Standing in the Footprints of the Contemporary Urban Child:
Constructing a Sense of Place Along The Everyday Urban Routes
Children Walk Through Public Space.

Jackie Bourke
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‘Standing in the footprints of the contemporary urban child’:
Constructing a sense of place along the everyday urban routes children walk through public space

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of a PhD

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October 2012
Abstract
This study investigates children’s perspectives on how they experience their everyday walks through a city neighbourhood in Dublin, Ireland. Of particular interest in this research are the children’s views on the urban public realm which they traverse daily on their walks to school and various other destinations. Having once been considered the domain of children (Karsten 2005) public space is now socially constructed as adult space (Aitken 2001) and there is a concern that children are disappearing from the city (Ward 1990; Valentine 2004). The focus of this research is the children who still access the public realm regularly, and how they encounter that space. Through an exploration of children’s sense of place in the public realm it becomes possible to reconsider the efficacy of policy decisions and to reconsider how we position children in public space.

A secondary aim of this study is an examination of the meaning and significance of independence for children. There is concern that a loss of independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990) has had a detrimental impact on children’s outdoor experience. (Mackett et al. 2007; Romero 2010). However there is an argument that these concerns have emerged from an adult understanding of independence (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). This study sets out to explore children’s perspectives on independence in the context of urban spatial mobility.

A complex interplay of factors shapes the children’s everyday spatial mobility experience. Drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), an ecological framework was ‘mapped’ onto the urban spatial mobility experience to facilitate an unfolding of the various factors. The sociological understanding of children as active agents shaping their own lives underpins this thesis. Children are positioned as experts in their everyday lives and have participated in a collaborative research process to reveal their experience of the public domain. A group of children aged between nine and eleven who live in the city and regularly walk to school and other places, either with or without an adult, participated. Using photography they documented the routes they walk, capturing the experience of that walk through the meanings they invest in encounters along the way.

The visual narratives through which the children describe their journey indicate that while their performance of public space is constrained by assumptions of appropriate behaviour, they experience a diverse engagement with the urban realm and feel a strong sense of belonging in their city worlds. Furthermore, the presence of an adult affects the extent to which the engagement with their urban worlds is pragmatic or imaginative.

This study contributes to the discourse on independent urban spatial mobility by identifying a need to reconsider the role children play in shaping urban public space and to rethink the meaning and significance of independence for them.
Declaration
I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by research of the Dublin Institute of Technology and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other third level institution.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the DIT’s guidelines for ethics in research.

DIT has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature ___________________________ Date _____________

Jackie Bourke

October 2012
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Chapter 1 Introducing the Study

‘Standing in the footprints of the contemporary urban child’

(Colin Ward 1990: x)

Introduction

The aim of this study is to present an exploration of children’s place-making in the urban public realm as constructed through their everyday walks, so that their experience might be better understood and their needs catered for. The intention in presenting this information is three-fold: firstly, to reveal how children encounter the adult oriented city space of the public domain as they move through it, secondly to examine how children understand the significance of independence in this context and thirdly, to advocate for a recognition of children as regular public space users by developing a children’s standpoint on independent spatial mobility.

Through a collaborative research process, children shared their everyday experience of the routes they walk through public space. Particular attention was paid to a comparison between the experience of children who are with an adult and those who are not with an adult in light of a concern in the literature that children have suffered a loss of independence (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000) and with that a loss of opportunities to develop certain skills (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002).

The focus of this research underwent a change from the original proposal to the final aim as described above. The journey from the initial research aim to the objectives which ultimately drove the study is described briefly in section 1.1 as a process which explains the
personal and academic motivation behind this thesis. This is followed by a discussion on the meaning of independence, the spatial location of the study and a definition of mobility as it applies to this study in section 1.2. The following section (1.3) contextualises the research question in relation to national and international developments. This is followed in section 1.4 by an overview of the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, the inter-disciplinary and methodological approaches adopted by the study and how children have been positioned in the research process. A summary of the thesis structure and contents is then outlined in section 1.5.

1.1 The research question and the rationale for this study

The research question which this study seeks to answer is: what are children’s perspectives on their experience of urban spatial mobility and the significance of independence? In an increasingly urban world (Prout 2003) where there is a rising concern with the lack of access children have to the public realm (Valentine 2004; Karsten 2005) it is a timely question which demands a comprehensive answer and an urgent response. This thesis is an attempt to answer that question by exploring their experience of public space, examining cultural understandings of children in that context and developing a better understanding of children’s urban lives. In doing so, this thesis endeavours to present children’s perspectives on the city and their views on how it might better meet their needs.

There is evidence in the literature of a loss of outdoor freedom among children (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) and worries about the implications of that loss (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Matthews 2003; Romero 2010). These concerns have given rise to a debate about the efficacy of parenting skills (Furedi 2001; Malone 2007; Guldberg 2009) and the impact of urban planning and design decisions (Jacobs 1961; Karsten 2002; Gleeson 2006). Although the focus of this
The original impetus for pursuing this research area was based on a personal and professional concern for the apparent loss of outdoor freedoms children were encountering.
My interest in this subject is described briefly here in recognition of the observation that ‘all research necessarily starts from a person’s view of the world, which is shaped by the experience one brings to the research position’ (Grix 2002:179). Children’s play opportunities, their welfare and rights, have long been an area of interest to me. It is an interest which informed the final project theme for my post-graduate diploma in journalism: I produced a 30 minute radio documentary on children’s play provision in Dublin’s inner city – where I was then living as a young mother.

The interest remained throughout my career as a journalist. I also worked on a voluntary basis with OMEP Ireland (Organisation Mondiale pour l’Education Prescolaire), an organisation which initiated the establishment of the Children’s Rights Alliance. In time I began working on a page in the Irish Times called Mediascope which was aimed at media studies students. It was this particular combination of an interest in children’s rights and the media which originally informed my research question and it was my intention to look at the role of the media in children’s loss of outdoor freedom. As I began the research, the focus changed; the role of the media became more peripheral and outdoor freedoms narrowed down to a more specific focus on mobility along particular routes in an urban area. The focus of attention also shifted to an examination of children’s individual perspectives on their experience of their spatial mobility. This interest in how children experienced public space as they moved from one place to the next, sharing in the life of the city (Ward 1990:179), mirrored my interest in children’s right to participation under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

While there is evidence that children have lost a degree of independence and are less present in the public realm than before (Karsten 2005), there is also evidence of children who continue to be public realm users (O’Brien et al. 2000; Matthews 2003; Valentine 2004). This study focuses on the views of children who still walk through public space regularly. By
engaging with those children and developing an understanding of their experience, this study attempts to learn from them how the urban public domain might better meet their needs, and in doing so, perhaps encourage more children back onto the city streets. The key objectives which arise from the research question as it was ultimately shaped are as follows:

- To contribute children’s perspectives to the discussion on independent spatial mobility
- To present an empirically rich account of how children experience their independent spatial mobility in an urban context
- To explore the meaning and significance of independence from the child’s perspective in relation to spatial mobility
- To develop a child standpoint on independent spatial mobility in the urban public realm
- To investigate the relationship between local knowledge of the urban environment, media coverage of children’s safety and restrictions on independent spatial mobility
- To make recommendations on how future urban development might better meet the needs of children by ensuring their views are included in policy and planning decisions

Through an exploration of the question and aims, the study comprises an attempt to contribute new knowledge in the form of children’s views on how they use the public realm, how they feel the city engages with their needs as they move through public space and how children construct a sense of place in what is considered adult owned space (Aitken 2001). A loss of independence evidenced in the literature is explored from the perspective of children and their views on the meaning and significance of independence contribute new knowledge to the subject of independent spatial mobility.
1.1.1 The academic rationale

A number of key texts influenced how the question evolved. Among them were Yi Fu Tuan’s (1977) work on the experience of space and place, which describes how space (the wider unknown world) transforms into place (the familiar known world) as people invest space with personal meaning. Tuan distinguishes between ‘space’ and ‘place’ describing the former in terms of a lack of familiarity which, in becoming familiar, takes on a more stable and secure sense of ‘place’. Tuan’s work inspired a shift in the focus of my study away from the extent of children’s outdoor freedom and onto their experience of the outdoors. With that change came a focus on how children construct a sense of place in the city space they inhabit and move through. The evidence that children are less and less likely to be outside moving around their urban worlds (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000) and the suggestion that they are vanishing from city space (Ward 1990) and disappearing from the street (Valentine 2004) led me to focus on those children who are still regular public space users.

An interest in Roger Hart’s assertion that; ‘children seem to find as much enjoyment in getting to places as they do in being there’ (1979:40) motivated a wish to examine that movement from one place to the next. However unlike Hart and Robin Moore (1986) - who revealed the urban built environment as a rich playground – I was less interested in children’s hidden worlds and the locations they wandered during their free time and more concerned with exploring the interface between child and adult territory through the meaning children invest in the routes they walk through public space on a regular basis. Through an examination of children’s perspectives on their experience of the public realm I sought to determine how they felt the city engaged with their needs.
The streets and squares of the public realm are identified as ‘the only places in our cities where public interaction takes place’ (Krier 2003:165). In Ireland, under the road traffic act (1961) the legal definition of public space is quite problematic from the perspective of children as it places an emphasis on ‘access with vehicles’. This definition reflects a trend towards moving children off the streets and into specific child designated places (Kernan 2005), a tendency evidenced throughout the 20th century towards constructing ‘a specialized public landscape for urban children’ (de Conninck-Smith and Gutman 2004:133) in the form of playgrounds and various childcare facilities (Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003). The resulting ‘colonisation of social domains’ (Stephens 1995:10) has led to a social construction of public space as adult territory (Valentine 2004) and served to dis-empower children by failing to acknowledge their use of public space, their needs in that domain and their rights as citizens.

Despite the challenges, there is evidence to suggest that children use the public realm regularly, for example, walking to school (Dublin Transportation Office 2007). The views of those children are an important contribution to the debate and in this thesis children’s experiential accounts of the city describe it as a rich and complex landscape of ‘everyday diversity of uses and users’ (Jacobs 1961:111) and reveal children as an essential part of that ‘citiness’ (Seamon 2012:139).

The research question was further shaped by reading Mikkelsen and Christensen’s (2009) article on the meaning of independence in relation to children’s spatial mobility and their conclusion that effective research into children’s mobility demands an awareness of ‘children’s own experiences of everyday mobility and constructions of meaning around it’(2009:56). In their work Mikkelsen and Christensen argue that the meaning of independence in the discourse on children’s independent spatial mobility is adult oriented and culturally dictated. In an effort to address the gap identified in the literature between the adult definition and children’s understanding of independence, this study explored children’s
perspectives on the meaning and significance of independence. The data on children’s views on independence reveals an important diversity of perspectives and a comparison of the experience of children who walk through public space with and without an adult suggests that the presence or absence of an adult affords a different, although not necessarily better or worse, experience.

1.2 Defining independent spatial mobility

The meaning of independence in the context of children’s spatial mobility is not entirely clear (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). It is conflated with an idea of freedom, in particular a freedom to roam the outdoor environment with little adult constraint (Hart 1979). According to Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009), the concept of independent spatial mobility was introduced by Hillman et al. in 1990. It has since been widely adopted in academic literature, however the meaning is not very clearly defined but instead it is related to the use of phrases such as ‘on their own’ or ‘alone’. The significance of independence is associated with a particular developmental understanding of ‘growing up’. But there is evidence that children’s mobility is in fact quite social and that independence is not a uni-directional trajectory which leads to maturity, but a fluid process throughout childhood and on to adulthood (Hockey and James 1993; Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). For the purposes of this research independence is defined as being without an adult as children move through their urban world but as the children rarely walked alone independence includes being with siblings, friends, cousins, or alone. The meaning and significance of independence is explored in more detail in chapters three and seven.

The meaning of ‘mobility’ draws on the work of Pooley et al. (2005) and implies routine daily travel to and from school, to the shop, out to play and to visit friends and family. Although many routine daily journeys are increasingly made by car, the focus of this research
is on the journeys children make by foot in order to explore an experience of their urban environment which is best described by being physically present (Tuan 1977; Cele 2006). Walking is understood as a dynamic place-making process through which unfamiliar space is invested with meaning and transformed into place (Urry 2007; Lee and Ingold 2006; Cele 2006).

In this study the spatial context is the urban public realm. As discussed above this is a realm where the presence of children is contested. In order to examine children’s experience of urban public space the study was located in the North West Inner City of Dublin, an area described in detail in section 1.3.2.

1.3 International Context

There is an international concern that children have suffered a loss of independent spatial mobility, particularly in an urban context. There is also an awareness of the need to understand children’s perspectives on living in cities and to engage with them in planning, developing and designing cities which meet their needs. The UNESCO Growing Up in Cities Project was initiated by Kevin Lynch to explore children’s views of their urban worlds (1977). In his study the children talk about their feelings of belonging and alienation, their fears, their use of the street as a place of social gathering and they share strong views on what they do and do not like about their cities. Lynch discusses the importance of engaging children in urban design plans and the need to open out the city more comprehensively to children (1977). Lynch’s project was re-visited in the 1990s by Louise Chawla who, together with a group of academics, explored children’s views in a number of cities, including some of the initial cities Lynch had worked in. The work was underpinned by a rights based approach and the purpose of the study was ‘to provide recommendations for increasing the
genuine participation of young people in community development projects’ (Chawla 2002:11).

More recently a number of initiatives designed to raise awareness of the needs of children living in cities and share knowledge on children’s urban experience have emerged. The bi-annual Child in the City Conference is organised jointly by the Child in the City Foundation and the European Network of Child Friendly Cities (ENCF). Themes for this conference have included children’s rights, health and play. Dublin is a member of the ENCF and in 2011 hosted the annual conference which focussed on traffic and safety.

In 1992 Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In doing so, the Irish state is obliged to promote and protect the rights enshrined in the convention. It is also obliged to submit regular reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child outlining progress being made on the implementation of children’s rights. The Irish government last reported to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006 and a list of recommendations on how further progress might be achieved was made by the Committee. The state was due to submit a report again in 2009, however that commitment was not met and it is currently unclear when Ireland will be in a position to submit the report. The Children’s Rights Alliance, a non-governmental umbrella organisation founded in 1992 to promote children’s rights in Ireland groups the articles of the convention together under four headings; survival rights, development rights, protection rights and participation rights. Those rights to participation which are of particular concern in this study include the child’s the right to a say in matters which affect them (Article 12) the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) and the right to freedom of association (Article 15).

There are a number of interesting examples of how to engage children in urban planning programmes. The UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative is a particular model of
engaging children in planning cities which centres on promoting children’s participation rights. The initiative defines a child friendly city as ‘a local system of good governance committed to fulfilling children’s rights’. A Framework for Action has been developed to facilitate cities interested in engaging with the initiative. This framework outlines a process whereby children’s rights can be adhered to by local governments through a system of nine ‘building blocks’, which promote acknowledgment of children’s rights in decision making processes. Indicators of child friendliness are developed by participating cities and include references to well being, education, play and levels of participation in decision making. The Child Friendly Cities Initiative is a model which could be effectively applied to Dublin City where there is ample scope for engaging children in local area plans, regeneration programmes and including children’s input into future development plans.

1.3.1 National Context

The views expressed by children living in Dublin suggest that they are out and about in their neighbourhoods. A report from the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children study says 60% of children who live in Dublin see their neighbourhood as safe (Gavin et al. 2008). The State of the Nation’s Children report (2010) indicates that more than half of all children living in Dublin (54.8%) take a reasonable amount of exercise everyday and the Dublin Transportation Office (DTO) report from 2007 suggests that for more than a third of them (37.1%) some of that exercise includes the walk to school. This study is concerned with the kind of experience those walks represent for children through the urban environment and the extent to which children feel their urban world is meeting their needs.

In order to meet those needs it inevitably follows that children’s views should be considered in any planning matters which will affect their local environments. Under the National Children’s Strategy (2000) the first goal is to give children a voice in matters that
affect them, however the extent to which that is put in to practice seems poor. Only 22.5% of children aged 9-17 report being able to participate in decision making at school (State of the Nations Children 2010). It is difficult to obtain precise figures on the extent to which children say they are consulted in relation to local government decisions although there has been an attempt to put into place structures which facilitate their participation. Through the Children’s Services Unit, Dublin City Council is committed to promoting children’s democratic participation in the city’s development. To that end the City Council facilitates Cómhairle na nÓg, one of a network of children’s councils which provide a forum to discuss local and national issues. The official website, www.comhairlenanog.ie, states that the council is the official structure for participation by children in the development of policy and services. Nonetheless there is scant evidence of any engagement with children in a participative decision making process in regard to local planning matters.

References to children in the current Dublin City Development Plan (2010) do not indicate an intention to engage children in a participative process on policy and planning decisions in relation to the city. There is a commendable degree of attention to children’s play referenced throughout the development plan. There is also a reference to the need to tackle ‘adverse environmental and road safety impacts of traffic in the city’ (2010:5.1.4.10) through the provision of Home Zones1 and the creation of a network of routes between home and play areas so children can walk or cycle. But the development plan lacks a strong sense of children’s right to a say in matters that affect them (National Children’s Strategy 2000) or any discussion on the importance of engaging with children in a participative planning process regarding the development of the city.

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1 Defined in the development plan as residential streets where the needs of people who walk and cycle are given priority over car drivers (2010:442)
Under planning legislation enacted in 2010 local authorities must indicate that ‘children are entitled to make submissions’¹² on development plans. But the legislation does not compel direct consultation with children. The lack of obligation to engage with children is reflected in the Dublin City Public Realm Strategy which centres on ensuring the needs of those with access difficulties, ‘such as children and the elderly are met’ (2012:30). This reference encapsulates an understanding of children as vulnerable and in need of protection indicative of the prevalent theoretical conceptualization of children in Ireland.

However, there are signs that perhaps local authorities will begin to include children in planning matters. There has been an attempt to consider seeking Child friendly City status for Dublin City³ under the UNICEF initiative (an initiative which promotes children’s participation in local governance, described above in section 1.3). Dublin City Play Plan (2012), for example, indicates that children will be consulted with on all matters regarding play and the Draft Manual on Local Area Plans (2012) includes as small reference to consulting with children. Within that slowly changing context, this study is an attempt to elucidate children’s perspectives on their experience of the public realm in Dublin City against the complex backdrop of the local authorities’ attitude towards children’s participation in the city.

1.3.2 The Study Site

The spatial context of the mobility experience under examination is the north-west inner city (NWIC) of Dublin and it was chosen for a number of reasons. The NWIC was identified as one of four administrative quadrants of the inner city by the Dublin Inner City Partnership. The partnership was set up to tackle disadvantage but lost its funding in 2010 and is now no longer operational. However a number of the original member organisations

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¹² Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010 Section 8.2.(bb)
³ This representation is included in Appendix 1
including the North West Inner City Network continue to support groups and individuals in the area. These quadrants were based on electoral divisions and a map of the area covering the NWIC is included below, figure 1.3.1. The boundaries loosely cover Infirmary Road bordering the Phoenix Park to the west, Arran Street to the east, the North Circular Road to the north and the north side of the city quays at the river Liffey to the south.
A misunderstanding on my part at the start of the research led to an assumption that the NWIC was a Dublin City Council administrative quadrant. The five schools located within the NWIC had been approached and four were participating in the research before the error was discovered. In fact Dublin City Council breaks the city into somewhat different administrative divisions and the area covered by the research location is Dublin Central (Figure 1.3.2). In turn, other organisations with a specific remit for the NWIC such as the North West Inner City Network or the Health Executive Service map the area to cover different boundaries. As a result it can be difficult to access accurate statistical information. The decision was taken to proceed with the research based on the map of the NWIC described by the Dublin Inner City Partnership, which comprises six electoral divisions as it is possible to base statistics on these divisions.

Figure 1.3.2 Map of Dublin City Council administrative areas

The most recent demographic information on the north-west inner city, calculated through an aggregate of the electoral divisions identified in figure 1.3.1, is based on the 2011

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4 Arran Quay A,B,C,D,E and Inns Quay C
Census. At the last count there were 2,361 children living in the NWIC, 13.33% of the population. It is a culturally diverse area with almost 40% of the population not born in Ireland. It is also an area of mixed socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from households described as very disadvantaged to households which are described as very affluent⁵.

Traditionally the inner city of Dublin has been understood as a financially disadvantaged area suffering a range of attendant social problems (NESC 1981). However the focus in this study is on the potential the city affords children through a rich tapestry of physical and social encounters and to present an account of the lived experience of ‘ordinary city childhoods’ (Prout 2003: preface). Children living in the NWIC have been asked to document their experience of walking through this diverse city space. Their experience of a built environment comprising a variety of land uses which encompass instances of historical and contemporary architecture and urban design is presented. Finally, this research location was chosen because it is where the researcher lives and she is familiar with the various routes walked by the children.

1.4 Theoretical framing and methodological approach of the study

Research into children’s experience of the outdoors is frequently underpinned by an ecological framework (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Matthews 1992; Kernan 2006; Rogers 2009). Children’s outdoor experience has been identified as shaped by several interrelated layers including cultural attitudes, environmental conditions and person specific characteristics (Matthews 1992). In order to present a comprehensive account of children’s independent spatial mobility an ecological framework, based on the model developed by Brofenbrenner (1979), has been adopted for this study.

⁵All-island deprivation index http://airomaps.nuim.ie/flexviewer/?config=AIDepIndex.xml
Using that ecological model of human development, this study set out to explore what are described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as ‘the systems of relationships’ which shape children’s spatial mobility. These systems are described by Bronfenbrenner as the micro-system comprising the interrelations between the person and the immediate setting, the meso-system, comprising relations between settings in the micro-system, the exo-system, comprising a system of relations which affects the micro-system but which the child does not enter and the macro-system, comprising cultural values and attitudes which affect each system.

By adapting the model for this study, the macro-system here refers to cultural understandings of the city and of children in the city, the exo-system comprises planning and policy decisions and the meso-system is the interrelations between the settings relevant to the children’s mobility experience. The primary focus of this research is the micro-system of the route the children walk through their urban world which comprises the interactions between physical features, social dimensions and the individual child.

A key feature of the model developed by Brofenbrenner (1979) is the two-way flow between the child and the systems of relationships. That two-way flow is recognised in the research undertaken here and the study is underpinned by a conceptualization of children as social actors (Prout and James 1997). The adaptation of the model, including the function of time (Brofenbrenner and Morris 2006), and the significance of the conceptualization of children underpinning the research are described in detail in chapter two.

Drawing on the work of Jonathan Tudge (2008) this study recognises children living in the city, albeit from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, as sharing a cultural environment. Tudge (2008) outlines a cultural-ecological theory of child development which acknowledges the role of the wider cultural context within which children live. The child
participants in this research share a physical environment which is culturally understood as a negative space – dirty, crime ridden and dangerous – and children and their behaviour are associated with this negative understanding (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Jones 2000). This thesis argues that while children living in the city do suffer the environmental deprivation of the city space (Kearns and Ruimy 2010) they should not be defined by it. In giving primacy to the voices of children it is an attempt to re-consider that paradigm and how children in the city are perceived. Through an examination of individual perspectives on their experience of walking through their city world, this study presents a range of views. It argues that the views of children living in the city should be respected and efforts should be made to maintain that which they identify as positive and change that which they identify as negative.

1.4.1 An interdisciplinary approach

Typical of studies which adopt an ecological approach (for example, Kernan 2006), this research has adopted a number of disciplinary lenses in order to present a detailed account of children’s perspectives on their experience of urban spatial mobility. It is a complex world shaped by a range of factors as described above, and in order to explore those issues fully there is a need to draw on a number of disciplines. The particular disciplines which have been drawn on for this study include; sociology, psychology, geography, children’s geographies, media studies and urban design theory. Each discipline facilitates an exploration of the various strands comprising the complex interaction of factors affecting children’s experience. These various disciplines have facilitated an exploration of this topic as follows:

- Sociology: structures that shape the children’s everyday walks, a conceptualization of childhood
- Psychology: personal identity in middle childhood, a developmental conceptualization of childhood
- Geography: the social construction of space and place, the relationship between walking and place-making
- Children’s geography: urban geography of childhood, children’s place construction
- Urban design theory: understandings of the city
- Media studies: the construction of ‘stranger danger’

1.4.2 Researching children’s experience through a collaborative process

A key focus of the research question being explored in this thesis is children’s experience. The decision to examine experience was taken for a number of reasons. To begin with this focus opens a useful window into the complexity of children’s everyday lives. Exploring their experience also places emphasis on the individuality of each child and indicates an interest in examining the richness of their lives as lived (Greene and Hill 2005: 3). Secondly, it suggests a respect for children as persons whose present lives are important and places value on their perspectives on their lives (Greene and Hill 2005).

In an attempt to give expression to that respect for children, they have been positioned as collaborators in the research process. Research on children was traditionally informed by a view of children as ‘becomings’ with a focus on their future as adult citizens. They were seen as passive recipients of the affects of structures and relations around them. Drawing on the understanding of children described in what is often referred to as ‘the new social studies of childhood’ (Holloway and Valentine 2000:5) this study is underpinned by an understanding of children’s agency, a position which recognises their competence and sees them as ‘active in the construction and determination of their own social lives’ (Prout and James 1997:8). As such children are understood as subjects of the research rather than objects (Greene and Hill
who are deemed experts in their own lives (Matthews and Limb 1999) and therefore collaborate in the data collection process. In this way the children who participated in this study contribute to the construction of knowledge on their experience.

The power relations between adults and children presents a particular challenge in conducting research with children (Hill 2005) and this has been given considerable ethical and methodological consideration. Each encounter with the children was based on the utmost respect for their views. The issue of ‘representations of what an adult is’ (Christensen 2004: 173) for the children and an awareness of this and how it might impinge on the discussions with them informed the interview process. A reflexive approach was adopted throughout the research process, particularly during the analysis of the data.

The children collaborated in the data collection process through the use of photography, photo-elicited interviews, semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire with the children. The micro-system of the route the children walk was explored during two separate phases of data collection, initially during the months of May and June while they were in fourth class, and again during the month of October when they had moved up to fifth class.

In order to capture that experience as it is happening, the children were given cameras to photograph the routes they walk on a regular basis through public space. The use of photography with child participants in collaborative research on their place making opens a window onto the ‘distinctive ways of seeing’ (Burke 2005:30) their world. The children can bring the camera with them as they move through the neighbourhood and capture a sense of their ‘situated knowledge’ (Cele 2006: 12) revealing the meaning they invest in places, people and objects along the way. The children were asked to map their route from a to b to
convey a sense of familiarity with the route and to simultaneously map the experience of the journey they were walking.

They photographed two separate walks, firstly the walk to school, then a walk of their choice made during their free time. There was a difference of several months between these two walks during which the children had moved up a class from fourth to fifth. The children participated in a photo-elicited interview process to discuss their images and the experience associated with each place captured in the images after the photographs for each walk had been developed.

As described above a key focus of this study is the significance and meaning of independence for the children. For the second phase of photographic data collection the children were asked to document their experience of a walk of their choice during free time. This was done partly to compare how having control over the choice of walk they documented might affect the experience and partly to examine how the experience of a walk which was independent of an adult controlled time (Ennew 1994) such as school time might compare. A further analysis compared the significance of the presence of an adult during the walk and how being with a grown up affected the experience the children documented. Finally, during semi-structured interviews conducted with the children they discussed the meaning and the significance of independence in relation to their spatial mobility. The findings of the study, presented in chapters five, six and seven, are framed by the ecological approach and the conceptualization of children as social actors as described above. The full layout of the thesis and a brief synopsis of each chapter is outlined in the next section.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis comprises nine chapters covering separate but interrelated aspects of the study which has been undertaken to explore the rich tapestry of children’s everyday lives as they
move through the urban public realm. It begins by identifying the range of factors - or ‘systems of relationships’ - which affect children’s independent spatial mobility. It then examines the various factors in detail, before tying those individual strands back together and presenting a final account of the complexity of their urban spatial mobility experience.

The thesis starts with a discussion of the underlying theoretical concerns (chapter two) and contextualises the study within the literature (chapter three). Chapter two consists of a detailed account of the theoretical basis for this research through a discussion of contemporary understandings of children and the ecological model it draws on. Chapter three consists of a literature review covering the issues that arise in relation to children’s independent spatial mobility and foregrounds a discussion of the research design.

Chapter four comprises an account of the methodological considerations, research design and fieldwork which shaped the research process for this study. It is followed by three chapters on the study’s findings. Chapter five consists of a presentation of findings on the macro-system and exo-system discussing the construction of these systems and the relationship between the child participants and those systems. In chapter six the focus of the thesis shifts to the micro-system through a presentation of the findings on the visual narratives the children created of their experience of their everyday mobility routes. Those routes take the children across public space and they reveal how they have constructed a sense of place in this adult oriented domain. Chapter seven comprises an account of the findings of the children’s perspectives on the meaning and significance of independence for them in relation to their urban spatial mobility. Chapter eight begins the process of knitting back together the various elements which shape the children’s experience through a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature. That process concludes in chapter nine which presents a summary of the study, conclusions and the contribution of the research undertaken to the academic study of children’s independent spatial mobility. That chapter
brings the thesis to a close with a series of policy recommendations based on the perspectives shared by the child participants and recommendations for further research possibilities arising out of this study.

**Conclusion**

Through this chapter the key themes of relevance to this thesis have been introduced. This chapter has given a brief account the research question, the aims, objectives and the rationale behind this study. The ecological approach and where children are positioned in the research process have been discussed along with the methodological considerations of this research.

The study is underpinned by a belief in the need to advocate for the right of children to be heard on matters which affect them. Children are understood as competent, social actors whose participation rights should be acknowledged in the public realm of the city spaces they inhabit. Their perspectives on how they experience that space is presented as a springboard from which the city might engage with children and meet their needs. Through a collaborative research design with children aged 9-11 that involves mapping their experiences and photo-elicitation methods, the study aims to shed some light on how children living in a contemporary urban area experience their spatial mobility. It has been undertaken with a view to making policy and legislative recommendations on how future urban development might more effectively meet the needs of children. It also seeks to inform future research and strengthen our knowledge base with respect to children as research collaborators. The following chapters comprise an attempt on the part of the researcher to give an authentic account of the complexity of their urban lives which the children shared throughout this research endeavour.
Chapter 2 Researching Children’s Perspectives on their Experience of Urban Spatial Mobility: Theoretical Frameworks

Introduction

A particular challenge from the outset and throughout the research process was how to authentically give voice to children’s perspectives on their experience of urban spatial mobility. In order to address the concern with representing children’s views and understanding the spatial context of their experience, two key theoretical approaches were adopted to frame this study: the sociological understanding of children as agents shaping their own lives and an ecological model of child development. The sociological approach to understanding children is encapsulated in six key points outlined by Prout and James in their work on the construction of childhood, including an assertion that ‘children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own lives’ (1997:8). This approach provides a basis for engaging children in collaborative research processes and it is an approach which informs contemporary debate on the spatiality of childhood (Holloway and Valentine 2000). It also complements the ecological model adapted for this study, the ecological model of human development developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 1998, 2006). This model, which was changed and adapted throughout Bronfenbrenner’s life, is discussed in more detail in section 2.4. In this study the ecological model is applied to a very particular context; children’s experience of their regular walks through the urban public space of the inner city of Dublin. Public space is understood as socially constructed and produced (Lefebvre 1991) through interactions between cultural understandings of the city as well as the place of the child in the city and policy and design decisions which reflect both these
understandings and practical considerations. The ecological model is used in this study to facilitate an examination of those interrelated factors which shape the children’s experience. Bronfenbrenner (1979) did not regard the process of human development as a uni-directional flow from environmental influences to the child, rather he acknowledged the active role children play in their own development. Positioning children as agents shaping their life worlds in this way also reflects the conceptualization of childhood underpinning this study.

The chapter begins by locating the study within a changing discourse on theories of childhood as they pertain to the disciplines of sociology and psychology and presenting its alignment with the new sociological understanding of children (section 2.1). The relationship between different understandings of childhood and the somewhat contentious issue of children’s independent spatial mobility is then presented with reference to the debate in the literature and the media (section 2.2). An argument in favour of acknowledging children’s agency as an informant to research with children is then presented in relation to an exploration of their daily life experience (section 2.3). It is proposed that establishing the perspective of the child on the routes they walk regularly through their urban environment is imperative for planning urban space which reflects an awareness of the presence of children on a daily basis. The effort to present this view from the perspective of children reflects what Mayall advocates as making ‘one kind of move towards upgrading childhood’ (2009:177). That upgrading is encapsulated in the attempt by this study to develop what Mayall refers to as a ‘child standpoint’ on the subject of children’s engagement with public space. This is followed by a discussion of the ecological framework in section 2.4, looking at how it facilitates an exposition of the interrelations between the agency of the child and systems which shape children’s experience of their spatial mobility and also the experience of the urban spatial context through which they move.
2.1 Contemporary understandings of childhood

“Childhood remains, we argue, a highly contentious topic”

(Jame, Jenks and Prout 1998:8)

Much of the focus of the discourse on contemporary childhood centres on a recurring concern that childhood today is in crisis (James, Jenks and Prout 1998; Valentine 2004; Mayall 2009). This ‘crisis’ might be defined as the tension between a traditional understanding of children as incompetent, vulnerable and in need of protection suggested by developmental psychology and socialization theories and an understanding of children as competent social actors who actively participate in shaping their own lives, which began to be articulated towards the end of the 20th century. The predominant understanding of children is shaped by a Piagetian concept of ‘the child’, a universal idea which assumes a biological stage of immaturity from which children gradually develop to become capable adults. Children are seen as a work in progress who, by virtue of a perceived lack of competence, are considered vulnerable and in need of protection. This psychological construction of childhood is reflected in a sociological understanding of childhood whereby children are understood to be gradually socialized into rational, socially conforming and contributing adults.

At the same time there has been a degree of recognition of the competence of children as social actors which is manifest in an acknowledgement of children’s rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. 6 The convention was ratified by the Irish government in 1992 resulting in policy documents such as The National Children’s Strategy (2000) which claim to recognise children’s agency and promote such rights as hearing children’s voices on matters which affect them. Nonetheless it is apparent that the traditional

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6 The UNCRC was ratified by Ireland in 1992 however the extent to which children’s rights are understood and implemented is a matter of debate, an example of which is discussed in section 2.2.3 below
understanding of children as incompetent has retained a firm grip on governance systems and continues to inform policy which affects children both directly and indirectly. An example of this is the changes made to Irish education policy in recent years which were intended to reflect an assumption of children’s agency indicative of a rights based approach (Devine 2000). But these changes came about without any consultation with children (Devine 2000). The failure to consult with children on policy which has a direct influence on their daily lives conveys the on-going influence of the developmental psychological model and reflects an understanding ‘which frames children and childhood in restrictive, adult-centred terms’ (2000:24).

This ‘adult-centred’ approach permeates wider social concerns and there is often a lack of awareness of how certain policy decisions will affect children. An example of the type of indirect policy that impinges on children’s lives lies in the area of housing (Woolley 2006). Children are rarely consulted on their needs in this context and the impact on their ability to access public open space where they live, for example, can be adversely affected (Woolley 2006). The understanding of children which assumes a lack of competence and therefore a vulnerability which requires protection, has been described as extraordinarily resistant and one which ‘still retains a powerful hold on social, political, cultural and economic agendas’ (Prout and James 1997: xiv).

The co-existence of the two divergent positions has resulted in a simultaneous increase in regulation to ensure children are protected and an emphasis on hearing children’s voices (James, Jenks and Prout 1998), conflicting trends which have particular implications for children’s independent spatial mobility and how children in contemporary western society are expected to occupy public space. The emphasis on children’s perceived vulnerability is a contributing factor in the tendency to reconfigure their fitting place from public domains such as the street, to school and home. Meanwhile questions are being asked about the
implications of ‘bubble-wrapping’ children cocooned in the home and the importance of allowing them an autonomous expression of what is seen as their competencies (Malone 2007).

In the study of childhood however, a shift in understanding of children has emerged in which the immaturity of children is accepted as a biological fact, but ‘the ways in which the immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture’ (Prout and James 1997:7). This shift marks a move away from the unitary child (O’Brien et al. 2000) towards contextualizing a plurality of childhoods in time and place, a view described in terms of a six point ‘emergent paradigm’ (Prout and James 1997). This paradigm reflects innovative late 20th century thinking on how childhood is understood. Childhood is defined as a social construct and a variable of social analysis. Children’s relationships and cultures are seen as worthy of study in their own right. The paradigm considers children to be active in the construction of their own lives, it advocates a voice for children in research and engages in the process of reconstructing childhood in society (Prout and James 1997).

The paradigm, although over 20 years old, is described as ‘emergent’ because in challenging dominant ideas around children it has met with a number of obstacles hindering acceptance in the mainstream. One of the more powerful obstacles towards a re-consideration of how childhood is understood as what Prout and James call ‘institutionalized practices’ which are subject to what they associate with ‘regimes of truth’ (an idea they cite as deriving from Foucault 1977) which prove extremely difficult to change (1997:23). Devine (2000) cites school as an institution where these regimes of truth are manifest and children ‘become objects of both social and administrative control’ (2000:25). In the context of this study those institutionalized practices are identified as including a media agenda which serves to exploit parental concerns for their children’s safety and urban planning practices which prioritise commercial needs over the needs of children. Both are discussed in detail in later chapters.
but it is useful to mention here that the understanding of children as incompetent and vulnerable informs Western parenting values and their safety is regarded as a primary concern (Valentine 1997). There is a strong belief among parents that the outdoors is less safe now than it was when they were children themselves (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 1997) and that their own offspring are not competent to deal with the sort of dangers which exist, in particular high traffic volumes and ‘stranger danger’ (McNeish and Roberts 1995).

Despite these entrenched societal views, in an academic context the study of childhood continues to pursue an agenda based on an understanding of children’s competence. According to Prout and James, between the initial publication of Constructing and Re-constructing Childhood in 1990 and its second print in 1997 the study of children had already begun to converge around an acceptance of the idea of ‘childhoods rather than childhood’ (1997: xi) and an acknowledgment of the competence of individual children is increasingly apparent in studies of childhood. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) identify four approaches to studying children rooted in a recognition of children’s agency: the socially constructed child, the tribal child, the minority child and the social structural child. Briefly, the socially constructed approach refers to an understanding of childhood contextualised in a time and place while recognising the individuality of each child, the tribal child approach refers to an understanding of childhood as culturally specific with its own language rituals and so on, the minority group child approach understands childhood in relation to adults and the power balance between the two while the social structural child approach understands childhood as an aspect of all social worlds and views children as ‘a body of social actors’ (1998:32).

The approach to the study of children in this research is not specific to any one category described above but draws on aspects of all four. The role of the particular time and place (contemporary urban space of early twenty first century Dublin) as factors which
should be examined to understand the children’s lives is acknowledged, while at the same
time placing value on the individual experience of the children and their particular
engagement with their urban environment. Reflecting the ‘tribal child’ approach it takes
children’s views seriously and at face value, while also drawing on the minority child
approach to examine how children are understood in the research context and the power
relations between the children and their parents in relation to negotiating their outdoor
freedoms.

This study seeks to confront the minority status of children through recognition of
young people as citizens with needs and rights and the endeavour to present their perspectives
on their spatial mobility. The importance of understanding children’s lives from their
perspective is discussed by Mayall in terms of developing a child standpoint (2009),
something she sees as a crucial contribution to advocating for children’s agency. Her
proposal for a child standpoint has been criticized and described as unachievable on the basis
that children tend not to initiate research nor consume the results in the same way as adults do
(Spyrou 2011). But Mayall recognises the disempowered position of children in society
which is manifest in research processes. Her attempt to develop a child standpoint is an
attempt to raise the social status of children.

Drawing on the approach which sees childhood as a social phenomenon identified by
Prout and James (1997) Mayall presents a sociology of childhood which is underpinned by a
contemporary western construction of childhood as a minority group in relation to adulthood
‘whose wrongs need righting’ (2009:9). She proposes a child standpoint as a step towards
righting those wrongs, which she argues must be developed through an understanding of
children’s lives. This understanding, she suggests, is best acquired through an appreciation of
children’s knowledge. She also proposes crediting children with knowledge, built up through
experience over time, which can inform an understanding of how society works. In order to
ensure a meaningful insight into that knowledge Mayall draws on feminist theory and suggests that, ‘as gender emerged as key to understanding social relations between women and men, generation is emerging as key to understanding relations between childhood and adulthood’ (2009:1). Childhood, she argues, is a time of subordination and the focus on the vulnerability of children within the developmental psychology paradigm that predominates in the organisation of society fosters unequal power relations between children and adults.

Both their position as a minority group and the role of generation are encapsulated in the disempowered position of children apparent in how society is organised at a macro level (Hayes and Kernan 2008). That macro-structure is conceived and regulated by adults, hence, ‘the concept of generation is key to understanding childhood’ (Mayall 2009:109) and an investigation of these ‘generational structures’ (Alanen 2001:14) is the basis of the endeavour to understand childhood. Rather than assume that adults, by virtue of the powerful position they hold in society have a better insight into children’s lives, the function of the recognition of this ‘generational order’ (Mayall 20005:110) is to question it and advocate for a more meaningful understanding of children’s lives, based on children’s experience. A recognition of their disempowered position should not suggest they be regarded as passive recipients of regulation and instruction. Children do not always share parental and societal concerns for their vulnerability. They negotiate with their parents for control over their lives both in the home and in the outdoors or, at times, take control by resisting adult spatial restrictions (Valentine 1997; Punch 2002). Mayall draws a distinction between the concept of children as social actors advocated by Prout and James (1997) and their agency. She argues that children are both social actors who actively participate in shaping their own lives, and agents who engage in negotiations with others such that a difference is affected. The tension between structure and agency this suggests indicates that power relations are perhaps less hierarchical and more horizontal - reflecting Foucault’s discourse on power (Wylie 2007). Mayall (2009)
identifies the relationship between social structures, development and the individual child as a two way flow; both shaping and shaped by the individual child. This understanding of children’s agency is a key element in the ecological framework which underpins this study discussed in more detail in section 2.4, albeit an agency which acknowledges Mayall’s assertion that ‘childhood agency has to be understood within the parameters of childhood’s minority status’ (2009:21).

An interest in the tension between structure and agency in studies of children’s lives underlies the ‘consideration of the temporal spatial framework of childhood’ (Hayes and Kernan 2008:43) and the contrasting positions of the traditional understanding of children as incompetent and the new sociological recognition of children’s competence defines the dichotomy which is at the heart of the subject of children’s independent spatial mobility. This issue is of particular interest in an exploration of their urban spatial mobility where that tension is manifest in contentious views of children’s use of public space (Valentine 2004; Aitken 2001). The next section explores how these various understandings of childhood are manifest in children’s access to urban public space.
2.2 Constructions of childhood and public space

‘The central issue in relation to childhood space is, of course, one of control’

Jenks 2005:75

The complex understanding of childhood described above is manifest in a concern which centres on the presence of children in public space. A recurring theme is one of consternation over the apparent disappearance of children from the street and a simultaneous commandeering of public space by adults in recent decades (Karsten 2005). Where once children typically wandered the streets at play, on their way to and from school or off to run errands without adult accompaniment, children wandering about their neighbourhood without a grown-up nowadays are discussed in terms of weeds or plants growing in the wrong place (Jenks 2005). They stand out as a worrying intrusion on adult space if they appear in areas which have not been specifically sanctioned ‘childhood spaces’ such as school or the playground (Jenks 2005).

While this growing concern with what is regarded as a dissipation of the presence of children in public space is debated in an academic context, a simultaneous discussion on the need to exert far greater control over children’s spatial mobility is given expression in the media. The representation of children in the media engages with a narrative of childhood spatiality which does not reflect a recognition of children’s rights or competencies (Qvortrup 2005). An article in the New York Times Magazine (Belkin 2000) is cited by Qvortrup (2005) as an example of conflicted societal discussion with respect to children’s outdoor freedoms. The article focuses on a resentment of children in public space, centring on the anger of a cohort of American adults who do not have children and regard them as a noisy, irritating burden. One interviewee asks incredulously: ‘to keep a kid from getting hurt we have to
change the whole world’? This reflects a view common to those interviewees who expressed a desire for child-free zones. They argue that children should be the sole responsibility of their parents and an entirely private matter, to the extent that they begrudge parents statutory tax credits or employer sanctioned time off for sick children. This vision is not unanimous and is challenged by an interviewee who advocates a more child friendly perspective. But many of the views in the interview reflect a wider societal concern, identified by Qvortrup, that assumes children belong to the private domain of the family and should be excluded from public urban space. It is also a stance which fails to give recognition to children’s right to participate in society\(^7\) and the importance of shaping public space to meet the needs of children.

Children who are seen out and about in the street without an adult are often regarded with a mixture of suspicion and worry (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Valentine 2004; Jenks 2005). Jenks describes this paradoxical position as indicative of ‘two dominant ways of talking and thinking about children’ (2005:62). He discusses this with reference to a mythological representation of children as, on the one hand, Dionysian, or embodying the unpredictable behaviour of the ribald god of wine, and on the other hand Apollonian, embodying the innocent fragility of the god of poetry. Although he describes these constructions as figurative descriptions expressed as images, they are nonetheless images he regards as ‘immensely powerful; they live on and give force to the different discourses that we have about children’ (2005:65). The two constructions are examined in more detail below.

\(^7\) The United States, where the people interviewed for the article are based, has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
2.2.1 Children as a threat to the public domain

The ‘Dionysian’ image of children as described by Jenks (2005) and others captures a perceived lack of moral agency (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Aitken 2001; Mayall 2009). However, Mayall counters the traditional view of children as irrational and incapable of moral positions arguing that children from quite a young age engage in ‘lively discussions of moral issues’ (2009:88). She refers to the work of Gareth Matthews8 (among others) who established the moral agency of children aged 8-11 years. According to Matthews children develop moral agency through hands on experience of daily encounters that provoke a particular need for consideration. Mayall draws a distinction between rationality and reasonableness with reference to the work of Michael Pritchard (1996) who, she says, describes rationality in terms of an ability to make moral judgments, and reasonableness as ‘primarily a social disposition’ (2009:89). The latter is described as specific to each individual personality.

Despite this re-evaluation of children as moral agents who may at times present their views in what might be considered an overly emotional fashion and an awareness among adults who have direct experience of children and their moral agency, Mayall identifies ‘a fault line between their moral competence in practice, and their ascribed low moral status – especially outside the home’ (2009:110). As a result of this understanding of children as lacking moral agency, their presence in public space presents an on-going challenge to the status quo as children without an adult are deemed to be ‘up to no good’ and considered to be a threat to that space (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Valentine 2004). The same construction of children as incompetent that assumes a lack of moral agency, expresses a concern for

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8 Mayall refers to Matthews work Philosophy and the Young Child 1980 and Dialogues with children 1984
children as vulnerable and in need of protection. This has a similarly inhibiting effect on their outdoor freedoms as described below.

2.2.2 Children as vulnerable in the public domain

A desire to protect them from public space has led to children becoming the victims of forces which contrive the geography of the built environment (Aitken 2001). In particular, children have suffered a geography of exclusion which has been the subject of debate among geographers since the 1970s who are concerned with what is seen as ‘the spatial oppression of children’ (2001:178). Children are regarded as vulnerable to a range of risk factors which shape perceptions of the public domain. As mentioned in section 2.1, from a parental point of view those risks primarily take the form of traffic and ‘stranger danger’ (Valentine 1997) but specific local community factors also come in to play (Tranter and Pawson 2001). Children themselves have identified bullying from other children and the behaviour of rude or even drunken adults as risk factors (Milne 2009). In some scenarios risk anxiety has become so profound that it is not just a matter of children being perceived as vulnerable but childhood itself, which is constructed as ‘a precious realm under siege’ (Jackson and Scott 1999:86) where children’s everyday worlds are understood as unsafe.

The management of that perceived risk within the public domain is not understood as a shared societal concern but rather solely the preserve of individual parents and little, if any, concession is made to designing public space with children’s safety in mind. Therefore parents are faced with no choice other than to restrict their children’s autonomy (Jackson and Scott 1999). As a result children are now subject to considerable adult supervision and what has been described as ‘the privatization of their lives’ (Katz 2005:103) or a removal of children from their neighbourhood streets to what is considered the safety of home. The
‘indoor child’ is increasingly an idea western society has come to accept as normative while ‘the outdoor child is automatically suspect’ (Ward 1994:152).

Urban public space in particular is perceived as a zone where children are spatially constrained within areas segregated according to age so that despite an increasing number of children living in cities (Prout:2003) they are less and less visible (James, Prout and Jenks 1998). Valentine’s research on parents views on children and urban space identifies the source of the problem not so much as a consequence of social structures acting to oppress children but rather as an expression of parental concern manifest in ‘a geography of fear in which danger is associated with strangers in public space’ (2004:69). According Valentine, parents are increasingly relying on private enterprises such as afterschool clubs and commercial play zones to protect their children from public space. Hence, she describes a retreat of children from the street that has fostered an assumption that public space is essentially the domain of adults. This in turn feeds into a perception that public space is not safe for children and results in investment in public space which is adult oriented while the provision of child friendly facilities such as traffic calming diminishes. As a result, children’s loss of outdoor freedom has become a self-perpetuation vicious cycle.

This complex understanding of children and their status lends itself to a somewhat poor assessment of children’s access to public space in contemporary western society. However, it is important to exercise some caution before assuming that children are entirely invisible in the public domain. Despite the structural factors that work to exclude them from their urban neighbourhoods, there is evidence that children are still present in some urban outdoor contexts. Research on children’s transportation modes to school (DTO: 2007) suggests they have not disappeared from public space as many of them walk to school. While there is empirical evidence showing that they have less independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990), there is also evidence that some children still enjoy autonomous access to public
space (Hil and Bessant 1999; O’Brien et al. 2000). Furthermore, those children who do access the public domain appear to invest the urban environment through which they move with meaning in an effort to resist becoming ‘passive casualties of domination’ (Hil and Bessant 1999:49).

2.2.3 Changing the power balance

In order to gain a more balanced view of children’s access to the public domain, there is a need for a shift of focus towards a children’s standpoint. This can be established through listening to their views. By developing an understanding of children’s perspective on their engagement with public space, the discussion can begin to open up to an acknowledgment of those children who do still walk through their urban worlds. A readiness to listen to children’s voices facilitates new insights into the urban space itself and important information on how children utilise that urban space. This acknowledgment of children’s agency shifts the argument more firmly towards a rights based discussion of children and public space, by having at its starting point the voice of the child, and as its endgame a recognition of the children’s right to participation which acts as a counterbalance to the current emphasis on protection.

An interesting example of the value of examining the use of public space from the perspective of children is the debacle which ensued over the introduction of a 30Km/h speed limit in Dublin City. In January 2010 Dublin City Council introduced this new speed limit in a section of the inner city which encompassed some of the neighbourhoods that children who participated in this research lived in. There was an immediate public outcry against the new speed limit. Prime among the arguments against it was the suggestion that maintaining a speed of 30 Km/h was an impossibility for drivers, who would inevitably break this new law and hence render it futile. The media attention focussed on individual drivers who seemed to
feel affronted by the new imposition and opposition mounted by the Automobile Association (AA), the car lobby organisation\textsuperscript{9}. Writing in the *Irish Times* the environment correspondent, Frank McDonald, said that the introduction of the slow speed limit was ‘interpreted by the AA and others as an unwarranted assault on the ‘rights’ of motorists’ (*The Irish Times* 25/2/2010). In response the AA was quoted as describing the speed limit as a ‘misapplication’ of an idea which had in fact only been implemented in residential areas in other cities (*The Irish Times* 1/2/2010). Some effort was made to discuss the numbers of pedestrian deaths in the area by way of arguing for the value of the new speed limit. Ultimately the city councillors, many of whom represented constituents living within the 30Km/h zone, voted for a reduction of the slower speed limit zone to a smaller section of the inner city.

The debate that played out through the media failed to engage with the fact that Dublin’s inner city is a residential area and home to thousands of children. The issue was subsequently revisited and a further public consultation was conducted but inevitably, children, who are not commonly understood to be autonomous public domain users, were not consulted. A failure to represent children’s perspectives on their lives in discussions on matters which affect them results in a lack of understanding about how they live their lives and leads to decision making which does not take their needs into account. This lack of awareness is tightly woven into the structural fabric of society, as has been discussed above. The value of exploring children’s perspectives through collaborative research models in order to develop a better understanding of their lives is discussed in the next section with reference to a focus on individual experience.

