

A Research Study Investigating Methods of Obtaining the Views and  
Opinions of Disabled Children about Spirituality

By

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## **Abstract**

*Aims:* To identify and evaluate effective interview methods for accessing disabled children's views on spirituality. To explore disabled children's theories of spirituality with regards to relational consciousness. To explore ethical issues which arise when working with disabled children.

*Background:* Biological theories suggested by Hardy (1965) and Hay and Nye (2006) propose that spirituality is innate to humans. Research conducted into children's spirituality by Hay and Nye (2006) identified a specific feature of spirituality called 'relational consciousness' which gives a basis from which to investigate spirituality. Researchers have investigated various types of interviews when working with disabled children. However, research has concentrated on education, health and welfare and has overlooked spirituality.

*Method:* Four different interview methods: puppets, vignettes, diamond ranking and statement ranking were used to interview a group of six disabled children aged between 7 and 14 years old to try to access their views on spirituality. The interviews were linked to two specific themes of spirituality: connectedness and transcendence. The children were explained their ethical rights and involved in the ethical decision making process.

*Results:* Analysis of the interview techniques found that some interview methods: puppets and statement ranking were more suited to interviewing disabled children about spirituality compared to vignettes and diamond ranking. Thematic analysis of the interviews found that all the children expressed spirituality connected to the two themes under investigation.

*Conclusion:* Spirituality seems to be an under researched topic especially with regards to disabled children. The children in this study all expressed relational consciousness as described by Hay and Nye (2006) and their own unique spirituality. Some interview methods worked better than others but more research is needed to see if this is due to the method or the abstract nature of spirituality.

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## **Chapter 1: Research Aims and Theoretical Framework**

### **1.1 Research Aims**

The overarching aim of this study is to identify effective interview techniques for accessing the perceptions of particular groups of disabled children and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), with specific reference to spirituality. Standard interview techniques may be of limited use when working with some disabled children, particularly those who have limited verbal or communication skills and/or SEN.

The study's aim is to explore methods which can be used to investigate disabled children's views on spirituality. The main objectives of this research are to:

- Identify and evaluate qualitative methods of data collection with disabled children, specifically methods for interviewing disabled children regarding spirituality.
- Identify disabled children's theories of spirituality with regard to relational consciousness.
- Explore the ethical considerations which arise when working with disabled children in a research context.

### **1.2 Spirituality definition and theoretical framework**

A concise definition for the term spirituality is difficult to isolate (Chiu *et al.* 2004, Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997). Researchers acknowledge that it is difficult to completely separate spirituality, religion and faith from one another (Delgado, 2005; Poston and Turnbull, 2004). It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to discuss all of these definitions and arguments. For the purposes of this dissertation I have decided to use a quote from Delgado (2005) which describes spirituality in the following terms:

*'Spirituality goes beyond religious or cultural boundaries. Spirituality is characterised by faith, a search for meaning and a purpose in life, a sense of connectedness with others, and a transcendence of self, resulting in a sense of inner peace and well-being. A strong spiritual connection may improve one's sense of satisfaction with life or enable accommodation to disability.'* (p.157)

Delgado's quote acknowledges the role that spirituality may have in the life of disabled people. This is of particular interest and importance to this research because the focus for this research is disabled children and their views on spirituality. Other researchers do not often acknowledge disabled people so clearly when defining spirituality (McCreery, 1996; Singleton *et al.* 2004; Warnock, 1998). Delgado (2005) acknowledges that spirituality may be an important mechanism in coping with disability and may help influence a disabled person's life.

Delgado's quote illustrates that spirituality is not a simple concept but is a product of interconnected features which go beyond religion and culture. For the purpose of this research, Delgado's description of spirituality encompasses aspects of spirituality; however it does not *define* spirituality completely. Delgado (2005) suggests that spirituality '*goes beyond religious and cultural boundaries*'. However Chiu *et al.* (2004) suggest that spirituality is often embedded within a culture.

Hardy (1965) suggests that spirituality is biologically natural to humans and has been selected by evolution because it has a survival value. Hay (2000) suggests that from this perspective, spirituality or spiritual awareness are a universal human predisposition which also permits the possibility of religious beliefs. Like the majority of authors, Hay distinguishes between religion and spirituality (Hay and Socha, 2005). However Hardy (1965) refers to 'religious experiences' rather than spirituality. This may just reflect the time

when Hardy was writing, rather than an underlying difference in opinion. Hardy (1965) suggested that there is a form of awareness which differs from, and transcends, everyday awareness, which is potentially present in all humans and has a positive function enabling individuals to survive in their natural environment. Consequently, spirituality has evolved through the process of natural selection (Hay and Nye, 2006). These authors suggest that if Hardy's theory is correct, and spirituality is biologically natural to humans, then the expression of spirituality must be an expression of a bodily predisposition or process.

The theory that spirituality is innate has been explored by other researchers in the suggestion that there is a 'God gene' (Hamer, 2004, cited in Kluger, 2004) which suggests that spirituality is an adaptive trait that can be located within our genes. Although there has been widespread criticism of this theory from religious institutions as being reductionist (Kluger, 2004), this suggestion does support Hardy's (1965) and Hay and Nye's (2006) theory that spirituality is innate in humans. There is some support for Hamer's theory however. Twin studies have shown that monozygotic twins who were separated at birth and raised apart showed overlap in their spiritual feelings. Monozygotic twins were also twice as likely as dizygotic twins to believe as much or as little about spirituality as their sibling (Kluger, 2004). Hamer also supports Hardy's evolutionary theory and suggests that the 'God gene' is central to human survival. Spirituality is a concept which appears across all cultures around the world, regardless of how isolated they are. Kluger (2004) suggests that this supports the notion that concepts of God and spirituality are within our genome.

The conceptual framework of spirituality as described by Hardy (1965) and Hay (2000) provides a working model for this research from which to study the spirituality of disabled children.

### **1.3 Relational Consciousness**

Research into children's spirituality in the UK has increased in recent years. A significant amount of research in this field has been conducted by Hay and colleagues (Hay, Nye and Murphy, 1996; Hay, 1998; Hay, 2000; Hay and Socha, 2005; Hay and Nye, 2006). During an analysis of the results from in-depth interviewing about children's spirituality, a core characteristic of spirituality was identified - relational consciousness Nye (1999). Nye (1999 p.66) describes relational consciousness as:

- 1) *an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to others interview passages for that child, and that*
- 2) *this appeared in how the child saw him or herself in relation to others, own self, God and their environment*

The concept of relational consciousness in terms of children's spirituality has become relatively dominant in educational research in recent years, with a number of researchers using it as a premise for further research (Reimer and Furrow, 2001; Hay, 2000; Permain, 2007; Johnson, 2006) and it would appear that Hay and Nye's concept has merit. From Hay and Nye's (2006) results, children's relational consciousness was not only associated with people but also with nature, animals and the environment, as well as contemporary film and media, and other senses such as smell, touch and vision.

Although Hay and Nye's framework for relational consciousness has been cited frequently in the literature on children's spirituality and education (Scott, 2003), there are a few aspects of their theory which some researchers have questioned. Scott (2003) suggests that Hay and Nye are *likely* [sic] to be drawing on their knowledge of adult traditional spiritual disciplines and

practices when they emphasise the capacity of children to be in the present moment as a spiritual quality. Scott (2003) suggests that Hay and Nye may be idealising certain traits in child-based identified adult [spiritual] tradition and experiences. Scott (2003) goes on to suggest that this may inhibit an accurate assessment of childhood spirituality. This may be an unfair criticism as Hay and Nye themselves note that previous research such as that of Robinson (1983) into children's spirituality was based on adults reflecting on their childhood. Hay and Nye's aim was to research children's innate spirituality based on Hardy's (1965) biological theory and to '*...uncover the innate spiritual potential children may possess*' (p. 60). Scott (2003) queries Hay and Nye's claim that 'mystery seeking' has a particular spiritual quality and suggests that cognitive developmental components may be involved. Scott's (2003) view is supported by Levine (1999) who suggests that the cognitive capacities of children are essential to spirituality. Both Scott (2003) and Levine (1999) suggest that cognitive, emotional and social developmental factors should be taken into consideration when exploring children's spirituality.

As a core characteristic of spirituality, relational consciousness gives researchers a good foundation on which to begin research or to analyse their results. Nye (1999) seems to have encapsulated spirituality into a definable, explainable and even measurable concept. Neither Hay nor Nye claim that relational consciousness is the only feature of spirituality and neither discounts other individual features. Nye (1999) suggests that relational consciousness is a '*common thread*' (p. 66) with regard to children's spirituality. Hay and Nye did not set out to 'discover' relational consciousness. In fact, relational consciousness did not feature in their original categories. It was only after analysing the data that the theory of relational consciousness emerged (Nye, 1999).

There are some aspects of Nye's (1999) relational consciousness that do require some further investigation. The definition that Nye has given seems to be rather broad. The first part of the definition:

*An unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to other interview passages for that child. (p.66)*

Nye does not state how she is measuring relativity.

The second part of Nye's definition:

*This appears in how the child saw him/herself in relation, to others, own self, God, or their environment. (p.66)*

seems to be similar to the concepts of connectedness and transcendence. Transcendence and connectedness are cited in many research papers as characteristics of spirituality (e.g. Delgado, 2005; Chiu *et al.* 2004). This may be a deliberate connection which Nye has simplified for her definition.

This chapter reflects on definitions and theoretical frameworks of spirituality which can be found in various research areas. It also discusses biological theories of spirituality and relational consciousness, which will be the theoretical basis for this research. The following chapter will discuss the background literature with regard to children's spirituality.

## **Chapter 2 Background Literature**

### **2.1 Background Research into Children's Spirituality**

Interest in children's spirituality as an educational research topic has increased in recent years. The majority of background research which will be discussed in this section has been based on qualitative interview methods with non-disabled children.

Heller (1986) used semi structured interviews to investigate children's ideas about God. Heller (1986) asked each child to use their own terms when talking about God. Heller's (1986) perspective was clearly religious and so it seems odd that he should go to such lengths to avoid using religious language. It may be that Heller (1986) did not want to influence the children's responses. Heller's (1986) interviews were completed in one session and Heller had no previous relationship with the children. Researchers have spoken of the importance of building a relationship with child interviewees (Eder and Fingerson, 2002). However, money and time pressures may make spending a large amount of time with participants before the interview problematic.

