DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL

Using a mosaic-based approach to construct children's understanding of safe space in school

Mearns Macdonald, Maria

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Using a Mosaic-Based Approach to Construct Children’s Understanding of Safe Space in School

Maria Mearns Macdonald

Thesis submitted in part fulfilment for the requirement for the degree of Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology

Queen’s University Belfast

May 2021
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Shelter from the Storm.

Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm

Come in, she said

I'll give ya shelter from the storm

I was burned out from exhaustion, buried in the hail

Poisoned in the bushes an' blown out on the trail

Hunted like a crocodile, ravaged in the corn

Come in, she said

I'll give ya shelter from the storm

Bob Dylan (1975) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gsDBuHwqbM
Abstract

This participative, creative research aimed to explore the meaning of ‘safe space’ at school, defined as areas which children could access when emotionally dysregulated. This conceptually confused term, originating in 1960’s civil rights movements and popularised through psychotherapy, has recently been described as the second-most popular strategy for supporting children’s anxiety in UK schools. The scarce research literature documents adult views of the benefits of safe space, with little reference to children’s perceptions. Using a Mosaic-based approach, offering child-centred, multi-modal methods enabled seven children and their three teachers to construct their understanding of safe space in school. Children designated as users of safe space due to having autism and/or socioemotional difficulties, led the researcher on a school tour and took photos of a puppet in their chosen safe spaces, teachers were subsequently interviewed. Visual data was categorised using content analysis and combined with inductive, reflexive thematic analysis of verbal data to identify themes. Children’s multiple, dynamic understandings of safe space generated themes of liberated places, safe bases and belonging, contrasting with teachers’ differing understanding of a static, boundaried, restricted space. The value of psychological safety in school alongside giving children agency to self-regulate according to context and need is emphasised when considering individualised safe space. Discussing the ‘dilemmas of difference’ arising for teachers operationalising safe space in school leads to consideration of the potential implications for educational policy and practice. The value of deconstructing dominant adult discourses through visibly listening to children using a humanistic, empowering psychological framework is highlighted.
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Journey towards Making School a Safer Space

Journey towards Making School a Safer Space
Chapter 1. Introduction

Looking back over the last year, it seems ironic that I began to research safe space in February 2020, weeks before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the whole world seemed to become an unsafe space. The prevailing sense of anxiety and uncertainty throughout the past year has led many of us to seek out places of physical and psychological safety. Last February when a group of schoolchildren helped me to understand safe space in their school, I had no idea that I would often draw on their wisdom throughout the ensuing pandemic. Children in this research revealed that safe space was dynamic and adaptable and could be created anywhere according to context and need. Children demonstrated how to feel safe in multiple ways: through being active and playing, through being quiet and retreating, through connecting with others and their own feelings. Knowing how to find safety and shelter from the storms that come our way through life is a valuable lesson learned through the active listening and documenting which took place in this research. This chapter records my initial professional curiosity about the metaphor of safe space, then briefly contextualises and conceptualises this contested term and refers to the underpinning psychological frameworks of the research before describing the current study, ending with an overview of the thesis.

Professional Curiosity

Before beginning doctoral training in educational psychology, I had twenty-five years’ experience of working with children, first as a teacher, then with foster families, which had instilled the importance of safety, belonging and positive relationships in school, for all children, but for traumatised children in particular. The importance of school enabling psychological safety was further emphasised during an elective placement with a Children Looked-After service in Year 1, which gave me the opportunity to work therapeutically with schools striving to manage children’s distress. Safe space was an oft-recommended strategy in this and other educational support
services, even though there appeared to be varied definitions of a safe space, and at times, the tacit assumption that different professionals involved with the children understood it as the same thing. Being aware of the relational and developmental trauma children in care were often experiencing (Treisman, 2017) made me wonder how they experienced and made sense of these mainly adult-designated spaces. I was also curious as to how the school staff who played a key role in implementing and managing these spaces, conceptualised them. On subsequent EP placements, it seemed to be becoming an increasingly popular strategy in schools, yet a brief review of the research on safe space as an educational strategy yielded very little evidence. The scarcity of research within mainstream schools contrasted markedly with a glut of research focused on polarised and politicised debates on safe space in university campuses and directed my interest towards exploring the research literature on the origins and conceptualisation of safe space.

**Charting the Territory**

Originating in the women’s rights movement in the USA in the 1960’s and then adopted by queer, anti-racist and civil rights political activists (Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014), safe space was originally conceptualised as part of a transformative, radical agenda to provide marginalized groups with collective strength (Kenney, 2001). Over the next few decades’, the term dispersed into other contexts, becoming popularised through its adoption by psychotherapists to signify both the therapeutic alliance between therapist and client and the room or space where therapy takes place (Friedlander et al, 2011; Allison et al, 2013). Safe Space became politicised again over the last decade with contentious media debates in relation to safe space on university campuses, with polarised and divided understanding of safe space as a conflict between protecting marginalised identities and free speech (Callan, 2016; Byron, 2017; Coley et al, 2020). Academic conceptualisations of safe space have mainly focused on university curricula, promoting a range of meanings such as: a classroom of congress (Boostrom, 1998), a place of civility (Barratt, 2010), a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013), a
site for negotiating difference and challenging oppression (Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014), a community of disagreement (Iversen, 2019), a place for ‘dignity safety’ rather than intellectual safety (Callan, 2016. p.64), or an ongoing, dynamic collaboration between teacher and pupils (Clark-Parsons, 2019). So although safe space can be viewed as an appealing classroom metaphor, it is also controversial, as it implicitly implies ‘a response to the menace of an alienating world’ (Boostrom, 1998, p.404), or at the very least, that some educational spaces are unsafe (Callan, 2016). Concerns that the phrase has been so widely adopted that it has become an “overused but undertheorized metaphor” (Barrett 2010, p.1) with coded meanings (Grimes, 2020) which differ according to context, has led academics to urge educators to disentangle the metaphor of classroom safe space (Stengel & Weems, 2010; Arao & Clemens, 2013; Flensner & Von Der Lippe, 2019). The continuing controversy over whether university safe spaces offer collective strength for social justice and diversity, or in fact serve to emphasise difference and exclusion (Arao & Clemens, 2013) raise concerns when considering safe space in schools.

Exploring the Context

Psychodynamically based approaches such as trauma-informed, attachment-aware and nurturing pedagogies are currently being highlighted as a beneficial way of supporting children who are experiencing adverse life events. (Brunzell et al, 2016; Kelly et al, 2020; Rose & Gilbert, 2017). The use of a tangible, designated safe space in schools for children who have socio-emotional difficulties has recently been described in UK government-funded research as the second most popular strategy for managing children’s anxiety in schools (Johnson et al, 2017). However, these psychodynamic approaches depend upon school being experienced by pupils as a safe and supportive place to be (Dorado et al, 2016), and some researchers suggest that psychodynamic approaches have proved difficult to implement in authoritarian schools, with educators who have a
superficial understanding of the underpinning psychological principles (Kellett, 2011; Smith et al, 2017).

**Mapping the Concept of Safe Space**

The concept of safe space has been applied to a wide variety of places and practices, ranging from an actual physical space to a visualisation held in mind (Stengel & Weems, 2010; Treisman, 2017). Psychologists promote safe space in school as somewhere which should ideally be easily accessible and provide children with a sense of calm and containment (Bomber, 2013; Perry, 2000; Treisman, 2017). These spaces come in many forms ranging from well-resourced sensory rooms to makeshift structures in the corner of classrooms (NAIT, 2020). Safe spaces in schools are commonly designed by adults and can be constrained by lack of space, resources and an unclear purpose, meaning and usage (Treisman, 2017). Although envisioned by educators in the UK as a universally positive, inclusive strategy (Johnson et al, 2017), the contrasting body of (mainly US-based) researchers who question the taken for granted assumption that ‘safe space’ is beneficial (Boostrum, 1998; Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014; Stengel & Weems, 2010), and argue that ‘what we count as safe is an imaginary construction reliant on ritualized forms of control’ (Stengel & Weems, 2010 p.505), should alert us towards further investigation of the concept. As educators have a moral and ethical obligation to avoid stigmatising children facing difficulties in school (Gaffney et al, 2019), as well as a statutory duty to seek children’s views on their educational provision (SEND, 2016), it seems vital then to explore how the strategy of safe space is understood and experienced by children. As educators and psychologists we need to ask: Is it a positive inclusionary practice or does it perpetuate social exclusion and pedagogical differentiation (Florian, 2015), through becoming an ‘inclusive exclusion’ (Carbado et al, 2008, p.83)?

As the emphasis on inclusive places rather than systems has led to some pupils actually experiencing deeper inequality (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016), it seems imperative to research children’s
understanding of adult-designated inclusive places to ensure that educational practices and policies address their experiences (Cologon et al., 2019). In seeking to research children’s understanding of special educational provisions such as safe space therefore, it is pertinent to consider the oft cited ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Charlton, 1998, p.1) and to provide agency and voice to children’s understanding of place and space in the school context (Agbenyega, 2011).

**Defining Key Concepts and Frameworks**

Research within human geography and spatially oriented childhood studies, generally differentiates between the concepts of place and space (Agnew, 2011; Green & Turner, 2017). This research defines *space* as a specific, clear, physical location whereas *place* is less substantial and more often refers to a lived and experienced space imbued with power relations and personal meaning (Green & Turner, 2017; Jobb, 2019). *Safe space* in this study is initially defined as a physical location in school which children can access when feeling overwhelmed or anxious, and through the process of the research also encompasses a place of psychological and emotional safety envisaged within the school. It is both a space and a place. Schools are both a specific space and place where everyday activities and social life occur, and recent research has highlighted the importance of place-belonging to achieving emotional safety (Kyronlampi et al., 2021). *Place-belonging* therefore is defined as the personal and meaningful experience of place that is rooted in feelings of attachment and belonging to particular environments (Middleton, 2020). Regulation has become an umbrella term across research disciplines and practices (Nigg, 2017) and requires explicit definition within this research. Self-regulation in this thesis is defined as ‘the ability of controlling or directing one’s attention, thoughts, emotions, and actions’ (McClelland and Cameron, 2012, p. 136). The term encompasses a temperamental, effortful control (Rothbart, 1989), neuropsychological, executive functions (Barkley, 2001; Diamond, 2013), affective, emotion regulation (Gross, 2014), and motivational self-control (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). *Co-regulation* is defined here as the reciprocal sending and receiving of signals of safety between people, the connection between two nervous systems; each nourishing and regulating the other in the process (Porges, 2011; Treisman, 2017).
This thesis is underpinned by empowering humanistic pedagogies viewing children as active, agentic contributors to their own development and learning (Clark, 2001; Einarsdottir, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2019), alongside a psychodynamic framework valuing relational, regulating practices. Viewing this research through the lens of place-based education to include both the environment around the child and the inner place within the child, enabled the observation of play as a distinct and perceptible place. *Play* therefore is defined as a safe place where children learn about the world and about themselves (Nitecki & Chung, 2016,) and is also considered according to the neuroscientific definition of a neural exercise that enhances the co-regulation of physiological states involved in supporting mental and physical health (Porges, 2011). Porges polyvagal theory (PVT) which connects the autonomic nervous system with our sense of safety and with our behaviour and communication patterns, is an important theory used to understand children’s safety seeking activities. Valuing children as active participants with their own agency (Clark & Moss 2005; Harcourt & Hägglund 2013; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012), and prioritising their views in this research is a key framework and aligns with recent proposals that ‘education should not happen around students, nor should it be performed on them; they should be active agents in a collaborative process’ (Parker & Levinson, 2018, p.890). Children were viewed as active collaborators in this research, co-constructing meaning and sharing their valuable insights on safe space.

**Research Rationale**

This research therefore aimed to prioritise the voice of the child through a participatory approach where they actively construct the meaning of safe space in school in an open and undirected manner. As children’s views on safe space are underrepresented in the research literature, this thesis strived to prioritise and privilege the voices and views of the children, purposefully moving away from dominant adult discourses (Moss, 2017). This research took a social constructionist approach, viewing children as having an active role in the search for meanings (Clark, 2007; Rinaldi, 2001; Vygotsky, [1933] 1978). As teachers are responsible for operationalising safe space in the classroom it was important to include their views. The Mosaic Approach is a useful
methodology to ensure visible listening to the voice of the child, as well as to enable children to actively participate in the co-creation of meanings with adults around safe space in school. Making children’s understandings of their educational settings visible opens up many possibilities for adults and children to discuss and explore these understandings together and enable children to feel secure and valued (Clark, 2007). In this research therefore, a Mosaic-based Approach was adopted to initially explore the understanding of children and teachers of safe space in school. Through the participatory work with the children and the process of analysing the data, the original research question evolved and was refined to reflect the flexible and dynamic approach children indicated towards safe space. So, as well as exploring what children understand by safe space, this study considered what places children experienced and constructed and adapted to become safer. The analysis of data also indicated some discrepancies between child and teacher understanding of safe space, so a research question examining how teacher understandings differ from those of children was included. The initial broad research question looking at child and teacher understanding of safe space was developed throughout the research process to include:

i) *What are children’s understandings of safe space in school?*

ii) *What places within these spaces are experienced and constructed as safe?*

iii) *What are teachers’ understandings of safe spaces in the classroom?*

iv) *How do teacher understandings differ from those of children?*

**Overview of the thesis**

The thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter Two presents the literature review in the form of a narrative overview of current educational guidance relating to safe space, situated within the psychological frameworks implicitly underpinning it. An overview of the educational outworking’s of psychodynamically-informed practices is described and evaluated, leading to the
speculation that safe space in school risks being both conceptually and operationally blurred. A scoping review was then considered the best means of capturing and evaluating the current research findings on the conceptualisation and operationalisation of safe space in school. This section of the review identified the lack of research on children’s views of safe space and provided the context for situating their perspectives within humanistic psychological frameworks.

Chapter Three presents the methods which followed the principles of the multi-modal Mosaic approach, using puppetry, photography and child-led tours with seven children and interviews with three teachers from one primary school to gather verbal & visual representations of their understanding of safe space. Visual data was categorised and coded using content analysis with inductive, reflexive thematic analysis applied to verbal data to identify themes, in line with the social constructionist epistemological stance of this thesis.

The findings in Chapter Four document children’s multiple, dynamic understanding of safe space which were compared and contrasted with teacher’s understanding of it as a static, boundaried space. These findings are then discussed in relation to the literature in Chapter Five, leading to a more subtle, nuanced conceptualisation of safe space suggested in the conclusion, alongside some implications for educational policy and practice presented in Chapter Six.
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter aims to explore how the concept of safe space has merged into inclusive education ideology. It will initially explore its current use as a strategy for supporting children’s emotional regulation in school. It will then document the current conceptualisation of safe space in local, Northern Ireland (NI), and national, United Kingdom (UK), educational policies and practices, before situating it within psychological approaches supporting children’s social and emotional development in schools more generally. After consideration of the current literature on behaviourist and psychodynamic frameworks and pedagogical practices, the chapter will go on to present the challenge facing educators attempting to put nurturing, relational strategies into practice within a behaviourist, academically-prioritising education system. A scoping review is then undertaken to explore how safe space is currently operationalised and understood in schools. What emerges from the research is the need for a nuanced and considered exploration of what is meant by safe space, and how children feel psychologically safe in school more generally. The literature also highlights that specific groups of children’s voice/views are under researched.

Safe Space within Compulsory Education

In UK educational policy, safe space has been recently described as the second most popular anxiety management strategy for supporting pupils with SEN (Johnson et al, 2017), without an accompanying description of how this space is operationalised or conceptualised. The emotionally regulating purpose of safe space is often invoked when considering strategies to support pupils with social and communication differences, such as those diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or those children experiencing adversity and trauma. This idea of safe space as an individualised ‘inclusive’ (NAS,2018) place to go when feeling overwhelmed or needing time and space to regulate behaviour (NAIT, 2020) implies that those who are different will be nurtured and
included within school (Evans & Davies, 2004; Jackson, 2014). Even though this notion of safe space as engendering inclusion, diversity and social justice harks back to the identity politics origin of the term (Grimes, 2020), the controversial free speech aspect of the term has been confusingly reiterated by the Department for Education in England within an anti-radicalisation, counter-terrorism programme named ‘Prevent’ (Ramsay, 2017). Although this policy document suggests that school should attempt to prevent radicalisation of their pupils through providing a ‘safe space’ to discuss the risks associated with terrorism, it has been construed by some educationalists as a constraint to free speech rather than an enabler (Ramsay, 2017). Familiar objections towards political interference on appropriate discussion topics in the classroom gave rise to suggestions that difficult and risky conversations are preferable to safe and comfortable discourses (Marsden, 2015) which can further marginalise minority students (Callan, 2016). As this polarised discourse and conceptual confusion has the potential to further undermine the psychological safety and inclusion of the most marginalised students (Barratt, 2010; Iversen, 2019; Wanless, 2016), it seems essential to examine how this blurred concept is currently operationalised in educational practice.

Guidance Relating to the Use of Safe Space in UK schools

Safe space in education has been applied to a tangible physically located space as well as a psychologically safe space (Stengel & Weems, 2010; Treisman, 2017). Many recent guidance documents produced by education authorities and behavioural support services promote the use of a separate, clearly defined safe space containing resources to support the child to self-regulate and calm down. Descriptions range from: an area specific to autistic children when they need to regulate behavior and emotions (NAIT, 2020), a place available to anyone who needs to feel safe; to access information on wellbeing strategies and to have access to peer mentors (Kent County Council, 2019), a quiet place for regulating sensory or emotional responses (Highland County Council, 2020), a separate area for counselling, therapists and massage (Spalding, 2001), a room to promote de-escalation which is supervised by school staff (Mindpeace, 2020), a calm corner to help encourage self-regulation while keeping children in the classroom (Education Authority NI, 2019; TES, 2020),
and somewhere in the school where the pupil can have the time and space away from any source of anxiety (NAS, 2018). All of this guidance emphasises that this area is not to be used for disciplinary punishment, as an isolation room or as a reward for desired behavior, although the documents do acknowledge the need for school staff to monitor access to the space. The guidance documents highlight the practical features of location, décor and resources needed for the space and common suggestions are soft furnishings, dark tents, sensory resources and screened off areas of the classroom with individually tailored resources (EANI, 2019: Highland Council, 2020; Middleton Centre for Autism, 2019; NAIT, 2020; NAS, 2018). Most spaces in schools are designed, created, maintained, and managed by adults (Koralek & Mitchell, 2005; Nordin-Hultman, 2004; Rasmussen, 2004) in keeping with what the adult views as being important to the child, or important for the child (Nicholson, 2005). Recommendations for obtaining children’s views on their ideas for creating safe space in these guidance documents are uncommon, with only Kent County Council’s Inclusion and Wellbeing team providing explicit detail on how their Safe Spaces are co-produced, with young people involved in the surveying of needs, preparation, design, set-up and evaluation of the safe space.

**Local Guidance on the use of Safe Space in the Northern Ireland (NI)**

Recent Education Authority (EA) guidance has emphasised the systemic factors necessary to nurture, understand and support social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing in schools (DENI, 2020). The most recently updated version of the EA Special Educational Needs (SEN) Resource File for social and emotional support promotes ‘an ethos of a safe space to try, make mistakes and to fail’ (p.16), resonating with Arao & Clemens (2013) brave space, and the document also makes links between learning and wellbeing based on growth mindset (Dweck, 2009). This guidance uses the language of nurturing, trauma-informed practice, adverse childhood experiences, safeguarding, relationship building, incorporating the idea of the classroom as a safe base where,
‘Adults recognise the link between emotional containment and cognitive learning. Relationships are key. We need to feel safe and to trust our environment and the people around us to progress.’ (DENI, 2020, p.25)

The SEN guidance document called The Autistic Spectrum promotes a sensory or quiet area described as a place of calm and low demands (DENI, 2019). Nurturing approaches are currently being promoted for all local schools, following research providing evidence for the positive impact of nurture groups (Sloan et al, 2016) and an Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI, 2016) report indicating similar benefits. The Education Authority are currently facilitating the delivery of a ‘Whole School Nurturing Approaches Model of Support’ to all primary schools (DENI, 2020) which incorporates an ethos of school as a safe base (Boxall, 1976, 2002; Mackay et al, 2010). Alongside this statutory guidance is legislation which stresses the importance of seeking the views of children with SEN in the context of meeting their needs, such as the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of SEN, 1998 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order, 2005, which was further strengthened in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Act of 2016. Educational policy promotes safe space therefore as a nurturing and beneficial practice for children who are likely to need specialised and considered care in school, but does not seem to have substantially sought children’s views on the strategy (Sloan et al, 2016) to date.

Psychological Safety as a Prerequisite for Learning and Development

Education professionals and psychologists who promote emotional and psychological safe space in schools view this as a prerequisite for learning in its broadest sense to include academic learning and socio-emotional learning (March & Kearney, 2017). Research indicates that it is particularly important for children experiencing adversity in their lives to feel psychologically safe at school (Roffey, 2013; 2016), and further research evidences more positive behavioural and academic
outcomes in nurturing, inclusive, safe school environments (March & Kearney, 2017; McGrath & Noble, 2010; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Organisational psychology research provides substantial support for the idea that a psychologically safe environment can alleviate the tension involved in learning within hierarchical institutions, such as schools (Edmondson 2004; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Schein 1996). Educational research also proposes that creating psychologically safe school environments may: promote greater self-regulation in children (Merritt et al, 2012), increase access to positive, authentic and empathetic relationships (Gong et al, 2012; Seligson & MacPhee, 2004), limit the potential risks and threats perceived by children in school (Wanless, 2016). Driscoll and Pianta (2010) and promote understanding of children’s challenging behaviour in schools (Zack et al., 2015). Children’s ‘challenging’ behaviour has been reframed by neuroscientists, psychiatrists and psychologists as their communicating feelings of psychological unsafety and emotional dysregulation (Mate, 2011; Perry, 2014; Van der Kolk, 2014) and many advocateremedying these behaviours through responsive teachers who can increase the child’s sense of psychological safety (Zack et al, 2016).

However, educational psychology research has identified that although a variety of psychological theories are drawn upon to promote learning and development in schools (Hart, 2010; Law & Woods, 2018), they sometimes lack an explicit description of the psychological principles underpinning the practice (Porter, 2020). It seems timely then to unpack some of these psychological frameworks to further understand how safe space came to be such a popular strategy for supporting emotional regulation in schools.

**Behaviourist Psychological Frameworks**

The predominant psychological framework in UK schools has for many years been strongly influenced by the principles of behavioural psychology, with a focus on rewards, sanctions and punishments as strategies for improving behaviour (Fontana 1984; Harold & Corcoran, 2013; Nash et al, 2015; Rogers, 2012). Behaviourism has been described as having enduring appeal to
educationalists due to its immediate, quick-fix nature (Evans et al., 2014), but detractors propose that it: can lead to a reduction in intrinsic motivation (Bromfield 2006; Hart, 2010), can intensify antagonistic behaviour (Greene, 2009; Taylor, 2010), and can ultimately lead to school exclusion (Nash et al., 2015). Strong criticism has been directed against behaviourist approaches for children labelled with social and emotional difficulties in particular (Botha & Kourkoutas, 2016), due to the long-term negative effects of punitive techniques and focus on enforcing conformity to rules rather than exploring the underlying problems causing the antisocial behaviour (Bock andBorders 2012; Cheney and Jewell 2012). More recently, behaviourist approaches have been described as coercing children into accepting the status quo, adjusting to established power structures and damaging emotional safety (Porter, 2020).

Concerns that behavioural approaches may neglect the influences of affective and environmental factors on behaviour (Hart, 2010; Roffey, 2016) have led to EPs favouring relationship based approaches where context, meaning and agency are prioritised (Law, 2018). This shift away from a behaviouristic, determinist lens (Porter, 2020) towards a relational approach underpinned by psychodynamic, humanist and systemic psychological approaches underlies much current educational psychology practice (Law, 2018). However, if governmental educational policies continue to be underpinned by behaviourist frameworks (Williamson, 2017), it is important that teachers do not receive mixed messages on how to manage behaviour in school (Parker et al., 2016). Highlighting this conflict between an inclusive, emotionally safe model of school and a competitive, performance focussed government agenda, Parker et al further posit that there is a danger that nurturing strategies underpinned by a need for psychological safety, are not compatible with behaviourist school policies and procedures. Further exploration of the effectiveness of current psychodynamic psychological frameworks within school practice is essential therefore to understand the conceptualisation of safe space in school.
**Psychodynamic frameworks in school**

Psychodynamic approaches emphasise the deep and complex roots of psychological difficulties, and the possibility of long-term change through personal development, with an emphasis on building relationships and trust, safety and security, and emotional containment and expression (Evans et al, 2014; Hart, 2010). Psychodynamic approaches in schools are often based on attachment theory, suggesting that early emotional bonds are an integral part of human nature, with the attachment figure acting as a secure base from which the child can explore (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby, 1951). The secure base is understood as an emotional connection with at least one sensitive and responsive attachment figure who meets the child’s needs, and to whom the child can turn to as a safe haven when upset or anxious (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). The psychodynamic language of secure base, safe haven and emotional containment is strongly resonant in the term safe space (Twemlow et al, 2002). Although attachment theory underpins many psychotherapeutic interventions, educational researchers have begun to raise concerns that there is little knowledge of its implications for learning outside the clinical setting (Nash et al, 2015), as well as a long-established but largely overlooked debate on the ambiguity of the term attachment itself (Duschinsky, 2021). Nevertheless, attachment theory implicitly provides the basis for a variety of psychological approaches in school such as nurturing schools (Bennathan, 1998; Boxall, 1976; 2002), the secure base model (Schofield & Beek, 2015; Twemlow et al, 2002) and attachment-aware frameworks (Bomber 2007; Bomber & Hughes, 2013; Cairns & Stanway, 2004; Geddes, 2006; 2017). These approaches have in turn influenced the introduction of safe space in the classroom and so will be explored individually in more detail below.

**Attachment-aware schools (AAS).** Attachment-aware schools is a project where academics have collaborated with school-based practitioners to promote practitioner awareness of attachment in relation to child behaviours and learning (Rose et al, 2019). The focus is on using relational-based strategies and interventions to address the needs of children and young people. The AAS framework
illustrated in Figure 1, identifies the key elements for enabling effective implementation of attachment awareness in schools.