\textsuperscript{9} There was at least one attempt to raise the media’s awareness of the needs of children in this discussion made jointly by myself and a community activist living in the north west inner city by issuing a press release. There were two responses; The Metro Herald and the City Channel
2.3 Locating children and their experience in the research process

The traditional developmental psychology and the newer sociological constructions of childhood referred to in section 2.1 inform the discourse on research into children’s lives and shape the approaches and methods employed. A debate among authors informed by different conceptualizations of childhood as described here conveys the ‘fit’ between understandings of children and research approaches. The traditional understanding of children as incompetent led to an assumption that information on their lives was best sought from adults, with the result that children were positioned in the research process as ‘objects’ who were not scientifically reliable.

Hogan (2005) summarises the criticism aimed at developmental psychology in terms of key issues including: ‘the perception that a focus on development has led to the neglect of the quality and meaning of children’s present lives, the search for ‘universal laws’ of child development, the assumption that child development is ‘natural’ (biologically based), a view of children as passive, and a focus on age-related competency/deficits rather than on subjective experience’ (2005: 23). She suggests that the ontological assumptions about childhood in mainstream developmental psychology (universal, progressive development, passive/dependent) and their accompanying epistemological assumptions about research with children (information about ‘the child’, about universal laws of child development, that adult views are more valuable than children’s) are enshrined in particular methodologies, none of which appear to acknowledge children as individuals who are affected by, and affect, the contexts within which they live.

As a result children are ‘treated as objects of research to the neglect of their subjective experiences’ (2005:25). There have, however, been challenges to the mainstream model, among them the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and more recently Tudge (2008) who argue
that children’s lives are influenced by the socio-cultural context in which they grow up, but also recognise the role children play in shaping their own lives.

Through the ‘emergent paradigm’ described above in section 2.1, the traditional understanding of children as incomplete adults within the disciplines of psychology and sociology was challenged and a new conceptualization of children as ‘active, competent beings dealing with complex social worlds’ was presented (Christensen and Prout 2005:48). Sociologically, children have come to be seen as actively making meaning of the world around them which has led to a shift in research focus towards seeing children as ‘social actors whose actions can both shape and change social life’ (Christensen and Prout 2005:50). This re-evaluation of children’s competencies has led to a recognition of children as experts in their own lives and increasingly the trend in research is towards engaging children as participants in the research process. This is usually accompanied by an assumption that research methods should be appropriate to the particular children involved in the study (Christensen and James 2008). This new direction in conducting research into children’s lives takes a view that their present lives are worthy of study in their own right, rather than examining their lives for clues to future, adult, outcomes.

The value of the contribution of the emergent paradigm and what is still sometimes called the ‘new’ social studies of children to a contemporary understanding of children and childhood is acknowledged by developmental psychologists. But it is argued by Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) that proponents of this position have been overly critical of developmental psychology and might be in danger of losing sight of the value of the discipline in their haste to re-invent the research agenda: ‘Before accepting the proposal that developmental psychology be consigned to the dustbin of history (James et al. 1998), it may be worthwhile looking more into the complexities underlying the simple appeal to listen to the child’ (2008: 14). Diane Hogan takes this point up in her account of research on ‘the
child’ from a developmental psychology perspective which has traditionally held that children lack the competence to participate in research on their experiences and suggests developmental psychologists are moving towards a better understanding of how to engage children; ‘when we attempt to make ourselves understood to children we find them to be more competent than we expected’ (2005:34).

Developments in research on children’s lives reflect an assumption that any effort to understand the complexity of their lives requires a shift away from a model which understands childhood as universal and de-contextualised. This is a position which has been acknowledged by developmental psychologists who argue that in some instances research on children in the field of developmental psychology has moved on, taking children out of the laboratory and focussing instead on children in context (Woodhead and Faulkener 2008). There is also a valuable precedence for studying children’s lives in context such as the work of the environmental psychologist Roger Hart (1979) who conducted research into children’s experience of place with children in their places of play. Similarly, Robin Moore (1986), an architect and urban planner with a particular interest in the learning value of play spaces, conducted research into the relationship between play and place during which he walked with children through their neighbourhoods discussing places they liked to play. Woodhead and Faulkner caution against throwing out ‘the baby with the developmental bathwater’ (2008:35) in favour of an understanding of children as active participants. They propose a need to look beyond dichotomies and consider children as ‘becomings at the same time as they are beings’ (ibid) and to adopt an approach to research with children which acknowledges their ‘social participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interests and ways of communicating’ (ibid).

A discussion in the literature on ways of examining childhood which draws on tenets of the ‘emergent paradigm’ (Prout and James 1997) that seem to contradict one another helps
clarify the benefit of considering the apparently contradictory understandings of childhood. Christensen and Prout (2005) identify one of the advantages of the re-construction of childhood as a social phenomenon as an opportunity to examine it in terms of contemporary trends. They point to two particular trends in contemporary childhood: familization and individualization. They argue that a move towards familization has led to a situation whereby children are increasingly seen as their parental dependents and their parents in turn are seen as the primary protectors of their offspring. This has given rise to an increased ‘sequestration of children in the family and the decline of children’s autonomous movement around their neighbourhood’ (2005:53).

Having identified this tendency it becomes possible to examine its implications for children as individuals, a perspective which reflects an understanding of children as experiencing a diversity of childhoods and as socially constructed. Qvortrup elaborates on the value of seeing scope for examining children’s lives through an ‘intersection’ (2008:81) between apparently contradictory understandings arguing that ‘no one method can produce all knowledge needed’ (2008:67). Concurring with this view, Hogan proposes that an open mind on approaches to researching children yields richer results and advocates ‘a collaboration across relevant disciplines’ (2005:37). This study has adopted such an open mind and draws on a number of disciplines. However it is aligned with the conceptualization of children as social actors and agents who negotiate and shape their lives. In doing so this study seeks to give primacy to the voice of the child. In the next section the place of children in the research process as a reflection of an acknowledgement of their rights to participation is outlined.
2.3.1 Listening to children in the research process

The new conceptualization of childhood marks a shift away from seeing the child as a universal concept over time and place. It is a change in understanding which has fostered research into the varieties of lives children experience and a focus on the importance of understanding the implications of individuality; ‘there is not one childhood, but many’ (Frones 1993:1 cited in Christensen and Prout 2005). This focus on individuality reflects a rights based approach to according children a voice in determining their lives and provides the impetus for engaging them in participative research designs which are increasingly the basis of research on children. The reappraisal of the place of children in research locates the research endeavour in a political discourse that questions the status of children in society and promotes recognition of children’s rights to participation (Mayall 1994; Lansdown 1994). It is an approach which suggests a moral imperative to conduct participative research with children (Spyrou 2011) complimenting the practical value of collaborating with children as discussed in more detail below in section 2.3.2

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have rights to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14) and freedom of assembly (Article 15). Article 12 on the right to have their voice heard is most commonly cited in relation to children’s participation in research processes. This article is divided into two sections focussing on a right to express views on matters which affect children and a right to be heard in judicial and administrative proceedings. Under Article 12 adults are obliged to ‘respect children as autonomous beings and rights-holders’ (Kilkelly and Donnelly 2006:8). The right to participation inevitably raises questions about the meaning of participation and how it might be achieved most effectively. Degrees of participation from
manipulation to child-initiated shared decisions with adults are described in terms of a hierarchical ladder in which child-initiated participation is regarded as the most meaningful and is thus placed at the top (Hart 1992; National Children’s Strategy 2000). It is not always appropriate for participation to operate at the highest level of the ladder (Hart 1997) and the level of participation depends on the circumstances (Kilkelly and Donnelly 2006). Similarly there are various ways and methods of engaging children in participative decision making processes (Hart 1992; Kilkelly and Donnelly 2006), adopted according to the relevance to the task at hand. The focus of this study is on children’s experience of independent spatial mobility. The collaborative methods employed in the research are described in chapter four, while the value of exploring individual experience is discussed in the next section.

2.3.2 Researching children’s experience

Studies which focus on children’s experience are based on a recognition of the uniqueness of each child. Greene asserts that ‘every child has an individual and unique experience of his or her childhood’ (2005: xi). The examination of children’s experiences of their everyday lives facilitates an understanding of ‘what being a child means’ (Danaher and Briod 2005:233), while simultaneously challenging adult conceptions and the adult constructed social world (Waksler 1986). Greene and Hill present a definition of experience which draws on the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary definition; ‘The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition or of being consciously affected by an event’, and suggest that experience demands a consciousness or awareness. While children may have this awareness, ‘the nature of any child’s (or adult’s) experience is always in part inaccessible to an outsider’ (2005:5). However Greene and Hill also argue that, as experience is socially mediated, it is ‘in some essentials, shared’ (ibid).
The meaning of experience is complex, with connotations of feeling, sensations, thoughts and learning (Tuan 1977). For Roger Hart (1979) the landscape children experience as they play is ‘known and felt’ (1979:9). Experience, according to Tuan (1974) refers to both the known and the unknown in so far as it applies to the familiar, but a desire for experience motivates people to move outside their comfort zone to encounter the unfamiliar. An exploration of selfhood in relation to the environment and the bond between people and their setting is the subject of Tuan’s *Tophophilia* (1974), in which he describes the experience which lies at the heart of this bond. He argues in *Space and Place* that it is through experience that reality is constructed; ‘what can be known is a reality that is a construct of experience, a creation of feeling and thought (1977:9).

The experience of environment is acquired through the senses in the first instance, while how the world is perceived and how the environment is negotiated is affected by cultural values. Tudge (2008) suggests that culture influences development because what is made available to children and the sort of access they have to different resources reflects cultural values. This sense of a socio-cultural relationship between experience and place is referred to by Greene and Hill (2005) who describe experience as something that depends on ‘the discourses that are dominant in their culture’ (2005:5). While those cultural values and attitudes shape experience, the role of the individual is also a key consideration and what people choose to acknowledge ‘is an accident of individual temperament’ (Tuan 1974:113).

Greene and Hill (2005) discuss the value of the study of children’s experience grounded in an assumption that enquiring into children’s present lives reflects an understanding of children as beings rather than ‘becomings’, thereby placing value on their lives in the here and now. Instead of looking at how their current lives will affect their future lives they advocate ‘a view of children as persons’ (2005:3) in their own right and argue against studying ‘the child’ in order to understand human psychology in general. An interest
in uncovering some of this individual complexity requires probing into individual experience; ‘The richness of an individual’s life story is very often not to be found in the surface of life but in how it is lived, in the person’s experiences and reactions to the world’ (2005:4).

Studies of individual experience are located within the constructivist paradigm which advocates the pluralistic nature of reality and an approach to ‘understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it’ (Schwandt 1998: 221). An understanding of this ‘lived experience’ facilitates an understanding of agency and the active role children play in shaping their lives. Greene and Hill argue that ‘without some kind of access to the content of a person’s experience, we have a very incomplete account, from a scientific perspective, of what it is that causes any person, adult or child, to act as they do’ (2005: 1).

In summary, this section describes an understanding of children as competent social actors and positions them accordingly in the research process. An acknowledgment of their competencies positions children as collaborators in the research process, and using methods which as children they enjoy and feel comfortable with\(^\text{10}\), facilitates a rich account of children’s lives. Identifying children as competent collaborators in the research process also reflects an acknowledgment of their rights under the UN Convention on the rights of the Child, in particular their participation rights under Article 12. The value of exploring individual experience has been described as manifesting a recognition of children’s rights and their individual agency in shaping their lives while at the same time creating an opportunity to explore the complexity of children’s daily lives. In this way a deeper understanding of both childhood and the structures which shape it can emerge. The next section looks at an ecological framework which serves to identify and examine those structures and how they impact on children’s experience. At the same time, this framework facilitates the

\(^{10}\) There is a detailed discussion of the methods used in this study in Chapter 4
identification of the individual agency of each child shaping both those structures and their own experience.

2.4 An ecological approach to understanding children’s perspectives on their spatial mobility

The study of childhood and children’s lives has increasingly focussed on looking at those lives in their daily context. It is an approach which encompasses the contextualist paradigm, a way of thinking which views reality as affected by context (Tudge 2008) and relevant to this study which is examining children’s lived experience ‘in the actual environment in which [they] live their lives’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998:994). In order to explore children’s lives within their everyday context it is useful to adopt an ecological model so as to identify and examine the systems of relationships which constitute that everyday context. This section describes the ecological dimension of the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, with particular reference to the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1994; 1998; 2006).

In 1979 Bronfenbrenner developed ‘a theoretical perspective for research in human development’ (1979:1). This theoretical perspective conceptualises the interaction between the developing person and the environment. In this thesis, that perspective has been adapted to explore children’s experience of urban spatial mobility. Bronfenbrenner developed and modified the model throughout his lifetime, shifting the focus on to what he described as the ‘proximal processes’ such as ‘parent-child and child-child activities, group or solitary play, reading, learning new skills, problem solving, performing complex tasks, and acquiring new knowledge and know how’ (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994:572). From an adult perspective a potential for many of these processes might be seen as being present in the walk a child makes through their urban neighbourhood. The extent to which children identify and
actualize any of these processes as relevant to their experience is explored in the findings chapters of this thesis.

As the theory evolved further, the role of proximal processes in human development was explored in the ‘bioecological model’ (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci 1994), or mechanisms ‘through which genetic potentials for effective psychological functioning are actualized’ (1994:568). The bioecological model encapsulates the nature/nurture debate as a framework which explores the interaction of these two ideas, recognizes the role of the interplay between the individual and the environment in contributing to realization of that genetic potential and proposes that it is through proximal processes that genetic potential is realised. Examples of proximal processes include reciprocal parent/child interactions and interactions between the child and objects in the immediate environment. It is proposed that the level of proximal processes increases the opportunities for realising that potential. The role of proximal processes is presented with an elaboration of time and the individual characteristics of the person in human development as elements of the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Brofenbrenner and Morris 1998). The power of proximal processes in effecting development varies depending on the characteristics of the individual person. Characteristics from curiosity and responsiveness to lack of interest and even aggression provoke or inhibit the affect of proximal processes in development.

Time is mentioned in the bioecolgocial model with reference to the occurrence of proximal processes on a regular basis (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci1994), and through the discussion of the PPCT model that sense of regularity is linked with stability, which is regarded as having a positive influence on development. Historical time is also discussed through the PPCT model in the context of changes in attitudes over time such as child rearing patterns and practices and how this shapes proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner and Morris1998). This tension between stability and instability is elaborated once more in the
2006 presentation of the model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris) as micro-time, which constitutes the impact of continuity and discontinuity in proximal processes. Meso-time is the time between these episodes of proximal processes which can extend over days or weeks. The reference to historical time is described as comprising macro-time or ‘the changing expectations and events in the larger society’ (2006: 796) and the reciprocal effect of historical time on human development. Ultimately the effect of time in Bronfenbrenner’s model is understood to extend ‘over the life course, across successive generations and through historical time, both past and future’ (2006:793).

The intergenerational function of time is explored in this thesis through parental perspectives on their own childhood freedoms and what is considered as a normative degree of independence today. The implications of time are also addressed in this study in relation to what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe as ‘meso-time’ or the occurrence of an activity over days or weeks. In the case of this research the time period is a number of months, when a comparison is drawn between how children experience their walks in the summer term and again when they have moved up a class in the autumn term. Finally micro-time, or ‘continuity versus discontinuity in ongoing episodes of proximal processes’ (2006: 796) is identified in this research as the regular occurrences on the children’s daily walks as well as sudden unexpected events which are explored in relation to how children describe their experience. The function of time in children’s lives is discussed in more detail in the next chapter with a focus on spatio-temporal considerations.

Although the model transitioned from a focus on the environment to a focus on processes as it evolved, the original model which teases out the environments impacting on the developing person, schematizing them as systems of relationships is of particular significance in this research. The aim of the study is to examine how children experience their daily walks through the public domain of a city space. Inevitably such an experience will be
subject to a plethora of circumstances. Bronfenbrenner advocated the use of his framework in research design: ‘the detection of such wide-ranging developmental influences only becomes possible if one employs a theoretical model that permits them to be observed’ (1979:4). The value of applying Brofenbrenners ecological model here lies in the revelation of the complex interrelationships of circumstances that shape the children’s experience. In this instance the model serves to facilitate an examination of the direct factors and the wider systems which contribute to the experience, exploring both the physical space through which the children walk and how that space is conceived and hence why it has been given this particular form. Bronfenbrenner describes the relevant environmental settings as systems of relationships described below:

- the micro-system, comprising the interrelations between the person and the immediate setting
- the meso-system, comprising relations between settings
- the exo-system, comprising an arena which affects the micro-system but which the child does not enter and
- the macro-system, comprising cultural values and attitudes which affect each system

In this research those systems of relationships have been mapped onto the children’s urban spatial mobility experience. The macro-system is identified as the socio-cultural understandings of the city. The exo-system is identified as policy, planning and design decisions which inform city development. The meso-system comprises the relations between settings such as the home and the route the children walk manifest primarily in the rules on how to navigate the route safely. The micro-system is the setting of the route the children walk from their home to school or another destination on a regular basis. The use of the ecological model in this study is illustrated below in figure 2.4.1.
An ecological framework has been used in other research into children’s outdoor experiences, including Roger Hart’s investigation of children’s place experience which employed what he called ‘an eclectic-ecological-field approach’ (1979:9). It is also an approach which has been used in research into children’s outdoor experiences and play development in Ireland. Margaret Kernan (2006) used this approach in an investigation of outdoor provision in early childhood education settings in urban area. Kernan focussed on the potential affordances of provision, examining the proximal processes in these settings and the more distal socio-cultural implications of parenting values (2006). Margaret Rogers (2009) explored the everyday lives of children in their neighbourhoods through two particular ecological ‘niches’; time and socio-physical place. Helen Lynch (2012) examined play development in relation to transactions between children and their physical home environment among infant children utilising Bronfenbrenner’s model to retain a sense of the holistic nature of the complex interrelationships of the setting and child.

In this study the urban spatial mobility experience is understood to be shaped by a range of interrelated factors. The ecological model is used to explore the nature of those factors, how children encounter them, and ultimately how the urban space through which they walk might better address their needs. It is also a model which engages with the notion of children’s agency that informs this research and acknowledges the role of individuality in shaping their experience (Tudge and Hogan 2005). The model as illustrated below draws on the work of Robin Moore (1986).
This study recognises that: ‘the forces shaping the development of human beings lie in the environments in which they live’ (Bronfenbrenner 1979:15), but there is a particular emphasis on the children’s perspectives on their experience. Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the role of the individual in shaping their development but, in the words of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998:993), in this investigation there is ‘a shift in the centre of gravity of the model’, with a stronger emphasis placed on how the children describe their experience at the centre of this thesis.
As has been suggested in chapter one, the examination of children’s experience of their everyday activities is best approached from an inter-disciplinary perspective. The ecological framework has a value here as a means to ‘bridge disciplinary boundaries’ (Tudge and Hogan 2005:102) by integrating the various perspectives coherently. The inter-disciplinary perspective is discussed in more detail in chapter four. Furthermore, merging an ecological approach with a particular focus on children’s agency parallels the theoretical basis of the discipline of children’s geographies which acknowledges both children’s agency shaping their lives and the role of the wider environment (Holloway and Valentine 2000).

The ecological theoretical framework facilitates an exposition of the complex interrelations of children’s lives and the range of issues which impact on their experience of independent spatial mobility. Through a clear illustration of the relationship between the proximal and distal systems and the children’s experience, it reveals both the active role children play in shaping their mobility experience and the limitations imposed on them by the wider structures.

**Conclusion**

While the focus for this research is on what Qvortrop calls a ‘micro-orientation’ (2005:67) or an examination of individual children’s lives, it is a study which also engages with the debate on the need to acknowledge the macro-structures which shape children’s lives, particularly those structures Qvortrop describes as ‘spatial forces’ (2005:68). However the purpose of this study is to develop an insight into children’s experience of spatial mobility and while acknowledging the importance of identifying the relevant macro-structures, the focus of this study is on the child’s perspective of their experience of those structures. This chapter describes an understanding of children as active agents shaping their life experience, an understanding which informs the attempt by this study to present children’s perspectives on
their spatial mobility in an urban context. The complex relationship between traditional and more contemporary understandings of childhood has been discussed in relation to children’s access to public space. A concern in the literature that children have been excluded from public space has been discussed as a consequence of how they are understood as simultaneously vulnerable and threatening. The concern is challenged by evidence that children do still walk to school through the public domain and the suggestion has been made that the assumption that they are disappearing from the outdoors has contributed to a vicious cycle whereby public space does not meet children’s needs, so it is not considered suitable for them.

Through this chapter the debate on children’s independent spatial mobility has been located within the breach between the child’s right to protection and the child’s right to participation, a gap which this study argues needs to be bridged so as to acknowledge the citizenship of children. This can only be achieved by making visible those children who regularly walk through their urban neighbourhoods en-route to and from school and other places of activity in the first instance. Having done that, children’s perspectives on their spatial mobility experience should be established so that the urban space in which they live might better reflect their needs and facilitate their participation in the public domain.

In order to present children’s perspectives on their spatial mobility this study draws on the various approaches to the study of children as identified by James, Jenks and Prout (1998) in an effort to examine the complexity of the individual lives of children. The challenge inherent in studying the individual experiences of children has been discussed with reference to the need to reveal ‘commonalities of childhood’ (Christensen and James 2008:17), which this study seeks to overcome through an exploration of individual meaning in the context of shared urban space. The importance of giving an authentic account of
children’s perspectives has been presented and a number of challenges encountered by researchers in relation to differing adult child perceptions have been discussed.

This chapter has focussed on the social construction of childhood in contemporary Western society and the implications for children and their independent spatial mobility in an urban context. In the next chapter the focus of attention shifts to the discourse in the literature on constructions of the city and the child in the city, and how these ideas affect children’s independent spatial mobility. Together these two chapters coalesce into a case for investigating urban spatial mobility and the significance of independence from the perspective of children.
Chapter 3 Children’s Access to Urban Public Space: the Complexities of Independent Spatial Mobility in a City Context

‘Children mostly live their lives within the warp and weft of the striations of adult space’

(Jones 2003: 43)

Introduction

The aim of this research is to describe children’s views of the experience of their walks through the adult oriented urban realm. The research aim calls for an exploration of various interrelated layers of concerns which shape the experience and as such locates this study within a contextualist paradigm (Tudge 2008). This chapter sets out to present the key contextual concerns in the literature surrounding children’s perspective on their urban spatial mobility. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to drill down into the various aspects of the research question and examine the underlying theoretical concerns. The urban spatial mobility experience is thus revealed as comprising quite a diverse range of factors.

The issues revealed in that process emerge as interrelated factors that shape the children’s experience, which in turn are shaped by each individual child. In order to examine the range of issues of relevance in a coherent way, an effort has been made throughout the chapter to present them separately although this is acknowledged as being somewhat contrived. As the thesis progresses these various strands which comprise the rich tapestry of children’s spatial mobility experience are gradually pulled back together again.

This chapter opens with a brief account of the ‘contextualist paradigm’ referred to in chapter one. The relevance of this paradigm to this thesis will then be demonstrated (3.1). The chapter goes on to present an examination of understandings of children in the city (3.2)
and the extent to which the city attempts to meet the needs of children is discussed as resulting in a paradoxical loss of freedom in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2. The theoretical constructions of space and place in an urban context are described in section 3.3 and 3.3.1. The theoretical issues underpinning the tension between mobility, embodied experience and place making is explored in section 3.4 and 3.4.1. The importance of independence is raised in the literature as a key consideration of children’s urban spatial mobility and section 3.5 begins with an examination of independence as a social construct. This is followed by a discussion of the perceived value of independence in relation to urban spatial mobility (3.5.1), and then an examination of evidence of a loss of independent spatial mobility (3.5.2) and causes of that loss (3.5.3). Particular attention is paid to the concept of ‘stranger danger’ as a construction which has contributed to a climate of fear around children’s outdoor freedoms (3.5.5). Children’s views are then explored in 3.5.7. The chapter concludes by returning to the city as a context for examining children’s perspectives, beginning with an examination of changes in the urban environment and how children are located within the changing discourse (3.6). Finally the need to re-consider the place of children in the city by recognising their status as citizens is presented (3.6.2).

3.1 Contextualizing children’s urban independent spatial mobility

As discussed in chapter one, this study is located within the contextualist paradigm or view of the world. It draws on the work of Jonathan Tudge (2008) to set the complex scene of interrelations which shape children’s urban spatial mobility. Tudge (2008) distinguishes between a ‘neo-positivist’ ontology which posits the view that ‘reality exists and although it is not possible to prove that reality, science advances by accepting as real what has yet to be disproved’ (2008:12) and a non-positivist ontology which recognises many realities, shaped by perceptions and circumstances. This latter ontological stance which recognises different
realities was discussed in chapter two with reference to constructivism as an approach to studying individual life experiences (Schwandt 1998).

In this chapter the circumstances and perceptions which shape the various realities are considered. Those circumstances which shape perceptions of reality include ‘time, power and local situations’ (Tudge 2008:59). The diversity of variables relevant to this study reflect a ‘variegated view of context’ (2008:67) as discussed by Tudge. They include the perceived role of play in children’s lives, the significance of risk anxiety, middle childhood, place/space dichotomy, mobility and the spatio-temporal structuring of childhood. According to Tudge (2008), sources of power difference include gender, age and ethnicity. Age is of particular relevance in this study and it has been discussed in chapter two both with reference to generation and the implications of the power dynamics of adult/child relations in situations such as home and school. In this chapter the significance of middle childhood, the age group explored in this research, is discussed as a period when children begin to move out in to the world alone. Time was also referred to in chapter two in relation to the ecological framework which underpins this thesis. It is explored in more detail in this chapter with reference to temporal constraints in children’s daily lives and how that affects the spatial arrangement of their day. Finally local situations are considered in relation to cultural understandings of the city and of children in the city as well as the meaning and the significance of independence in contemporary Western society.

From an epistemological perspective, Tudge (2008) suggests that research which is informed by a contextualist paradigm examines people’s experiences ‘by situating them in their context’ (2008: 62). This chapter examines the theoretical significance of space and place, the process of place making and the significance of the ‘embodied’ experience of landscape (Wylie 2007) by way of foregrounding the findings on children’s experiences of urban spatial mobility. In the following section the discussion in the literature on cultural
understandings of the city, and how children are conceptualised and provided for in that context is presented.

3.2 Understandings of the city and children in the city

A pervasive understanding of the city as threatening (Kearns and Ruimy 2010) is conflated with a perception of children who walk through the public realm as an irritation at best, or a ‘social menace’ at worse (Ward 1990:183). Through his study on the interaction between adult and child geographies Owain Jones (2000) encountered a concern that children’s behaviour in the city is often misconstrued. Jones discusses the ‘imaginative geographies’ (2000:33) of place where rural is socially constructed as pure space, by contrast with the inner city which is constructed as impure. The behaviour of children in both is associated with these place constructions and where rural children walking about are viewed as engaging in a healthy free form roaming around their neighbourhoods, city children who wander in a similar way are regarded with suspicion. Jones quotes a rural parent interviewed for his study who contrasts perceptions of her son’s behaviour in the village and the city;

‘they can’t do wild things in the city, can they, without, without sort of damaging things. Jack running around with a huge stick (here) sort of, it looks funny rather than menacing, doesn’t it’ (cited in Jones 2000:35).

By associating the perceived threat the city represents with the children who live in the city, their behaviour, whether it is hanging out on the corner or kicking a can down the street, is understood as suspicious and threatening. This association between place and behaviour is indicative of a dichotomous construction of childhood as devil/angel described by Holloway and Valentine (2000) discussed in chapter two. A historical construction of children as impure beings who need to be constrained and controlled preceded a construction
of children as innocent and in need of protection and both understandings ‘continue to be mobilised in contemporary Western society’ (2000:4). In her work on public space and the culture of childhood Valentine suggests that this ‘binary conceptualization of children’ (2004:1) is reflected in how city space has been designed to effectively keep children away from impinging on the adult claimed public realm, containing them in places deemed more appropriate for them.

Despite these concerns, children continue to inhabit cities; it has been projected that by 2025 60% of the world’s children will live in cities (Prout 2003) and a significant number of children currently live in Dublin City (97,769 under 18)\(^\text{11}\). But the street outside their homes is considered adult territory. In her discussion on space and place Elizabeth Kenworthy-Teather makes the point that ‘space is not neutral’ (1999:3) and that as such it is ‘actively contested on a daily basis’ (ibid). If children are to move anywhere through their urban environments they have to cross public space. Driven in a car through the public domain does not present a problem but if children are walking, playing or merely ‘hanging out’, they are regarded as being out of place (Jenks 2005). Despite historical and on-going efforts to corral them away from the public domain and into specific childhood places (Karsten 2002) assumptions about ownership of the public realm are contested daily as children go about the everyday business of being a child; walking to and from school, to play or wherever their journey demands. But the urban environment through which they move seems to have very little regard for their existence, a landscape described as having only ‘adult values imprinted’ (Matthews and Limb 1999:61) on to it. There is research which suggests a need to shift this understanding of the function of public space because; ‘the way in which children and adults can share space equitably and the degree of spatial flexibility or

\(^{11}\) [http://www.dublincitychildrensservices.ie/](http://www.dublincitychildrensservices.ie/), Accessed 14/05/12. The figure reflects the number of children in the area covered by the local authority and includes the inner city and inner suburbs.
rigidity children experience’ (Jones 2000:31) has implications for how children identify with their local environments as welcoming or alienating (Lynch 1977).

An example of urban design which seeks to acknowledge children on the streets of their urban neighbourhoods is the Woonerveren in The Netherlands and other European countries which are known as Home Zones in Britain and Ireland. The Woonerven scheme originated in The Netherlands in the 1970s as a means of making neighbourhoods more child friendly and promoting shared use of public space. Influenced by the Woonerven, Home Zones began to emerge in Britain in the 1990s, and later in Ireland. While the primary aim of Woonerven or Home Zones is to make streets safer for pedestrians, how this is achieved, the legal status and the design regulation, vary from country to country. The streets under these schemes have in common that they are not car free, but shared by cars and pedestrians, with priority being ceded to the needs of the pedestrian. However there is evidence that how the space is designed affects the success of the scheme and examples which adhere to strict legal and design requirements are most effective (Gill 2006).

In Britain and Ireland Home Zones do not have a legal status unlike, for example, Germany where a Woonerf has a legal obligation to allow children use the entire street for play (Eubank-Ahrens 1984). Even where there are specific play areas, the neighbourhood is regarded as a play space for children and the higher the quality of the intervention, the more effective the Woonerf or Home Zone is at promoting independence and outdoor play (Eubank-Ahrens 1984; Gill 2006). The development of Home Zones in Ireland is quite recent and the focus of provision for children is on the development of play areas. The effectiveness of creating playgrounds as a solution to children’s safety in the city has been challenged and it has been proposed that: ‘danger should be removed from children rather than children from danger’ (Meyer Hillman quoted in The Guardian 2002). Hillman’s comment reflects a concern that children have lost their freedom to move through the city (Ward 1990). In the
next section efforts to address children’s safety needs in the city through the provision of playgrounds is discussed in more detail.

3.2.1 Meeting children’s needs through play provision

The use of the urban public domain by children has long been viewed as problematic. Early in the 20th century efforts were made to ‘rescue’ children from the poverty, deprivation and depravity associated with the streets where they socialised and played. In the Netherlands supervised playgrounds were introduced in the late 19th century offering city children protection from the street and at the same time promoting socialization to middle class norms (Karsten 2002). Similarly, the Playground Association of America was set up at the start of the 20th century to develop playgrounds across the US which were designed to counteract what were perceived to be the ‘social ills’ (Gagen 2003:217) of city life by providing a place for children to play under a strict form of supervision. Here the supervision focussed on socialising children, many of whom were from immigrant families, into middle class ‘American ways’ (Mrs Almy 1906 cited in Gagen 2003: 217). The playground served the purpose of shepherding children away from the perceived dangers of the public domain and into a spatially regulated setting where they were ‘placed under a controlling public eye’ (Aitken 2001: 26).

A similar concern for the welfare of children living in Dublin in the early 20th century was addressed by the Iveagh Trust through the provision of a play centre (known locally as the Beano) in the Liberties in 1915. The ethos behind the provision was one of a ‘social improvement scheme’. Local charity groups would actively seek out families most in need and the children would come and learn a range of skills and participate in routine physical exercise. In 1914 the Civics Institute of Ireland was founded in an effort to address the squalid living conditions of the state’s urban areas. In the 1930s the Institute, in cooperation
with the local authority (then known as Dublin Corporation), took on the development of supervised outdoor playgrounds for children in Dublin City (Kernan 2005). The first such playground was built in 1933 in Broadstone in the north inner city, followed by nine more playgrounds in both the north and south inner city and one in the inner suburb of Cabra.

The playgrounds were developed with three key aims: to improve children’s health, to promote moral behaviour and to tackle public safety issues (Kernan 2005). This latter aim centred on the danger caused by the presence of children in the street as well as the dangers which presented themselves to children – an understanding of children’s use of public space which persists today. From early in the 20th century housing policy centred on moving families out of the city and into the suburbs (Cleary and Connolly 2009) and the inevitable decline in the inner city population, coupled with the economic recession of the 1970s led to a significant deterioration of the playgrounds. By that stage management of the playgrounds had been handed over to the Corporation and, for largely financial reasons, the Corporation discontinued the supervision of the playgrounds by play leaders (Kernan 2005). A simultaneous dramatic increase in heroin use in the inner city in the 1980s resulted in the playgrounds becoming spaces for drug dealing and drug use and hence considered unsafe by parents. In the late 1980s playgrounds in the inner city were considered more a hazard than a place children could thrive12. From the 1990s on there was a gradual change in provision.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, incorporating Article 31 on the Right to Play, was ratified by Ireland in 1992, followed by The National Children’s Strategy in 2000 and the National Play Policy in 2004. Alongside the renewed interest in children’s play needs there was a change in policy towards a renewal of Dublin’s city centre with a focus on making it more liveable (Lord Mayor’s Commission on Employment 2010).

12 In an interview I conducted as part of a post-graduate final year project with the then head of A&E at Temple Street Children’s Hospital located in the north inner city, Dr. Peter Keenan described the local playgrounds as a constant source of injury. At the time children were presenting with broken arms or legs at least once a week.
In 2012 the Dublin City Development Board published a play plan for Dublin which emphasises the value of the city being a ‘child-friendly, playful city’ (2012:9). The policy places an emphasis on creating ‘an effective city play infrastructure and [the need to] improve the design of our play spaces’ (2012:9). However it does not address the relationship between roaming freely and play identified by Hart (1979) and (Moore 1986). In fact the effort to provide for children’s play in Dublin, which originally sprang from a perceived need to remove them from the street so that the streets might be ‘used to the full purpose for which they exist – carry traffic with maximum efficiency’ (Manning Robertson, member of the Irish Civics Institute: 1944 cited in Kernan 2005) has been criticized as having a paradoxically adverse affect on children’s freedom (Wood 1977) which will be explored in the next section.

3.2.2 The relationship between play and independence

Research into the relationship between independent spatial mobility and play opportunities in the outdoor environment indicates that the extent of independent spatial mobility and play opportunities are interdependent (Kytta 2004). Studies into children’s outdoor play report a correlation between their independence and where they play (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Veitch et al. 2006; Bringolf-Isler et al. 2010). Children who do not have much outdoor independence are more likely to play at home or the home of their friends while parental perception of safety has a direct effect on whether children are allowed to play outside independently (Bringolf-Isler et al. 2010; Valentine and McKendrick 1997). These limitations on children’s access to outdoor play in their local environments are unfortunate considering ‘play is the primary mechanism through which children become acquainted with their environment’ (Valentine and McKendrick 1997:220).

The development of play provision for children in urban areas throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and into the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is equated with the ‘socio-spatial marginalisation’
(Matthews and Limb 1999:61) of childhood and has led to a loss of freedom of movement for children. This has been accompanied by what is described as a gradual disappearance of children from the public domain (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Valentine 2004; Zeiher 2003; Karsten 2005). Some argue that this loss of freedom was in fact the original intention of the development of playgrounds (Aitken 2001). Jane Jacobs (1961) was one of the first authors to express a concern about the development of playgrounds for children. A writer and activist on urban issues, Jacobs drew a comparison between delinquency and playgrounds which were located away from the direct adult supervision of parents in the home – who traditionally kept an eye out on children playing in the street.

Also concerned with the removal of children’s play from the street, Dennis Wood (1977) argues that the trend to provide for children’s play through the development of playgrounds has resulted in a disquieting form of ‘ghettoisation’ of childhood. According to Wood, children do not wish to be cocooned in the ‘sanitized environments’ (1977:236) that have been constructed for them, they want to be out and about in the streets. He argues that the provision of children’s places, specifically playgrounds, is entirely selfish and serves primarily to allow adults a freedom to occupy the city streets; ‘to be blunt, the playground is a ghetto in which kids are kept in all ways out of the way of adults’ (1977:235). Wood suggests that feigning concern for children’s safety, adults really want the city for themselves so that they can drive through the streets at speed without worrying a child might get in the way. This focus on creating spaces specifically for children has resulted in a failure to consider ‘the needs of children and young people for high quality urban public space’ (Elsey 2004:162). The underlying assumption among those responsible for public space seems to be that children are in their place when they are away from the public realm. Hence, they assume that they do not need to be provided for as public space users. As a result efforts to improve
the public domain tend not to engage with children’s spatial mobility needs and they remain, ‘seemingly invisible’ (Matthews and Limb 1999:66).

Both Karsten (2002) and Zeiher (2003) refer to urban development as a reflection of the view that children should not have a freedom to move around the public domain and suggest that city spaces are increasingly planned with separate children’s places, such as playgrounds, play centres and leisure centres. Karsten refers to this sort of urban development as comprising; ‘processes which contribute to the exclusion of children’ from the public domain (2002:231). She describes the shift of children away from public space as a gradual process which began as soon as children were given their own spaces such as school and playgrounds. This process has resulted in today’s cities becoming increasingly segregated in terms of age (Karsten 2002). Children are now expected to remain in their designated zones – school, after school care, leisure and sports centres or the playground – which she describes as ‘an archipelago of enclaves’ dotted around the city (2002:239).

Zeiher (2003) agrees that children’s lives are increasingly confined to designated areas, although while Karsten focuses on concerns for children’s safety and ideologies around personal achievement and good parenting as underpinning this sort of urban planning, Zeiher describes the spatial arrangement of children’s lives as a manifestation of temporal obligations of both the children (school) and the adults (work). She proposes that urban children have consequently suffered an ‘insularisation’ of their worlds (2003:67), confined to their designated places which, like Karsten, she regards as ‘scattered like islands on the map of the city’ (2003:66) which can only be reached by car. Both authors assert that the location of these children’s places ensures they have little opportunity to engage with the public domain.
Comparative research into the outdoor freedoms of children living in rural and city spaces indicates that rural based children have more outdoor freedoms than those based in the city (Kytta 1997), suggesting a relationship between urbanisation and independent mobility. Perhaps somewhat ironically, playgrounds are intended to compensate for the loss of freedom which urbanisation seems to have caused (Kytta 1997). The focus on developing specific play areas for children is not unique to city planners. Concerned that their children have less freedom than they once had themselves, parents living in urban areas advocate the provision of play areas to offset the perceived loss of freedom (Veitch et al. 2006) and often associate poor play provision with an environment which is unsuitable for children (Valentine and McKendrick 1997). In some instances play itself has been transformed into a commodity and parents pay for their children to play in ‘safe’ indoor leisure centres (McKendrick et al. 2000). It seems the original intention of play provision - to provide a safe place for children to play - has produced new concerns for children as their needs are not factored in to urban design and it is more difficult for them to move through their urban worlds safely. An image of the city as an unsafe place for children to grow up in persists, alongside a somewhat negative perception of children who inhabit the city. In the next section, the theorising of the urban public realm is discussed.

3.3 Theorising public space and place

Although often used interchangeably, a distinction is drawn by Tuan (1977) between the meaning of place and space, the one local the other more distal. His discussion refers to a personalized association with place and space; he defines space as a term which evokes ‘openness’ and ‘freedom’ (1977:6), the unknown, and thus at times, somewhere which feels threatening, meanwhile place is associated with ‘stability’ and ‘security’ (1977:6). He suggests that the latter concept, place, is what space transforms into as it is known and
becomes familiar. That knowing evolves in a number of ways. It might be in the way the eye rests on something specific which grabs its attention in a vast panoramic scene or from an emotional response to place borne out of ‘intimate experiences’ (1977:137). These experiences can be difficult to express and might include close relationships with others or a brief sensory moment of the rich smell of a bakery floating on the air as we walk by. Relph (1976) emphasises the significance of place as being necessary for meaningful human activity, suggesting that place is meaning associated with a location, and discusses places as ‘directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world’ (1976:141). He refers to the essence of place as something which ‘lies in the largely unselfconscious intentionality that defines places as profound centres of human experience’ (1976:43). This subjective sense of place also has significance for larger groupings. For example, a neighbourhood takes on a shared sense of place when residents feel threatened by developers (Creswell 2004). At the same time an entire nation, which, by virtue of its size is not very readily knowable through personal experience, takes on a sense of place through unifying feelings of patriotism.

In one way or another ‘place’ holds meaning for the individual. The meaning with which place is invested can be difficult to express but it is sometimes captured in symbolic images or structures such as the local church or corner shop. Essentially, for Tuan, ‘space is transformed into place as it acquires definition and meaning’ (1977:136). Similarly Relph describes places as ‘the significant centres of our immediate experience’ (1976:141) and distinguishes space from place by defining space as ‘intangible’ but encompassing the wider context within which place is made.

The work of Tuan (1977) and Relph (1976) is concerned with examining place meaning from an experiential perspective, but there is also a view that space is invested with social meaning which affects how place might be experienced. While Tuan draws a marked distinction between space and place, the words are frequently used interchangeably in a
discussion of a social or cultural construction of space/place. Creswell looks in some detail at other conceptualizations of place and space and, referring to Rose (1993), presents the critique of an individual experiential focus on place meaning as one which fails to consider the political significance of place. With reference to Michel de Certeau (1984), Creswell explores the notion of place as fluid and discusses an understanding of place as practiced, ‘made and remade on a daily basis’ (2004: 39). This reference is comparable to Lefebvre’s argument on how space is produced, and can be reproduced: ‘Every social space is the outcome of a process with many aspects and many contributing currents signifying and non-signifying, perceived and directly experienced, practical and theoretical’ (1991:110). Valentine (2001) refers to this idea and discusses relationships between socially produced space, identities and the way in which ‘the use of these spaces can feed back into shaping the way in which people categorize others and identify themselves’ (2001:5). This argument that space or place holds meaning which is socially constructed has particular significance for how the public space of the urban realm is understood and used.

In a discussion on an economic trend in some Western cities to attract people with spending power into the city centre as a way of rejuvenating economies (a trend applicable to Dublin City), Valentine (2001) describes the resulting middle class values with which public space is infused. This construction of public space renders people who might occupy that space but do not fit with a normative idea – for example, teenagers or the homeless – as ‘other’ and out of place. In this sense public space takes on what might also be considered a cultural meaning (Mitchell 2000), in this instance shaped by middle class values.

Within any place or space which has a perceived function, there is an expectation of appropriate behaviour (Creswell 2004). People who do not behave in an appropriate way, such as children who kick a football through a shopping mall, are deemed to have transgressed that place and to be effectively ‘out of place’ (2004:27). But this is not to
suggest complicity among various groups as to who can access certain spaces. Public space has long been understood as a place of democratic political expression (Valentine 2001; Cleary and Connolly 2009) and in fact socially constructed space, or place, is contested on a daily basis (Kenworthy-Teather 1999; Valentine 2001; Creswell 2004).

The place or space of human behaviour is also described as a landscape; both observed and inhabited (Wylie 2007). A tension between these two affects both what is considered appropriate behaviour and for whom the place/space is deemed appropriate. The complex idea of landscape and the interdependency of behaviour and place is discussed in the next section.

3.3.1 Place as landscape

The word landscape evokes a view, one we look at in the form of an image or outside from a distance as a sweeping vista. Relph, for example, defines the landscape as the ‘physical, visual form’ (1976:30) of place. It is a concept which for Creswell centres around that which can be seen, and the way in which is seen (2004:10). It is also somewhere we move through on our way from one place to the next and become enfolded within. Whether rural or urban, Creswell suggests that ‘landscape refers to the shape’ (2004:11) and in this section how that shape is looked at, carved out and experienced is discussed. Beginning with an examination the role of power as an informant on the construction of landscape, this section examines landscape as an expression of agency, particularly the agency of children. The perspective of landscape as an embodied experience is then explored, and finally the relationship between walking and ‘landscaping’ is touched on in order to foreground the next section on mobility.

Wylie approaches the subject of landscape by way of questioning whether landscape is looked at or lived in. He responds simply, ‘Landscape is tension’ (2007:1). He describes an
idea of landscape which holds contrasting philosophical meanings and seeks to resolve the tension of what he calls ‘observation/inhabitation’, by suggesting that ‘we are always doing both’ (2007:4). While that may be the case, how landscape is looked at or lived in is understood from a number of different perspectives.

For example, critics of an experiential approach to landscape and place-making argue that it places too much emphasis on individuality and fails to engage with the ‘varied social, economic, historical and political contexts in which individuality is, the argument runs, primarily shaped and determined’ (Wylie 2007:180). The approach is criticised as failing to question how society functions and how power affects the experience. Authors such as John Berger and Don Mitchell, informed by a Marxist approach, discuss representations of landscape with reference to power dynamics and cultural understandings. Landscape is understood as an aesthetic ‘veil’ over a hidden reality of the power exerted by a faceless industry over the disempowered people who work the land (Wylie 2007).

Landscape is also described in relation to structuration theory and the tension between freedom and constraint (Creswell 2004). The view of society as a relationship between structures that influence people lives and their ability to exercise agency in their everyday lives was discussed with reference to children’s agency in chapter two. In the context of a discussion on landscape, structure is understood as the institutions with responsibility for constructing the world through which people move. In a city context, it is primarily the local authority, which plans, designs and builds the pathways, and streets. The local authority also determines the regulation of that landscape. Despite these governing structures, people respond to, and engage with the environment in unexpected ways because, as Creswell writes: ‘human agency is not so easily structured’, (2004:36). The structure responds to people’s negotiation of the landscape and ‘structures themselves are made through the repetition of practices by agents’ (ibid). The public realm, for example, is not understood as
appropriate for children who are unsupervised and it is designed to meet adult needs (Valentine 2004). However, children who access public space may use that space in a way which it is neither designed nor regulated for, and through this expression of their agency, the space may be reconfigured by the local authority to engage with their needs.

A post-structuralist perspective of landscape considers the power dynamics of how place is constituted (Wylie 2007). With reference to the work of Michel Foucault, Wylie (2007) describes power as operating in a dispersed manner rather than emanating from a single source. The way landscape is understood and the practices engaged in through the landscape, such as walking, may vary according to a particular historical time. However that variation in understanding is not dictated by a single, hierarchical power base, rather according to the post-structuralist perspective, power is exercised ‘both over oneself and between and across selves’ (Wylie 2007: 112).

How the individual self understands the landscape as an experience of place is the focus of a phenomenological approach. Relph discusses place as landscape experienced subtly as a reflection of ‘human values’ (1976:30). In his work on children’s place experience Hart (1979) describes their experience of the place of play as a ‘phenomenal landscape’ (1979: 9) which is ‘known and felt’ (ibid) by them. Wylie describes this perspective with reference to the work of the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty who, he writes, placed an emphasis on human experience and perception and argued that ‘the body is the basis and the conduit of knowledge’ (2007:148). Wylie describes the phenomenological approach as diverse, but that ‘a faithful description of everyday ‘lived’ experience’ (2007:140) is a common trait. He applies this approach to landscape study as an approach which looks at engaged experience rather than detached reflection. This sense of a more ‘embodied’ experience focuses on ‘a particular point of view within the world – not a gaze from without’ (2007:150).
Merleau-Ponty argues that ‘we are involved in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world’ (1962: 5). Ingold (2000) applies this idea to a discussion of ‘dwelling’ and suggests that ‘through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are part of it’ (2000:191). Discussing the relationship between landscape and place, Ingold posits that: ‘a place in the landscape is not ‘cut out’ from the whole....each place embodies the whole at a particular nexus within it, and in this respect is different from every other’ (2000:192).

According to Wylie (2007) the dwelling concept acts to dissipate a perceived difference between reflection and action and, like Ingold (2000), he describes a sense of an intertwining of the person and the landscape - of the landscape being part of the person and the person part of the landscape. The meaning of landscape, as distinct from place or space is captured as ‘a tapestry within which their lives [of inhabitants] are interwoven’ (Ingold and Vergunst 2008:8), a process which fosters a sense of belonging (Olwig 2008). This sense of dwelling in the landscape is closely associated by some authors with mobility (Urry 2007), and footprints are described as being ‘part of the weave’ (Ingold and Vergunst 2008:8) that comprises the tapestry of the landscape. Rather than thinking in terms of a landscape through which one moves, Cresswell and Merriman suggest it is more appropriate to consider the process through which the world one moves is shaped as ‘landscaping’ (2011:7). The next section presents the discussion on the active process of place making and landscaping by shifting focus on to the everyday practice of walking.
3.4 Mobility: the embodied experience of walking as place-making

The relationship between walking and place-making, in particular the experiential quality of place making which walking affords, is examined in this section. Towards the end of this section there is a brief account of walking and interdependent place knowledge, which foregrounds an examination of the construction of independence in western society and the value it is accorded in relation to children’s spatial mobility. But to begin with, the significance of mobility in Western society is examined.

Mobility is regarded as being ‘centre stage’ (Urry 2007:6) in policy development and academic agendas. It is at the centre of global debates on issues as diverse as climate change, obesity, war, famine, economic crises and tourism. Mobility is dependent on a complex interrelated series of systems such as ticketing, safety and timetabling, systems which simultaneously open up considerable freedom of movement and render the traveller dependent on their efficiency. It is a key component in today’s risk-averse society (Adams 2001) where fear of large-scale terrorist attacks or unsavoury characters living down the street have both transnational and very local implications.

Mobility is also a means of constructing and performing place (Urry 2007; Creswell and Merriman 2011; Lee and Ingold 2006; Cele 2006; Legat 2008; Ingold and Vergunst 2008). The function of place shifts and changes as people with different purposes move in and out of them; ‘places are economically, politically and culturally produced through the multiple mobilities of people’ (Urry 2007: 269). Some places assume a particular type of mobility, for example cheap flights are a feature of well known holiday destinations, while ancient pilgrim routes are associated with walking (Urry 2007; Lorrimer: 2011). Daily travel, such as school trips, which are central to this thesis, are most often linked with car travel (DTO 2007) although a significant number of children walk to school regularly (Tranter and Pawson
A particular mobile behaviour (commuting for example) can be a daily or weekly experience, other mobile behaviours can occur over a lifetime. Mobility in this context might just as likely be driving, flying, bussing or cycling as walking, but walking is associated with a type of place making which arises from the corporeal contact with the environment being traversed.

Urry (2007) associates mobility with social behaviour, pleasure and obligation, suggesting that: ‘movement often involves an embodied experience of the material and social modes of dwelling in motion’ (2007:11). This sense of movement is of particular significance to walking where the physicality of the movement fosters a sensory and even tangible connection between the walker and the environment they are moving through. Walking affords an embodied experience of the environment through which the movement occurs which ‘imprints itself on the body’ (Lee and Ingold 2006: 73) in the form of sound and smell, for example, and we construct a knowledge of the environment of which we are hardly aware of (Cele 2006). The more frequently the path is walked, the more meaningful that pathway becomes – replete with memory and encounters that are social, sensual and practical (Lee and Ingold 2006). Everyday routes, to the shop, school, or to visit a neighbour, acquire a quality of ‘thick lines’ (2006:77), full of meaning which is described as ‘un-thought’ (ibid), but felt and experienced.

Walking also has a social significance as people walk to visit friends and neighbours or walk with peers to work or with children to school (Lee and Ingold 2006; Ingold and Vergunst 2008). Those walks in turn are often made with others – children, for example, typically prefer company when they are walking to and from places (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). Walking affects how we communicate with those we are with, compelling walkers to maintain a similar rhythm, change position according to the narrowing of a pathway and to speak without making eye contact due to the need to focus on the
environment (Lee and Ingold 2006). Regular walks along particular routes with recurring social encounters have a positive effect on the social capital of a place (Leyden 2003).