Previous research into children's spirituality has concentrated on older primary age children. A notable exception is McCreery (1996), who investigated the spirituality of children aged between four and five years. McCreery (1996) used a variety of interview methods including drawing, pictures, stories, and question and answer interviews. The results suggested that young children are more aware of spirituality than had been previously considered and that particular interview methods such as stories, were easier for the children to access. McCreery (1996) defined spirituality as:

*'An awareness that there is something other, something greater, than the course of everyday events' (p.197)*



Although the difficulty in defining spirituality has been discussed earlier, this definition of spirituality is wide ranging and could encompass many different issues which may or may not include spirituality. However, McCreery (1996) may have used a wide but simple definition to incorporate her participants' understanding as it was a young age group. McCreery (1996) also used group interviews in her research. Previous researchers have commented about the advantages of using group interviews with children, such as providing confidence to individuals, and encouraging young people to give their true opinions (Grieg and Taylor, 1999; Scott, 2000). Other researchers have noted that group interviews with children can have an adverse effect, and that whilst peers can be supportive, they can also be hurtful and that participants may speak over one another (Ding and Kellet, 2004; Wollfson *et al.*, 2007). Mauther (1997) suggests that group interviews and activities are not always equal in terms of exchanges and that some children may become impatient when one child is dominating the discussion. Hay and Nye (2006) suggested interviewing with regard to spirituality as a topic is best done in a one-to-one situation rather than in a group interview. This is because previous research has suggested that children are embarrassed by their own spiritual awareness and may be shy about discussing the subject (Hay, 2000).

Hay and Nye (2006) conducted a comprehensive study into children's spirituality in Britain. They used one-to-one interviews with children aged between 6 and 7 and 10 and 11 years of age. Each interview was divided into three stages. The first stage was a loosely structured chat about the children's lives and interests. Stage two concerned spirituality and used various pictures which the children would be invited to comment on, and the third stage asked children about their own experiences of spirituality.

Hay and Nye (2006) decided to use religious language in their interviews. They suggested that the use of religious language can be useful in directing children into talking about spirituality. However, they acknowledged that the use of religious language may generate

'learnt' responses. I agree with Hay and Nye (2006) that religious language is the '*traditional vehicle*' (p.88) when talking about spirituality and, as such, can help children express their views. McCreery's (1996) research focused on avoiding the use of religious language when talking to the children in order to avoid influencing their responses. Interestingly, McCreery's (1996) avoidance of religious language did not transfer to the children that she was interviewing, many of whom used religious language in their responses. This seems to support the use of using some religious language when interviewing children.

Although the use of pictures or photographs is comparatively common in spirituality research (Pearmain, 2007; Hay and Nye, 2006), the initial choice of photographs may significantly affect the research and researchers would have to ensure that there was a large range of photographs to try to counterbalance any bias. Although a similar critique may be used for interview questions, however interviewers may be more aware of the minimising potentially leading questions as this bias is well documented throughout the research literature (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Byrman 2004).

## **2.2 Current Research**

Disabled children's spirituality has, until recently, been overlooked by researchers in the UK (Swinton, 2004). By using a combination of interview methods and questions based on connectedness and transcendence, this research aims to investigate the spirituality of a sample of disabled children with specific reference to relational consciousness. The research aims to investigate four interview methods and examine the appropriateness of each method for this type of research and this population of children.

## **Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations**

### **3.1 Introduction**

One of the foremost difficulties in researching children's spirituality is devising a methodology (Murphy, 1978b). Research methods that involve children as participants should take into account the cognitive and social development of the children (Scott, 2000). Previous researchers have used a variety of interview methods, some of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. However some of these interview methods may not be appropriate for some groups of disabled children. This chapter will discuss the epistemology and methodology, before moving on to discuss the design and interview themes of the research.

### **3.2 Epistemology**

Research is usually conducted within a recognised or unconsciously assumed paradigm (Ernst, 1994). It is the choice of paradigm which establishes the intent, motivation and expectations of the research (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). The epistemological paradigm of this research is interpretivism. Interpretivism seeks to understand the world from the perspective of the participant (Pring, 2000). The researcher's intent is to make sense of, or interpret, the meanings that others have about the world (Creswell, 2003). The interpretive paradigm suggests that there are multiple truths and that truth is a subjective concept, thus different for different people (Robson, 2002). Interpretive epistemology is based on personal knowledge, suggesting that people construct their own knowledge (Ernst, 1994). The interpretive paradigm is primarily concerned with human understanding, interpretation, intersubjectivity, and lived truth (Ernst, 1994 p24). This suggests that spirituality and

interpretive epistemology combine effectively in their conceptions of interpretation, personal belief and human understanding.

Spirituality is usually personal to an individual therefore to try to find a single 'truth,' which would be the aim of a positivist epistemology, would be contradictory to the notion of spirituality. Spirituality is based on an individual's belief, interpretation and understanding of their world. The present research is concerned with ways of accessing disabled children's interpretations of their spiritual world. The research epistemology is that disabled children interpret their world based on their construction of their own knowledge, just as any other person would. The research is not concerned with finding a single 'truth', which is part of a positivist epistemology, but to 'hear' the participants' 'truths' and how they interpret their own concepts of connectedness and transcendence which inform their own spirituality.

Interpretive epistemology is also referred to as constructivism (Robson, 2002). Constructivist researchers consider that the task of the researcher is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Robson, 2002). Interpretive research generally uses qualitative methods of data collection and analysis or uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006). Interviews and observations are commonly used as these allow researchers to acquire multiple perspectives (Robson, 2002). This research will be conducted using qualitative methodology. Qualitative research often refers to designs which are 'flexible' (Robson, 2002). The term 'flexibility' refers to the implication that the design 'unfolds' and 'develops' as the research progresses (Robson, 2002). A flexible design is more suitable for the current research as the participants will be disabled children. A flexible design will allow the research to change or modify to correspond to the participant's understanding and specific needs. As this research is dealing with people, a flexible design will allow the research to adapt as a result of any changes that may occur during the research. This research is trying to find the optimum approach for

interviewing disabled children on spirituality. Using a qualitative design acknowledges that existing interview designs may not be the most appropriate way of interviewing disabled children and allows the researcher to try different approaches and evaluate these approaches for their effectiveness.

### **3.3 What is Research Design?**

The research design is crucial to any research project. The design of every research project has to be prepared after careful consideration of the research aims, questions and participants. Yin (2003) suggests that every type of empirical research has an implicit research design. Ragin (1994) suggests that the term research design can be defined as:

*... a plan for collecting and analysing evidence that will make it possible for the investigation to answer whatever questions he or she has posed. The design of an investigation touches almost all aspects of the research, from the minute details of data collection to the selection of the techniques of data analysis. (p 191)*

Flick (2007) proposes that the term 'research design' represents several components, which have an influence on how the research project is planned and carried out. Yin (2003), Ragin (1994) and Flick (2007) take into account the importance and the impact the design of a study has on the research. However, all define the features of research design rather than an offering a concise definition. Yin (2003) suggests that every type of research has an implicit design, yet research can often be undertaken using several research designs, but the researcher must choose the design that most reflects their aims and epistemology. However, the design of a piece of research is more than a *reflection* of the researcher's aims and epistemology as suggested by Yin (2003). It is part of them and emerges from consideration of these components, as well as the research questions and background literature for the research. Due to the formation of research questions, aims, methodology and epistemology it has been decided to use a multiple case study design. The subsequent sections of this paper

will discuss case study design in more depth, evaluate its strengths and weakness' and examine why a multiple case study design is the most appropriate design for this research, before proceeding to discuss the interview themes and questions.

### **3.4 Definitions of Case Study Design**

It is not easy to define case studies succinctly. Yin (2003) is quoted widely when defining case studies. Yin (2003) defines case studies as:

*'The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events.'* (p2)

I am not sure if Yin's (2003) definition is adequate to distinguish case studies from other qualitative designs. I feel that Yin's (2003) definition could be used as a general description of any type of qualitative research design. Stake (1995) defines a qualitative case study in more detail:

*Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.* (pxi)

Part of the reason for the difficulty in defining the term 'case study' is that case study designs are used by a variety of disciplines (Bergen and While 2000). These disciplines include medicine, psychology, business and education. They generally agree that a *case study* investigates a particular case or cases to answer specific research questions and seeks a range of different types of evidence which is there in the case setting, and which has to be selected and assembled to get the best possible answers to the research questions (Gillham, 2000). What constitutes a 'case' to be studied differs between disciplines Gillham (2000) suggests that a *case* can be an individual or a group such as a family, or class, or an institution such as a school. Creswell (2007) states that case study research is the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within 'bounded system'; examples of a 'bounded system' could be a setting, or a context. Denscombe (2007) suggests that the idea of a case study is that the focus is on individual instances rather than a wide spectrum of issues. The aim of a case study is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular (Denscombe, 2007). As with all research design there are strengths and weaknesses associated with particular research designs, the subsequent sections will

discuss some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with case study design before proceeding to discuss why case study design has been chosen.

### **3.5 Strengths of Case Study design**

Multiple case studies allow researchers to study issues in detail, and enables the prospect of gaining some valuable and unique insights into the topic being investigated (Denscombe, 2007). The specific detail that the case study investigates helps us see how the abstract principles fit together and quoting from a case study can help illustrate reality (Nesbit and Watt, 1984). This research is investigating an extremely abstract concept in the form of spirituality. Spirituality is in itself an abstract concept, which has many definitions, concepts, and theories, some of which have been discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation. However, Nesbit and Watt's (1984) suggestion that case studies can help illustrate reality does not correspond with the interpretive paradigm. The interpretive paradigm suggests there are multiple realities, which the participants construct for themselves. Therefore, a case study can only help to enlighten the participant's reality. I hope that this research will illustrate some valuable and unique insights into this group of disabled children's spirituality and inform others of their individual reality.

Case study design is flexible and allows the researcher to adapt the design and the data collection methods to the research questions (Meyer, 2001). This is very important to this research because the participant group is very diverse. A flexible design enables me to tailor the interviews and interview question towards an individual child. Flexibility within the design may enable me to gain an accurate representation of an individual disabled children's concept of spirituality and which methods of interviewing enable them to express their views.

Denscombe (2007) suggests that the real value of case studies is that they allow the research to explain *why* particular results have occurred, rather than just finding out *what* the results

are. Successful completion of case study research requires enthusiasm and curiosity about the phenomena being investigated, and a desire to communicate the results (Drake *et al.* 1998). Any research benefits from the researchers being enthusiastic but the time case studies involves needs the researcher to be animated by the topic to keep the momentum of the research going. As with all research designs case studies have a number of weaknesses, some of these will be discussed in the next section.

### **3.6 Weaknesses Associated with Case Study Design**

Case studies try to give an in-depth analysis of a particular phenomenon. This means they can be costly in terms of time and money on the part of the researcher and participant. The availability of case study sites maybe restricted (Drake *et al.* 1998) and so participants may be difficult to find. When conducting multiple case studies a research has to find a balance between gaining good quality data rather than a large quantity of data. Ideally, researchers have to make a decision on what is a practical number of cases, which will enable them to gain good quality data. Multiple case studies are often seen as being more robust than single case studies (Yin, 2003). However, multiple case studies take more time and resources than a single case study. Researchers must be careful not to compromise on the depth of their research to gain a wider sample. If there is insufficient time or participants to conduct a good multiple case study design, then a single case study is a better option. As this is a small-scale research, one must be careful to maintain the balance between being able to conduct a detailed in-depth investigation of cases and have enough data to make relevant inferences from the results.