**Figure 1.**

*The Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) Framework, (Parker et al, 2016)*

AAS are currently being highlighted as a beneficial way of nurturing and relating to children who have experienced or are experiencing adverse life events (Cole et al, 2013; Parker et al, 2016). Claimed to provide a universal whole-school strategy, enabling individual needs to be met (Parker & Levinson, 2018), AAS focus on relationships between staff and pupils, emphasising social and emotional learning (Rose & Gilbert, 2017). School staff are often trained to understand and regulate emotions through approaches such as Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al. 1996) and mindfulness, alongside highlighting attachment theories (Bomber, 2007), and neuroscientific developments (Porges, 2011, Schore & Schore, 2008; Siegel, 2012). Although researchers cite a growing evidence
base on the effectiveness of whole school attachment-based strategies (Rose et al, 2017), it must be noted that most of the researchers involved are already advocates or founders of the approach and positive outcomes have been reported by school staff rather than pupils (Kelly et al, 2020; Rose et al, 2019; Zsolnai & Szabó, 2020). Researchers have admitted that there is a need to elicit children’s views on their experiences of the attachment-aware approach (Rose, et al, 2019), and with the recommendation of a designated safe space within schools and classrooms featuring prominently within AAS approaches (Kelly et al, 2020), it seems important to act on this.

**School as a Secure Base.** Twemlow et al. (2002) hypothesised that for a child to feel safe and to learn at school certain psychological conditions, derived from psychoanalytic theories, must be met. These conditions include: a feeling of safety and wellbeing derived from a healthy development, a holding environment of adults who can respond appropriately to developmental needs, an environment that provides containment and helps children process negativity in relationships; processes that help children regulate affect, value relationships, and learn to mentalise, in a secure attachment experience, and finally, supports that encourage children to function as responsible members of a community. The growing interest in conceptualising schools and classrooms as a psychologically therapeutic milieu (Perry, 2000; Geddes, 2006, Bomber, 2007; Bomber & Hughes, 2013) led to neuroscientists and psychologists promoting the idea of having a physically located safe space for emotional containment in school (Treisman, 2017; Van Kolk, 2014). When advising teachers on creating an emotionally safe classroom, Perry (2000) suggests letting ‘children find some space and solitude when they seem to be overwhelmed,’ and urges teachers to create ‘a safe "home base" from which the child will explore’ (p.2). Similarly, Treisman, (2017) suggests schools create sensory and regulation rooms where pupils can experience feeling safe, calm, secure, contained and being welcomed and valued. Strongly evoking psychodynamic language, she suggests that the school environment should be a “brick mother” (p.151) and ideally should embody the principles of being a safe haven and secure base.
Nurturing Schools. Developmental and social psychological theories have developed alongside neuroscience to inform the pedagogical framework of nurture groups and nurturing schools (Bretherton, 2006; Lucas, 2010; 2019). The classroom as a safe base is one of six key principles underpinning the context, organisation and curriculum of nurture groups (Lucas et al, 2010). The nurture group classroom is deliberately designed ‘to create an educational experience that is rooted in feelings of emotional security’ (Cooper and Tiknaz, 2007, p27), taking into account the impact of both the ‘emotional space’ (Middleton, 2020 p.37) and the physical environment and the positive effects of both spaces on building attachment. As large scale studies have consistently reported on the benefits of nurture groups for improving children’s social, emotional and academic outcomes (Bennett, 2015; Hughes & Schlösser, 2014; Ofsted, 2011; Steer, 2005), many educational authorities have adopted nurturing approaches as a whole school behaviour policy (Coleman, 2020; Kearney & Nowek, 2019). However, similar to AAS, most research on nurture groups has described adult perspectives on improved outcomes, often reported by nurture group advocates, teachers using nurturing approaches, and some parents, with only limited independent research exploring children’s perspectives (Sloan et al, 2016).

Critique of Psychodynamic Approaches. While there does appear to be evidence for the impact of attachment-based approaches, both in terms of outcomes for individual children and families, and on the practice of those adult professionals involved (Dingwall & Sebba, 2017), these have rarely taken children’s views into account. Some educational researchers have taken issue with promoting emotional literacy and wellbeing in school, suggesting this creates a dependence on therapies derived from popular culture, rather than any sound theoretical educational framework (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). Parker and Levinson (2018) have also warned that some teachers and parents view socio-emotional learning as an add-on to the real business of education and caution that an over-emphasis on wellbeing could risk alienating some parents and teachers.
As attachment approaches originated from an individual psychotherapeutic model, there have also been suggestions that psychodynamic approaches in school imply a within-child deficit model (Parker & Levinson, 2018). Attachment-based approaches have also been queried as inappropriate for children suffering from severe trauma, due to a perceived lack of safeguarding and a one-size-fits-all approach (Bomber & Hughes, 2013; Golding, 2013). Smith and colleagues (2017) argument that simplistic assumptions about attachment have been over-dominant in social care, with a pick-and-mix approach to neuroscience, and a biologising of issues leading to a deficit medical model emphasising disorders and normative family structures, could equally be applied to the education context. Ecclestone (2017) also highlights attachment-based approaches as undermining individual agency due to the emphasis on vulnerability rather than a more liberating humanistic narrative promoting autonomy, empowerment and self-help.

Attachment-based approaches also place emotional demands on teachers, given the psychological investment they require, and caution is advised around the professional boundaries between teacher and therapist (Howes, 2000). Trauma-informed approaches have been proposed as a solution-focused, more systemic and less deficit-based alternative to socio-emotional development in schools (Brunzell et al, 2016), and these will now be considered in more detail.

**Trauma-Informed frameworks**

Similar to AAS, trauma-informed frameworks position the classroom as a daily therapeutic setting, conceptualising schools as having the potential to promote post-traumatic healing and growth (Perry, 2006; Perry & Daniels, 2016; SAMSHA, 2014). A trauma-informed approach depends upon school being experienced by pupils as a psychologically safe and supportive place (Dorado et al, 2016) with a pragmatic emphasis on repairing regulatory abilities and dysregulating the stress response (Brunzell et al, 2015) which differentiates it from the attachment frameworks. Local NI educational guidance is proposing a move towards understanding, nurturing and supporting social, behaviour and emotional wellbeing through a trauma lens (DENI, 2020), illustrated in Figure 2.
The emphasis on emotional regulation and connection with the child (Schofield et al 2012), coupled with an understanding of the regulatory repair needed to counteract developmental trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014), has led to the promotion of psychological safe space practice (Perry & Daniels, 2016) in trauma-informed schools. The practical strategies suggested for improving regulatory capacity have been described as increasing pupil’s regulatory abilities, as well as increasing teachers’ own abilities to manage classroom behaviours through co-regulation and de-escalation (Brunzell et al, 2016). Trauma-informed approaches recommend that teachers proactively establish trust, validation, and safety to support children’s self-regulation (Treisman, 2017). Although trauma-informed approaches are lauded across many disciplines (Cole et al, 2013), like AAS they require a depth of psychological and neuroscientific knowledge and corresponding skills which some teachers may not currently have (Porter, 2020).
Conflation of Therapy and Education. Again, the trauma-informed approach has attracted criticism for conflating therapy and education (Ecclestone et al, 2005; Gillies, 2011), and caution has been recommended when applying these techniques in practice (Mayer & Cobb, 2000), so as to avoid re-traumatising children (Gaffney, 2019). There is a risk of educators being placed in a double-bind when attempting to combine the current traditional, normative, behaviourist classroom policies (Parker & Levinson, 2018), with a conflicting government mental health and wellbeing agenda situated within psychotherapeutic concepts of attachment and developmental trauma (Perryman et al, 2017). There have also been suggestions that there is a lack of conceptual clarity around the therapeutic concept of regulatory repair which underpins much trauma-informed practice (Bomber, 2013). Self-regulation has become an umbrella term in research and practice making the consolidation of findings across fields difficult (Nigg, 2017). Within schools although regulation commonly refers to a child’s ability to manage their behaviour and emotions appropriately (Erdman & Hertel, 2019), there could be a risk that this is understood differently across different agencies around the child.

Disentangling the Metaphor of Safe Space

There can be no doubt that safe space is a misunderstood and confused concept in education (Barratt, 2010; Clark-Parsons, 2019, Grimes, 2020), which has been problematized in polarised debates in higher education circles (Clark-Parsons, 2019; Rosenfeld & Noterman, 2014), yet has received universal approval as a benevolent and beneficial strategy in mainstream education (Barratt, 2010; Boostrom, 1998). While linguistic debates are critical to provide clarification of the meaning of safe space there is also an urgency in reviewing and understanding the operationalisation of it in daily classroom practice, especially since it is used as a strategy for some of the most distressed and marginalised students (Johnson et al, 2017). It seems salient therefore to
review the current research literature on safe space in schools, with specific reference to how it is understood by the children designated to use it and the teachers who operationalise it.

**Literature Review Search Strategies.** Based on the preliminary research generated for the research proposal on safe space, four search pathways were devised to generate the material for this chapter: grey literature searches; snowballing from reference lists, author searches and citations; Google searches and a scoping review of relevant electronic databases. The next part of this chapter will further deconstruct the concept of safe space by scoping the research literature to identify current child and teacher perspectives on safe space.

**Scoping Review.**

Pham et al, (2014) suggest that a scoping review can be of particular use when the topic is of a complex or heterogeneous nature, as is the conceptualisation of safe space in school. Scoping reviews serve to synthesize evidence and assess the scope of literature on a topic (Tricco et al, 2018) which was considered useful to consider when attempting to determine the extent, range and nature of research activity in the area of safe space in school, with specific reference to the conceptualisations of the children and teachers who use it. The review also aimed to summarise research findings and identify research gaps in the existing literature on school safe space.

**Definition of Safe Space for the Scoping Review.** Safe space was defined for the purposes of the search as a physically located area in school which children could access when feeling overwhelmed or anxious, or a place of psychological and emotional safety envisaged within the school. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were carefully considered due to conceptual confusion around the term.

Scoping Review Question. The next part of this chapter will therefore further deconstruct the concept of safe space by scoping the research literature to identify current child and teacher
perspectives on safe space with a specific focus on the question ‘What are child and teacher perceptions of safe space in school?’

**Search Process.** Key search terms used were: “safe space” in school; safe space in primary or secondary education; a safe space; safe spaces; Teacher AND Child* AND “safe space*”; safe learning space*; teacher or parent or education; views or perceptions or perspectives

The electronic databases Scopus; ERIC; PsychINFO; British Education Index and ProQuest were selected for their coverage of psychological, educational and multidisciplinary research and searches were conducted between June 2020 and February 2021.

**Screening for Eligibility.** Studies were included that met the following inclusion criteria:

1. Safe space was used as a specific term within the article as a physical or psychological place within the school setting.
2. Research was conducted in pre-, primary or secondary school settings.
3. Research used qualitative methods (such as interviews and focus groups) or mixed methods where a qualitative research strand was evident.
4. Primary data sources were used, based on original research.
5. Studies were available in the English Language (or could be readily translated from another language);
6. UK, US and International literature were considered.

The following exclusion criteria were used: (a) focus was on specific identities, i.e safe space relating to cultural, religious, sexual, gender, political identity; (b) safety was defined by personal safety in the community in terms of protection from violence, bullying, drugs and alcohol or potentially harmful physical environments; (c) manualised and standardised school interventions called Safe Space; and (d) higher education contexts. Table 1 specifies the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the identified studies and provides the rationale for applying each criterion.
Table 1

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Scoping Review

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Exclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptualisation of Safe space</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Space conceptualised as designated physical/psychological place within school</td>
<td>i) focus was on specific identities, i.e safe space relating to cultural, religious, sexual, gender, political identity; ii) safety was defined by personal safety in the community in terms of protection from violence, bullying, drugs and alcohol or potentially harmful physical environments; iii) manualised and standardised school interventions called Safe Space; and iv) higher education contexts</td>
<td>Broader range of children required to explore safe space in general Psychological and emotional safety to be explored as well as physical safety General designated safe space to be explored rather than specific programmes Focus on compulsory education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Publication Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study contains primary or secondary data.</td>
<td>Primary &amp; secondary data needed to explore adult &amp; child understanding of safe space.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Children & adults in pre-school, primary or secondary education settings. Further & Higher education students & staff, safe space in the community/outside of school settings. Compulsory school settings only to be considered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Type</th>
<th>Qualitative studies and mixed methods with qualitative strand.</th>
<th>Studies using only quantitative methods to gather empirical data.</th>
<th>Views and perceptions of school staff to be explored.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The scoping review identified 58 studies as potentially relevant, which were exported to Microsoft Excel for screening; 9 were excluded as duplicates and a further 7 excluded after screening of titles and abstracts. Subsequently, 42 full-text articles were read for eligibility and a further 30 were excluded according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The identification, screening and selection of studies is shown in Figure 3 according to a PRISMA Flow diagram (Moher et al, 2009).
Figure 3

Prisma Flow Diagram (Moher et al, 2009)

Records identified through database searching (n=58) → Duplicate Records excluded (n=9)

Records after duplicates removed (n=49) → Records screened (n=49) → Records excluded according to Table 1 (n=7)

Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n=42) → Full-text articles excluded, according to Table 1 criteria (n=30)

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n=12)
Search Findings

Twelve articles which included safe space conceptualised as a psychologically safe place, i.e. with the function of providing psychological and emotional safety, or spatially located as a specific designated area of the school, were selected and read and an overview of these is included in Table 2, after a brief description of the general and methodological characteristics of the studies.

General Characteristics

Four studies took place in Australia, three in the US, three in the UK, (all in England), one in Spain (Catalonia), and one was an international systematic review. Sample size varied from five to 225. Five of the studies reported on safe space from adult viewpoints and five from children’s perspectives, with the remaining two having both adult and child participants.

Methodological Characteristics

There were a variety of age ranges among child participants with two studies focusing on adolescents, two on primary school aged children, and one with pre-schoolers. Four out of the five adult perspective studies were with school staff, one study was undertaken with mothers. Methods were mostly qualitative, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and child-orientated approaches, such as mapping and photography, with three mixed methods studies which used questionnaires to correlate data quantitatively.
Table 2

*Characteristics of Included Studies (Continued over next few pages)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study #</th>
<th>Author(s) / Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Definition of Safe Space</th>
<th>Methodological Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agbenyega (2011)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24 Pre-school children age 4-5</td>
<td>Explores how children make sense of safe and unsafe learning spaces</td>
<td>A habitual site or territory where a child felt safe or content, relaxed and creative, without obsessive adult intrusion</td>
<td>Participatory visual and observation approaches, photo-elicitation and interviews, conversational analysis, systematic content analysis and semiotic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biag (2014)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>20 Children aged 13-14</td>
<td>Safe and unsafe spaces in school</td>
<td>Social, spatial, and temporal aspects of safe and unsafe locations</td>
<td>Participatory visual research methods, photography, photo-elicitation interviews &amp; mapping. Grounded theory analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Díaz-Vicario &amp; Gairín Sallán (2017)</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>49 School staff &amp; 2 parents</td>
<td>Exploring the concept of school safety with school staff</td>
<td>An environment that promotes physical, emotional and social wellbeing, both individually and collectively.</td>
<td>Interviews focus groups and secondary data analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Frey et al (2020)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>Unspecified number of teachers &amp; students</td>
<td>Trauma sensitive redesign of school co-produced by teachers &amp; students</td>
<td>Physical and emotionally safe classrooms</td>
<td>Action research case study, photography, walking tours and discussion. No formal analysis, recommendations for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kelly et al (2020)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>154 School staff</td>
<td>Attachment Aware Schools programme reviewed</td>
<td>Both psychological (whole school) and physical place</td>
<td>Action research, mixed methods: questionnaires analysed quantitatively, and interviews analysed with Thematic Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Sample Characteristics</td>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Langhout &amp; Annear (2011)</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>225 Children aged 5-10</td>
<td>Child perspectives of safe and unsafe school spaces</td>
<td>Physically located places of safety within whole school</td>
<td>Mixed methods; questionnaire &amp; focus groups, all verbal data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lewis (2009)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>24 Children aged 8</td>
<td>Child perspectives of safe and unsafe in school &amp; their community.</td>
<td>Learning spaces, play spaces and time out areas undefined</td>
<td>Photo-elicitation methodology in combination with semi-structured interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>Research Focus</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Robinson (2018)</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>27 Children aged 7-17 &amp; 13 adults</td>
<td>Barriers to personal safety for students with an intellectual disability and the adults who care for and work with them</td>
<td>Participatory research - verbal interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ross, H. (2019)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>5 Senior teachers</td>
<td>Staff rationale for setting up, designing and review of room within 1 school</td>
<td>Room for autistic children provided for short-term crisis intervention</td>
<td>Action research, case study, assess, plan, do, review approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Turner &amp; Braine (2014)</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>32 Science teachers</td>
<td>Teachers understanding of safe space explored</td>
<td>Psychologically, physical and intellectually safe</td>
<td>Mixed methods, questionnaires &amp; group interview. Themes identified according to pre-identified categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adult Understanding of Safe Space in School

Only two studies overall incorporated designated safe spaces in school. Both studies were based in England and action research based, undertaken by teachers or education professionals working in the schools. Ross (2019) reported on the setting up, evaluation and review of an adult designed safe space room involving five secondary school teachers. The room was described as a short-term crisis intervention for autistic children who were becoming overwhelmed during the school day. Although adult-led in design and initially focused on managing behaviour, this safe space changed under review to fit the children’s needs, becoming an emotionally containing space where the pupils could regulate and process their emotions through games, creative activities, friendships and talking with adults. This article prioritised adult perspectives on the benefits of a separate safe space, with only paraphrased excerpts of pupil voice throughout, and concluded that teachers perceive the safe space to have improved student behaviour and social interaction. This study did however, take place in a small private school, with an unspecified number of students receiving a high degree of adult teaching assistant support, and so may not be applicable in mainstream secondary schools.

Kelly et al (2020) reviewed an attachment-aware schools programme in England with school staff from seventeen schools, using mixed methods by analysing staff questionnaires quantitatively and identifying further themes through qualitative interviews. A range of schools were involved in this review including secondary, primary, special schools and a pupil referral unit. Safe space was not the focus of this study as the aim was to evaluate the effectiveness of attachment awareness programmes on whole school development. Similar to Ross (2019), safe space was perceived by school staff as beneficial for developing a safer and more nurturing environment. The review reports that staff became aware of the need for a ‘safe, quiet space…where young people can go to calm down’ (p.345). The only detail provided around what children had contributed towards safe space, was the décor, which is similar to the teacher-led study in the US (Frey et al, 2020). As with the
other teacher led studies (Frey et al, 2020; Ross, 2019), the article does not describe pupil views in
detail and it is noted that the lead author, Kelly, is a founder and proponent of AAS which may have
impacted on the reported effectiveness of the programme.

Another teacher-led action research article by Frey and colleagues (2020) described their
journey towards making their classrooms trauma-informed and safe, inviting spaces for students.
Their trauma-sensitive redesign in one high school involved teachers walking through the school
with a student committee taking photos and discussing where environmental changes might be
made. The authors describe safe space as a ‘den’ (p.2) offering a sense of protection, a safe place to
observe the world from, or an alternative retreat space. The article includes three direct quotes from
students in relation to classroom colour schemes, with other student suggestions paraphrased and
combined with teacher recommendations. This is a descriptive article which does not analyse or
examine the meaning or understanding of safety, as it solely focuses on environmental changes
needed for physically restorative spaces. Implicit within the article is the idea that a calmer, more
neutral environment will be easier for traumatised students to be in, and it would be interesting to
hear more from students in this school to understand if it was experienced by them as safer and
calmer.

Díaz-Vicario and Gairín Sallán’s (2017) study in Catalonia encompassed a broader idea of
safety and suggests the importance of teacher training and awareness raising to include physical,
emotional and social wellbeing in school. Forty-nine school staff and two family focus groups were
interviewed, along with a review of policy documentation to explore nine schools’ safety
environment. Safe space was defined as well-being in its broadest sense, with a clear distinction
between physical, social and emotional safety. This research proposed the creation of a more
positive socio-emotional safety environment and suggests this should be a whole-school endeavour,
rather than just the responsibility of management. The authors advocate for student involvement in
creating a safer school culture, and that awareness of a broad conceptualisation of safety be built
into trainee teacher programmes. This study also proposes that school safety should be explicitly endorsed within policy as well as practice.

 Mothers of autistic children in Australia also endorse safe space in school describing it as a ‘significant innovation’ (p.90) which enabled their children’s inclusion within mainstream education by providing individualised and targeted support (Reupert et al, 2015). This Australian study, focused on school inclusion, asked fourteen mothers of autistic children about supportive strategies provided by schools. Mothers described a safe space within school variously as: a ‘meltdown room’ (p.90), containing beanbags and toys and with school systems in place to identify when a child is getting wound up, removal of the child from an overwhelming environment to a place where they can ‘decompress’ (p.90) and they also valued discreet adult supervision in this space. Reupert and colleagues (2015) concluded however, that it would be important to seek alternative views of students and teachers as this might generate different results from parental perceptions.

 Focusing on English secondary school teachers, Turner and Braine (2014) explored twenty-four trainees and eight experienced teachers’ understanding of safe space using mixed methods of questionnaires and focus group interviews. They found that most trainee teacher responses considered safe classrooms as those where pupils are comfortable about taking risks in their learning and voicing opinions, and where there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. Experienced teachers reported that a safe classroom was where pupils could express their thoughts, feel comfortable and be safe from harm. The authors conclude that the concept of safe space has been used by all teachers differently and urge further exploration and understanding of the term as not just an educational metaphor, but as to how it relates to social and emotional learning in school. Teacher emphasis on comfort within this article raise concerns about the danger to intellectual progress and personal development when safety is conflated with comfort (Boostrom, 1998; Callan, 2016), especially in the context of a science classroom it might be more stimulating to learn within a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013).
In summary, most research involving adults promotes safe space as a positive strategy for psychological wellbeing and suggests a spatially located area as beneficial, even though the children who use this space appear to have only been consulted about the décor and furnishings of this adult-designated space. Adult discourses on safe space in these articles bring to mind Boostrom’s (1998) concerns that it is a response to an alienating world and classrooms that unthinkingly conflate safety with comfort may be repressing individuality and diversity. It is relevant therefore to explore if this overused and under-theorised metaphor (Barratt, 2010) is experienced by children as positively as adults assume. The next section will look at what the research literature provides in terms of children’s understanding and experience of safe space.

**Child Understanding of Safe Space in School**

Apart from O’Gorman and colleagues (2016) systematic review, all of the other 5 studies focused on safety as a binary concept of safe or unsafe, which could be considered over-simplistic for such a contested and individually experienced notion. Three of the studies were focused on unsafe spaces in school (Biag, 2014; Langhout & Annear, 2011; Robinson, 2018) and areas outside of these were assumed to be safe and therefore given less attention. Participatory and visual research methods were used in most of the articles included and, although purporting to be from children’s perspectives, they were adult led and designed according to adult assumptions of safe meaning free from harm. Two studies prepared photographs or labelled maps of safe/unsafe places in advance (Biag, 2014; Langhout & Annear, 2011) and directed the children towards these spaces, and most studies prioritised verbal reports from children as the main method of data collection. Three articles are from Australia, two are from the US, with one systematic review of international literature, meaning there were no UK based studies from children’s perspectives.

In a conference paper presented in Australia, Lewis (2009) described action research involving twenty-four 8-year old children taking photos of learning spaces, play spaces, and time out
areas. The photo elicitation methodology in combination with semi-structured interviews appeared to demonstrate the importance of feeling safe and the need to have safe physical spaces at school for the children. Through words and photos, children described the enjoyment they had in having wide spaces to run in, as well as having trees and a sandpit to play in when they wanted to be alone. It is interesting to note that unsafe spaces in the playground were described as those where there was bullying or social isolation, and this study led to some schools redesigning play areas according to children’s wishes. There is however, no clear definition of safe space in this study, just a brief description of the places children photographed (photos were not included), and it would have been interesting to have more in-depth detail on what children actually said and reproductions of photographs to illustrate this.

Biag (2014) also used photo-elicitation interviews and mapping with twenty young adolescents in California to explore the safe and unsafe spaces on campus. Safe spaces were described by the author as those where students could access informational, social, and emotional support, as well as ‘opportunities to distance themselves from life’s stressors’ (p.165). A majority of students in this high school identified the school library as the safest place describing it as ‘comfortable...with a sense of calmness...a place where you can let all your thoughts out’ (p.175). The sense of a solitary retreat is similar to Frey and colleagues (2020) conception of trauma-sensitive classrooms, but as the student participants in this study were described as gifted high-achievers, they might be more likely to feel comfortable in the library than other students. Nevertheless, Biag (2014) proposed that visual methods can stimulate empowerment, self-efficacy, and a sense of community among the participants, while generating valuable information for school leaders. This study however was adult-led and directed as it was designed to inform school leaders of areas of unsafety as part of a school improvement plan. The focus therefore was skewed towards places where students felt unsafe and, although it purported to contain ‘visual narratives,’ the photographs reproduced in the study are of empty places without people or explanation and seem devoid of meaning. Biag (2014) highlighted the restrictive nature of the photography as school leaders.
determined only five specific places be included. The author suggests that future, less restrictive research may uncover the ‘social, spatial and temporal dynamics’ (p.181) of school safe spaces to generate deeper insight and ultimately promote pupil wellbeing.

Similarly focused on unsafe areas in school, Robinson (2018) interviewed twenty-seven students with an intellectual disability aged between seven and seventeen alongside thirteen adults in Australia. Safe space in school here was conceptualised as being free from harm and key barriers to personal safety were uncovered such as, feeling unheard and isolated, feeling that help was insufficient, or being unable to ask for help. Safe spaces were described by the students not as specific places but as interpersonal relationships, i.e. having someone who knows and values you, being acknowledged, listened to and having concerns taken seriously. However, the author describes how adults spoke for the student at times during the interviews, reasoning that this was due to the nature of their disability. As solely verbal methods were used, and student voice is paraphrased by the author, it is not clear which excerpts are student views and which are adult concerns. Due to the chronic harm uncovered during this study the author stresses the clear need for further research which explores safety for students in their school context, especially for those experiencing marginalisation. This study emphasises the need for school systems to ensure dignity safety (Callan, 2016) and provide a space for students to participate and voice their opinions (Lundy, 2007).

O’Gorman and colleagues (2016) undertook an international systematic review of school as a safe place for marginalised students, as in those who had been placed in alternative education, due to having been excluded from mainstream placements. According to the reviewed articles students felt schools were sanctuaries when they offered physical, emotional and psychological safe spaces; fostered a sense of community; enabled them to affirm their racial/ethnic pride and employed flexible behavioural supports. This review highlighted the importance of seeking the perspectives of marginalised young people, but as the majority of articles reviewed were from the US (20 out of 24 in total, with only 2 from the UK), the authors recommend more research with marginalised
students be carried out in other countries. It is interesting that student voices in this review emphasise inclusion and diversity in terms of their identity, as this echoes the political origins of safe space as a place for collective strength, inclusion and diversity (Arao & Clemens, 2013).