In their work on walking Ingold and Vergunsch (2008) explore ‘ideas of the social and symbolic with the immediate day to day activities that bind practice and representation ...to show that everything takes place in one way or other, on the move’ (2008:3). They look at walking as an efficient way to move through urban areas. They also describe how (depending on the pace at which one walks and the demands on ones attention) walking allows time for reflection; an experience which encompasses the need to both look out and around and look in and reflect. It is a means through which we examine ‘the relationship between self and landscape’ (Creswell and Merriman 2011:6). As children walk their daily routes to school they become ‘detectives’ (Lee and Ingold 2006:4) taking in the sensuous experience and engaging with their movement ‘as a way of knowing’ (ibid).

That ‘way of knowing’ is bound up with place making and as they move along their urban routes, walkers ‘inscribe their lives into the city’ (Lee and Ingold 2006:77) and the ordinary is transformed into a personal story - described by Creswell and Merriman as ‘spatial stories’ (2011:6). Writing about the Thcho people of Northwest Canada and how they construct knowledge, Legat (2008) discusses how walking is the experience which links narrative and personal knowledge. The routes the Thcho walk contain both a personal and an ancestral biography, shared as narrative while they walk in order to gain important and useful knowledge. It is through the stories that perceptions of reality are constructed, coupled with a physical experience of walking the route which must be done at a pace that ensures a sensory connection with the environment. In this way knowledge might be regarded as a co-construction of the child’s attention to their surroundings, listening to the stories, both ‘following footprints’ and ‘leaving one’s own footprints’ (Legat 2008:47). It is a somewhat
different view of building knowledge to the contemporary Western view which places emphasis on independence as fundamental to developing place knowledge (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) and decision making skills necessary for spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990).

The following sections present a discussion of how independence is conceptualised in Western society, leading into a discussion of the perceived value of independence, evidence of loss, and the perceived causes and consequences of that loss of independence among children.

3.5 Independent spatial mobility: a social construct

Questions have been raised in the literature on how independence is understood and defined in studies on children’s spatial mobility. The concept of independent mobility was introduced by Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg in 1990 (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). Although it has been widely adopted in academic literature since then, the meaning is not discussed in the original study apart from the use of phrases such as ‘on their own’ or ‘alone’. Definitions of independent spatial mobility have focussed on children’s ‘territorial range’ and permission they are granted from parents to play and roam outside without adult supervision (Hart 1979). In One False Move, the report of the findings of a study on levels of independent mobility among English school children aged 7 to 15 years conducted by Hillman et al. (1990), the extent of children’s independent mobility is measured in terms of what are called ‘licenses’, granted by parents to children for permission to travel places alone. The first set of licenses refers to permissions children gain from parents to move around independently on foot, the second set refers to permissions children gain from parents to use ‘mechanised vehicles’ (Hillman et al. 1990:20) such as bikes or public transport. According to the study findings ‘the number of ‘licences’ (ibid) that children are awarded ‘increases with age’ (ibid)
and the more licences children gain, the greater the extent of their independent spatial mobility is considered.

A more recent study, the *Childhood, Urban Space and Citizenship Project* conducted in the late 1990s, set out to ascertain ‘where children reported being allowed to go without adults’ (O’Brien et al. 2000:265) in three contrasting urban environments. The model of independent spatial mobility underlying that research draws on the use of licences as described by Hillman et al. (1990) to determine the extent of independent mobility and as such the definition of independence is also adult oriented. Similarly, the study by Tranter and Pawson (2001) which examines independent spatial mobility among children living in Christchurch, New Zealand to establish levels of access to their local environment uses these ‘licenses’ as a measurement. Alparone and Pacilli developed a ‘structural equation model’ (2012: 109) to examine the relationship between personal, environmental and psychosocial factors and the extent of children’s independent spatial mobility but again the study was approached from an adult perspective. They based their research on questionnaires distributed to mothers of primary school children focussing on maternal perceptions of danger, characteristics of the local environment and of the value of autonomy and personal characteristics. They concluded that a lack of social capital among the mothers increases perceptions of danger, which in turn leads to parents building ‘multiple barriers which severely restrict their children’s daily life’ (2012:117).

Kytta’s (1997) study of children’s independent mobility in urban, small town and rural areas involved a more child centred perspective on the extent of independent spatial mobility through the use of ‘mobility diaries’. The children in the sample group filled in a diary over the course of two weeks which described all outdoor journeys made after school. The data were then analysed to establish how many journeys were made without adult accompaniment and where the children went on these journeys, in order to examine the
extent of the children’s independent spatial mobility in each of the three contrasting environments.

The emphasis in these studies on the extent of independence is stressed at the expense of understanding the meaning and experience of independence for children. Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) question the assumptions underpinning the assertion that the loss of independent spatial mobility is problematic for children’s development, as suggested by Hillman et al. (1990). By way of developing a better understanding of the meaning of independence in relation to children’s spatial mobility which informs much of the research on outdoor freedoms, Mikkelesen and Christensen identify the theoretical framework which underpins the work of Hillman et al. (1990). They argue that the concept is informed by a developmental model which understands childhood as a phase of vulnerability and dependence and associates independence with increasing competence and a move towards adulthood. However it has been argued that dependency is not an aspect of particular stages in the process of maturation but that it is ‘primarily a social relationship which rests on the exercise of power ’ (Hockey and James 1993:105).

Hockey and James argue that independence is a social construct within a society that views dependence and independence as ‘binary oppositions’ (1993:48), where dependency is associated with those who have not achieved ‘full membership of society’ (ibid), in particular children, and that as they grow up children are given increasing amounts of independence so that they might achieve a status more akin to being ‘fully human’ (ibid). This understanding of dependency relates to how childhood is understood in western society as a period of vulnerability and dependence, when children have ‘rights to protection and training but not to autonomy’ (Ennew 1986:21 cited in Hockey and James 1993:57). Dependency is associated with powerlessness while independence is understood to be a goal one achieves on entering the ‘completeness’ of the adult world. Mikkelsen and Christensen argue that dependence and
independence should be seen ‘in a perspective broader than one of hierarchical and predetermined relation between child and adult’ (2009:41) and they suggest that the assumption that independence is a goal to be achieved on reaching full maturity is an idea which ‘reflects a cultural focus on individuality’ (2009:40).

They propose a need for research into the meaning of independence from the child’s perspective in order that its value might be better understood. For example, the findings of Hillman et al. (1990) make reference to independence in terms of being ‘alone’ or ‘on their own’, but in their ethnographic study of children’s mobility using GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) systems, Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) found that children prefer not to walk alone but rather to travel in the company of their friends and that their spatial mobility is more social than originally assumed. They describe independent spatial mobility as more complex than has previously been acknowledged, and suggest it should in fact be regarded as ‘different relations of interdependency’ (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009:37). In order to develop a more meaningful insight into children’s independent spatial mobility they suggest a need to examine how that mobility is perceived by children themselves. The following section looks at the relationship between independent spatial mobility and middle childhood, before going on to discuss the perceived benefits of independence.

3.5.1 Independent spatial mobility in middle childhood

Independent spatial mobility or the opportunity to move around free from the restrictions of adult supervision is a particular feature of middle childhood. The age span of middle childhood is variously defined as anything between 6 and 12. This is the age group of the participants in this study. It is generally understood as the period of time when children spend a considerable amount of the day away from the family home, usually at school, and thus as ‘the stage during which children begin to adapt to life outside the family’ (De Fries, Plomin
and Fulker eds. 1994:1). It is regarded as a stage in children’s lives when they transition from the dependency of early childhood to the independence of adult life (Jones and Cunningham 1999). Children begin developing a self concept informed by an awareness of ‘the evaluation of others’ (Markus and Nurius 1984:147) and they start to gain ‘social competence with peers’ (Huston and Rikpe 2006:409) which is of increasing importance to them.

During middle childhood children, ‘assume increasingly greater responsibility for the control of their behaviour’ (Markus and Nurios 1984:152) and their parents exercise a ‘general supervisory control’, while children begin to exercise ‘moment-to-moment self regulation’ (Macceby 1984:191). Although the transition from dependence through to independence is controlled by parental concerns and values, children on the whole appear to accept the limitations and to ‘make the best of what’s available to them’ (Jones and Cunningham 1999:38) within their spatial range.

3.5.2 The perceived value of independent spatial mobility

As has been discussed above in section 3.5, independence is highly valued in western society and independent spatial mobility for children is a particular case in point. Travelling independently through their urban world is regarded as an opportunity for a variety of learning experiences, the opportunity to develop a sense of participation and belonging in their cities and is believed to promote self esteem and foster a sense of personal identity.

As they move through their outdoor world children often explore various aspects of that world and ‘invest it with meaning’ (Hart 1979:3). They use their environment to ‘achieve their own goals’ (Moore 1986: 12) and as they develop a sense of control over that environment children gain ‘a feeling of competence’ (ibid). Their ability to shape the outdoor experience is affected by the extent of their independent mobility (Hayes and Kernan 2008).
Making a case for the value of independent spatial mobility for children Hillman et al. (1990) also argue that this sort of freedom allows children to gradually develop a sense of control over their own lives. They suggest that travelling without an adult gives children the opportunity to learn how to take responsibility for themselves and how to judge perceived risks such as whether or not it is safe to cross the road. They argue that the sense of personal autonomy which arises from feeling in control promotes self-confidence and self-esteem among children (1990).

Studies on the experiences of children living in cities have associated feelings of self esteem and a positive sense of personal identity with the relationship children have to their city environment. The study of children living in cities initiated by UNESCO in the early 1970s, the Growing up in Cities Project led by Kevin Lynch, sought to examine how children’s use and perception of the environment affects them. Lynch argues that when children can travel, roam and play in the urban environment freely they learn ‘to use the city as a learning ground’ (Lynch 1977:58). In the 1990s the study was revisited, broadened out and implemented in several more cities. This subsequent study found that children who participated in the life of their city ‘gained a strong personal identity and sense of belonging from the cultural richness and social density of their daily lives’ (Cosco and Moore 2002: 36).

Having the freedom to play and wander through their neighbourhoods also gives children the opportunity to develop a sense of collective identity. Matthews, Limb and Taylor (2000) refer to their outdoor environment as ‘the street’, a metaphorical space where children play unimpeded by adult supervision and construct their childhood world. As they roam and play, children appropriate places, usually somewhat hidden from adult view, where they create a world governed by child generated rules and regulations. In this world children develop a sense of collective identity quite distinct from the adults in their lives (2000). As children begin to roam further afield and feel a part of their wider urban environment they
develop a positive sense of place and belonging. In *The Child in the City* Colin Ward advocates for greater freedom of movement among children living in cities so that they can share in the life of the city and feel a sense of belonging in their urban neighbourhoods (1990). Lynch discovered that even children living in environmentally deprived areas feel a sense of pride and belonging in the city spaces they inhabit when they feel they participate in community life (1977).

As they travel and engage in their urban environment children acquire important knowledge which helps them develop mental maps of the city and fit together the jigsaw pieces of the world which surrounds them (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). That sense of engagement helps develop a sense of belonging in what might otherwise be a more abstract place, anonymous and even threatening. Rissotto and Tonucci (2002) examined the relationship between autonomy and environmental knowledge and through the use of map drawing techniques, concluded that children who walk independently of adults have more familiarity with their local environments. They argue that this sort of independent movement through their neighbourhoods which ensures local knowledge ‘produces a feeling of security’ among children (2002:76). Whether or not these benefits accrue for children who travel through that environment with adult accompaniment is a question this study will consider.

In a study on children’s experiences of walking to school Vivian Romero found that children who were not accompanied by an adult have a richer experience than those who are with an adult (2010). The richness of the experience is measured in her research in terms of the number of items of interest children identify along their routes through a questionnaire. There is also research which indicates that the presence of adults can dictate the nature of the experience, in terms of, the amount of dawdling, ‘messing’, and generally playful activities which take place and as such affect how children experience their mobility (Mackett et al. 2007). In both the work of Rissotto and Tonucci (2002) and Romero (2010), the children
were not present in their local environment walking their routes as they described the experience, they were relying on memory. In the Mackett’s study (2007) the children’s spatial behaviour was analysed through the use of activity monitors, GPS, questionnaires and diaries kept by the children. This study seeks to contribute to the discourse on children’s independent spatial mobility by approaching the implications of an adult presence from the children’s perspective. It endeavours to contrast the experience of spatial mobility with and without an adult as children document it using photography to map the experience of their routes while they walk them. In the next section evidence of a loss of independent spatial mobility is presented.

3.5.3 Evidence of a loss of independent spatial mobility

Although developments in transport technology have meant greater mobility among populations, that mobility has been largely dependent on access to a car. Family ownership of a car indicates more mobility for children, but that mobility is of course entirely dependent on adults (Pooley et al. 2005). Meanwhile an increase in car ownership has led to urban environments being adapted and designed to meet the needs of the car rather than those of pedestrians which in turn has had detrimental implications for children’s independence (Jacobs 1961).

In a detailed examination of how children interact with their city world first published in 1978, Colin Ward drew attention to what he saw as a lack of participation among children in that world. He described a sense he had that children were not moving through the city or even beyond a small chain of streets near home and as a result they did not have a connection with their city. In their study on children’s independent spatial mobility, One False Move, Hillman et al. (1990) showed conclusively a loss of independent mobility among children living in urban areas between 1971 and 1990. The study found that the number of children
aged 7 to 11 who were allowed cross the road alone had dropped by a quarter while the number of children in the same age group allowed to go to places other than school alone had halved. The proportion of children being driven to school had more than doubled while those who still walked were more likely to be accompanied by an adult. As suggested by Jacobs (1961) and Pooley et al. (2005) the study identifies a relationship between a loss of freedom among children to access the outdoor environment unaccompanied and significant increase in car ownership among families.

Subsequent to the One False Move report, research under the Childhood, Urban Space and Citizenship Project carried out in contrasting urban environments in London between 1997 and 1999 showed a further drop in independent spatial mobility among children in middle childhood (O’Brien et al. 2000). The aim of the study was to examine how children used their city. When compared with data in the Hillman et al. study this study found a further decrease in children’s independent mobility. Ninety four per cent of children in primary school surveyed by Hillman in 1971 said they went to school without an adult, by 1990 that figure had dropped to 54% and by the late nineteen nineties when the research for the O’Brien et al. study was conducted there was a further decrease to 47% of those surveyed who said they went to school without adult supervision. The proportion of children who were driven to school increased by 11% between 1990 and 1999.

Irish data on methods of travel to and from school suggests a similar decrease in independent mobility at the beginning of the 21st century. Comparing 2002 census data and a survey conducted in 2006 the Dublin Transportation Office examined how students in primary, secondary and third level education travelled to and from their education centre. A comparison between these two sets of data shows a decrease in the number of primary school children travelling to school on foot. Of those surveyed in 2002, 46.5% were driven to school, while in 2006 that figure had increased to 52.7% per cent. This increase
is noteworthy and seems to indicate an ongoing decrease in independent spatial mobility. However the increase in car dependency is not the sole factor contributing to a loss of independence. The next section outlines the other various factors involved.

3.5.4 Causes of a loss of independent spatial mobility

While car ownership is a contributor to the loss of independence as identified above, a complex interplay of factors has led to a loss of independent spatial mobility among children in urban areas. Risk perception, changes in work practice and changes in how the role of the parent is understood have all had an impact. Risk anxiety is an increasingly pervasive concern in Western society (Adams 2001). There is a perception that ‘the contemporary mobile world seems to be characterized by awesome dangers and restrictions for people, places and environments’ (Urry 2007:12). The two main concerns parents express with respect to their children’s safety - traffic and ‘stranger danger’ - are discussed first. This is followed by an account of changes in work practice and parenting cultures. Finally there is a brief account of children’s concerns.

The primary source of the loss of independence among children would appear to be an increase in car ownership (Hillman et al. 1990). The increase in car ownership among families has had a dual affect: firstly, families that own a car are more likely to drive their children places. Secondly, the increased use of cars to transport children contributes to higher levels of traffic which in turn makes it less safe for children to travel independently on foot and therefore parents chose to drive them. The situation has become something of a vicious cycle (Tranter and Pawson 2001). In their survey of the extent of independent spatial mobility among children Hillman et al. (1990) found that 90% of children surveyed who lived in households where there was no car walked home from school. Where the household owned one car that figure dropped to around 70% and where there were two cars in a
household only about 50% of children walked to school. Tranter and Pawson (2001) surveyed children aged 9 to 11 living in Christchurch, New Zealand to establish levels of independent access to their local environment. The children attended four schools whose catchment areas represented contrasting socio-economic status and were located in areas of the city with varying levels of traffic. Traffic was identified as the factor which impinged most significantly on children’s independent mobility; ‘the schools with the highest levels of traffic ... are also the schools with the lowest levels of freedoms’ (Tranter and Pawson 2001:34). As with the findings in the Hillman survey, socio-economic status per se did not affect mobility rather the factor which tended to impinge on children’s independent mobility was car ownership.

Transport policies which give precedence to the car over pedestrians have coincided with an increase in car ownership. A concern in the literature on the implications of traffic for children focuses on how traffic affects behaviour; ‘The rising volume and speed of traffic has created an environment in which young children in particular have sustained a dramatic loss of independence as parents have increasingly felt obliged to impose restrictions on them’ (Elkin et al. 1991:53). A correlation between increased traffic volumes and a decrease in social encounters among people in cities has been identified (Elkin et al. 1991:54) - a consequence which is of particular significance to children for whom the social function of the mobility experience is so important (Mikkelesen and Christensen 2009).

A number of perceived risks to children’s safety other than the car have also contributed to a decrease in independent spatial mobility. The more people drive, the less likely they are to meet neighbours out and about. In urban areas where driving takes precedence over walking, cycling or using public transport, adults and children are less familiar with their immediate environment and their neighbours. This results in a lack of social capital, less trust and fewer feelings of concern for one another’s well being among
residents. Lack of local knowledge feeds into parental concern for their children (Leyden 2003; Alparone and Pacilli 20012). Hand in hand with decreasing knowledge of community there has been a media generated rise in awareness of ‘stranger danger’ among parents. In neighbourhoods where residents do not know one another there can be higher levels of concern among parents relating to somewhat abstract fears for their children’s safety including a fear of ‘strangers’ who might harm their children (Kitzinger 1999).

Fear of ‘stranger danger’ is identified by parents as another key reason for restricting children’s independent spatial mobility (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 2004). This is a particularly insidious fear, which paradoxically does not merit the attention it gets based on the low statistics associated with the abduction of children by strangers. Given the prominence of what might be considered a somewhat irrational fear, the construction of ‘stranger danger’ is discussed in the context of a culture of fear in the next section.

3.5.5 The construction of stranger danger

What has been described as a ‘culture of fear’ (Jenkins 1998) has emerged in recent decades feeding into, and fed by, a lack of local knowledge. Parents interviewed about their children’s safety consistently express worries about attacks on their children by strangers (McNeish and Roberts 1995; McKendrick and Valentine 1997; Furedi 2001). Government advertising campaigns, safety related education programmes and literature from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which focus on child protection have all been cited as sources which contribute to the ‘culture of fear’ that leads to parental restrictions on children’s independent spatial mobility (Jenkins 1998). The media also contributes to this ‘culture of fear’ and fear of attack by strangers has been shaped by media coverage of what are in fact rare instances of children being abducted, raped and murdered by strangers.
The media coverage is linked with what is described as ‘moral panics’ over children’s safety, a concept first discussed by Stanley Cohen (1973) with regard to concerns in the 1960’s over what was considered deviant youth behaviour. Critcher (2003) looks at how the concept of the paedophile has been constructed through a process of moral panic and what he describes as ‘monster making’ (2003:100) in the media. He begins with the emergence of the term paedophile in the media from the mid-seventies when paedophilia was associated with the stereotypical ‘lonely old man in a rain coat’ and traces the evolution of this stereotype through the 1980s and 1990s in the context of a series of moral panics in the media which have given rise to the construction of the figure we know today as ‘obsessive and compulsive’ and ‘cunning’, (2003:104). Jenkins concentrates on language used to describe paedophiles since the mid-1970s and concludes that through the language used in the press the construction of ‘the paedophile as unstoppable predator has emerged’ (1998:189).

Critcher (2003) describes one of the most troubling aspects of this paradigm as relating to the fact that while the danger is known, the person is not. Or as Kitzinger says; ‘the paedophile is a creature that embodies ‘stranger danger’’ (Kitzinger 1999:219). The vast bulk of media coverage of child sex abuse since the mid-1980s has concentrated on the paedophile as a stranger. There have been exceptions to this, particularly during the 1990s in Ireland as evidence of abuse by the clergy of children in their care came to light. There are also occasional articles on abusive parents. But the evidence indicates that the likelihood of a stranger committing a crime (abduction, abuse or murder) against a child is quite small. In the United States approximately 900 children per year were murdered between 1980 and 1994, of those 6% were killed by a stranger, and a total of five of the 900 children killed per annum were killed and sexually abused by a stranger (Jenkins 1998).

British figures show similar results and indicate that abuse by someone known to the child is much more common than abuse by a stranger (Critcher 2003). Yet tragedies such as
the murder of Sarah Payne in 2000, of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in 2002, and the disappearance of Madeline McCann in 2007 receive many, many column inches of coverage in print media, fuelling parental fears that strangers lurking outside are determined to abuse their children (Kitzinger 1999). Despite the fact that abuse by someone known to the child is more common; ‘stranger danger, more than abuse by intimates, hits the headlines’ (Jackson and Scott 1999). Media concentration on abuse by strangers has resulted in a general societal acceptance that that there is a significant threat to the well-being of children from strangers outside their homes (Jackson and Scott 1999). According to Silverman and Wilson the focus on the paedophile as a stranger by the media has ensured parents feel nowhere is safe for children to play anymore as the overwhelming feeling among parents is that ‘paedophiles were literally everywhere’ (2002:40).

Coinciding with changes in recent years which saw increased coverage of paedophilia in the press was a change in narrative structure. Through qualitative and quantitative analyses of press coverage of child murders in the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s, Claire Wardle (2006) concluded that there have been significant changes in how the story of child murder (often associated with child sexual abuse) is told by the press over those sixty years.

In the 1930s and 1960s, the cases were treated as ‘isolated murders committed upon young girls who were unfortunately in the wrong place at the wrong time’ (2006:516). However by the 1990s the murders were treated as ‘sexually motivated attacks which lead to murder’ and the offender was no longer conceived of as a once off murderer, but rather a predatory paedophile with the more recent connotations of compulsive ‘serial’ offender. In the 1930s and 1960s interviews with the victims’ family were considered an unacceptable intrusion into the life of people in mourning. The narrative was developed around attempts to explain the perpetrators background, the police investigation and the trial. By the 1990s the impact of the loss on the family, and even the life of the victim before their murder, were an
intrinsic part of the coverage. The narrative became what Wardle describes as ‘personalised’ (2006:517), the families portrayed as ‘normal’ (ibid) every day families and not unlike the families of the newspaper readers. This narrative technique not only served to elicit empathy and thus ongoing purchase of the paper to stay abreast of the unfolding story, but one which instilled in the reader a sense that this horrific crime ‘could happen to anyone’ (ibid). The resulting concern felt by families that their children’s lives were far less safe than the lives of children in ‘the past’ was expressed in the letters pages of the various newspapers.

But Wardle does not argue that fear of paedophile attack by a stranger among parents is solely a consequence of the more emotive and personalised coverage of such attacks since the 1990s. She sees it as part and parcel of a wider ‘climate of feelings of risk and panic about modern life’ (2006: 530). This is a view shared by Furedi (2001) who argues that a change in cultural values that places undue emphasis on the failings of parents trying to manage alone has undermined their self confidence and fostered anxiety for the children’s well being (2001:184). The role of the media as an organ of change or as one which merely reflects societal views is subject to on-going debate, but Wardle concludes from her research that the press is ‘a cultural barometer of public attitudes’ (2006: 516) which reflects back to its readership an existing fear and merely provides ‘a cultural outlet’ (2006: 530). Alongside these cultural changes in risk perception there has been a change in parenting work practices and parenting values, as discussed below.

3.5.6 Changes in work patterns and parenting culture

Changes in work patterns mean that in many families both parents work fulltime outside the home and that, increasingly, among one parent families the parent also works outside the home. In some situations parents who work outside the home have no choice but to ferry their children between ‘islands’ (Zeiher 2003:67) of child care facilities (such as crèche,
school and after school activities) where their freedom is curtailed by the rules and regulations of the various institutions. There is also evidence of peer pressure relating to a change in parenting culture whereby parents feel they are not doing a good job unless they drive their children from one place of activity to the next (Malone 2007; Tranter and Pawson 2001). The prevailing conceptualization of childhood in western society whereby the child is seen as vulnerable and dependent on adults for protection (Jenks 2005) would appear to have affected parenting values and roles. A good parent, particularly a good mother, is now regarded as one who is actively seen to be protecting her children by chaperoning them through their daily lives. In some communities good parenting means driving children to and from school and to and from after school activities, which clearly restricts independent mobility for the children concerned (Valentine 2004; Tranter and Pawson 2001).

This shift in how parents act out their role has been roundly, and perhaps unfairly, criticized. Malone (2007) sees the propensity to restrict independent mobility and protect children as a reflection of late 20th century ‘sentimentalization of childhood’ (2007: 515) among middle class western parents. She regards this ‘phenomena of ‘bubble-wrapping’ children [as a tendency to] appease the anxieties of some middle class parents’ (Malone 2007:513). However in many instances families, by virtue of the urban design context in which they live and work, find themselves extremely car dependent and it can be difficult to distinguish between the degree to which parenting culture and genuine dangers affect parental decisions regarding children’s independent mobility.
3.5.7 Concerns children express

Research with children on their perceptions of their outdoor environment reveals a number of concerns they have about their own safety. Children express anxiety over volumes of traffic, worries about bullies, crime and adults who tell them to move. They cite these concerns as reasons they choose to restrict their own independent spatial mobility (Chawla 2003). The children in Toulca, Argentina, who participated in the original Growing Up in Cities Project played out in the street less than children in other areas and cited high volumes of traffic as the reason they preferred not to play outside together (Lynch 1977). There is also a suggestion that children are influenced by fears their parents express about the local environment as well as their own individual concerns about the dark or getting lost as a result of which they choose to limit their own mobility (Matthews and Limb 1999).

Thus far this chapter has examined a number of issues of relevance to children’s urban spatial mobility including: how children are understood and catered for in the city, mobility and walking, the meaning of independence in relation to children’s mobility, the perceived value of that independence, evidence of a loss of independence and the causes of that loss. The next section will move the discussion towards the relationship between children and their urban environment by analysing the literature dealing with children’s perspectives on urban spatial mobility and place-making.

3.6 The urban spatial mobility experience: children’s perspectives

This final section of the chapter begins by looking at children’s place making and the significance of the presence of an adult, individual personalities, and everyday events that
occur. The city location is then revisited (3.6.1) through a discussion on urban rejuvenation and how children are situated within that change. Finally, the chapter concludes with a look at the literature which argues the need to reconsider children’s place in the city through recognition of their citizenship.

While there is evidence that children have suffered a loss of independent spatial mobility and are less inclined to be seen in the urban public domain, there is also evidence that a significant number of children still use public space to for daily activities such as walking to school (DTO 2007). The views of those children on their experience of walking through the urban environment both with and without an adult are of paramount importance in any effort to understand the relationship between the city space and young people. An exploration of children’s perspectives on walking through their city neighbourhoods also affords an opportunity to develop a meaningful understanding of their urban lives. According to Christensen and O’Brien insights into how children ‘experience and construct a sense of place’ (2003:1) facilitate a meaningful understanding of how children interact with the city, of their views on what works and what does not work. By exploring how children experience their spatial mobility the ‘macrostructures of childhood’ or ‘the ways in which political, social and economic forces’ (Matthews and Limb 1999:64) impact on them are revealed. This kind of examination is simultaneously an account of how children engage with and experience the city, how the city meets their needs in the public realm and how children in an urban context are perceived.

Although research on adult views of children’s outdoor freedoms provides valuable information on the factors which facilitate and inhibit their autonomy, an understanding of their experience is best acquired through direct consultation with children. At the most simplistic level, children’s experience of their walks through the public domain will differ from that of adults’ by virtue of difference in physical size (Ward 1990; Kenworthy -Teather
1999). Children experience space more sensually than adults (Tuan 1977) and their perceptions are not subject to the same understandings that adults project on to their surroundings (Ward 1990). Research on their place making suggests that children invest the world around them with their own individual meanings, which provide an insight into their everyday lives (Rasmussen 2004). As they develop a familiarity with the world around them, children invest that space with meaning (Tuan 1977) and construct knowledge of place (Matthews 1992). But there is a concern that the fact that children are more likely to walk with an adult has had a negative impact on their experience of place. There are studies which have examined how the presence of an adult affects local place knowledge that suggest children who walk without an adult know their local environments better than those who are with an adult (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). Through a questionnaire and focus group discussions Romero (2010) has provided empirical evidence of a richer experience among children who walk through their neighbourhoods without an adult.

Other factors apart from the presence of an adult also impact on children’s experience. Individual personality types and specific encounters, in particular with adults, have been shown to affect the quality of the mobility experience (Matthews et al. 2000; Milne 2009). While it seems that most encounters with adults as children travel through their local environment are ‘fleeting’, they notice the behaviour of adults around them and can find this frightening (Milne 2009:111). Frightening adult behaviours as identified by children include fighting, drinking, taking drugs and smacking children. Other forms of intimidating and humiliating adult behaviours include shoving past children in queues and treating them as if they were invisible. Conscious of concerns their parents have expressed to them regarding ‘stranger danger’ children are wary of engaging in conversation with unknown adults in public places and when there is a necessity to speak to a stranger will endeavour to establish how safe a person might be based on ‘appearance and behaviour’ (Milne 2009:113). Other
negative encounters identified by Milne related to adults in a position of authority who enforced rules in ways children found upsetting.

Each individual child will experience these encounters through a prism of unique constituent parts which include the home environment and ‘the agency of the children themselves’ (Matthews et al. 2000:76) and they will cope with the situation in their own unique way. It is evident that a range of factors, including the presence of an adult, the nature of the child, and the specific encounters they have on any given day will shape their experience of spatial mobility and affect the meaning they invest in place. By exploring the experience of individual children who walk both with and without an adult along everyday routes through their urban world, this study will look at how these various factors shape the experience the children describe. The next section turns briefly to the city and how decisions to revitalise urban areas have affected children

3.6.1 Returning to the city context: the implications of urban renewal for children

The complex domain of Dublin City is the location of this study. It is a location where, like many other cities, authorities and residents grapple with the demands of the perceived conflicting functions of the city (Sheridan 1988) and one which is subject to negative imaging (Jones 2000; Valentine 2004; Kearns and Ruimy 2010). Dublin City Council is keen to revitalise the city centre both commercially and as a residential area (Dublin City Development Plan 2011-2017). This intention is at the core of a discussion in the literature on around the ideas of regeneration, re-urbanisation and gentrification. Essentially re-urbanisation is defined as a trend in population growth in city areas (Kabish et al. 2010) while gentrification has a somewhat negative meaning suggesting the colonisation of city areas by a middle class population which results in the ousting of working class population which
traditionally inhabited the area (Valentine 2001). Regeneration on the other hand is an attempt to revitalise city areas (Kabish et al. 2010) or to ‘improve the quality of the environment’ (www.Dublincity.ie accessed 28/07/2012). All three concepts apply to the north-west inner city of Dublin where this study is located, reflecting a trend identified in other cities and described by Valentine (2001) as having mixed results.

Valentine describes a move towards the end of the 20th century and into the beginning of the 21st century to revitalise cities which were in decline. The primary strategy centred on attracting people back in to the city, particularly the middle classes, to live, to shop and to socialize. Local authorities often invested considerable finance in an effort to attract middle and high earners, at the expense of the low income families living in the city (Valentine 2001). A case in point is the O’Connell Street area of Dublin City which has under gone an expensive ‘face lift’ with new street furniture, planters and traffic calming measures while the local authority housing nearby suffers neglect and the families contend with the increased traffic volumes of traffic re-directed away from the shopping areas. These measures reflect a particular economic model designed to inject capital in to the city, but which in doing so, further polarizes the discrepancy between the wealthy and the poor (Valentine 2001). Amidst the effort to find a balance between the various demands of the city; ‘the ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below”, below the thresholds at which visibility begins’ (de Certeau 1984: 93). De Certeau (1984) is referring to New York and the perspective from the height of the World Trade Towers as he surveys the city, however that sense of the everyday lives of the people of the city being invisible is especially pertinent for children who seem neither to be physically present (Valentine 2004) nor represented on local authority agendas (for example, the Dublin City Public Realm Strategy 2012).

A discourse in the literature on the importance of highlighting children’s perspectives on their experience of the city has developed as the number of children living in cities
globally increases (Chawla 2002; Prout 2003) and a concern that children’s needs have been neglected at the expense of their well being is strongly argued. In Creating Child Friendly Cities: Reinstating Kids in the City, Gleeson (2006) presents a somewhat bleak account of urban childhood today. Comparing the lives of children living in poverty with the lives of more affluent children, he concludes that both suffer health problems as a consequence of planning and policies which inhibit their mobility and restrict them to spatially oppressive environments. The children, whether from affluent or poor families, are regarded as victims of a neo-liberal agenda which sought to dis-empower local governments by cutting funding and focussed on privatisation and fostering a culture of individualism. The net result is ‘toxic cities’ which Gleeson describes as ‘urban areas that fail to nurture the young’ (2006: 34). He calls for an urgent shift of attention towards the needs of children in the city, and the value of ensuring cities are more child-friendly is discussed in the next section.

3.6.2 Cities which support children's citizenship

Reconfiguring cities so that they function more effectively for children demands an understanding of children’s needs. The discipline of urban design acknowledges the implications of urban form for people and that bad design ‘promotes social disintegration’ (Krier 2003:9). Good urban design on the other hand ‘embraces the entire physical fabric of a city’ (Krier 2003:7) and fosters the use of the public realm as ‘gathering spaces for the citizens of the city’ (ibid). This argument applies equally to children whose citizenship rights are recognised in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and under the Irish Constitution. Jacobs (1961) argues that the removal of children from the street and in to child designated areas such as playgrounds ‘for their own good’ has led to a loss of opportunities to engage with the city life around them. She argues that this loss results in an inability for children to enjoy the sort of daily interaction with adults which serves to ‘assimilate them into civilized
society’ (1961:82). The link between cities and citizenship is explored by Valentine (2001) who refers to a historical relationship between public space and citizenship dating back to early Greek civilization. More recently, she writes, the street is used for public demonstrations as ‘an important forum in which ...organizations could communicate their arguments to the wider public’ (2001: 171). However as in the era of the Ancient Greeks, the public realm in contemporary society is also ‘a place of exclusion’ (Valentine 2001:170) where children in particular are inhibited from participating in city life.

In *The Child in the City* Colin Ward (1990) attempted to uncover how children related to their urban world. He argues that it is imperative that adults make every effort to see the city as children see it so that it might be rendered ‘more accessible, more negotiable and more useful to the child’ (1990:182). This access to the city can only work effectively if it reflects children’s perspectives on their city world, perspectives which inevitably cover a diverse range of views. Recognizing children’s agency does not suggest a ‘universalization of the category ‘child’’ (Holloway and Valentine 2000:6). In fact it recognises a range of childhoods ‘constituted in different ways in different times and places’ (*ibid*). The second phase of the *Growing up in Cities Project* led by Louise Chawla conducted comparative research in to how children in cities around the world assessed their urban environments (2002:11). Based on participative research conducted with children Chawla concludes that ‘not only is the urban world multi-faceted, but so are the children’s points of view regarding their experience’ (2002:29). This diversity of opinion reflects both the individuality of the children involved and how they feel they are valued in the wider social context they inhabit (2002:32).

However, ensuring city environments meet children’s spatial mobility needs is challenging. Finding a happy balance between competing economic, political, cultural and residential needs of the city often proves extremely difficult as is the case with Dublin City
where the competing tensions have resulted in what is described thus: ‘Profound contradiction seems to be the nature of things where Dublin is concerned’ (Sheridan 1988:2). Frequently these contradictions have led to planning decisions which have decimated city communities (McDonald 1988; Bisset 2008) and impacted on children in particular. Children’s perspectives on their urban spatial mobility shed much needed light on their interaction with their local environments if future development is to meet their needs, but much of the research has been on the spaces children inhabit away from territory shared by adults (Hart 1979; Pike 2008; Rogers 2009). There is a need to build on this research and to place the spotlight on children’s perspectives on how they interact with the public space of city streets, an arena which has been identified as providing space where a sense of belonging and personal identity are fostered (Matthews et al. 2000). By conducting a comparative study of the experience mapped by children who are with and without an adult as they walk various routes through the city and examining the basis of any differences which emerge between the two cohorts, this study seeks to present children’s perspectives on independent spatial mobility in the public domain.

An examination of these issues from children’s perspectives has a dual intention. It is firstly an acknowledgement of children’s participation rights and a recognition of their expertise in their own life worlds (Matthews and Limb 1999) and as such it is an attempt to elevate their position from minority status (Mayall 2009). Secondly, it contributes to ‘contemporary theorisations of space, place, scale and landscape’ as advocated by Horton et al. (2008:340). In doing so, it presents an opportunity to better understand the lives of children and to move towards the construction of child-friendly cities based on children’s perspectives, which are more readily ‘negotiable’ (Ward 1990:182). This is a position which promotes children’s citizenship and, it is hoped, might foster an increased mobility among children.
Conclusion

In this chapter a more precise understanding of factors which shape the individual experience of the child has become apparent. To begin with, how the city itself is understood presents a number of challenges. Perceptions of the city as grimy and dangerous impact on how children in the city are perceived. Their behaviour is associated with these perceptions and is subject to negative interpretation. A suspicion of children in the public domain is compounded by a socially constructed understanding of children as vulnerable, resulting in an assumption that public space is more appropriate for adults. There is evidence that children no longer move through the city with the degree of freedom they once had and the literature argues that this loss of freedom has been caused by a number of interrelated factors. There is a particular concern that children have less independence from adult control than before and that the loss of independence has impacted negatively on their skills development and their experience of their local urban environments. Nonetheless there are still children who travel independently through their neighbourhoods and how those children experience their independent spatial mobility is of increased interest among researchers.

In light of empirical evidence of a loss of independence, children’s understanding of independence is an important consideration – as are their views on how independence impacts on their experience of spatial mobility. Whether the experience of spatial mobility differs radically for children who are with or without adults is a key consideration in research on independent spatial mobility. Their perspective on this matter presents an important insight into how we understand children’s lives, shifting the focus from adult oriented concerns and solutions towards meeting the needs of children as they see them.
Children’s views on how they experience the routes they walk through the public realm offer an opportunity to address the challenges they face and meet the needs they identify. In doing so, there is an opportunity to reconfigure the city as a space which recognises children’s participation rights and fosters an acknowledgment of children as citizens. The next chapter presents the methodological considerations which have been brought to bear on the research process through which the study’s aims have been explored.
Chapter 4 Methodological Considerations and Implementation

Introduction

In this chapter the theoretical and practical considerations which comprise the methodological approach adopted by this study are outlined. This research endeavour is positioned within a constructivist approach that recognises the different realities of individual children (Schwandt 1998). The study aligns itself with methodologies that advocate an examination of their experiences and perspectives through an engagement with children as contributors in participatory research processes, methodologies which are moving away from seeing the child as object in the research process towards the child as participant (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008).

The chapter begins by looking at the inter-disciplinary approach adopted by the study and the various methodological approaches which have been drawn on. This is followed by a discussion of the sample group and the research location. The choice of quantitative and qualitative methods is then described, followed by a discussion of ethical considerations and finally the limitations of the methods employed. The chapter then focuses on the implementation of the research design in the field through a detailed account of the fieldwork and reflexivity in the field. It concludes with a defence of the study’s trustworthiness and validity.
4.1 Addressing the complexity of children’s spatial mobility experience: an inter-disciplinary approach

The focus of this thesis on children’s experience of independent spatial mobility in an urban context reveals many interconnected factors as discussed in chapters two and three. In order to address the multi-faceted nature of the research question, the research has drawn on a range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, children’s geographies, media studies and urban planning and design theory.

Each disciplinary lens focuses on the different aspects of children’s lives addressed in the research question and each has a different value in the exploration of children’s urban spatial mobility. Drawing on the theoretical discussion which informs social and cultural geography and children’s geographies facilitates an examination of meanings attached to urban space, walking as a place making process, as well as children’s urban geographies and place construction. Drawing on the theoretical concerns of psychology facilitates an examination of children’s perceptions and sense of self, while the concerns of sociology facilitate an examination of the structures shaping their lives. In this study the role played by the media in shaping risk perception has been explored through the discipline of media studies and theoretical debates in the field of urban design have been drawn on to facilitate an examination of understandings of the city space the children move through. While the individual disciplines provide a source of knowledge on specific areas, at times they also overlap and in doing so, enrich the knowledge building process. The approach is illustrated below:
There is considerable value in exploring the complexity of children’s lives in this way. As described by Greene and Hill (2005), the wish to understand children’s lives reflects ‘a moral perspective on the role and status of children which respects and promotes their entitlements to being considered as persons of value’ (2005:3). Secondly, an understanding of children’s lives affords an insight into how society in general works, offering ‘evidence of the workings of the social order’ (Mayall 2009:2). Adult researchers discover the validity of their assumptions by examining ‘the degree of ‘fit’ between assumptions and presumptions of the ruling social order and people’s experience and understanding’ (2009:2). In other words,
we learn about how effectively the world we have constructed as adults works for children and this is particularly the case with the urban public domain, where this study is located.

The focus of this study is on children’s individual experience in the belief that an understanding of children’s lives is best achieved through an exploration of their experience as ‘without some kind of access to the content of a person’s experience, we have a very incomplete account’ (Greene and Hill 2005:2). But how to access that experience has been a recurring concern throughout this research process. It requires an awareness of assumptions, asking oneself almost as many questions as might be asked of the participants in the study. This reflexive process (described in more detail in section 4.2.4) has been an attempt to identify my subjective stance, which in turn creates space for a range of perspectives on the issues being addressed in this study.

The key consideration underpinning the research question, aim and objectives is an exploration of the children’s individual perspectives on their experience of their spatial mobility. This study has drawn on multiple theories and multiple methods to give primacy to the voice of the child throughout the research process. Adopting an inter-disciplinary lens for research with children is consistent with the ecological framework underpinning this study as described by Bronfenbrenner; ‘the ecology of human development lies at a point of convergence among the disciplines....as they bear on the evolution of the individual in society’ (1979:13). This framework, which functions to position children at the centre of the research process and identify the factors which shape their experience, also serves to knit the range of disciplinary and methodological approaches together. The next section moves on to describe the methodological approaches which are each discussed in relation to their relevance and application to this study.
4.2 Methodological approaches: children as collaborators

This study seeks to give primacy to the voice of the child and understand their experience. In order to realise these objectives the study drew on a number of methodological approaches, adopting aspects of each to ‘fit’ the research. Developing a child standpoint on urban spatial mobility is also an objective of this study, and one which suggests raising the status of children in society (Mayall 2009). The attempt to reposition children in society reflects the aims of participatory action research (McIntyre 2000; Baum et al. 2006) and although the research design for this study is not one which reflects ‘a collective investigation of a problem’ (McIntyre 2000: 128) it does give priority to ‘indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem’ (ibid). In this study, the research question, aims and objectives were developed by the author, but the children are positioned as collaborators in the research process, collecting and interpreting the data which convey their individual experience.

The value of conducting participative or collaborative research with children which is informed by the theoretical considerations underpinning Participative Action Research lies in producing ‘different knowledges that emerge from diverse actors’ (Porter et al. 2012:132). Although there are instances of participative research directed by children, most frequently children are involved in a collaborative process contributing to adult designed and conducted research (Alderson 2008). The trend towards positioning children in the research process as collaborators, and even researchers, has given rise to much discussion in the literature on the efficacy of models of participation that have been employed. Some of that discussion is presented here in order to foreground some of the challenges encountered during the fieldwork for this study. An overview of two models of participative research is presented, followed by aspects of the debate around the use of participative methods with children.
4.2.1 Models of participative research with children

A shift in children’s position in the research process identified in the literature from subjects to participants (Veale 2005), coupled with an awareness of the value of contributions they can make to urban planning (Christensen and O’Brien 2003), has given rise to various models of participative planning with children, two of which are described here. Firstly, the system of participative planning developed by Roger Hart (1997) and implemented through the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities programme, is designed to involve children in community development and environmental care. It is not intended as a ‘universal model’ (1997: preface) but rather a set of suggestions for children’s participation which can be adapted to meet individual and cultural needs. For Hart the meaning of participation resides in a democratic engagement in decisions that affect both individuals and their communities (1992).

Accordingly the participative methods he proposes are underpinned by a political objective that centres around giving children a strong role in local democracy by learning about ‘the entire process of research, planning and action, including, in most instances, recognizing the impossibility of their ideas being carried out to fruition’ (1997:26). The process of participation proposed by Hart is informed by a theoretical understanding of children as social actors who are experts in their own lives (1997). Reflecting an understanding of the diversity of childhoods and individual preferences of how to communicate, Hart proposes a range of methods including drawing, mapping, interviews, surveys, photography, television and even dramatic performance. The primary aim of engaging children in participative research and policy making is to empower them as citizens
with a right to have their voice heard and accord them responsibility for affecting the changes to problems they identify in their communities.

Secondly, based on the work of the Growing Up in Cities project, David Driskell’s (2002) manual for children’s participation in creating better cities focuses on eliciting children’s views on their urban environments and looks at ways they can influence urban policy. Drawing on a conceptualization of children as citizens who have a right to a say in how their communities evolve which is similar to Hart’s, this model also proposes a range of methods; from the more traditional interview to creative methods such as the use of role play and puppetry. While the focus is on investigating children’s perspectives on their urban worlds, Driskell proposes ways those views might be given meaningful consideration in order to ‘provide the essential and lasting foundation on which better cities can be built’ (2002:176).

There are many examples of how these participative planning processes have been used with children (for example see Chawla 2002 and www.childfriendlycities.org). However questions have been raised about the efficacy of some participative initiatives (Baraldi 2003; Percy Smith 2010) and how collaborative methods are understood and employed. Kullman (2012) sounds a note of caution against attempting to assume methods are ‘stabilised procedures’ (2012:12), suggesting instead that methods are ‘fragile arrangements’ (2012:13) which take on ‘unexpected qualities when they encounter children’ (2012:13). He advocates an experimental attitude in the research process with children which allows for an exploration of new ways of describing their everyday lives and encourages an open attitude towards the unexpected. A willingness to allow the research to shift in accordance with the input from child participants indicates a respect for their views, which although acknowledged as challenging for researchers (Kullman 2012), allows a recognition of children’s agency to permeate the research process. This sense of the researcher stepping
back and allowing the voice of the child to come to the fore is endorsed by Christensen who proposes a degree of restraint in order to ensure children are ‘actively involved in research’ (2004:174).

Re-appraising participative policy making processes, Percy-Smith (2010) expresses a concern that models of participation can be disempowering for children. He identifies a tendency to focus on presenting children and young people with an issue to discuss, which, it is proposed, will ultimately be resolved by, for example, the local authority. He criticizes this tendency as it promotes a ‘passive form of citizenship’ (2010:115) rather than advocating for ‘individuals and groups to act as competent and autonomous social actors’ (ibid). Similarly, a reluctance on the part of politicians, teachers and parents to engage with children in participative processes which do not have an overtly educational value inhibits the voice of the child (Baraldi 2003). Percy-Smith (2010) presents a case for re-considering both the settings and aims of participative processes. He proposes the development of processes which involve stakeholders all the way through to the final conclusions and decisions. This would result in better services and in a more meaningful understanding of the process of active citizenship. He says participation rights should not be interpreted merely as ‘having a say’ but should be accorded ‘deeper levels of expression and engagement in social activities’ (2010:118).

The research site can present other challenges and Spyrou (2011) argues that the voice of the child and how it is heard is shaped by the social, political, historical and cultural context within which it is produced. The research site is shaped by power dynamics and expectations of children’s behaviour, which in turn influence their response to questions (Weller and Barker 2003; Percy-Smith 2010). Weller and Barker draw attention to what they call the ‘spatiality of research with children’ (2003:207) referring to the controlled nature of spaces such as school and home as disempowering for children. Percy-Smith (2010) proposes
taking the research out of the school and into community spaces. He suggests that how the space where participation occurs is constructed ‘directly influences whether and how people participate’ (2010:109). This complex context also informs the researchers understanding of childhood and as such shapes interpretation of the voice of the child (Spyrou 2011).

Accessing participants, finding some privacy and ensuring children have an opportunity to express themselves freely without adult intervention can prove difficult. The research location for this study was school and in a few cases, home. There is anecdotal evidence (see section 4.8.1) that engaging children in research in Ireland can be difficult and the children who participated in this study were accessed through their schools partially due to that challenge. The school was however considered an appropriate location in so far as the walk to school was of particular interest in this study. But the limitations of conducting research with children in a school setting are acknowledged and the challenges that arose during the fieldwork are described in section 4.7.1.

In any effort to represent the voice of the child a conscientious researcher is aware that issues will arise, not least of which is the power dynamics between child participants and adult researcher (Christensen 2004; Hill and Greene 2005; Spyrou 2011). The ethical concerns in conducting research with children, the role of researcher reflexivity and what Christensen refers to as issues of power and representation (2004) are described in detail below. Recognition of what Spyrou refers to as ‘the limits of children’s voices’ (2011:151) implies an acceptance of the messiness of the research process, recognition of which both Spyrou (2011) and Kullman (2012) say leads to a more creative research process which in fact increases the rigour of the study. The next section looks more specifically at how the experiential dimension of the research question informed methodological considerations which have been brought to bear in an exploration of children’s every day experiences.
4.2.2 Methodological approaches: researching children’s experience

This study drew on elements of phenomenological methodology in order to explore the individual lived experiences of children’s spatial mobility. According to Crewsell, this approach applies to ‘the study of the lived experience of persons’ (2007:58) and the purpose of a phenomenological study is to examine the meaning of a phenomenon to a number of individuals and describe the common experience among those individuals. It is an approach which ‘aims to be open to the phenomenon so that it can reveal itself and be understood as fully as possible’ (Seamon 2012:139). This study acknowledges the unique experience of individual children as they walk through the urban world in which they live and seeks to explore the shared meaning of their spatial mobility by remaining ‘open to’ the complexity of hearing their voices, as described above. In a discussion of phenomenological approaches used in research with children, Danaher and Briod give a brief account of the history of phenomenology and the study of human science as an exploration of ‘what it means to be a human being’, defined in terms of ‘life experience’(2005:220). Danaher and Briod argue for the necessity of phenomenological study of children to facilitate a better understanding of their lives, leading to a ‘higher quality’ (2005:233) of provision for children. Drawing on this approach, the focus of this study is on individual children’s every day experience of their walks through the public realm.
4.2.3 Methodological approaches: narrative research and grounded theory

The complexity of children’s everyday lives has been described above and an exploration of those lives often requires an ‘eclectic’ (Hart 1979: 9) approach to research design and the adoption of methodologies which are considered fit for purpose (Clough and Nutbrown 2007). To ensure a fully rounded account of children’s experience the research design developed for this study is not what Creswell refers to as ‘pure’ (2007). It includes the use of a questionnaire, a quantitative method which is not normally used with phenomenological research and has adapted elements of participative action research to fit the study. Data collection methods associated with narrative research were also employed, in this instance visual-narratives (Burke 2006), again an approach which facilitates the exploration of individual lives (Creswell 2007), while empowering the child participants to describe those lives in their own words and through the use of images.

To ensure those voices are authentically represented, the analysis is grounded in the data the participants collected and data collected in collaboration with them through interviews. The theoretical exposition of the children’s experiences is drawn from the data, or ‘discovered’ within the data (Glaser and Strauss 2009), utilising examples of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Every effort has been made to refer to the data collected with the children in generating theory on their experience in order to ensure the perspective conveyed through the thesis is that of the children’s. This somewhat eclectic approach is one which supports the aim of hearing children’s voices in this study. The next section describes the reflexive position adopted in this research to facilitate an authentic account of children’s views.
4.2.4 A reflexive approach

‘As adults we bring to our encounters with children a particular package of attitudes and feelings, constructed through our own personal childhood history and our contemporary perspective on childhood, often coloured by one or more of the various prevailing ideologies of childhood’

Greene and Hill (2005:8)

Adults bring to the research agenda a set of particular assumptions about what childhood is, what childhood should be and the role children should play in society. The particular power dynamic between adults and children can leave children little scope to contest these assumptions as they ‘often find it difficult to dissent, disagree or say things which they think may be unacceptable’ (Greene and Hill 2005:10). Thus, extracting an insight into the complexity of children’s lives from the stranglehold of adult assumptions is a key challenge in research on their perspectives. The contextualist paradigm which informs this study points to a recognition of the presence of the researcher throughout the course of the research process and the need to understand; ‘the information gained as a co-construction of the researcher and participant in the research’ (Tudge 2008: 61).