Generalisability is one of the most hotly debated problems in case study design research (Kyburz-Graber, 2004). However, Stake (2000) and Hammersley and Gomm (2000) suggests that case studies need not make any claims about generalisability. They suggest that what is



crucial is the use others make of the findings, and that the aim of a case study is to capture the uniqueness of the case rather than to use them as a basis for wider generalisation. Nesbit and Watt (1984) highlight that case studies are often limited to quite specific issues and because of this, case studies are not easily generalisable. However, Kyburz-Graber (2004) states that case study design follow the research philosophy of analysing existing real life situations. Its aim is to understand the meaning behind the action or knowledge of participants and assumes that each participant constructs this meaning according to their own context. Kyburz-Graber's (2004) assertion would suggest that case study design is well suited to the interpretive paradigm. Since both have similar philosophies and aim to examine and understand situations from the participant's point of view.

### **3.7 Why Case Study Design has been chosen**

Although definitions of case study research have been discussed previously in this section it is clear that is difficult to find a concise definition for case study research. Case studies can generally be defined by the features of the research being undertaken. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) propose that a case study research has several features, which include:

- It is concerned with rich and vivid description of events relevant to the case.
- It provides chronological narrative events relevant to the case.
- It focuses on individual actors or groups of actors, and seeks to understand their perceptions of events.
- It highlights specific events that are relevant to the case.
- The researcher is integrally involved in the case.

The features of case study described by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) correspond suitably with this piece of research which makes a viable case study. The research is concerned with a rich and in- depth description of disabled children's spirituality. It aims to provide an account of these children's ideas

and expressions of spirituality. The focus of the research is on this group of individual children and seeks to understand their perceptions. The aim is to highlight specific methods of interviewing which may enable disabled children to express their views on topics such as spirituality. As the researcher, I am integrally involved in the case not only as a piece of research but also because I have taken time to build relationships with the participants and I am particularly interested in this topic.

### **3.8 Interview Themes and Questions**

All the interview questions are designed to explore areas of transcendence and connectedness. Previous researchers vary in their ideas about the characteristics of spirituality, but the concepts of connectedness and transcendence are common themes across various papers (Delgado, 2005; Zinnbauer *et al.* 1997; Elkins *et al.* 1988). Themes of connectedness and transcendence are also common areas for investigation in previous research (Swinton and Mowat, 2006; McCreery, 1996). These concepts also reflect Hay and Nye's (2006) theory of relational consciousness.

Delgado (2005) defines connectedness as:

*'The recognition and acceptance of a connection or relationship among self, others, and the world' (p.160)*

Transcendence is defined by Delgado (2005) as:

*'The belief that extension beyond the self is possible, that there is something more. Transcendence also refers to the experience of that which is outside the usual aspect of human perception' (p.160)*

Previous researchers use similar definitions for connectedness and transcendence (Chiu *et al.* 2004; Elkins *et al.* 1988). The interview questions will progress from concrete aspects of connectedness to more abstract ideas of transcendence. Arranging the questions in order of increasing complexity enables the interviews to be flexible and caters for individual children's needs. It not only enables me to probe interesting answers from the children, but it

also gives me and the children the option of deciding whether a particular theme is too complicated for the individual child. Allowing the questions to become increasingly complex will help the children gain confidence and not feel that the interview is a test of knowledge. All the interview questions can be seen in Chapter 7 and Appendix 1.

Although an unstructured interview might have been advantageous for this topic as it might have allowed the participants complete freedom to express their views, it was decided to use semi-structured interviews. This was decided on after considering the sample population taking part in the research. Having built a relationship with the children taking part in the research, it was decided that an unstructured interview might have been difficult for some of the children to understand. In an unstructured interview, the interviewer has a general area of interest and allows the conversation to develop within this area (Robson, 2002). However, this could create pressure for the children and make them feel compelled to speak on a complicated topic. A structured interview might also have been too rigid and might not have allowed me to deviate from the set questions and probe interesting questions. Semi-structured interviews allowed me more flexibility and enabled me to probe any interesting answers (Robson, 2002). It was therefore decided to use semi-structured interviews as this would give structure and guidance to the interview but would also allow the flexibility that these interviews require.

This chapter has discussed the initial methodological consideration of the research design including epistemology, design and interview themes. As is common in research, a pilot study exploring different interview methods and questions based on themes of connectedness and transcendence was conducted prior to the main study. The method, results and implication of this will be discussed in the next chapter before revisiting the methodology for the main study in Chapter 5.

## **Chapter 4 Exploratory Pilot Study**

### **4.1 Pilot Study: Aims, Design and Methods**

The main reason for conducting a pilot study is to give advance warning about where the main study could fail, where research protocols might not be followed, or whether proposed methods are appropriate (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002). The pilot interviews for this research highlighted several interesting aspects which may have affected this research, including the appropriateness of the interview methods, the use of religious language, and group affects.

A series of three pilot studies was conducted with a group of eight girls aged between 7 and 9. All the girls were from a white British ethnicity. Due to time pressure, the pilot sample was taken from the ‘Brownie Guide’ pack at which I volunteer. It was a convenience sample, which is a sample that is simply available to a researcher by virtue of its accessibility (Bryman, 2004). As a result, none of the children who took part in the pilot study were disabled. Background information and a more detailed explanation of the methods are given in the next chapter. The tables of each pilot procedure are shown below.

**Table 4.1: A Table Showing Pilot One Procedure**

Interview Method	Method Protocol	Question Protocol	Examples of Questions asked	Number of Participants
Puppets	1:1 semi-structured interviews. Both interviewer and interviewee use puppets to ‘ask’ and ‘answer’ questions	Participants randomly chose 4 pre-written questions from a selection of 8. Questions were written on cards and placed on a table for the participants to choose from.	Question: Why should we be good?  Question: Is there a God?	5

Vignettes	1:1 activity. Participants listened to a series of vignettes and answered questions based on that vignette	Participants randomly chose 1 pre-written vignette from a choice of 3. Vignettes were presented in short stages to allow the participants to listen to each stage. Following each stage participants were asked a series of questions or asked to complete sentences to give their answers. Vignettes were written on cards and placed on a table for the participants to choose from.	<p><i>Josh comes from another country. In Josh's country they do not have Easter. Josh wants to know what you did at Easter. You tell him:</i></p> <p>At Easter I...</p> <p><i>Josh thinks that your Easter sounds lovely but he wonders why we have Easter. You tell him:</i></p> <p>We have Easter because...</p>	5
Diamond Ranking	1:1 activity. Participants used 'Post It' notes to write down and rank their answers on order of importance. Most important are placed at the top. Least important at the bottom, and the remaining in between.	Participants randomly chose 3 pre-written questions from a selection of 5. Participants listened to the question then ranked their answers accordingly. The interviewer discussed the reasons for their answers and their ranking.	<p>Question: What makes you happy/sad?</p> <p>Question: What makes a good friend?</p>	5
Cue Cards (Leicester Version)	1:1 activity. Visual cue cards depicting place, time, people, feelings, talk, actions, end and consequences are used to prompt participant answers. No verbal prompts are given by the interviewer. Cue cards are placed on the table and participants use the cue cards to expand	Participants randomly chose 2 pre-written questions from a selection of 4. Participants use the cue cards to help expand their answers. Questions were written on cards and placed on a table for the participants to choose from.	<p>Question: what do you do at the weekends?</p> <p>Question: Where do you see your friends?</p>	5

	their answers and 'speak' to each card.			
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**Table 4.2: A Table showing Pilot 2 Procedure**

Interview Method	Interview Protocol	Question Protocol	Examples of Questions	Number of participants
Puppets	1:1 semi- structured interviews. Both interviewer and interviewee use puppets to 'ask' and 'answer' questions	Participants randomly chose 4 pre-written questions from a selection of 8. Questions were written on cards and placed on a table for the participants to choose from.	Question: If you had a superpower what would it be?  Question: Who made the world?	3
Vignettes	1:1 activity. Participants listened to a series of vignettes and answer questions based on that vignette	Participants randomly chose 1 pre-written vignette from a choice of 3. Vignettes were presented in short stages to allow the participants to listen to each stage. Following each stage, participants were asked a series of questions or asked to complete sentences to give their answers. Vignettes were written on cards and placed on a table for the participants to choose from.	<i>Jo is seven. She has lots of friends at school but she also has an invisible friend that others can't see.</i>  Do you have any invisible friends?  Do you have any friends that other people can't see?  <i>Jo likes to talk to her invisible friend if she has any worries or is in trouble.</i>  Who do you talk too if you are worrying about anything?  When do you think Jo talks to her invisible friend?  Do you think talking to an invisible friend might help Jo?	3
Diamond Ranking	1:1 activity. Participants used 'Post It' notes to write down and rank their answers in order of importance. Most important were placed	Participants randomly chose 3 pre-written questions from a selection of 5. Participants listened to the question then ranked	Question: What makes somebody a good person?  Question: What reminds	3

	at the top. Least important at the bottom and the remaining in between.	their answers accordingly. The interviewer discussed the reasons for their answers and their ranking.	you of God?	
Cue Cards (Leicester version)	1:1 activity. Visual cue cards depicting place, time, people, feelings, talk, actions, end and consequences are used to prompt participant answers. No verbal prompts are given by the interviewer. Cue cards are placed on the table and participants use the cue cards to expand their answers and 'speak' to each card.	Participants randomly chose 2 pre-written questions from a selection of 4. Participants use the cue cards to help expand their answers.	Question: Tell me what you would like to be when you grow up?  Question: Tell me what you do at the weekends?	3

**Table 4.3: A table Showing Pilot Three Procedure**

Interview Method	Interview Protocol	Question Protocol	Examples of Questions	Number of participants in group.
Puppets	Conducted as a group interview with 4 girls who had all previously taken part in either pilot 1 or 2. 2 girls from each pilot. All girls used a puppet to ask and answer questions.	To begin, I asked the girls 2 questions. The remaining 4 questions were asked by the girls themselves using prewritten questions. The girls were left to agree amongst themselves what order they wanted to ask questions in and who asked which question.	Question: Is God close or far away?  Question: If you had a question for God what would it be?	4
Diamond Ranking	Conducted as a group activity. 4 girls who had previously taken part in pilots 1 and 2. 2 from each pilot. Their answers were recorded on 'Post It' notes and	One question was asked and the girls worked as a group to answer. All answers were written down then discussed and ranked.	Question: What does the word 'spirituality' mean?	4

	arranged in order of importance.			
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The children responded without difficulty to most of the interview techniques. They found them easy to understand and use without a great deal of further instruction or help from me. There were certain questions that some of the children could not answer, but this will be discussed in more detail below, as this seemed to be due to the wording and language of the question, rather than the technique. Although all of the children who took part in the pilot study were from a white British ethnicity, questions were modified for children of other cultures whom may have taken part. When preparing the interview questions, some questions were changed to take into account different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example the questions about Christmas and Easter were changed to ask about Eid, or Divali. The word ‘God’ was changed to Allah or Deity in questions which asked specifically about God. However, these questions were not needed and so not included in the pilot study. Details about the children’s backgrounds were gained from parental information.