Similar to Robinson (2018) and Biag (2014), Langhout & Annear (2011) used verbal data collection methods to explore children’s safe and unsafe school places in the US. Adult-designed questionnaires, booklets and maps were produced for 225 children under 10 to label places as safe, unsafe or unsure. The researchers questioned children on safety but did not provide a definition and children seem to have interpreted it in the physical sense as unsafe places were labelled in those areas where physical injury or violence occurred. Langhout and Annear suggest that just because a school is not considered unsafe does not necessarily mean that children experience it as safe. The authors acknowledge that school safety experiences are complex and context-dependent and urge involving children fully in programmes designed to increase safety.

Agbenyega (2011), used photo-elicitation methods with pre-schoolers in Australia to explore how they made sense of safe and unsafe learning spaces. Safe learning spaces were clearly defined as ‘a habitual site or territory where a child felt safe or content, relaxed and creative, without obsessive adult intrusion’ (p.163). Agbenyega found that children felt safe in ‘liberated spaces’ (p.166) where they could play and interact with each other freely and described unsafe spaces as those where their learning was disrupted or restricted by adults ‘policing’ (p.169) them. Safe spaces were construed in this research as places where children felt safe and content to follow their own curiosity in terms of learning and this corresponds with humanistic, progressive educational philosophies valuing visible listening and child agency (Rinaldi, 2001; Clark, 2017).

The visual, creative methods employed by some of the researchers seemed to lead to a more nuanced understanding of children’s perspectives (Agbenyega, 2011; Biag, 2014; Lewis, 2009). However, not all researchers clearly define safe space and the definitions provided mainly focus on physical safety. Studies focusing on unsafe places suggest that children feel safer with adult
supervision and interaction (Biag, 2014; Langhout & Annear, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Robinson, 2018), but this does not necessarily imply that safe spaces require adult presence. Agbenyega (2011) finds children feel safer in liberated spaces free from adult intrusion as their presence sometimes restricts learning due to over supervision and direction. The research focusing on marginalised children (O’Gorman et al, 2016; Robinson 2018;) accentuates their need to be heard, affirmed and acknowledged within strong interpersonal relationships. It is concerning that none of the research with children took place in the UK, even though the dominant discourse (Moss, 2017) here recommends safe space for marginalised children (Johnson et al, 2017, Kelly et al, 2020; Perry, 2000; Treisman, 2017). The dearth of evidence as to how children experience and understand safe space in schools, conflicts with its promotion as a universally benign and beneficial intervention (Frey et al, 2020; Kelly et al, 2020; Ross, 2019). Arao and Clemen’s (2013) query asking if safe space is an ‘inclusive exclusive’ is not answered by the research literature reviewed. In terms of designated, specific safe spaces in schools the research cites adult’s evidenced views of its benefits, with children seemingly only consulted in terms of décor and furnishings. Teacher views on safe space also seemed varied and unclear so it would seem timely to research the understanding of child users of safe space alongside the views of their teachers who are responsible for implementing this in practice.

Humanistic Psychological Frameworks: Children as Experts in their Own Lives

The person-centred counselling style of Carl Rogers and the corresponding humanistic approach to psychological health has informed progressive education movements which take a pragmatic view of children as competent, constructivist social leaners (Porter, 2020). Advocates of humanist and progressive education such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Friedrich Froebel identified tensions between traditional education which ‘conditioned children into docility, receptivity and obedience’ (Dewey, 1938, p.18) and progressive education, which placed emphasis
on ‘expression, individuality and learning through experience’ (Dewey, 1938, p.20). Progressive educational ideologies adopted by the Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1993) and Montessori (Montessori, 2013) preschools promote unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961), and the autonomy of children as learners, alongside Froebel’s belief in the value of play (Manning, 2005). This humanistic and progressive approach to pedagogy emphasises the value of listening to children (Clark, 2010; Edwards et al, 1998; Rinaldi, 2001), enabling their communication (Botsoglou et al, 2019; Cagliara et al, 2016), recognising them as experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994) and ultimately increasing their participation in educational decisions (Lundy, 2007). Humanistic approaches emphasise participation and agency and would view learning as dynamic and the classroom as a place of individual expression, more in line with a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013), a place of civility (Barratt, 2010) or a classroom of congress (Boostrom, 1998). Humanistic approaches emphasise the importance of listening to children, enabling their voice and encouraging participation in educational decisions (Lundy, 2007).

**Enabling Voice and Participation: Visibly listening**

Differences between adults favoured communication styles – oral, verbal, written - and children’s – visual, behavioural, expressive – have been proposed as one of the barriers to full participation of young children in decisions made about their lives (Winter et al, 2017). Humanistic pedagogical approaches where adults provide a rich mix of different resources and environments to enable young children to communicate their voice (Cagliara et al, 2016) can help to create meaning and understanding of children’s lived experiences (Clark & Moss, 2005). To effectively listen and enable child voice while dealing with powerful adult dominant, within-child deficit discourses (Dyson, 2015), could be seen as an impossible task; however, it can be done through encouraging full participation of children within their educational context (Clark, 2017; Shier, 2001). Enabling children’s participation involves recognising that they are experts in their own lives (Langsted, 1994) and enabling them to present their expertise in a mode of communication of their own choice, whether that be verbal or visual (Clark, 2017). In terms of psychological safety, humanistic
approaches view safe learning spaces as those where children are actively engaged and have autonomy over their own learning (Agbenyega, 2008; 2011; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Although humanistic, child-centred approaches are broadly lauded in education (Wood, 2014), international evidence attests to the challenges that practitioners face when combining freedom and structure in schools (Bodrova 2008; Broadhead et al, 2010; File et al, 2012). Educational research identifies structural barriers to child-led learning such as policies, space, time, staff roles, beliefs, values, rules, parents’ expectations and the performative primary curriculum (Brooker, 2011). Researchers have proposed the need to focus on children’s perspectives in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of these structural barriers (Wood, 2014).

**Conclusion.** This chapter reviewed and discussed both the academic and grey literature on safe space in school, concluding that it is an under-theorized (Barratt, 2010), confused concept with coded meanings (Grimes, 2020), which need to be clarified, especially in relation to how the children who use such space understand it.
Chapter 3. Method

Introduction

This chapter will focus on introducing the methodology and research methods used to examine safe space in school. The chapter is divided into 5 sections. First it will offer insight into the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning the research, and consider the epistemological and ontological stance that led to this specific qualitative methodology, shaped around honouring children’s perspectives and viewing them as active agents who create their own experiences and place in the world (Corsaro, 2005). In Part 2, detail is offered in relation to research design, and what follows is a discussion of the data collection methods used. In Part 3 detail is provided on the analytic strategy adopted to analyse the data of the study; and in Part 4 ethics, in relation to the fieldwork and the data interpretation are discussed. Finally, in Part 5 the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher is emphasised by making transparent the methodological concerns and advantages of ‘perspectival subjectivity’ (Kvale, 1996, p.277).

Part 1: Theoretical and methodological framework

All forms of research are interpretive, as researchers are guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Positivist quantitative research posits that reality can be demonstrated through objective collection of data using established scientific methods, whereas post-positivist research is concerned with the subjectivity of reality and believes that not everything is knowable (Krauss, 2005). Positivist and post-positivist research is positioned on a continuum between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms, with qualitative research processes being more ‘exploratory, open-ended and organic, producing in-depth, rich and detailed data from which to make claims’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.21). While positivism assumes a single, concrete reality, interpretivism assumes multiple realities
(Healy & Perry, 2000). As this research explores how children and teachers interpret and make sense of their experiences by validating their expressed meanings, views, perspectives, experiences and practices (Braun and Clarke, 2017), it is best described as experiential qualitative research with an interpretivist epistemological stance and a social constructionist ontology. This is congruent with the theoretical framework of this research which honours children’s perspectives as active agents who co-construct their own experiences to make sense of their world (Corsaro, 2005).

Experiential qualitative research. Experiential qualitative research is a process of collecting information on individual perspectives and meanings and then putting an organising, interpretative framework around what is often messy and conflicting accounts or data (Shaw et al, 2008). Creating an open environment for both adults and children to step back and reflect on their views and experiences was an important factor in this study. The research was conceptualised as a process of co-constructing knowledge and of understanding and interpreting the meaning of lived experiences (Guba &Lincoln, 2005), specifically the safe space experiences of both teachers and children in a primary school. To play to children’s strengths (Clark, 2017) and amplify their voices (Dali &Stephenson, 2010), different layers of meaning and sense-making were explored using a creative, participatory approach.

Theoretical framework. Social constructionism is a broad theoretical framework which understands people as responding to external and internal influences in a fluid and reciprocal way (Braun and Clarke, 2017). This framework perceives people as constructing their world through language, representation and other social processes. The world is understood in relation to specific socio-political, cultural and historical contexts and meanings which arise from individual’s social interaction within these contexts. Social constructionism rejects the idea of an observable, independent reality in favour of a subjective, interpreted world (Burr, 2003). The social constructionist framework of this research combined with a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology which in turn necessitated a naturalistic methodology.
Relativist Ontology. The relativist ontology underpinning this research holds that there are multiple versions of reality which are ‘relative to the person(s) who hold particular sense-makings, constructions or meanings’ (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p.46). Each different version is also closely related to the context in which it occurs (Braun and Clarke, 2017). As safe space is a broad, often undefined term, meaning different things at different times to both adults and children in school, these meanings need to be considered within each individualised context. So each individual’s inner world and outer world of the classroom and the school was respected alongside their broader sociocultural, economic and political contexts.

Subjectivist Epistemology. In this research the subjectivist epistemology led to the researcher and each different participant co-constructing their meaning of safe space within their specific classroom and school context. The differing meanings of safe space co-created during the research process combined with my interpretive analysis of the data sought to deepen understanding of the meaning of safe space within school.

Participatory Methodology. Methodology ‘provides the link between technique and theory’ (Burawoy et al., 1991, p.271) and as this research aimed to explore and understand both child and adult perspectives a creative and participative methodology was required. Participatory methodology has been described as an “orientation to inquiry” (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), which belongs within the social-constructionist paradigm (O’Kane, 2008). The advantage of this methodology is in involving research participants in the process of producing knowledge. This creative and participatory methodology necessitated then the employment of creative and participatory methods with their own theoretical underpinnings. The Mosaic approach is a multi-method participatory framework, which combines a variety of verbal and non-verbal tools to enable adults to understand the depth and complexity of young children’s lives (Clark & Moss 2001). This approach will be discussed in more detail in the Methods section. The rationale for this methodology
will be discussed now in the Design section with further description of the research tools used in the Method section of this chapter.

**Part 2: Research Design**

The current research adopts a cross-sectional design to explore meanings of safe space in school by visibly listening to the voice of the child and enabling adult understanding of children’s ‘sense of place’ (Clark 2001, p. 339). A quantitative design featuring objective collection of data according to a survey or questionnaire would not have provided the open, exploratory and flexible mode of understanding safe space in school that was the desired outcome of this study.

**Recruitment, Participants and Sampling**

Ten participants, including seven children and their three teachers, were recruited through purposive sampling (Bryman, 2004). Educational psychologists emailed ten Head Teachers in schools which regularly used safe space as an inclusive strategy. Head teachers were provided with a researcher-designed brief outline of the study and an Information leaflet (Appendix A), which invited them to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part. The recruited school was a Catholic Maintained Co-Educational Primary School in Northern Ireland with approximately 600 pupils. It was located in an inner city, in an area of multiple deprivation, and was chosen because it had the most extensive prior experience (5 years) of using safe space, out of all the interested schools. It was decided that this school’s experience would be more useful to explore rather than other schools where the strategy had been only recently introduced.

The researcher met individually with the head teacher and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) to discuss any queries arising from the Information leaflet and further clarify consent (see Appendix B for the school consent form), and the process and aims of the research. For the three adult participants, the choice was limited to those teachers who volunteered to take part in the research. (See Appendix C for teacher, school, and child inclusion/exclusion criteria). Three
experienced female teachers agreed to take part. Teachers taught classes from Primary 6 (aged 9-10), Primary 3 (aged 7-8), and Primary 2 (aged 6-7).

Child participants were then purposively selected by their teachers according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Child Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion criteria for child participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The child must have parental consent to take part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The child must have access to safe space within the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The child must have the capacity to meet and talk with the researcher or puppet and give ongoing assent. This capacity will be determined by class teachers who will have known children for 5 or 6 months at the time of research taking place (February 2020).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusion criteria for child participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Children will not be included if they do not wish to take part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Children who do not have parental consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Children who do not use the safe space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Children who are currently experiencing adverse life events such as bereavement, separation or trauma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers provided the parents of selected children with a parent information and consent form (see Appendix D). The selected children were then provided with a child information and consent form (Appendix E) by their teacher who read through the form with seven children, all of
whom agreed to take part. The seven child participants are anonymised and detailed in Table 4, with teacher reported SEN included.
### Table 4

**Child Participant Information (anonymised), including Teacher-Reported Special Educational Need Requiring Usage of Safe Space**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Key stage</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Reported SEN</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Abbie</td>
<td>Y6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>KS2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)</td>
<td>Ms Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Ben</td>
<td>Y6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>KS2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>ASD, developmental trauma</td>
<td>Ms Harvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Cormac</td>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>KS1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Social &amp; emotional needs</td>
<td>Ms Irving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Dena</td>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>KS1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Social &amp; emotional needs</td>
<td>Ms Irving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Eddie</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>F/S</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Ms Jackson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Finn</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>F/S</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Speech and language difficulties</td>
<td>Ms Jackson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Gino</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>F/S</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Speech and language difficulties</td>
<td>Ms Jackson</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Research Methods

As research methods needed to move beyond the spoken word to capture the everyday complexity of children’s lives in this study, a creative and participatory design was adapted from the Mosaic Approach (Clark, 2001; Clark & Moss, 2005). This is both a methodological framework and a method which follows a visual, participatory approach, originally developed to research with young children their perspectives of their early childhood institutions (Clark, 2019), and to enable adults to understand the depth and complexity of young children’s lives (Clark, 2010).

Previous Mosaic research used a combination of verbal and non-verbal tools to enable children’s voice and to document their understanding of their everyday spaces (Clark, 2007; Greenfield, 2007; O’Callaghan et al, 2011; Rouvali & Riga, 2018; Waller, 2010). As the research question aimed to consider the nuanced understandings of safe space in school, while honouring the
children’s perspectives, aspects of the Mosaic approach were considered to be a useful approach for understanding and documenting children’s conceptualisation of safe space in school. Additionally, as the child participants in this study were described by their teachers as having special educational needs, including speech, language, and communication difficulties, it was vital to take an inclusive stance by offering non-verbal modes of communication. An adapted Mosaic approach proposed a suitable framework for offering children simple and familiar ways of communicating.

As Mosaic approaches also include adult perspectives, the children’s teachers were invited to contribute their understanding of safe space in their classrooms. Adapted from the Mosaic approach, this research has taken a multi-method approach, with observations and semi-structured interviews, combined with child-centred techniques such as photography, puppetry, child-led tours, drawing and playing in safe spaces. The combination of several methods was used to ensure triangulation or the process of qualitative cross-validation. The multiple data collection tools used in this study are detailed in Figure 4 below and each method will be described in more detail in the next section.
Observation and Field Notes

Observations in three different classrooms and in safe space areas outside of classrooms were undertaken over the two-week duration of this study. Classroom observations began around 9:30am in the morning, with teachers introducing me to the class as a researcher interested in seeing and hearing about how children use all the different spaces in their classroom. This introduction had been scripted by the researcher to be deliberately informal and non-threatening and had been agreed with the teacher in advance (see Appendix F for this script). As a familiarization period is essential when engaging in research with children (Barley & Bath, 2014; Punch, 2002) I was in each class for at least two hours before beginning the participatory work.
During data collection within the classroom I sat as near as possible to the safe space area, in as discreet a position as possible, in an attempt to minimise observer intrusion (Wragg, 2012), and to counteract the reactive effect where participants change their behaviour due to being observed (Bryman, 2004). I engaged in active listening and kept ‘a running mental stream of observation’ (Suzuki et al, 2007. p. 73), supplemented with field notes. Condensed field notes, written during classroom observations were used as the basis for more detailed field notes, expanded on later (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). These notes were conceived as being the best fit for the busy, lively atmosphere of a typical primary school classroom and worked well, as both children and teachers often drew me into the work they were doing. So, although the study was originally designed to employ non-participant observation, in reality it became more aligned with participant observation at times. During each observation notes included descriptions of; the physical safe space, the social situation leading to safe space use, children’s activities in safe space, objects used, approximate duration of time and teacher words and actions regarding safe space. Field notes were supplemented with researcher photographs of safe space and a reflexive journal to record personal reflections regarding experiences in the field (Spradley, 2016), as well as a tentative analysis and interpretation of the fieldwork (Morrow and Smith, 2000 ; Silverman, 2015). These notes and analytic and reflexive memos were used throughout the school in observations of a separate sensory room which was a designated safe space outside the classroom and open areas of the school between classrooms which were used as ad hoc safe space areas.

**Child Interviews**

Individual interviews with children took place in neutral, informal school spaces i.e. the school library, or an empty multi-use classroom in the primary school, (Goodenough et al, 2003; Jones, 2008) chosen as they were available, familiar and comfortable for children. Interviews lasted between fifteen and fifty-seven minutes each. Interviews began with free narrative to facilitate ‘both the child’s settling-in phase and the interviewer’s grasp of each child’s communication style and
concerns’ (Cameron, 2005, p. 601). Participatory work began with a recap of the information sheet and consent form with children (Appendix E).

I strived to make explicit to children that they were the expert in their own lives (Langsted, 1994) and that I was interested and curious to hear what they understood by safe space in school. The child semi-structured interview schedule is available in Appendix G. Easier, broader questions were asked first (Fargas-Malet et al 2010) as I stayed alert to children’s responses (e.g. falling silent, appearing distracted or changing the subject suddenly), in order to respect their reluctance to answer questions that might be difficult for them (Kay et al., 2003). Non-verbal behaviours (e.g. keeping eye contact, sounds like ‘mmhmm’ or ‘really’, and head nods) and verbal prompts (such as ‘tell me more about that’), were used to indicate that I was listening and interested in the child’s views (Cameron, 2005). Open-ended or ‘wh’ questions were used when possible (Waterman et al, 2001).

Interviewing children was done slowly and playfully giving them time to think about what they would like to communicate, so they did not feel pressured to give a quick answer (Punch, 2002), as well as giving choice and control on how to express themselves, and assisting them in talking about the complicated, sensitive, and abstract idea of safe space (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). Children were free to move around the room as they pleased during the interview. A puppet was introduced towards the end of the child interview to aid these efforts towards participation and agency, opening up communication modes and power imbalances between interviewer and interviewee. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymised later in the same day with children given pseudonyms.

**Puppetry**

In line with Belohlawek et al. (2010) who noted that children are more likely to view puppets as peers rather than authority figures, a puppet was used to gain rapport between young
children and interviewers (Epstein et al, 2008); to initiate conversations (Green, 2012); and also as a means to check ongoing assent and understanding of the research process (Dorie et al, 2013).

Puppetry is not typically part of the Mosaic approach, so this adaptation was made to mitigate the unfamiliar adult researcher and the relatively short time I had in school, compared to the original Mosaic research which advocates slow building of trust and familiarity with child participants (Clark, 2010; Rouvali & Riga, 2018).

Choosing the right puppet was deemed important for this study and following Dorie and colleagues (2013) guidelines for using puppets when researching with children, a flexible, soft, pleasing to the eye, gender neutral, and smaller than child puppet was chosen. The puppet was named Mo after discussions with several children unconnected with the study.

A script for the puppet was drawn up beforehand (See Appendix H) and used in a flexible manner throughout the interview, depending on individual children’s reactions to the puppet.

**Photography**

**Children’s Photographs.** Clark (2017) noted that children’s photography can also be used to provide in-depth communication and to express facets of their lives in a unique way (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Byrne and colleagues (2016) also discussed that children are likely to reflect on what matters to them. As such photography was vital to the ‘visible listening’ taking place in this study. The device used for photography in this study was an iPad and all children seemed keen to take photos with it.

The children took some practice photos of the puppet in the room where the interview took place to get used to the iPad. Reviewing photos on the iPad was quick and easy to do and, at the end of the participatory work with each child, I showed the children how to delete any ‘regret’ pictures (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004.) It was considered important they had full control over this process.

Photographing safe spaces encouraged the children to talk about their own experiences and views,
while setting up their photos. Children’s photographs structured the safe space discussion, providing a focus, and acting as a clear and tangible prompt or as a means for remembering (Fargas-Malet et al, 2010). Although the digital photography was a popular activity some children engaged with it more than others with the number of photos taken by individual children ranged from eleven to thirty-two.

**Researcher Photographs.** Photographs of safe spaces in the school were taken as an aide-memoire and were recorded in the reflexive journal according to time and date stamp on the iPad to differentiate from children’s photographs.

**Child-Led Tours**

Tours were inspired by walking methods and transect walks (Kanstrup et al, 2014), used as a method of gathering detailed info from local people involved in in participatory rural appraisal programmes (Chambers, 1994), and have also been termed a ‘walking interview’ (Langsted, 1994), talking whilst walking (Anderson, 2004) or ‘neighbourhood walks’ (Walks, 2018). The physical act of walking and directing has been found to reduce power imbalances (Kinney, 2017) and allow children to talk freely about their safe spaces in the school environment.

The child initiated each tour, leading the researcher and the puppet from the room where the interview had taken place. The researcher listened while the child talked about what they did in different parts of the school, what places were important to them and where in the school they felt safe and calm. During the tour children took photographs of places Mo could go to feel safe and calm, this ensured that data gathering was fully in their hands. The tours lasted from 20 minutes for the younger children to 40 minutes for the Year 6 children and concluded when the children decided to or when the timetable required them to be elsewhere. Tours and photography were a powerful communication tool for showing children’s perspectives. The child-led tours provided freedom for children to communicate in their own unique way and as I made deliberate attempts to slow down
to a child’s pace and follow their lead I noticed they were communicating safe space ideas through another mode - their play. Play therefore was the empty square of the Mosaic

**The Empty Square**

The empty square is a theoretically and methodologically important part of mosaic research as it is a visual reminder that this is intended as an open process to which new modes of listening can be added (Clark, 2017). Flexibility in the tools used and following children’s lead during the child-led tours in this research, enabled the children to frequently stop to play. Their play activities demonstrated how what they were doing made them feel safe, every child invited Mo in as a playmate and some of them invited me into their play as well. This involved role-play, turn-taking games or being directed on how to manipulate Mo. This purposefully open to improvisation aspect of the mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) proved invaluable as children really opened up their play worlds to me and communicated some significant and thought-provoking perspectives on safe space through their play.

Without the empty square the Mosaic approach could be seen as prescriptive, keeping the empty square in mind during the research process enabled me to notice that the children were demonstrating how they soothed and regulated themselves through free play. This was an additional meaningful way of communicating chosen by children themselves which may not have arisen through a more rigid, prescriptive methodology.

**Interviews with Teachers.**

Interview schedules were semi-structured with open-ended questions to allow flexibility and to encourage the spontaneity that is necessary when co-constructing meaning (see Appendix I). Broad opening and closing questions were designed to be non-leading, short, clear and precise (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), and to assume shared knowledge (Patton, 2002). Two interviews took place in the teachers’ own classroom and the third took place in the learning support room of the
school. Each interview lasted for between thirty minutes and an hour. As the interviews became more relaxed and fluid the data became richer and more detailed as participants had a clear personal stake (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This school used the term ‘calm corner’ for a classroom safe space, as teachers explained that they felt calm was a more reassuring term than safe.

Part 3: Data analysis

The data gathered in this study aimed to be appropriate for children and that would put children at ease. More specifically two types of data were gathered and co-constructed in this research:

i) visual data in the form of children’s photographs taken during walking tours

ii) textual data in the form of interview transcripts, observation notes, memos made during fieldwork and data analysis

Visual data was analysed using content analysis (Kolb, 2008, Rose, 2016) and textual data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2018) and these are both explored in more depth below.

Visual Data Analysis

Children’s photographs were analysed using content analysis of visual data to understand, decode and interpret the visual information (Kolb, 2008). There were four phases of the visual analytic process illustrated in Figure 5. Child participants only took part in phase 1 choosing the photographs from their individual tour which they felt best represented safe space. The original research plan had been to involve children in coding and categorising of photographs, but the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in school closure for the remaining four months of the academic year.
**Figure 5.**

*Phases of Visual Data Analysis*

**Phase 1.** By systematically working through the body of images (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001) with the researcher each child participant chose the six to eight defining images which best illustrated their ideas of where the puppet felt safe in school. The photographs were organised into separate albums on the iPad according to child name. During this first phase of the analysis children’s comments about their images were recorded to understand further how they experienced the places they inhabit (Agbenyega, 2008). Keeping in mind that “content analysis alone is seldom able to support statements about the significance, effects, or interpreted meaning of a domain of representations” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 13), it was vital to consider images alongside children’s comments and researcher observations and interpretations.

**Phase 2.** Here, the researcher examined the content of the photos, focusing on recurring features as representations of safe space or ‘photo motifs’ (Rose, 2016, p.59). Photo motifs were descriptive according to location (outdoors, indoors, sensory room, classroom, KS1 corridor, foyer), activity (playing, hiding, watching, being with friends) and resources (books, toys, putty, massage
tools, lights). Photo motifs were then recorded on a separate tab of the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and content was recorded on each child’s worksheet. See Appendix J, Table 5 for an excerpt of this spreadsheet.

**Phase 3.** Photo motifs and content were then worked into codes by the researcher and recorded on the spreadsheet using codes such as outdoor play, indoor play, sensory play, friends, reading, nurturing, connecting, hiding, watching, and privacy. For example, a photograph of the puppet Mo with his arm around a friend was coded in the following way: friends, connecting. See Appendix J and photograph in Figure 13.

**Phase 4.** Category generating discussions bore in mind that these images were communication tools conveying messages reflecting the psychological state of the image producer, the communicator and enacted practices within the cultural context of the school community (Riffe et al., 2005). The categories identified were validated in the discussion between the researcher and her supervisors, the photos were examined again, resulting in the visual categories of outdoor and indoor play, friends & connection, hiding places, watching & vantage points, withdrawal & privacy and a sense of calm & comfort. Visual data categories can be seen in Table 8.