Recognition of this relationship demands a reflexive approach on the part of the researcher, a key aspect of this research endeavour. Giving an authentic account of the experience of others is arguably not so much an exercise in creating objective distance between the researcher and the research participants (Creswell 2007) but rather an effort which demands awareness and exposition of the subjective understandings and views the researcher brings to bear on the subject matter. This self-awareness or reflexivity is defined by Luttrell (2010) as a reflection on personal bias and an acknowledgment of being part of
the context the researcher is examining. Drawing on Luttrell’s Reflexive Model of Research Design which ‘emphasizes reflexivity as the centrepiece of qualitative research and design’ (2010:160) there has been an effort to apply a reflexive approach throughout this study. In her account of how she resolves ‘tensions, contradictions and power imbalances’ (2010:500) which arise during the research process, Luttrell calls for transparency among researchers surrounding the decisions that are made throughout the process. She suggests that; ‘All manner of contingencies shape the nature of our research relationships – practical, theoretical, ethical, moral and political – and these must be taken into account, and decisions made along the way’ (2010:160).

As this study unfolded I considered my personal bias as an advocate for children’s rights and I reflected on my relationship with both the subject matter and the research location as a parent with children living in the north-west inner city. I also reflected on my own childhood experience of independent spatial mobility as the interviews I conducted with parents for this study revealed a correlation between parent’s memories of outdoor freedoms as children and how they perceived their children’s freedoms today.

Studying children is sometimes described as doubly challenging because of the difficulty of assuming knowledge about childhood based on the sort of childhood the adult research once lived. Thorne (2010) gives a detailed account of this particular challenge in her ethnographic study on fourth/fifth grade children in the US during which she spent time both in the classroom and the school yard with, and observing, the children’s interactions. The research process provoked vivid memories of her own childhood encounters at school, which she describes as shaping the relationships she developed with the children she was observing.

Conscious that my memories of my outdoor childhood experience (suburban with considerable outdoor freedom) might affect my views of the experiences of the child
participants I was working with documented, I took time to ‘bracket out’ (Danaher and Briod 2005) assumptions I held both before I met the children and again during the analysis process. It was a valuable process, but not in the sense I had anticipated. My memory of a childhood spent out roaming the streets all day long did not impinge on my encounters with the children I was working with so much as my adult opinion on what constituted a good childhood today. This emerged as an idea which revolved around a personal understanding of the aesthetic appearance of a place I believed children should inhabit and a political perspective on their right to participate in that space free of the impositions posed by adult generated traffic. My assumptions inevitably shaped my perceptions and I soon realised that research with children also poses a challenge to adults in so far as “the perceptions of adults and children differ” (Cele 2006:15).

Cele proposes that the way to overcome this difference in perception is to develop an understanding of how the child participants ‘use, relate to and reflect over phenomena” (2006:15), which in my experience requires both self awareness and a constant questioning of any inference in relation to the data. It is an attitude which in essence demands an acutely self conscious listening to what the children are saying. This listening presents challenges firstly because views expressed by the children proved at times contrary to my own view of what is ideal for them in their outdoor world, and secondly because the children as individuals express conflicting views. A third challenge during this investigation has centred on how to present children’s views so that they are heard without prejudice. This can be a particularly difficult challenge to overcome. In this study representing the children’s perspectives is especially complex due to the assumptions adult readers make about city space and children who live there (Jones 2000; Kearns and Ruimy 2010).

The challenge of dealing with what can be projected onto the participant’s views and perceptions is addressed by McDermott and Varenne (2010) in their essay on culture,
development and disability using the case of the deaf population based at Martha’s Vineyard in the US. For genetic reasons there was a particularly high instance of deafness historically in Martha’s Vineyard. This did not, however, present as a problem as the hearing population all learned to sign. As the island became a popular tourist destination ‘the plight’ (2010: 165) of the deaf population became the subject of popular discussion and with that ‘a call for a remedy of the situation’ (ibid) - which had not in fact been perceived by the indigenous population as in any way problematic. McDermott and Varenne make the observation that; ‘if the surface of appearances coincided with reality, we would not need science’ (2010:173) and in this study there has been an attempt to avoid imposing my own adult interpretation of urban ‘appearances’ on the children’s lives.

But while I can acknowledge my own assumptions and work to genuinely represent the children throughout the research process, it is more difficult to ensure readers will suspend judgment of particular images of what may seem like urban deprivation and refrain from making assumptions about the children who inhabit these places. Thus I was initially reluctant to use certain images. However the purpose of this study is to present children’s perspectives and rather than censor any of the images, they are included in the hope that adult readers will pause and reflect on what it is that the children are saying through their photographs rather than interpret their visual narratives based on the reader’s values. It is an indication of how difficult it can be to listen to children’s voices and present them (Roberts 2005). But it is an effort that must be made if as adult we genuinely wish to understand their lives better.

Finally, the attempt through this study to give an authentic account of children’s perspectives on their spatial mobility is also an acknowledgement of their agency, an understanding of children reflected in an awareness that children too are reflexive; ‘They reflect upon their experiences and practices. In this way the children not only appear as
respondents but as also actively involved in interpreting and shaping the research process’ (Christensen and James 2008: 7). The understanding of children as agents shaping their own lives which underpins this study, reflected in the positioning of children as participants in the research process, informs methodological considerations which underlie the aim of this study: to listen to, to hear and to present the perspectives of children by acknowledging the challenges inherent in being an adult researcher who inevitably has subjective views on the research question.

4.3 Physical location of the research

The research is located in the north-west inner city of Dublin (NWIC), a demographically and physically diverse area of the city. The map used in chapter one is included here again for the readers convenience.
The location was chosen partly out of expediency as it is where I have been living myself for the past ten years. I am familiar with the routes the children take, with the location of their homes and schools, and the physical space through which they move. I have an ‘emic’ perspective on the research location through which I share, to an extent, the children’s experience. This location has also been chosen as the site for the research as it offers a rich and complex city landscape which shapes the experience of the children’s spatial mobility. The NWIC is a historic quarter of Dublin which has undergone an urban regeneration programme over the past twenty years. It comprises a juxtaposition of old with new.
architecture and small cobblestone laneways with wide traffic filled streets. Residential areas and busy commercial zones blend seamlessly together.

Historically Irish urban planning and housing policies have reflected and promoted a somewhat negative understanding of the city. The city has been viewed as dangerous and dirty - more a place for commerce, culture and drinking than providing high quality living conditions – and suburbs have been regarded as the proper place to raise children (Connolly and Cleary 2009). The focus of city planning has been on commercial needs, reflected in high volumes of traffic moving through the inner city at speed. Planning policy such as this which prioritises traffic over the needs of other road users such as pedestrians is not a very safe place for children to wander freely (Jacobs 1961). This understanding of the city gives rise to a perception of public space as being unsafe for children who do not have adult supervision resulting in a further curtailment of freedom for children (Valentine 2004).

Irish planning policy has tended to reflect an assumption that children should not be outside in the urban world without an adult and as such the city has not been designed to adequately meet the needs of children. Dublin city has been adversely affected by what Kearns and Ruimy describe as a ‘lack of interest in city living environmental issues [that] may reveal an underlying anti-urban bias which fails to comprehend the challenge and importance of these issues in making successful high density residential areas’ (2010:36). There is, however, some indication that this ‘anti-urban bias’ may be changing. Both the Department of the Environment produced Urban Design Manual (2009) and the Dublin City Development Plan (2011-2017) encourage city living. Current city policy promotes ‘good urban neighbourhoods throughout the city’ (2010: 11.4.2) and encourages ‘the creation of attractive mixed use sustainable safe neighbourhoods which contain a variety of housing types and tenures with supporting community facilities, public realm and residential
amenities’ (2010: 12.4.1). The extent to which this change in attitude has affected the experience of children living in the city is of interest in the context of this study.

This research is concerned with the urban geographies of children who live in the city, with their experience of mobility in that city space and how they engage with that environment. It seeks to transcend negative assumptions made about children who live in the city and is located within this spatial context in order to bring the child’s perspective of their independent spatial mobility in an urban context to bear on the current discourse surrounding planning cities for children.

4.4 Sampling procedures

The first phase of the data collection process entailed collecting quantitative data and was aimed at fourth class children who are aged between 9 and 10. This age group has been identified as the age at which children begin to develop some independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990). All five primary schools in the north-west inner city were approached and four of the five agreed to participate in the research. A total of 94 children were given consent forms to sign themselves and to be signed by their parents. In all, 52 children consented to participate. One of the primary aims of this phase of data collection was to identify appropriate participants for the qualitative data collection. The population of interest to this study is children who live in the city and move around their urban world on a regular basis, both with and without an adult. Not all the children at school in the north-west inner city live in the city; some commute from various suburbs, others live in the south west inner city and some are driven most places they go, thus not all the children at school in the location would be suitable participants for this study. Demographic information on the questionnaire form facilitated the identification of a potential qualitative sample group.
A purposive sampling strategy was applied to identify participants for the next three phases of data collection, which used qualitative methods. The strategy reflects the research aim and questions and the underlying theoretical framework. In order to examine the mobility experience of children living in a city environment and address the research questions regarding the meaning of independence, a sample group of children aged 9 or 10, who live in the north west inner city and walk to school either with or without an adult on a regular basis was identified following analysis of the questionnaire. The sample group is what Silverman describes as ‘typical of the phenomena’ (1999:91) to which the relevant theorising on independent spatial mobility applies. The age group has been identified in the literature as the time when children begin to get a certain amount of independence and through their walks to school these children can describe the experience of children’s geographies in an urban environment and the role independence plays in shaping that experience (Hillman et al. 1990; Matthews et al. 2000). Following identification of an appropriate sample group, a new consent form was issued to the children and their parents seeking permission to participate in the next two stages of data collection. A total of 20 children consented to participate with written agreement from their parents.

Sampling adult participants also adopted a purposive sampling strategy. Two groups of adults were identified as appropriate to this study; group a) people with an expertise in planning and children in Dublin City and group b) the parents of the children who participated in the research. For group a) two officials at Dublin City Council with specific responsibility for planning decisions in the north-west inner city were approached to participate and both agreed to a joint interview. An official at Dublin City Council with responsibility for children was also approached and she too agreed to an interview. Finally, an urban design practitioner with an academic background as Director of the Urban Design Masters in Urban Design at University College Dublin was approached to participate in an
interview and he agreed. The two planners were interviewed at the local authority office. The official with responsibility for children was also interviewed at the local authority office, but on a separate date. The urban design expert was interviewed at his office in the city centre. All four interviewees were approached with a view to gaining an insight into the place of children in the city from the perspective of the local authority and an understanding of how children are prioritised in planning decisions.

For group b), parents of the child participants, a note was included in the consent form which parents signed indicating they would be approached to participate in an interview at a later date. Following the interviews with the children, the parents were phoned and asked if they were available for interview. Parents of nine of the children agree to participate in an interview, the purpose of which was to ascertain their views on their children’s independent spatial mobility in the city neighbourhood which they inhabit. Almost all these interviews were conducted in the family homes. One was conducted over the phone at the request of the parent.

4.5 Methods for collecting data with children on their spatial mobility experience

Different methods will produce different knowledge so consideration of a relationship between methods and research questions is important (Porter et al. 2012). Also the choice of methods will depend on the setting and their appropriateness for the individual children who are participating (Alderson 2008). Typical research methods used in research on children’s outdoor experiences include mapping, drawing, photography and interviews (Driskell 2002). Creative methods such as drawing and photography are often employed to conduct research with children, as methods they enjoy (Veale 2005). A consideration of methods should not assume a lack of competence among children but rather of how appropriate they are to
capturing children’s everyday lives and how children ‘routinely express and represent’ episodes in their daily lives (Christensen 2004:166).

The methods used in this study have been used with children to develop an insight their play spaces (Burke 2005), develop well-being indicators (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2005) investigate place making (Rasmussen 2004; Cele 2006), explore school journeys (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Kullman 2012) and to represent their urban environments (Matthews 1992; Beneker et al. 2010). As mentioned above, there is a suggestion that different methods produce different types of knowledge of their outdoor world. Drawings of particular places created from memory or influenced by an idea of an area focus on landmarks and tend not to show people (Matthews 1992; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Beneker et al. 2010), while photographs taken in situ as the children walk through their neighbourhoods focus on people and the social significance of the walk (Kullman 2012) and the ‘landscapes of social and environmental problems’ (Beneker et al. 2010:136; see also Cele 2006 and Rasmussen 2004).

The data were collected during four separate phases. The purpose of the first phase of data collection was to quantify the opportunities children said they had to move around in their urban world without an adult. Those opportunities were identified through the use of a questionnaire. The next two phases comprised a combination of photography, photo-elicited interviews and semi-structured interviews. The children were given cameras to bring with them as they walked so they could document places which held meaning for them along routes they regularly walked. This was followed by photo-elicited interviews designed to afford the children control over interpreting the meaning they associated with each image and semi-structured interviews on their views on independence. The fourth phase of data collection consisted of interviews with the children’s parents, officials based in the local authority with responsibility for the research location (Dublin City Council) and an urban
design academic and practitioner. The purpose of these interviews was firstly, to establish concerns parents had regarding their children’s spatial mobility in the city space where they live. Secondly, to examine how that city space is understood and planned for children.

![Diagram of data collection phases](image)

**Figure 4.5.1 Four phases of data collection**

The data collection methods used with the children were chosen to elicit rich data sets and as methods children would enjoy (Darbyshire et al. 2005; Hart 1997; Driskell 2002). The use of these methods is described in detail below with reference to the relevance to the research question and conducting research with children.
4.5.1 Questionnaire: identifying opportunities to move around outside without an adult

Drawing on a concern in the literature regarding the loss of outdoor freedom among children (Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) the first phase of the data collection process, which began in February 2010, focussed on identifying opportunities children said they had to move around the neighbourhood without an adult. A function of this stage was to investigate children’s perspectives on opportunities to access the outdoors without an adult. It also served to begin to build knowledge on the experience of spatial mobility for children and thirdly, to identify an appropriate sample of children for the qualitative data collection.

The questionnaire was piloted among a number of children who were in the same age range as the sample group for the study and following feedback on the relevance of questions and the ease with which they might be understood, ten multi-choice questions were devised (Scott 2008). The questionnaire was designed as a tool which was quick and easy to fill out and which was engaging, colourful and fun\(^\text{13}\) (Weller 1998). Graphics were chosen on the basis that they would engage the children without biasing answers in any way. The short multiple choice questions were focussed on the kinds of places children typically go each day (Karsten 2002) such as school or out to play, and explored how frequently children say they access these places without an adult. The questionnaire was designed to take approximately five minutes to complete so as to cause little disruption to normal school routine.

\(^{13}\) A copy of the questionnaire is included in appendix 5
4.5.2 Photography: mapping children's spatial mobility experience

‘Research that involves people’s, and especially children’s interactions with and perception of their physical environment always creates methodological challenges since the experiences are subjective and often difficult to communicate’

(Cele 2006:9)

The use of photography as a method has both pragmatic and theoretical implications in this study. Verbal data collection methods have been understood as being more valuable than visual methods and it has been suggested that ‘photographs are acceptable only as means to record data or as illustration and subservient to that of the central narrative...they distort that which they claim to illuminate’ (Prosser 1998:99). However it is precisely the subjective nature of image making which is of value to this study, providing a means through which the children can document what are fundamentally subjective spatial mobility experiences and provide an insight into their lives. The use of photography in qualitative research has been identified as contributing ‘a degree of tangible detail, a sense of being there’ (Prosser 1998:116) and an immediacy which facilitates the children to describe their daily encounters.

The purpose of the data collection was to document how the children interacted with the place through which they moved and to convey their subjective understanding of the objective reality of their physical urban world (Cele 2006). Although the children who participated in the data collection were articulate and might well have been able to discuss their experience with me if I had gone on the walks with them – a data collection method used by Cele (2006) and Moore (1986) – one of the objectives of the research was to compare the spatial mobility experience among children who are with and without an adult. Had I been
with the children it would have been impossible to collect data on the nature of the experience without an adult.

I decided on the camera as a tool the children had some familiarity with and could easily bring with them as they walked. A camera would allow children to document the exact route and could be used in the moment of the experience to capture an image associating experience with place. The relationship between place knowing and emplacement is described by Christensen as; ‘There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place and being in a position to perceive it’ (Christensen 2003:16). This knowing or sensing of place arises to some extent out of familiarity or ‘habit’, but also changes in the ‘directly experienced’ (Hart 1979:12) moment of the environment. The experiences the children map are of daily experiences, but also of any given ‘event’ (Tudge 2008) which might occur on a particular day, affected by everything from the weather to their absorption in a mapping exercise. The camera facilitates capturing experiential maps which must be understood as having a fluidity as well as containing static elements and this was taken into consideration during analysis.

In recognition of the value of photography as a method to capture experience and a method which children enjoy and engage in with relative ease, photography has been used in collaborative research on a diverse range of aspects of children’s lives, in particular research which explores place meaning with children (Rogers 2009; Cele 2006; Rasmussen 2004; Burke 2005; Darbyshire et al. 2005; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2006). With much of this work the children bring the camera to places they go in their neighbourhoods that adults are frequently unaware of. The children literally bring the camera ‘into an environment beyond that surveyed by adults’ (NicGabhainn and Sixsmith (2006:251) and use it ‘to depict children’s places’ (ibid) and reveal a physical geography which is their own. In this study the
children do not use the camera to document their ‘hidden places’, instead the camera is used to capture meaning they ascribe to the space they share with adults.

During the second phase of data collection the children were asked to map their route to school (a typical walk children make through public space) indicating exactly how they got from home to school every day. The purpose of this was firstly, to compare a sense of familiarity and belonging in the neighbourhood among children with and without an adult. The children were asked to simultaneously map the experience of that walk with reference to things they liked and did not like along the way. I had piloted the use of both drawing and photography as methods to map routes to establish the suitability of these methods for the children and the data they were collecting. In the initial meetings with the children participating in the study where we discussed the mapping assignment, I asked them to draw maps of their route from home to school. However they expressed frustration at their lack of ability to properly convey the route and some did not enjoy the task. It seemed to be difficult for the children to remember things they saw on the way and to draw them as accurately as they would wish.

I also asked the children to tell me exactly how they got to school and they were reasonably adept at articulating the route they took, but sometimes struggled to remember detail along the way. The children were asked to simultaneously map how they experienced those routes and, again, while they were capable of giving a broad overview of the experience, they found it more difficult to identify specific places they did and did not like.

I made an ethical decision not to continue with the drawing assignment based on the impact it was having on the children’s sense of their ability and instead decided to concentrate photography. I felt this method would facilitate a more meaningful insight into their experience and overcome difficulties they seemed to have remembering what their
walks were like. By giving the children a tool to convey their perspective, the use of photography reflects an understanding of children as agents shaping their own life experiences in so far as they choose experiences of the walk they deem significant. It is also a method which is a good ‘fit’ with the research aim: the children used their cameras to document the everyday experience of their walk and to reveal the meaning children associate with the adult world of urban public space.

4.5.3 Photo-elicitation: children interpreting their images

‘What to an adult might seem to be insignificant, an obstruction or an “eyesore” often is shown to be of vital importance to children’

(Burke 2005:36)

The decision to use photo-elicited interviews was taken to give each child the opportunity to explain the photographs they produced and describe the visual narrative of the walk to school they had created. The images document a subjective experience and they have a specific meaning which can only be de-coded by the children with any degree of accuracy. The aim of conducting photo-elicited interviews with the children was to give them the opportunity to articulate that meaning themselves. Photo-elicited interviews often facilitate a deeper discussion of experience using the image as a trigger to discuss a range of concerns. Mitchell (1994) raises the question of agency and power in his essays on the relationship between photography and language and describes these as central to the way images ‘work’. In this study the only meaning associated with each image is that which the children describe during the photo-elicited interview. The images ‘work’ with reference to an acknowledgement of the children’s agency. To invest the images with any other meaning is to dis-empower the children and disregard the voice of the child which this study seeks to give expression to.
When the children’s photographs had been developed I met with them each individually for a combined semi-structured interview and photo-elicited interview. As will be discussed in more detail in the section on fieldwork, almost all the interviews took place in school. There was one exception, when a child was interviewed at home. Photo-elicitation focussed on the visual narrative the children created of the experience of their walk to school and was employed to ensure each image was interpreted by the child. The first set of interviews carried out with the children was based on the images of their walk to school.

The second set of photo-elicited interviews was based on photographs of walks they made during their free time. The purpose of this stage of data collection was two-fold; to ensure the validity of the research through a triangulation of data and confirm the findings of the second stage of data collection, and to explore whether giving the children more autonomy over the walk they mapped would have any implications for their experience of spatial mobility. This time the children chose for themselves the walk they wished to document, and the data collection mostly took place over the weekend when they were free of the constraints of school. As with the data collected on the walks to school, the focus of this phase was an exploration of the children’s experience of their walk through the urban world in which they live and as such the same methods were employed.

4.5.4 Semi-structured interviews: children discussing independent spatial mobility

The semi-structured interviews devised for this research provided a context in which to have a detailed discussion of the children’s views of their independence, the city world in which they lived and through which they moved around. These interviews were intended to provide an opportunity to share their perspective on questions which I asked, as intimately and openly as they chose.
There were two objectives to these semi-structured interviews, which led in to the photo-elicited interviews; firstly to have a general chat with the children and to put them at their ease, secondly to gather information on the wider issues surrounding their spatial mobility experience. These wider issues refer to; how they view the significance of independence with respect to their spatial mobility, how they understand the urban environment in which they live, and some detail on how they felt about the data collection assignment. The open ended questions on these matters formed the basis for a discussion with the children which locates the more specific description of the walk they photographed in the context of the research objectives (Creswell 2007). Acknowledging the wishes of the interviewees, the interview process did not stick rigidly to the questions but allowed for a more fluid interaction between the participants and the researcher. This helped to facilitate a more collaborative exploration of the children’s views and experiences (Westcott and Littleton 2005).

There was a second set of semi-structured interviews with the children following the photographs they took of their free time during phase three of the data collection process. The questions asked were slightly different, with a greater emphasis being placed on the wider world of Dublin City and how the children understood that as a space in which they lived and the extent to which they could identify with it.

4.5.5 Semi-structured interviews: parents and city officials discussing the urban context

The parents and city officials were interviewed during the final stage of data collection. The purpose of this final stage was to establish an understanding of the relationship between the children’s experience of spatial mobility and the macro-system and the exo-system surrounding that experience. Parents exert control over the extent of the children’s
independent spatial mobility (although children sometimes contest and overstep the boundaries which have been imposed) and as such delineate the territory which comprises the children’s experience. Thus, the purpose of the interviews was to examine issues of concern to parents which inform the spatial range they accord their children. In the first instance, I decided to examine parental concerns and to look at whether there was any correlation between parental concerns and their children’s experience. I devised semi-structured interviews which comprised questions on their views of the city space and their views on children and independent spatial mobility. These questions reflected both socio-cultural concerns and pragmatic concerns. Next, in order to examine how, and to what extent Dublin City Council engages with the needs of children in the city I developed semi-structured interviews aimed at city council officials and an urban design expert which consisted of questions on how children were positioned in policy and planning decisions.

4.5.6 Methods: a brief summary

The use of multiple methods facilitated rich data sets which offer ‘complementary insights and understandings’ of children’s experiences (Darbyshire et al. 2005:417). The decision to use of a range of data collection methods was consistent with the focus of the research question on presenting the experience of independent spatial mobility from the perspective of the child and in so doing reflected the understanding of children as competent social actors who actively participate in shaping their life experiences. The children used the camera to document their every day experience, while they were in that moment of their every day walks. Through the photo-elicited interviews they interpreted the images and described the visual narrative of their daily experience. The semi-structured interviews facilitated a discussion which was not overly prescribed and allowed the children take a degree of control
over the interview process as they described wider issues surrounding their spatial mobility experience.

4.6 Limitations and ethical considerations

As discussed above, I chose photography as a method of collecting data as it facilitated the children being in the experience as they were documenting it. But the camera also created an obstacle between the child and the experience. In the process of photographing their routes the children were in fact slightly removed from the experience as they were watching the experience through the lens of the camera, endeavouring to capture something to ‘show’ the researcher and consciously selecting what to share. Busy thinking through the experiences to document, the children no longer had the opportunity to enjoy a sort of spontaneous engagement with their environment which has been observed by other researchers (Mackett et al. 2007).

Conducting the data collection within a school setting can present challenges. Most of the contact I had with the children was at school, a place where adult child relations are understood in terms of a hierarchy whereby ‘teacher authority [is] a given’ (Devine 2000:28) and children are rarely consulted as equals. It is a power structure which compels children to convey their acknowledgment of the adult’s authority by seeking to give the ‘correct’ answer to questions posed and by being obedient to the rules. Although children are not entirely submissive and assert their agency in a range of ways (Devine 2000) they tend not to flagrantly disobey the school regulations. This seems to have impacted on their inclination to reveal to the researcher places they might go or routes they might take which they are not allowed go, as well as a disinclination to discuss certain spontaneous behaviours they might engage in such as ‘messing’ - which is usually frowned upon in school. The school setting did also offer up a positive dimension for the children. It is a setting they are familiar with
and therefore comfortable. Also, the primary school curriculum encourages sharing personal experience (SPHE Teachers Guidelines 1999), which meant most of the children enjoyed speaking quite openly about their spatial mobility experience.

Power relations and discipline within the school setting also affected the extent to which I felt I could achieve my own ethical goals and empower the children throughout the process. One particular incident stands out in my notes on the fieldwork. Towards the end of the data collection process I went to one of the schools to return the images to some of the participants. When I arrived the class was in the library, having quiet time, reading to themselves. As I was talking to the teacher some of the girls began chatting, among them one of the participants I was due to return images to, and they were sent out and back up to the classroom. Rather than return the images to the child as intended, I had to give the pictures to the teacher who said she would give them to this participant at the end of the day. I did not get a chance to say thank you or acknowledge my appreciation for her contribution personally. I felt my last contact with this child was associated with her being in trouble and that, having disrupted the class during quiet time, I was inadvertently to blame for it.

4.6.1 Ethical Clearance

The two primary ethical issues with respect to conducting research with children relate to ‘ability and power’ (Greene and Hogan 2005:63). These and other ethical issues surrounding research with children are understood and have been addressed by the researcher throughout the study. The research proposal was first submitted to the DIT Ethics Committee in June 2009. A number of recommendations were made regarding the submission, in particular the need to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The proposal was re-submitted in September 2009 with reference to the recommendations and the study was granted ethical clearance in February 2010. Informed consent was given by the children and their parents
for both the quantitative data collection stage and again for the qualitative data collection stage.\textsuperscript{14}

Drawing on my own previous experience with children as a parent, working in a voluntary capacity in a range of early years settings and as a children’s rights advocate, a key ethical consideration focussed on how the children felt about their involvement in the study. Throughout the data collection process each child was accorded the utmost respect and I endeavoured to dissipate any sense of the usual hierarchical nature of adult/child relations which apply in a school context. Every effort was made to assure the children their involvement and contribution was highly valued. Any indication of discomfort or nervousness on the part of a child was acknowledged and the discussion was as relaxed and encouraging as possible. The subtlest suggestion, whether articulated or expressed through body language, of any unwillingness to answer a particular question was understood and respected. At the end of each contact with the children they were thanked and it was made clear to them that their input was much appreciated. Again, following the final interview with the children they were all individually thanked and copies of all the photographs were returned to them. It was also considered ethically important that the parents were kept fully informed and each time I gave the children a camera I rang the parents to let them know the children were bringing home cameras and would be using them the following day to photographs routes they were walking.

As described above, I did not feel that I always succeeded in my effort to ensure the children felt empowered and enjoyed their involvement in the research. Even though the children were advised they could pull out of the research at any time, in reality it can be very difficult for children to decide to disengage and they may chose subtle ways of resisting rather than overtly stating they no longer want to participate (Hill 2005). There was one

\textsuperscript{14} See appendix 3 for ethical clearance and appendix 4 for copies of consent forms
particular situation which arose where I did not pick up on the subtle cues a child participant was giving me that he did not want to continue. Through my experience with this child I developed a keen sense of just how disempowered children can feel in relation to adults, especially within a school setting. The next section includes a discussion of that instance as well as a detailed account of the fieldwork and how the methodological and ethical considerations were implemented.

4.7 Methodological considerations in practice: the fieldwork

The fieldwork undertaken for the study is described here in detail. Some of the challenges which arise for researchers working in collaboration with children are examined alongside a discussion of ethical issues which arose in the field. With reference to the extensive field notes taken throughout the data collection process, the application of the reflexive approach adopted for the study is described. This section begins with a discussion of that reflexivity and some of the ethical concerns which arose. That is followed by an in-depth account of each phase of data collection. Finally, the trustworthiness of the study is discussed.

4.7.1 Reflexivity and ethical concerns in the field

Reflexivity is a key methodological consideration for this study and throughout the research process I have made every effort to maintain a sense of self-awareness and ‘bracket out’ assumptions I make about issues surrounding the research question (Creswell 2007). Engaging children in a collaborative research process demands more of the researcher than awareness of personal assumptions. It also requires a profound sense of the impression the researcher makes on the children, how he or she is being perceived and how he or she engages with the participants (Luttrell 2006). My own ethical framework stipulates that every effort should be made to ensure the children feel comfortable and are enjoying their
involvement in the research and that they feel both they themselves and their contribution is respected and valued. Before and after meetings with the children I kept notes on how to present myself to them and subsequently how I dealt with any situations arising where the children seemed in any way uncomfortable. The following extract from the folder containing some of these notes details how I tried to put the children at ease and how I behaved after the interviews when I bumped into some of the children around the neighbourhood:

‘To put the children at ease, to make the engagement fun, to try and dissipate the adult child power imbalance, I often chat to the children about my own life, or mention something about the place they are describing (the ha’penny bridge/the Richmond courts, taking my own kids to the park) Sometimes they are very curious about my life and children. It is a way of making it a bit more of a two way conversation rather than being too much of a ‘Spanish inquisition’.


I was always smiley and friendly. I always praised them, which children like. I was careful to find a good balance between letting them chat away about something which was not relevant and coming back to the questions we needed to cover.

If I see any of the kids out and about when I’m walking through the neighbourhood after interviews, I take my cue from them. I say hi, or just smile to acknowledge them, depending on their reaction to me.’

As the adult researcher I am conscious that I have ultimate control over the study. Nonetheless it is a study which holds at its heart the wish to allow the voice of the child to be heard and to engage with the child participants respectfully. Reflecting best practice in collaborative research with children, the participants in this study were kept well informed
throughout each step of their involvement (McAuley and Brattman 2002) and every effort was made to convey an appreciation of their role.

A particular incident during the third phase of data collection illustrates how, despite making considerable effort, ethical difficulties arise. When the children photographed their walk to school a particular child produced some of the most beautifully composed images and his articulation of his experience of his mobility route was exceptional. He agreed to participate in the second stage of photographic data collection – photographing a walk he made during free time - but when I got his camera developed there were no images. I presumed the camera had been faulty and as I was very excited about the next set of photographs he might take, I decided to give him another camera and ask him to repeat the exercise. When I came to the school to give the child the camera the vice principal accompanied me to his class and we spoke to him together in the corridor outside his classroom. At that stage, aware that I might be putting him to a bit more trouble than he had originally anticipated, I tried to tell him he did not have to continue if he did not want to. However the vice principal, who understood the data collection process as work the boy was expected to do, intervened and said ‘ah, you will do that, won’t you, good man’.

The clear message to the child participant was that he did not have a choice. Leaving the school I felt a bit uncomfortable that he had not been given any chance to say he did not want to take the photographs all over again, but I accepted the vice principals view that he was the sort of child who enjoyed participating and doing various activities. I also had not had any impression from him previously that he was anything other than happy to be involved. I then returned on three separate occasions to retrieve the second camera. Eventually, the third time I arrived, the child was told to call his granny and get her to bring in the camera. I knew this was going to present him with a difficulty and that once his granny was involved he would be very uncomfortable. His grandmother is his guardian and I had
previously had a sense that getting consent forms signed had been difficult for him. During break-time his grandmother brought in his camera and after break I collected it and thanked him profusely for going to so much trouble for me.

When I returned home I checked the camera and I realised no pictures had been taken and my heart really sank. I was deeply disappointed with myself that I had not realised what was going on all along – that the child wanted to disengage and his way of resisting was not to take photographs. I was concerned by how anxious he must have been feeling all along and by the difficulties my failure to pick up on his resistance had caused him. I was acutely aware that I might have failed to understand what he was trying to tell me because I had been so impressed by his initial photographs and that my judgement might have been swayed by the wish to collect good data. I was due to return to the school for one more interview and on that occasion I had the chance to meet up with him. I colluded with his assertion that he had indeed taken the photographs as asked both times around, and that it was very bad luck that the cameras were faulty. I was very warm and friendly towards him and I chatted about how brilliant his initial photographs of the walk to school had been. I told him I had made a point of telling his vice principal how good his work had been and I thanked him for all his help and I apologised for causing him any hassle. He seemed relaxed and pleased in the end, as he headed back in to the class with a smile he thanked me.

4.8 Fieldwork phase one: quantitative data collection

The first phase of data collection, which began in February 2010, was designed to identify opportunities children said they had to be out and about in their urban neighbourhoods without an adult. This reflects a concern in the literature that children have fewer opportunities to wander around their neighbourhoods without adult accompaniment and a research objective to explore children’s perspectives on the extent of their outdoor freedoms.
A secondary aim of this stage of data collection was to identify appropriate participants for the qualitative data collection. The population of interest to this study is children who live in the city and walk through it, both with and without an adult and the questionnaire helped identify those children who might be appropriate.

4.8.1 Recruiting participants

The five primary schools based in the area where the research is located (the north-west inner city) were contacted to participate in the study. The children who participated come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds however the north-west inner city is an area of Dublin where there is a high level of poverty (Census 2011) and most schools would have designated disadvantaged status under the DEIS programme (Dept of Education and Science 2005). There is a view among Dublin based researchers that a significant focus of research on communities living in poverty in recent years has led to a sense of ennui among both families and school staff based in economically disadvantaged areas and I had been advised that there might be a low take up level\(^{15}\).

I decided to use the fact that I lived in the area to my advantage and rather than phoning or emailing school principals or school secretaries that I would walk to each school and endeavour to meet each principal in person. I began to make contact in early spring, a time of year which can be very cold and wet in Dublin. I deliberately chose to head out on sunny mornings when doors were literally more likely to be open and staff and pupils might be feeling in good from. I also felt I would be arriving at the school looking fresh and a bit more convincing than if I arrived there wet and bedraggled. I put together a colourful pack of information for each principal which detailed who I was, the college I was based in, a copy of

\[\text{\textsuperscript{15} I sought advice on approaching schools from both an academic researcher and a landscape architect who had been involved in studies with children living in areas where there is a high level of poverty.}\]
my ethical clearance form, the purpose of my study and what my involvement with the children at the school would entail. I handed over my pack to four secretaries and one principal; this latter immediately agreed to participate. I followed up the rest with phone calls and emails and ultimately four of the five schools agreed to participate, which is considered quite a good response. Although the initial effort to make personal contact was to overcome the challenge where some schools suffer from having their children ‘over work-shopped’, this personal contact helped develop a sense of familiarity and trust and facilitated co-operation between myself and the school staff from the outset.

4.8.2 Questionnaire design

An age appropriate questionnaire, drawing on examples such as the questionnaire used in the Growing up in Ireland survey (ESRI/TCD 2009) was designed. The design deliberately reflected a sense of fun, through the use of colour and graphics, so the children would not see the questionnaire as a school test but rather an enjoyable exercise; it was clear, easy to understand and follow. I had piloted the questionnaire with a small group of children of a similar age who all walked regularly to school both with and without an adult and based on advice given to me by these children I made a couple of changes such as ensuring the questions were very precise, as the children were keen to give very precise answers. The questionnaire consisted of a short set of ten multiple choice questions including ‘how do you usually get to school’ and ‘who do you usually come with’. The questionnaire was designed to take approximately five minutes to complete so as to cause little disruption to normal school routine.
4.8.3 First Meeting with the children

Through the school secretaries I exchanged mobile phone numbers with class teachers so as to arrange suitable times to meet with the children. I set up an initial meeting with each class to introduce myself, explain the research to them, what I was asking of them and to discuss in detail their consent and read through the consent forms with them. The children were all given a consent form to sign themselves and a separate consent form for their parents to sign. In accordance with my ethical framework the children were advised they were free to decline to consent and free to pull out at any stage even if they did sign the consent form (Hill 2005). Before leaving I agreed a day with the pupils when I would return to collect their consent forms. I left behind a colourful poster I had designed in each classroom with the agreed date for the return of consent forms as both a reminder of the project I was asking them to participate in and a reminder of when to bring in the consent forms.

My experience in each classroom was different. The first class I went in to I read through the consent form and it was clear from reading it out loud that the language was not age appropriate. The children seemed a bit bewildered and one child immediately announced she did not want to participate. Following that meeting I revisited the wording of the consent form and made changes. It was clear from the children’s response at initial meetings thereafter that the form was much easier to understand.

Fifty two of the parent and child consent forms were returned. I collected these forms on the day agreed with the children and distributed the questionnaire to children who had consented to participate. A couple of children who were very anxious to participate said they had forgotten or misplaced consent forms. I agreed with the teacher that they could fill in the questionnaire rather than feeling left out, on the basis that those particular questionnaires would not be used for the study. Before leaving each classroom I discretely
returned questionnaires filled out by children who did not have consent forms to the teacher. I stayed in the classroom while the children filled out the questionnaire to answer any questions they might have and to assure them that this was not an exam and there were no right or wrong answers. The questionnaires took on average five minutes to complete and all the children seemed to enjoy the experience.

4.9 Fieldwork Phase 2: photographing the walk to school

Having analysed the data from the questionnaires I identified a suitable cohort for the qualitative data collection process. The data collection during this stage involved using a camera to map the walk to school both in terms of exactly how the children got from a to b and to map their experience of the walk. I returned to the classrooms to discuss the next stage of the data collection with the children, explain what their role would be and answer any queries they had. Although in some studies one consent form covers any involvement children have in the study, I designed new consent forms for the children and their parents at this stage as I was asking the children to do something more complex than fill out a questionnaire in the classroom. Getting forms signed by parents and children is not a smooth process; as a parent I know forms are easily forgotten or lost down the end of school bags and even if they do come out of the bag, remembering to fill them in and put them back into the bag can be a challenge first thing on a school morning. Nonetheless I felt it was very important that the children understood they were now consenting to take photographs and that their parents understood the children (some of whom would not be accompanied by an adult) would be taking photographs as they walked along.

The consent form covered the second and third stage of the data collection process, both of which comprised photographically mapping routes the children walked, semi-structured and photo-elicited interviews. As with the first stage of data collection I went in to
the schools and I discussed these new consent forms with the children. Once again I explained that they were not under any obligation to participate and were free to disengage from the process at any point.

### 4.9.1 Meeting the participants in the qualitative data collection process

Twenty children consented to participate in the qualitative data collection stage. Their parents also gave consent to allow their children participate. I arranged to meet the children who were participating in this stage of the research process at their respective schools. This stage of the data collection process had been piloted with a group of children and I learned that some children are only familiar with digital photography methods. A lack of funding meant I could only afford to use disposable cameras so I knew would have to show them all carefully how to use their camera. I also learned that it would be important to have a lengthy discussion with the children about the kinds of experiences they had on their walks and how they might photograph those experiences.

During this meeting I discussed with the children what I was asking them to do, and why. By way of discussing how they perceived their individual trips, the children each drew a map of that journey and discussed things they liked and disliked along the way. We then talked about cameras and photography. As anticipated, most of the children were unfamiliar with disposable cameras and we spent some time practicing how to wind on the film before taking a photograph. We also had lengthy discussions on how they would keep themselves safe while photographing their various routes. Once the children had asked as many questions as they needed and felt clear about their assignment, I instructed them to put their cameras safely in to their bags, to remember to take them out of their bags at home, and to take the photographs on the way to school the next day.
Each camera was labelled with the relevant child’s ID number and placed in a sealable plastic bag for safe keeping. In case the label came unstuck, I took a photograph of the relevant ID number with each camera. I told the children I would come back next morning to collect their cameras. They were all instructed to put their cameras safely away into the sealable plastic bag and then in to their school bag once they had finished taking the photographs. I arranged with each teacher a time to return the next day to collect the cameras. Some of the teachers offered to take the cameras from the children as they arrived in and have them at their desks for me. The children were all very excited about the prospect of taking photographs and their obvious wish to continue participating was an important ethical consideration. The following day when I arrived to collect the cameras, not all children had remembered to do the project and some children were absent from school. However the missing cameras all eventually arrived back with assignments completed.

4.9.2 Conducting interviews

Once I had collected each camera, I brought them to be developed and returned to the school with the photographs within 48 hours to conduct individual, semi-structured and photoelicited interviews with the children. Each interview was recorded on an MP3 player with the children’s consent. Reflecting good practice guidelines for data collection with children, I made notes of each place of interview, and how each child seemed during the interview (Barker and Weller 2003). Due to space limitations at some of the schools the interviews were not conducted in an ideal place, which proved at times inhibiting or disruptive for the children. However, throughout each interview there was an emphasis on creating a reassuring and encouraging atmosphere. Questions children hesitated to answer were not probed and the children were constantly assured that their input and images were very useful and helpful.
By the time these interviews were all completed the school year was almost over and I arranged to return to each class with a gift to thank the children who had participated in the questionnaire and also those who had not participated for putting up with the disruption. I presented the children who had participated in the qualitative data collection with a certificate and told them I would be back again after the summer to ask them to take some more photographs. All the interviews were uploaded as audio files and subsequently transcribed on to my lap top.

4.10 Fieldwork Phase 3: Photographing a walk during free-time

After the summer I re-initiated contact with the schools. All the children were now in fifth class, some were older, aged 10 or 11, and they had new teachers who were unfamiliar with the research project so it took a while to set up the second data collection process. One of the schools did not respond to my effort to make contact at this stage, however only two children in that school were eligible for this phase so I made contact through their parents and met them at home. The purpose of this phase of the data collection process was to confirm initial findings and to explore the question of independence further. The idea of ‘independence’ and ‘freedom’ are conflated in the literature (Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) and to examine the experience of independence further the focus of the process was on routes children walk in their free time. Some children were not eligible for this phase of the data collection process as they said they did not walk anywhere during free time but rather were taken places by car. Two children could not participate due to illness. A number of children chose not to participate second time around. A total of 13 children participated in this phase of the data collection process.
4.10.1 A further meeting with the children

Once again I had an initial meeting with the participants at their schools to discuss the project and issue cameras. The idea of free time was discussed with the children during this meeting. For some it was going out to play, for others it was the walk to any activity they did outside school hours, and for others the walk home from school constituted a route they took during free time. The children chose whichever route it was they wished to photograph. They were also told they could photograph a number of routes if they wished. The children took the cameras home for the weekend to photograph routes they walked during their free time. Not all the children remembered to take their photographs over the weekend. Those who had forgotten chose to take photographs of free time routes on a weekday after school instead. Again, once the photographs were developed individual semi structured and photo-elicited interviews were arranged with the children. Following completion of all the interviews I returned all the photographs and thanked each child. Once again, each interview was uploaded as an audio file and then transcribed on to my lap top.

4.10.2 Fieldwork Phase 4: Interviewing the adult stakeholders; parents and city officials

Due to work or other commitments, not all the parents were in a position to participate in the interview process and ultimately parents of nine of the children consented. These interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews designed to gather data on their views about their children’s independent spatial mobility, in order to develop a fuller understanding of the restrictions that shape the children’s experience. Acknowledging the preferences of the parents, these interviews were not recorded on an MP3 player, but rather through note taking. All except one of the interviews took place in the family home. The exception was an
interview over the phone, as requested by the parent. The parents were all very friendly and welcoming and pleased to have the opportunity to express their worries about their children’s independence and the city location in which they live. They were all very forthcoming about their concerns and comfortable to chat at length.

The local authority has primary responsibility for the built environment through which the children move and the extent to which the needs of children are understood in a city context impacts on how the needs of children who use the urban space are prioritised and met. Three employees of the Dublin City Council, (the local authority responsible for the north-west inner city) and a lecturer in urban design were interviewed to explore how the needs of children are understood and met in the north-west inner city.

Two senior planners and the head of the Children’s Services Unit were interviewed at length in city council offices. There was no difficulty accessing the local authority employees and all three were very open and honest about the challenges of creating a child friendly urban environment. The interviews were recorded on an MP3 player with the permission of the participants. The urban design academic was interviewed in his city based office and that interview was also recorded on an MP3 player, with his permission.

4.11 Trustworthiness of the study

Drawing on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1999) and Bryman (2008) the trustworthiness of the research design and its implementation in the fieldwork is evidenced through:

- The ‘fit’ between the question, aims, theoretical framework and the methods employed
- Maintaining an ethical stance throughout the research process to ensure respectful relationships between participants and the researcher
• Visiting each interview site and meeting with the children on a number of occasions to ensure they understood their involvement in the process and build trust between the researcher and the participants

• A reflexive attitude which ensured the study was genuinely collaborative, that the children were empowered through their involvement in the research and that the voice of the child is heard and authentically represented in the study

• ‘Member checking’ with the child participants during interviews that any inference the researcher was inclined to make accurately reflected the views being expressed

• The location of the study within a body of literature on children’s spatial mobility to lend the research credibility

• The purposeful sampling strategy resulting in children who share middle childhood as an age group, diversity of backgrounds which reflects the research location population and children who regularly walk through their urban environment both with and without an adult

• The detailed account of the research location as an urban context which the children walk through to ensure transferability

• The use of ‘data triangulation’ through the two walks the children made and the use of a variety of methods and interviews gathering a rich data corpus to confirm the findings in relation to their experience of spatial mobility

• The meticulous documenting of the fieldwork inquiry including notes on settings for interviews, how each participant appeared to be relating to the data collection process on any given day, decisions that were made by the researcher on a daily and even minute by minute basis when necessary and the reasons for those decisions which conveys the dependability of the study.
Interviews were all transcribed and all the images produced by the children were uploaded to folders on the researchers laptop.

**Conclusion**

This chapter describes the challenges inherent in a study which seeks to present an authentic account of children’s lived experience. The need to maintain a profound sense of self awareness and reflexivity throughout the process, from assumptions underlying the research question to encounters with participants to the analysis of the data, has been described with reference to an obligation among researchers to empower child participants and address ethical challenges which arise. The logical coherence of this study has been described through a discussion of the relationship between the research question, aims, theoretical framework and methodological approach and design. Through a multi-method approach resulting in a rich body of data, this study is an attempt to contribute a more meaningful understanding of children’s lives. It attempts to do this through a process which seeks to elucidate the perspective of children on their experience of spatial mobility in a city neighbourhood and the significance of independence for children in that context. Children’s views on those issues are described in the following chapters on the findings of the study.

The presentation of the findings begins with a description of how the city is understood and how children are planned for. Parents’ views on their children’s independent spatial mobility are discussed and the findings on children’s perspectives on opportunities they have to access public space without an adult are presented. This is followed in chapter six by the findings of the analysis of the photographic data and an account of children’s experience of urban spatial mobility which is encapsulated in their perception of the city landscape through which they walk and place making as they move through that landscape.
Findings on the role of independence in shaping the spatial mobility experience are also presented.

In chapter seven the findings on the meaning and significance of independence for children are presented. In the final chapters the theoretical implications of the findings are considered and recommendations arising are presented.
Chapter 5  Shaping the Space of their walks: Findings on the Macro and Exo-Systems that Underpin the Spatial Mobility experience

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings on how the city engages with children, how parents view the city in relation to their children and, in turn, how the children view their access to the public domain. Drawing on the meaning of space as defined by Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), the data were collected to explore an understanding of the city as a space in the sense of the wider, less familiar world which shapes the environment the children move through. The logic behind the presentation of the findings in this chapter is derived from the conceptual frameworks described in chapter two. The ecological model of child development has been mapped on to the research question in order to prize open the various issues which inform policy and how it is implemented. As discussed in chapter two, the macro and exo systems described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) apply in this study to the cultural understandings of the city and children in the city (macro-system) and to policy making in relation to the city and children in the city (exo-system). Parents are the key decisions makers on the extent of children’s independence and their views are shaped by cultural values and a historical perspective derived from childhood memories. The application of the model is illustrated below, highlighting the systems of relationships involved and the relevance of time.
The process of mapping Bronfenbrenner’s framework on to the question of children’s urban spatial mobility reveals a range of issues and concerns, reflecting the discussion in chapter 3 on the multi-faceted context. The initial findings presented in this chapter represent an adult perspective on the city space and convey the various elements which impact on policy and planning decisions, the understanding of children in that context and parental concerns regarding their children’s mobility through that space. The final section presents the children’s perspectives on their regular access to public spaces they know and as such shifts
the discussion towards the city as place and foregrounds the findings of the next chapter on children’s place-making.

The themes which arise are presented here under separate headings for the sake of clarity, although in reality the various strands are tightly interwoven and as the thesis draws to its conclusion, these strands are drawn back together again to present an interconnected account of how the city is viewed and shaped. This chapter also draws on the understanding of children as competent agents, an understanding described in chapter two, by presenting the findings on children’s views of their access to the urban realm and in doing so contributes a sense of the perspective of children to the discussion.

This introduction includes a description of the various participants in the data collection process. In the next section (5.1) the findings on the tensions which shape policy making and planning in the city space are presented. Findings on how children are imaged by city officials are then outlined in section 5.2. This is followed by the findings on children’s role in policy making and how the city is understood in relation to children, both from the perspective of the city officials and the parents (section 5.3). Finally, the children’s views on their regular independent access to the outdoors in the city are outlined firstly, as a contribution to the discussion on the city as a ‘space’ planned by adults and secondly, by way of foregrounding the city as ‘place’ with which the children have considerable familiarity (section 5.4).

This chapter does not claim to give a definitive account of how Dublin City is planned for children. Rather it is an attempt to convey a sense of the complexity of the issues with which the city officials wrestle as they design policy, and their awareness of children’s needs. The findings on those challenges are juxtaposed with the findings on the views expressed by parents who live in the city, and the views of children living in the city, in order to convey the
complexity of issues faced by city officials and residents in their shared wish to create a ‘child-friendly city’ (Dublin City Play Plan: 9).

**An overview of the participants**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three city officials and an expert in urban design theory and practice to examine the issues of relevance to the macro- and exo-systems of relationships which underlie the children’s urban spatial mobility experience. The purpose of these interviews was to look beyond policy statements and statistical information and to explore a qualitative perspective on the views of the people who write policy and make planning decisions which affect children. The intention was to develop an understanding of the challenges they contend with in making those decisions and how they view children in that process. To that end, two Senior Planners at Dublin City Council, the local authority with responsibility for policy and planning decisions in the north-west inner city, were interviewed at length. One of the planners lives in the north-west inner city and his planning remit with the council specifically includes this section of the city. The other is a Senior Planner in the Economic Development Unit who was directly involved in writing the current city development plan. The third local authority official interviewed for this study is the Head of Children’s Services Unit at Dublin City Council, where she has been based since its inception in 2007. The views of an urban design expert who works in private practice in Dublin were also sought for this study. He is the Director of the Masters in Urban Design Programme at University College Dublin, a former member of Students Against the Destruction of Dublin and has written extensively on urban spatial planning and design.

The parents of the 20 children who participated in the qualitative research for this study were also approached to participate and nine families agreed to be participate. In each case the mother was either the primary or sole respondent, and only two fathers contributed
even though the father was present during five of the interviews. Only one of the parents was not born and raised in Ireland, one grew up in County Kildare, and the rest had grown up in Dublin. Reflecting the diverse socio-economic make up of the north-west inner city, the socio-economic status of the families varied. Socio-economic background has been identified as a variable in attitudes towards children’s independent spatial mobility and some studies indicate that parents from lower income backgrounds tend to allow their children greater freedoms than parents from higher income backgrounds (Valentine and McKendrick 1997; Tranter and Pawson 2001; Malone 2007). But irrespective of socio-economic status the parents interviewed for this study expressed both a shared understanding of the city space and similar attitudes towards their children’s independent spatial mobility within that space.