The Cue Card interview technique was the least successful interview method. The children found using Cue Cards confusing. They would often speak to just one card, depending upon how the question was posed. For example, if the question was ‘*Where do you see your friends*’ the children invariably picked up the places card and listed places. In Lewis *et al.* (2008) both the researcher and the children were taught how to use Cue Cards before the investigation began. I think that a lack of knowledge with regard to how to use the Cue Cards affected the children’s ability to access them. If the children were taught explicitly how to use the cards this might have enabled them to use the technique more effectively. This was not possible during the pilot study due to time constraints and other Brownie activities.



It may be that Cue Cards are not the most appropriate interview technique to use with a topic such as spirituality. Previous research using Cue Cards has been conducted to interview disabled children on more general issues, such as what they did at weekends (Lewis *et al.* 2008). Although these researchers suggest that Cue Cards could be used to help children express more sensitive or personal views, this was not attempted during their research. It would also have been difficult to explicitly teach the Cue Card technique to the six children in the main study. The majority of the children taking part in the main study were taken from a youth group at which I became a volunteer. The group is designed as an inclusive group where the children interact with each other and take part in activities such as play and art. Asking the children to 'learn' a communication technique would have interfered with the group's dynamics and workings.

The use of religious language gave fuller and more detailed answers than more abstract language. For example, the children gave fuller answers without needing many prompts to questions such as '*Do you think there is a God?*' compared with '*Do you believe in a higher power?*' When asked '*Do you believe in a higher power?*' most of the participants either responded '*I don't know*' or '*what's a higher power?*' When asked '*Do you think there is a God?*' responses included '*Yes. He's up in heaven*'. Interview methods have often been criticised for eliciting misleading reports (Poulou, 2008). Poulou (2008) suggests that this criticism is often due to the vagueness of the questions posed by the interviewer. The children appeared to be more comfortable talking about spirituality using religious language than more abstract language. Hay and Nye (2006) suggested that religious language is the *traditional vehicle* (p. 88) when talking about spirituality and, as such, can help children express their views. This assertion appeared to be supported by the results of the pilot study.

In the third pilot study I conducted a puppet interview as a group interview, and used diamond ranking as a group activity. As was discussed in Chapter two, there are a number of

strengths and weaknesses involved in group interviews. I found that the girls often spoke over each other and this made transcription of the interview difficult, even though I knew the girls well. The girls argued over who should have which puppet, as all wanted the girl puppets. Group dynamics also became evident within the group as some younger girls were nervous about voicing their opinion. When discussing the word 'spirituality' in the group diamond ranking activity, one of the younger girls said very quietly:

*'Soul mates, no that's stupid'*

It happened that this participant was sat next to me so I heard her say it. I reminded her that there were no 'stupid' answers and it was a lovely thought. I told her to say it a bit louder so the others could hear. She repeated her statements and the others agreed with her. This seemed to raise her confidence and I think it reiterated to the participants that there were no 'wrong' answers. The participants did have initial difficulties in organising themselves and working as a group. However, they did work well together and completed all the tasks they were given. They reported that they enjoyed working together as a group and would like to do it again.

#### **4.2 Piloting Ethical Information**

Consent letters had been sent to all the Brownies in my Brownie pack (Appendix 2). From the eighteen letters sent home, 8 parents replied indicating they were willing to allow their child to take part. The participants were also asked for their consent. Consent and other ethical issues will be discussed in more detail in the ethics chapter.

During the pilot study, I took the opportunity to pilot the ethical information sheets which had been prepared for the main study (Appendices 4 and 6). Copies of the information sheets were shown to three of the participants and they were asked to comment on anything they did

not particularly like, anything they particularly liked and anything they did not understand. The girls were also asked about each symbol/picture on the visual consent form to see if they understood what each meant. This was done by pointing at each picture/symbol and asking “What do you think this means?”

The girls generally liked the forms and could understand them. However, they raised a few issues about some aspects of the forms (Appendix 4). The first was that they did not understand the e-mail address as a contact detail. I think that this might be because of their age. I think that primary age children do not use e-mail as regularly as senior schoolchildren. Although as part of their I.T lessons they do learn about sending e-mails, they were still unfamiliar to them. I also think that the wording of the e-mail address would have been unfamiliar to them. I used my university e-mail address rather than my personal address. I think that the university e-mail address does not look like a typical e-mail address, which the children may be used to. The girls liked the pictures that were used, but they made some comments on a few of the pictures. Ones which depicted spirituality they found quite confusing, in that they were not familiar enough for them. On the visual consent sheet, they liked the symbol of the yellow face, which gave information. The only other symbol they found difficult was a person holding a tick, which was meant to represent that this was not a test and there are no ‘wrong’ answers. This picture was subsequently changed to a single large tick. The only other comment which was made was the fact there was a picture of a football. They were girls, and ‘*girls don’t like football*’. This picture was retained however, as I explained that boys would also be involved in the research. However, I added other pictures as well to represent both genders.

### **4.3 Reflections on the Pilot Study**

After reflecting on the results of the pilot study, a number of changes were made to the main study. I decided to use 'religious language' in the phrasing of the questions. This was due to the children outwardly seeming to understand these questions better than when no religious language was used. It was also decided to discard Cue Cards as an interview technique. I decided to not to use Cue Cards because I felt that it was not the best technique to use with this topic. I would not have time to explicitly teach the technique to the children which I feel makes a significant difference to the results of this technique. I also decided not to use group interviews in the main study. This was due to the difficulties I had in transcription and the issues with group dynamics which occurred during the pilot study.

## **Chapter 5: Revisiting Methodology**

Previous researchers have commonly used interviews to investigate children's spirituality (Hay and Nye, 2006; Pearmain, 2007; Heller, 1986; Taylor, 1989). Rather than conducting a standard semi-structured interview, several researchers have had the foresight to tailor their interviews to the children in their sample (Hay and Nye, 2006; Taylor, 1989; McCreery, 2000). As discussed previously, several of these use pictures or photographs as part of the interview. I decided not to use photographs or drawing in my interviews for a number of reasons, some of which I alluded to in the previous chapter, but I will now give more in-depth reasons for not using these interview techniques and will discuss the interview methods which will be used in more depth.

When planning any interview, questions and methods are carefully considered after researching the background literature. Drawing is a common method of interviewing children on a variety of topics. Drawing can be a creative and enjoyable way of accessing children's views, enabling them to express themselves (Strafstrom and Havlena, 2003). However most researchers advise caution when trying to interpret meaning from drawings (Grieg and Taylor, 1999; Strafstrom and Havlena, 2003). Previous researchers have used drawings as a precursor to the interview or to use as a talking point with the children (Heller, 1980; McCreery, 1996). Whilst many children enjoy drawing, there are those who may not, (Strafstorm and Havlena, 2003) and asking these children to draw may actually pressurise the children and make them feel uncomfortable. Drawing can be distracting (McCreery, 1996) and might hinder the interview. Scott (2000) suggests that pictures do not ease the basic decision-making process. Some children may become fixated on finishing their picture rather than moving on to the interview.

Photographs or pictures are also a common way of accessing children's views on spirituality (Hay and Nye, 2006; Pearmain, 2007). However, spirituality is a personal concept (Lee, 2005) so it may be difficult to find an image that would truly represent an individual's spirituality. Caution must also be used when using images with particular religious groups, in that some faiths would regard depicting God in an image as being sacrilegious.

I have therefore decided not to use drawing or images as part of this research. Based on the results of the pilot study, puppets, vignettes, and diamond ranking will all be used as interview methods with each child. It was decided not to use Cue Cards for various reasons which were discussed in Chapter 4. A second ranking activity, statement ranking, has also been added to the main study. The following section will discuss each of these methods and the reasons for their inclusion in more detail.

### **5.1 Interview Methods which will be used in the main research**

Previous researchers have used puppets when interviewing children on a number of topics (Pelletier, 1999; Lake, 2003; Cameron 2005; Lewis *et al.* 2005 and Pelicand *et al.* 2006). Puppets were used as part of a one-to-one, question and answer, semi-structured interview with the children. The interviews began with undemanding questions about friends and family to explore notions of connectedness and then progressed to questions about the world and spirituality to explore notions of transcendence. The children and I had a puppet each; there were four different 'people' puppets, which represent both genders and four different ethnicities. There were also two different animal puppets and each child had a free choice on which to use.

Rather than using puppets McCreery (1996) used a photograph of her nephew in the guise that he asked her questions. In this research, I applied a similar idea, but used the puppet 'ask' the questions rather than another child. Puppets have a number of advantages over the

image of a child as used in McCreey's (1996) research. Puppets may allow children to express their views more freely as it is the puppets that are 'talking', not the children. During the pilot study most of the children became absorbed in the puppets and would listen to the puppets 'whispering' their answer in their ears before they would vocalise the answer. Other children answered in a puppet 'voice' and often started their answers with: '*Daisy (puppet's name) say's....*' Pelicand *et al.* (2006) suggest that puppets allow the children to make decisions, react autonomously, and so regain power over situations in which they had previously felt disempowered. Puppets are child-friendly, and a child-led interview technique which can be effective with children with SLD (Severe Learning Difficulties) and PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) (Lewis *et al.* 2005). Using puppets meant that children who may have been excluded from the study were able to contribute via these puppets.

**Fig 5.1 Photo of Puppets used in Interviews**



As this research investigated a complex and abstract topic, it is hoped that the use of puppets facilitated the children answering questions. The children may have found it easier to identify with a puppet and felt that the puppet is asking the questions rather than an adult. Puppets are also friendly which will hopefully create a fun and secure environment for the children to talk. Animal puppets were also offered in case some children did not want to use 'human' puppets. This decision was made in case children who have particular social difficulties felt more comfortable 'talking' to animals. The animal puppets were also easier to manipulate than the people puppets. During the pilot study, the children found manipulating the puppets straightforward although the puppets are quite large and some of the smaller children needed some initial help to get their hands into position. In the main study there were two children with physical disabilities so they may have found using an animal puppet easier, although the children were given free choice with regards to which puppet to use, all the children chose to use the 'people' puppets.

When exploring spirituality with young children, McCreery (1996) used stories from children's books as a vehicle to interview children. In this research I used vignettes to explore connectedness and transcendence. Vignettes are short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances which participants are invited to comment on (Finch, 1987). Vignettes have been used by researchers to explore a wide range of social issues (Barter and Renold, 2000). Each child listened to a series of vignettes being read and then answered questions on the story they had heard. As in the pilot study, the vignettes were presented in stages. It is hoped that this enhanced the child's understanding of the vignette than if it had been presented as one long vignette (Finch, 1987). Having stages to the vignettes also allowed me to stop at any particular point if I felt that the child did not understand the vignette. Vignettes allow children the opportunity to explore their own perceptions and beliefs about a given situation (France *et al.* 2000). Vignettes are an unobtrusive approach, as



a vignette presents a hypothetical scenario which does not involve the participants directly (Poulou, 2000). Vignettes can be tailored to an individual child by creating a character that they can identify with, and this might enable the child to answer honestly and completely.

There are, however, some limitations to vignettes. One frequently cited theoretical limitation of vignettes is the distance between the vignette and social reality, in that what people believe they would do or say in a given situation is not necessarily how they would behave in reality (Barter and Renold, 2000). Participants may provide socially desirable responses to the questions (Barter and Renolds, 2000). However this could be a limitation of interviewing participants in social research. Probing participants' answers may reveal any discrepancies in their answers (Barter and Renolds, 2000). Using staged vignettes may also help reduce responder bias because participants are asked to comment on similar scenarios which become increasingly more complex.