**Table 8.**

**Visual Data Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outdoor &amp; Indoor Play</th>
<th>Withdrawal/Privacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Calm &amp; Comfort</em></td>
<td>Watching/Vantage Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Friends &amp; Connection</em></td>
<td><em>Hiding Places</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Textual Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of textual data was considered particularly useful in this research as the emphasis was on the content, what was said rather than how it was said, the told rather than the telling (Riessman, 2008). Textual data included observation data, field notes, recordings from child-led tours and discussions of photos as well as teacher interviews. It was also important that analysis was inductive, or data driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as this increased the potential for the views of the child participants to be prioritised in the themes. As relevant theory around safe space use in school is undeveloped, it was not possible to initiate a theory-driven deductive analysis. Inductive data analysis allowed for the inclusion of data-driven themes (Blank, 2004) and also let the data speak without imposing researcher assumptions (Braun et al, 2018). Themes were generated from what was understood after deep familiarisation with the recordings, reading and re-reading interview transcripts. A thematic analysis, adapted from the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006), was adopted in the analysis of data, and integrated with visual data, according to Figure 6.
**Step 1:** Familiarisation with the data occurred through transcribing the interviews verbatim (Gillham, 2005), and reading observational records and field notes (See Appendix K for an observational data record). Transcripts were typed on to a Microsoft Word document, read and initial comments which appeared of relevance to the research question, or appeared common across the data sets were highlighted in yellow. A separate worksheet was opened on the Excel spreadsheet to record child-led tours with headings according to duration of each tour, locations, activities and resources documented. See Appendix L for child-led tour data.

**Step 2:** Working systematically through all of the textual data, safe space comments were highlighted, and codes were applied to organise the data into meaningful units. An excerpt of transcribed and coded data from a child’s worksheet is included in Table 9, Appendix M. See Appendix N for an example of initial coding of child textual data and Appendix O for initial coding of teacher data. Codes were then transferred on to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with a separate worksheet for each of the ten participants.
Step 3: Clustering of codes was not a linear process and a great deal of rereading occurred during this activity (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as well as more discussion with supervisors. Transcript codes were clustered and considered alongside observation and field work notes which served to illuminate specific patterns. As codes were being searched for possible themes, thought was given to the relationships between child textural and visual codes. Textual codes were recorded on each child’s worksheet in a column alongside visual codes.

Step 4: After discussions with supervisors and reviewing photographs, child codes were clustered to generate initial themes which were colour coded (See Appendix P). Teacher codes were subsequently clustered and themed according to Appendix Q. Rather than quantifying the number of responses relating to particular codes, I endeavoured to represent all themes, which were of relevance to the research questions (Terry et al, 2017). To this end, any themes which appeared to describe how the participants viewed safe space, were included.

Step 5. Themes appearing across the data sets from the participants were grouped together and compiled into tables on spreadsheets to review (See Appendices P & Q). This made the individual extracts from the data easier to compare and provided a holistic picture of differing perspectives generated around one theme. Visual data themes were then combined with textual data to review and refine themes (Appendix P visual initial thematic map). This phase involved checking themes linked to the coded extracts and to the visual data set. The checking and reviewing of themes is part of the iterative cyclical process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The original transcripts and photographs were revisited many times, in a process of actively engaging with the data and deliberating over which themes and sub-themes most effectively illuminated and explained the meaning of safe space for the participants. Textual themes from the teachers were reviewed alongside the children’s themes, keeping in mind Clark-Parson’s (2019) questions: What does “safety” mean in this context? How is safety achieved? Who is it safe for? What is safe to do in this space?
Although the analytic process was discussed and reviewed in supervision and the theme names deliberated upon, inter-rater reliability was not used as the interpretivist approach underpinning this research accepts that different interpretations are inevitable. However, having a supervisor engage with the coding helped to generate alternative interpretations, question my rationale for ascribing certain themes and ensure that I could justify my findings and discuss how to improve them with the help of another critical eye (Barbour, 2001).

**Step 6:** Themes in this final phase were further defined and considered in terms of relevance to the research questions (further detail can be found in Appendix Q). Themes were assigned to reflect the experiences, values and needs of the children (Lundqvist et al, 2019), specifically about their understanding of feeling safe in school. Final themes are detailed below in Table 9. Child and teacher themes were defined and compared for similarities and differences, as will be discussed further in the next chapter.

**Table 9.**

*Final Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual &amp; Visual Data Themes synthesised</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberated Places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Bases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restricted Places (from teacher themes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part 4: Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from The Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPS) Research Ethics Committee (REC), Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). Appropriate measures were taken to ensure the study adhered to the ethical standards of The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016) and The British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018). In addition to the University guidelines, HCPC and BPS standards I followed guidelines specifically generated for Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) which are included in Appendix R.

Consent and Confidentiality.

Prior to taking part, teachers and parents received participant information sheets and completed and signed consent forms (Appendices B & D). In obtaining written consent, participants were made aware of the voluntary nature of participation and the right to withdraw their consent (up to 3 months after the interview date). Transcriptions of each interview were anonymised to prevent participants and their data from being identified and written permission was obtained to use anonymised verbatim extracts from their interview in the write up of the research.

Child Consent. Child information and consent forms (Appendix E) were talked through slowly and carefully with the children as it was vital to have their full and informed consent. The puppet was an important tool to check the child’s ongoing assent to take part in the study as the child was asked regularly to show thumbs up or thumbs down to continue. I strived to avoid children saying what they think adults want them to say (Clark, 2005; Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999) by keeping the conversation informal and reassuring children that there were no right or wrong answers (Punch, 2002). Audio recordings were practised with each child so that they fully understood what they were consenting to. One child did not consent to the audio recording which reassured me that it was understood that consent was in his gift to give (Cocks, 2006). The school context raised specific issues such as negotiating privacy (Mauthner, 1997), keeping confidentiality (Barker and Weller, 2003), timetable limitations and difficulties in finding available spare rooms.
which had to be carefully negotiated. To avoid ethical challenges concerning issues of confidentiality, children were asked to only take photos of the puppet in safe spaces with no other people in them. At the end of the session children were offered individual photos of themselves with the puppet as a memento of their participatory work (Fargas-Malet et al, 2010).

**Distress and Disclosure Protocols**

Although no participants showed any signs of distress during the interview they were advised at the outset that, should they experience distress or discomfort at any time, the interview would be paused and they could choose whether or not to continue. Some children’s photographs or narratives were interpreted as concerning, leading to discussions with my supervisor and their teachers. It was reassuring to know that teachers already had a good understanding and empathy for adversity happening in these children’s lives.

**Part 5: Positionality and Reflexivity: The Researcher and the Researched**

Qualitative research begins with a gendered, multi-culturally situated researcher with a distinct ontology, epistemology and methodology which inform her ideas about what questions to research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). In honour of transparency therefore the researcher in this study is a white, European, English-speaking mother, studying for a professional Doctorate of Educational Psychology. This particular ‘perspectival subjectivity’ (Kvale, 1996) strongly influenced my approach to this research and informed various insider-outsider (Le Gallais, 2008) positions I held. The insider status held with my teacher participants, sometimes conflicted with my concurrent outsider status from being both a researcher and an educational psychology trainee. The insider teacher role was advantageous however in terms of my familiarity with the primary school setting, it’s overt and covert norms and rules, as well as my useful interactional skills with children and teachers. However, I was still a strange and unfamiliar adult to the children which may have affected their responses in
Taking a participatory research approach with children, compels consideration of the issues of power and control between the researcher and the researched (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). Continuous efforts were made throughout to set aside my own understandings and experiences of safe spaces, in order to view experiences through the eyes of young children. This presented numerous challenges, especially around my own need to exert control over the situation, particularly around time pressures. For instance, I was constantly aware of the school bell ringing for lunch or break time and felt pressurised to get work completed with children around these set times. This is in direct contrast to the slow pace advocated by the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017). While playing outside, I felt obliged at times to redirect children back inside into more permitted areas. Working with children in the hierarchical, authoritarian setting of a school makes it difficult to unbalance or redress the inherent power imbalance between children and adults. The freedom and flexibility required for the Mosaic approach can be challenging to enact in this environment.

**Trustworthiness of the Method and Analysis of Data**

In qualitative research it is vital to be open and trustworthy about the method and analysis of data. To this end Yardley’s (2000,2008) open-ended, flexible quality principles were applied for evaluation purposes and are detailed in Table 10.
Table 10


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria/Comment</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to context</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mosaic multi-modal methodology was highly aligned to participants’ perspectives and the socio-cultural context of school</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher was sensitive to ethical issues such as the extra responsibility of care when working with children with SEN and trauma</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inductive approach to the data meant that researcher was open to capturing different ‘stories’ in the data</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused on existing educational research and theory – maybe could have broadened this out?</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment and rigour demonstrated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thorough data collection evidenced in spreadsheet and reproduced in appendices</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadth and depth of analysis undertaken using both visual and textual data and demonstrated in appendices</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous teaching and research experience contributed to methodological competence and skill</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparency and coherence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher aimed for clarity and power of description through a persuasive and convincing account of the interpretation of data in the main body of thesis with supplementary appendices including more detail</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research question focused on meaning-making which aligned with the social constructionist theoretical framework and the participatory methodology used to collect and analyse data</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A transparent account of how data were collected, analysed was presented; presentation of data extracts was provided in appendices to allow the reader to judge for themselves the adequacy of interpretations</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact and Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part 5 of the Methods Chapter focused on reflexivity through considering how the researcher, and the Mosaic methodology or the use of particular methods, shaped the research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical or applied impact for schools who use safe space as well as the particular children who use it is evidenced by the subtle and nuanced understanding of safe space demonstrated by the child participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is an emerging theoretical impact through increasing our understanding of safe space in school as a dynamic, flexible place rather than an adult-designated static and boundaried place.

There is the potential for socio-cultural impact through contributing to positive social change for a group of ‘silenced’ children in terms of participation and understanding of psychological safety in school.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter outlined the constructionist, participatory, and qualitative methodology adopted within this research reflecting the child-centred philosophy of Mosaic. Verbal data was constructed using semi-structured interviewing, puppetry and walking tours alongside non-verbal methods such as photography, observation and play. Ethical issues were highlighted along with details of participants and information relating to data construction and research procedure. Thematic and content analysis was grounded in the subjective perspective of the participants to analyse community data and explore the wider societal context in which the study was embedded (Kolb, 2008). Similarities and differences in child and teacher understanding of safe space were identified and themes will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. In producing the findings (Chapter 4), the themes identified are outlined along with selected data extracts to illustrate and provide evidence for their inclusion.
Chapter 4. Findings

Introduction

Children’s experience and understanding of safe space within their primary school setting appeared to be flexible and dynamic and was expressed through four broad themes - liberated places, safe bases, belonging and restricted places. The first theme of liberated places relates to how children adapted school spaces to create places where they could freely play or regulate themselves and the value of agency and active participation in doing so. A second theme of safe bases was identified, where children were observed to construct safe bases according to context and need, incorporating tangible places for solitary withdrawal, as well as intangible, psychological places for self-regulation. In the third theme it was identified that safety could be found through belonging, in terms of belonging to a pair or a group through connecting with others and belonging to the whole school community through inclusion. The final theme generated was restricted places which identified constraints on children’s safe spaces, such as temporal and spatial restrictions, conceptual confusion over the purpose of safe space and the meaning of emotional regulation as well as restrictions observed on child voice.

This chapter will foreground children’s understanding of safe space, in relation to the themes identified from children’s data, and will explore the discrepancies in constructions of safe space between children and their teachers, shedding light into the tensions and dilemmas with balancing the classroom space. The themes identified are illustrated in Figure 7 and discussed in more detail in the following sections.
Theme 1: Liberated Places

This theme captured the pleasure and emotional safety children demonstrated when given agency to direct their play and express themselves creatively. Liberated places were those where children seemed content, laughed freely, engaged positively, and actively participated. Liberated places therefore encompassed two sub-themes: free play and agency and active participation. The sub-theme of free play reflected the importance of varied types of free play such as physical, imaginative, creative and constructive play.
Sub-Theme: Free Play

This sub-theme reflected the pleasure of speed, excitement, and physical challenges that children demonstrated through their physical play, especially in outdoor spaces. Active involvement in physical play was predominant on child-led tours and included riding on trikes, jumping, swinging, hanging and falling. The multi-modal aspects of the Mosaic approach highlighted the emotional and social benefits of physical play, as evidenced by the way’s children were subtly communicating and negotiating messages through their physical play. During classroom observations Eddie appeared withdrawn, yet once outside he rode around happily on the trike, singing to himself and chatting to Mo in an encouraging and reassuring manner, ‘you’ve got balance…you’re doing well…are you ok sitting there at the back?’ He indicated his sense of social and emotional connection here, as well as his happiness during physical free play.

The sensory experience of physical free play was observed to require whole-body engagement, allowing children to feel acceleration, an adrenaline rush, weightlessness, to be loud and experience competence in their physical skills. For instance, when asked where Mo could go to feel better, Dena replied:

‘Maybe I can take him outside for a wee minute? cause he needs some fresh air cause look
[Denan manipulates the puppet to nod his head and says in a puppet voice] yea we’d like a
wee lil ride’

Once outside, Dena excitedly invited Mo to join her physical play saying ‘yea...Mo you wanna see how I do this? ... put him on the seat ..and then and then we’re gonna have some fun out here!’

Dena’s autonomy combined with demonstrating her competent mastery of the trike appeared to enable her enjoyment and sense of emotional safety.
The liberation of physical play was valued by children, exemplified when Gino demonstrated how to swing and hang on playground railings saying, ‘look Mo it’s so fun up here!’ His pushing of physical boundaries through play was observed indoors also:

‘I wanna do..move him across [puts Mo up on high shelf and pushes him down to soft seat]….ok yea he’s safe ‘cause he landed [landed] on here [takes photo of soft seat].

This sense of safe spaces being places where children could take healthy risks was observed in other children’s play. Figure 8 documents how Abbie demonstrated that Mo might feel safe by falling on to a soft beanbag in the sensory room.

Figure 8

*Physical Free Play in the Sensory Room (Abbie, P6)*
This photograph and Gino’s commentary suggest that for some children, risky play can demonstrate their sense of safety, as the beanbag and the railings were places for testing out and extending the boundaries between safety and risk. This sense of gently pushing boundaries by moving Mo out of his comfort zone and taking a calculated risk appeared to be a valuable way of children making sense of safety in all its forms. This may indicate that taking healthy risks by jumping or falling with a safety net below encourages active physical development and concurrent emotional growth. Feelings of fear or anxiety about new situations can be resolved through experiencing them with a safety net in place. This liberated, autonomous physical play suggested that, for these children, play was a place, a safe place, where they could learn about the world and develop themselves, physically and emotionally.

In contrast to the high value placed on play by children, teachers appeared to perceive it as a lower priority aspect of school life. Teachers acknowledged the popularity of playing in the classroom safe space ‘when it was first set up of course everyone wanted to have a go ... for a couple of Fridays everybody had to have a little go... and they had to have a little nosy and a little play’. Children’s natural curiosity and wish to play in the space appears difficult to manage within the school day and the attraction of this space had meant that teachers sometimes adapted it as a behaviourist classroom management tool. At times, safe space seemed to be offered as a reward for hard work when children could choose what activity to do, ‘it would be more a free for all would be golden-time’ and at other times teachers suggested that it was effective for calming children down after playtimes, ‘he would definitely need it after break just after being outside to calm him and to settle him ‘.

In the case of teachers, instances of prioritising classwork over play frequently arose in their narratives, with safe space described as a place to encourage motivation for learning ‘somewhere for those two individuals to... focus... to cal- to stay calm to relax and settle to learn’. Repeated suggestions that the space is to ‘settle’ for academic work could point towards an underestimation
of the link between play and learning as well as the performative pressures teachers are under from curriculum and systemic constraints. Systemic restrictions on children’s play were also highlighted prior to participatory work during observation in school when children were not allowed outdoors to play at break or dinnertime due to a light snowfall and had to remain in their classrooms.

**Sub-Theme: Agency and Active Participation**

Throughout the participatory work children indicated the psychological safety and enjoyment they experienced from having agency and active involvement within liberated places where they were free to influence the activities and people they interacted with. Having agency and choice over activities which were intrinsically motivated and thus meaningful and enjoyable, was valued by children as demonstrated in Figure 9 by Dena (aged 7), actively involving Mo in her sand play:

**Figure 9**

*Actively Participating in Sand Play*
‘here Mo do you wanna do this? This is the sand.....put this in there ok Mo, so we have to get a lot of sand as we can, ok mo so let’s get the sand’ [sings and hums happily to herself while playing alongside Mo].

By choosing a meaningful and self-directed activity Dena appears to demonstrate the link between agency, self-regulation, and feeling safe. Children decided where to go on tour (within the temporal and spatial restrictions of school), indicating their contentment through relaxed body language, by chatting easily, laughing, playing happily, humming, and singing. For instance, Abbie indicates her contentedness on tour as she ‘sings to herself while taking photos...humming and singing to herself happily’.

Children were observed to appreciate their control over the photography, sometimes directing the setting up of the scene for photographing:

‘I want you to whenever I say go throw it like that and I’ll just throw it on and it will be perfect.... do you get my idea? [Demonstrates throwing Mo on the big green beanbag].
The value placed on agency was expressed by Ben who when first introduced to Mo immediately reassures him ‘Mo are you happy to come? You feel calm? [Puts puppet to his ear and listens] What do you want to know? Why are you here?’ These quotes indicate children’s need to be in control, give consent and have agency over the research process as well as signifying how they make sense of safety. Their active engagement and participation in tours and photographs revealed their capacity to regulate their behaviour and emotions independently, through valuing a balance of activity, rest, and connection.

**Theme 2: Safe Bases**

In contrast to the free play sub-theme, safe bases seemed to enable autonomy and self-regulation due to the quiet, privacy, solitude and respite they provided. Children’s need to claim their own places was observed in this study as it was within these constructed special spaces in an adult-structured world that children gained control and created their own safety. Safe bases were created within liberated places in both tangible and intangible ways. These safe bases appeared to be a temporary escape from the collective, by retreating, as a means of sheltering from the storm to gather oneself, or protect oneself, before venturing out again. Children constructed a safe base by various means such as resting, hiding, withdrawing, protecting themselves from harm, reading and initiating sensory play. Safe bases seemed to enable feelings of emotional and physical containment, as children autonomously constructed these bases according to what kind of regulation they needed at the time. Gino finds a ‘safe spot’ for Mo to rest in a plastic box, within a cardboard box

‘he’s in there…….that looks good….where’s his wee…..his legs go down on there [he checks the photo and rearranges Mo again]……mmmmmm he’s relaxing again [he puts on a puppet voice] ah here I can see…right here…….this is a great wee spot I know where is a safe spot...in here. [Gino removes Mo and jumps in himself]
Due to the quiet and private nature of these self-constructed places, children often could not resist claiming them and appeared to be feeling calm, comfortable, content, and secure while in there. The safe bases theme contained two sub-themes which will be dealt with in turn: escape through withdrawal and emotional regulation.

**Sub-Theme: Escape through Withdrawal**

Withdrawal places, hiding places and vantage points were constructed, revealing children’s inventiveness and resourcefulness in using whatever materials were at hand to create these safe bases. Most children constructed their own safe bases during the tours, using objects such as empty boxes, cushions, umbrellas, and shelves. At times, constructing places appeared to be a mechanism for gaining privacy and withdrawing from the world, when physical removal from the collective was needed. This desire for quiet, privacy and solitude was alluded to by both children and teachers.

Arriving in the sensory room, Ben comments, ‘*if you’re in here you have to take this out* [removes doorstop] *because there’s a lot of noise out there*’ and then breathes a sigh of relief when the door is closed. Abbie also mentions the value of withdrawing from noise ‘*if they’re screaming like that* [laughs as it’s noisy outside the door where playground is with children playing] *it’s too noisy to be calm*’.

Teachers reinforced this need for quiet when referring to the classroom safe space ‘*he needs to be away from the melee and the craziness that is the class*’ and, ‘*she doesn’t really like the craziness of the classroom so that’s nice for her, she loves drawing, so sometimes she can sit and just draw or just do quiet things there*’. Teacher’s apparent acknowledgement of the occasionally overwhelmingly noisy nature of the classroom led to them reflecting on their own need for respite at times, appreciating that the safe space provided a ‘*breathing space*’ for both themselves and children.
Children’s constructed safe bases were noticeably more private than the designated classroom safe spaces however and often purposefully made for withdrawal as can be seen from Figure 10 and the accompanying narrative.
In an empty classroom, Cormac busily concentrated on constructing a den for Mo, using an umbrella, cushions, and blankets to tuck Mo in securely while explaining that Mo would feel calmer on his own in there. Cormac plays happily alongside him for a while, reiterating how Mo would feel better in there. This reclaimed, constructed safe base gave a sense of a shelter from the storm of the noise and busyness of the school.

Respite through resting and sleeping was described by several children and also mentioned by school staff as an important benefit of the sensory room. Teachers talked about children not sleeping well at home and being tired during school and recounted episodes of children falling asleep when wrapped in blankets, relaxing in the sensory room. Dena evoked the sense of a safe
base when she talked about the classroom safe space as a place to rest and recuperate from possible psychosomatic issues:

‘sometimes if people get tummy aches teacher lets them go in the calm corner...last time I was sick and teacher let me go in the calm corner and the sickness was making my tummy all sore and yea.......it helps me to think about my betterness’.

The respite offered through withdrawing physically and psychologically from the class collective seemed to enable Dena to feel better.

**Safe Hiding Places.** Hiding places seemed to play a significant role as a safe base for children to actively and temporarily withdraw to find comfort and security. Most of the younger children associated safe spaces with places to hide. They photographed Mo hiding in boxes, in bookshelves, alongside cupboards, under stairs or in a play tent. Hiding places were construed as both safe and fun, as alongside being physically containing, the child had full autonomy over whether they could see out from their hiding places or whether they remained completely hidden, as documented in Figure 11.
Cormac photographed Mo in three different hiding places, indicating his need to claim and create his own space within the school environment. Other children also indicated that Mo would feel comfortable and secure through hiding and some further emphasised the protection from harm aspect of safety by constructing a protected hiding place with barriers.

Maria: *Mo’s on the bottom shelf in the library… do you think he’s safe and calm in there?*

Eddie: *yea he’s protected*

Maria: *’cause he’s protected* [Eddie moves chairs in front of Mo and sits on one of the chairs so Mo is out of sight]*

Maria: *you’re putting chairs in front of Mo*
Eddie: so he’s calm... calm and safer

There is a clear sense of Mo being triply safe from harm here through being protected by the physical barriers in addition to a person guarding him, as well as hiding out of sight. This substantial and demonstrable aspect of physical safety from harm was further evidenced by the youngest three children seeking safety through height, when hiding places were unavailable, in the wide-open places of the school, such as the playground.

**Safe vantage points.** In wide open places with no hiding places, younger children seemed to create safety by placing Mo as high up as they could reach. From these vantage points, it was possible to see for a good distance, and to possibly be on the lookout for potential allies, threats or danger approaching. All three of the youngest and smallest child participants in P2, photographed Mo looking out from various high-up vantage points. Photographs demonstrate Mo watching out from a playground windowsill, on a table in the front foyer of the school looking out towards the front door, on the highest shelf of the library and at the highest reachable point of the playground, on top of the playground steps. After placing Mo on the railings at the top of the playground steps, Gino says ‘it’s so fun up here ... I can see through to everything... all I can see is the roof’. It seemed significant that the smaller, younger children in a large and busy school, placed Mo in high-up vantage points where he would presumably feel both physically and emotionally safer while looking out for danger. This autonomous control over their own environment could also suggest that being vigilant helps these younger children to feel safer in places which are potentially more difficult to navigate safely through.

**Sub-Theme: Emotional Regulation**

As well as the perceptible physical and social spaces around the child in school, it was noted that children appeared to create safe internal psychological places through emotional regulation. Children ostensibly accessed their inner world through emotionally regulating activities such as sand play and sensory soothing activities:
Dena: *oh here’s a place where Mo would feel happy, here’s the sand, let’s play on the sand... yea it’s fun ... it’s fun playing with sand Mo! Does Mo like playing with sand? It’s fun playing with sand*

Dena’s palpable excitement at discovering the sand box is evident here and it was interesting to observe the change in her behaviour as she quietly played in the sand. She visibly relaxed, alternating humming with silence as she became absorbed in shifting the sand from one container to another. This soothing play, occurring at her own pace, seemed to enable a safe psychological place for Dena as she then talked about personal events in her life, in a reflective way, giving the impression that she was actively making sense of them. This physical slowing down of the body towards sensory play seeming to enable a more reflective place was also observed with several children including Ben in P6:

**Ben:** *feel it [he directs my hand into the sand] I wanna fall asleep in this, I wanna put my face in this [he puts his face in the sand]*

This complete immersion in the sand appealed to him and seemed to soothe his autonomic nervous system as he relaxed and began to talk about how he managed some difficult feelings during the sand play.

**Emotional regulation through soothing the nervous system, comfort and psychological safety** was apparently also gained through massage. Figure 12 illustrates how Abbie appeared to relish demonstrating massage resources from the sensory room to show Mo how to relax:

**Abbie:** *‘um well you could do him massaging like on the ground and like someone giving him a massage [gets massage tools out and massages Mo]...he looks so relaxed right now’*
The quote and the photograph show the relaxation, sense of calm and contentment felt through the bodily connection of massage, also demonstrated by Ben:

Ben: *let me get the toys out for you Mo* [in a loud voice] *I will pressure first for now*

Yea...*let me try this on ye* [tries another massage toy on Mo... brushing his fur down]

*I need to calm him...* [Continues using the roller on Mo’s hands and feet]

......*right now and the calm toys and oh my lord I love these .....*

The sensory processing benefits of massage was indicated by these children who specified the additional benefits of massage for emotional regulation. There may also have been an aspect of psychological safety gained through the relational aspect of massage as children talked in a soothing manner to Mo while massaging him. These children may have been intangibly enacting the
emotional containment and safety they had themselves experienced within the safe space of the sensory room. There were also several photographs of Mo experiencing comfort and being nurtured with food, blankets and becoming immersed in the visually stimulating lights in the sensory room. During all these psychologically nurturing activities the children slowed down their pace and visibly relaxed, giving the impression of taking this time to reflect and think about events and feelings in their life.

**Contradictions between Child and Teacher Understanding of Self-Regulation.** There were instances of adult’s misunderstanding the different ways children sought safety through active self-regulation:

Teacher: *What’s your calming music that you love?*

Ben: *Mozart*

Teacher: *No that’s my calming music, what do you like?*

Ben: *I like Mozart*

Teacher: *No you don’t, what’s the one that you really love?* [no reply from Ben] ...you’ve forgotten. [She presses play on the cd player]

Ben: *That’s the Greatest Showman........the Greatest Showman doesn’t calm me it makes me hyped.*

Teacher: *No but it makes you... that’s funny you’re saying that. [to me] he very often likes the Greatest Showman. It’s this one here he really likes, that’s the first time you’ve actually said it doesn’t calm you it makes you hyped!*

Ben suggests that he experiences the music of Mozart to be calming and the Greatest Showman soundtrack to be stimulating, contrary to his teacher’s opinion, signifying the importance of his own choice of music to regulate himself, depending on whether he needs to be calm or active.