The views of children aged between 9 and 10 at school in the north-west inner city on their outdoor freedoms were explored for the study. Four out of five of the schools in the research location agreed to participate in the study and a total of 52 children, or 54% of children aged 9 to 10 attending those schools took part. The final section of the chapter presents the quantitative findings on data collected through a questionnaire which examined their views on the extent to which they access the public domain without an adult on a regular basis.

5.1 The tensions underpinning the city space through which the children move

This section presents the findings on the interplay of factors which inform planning and policy decisions regarding Dublin City. The interviews with the city officials and the urban design academic and practitioner reveal the city space as characterised by tensions inherent in meeting its needs as a commercial entity and a liveable place for families. The findings reveal a historic disconnect between the theoretical grounding of urban design, planning
policy and architectural practice which has resulted in a city struggling to realise it’s aspiration to be a place ‘where people will seek to live’ (Dublin City Development Plan 2010:10). A lack of coherence between policy and practice is also identified and political considerations emerge as playing an influential role in policy development and implementation which does not necessarily favour city residents. The findings are organised under three headings: the relationship between theory and practice, the lack of coherence between policy and practice and the relationship between politics and the implementation of policy. The presentation of the findings begins with the analysis of the interviews with the city officials and the urban design expert and outlines the findings on the complex interplay of factors which shape planning and policy decisions in Dublin City.

5.1.1 The theoretical and pragmatic concerns underpinning policy and practice

An analysis of the interviews reveals that a lack of cohesion between urban design theory and how architecture is practiced in Dublin has resulted in a poorly planned city and a tendency to build without consideration for how this might impact on the way the city works. The urban design academic interviewed for this study describes this as both a historical and contemporary inclination to;

‘build into thin air without any consideration of the impact of that build on the social context within which it occurred. In other European countries traditionally the planner was, and is, more the architect. They build within an overall plan that is already made. I would define urban design as everything going on outside the building. In other countries there is a very sophisticated discussion [around that]. Here we have our own very odd definition’

(Urban design academic and practitioner)
This is an insight which gives a sense of how the role of the planner and architect are understood as two separate functions. As such, it sheds some light on what might be considered the somewhat incoherent way in which the urban environment the children in this study move through is planned. This tendency contrasts with contemporary discourse on urban design. The theoretical basis of good quality urban design is centred on a range of solutions specific to place, which reflect a mindset that understands the nature of community within the city (Krieger 2002).

A weakness in theoretical discussion on urban design in Ireland is partially a consequence of the failure to link the study of architecture and planning, a failing which has begun to be addressed through academic programmes at university level. Although questions surrounding the design of the modern city were being asked from late in the 19th Century by people such as Ebenezer Howard, and early in the 20th Century by people such as Lewis Mumford (Jacobs 1961) the discipline of urban design as an academic pursuit was not recognised until the mid-century and a Masters in Urban Design has only been available in Ireland since 1996. It is this slow shift towards engaging with urban design theory which has led to an urban practice which does not always reflect the theoretical discourse but rather a particular economic model:

‘there is almost no relationship between theory and practice...[urban design reflects] a neo-liberal, semi-ignorant contention about what culture is, what economies are and what places are and how we change and how we make cities’

(Urban Design Academic and Practitioner)

One of the consequences of the focus on the commercial significance of the city identified by this participant has been an inclination to widen roads to encourage increased volumes of traffic in and out the city for the purposes of both work and shopping. The
resulting impact on communities whose neighbourhoods were devastated by these decisions is well documented (McDonald 1985; Sheehan and Walsh 1988; Bisset 2008), a typical example of which is clearly visible in the image taken by one of the child participants on his daily walk to school below.

Figure 5.1.1 ‘just more traffic’ Child participant documenting walk to school

In his work, *The Child in the City*, Colin Ward advocates a theoretical perspective of the function of the city as working to promote interactions between people and place; ‘interaction with the environment is a good thing, that this is what the city is for and that this is the way people become citizens’ (1990:136). The kind of development depicted in the image above clearly has an adverse affect on children’s mobility. As such it inhibits community interaction and represents the antithesis of theoretical understandings of how the city should function. It confirms the assertion made by the urban design academic interviewed for this study that ‘theory does not inform practice’. 
5.1.2 The relationship between policy and practice

The findings presented above convey a lack of connection between theory and practice and a focus on the economic function of the city underpinning design which has had a negative impact on children’s mobility. But it is argued by the city officials that the focus on commercial needs is not necessarily at the expense of the residents;

‘They are not necessarily in conflict with each other. A particular issue in the inner city for commercial needs would be dealing with anti-social behaviour, to deal with safety in the street, with a clean environment, I mean all these things help local business, there can be an amazing common sense overlap’

(DCC Senior Planner)

This view is reflected in current policy which focuses on developing Dublin City as ‘a city of sustainable neighbourhoods which foster a sense of community and belonging’ and are; ‘safe and suitable for a variety of age groups’ (DCC Development Plan 2010). Nonetheless the practical implications of some of these policy measures have created significant challenges for residents. The senior planner interviewed above recognises that efforts to make the commercial city centre more attractive for shoppers through path widening and traffic calming schemes have resulted in an increase in traffic in inner city residential areas. He also acknowledges that there is a difficulty with resolving the pragmatic concerns of people who come to visit the city for commercial purposes with policy decisions regarding the needs of the city residents;
'You have a traffic system that has been arranged to push away, for good reasons, to make the city centre work, has pushed traffic on to these arterial circular routes going out...so the north-west inner city is bisected by at least five horrendously busy roads running through a residential area...it’s a juggle then for the engineers...it’s finding a balance'

(DCC Senior Planner)

One of the reasons it is so difficult to find this balance is a failure to understand the city as one inter-connected whole. This tendency to plan and design the city in a somewhat piecemeal fashion is identified by the urban design academic interviewed; ‘Dublin is an organism which is all connected, but it isn’t treated as such’. This tendency is reflected in other cities such as Christchurch, New Zealand where there has been a failure to look at traffic in relation to ‘the entire urban system’ (Tranter and Pawson 2001:45). The tension between the needs of the various city users that results in an implementation of policy that favours one group over the other is not solely a consequence of practical decisions but also reflects a political agenda which is discussed in the next section.

5.1.3 The role of politics

The findings of this study suggest that politics plays quite a strong role in both policy development and how policy is implemented. The urban design academic who participated in this study describes this as the power of politics over theory;

‘Academia does not inform policy, it is basically politically informed’

(Urban design academic and practitioner)
The political implications of how policy and practice converge in relation to how the city is conceived for children in particular are also recognised by the city planners:

‘one of the key things behind children living in the inner city is poverty....they are poor, they have little influence, there are things that happen in the inner city, glass strewn tarmac areas that are meant to be parks and that would not be allowed to happen in other parts of the city’

(Dublin City Council Senior Planner)

This city official says that the failure to implement family and child friendly policy reflects issues of class division which he believes are ‘at the heart of Irish society’. The academic interviewed for this study also regards the political failure to implement policy as indicative of a complex wider cultural attitude to power and personal responsibility:

‘we, all of us, are not a sophisticated enough culture to make the policy into something that happens right there on the street...no one acts back up in to the policy with real information and custom designed solutions’.

(Urban design academic and practitioner)

The role of politics in the planning and development of the city is not unique to Dublin. As discussed in chapter three, internationally there are moves to address the power imbalance, at least for children, by giving them a political voice in their cities through participatory planning and design practices which ensure their perspectives are represented and their needs are met (Tranter and Pawson 2001; Baraldi 2003). Before presenting findings on the voice of children in policy development in Dublin City, the next section outlines the findings on how children are viewed by city officials with responsibility for policy.
5.2 Conceptualising children in Dublin City Council

“You could describe children in the city as the canary in the coal mine...in the sense that if it’s suitable for them, it’s suitable for everybody”.

Dublin City Council Senior Planner

The view expressed above by a senior planner with Dublin City Council who was interviewed for this study suggests a keen awareness of the needs of children within the local authority. But the data collected for this study reveals contradictions in how children’s needs are understood and met and an internal culture which does not view children as a priority. This section presents the findings on how children are viewed and understood by the council. The findings are presented under two separate headings: how children are imaged and internal power struggles within the council.

5.2.1 How children are imaged in the council

Subtle references to children who live in the city that were made in the interviews are quite revealing. The city planners refer, with it must be said a sense of admiration, to city children as ‘streetwise’. They discuss how city children who live in the city are ‘sussted’ and suggest that these children;

‘know when to make a run for it [to get safely across the road]

(DCC Senior Planner)

The children’s parents (as discussed below) do not share this view but go to considerable length to teach their children to cross the road safely. They regard their children as extremely
vulnerable to perceived city dangers. The findings of this study suggest that, despite parental concerns for their children’s safety, the local authority does not prioritise safety in the public realm for children as they are viewed as ‘streetwise’ and thus capable of dealing with adult oriented space.

At the same time there is a suggestion that children are considered irresponsible and morally questionable. The two planners described attitudes within the council which prohibit the provision of play spaces in some instances because;

‘there were worries about the equipment getting damaged, and the cost of maintenance’

(DCC Senior Planner)

This concern with how facilities provided by the council might get damaged by children is indicative of an assumption that children are a threat to public provision and incapable of taking proper care of equipment that might be provided for them. It is a view which reflects the discussion in the literature whereby children in the city are imaged as ‘devils’ and as a threat to public space (Holloway and Valentine 2000) and one which concurs with a conceptualization of children as morally inept (Mayall 2009).

5.2.2 Internal power struggles within the council

This view of children in the city as simultaneously threatening and capable of coping with urban space designed to meet adult needs feeds into what was identified in the interviews as complex internal ‘power struggles’ (Urban design academic and practitioner) within the local authority. One of the senior planners interviewed had proposed the implementation of aspects of city development policy\textsuperscript{16} through the provision of a small playground beside a

\textsuperscript{16} Dublin City Development Plan (2011-2017) refers to the cities role in play provision and also in traffic calming
busy street as a traffic calming measure. However he was critical of a hesitancy among individuals within the council to move policy forward in this way on the basis of what he considers unfounded fears such as concerns that equipment would be damaged. He took issue with what he regarded as the inability of individuals to think more creatively about providing solutions;

‘there is a lack of imagination regarding traffic management’

Dublin City Council Senior Planner

The urban design academic also expressed a concern that the design and development of the city can be heavily reliant on the role of key individuals who may or may not understand how to make adequate provision for children;

‘just one person saying something can make a change and the positive things which happen in Dublin are due to individuals operating in a guerrilla fashion, not a consequence of a groundswell of understanding within the organisation’.

(Urban design academic and practitioner)

Both the city planners and the academic believe that while the work of individuals can be beneficial, there is a need for a whole cultural change within the council which engages with the theoretical discourse that;

‘looks at the needs of children positively and constructively’

(Urban design academic and practitioner)
5.3 Understanding children’s needs in the city

This section presents the findings on how the local authority engages with children and the parent’s perspectives on the suitability of the urban neighbourhood for their children. The findings are based on interviews with the city officials in the first instance and then with the parents interviewed for the study. The interviews with the city council officials reveal a limited ability to engage children in policy making and limited powers to address children’s needs in the city. Through semi-structured interviews with the parents their understandings of the urban domain through which their children walk and their attitudes to independence were explored. The purpose of the interviews was to establish the issues which shape the parent’s views on their children’s urban spatial mobility. Through the interviews the families revealed a strong wish to encourage their children to do things for themselves which was mitigated by concerns and fears they had around allowing them out without an adult. The analysis reveals a wish to allow their children learn to negotiate the neighbourhood without adult company common among all the parents interviewed and a shared fear around safety issues such as traffic and ‘stranger danger’.

The parents who did allow their children out without adult supervision were concerned with giving the children a list of ‘rules’ for how to behave safely, while parents who did not allow their children out without adult supervision cited concerns around an individual child’s competence, traffic and ‘stranger danger’. The gender of their child did not appear to be of significance in relation to the parental concerns. This reflects current research which indicates that gender seems to be playing less of a role in relation to independent spatial mobility now than previously (Valentine 2004).

The findings also indicate that the issue of independent spatial mobility is quite a fraught subject for parents. The parents are aware of popular discourse as reflected in the
press which inflames worries around ‘stranger danger’ and fluctuates between condemning parents who allow their children move around the neighbourhood without an adult as neglectful\textsuperscript{17} and raising ‘feral’ children, and condemning parents who do not allow their children move around the neighbourhood alone as being overly protective and failing to give their children opportunities to mature\textsuperscript{18}.

The findings are presented here under four separate headings, beginning with how the local authority engages with children (5.3.1) and moving on to the findings on parent’s perceptions of the city environment in which they live (5.3.2), then looking at their memories of their own childhood freedoms (5.3.3) and finally the issues of importance to them regarding their children’s independent spatial mobility (5.3.4).

5.3.1 Engaging with children on their needs

There has been an attempt on the part of the council to represent children in relation to both policy development and strategic plans. In 2007 the Children’s Services Unit was set up by Dublin City Council to raise awareness of children and children’s needs within the organisation by encouraging all employees to understand that ‘what we do affects all children, not matter what way you look at it’ (Head of Children’s Services Unit).

The unit has specific responsibility for play provision in the city with a particular emphasis on providing playgrounds. There are mixed views in the literature on constructing playgrounds as a way to provide for children with some authors suggesting that playground provision in fact inhibits children’s freedoms (Wood 1977; Aitken 2001; Karsten 2002). Historically the council provided playgrounds for children as a way to protect them from the

\textsuperscript{18} The Guardian Online 22/8/08, The Irish Times 07/05/2011, Daily Mail 02/04/2009, BBC News Online 04/06/2007
hazards of the city streets (Kernan 2005) but this strategy fails to address the cause of danger for children such as traffic. Since the interviews were conducted The Dublin City Play Plan (2012-2017) was published with what appears to be a shift towards seeing the potential for play throughout the city including ‘small pieces of land, or open spaces where children and young people congregate to equipment based larger play spaces’ (2012:15). Whether or not this will result in safer streets for children remains to be seen.

The Children’s Services Unit also co-ordinates the children’s council, Cómhairle na nÓg. Youth councils were established in 2002 under the National Children’s Strategy to represent the voice of children to the local authorities around the country. The success of Cómhairle na nÓg as a way of engaging children in policy development and planning decisions at Dublin City Council is limited and the head of the children services unit in acknowledges difficulties with the efficacy of the council;

‘they don’t always see issues as relevant or interesting and that can be a challenge...there is a need for a lot of engagement with them, educating and explaining the relevance... by the time a young person is on their second year in the council they are fully understanding, and if it coincides with a year when they are not too busy, great, but it may not’

(Senior Executive Officer Children’s Services Unit)

The Children’s Services Unit also has a broader brief which involves exerting influence on the work of all other departments in the council by raising awareness of children’s needs. However the success of the unit is difficult to measure and its powers of influence are limited;

‘some people would automatically be thinking of children, others it’s not on their radar [but]

I remind everyone...that they are making sure that they are looking at their actions and
decisions and how it affects children...whether they do or don’t, I don’t know, and it is hard to measure the degree of success we have’

(Senior Executive Officer Children’s Services Unit)

The city planners interviewed for this study argue that the difficulty with planning the city around children’s needs is not so much a lack of understanding of how the city might work better for children but of finding the confidence within the organisation to put thinking in to practice;

‘all the policies are in place, there is an understanding of what is needed – good playgrounds, good management of public space, quality apartments, etc, all this is understood, none of it in particular is rocket science. It is a challenge in terms of convincing people that it is doable’

(DCC Senior Planner)

The assumption that policy engages with the theoretical debate on children’s needs in the city is perhaps somewhat optimistic. Ward argues that a city which is ‘concerned with the needs of its young will make the whole environment accessible to them’ (1990:73). While the current development plan does reference children, consistent with how the council sees its role vis a vis children, the focus is in relation to family needs and play provision and a commitment to support the aims of the Children’s Services Unit - which by its own admission does not have much influence. Meanwhile the Dublin City Public Realm Strategy (2012) fails to engage with how children use public space in the city, reflecting a concern in the literature that public space has now become almost exclusively the domain of adults (Karsten 2005; Valentine 2004). The next section presents the findings on the parents views
of how the attempts to engage with children’s needs in policy, planning, and design of the city manifest on a day to day basis.

5.3.2 Parents’ views of how the city meets children’s needs

In contrast to the emphasis placed by the local authority on play provision as a means of meeting children’s needs, the interviews with the parents focused on a lack of play facilities as an indication that the urban environment in which they live offers nothing for their children;

‘there’s nothing here for them’

(Michael, father of Finn)

This comment is a common complaint among the parents. The play provision which does exist is not considered to be adequately maintained (at least one playground and two football pitches which had been damaged by fire and vandalism had not been replaced), and parents who would like their children to play at a playground usually have to bring them as getting to the playground involves crossing dangerous roads.

A perceived lack of properly maintained play facilities within sight of their homes meant the parents did not view the urban environment in which they lived as being a positive place for their children. The association between good quality play facilities and a neighbourhood which reflects children’s needs is identified in the literature (McNeish and Roberts 1995).

Some parents felt the outdoor environment was unsafe, citing issues specific to their own streets such as the Courts of Criminal Justice which attracts ‘spaced out druggies’ (Sonia, mother of Ella) the alcohol treatment centre which attracts ‘people you wouldn’t be
comfortable with’ (Frances, mother of Aoife) and the traffic on certain streets which leads to ‘smashes at least once a week’ (Jennifer, mother of Finn). The parents in one particular local authority complex which has a lot of social problems express concerns with drug dealing, the strangers this attracts into the complex, drinking, and the appalling physical condition the complex has been allowed degenerate into with one parent expressing her fear that;

‘somewhere might get shot in front of me someday, someone might just come up on a motorbike and shoot someone’

(Clare, mother of Aisling)

The parents perception of their city neighbourhood as unsafe for the children and their concern with what they regard as a lack of play spaces are identified as particular urban issues in the literature (Malone 2007; Karsten 2005). But parents interviewed for this study seem to associate the problems of their neighbourhood specifically with their children’s needs rather than seeing the city as somewhere they do not wish to live. Only some (a third) of the parents expressed a desire to move. The parents are generally happy with the area, with the neighbours, the facilities nearby and the proximity to the city centre. But looking at their neighbourhood through the lens of their children’s perceived needs, they understand it to be threatening and lacking what are understood to be child friendly opportunities, as represented for them by a well maintained playground.

5.3.3 How childhood memories impact adult perceptions

Half the parents who were interviewed grew up in the local area, some grew up nearby in the inner and outer suburbs, two of the parents grew up in a south county Dublin suburb, one grew up on an estate in an Irish village and one parent grew up in a village in Germany.

There were certain restrictions for all the parents growing up. Some remember rules about
where they were not allowed go, while one parent remembers that, ‘the danger was out there’ (Sarah, mother of Mathew) and that her parents were very strict and conscious of their children’s safety when they were outside. Despite the constraints, the parents all remember having more freedom than their own children. Some talking about being:

‘out all day playing in fields and only coming in when you were hungry’

(Sonia, mother of Ella)

This memory of being out playing all day is shared by parents who grew up in the inner city, the suburbs and the countryside. This sense of a freedom they feel they once had pervades the parent’s childhood memories. It seems to shape their understanding of the city today as a space destined to fail to meet the standards of that lost place where they once spent their days; ‘playing out on swings, a rope on a pole, doing piggy beds, and up in a club playing football’ (Sarah, mother of Mathew).

The influence of the role of ‘macro-time’ or changing societal expectations (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) is apparent here in the analysis. It is a factor which has also been identified in the literature (Valentine and McKendrick 1997), whereby parent’s childhood memories underpin a perception of their children’s lives as being more restricted than their own once used to be. A tendency among adults to remember their childhood somewhat nostalgically has been identified by Karsten (2005) and may explain the discrepancy in this study between the parent’s childhood memories and how they perceive their children’s freedoms to some extent. But there may also be a certain amount of accuracy in the memory of more freedom to play, as exemplified in Karsten’s study, which focussed on intergenerational freedom of movement in Amsterdam and compared adult memories of childhood with historical statistical information. Karsten concluded that outdoor space where children once played has been ‘lost to parked cars and motorized traffic’ (2005: 277). There
is evidence of high volumes of traffic in Dublin City, as discussed in section 5.1, and traffic is identified as a key reason parents limit their children’s independent spatial mobility in this study. That concern is discussed in more detail in the next section.

**5.3.4 The complexities affecting parents’ views on independent spatial mobility**

The parents expressed desire for their children to share the sort of childhood they remember enjoying is frustrated by a range of interrelated factors including how they understand good parenting and concerns for their children’s safety. The opportunity to experience outdoor freedom and the importance of safety, have been identified as core values associated with constructions of a good childhood (Kernan 2006). As children mature and that freedom begins to extend beyond the adult gaze a pronounced dichotomy between these two values emerges and parents in this study struggled with a resolution which they felt met their children’s need for independence within a context they considered safe.

All the parents regarded independent spatial mobility as a valuable opportunity for their children to learn decision making skills and how to take control over their own lives. However sometimes their concerns for their children’s safety overwhelms their wish to allow permission to move around outdoors without an adult, and the parents find themselves having to work hard at overcoming their fears;

‘*I feel we will have to force ourselves to allow her independence, she needs it for her development*’

(Sonia, mother of Ella)
Traffic and ‘stranger danger’ are the two primary concerns and while the parents wish they could overcome ‘stranger danger’ as a somewhat irrational fear, the barriers faced by the very real concern of traffic impinges on this wish. One of the parents discussed how she wished she was in a position to face down what she see as an irrational fear by giving their daughter some freedom but cannot as;

‘there is so much traffic, I’m worried she would be knocked down’

(Sonia, mother of Ella)

Another parent described walking to school with his son one morning and almost being knocked down by a car driving through a red light at a pedestrian crossing (Michael, father of Finn). Finding a balance between keeping them safe and allowing them some freedom is a recurring concern and invariably the children’s independence is circumscribed by parental controls;

‘There are three rules for her walking home from school: don’t talk to strangers, don’t take anything from anyone you don’t know, and if anyone approaches you, go and bang down the nearest door. With the rules they have a security blanket, they are safe, but they have freedom’

(Sharon, mother of Sophie)

As with this mother, many of the parents are concerned about the possibility of strangers harming their children, but for the most part they understand this as a threat which exists elsewhere and is primarily a media generated fear. One parent in fact feels angry towards the media for what he feels is its role in creating this fear;
‘I am very angry at the media, it worms its way in to your brain and it annoys me, I would like to push against the media hype’

(Richard, father of Ella)

Another parent, who is not originally from Ireland, described how media coverage of ‘stranger danger’ has instilled a concern for her daughters’ safety which she makes a considerable effort to overcome;

‘I feel unsafe to let her out as an outsider, so have made a purposeful effort to let her have independence. I am aware of stranger danger and it feels like it is in front of your doorstep, but it’s not...it’s the media, and you feel it happens outside your door’

(Clara, mother of Tina)

The parents’ decisions on their children’s independence were also affected by local parenting values and how they felt they might be viewed by other parents. Parents who do not allow their children walk to school alone worried about being considered ‘a bad parent’ and were at pains to assure me they did not keep their children ‘locked up at home’ (Michael, father of Finn). They described opportunities they took to teach their children skills outside to offset the fact that they did not allow them out alone; ‘Am I a bad parent? I let him walk ahead and cross the road on his own sometimes, so he learns’ (Maria, mother of Mark). Meanwhile parents who do allow their children walk to school talk about ‘getting stick from other parents [who are]’amazed I would do it’ (Clara, mother of Tina).

The perception of parents who do not allow their children outside without an adult as ‘failing’ (2007:513) is discussed in the literature by authors such as Malone who suggests some parents are causing their children problems by ‘micro-managing their lives’ (2007: 515). Meanwhile, the sense expressed by the parents throughout the interviews of being
‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’, is reflected in the literature where the turmoil parents endure is described as being akin to walking a tightrope, ‘wavering between being anxious they are being overprotective and fearing that they are placing their children in danger’ (Valentine 1997:73) on the one hand, while seeking to conform to ‘local parenting culture forces’ (Valentine 1997:74) on the other.

Having presented the findings on adult views of the city space with reference to how children are imaged by the local authority, how it endeavours to meet their needs and how parents view the city in relation to their children’s independent spatial mobility, the next section presents the findings on children’s perspectives on what can be described as the city place, or the city neighbourhood where they live and are familiar with, by focussing specifically on opportunities the children identify to access the public domain independently.

5.4 Opportunities children identify to access the urban environment without adult supervision

The age at which children are beginning to get permissions for independent spatial mobility has been identified in the literature as somewhere between 8 and 11, although 9 or 10 is the age group at which most authors agree that children begin to access the outdoor environment without an adult (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Tranter and Pawson 2001). As children of this age group are usually in 4th class at school, this was the class targeted for the study. Four of the five schools located in the research location, the north-west inner city, agreed to participate in the study and just over fifty four per cent of the children in fourth class at these four schools filled out the questionnaire. A summary of the participation rates per class is illustrated in Table 1 below.
The primary purpose of the questionnaire was to identify a sample group of children of the appropriate age, who lived in the north-west inner city and walked to school on a regular basis either with or without an adult, that might participate in the qualitative data collection process. The questionnaire also functioned to give a wider sense of the freedoms children who participated in the qualitative study enjoyed in order to facilitate a discussion on the significance of independence with them. Finally, the questionnaire was designed to give some insight into how accessible the outdoor environment was for children at school in the north-west inner city. The focus of this chapter is on the third rationale for the questionnaire, which was to explore children’s perspectives on their independent access to the public domain, and the results of the analysis of that quantitative data collected are presented.

As mentioned above, while the participants were all at school in the north-west inner city they did not all live in that urban neighbourhood. Some of them commuted in from different parts of the city and the suburbs of both the north and south side of Dublin. As such the results do not necessarily reflect on the city area where the research is located. The questionnaire analysis reveals the perspective of children age 9 or 10 who live in the wider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Possible Participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St Mary's</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>85.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scoil Naomh Padraig</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>56.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Vincent’s</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Catherine’s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>55.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>96</strong></td>
<td><strong>54.17</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
urban context of the city of Dublin on the amount and type of opportunities they have to access the outdoors without adult supervision.

The presentation of the children’s perspectives marks a shift away from the city location of the study as unfamiliar ‘space’ shaped by cultural and practical concerns, towards an insight into that city location as the more familiar ‘place’ the children access regularly. It gives a sense of the independence the children experience from their point of view and in doing so acknowledges them as competent social actors whose opinions merit consideration in discussion on independent spatial mobility. Those outdoor freedoms are based on variables hypothesised to suggest opportunities for independent mobility through their neighbourhoods, drawing on the spatial construction of urban childhood developed by Karsten (2002) and refer to the walk to and from school, walks near home such as the walk to the shop, to visit friends going out to play, and the walk to afterschool activities. The findings on the opportunities the children identified to move around outside without an adult are outlined first (section 5.4.1) then the findings on the kinds of opportunities they identified are presented (section 5.4.2). An analysis of the data with respect to gender is then discussed (section 5.4.3). The data from the sub-group of children who participated in the qualitative data collection were analysed separately to see if this group - who are all living in the north-west inner city - identified a difference in the degree of independent access to the public realm or different opportunities to independently access the public domain (5.4.4).

5.4.1 Number of opportunities the children identified to access the public realm without an adult

The data were analysed to establish the degree of independent access participants had to their outdoor environments. Children who indicated between five and six out of a possible maximum of six opportunities identified in the questionnaire are understood to have a
considerable amount of access to the outdoor environment without an adult. Children who indicated between three and four opportunities are considered to have a reasonable amount of freedom. Children who indicated up to a total of two opportunities are considered to have very few opportunities to access the outdoor environment without an adult. The results are illustrated in the chart below.

![Outdoor Opportunities per Child](chart.png)

**Figure 5.4.1 Number of opportunities children identify**

As the chart shows, nearly a quarter of the children (23%) identified five out of six opportunities they have regularly to access public space without an adult, which is defined here as a considerable amount of freedom in this study. Almost 55% of the children indicated they had either four or three opportunities described in the questionnaire to access public space without an adult, which is an indication of a reasonable amount of freedom. None of the children said they had no opportunities to move around outside without an adult. The extent of the children’s freedom as a distance from their front door, or their ‘territorial range’ (Hart 1979) is not apparent from the questionnaire analysis and it may be less than the extent of freedom enjoyed by children in the past as suggested by Karsten and Van Vliet.
(2006). Nonetheless the data reveal that, from their perspective, they do regularly access public space without an adult. Their perspectives contrast with the parents’ views that their children do not have much freedom and also suggest that more attention should be paid to children’s needs in local authority policy on public space.

The children’s perspectives on their access to the public domain is a valuable contribution to the discussion in the literature on independent spatial mobility which indicates an on-going loss of outdoor freedoms among children (Hillman et al. 1990, O’Brien et al. 2000) and supports the argument that there is a need for more research into independent spatial mobility which examines the issue from the perspective of children (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). It suggests a form of Foucauldian ‘resistance’ to restrictions imposed (Hill and Bessant 1999:41) on them by parents who perceive their environment as being unsafe. It also suggests a similar resistance to the haphazard engagement with their needs in the public domain on the part of the city council identified above. This resistance to the power exerted over them by both the local authority and their parents is an indication of the children’s agency described in chapter two on the conceptualization of children which underpins this study.

5.4.2 Types of opportunities the children identify

The opportunity the children said they were most likely to have to access the outdoor environment without an adult was play (82.69%). Slightly fewer children, 75%, said they were allowed to visit friends or family without an adult while the vast majority said they could go to the shop (69.23%) and to an after school activity (65.38%) without an adult. The figures drop quite a bit in relation to the walk to school, with less than half identifying the walk to school as an opportunity to access the outdoor world without an adult. This
finding reflects the fact that some of the children are driven to school, either because they live too much of a distance away to walk or because parents drop them off on the way to work.

The findings in relation to opportunities to access the outdoors without an adult which do not relate to school travel but are centred in the neighbourhood the children live in suggest that the spatial arrangement of the area they live in provides relatively easy access to friends and family, a shop and an after school activity. This finding indicates that the neighbourhoods of Dublin the children at school in the north-west inner city come from are reasonably ‘walkable’ which is defined by Leyden (2003) as ‘pedestrian-oriented mixed-use neighbourhoods’ (2003:1546).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outdoor Opportunity without Adult</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walk to school</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>46.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk home</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>48.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to shop</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>69.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk to friends</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk to after school activity</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>65.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out to play</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>82.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Type of opportunity children said they were most likely to have

5.4.3 The role of gender

Altogether more boys than girls participated in the quantitative data collection process (see chart below) and the girls identify marginally more opportunities for independent spatial mobility than the boys; the girls indicate they have on average 3.9 opportunities while the boys indicate they have on average 3.8 opportunities. There is a divergence of opinion in the literature on the relationship between gender and independent spatial mobility with some
authors suggesting boys consistently have more outdoor freedoms than girls (Hart 1979),
while others suggest that how boys and girls are understood is changing and the discrepancy
between them in relation to their freedoms is decreasing (Valentine 2004). Recent research
indicates that the relationship between gender and independent spatial mobility demands a
complex analysis reflecting the different preferences boys and girls have in relation to their
engagement with the outdoor world (Brown et al. 2008).

Figure 5.4.2 Participation by gender

Some of the figures merit further consideration reflecting the suggestion by Brown et
al. (2008) of a need to investigate the subject of independent spatial mobility focussing
attention on ‘different patterns of behaviour’ (2008:399). Slightly more boys (46.4%) say
they walk to school without an adult than girls (45.8%). However, these figures change for
the walk home with 54.1% of the girls indicating they walk home from school without an
adult and 42.8% of the boys indicating they walk home without an adult. The reason the
boys initially seem to have slightly more freedom in relation to the walk to school does not
appear to be gender based but in fact relates to family dynamics. Where there is a younger
sibling present and the older child is not considered competent enough to have responsibility for the younger sibling, a parent accompanies both to school. But in some cases the younger sibling finishes school earlier and the older child is considered competent enough to walk home unaccompanied by an adult. In other cases parental needs play a role. One of the boys who walks to school without an adult says his mother usually collects him. He suggests his mother is too tired to walk him to school first thing in the morning, but that she is happy to come and walk him home in the afternoon.

The girls who participated in this study over all identify more opportunities to access the outdoor environment without an adult than the boys. Seventy per cent of the girls said they go to the shop without an adult while 67% of the boys identified the same opportunity. 79% of the girls say they visit friends and family without an adult, compared with 71% of the boys, and 83% of the girls say they go out to play without an adult, compared with 82% of the boys. There is a considerable difference in gender based freedom when it comes to going to after school activities with 71% of the boys saying they go without an adult and only 58% of the girls saying they go without an adult.

5.4.4 Number of opportunities identified by qualitative sample group to access the public domain

The quantitative data from the qualitative sample group were also analysed separately to gain a more specific understanding of their independent access to the public domain. The children who participated in the qualitative data collection all live in the north-west inner city and as such share a similar spatial design. Neighbourhood design is sometimes understood as a variable in relation to independent spatial mobility (Tranter and Pawson 2001; Malone 2007) and some of the children who did not participate in the qualitative sample group live in suburban areas which can have a different form to a city neighbourhood and that might affect
the overall findings. For example, some of the children in the quantitative sample are more car dependent than the children in the city. As they do not live within walking distance of the school they do not have the option of walking to and from school without an adult but are driven. However despite the possible differences in urban form which may affect the children’s independent spatial mobility, the analysis revealed little disparity in terms of opportunities to access the outdoor environment without an adult between both groups. The qualitative sample group identifies an average of 3.9 opportunities per child by comparison with the overall sample group which identifies an average of 3.8 opportunities per child, with most children in the qualitative sample group identifying 5 opportunities and most children in the overall sample group identifying 4 opportunities to be outside without an adult. Table 5.3 below shows the number of outdoor opportunities the sample group identify.

![Bar chart showing qualitative outdoor opportunities](image)

**Figure 5.4.3 Number of opportunities qualitative sample group identify for independent outdoor access**

The slightly higher rate of opportunities among the qualitative sample group is primarily due to these participants being more likely to walk to school without an adult. The two groups are almost equally likely to go to an after school activity without an adult and almost equally likely to go out to play. There is a small difference in their opportunity to go
to the shops and visit friends, with just over 5% more children in the qualitative sample group saying they go to the shop without an adult regularly while 5% more children in the overall sample group say they go to visit friends or family without an adult regularly, see table 5.3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity without Adult</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walk to Shop</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk to Friends</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walk to after school activity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go out to Play</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 Qualitative sample type of opportunity outside without adult

On the basis of the demographic information supplied through the questionnaire it is clear that the children living in the north-west inner city live within a mile of their school. Distance from school has been identified as a variable in the literature in relation to how children travel to school (McMillan et al. 2006) and the fact that some of the children who participated in the questionnaire live quite a bit further from school may explain why some of them they do not walk. But the questionnaire does not provide enough detail to explain difference among the participants in the qualitative study and the wider sample group in relation to the other opportunities to access the outdoors without an adult. An explanation for the difference in the kinds of outdoor freedoms the two groups identify which referred to neighbourhood design would demand a more complex analysis of the spatial arrangement and urban form of the differing neighbourhoods.

An analysis in relation to gender confirms the original findings; the girls have slightly more freedoms than the boys. They are more likely to walk home from school without an
adult to go to the shop, to visit friends and family and to go out to play without an adult than
the boys, however, as with the overall sample group, the boys are far more likely to go to
after school activities than the girls.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Going to School</th>
<th>~</th>
<th>Boy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Girl</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With Adult</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44.40%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Adult</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55.50%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>54.50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coming from School</th>
<th>~</th>
<th>Boy</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Girl</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With Adult</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33.30%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Without Adult</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66.60%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 Girls are more likely to walk home from school than boys

**Conclusion**

As described in chapter one, at the core of an understanding of children’s experience of
independent spatial mobility is a discussion of children’s engagement with place as shaped by
‘worlds as structured “from without” and as experienced from “within” (Philo quoted in
Jones 2000: 29). The primary focus of this chapter is that world structured from without and
the views of the people who are responsible for that structuring. The findings look beyond
policy statements and planning decisions to the people who make policy and planning
decisions and convey an insight into the challenges they face and how they position children
in the process of decision making. Those people include city officials and parents who both
exert an influence over the macro and exo-systems that shape the children’s urban spatial
mobility experience.

An analysis of the interviews with the adult stakeholders reveals an understanding of
that ‘outer structure’ or the less familiar ‘space’ (Tuan 1977) of the city around the children
as shaped by the tension between academic theory, politics, policy makers, and practitioners.

City officials struggle to engage with children, contending with a consultative system (Cóimhairle na nÓg) which is flawed and an internal organisational culture which does not fully comprehend the citizenship of children. As a result the needs of children as public domain users are not properly understood and they are simultaneously imaged as capable of contending with adult oriented space and being incapable of taking adequate care of provision which is made for them in the form of play areas. The historical focus on play in the council as a way to meet children’s needs and keep them safe results in a failure to look at children’s movement through the city and the need to make safer streets.

The parents, who make the decisions about the children’s independence, do not view the city as safe or appropriate for their needs and struggle with their wish to allow their children freedoms they associate with their own childhoods and a concern that their children need to learn to become independent. In doing so, the parents tread a tightrope between safety and outdoor freedoms which underpins cultural constructions of a good childhood (Kernan 2006).

The examination of the systems of relationships which shape the children’s experience has revealed a complex understanding of the city space the research is located in. Children’s needs are recognised by some members of the local authority, but not prioritised. This results in a built environment parents perceive as poorly designed to meet the children’s needs, is lacking in adequate play facilities and presents a range of safety concerns. The struggle to provide for the ‘wide range of functions of the city’ (Stevens 2007:5) is not unique to Dublin City Council and the rhetoric of urban design is replete with theoretical and practical proposals on how to construct a space that engages with such a variety of needs (Miles 2007).

Within the cauldron of conflicting demands, perceptions and understandings which comprise the urban macro-system and exo-system through which they move, the agency of
the children exerts itself and the findings reveal that they consider themselves regular independent public domain users. Their agency has been described above in terms of ‘resistance’ (Hill and Bessant 1999) to the failure to acknowledge their needs rather than an active engagement in shaping these systems. The findings indicate a tenuous relationship between the children’s agency and the macro and exo-systems which should be addressed through a cultural change in attitude to the status of children and a recognition of their participation rights in policy and planning decisions.

Their identification of themselves as regular public space users suggests a familiarity with the public domain which marks a shift from ‘space’ as unknown territory to ‘place’ where there is a sense of belonging (Tuan 1977). This thesis contends that that ‘place knowledge’ which children acquire is of value to the development of policy and planning decisions in relation to the wider city space. The next chapter looks at the ‘place’, or micro-system, of the routes children walk through the city on a daily basis and explores their place making as described through photographic narratives of the experience they mapped. The findings of this chapter described children’s independent access to public space, while the next chapter explores the role of independence in children’s place construction.
Chapter 6  Landscaping Urban Space: How Children Image and Experience the Routes they Walk

‘Our mobilities create spaces and stories – spatial stories’

Creswell and Merriman (2011:6)

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the analysis of data collected by the children on their experience of spatial mobility. As evidenced in chapter five, public space is not considered child-friendly by parents and they struggle to balance what they perceive as their children’s need for independent spatial mobility and a concern for their safety. The children on the other hand reveal a type of ‘resistance’ (Hil and Bessant 1999) to the failure to engage with their needs and say that they are independent public space users, accessing the public domain on a regular basis to walk to and from school, to the shop, visit friends and play. The regularity of their use of public space suggests a familiarity with that space through which it is transformed into place (Tuan 1977) which they know and feel a sense of belonging in. In this chapter the focus of the findings shifts away from the public domain as ‘space’ towards the more meaningful sense of ‘place’ as constructed by the children on their regular walks through the city.

The findings of this chapter are grounded in a number of definitions and theoretical concerns discussed in the literature review and briefly re-visited here. The act of walking itself is understood as a practical way of getting to a particular location (Lorimer 2011), as an everyday practice (de Certeau 1984) through which the ‘thick lines’ (Lee and Ingold 2006:77) of place knowledge are drawn, and at the same time there is a sensitivity to walking as an embodied experience which is ‘unthought’ (ibid) and hard to articulate. An
understanding of children’s needs in the city as being play based was discussed in chapter three and five and the findings in this chapter explore children’s perspectives on the place of play as they move through public space. The meaning of space and place are drawn from the work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) in the first instance as well as being informed by the work of Creswell (2004) who describes the process of place making as investing space with personal meaning and also as being socially constructed. Place as a social construct refers in part to how it is viewed and understood, while place as invested with personal meaning refers to how it is experienced. As discussed in chapter two, the meaning of experience in this study draws on the work Tuan (1977) who suggests that the experience of place relates to feelings people hold about that place. He defines experience as ‘a cover all term for the various modes through which a person knows and constructs a reality’ (1977:4), a reality which in this instance refers to meanings children attribute to places, people and things they encounter on their walk.

Drawing on the theoretical discussion and definitions in the literature, this chapter presents the findings on how the children image and experience the landscape of the urban public domain through which they walk. Although the findings are presented on how the city is imaged and experienced under two separate headings, there is an acknowledgment of the complex interrelationship between the experience of place and how it is viewed. The separation of the two is contrived in order to examine children’s perspectives on both how they see and experience the city, however these two perspectives are inevitably interrelated in so far as how a place is viewed affects how it is experienced, and vice versa.

The conceptual frameworks which underpin this study informed the analysis of the data and the presentation of the findings. The ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and adapted for this study identifies the children’s experience of the routes they walk as the micro-system of their urban spatial mobility. The complex system of relationships
through which the children engage with their urban environment was explored in the analysis process and the findings reveal an experience shaped by a landscape of interrelated encounters of a visually diverse, social, sensory, pragmatic and imaginary nature, illustrated below.

Time is a factor in the later elaborations of the model (Brofenbrenner and Morris (1998; 2006). The implications of what is referred to as ‘meso-time’ were examined during the analysis. In this study that period of time is the summer months between when the children took their first and second set of photographs. By the time they took their second set of photographs they had just moved up a class from fourth to fifth. But this lapse of time did
not emerge as having any obvious significance. The significant temporal factor in the analysis is in fact the implications of ‘free-time’ for the children and what is revealed about their spatial mobility experience when they are not constrained by school. Drawing on the conceptualization of children as competent social actors (Christensen and Prout 2005) discussed in chapter two, the focus in this chapter is the voice of the child and there has been a concerted effort to understand the data and present the findings from the perspective of children.

In the literature the role of independence is considered significant in relation to children’s place knowledge (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) and how they negotiate their spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990). The meaning of independence and its significance has been described as referring to an adult focus on the importance of independence without adequate cognisance of children’s perspectives (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). The findings presented in this chapter compare the experience of spatial mobility among children who are with and without an adult on their walks in order to explore the implications of independence for that experience. The next section briefly describes the data collection process, the child participants, and how the chapter is organised.

6.1 Mapping their routes through the city space

The data comprise the photographs the children took of their walks and the photo-elicited interviews in which they participated. The children were asked to photograph walks they made on two occasions; firstly their walk to school and secondly a walk they made during their free time. The children were asked to map their routes through the city to school and a place of their choice during free time, showing how they get there and simultaneously mapping the experience of that route. As suggested in the quote from Creswell and Merriman (2011) above, the resulting visual narratives tell descriptive ‘spatial stories’ of the
world of childhood as it transgresses the public space of adulthood. The children reveal a unique perspective on their urban environment indicating a view of the city as a rich tapestry of splendour, decay, beauty, neglect, stimulating and dull, all at the same time. The experience they map is equally rich, indicating a world invested with imaginative associations, pragmatic concerns, social encounters and sensory moments which are at times appealing and at times unpleasant. The extent to which they engage with the pragmatic, imaginative, social and sensory aspects of their landscape illustrates the significance of independence in determining the experience of spatial mobility, and there is a marked distinction between the pragmatic and imaginative experience of children who are with and without an adult.

6.1.1 The participants in the photographic data collection

Twenty children agreed to participate in the first phase of photographic data collection, all of whom had been identified as living in the NWIC (the research location) and who walked to school most days either with or without an adult. Using disposable cameras the children were asked to map their walks to school, as described above in section 6.1. The children were all in fourth class and aged nine or ten. The second phase of photographic data collection took place some months later when the children were in fifth class and aged ten or 11. During this phase the children were asked to photograph a walk, or a number of walks if they preferred, made during free time. Again, some children walked with an adult, and some without. Thirteen of the original sample group agreed to continue to participate at this stage. Following the development of the films the children participated in photo-elicited interviews which determined the meaning of each image as they understood it and described their walks.

In my dealings with the children I made my own observations about their personalities. I also made note of how comfortable they seemed and their level of interest in
the project. They appeared to be variously shy, chatty, bright, nervous, tired, enthusiastic and thoughtful. As these were personal observations based on relatively brief encounters they are not relevant to the analysis process. But in accordance with my ethical framework I took these various characteristics into account during interviews and made every effort to ensure the children enjoyed the process as much as possible. The findings are presented below under four headings: how children image the city (6.2) how children experience the city (6.3) the role of play (6.4) and the significance of independence (6.5).

6.2 Imaging the city: how children see the public space they walk through

As discussed in the previous chapter, the city space the children walk through is imaged as adult space which does not meet children’s needs. Children in turn are imaged by the local authority as ‘streetwise’ and able to cope with that space, yet incapable of taking care of provision which might be made for them. This section presents the findings on how the children themselves image the city space as they walk through it on their way to and from school and during their free time to the shop, to see friends or to play.

The picture which emerges from the children’s visual representation of place is rich and varied, an urban world which is simultaneously filthy and neglected yet beautiful and alive with flora and fauna. The children do not ‘see’ the meanings adults associate with the uglier elements of the urban environment such as palisade fencing, barbed wire and high walls. They see beyond the stigma associated with these features to the fun and beauty hidden from adult view. But they share with adults a sense of the sheer ugliness of derelict playgrounds and abandoned buildings and they take pleasure in good design and a well maintained built environment. The findings are presented under three separate headings: seeing things differently to adults, imaging the unpleasant in their city place and imaging the beauty of their city place.
6.2.1 Seeing things differently to adults

The wish to present children’s perspectives authentically was of paramount importance in the analysis process and the challenges faced by an adult researcher conducting research with children into their lives and giving them a voice were discussed in chapter four. It is particularly challenging to present an authentic account of the children’s experience as captured in their visual narratives because adults and children see the city differently in so far as they see it literally from a different level (Ward 1990) and also because the children’s perceptions are ‘not tainted by social considerations’ (1990:22). In other words, as adults our line of vision leads us to look at different things in the urban environment and as adults we interpret what we see differently to children. Hence I was aware that how I might see and understand the children’s photographs could be at variance with what they were documenting. Sometimes the children inadvertently draw attention to elements of their physical environment which evoke negative assumptions both with their urban world and by association, with the children and their families (Jones 2000). Thus I was initially reluctant to include certain images which might be read in ways the children had not meant them to be read and I was concerned that their ‘voice’ would be silenced in favour of an adult perception of aspects of the environment.

However, drawing on the work of Wendy Luttrell who developed a Reflexive Model of Research Design (2010) a reflexive approach has been brought to bear throughout the analysis process in order to ensure the child’s views are given voice through this study. During the photo-elicited interviews the children explained the content of their images and during the analysis the images and comments were organised together as individual data items so that the child’s interpretation and the image were understood as one. Rather than
leave out images I felt might be mis-read, throughout this chapter the images are accompanied by the comment the child made in order that a clear understanding of how the children intend to represent their urban routes is conveyed.

Two particular images illustrate both my own personal challenge as a researcher concerned with how the city meets children’s needs and also the difficulty researchers have counteracting external assumptions which may be brought to bear on their work. When I first looked at figure 6.2.1 below, I saw a depiction of traffic impinging on this child’s spatial mobility. As suggested by Berger (1972) and Ward (1990) my values informed how I saw the image and I understood it as capturing the failure of current planning and design practice in Dublin City Council to engage with children’s needs. However, to my surprise, the discussion with the child revealed that this was actually an image of beauty and captured a positive experience of nature which the child revelled in on the way to school every day. What I had perceived to be an image of threat and obstruction represented by the intrusive presence of traffic was in fact a picture of ‘the lovely trees’ the child walked past on the way to school each day.
The second image below presented a particular challenge both in terms of ‘hearing the voice of the child’ and offsetting assumptions which might be made about her through adult associations between children and place, in particular, children and city space (Jones 2000). The estate where this child lives is a notoriously neglected local authority complex which, following the collapse of a public private regeneration partnership, has been allowed deteriorate into one of the most run down estates in the country. Media coverage of the complex has focussed on anti-social behaviour including drug dealing and joy riding and on one particular occasion, riots\(^\text{19}\). Through adult eyes the palisade fencing and wilderness behind it seem to capture the neglect of the complex and portray it as a difficult place for a child to live in, both physically and socially.

\(^{19}\) ‘I saw one young lad waving a gun during riot’ The Evening Herald 8/08/2008
In fact it is a photograph of the little pony, or ‘the little chip’, the child walks past every day on the way to school and she presented it to me as a very happy image. She spoke with so much fondness for the pony and seemed so excited by the photograph it may as well have portrayed an image of a horse frolicking about in a buttercup filled meadow. I found it difficult to ignore the fencing which to me was both ugly and oppressive, and so I asked her about it. However she neither saw the palisade fencing as a visual blight nor an obstacle. She pointed to the hole the older children had made in the fence so the pony could be reached and tended to. Once again this image presents an example of how adult and child perceptions differ, and how important it is to listen carefully to children in order to allow a genuine account of their perspective to emerge.

Figure 6.2.2 ‘The little chip on the way to school’
6.2.2 Imaging the unsightly in their city place

Some of the photographs the children took show places and things along the urban routes they walk through public space which they feel lack visual appeal or have been neglected. They are conscious of how dirty the city routes they walk are and through their visual narratives they describe their disgust with rubbish and dirt on the ground as can be seen in figure 6.2.3 which the child explained shows somewhere she passes which ‘doesn’t look nice’ and figure 6.2.4, again rubbish strewn on the ground the child finds unappealing. They do not like seeing this kind of mess as they are walking along and they express their dismay that it is ‘just left there’. They also express frustration with buildings which are left in bad condition or even new buildings which are boarded up and unoccupied.  

Figure 6.2.3 ‘there’s loads of rubbish there, which I don’t think is nice’

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20 Dublin has many buildings developed during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era of the early 21st century which remain empty since the collapse of the economy in 2008
Figure 6.2.5 shows a typical modern building which has been left unoccupied for several years on this child’s walk to school. She does not find it especially attractive and it seems to her that ‘no one knows what to do with it’. There are also examples of buildings which have been bought by developers and vacated with a view to constructing new buildings in their place, but where the planned development has been unable to continue. In this instance the buildings are left to deteriorate and for one of the children they result in an unsightly presence she walks passed, ‘all dirty and covered in grime’, see figure 6.2.6. There is also a reference to graffiti on the wall which one of the children says is ‘all over the place’ and another reference to broken glass and beer bottles on the path.
Figure 6.2.5 ‘no one knows what to do with it’

Figure 6.2.6 ‘abandoned houses all dirty and covered in grime’
Their frustration with the people responsible for the mess and the neglect is expressed quite frequently by the children, who do not seem to feel they have any power over their urban environment. But when asked, they make reasonable suggestions for how it might be improved. Figure 6.2.7 shows a field at the end of a road which has been blocked up by large boulders (a standard intervention used by the local authority to prevent members of the travelling community from camping). The child photographs this place which he walks by on his way to the shop and describes how the field has just been left there, inaccessible to the children, with no sign of development occurring. He proposes the field could be put to some use for the children if the local authority built, ‘a big playground or something, or another little football pitch’.

Figure 6.2.7 ‘see the rocks at the end, there’s a big barred up field and they’re not doing anything with it’
The children see considerable dirtiness and uncared for buildings along their walking routes through public space and they are perturbed by this environmental neglect. But while the children image their city routes as suffering what has been described as ‘environmental disadvantage’ (Kearns and Ruimy 2011:36) their visual narratives of those routes also show an urban world full of beauty and attractive buildings, discussed in the next section.