During the pilot study, most of the children showed a good understanding of vignettes and listened well to the stories. Some of the vignette questions included sentence completion tasks. The children found this simple to do and completed each one with ease. Sentence completion tasks were included in the main study as they allowed the children to express their opinion about the story and not be restricted to simply answering questions. Sentence completion questions varied the interview for the children and asked them to interact more within the interview. During the pilot, one of the children found some of the vignettes difficult to understand and answered 'I don't know' to some of the questions. I have therefore changed some of the vignette questions to try to enable the children to understand the questions more easily. The language used in each vignette was kept simple to enable children with language difficulties to understand the vignette. The children in the vignettes were given unisex names such as Jo and Alex, to enable all genders to identify with the children, whilst the ages were within the age range of the participants taking part in the study.

I tried to include interview methods which were child-orientated and easily accessible. The final two interview methods are both ranking activities. Diamond ranking allows children to create their own statements and then rank them, while the second method is a statement ranking activity.

Diamond ranking allows children to generate their own ideas and opinions on topics in a non-threatening way. It is also useful for children with language and communication difficulties as it removes the need to articulate speech. In this research, diamond ranking was used in a one-to-one activity. Children were asked or shown a written question and asked to create statements that they thought answered the question. I offered to write down the children's answers as some of the children had difficulty with writing. Lewis *et al.* (2005) suggested that diamond ranking allowed the researchers to explore views from a wide range of individuals, including those with SLD. It also allowed the children to change their minds about the rankings as they thought about the answer; this may be an advantage in making the activity feel less like a test.

O'Kane (2000) used diamond ranking as a group activity rather than during one-to-one interviews, and asked the children to rank predetermined statements. An advantage of using ready-made statements is that it saves time and it takes pressure off children in terms of having to think of statements of their own. O'Kane (2000) used statements that had been previously produced by the children during interviews and discussion and, as such, children and not adults had created the statements. In fact, by ranking ready-made statements, the children do not have the freedom to create and discuss their own individual views. Children may feel that these statements have been imposed on them and that the activity is some sort of test given by the researchers.

During the first two pilot studies, diamond ranking was conducted as a one-to-one activity in which the children were asked to create their own answers. Initially the children had a problem as they became fixated on making a perfect diamond shape. In pilot two I did not mention the word 'diamond' when introducing and explaining the activity, and this removed this problem. I do not think that predetermined statements would be advantageous in this research. As has been mentioned previously, spirituality is a personal topic (Lee, 2005). It would therefore be difficult to use predetermined statements as they would be based on other's spirituality and may not reflect the children's own opinions.

The second ranking activity required the children to rank their opinions on a number of predetermined statements concerning spirituality. The children were asked to place the number of beans which reflected their opinion on each statement. One bean represented 'no', two beans meant 'I don't know or 'not sure' and three beans indicated 'yes'. A limited number of responses were used as children may have difficulty in remembering even a limited number of response options (Scott, 2000). However, even a limited number of response options can be probed for more detail or strength of feeling (Scott 2000). The ranking activity removed the reliance on questions and asking the children to produce an answer. Such ranking activities have been used in previous research (O'Kane, 2000; Lewis *et al.* 2005; Van der Reit, 2005) with disabled and non-disabled children on a variety of interview topics. All statements were linked to spirituality and the areas of connectedness and transcendence which were the themes of the interviews.

## 5.2 Interview Procedure

All children were asked to complete all interviews. All interview methods were conducted during one interview session. Sessions were completed during a weekly youth group meeting, over a period of around six weeks. The youth group meets for one and a half hours each. Interview methods were presented in a random order and children were given an indefinite amount of time to complete each interview. All interview questions can be seen in Chapter 7 and in a list of interview questions and prompts can be found in Appendix 1. Table 5.1 below, shows the interview procedure.

**Table 5.1: Interview Procedure**

Interview Method	Interview Procedure	Number of questions	Interview topics	Examples of questions.
Puppets	Semi-structured interview using puppets. Questions and answer format.  Both interviewer and interviewee use a puppet to 'ask' and 'answer' questions.	Initially 6 questions will be asked. If the child mentions 'God' an additional question will be asked.	Connectedness and transcendence	Question:  What's at the end of the sky?  Question:  Is God close or far away?
Vignettes	Children read or listen to each of the three vignettes.  After each stage in the vignette, children answer questions based on the stage they have just heard.  Question and answers and sentence completion formats used.	Three vignettes and a possible total of eleven questions, depending on if the child completes all the vignettes and questions.	Connectedness and transcendence	<i>Danny/Dan is 8. She/he goes to school and sees her/his friends. Danny/Dan tries to be nice to everyone even to people that aren't her/his friends.</i>  Q) Is Danny/Dan a good girl/boy?  Q) Should we try to be nice to other people?  Q) Why?  <i>Dan/Danny thinks that we should try to</i>

				<p><i>be nice to other people so that then people will be nice to us</i></p> <p>Q) Do you think that Dan/Danny is right?</p> <p>Q) Why?</p> <p><i>Dan/Danny also thinks that if s/he is nice to other people, nice things will happen to her.</i></p> <p>Q) Is she/he right?</p> <p>Q) Do you try to be nice to other people? Why?</p>
Diamond Ranking	<p>Children will write or have their statements or have them written for them on 'Post It' notes.</p> <p>'Post It' notes will be ranked in order of preference.</p> <p>Children can change the ranking as much or as little as they wish until they are satisfied.</p>	<p>Total of 4 questions. Each child will complete at least one diamond ranking activity depending on time pressures and child's disposition.</p>	<p>Connectedness and Transcendence</p>	<p>Question:</p> <p>What do you think God is like?</p> <p>Question:</p> <p>What makes a good friend?</p>
Statement Ranking	<p>Children will listen to each statement in turn.</p> <p>Children will rank their feelings using beans or cards.</p> <p>Rankings range from 1 to 3. 1 indicating 'no/I disagree' 2 indicating 'not sure/ I don't know' 3 indicating 'yes/ I agree'</p>	<p>Total of 25 statements. Children will complete as many as they can.</p>	<p>Connectedness and transcendence</p>	<p>Statement:</p> <p>I like being with people</p> <p>Statement:</p> <p>I can tell God anything.</p>

### **5.3 Sample**

The majority of the sample was taken from an inclusive youth group in North Birmingham. I have been volunteering at the group every Monday for six months, and have been on a number of outings with the group. One of the sample was a friend's child whom I have known for around seven years. Table 5.2 shows a detailed description of the sample. All the names are pseudonyms to protect identities. All of the children attend non-faith state schools. Two children attend special schools and one attends a pupil referral centre. None of the children's families attend regular religious or spiritual meetings or gatherings. The information regarding the children was obtained through the parents.

**Table 5.2: The sample of children taking part in the research**

Name	Age	Gender	Disability	Schooling	Ethnicity
John	10	Male	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	Mainstream School	White Irish
Jane	14	Female	Social Emotional Behaviour Disorder	Pupil Referral Centre	White British
Rebecca	8	Female	Physical Disability	Mainstream School	White British
David	11	Male	Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	Special Educational Needs School	White British
Jack	7	Male	Physically Disabled	Mainstream School	White British
Christopher	9	Male	Autistic Spectrum Disorder	Special Educational Needs School	White British

With the exception of John, all the participants' have the same ethnicity and all live in the same geographical area in Birmingham. John has Irish parents, although he was born and has lived in England all his life. The aim of the research was not to investigate cultural or ethnic

differences and spirituality, so having children from similar ethnic backgrounds should not affect the results of the study. Having volunteered at the youth club for six months before the data collection, I knew the children's ethnicity before any data collection began. Therefore differentiation of questions to take into account ethnicity was not required. Had children of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds taken part in the research then questions would have been changed to be ethnic and cultural sensitive, and the bearing of this and any affect on the data would have been taken into consideration .

Before any data collection can begin, researchers must consider the ethical implications for participants. Having discussed the interview methods, the procedure and the sample for this research, the following chapter will examine the ethical considerations of this research project with regard to the participants.

## **Chapter 6: Ethical Considerations**

There are important ethical issues that must be carefully thought through when undertaking research with children (Young and Barrett, 2001). It is important to recognise that childhoods are diverse, with different children and their experiences requiring unique approaches, both in terms of methodology and ethical considerations (Young and Barrett, 2001). Part of the remit of this research was to explore ethical considerations which arise when working with disabled children. This chapter examines particular ethical consideration which arose in this research in terms of informed consent, the right to withdraw and confidentiality with reference to this research and its participants.

### **6.1 Informed Consent/Assent**

Central to any ethics protocol is the need for informed consent (Nind, 2008). This has been widely discussed by various researchers (Heath *et al.* 2007; Wiles *et al.* 2007; Green *et al.* 2003). Historically, it has been considered that people with learning difficulties are unable to make decisions for themselves (Nind, 2008). Therefore consent from parents or guardians has been used when conducting research with children and adults who lack capacity to give consent for themselves (Wiles *et al.* 2007). Initially eight parents of disabled children were approached personally to see if they would consent to allow me to approach their children to see if they would be interested in taking part in the study. After this initial approach, consent forms and information sheets were sent out to the parents (see Appendix 3) and a simplified letter and information sheet was sent out to the children (see Appendix 4). Neither of these focused specifically on spirituality. I had already informed parents that I would be investigating areas of spirituality. The letter to the children and the information sheet mentioned spirituality along with topics such as friendship and 'the world'. I did not want to focus too heavily on spirituality as I did not want the children to be influenced before the



interview. Signed consent forms from parents were collected three to four weeks after they had been handed out. This was to allow parents and children to read through the information and decide whether or not to take part in the research. All parents returned the consent forms indicating that they were willing to allow their children to take part in the research. Due to illness, two of the children were not included in the study as they were absent during the data collection period.

As this research involved the children directly, it was vital that those who were taking part did so of their own free will. Green *et al.* (2003) suggest that seeking assent from children allows the inclusion of the participants in the decision making process which, in turn, encourages a sense of ownership in what happens during the research. Furthermore it was important to emphasise to the children that their assent was considered crucial for their participation and that their assent or dissent would take priority over consent given by their parents. For this research, the child's assent was deemed an ongoing issue. The suggestion that assent should be an ongoing issue is becoming common in research involving children and vulnerable groups (Helseth and Slettebo, 2004; Lewis and Porter, 2004). In this research, ongoing consent was taken to mean that consent was revisited after each interview method. Children were asked if they wanted to continue with the interview at each stage, to check that they were still willing to continue, and verbal agreement from the children was taken as consent. Children were not asked for signed consent as many of the children have learning difficulties and some found writing difficult. I decided to use verbal consent in all cases so as not place undue pressure on the children. At the beginning of the interview a verbal ethics script was read to each child (see Appendix 5). There was also a visual ethics script which was designed for children with language difficulties or more severe learning difficulties (see Appendix 6). The visual consent script contained simple bold words and pictures to illustrate the child's rights. Both the spoken and visual consent script explained the child's rights such

as his/her right to withdraw, the right not to answer, confidentiality and whether the interviews could be audio-taped. All children agreed to be interviewed, however two did not want to be audio taped. Consequently, written notes were taken.