Reiterating this later during individual participatory work, Ben demonstrated how he liked dancing
to The Greatest Showman and relaxing to classical music. This points to children’s capability to seek safety through self-regulation in a flexible manner, according to how they feel at the time.

**Theme 3: Belonging**

Belonging is interpreted in this theme as a basic psychological need with children typically seeking to create bonds with peers, adults, places, material objects and the school community. Such attachments are considered crucial to the healthy cognitive, social and psychological development of children in school, as belonging to people, places and the whole school community is linked to children’s evolving identity and overall well-being. This theme incorporates the sub-themes of connecting with special people and whole-school inclusion as important facilitators for belonging and safety.

**Sub-Theme: Connecting with Special People.**

The sub-theme signifying the value of connecting with special people to experience psychological safety became evident through children’s photographs and commentaries. Children remarked on alliances with peers, special adults, and family members within the school alongside photographs, as in Figure 13, implying that a sense of emotional safety could be gained through belonging to a pair or group.
When asked ‘What else would make Mo feel really nice and safe...?’ Abbie replied ‘ooh we could do him having a friend’ and Ben also demonstrated the emotional safety of having friends by arranging and photographing Mo beside other puppets and teddies in the sensory room and explaining ‘Mo would love in here he has friends and all, he should like in here he has friends look’. Finn also described playing outside with his friends, his sister and an assistant, all people who were special to him. The fact that Mo was invited to join in with all the children’s play could indicate the safe place children created through attachment to and having fun with a playmate. Children’s expressed need for friendship and belonging did not however seem to be visible to their teachers who used phrases such as ‘she would tend to be on her own, so she would tend to be a loner so she really enjoys going there’ about a child who sought out friends during participatory work and another reasoning that the solitary nature of the space appeals to children ‘well they know now it’s just one person and
they’re quite happy to go in and just use it as one person’. This conflation between compliance and happiness was occasionally used to describe the benefits of classroom safe space and potentially signifies an adult underestimation of the power of connection and belonging for children. Adult restrictions on single occupancy use of the safe space may have led some children to perceive that they belonged there because they were somehow different from their peers, their class and the school community in general. Undermining children’s need for connection could potentially risk destabilising their emotional safety and psychological security gained through a sense of belonging, as well as raising concerns over how included they feel within the whole class.

**Sub-Theme: Inclusion and Exclusion**

Inclusion was conceptualised within this sub-theme as all children feeling like they belong to places within school as well as teacher’s attempt to include diverse children’s needs within their classroom. Belonging in the form of attachment to places was associated with being the right person to be in this place, which equally appeared to create feelings of un-safety when children were restricted from certain places. When asked where he would like to go with Mo Eddie points towards an outdoors side area saying ‘dat one there but you’re not allowed out any more.’ Gino also mentions the restrictions on this same area. ‘oh doesn’t that wee bit that you’re not allowed to belong there’. Children seem to be attaching a negative meaning to these forbidden places, understanding them as places where they do not belong. Such comments imply that there may be other spaces within school where children could feel safer through being included rather than excluded from places, but these places may not be currently visible to adults, due to systemic constraints.

Teachers seemed to experience tensions and dilemmas when balancing the need to include children designated as different from others through having SEN, with the needs of all children in the class. The systemic requirement for timetabling specific children to use the safe space at certain times of the day became absorbed into a form of teacher shorthand for ‘needy’ children, frequently
referred to as ‘timetabled’. Children’s diversity appears to create challenges for teachers and safe space is perceived to be an essential strategy for managing this ‘I would not be able to manage my class if it wasn’t for the calm corner because my class are extremely needy’. A dilemma arose in teacher narratives however in terms of inclusivity when trying to balance the systemic requirements of the space to be specialist provision for specific children, against their understanding of the value of safe space for other children:

‘the reason it was set up was because I’ve...two statements...well one statemented child and one other child on their way to be statemented so they’re stage 5 IEP they are ADHD, ASD and autistic and both tricky backgrounds.... those two in particular that’s why it was set up but there are another four or five very needy wee kids in the class who would benefit from it’.

The systemic drive for categorisation of children according to diagnoses and difference seems to be understood here as part of what schools are compelled to do by outside agencies. The setting up and naming of specialised provision like safe space is understood to be a systemic requirement of the SEN system, rather than a natural teacher-initiated classroom adjustment to meet the needs of a wider range of pupils. Teacher acknowledgement of children’s differing needs conflicts with their desire not to exclude or stigmatise them through highlighting their difference. Ms Jackson describes a push/pull wall area set up for a child on the recommendation of an occupational therapist, ‘it’s probably something he doesn’t want to do in front of everybody cause of visibility’, with the result that this has been moved to an area outside of the classroom, making it less accessible for the child who requires it. The potential of the tangible specialist provision of safe space becoming stigmatising and exclusive seemed to be rationalised by teachers through allowing access to the rest of the class. Teachers adapted the space ostensibly to promote inclusion:

‘the other children in the class, although they’re not timetabled, we try in the afternoon just to set aside a wee bit of time even if it’s just five minutes ....for them I suppose it’s just they would have anxieties but it keeps them a bit more focused ‘
Potentially, highlighting some children as ‘timetabled’ could be stigmatising and could possibly affect children’s feelings of belonging to the class and whole school community, if perceived as different and othered in this way. Educational support services designating safe space specifically for individual children appeared to cause dilemmas for teachers, which they attempted to resolve by managing the safe space temporally, spatially, and psychologically.

**Theme 4: Restricted Places**

Children documented various alternative safe places in school which were not normally accessible to them, mostly due to systemic restrictions. Access to the adult-designated safe spaces in school were dependent on various factors; the needs of children as described in statements of SEN, the daily routine of the school, the timetabling of the space and adult permission. These factors seemed to lead to the taken-for-granted assumption that safe spaces required a high degree of adult restriction. Adults appeared to be unaware that temporal and spatial constraints could potentially impact children’s safe places, and the conceptual confusion as to the function and purpose of safe space seemed to restrict its usefulness for some children. A further restriction on safe places was observed when adults spoke for or did not listen to children. There were three sub-themes within restricted places therefore: temporal and spatial constraints, conceptual confusion, and adult ventriloquism.

**Sub-Theme 1: Temporal and Spatial Constraints**

Restricting access to safe places through temporal and spatial boundaries were frequently discussed by teachers and seemingly internalised by children at times:

*Abbie: Oh I know the perfect place (inhale) I go to this um... room all decorated with like mythical creatures and all and like anyone could probably go in there and I just think it’s like*
all calm but like she even works in there with people so sometimes you need to make sure that she’s not busy.’

The temporal restrictions made explicit here along with the implicit uncertainty over who is permitted access invokes a place which although safe, is less safe than it could be. For Abbie (aged 10), another restricted place which she had reclaimed as a safe place was the school toilets, which were also only accessible with adult permission:

Abbie: these are our toilet teddies

Maria: what are they for?

Abbie: so it just keeps her [the teacher] from getting annoyed like ‘can I go to the toilet can I go to the toilet can I go to the toilet .. like remember Mr Smith last year and he used to be no you should-you have to wait until breaktime-like even if you’re upset and you want to go and cry in the toilet and you ask him sir can i go to the toilet and he would be like no you have to wait and then you just start bweeeaaaaahhh.’ [mimics crying]

As the data suggests, it appears that this incident had caused bodily discomfort, emotional distress and potential social embarrassment and systemic restrictions on places which may not have been considered as safe places by adults, could potentially result in reduced emotional safety for some children. Difficulties in finding the right place and time to express and manage emotions were also visible in Abbie’s comments:

‘Sometimes when you feel upset about something and you just can’t get……and you can just need to get away and have a think about it ..’

Abbie’s previous conversation about being restricted from going to the toilets when upset also pointed to a sense of having to repress or contain feelings within the classroom, as did her comments on trying to discuss her feelings with a teaching assistant ‘we couldn’t actually walk down here with Ashley, we would have to talk about it and then you would have to go back to your
The noticeable lack of time and space available for children to manage their feelings is plain here and can be juxtaposed against teacher understanding of safe space as providing a designated time and space in which emotions are to be managed.

**Sub-Theme 2: Conceptual Confusion**

Teacher’s conceptual confusions about the function and purpose of safe space was indicated in a blurred idea of what emotional regulation was and how the space could help to achieve this. Although teachers recognised that it was useful for children ‘to know that there are ways of coping with emotions and to teach them the strategies to do that and definitely having the calm corner is part of that’, there seemed to be some confusion over the meaning of emotional regulation. Teacher comments such as ‘she can zone out and not think about other y’know and think about nothing...they’re already in their wee... in their wee head in their wee zone y’know kinda.’ seemed to conceptualise emotional regulation as a passive process of dissociating from and extinguishing emotions by not thinking about them, rather than acknowledging and processing them. Similarly, the idea of safe space functioning to reduce the emotional overwhelm of the class is suggested ‘when they find it all a bit overwhelming and they quite like to go in and put the headphones on and read a book just to zone everybody out’, reiterating again that emotional benefits are perceived to derive from physically being in the space, socially removed from the rest of the class and doing a calming activity. This conflation between containing and regulating emotion arose frequently in teacher talk, indicating a possible underestimation of the complexity of emotional regulation. Although teachers acknowledged that ‘calm corners are a nurturing, safe space for children to go to when they are feeling anxious’, their adaptation of the space for more systemic needs meant that it functioned also as somewhere to situate a child until they were ready to sit still and learn:
'he would need it in the morning and he would definitely need it after break just after being outside to calm him and to settle him ...and it is somewhere for those two individuals tooo...focuss...tooo cal- to stay calm to relax'.

This could suggest a blurred understanding of the space as functioning to prepare the child for academic work as well as regulating emotions which risks sending mixed messages to children as to the purpose of the space. Moreover, the passivity implied through the focus on calming down contrasts with the observations of children’s need for active involvement when autonomously seeking safety. Teachers seem to have interpreted the individual need for the emotional regulation the space offers as something that must be timetabled or restricted to certain parts of the school day ‘it’s the first time it’s been more sensory as in it’s not to go to do work and it isn’t to get away from everybody, it’s timetabled’. Here the referral to a previous use of a separated space for social removal for classwork completion is acknowledged as being different from the current sensory focused space. Yet the social removal aspect of the space persists in this teacher’s account, and again points towards a dual purpose of the space which may be confusing for children:

‘I was quite surprised that he in particular was happy to sit and not join us so it shows you just how much I think how much he needs something timetabled, needs something focused and needs to be away from the melee and the craziness that is the class’

Teachers often gave pragmatic reasons for using the space for social removal, perceiving that they could more effectively manage the rest of the class at the same time as managing their own emotions:

‘It helps me to be more patient with all the class because it gives me a safe space to put them y’know a safe space for them to be but somewhere safe I know they can be until I can get to them’
This acknowledgement of the dual value of the safe space in terms of the emotional respite offered to both teacher and child is further explicated by ‘it just gives us both a bit of breathing space’ and is combined with the perception of the space as an effective classroom management tool:

‘when the assistant leaves the room...the...She really doesn’t do much and ...doesn’t really focus much and so it’s a good tool for me because then I can- because she doesn’t take all my attention- then I can really focus on the rest of the class and so that was a very practical solution’.

Implying here that managing the whole class conflicts with the need to support a child who requires a high level of adult attention, this teacher’s pragmatic solution is the removal of the child to the safe space. This could also point towards the challenges faced by teachers in fully including children designated with SEN within the class group.

The tension between the nurturing, emotionally regulating function of the space and the popularity of the space with all children was also present in teacher accounts. Descriptions such as ‘at the beginning of the year they hadn’t had a calm corner in their classroom last year so they were all very inquisitive about it...‘people were nosying around it and coming in and it wasn’t just as safe a space as it could be’, implied that children were curious about the space and chose to go there when they could. Confusingly, teachers also described using it as an ‘area for reflection for an incident after lunch and if somebody’s upset or there’s a grievance ,where the child will then go to read through the social stories and about why it’s important to say sorry and ..’. This expedient reason provided of a space needed to manage conflict or aggression is further evoked by:

‘I just said why don’t you just take some time out over there and then looking back time out probably sounds like its punishment.....but whenever that chair is about to hit another child you go why don’t you (laughs) just go over there and calm down’.
Although the teacher acknowledges that the space should not be used as a punishment, she concurrently reasons that the requirement to protect other children is her priority. The tension and dilemmas within teacher accounts about the multiple functions and usage of safe space pointed towards a conceptual confusion as to the purpose of the space. The adaptation of the space towards a variety of uses may indicate that the original psychological safety-enabling purpose of the space had been reduced for some children.

**Sub-Theme 3: Adult Ventriloquism**

Restrictions on children’s safe places were observed when school staff contradicted and spoke for children, at times as if they were reading the child’s mind, like a ventriloquist. Before participatory work with children started, the P2 teacher commented that she already knew where children would photograph, indicating various hiding places within the classroom. Although, two out of her three children did indeed photograph hiding places, they also photographed many more nuanced and elusive places such as high-up vantage points, constructed dens, connecting with friends and outdoor play. Teachers generally equated feeling safe with physical containment and privacy, often speaking authoritatively on children’s feelings about classroom safe space saying ‘they love it’, ‘it relaxes them in here’ in contradiction to children’s ambivalent descriptions of the same space. When asked whether the designated space would help Mo to feel calm, Cormac replied ‘Sometimes he would feel better and sometimes he wouldn’t’, indicating that it may not always be an effective strategy. Abbie in P6 gave a similarly ambivalent response to the same question, hesitantly saying ‘yeeeeaaaa a little bit’. Teacher assertions that children felt safe, calm and relaxed in the designated safe spaces was not fully borne out by child-led tours and photographs, as classroom photographs where only taken when I specifically asked about safe and calm places within the classroom.
Conclusion

Both teachers and children understood safe space as offering respite from the demands of the classroom and a place for sensory and emotional regulation. However, children constructed their own dynamic and flexible physical and psychological safe places, within school spaces through active, agentic participation in play and self-regulation.

Children differed from teachers in their understanding of safe space as incorporating belonging, connecting to special people, and valuing free play, all underpinned by having agency and actively participating in these places. Teachers differed in constructing safe space as a good tool for classroom management which provided welcome respite at times and caused inclusive dilemmas at other times. Teachers made sense of this dilemma by adapting safe space to a multi-purpose area which changed according to the context and demands of the classroom. Systemic restrictions on children’s often unobserved safe places served at times to potentially destabilise children’s psychological and physical safety and these convergences, divergences and dilemmas will be discussed further in the next chapter.
Chapter 5. Discussion

Overview

This study aimed to explore the understanding that children and teachers had of safe space in their primary school. As children’s views on safe space are underrepresented in the research literature, this thesis aimed to prioritise children’s understandings, moving away from dominant adult discourses (Moss, 2017), but including teacher perspectives for comparison. A Mosaic-based approach was employed to work to children’s strengths (Clark, 2017), using interviews, child-led tours, photography, and puppetry, with teachers also interviewed about their views on safe space in their classroom. In this chapter research findings will be contextualised in relation to relevant theory and previous research, with a focus on the research questions. Recommendations for educators based on the emerging findings will be outlined and the implications for Educational Psychology practice and future research will be considered. A critical appraisal of the methodology will be presented, including the strengths and weaknesses of the study design, data gathering techniques and analysis. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the researcher’s experience of completing the thesis. The main findings are presented and contextualised in this chapter, in terms of similarities and differences to the existing research literature, and in relation to the research questions:

What are children’s understandings of safe space in school?

What places within these spaces are experienced and constructed as safe?

What are teacher’s understandings of safe spaces in the classroom?

How do teacher understandings differ from those of children?
Understanding Safe Space

Findings from this study consolidate and add to existing research. Children indicated that they felt safe when given agency and the opportunity to be actively involved in choosing liberated places to play freely and to claim and construct their own safe bases within self-selected places. Children found safety in places which they created themselves, and where they felt like they belonged. A convergent theme identified for children and adults was the centrality of sensory activities for emotional regulation in safe spaces, although there were differing understandings of this process between children and teachers. Children self-regulated in a dynamic, flexible, open and playful manner whereas teachers appeared to understand safe space as a passive, tangible, boundaried space. In this study children’s activities appeared to align with Porges (2011) PVT as they recognised when their nervous systems needed to mobilise through active play such as cycling, swinging, jumping and falling and then moved fluidly to rest and recover through playing quietly with sand or massage or withdrawing into self-constructed or reclaimed places. Vitally, children in this study highlighted the importance of connection for feeling safe in line with PVT which states that by co-regulating, constantly attuning and connecting with others who are safe, the ANS is restored and relational and emotional repair can take place (Eichorn, 2018).

This sense of connection and fluid movement from one state to another to maintain a sense of safety was not present in teacher accounts of safe space in this study. Teachers perceived safe space to be a useful classroom management tool, mainly beneficial in terms of offering respite in the form of emotional and physical containment to both children and to themselves. Systemic restrictions seemed to unconsciously work against children’s sense of safety at times, with temporal, spatial and psychological constraints on children’s safe places observed. These restrictions impacted on children’s sense of belonging, in terms of connections with people and inclusion in the school more generally and may have led to a destabilising of children’s safe spaces. These findings are in line with existing literature on safe space in terms of the documented confusion over the term
(Barratt, 2010; Boostrom, 1998; Callan, 2016; Clark-Parson, 2019; Grimes, 2020), and serve to challenge existing literature which assume it to be a universally benign, nurturing strategy promoting safety in school (Frey et al, 2020; Kelly et al, 2020; Ross, 2019).

**Safety through Play and Constructing Safe Bases**

This thesis conceptualised children as active agents, social actors, competent, capable of co-constructing their lives and able to comment on things that affect them (Clark, 2001; Corsaro, 2017; James et al, 1998: Qvortrup, 2004). Play was viewed through a broad lens, as a sensory and emotionally regulating activity (Porges, 2011), and as a place (Nitecki & Chung, 2016), which included both the physical environment around the child and their inner, emotional world. Findings aligned with a well-established research base identifying play as vital for children’s cognitive, physical, social, emotional development and wellbeing (Lester & Russell, 2010, 2014). Findings highlighting the value of play for middle-childhood aged participants (6 -10 years old), which has recently been described as ‘the forgotten years of development’ (Finney & Atkinson, 2020, p.441) since most previous play research focuses on the preschool years (Drewes & Schaefer, 2016). Aligning with previously cited research (Agbenyega, 2011; Lewis, 2009), children in this study indicated the inextricable link between free play and psychological safety, and the explicit relational strategies children used during their play to connect and engage with the puppet and the researcher, emphasised the value of play as a place to encourage belonging and inclusion (Lundqvist et al, 2019). Similar to Lewis’ (2009) and Agbenyega (2011), children in this research valued the sensory and emotionally regulating aspects of physical play, creative play and sand play. Children’s adaptability in creating alternative safe places for regulation within the constraints of school was indicated in my study by Abbie ‘sometimes when you feel upset about something and you just need to get away and have a think about it’, echoing the adolescents in Biag’s (2014) Californian study who identified the school library as the safest place to ‘let all your thoughts out’ (p.175). Both adults
and children in my study acknowledged the importance of creating a safe base in the form of a shelter from the storm, aligning with previous adult-perspective research reporting on the necessity of having a separate, solitary withdrawal space (Frey et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2020; Reupert et al., 2015; Ross, 2019). Children in this study however, seemed to favour creating their own dens or hiding places, sometimes within adult-designated spaces such as the sensory room or, at times, by simply taking advantage of the materials and resources at hand. This flexible, agentic and dynamic approach to safe places was also encapsulated within the scoping review literature which prioritised children’s perspectives (Agbenyega, 2011; Biag, 2014; Lewis, 2009; O’Gorman et al., 2016). Similar to Green’s (2013) work on children’s special places, this study observed children gaining a sense of agency and control through self-initiated activities. However, as well as places for playing, hiding, resting, and exploring, evidenced in previous research (Agbenyega, 2011; Green, 2013; Lewis, 2009), this research uncovered an unexpected safe place, which was a high-up vantage point highlighted by the youngest (aged 5/6) children in this study. This enabling of physical and psychological safety through potentially being vigilant to danger approaching, seems to be unique to this study and is valuable in terms of recognising the competency of young children in adapting their environment to meet social, emotional and personal safety requirements (Green, 2013; Kyronlampi et al., 2021).

Contrary to research which advocated that children feel safer in places with adult supervision (Biag, 2014; Langhout & Annear, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Robinson, 2018), this research aligned more closely with Agbenyega’s (2011) findings where children were observed to enjoy safety in ‘liberated spaces’ (p.166), away from adult intrusion. Restrictions placed on children’s safe places also came to the fore through both teacher and children’s commentaries and highlight the challenges faced by schools which have to play a dual role in both promoting and restricting the conditions for children’s physical and psychological safety (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017).
The emotionally regulating aspects of play were predominant in this study and are well-established in neuroscience, psychology and educational research (Gottman et al. 1996; Porges, 2011, Schore & Schore, 2008; Siegel, 2012). Porges’ (2011) research on the polyvagal theory seems most relevant here in contextualising how cues of safety can essentially calm the autonomic nervous system (ANS), shedding light on the individual variance observed when children actively constructed their own safe places in this study. Porges’ PVT (2011), emphasising the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) constant checking of the environment for cues of safety and danger, appeared to be borne out through the children’s demonstrations of how to find safety at school. PVT describes three ANS states: safe, mobilised, and immobilised states. Safe state is feeling calm, relaxed & connected to others, mobilised state is feeling alerted, and immobilised state occurs when ANS detects that the danger is so great that the body shuts down and heart rate decreases. The ANS does all this automatically, by moving fluidly from one state to another, sometimes mobilising, sometimes resting and recovering. For example, PVT highlights that during play the ANS blends the mobilised and safe states and when connecting with others it combines immobilised and safe state (The Trauma Foundation, 2021). Children’s internal, embodied sense of safety also aligns with Van der Kolk’s (2014) proposal that:

‘Our sense of ourselves is anchored in a vital connection with our body. We do not truly know ourselves unless we can feel and interpret our physical sensations; we need to register and act on these sensations to navigate safely through life.’ (p.272)

The wide range of embodied activities chosen by children to make sense of safety resonated with neuroscientific and psychological research emphasising the importance of conceptualising safety in its broadest psychological and emotional sense in schools (Díaz-Vicario & Gairín Sallán, 2017; O’Gorman et al, 2016). However, the confusion around the terms safe space and emotional regulation implicit in teacher accounts in this research raises concerns around the challenges faced by schools attempting to implement therapeutic practices. Children’s documentation of the
importance of connecting to others in this study aligned with neuroscientific research emphasising that the goal of regulation is not to feel relaxed, but to feel connected, to enable our own internal sense of safety, which we can take with us wherever we go (Porges, 2011, Siegel, 2012; Van der Kolk, 2014). Children seemed to intuitively understand this internalised and fluid approach to safety and regulation, even though teachers seemed to perceive the static safe space as specifically focused on calming down and zoning out in isolation from others. Teacher comments like ‘having just a little safe space, just a little time for themselves... a calming space, a place to relax or just to.....come away from anxiety or intensity’, implied that they perceived the safe space as working to emotionally regulate children because it was separated from the rest of the class and because there were calming activities on offer. This misconception of how children self-regulate is exemplified when Ben corrects his teacher’s assumption about why he likes a piece of music: ‘that doesn’t calm me, it makes me hyped!’ The importance of co-regulation, through connecting with others who are safe, attuned and present is promoted by psychodynamically underpinned school practices which have been suggested as the best way to support socioemotional learning and development in school (Rose & Gilbert, 2017). Although children in this study sought to co-regulate at times, at other times they demonstrated a resourceful and inventive capability to self-regulate through constructing safety within school places which had been designed for a different purpose. The dynamic nature of these constructed places resonated again with Porges Polyvagal theory (2011) which suggests the importance of fluidly moving between the states of being safe, being mobilised and being immobilised to become resilient. These three different states were clearly documented in children’s photographs and play in this study. Although the safe places children created seemed to point in different directions, i.e. sometimes connecting with others and sometimes withdrawing from others, this aligns with other child-oriented research indicating that children need variation of experience and a balance of activities in their everyday life as their needs change according to context and environment (Lundqvist et al, 2019). School safe spaces tend toward calm and quiet, often given names such as the calm corner, the zen zone, the serenity space
which risks conflating feeling safe with feeling calm and comfortable. Current educational policies, guidance and practices cited in Chapter Two evidenced an adult understanding of feeling safe as equivalent to feeling calm whereas children’s understanding of feeling safe aligned with current neuroscientific research demonstrating it as an embodied state varying between feeling calm, feeling connected and feeling stimulated (Porges, 2011).

There were also indications that teachers felt emotionally dysregulated at times themselves with their description of safe space as ‘a breathing space’ in this study, which would serve to further undermine the therapeutic co-regulating function of safe space, originally envisaged by proponents of psychodynamic school practices (Cole et al, 2013; Dorado et al, 2016; Kelly et al, 2020; Parker et al, 2016; Perry & Daniels, 2016). Teacher reflections on their own emotional needs could also be indicating the well-documented strains and pressures teachers are currently under (Coleman, 2020). Teacher’s potential underestimation of the complexity of emotional regulation in this study indicates that academic concerns about the appropriateness of psychodynamic approaches in school warrant further consideration (Eccleston, 2017; Parker & Levinson, 2018).

Safety through Belonging

The concept of place-belonging encompasses children’s lived experiences and emotional attachments and has been described as an important contributor to children’s learning and overall well-being (Fattore et al. 2016). In the present research, children experienced safe space by participating in place-related activities and by attaching meanings to the places in which they spent their school day, ultimately achieving emotional safety through place-belonging (Cena et al, 2018; Kyronlampi et al, 2021). This concept of place-belonging acknowledges the personal and meaningful experience of place that is rooted in feelings of attachment and belonging to particular environments (Middleton, 2020). The safeness seemingly implied by children in this study through belonging to people and places within school, aligns with previously reviewed literature emphasising
the need for marginalised children to be heard, affirmed and acknowledged within strong interpersonal relationships (O’Gorman et al, 2016; Robinson 2018). Recent research has built on this understanding by finding that person-place connections contribute to psychological wellbeing including cognitive-emotional benefits, such as comfort/security, belonging, relaxation and positive emotions (Scannell & Gifford, 2017).