### 6.2.3 Imaging the beauty of their city place

Nature features quite prominently in some of the children’s photographs. The natural environment is a much treasured source of fun and pleasure among children (Hart 1979; Moore 1986) but parents living in urban areas express a concern that their children do not have sufficient access to nature (Kernan 2006). Nonetheless, the children convey a strong awareness of even the smallest natural details around them, such as a snail crossing the path as the walk by (see figure 6.2.8) and take a lot of pleasure in the beauty and fun of the various natural elements they see on their walks.
Some of the children walk passed a small enclosed park in the middle of the road on their way to school. The park is for the elderly residents in the area and is usually locked. But the children do not necessarily feel they should be allowed in, in fact some of them are worried children might damage the park, and they take pleasure in seeing the trees and flowers growing behind the railings.
Figure 6.2.9 ‘the old folks field with trees and all’

They capture images of natural beauty in people’s gardens, grass verges, and even the branches of trees which appear from behind a high wall. They see the greenery and flowers around them as an important indication of ‘life and growth’ (Aoife). The children also photograph animals they see on their journeys, including horses in stables half hidden behind railings down an old laneway (known locally as Chicken Lane). They photograph ponies in green spaces surrounding their homes, and they take pictures of cats sitting in windows which they see every day, one of which ‘has two different coloured eyes’ (see figure 6.2.10).
The children have a good sense of aesthetic design and capture the beauty of certain buildings they pass. Some of the children photograph details of the Victorian fruit markets they live near and go to school beside (see figure 6.2.11), another child takes a photograph of an impressively ‘huge’ Clock Tower she passes on her walk, while one of the children produced an image of a contemporary apartment block which he thinks ‘looks nice’ (figure 6.2.12). They are also aware of the function of some of the buildings they see along the way. The church one of the children passes, for example, is described as ‘a holy place where God lives’ (Kevin), while a prefabricated building another child documents is described as the building which houses ‘the corporation’\(^\text{21}\), for meetings, to ask for a house, to make complaints’ (Keith).

\(^{21}\) Dublin City Council was previously known as Dublin Corporation. This child lives in a local authority housing complex and the tenants are dependent on the council to resolve certain problems which arise on the estate.
Figure 6.2.11 ‘I like seeing this because it’s really nice’

Figure 6.2.12 ‘looks nice’
Summary

The children capture the visual diversity of the city space through which they move and in doing so, convey a sense of place they image as both beautiful and ugly. While they share some instances of pleasure and aversion which coincide with adult views, they often see things and places adults might miss, or even see those things and places differently. The sense of place they carve out through the routes they walk across the public domain offers an enhanced vision of the city space which has been shaped by adults and contributes a perspective which could facilitate the design of an urban environment that would appeal to children and adults alike. The next section outlines the findings on how children experience the routes they walk regularly.

6.3 The experiential landscape of the children’s everyday journeys

Having discussed the children’s place-making as how they see the city routes they walk, this section presents the findings on how that place is experienced. An analysis of the findings indicates that their experience of place can be described as moving through a landscape comprising four interlinked dimensions: social, sensory, pragmatic and reflective/imaginative. The social landscape comprises the social encounters the children document on their trip. The sensory landscape comprises the sensory experiences the children describe on their trip. The pragmatic landscape comprises the practical concerns the children refer to on the trip and the reflective/imaginative landscape comprises the more abstract associations with the environment that the children document. The children’s visual narratives reveal how they weave their way through this landscape, at times experiencing it as a combination of dimensions and at times with a stronger focus on one particular aspect. The extent to which the landscape is experienced as social, sensory, pragmatic and reflective/imaginative varies with each individual child reflecting the suggestion in the
literature that the landscape and the person experiencing it are intertwined Wylie (2007). This section outlines the findings on the children’s place experience under the four headings which comprise the experiential landscape of their journeys.

6.3.1 Mapping the social experience

The bulk of the experiential references the children capture in their visual narratives are to social encounters. These vary from people they meet every day on the way to school to the experience of going to the shop and interacting with the sales assistant. The importance of going to the shop was quite consistent among the children as a special moment on the walk either to or from school, and a number of children specifically chose the walk to the shop to photograph during their free time. The children go to the shop to get messages for their parents or treats such as sweets or ‘a sausage sandwich going to school’ (Maeve). They enjoy the sense of responsibility when they are tasked with buying messages and they love getting various treats either with money they have been given or going in to the shop with a parent. But they particularly stress the social significance of the shop. For example, children at school in the fruit markets area photographed Brendan’s Coffee Shop (figure 6.3.1). It was documented as a place they pass by their teachers having a coffee before the day begins and give them a wave, where the staff greet them with a wave through the window or a smile and a chat if they go in for a treat. Brendan himself is photographed by the children as a very important person they see most days on their walk to and from school, someone who recognises them and is friendly to them.
There are a number of photographs of people like Brendan who they see each day including the Lollipop Lady, the school caretaker, or an uncle who throws them over an orange on the way through the markets. These various people, who have a smile for them and express an interest in them, enhance the social experience. A number of children just photographed the place where they encounter adults who they like and are nice to them (figure 6.3.2) and even where they cannot remember the grown-ups names (as in the photograph below), these brief meetings construct a sense of community for the children where they know people around them and are known.
This sense of community they map out on their everyday walks was described by them in interviews as the main reason they like living in the city.

The company they have as they are walking is also very important to them. Some of the children took a photograph of the parent who accompanies them to school, and they convey the pleasure they take in their parents company and their love for them. This was especially so with one of the children who photographed his mother and her sunburned arms which he was worried about (figure 6.3.3). He spent some time during the interview talking about the games he plays with his mother along the way and the fun they have chatting. The children also emphasise the importance of being with peers who they can chat with along the way and take photographs of their friends and siblings. The children pass by friends houses and call in for them on their way to school or to play and they love the opportunity the walk affords for a chat, to catch up on gossip or to confide in a friend.
These social encounters with people who they are familiar with creates a strong sense of belonging among the children as they walk through the public domain and helps engender a sense of place within the city. The social significance of spatial mobility is discussed by Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) who challenge the assumption that children’s spatial mobility should be understood solely as a context for independence and an opportunity to develop individual competencies. The social importance of walking is also referred to in the literature on walking both with reference to the destination as having social significance such as the habitual walk to the shop (Lee and Ingold 2006) and stepping in time with the company beside us on the walk (ibid). But the daily walk to school is one which is considered especially social ‘shared by parents (or carers) and a gaggle of children’ (Lorimer 2008:21), a sociability which is apparent in the children’s descriptions of their routes.
6.3.2 Mapping the sensory experience

The sensory nature of the spatial mobility experience is of particular relevance to children (Tuan 1977). Walking is described as a physical activity involving the body in motion while being present in the environment through which one is moving. This action affects an embodied experience (Kenworthy-Teather 1999; Cele 2006; Lee and Vergunst 2006) of sound, smell, seeing and the tactile sense of the rhythm of the feet on the pathway. But this embodied experience, being sensory in nature, can be difficult to articulate. More often than not it is quite subtle and ‘sometimes unexplainable’ (Cele 2006: 9). Nevertheless, the children mapped out a sensory dimension to their everyday walks. The visual experience is inevitably the most prominent as they are looking at their walks through the lens of the camera and ‘showing’ me their routes and their experiences. That visual experience is described above as how the children image the city. Here the references to sound, smell and tactile experiences are presented.

Smell is quite powerful for the children and they photograph places they associate with both good and bad smells. The place where smell features most prominently is the markets area. The children talk about the smell of the fruit around them, how they are sometimes handed a piece of fruit by a worker at the market (who is often a relative or a neighbour) and one of the children describes walking to school through the markets and the lovely smell of the oranges. Another child photographs the car park where the Victorian fish market was located until 2007 when it was taken down by Dublin City Council with a view to developing the site. According to the council the fish market was underutilised and it was felt that the site could be put to better use for the community. The loss of the old market and the fact that the empty site remains as a car park is viewed with dismay by conservation groups such as An Taisce and people living locally. However the child’s abiding memory of the
market was the overpowering smell, a smell which returns to her at least in memory as she walks passed the site on the way to and from school each day. For her the fish market ‘smelled horrible’ (Maeve) and it was almost impossible to get away from – wafting in through her bedroom window in the flat she lives in next to the old site.

Noise is another consideration for the children. The tram or Luas runs through the markets area and some of the children have to cross over the tracks when they are walking to school or to town. In order to alert pedestrians and cyclists of its approach the Luas bell is rung quite loudly over and over again as it moves along the tracks. One of the children finds the sound quite upsetting and frightening and she dislikes having to cross over as she says, ‘I don’t like going across the track’, in anticipation of this exceptionally loud noise (figure 6.3.4).

Figure 6.3.4 ‘It’s really noisy, and there’s the Luas track’
Another child talks about noise of the articulated lorries pulling in and out of the markets area from early in the morning until late at night, disturbing her at home and unnerving her when she is out walking.

One of the children captures a tactile experience which he enjoys on certain occasions as he walks to school. He takes a photograph of a walkway through apartments and describes the warmth of the sun flooding the space on sunny days (figure 6.3.5).

![Figure 6.3.5 ‘the sun beats down on you’](image)

The sensory experiences the children describe shape their sense of place. Some they like, some they dislike. But overall the data indicate that, from the children’s perspectives,
factoring in the sensory impact of development and urban design could serve to enhance their experience of the city.

6.3.3 Mapping the imaginary/reflective experience

The children capture places and things along the way which provoke imaginary assumptions or their own reflections and which they associate with particular feelings. One of the children photographed an empty tarmacadam space which for her represented a place of memory of good times where she used to ‘play with me friends on the roundybout and all’ but which is now a place of loss because the playground that once stood there was knocked down by the local authority (Figure 6.3.6). She expresses her frustration with the other children who were responsible for burning parts of the playground leading to it being knocked down. It is a place she invests with quite a bit of meaning; the memory of happy times, the sadness of the loss and her anger with the children who damaged the playground. It is an example of how children reflect on the world around them and the feelings place provokes.
On his walk to the shops, another child photographs the cottages where an elderly disabled man lives. He has never met this man but he explains quite a bit about him – that he has a carer and a special entrance to his house that requires a swipe card; ‘he has a pin, like a little pin, and some fella looking after him and he has his doorbell and he hasn’t even got a key for the house, he just has a swiper, and he just puts it against something or types in the pin or something’ (Keith). He expresses concern for this man who he feels is vulnerable and also a curiosity with the special way the man opens his front door which indicates quite a reflective engagement with the environment.

Their sense of their safety is sometimes described by the children in quite an imaginative way. They share their parents concerns with traffic and during the interviews they refer to ‘stranger danger’, conveying an awareness which has been passed on to them by
their parents through rules around talking to strangers. But they neither make references to ‘stranger danger’ in their visual narratives nor mention feeling threatened when they are describing them. The adult fear of ‘stranger danger’ expressed by the parents in chapter five is described in the literature as somewhat irrational given the low rate of kidnapping and abuse of children by strangers (Jenkins 1998). While the children are not overly concerned with the threat of ‘stranger danger’, they do express what might be considered somewhat irrational fears of their own. Those more imaginative fears are an integral part of the imaginative/reflective experiences of place they map. They are fairly typical childhood fears which feature in children’s books, films and television series such as haunted houses, killer dogs and derelict sheds where evil people lurk. One of the children photographed the front door of a house she passes every day explaining; ‘this freaks me out’ (figure 6.3.7). The house dates back to the mid 18th century and was originally home to a senior figure in the British Army and was connected with the nearby Collins Barracks. It is now in a state of considerable disrepair and covered in ivy, however it is inhabited by a family whom I know to be very friendly. The father of the man who lives in the house bought it some years ago in a bid to conserve it from falling in to total ruin. But neither he nor his son are in a financial position to fix it up. As a result the fairly decrepit condition of the house gives it a haunted feel which is frightening from a child’s perspective.
While the children’s imaginations and musings can evoke fear and sadness, the same qualities help construct a sense of place which is quite entertaining for them on their walks. Some of the children photographed funny things they saw along the way. One of the children photographed a car which had been clamped which she found funny as every day there is at least one car clamped in the same place. Another child photographed a bus stop on the street where she walks which she finds amusing as there is no bus which goes along this particular
street. One of the children photographed the tower in Smithfield which was originally used for distilling whiskey (figure 6.3.8). The tower became a tourist attraction for visitors who could go up a lift and enjoy a panoramic view of Dublin City. The child explained to me that the lift had broken down one day possibly leaving a group of visitors stranded. To this day it seems, the lift remains broken and the visitors are probably still stuck up the top as, he explains, ‘you can’t get a ladder that high’. It is both amusing to the child and disconcerting as the top of the tower is a place you can go to see Santa Claus at Christmas time and get a small gift. Mostly though the child was amused by his highly imaginative view of the tower and found the plight of the stuck tourists quite entertaining.

This imaginative or reflective experience of place is more often apparent in the data collected by the children who are with an adult, while the children who are not with an adult are more inclined to focus on pragmatic concerns which is described in the next section. This distinction between the experiences mapped by the two cohorts of children is discussed in more detail in section 6.5.
6.3.4 Mapping the pragmatic experience

The volume of traffic on the streets they cross as they walk through public space is a very practical consideration which is to the fore of the children’s pragmatic experiences. One of the children photographs the traffic lights at a pedestrian crossing on the way to school which she says takes forever to change (figure 6.3.9), while another child photographs the place where the footpath gets quite narrow and puts her in a precarious position in relation to the traffic.
They map ‘blind spots’ where they find negotiating the traffic very challenging and have to walk carefully forward checking for traffic as they go and they map busy junctions where there are pedestrian lights but which nevertheless they find crossing quite difficult. Road size is a concern to them and they describe wider streets as a ‘really dangerous road I have to cross (Paul)’ or ‘this big road I don’t like going across’ (Miryam). But they feel reassured by signage aimed at slowing down the traffic which tells them there are ‘kids about’ (Tina) and to ‘look around’ (figure 6.3.10), and similarly reassured by the presence of police vans.
and police cars which suggest there are policemen nearby dealing with criminals ‘who are just wrecking the world’ (Finn).

The children also photograph damaged cobblestones and cracks in the path which they say is a danger to their safety as they might fall. Their pragmatic experience is in fact quite similar to an adult experience with its focus on traffic and a poorly maintained built environment. These issues are relatively easily addressed, through better maintenance and by designing traffic calming features such as footpath widening, narrowing streets, greening road space with trees and hedging and other features which discourage commuting by car and speeding and prioritises pedestrians in the city. These measures create a more child friendly city, but one which also meets the needs of adults and has the wider benefit of creating a more sustainable city. Planning and designing the urban space so as to meet children’s spatial mobility needs is not a key consideration in local authority policy or one expressed by
the planners interviewed for this study (see chapter 5). The primary focus of the city council when it comes to meeting children’s needs is on play. The next section looks at play from the perspective of the children, its role in their walks from one destination to the next and the extent to which they map out a ‘playful city’ on their routes through the public domain.

6.4 Play and routes the children walk through public space

Dublin City Council focuses largely on play facilities as a way to meet children’s needs in the city, (as discussed in chapter three and chapter five) and children say that the main reason they access public space without an adult is in order to play. The focus on play in the city by both the local authority and the children corresponds with research on children’s use of the outdoors as being closely linked with playing (Opie and Opie 1969; Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Mackett et al. 2007; Rogers 2009). However, despite both evidence in the literature and the evidence of this study that children regularly play outside, there are very few references to play in the children’s portrayals of their walks to school. There are a number of explanations for this lack of reference to play, firstly, the nature of the walk, secondly, the spontaneous nature of play and thirdly, how play is perceived and understood.

The walk to school is what Lorimer (2011) describes as destination oriented and the destination in this instance obliges the walker to be on time. Hence, playing along the way is inevitably constrained, as Punch found, because ‘they were supposed to arrive on time for lessons’ (2000:56). The sort of play that children engage in as they are moving around outside is usually quite spontaneous and their movement is ‘choreographed’ (Moore 1986:56) by the topology of the route they walk. But as the children were busy taking photographs they may have been disinclined to play. The final explanation refers to how the children represent play in their walks which simultaneously offers an insight in to how they understand play in the city and how play in the city is perceived. This section focuses on the walk the children
photographed which they made during their free time when they were more likely to capture places associated with play. It begins with an overview of the meaning of free time for the children and then presents the data on the relationship between play and independent spatial mobility in the city.

6.4.1 The meaning of ‘free time’ for children

As well as being asked to photograph the routes they walked to school, the children were asked to photograph routes they regularly walked during their free time. They chose a wide variety of walks to photograph and their choice of walks reveals an interesting perspective on the discussion of children’s loss of freedom and a move towards structuring their time outside of school hours (Ennew 1994). There is a concern in the literature that children’s lives are overly prescribed nowadays, and that they are ferried from one island of institutionalised activity to the next (Zeiher 2003) with far too much emphasis placed on educational activities at the expense of simply playing and wandering about freely (Malone 2007).

But there is evidence that children themselves see these prescribed after school activities as a source of fun and understand them as a form of play (Brennan 2001). Children who participated in this study chose to photograph their walk to after school classes as a walk made during what they understood to be their free time rather than seeing the classes as extended form of organized school time. They photographed walks to drama class, to kickboxing class and to dance class. They also photographed the walk home from school on Friday afternoon, a walk to visit relatives, to the shops, the cinema and to play – in the park, the playground or around the neighbourhood. The routes are all still through what has been described as an adult constructed public space, but during their free time, perhaps less constrained by their haste to get to school on time, the children share more personal details about their lives and map what Philo refers to as more ‘intimate geographies’ (2000:243) of
their journeys. This marks a shift towards sharing information about their personal lives, such as the barbers where you can have a great chat (Figure 6.4.1), ‘me Nanny’s’ (figure 6.4.2), ‘the view out my bedroom window’ (Finn) or even where one of the children had an argument with his mother while they were on their way through town. In this way the children reveal the public space of the city as place which to them is their home, where they feel a strong sense of belonging.

Figure 6.4.1 ‘I always go there and they are so good. I mean they’re so good to talk to’
6.4.2 Walking and playing

Through the references the children make to play in their portrayals of the routes they regularly walk through the public realm these routes emerge as having little play significance. Only one child photographed a place she regularly plays on her way to school (figure 6.4.3) and a couple of children photographed places they like to play on regular walks during free time (figure 6.4.4 the bean bag shop for hanging out in).
During the photo-elicited interviews I enquired about playing as they walked. But mostly the children said they never played on the walk to school but that there were occasional playful moments on walks during free time. In the interviews they conveyed an understanding of this kind of play, where children interact with the environment and their friends playfully, as in fact ‘messing’ (John). They give the impression that messing is frowned upon by adults so they were reluctant to admit to any kind of messing on their walks.

The few instances they do describe are examples where their playfulness is tolerated in the public domain such as swinging out of the lamppost on the path to school or falling into the over sized bean bags – which is encouraged by these particular shop owners.
Consistent with the trend in urban planning to segregate children’s areas where playing is allowed (Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003), most of the references to play were to places specifically intended for play such as the park or the playground which they go to after school and at the weekend. Some of the children mapped their walks to these play spaces after school and at the weekend. These visual narratives actually said very little about play, neither capturing instances of play on the way or much play activity in the playground or park itself. They do show these places as very sociable, where they meet friends and where the adults sit and chat (figure 6.4.5).
There is a sense that playgrounds act as civic gathering spaces for children and adults alike, but that opportunities for imaginative playing seems to be somewhat constrained. This may be, as Wood (1977) suggests, that playgrounds are somewhat oppressively supervised by adults and also that the prescribed nature of the equipment which Wood considers ‘homogenized, sanitized’ (1977:236) is inhibiting.

Where the children are freer from adult constraints they show evidence of creating their own play worlds, which occur in places which are explicitly out of bounds (figure 6.4.6) or which are highly imaginative (figure 6.4.7). One of the children walked around her neighbourhood photographing places she plays and told me what she plays there. She photographed places that have been deemed out of bounds, a fact reinforced by palisade fencing visible in the images. During the interview she discussed the hole in the railings through which she and her friends go to play and the fact that ‘they throw you out’.
The small grassy patch accessed through the hole does not appear to offer up much in the way of play opportunities, however the play in this instance seems to be the fact of getting into the forbidden zone.

Another child chose to photograph himself and his friends playing around the area close to his home without a parent. He has been allowed out to play with his friends and there is no evidence of an adult nearby supervising their activities in his photographs, nor does he mention the presence of any adults. Through his visual narrative he reveals a very imaginative game in which he is a policeman and the children are playing hide and seek. In one image he has literally taken the camera into the play world and captures himself holding a policeman’s torch which he explains shows ‘me on patrol’.
He also photographs his friends from his hiding spot when he is playing hide and seek, and giggles at the image of them in the flats complex heading in the wrong direction, ‘looking for me’ and shares some of the fun and excitement of his play world. These images, more than any in the data, provide an insight into what has been described as ‘the liminal place’ (Sutton-Smith 2001) of play based on anthropological research into rites of passage which describe these rites as occurring on the threshold between stages of being. In the context of this study that liminal place of the imaginative play world is also located on a threshold; not quite in public ‘space’ which is adult constructed, nor the children’s familiar ‘place’. As such, the children’s imaginative play world is distinct from the imaginative meanings they invest in the routes they walk through public space described in section 6.3.
Heft (1988) and Kytta (2004) identify a relationship between children’s play, their spatial mobility, and the affordances of the environment. The evidence of this study suggests that ‘permission’ might be added to that equation and that where playfulness is tolerated by adults in public space, children actualize the affordances (Kytta 2004) and engage in the sort of playful activities identified by Moore (1986) and Hart (1979). Permission coupled with time gives children the opportunity to use the public domain for more imaginative play where they are absorbed in complex games and role playing. The understanding of children as a threat to public space in the city inhibits that playfulness which is sometimes read as destructive behaviour (Valentine 2004). The children express an awareness of this negative view of their play which they explain is considered messing. There is a trend towards containing play within specific areas and it seems to play outside these areas is not tolerated because it is considered inappropriate and ‘out of place’ (Creswell 2004). A change in attitude towards children and their use of the public domain is required if they are to engage more freely in spontaneous play as they walk through the city.

The findings presented here indicate that children’s play as they move through the public domain is constrained by adult regulation. The obligation to get to school on time, the rules around ‘messing’ and appropriate use of public space, and the limitations of designated play areas - all of which are adult controlled even when an adult is not physically present - affect their playful engagement with the environment. The next section looks in more detail at the findings on how the presence of an adult shapes children’s spatial mobility experience.
6.5 The significance of independence in the spatial mobility experience

There is evidence that children who do not walk with an adult have a more detailed knowledge of their local environment and can identify more landmarks in maps they draw of their routes (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). There is also evidence that children who walk without an adult have a richer experience of their environment (Romero 2010). In this study the visual narratives of the children who were with an adult and those who were without an adult were compared to explore why the presence of an adult might shape their spatial mobility experience in this way.

This comparison revealed that there was no obvious difference in the children’s sense of familiarity with their route or how to get from one place to the next. They had an equal ability to construct a map of how to get from a to b which they each indicated using their photographs. However there is a difference in how they express their place knowledge both as an experience and what they see. An example of this difference is evidenced in the photographs of Mathew and Ella. Mathew walks without an adult to school and he included an image of a pub he passes each day, because it is ‘on the way there’. In other words, the pub represents a landmark on the way there. Ella, who walks with an adult by contrast talks about an old house she passes each day because it is frightening and for her it is more than a landmark, it ‘looks haunted’. In general, the children without an adult photographed more ‘landmarks’ which indicate the way there, while the children with an adult photographed markers which also hold a different kind of meaning. As such, the two cohorts of children see the city a little differently from one another, and as discussed above, how they see the city is related to how they experience it. This section describes that finding in detail, beginning with an examination of the role of independence in the richness of the experience and moving on to discuss how independence shapes the nature of the experience the children have.
6.5.1 How the presence of an adult affects the richness of the experience

In a study of children’s views of independent mobility walking to and from school Vivian Romero (2010) found the children without an adult had a somewhat richer experience than children who walked with an adult. Using a questionnaire with both closed and open ended questions distributed to children, she defined the richness of the experience as the amount of items of interest the children document on their walk. She found that children without an adult listed more items of interest. She concludes that the sort of engagement children accompanied by an adult have with the environment around them is inhibited by the grown up who, she says, is probably in a hurry. But she suggests that children who are not with an adult spend more time exploring the environment on their walk to school (2010:58). It is a
finding which reflects other research that shows children have a desire for exploration of the world around them (Hart 1979; Moore 1986) and tend to wander more slowly when they are not with a grown up (Mackett et al. 2007).

A similar comparison was undertaken for this study through an examination of the number of items of interest the children who were with and without an adult photograph on their routes. By contrast with Romero, in the case of this study children who are with an adult describe a richer experience than children who are without an adult; on average children with an adult recorded 11.3 items of interest while children without an adult recorded 10.1 items of interest. To rule out the possibility that parents had influenced the number of items documented I asked the children during the photo-elicited interview who decided on the photographs and a couple of children identified images which had been suggested by a grown up. These photographs were not in fact relevant to the analysis and were not used.

The choice of methods is a contributing factor to the difference in the findings between the two studies. In this research the children are all actively involved in a process of documenting their daily experience of routes they walk and showing the researcher items of interest they see on the way. The very act of gathering the data inhibits the possibility for exploration either group of children might usually engage in. Secondly, by virtue of ‘being in that place’ (Christensen 2003:16) rather than relying on recall, the children document the embodied experience they have and capture their imaginative reflections. By and large these latter images are taken by children who are with an adult, as the children without an adult by necessity have a more pragmatic engagement with their routes. The children who are with an adult and less distracted by the practicalities of getting to their destination have more time for reflection on the world around them and in this study document slightly more examples of items of interest which shape that reflective experience. In the next section the role independence plays in shaping the nature of the experience as the children walk is discussed.
6.5.2 How the presence of an adult shapes the nature of the experience

The children’s journeys through the urban landscape are described in section 6.3 as moving through an experiential landscape which is rich in sensory, social, imaginative and pragmatic significance. However that landscape is described with a somewhat different emphasis depending on whether or not the children are with an adult. The ‘spatial stories’ referred to above which the children narrate through the experiential maps of the routes they photographed conveys a somewhat more pragmatic engagement with place among children without an adult, and a somewhat more imaginative engagement with place among children with an adult.

During the initial meeting with the children to discuss mapping their experience using photography, they described good experiences as somewhere, something or someone they liked, found amusing or made them feel good on their route. They described bad experiences as somewhere, something or someone the disliked or that made them feel bad. This section begins by looking at a comparison of references to the experience of the walk mapped by children with and without an adult. Then there is a comparison of experiences they like and dislike. Finally, an explanation for the difference of experience described by both sets of children is proposed.
In general, the children with an adult were more likely to describe the experiential nature of the walk than children who were not with an adult.

![Non-experiential references mapping the route](image)

**Figure 6.5.2 Comparing amount of experiential references among children with and without an adult**

They capture 36 references which serve solely to mark the way from a to b, otherwise their images captured a place, person, or object which they invested with meaning other than showing how to get from one place to another. The children who were not with an adult were more likely to map the route with references to ‘the next step’ on the way, documenting a total of 46 references to the way from A to B. Each cohort mapped a range of experiences, but the children without an adult documented a more practical engagement with their routes.
The experience the children document of the walk to school is overwhelmingly positive irrespective of whether or not they are with an adult - although children with an adult describe a somewhat less positive experience than children without.

![Figure 6.5.3 Comparing positive experiences among children with and without an adult](image)

The children capture similar numbers of social and sensory encounters along the way which enhance their experience but they are more likely to capture practical interests along the way if they are without an adult. Typically children without an adult will photograph buildings they like as markers, or landmarks, which map the route. They also capture places which hold a deeper meaning such as the parish church or the statue of our lady but they are more likely to photograph somewhere nice as ‘it’s on the way’. The children who are with an adult on the other hand are more likely to share an imaginative or reflective discussion of a place or object such as the tower on Smithfield square which is ‘where you go up to see Santa Claus’ and as mentioned above is believed to be ‘stuck up the top with loads of people in it’.

Another place photographed by the children is the very striking 19th century building which it is believed locally was originally intended for a city in India but the architectural
drawings were mixed up and the building ended up in Dublin. The function of this building has changed over the years and while the data was being collected it housed a number of district courts. For children with an adult it was more than a landmark along the way, it was associated with ‘the law and everything’ which meant passing by here children could feel good and know they were being kept safe.

Along each route to school the children with an adult photographed there are examples of trees scattered around either on footpaths or emerging from behind high walls as well as, grassy verges, various kinds of landscaping, front gardens and wasteland areas overgrown with wild shrubs and weeds. These small pockets of nature seem to go unnoticed by most of the children without a grown up. Only one of the children who walks without an adult mentions nature. He photographs a small enclosed park for older people and he specifically mentions the trees he likes. Similarly children walking with an adult photograph
animals they encounter along their urban route such as cats and horses. These aspects of the landscape serve the sole purpose of enhancing the experience and it seems they are not as important to children who are actively engaged in getting themselves from their starting point to their destination.

The children with an adult are also more likely to express an imaginative sense of excitement with the world around them. Walking to school through the busy city markets area the children with an adult photograph the fun they derive from watching forklift trucks darting about ‘carrying huge things’ and the speed with which they ‘come in and out’. There is no suggestion of excitement with the forklift trucks among the children who are not with an adult and have to take responsibility for their own safety. All forms of traffic are depicted as a hazard they have to navigate their way through and they show the places which they find particularly challenging such as the gateway between their home and the busy road or the place where the footpath narrows and the speed of the traffic on particular streets.

![Negative Experiences](image)

Figure 6.5.5 Comparing negative experiences among children with and without an adult
The children who are with an adult are more than twice as likely to describe the spatial mobility experience with reference to somewhere, something or someone they did not like. Altogether the nine children with an adult document 22 places or objects which are of concern to them, or an average of almost two and a half each. Meanwhile the eleven children who are without an adult only document eight negative experiences which averages out at less than one each. How the children describe their journeys is an indication of the individual ‘characteristics’ of each child described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Tudge (2008) as shaping how they engage with people and processes in their everyday lives. However this study also suggests that the kind of experience the children describe is affected by the presence of an adult. Children with an adult are inclined to describe their concerns with reference to quite imaginative fears. They document derelict houses along the way which one of them says ‘freaks me out’ and discuss the ‘scary’ look of a house which appears to be haunted. Similarly houses which have been ‘blocked up’ or ‘abandoned houses’ appear to be frightening to the children, evocative perhaps of classic children’s stories such as the Lemony Snicket series. For children who are walking without an adult an unsightly building is described in a more pragmatic sense as ‘doesn’t look nice’ and seems to have been left there because no one knows what to do with it. Both cohorts of children share a concern with the amount of rubbish on the ground. But while those who are without an adult express disgust with the mess, those who are with an adult invest the rubbish they see with a meaning that is at times frightening for them, for example, broken glass and empty bottles ‘gives me the feeling of people drinking too much’. As with the places and things they like, the children with an adult are also more likely to describe their concerns in considerable detail. The walkway through two apartment blocks shows the place where two people ‘jumped out the window and committed suicide and there was blood and everything everywhere’, while the
doorway with a sign saying beware of the dog photographed by a child without an adult is simply ‘scary’.

The graphic and imaginative nature of the account of the suicide might be too frightening for a child who is not walking with an adult to dwell on. Children’s spatial mobility is particularly inhibited by fears of the unknown (Matthews 2003) and imaginative fears are by their nature more difficult to ‘know’ and take control over than the practical concerns with traffic children without an adult express. The urban spatial mobility experiences described by children who are with and without an adult are similarly social and sensory, but the data from this study shows that the experience for children without an adult has a more pragmatic focus while the experience for children with an adult has a more imaginative and reflective focus. The children without an adult have what Tuan regards as an adult responsibility for reaching their destiny, a responsibility which lends itself to a ‘habit of taking a mental note of where things are and how to go from one place to the next’ (1977:26), while the children who do not have this responsibility have the freedom to get ‘caught up in the excitement of people, things, events’ (ibid). It is a freedom to be more reflective about the world they are moving through and to engage on a more imaginative level with their routes through public space. The disparity between how children who are with an adult and children who are not with an adult experience their urban spatial mobility suggests a paradoxical loss of freedom among children who are independent. By virtue of having to take responsibility for their welfare they are somewhat constrained by pragmatic concerns on their journeys. Meanwhile there appears to be a freedom among children who are not independent to engage more reflectively with the local environment.

The data presented in this chapter show that the presence of an adult shapes children’s place making as they walk through public space. The public domain was revealed as being designed with adult needs in mind in chapter five. In order to navigate this adult oriented
space alone, children have to adopt a more adult awareness (Tuan 1977). In doing so they are
developing a sense of autonomy, decision making skills and learning how to map routes
which show relevant landmarks for getting from a to b, all achievements which are valued in
western society. But if their pragmatic concerns for the safety were addressed through traffic
calming measures they might also enjoy a more reflective and imaginative sense of place.
Similarly, if the more imaginative concerns expressed by the children with an adult for their
safety were understood and addressed by maintaining clean streets free of graffiti and derelict
housing stock, the sense of place children with an adult document as they move through the
city might be less fraught with fears.
Conclusion

The findings on children’s sense of place as they walk through adult oriented public space (Aitken 2001; Valentine 2004) reveal a complex image and experience of the urban environment which simultaneously shares adult concerns and ‘sees’ beyond adult assumptions of place (Jones 2000). Through their visual narratives the children image the city as a place of decay and neglect, but they also see past the fencing, barbed wire and high walls to the pony in the field and the tree ‘full of life and growth’. They experience their walks as social, pragmatic, sensory and imaginative, at times reflecting a childish world of haunted houses and shops for treats, at times conscious of adult concerns such as getting across the road safely.

The playful affordances of the urban landscape (Kytta 2004; Stevens 2007; Gehl 2010) are rarely realised by the children in their walks through the public realm. They tend to associate play with child designated areas described by Karsten (2002) which offer quite prescribed play opportunities (McKendrick et al. 2000). In the public realm, understood as adult territory, the children indicate that play is considered ‘messing’ - which is discouraged. They are aware that this behaviour is considered bad behaviour and that children behaving inappropriately, or in other words, playing in places not designated for play, are regarded with suspicion, as discussed by Jenks (2005) and Valentine (2004). There is evidence that children are highly adept at creating playful opportunities in urban environments when they are away from the adult gaze (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Rogers 2009) and this study shows that where children have permission they will also play along the routes through public space, using everything from lampposts to bean bags. Free of adult time constraints (Ennew 1994), their play becomes highly imaginative.
The role of independence in relation to how children experience spatial mobility is revealed as complex. The findings for this study indicate that whether or not a child walks with an adult has little effect on the sense of belonging they convey or their place knowledge. But children with an adult document a slightly richer experience. This finding contrasts to evidence in the literature which suggests that children who walk *without* an adult have a richer experience (Romero 2010) and that children who walk without an adult have a better knowledge of their local environments (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). But this study shows that the children who are with an adult are less aware of the places and objects they pass as landmarks (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) on their route and more inclined to invest places with an imaginative meaning which may not transfer so easily to sketched out maps indicating the way from a to b.

Irrespective of the presence of an adult the children primarily document an experience which is social and sensory. This finding corresponds with the discussion in the literature on the social significance of the walks children make (Cele 2006; Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009; Rogers 2009) and the sensory significance of their outdoor experience (Tuan 1977). But children who walk without an adult and enjoy the personal autonomy of negotiating their way through the public domain are more concerned with the pragmatic demands of reaching their destination safely, while the children who do not have responsibility for getting to their destination, have a greater freedom to engage with their surroundings on a more imaginative or reflective level.

Given the implications of adult presence for how children experience urban spatial mobility revealed in this chapter, how children regard the significance of independence in their regular walks is explored in more detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 7 The Significance of Independence in the Context of Urban Spatial Mobility: Children’s Perspectives

Introduction

The findings presented in this chapter mark a shift in the focus of the thesis towards exploring the meaning and significance of independence for children. As discussed in chapter three, children’s urban spatial mobility is problematized around evidence of a loss of independence (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Alparone and Pacilli 2012) and the consequences of that loss (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Valentine 2004). The meaning of independence and its significance for children have been questioned in the literature with a suggestion that it is a contemporary Western society value based meaning and that the significance of independence has been determined from an adult perspective (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). This study is underpinned by an attempt to reposition children’s views in the debate by examining the experience of urban spatial mobility and the role of independence from their perspective.

In chapter five the findings on the urban context of this research indicated a lack of understanding of children’s engagement in the public domain and their needs as public realm users. The findings on the relationship between the experience of spatial mobility through public space and independence discussed in chapter six revealed a difference in how children with and without an adult describe that experience; children with an adult document a more reflective/imaginative experience while children without an adult document a more pragmatic experience. Having explored the various aspects of children’s urban spatial mobility, the purpose of this chapter is to complete the picture by focussing more specifically on
independence itself. This chapter focuses on the meaning of independence for children and how they understand the significance of that independence in relation to their urban spatial mobility.

The shift in focus also marks a shift towards placing more emphasis on the theoretical framework discussed in chapter two which conceptualises children as competent social actors. The rationale behind the two previous chapters was drawn from the ecological model developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979). The ecological model serves to unpick the various strands which comprise the complex tapestry of children’s independent spatial mobility in an urban context, while understanding the relationships as a two way flow between the child and the macro, exo, meso, and micro systems. The idea of an ecological system of relationships shaping children’s views remains relevant in this chapter, however greater emphasis is placed on the children’s agency.

The meaning and significance of independence was explored in a series of open-ended interviews through a discussion of the children’s feelings about; the extent of their independence, why they would prefer to be with or without an adult and the implications of the nature of the walk in relation to their views. The analysis is based on the two sets of interviews conducted with the children who participated in the qualitative data collection. The analysis reveals that regardless of how much independence they have the children are generally happy with the extent of it. The meaning of independence is described as an interplay between personal identity and middle childhood and the significance of independence is discussed as the tension between a desire for autonomy and security. This tension also informs their parents view on independence and indicates a correlation between parental perceptions of a ‘good childhood’ and the children’s perceptions of their needs. However, that is not to suggest the children’s perspective and the parent’s views on how to actually meet the balance between the safety and autonomy are never at odds with one
another. Finally, the dynamic underpinning children’s independence is revealed as fluid and organic, as posited by Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009). It does not appear to be a one way trajectory from dependent to independent as suggested by Hillman et al. (1990), but a process which involves moving back and forth between the two.

In this chapter the children’s agency is explored more deeply. The chapter begins by returning briefly to the discussion on the meaning of independence as a social construct and the significance of independence for children aged between nine and eleven. The findings on the children’s views on the extent of their independence are then outlined in section 7.2, followed by the findings on findings on how independence is negotiation (7.3). The findings on the meaning and significance of independence from the children’s perspective are then outlined in sections 7.4 and 7.5.

7.1 Returning to the meaning of independence in relation to the literature

As discussed in chapter three a criticism of some of the literature is that independent spatial mobility has been studied and analysed from an adult perspective and the meaning of independence in the context of children’s spatial mobility is vague (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). It is often conflated with an idea of personal autonomy and is generally understood in Western society as an expression of ‘personhood’ (Hockey and James 1993) and something children gain incrementally as they mature (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). The value of independent spatial mobility for children is described in the literature with reference to a number of factors including knowledge of local environment (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002), the richness and exploratory nature of the experience (Romero 2010 and Macket et al. 2007), as well as being a context through which children develop important life skills such as decision making and risk taking (Hillman et al. 1990).
Given that individual freedom is so highly valued in Western society, it might be assumed that all children strive for and demand independent spatial mobility as an expression of their own ‘personhood’. In fact as will be discussed below, children do not seem to regard independence in relation to their outdoor mobility solely as something to gain and maintain. The context of the walk, the wish for company, or even the fact of enjoying spending time with parents affect the children’s views on their independence. Their views on their independence can vary from day to day and the shift between dependence and independence seems less one directional and more a transition which involves moving back and forth between the two and on-going child/adult negotiations. The findings in the analysis correspond with Hockey and James’ discussion of dependence and independence as being part of a ‘fluctuating continuum’ (1993:110) and reflect Mikkelsen and Christensen’s assertion that relations of dependence are changeable over time rather than being fixed (2009).

The children’s perspectives presented here suggest that the significance of independence in their daily lives is quite fluid and that the desire to move from dependence to independence is a reflection of individual identity and a personal sense of maturity, safety and autonomy and which can fluctuate from moment to moment.

7.2 Children’s views on the extent of their independence

As evidenced in the findings of the analysis of the questionnaire in chapter five, the children have varying degrees of independence. However most children identify a reasonable level of independent access to public space either to play, or go to the shop, walk to school or visit friends and relatives. This section presents the findings of an analysis of the qualitative data which explored the children’s views on whether or not they were happy with the extent of their freedoms. The children expressed very individualistic views which are presented here in
some detail as individual preference is revealed as a key factor shaping children’s views. The nature of the walk also emerges as a factor which influences the children’s views.

As might be anticipated given that most children indicated a reasonable degree of independence in their questionnaire, the majority (65%) of the children included in the analysis (18 of the 20 children expressed a view) said they were happy with the extent of their independent spatial mobility. A few of the children said they did not really have an opinion one way or the other about the extent of their freedom although almost 25% said they would like more independence. However the fact that the majority of children were happy with their independence contrasts with the concern expressed in the literature indicating a loss of independence for children in recent decades (Hillman et al. 1990). It would seem that although children may not have as much independent spatial mobility as in the past, they are not overly concerned but appear to be happy with the extent of independence they have.

This finding needs to be understood in relation to the fact that the experience of greater independent spatial mobility refers to their parents and grandparents and not their own lives so that while they are suggesting they are happy with their independence, they are not aware of the loss which has been identified and they are not comparing their independence with other freedoms. Nonetheless, the fact that the children do not feel constrained contributes an important perspective to the discussion on independent spatial mobility. It sheds light on the views of a group of children who have a degree of independence which is specific to the lives of children in the 21st century. This generation of children have been described as ‘back-seat’ children, driven from place to place (Zeiher 2003) and a concern is expressed that they are cosseted in an inhibiting way (Malone 2007). But some children specifically state they do not want any more independence and others are happy with the independence they have, a perspective which should be taken in to consideration in the discussion. There are of course children who express a desire for more independence. These
views are all presented below in section 7.2.1 on the context of children’s satisfaction with their independence and section 7.2.2 on the reasons children would like more independence.

7.2.1 Contextualising children’s satisfaction with their independence

The children who say they are happy with the extent of their independence have varying degrees of independence, and in fact some have very little. Paul, for example, always walks to and from school with an adult and while he is allowed play without a grown up in the courtyard in front of his apartment block, he is not allowed outside the gates of his block without an adult.
But he says he does not want to go out of the complex without an adult and feels his level of independence is adequate;

‘I think it’s far enough’

Paul, who has very little independence but feels it is adequate

Finn, who also describes himself as having very little independent mobility, says that he is allowed go out to play on the path just outside his home but he is not allowed across the road. During the first interview he says he is very comfortable with his level of independence and describes it as being just ‘normal life’. Ella walks to and from school with an adult each day, however she is allowed out to play without an adult, although only to play in front of her home where she can be seen, or around the corner which is part of the cul-de-sac where she lives and there is no traffic. She says she is happy with the amount of independent mobility she has and that there is ‘not really’ anywhere she would like to go that she is not allowed go. These views indicate that even children who have very little independence can be content the extent of freedom. While from an adult perspective there is a concern around the lack of freedom children seem to have to move around, this may in fact reflect a choice made by children themselves and suggest an expression of their individual agency.

The nature of the walk also emerges as a factor influencing children’s views. Some of the participants said they were not only happy with the extent of their independence walking to or from school, to the shops or to friends or to the playground for example, but that they would not like any more independence. One of the children, Tina, has considerable independence. She walks to and from school without an adult, to various after school activities, to the shop, out to play and to visit her friends. However she expresses concern with the possibility that she may have to travel further than usual without an adult if she does
a particular summer camp. She says she is happy with the level of independence she has but she does not want to go further on her own in case something happens.

‘I’m scared something will happen and that someone will come up to me’.

Tina, has a lot of independence but does not want more}

She feels comfortable with her safety in the places she knows, but is anxious about moving further afield to somewhere she is not familiar with. Similarly Sarah, who says she has a lot of independent mobility and is allowed walk to and from school, play outside and go to the shops without a grown up, draws a line between the extent of the independence she has and going any further. She says on a walk somewhere she is less familiar with she would prefer to be with an adult; ‘if I was walking into town or anything, like, I’d prefer it [to be with an adult]’.

Both children have considerable independent spatial mobility but both wish to remain within the mobility range they are familiar with. Their views reflect Tuan’s (1977) suggestion that the ‘space’ people do not know well can be daunting for them. Their views also indicate that the nature of the walk affects the children’s views on whether or not they would like to make the journey independently and suggest that their independent spatial mobility is shaped by context. In her study on children’s use of time and space in rural Bolivia, Samantha Punch (2004) states that independence should be understood in relation to social and cultural context. The findings in this study suggest that the more immediate context such as where the children are going and the personal preference of an individual child also affect how independence is viewed which indicates that the extent of their independence is, at least to some extent, an expression of their own agency. While the
children may have less independent spatial mobility than previous generations, they generally express satisfaction with the extent of their freedom and as discussed in the literature make the best of what they have (Jones and Cunnigham 1999). The findings here indicate the value of considering the debate on independent spatial mobility from children’s perspective. The extent of their independence should be understood in context as both individual personalities and the nature of the walk the children make shape the extent of independence they want to have themselves. Within that context there are also children who would like more independence and their views are considered in the next section.

7.2.2 Reasons children would like more independence

Of the children included in this analysis, 27.8% said they would like more independence, although generally that is qualified and they say they would like only ‘a bit more’. They have a considerable degree of independent spatial mobility; they can either walk to school without an adult or are allowed home without an adult either after school or during lunch break.

Aisling, for example, she says she would like ‘a tiny bit more’ independence. However her understanding of independence in this context is not a spatial concern, rather she discusses the issue in terms of getting permission. If she wants to go and visit her grandfather or go with her friends to play at the pitch nearby she has to ask her mothers’ permission. She lives on the fifth floor of an apartment block and each time she wants permission she has to walk all the way up the stairs to her mother, which she finds frustrating.

‘I have to go up and down, up and down’

Aisling, who would finds asking permission a hassle

She says she is happy with the extent of her independence, but would rather have the freedom to make decisions about when to make journey’s to places nearby without always having to
seek permission. Her view suggests that the concern for children is not always centred on how far their territorial range extends (Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) as it is with adults, but rather having a spontaneity to choose to walk independently of a grown up.

As with the children who identify places they do not want to walk without an adult, the nature of the walk affects the views of children who do wish to walk independently. Although going to town is a step too far to make without an adult for Sarah (discussed above) Alice specifically cites going to town as somewhere she wishes she had permission to go without an adult. However she qualifies this somewhat and explains that while she wants to go to town without an adult she would like to be with someone older than her.

‘With a teenager or something, you know, not a real adult’

Alice, who wants to go to town independently of a grown up

Her suggestion that she would like a bit more independent spatial mobility implies a sort of half way house between moving further afield without an adult but still being with someone older than her who is not quite an adult yet. Jaimie also he says he would like if he was allowed go ‘a bit further’ than he is currently allowed without an adult. He walks to and from school independently but he lives near his school and he does not consider his walk to school particularly long. He would like to be allowed go a bit further so that he could get to the shop nearby. But he is not allowed go due to the traffic and he says his mother is ‘just afraid that I’d get hurt or something’. John also goes to and from school without an adult but he would like more independence and wishes he could walk over to where his friend lives without an adult.
Finally, Sophie, explains that she is allowed go quite a few places without an adult, but she has to be within sight of her mother looking out from their apartment. She would like to be allowed walk to school without an adult as she sees herself as quite mature, or as she says, ‘I am a woman’. She is frustrated by the ‘unequal power relations’ (Punch 2004:94) reflected in the relationship between herself and her parents. In this instance, the wish for more independent spatial mobility is discussed as a desire for an acknowledgment of who she feels she is. Her wish for more independence is indicative of an individual sense of self. The views of these children reveal the role of individual personality in how independent spatial mobility is shaped. They have a considerable amount of freedom and they would feel comfortable with having more, which contrasts quite sharply with their peers who have very little freedom, and do not want any more.

The nature of the walk (Lorimer 2011) shapes the children’s views, revealing a considerable diversity of opinion among them. For some, a trip to unfamiliar territory without an adult is not something they are keen to do, while others specifically want to walk new places, such as to visit a friend, independently. The contrasting views expressed by the children who say they would like more independence and those who do not want any more independence shows the importance of listening to children and recognising the individuality of their needs. It shows the complexity of children’s lives and indicates that in order to meet their needs there is a need to acknowledge the assertion that there is not one childhood, but many childhoods (Prout and James 1997).
7.3 Children’s perspectives on how independence was negotiated

The findings on how the children’s independence was negotiated centre on the walk to school. The majority of children who walk to school independently say they negotiated this independence themselves (63.6%). In other words when asked during interview who suggested they walk without an adult, they replied ‘I did’. The results of the analysis are presented in the chart below.

![How Freedom Was Negotiated](image)

Figure 7.3.1 How freedom was negotiated

For some of the children the freedom to walk to school seems not to have been either actively initiated by the child or the parent, but just evolved over time. There were examples where under unusual circumstances such as a parent being late for pick up time at school or a parent sleeping in late in the morning, the child decided to walk without the parent. Having displayed their competence in this way, they were allowed walk independently thereafter. But the children did not see this as them taking the initiative rather they describe being allowed to
walk independently as something which ‘just happened’. On a couple of occasions the children say independence was jointly instigated by themselves and their parents.

A number describe the decision as one made by their parents and then proposed to the child. There is no suggestion that the children object in any way to being told they are ready to walk to school without an adult and they are content to walk independently. Only two children (Tina and John) said their parents instigated the independent spatial mobility. Gender does not appear to be a significant variable in how the independence is negotiated and slightly more girls (66.6%) than boys (60%) say it was either they who instigated their independence or that it was a joint decision.

The data suggest that more often than not children decide when they are competent enough to walk independently and initiate a process of negotiation for that independence. Sometimes there is no sense of an active negotiation process from the children’s perspective and they feel their independence just evolved. Occasionally the parents themselves initiate the independence, perhaps because they see it as important for their children (Valentine 1997) or it may be a question of expedience (ibid). Some of the negotiations seem from the children’s perspective to be on-going and a number of children who originally initiated their independence say that they are not happy with the extent of independence they have and would like to go certain other places. The on-going nature of the negotiation for independence is identified in the literature (Hart 1979; Moore 1986). In this study walking independently of an adult is also revealed as a process of negotiation from the children’s perspective, which for the most part, they themselves instigate. Their parents express a view that independence is important for the children (discussed in chapter five) and the significance of the negotiation process revealed here lies in how it confirms the discussion in the literature of child adult relations as being interdependent (Punch 2004; Mayall 2009).
Nonetheless the children emerge as somewhat disempowered and whether or not they initiate their independence, it is ultimately the parents’ decision to allow them permission to walk without an adult. But despite what has been described as children’s subordinate position in relation to adults (Mayall 2009), they engage their parents in a discussion and in many cases they are successful. The importance of negotiating and re-negotiating what are described as adult-imposed boundaries is understood by Punch as being a way of ‘taking action to shape one’s own life’ (2004:95) and part of a discourse which understands children as agents shaping their own lives (Prout and James 1997) which informs the theoretical framework underpinning this study. The position of children in the home is revealed here as in fact less disempowered than in wider society. The children can negotiate and are often listened to. Despite having a right to a say in matters which affect them under the convention on the rights of the child and a stated recognition of that right under the National Children’s Strategy (2000) the evidence of this study as discussed in chapter five indicates that children’s views are not taken in to account in important policy and planning decisions which are made in relation to the city in which they live. There is no evidence of communication between the children and the cultural values which inform policy at a macro-level or the development of policy and planning decisions at an exo-level. In the home the children are more likely to be understood as competent (although there is a strong sense of concern for their vulnerability expressed by parents also, see chapter five) and there is a recognition of their agency.

The interviews with the children were analysed without reference to other data collected in order to ensure the voice of the children was represented authentically and the findings of that analysis are presented above. However the interviews with the parents offer a useful insight in to the position of children both in the home and in society. Although the parents describe their wish to allow their children more independent spatial mobility as constrained
by perceived risks in the public domain, they are often willing to acknowledge their children’s competence and to engage in negotiations with them and allow them walk various places without an adult. There is scope for transferring the view of children as competent expressed by some of the parents to the wider sphere of the children’s lives and for understanding the concerns parents have about the public realm which inhibit their wish to allow more independence. The evidence of this study suggests greater communication between the local authority, children and their parents would provide the basis for a more effective engagement with children’s urban spatial needs.