Some researchers have expressed reservations about the basis of informed consent. Heath *et al.* (2007) suggest that informed consent is a largely unworkable process given that researchers can rarely - if ever - know the full extent of what participation may entail or cannot predict the possible outcomes of participation. Wiles *et al.* (2007) suggest that there is no consensus amongst researchers concerning what 'informed consent' involves, and whether the same set of principles and procedures are equally applicable to research among different groups and methodological frameworks. Scott *et al.* (2006) suggests that issues around fully informed consent are further complicated when research is undertaken with disabled children, whose levels of understanding may compromise their ability to give fully informed consent. However, Green *et al.* (2003) suggest that normally developing children as young as five years of age are capable of giving voluntary assent if developmentally appropriate information is given. Providing the appropriate information in a comprehensible way for children with learning disabilities is far from straightforward. At a minimum it involves developing an uncomplicated set of statements, written in simple language (Scott *et al.* 2006). This research used information sheets which were child friendly, simple to understand, and informative. The information sheets used in the research had been piloted for their appropriateness. Although the children in the pilot group were not disabled, they were younger than the children in the main study, and so some of their comprehension capabilities might have been similar.

## **6.2 Right to withdraw**

Part of informed consent concerns giving participants the right to withdraw from the study at any point (Wiles *et al.* 2007). I wanted the children to understand that they could withdraw in this way. During the introduction of their ethical rights at the beginning of each interview I introduced a 'stop' card. This was designed as a visual signal (fig 6.1) to signal that the child wished to terminate the interview. I explained to the children that the card could be shown at any point during the interview if they wanted to leave. I also explained that they did not have to give any reason for stopping the interview. Helseth and Slettebo (2004) suggested that it might be easier for a child to interrupt an interview by showing a card than raising their voice. Only one child cut short his interview. Christopher\* is nine years old and has ASD. He has a very short attention span and is very wary of people who are not in his immediate family and so I was not surprised when he terminated the interview early. He did, however, use the 'stop' card and demonstrated that he understood what it signified. I asked him if he wanted to leave to check that is what he meant and he responded that he did. We had completed one interview in its entirety when he produced the card. I let him leave immediately, but asked him if I could use his interview for my work. He agreed, and so his interview data remains in the study.

**Figure 6.1 The ‘Stop’ card used by the children to signal that they wished to leave the interview.**



### **6.3 Confidentiality**

Many researchers comment on the difficulty of giving complete confidentiality to participants when they are involved in research (Lewis and Porter, 2004; Helseth and Slettebo, 2004). Issues of confidentiality can become further complicated during transcription and data analysis. It is common practice in academe for someone other than the researcher to transcribe the recordings of the collected data (Tilley, 2003). Due to time pressures this research also used an outside transcriber to transcribe some of the interview data. This could be taken as a breach of confidentiality as someone other than myself has listened to a participant's interview in its entirety. However, there is little written about this issue in the literature. In fact, I could find no references to transcriptions and related ethical issues in the literature search I conducted. Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) suggest that researchers should consider carefully when assigning transcription work to others. However, both they and Tilley (2003) focus on the effects transcribers have on the data rather than on ethical implications. The person I chose to transcribe the data had no connection with any of the children or the families in the study and it was unlikely that they would ever meet. In the

interviews given to the transcriber, none of the children were named on the tape and so the only identifying characteristic of the child on tape is their gender.

The children who agreed to allow their interviews to be audio taped had the opportunity to listen to a playback of their interviews. All the children took up this opportunity. Only one child asked for some of her interview to be omitted. I agreed to this and, although it remains on the audio tape, it has not been transcribed and will not be used in analysing the results. This interview was transcribed by myself rather than the transcriber.

The issue of complete confidentiality becomes more complicated when undertaking research involving children and vulnerable groups, as parents may feel that they are entitled to know what their child has discussed during the interview (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Helseth and Slettebo, 2004). All the children were told that they could discuss any parts of the interview with their parents and I actively encouraged the children to tell their parents what we had done. The only information I gave the parents was that we had completed the interview and that their child had been a great help. A synopsis of the interview methods and results were created for each child in an information sheet and a thank you card was handed to them (Appendix 7). Parents had the opportunity to read this and to discuss the overall results with me, although I had to inform them that individual answers could not be specified.

Williamson and Goodenough (2005) refer to the limitations of confidentiality, particularly given the lack of any legal mandate on professionals to disclose suspicions of abuse. Researchers must ask themselves whether it is in the best interests of the child to break their confidence and report such harm, and then to whom, or whether producing general statements through research is a better way of advocating children’s rights and protecting the children involved (Young and Barrett, 2001) . At the present time, within the UK, researchers are not required by law to report suspicions of child abuse (Williamson and Goodenough, 2005).

This situation has changed in recent years. The Revised Childrens' Trust guidance on the 'duty to cooperate' was published in 2008. 'Relevant partners' at the moment include people such as police, Primary Care Trusts, Connexion partnerships amongst others. However it does not specifically include researchers. My position as a volunteer and researcher within the group from which my sample was drawn meant that I could not give the children complete confidentiality. As a volunteer at the group, I am bound by the Childrens' Act (2004) and the 'duty to cooperate' (2008) to disclose any instances of abuse or neglect which a child may reveal. If I do not inform the designated safety person of any reports of abuse or neglect, then it may be construed by Childrens' Services that I am implicit in the abuse.

Most researchers carefully consider any implications of disclosure of abuse before research begins. Williamson and Goodenough (2005) suggest that it is good practice to try to gain a child's permission to break confidentiality if you need to. Thomas and O'Kane (1998) suggest that any disclosure of abuse indicates that children are ready to inform people about such abuse, and they then can be supported in reporting it themselves to relevant adults. Thomas and O'Kane (1999) therefore gave blanket confidentiality to the children participating in their study. Their study, however, was conducted five years prior to changes in the Childrens' Act. It may be that if they repeated their study, confidentiality and disclosure procedures would have to be reviewed. I had to introduce the topic of confidentiality and its limitations carefully to each individual child. Williamson and Goodenough (2005) suggested that although this is good practice, it may confuse the child and undermine the normal boundaries of child protection within adult-child interaction. I verbally explained to the children when I may have to break their confidence. The children seemed to understand and to react positively to the information and answered 'OK' to the limitations. This was similar to the results found by Williamson and Goodenough (2005). I explained to the children before the interview started that if they told me something I thought

someone else should know, I would have to tell another adult. I used the example of bullying or somebody hurting them rather than specifically using the term abuse or neglect. Although I had decided that, due to my position of volunteer and researcher, and due to the fact that I work directly with disabled children, this meant that I could not offer the children complete confidentiality. This decision still has a variety of limitations for the research.

When explaining the limitations of confidentiality to children and disabled children, the language which researchers use must be chosen carefully. I used the examples of bullying or someone hurting them to try to explain the circumstances under which I would have to tell someone. However individual's concepts of harm differ and children may attach different meanings to these terms (Williamson and Goodenough, 2005). However, none of the children reported any type of abuse or neglect, and so confidentiality was not broken. A few of the children talked about being bullied; however their parents and schools are aware of the situation and so again confidentiality was not violated. In these situations we talked about what was happening to them and how we could help them, and how they could handle the situation. The children may have reported bullying as I had disclosed that I would inform people about bullying. Some children spoke about incidents of bullying or another child 'hurting' them in the past. They also spoke about fighting with their siblings where they had been 'hurt'.

The three ethical issues which have been discussed in this chapter are not the only ethical issues which may arise when conducting research with disabled children. Other issues such as subterfuge, detrimental effects and storage and handling of data need also to be considered. Whilst these are also important ethical concerns, they are not as pertinent to this research as the issues which were discussed in detail. When conducting research, a researcher must first consider the various ethical implications that may affect their individual participants in both

the immediate research and beyond. For this research I tried to ensure that the ethical rights of my participants were paramount before, during, and after the research.



## **Chapter 7: Results**

The objectives of the results chapter are twofold:

- I. To evaluate interview methods used to interview disabled children about spirituality.
- II. To analyse the results of the interviews.

The results section is divided into three parts. The first part considers the strengths and weaknesses of each interview method based on observations made during the interviews and a thematic analysis of the data, the second part analyses the interview data in more detail using thematic analysis in order to examine the data for themes of connectedness and transcendence. The final part examines the methods and interview analysis to see how they compare.

### **7.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Interview Methods**

#### **7.1.1 Puppet Interviews: Strengths and Weaknesses**

The puppets interviews had various general strengths, some of which have been discussed in previous research such as being child friendly (Lewis *et al.*2005) and allowing the child to feel more in control (Pelicanand *et al.* 2006). I also found that the puppet interviews allowed me to ask direct questions in a non-threatening way. This was especially important as spirituality is a complex topic and I did not want the children to be discouraged from the interview because they found the questions difficult or threatening. The children seemed to find direct questions easier to answer than more abstract ones. The children gave the most in-depth answer using this interview method. A more in-depth analysis is provided in the next section. Puppet interviews also worked well with regard to interviewing related to either topic, connectedness or transcendence. There was a potential weakness with regard to puppet interviews in that they might not be appropriate for all disabled children. The physically

disabled children in the research needed help to begin with to manipulate the puppets. However both managed well.

### **7.1.2 Vignette Interviews: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Vignette interviews also have general strengths, particularly for this group of children, as it was a familiar format. Vignettes are similar to ‘*Social Stories*’ (Gray, 1990) which are commonly used with disabled children. The children seemed to relate to the story, with a few asking for more details of the child. The vignettes were unobtrusive (Poulou, 2000) which may have helped the children to relax and enjoy the interview. I found that vignettes were good at investigating both topics; however the vignette needed to be clear and direct. When they became more abstract, the children had difficulty linking them to spirituality. I also found it more difficult to probe the children’s answers as the structure of the vignette did not really allow for this.

### **7.1.3 Diamond Ranking Interviews: Strengths and Weaknesses**

There were general strengths associated with diamond ranking. It allowed the children to give multiple answers and to change the rankings easily. This flexibility also allowed the children to think and to discuss their answers more. The children seemed to find this method easy to understand and use. However this method did not provide the scope needed for this topic. It did not address abstract topics well, especially the topic of transcendence. It was probably the least successful of all the methods in that it did not produce the same range or amount of data compared to the other methods. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **7.1.4 Statement Ranking: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Statement ranking had a number of strengths. The children found it easy to understand and use. It was particularly good for the topic of spirituality, as it used direct questions and was very good at investigating more abstract questions. One drawback to statement ranking was that it did not allow an easy probing of the participants' answers. However I found that the children gave spontaneous comments on their ranking which provided extra information about their opinions without probing. Without the children giving extra information, there is a possibility that statement ranking may only give an impression of children's opinions without giving any in-depth information.

Table 7.1 shows a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each interview method. The results of the thematic analysis of each interview method will be discussed in the next section, before progressing to a comparison of interview methods and thematic analysis.