Children documented safety through belonging in many creative ways, such as ‘feeling secure, feeling suitable, feeling ‘like a fish in water’, feeling recognised and feeling able to participate’, similar to other studies (Wastell & Degotardi, 2017; Woodhead & Brooker, 2008, p. 4). Children’s safe places were constrained in my study however when they encountered systemic restrictions, which was significantly described as ‘not belonging’ by Gino during the child-led tour, resonating with Cena et al’s (2018) findings that children’s ‘sense of belonging is negotiated in relation to multiple temporal and spatial frames of reference to which children attribute meaning’ (p.1156). These out-of- bounds school places bring to mind Biag’s (2014) call for less restrictive research to uncover the ‘social, spatial and temporal dynamics’ (p.181) of school safe spaces, to generate deeper insight into and ultimately promote pupil wellbeing. As a sense of belonging to a community is one factor likely to significantly affect children’s feeling of safety and wellbeing in school (Twemlow et al 2002), restricting children’s access to their perceived safe places may unwittingly be reducing their safety, sense of belonging and ultimately inclusion in school.

Nsamenang (2008) also acknowledges this link, stating that ‘tacit in the concept of a “sense of belonging” is the opposite experience of “not belonging”’ (p. 16). Belonging to people, in terms of your personal identity being accepted and understood, has been strongly linked to inclusion, with not belonging then risking exclusion (O’ Gorman et al, 2016; Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). This also harks back to the political origins of safe space as a welcoming and inclusive place for marginalised groups (Kenney, 2001).
Safe spaces in terms of protection from physical harm were highlighted in the literature review (Robinson, 2018; O’Gorman et al, 2016) and echoed by some of the children in this study. This protection from harm aspect was implicit in Reupert and colleagues (2015) mothers of autistic children, who strongly endorsed safe space in school as an enabler for inclusion and safety. These studies reverberate with the original political origins of safe space as a place for collective strength, inclusion and diversity (Arao & Clemens, 2013), and this was also indicated by a child in my study towards the end of a session saying ‘I’ve autism... it’s autism... it makes me think different’. This acknowledgement of difference was shared within a safe place and it contrasted with teacher conceptions of child ‘neediness’ which in turn seemed to be reproduced by classmates describing how others, ‘get to have time in here [the safe space] cause they get upset really’, ‘he needs lots of help because he has ADHD, autism and lots of other things wrong with him and I kinda feel bad for him because he had to get taken away from his mum’. These classmates had noticed that some children were treated differently because of their difficulties and although their comments were given empathetically, they could potentially lead to an awareness of difference as stigmatising. This well-documented dilemma of difference (Minow, 1990; Norwich, 2008) frequently arose also in teacher narratives. The dilemma on whether to identify and risk stigma or whether not to identify and risk losing protected provision, has been long running and is still unresolved (Norwich, 2019).

Reviewing the international literature on school belonging, Roffey (2013) explored the distinction between inclusive school communities which facilitate participation for all students, and those that maintain an exclusive position by regulating who may belong and who may not, who is valued and who is marginalised. This study highlights this distinction with uncomfortable resonances when children were uncertain whether they belonged in specific areas or not.

*Dilemmas of Difference – Enabling or Stigmatising?*

Teachers resolved the dilemmas of difference in this study through adapting safe space as ‘a good tool’ for general classroom management rather than for specified children. Inclusive literature has described educators conceptualising difference as both signifying a need for protection and
providing a tool of stratification (Artiles et al, 2016). Safe space in the classroom seemed to be perceived by teachers as both a good tool for stratification, as well as a protection from anxiety and overwhelm for both themselves and children. However, considering safe space as a benign, protective intervention while also using it as a tool for stratification risks it becoming an exclusionary practice (Schuelka et al, 2020). Teachers’ adaptations of safe space in this study risked stigmatising ‘timetabled’ and ‘needy’ children as well as excluding them from whole-class activities at times. The equity dilemmas, tensions and contradiction arising from the implementation of inclusion in practice (Artiles et al., 2011; Kozleski et al., 2013, Kozleski & Smith, 2009) have also been highlighted by this study noting that teachers seemed to use safe space as a behavioural management tool, in the form of a ‘time-out’ area rather than its original conceptualisation as an inclusive ‘time-in’ area.

**Safety through Agency and Active Participation**

The value children placed on agency and active participation in this research substantiates the emphasis on autonomy and agency in psychological theories of motivation (Connell, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000), as well as humanist, relational approaches to education where context meaning and child agency is prioritised (Law, 2018). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) claims the existence of basic needs that are necessary for healthy development and psychological wellbeing, the first of which is autonomy or agency, which children seemed to crave in this study. The other two strands of self-determination theory, competence and connection were observed in this study with children valuing mastery and control over their environment when playing. Mastery and control are especially significant for children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma to combat feelings of powerlessness and helplessness (Treisman, 2017). Children in this study appeared highly motivated when they realised they had agency to influence the activity and the people they engaged with (Brownlee & Berthelsen; 2009). The multi-modal participatory methods used worked to ‘count the students in’ (Agbenyega, 2008.p.62), giving them the agency to
reveal safe places which may have been previously hidden from adult viewpoints. As children were positioned as experts in their own lives in this study (Langsted, 1994), they constructed safe places and enabled their own regulation, rather than being a ‘mechanistic receiving object’ (Agbenyega, 2008. p.62) of a static adult-designated strategy. Children’s constructions of safe spaces in this research, in those places where they felt physically and psychologically safe enough to follow their own curiosity, aligns with humanistic, educational philosophies valuing visible listening, child agency (Clark, 2017; Rinaldi, 2001;), active engagement and play (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Nevertheless, these safe places were notably compromised by systemic constraints, corroborating research on the challenges faced by educators attempting to combine freedom and structure in schools (Bodrova, 2008; Broadhead et al, 2010; File et al, 2012; Wood, 2014). Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 found scarce evidence of child agency in school-designated safe space, apart from decorative contributions (Frey et al, 2020; Kelly et al, 2020) and one description of a space being adapted towards more social and emotional provision, only because teaching assistants noticed, listened and acted upon their pupil’s needs and wishes (Ross, 2019).

**Restrictions on Children’s Safe Places**

Educational research identifies many structural barriers to child agency and participation in school such as policies, space, time, staff roles, beliefs, values, rules, parents’ expectations, and the performative primary curriculum (Brooker, 2011). Teachers in this study appeared to feel constrained by the SEN system which designated some children as needing more specialised provision than others with the emphasis on academic progress paramount (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), causing them to prioritise the academic needs of the whole class over the emotional needs of the few. Similarly, temporal and spatial restrictions in this study reduced child agency within the classroom safe space to only being able to select one out of several predetermined activities to do. Researchers have proposed the need for future research to focus on children’s perspectives in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of structural barriers to child play and agency (Wood, 2014), and this study concurs with the need for a more nuanced understanding of the systemic
restrictions on children’s safe places. The adult ventriloquism or silencing of children’s voices in this study by teachers appearing to speak for them was also implicit in many of the scoping review studies in Chapter 2 (Frey et al, 2020; Kelly et al, 2020; Robinson, 2018; Ross, 2019) and could possibly significantly impact children’s psychological safety at school.

**Rationale Revisited, Strengths and Limitations**

This study aimed to answer the research question – what is the understanding of children and teachers of safe space at school? This research explored and analysed child and teacher understandings with some degree of success, and some limitations. It is important to consider the rationale underpinning the methodological choices in this research as well as the strengths and limitations of the study and researcher reflexivity.

**Rationale for Methodological Choice**

At the outset of the study, consideration was given to all available options which would prioritise child perspectives in terms of methodological approach. The multi-modal aspect of the Mosaic approach which did not fully rely on verbal data appeared appropriate for working with a group of children who had social and communication challenges. Although the Mosaic approach was curtailed because of school closure because of the Coronavirus pandemic, the data was very rich and detailed after two weeks in school. As this was an exploratory study, focussing on providing a detailed analysis of the visual and verbal data from the children alongside teacher interviews, the Mosaic-style methodology seemed to construct a multi-faceted understanding of safe space in school.

Flexibility in the Mosaic tools used and following children’s direction during the child-led tours in this research, enabled the children to frequently stop to play. The physicality and mobility of this technique worked to children’s strengths and demonstrated children’s safe space priorities which might not have been documented if we had remained in the one room for the participatory work (Clark, 2010). This purposefully open aspect of the empty square in the Mosaic-based
approach proved invaluable as children really opened up their play worlds to me and allowed me to visibly and actively listen to children’s significant and thought-provoking perspectives on safe space through their play.

The decision to undertake participatory work with one child at a time, as opposed to focus groups was based on the view that interviews can generate a rich understanding of each individual’s perspective, while a focus group may have encouraged participants ‘to make collective sense of phenomena’ (Finning et al, 2018, p.213). Focus groups with school staff may have been limiting in terms of differences in status, job role, or experience, which may have made some participants less able to share their views in a group setting.

In terms of sampling, attempts were made to work with a school which had been using safe space for several years, and with a group of children under-represented in research, those with social, behavioural, emotional and communication needs, alongside their current teachers. The guidance on sample size in research design from Braun and Clarke (2013) was followed as they recommend 6-10 participants in a small-scale study. Consideration was also given to alternative analytic approaches to thematic analysis, namely, the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or grounded theory (GT). IPA examines the subjective lived experiences of individuals and aims to develop descriptions of these experiences (Creswell et al, 2007). The current study was considered incompatible with IPA as it sought to co-construct meaning with children and teachers rather than assuming that participants were self-interpreting beings (Taylor, 1985) who had already made sense of safe space. GT seeks to move beyond description to create abstract and analytical schemas detailing action, interaction, and processes (Creswell et al, 2007). The prescribed methodologies associated with GT would also not have been compatible with the research question in terms of exploring the views of participants. While recognising that TA is not without limitations, it presented an accessible and flexible analytic method for this study that was compatible with the visual and verbal data as well as the research question.
**Strengths.** The current research study is considered to have several key strengths. The qualitative design may be considered a strength, as the application of participatory work facilitated the collection of rich, detailed data. The researcher had no relationship with the participating school or the participants prior to making contact for the study, but established an easy rapport with children, supported by the puppet which seemed to aid participation, interest and enjoyment. Having been a teacher previously may have helped establish trust and respect with teachers, as well as experience gained in schools as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP).

At an overall level, the Mosaic methodology gave agency to children to choose how to communicate their understanding of safe space and enabled active participation in the form of tours and photography. Using an iPad for digital photography in this research worked to balance the power between the children and researcher and enabled a deeper construction of safe space than words alone would have provided. Warren (2005) states that:

> “the process of making a photograph probably tells us more about the photographer than what he/she has chosen to photograph given that the particular visual cultures they are bound up with will shape their choice of subject within the frame and what they choose to leave out” (p. 864).

Photographs were a good way of eliciting relevant detailed information and rich descriptions from the participants, leading to ‘a far deeper understanding than a simple conversation’ would (Newman et al., 2006, p.301). For example, the high up vantage points photographed by the younger participants were not described verbally, and not fully understood by the researcher until close observation of the photographs. Further, photographs can evoke emotions and affectively charge responses (Fargas-Malet et al, 2010) as did the photographs in this research which poignantly depicted friendships or hiding from harm.
Child-led tours enabled openness to new thoughts and impulses that occurred to children during the conversation (Kinney, 2017). The route was not predetermined as in some of the scoping review studies (Biag, 2014), but took shape as the child recalled places and incidents which embodied safety, as they walked and moved around the school. Interview types in which the researcher moves around with the child interviewee in familiar territory while conversing are widely used in childhood research and advantageous as they are a more relaxed and relevant way of interviewing children than the conventional approach (Clark, 2017).

Graue and Walsh (1998) argued for the importance of learning about children’s views indirectly and the need for creative use of methods and instruments when seeking children’s views. This study used varied research methods to visibly listen to children’s perceptions and views. Looking from many different angles and in many ways provided a more nuanced understanding of the complex concept of safe space as the methods supported each other and added to the overall picture. This study highlighted the value of attending to the temporal and spatial dimensions to listening, by slowing down the research process to prioritise children’s responses and explore adult assumptions. Clark (2017) urges researchers to consider the importance of where research takes place, believing this is as important as how we engage with children, this study showed how children sought safety in different places while they were in those places. This may not have been apparent from just talking about or drawing places when not in those places. Data gained from one method clarified and helped interpret data gained by another method. This study confirms the views of other Mosaic researchers (e.g., Clark & Moss, 2001; Rouvali & Riga, 2018), demonstrating that with the right mode of communication, children are competent at communicating their perceptions and valuable insights (Einarsdottir, 2005).

**Limitations.** In line with assumptions underpinning qualitative research methods (Creswell et al., 2007), the study findings may not be generalized across all primary school users of safe space. It is therefore important for the researcher to reflect on how she is integrally linked to the research
process and what she brought into the research including demographic markers such as her gender, age and social class (perceived or assigned) as well as other markers that may not be so apparent.

The sampling inclusion criteria of the present study sought to find schools with experience of using safe space through the local Educational Psychology Service, and participating school staff were in effect selected by the Principal, who in turn selected the children to take part. It is unknown how representative a sample the school, teachers and children were. Therefore, it must be considered that biases in participant selection may have influenced the data collected. Moreover, the extent to which the nominated individuals took part willingly or felt coerced is also unclear, and this may have influenced the views and perceptions they shared. It is also acknowledged that information gathered from school staff may be biased by systematic attribution tendencies and the possibility of trying to gain the approval of the trainee educational psychologist researcher in terms of safe space understanding.

A pilot study may have provided an opportunity to test and refine the individual interview questions, the order in which they are asked and the links between them (Breakwell et al, 2006). It may also have further assessed whether the questions in the interview schedule adequately addressed the study research question, as well as how well the photography and tours illuminated the safe spaces in school.

Focus groups with teachers may have provided an opportunity to record and analyse the views of school staff on safe space in joint discussion as well as highlighting commonalities and contradictions between individuals (Morgan et al, 1998).

Photographs are not necessarily representations of empirical truth (Prosser & Loxley, 2007), they require interpretation and categorisation of content may have been improved by checking back with participants that I had understood and interpreted the photographs correctly.
The novelty aspect of the puppet may have been a limitation of this study as this may have changed children’s interactions with their environment, they may have behaved differently around the puppet and their construction of safe space may have been influenced by this.

Although this research was designed to be participatory and flexible, power relations are always inherent between adults and children. School is a context where adult-child power imbalance is particularly acute. The ethics of doing research in school has been questioned as children are ‘captive subjects’ (Morrow & Richards, 1996). This concern with power imbalance and ‘captive’ was challenging for the researcher as sensitivity was required to ensure that exploring and uncovering children’s safe spaces in school may breach the privacy of their special places (Green, 2013). These places may have been experienced differently after the research process, perhaps becoming less private by revealing them to an adult.

Although the constructionist framework of this research viewed children as knowledgeable, active thinkers (Einarsdottir, 2005) and strived to foreground children’s views, their perspectives were filtered and interpreted by the researcher which could be conceived as further adult ventriloquism. This study endeavoured to open out children’s thinking on safe space while dealing with the consistent challenge of attempting to document and incorporate children’s perspectives. Research such as this which incorporates adult researcher interpretation of children’s photographs, actions and words could be viewed as further constraining or limiting child voice.

An important aspect of the Mosaic approach is revisiting the material gathered with participants to provide an opportunity for participants to ‘think what they think’ (Clark, 2017). This slowing down to listen respects children’s need to be given time to step back from their everyday experiences and reflect and is a vital aspect of the Mosaic approach to documentation. This did not take place due to school closures because of the pandemic and important continuities and changes in participant perspectives may have been missed. Member checking (Braun & Clarke, 2013) in terms
of checking the analysis with participants may have strengthened the credibility and quality of the analysis in this study.

One of the core tenets of the Mosaic approach is the material provided by the children being shared as a ‘platform for communication’ (Clark & Statham, 2005) between adults and children. The Mosaic is formed when adults visibly listen (Rinaldi, 2001) to children’s experience of place and when adults are enabled to have a deeper understanding of their own perspective of a place. This study only began the first stage of the Mosaic – the gathering and constructing of child and adult understanding of safe space. It was a major limitation that these initial constructions were not shared due to school closures as the result of the pandemic. Attempts were made by the researcher to compare child and adult understandings of safe space in terms of similarities and differences, but the full Mosaic was not completed.

**Personal and Epistemological Reflexivity**

Personal and epistemological reflexivity are crucial factors to consider when considering the assumptions made during the research, the interpretation of findings and the implications described (Willig, 2013).

The epistemological and ontological positions adopted by the researcher were considered throughout the conceptualisation, design, implementation, and analysis of the current study. In terms of personal reflexivity, it is vital to have an awareness of researcher values and judgements brought into the research. On personal reflection, the main factor influencing and shaping the opinions of this researcher was the experience of hearing safe space recommended as a strategy for marginalised young people, but being unable to get a definitive description of this space beyond its location and resources. Being mindful of this, a research diary was kept throughout the process of data collection and analysis, which was a useful tool in supporting reflexivity (Creswell et al, 2007).
Quality Criteria Evaluation of this Research

Although some academics have proposed that it may not be possible to develop a single set of guidelines for evaluating qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Reicher, 2000), quality criteria guidelines were used for this research according to Yardley’s (2008) open-ended, flexible quality principles: i) sensitivity to context, ii) commitment and rigour, iii) transparency and coherence and iv) impact and importance.

Sensitivity to context was achieved by keeping in mind each participants differing sociocultural context in school and through using an open-ended flexible methodology, while commitment and rigour was demonstrated through the trustworthiness and dependability of data collection methods and analysis (McLeod, 2001). As the data collection took place in the children’s real world setting of their school, findings can be assumed to be a good measure of ecological validity, (Braun & Clarke, 2013), as well as being transparent and coherent. Transferability was enhanced in this study by describing the specific contexts, participants, settings and circumstances in detail so the reader can decide for themselves if their context is similar enough to warrant a safe transfer (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Transparency and coherence were demonstrated through a clear presentation of the analysis and transparency around researcher reflexivity. The impact and importance of this study will hopefully be demonstrated in the future, through applying the findings to the relevant community (Yardley, 2008), which in this case will be through dissemination to schools and the Education Authority in general.

Dissemination of Findings

The findings of this research will be disseminated to current Doctorate students and tutors in the form of a PowerPoint presentation. They will also be offered to be shared in presentation format with various EA support services who recommend safe space such as the Children Looked-After team and the Autism Support Service and the EPS. Safe space using schools will be offered a summary of findings and the checklists and leaflets (Appendices K & N) designed to actively involve
children in understanding and designing a shared, collaborative space. There are several angles that could usefully be isolated from the wider safe space project and given dedicated attention in the form of a journal article for publication. Themes relating to attachment, meaning making, belonging, psychological safety could be developed for specific journals or conference audiences. A poster presentation of this research has already won first prize in a British Psychological Society NI conference so this poster could be disseminated in further conferences.

**Further Research**

There remains a dearth of studies focussing on children’s experiences, understandings and perspectives on school strategies aimed at promoting safety, reducing anxiety, and managing emotions in school. Future research endeavours should seek to provide a more substantial exploration of the views of children designated as requiring extra or 'special' provision within the classroom. This was one small-scale qualitative study gathering the views of ten participants in one school and future research will benefit from accessing the views of larger sample sizes across a wider range of school settings. To access these larger samples, further research in this area could investigate school staff views on safe space on a quantitative scale, alongside measuring the frequency, usage, purpose and function of designated safe spaces in a variety of school settings. While this study added to the available literature by including both children and teacher perspectives, it excluded other school staff, parents, and classmates. Future research should also seek to develop a full picture of psychodynamic-based practices in schools and how these are experienced in practice by both children and the educators attempting to implement them.
Chapter 6. Implications for Educational Policy and Practice.

This research set out to explore child and teacher understanding of safe space in school and as the findings have ecological validity they could be extrapolated and related to psychological safety in schools more generally. These findings may have relevant implications for educational policy and practice in terms of how schools can enable and empower children to feel safer, how educational policy makers need to ensure teachers are fully supported in terms of their emotional wellbeing and how school policies need to embed psychological safety in its broadest sense. Research findings also have implications for the Educational Psychology Service in terms of the importance of sharing and making explicit the psychological theories underpinning strategies such as safe space.

Recommendations for Schools

Based on the emerging findings from this study, it may be useful to consider safe space as an ongoing collaborative, dynamic process (Clark-Parsons, 2019) between teacher and child, rather than a static space. One of the key findings of this study was the agentic way children constructed safe places after being ‘liberated’ to do so, and how this active, dynamic understanding of safe space differed from their teachers understanding of the space as static and for being calm and relaxed. Educational guidance abounds proposing a spatially located area in the classroom, mainly envisaged as a calming-down area, perhaps most usefully aligned with Porges (2011) feeling safe state, involving feeling both calm and connected. However, PVT warns that if children have experienced trauma and chronic stress their ANS can be impaired and get stuck in states of survival, rapidly moving between mobilising and immobilising or fight, flight, and freeze. Children may not be able to sit calmly in class if their internal ANS is signalling an alarm and we may need to visibly listen to their signalling for connection or active play or withdrawal. PVT theorists propose that we communicate through our nervous systems as much as our intellects and it would be useful for educators to consider what children are communicating about the state of their nervous systems
through their behaviour. There are undeniable challenges and tensions involved in incorporating child and adult perspective on safe space as demonstrated by this research but it is vital to ensure safe space is experienced as such by traumatised children and by proponents of trauma-informed and attachment-aware educational approaches. Figure 14 illustrates an example of how the ongoing, dynamic collaboration towards making school a safer place might look in process, as a collaboration between children and the adults in school.

**Figure 14**

*Journey towards Making School a Safer Space*

*Embed Psychological Safety into School Policy*

The current educational psychological shift away from behaviourist, deterministic approaches in schools towards psychodynamic approaches appeared to be causing dilemmas for
teachers in this study. The nurturing, regulating aspect of safe space conceptualised by its psychodynamic leaning proponents may be undermined by a behaviourist classroom ethos. Teachers’ assumptions of the necessity of temporal and spatial restrictions on safe space, alongside systemic curricular restrictions based on legislation, align with academics concerns that although some current psychodynamic approaches in school are ostensibly child-centred, this can become deterministic if not balanced with empowerment through providing agency for children (Bomber & Hughes, 2013; Porter, 2020). Warnings about grafting psychodynamic approaches onto behaviouristically inclined school settings (Parker & Levinson, 2018) are validated in this study with teachers appearing to adapt safe space for a broader classroom management function, sometimes using it for discipline after conflict or as a reward for completing classwork. Children’s freely chosen forms of self-regulation were often constrained by systemic restrictions such as evolving educational policies and practices, health and safety concerns, and the pressures of the performative primary curriculum commonly cited in other research (Brooker, 2011; Parker & Levinson, 2018; Wood, 2014). Recent research demonstrating the importance of student self-determination in education contexts (Howard et al, 2021), also highlights the potential of embedding psychological safety into school practices as it correlates with both student wellbeing and academic achievement. This study also indicated the need for embedding teacher psychological safety and emotional respite into school policy, linking to previously cited literature warning of the added emotional labour required by teachers operationalising attachment-based approaches (Howe, 2000).

To be safe psychologically, a school environment must provide a context of safety by helping pupils regulate their emotions and deal with fear (Twemlow et al, 2002). Schools need to be supported to recognise children’s dysregulated behaviour as communicating distress and alarm, and to understand and implement emotionally regulating strategies to promote feeling safe. Creating safe schools begins with developing an understanding of what makes children feel safe in schools and in their communities. Starting with children’s agency, participation, and space for free play and encouraging connection and belonging through relational practices could create a safer school
system which incorporates open, compassionate and connected groups (Twemlow, 2001) where children feel safe and known (Van der Kolk, 2014). This requires a reframing of wellbeing and personal development being valued equally alongside academic learning.

**Establish a Shared Understanding of Safe Space**

As the conceptual confusion surrounding the term safe space may have the potential to further undermine the psychological safety and inclusion of the most marginalised students (Barratt, 2010; Iversen, 2019; Wanless, 2016), it is vital for children, schools and their support agencies to establish a shared understanding of the term. This needs to be clearly constructed by actively collaborating with children, perhaps following a Mosaic style approach using photography and a puppet to uncover safe places. This research suggests that safe space could cover a broad definition including physical, psychological and emotional safety, as well as specifically focusing on classrooms becoming a place of civility (Barratt, 2010), a place for ‘dignity safety’ (Callan, 2016, p.64), and an ongoing, dynamic collaboration between teacher and pupils (Clark-Parsons, 2019). To establish a deep understanding of safe space educators, need to consider Clark-Parson’s (2019) reminder that safety is a relative concept, requiring reflection on:

> What does safety mean in this context? How is safety achieved? Who is it safe for? What is safe to do in this space? (p.3)

Incorporating child and adult perspectives on safe space, according to the findings of this study, could be enabled by using a checklist such as that reproduced in Appendix V, the Safe Space checklist for schools. If staff come together as a group to explore the checklist of staff questions and then listened to children’s views following the child’s checklist, they would have a good basis for a shared understanding of this space.

**Active Involvement of Children**

When schools adopt a humanistic pedagogy of listening (Clark & Moss, 2005), they can move positively towards enabling voice and participation in education more generally (Lundy, 2007).
Active, visible listening needs to be modelled alongside humanistic psychological principles valuing children as experts in their own lives and addressing the challenge of tokenism through respectful and meaningful engagement (Lundy, 2018). Mosaic-based methods such as photography and child-led tours could be used as a useful pedagogical tool for promoting active participation (Rouvali & Riga, 2019) and visible listening through observing children’s behaviour. Using a puppet to open up communication with children can be an effective way of listening to them; this could be supported in a sensitive manner by using Appendix S, a document created by the researcher as a guideline for co-constructing safe places in school with individual children who require them. Appendix S could be discussed, laminated and used by individual children to indicate how they are feeling and what they need at particular times of the school day.

**Promote Belonging through People and Place-Attachment**

Schools are places imbued with both personal and shared meaning and therefore the space they occupy can promote belonging and attachment (Hutchison, 2004). A school’s approach to managing the environment is important to development of a child’s place identity and environmental competency in using the environment to meet social and personal goals (Green, 2013). In this study the school environment had been prioritised towards systemic needs, which could potentially destabilise children’s safety at times. What makes children feel safe is an elusive topic (Twemlow et al, 2002), and this research could aid schools to pinpoint what makes school feel like a secure base by promoting belonging through providing more agency and free play opportunities for their pupils, in places which are as unrestricted as possible. Schools could include a reliable, standardised measure of belonging such as the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) scale (Goodenow, 1993).
Implications for Educational Policy

A secure school system accurately recognizes the emotional state of its pupils and teachers and establishes safety by meeting distressed behaviour with comforting actions (Twemlow et al, 2002). School cannot be experienced as safe by pupils if it is not also safe for teachers and support staff. The whole school community needs to be supported towards psychological safety and to reach out to parents/carers and the community outside the school building (McShane, 2012).