7.4 The meaning and significance of independent spatial mobility for children

Thus far the findings in this chapter suggest that most children play an active role negotiating their independence and most children are happy with the extent of their independence. This section outlines the findings on what independence means to the children and why it is – or is not – important to them. Their preference was discussed during the first interviews after they had mapped their experience of the walk to school, and again during the second interview after they had mapped their experience of a walk made during their free time. But these discussions on their preference were not confined to the walk they had mapped. Instead any regular walks the children made were referred to during this particular discussion. The data were analysed to establish whether the children prefer to be with or without an adult and why they have a particular preference so as to explore their views on the meaning and significance of independent spatial mobility.
Independence is understood in contemporary western society as an indication of ‘personhood’ (Hockey and James 1993) and valued as a way to develop competency (Moore 1986; Hillman et al. 1990) and a sense of belonging in the neighbourhood and wider city space (Ward 1990; Matthews and Limb 1999; Moore and Cosco 2002). As discussed in chapter three, the meaning of independent spatial mobility has been queried as adult oriented and a need to understand the value of independence from children’s perspectives identified (Mikkelesen and Christensen 2009). The findings of this study suggest that the preference the children express does not necessarily correspond with the extent of independence they have, but that children with quite a bit of independence will sometimes prefer to walk with an adult, or may not have a preference one way or the other. There is also evidence that children’s views on their independence are not static but more fluid and that they may change their opinion over time. Why children have a particular preference is understood in this study as an indication of the significance of independence for them as they walk from place to place. They indicate that safety, autonomy and maturity are the considerations which inform the significance of independent spatial mobility for them. The findings on whether or not the children had a preference for being with or without an adult are presented first in section 7.4.1. This is followed by the findings on why they expressed a preference in section 7.4.2.

7.4.1 Whether or not children prefer to be with or without an adult

Not all the children were included in this analysis. Some children go almost everywhere with an adult and the extent of their independence can be a sensitive issue for some them so the question was not raised in some instances, and in other cases the children chose not to answer. Altogether fifteen children are included in this analysis and one of the children is included twice as she says she sometimes prefers to be with an adult and sometimes prefers to be without an adult. Just over half the children (53%) say they prefer to walk without an
adult during the first interview. This corresponds with other evidence in the literature which shows that children prefer to travel without a parent or guardian (Romero 2010) and reflects the discussion in the literature that children of this age group are beginning to have some independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Jones and Cunningham 1999).

Just under a quarter of the children interviewed for this study said they prefer to walk with an adult. These children all have a reasonable amount of independence and can walk various places without an adult if they wish, however they say they prefer to be with a grown up. Amy’s account reflects how some children enjoy the intimate company of friends, but are simultaneously worried about having personal responsibility for their welfare if there is no adult with them. She usually walks with her father to school, although occasionally she walks with friends and no adult. Although she says she enjoys the walk, she also describes it as being ‘serious’ as there is a lot of traffic she needs to be careful about. She says she prefers when her father accompanies her and her friends so he can take charge of helping them manage the traffic. Although sometimes she walks independently of an adult it does not seem to be of enormous importance to her and she is just as happy to be with an adult.

‘I’d say it’s fun and serious. The serious part is that you have to watch the roads, like, and the fun part is I do meet [name of friend] at the gate and the two of us do walk over..... I could just be walking along and a car could hit me but...... it’s safer when I’m with me Da’

Amy who says she prefers to walk with her father to school

Aisling also says she would prefer to walk with an adult. She reports her independence as being quite considerable; she has been walking home from school without an adult since she was eight (at her school children who live nearby are given an option of going home for lunch, with their parent’s written permission, at the age of eight), she is also
allowed to visit her grandfather who lives nearby, to play and to go to the shop without an adult. But she walks with her mother and her little brother to school and she says in this context she prefers to be with an adult.

![Children's preference](image)

Figure 7.4.1 Whether or not children prefer to be with an adult (based on 1st interviews)

### 7.4.2 Why children express a particular preference

As discussed above in section 7.1 the nature of the walk affects children’s views on their independence and while they may have considerable freedom to walk places without an adult, they will identify what they feel the limit of their spatial range should be. Sarah, for example, would prefer to be with an adult if she was walking to town. However she says that if she was walking to school it would make no difference to her if she was with or without an adult. The presence or absence of an adult is of no particular consequence to a number of other children, unlike other research (see for example Romero 2010), and in this study just under a quarter of the children interviewed said they did not have any preference. All these children have a considerable amount of independence; they all walk to school without an adult sometimes and they also have other opportunities to be without an adult, such as walking to the shop or
to visit friends. Rebecca sometimes comes to school without an adult which she says she is ‘happy’ to do, and sometimes she is with her mother. But she does not feel there is not much difference whether she is with or without an adult. Similarly Rachel sometimes comes to school with an adult and sometimes without but has no clear preference; ‘I like walking with me friends and sometimes I like going with a grown up’. Jaimie says that he might be a little safer with an adult, but it is a very short walk to school so he does not really mind one way or the other. Sarah’s response was coded twice. As discussed above, if she were walking to town she says she would prefer to be with an adult. But if it was a walk she makes regularly to school she would have no particular preference; ‘walking to school, it’s just like all the same really’.

Once again it is the context of the walk which is revealed as a significant variable shaping the children’s views. The views expressed by these children contradict an assumption in the literature that being without an adult is preferable for children as they are walking through their urban neighbourhoods (Hillman et al. 1990). In some instances, such as Aisling, children enjoy the opportunity to be with an adult and like to have their company. Their views on independence are revealed as fluid and subject to change depending on the nature of the walk. The next section presents the findings on the temporal implications for children’s perspectives on their independent spatial mobility.

7.4.3 Time as a variable affecting the children's views

This section outlines the findings of the analysis of the second set of interviews which were conducted with the children after they had photographed a walk of their choice during free time. These interviews were examined for preferences children expressed regarding being with or without an adult to confirm the original findings. They were also analysed to establish how moving into a higher class and discussing independence in relation to walks made when
they were independent of constraints imposed by the school system might impact on their views on their independence. The findings suggest that neither the change in class nor the change in the walk affect the children’s views, but that events which occur on a particular walk or a moment in which something occurs to a child as they are discussing independence is more likely to affect their views.

Altogether 11 of the 13 participants in this stage of data collection are included in the analysis. Two children are not included as the issue did not arise during the interview. In one case it was not brought up as the child mentioned during the first interview that he always prefers to be with an adult because he has been bullied. In the second case the child walks everywhere independently and has expressed a strong preference in the first interviews for being without an adult. There was considerable variety in the walks the children chose and how they seemed to define free time, including the walk home from school on Friday afternoon, the walk to visit friends and family, the walk to the shop, out to play and to afterschool activities. The finding on children who would rather walk with an adult is similar to when the children were first interviewed, and just over a quarter (27%) said they would rather walk with an adult. During the second interview however none of the children said they had no particular preference one way or another and the majority said they would prefer not to be with an adult (73%).

The interview with Jaimie captures the nature of the circumstances which affect the children’s views on their independence. He usually walks to school without a grown up but occasionally walks with his mother. In the first interview he says he has no preference for being with or without an adult. In the second interview he has changed his mind and is quite emphatic about not wanting to be with a grown up. The change of mind seems not to relate to the route he takes for the second set of photographs, which is a complex journey through town and involves taking the Luas. Rather his view seems shaped by the circumstances of
the trip in which he found his mother ‘very frustrating’, and seems to have had an argument with her. He says having to walk with an adult ‘wrecks my head’ and he is adamant he would rather walk without a grown up.

A particular interaction, this time the conversation which took place during the second interview, also shaped the view expressed by Finn. While having a conversation about the difficulty the high volume of traffic on the street he lives poses, he commented; ‘I can’t really go anywhere without a parent’. In the initial interview his lack of independence does not pose a problem for him and he describes it as ‘just normal life’ (see section 7.2). But during the second interview as he reflects on the constraints caused by the traffic, he considers the other children he sees outside playing and he changes his mind and says he wishes he too could cross the road and play like the others;

‘I hate looking at children who are let across the road and I keep thinking, awwww, why can’t I do that’.

Finn, whose view is affected by the events of a moment in time

The data were originally analysed to explore the implications of getting older or maturing (Hockey and James 1993) and moving up a year at school, or a change across meso-time (Brofenbrenner and Morris 2006), as temporal variables suggested by the literature. But the findings do not indicate that maturity or the implications of the affects of a period of time had a significant bearing on the children’s views. Where there is a change of opinion expressed it is in response a more immediate moment in time or something that occurs during a specific interaction referred to as ‘micro-time’ (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Tudge et al. 2009). The children respond to the immediate ‘every day events’ of life (Tudge 2008), for example, something that happened on a given walk or something that occurs to them during
the course of a particular conversation. The preference they express is shaped by that particular moment in time.

As independent spatial mobility is valued as an opportunity for children to gain a range of benefits (Hillman et al. 1990; Ward 1990; Matthews and Limb 1999; Matthews et al. 2000; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Alparone and Pacilli 2012), the reasons children do or do not prefer to be with an adult was explored more deeply. This was done in order to examine the significance of independence from their perspective. Their views are expressed under the headings maturity, autonomy and safety, reflecting the themes which were identified during the analysis process.

7.5 Children’s perspectives on the significance of independent spatial mobility

The significance of being independent of an adult as they walk to school or other destinations in their urban neighbourhoods was described by the children as an opportunity to take autonomous control over their mobility and an expression of their sense of self as competent and mature. Independence is also looked on with a certain unease by children who at other times do not wish to take full responsibility for their own safety. The analysis of the interviews revealed that independent spatial mobility holds a significance for children which is underpinned by a tension between the wish to take control of their day to day lives and a concern with the degree of responsibility that control entails.

The significance of independence for children emerges as comparable to the significance expressed by their parents who view this tension as a tightrope they walk between allowing their children take more control and protecting them. However while the parents understand independence as a context for learning, the children see it as a chance to
give expression to their self identity, and swing back and forth between resenting adult rules designed to keep them safe and wanting an adult present to take charge of their safety. In this way, the significance of independence is described below as something relatively fluid rather than a one way trajectory from childhood to adulthood. The wish to have more control over their lives is described under the sections on autonomy and maturity, while the preference for having an adult present who is responsible for their welfare is described under the section on safety.

### 7.5.1 Autonomy

Some of the children describe their preference for walking without an adult as a desire for personal autonomy which they express in a number of different ways including being free of adult constraints, being able to go at their own pace and being able to chat to friends and relax. Autonomy is discussed in the literature as an expression of self (Hockey and James 1993) and a tendency to take increasing control over their daily lives is a feature of middle childhood (Markus and Nurios 1984). In the discussion on why they prefer to walk without an adult the children express an understanding of the significance of independent spatial mobility as a context for personal autonomy. It is viewed as an opportunity to take charge of their lives, to make their own decisions and walk through their urban worlds free of what they regard as the constraining presence of an adult.

The children are quite specific about the affect of an adult presence on their walk as inhibiting and restricting and they dislike certain adult interventions as they are walking. Miryam for example, walks to school with her friends and her siblings and she says she prefers to walk without her mother because she is ‘very bossy’. Kevin and Mathew also dislike the restrictions imposed by an adult when they are present. A grown up on the walk to school for example, will ‘make you do good stuff’ says Kevin. ‘Good stuff’ in this instance
refers to road safety measures, or as Mathew explains, with an adult you have to ‘cross at the light and stay on the pavement’. During the interviews the children all discuss an awareness of road safety which they have learned at school and from their parents and a concern with the danger of high volumes of traffic in the city. There is no suggestion that they do not walk on the pavement or that they take unnecessary risks. The significance of independence for them in fact refers to their desire for the freedom to take responsibility for their own safety free of what Miryam regards as parental ‘nagging’.

They also value independence as they can take control over how the walk is executed and walk at their own pace, chatting as they please to their friends. Tina and Keith both like to have the freedom to make autonomous decisions about the pace they walk at. In Keith’s case he says he on his way to school without an adult ‘I can run’ but that if he is with his mother ‘you have to walk slow...you have to stand beside them’. Tina explains that without her mother she is free to leave home when she wants and walk over to collect her friend for the school trip;

‘I can leave early...and walk over to my friends house, I don’t have to wait for her [child’s mother]’

Tina, feels her mother slows her down

While some children like a freedom to hurry along the way like Keith and Tina, others, such as Dave, prefer to be without an adult so they can stroll at a more leisurely pace and; ‘it is more relaxed’.

The desire for autonomy on their walks is also expressed as a freedom to chat to their pals on the way and a number of children such as Tina who talks about collecting her friend for the walk or Rachel who mentions being able to chat with a group of friends.
‘If there’s a gang of us, I prefer not a grown up. You can just talk about all things’

Rachel, who prefers not to walk with an adult so she can chat with pals

There is evidence in the literature that children prefer not to walk with an adult so they can choose the pace of the walk (Romero 2010) and that children who are not with an adult walk more slowly to school, exploring and chatting on their way (Mackett et al. 2007). The finding here that children also prefer to walk without an adult so they can in fact walk more quickly or run is an indication of the sort of spontaneity independent spatial mobility affords (Moore 1986). The social significance of independent spatial mobility identified in this study is also discussed in the literature and the suggestion that the meaning of independence is equated with being alone (Hillman et al. 1990) has been queried (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). For the children in this study independent spatial mobility is in fact quite sociable and even when they prefer not to be with an adult, they enjoy the company of their friends, either to stroll and chat with, or to hurry along and run with.

The relationship between autonomy and independence is also expressed by the children as a freedom to make decisions themselves. For example, Aisling describes her frustration with having to ask permission to walk to a new place when she is out playing (mentioned previously in section 7.2.2). If she and her friends want to move on from where she has agreed with her mother she will be playing and, she suggests, go visit her grandfather, then she might not be allowed to. She says that ‘if I was just going down on me own’ there would not be any problem but ‘if I had to ask her’ then her mother might say no and she could not go. Independence is valued in the literature as an opportunity to learn decision making skills as suggested by Aisling and in this way the children develop self confidence (Hillman et al. 1990).
7.5.2 Maturity

The children occupy a period of time in their lives which is referred to as middle childhood. This age group spans from age six to twelve, roughly the period of time when children are at primary school. It is described as a time when they are starting to develop their competencies beyond the family (De Fries, Plomin and Fulker 1994)) and when friends, through whom they learn what is and is not considered socially acceptable, become increasingly important to them (Markus and Nurius 1984). The value of independence in this context is identified as offering scope for children to develop a sense of their own collective identity beyond the gaze of adults (Matthews et al. 2000).

Middle childhood is the age group of relevance to the children who participated in this study and are aged between 9 and eleven. Some of the children who prefer to walk without an adult refer to what they regard as their maturity. They suggest they are developing a sense of self which is competent and that they are conscious that among their peers walking with an adult is not befitting of their age group. For Sophie, independent spatial mobility is an indication of what she considers her maturity and she says she prefers to walk without an adult; ‘because I am older’. That maturity and an awareness of peer pressure is also referred to by some of the other children. Mathew says it is ‘embarrassing’ to walk with an adult because if you are with an adult you ‘have to hold their hand’. Dave walks to and from school with an adult each day but he is allowed go out to play and to the shop without an adult after school. He says he has only recently been allowed out independently of an adult, which he considers ‘embarrassing’ for someone of his age. He prefers to be allowed out without an adult after school as he believes he is both competent and mature enough to do so.

The children are starting to feel self conscious being with an adult when they are moving around outside and that this is not entirely acceptable among their peer group. This
view reflects a shift towards an awareness of what is expected of them collectively (Matthews et al. 2000). Walking with a grown up is something they are starting to associate with a younger age group and not necessarily appropriate for themselves. But they are not always ready to take on the responsibility for their safety which walking without an adult entails and the children who still prefer to walk with an adult do so primarily for safety reasons. This finding is discussed in the next section.

7.5.3 Safety

Some of the children say they prefer walking with an adult, among them children who have considerable independence and can walk various places on their own, as discussed in section 7.2. The analysis of the interview data showed that safety is the reason they prefer to be with an adult. Some of the children expressed concerns with the traffic and prefer an adult to take responsibility for getting them safely across the road rather than have that responsibility themselves. Other children centre on worries about ‘stranger danger’ and the fear that they may be taken away by someone if they were not with an adult.

Both the children who walk with and without an adult express concerns with the traffic and ‘stranger danger’. They are made aware of these two issues as risks in public space by their parents and their teachers and can recite the lists of rules and regulations they have been taught to manage these risks such as ‘always look both ways’ and ‘don’t talk to strangers’. However the children who prefer to walk without an adult describe the traffic as a challenge they can cope with and some of them say they take precautions to safeguard themselves from strangers such as keeping an eye out for someone who might take them (Keith). They also view the presence of police vehicles as an indication that there are policemen around keeping an eye out for them and keeping them safe. Although conscious of the risks, they feel capable of managing any threats that may arise.
Other children prefer an adult to take charge of their safety when they are out walking. Alice says she feels ‘safer’ when she is with an adult, while Amy and Rachel explain that the speed and volume of traffic is quite a challenge for them and they prefer an adult to negotiate that risk on their behalf. Amy feels she is quite vulnerable and that:

*I could be walking along and a car could hit me*

Amy, who prefers an adult to negotiate the traffic for her

Rachel does not mind the traffic as much but would rather not always have to have the responsibility of negotiating it alone, especially if there is a lot of traffic about.

*‘If the roads are busy, like, that there’s somebody there with you’*

Rachel, who prefers not to have to manage traffic without an adult

The relationship between independent spatial mobility and the degree of responsibility the children are comfortable with, as expressed by Rachel and Amy, is a key feature which emerged when the data were analysed. It is also identified in the literature as the tension between a desire for autonomy and the wish to explore the unfamiliar and a need to feel secure (Tuan 1977; Kernan 2006).

Fear of ‘stranger danger’ is the other reason children say they would prefer to walk with an adult. This fear does not play as prominent a role in the children’s discussion as it does in their parent’s interviews (see chapter five). The parents were anxious about the possibility of their children being abducted by a stranger and several parents gave a number of examples of potentially dangerous situations when ‘a white van’ had appeared in sites throughout the research location and the occupants had tried to take a child. The parents are also conscious
of the role of the media as a source of unnerving but not necessarily reliable information which inflames their concerns and they struggle to overcome what they feel is a somewhat irrational fear. Some of the children find this particular threat one which they cannot always manage without an adult. Aisling, for example, is comfortable walking many places without an adult, but she is aware of the threat of ‘stranger danger’ so on her walk to school she likes walking with her mother.

‘I’m happy to walk with her... in case anyone tried to rob me or anything’

Aisling, who prefers to be with an adult due to the threat of ‘stranger danger’

Maeve has far less independence than Aisling but she prefers to walk with an adult and again it is because she is worried about the threat of ‘stranger danger’.

‘In case something happened... someone could take you’

Maeve, who is worried about ‘stranger danger’

While some of the children feel vulnerable in the face of the threat of ‘stranger danger’, others just feel they lack the skills to get to their destination without an adult. Ella goes to drama class to every week and photographed as a walk she likes making during her free time. But she says that she likes to walk with one of her parents to drama as she would not be able to find the way on her own. The trip involves taking the tram, known in Dublin as the Luas.

‘I don’t really think I’d like to take the Luas on my own because I might get lost on my own’.

Ella does not like to walk independently as she may not find her way to drama class
Her worry about getting lost is not unique. It has been identified as a fear common among children, who generally prefer to be familiar with where they are walking and to have a strong sense of place rather than venture out into unknown territory (Matthews 2003).

There is a focus in the literature on opportunities to develop skills, competencies and self confidence afforded by independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; Romero 2010) and a proposal that parents in particular should make a greater effort to allow their children walk without them (Malone 2007; Romero 2010). But the evidence of this study suggests that children do not always feel ready to take on the challenges which walking through the urban environment without an adult demands. The evidence of this study shows that decision making around children’s independence needs to be a two way negotiation between parent and child, rather than something which is imposed when children are not ready. While in some cases parents are perhaps overly protective, as suggested by Malone (2007), the evidence of this study suggests that children do not always wish to travel without an adult. A majority of children who participated in this study would prefer to walk without an adult, a finding which is consistent with other research (for example, Romero 2010), but the views of the minority should also be taken into consideration in any discussion of their independent spatial mobility.

Conclusion

A key component of the research aim is to attempt to understand the meaning and significance of independence for children. There is a concern in the literature and popular media that children have suffered a loss of independence. Independent spatial mobility is valued as an opportunity to develop skills and competencies, to foster self esteem and to shape both personal and collective identity among children. But the meaning of and
significance of independence have been questioned as socially constructed and adult oriented (Hockey and James 1993; Mikkelson and Christensen 2009).

In order to acquire a more rounded understanding of children’s spatial mobility Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) submit that the meaning and significance of independence be revisited and explored from the perspective of children. This thesis is an attempt to engage with that suggestion. It is underpinned by a conceptualization of children as competent social actors whose views and opinions merit serious consideration. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings on children’s perspectives on the meaning and significance of independent spatial mobility for them.

An analysis of the qualitative data collected with the child participants shows that most are happy with the extent of independent access they have to public space. The children’s perspective reveals a self image which is both competent and vulnerable. It is an image shared by the parents, but less so by the local authority who conceptualise children as competent and irresponsible and do not address the issue of their vulnerability in public space but consider them instead to be out of place in this context.

The findings in this chapter suggest that most children who participated in the study feel they have enough independence. This finding does not suggest that the loss of independence identified is acceptable, but that this view expressed by the children should be regarded within the limitations of their experience and the fact that they are not aware of a loss of independence. Nonetheless it is a finding which is of value because it indicates that children believe they have a presence in the public domain and it represents an important element of an argument which seeks to counterbalance the concern that children are disappearing from public space. While the evidence in the literature suggests they are less
visible, the children’s perspective identified here acts to reassert an on-going presence which should be acknowledged in policy and planning decisions regarding the public realm.

The evidence in this study indicates that the negotiation of independence is more likely to be initiated by children. The fact that they are given permission is evidence that in the home there is a recognition of children’s competencies and that they are listened to. The parental willingness to engage with the children and reach agreement between the views of the children and their own views confirms evidence in the literature that child adult relations should be understood as a process of interdependence (Zeiher 2001; Punch 2001; Punch 2004; Mayall 2009; Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009).

Most children prefer to walk without an adult, but even children who have considerable independence sometimes prefer to be with a grown up. The meaning of independence is tied up with their individual sense of self as capable and the nature of the walk they are undertaking. The extent to which they are familiar with the route, the events that take place along the route – such as a recent argument with a parent, or the freedom to play with friends – and the complexity of the journey affect their views on independence. They fluctuate between wanting to walk with and without an adult and the transition from dependence to independence is revealed as a fluid process rather than a one way trajectory. The significance of independence is primarily understood by the children as a context within which they can give expression to their individual sense of self free from adult constraints. Their autonomy as they walk their urban routes is valued by the children and they enjoy the opportunity to chat with friends, move at their own pace and make decisions about how to negotiate a particular walk.

The discussion on the significance of independence for them offers an insight into the children’s self-identities. The relationship between individual personal identity, independent
spatial mobility and the more general context of middle childhood is a feature of the analysis of the data. The children’s views on their independent spatial mobility do not reflect the concerns expressed in the literature regarding the development of skills or engagement with their environment (Hillman et al. 1990 and Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) but rather an understanding of self and the wish to give expression to that understanding of themselves. The children’s perspectives on independent spatial mobility reveal a tension between the wish to have control over their lives, a sense of their individual competence and having responsibility for ensuring their personal safety as they walk to their destination.

A considerable variation of views is revealed among the children. As has been discussed in chapter six, hearing children’s voices is a challenge for adults. While a majority of the children may hold a particular view on, for example, the extent of their independence, this thesis contends that the views of the minority must also be listened to. In concluding this chapter, it is proposed that resisting the temptation to engage solely with a majority view and rather to listen to all the voices which comprise individual children’s experience (Greene and Hill 2005) is a further challenge in the endeavour to raise the status of children as proposed by Mayall (2009). While it may present challenges, it reflects an attempt to accord all children their participation rights and recognise them equally as citizens who access the public domain regularly. In the next chapter the findings of this study are discussed in relation to the literature, foregrounding the conclusions to be drawn from this study.
Chapter 8 Children and the Urban Public Realm: a Discussion of the Findings

‘to look closely, and with as little previous expectation as possible, at the most ordinary scenes and events, and attempt to see what they mean’

Jane Jacobs 1961:13

Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings on ‘the most ordinary scenes and events’ (Jacobs 1961: 13) of children’s everyday walks in the city in relation to the theoretical concerns and empirical evidence of other studies. In doing so, the discussion validates the findings of the study and conveys the contribution the study makes to the literature. Drawing on an ecological model, the study set out to unpick the various elements that comprise the complexity of children’s experience of independent spatial mobility in an urban context. This chapter is structured to begin the process of tying the various strands back together, foregrounding the conclusion in the next chapter. It is framed by the key concerns underpinning the research question which drove this study including: the conceptualization of children, their everyday experience, how they utilise public space and construct a sense of place as they walk their regular routes and the significance and meaning of independence for them.

Among the findings identified in the analysis that are discussed here is a discrepancy between the perception of children in the city and how they see themselves. There is also an inconsistency in how the local authority understands their use of public space as limited and how the children describe their regular access to the public realm. The children describe their
daily use of the public realm in much the same way as adults do – to visit friends or go to the shop. Through their everyday walks across the public domain the children construct a sense of place they describe as a rich and varied landscape comprising social, sensory, pragmatic and reflective features. But they reveal a childhood geography which is constrained by the social construction of public space that perceives children’s innate playfulness as inappropriate.

In light of a concern that children have lost a degree of independent spatial mobility (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) the study also explored the implications of the presence of an adult for the children’s experience. The children’s views on the significance of independence contrasts with an adult perspective which underpins much of the literature. They do not understand it as a one directional trajectory from the dependency of childhood to independence, by which adulthood is defined (Hockey and James 1993). They contextualise the meaning of independence in relation to spatio-temporal considerations and as a result the transition between dependence and independence is revealed as more fluid.

What has been learned through the research process is presented under the following headings: conceptualising children in the public realm (8.1), exploring children’s everyday experience (8.2), the children’s multi-faceted urban routes (8.3) and the significance of independence (8.4). The chapter begins by discussing what is learned about children in this study through the findings on how children are conceptualised by the local authority responsible for shaping the routes the children walk, the findings on how parents position their children in the public domain and the findings on what has been learned about how children view themselves in this context. The three perspectives reveal differing views on the place of children in the urban domain which it is proposed needs to be addressed in order to incorporate children’s needs in future policy and planning decisions.
8.1 Conceptualising children in the public realm

The structure of the Children’s Services Unit in Dublin City Council, as evidenced in the findings of this study, indicates that it understands children’s outdoor needs in the city as being centred around play provision. This assumption has a historical basis in the development of play provision in the early part of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as a way to protect children from the dangers of the city, especially traffic, and simultaneously offer programmes which served to teach children skills based on a middle class value system (Kernan 2005). The development of playgrounds reflected a trend in the United States (Gagen 2003) and Europe (Karsten 2002) to ‘rescue’ children from perceived city dangers and mould them into good future citizens. The provision of play facilities was designed to protect the children from the city and to protect the city from the perceived threat of unruly children wandering the streets unsupervised. An on-going focus on children’s play in the city is seen in the publication of The Dublin City Play Plan (2012). This document has value in so far as play is a fundamental aspect of children’s outdoor experience (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Rogers 2009). But the focus on creating play spaces is criticized in the literature as serving to corral children into ‘ghettoes’ (Wood 1977). It is considered an ill conceived approach to providing children with the freedom to play because the construction of separate areas for children results in ‘a geography of exclusion’ (Aitken 2001) and in effect obstructs their participation in city life (Jacobs 1961; Wood 1977; Ward 1990; Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003).

The views expressed by local authority officials interviewed for this thesis suggest that the understanding of children as both vulnerable and a threat to public space which led to the development of play areas for children at the start of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, persists. A lack of understanding of children as public space users is manifest in the Dublin City Public Realm Strategy (2012) where children are identified as users with access difficulties, along with ‘the elderly’. So on the one hand there is an ongoing effort to protect children from the street by
providing them with separate play areas (Dublin City Play Plan 2012). On the other hand a reluctance to provide or maintain play provision was revealed through the interviews with the local authority planners and children are viewed as a threat to this sort of provision. These views are reflected in a theoretical discussion of the conceptualization of childhood in the literature whereby children are imaged as either innocent and vulnerable or suspicious and threatening (Jenks 2002; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Valentine 2004). There is also evidence in this study that the conceptualization of children is further complicated by subtle associations between the perception of the urban environment as tough (Kearns and Ruimy 2010) and the behaviour of the children. The children are described as ‘streetwise’ and ‘sussed’ and as such capable of negotiating city challenges such as the traffic. A tendency to construct associations between children and place is identified in the literature (Jones 2000).

But there is evidence that attitudes are slowly changing. The findings of this study indicate that the local authority is aware of how a focus on traffic management and developing public spaces which do not reflect children’s needs inhibits their freedom to move through their urban neighbourhoods. As yet it seems that this shift in attitude is dependent on individuals rather than reflecting a wider cultural shift within the local authority. For example, a key function of the Children’s Services Unit is to ensure that an awareness of the needs of children permeates all sections of the local authority, including planning divisions and traffic management sections. By its own admission, the success of the unit remains as yet somewhat random in so far as for some officials it’s not on their radar’ while other people make a concerted effort to understand and meet the needs of children. The reliance on individuals to take the initiative is criticized in this study by an urban design expert as a failure on the part of the council to affect a wider cultural change which understands the city as a liveable space for children. Among the officials interviewed there is an agreement that there has been shift in understanding of children and their needs in the city. But that change is
slow, at least in part due to what is described as ‘a lack of imagination’ on how to move forward.

However an effort is being made to acknowledge children’s participation rights and their citizenship at Dublin City Council through the development of the children’s council Cómhairle na nÓg. The council is aware that this model as a way of engaging with children remains imperfect and is endeavouring to improve children’s participation. Moving beyond the council there are other signs of change. The 2010 Planning and Development (Amendment) Act makes a mention of children for the first time in a planning context. Arising out of that, a pilot project is under development by the Irish Planning Institute which is aimed at teaching children about the Irish planning system. At a national statutory level, the Draft Manual for Local Area Plans (2012) refers to the need to consult with children and includes a case study of a consultation process undertaken with children for a local area plan in County Limerick.

But how these initiatives are developed is important as there is considerable discussion in the literature on the efficacy of methods of engagement with children and problems which can arise (Barraldi 2003; Percy-Smith 2010). Equally, more clarity on what children’s needs are should be established as references to a ‘child-friendly’ city in policy documents (for example the Dublin City Play Plan 2012) are ill defined and the meaning of child-friendly remains vague. These initiatives require more consideration if local authorities and other agencies with an interest in children’s urban needs are not to fall in to the trap of making mistakes based on poorly conceived models of participation (Hart 1992; Hart 1997; Barraldi 2003; Percy-Smith 2010; Kullman 2012 ).
8.1.1 How parents conceptualise their children in public space

The findings show that the local authority and the children’s parents have contrasting views on children’s needs in the urban domain. Despite the local authority’s focus on play provision, the parents are all agreed that there is a general lack of good quality play facilities. They feel that what exists is poorly maintained and that accessing the play areas can be difficult due to the traffic on the roads leading to them. The parents cite their concern with what they consider poor play provision as an indication that their city neighbourhoods do not meet their children’s needs. This view is echoed in other studies on parents’ perspectives of their neighbourhood (McNeish and Roberts 1995).

The parents also have a different view of their children’s competencies to the city council. They do not see their children as in any way streetwise, as the local authority suggests, and if anything express concerns about them with regard to a perceived lack of safety in the city. Their worries centre on traffic and ‘stranger danger’, although worries about drug users, alcoholics and other unsavoury characters are also expressed. They share these concerns with parents who participated in other studies (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 1997). The parents are at the same time concerned to allow their children to develop a sense of their own independence. They regard moving around outside in the public domain without an adult as an opportunity for their children to learn to develop a sense of responsibility and to look after themselves. These skills are valued by authors who theorise the value of independent spatial mobility as an opportunity to develop skills and spatial knowledge (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). But the parents feel they are hindered by the perceived threats of the city. In effect, although few of the parents said they would like to move, they view the city space as a location which has let their children down.
There is no evidence in the interviews with the city officials that the local authority is aware that urban residents consider walking through public space independently as an important opportunity for children. There would appear to be a lack of communication between the two groups, which, if it were rectified, would enlighten the officials with responsibility for planning and for children as to how the public domain might be better adapted to facilitate children.

8.1.2 How children position themselves in public space

A distinction has been drawn in this study between how children who walk with and without an adult view their safety in public space. Both the children who walk with an adult and those who walk without an adult indicate that at times they recognise threats in the urban public realm. However, while the children walking with an adult suggest that they prefer not to have the responsibility of contending with those threats themselves, the children who are not with an adult see themselves as being able to competently negotiate these challenges. Children who are with an adult express concern with signs of danger they notice on their routes such broken bottles and empty beer cans and associate these indications with a threat they feel vulnerable to. For both groups, volumes and the speed of traffic are also considered dangers along the way. But the children who are not with an adult express a sense of their own capability to cope with these perceived threats. In other words, they recognise a danger to which they may be vulnerable, but they do not correlate vulnerability with incompetence.

Their views challenge the theoretical discussion in the literature which presents two contrasting conceptualizations of childhood as, on the one hand a period of vulnerability and incompetence when children are learning the skills which will ensure they become capable adults, and on the other hand as competent social actors. The former construct is aligned with
the developmental psychological model (Hogan 2005) while the latter derives from an ‘emergent paradigm’ which draws on a sociological perspective (James and Prout 1997).

It has also been argued that there is merit in refraining from seeing these two contrasting conceptualizations of childhood as mutually exclusive (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008). This argument appears to reflect the children’s self-image. They acknowledge threats in the public domain which engages with a sense of their vulnerability described in the developmental psychological model, but they do not associate vulnerability with incompetence – thereby challenging the link between these two ideas in that model. The children express a sense of their competency which is fluid and dependent on the situation, a view which has been noted in other studies with children (Valentine 1997).

While the children express a sense of themselves as vulnerable but competent, they also see themselves as active agents in their own lives. They are conscious of the rules and regulations they have been issued with by their parents on how to behave safely in public and can duly recite codes of conduct in relation to strangers and crossing the road, as evidenced in other research (Valentine 1997). But they do not see themselves as passively accepting adult control. In fact they regard themselves as active agents who negotiate their independence with their parents. Most of the children who walk either to or from school without an adult, or to other places such as the shop indicate that they instigated that independence in discussion with their parents. Although parents are regarded as holding the power in relation to independence and gradually allowing their children increasing permissions to move around without an adult (Hillman et al. 1990; Kytta 1997; O’Brien et al. 2000; Valentine 2004), from the children’s perspective, they themselves play an active role in negotiating those permissions. The children’s self image as simultaneously vulnerable and competent and as social actors confirms the importance of refraining from relying on rigid categorizations of childhood, as posited by Woodhead and Faulkner (2008).
There is a disparity in how the local authority officials image children and how the children see themselves. While the local authority describes the children as streetwise, the children describe the city environment as challenging and indicate that they are cautious with traffic and other difficulties that arise. The suggestion that children are imaged by some city council employees as a threat to public space also contrasts quite starkly with the children’s own expression of moral agency. They are quite clear that they do not consider damaging public property acceptable. They express their dismay at vandalism such as burning playgrounds and describe the rubbish, dirt and neglected building as a blight on their walk through public space which they consider extremely irresponsible. They indicate an empathy for older people living in their community and an awareness of the value of the various natural elements they see such as trees and flowers as they walk. They also express both an awareness of and an interest in animals they see each day. The expression of moral agency among the children is confirmed in the literature (Mayall 2009).

While some of the problems visible in the public domain may be a result of the behaviour of children, it is clearly imperative not to conflate all children living in the city with the problems perpetrated by a few. This study suggests that associating children with prevalent negative imaging of the city (Kearns and Ruimy 2010) is an inaccurate reflection of their moral agency, a finding confirmed by other empirical evidence (Rogers 2009) and the suggestion that there is a need to adopt a more positive attitude to children in the city (Ward 1990).

The children’s assumption of their own competency and agency was confirmed through their role as collaborators in the research process. In the next section there is a discussion of what is learned through this study about conducting collaborative research with children and the value of examining their perspectives on their everyday experience.
8.2 Exploring children’s everyday experience through collaborative research

This section discusses the findings which emerged from adopting a reflexive approach to conducting research with children and what was learned about involving children in a collaborative research design. Children are positioned in this study as social actors who are capable of engaging in participative research processes and sharing their expertise on their lives. As such this study is aligned with the trend towards understanding children as collaborators in the research process (Porter et al. 2012; Alderson and Morrow 2011; Christensen and O’Brien 2003; Woodhead and Faulkner 2008; Greene and Hill 2005). Conducting research with children is discussed in the literature as having mixed success (Percy-Smith 2010) and the particular insights gained through the collaborative process of data collection in this study are shared here by way of contributing to future research with children. The detail of that process is described in chapter four, but the following is a brief synopsis which includes insights that emerged during the research process.

8.2.1 Communicating with children and the implications of power dynamics

The data collected in collaboration with the child participants were gathered during three separate stages. The first stage involved collecting quantitative data using a questionnaire on children’s access to public space. In accordance with ethical requirements the children were initially asked to give informed consent to participate. To ensure they were aware of what the study was about and what would be asked of them should they choose to participate, an initial meeting was held with them in the classroom. It was a very informal meeting during which I introduced myself, explained the project and answered questions. But the take up in the first school was quite poor, partly due to how I explained the project to the children.
It was clear very quickly that the language I was using was not appropriate and my explanation was not engaging. Many of the children assumed they were being asked to take part in a difficult exercise which they did not feel they were capable of. It was evident that how an initiative is explained to children is extremely important and that an effort needs to be made to communicate with them on their terms, while ensuring the children are adequately informed. The complexity of communicating effectively with children is described in the literature where an understanding of their ‘cultures of communication’ is identified as essential to successful engagement of children in research processes (Christensen 2004).

The children who consented to participate were asked to fill out a questionnaire which focussed on their views on their independent access to public space. The questionnaire was designed with the needs of the participants in mind (Scott 2008). Drawing on the experience of piloting the research design, it was designed to be attractive for children, short and to the point, and with very precise questions which appeals to this age group as they are keen to give a very precise and correct response. By remaining in the classroom with the children as they filled out their questionnaires it was clear that the participants were enthusiastic about sharing their views and keen to be as accurate as possible. The competence and enthusiasm apparent through the participants involvement is frequently found in research conducted with children (Hart 1997; Chawla 2002; Driskell 2002; Mayall 2009; Rogers 2009). It is an indication of the merit of engaging children as collaborators in research on their lives.

The second stage focussed on collecting qualitative data on the children’s experience of their walks to school and the third stage focussed on their experience of walks made during their free time. At this point they used photography to map their experience and participated in photo-elicited interviews. During the initial meeting to discuss the purpose of photographing their walk, the children were asked to sketch a map of the route they came along to school. Many of the children found this exercise too difficult and they did not feel
they could adequately depict the route so this method was dropped from the process. This decision was based on a sense of respect for the participants which underpins the study. It is a decision which recognises the children’s agency and affords them a more active engagement in the process (Kullman 2012; Christensen 2004). A willingness to adapt the process to suit the participants facilitated a more genuine representation of the voice of the participants as they were not inhibited by a method they found inappropriate. It was also a decision which helped address the unequal power balance between researcher and participants (Christensen 2004). By listening to the children in this way and acting on their wishes, the power balance between the researcher and the participants shifted, at this point, towards one of greater equity.

But that power balance changed at other times and there were a number of incidents where children were disempowered through the various adult/child relations. One example is the child who consistently failed to bring back his camera having been pressurised by the school vice-principal to take another camera to photograph his route, as discussed in chapter four. This child had in fact decided he did not wish to continue to participate but could not find a way to withdraw. Children do not always feel they can assert themselves against the perceived authority of adults (Devine 2000) and there is a challenge for researchers working with children to find a way for them to pull out of something they have agreed to do when they change their mind. The instances noted throughout this study where children were disempowered confirm a need for ‘constant vigilance’ (Porter et al. 2012: 134) regarding adult-child relations.

Certain settings are particularly disempowering, especially the school setting which is structured around a hierarchical system placing adults at the top and children at the bottom (Devine 2000). The school setting of this study affected how the children responded to questions. They were always keen to be honest and to share considerable detail about their
lives, but they also appeared to want to give the right answer and were anxious not to come across as being disobedient. They were at times nervous about answering questions during the interview and sometimes chose not to answer or to change the subject.

A case in point is the child who referred to ‘messing’ on the way to school but did not want to elaborate in any way on this experience. Messing in school and on the way to school is frowned on and he seemed to feel he was leading himself in to trouble. Their wish to give the correct response appears to reflect the test based system of school and the desire to be well behaved is indicative of the sort of rules of conduct they are familiar with (Devine 2000; Weller and Barker 2003; Percy-Smith 2010; Spyrou 2011). The school setting also proved to be an asset. The children were by and large very relaxed in a setting they knew well and content to talk quite openly about their lives. They enjoyed the chance to get out of class and take part in something quite novel.

The use of the camera was empowering for them and they were all extremely adept at producing visual narratives of their experience. But it should be noted that the use of the camera as a data collection tool yields very particular results. For example, the fact that the children were busy documenting their routes through the lens of the camera inhibited the sort of spontaneous engagement children have with environments they walk through. As a result there is a lack of any sense of exploration of the route or play along the way which other researchers have observed (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Mackett et al. 2007).

Nonetheless, there is an immediacy in the data the children collect which is absent in other methods that involve children discussing or drawing maps of their experience subsequent to the walk. This immediacy facilitated the children in capturing the embodied experience of their walks and in conveying details which are not always easy to articulate (Cele 2006; Lee and Ingold 2006). It was apparent during this study that careful consideration
of methods (Veale 2005) and being flexible with how the children are engaging at any given moment in time helps produce a rich data set, and one which is more likely to capture the participants views authentically (Kullman 2012).

8.2.2 Acknowledging the individuality of children’s experiences

The decision to focus on children’s experience showed that each participant had a highly individualistic insight into their everyday lives. There is considerable diversity in the views the children expressed and the nature of their experience of their mobility routes. An interesting case in point is the comparison between two boys both aged 9 both walking with a parent from the same street along the same route to the same school. These two boys are in the same class. Despite the similarities, what they see and how they experience it is quite different. For one of the children the laneway leading to Smithfield (the public square the boys pass through on their way) is a lovely place where you can enjoy the heat of the sunshine. For the other boy, the same laneway is the site of a double suicide which was covered in blood. For one, the square itself is the place of a shop where the people are very friendly, and the tower where Santa Claus hands out gifts. For the other, it is where the Horse Fair occurs, resulting in such a disgusting state it makes him want to ‘puke’.

There is a similar diversity of experience documented by two cousins who live next door to one another. Again they have much in common; both are boys, the same age, they walk the same route to school and both walk without an adult (although separately of one another). One child photographs two churches he passes every day which he describes as special places. The other photographs a pub he considers special because adults get to have a nice night out there and the bookies which is where he says adults put bets on horses. The focus of their attentions along the same route differs considerably and lends itself to quite a different experience of the urban space, which reflects their unique viewpoints (Greene
The notion of a unitary ‘childhood’ which has been a cornerstone of research on children (Greene 2005) is challenged in the literature in theoretical discussions (Prout and James 1997) and through empirical evidence (Christensen and James 2008).

The diversity of childhoods revealed in this study is confirmed in the literature and it is apparent that taking into account their individuality facilitates a richer understanding of the complexity of children’s lives (Greene 2005). By examining children’s experience the realities they construct are revealed. The focus of this study is children’s everyday experience and it is evident that the decision to focus on children’s experience through this exploration of their everyday lives has revealed a valuable insight into what it is to be a child (Danaher and Briod 2005) in all its diversity.

Developing an understanding of children’s lives challenges adult assumptions about the world we share. There are a number of examples in this study of how children see the world around them differently to adults (Ward 1990). Palisade fencing, barbed wire and high walls, for example, are read by adults as alienating and constraining. But in the findings of this research suggest children often see beyond those features to the potential for play in the wastelands, to the pony behind the fence or the tree that appears above the wall. The evidence of this study shows that they see and take pleasure in many instances of nature in the urban environment which go unnoticed by adults. They also feel threatened by examples of rubbish, such as empty beer cans, which to an adult are more a question of unsightliness than danger.

The diversity of individual experience and the challenge this presents to an adult view demand a very careful form of listening on the part of the researcher. In order to present an authentic account of children’s voices, the considerable variety of their experiences and views are acknowledged in this study. In an effort to hear those voices without making
assumptions about the children and their lives, a reflexive approach was adopted throughout the research process (Luttrell 2010). Listening to children and hearing children’s voices has been shown in this research endeavour to be complex and challenging, a finding confirmed by the literature (Roberts 2005). But by acknowledging that challenge and listening carefully to what they say about their experiences of their urban routes, children’s perspectives on an adult oriented space become clear. That perspective raises questions about the way the public space is designed, which is discussed in the next section.

**8.3 The children’s multi-faceted urban routes**

The findings of this study challenge the view in the literature that children are disappearing from public space (Karsten 2002; Valentine 2004). Through their responses to the questionnaire on their access to public space the children indicated that they regularly walk through the public domain to visit friends, to go to the shop, to walk to school and to play. The questionnaire did not cover distance and how far the children go without an adult so the findings do not contradict evidence in the literature that children’s territorial ranges have shrunk (Karsten and Van Vliet 2006), nor that children are perhaps less visible in so far as the evidence of other studies suggests that they are more likely to be driven places than in the past (Hillman et al. 1990; Pooley et al. 2005). However the evidence of this study indicates that, from the children’s perspective, they are still present.

The children indicate that they have varying degrees of independence but that overall they are happy with the extent of independence they have. They also indicate that irrespective of whether or not they walk with an adult they have a wealth of knowledge about their urban environments. There is a worry that the loss of independence children have suffered (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al.) has affected their spatial knowledge (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). But the evidence of this study shows that both children who walk with and without an adult
have considerable knowledge of their routes and are experts on their local environments (Matthews and Limb 1999). However by drawing a comparison between the experience of children who are with and without an adult, this study shows that the way they engage with the environment they move through differs. As such, the knowledge the two cohorts convey does not suggest the presence of an adult inhibits spatial awareness, but rather how they express their knowledge differs. This finding is discussed in more detail in section 8.3.2. In the following section the findings on children’s perceptions of the public space they walk through are discussed.

8.3.1 How children see their city

As evidenced in the findings of this study, the children see considerable variety as they walk through public space along their regular urban routes. The visual narratives of their walks made by children who participated in this research reveal a view of the city as simultaneously beautiful and ugly, where they take aesthetic pleasure in the architectural diversity but are appalled at the filth and neglect all around them. At times their perspective is similar to an adult perspective but often they reveal details which go unnoticed by adults (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003), and see past features that are considered unattractive to ‘hidden’ instances of nature or beauty.

The north-west inner city was chosen as the location for this research partly as it comprises a diverse built environment, reflecting the old and the modern. The children walk across centuries old cobblestones and contemporary stone brickwork, past occasional 17th century ‘Dutch Billies’ and 21st century apartment blocks. They are aware of the architectural heritage they walk through and capture images of the 19th century fruit markets which they find beautiful and more modern buildings which they think ‘looks nice’. For the most part, the children construct a more positive sense of place than that expressed by their parents.
Their largely positive perspective is confirmed in the literature (Lynch 1977; Chawla 2002; Chawla and Malone 2003). But they do express their dismay with the neglect of buildings both, old and new, and their concern with often squalid state of the public domain in Dublin City.

The children also see quite a lot of nature along their routes. Trees, flowers, grassy passages and small parks (both referred to at times as ‘fields’) populate their visual narratives, as do a range of animals from a snail on the edge of the footpath to horses behind corrugated iron gates and palisade fences. Their depiction of the natural elements of their urban environment contradicts the normative view of the city as a concrete jungle where flora such as buddleia plants and Japanese knot weed are reviled as invasive weeds indicative of environmental neglect (Ní Lamhna 2008) and removed.

A good childhood is associated with time spent outdoors in nature (Taylor et al. 1998; Pyle 2002; Kong 2003; Kernan 2006), which is considered a rich source of both play and educational opportunities (Louv 2005; Trimble and Nabhan 1994). Growing up in urban areas where adults do not always recognise the elements of nature the children see, there is a concern that children have little relationship with and understanding of the natural world (Louv 2005). Yet the variety of natural elements depicted by the children is confirmed by accounts of the bio-diversity in Dublin city where; ‘who can ever know or record the presence of every single species?’ (Ní Lamhna 2008:09). The children in this study notice and benefit from even the slightest degree of nature along their routes, a finding which is discussed in the literature by authors who suggest that, ‘if what is at hand is a scrap of the wild, at least some children will become naturalists’ (Pyle 2002:311).

This finding is of value to future city development plans and this thesis proposes that how the children see nature in the city might be capitalised on to enhance their contact with
it. There are some examples where residents have begun to find ways to ‘green’ the public realm which are supported by Dublin City Council, such as community gardens and collaborating with artists to cultivate pocket parks, all of which enhance bio-diversity in the city. But many of the spaces which provide opportunities to enjoy nature are out of bounds for children. There are several small inner city parks near their homes which are locked most of the time, and the larger open parks are perceived as too dangerous for them to explore (Chawla and Malone 2003). The exclusion of children from these places reflects a view of them as a threat to public space (Holloway and Valentine 2000; Jenks 2002; Valentine 2004). However it is perhaps inevitable that if a park is used it will suffer some wear and tear as children perhaps climb trees, make swings and do all the things both academics (Taylor et al. 1998; Pyle 2002; Kong 2003) and their parents lament they do not appear to do any more. Rather than keep the few areas where children can enjoy nature more fully under lock and key it might be more productive to factor in a maintenance cost and allow them in to use these precious green spaces.

The children also see a more unpleasant side to their urban routes and they capture images of abandoned buildings, rubbish and dirt on the streets which is confirmed in the literature (O’Brien 2003) and it has been suggested reflects their size and the fact that they are nearer to the ground (Ward 1990). They are very vociferous in their condemnation of these unsightly features of their daily routes but they maintain a personal distance from the rubbish. Contrary to evidence in the literature, they tend not to associate these signs of deprivation with a stigma which might attach to them or understand it as a reflection of how they are regarded themselves in society (Lynch 1977; Ward 1990; Jones 2000). But they do see it as a failure on the part of those with authority to remedy the situation. The children refer to an anonymous ‘them’ or ‘they’ in their discussions of the poor condition they see in parts of the public realm, for example, talking about broken cobblestones which need to be
repaired ‘but they don’t cos they’re lazy’. This perspective is confirmed in the literature where these examples of what are considered ‘environmental disadvantage’ (Kearns and Ruimy 2010:36) are understood as a neglectful attitude on the part of the local authority. This failure to engage with children’s needs by the local authority confirms the view that children’s position in society is relatively disempowered (Karsten 2002; Mayall 2009).

In summary, the children see the city in ways which are similar to adults; they appreciate the beauty and are repulsed by the unsightliness. But their vision is often centred on the more immediate elements of the environment and they are more focussed on the details that comprise their sense of place (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). As a result they often see and appreciate features which are hidden from an adult gaze that tends to look out towards the wider context of the city (Rasmusssen and Smidt 2003), and they enjoy, for example, aspects of nature that an adult might miss. The findings of this study concur with the literature in suggesting that a keener awareness of how children see the public domain among policy makers would enhance the space for all users, adults and children alike (Rogers 2009).

**8.3.2 Performing and constructing place as they walk through public space**

Contrary to evidence in the literature (Opie and Opie 1969; Moore 1986; Macket et al. 2007; Rogers 2009) the children in this study do not map their everyday walks through public space as a playful experience. Their knowledge of the urban environment (as discussed above) indicates considerable familiarity with their routes, which in turn suggests they feel a sense of place and belonging as they walk (Tuan 1977; Cosco and Moore 2002; Creswell 2004; Olwig 2008). However their behaviour indicates that they understand the public domain as adult oriented territory which they may traverse, but where the expression of childhood in the form of playing is considered inappropriate. They rarely document places along their routes where
they play as they walk, utilising the street, kerbs, walls, and other elements of the urban fabric for fun (Moore 1986; Rogers 2009). Instead they photograph particular places they go in order to play such as parks or playgrounds which they suggest they understand as the appropriate place for play. Even children who photograph a walk to the playground during free time do not photograph playing along the way.