**Table 7.1 A Summary of the Strengths and Weaknesses of each Interview Method.**

	Strength	Weakness
Puppets	<p>Child-led.</p> <p>Enabled interviewer to ask direct questions easily.</p> <p>Good for both interview topics; transcendence and connectedness.</p> <p>Enabled probing of answers.</p> <p>Could deal with the abstract nature of the topic.</p>	<p>May not be appropriate for all disabled children, especially physically disabled children.</p>
Vignettes	<p>Simple Format.</p> <p>Good on both interview topics; transcendence and connectedness.</p>	<p>Not very good at dealing with abstract nature of topics. An increase in abstractedness of topics leads to increased difficulties for children answering questions.</p> <p>Could not probe answers easily as format did not allow for this.</p>
Diamond Ranking	<p>Flexible</p> <p>Allowed easy probing of answers.</p>	<p>Did not deal with the abstract nature of the topics well.</p> <p>Topic of transcendence was</p>

	Children understood the method. Allowed for multiple answers. Good with the topic of connectedness	particularly difficult to access using this method.
Statement Ranking	Simple task. Good with both topics: transcendences and connectedness. Easy for the children to use and understand. Enabled interviewer to ask direct questions. Dealt with abstract nature of the topic well.	Did not allow for probing of questions. Did not give in-depth information. May be better used as a precursor for an interview rather than an interview method.

## **7.2: Thematic Analysis of Interviews**

Qualitative data analysis generally consists of three processes - describing phenomena, classifying them and seeing how the resulting concepts are linked (Dey, 1993). As indicated previously, each interview was transcribed and the transcriptions were thematically analysed and coded for themes of connectedness and transcendence. Thematic analysis was undertaken manually rather than using a computer programme such as N-VIVO. This was due to the lack of familiarity and experience with the N-VIVO programme on my part. Thematic coding was undertaken using a series of steps (Flick, 2002). Initially, a short description of each case was generated. This might have included a description of the person and their lives; it might also have included a statement which is typical to the case and relevant to the research. A system of categories was developed using a single case, and these categories were then coded and cross-checked against the others to see if similar categories occurred across cases (Flick, 2002). Hay and Nye (2006) used ‘signature’ phenomena in their research to try to convey the ‘...individual character that seemed to reflect the unique disposition of each child.’ (p.94).

The signature phenomenon is similar to Flick's (2002) initial step in thematic coding, by generating a short description of each case. However, the signature phenomenon specifically refers to the spirituality of the case. Examples of signature phenomena for this research can be found in Appendix 8. The interview questions were written in such a way as to investigate the themes of connectedness and transcendence and so the thematic analysis concentrated on these two topics and on any similarities between cases. The results of the thematic analysis are discussed below with specific reference to method.

Questions linked to friendship and family yielded the greatest number of themes in terms of connectedness. This was as expected, as many of the questions which were linked to connectedness focused on these topics. As stated in the previous chapter, for the purpose of this research, connectedness is defined as:

*The recognition and acceptance of a connection or relationship among self, others, and the world (Delgado, 2005, p.160)*

All interview methods included questions which were linked to the topic of connectedness via questions related to friendship and family.

The topic of transcendence was more difficult to categorise and to create questions for. As stated in the previous chapter, for this research transcendence is defined as:

*The belief that extension beyond the self is possible, that there is something more. Transcendence also refers to the experience of that which is outside the usual aspect of human perception' (Delgado, 2005 p.160)*

All interview methods had some questions which were linked to the topic of transcendence. These included questions about death, invisible friends, creation and heaven.

### **7.2.1 Thematic Coding and Emerging Codes**

Thematic coding involves several processes which have been discussed above. This section will discuss the process of thematic coding and the codes which actually emerged in this research project in more detail. Having transcribed all the interview data, the first stage of analysis was to create a 'signature phenomena' for each individual child based on their interviews. The signature phenomena gave me an overview of each child's interview, and the essence of their interview and spirituality. The coding for each interview was undertaken manually, which involved having multiple copies of each interview transcript, which were annotated and sections of data highlighted.

Each interview transcript was initially coded for the broad themes of connectedness and transcendence. These codes were highlighted using separate colours. The interviews were then analysed again to see if there were any repeating ideas and themes which emerged from the data. Repeating ideas and themes from interviews were noted and then tracked through each interview. Relevant pieces of coded data and repeating ideas were highlighted using separate colours so that they could be traced through interviews. This highlighting system is rather like a 'coding grid' which has been discussed by previous authors (Brewerton and Millward, 2001). Themes which occurred to specific questions were also highlighted. In the initial stage of coding just the themes of transcendence and connectedness were coded for. The interviews were then re-coded to look for emerging themes and repeating ideas. Specific themes and ideas are discussed in the next section of this chapter in conjunction with the corresponding questions however; broad themes that emerged were love, friendship, social justice, media, destiny, and death.

### **7.2.2 Thematic Coding for Themes of Connectedness in Puppet Interviews**

#### *Q) What makes a family?*

The participants gave unique and in-depth answers to this questions and revealed interesting answers which included feeling, emotions and actions, as well as influences from the media. Media influence on the older participants' answers were particularly interesting as this was similar to Hay and Nye's (2006) results, who found that participants used references from the media in their answers:

*Jane: ' Friends can be a family like on St Trinians [movie].*

*John: Bands can be like a family or musical families like Mary Poppins.*

The biggest influence which participants thought made a family was love, feelings and actions:

*Rebecca: Love makes a family.*

*Jane: Members that love you and stick by you.*

*Jack: Meeting up and doing things together.....like playing games and stuff*

The participants all seemed to agree that families did not necessarily need to be blood relations and that there are many different types of families.

*John: Well a school could be a type of family.*

*Jane: Anyone can be a family if they are close. Friends can be a family.*

Participants showed connectedness to others through feelings and actions, and identified the term 'family' to encompass these. To the participants, families were more complex than the traditional nuclear family and could include friends as well as blood relations. The

participants seemed to suggest that aspects such as love, togetherness, and loyalty were the most important things for a family.

***Q) Who looks after you? Who looks after people?***

To begin with, all the children listed their family members such as parents, grandparents and siblings. However, many of the children suggested that society should help look after individuals.

*Jane: Everyone should look after each other.*

*Rebecca: Foster people and doctors and nurses look after people.*

*John: Other people can look after others like police, or if they are old then their kids can, or get people to help them from outside.*

Some of the children had a strong sense of social justice. This theme came up a few times throughout the interviews and was often linked to the theme of connectedness and friendship. More examples of the social justice theme will be given other areas of the results section.

**7.2.3 Thematic Coding for Themes of Transcendence in Puppet Interviews**

***Q) Do you think anything looks after you that you can't see?***

Both the girls who took part in the research replied that their dead Grandparents looked after them. The boys, on the other hand, said that nothing invisible looked after them.

*Jane: Yeah my Granddad definitely, 'cos he adored me.*

*Rebecca: My Grandpa and Grandma. Yeah in some way that I don't know but they still do.*

Rebecca suggested that dead people looked after you and it was their love that carried on:



*Rebecca: If someone dies in your family then those people will still love you. So basically what I'm trying to say is that love doesn't die.*

***Q) How did the world get here?***

The younger children were very definite on this:

*Rebecca: God made it.*

*Jack: God made it.*

When their answers were probed, they were unsure how, but were still sure that God made it.

*Jack: I don't know but yes. [God made it sic]*

*Rebecca: He just did.*

The two older children were more uncertain. However God featured in all of the children's answers. There was a mix of science, spirituality and media influences in the older children's answers.

*Jane: God knows I don't. Magic, big bang probably, rocks in space but it had to develop I do and I don't believe that God made it*

*John: Well there a lots of different things. Do I have to say scientifically? Well they did an experiment about it in Switzerland and made a tunnel from France to Switzerland and put them [electron particles] through the tunnel. Almost as fast as the speed of light and it was like these two energies mashed together and it made a giant explosion - the big bang and it kind of created the world, the planets, the sun and all that. And some people say that God made it. Or some people think that rocks in space all joined together in like a whoosh and it made the world [this was in a scene from an episode of 'Doctor Who'].*

Both Jane and John express doubts and were unsure about what they believed in. This again is similar to results from Hay and Nye's research that found older children wanted 'proof' in their beliefs. John again used media influences in his answers. He made reference to an episode of *'Doctor Who'* in his answer.

***Q) What's at the end of the sky?***

All of the children initially answered *'Space'*. When probed, some of the children expanded their answers to include aspects of science and spirituality.

*Jane: Maybe heaven. I don't know*

*John: Well that's scientifically [space being at the end of the sky] If you go high enough you could get to heaven where you go when you die.*

**7.2.4 Additional Question**

This is an additional question which I asked if the children had initially mentioned 'God' in their answers to previous questions. All of the children except David had mentioned God at least once in their answers. The question *'How did the world get here'* seemed to initiate this in all of the children.

***Q) Is God close or far away?***

There was a mixed response to this question. The younger children seemed to be more confident in their answers. The older children were less certain.

*Jack: Far away.....Yes because he's up in the sky.*

*Rebecca: I would say in between. So he's not really close but not really far away. Can I borrow your head? Cos the worlds a circle is could be that he's about here and [making*

*points on my head] yeah but if we are on the other side of the world he could be just be behind us 'cos we don't really know where he is.*

*Jane: I don't really know. It's difficult to say. A bit of both really. No, I'm not sure.*

*John: Not sure. Isn't he supposed to be everywhere? There's a big word for it. [me: omnipotous] Is that it? [me: I think so]. Well he is supposed to be that so he is everywhere so close I would say.*

### **7.2.5 Thematic Coding for Themes of Connectedness in Vignette Interviews**

*Vignette 1a)*

*Dan/Danni is 8 years old and when he/she goes to school he/she sees all his/her friends.*

*Dan/Danni tries to be nice to people who aren't his/her friends.*

***Q) Is Dan/Danni a good boy/girl?***

All the children answered 'Yes' to this question.

***Q) Should we try to be nice to other people?***

***Q) Why?***

All the children thought that we should try to be nice to other people and all gave the same reason for doing so:

*Christopher: To make friends.*

*David: To get friends*

*Vignette 1b)*

*Dan/Danni thinks we should try to be nice to each other so that people will be nice to him/her.*

***Q) Do you think she's right?***

Again all the children responded 'yes' to this questions. When probed their answers varied:

*Jack: Because....I don't know.*

*Jane: Because if you respect others they will respect you.*

*David: 'Cos people will be nice to you when you are nice to them.*

All the children thought that you should be nice to others, although were unsure why. Many of their answers centred on the fact that if you were nice then others would be nice to you in return. This opinion seemed to have a 'karma' type quality to it. John illustrates this:

*John: So it's kinda the same thing. Good things happen to you [if you are good] but if you do bad things its [sic] gonna punish you.*

### **7.2.6 Thematic Coding for Themes of Transcendence in Vignette Interviews.**

*Vignette 2*

*Joe/Jo is 7. He/she has lots of friends at school but she/he also has an invisible friend that others can't see.*

***Q) Do you have any invisible friends?***

***Q) Do you have any friends that others can't see?***

Four of the six children said that they had or have had imaginary friends. John reported that he had an imaginary friend when he was younger, about five years old but this was no longer

the case. Rebecca and Christopher both said they still had imaginary friends and Jane said that she spoke to her dolls and teddies as if they were her friends.