Create Inclusive Schools as Safe Systems

Systemic concerns over categorisation and management of pupils with SEN, with an accompanying lack of awareness of psychological models underpinning approaches such as safe space were indicated in this study. Contrasted with this was children’s capability to identify and manage their own emotions according to context and need, such as enjoying the liberation of outdoor physical play, or quietening down at times and creating or finding a safe base to reflect or process emotions, using sand or sensory activities to soothe themselves when needed and having friends and connections as an emotional safeguard. Inclusive schools could empower and enable children to self-regulate and could reframe difference as an essential aspect of human development (Klibthong & Agbenyega, 2018). This could reduce exclusion and would be preferable to potentially stigmatising specialist provision being required for an ever-increasing number of specific categories of pupils (Nel et al, 2014; Tomlinson, 2018; Schuelka, 2020).

Schools as Community Hubs

Inclusive academics have argued for years that educational policy makers need to develop community-focused schools which look beyond their gates to the social justice issues in the areas they serve (Dyson, 2008). Community-focused schools provide a range of services such as health and social care, leisure, arts, advice and training from the school base, to support the needs of their local community. This educational model is being adapted in several countries, in a recent Australian study of schools as community hubs, children were reported as saying ‘It makes me feel safe
because if something bad happens there are a lot of people around to help me’ (Department for Education and Child Development, 2021). An excerpt from the Australian model of schools as community hubs is included in Appendix T. A community-focused school which brings outside agencies in has the potential to offer support for teachers, as addressing the wellbeing of children in schools also needs to support the well-being of teachers (Roffey, 2012).

**Implications for Educational Psychology Practice**

Educational psychologists have a clear role in promoting psychological safety through inclusive belonging within whole school wellbeing (Roffey, 2013), which is vital for pupil well-being and improving learning outcomes and pro-social behaviour (Noble et al, 2008). Encouraging schools to consider promoting psychological safety through agentic play, connection and belonging is an evident role for EPs. Offering teachers emotional support and supervision, perhaps through a Motivational Interviewing model (Atkinson et al, 2019) could be relevant during EP consultation and services offered to schools.

**Making Psychological Theories Explicit**

The value of EPs making the psychological theories which underpin specialised strategies more explicit came to the fore in this study. Teachers did not seem aware of the psychodynamic underpinnings of safe space, resulting in it being adapted towards more behavioural means which arguably reduced its effectiveness. There is much more work required from educational psychology in making explicit the psychological theories underlying psychodynamically-based educational interventions (Parker & Levinson, 2018). This research also raised concerns over whether it is possible for emotionally drained teachers to offer relational and regulation repair to their pupils.
**Continuing Professional Curiosity**

Recent critiques of attachment theory need to be considered carefully by EPs. Attachment, like safe space, is a term which is conceptually blurred. Duschinsky, (2021), described Bowlby’s struggles with the ambiguity of the term attachment, which conceptually combined an evolutionary-based disposition for infants to seek proximity to caregivers when alarmed, with psychoanalytic language describing an emotionally-invested relationship which serves as a symbolic source of comfort and protection. Ainsworth’s (1968) concerns that ‘attachment has become a bandwagon’ (in Duschinsky, 2021, p.77) seem to be borne out by the current misunderstandings around attachment theories in education (Nash et al, 2015). Confusion between the narrow and broad meanings has made it seem like attachment is the child-caregiver relationship, when in fact it was originally conceptualised as just one component of this relationship (Ainsworth, 1984). This leads to problems when educators view a child’s attachment style as fixed and deterministic (Duschinsky, 2021) and risks disempowering and pathologising children and families (Ecclestone, 2017; Forslund et al, 2021; Smith et al, 2017). Whilst caution about the term ‘attachment’ may be warranted, the central idea of the secure base as an emotional connection with at least one sensitive and responsive attachment figure who meets the child’s needs and to whom the child can turn to as a safe haven when upset or anxious (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969), remains an important insight for EPs to share (Duschinsky, 2021). It may be useful for EPs to deconstruct or be explicit about the meaning of attachment, as safety-seeking or care-seeking behaviour when fearful, rather than a fixed, within-child way of relating.

EPs could continue to view educational strategies through a critical psychology lens by asking - ‘Who does it marginalise and in what ways? (Kessi & Kiguwa, 2015 p14.). Marginalization is a consequence of not being psychologically included due to social context not meeting needs and EPs are well placed to recognise, acknowledge, and combat this (Roffey, 2013). EPs also need to be aware of and curious about the structural issues in terms of the negative impact of discrimination, poverty, race, and trauma on children’s safety and raise these issues with schools.
**Clarifying and Defining Concepts**

EPs are also well placed to promote trauma-informed approaches in school, while ensuring schools have the relevant foundational knowledge of trauma, regulation, and dysregulation (Dorado et al, 2016). This research has indicated that trauma-informed strategies such as safe space, require a depth of knowledge of psychological understanding and corresponding skills which EPs may need to support schools with (Porter, 2020). The trauma-informed emphasis on repairing regulatory abilities and dysregulating the stress response (Brunzell et al, 2016) may be useful to highlight when recommending safe space as a strategy, by clarifying and defining the terms and focusing on the need for co-regulation with an attuned emotionally available adult (Sunderland, 2019). This study also documented the capability of children in constructing their own safe places and self-regulating and EPs could advocate for children being listened to and enabled to do this within the school setting. The challenges involved in incorporating children’s perspectives into adult practice was evidenced in this study and has implications in terms of improving adult listening to children. The form of listening advocated by the Mosaic Approach creates ‘slow knowledge’ (Clark, 2019) and necessitates a time investment from adults to ensure that children get the opportunity to create a ‘nomadic thinking space’ (Clark, 2019 p. 237), giving them the freedom to act in unconstrained ways in school. The temporal restrictions on children’s safe places were evident and it is incumbent on EPs to reflect on how to create time to listen to children and I will strive to use or recommend Appendix S to provide a visual record of co-constructing safe places in school when working with traumatised and/or distressed children.

The ambiguity that the term emotional regulation held for teachers in this study also indicated an area where EPs could support educator understanding and practice. Specifically, for traumatised children EPs could incorporate a deeper understanding of the importance of the much broader concept of emotional processing (Greenberg, 2002), rather than just containment or regulation. See Appendix U for Emotional Processing Information for EPs.
**EP Action Research**

In terms of EP’s continuing research, this study emphasised the value of listening to marginalised students by using creative methodology, moving away from dominant tidy approaches to research towards embracing the messiness of ecologically based projects (Agbenyega, 2008). Embarking on child-led tours with digital cameras in this study gave flexibility and openness to balance the power in favour of the children, so that they could be liberated to construct safe places. I hope to continue tours and photography in my future work as an EP to position the child as an expert in their daily life and setting.

**Personal Reflection**

The process of completing this research has been both challenging and rewarding. Overall, I aimed to answer the research question to the best of my ability against the backdrop of competing professional training commitments and a global pandemic. The steep learning curve in terms of my research skills has resulted in positive developments in several areas including reflective practice, critical and flexible thinking, and measured decision-making. I believe it will be important and beneficial to incorporate these developing skills into my future Educational Psychology practice.

Making justifiable decisions among various options at points was difficult and it was essential to draw on the support, guidance, and critical input from my supervisors. Their contributions guided me to consider alternatives and the potential implications to the crucial research decisions being made. Developing my own reflective practice was also important in considering how to proceed at various points as well as how I might proceed differently in the future if embarking on similar research.

In hindsight, one of my biggest challenges resulted from underestimating the sheer volume of data generated from ten individual interviews of 25-60-minute duration, as well as the analytical process required to make sense of the data. I discovered that the process of data analysis is indeed a slow wheel of interpretation with many ebbs and flows (Braun & Clarke, 2021). At times, as a
researcher, I became blocked in this process and seeking supervision and fresh insight was vital to illuminate and unlock the data and keep the wheel turning.

Undertaking this research has shed light on my understanding of safe space in school in particular and psychological safety in general and the complexities and challenges this poses for children and school staff. It has also developed my awareness of how schools can support children’s experience of safety and has increased my awareness of the strains on teacher emotional wellbeing that will be important considerations in my future career as a practising EP. I believe this experience will benefit how I approach cases in the future, as well as the realisation that I will need to make psychological theories explicit when working collaboratively. Moreover, this research journey has affirmed that enabling marginalised children to find psychological safety in school is an area of specialist interest to me, and one which I want to develop further in the future.

Synthesis of Findings and Concluding Remarks

This study explored child understanding of safe space in school, alongside their teachers, using a qualitative, participatory design within a social constructionist framework. Findings suggested that children constructed safe space as involving agency and active participation to play, appreciated the opportunity to create their own safe places and valued belonging in terms of relationships and inclusion. Teachers held similar views on the importance of emotional regulation for safety, but diverged from children in terms of viewing safe space as a good tool for classroom management, and did not appear to consider play, friendship or belonging as important aspects of safe space. Existing research literature has suggested that school staff perceive safe space as a beneficial strategy for managing anxiety and view the tangible features of the space as a separately located area as working to regulate children. This research extends, and to a degree challenges these previous findings, as child participants in the current study were more dynamic and flexible in their understanding of safe space while concerns were raised about the understanding and awareness
teachers have regarding psychodynamic interventions and how these may become stigmatising within a behaviourist-dominated school perspective.

The present research can be considered timely, as most research related to child perspective on safe space tends towards literal interpretations of safety in terms of being safe from harm. This study extended this limited understanding of safety by prioritising children’s experiences in an open and flexible child-led manner which uncovered the various adaptive ways in which children seek safety in school. As O’Gorman et al (2016) noted in relation to adolescents in alternative school settings, students experienced school as a ‘sanctuary’ when it offered physical, emotional and psychological safe spaces; fostered a sense of community; enabled them to affirm their identity and employed flexible behavioural supports. This research builds on this foundational knowledge by suggesting that free play is a safe place for middle-childhood aged pupils and moreover, by also seeking the perspectives of teachers, it helps to highlight the considerable emotional strain they are currently experiencing. This research also discussed the current promotion of psychodynamic approaches in school as potentially accentuating a within-child conceptualisation of behavioural issues and considers instead a move towards more empowering humanistic psychological approaches in school.

In conclusion, although this is a small-scale exploratory study conducted in, and specific to, the NI context of mainstream primary schools, it is hoped that it will offer some beneficial contributions and provide new insights into an area that to date has been under-researched. Finally, as the words of the poet TS Eliot (1942) remind us, we must continue exploring and reflecting:

‘We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time’.
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Appendix A. Principal Information Sheet

Principal Information Sheet

Title: Visibly listening to children’s understanding of ‘safe space’.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to explore the social constructions that primary school aged children attribute to ‘safe space’ in the classroom. Psychologists suggest that safe spaces should be ‘easily accessible and provide children with a sense of calm and containment’ (Treisman, 2017). The meaning of safe space varies from school to school and so it will useful to explore what children understand about safe spaces within their classrooms and schools. Children’s understandings will be explored with the researcher using a participatory, creative and visual framework known as the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2001). This approach uses traditional research methods such as observing and interviewing children, alongside more creative techniques such as children taking photos, guiding the researcher on a tour of the school, making maps and drawing. Children will co-construct their understanding of safe space with the researcher and school staff will also be asked about their understanding of safe space. It is important to understand what children think about their safe spaces in school to ensure that these spaces are effective in providing them with a sense of calm and containment. This study will help to refine the concept of safe space in school and ultimately improve a child’s self-regulation strategies by helping them understand safe space and how they can best use it.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you and your staff use safe space as a self-regulating strategy for children in your school and you understand and support seeking children’s views on matters that affect them. This research conceptualises children as being experts in their own lives and the Mosaic approach enables children to present their expertise to an audience in a mode of communication of their own choice. This research will result in a Mosaic which is a documentation of both the child and adult understanding of safe space and will promote dialogue, reflection and interpretation of safe space.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish your staff to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet and you will be invited to formally consent to participate on behalf of your school. Staff interested in participating will
also be invited to consent on their own behalf. Parents will be asked to consent on behalf of their children.

It is anticipated that the study will take place in February 2020.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Principals will be asked to consent on behalf of their school and their teachers and to identify teachers who use safe space as a strategy within the classroom. The researcher will then meet with teachers at school, who are considering participating, at a mutually convenient time. At this meeting the researcher will describe the research, explain the purpose and the demands of the study and seek the teacher’s individual consent to participate. They will be discouraged from participating if they are currently experiencing high levels of stress or if they feel that it would be distressing or detrimental to any of their pupils.

The parents of all children in the included classrooms will be given the opportunity to opt out if they do not wish their child to be involved in the participatory stage of the research. All parents will receive a parent information leaflet to help them make their decision and a parent opt out form.

The researcher will observe within-classroom use of safe space for 2 days per class. The teacher will be asked to introduce the researcher to the class using clear and simple language, with a script provided by the researcher.

Following observation, the class teacher will then introduce the researcher and puppet to the class using a script again provided by the researcher, where it is made clear that we want to find out more about safe space or calm corners, using whatever terminology the school uses and feels is appropriate for the researcher to use with the children. Subsequently the children in the class will be invited to volunteer to engage in participatory work with the researcher.

The puppet will be used to explain the purpose of the research and gain children’s assent to take part. Older children who can read and write, or those who do not wish to interact with the puppet, will be provided with a child information leaflet and consent form.

The researcher will then invite children to talk to the puppet about safe spaces. This conversation will take place within the classroom as this is a familiar place for the children and it also may be easier to talk about these places in the room while they are there. This child interview will be audio recorded for later analysis.

The children will then be invited to draw a picture of safe spaces in school and to describe their drawing to the puppet or the researcher. The puppet or researcher will then invite the child to show them their safe spaces in school and the child will ‘tour-guide’ the researcher and puppet around the school, using a polaroid camera to take photos (which can be instantly printed) of the puppet in their chosen safe spaces in school. Following the tour around the school and the taking of photographs the child will be invited to choose visual representations of safe spaces to stick on to a large piece of card. Children will also be invited to represent safe spaces in a creative method of their choice – drawing, clay modelling or using construction or junk art materials. The researcher will then ask children’s permission to scribe their verbal descriptions of the photos accurately on the card. These will be photographed and added to the Mosaic.

The large piece of card forms the Mosaic. No photographs of children or adults or identifying pictures of the school will be used in the final Mosaic document to preserve the anonymity of the school.
The child will be invited to talk about their mosaic, with specific focus on their understanding of the meaning of safe space in their school. The composition and the child’s description of their mosaic will be audio recorded for later analysis. The child will be asked by the researcher if they want to share their mosaic with other class members, their teacher, other adults in the school or their parents. The child will be reassured by the researcher that they do not have to talk about the completed mosaic if they do not want to and they can return to class at any point.

The children will then be invited to take a photo of their mosaic and to take the photograph home if they wish. If they do not want to take the photo home, they will be asked what they would like to do with it and their suggestion will be carried out by the researcher. The created document will be retained for analysis.

Subsequently, an interview will take place with each child’s teacher about safe space usage in the classroom. The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

As this research has been designed with children’s rights in mind it is low risk for children taking part as at all stages their participation is voluntary and fully informed. The creative activities they will be invited to take part in will be familiar to them and should be fun and interactive. Their ongoing consent will be sought by the researcher who has many years of experience working with children in primary school and children can freely withdraw from the study at any time. They will be provided with various ways of doing this. There may be some risk of stress or anxiety to school staff with having another adult in the classroom. The researcher will minimise this by being open and transparent about the aims of the study, being available for individual meetings about the study and providing contact details for any queries in advance and throughout the study. The researcher will provide all scripts and materials for the study so as not to add to teacher workload. The researcher will reassure school staff of their right to withdraw from the study and provide a clear process for doing this. The researcher will familiarise herself with and follow the school’s safeguarding policy and guidelines in the event of any safeguarding concerns arising during the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

For children to learn, school needs to be experienced as a safe and supportive place to be (Dorado et al, 2016). Many schools are using the strategy of ‘safe space’ to support pupils who are becoming anxious or overwhelmed by the demands of the classroom. Although safe space is currently a popular strategy used in many schools as a self-regulating strategy for pupils, there has been very little research into the understanding of ‘safe spaces’ in schools, their effectiveness, and how they support the children who use them. This research will seek the views of the child on their understanding of ‘safe space’ as by listening to what the children themselves have to say, we may be better able to provide them with a better quality and more relevant space in school. The study will also involve a brief informal interview with teachers about their understanding of safe space. The school will benefit from a deeper understanding of safe space in their school through the child and adult co-construction of the meaning of safe space in their school.

What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

Should the research stop earlier than planned and you are affected in any way we will tell you and explain why.

What if something goes wrong?
If you have any complaints about the project in the first instance you can contact the researcher. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the research supervisor, the Programme Director on the DECAP course in Queens University Belfast or Head of School in Psychology, Queens University Belfast. All contact details are provided below.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

A number of safeguards will be put in place to protect the identity of your school, your pupils and your staff. Any photos which include people or other identifying features of the school will not be used in the final document produced and created by the children. In addition, any data collected about you will be encrypted and protected by passwords and other relevant security processes and technologies. These have all been approved by QUB Ethics panel.

**Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Children’s ideas on safe space during discussions, tours around the school and drawing, modelling, photography and creation of a map will be recorded. These recordings will be anonymised to remove any identifying features of individual children or the school. The recordings will then be analysed for meaning by the researcher. The teacher interview will also be recorded, transcribed anonymously and analysed for meaning.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

This research is for a doctoral thesis which will partly fulfil the requirements of the Doctorate in Child, Adolescent and Education Psychology. The research may be submitted for publication or presented at conferences or events organised by Queens University Belfast.

**Who is organising the research?**

This research is being conducted by trainee educational psychologist, Maria Macdonald and is supervised by Anthea Percy, Course tutor and research supervisor.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved by the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Ethics, QUB, Review Procedures.

**Contacts for further information**
Appendix B. School Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Participant Identification Number: ________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Project:</th>
<th>Visibly Listening to Children’s Understanding of Safe Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Investigator:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Number:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read, or had read to me, and understand the information sheet dated dd/mm/yyyy, version xx for the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered fully.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw within one month after the research has finished in school, without giving any reason and without my legal rights being affected.

3. I understand the study is being conducted by a researcher from Queen’s University Belfast and that my personal information will be held securely on University premises and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Data Protection Act 2018.
4. I understand that data collected as part of this study may be looked at by authorized individuals from Queen's University Belfast and a panel of external examiners. I give permission for these individuals to have access to this information.

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

6. I understand that the information I provide may be published as a report. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications.

7. I understand that this study is confidential but there are limits to this confidentiality. Revelations that are criminal [or in clear breach of good practice] may require confidentiality to be broken by the researchers.

8. I understand that what is discussed during the interviews and classroom observations and creation of mosaics is confidential with the exception that if I disclose information that indicates that I am at risk of harming myself or others, or in danger of being harmed by someone else. The researcher is legally obliged to pass on this information to designated safeguarding officials in school or in the Education Authority.

9. I understand the interviews and creation of mosaics will be tape recorded and photographed and there is a possibility of direct quotation and images (with no identifiable features) being used in publications.

10. I agree to being contacted at a later date and invited to take part in future studies of a similar nature. I understand that I am only agreeing to receive information and I am under no obligation to take part in any future studies. If you decide not to consent to being contacted in the future it will not have any influence on your involvement in this particular research study or impact on your relationship with the researcher or QUB.
Name of Participant (please print) __________________________ Signature _______________ Date ___________

Name of Person Taking Consent (please print) __________________________ Signature _______________ Date ___________

Chief Investigator or Researcher Contact details:

Researcher: Maria Macdonald
            mmacdonald05@qub.ac.uk

Chief Investigator:
### Appendix C. School, Teacher and Child Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Inclusion criteria for schools:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. They currently use safe space or calm corners as a strategy for supporting children and have made parents aware of this strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. They are willing to facilitate the researcher working with children for up to 2 weeks during February 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. They are willing to obtain teacher consent and parental consent for participating in the study</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusion criteria for schools:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. They do not have a current designated safe space or calm corner available for children to use when required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A recent traumatic event which will have impacted on teachers or children’s feelings of safety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Inclusion criteria for Class Teachers:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Must give their verbal consent to the researcher at stage 2 of the research protocol.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Must be of the view that no child in the class will be negatively impacted by the presence of the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Must be comfortable with the researcher carrying out an observation in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Must have a designated safe space or calm corner in use within their classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusion criteria for Class Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers will not be included if they are experiencing high levels of stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teachers will be excluded if they feel that there will be a negative psychological impact to any individual as a result of the research within the class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers will be excluded if they are currently experiencing adverse life events such as bereavement, separation or trauma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Inclusion criteria for child participants:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The child must have parental consent to take part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The child must have access to safe space within the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The child must have the capacity to meet and talk with the researcher or puppet and give ongoing assent. This capacity will be determined by class teachers who will have known children for 5 or 6 months at the time of research taking place (February 2020).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exclusion criteria for child participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Children will not be included if they do not wish to take part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Children who do not have parental consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Children who do not use the safe space.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Children who are currently experiencing adverse life events such as bereavement, separation or trauma.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D. Parent Information and Consent Form

Study title: Visibly listening to children’s understandings of Safe Space in schools

This project has been fully ethically approved by the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Ethics, QUB, Review Procedures.

Introduction and background to the study

Many schools use safe space as a way of helping children to calm down and feel better when they need some quiet time to themselves. Safe space has been defined by psychologists as an easily accessible area which supports children to feel calm and safe. However, very little research exists to show what children understand by safe space. Given that children are the ones for whom the space is designed, it is important that we explore their views.

Your child’s school principal has given permission for this research study on children’s understandings of safe space in school to take place in their classroom. This information sheet has been designed to tell you why the research is being done and what it might involve if you would like your child to take part.

I would appreciate your taking the time to read this information carefully. If you have any questions after reading this, please feel free to contact me using the details below and I will be happy to chat things through with you.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of the research is to find out what children think about safe space in school and to make sure these spaces are useful for them. The research will be conducted by myself, Maria Macdonald, a trainee educational psychologist at Queen’s University Belfast, for use in a doctoral thesis and relevant journal publications, conferences and events.

Why has my child’s school been chosen?

Schools were contacted to take part in this research and your child’s school has expressed an interest in exploring the views of their children on safe space. By agreeing to take part in this research the school is showing how much they value their children’s views.

What will the research involve?

I will be inviting children to volunteer to explore their ideas creatively. However, I will not talk to your child individually if you have opted them out of the study. If you are happy for your child to participate they will be offered a choice of activities that they will already be familiar with as part of their everyday school experience, such as drawing or clay-modelling. Next, they will be asked to take me on a tour of their school and comment on and/or photograph relevant places and spaces. Finally, working with the researcher, the children will use their materials to make a document showing their ideas and understanding of safe space. Everything will take place during school hours, using
resources that I will provide. Once the children produce their document, I will remove all references to anything that might identify them or the school, and then explore their ideas about safe spaces.

I have been given permission by the principal to begin by sitting in the classroom for two days. Here I will see how the children use the different spaces in the classroom while they can get used to my presence. Then I will have a chat with the whole class about the study and will ask for 5 volunteers to take part in the creative activities. If more children are interested in taking part, we will choose by randomly picking names out of a jar. Every child will understand what is involved and know how to pull out if they change their mind.

What will happen to my child by taking part?

I. The class teacher will introduce me (and a puppet for younger children) to the class and we will explain what the study is about and why it's happening. Then, the teacher will ask for volunteers to take part

II. Chosen volunteers will be invited to use creative and fun activities to explore how they understand safe spaces and how these spaces can be used to help all children feel calmer and better when they need to. These discussions will be tape-recorded but no names of people or schools will be used in the write-up so that your child will remain completely anonymous. Activities will take place within the familiar classroom and school surroundings and children will be reassured that they can stop taking part at any time.

III. Children will be invited to take a photograph of their work home if they wish. The created document will be kept by me as part of the research write-up.

IV. An interview will take also take place with the class teacher about safe space usage. This interview will be voice recorded to be used in the research write-up.

V. I will invite school staff and children to share their ideas about safe space in school.

Will my child be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

Your child’s ideas on safe space will be voice recorded and photographs will be taken of the creative documents they make. No photographs or documents which identify the school or children will be used in this study. I will make all recorded media anonymous by removing any identifying features of individual children or the school. I will then analyse the recordings will then be analysed for meaning.

Will my child’s part in this project be kept confidential?

Every reasonable effort will be made to protect the identity of your child, the school and the staff. The children’s final document will not contain any photos of people or anything that could be used to identify the school. All data collected throughout the study will be treated in accordance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and your child and the school will not be identifiable in the final write-up.

Full confidentiality and privacy will be given to the children taking part, unless there are concerns for their safety. In this case I will follow the school’s safeguarding procedures. The documents created by children will be checked to make sure that the school and children are anonymous. In addition, should your child participate they may not wish to bring a picture of their mosaic home. We would ask that you respect their wishes.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Research has shown us that children can benefit from being listened to and encouraged to express themselves in a creative and fun way. They will be talking about and deepening their understanding of good ways to keep calm and feel good in school. Their ideas will help to make sure that school has positive and useful safe spaces.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

It is possible that a child might feel shy or uncomfortable talking about something that is personal to them. If you feel this is a sensitive issue for your child, or you are concerned they might become upset if talking about safe spaces, it would be best to tell them not to volunteer for this study and complete the opt-out form which is attached.

Do I have to take part?

I am seeking to work with a group of 5 children. It is up to you to decide whether or not you wish your child to potentially take part.

If you do decide to take part, you do not need to do anything further. Please keep a copy of this information sheet and make contact with me using the details below should you have any questions. Your child will also be invited to consent on their own behalf during class time. Your child will be clearly told that they can withdraw from the research at any time by telling me or the teacher or using a thumbs down gesture or visual card showing a stop sign.

*Please let the school or myself know if you do not want to take part by completing the form attached below and returning to school by 24th January 2020.*

Who is organising the research?

This research is being conducted by myself, trainee educational psychologist Maria Macdonald and is supervised by XXXXXXXX, Course tutor at Queens University Belfast.

When will the research take place?

This is planned for February 2020.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

This research is being done as part of my Doctorate in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology. The research may be submitted for publication or presented at conferences or events organised by Queens University Belfast. Your child and the school will not be named or identifiable from any written publication. If you would like a summary of the final report, please contact me or my supervisor using the contact details below.

What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

Should the research stop earlier than planned and you are affected in any way we will tell you and explain why.

What if I change my mind and want my child to withdraw?

You can withdraw your child from this research at any time by contacting me at the School of Psychology, Queens University Belfast.
Or if you prefer you can contact the school head teacher or your child’s class teacher to withdraw consent and they can then inform me. Your relationship with the teachers or school or myself or QUB will not be affected by this withdrawal.

If your child is withdrawn from the study all their data (including drawings and photos taken) will be deleted or destroyed.