This is partly explained by the fact that this sort of play tends to be quite spontaneous (Moore 1986) and the children in this study were busy taking photographs which could inhibit that sort of spontaneity. But they do not photograph friends or siblings playing along the way and only one child photographs a place that she would normally play as she walks to school (the lampposts for swinging out of). In the interviews with the children they generally said they did not play on their walks to school and other places. They did indicate that they enjoyed being with their pals so they could ‘mess’. But did not want to elaborate on what this might entail. In fact while ‘messing’ in Ireland is associated with giddiness and being playful, it is a sort of behaviour children are warned against in certain contexts. ‘Messing’ is frowned on in school – the site of almost all the interviews – and being told to refrain from ‘messing’ on the way to and from places would be a common instruction to children.

The children convey an awareness that the public domain they traverse every day is subject to adult ideas about appropriate behaviour and how that space should be utilised. They appear to be aware that how public space is performed should conform to the adult orientation of the space and that while they have constructed a sense of place through their everyday routes, they will be considered ‘out of place’ (Creswell 2004) if they behave in a childlike fashion by playing (Opie and Opie 1969). Their sense that children’s behaviour is understood in certain contexts as inappropriate is confirmed in the literature through a conceptualization of children in public space as ‘devils’, and as such, menacing (Ward 1990; Holloway and Valentine 2000; Jenks 2002; Valentine 2004). There is evidence in the
literature that children feel inhibited by adults they encounter in the public realm, who frighten them by telling them to move along or by giving out to them (Milne 2009; Chawla and Malone 2003). It would appear that the children are conscious of public space as adult owned territory (Aitken 2001; Karsten 2005) and that while they can cross through on their way, contesting that space (Aitken 2001) by behaving in a way that is considered inappropriate (Creswell 2004) is not tolerated.

Their visual narratives depict a number of areas the children go to play, which they are comfortable revealing. So while the public realm may not be a place they feel they can be playful, they are aware that play is acceptable in what are considered child designated areas (Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003). The most explicit evidence of play is captured by children who are moving through their local neighbourhood away from an inhibiting adult ‘gaze’ (Matthews and Limb 1999). In these images the children show the hidden and out of bounds areas they play and capture themselves and their game by taking the camera in to the imaginative world of their play. It would seem that where the children can access places free of adult regulation they feel free to play quite creatively (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Rogers 2009). The evidence of this study indicates that the enactment of childhood as the children walk through adult understood public space is highly constrained. Within that spatially bounded context, how children construct a sense of place is discussed in the next section.

8.3.3 Children’s experience of their everyday routes

In the everyday practice (de Certeau 1984) of their walks through the city, the children construct a sense of place which comprises a landscape of tightly interwoven social, sensory, pragmatic and imaginative dimensions. Through their visual narratives they capture places and people they encounter along the way which they invest with meanings that describe the elements of their experiential landscape. Research on children’s relationship with their
neighbourhood indicates that they experience their neighbourhoods through intertwined physical and social elements (Matthews 1992; Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). The physical dimension of their experience is discussed in section 8.3.1 above as how the children see their urban environment. Their construction of place as they move daily across public space is discussed in this section with reference to the less concrete factors which shape the experience. The children’s experience is described in terms of the sensory, social, pragmatic and reflective dimensions of the landscape they shape through the public realm.

The sensory dimension

As they walk to and from school, or to places they go in their free time such as the shops or to a drama class, the children photograph places they associate with smells, sounds and touch. The relationship between the walker and their environment is described as an embodied experience (Kenworthy-Teather 1999; Cele 2006; Lee and Ingold 2006; Wylie 2007) comprising barely perceptible sensory encounters (Tuan 1977; Rasmussen and Smidt 2003; Cele 2006). For children the sensory experience is more intense (Tuan 1977) and the children in this study expressed both strong aversion and attraction to what they hear and smell. Children who walk to school through the old markets area of the city photograph places where they encounter the beautiful smell of oranges and also places they remember as having smelled badly of fish (before the fish market was knocked down). The children describe the jarring sound of the articulated lorries that drive by their homes in the city and the loud bell of the Luas on their way to school, as well as photographing a place where they feel the warmth of the sunshine. These sensory encounters which permeate their routes are confirmed in the literature as a powerful aspect of walking as place-making (Lee and Ingold 2006).
The social dimension

The children value their walks as social experiences, photographing parents, friends and siblings who accompany them to school and the various people they encounter along the way. The company of friends is especially important to them as they enjoy chatting as they walk. This finding concurs with the suggestion in the literature that the meaning of independence in relation to children’s spatial mobility needs to be reconsidered. There is an assumption in the literature, stemming from the work of Hilman et al. (1990), that independence should be equated with being alone. However this understanding of independence is challenged by Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) who say that walking is a very sociable experience for children and that they prefer not to walk alone. The sociable nature of walking is identified in theoretical discussions in the literature (Lee and Ingold 2006; Ingold and Vergunst 2008) and evidenced in studies on children’s spatial mobility (Romero 2010). The sociability of their daily walks is also apparent in this study and while some of the children prefer to walk independently of an adult, they all prefer to have company, whether it is of friends or siblings.

Encounters with people they have come to know along the routes they walk enhance the social experience for the children. They photograph the Lollipop lady and the cafe owner who greet them each day. They also photograph the shops they go to for treats and to get the messages, where they know the shop assistants and where they enjoy engaging in the social transaction. These social interactions with people along their daily routes serve to construct a sense of place and belonging for the children and add considerable pleasure to the experience. They also serve to foster social capital in the city world they inhabit. There is evidence in the literature of a loss of social capital among children (Karsten 2011). They are less likely to wander around their neighbourhoods than in the past and as a result know fewer children living nearby (ibid). There is also evidence that the more walkable a neighbourhood is, the
more social capital the neighbourhood has because people out walking meet, greet and get to know one another (Leyden 2003). The findings of this study reflect the evidence of the literature which indicates that children who walk around their neighbourhoods interact with a diverse range of people, helping to build social networks along their daily urban routes (Weller and Breughel 2009).

**The pragmatic dimension**

The children also describe a pragmatic experience of their routes. They photograph places where they need to make decisions about how and when to cross the road, as well as places they have to take care because the path surface is dangerous. The pragmatic experience is more pronounced among children who are not with an adult as they are more concerned with navigating themselves to their destination. The pragmatic nature of walking as a form of mobility is acknowledged in the literature (Tuan 1977; Lee and Ingold 2006) and the value of walking independently has been described as affording an opportunity for children to develop decision making and risk taking skills (Hillman et al. 1990; Tonucci 2005). The children also express quite practical concerns for their safety, particularly with reference to the speed and volumes of traffic on the road. They photograph places where they have to be cautious how they proceed. Their concerns are reflected in literature on adult worries for their children’s safety (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 1997) as well as being in accord with views expressed by children who have participated in other research (Lynch 1977; Valentine 1997 Matthews 2003).

**Imaginative/reflective dimension**

Other concerns the children express for their safety are highly imaginative and their visual narratives capture quite an imaginative and reflective experience of their urban routes. They photograph places that seem ‘haunted’ or which freak them out and they photograph
places they associate with dangerous people. They also photograph places they project imaginative ideas on to, such as the tower where the lift remains stuck and full of people. There is evidence in the literature that children will associate places with quite imaginative meanings, drawing on what they know through stories and other media and interpret those places accordingly (Holloway and Valentine 2000b). Sometimes the children photograph places which are cause for less imaginative reflection such as a holy statue they associate with the commemoration of people who have died or a statue of Erin at the playground they associate with ‘the old days’. The children value these symbols of history that shape their community and enjoy taking time to discuss what they mean to them. A relationship between the act of walking and reflection is discussed in the literature (Ingold and Vergunst 2008), particularly as it provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between the self and place (Creswell and Merrriman 2011). In the case of this study, the place knowledge the children convey through their reflections suggests a strong sense of belonging.

The relationship between walking and reflection is identified as dependent on the sort of demands on the walkers’ attention (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). This is reflected in the findings of this study where the children who are not walking with an adult are less inclined to capture places they associate with imaginative musings as they are more focussed on navigating their way from a to b. Although the children value their independence as allowing them express their autonomy, the findings of this study indicate that freedom of movement afforded by independence is to an extent off-set by a loss of freedom of reflection.

In summary, the children’s visual narratives provide an insight into the childhood geography of public space and how they construct a sense of place as they walk their everyday routes through the public realm. They describe a lively and diverse world which they feel very much a part of. In the next section the significance of independence is discussed as a feature of their urban spatial mobility.
8.4 The significance of independence

This section draws together adult and children’s views on independent spatial mobility in order to contribute an insight into children’s perspectives to the discussion in the literature. It begins by discussing the views of the parents who participated in this study as a reflection of wider cultural values and social concerns. This is followed by a discussion of children’s views on the meaning of independence to them as they move around outside.

The parents who participated in this study value their children’s independence in the outdoors. They regard autonomy as a sign of growing up and moving on in to adult life, or as one parent said, ‘learning to stand on her own two feet’. Even parents who walk with their children all the time try to find moments where they can encourage them to do things along the way independently, such as allowing them decide when it is safe to cross the road. They understand their children’s spatial mobility as an important context for them to learn to navigate the outdoor world, develop skills, and generally enjoy some freedom. Facilitating their children to make the transition from being entirely dependent on their parents to becoming independent is perceived as part of their duty as good parents.

Their views on independent spatial mobility reflect cultural values identified by Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) who describe independence as highly valued in contemporary Western society. It is equated with achieving full ‘personhood’, with competence and with being capable of contributing fully to society (Hockey and James 1993). Dependency on the other hand is regarded as a state of childhood during which a person is ‘controlled’ and subservient. This understanding of dependency and independence as opposite ends of a spectrum from childhood to adulthood is identified by Mikkelsen and Christensen (2009) as reflective of the developmental psychology conceptualization of childhood that does not recognise children as social actors. They argue that much of the
literature on independent spatial mobility draws on the developmental psychology model and reflects cultural values that place an emphasis on individuality over collectivism.

Evidence that children have suffered a loss of independent spatial mobility in the literature (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Karsten and Van Vliet 2006) is regarded as detrimental to their welfare, a view that has permeated media discussions and impacted on parental views. While the parents in this study value independence for their children, they are constrained by what they perceive to be an increasingly threatening urban world and even when they do allow their children to walk independently, they express worries for their safety. They identify traffic volumes as the key threat to their children’s safety, with ‘stranger danger’ being the next major concern.

In some studies ‘stranger danger’ is the primary concern among parents (Valentine 1997; Valentine 2004) which is perhaps indicative of the high level of media coverage of specific cases of child abduction when the studies were conducted. The period of time when the interviews for this research were conducted did not coincide with coverage of a high profile case of child abduction. The parents cited traffic as their primary concern, echoed by Matthews (1992) work on children’s outdoor experience. Nonetheless the parents were aware of the impact of media coverage, which they felt had a long lasting effect. They criticized the media for exploiting what they regarded as innate parental concerns for the safety of their children by putting constant doubts in their minds about ‘stranger danger’, doubts they felt were ultimately irrational as they regarded the instance of ‘stranger danger’ as quite rare. This perception is confirmed in the literature (Jenkins 1998). Traffic is a bigger issue for parents in Dublin City, partially due to what they perceive to be the high volumes that move through the city each day and also the behaviour of drivers who disregard pedestrian lights and drive too fast.
The parents weigh up the pros and cons of allowing their children out without out them on an on-going basis. They all struggled to allow their children the independence they regard as extremely important for their development while protecting them and keeping them safe. They share their difficulties with walking this challenging tightrope and meeting the right balance with parents who have participated in other studies (Valentine 1997; Valentine 2004).

It is possible to address these parental concerns through planning and design policy and decisions. The introduction of traffic calming measures, for example, would tackle the threat posed by traffic in the city (Elkin et al. 1991). But efforts to do so, such as the imposition of a 30K speed limit in the inner city, have proven quite controversial. Interviews with officials at Dublin City Council suggest an awareness that use of the outdoors is important for children, but there is less awareness of the perceived importance of independence. They understand their role in relation to facilitating outdoor access as being met by play provision and seem less conscious of children’s use of the outdoors to get from one place to the next. There is scope for improving communication between the parents of children living in the city and the local authority with responsibility for that space in order to allay fears the parents have around safety.

The children do not always rate independence as highly as adults. Many are happy to walk with an adult to school and other places because they do not wish to take on the responsibility for their own safety which walking alone demands. They share safety concerns with their parents and their main worry is traffic, although some children express more imaginative threats such as a fear of haunted houses. They also see their walks as a social occasion and enjoy the company of parents – one of the children described the fun he has joking with his mother on his walk to school. This sociability is equally important to children who do not walk with an adult and they discuss the value of chatting to friends or siblings on
the way. Although independence has been described as a child walking ‘on their own’ (Hillman et al. 1990) the children in this study contest that view stating that they do not like to walk alone and prefer company.

The significance of independence is described by them as an opportunity to give expression to their autonomy by going at their own pace, to be free of ‘nagging parents’ or to get to school on time (something identified in the literature as quite important for children by Punch (2001)). They enjoy independent spatial mobility as a chance to be themselves - somewhat - free of parental control (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). As posited by Mikkelsen and Christensen, the children are not entirely free of adult control as they have been told to obey a strict set of rules on how to negotiate their walks. It is possible the children do not always obey the rules, but they did not indicate this in their interviews. Independence is also valued by the children as an expression of their self-identity as ‘mature’. They see themselves as too old to be with a parent on certain walks and express an awareness of peer pressure to walk independently (Markus and Nurios 1984). Middle childhood is a stage when children are beginning to move away from the home and to negotiate more independence (Markus and Nurios 1984; Jones and Cunningham 1999) and the children in this study are conscious of a growing expectation among their peer group that they will move around without an adult. They describe the presence of parents as embarrassing and feel ashamed when they are not allowed go places friends can go without an adult.

8.4.1 The spatio-temporal context of the significance of independence

Contrary to the views of their parents and cultural understandings of independent spatial mobility as a context for skills development (Hillman et al. 1990; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002), the children do not value independence as an educational opportunity. Nor do they regard walking with a parent as indicative of a lack of competence. Their understanding of
independent spatial mobility differs to this cultural perspective in so far as they contextualise
the significance of independence and their views are shaped by the nature of the walk and
temporal considerations. While the everyday walk to or from school, to visit a friend or go to
the shop might be a walk they prefer to make without an adult, they identify other
destinations as walks they would only wish to undertake with an adult. These include the
walk ‘to town’ and elsewhere which takes them beyond their familiar zone and into
unfamiliar territory.

Sometimes the children change their mind from moment to moment as an event in the
‘micro-time’ (Brofenbrenner and Morris 2006) shapes their views. Following a row with a
parent or a fleeting thought about the freedom other children seem to have to play, views on
whether or not the children preferred to be with an adult changed. One moment a child says
they prefer to be with a grown up or that they have no preference, the next minute they are
adamant they would rather not be with a parent. These ‘context bound’ (Nordstrom
2010:218) views are identified as typical of children in this age group in the literature.

The spatio-temporal context through which independence holds meaning for the
children identified in this study gives it a more fluid significance in their lives than is
recognised in adult constructions of the importance of independent spatial mobility (Hillman
et al. 1990). It reflects an understanding of independence in terms of ‘relations of
dependency’ (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009:41) which fluctuate over time. The children’s
perspective challenges the conceptualization of childhood as a time of dependency which
moves in a trajectory towards independence, simultaneously revealing the children’s agency
in negotiating their independence and adult-child relations as ‘interdependent’ (Punch
2001:94).
Conclusion

This chapter has presented a systematic discussion of the findings of this study with reference to the literature. It is an attempt to draw back together the various strands of the ecological configuration which comprises the experience of independent spatial mobility. The interrelationships of the various concerns that shape that experience have been described and the conceptualization of children as social actors which underpins this study has been confirmed. This endeavour is framed by a return to the research question to look at what has been learned about children, their everyday experience, their spatiality and the meaning of independence for them. Through this process the study has been solidly located within the theoretical discourse on independent spatial mobility, its’ transferability clarified and the contribution which is made by this research has been described. The next chapter marks an attempt to wrap the whole study together through concluding remarks in which children who are still regular public space users are revealed as essential to the urban fabric. The thesis then concludes with recommendations on future policy and research possibilities.
Chapter 9 Re-thinking Children’s Place in the Urban Public Realm: Concluding Remarks

Introduction

Driven by a concern in both academic and popular discourse that children are ‘disappearing’ from the public realm of urban streets, this study has focussed on those children who have not yet disappeared and continue to access public space regularly. This particular focus has underpinned the research in order to present an account of children’s perspectives of their experience on what is increasingly understood as adult oriented territory (de Connick-Smith and Gutman 2004). It is hoped that by having a better understanding of children’s encounters with the urban environment it may be possible to adapt it to suit their needs better, and in so doing, encourage more children back out on to the streets.

The concern that children are disappearing from the outdoors is conflated with evidence of a loss of freedom to move around without an adult (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000). There is evidence that the loss of independent spatial mobility children have suffered has impacted on their spatial knowledge of their local areas (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) and affected opportunities they might otherwise have to develop certain skills (Hillman et al. 1990). There is something of an urgency to investigating children’s urban experience as evidence accumulates that their city worlds are failing them (Ward 1990; Gleeson 2006). It is of particular import as children are increasingly resident in cities globally (Chawla 2002; Prout 2003). But unless we develop an understanding of their everyday urban lives, it will not be possible to adequately address this concern.

The study set out to explore children’s views on this topic. By exploring and outlining children’s perspectives of their experience of spatial mobility and the significance of
independence, the study presents a children’s ‘standpoint’ (Mayall 2009) on these issues which acts as a springboard to raising their status both in relation to local government and society as a whole.

This chapter outlines the conclusions drawn from the research. It presents the contribution the study makes to the discourse and makes recommendations on policy and future research possibilities. It begins by re-visiting the research question (9.1) before moving on to look at how the study was conducted (9.2). The findings are then outlined with reference to the contribution made by the study, culminating in the children’s standpoint which has been revealed through the research. In chapter one it was proposed that a children’s standpoint would be developed through a combination of a collaborative research design and by examining children’s perspectives on the research topic. That standpoint is described in section 9.4.4, where it is suggested that in looking at their urban spatial mobility from the children’s point of view, they emerge as an essential feature of the urban public realm.

9.1 Re-visiting the research question

As described in the introduction to the thesis, this study asks the question: what are children’s perspectives on their experience of urban spatial mobility and the significance of independence? The evidence of other studies in this field indicates that children are less likely to walk through their urban worlds than in the past, (Hillman et al.1990; O’Brien et al. 2000, Karsten 2005). Car dependency (Tranter and Pawson 2001; DTO 2007; Barker 2009) and a shift towards compartmentalizing children into designated zones such as school, childcare, playgrounds and home (Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003; Valentine 2004) have given rise to the concern that children are disappearing from the public realm of the city.
This apparent disappearance is of particular concern as access to the outdoors is theorised as the mark of a ‘good’ childhood (Kernan 2006). Access to the outdoors facilitates an exploration of local and more distal environments which affords learning opportunities, skills development and facilitates children to construct a sense of place and belonging (Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Hillman et al. 1990; Matthews et al. 2000; Cosco and Moore 2002; de Vischer and Bouverne-de Bie 2008). It promotes social capital among children and within the community and encourages participation in the life of the city which in turn is regarded as facilitating children’s participation rights (Ward 1990; Leyden 2003; Valentine 2004; Karsten 2011).

Children’s spatial mobility in an urban context is also problematized in relation to a loss of independence from adults (Hillman et al. 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000). Fuelled by what has been identified as a culture of fear (Jenkins 1998; Adams 2002; Furedi 2001) that has begun to dominate contemporary Western society, parents are worried about letting their children out without them. Their worries range from a media inflated fear of ‘stranger danger’ (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 1997; Jenkins 1998; Kitzinger 1999; Valentine 2004; Wardle 2006) to more concrete and local concerns about traffic volumes, bullying and drug dealing (McNeish and Roberts 1995; Valentine 1997; Tranter and Pawson 2001; Valentine 2004). As a result, the evidence suggests that children do not have the same scope to explore their urban worlds as previous generations (Karsten 2005; Mackett et al. 2007; Romero 2010), that their spatial knowledge has suffered (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002) and they have a less rich experience of their outdoor worlds (Romero 2010). There is also a concern that children who are accompanied with an adult do not have opportunities to develop risk taking and decision making skills (Hillman et al. 1990).

But the meaning of independent spatial mobility and the argument that the loss of independent spatial mobility is detrimental for children has been examined largely from an
adult point of view and is understood from an adult perspective (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). A need to study the meaning of independent spatial mobility from children’s perspective has been identified (Mikkelsen and Christensen 2009). This study has sought to contribute towards filling that gap in the literature by conducting comparative research on children’s perspectives of their experience of urban spatial mobility with and without an adult and an examination of the meaning and significance of independence for children.

9.2 An ecological and inter-disciplinary approach

The complex of interrelated factors surrounding independent spatial mobility in an urban context has been explored in this study through an ecological framework, drawing on Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of human development and Jonathan Tudge’s (2008) discussion of the use of a contextualist paradigm to explore children’s ‘every day lives’. Through this conceptual framework the children’s spatial mobility experience unfolds to reveal: a macro-system comprising cultural values and attitudes to the city and children in the city, an exo-system comprising policy and planning decisions regarding the city and children in the city, a meso system comprising relations between settings and a micro-system comprising relationships between the person and the immediate setting of the route they walk through public space between home and their destination.

The ecological framework implies a two way interface between the child and the factors which shape their urban mobility experience. The acknowledgement of the role children play in shaping their experience engages with a sociological understanding of children as competent social actors (Holloway and Valentine 2000) which underpins this study. The complexity of this aspect of children’s lives has necessitated an inter-disciplinary examination (Hogan and Greene 2005) of urban spatial mobility drawing on sociology, psychology, geography, children’s geography, urban design theory and media studies. The
ecological framework has served to deconstruct and then pull together the complex interplay of factors which affect children’s spatial mobility in the urban public realm and the insight drawn from the various disciplinary approaches.

Children aged between 9 and 11 (the age at which children have begun to gain some independence, Hillman et al. 1990) at school and living in the city participated in the research process. In order to ensure an authentic account of children’s perspectives is presented what has been described in the thesis as ‘acute listening’ skills and a reflexive approach have been adopted throughout the research process.

A collaborative approach to data collection was employed, using a child-friendly questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, photography and photo-elicited interviews. Through the questionnaire children were asked about their views on opportunities they have to access the outdoors independently. By way of exploring their experience of their everyday walks through public space, children who were with an adult and children who were not with an adult were asked to photograph walks to school and other places they went during their free time, simultaneously mapping the way there and their experience. In this way children’s place-making in the city was revealed and a comparison drawn between the experience of children who walked independently and those who did not.

9.3 Who are the children in the urban public realm?

A complex cultural understanding of children in the city is apparent in the findings of this study. Officials at the city council who are responsible for planning and designing the urban space the children inhabit and move through describe them as simultaneously competent, a threat to public space and vulnerable. There is a lack of engagement with children as to how they use the public domain and how they view their needs in that space. This conflicting conceptualization of children, and a failure to consult with them, results in public realm
policy which does not recognise them as regular public space users (Dublin City Public Realm Strategy 2012). For historical reasons (Kernan 2005) the city council regards its function *vis a vis* children’s outdoor use as being to remove children from the public domain and to provide play facilities in child designated play areas. Political and practical tensions within the local authority lend a priority to traffic on the streets which inhibits children from accessing the wider city. The data in this study suggest that the importance of independent spatial mobility is not recognised by the city council.

But the parents who participated in this study value independence for their children. However they express concerns about perceived threats to the children’s safety including traffic and ‘stranger danger’. They understand independence as giving children the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves and develop autonomous skills. But they struggle to meet a balance between allowing their children that independence and protecting them from the perceived risks of the city.

Meanwhile it is apparent from the research process that the children see themselves as both competent and vulnerable to certain risks, such as traffic, or more imaginatively, haunted places. At times they feel capable of contending with these risks and at other times they express a preference for handing over the responsibility for their safety to an adult. They see themselves as mature and express a desire for autonomy. They reveal their agency through their negotiations for independence (Punch 2001) and their moral agency is expressed as a consideration for the built and natural environment and other people they encounter on their everyday walks.

A focus on children’s experience shows that they are very individualistic and that they have a diversity of views and opinions, which supports the call to move away from the idea of ‘the unitary public child’ in discussions on children’s urban spatial mobility (O’Brien et al.
2000). How the children conceptualise themselves reflects the shift towards recognising children as social actors (Prout and James 1997) while at the same time recognising their vulnerability as described in the psychological developmental model (Greene and Hogan 2005). Their self-image reflects the assertion that there is merit in keeping an open mind when studying children’s lives and acknowledging the value of the various conceptualizations of childhood (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of independence in Western contemporary society (Hockey and James 1993) the children do not see themselves as occupying a one way trajectory from a lesser position in society of dependency towards attaining independence and full ‘personhood’. The significance of independence is more fluid for them. They understand its’ value as context bound and their views are affected by the nature of the walk and something that may happen or occur to them in a moment in time. They happily move back and forth between walking with and without an adult at this stage of their lives, depending on the circumstances of the walk. Nor does independence hold the same meaning for them as it does in wider society. They do not understand the importance of independence as an opportunity to develop skills (Hillman et al. 1990) or spatial knowledge (Rissotto and Tonuci 2002), rather they see it as an expression of their self-identity as competent and an opportunity to give expression to how they wish to negotiate their urban routes free of the constraining presence of an adult. This insight into the value of independent spatial mobility for children is an important contribution to the discussion and raises questions about the relevance of the way in which independence is socially constructed to their everyday lives.

9.4 What is their city?

Through the questionnaire in which they were asked about opportunities they had to access the outdoors independently, the children indicated that they have a reasonable level of access
to their urban environment. By contrast the people responsible for planning the urban domain the children use indicate that they are unaware of how children use public space. As discussed, the focus on the part of Dublin City Council on play provision has resulted in the construction of designated play places in the city leading to the removal of children from the city streets and a failure to conceive of the wider city space as child oriented. This thesis suggests that children’s unnoticed everyday use of public space (de Certeau 1984) is indicative of a form of ‘resistance’ (Hil and Bessant 1999) to the social construction of the public domain as adult owned (Aitken 2001).

While there may be a valid concern that children are disappearing from public space (Valentine 2004) there is a need to recognise and acknowledge the presence of children who are still there. In doing so it becomes possible to see and understand the city from the perspective of children and to begin to design the urban domain in accordance with their needs. How they see, experience and enact the public space of the city they walk daily is described in the following sections.

9.4.1 Children’s perception of the public domain

In order to understand children’s experience of the urban public realm it is clear from this study that there is a need to make a concerted effort to set aside adult assumptions about the socio-political meaning of the city (Ward 1990). It is argued in this thesis that this has to begin by acknowledging and letting go of negative associations between children and the city (Jones 2000). It also demands holding back on an adult interpretation of the visual depiction of the city world made by children and accepting the meaning they ascribe to what they see.

The children’s height, for example, can affect their line of vision (Ward 1990) and they may be more inclined to notice broken cobblestones or rubbish scattered across the ground. In some studies children share an adult association with gritty urban features such as
barbed wire and associate it with alienation and the stigma of poverty (Lynch 1977). But in other cases children do not ‘see’ negative associations. In this study the children often see beyond these barriers to a beauty and an enticing potential.

There are many different ways of seeing (Berger 1972; Wylie 2007) and children see their city in a range of different ways. They tend to look at the more immediate environment (Tuan 1977) and in doing so, to see an extraordinary level of detail (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003). The challenge is to hear their many voices on this topic (Roberts 2008). But through listening carefully to them, the city emerges here as a remarkably diverse space of engaging natural elements appealing architectural design, amusing features and, at the same time, filth, squalor, neglect and ugliness.

The effort made throughout this study to present the city as children see it, shows that they share an adult dislike of aspects of the public domain such as dirt and neglect. But the data also indicate that children have a more positive view of the city than adults and see a richness we often miss. Their perspective might be capitalised on and, for example, instances of nature and the various elements they take pleasure in seeing on their routes to school, visit friends, go to the shop, and so on, protected in future development, enhanced and made more accessible.

9.4.2 Children’s sense of place in public space

In their everyday walks children shape a sense of place comprising the ‘thick lines’ (Lee and Ingold 2006) of their urban routes as a landscape of social, sensory, pragmatic and imaginary/reflective dimensions. The evidence of this study shows that their everyday walks are of social significance to them. The company of friends, siblings or grown ups along the way ensures they have someone to chat with, to enjoy the walk with and in some cases, feel safe. The people they encounter regularly on the way, passing certain places or buying
something in the shop, further enrich the experience for them. As they walk their regular routes through the city the children both enjoy and act to foster social capital in the public domain (Leyden 2003; Karsten 2011).

Children are acutely aware of the visual stimulus on their walks through the city. But their walks are also shaped by the smells, sounds and the physical sensations of city life. At the same time, they experience their routes quite pragmatically. They have to navigate hazards such as the traffic, damaged footpaths and all manner of rubbish along the streets. At times those same streets take on a more imaginary or reflective meaning, transforming into an uneasy world of frightening people and buildings. Then shifting again to a more amusing place of bus stops where they are no busses, car owners relentlessly getting clamped, or people forever stuck up a lift in a tower where Santa Claus visits every year.

A loss of independence among children over the last forty years (Hillman 1990) as they walk through their urban worlds has given rise to a concern that they no longer enjoy as rich an experience (Romero 2010) and that their sense of place has been adversely affected (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). But the visual narratives of their everyday urban walks produced by children who participated in this study show the presence of an adult does not constrain the diversity of the experience, the sense of place and belonging they construct or their familiarity with their routes. Rather a comparison of the experience of children who walk with and without an adult indicates a difference in the practical and imaginative engagement they have.

The children who walk without an adult are more concerned with the practicalities of navigating their way safely to their destination. This thesis proposes that practical concern explains why they are more aware of particular landmarks in their neighbourhoods that indicate the way (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002). The children who walk with an adult are
equally familiar with their routes, however they are more inclined to invest places on the way with an imaginary or reflective meaning. Children who are with an adult do not have the same responsibility for navigating their routes. That responsibility is taken on by the grown up they are with. The lack of responsibility is inevitably accompanied by less freedom to make decisions about the walk, an autonomy children without an adult value. However the freedom to take control over how the walk is negotiated in turn seems to result in a loss of freedom to reflect on the surrounding environment somewhat imaginatively. The evidence produced by this study indicates that the presence of an adult does shape the walk (Romero 2010), but from the perspective of children, the loss of independence (Hilman et al. 1990) affords another freedom: the freedom to interpret the environment through which they are walking more imaginatively.

9.4.3 How children perform public space

Despite the sense of belonging children convey, their behaviour in public space is constrained by their awareness of what is considered appropriate. The evidence of this study suggests that the children are aware of the adult orientation of public space. For example, they are guarded about times when they might ‘mess’, a form of behaviour which is understood in an Irish context as innately childlike and playful, but often frowned upon. They also rarely photograph places on their routes where they play. This evidence is in contrast to other studies where children’s play and their mobility are viewed as closely enmeshed (Opie and Opie 1969; Hart 1979; Moore 1986). But as the presence of children in the public domain has decreased and any ongoing presence regarded with suspicion (Ward 1990; Jenks 2002; Valentine 2004) the data collected for this research suggests that the freedom to perform public urban space as an expression of childhood and to be playful is increasingly constrained.
Consistent with a trend towards designating specific places for play in cities (Jacobs 1961; Woods 1977; Karsten 2002; Zeiher 2003), the children document playgrounds they are allowed go to play when they are not actually walking through the public domain. But through their visual narratives there is a suggestion that the play itself is somewhat inhibited by the play space (Wood 1977). This thesis proposes that in reconsidering the construction of public space as adult owned, that children be accorded permission to behave in a more childlike way so that they could actualize the playful affordances of the city space (Kytta 2004; Gehl 2010) and transform it into a place where they enjoy opportunities to explore the ‘urban playground’ (Lynch 1977; Hart 1979; Moore 1986; Mackett et al. 2007).

Introducing this study in chapter one the need to develop a children’s standpoint on their independent spatial mobility in an urban context was identified. The following section summarises the children’s perspectives on their spatial mobility as outlined above and in doing so, presents their standpoint.

9.4.4 In summary: the children’s standpoint on their urban spatial mobility

By examining children’s perspectives on their walk through the public realm, a child standpoint on independent spatial mobility emerges. This standpoint comprises a number of key issues including: how children image themselves in public space, their experience of the public realm, their sense of place in that context and the meaning and significance of independence for them.

In the first instance, by listening to children in this study it has become clear that they see themselves as both competent and vulnerable in the context of their urban spatial mobility. They also reveal a moral agency through their concerns they express and they see themselves as agents actively negotiating the extent of independence they have with their parents. Secondly, as they walk their everyday urban routes children see and experience a
rich and diverse space. They convey a strong social involvement with the people they encounter along the way, an embodied sensory awareness of the environment, pragmatic issues they contend with on the way and the imaginary meaning they invest in their routes. Thirdly, they indicate that their innately playful behaviour is constrained by the social construction of the urban public realm. Yet, within this space they construct a strong sense of place and belonging.

Finally, they are largely content with the degree of independence they have, sometimes preferring to walk with an adult, sometimes not. Whether they are with or without an adult, they indicate a detailed knowledge of the public space through which they walk. But how they express their knowledge is affected by an adult presence. Children who are with an adult invest more reflective or imaginative meaning in their routes, while children who are not with an adult are more responsible for dealing with the pragmatic details of reaching their destination so they appear to have less freedom engage as reflectively with the environment. These elements of the child standpoint on independent spatial mobility in an urban context present a useful contribution to the discourse.

The experiential dimension of the standpoint is of particular value as it portrays a dynamic relationship between children and urban public space. The children’s perspectives on their everyday walks reveal an active role in the life of the city and a sense of their presence pulling together the various strands of the urban fabric. In this way the children indicate that they are part of what Seamon refers to as the essence of the city, or as discussed in chapter one, its’ ‘citiness’ (2012:139). The ecological model adapted for this study is revisited below as an illustration of this aspect of the children’s standpoint.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of human development has been employed in this thesis to identify and examine the various factors which influence the children’s
experience of urban spatial mobility. The focus here, as the thesis comes to its conclusion, is the children’s perspectives on the relationship between them and the public domain. In order to highlight the children’s experience, the layers of the macro system, the exo system, the meso system and the micro system are telescoped together within the centre of the diagram as ‘the city’. The outer layer of the diagram represents an aggregate child’s experience derived from the data collected by the children who participated in this study. It comprises the pragmatic, sensory, imaginative and social elements of their spatial mobility experience, as indicated in the diagram. The use of Brofenbrenner’s model in this study has helped penetrate the rich tapestry of the children’s urban experience. By effectively flipping around the illustration of the model as it is used in this study to convey their perspectives as agents actively shaping their urban world, the children are repositioned as occupying a more prominent place in the life of the city. The diagram overleaf focuses on the child’s experience, illustrating its richness and diversity, and simultaneously showing the complex interaction between children and their city worlds.
Figure 9.4.1 The child’s experience reveals the dynamic interplay between children and the city
9.5 Concluding remarks and recommendations

In an effort to ‘stand in the footprints of the contemporary urban child’ as suggested by Ward (1990) in the title of this thesis, the study set out to explore children’s perspectives on their urban spatial mobility. By mapping an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979) onto children’s urban spatial mobility experience, the interrelationships between the structural systems and spatial design that shape the individual experiences the children document is revealed. In turn the children’s perspective which emerges indicates a rich experience and shows that they are part and parcel of the city life in which they engage. In other words, the dynamic interplay of factors which comprise what Jacobs refers to as the ‘lively diversified sidewalks’ (1961:83) of the urban realm both shapes the children’s experience, and is at the same time shaped by them.

The findings of this study show that there is a need to reconsider how children are conceptualised in the city, particularly the public realm, in future policy documents. Their views suggest that as a first step their use of public space to navigate their way to school, to the shops, and other places (in much the same way as adults use it) must be acknowledged. The collaborative nature of this study has shown the value of engaging children in participative design models which could be applied to future policy development. This kind of engagement with children marks a recognition of their citizenship and in doing so, recognises their participation rights and fosters an elevation of their status. An effort to raise the status of children in this way engages with their self-image as competent social actors and off-sets negative associations made between the city and children, as revealed in this thesis.

Engaging with children leads to the design of authentically child friendly urban realms because it is based on their views. The findings suggest that a child friendly urban
realm designed in collaboration with children would not differ dramatically from a public domain which addressed adult concerns. It would in fact address shared pragmatic concerns such as traffic, unsightly buildings or rubbish while simultaneously enhancing the more appealing aspects of the urban environment.

The study has also shown a discrepancy between how local authority officials and parents understand children and their needs in the city. This finding suggests a need for more effective engagement with parents in relation to their children at policy level. If the presence of children in the public domain was better understood and the space adapted to meet their needs, more children might begin to access the city streets. As such concerns associated with the loss of children’s independent spatial mobility expressed by parents in this study and in wider society, would be addressed.

9.5.1 Future research possibilities

The findings as outlined contribute to the discourse on children’s independent spatial mobility through urban public space (Hillman et al. 1990; Ward 1990; O’Brien et al. 2000; Rissotto and Tonucci 2002; De-Connick Smith and Gutman 2004; Valentine 2004; Romero 2010; Mickelsen and Christensen 2009) and a research interest in children’s outdoor experience in Ireland (Kernan 2006; Pike 2008; Rogers 2009). This study explores new ground in an Irish context by focussing on children’s experience of public space and contributes to the growing body of research on children’s urban lives. By exploring the meaning and significance of independence with children the study contributes an important perspective to the discussion and challenges some assumptions about a loss of independence identified in the literature. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of the research design engages with a move towards recognising children’s agency in contemporary research (Greene and Hogan 2005).
The effort made in this study to engage children in a collaborative research process in order to ascertain their views on their urban spatial mobility has proven quite fruitful. It has shown that despite the challenges, collaborating with children affords an important insight into their everyday lives. It seems clear then, that a continuation of the process of researching children’s perspectives on their everyday lives in an urban context by using participative research design methods would yield further useful knowledge on how cities work, and whether they work for children. This study focussed on middle childhood, but the views of younger and older children would enrich the perspective contributed here. Broadening out the scope of the study to include larger populations and compare the experience of children living in different parts of the city would prove beneficial.

It would also be useful to explore further the notion of a shared culture of urban childhood adopted by this study (Tudge 2008). This would be of particular interest in Dublin City were recent statistics show that in some parts of the city more than half the population was not born in Ireland (Census 2011). The diversity of backgrounds this suggests is a relatively new trend in Ireland. A rich insight into what constitutes a culture of urban childhood might be afforded through a comparison of the perspectives of children whose families have been based in the city for many generations and those city based children whose families have moved to Ireland more recently.

Finally, an emerging interest in Ireland in engaging with children in the planning process has been noted in this thesis. At this juncture, an evaluation of all participative planning initiatives undertaken and a data base showing what has been done, where, how and the impact these initiatives have had on planning decisions would be of considerable value.

This study set out to open up a window onto a better understanding of children’s urban lives. The findings of this study suggest that listening attentively to children reveals a
rich insight into those lives, how the city works and the dynamic role children play in shaping the urban public realm.
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American Council of Learned Societies


Department of International Development


Appendix 1: Question to City Manager City Council Meeting 06/12/2010

Q135. COUNCILLOR CLAIRE O’REGAN

To ask the Manager to seek Child Friendly City status for Dublin under the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative in order that the voice of the child is heard and that the needs and rights of all children living in and visiting Dublin city are met, and to ask the Manager to begin implementing the spirit of Section 8 (1) (b) of the Planning (Amendment) Act 2010 in the new LAPs for the city in the new Development Plan, the relevant section stating that that children, or groups or associations representing the interests of children, are entitled to make submissions or observations regarding objectives and policies to deliver an overall strategy for the proper planning and sustainable development of the area of the development plan.

CITY MANAGER’S REPLY:

Dublin City Council is aware of the goals of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) in its delivery of services to children and young people. The CFCI aims to guide local governance towards including children’s rights as a key component of their structures, goals, policies and programmes. Becoming child friendly is a process involving a number of steps which CFCI identifies as 9 building blocks which are necessary for a child friendly city around structures/ activities that are necessary to ensure a children’s rights perspective and active involvement. In meeting the Council’s commitment to the National Children’s Strategy 2010 and Towards 2016 lifecycle approach), a Children’s Services Unit was established in 2007 as well as an interdepartmental Children’s Services Steering Group. This led to the development of a children’s services document, which was agreed by the Housing, Social & Community Strategic Policy Committee (SPC) in September 2009, which works “towards making Dublin a better place for children and young people”. This statement is a significant step towards a child friendly city and is reflected in the new City Development Plan which includes a range of policies which support the interests of children and young people.
Work will continue in 2011 through the steering group and corporate plan to assist departments/areas in engaging with communities, government departments and statutory/voluntary agencies where appropriate to further meet the building blocks necessary to help make Dublin a child friendly city. Groups representing a range of organisations, communities and sectoral interests have always been encouraged to make submissions to Development Plans, Actions Plans and Local Area Plans under preparation. However, by the 2010 Act highlighting the importance of submissions from organisations representing children, it is the intention that during future Local Area Plan consultations the Council will actively seek and encourage submissions addressing the rights, needs and wishes of children from organisations representing the interests of children.

Contact: Martin Kavanagh, A/Assistant City Manager, Housing & Residential Services - 222 2148

John O’Hara, A/Deputy Planning Officer - 222 3813
Appendix 2: The voice of the child in the analysis process

Introduction

Reflecting this study’s endeavour to explore children’s perspectives on their urban spatial mobility, at the core of the analysis process was a respect for the individual voice of each child participant. Hence, the focus of the analysis was on making visible the agency of the children as they shape and describe their spatial mobility experience (Tudge 2008). This appendix gives a brief account of the steps taken to ensure the primacy of the voice of the child.

Rigor and the transparency of the process are of particular significance in relation to this study as it seeks to give voice to the experience of children. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Glaser and Strauss (2009), the analysis was grounded in the data in an attempt to ensure the theoretical insights presented in this thesis are drawn from the children’s views. Given that adults and children often see places differently to one another, maintaining a sense of each child’s perspective was a particular challenge for the analysis of the visual narratives. A considerable amount of time was devoted to how that voice might be heard with as little interference from the researcher as possible. Several examples of collaborative studies with children using photography provided guidance on ensuring the voice of child was brought to the fore through the analysis. These include: Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith (2005), who asked children to photograph ‘well being’, Burke (2005) who asked children to photograph their places of play, Rogers (2009), who explored children’s experience of neighbourhood and Luttrell (2000) who conducted a visual ethnography with children. This account begins with an outline of the analysis of the children’s visual narratives and photo-elicited interviews.
(PEI’s), then describes the analysis of the semi-structured interviews and the importance of reflexivity throughout the process.

**Organizing the data to hear the voice of the child**

It is helpful to return briefly here to the decision to use photography as a data collection method in this study in order to make explicit the relationship between the research question, the methodology and the analysis. The children were asked to document two routes they walk on a regular basis through their urban neighbourhoods using cameras. Firstly, the walk to school, secondly, to a destination of their own choosing. The children undertook the task to describe their journeys with a lot of interest. As they walked they stopped to take their photographs. Each place documented by the children indicates a pause in the walk during which they capture a moment in their everyday lives which holds meaning for them (Tuan 1977). According to Prosser the unique capacity of photographs is to ‘usefully represent the peculiarities of a specific moment in time and space’ (1998:119). The photographs represent a moment in time and space of each child’s life experience and ‘the peculiarities’ which may have influenced that moment are taken into consideration during the analysis.

The images do not stand alone however, they have a specific meaning which was decoded by the children during the photo-elicited interviews which was conducted when the images had been developed (Burke 2005). In order to analyse the images in conjunction with the interpretation articulated by the children during the interview, I developed a system which organized the images and words together. I uploaded the images on to a Flickr page and organized the comments into an Excel spreadsheet. I then hyperlinked each comment to the relevant image so I could look at both simultaneously during the analysis process.

The photography and the child’s comment were combined and treated as a single data item during the analysis. The analysis consisted of an iterative process comprising three
different phases. It began with a comparison of the data collected by children with and without an adult in terms of the richness of the experience. Drawing on the work of Romero (2010) the richness of the experience is understood to be expressed in terms of the amount of items of interest the children document on their walk. The images relevant to the research question were selected from all the photographs the children produced (Prosser1998).

Instances of positive and negative experiences were then compared among the two cohorts. The definition of a positive or a negative experiences was based on what the children identified as something, someone, or someplace they said the liked or disliked during the first meeting with them. This definition was confirmed with reference to the images the children had produced during the photo-elicited interview. Finally, using a process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006), recurring patterns describing the kinds of experiences the children described were identified.

Analysing children’s views on the significance of independence through the interviews

During the semi-structured interview process the meaning and significance of independence in relation to their spatial mobility was discussed with the children. In order explore the children’s views on independence, the interviews were analysed using the process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is described by Braun and Clarke as a method for ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data’ (Braun and Clarke 2006:77). The process is recursive, it demands going back and forth to the data to identify and validate the generation of themes which lends a thoroughness to the analysis. As suggested above, there was a need for this degree of rigour to ensure the primacy of the voice of the child throughout the analysis. The significance and meaning of independence for the children was examined through a series of queries and the data were subject to an iterative
process with each query building progressively towards a final analysis. Data extracts were organised to show patterns which indicated how meanings of independence were constructed.

The first phase was an examination of how many of the children were happy with the extent of their freedom. The data were then analysed to establish how independence had been negotiated. The purpose of this analysis was to establish an insight into the children’s agency in relation to their independence. Then the data were examined to establish whether the children preferred to be with or without an adult – which is the definition of independence in this thesis. The final analysis then probed more deeply into children’s perspectives to establish why they had a particular preference and in doing so, to explore the significance of independence for them.

Reflexivity

This analysis process demanded a high degree of reflexivity. Assumptions on the part of the researcher in relation to Dublin City, the needs of children in the city and the value of independence were identified and ‘bracketed out’ both prior to beginning the analysis and at times during the analysis so as to ensure an authentic account of the children’s views. It also meant applying a rigorous and recursive approach to analysing the data, examining individual responses in relation to the wider interview for consistency and where there was a lack of consistency in a child’s view, going back to the transcripts to listen to the exact question asked and how that might shape a response, or accepting the inconsistency and factoring it into the findings. The analysis revealed a more complex understanding of how children position themselves in the urban public realm and the meaning and significance of independence for them than is generally understood in the literature.
Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance

19th February 2010

Ms Jackie Bourke

50 Montpelier Hill

Dublin 7

dublin institute of technology
institiuid teicneolalochta bharle atha iliarh
mount joy square dl
cearn6g mhuinseo dl

Re: Your application for ethical clearance Ref. 43/09

Dear Jackie,

Further to you following up on recommendations made by the DIT Research Ethics Committee, the Committee has agreed to grant ethical approval to your research "Shrinking Worlds - How Do Children Perceive their Independent Spatial Mobility in a Zl" Century Irish City?" (Ref. 43/09).

Kind regards,

Graduate Research School Office
Appendix 4: Consent Forms

Child consent form

Permission from child to fill out a questionnaire on outdoor freedoms

I, ---------------------------------------------, agree to participate in a research project which is on children’s outdoor freedoms. Jackie Bourke is doing the research.

To help explain how much freedom children have I will answer multi-choice questions about how often I am allowed outside without a grown-up.

I don’t have to answer any questions I don’t want to answer.

The researcher, Jackie, will write a long essay about children’s outdoor experience and she will include information I have given her in the multi-choice questions.

I understand that everything I share will be private and my real name will not be used in the essay.

I can read the essay if I like. It will be in a library in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

I have been allowed ask questions about the research and what I have to do.

I understand I can change my mind and stop being involved in the research project at any time I like.

This form has been explained to me and I understand it.

The research project has also been explained to me. I understand what it is for and what I will be doing. I would like to participate.

Jackie’s supervisors are Professor Nóirín Hayes of the Department of Social Sciences, DIT Mountjoy Square tel: 4024196 and Dr. Brian O’Neill, Head of the School of Media, DIT Aungier Street tel: 4023481.

Signature of participant: 

Date:
Consent Form 1b: parental consent for child to fill out questionnaire

I, ________________________________,

agree to allow my child:

______________________________________________________

___________________________


to participate in the research project entitled ‘Shrinking Worlds – how do children perceive their independent spatial mobility in an urban context?’, which is being conducted by Jackie Bourke tel: 087 2516 148.

She is supervised by Professor Nóirín Hayes of the Department of Social Sciences, DIT Mountjoy Square tel: 4024196 and Dr. Brian O’Neil, Head of The School of Media, DIT Aungier Street tel: 4023481.

I understand that participation in this study is strictly voluntary and I can withdraw my child at any time during the study.

I understand that the purpose of this research is to examine how children see their freedom to roam and play in a city context in Ireland. I understand that as part of the research my child will be asked to fill out a questionnaire with multi choice questions on the extent of their freedom to travel and play outside. I understand that all information will be completely confidential and my child’s anonymity will be protected.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. I understand that if my child so chooses they are entitled to withdraw from the study at any time immediately. A benefit of participation for my child is the opportunity to learn about themselves and to share information which will contribute to a better understanding of how children engage with their city environment.

Parent/guardian signing on behalf of child                         Date
Appendix 5: Questionnaire

PERSONAL DETAILS

COVER PAGE WITH PERSONAL DETAILS TO BE STORED SEPARATELY FROM ANSWERS

School:

Your Full Name:

Age:

Full Address:

Girl/Boy:
Instructions

Thank you for taking the time to answer questions about your free time. I want to find out how much freedom children have to go places without a grown up these days. I am asking all the children in fourth class who go to school in this area these questions. Your answers will help me understand what life is like for children of your age.

There are a number of questions which I will explain to you and which I would like you to answer. If you feel that there are any questions which you do not wish to answer, then that’s ok.
This is not a test and there are no right or wrong answers. Take your time and try to answer each question the way you really think.

If you need help just let me know.

I will not tell anyone the answers to your questions.

How to fill out the questionnaire

EXAMPLE:

Circle the answer you want to give.

1. Who do you usually go to school with?
   a) A grown up
   b) Friends
   c) Cousins or siblings
   d) A combination of grown up and above
   e) By myself
   f) Other – please describe what that is: ________________________________
Section A  GOING TO SCHOOL

1. How do you usually get to school?
   a) By car
   b) By bus
   c) By train or Luas
   d) Walking
   e) Cycling
   f) A different way – please describe what that is:

2. Who do you usually go to school with?
   a) A parent or other grown up
   b) Friend/Friends
   c) Cousins or siblings
   d) A combination of grown up and children
   e) By myself
   f) Other – please describe what that is:

3. How long does it usually take you to get to school?
   a) Five minutes or less
   b) Between five and ten minutes
   c) Between ten and twenty minutes
   d) Other – please say how long:
Section B  GOING HOME OR TO YOUR MINDER

4. When school is over do you usually go:
   a) Home
   b) To your minder
   c) To your after school club
   d) To a relatives’ home such as your granny or aunty
   e) To a hobby such as sports or music class
   f) Other-Please describe what this is:

5. How do you usually get there:
   a) By car
   b) By bus
   c) By train or Luas
   d) Walking
   e) Cycling
   f) Other – please describe what that is:

6. Who do you usually go with:
   a) A parent or other grown up
   b) Friend/Friends
   c) Cousins or siblings
   d) A combination of grown up and children
   e) By myself
   f) Other – please describe what that is:

7. How long does it usually take to get there?
   a) Five minutes or less
   b) Between five and ten minutes
   c) Between ten and twenty minutes
   d) Other – please say how long:
8. Do you go to the shops without a grown up:
   a) Often (4 to 6 times a week)
   b) Sometimes (1 to 3 times a week)
   c) Never

9. Do you go to visit friends or family without a grown up:
   a) Often (4 to 6 times a week)
   b) Sometimes (1 to 3 times a week)
   c) Never

10. Do you go to after school hobbies such as sports or a club without a grown up:
    a) Often (4 to 6 times a week)
    b) Sometimes (1 to 3 times a week)
    c) Never

11. Do you go out to play without a grown up:
    a) Often (4 to 6 times a week)
    b) Sometimes (1 to 3 times a week)
    c) Never

Thank you very much for answering these questions!