The researcher will not be able to give you any advice about your child. If you have any concerns about your child’s use of safe space in school, please contact your child’s teacher, the special needs coordinator in school or the school principal

What if something goes wrong?
If you have any complaints about the project in the first instance you can contact any member of the research team. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the research supervisor, the Programme Director on the DECAP course in Queens University Belfast or Head of School in Psychology, Queens University Belfast. Contact details are provided below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.
Child info sheet and consent form

My name is Maria Macdonald and I am hoping to find out about your safe spaces in school.

Safe spaces are places you can go to in school when you need to think or calm down or when you feel bad. You can show me your safe spaces by drawing or taking photos or taking me there or just telling me – whatever you prefer.

This will be just between us unless there is something big worrying you that I might need to share with another adult. Your parent knows that you are working with me and is happy for you to do this.

You can stop at any time by telling me or giving me a thumbs down sign or showing me the thumbs down or STOP visual which will be available all the time.
Thank you for taking the time to read this!

It is completely up to you whether you join in or not – you can choose. Before you decide please read the statements below.

If I talk to Maria about safe spaces, I understand that:

- Things I say will be voice recorded

- things I say or draw or photos I take might be in Maria’s research but no-one will know that it was me that said or did these things

- I can stop the interview at any time by telling Maria or using these signs
Please circle the tick to say yes I agree to take part, or the X to say no I do not want to take part:

![Tick and Cross]

Please write your name

__________________________________________________________

Signature____________________________________________________

Date_________________________
Appendix F. Researcher Introduction Script

Class, this is Maria who is a student at Queens University Belfast. She is here in our classroom to see all the activities we do and how we use all the different spaces in the classroom. She will be sitting here in the classroom (teacher indicates where I will sit) and will be taking some notes on how we use our classroom space. Maria will be doing this for two days. After that Maria would like to talk to some of you about the classroom and other parts of the school. Have a think about whether you would like to talk to Maria about our school. Please just carry on as normal and let Maria see what we do in our classroom on a normal day.
Appendix G. Child Interview Schedule

Child interview

Hello…. My name is Maria and I’m here to find out about the different places and spaces in your school and classroom. Your teacher told me that you might like to talk to me. Is that right?

You do not have to tell me about any places that you want to keep to yourself. Only tell me about the places you would like to share. Do you want to talk to me?

Tell me about all the different places in your classroom

*If prompt is needed* ........Where would I go if I wanted to read?

.................................Where would I go if I wanted to wash my hands?

If I wanted some quiet time on my own where could I go?

Your teacher tells me you have a calm corner – what would I do in there?

Tell me about the calm corner.

Can you show me around the rest of your school?

Would you like to tell me about the places you like to go in school when you need some peace and quiet? Time on your own?

Where would I go if I was feeling bad or sick?

Can you take some photos of Mo in the calm corner in the classroom?

Can you take some photos of Mo in calm places around the school?

Is there anything missing from the calm places that you would like to see in there?

What would make a space feel really safe for Mo?

I would like to share your ideas about safe space with other children and adults in school. Is this ok or not, yes or no, thumbs up or down?

Would you like to help me make a mosaic?

What will we do with the mosaic when it’s finished? I need to share it with my friends in Queens University but you can take a photo of it to bring home. It is up to you whether you want to show it to your family.

Would you like to show the Mosaic to your teacher?

Would you like to show it to your friends?
Tell the puppet about all the different spaces in your classroom and what they are used for.

The puppet is interested in this space – the calm corner – tell the puppet what it is.

When would the puppet go in there?

What would the puppet do in there?

How would the puppet feel in there?

If the puppet wanted to spend some quiet time in the rest of the school where would it go?

Would you like to take the puppet and me around the school to show me these calm places?

Would you like to take some photos of the puppet in these calm places?

Would you like to draw your calm place or make a model of it?

Let’s put all your ideas about calm places on to this big bit of card and we’ll call it a mosaic. Tell me about your Mosaic as you are working....

Would you like me to write about this picture or would you like to do it? What shall I write for you?

Some children like to share their work with their teacher and their class. Would you like to do that?

Would you like to have a picture of your Mosaic to take home?
### Appendix I. Teacher Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aim: to understand the purpose, meaning, usage and effectiveness of safe space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about the safe space in this classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why was the safe space set up in this classroom?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was it decided where to locate it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you decide what to put in it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do the children use it for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is effective in supporting children to feel safer and calmer?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix J. Visual Data Analysis

Phase 1. Child chooses photos.

➢ Child chooses 6 – 8 best photos which are stored in separate folders according to child name on iPad

➢ Researcher opens spreadsheet with separate worksheet for each child and separate columns for photo content/data extract/line/code/initial reflections

Phase 2. Content examined and categorised

➢ Researcher examines content of photos and identifies photo motifs according to location, activity and resources

➢ Photo content is recorded on each child’s worksheet on the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet as reproduced from Child 4’s worksheet in Table 5

➢ Photo motifs are recorded on separate worksheet as reproduced in Table 6

Table 5

Photo content (Child 4)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Photo location</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms H. room – empty classroom</td>
<td>Mo covered by child constructed den</td>
<td>Umbrella, cushions, blankets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside at disused side area of school</td>
<td>Mo playing/ riding a trike</td>
<td>tricycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors – Under stairwell</td>
<td>Mo hanging/swinging on railing</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indoors</td>
<td>Mo squeezed in hiding place between cupboard and wall</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS1 corridor</td>
<td>Mo hiding in dark den tent</td>
<td>Dark den</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS1 corridor</td>
<td>Mo &amp; child laying together in the sand tray</td>
<td>Sand and sand toys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 6

**Photo Motifs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child class</th>
<th>Outdoor play</th>
<th>Sand play</th>
<th>Sensory play</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Ms Room</th>
<th>Feeding</th>
<th>Hiding places</th>
<th>Watching</th>
<th>Calm, privacy/withdrawal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Y6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>bubble light, peanut ball, massage tools</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>books, toys, putty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Y6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>massage tools</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Y3</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>turned away towards wall, sensory ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Y3</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>x - although wanted to go to sensory room but unavailable</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>tangle twister for regulating breathing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Y2</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Y2</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Y2</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase 3. Photographs coded**

- Photo motifs and content were re-examined and worked into codes by the researcher
- Codes were recorded on each child’s worksheet on the spreadsheet under headings in Table 7
Table 7.

**Photo codes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>codes 200121</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>outdoor play, indoor play, sensory play, friends, reading, nurturing, connecting, hiding, watching /observing, privacy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase 4. Photo Categories generated**

- Photos, content and codes were discussed and examined with research supervisors
- Categories were generated from codes and discussions
- Photo categories of Outdoor & Indoor Play, Friends & Connection, Hiding Places, Watching/Vantage Points, Withdrawal/Privacy/escape/refuge and Calm & Comfort were added to each child’s worksheet and recorded in tabular format on the photo motif worksheet according to Table 8 in the main body of the thesis, part of which is reproduced below.

**Table 8**

**Visual Data Categories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual data Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor &amp; Indoor Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends &amp; Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding Places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching/Vantage Points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal/Privacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm &amp; Comfort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix K. Observational Data Record Including Initial Reflections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>child</th>
<th>safe space</th>
<th>reading</th>
<th>drawing/colouring</th>
<th>sensory resources</th>
<th>field notes</th>
<th>initial comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Y6</td>
<td>Timetabled – am &amp; pm</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>enjoyed 1on1, mentioned behav. support teacher. Is safe space a person/individual time with friend rather than a place?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Y6</td>
<td>Timetabled – am &amp; after lunch</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>enjoyed lego &amp; kinetic sand play &amp; massage tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Y3</td>
<td>When needed</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>seemed to like small hidey places, built a closed in den with cushions, went outside to side of school (disused area) to use bikes &amp; scooters. Seemed free&amp;happy doing that rather than with a sore head and upset looking when coming out of class. Loved free play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Y3</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>Y0</td>
<td>Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Y3</td>
<td>When feeling sick</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>loved to play outside and with sand, chatty. Need to check comment about werewolves with teacher. Importance of leaving silence for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Y2</td>
<td>When needed</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>liked small hidey places for Mo to squeeze into. Put chairs in front of Mo and sat on chairs to protect him. Why has he got a green ‘cong’ for? Told mo at the end that he had good fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Y2</td>
<td>When needed</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>softly spoken child, difficult to understand, deaf in one ear (teacher told me afterwards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Y2</td>
<td>After lunch</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>lively enthusiastic. Put mo in a box, put himself in a box, wrapped up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>8 Y3</th>
<th>9 Y6</th>
<th>10 Y2</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>y</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>used for classroom management - child to wait there until adult ready for them. Timetabled. Sometimes used for pupils to reflect after fights/arguments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mainly used by 2 children - initially TA went there too but pupils prefer to be alone. Sit with back to class and not distracted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>asked children for design ideas for safe space, concerned with resources &amp; aesthetics of it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix L. Child-Led Tour Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>child</th>
<th>duration</th>
<th>location 1</th>
<th>location 2</th>
<th>location 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 P6</td>
<td>57 mins</td>
<td>Ms H room</td>
<td>sensory room – visuals &amp; puppets</td>
<td>dark den tent KS1 corridor - hiding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 P6</td>
<td>38-40 mins</td>
<td>Ms H room</td>
<td>sensory room – massage toys</td>
<td>Push/pull wall – physical play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 P3</td>
<td>45 - 50 mins</td>
<td>empty classroom</td>
<td>outside - on trikes</td>
<td>under stairs – swinging/hanging on railing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 P3</td>
<td>34.91 mins</td>
<td>outside on trikes</td>
<td>empty multi-use classroom – constructing hiding places</td>
<td>sand play (empty classroom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 P2</td>
<td>20.45 mins</td>
<td>small tight hiding places (shelves in library, cardboard box, ‘protected by chair in front of bottom shelf so it’s hard to see him)</td>
<td>playing outside – trikes, scooters, high-up vantage points</td>
<td>back in library - Mo falling/jumping from high shelf to land safely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 P2</td>
<td>22 mins</td>
<td>library – chairs &amp; high-up shelf</td>
<td>outside - main playground - corners with viewpoints</td>
<td>Outside side area - trikes &amp; scooters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 P2</td>
<td>42 mins</td>
<td>library - high shelf &amp; tight spaces (lower shelves and boxes)</td>
<td>empty multi-use classroom</td>
<td>outside main playground – steps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Appendix M. Child Transcribed and Coded Data Excerpt**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview transcript (child participant 2)</th>
<th>Initial codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: it's a little place where you go to if you need to calm down</td>
<td><strong>Function of cc</strong> – to calm down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: I like movin’</td>
<td><strong>Physical activity</strong> – moving makes him calmer (+ photo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher</strong>: you like moving</td>
<td><strong>Contradiction</strong> between child &amp; teacher – child says it makes him hyped rather than calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: yea movin’ makes me calmer sometimes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: the greatest showman..the greatest showman doesn’t calm me it makes me hyped</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: Mo would love here actually Mo should love in here</td>
<td><strong>Sensory room</strong> - Mo would feel safe here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: he has friends and all (16.46) he should like in here he has friends look</td>
<td><strong>Friends</strong> - important in feeling safe and calm (+ photo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: let me get the toys out for you Mo (18.37) I will pressure first for now</td>
<td><strong>Sensory/nurturing activities</strong> – massage deep pressure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yea...let me try this on ye (tries another massage toy on Mo) (19.08)</td>
<td><strong>Nurturing</strong> Mo- massage/brushing his fur down/nurturing (+ photo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong>: you could roll on the peanut ball ...can you help me Maria?</td>
<td><strong>Physical play</strong> – Mo playing on ball (+ photo)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix N. Initial Child Codes

Child 1

- 41 – space as belonging to the adult: is child’s understanding of space from an outsider viewpoint?
- 68 – space as regulated, restricted, organised, controlled by adult
- 199 – 215 – nurturing Mo, understands value of relaxation
- 320 – friendship, companionship as safety
- 393 – needing physical removal to allow thinking through
- 426 – walking quiet, solitude – need mental removal
- 515 – cc as high currency – in teachers’ gift to give
- 520 – restriction, controlled
- 573 – need to escape, let it out boundaried by adult controls: child unable to escape, release – what are they learning here? To bottle up / it doesn’t matter / there’s a time & place??
- 705-761 – request permission

Key ideas:

- **Escape**
  - Removal
  - Quiet
  - Expression of feelings
  - Functions as an escape
- **Controlled**
  - Permission necessary
  - Highly regulated, organised
- **Nurture – companionship – connection**
  - Able to connect safely in that place

Child 2

- **Removal for** calming
- Clear sensory preferences – movement, sand, hypersensitive to music
- Need for free, unstructured, unboundaried play limited (blocked) by teacher – again, extent of their freedom controlled by adult, potentially confusing for child, what are they learning?
- Repeated pattern of violence, attack, aggression
- Strong feelings
- Seeking alignment, connection with M, quietly inviting / letting her into his world

Key ideas:

- **Restrictions**
  - Use of space controlled by adult
- **Significance of connection**
  - Actively, quickly seeking connection with M
  - Play interactions reflecting interpersonal experiences?
• Need for **physical removal**: into ss when feeling sick, head sore
• Adult controlling space – in her gift to ‘allow’ entry
• Child’s symptoms constructed as fake
• Space not a panacea – child understands & accepts space itself won’t always fix feelings, but still returns. Remarkable emotional maturity, kind of stoicism – it’s the space that matters maybe?
• Boundaries around Mo – tight den – reflected in photograph
• Safe as being outside the building / behind it
• Mo is safe where he can see out, but no one can get in. Trust this vantage point, clear understanding of what it is to not feel safe
• **Solitary play** is calming, safe to explore

Key ideas:

- **Away from** – Complete removal
  - Hiding
  - Escape
  - Respite
- **Controlled**
  - Contingent access
  - Adult dismissal of symptoms
- **Safety of the base**
  - Can see out, observer viewpoint, knowing no one can get in?
- **Privacy as Safe**
  - Function of space as complete physical & psychological removal – it’s bigger than the ‘what’ they’re doing – it’s serving to get them out of a place where they are seen / can be seen by everyone else, perhaps during moments of fierce emotional intensity they feel as though it’s all on display, sense of exposure is too much – especially if there are things they feel the need to hide, e.g. to protect a caregiver / home base? Physically leaving gives privacy where they can regroup & manage themselves even if that space is highly regulated

Child 4

- SS when feeling sick, sore – escape, respite, calm
- Nurturing puppet, caring
- Lovely positive **connections** with M
- Need permission to enter: restrictions from home & school
- Keeping clean as significant, important to her
- Feeling happy as important for Mo – **caring, nurturing role**
- Rules around clean – home influence

Key ideas:

- **Nurture, care, loving**
  - Comes so easily, instinctive with Mo
  - Reflective of how she is / would like to be nurtured?
- **Rigid boundaries**
  - Accepted as normal, highly compliant – boundaries taken for granted
  - SS extension of home / home influences at forefront while she’s in here?
• Escape, respite, calm
  o Play as relaxing & calming
  o **Removal** is the mechanism – facilitates the relaxing, it’s what allows them to connect in whatever way they need to with the object/toy/art/musical instrument in question
  o Removal & escape facilitates individual sense making of whatever is upsetting them

**Child 5**

• Safe, calm: *observing*
  • **Outside school building safe**
  • Barriers, fortress – strong **strong protections**
    o Took time to understand – was he trying to give the ‘right’ answer?
  • Safe & calm - maybe about being able to see from a safe place??

**Key ideas:**

• Observation, observer position seems important
  • **Protection, physical barriers as conveying safety**
  • Safe & calm when can observe???

**Child 6**

• **Friendship important, strong connection – association with safety**
• Being outside
• Pull to play, natural, instinctive – sense of fun
• Control, boundaries – not allowed

**Child 7**

• Safe as lying down, sleeping important for safety – asleep as representing safe?
  • **Protected, very tight restricted space – boxed as secure – no one in/out**
  • Restrictions
  • Wants to surprise not be surprised – positioning key for this
Excerpt from transcribed data coded on spreadsheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher 1 Primary 3</th>
<th>06/04/2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Line</strong></td>
<td><strong>Data Extract</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>particularly for one child who had specific needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>all children benefit and enjoy going into it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>having just a little safe space, just a little time for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>function of it in my room is to help those children who have emotional regulation difficulties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>well because there are walls around you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>people were nosying around it and coming in and it wasn’t just as safe a space as the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>they’re removed slightly from the other children so there is slightly less noise up there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71</td>
<td>I knew I needed one, I knew it had to be put in a corner and emmm… I know the way it’s organised now, although it’s much reduced in size it seems to be more effective for the children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>at the beginning of the year they hadn’t had a calm corner in their classroom last year so they were all very inquisitive about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94</td>
<td>helped to build relationships especially for those kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101</td>
<td>instead of being overwhelmed by everyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Generating Initial Codes:**

- Function – ‘specific needs’ – can’t be met anywhere else?
- Inclusive, shared benefit – all kids like
- Privacy as a gain – ‘just’ – like a courtesy/privilege?
- **Function – supports regulation**
- Walls, physical boundaries convey & reinforce sense of safety
- Other people as intrusive – need solitude for safety/Need space from others
- Recognises need for **Physical, sensory removal**
• Need for 1 & boundaried as fact, taken for granted
• Small size irrelevant to kids
• Initial novelty value, everyone curious
  • Function – facilitated relationship building
• ‘especially for those kids’ – explicitly categorised as different, implicitly as problematic, burdensome, different – evidence of othering
  o If T sees kids as ‘those kids’, how do they feel? What are classmates picking up on?
• Larger space as inappropriate
• Function = relaxing, calming, removal from anxiety-provoking class context
• First successful regulation approach – less responsive to previous attempts
• Visible response to the boundaried space
• Uses resources
• Gain for class ‘he is contained’ – implicit relief?
  • Control – system for permission – rules around it
    o ‘his corner’ – this could be problematic, expectations for child & others?
• Function – facilitate learning via regulation
• Function – for T, frees up to organise others
  o Separate management, implicitly teaching others about how to treat this child
  o Implicitly exclusionary practice
• Strategy – class first, child next
• Function – for T, needs to regroup before engaging
  • Nurturing – special, positive space
• SEN child waits until rest of class is dealt with
  o Is regulation happening? What’s the message for child – has she made clear this is to give you a chance to calm down first or is it assumed they understand this? This is very important for child’s takeaway!!
• Controlled – everyone uses rather than some
  o not an open space when everything is so controlled – Does that shut down the space for a child who considers it ‘his corner’ in a moment of need?
  • Coveted, prized space – Golden time, popular
• Kids learned to see 1 child as a danger zone – is this exclusionary?
• Blurred function – managing daily headaches
• Function – teaching behaviour via SS, supports reflection, emotional literacy dev – are kids on their own?
  • Nurturing
  • ‘extremely needy’ – implicitly problematic
• Function – T management tool, essential
• Wide range of resources used
• Function / usage – space to learn & practice regulation techniques
• Rules, controls, restrictions, timer, bell all used
• More needs as problematic, burdensome
• Part of what we do – oblivious to exclusionary nature of cc practices
• Not much to it – it’s the removal that is the effective regulating mechanism
• SEN as a drain on time, energy
• Children’s understanding is clear re how to use it
• Vague re their calming practices, understands as effective, it works – what is the understanding of emotional regulation?
• Function – dual function, also regulating for T
• First then, somewhere to go till I’m free

Some impressions

• T’s view of children as different: maybe an effect of how they are categorised by psychology – enabling or stigmatising? Dilemmas apparent
• Othering of kids with SEN
• Explicit re dual function – Is the space used primarily to meet Ts’ needs
  o Control is the problematic aspect if access is only allowed when T deems it necessary or when she needs it
• Removal, reflection, regulation
• Language others SEN, teaches the child & their peers that separate, high level management is necessary
  o Does the way she discusses ‘needs’ legitimising the exclusionary approach, reifies differences. Dilemmas of difference
• Similarities – both child & teacher have similar perceptions of ‘the problem’ as within child –
### Appendix P. Child Theme Development

#### 1. Initial Themes from participant data spreadsheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>escape</th>
<th>removal</th>
<th>quiet</th>
<th>respite</th>
<th>expression of feelings</th>
<th>play as calming/relaxing hiding</th>
<th>facilitates sense making away from the noise of class</th>
<th>managing distress</th>
<th>Physical active play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>escape</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>controlled</th>
<th>permission necessary</th>
<th>highly regulated/organised spaces</th>
<th>contingent access</th>
<th>Restrictions</th>
<th>use of safe space controlled by adults</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>controlled</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nurture</th>
<th>companionship connection</th>
<th>instinctive sensory play</th>
<th>Connection with me &amp; Mo</th>
<th>play facilitates connection with intense emotions</th>
<th>soothing through sand play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>nurture</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>safe base</th>
<th>protection/physical barriers</th>
<th>boxed in no-one can get in.....</th>
<th>tight/restrictive space</th>
<th>outside of school building</th>
<th>observer viewpoint</th>
<th>positioning of child as the one to surprise rather than be surprised</th>
<th>Hiding but child/mo can see out</th>
<th>sense of threat?</th>
<th>barriers/fortress</th>
<th>Shelter from the storm</th>
<th>free play</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>safe base</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>rigid boundaries</th>
<th>children accept boundaries as normal</th>
<th>compliance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Combined visual data themes with textual data themes for initial visual thematic map

- **Privacy**
  - Physical removal from rest of class
  - Psychological removal from rest of class
  - Essential

- **Children**
  - Connection & friends
  - Free play
  - Rest & sleep
  - High up vantage points (P2)
  - Autonomy & control

- **Liberated play**
- **Containment through sensory soothing**
- **Watching out**
- **Respite through withdrawal**
- **Connectedness**
3. **Reviewed each theme according to Clark-Parsons (2019) questions:**

*What does “safety” mean in this context? How is safety achieved? Who is it safe for? What is safe to do in this space?*

- Autonomy and control – contingent access, restrictions, compliance with adults or restricted vs liberated spaces
- Liberated play (functional/physical, constructive and symbolic), free choice, without adult intervention
- Respite through withdrawal – solitary, resting, sleeping, reading, protecting from harm
- Connectedness – with friends and others inc. Mo
- Containment through sensory soothing (sensory soothing and processing feelings)
- Watching out - from a place of safety, up high

4. **Generated final themes** of liberated places, safe bases, belonging and restricted places

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Textual &amp; Visual Data Themes synthesised</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberated Places</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Safe Bases</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Restricted Places (from teacher themes)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Q. Teacher Theme Development

1. Initial clustering of codes

   - Managing class
     - Respite breathing space
     - Containing emotions
     - Dilemmas of difference

2. Initial themes

   - A good tool
     - A breathing space
     - Dilemmas of difference
     - Temporal & spatial restrictions
3. Final themes

**restricted places:**

**dilemmas of difference**
- inclusion-exclusion/conceptually confused

**spatial & temporal restrictions**
- a breathing space/timetabled/boundaried

**adult ventriloquism** - a good tool/beneficial for children

---

4. Thematic similarities and differences between children & teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIMILAR THEMES</th>
<th>DIFFERENT THEMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RESPIE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANAGING EMOTIONS</td>
<td>Connection &amp; friends (children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESTRICTIONS AND CONTROL</td>
<td>Play – liberated free play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hiding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SENSORY &amp; NURTURING</td>
<td>Necessity &amp; benefits (teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child agency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix R. Mosaic Approach Ethical Guidelines

Ethical Guidelines for Researchers Using the Mosaic Approach (Alison Clark, 2017)

I need to:

**Stay curious to what the child expresses**

The whole point in seeking children’s perspectives is to remember that children will probably draw attention to something other than what I would pay attention to as important.

**Keep exploring**

The insights I’m offered are like a snapshot. The child reacts to a certain context and has many facets, expressions and preferences that I do not see – so I will never find a definitive truth about the child.

**Focus on resources and environments for communicating**

The child’s engagement will reveal competences in a given setting. I need to refrain from judging the child’s abilities, but stay focused on creating environments and opportunities for the child to convey their perspectives.

**Respect the child’s confidentiality**

I am invited into the child’s world and it’s my responsibility to care for the child and respect their privacy.

**Stay ethically aware**

I step into an unpredictable process where the power balances between adult and child are unequal. I therefore need to consider ethics in every action I take.
Appendix S. Co-Constructing Safe Places in School

What makes me feel safer?

I feel safe when I play__________

I feel safe when I get time on my own to____________
I feel safe when I connect with___________________

I do not feel safe when I____________________________
Appendix T. Schools as Community Hubs

Example guidelines taken from SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS AND PRESCHOOLS, Government of South Australia, Department for Education and Child Development (2021, p.11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active participation</th>
<th>Safety</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Belonging</th>
<th>Play and leisure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student representative council (SRC) involved in planning</td>
<td>Cyber safety sessions</td>
<td>Visiting health professionals</td>
<td>Supported playgroups</td>
<td>Interest groups eg photography, using an iPad</td>
<td>Board game groups eg chess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children arranging presentations at staff meetings</td>
<td>Police visits &amp; workshops</td>
<td>Docs on campus</td>
<td>Community Mentoring</td>
<td>Community garden</td>
<td>Kite making &amp; flying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarning circle</td>
<td>Looking after yourself groups</td>
<td>Mental health info sessions</td>
<td>Youth workers at school</td>
<td>Cultural days and celebration</td>
<td>Dance groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families designing hub flyers</td>
<td>Shine sessions</td>
<td>Breakfast clubs</td>
<td>External agencies running programs</td>
<td>Grandparent days</td>
<td>Cultural festivals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix U. Emotional Processing

Emotional processing may be a more useful framework for understanding the repair needed after relational and developmental trauma. This formulates a specific model of how experiencing emotion actually changes people—or how “emotion changes emotion” to use Greenberg’s (2002) phrasing—researchers must examine the mechanisms underlying this process directly. (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2008). Greenberg has posited six principles of emotion processing: (1) awareness of emotion or naming what one feels, (2) emotional expression, (3) regulation of emotion, (4) reflection on experience, (5) transformation of emotion by emotion, and (6) corrective experience of emotion through new lived experiences in therapy and in the world. While primary adaptive emotion responses are seen as a reliable guide for behaviour in the present situation, primary maladaptive emotion responses are seen as an unreliable guide for behaviour in the present situation (alongside other possible emotional difficulties such as lack of emotional awareness, emotion dysregulation, and problems in meaning-making). This could be more useful than just focusing on emotional containment and regulation.
Appendix V. Safe Space Checklist for Schools

For Staff:

Safe Spaces

What is a safe space?

Who is it for?

What does it need?

Why is it beneficial?

How will it be maintained?

For children and young people:

Safe Places

What makes you feel safe?

What would your safe space be called?

Where do you feel safe in your school/hub?

What things would you have in your safe space?

(Based on Kent County Council’s guidance on safe space Headstart document)