*Vignette 2b)*

*Joe/Jo likes to talk to her imaginary friend if he/she has any worries or is in trouble.*

***Q) Who do you talk to if you are worried about something?***

Christopher, David, Jack and John all said they spoke to a parent or other relative if they were worried. Both Jane and Rebecca said they spoke to their imaginary friends. Jane's response was interesting.

*Jane: My teddies.... I don't know. I write it on a piece of paper then tear it up. It makes me feel better. Someone has listened.*

*Vignette 2c)*

*Jo/Joe does not feel lonely very often because he/she has his/her invisible friend to talk to.*

***Q) Do you ever feel lonely?***

David was the only participant who reported that he never felt lonely. All the other children said they felt lonely sometimes. Mostly the children felt lonely when they had no one to play with.

***Q) Who do you talk to when you are lonely?***

Again the children reported that they spoke to parents, friends or tried to find something to do. Jane said she spoke to her dolls.

The aim of this vignette was to see if the children used spirituality when they felt alone or if they felt that there was 'something' with them which had no physical presence.

*Vignette 3*

*Ali's dog, Rex has died he/she is very upset.*

***Q) What could we say to cheer him/her up?***

*Vignette 3b) Ali doesn't understand why Rex has died so you tell him/her.*

***Q) Rex died because.....(Complete the sentence)***

All the children were very practical about this scenario. All of the children suggested that telling her the dog was old or ill and that we could get her another dog to cheer her up. John and Jane both suggested that you could tell Ali that the dog was in 'heaven'

*Jane (sentence completion) His time had come to move on. He is free from harm now and in the environment, in heaven.....Do dogs go to heaven?*

*Me) What do you think?*

*Jane: I think so, yeah. He's in doggie heaven.*

*John: He is in doggie heaven.*

Again influences from the media and popular culture were evident in John's answers as he went on to chat about a recent television programme.

*John: They had like a man's Gran died and one of the people and it was like the fortune teller predicted that about the grandma. He said yes she is doing fine. She's in heaven with - I'm not sure who other one was?*

*Me: It was like R something because the man was 'R Wayne' and she was R Gran.*

*John: That's it R Wayne, R Gran, and it's like she's in heaven watching TV and playing golf with I'm not sure who one of them was, but one of them was Keith Ledger. He died not so long ago.*

The final two interview methods were both ranking activities. Summaries of the results can be found in the following sections.

### **7.2.7 Results from Diamond Ranking**

All the children found this method easy to understand and access, which differed from the results of the pilot study. In the pilot study participants had difficulty with regard to how to complete this method. Due to the problems which arose during the pilot I changed the explanation of the method for the main interviews. Rather than using the term 'diamond' I explained to the children:

*'What we are going to do is I am going to ask you a question and we are going to write down your answers on these special 'Post it' notes and put them in order of most and least.'*

I also used arrow shaped 'Post it' notes and explained to the children they could turn them up, down or sideways to indicate the ranking. This may have contributed to enabling the children in their understanding of how to complete this method. The arrow shaped 'Post it' notes also helped make the method more visual and may have facilitated the interview with the children.

### **7.2.8 Thematic Coding for Themes of Connectedness in Diamond Ranking Interviews**

***Q) What makes a good friend?***

All the children had similar ideas as to what did and did not make a good friend. Attributes which made a good friend included: being kind, playing with you, being funny, not leaving you out. Attributes that made a bad friend included, being mean or unkind, going off on their own, arguing.

**Fig7.2.1 Photo of Participant's Diamond Ranking Results For What Makes a Friend**



***Q) What reminds you of nature?***

Again the children all created similar answers including aspects of nature such as trees, mud, the sea and animals.





**Fig 7.2.2 Photo of Participant's Diamond Results for What Reminds you of Nature**

### **7.2.9 Thematic Coding for Themes of Transcendence in Diamond Ranking Interviews**

*Q) What does the word spirituality mean?*

I asked this question to gain an impression of what the children thought this word might mean. All the children, except John, said they did not know what it meant. John's definition was

*'It means you believe in something or someone.'*



**Fig7.2.3 A Photo of Participant's results Diamond Ranking for What does the word Spirituality mean?**

*Q) What reminds you of God?*

*Rebecca: My Grandpa and Grandma because they are up there with him. And half the world because God made half the world but people made the rest of the stuff. Like God made the trees and that.*



**Fig 7.3.4 A Photo To Show Participant's Results for What Reminds you of God?**

**7.2.10 Results from Statement Ranking Activities**

The statement ranking activity required the children to rank their opinion with regard to a variety of statements. The twenty five statements were written to cover the topics of connectedness and transcendence. The results are presented in the tables below, with each child's responses. To ensure the results are clear to the reader, I have spilt the statements into two tables which separate the topics. The statements were not presented to the children as shown in the tables below as they were asked in a random order and both topics were mixed. Christopher did not participate in this part of the interview as he had used his stop card and

had withdrawn from the interview. ‘Y’ indicates, ‘yes’ or ‘I agree’, ‘DK’ indicates ‘not sure’ or ‘I don’t know’ and ‘N’ indicates ‘no’ or ‘I disagree’.

**Table 7.1.1: The results from the statement ranking activity on statements linked to connectedness**

	John	Jane	Rebecca	David	Jack
I think friends are important	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
I try to be a good boy/girl	Y	Y	Y	DK	Y
My family are the most important people in my life	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
I like being with people	Y	DK	Y	DK	Y
There is good and bad in everyone	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Sometimes I feel lonely	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
The world is a beautiful place	Y	DK	Y	DK	Y
I am part of the universe	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
If you are sorry you will be forgiven	Y	DK	Y	DK	Y
Everyone should be nice to one another	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

**Table 7.1.2: The results from statement ranking activity on statements linked to transcendence**

	John	Jane	Rebecca	David	Jack
I think that there is something greater than me	DK	Y	Y	N	N
I believe in heaven	DK	Y	Y	N	Y
There is no such person as God	DK	DK	N	DK	Y
I believe in angels	DK	DK	Y	N	Y
I think I have a good relationship with God	Y	DK	Y	N	Y
I think an invisible power watches over me	DK	DK	Y	N	DK
When someone dies they go to heaven	Y	DK	Y	Y	DK
I pray a lot	DK	N	N	N	Y
When I pray, God listens	Y	N	Y	N	Y
God is there when I need him	DK	DK	Y	DK	Y
I am important to God	Y	Y	Y	DK	Y
I can tell God anything	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
God gave me a family so we could look after each other	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
God is good	Y	DK	Y	Y	Y
God loves me	Y	DK	Y	DK	Y

As the children ranked their statements, all of them made additional comments about the statement. This was interesting as I had not probed their answers. Rather, the children spontaneously made their own comments, examples of which can be seen below.

Statement: There is no such person as God.

*Rebecca: Yeah there is such a person as God. He listens to me.*

Statement: The world is a beautiful place.

*John: Well it was. We haven't done a very good job have we?*

Statement: I have a good relationship with God.

*David: I don't really know who he is.*

Statement: If you are sorry you will be forgiven.

*Jane: Suicide is wrong as it's God's body, not yours.*

Statement: God is good.

*Jack: Yep we learn about him in R.E.*

### **7.3 Relational Consciousness**

In various parts of each interview the children expressed a level of consciousness relative to other passages and this appeared in how the children saw themselves in relation to others and self expressed through questions about connectedness and God and their environment in questions about transcendence. This would seem to support Hay and Nye's theory of relational consciousness and the belief that it is a feature of children's spirituality. Hay and Nye found similar results throughout their analysis which would suggest that relational consciousness exists in all children, independent of ability or age.

### **7.4 Comparisons of Interview Method and Thematic Results**

All the children who took part in the research were able to understand and be involved in each interview method. The children reported that they found none too difficult, but found some of the questions difficult to understand and answer. After analysing each of the

interview methods it became clear that some methods produced better results than others when interviewing disabled children about spirituality.

The puppet interviews produced more in-depth answers from the children and allowed these answers to be probed easily. This meant that the children could elaborate readily on their answers. This may be because the puppets helped the interview transpire in a non-threatening and child-friendly way, whilst enabling direct questions to be asked. The statement ranking activity also produced interesting results. Although the children were simply asked to rank their feelings, I found that all of the children began to explain and expand on the answers. This may have been only with small comments, but all added to the information gained as a result of the interview. As in the puppet interview, the bean ranking contained very direct questions and a lot more religious language than any other interview method. The success of this interview method may support Hay and Nye's (2006) use of religious language in interviews.

Both vignettes and diamond ranking interviews produced good data on the topic of connectedness but a lot less on transcendence. This is probably due to the abstract quality of transcendence and the quality of the questions asked. It was more difficult to write questions about transcendence for these two activities and I found that the children did not link the questions from these activities to transcendence. Developmental difficulties may also have produced difficulties in these activities because, although the children could complete the interviews, it may be that they could not link the questions to spirituality as it was too abstract. The children simply answered the questions rather than associating them to spirituality. It is, however, difficult to separate all the variables to establish cause and effect. The implications and discussion of the results can be found in the final chapter of the dissertation.

## **Chapter 8 Implications and Discussion**

### **8.1: Implications**

The implications for this research fall into three main areas: implications for interview research, implications for spirituality research and implications for research ethics, each of these will be discussed separately below.

### **8.2: Implications for Interview Research**

Researchers should always strive to find innovative and inclusive interview methods so that all sections of society can be involved in research. When working with disabled children in particular, interviews need to be flexible and tailored to the needs of the participants to allow their data to fully represent the views of the children taking part.

### **8.3: Implications for Spirituality Research**

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in research into children's voices (Garth and Aroni, 2003). Currently, the research which has been undertaken has explored various aspects of disabled children's lives such as education, health and friendship (Maxwell, 2006, Bereford *et al.* 2004, Woolfson *et al.* 2007). However, there is a lack of research into their views on topics such as spirituality or religion (Swinton, 2004). Larger studies in the area are needed which would include both disabled and non-disabled children, to see what comparisons may be made in investigating children's spirituality as a whole. The uniqueness and personal nature of spirituality make this area an exciting a largely unidentified field for research.

#### **8.4: Implications for Research Ethics**

The ethical implications of this study can be applied to other research studies that involve disabled children. To allow disabled children to make informed decisions, and being aware of their ethical rights, should be paramount to all researchers. Allowing disabled children access to their ethical rights improves the quality of the research and creates a positive research experience for researchers and participants alike. Researchers should try to implement an ethical code of conduct that involves participants, and gives them control of their own voice. Creating information sheets which are accessible to children and making them aware of their ethical rights are simple ways by which researchers can help make their research more ethical.

#### **8.5: Discussion**

This was a small scale research project to investigate effective interview techniques for accessing the perceptions of a group of disabled children and children with SEN, specifically regarding spirituality. The study found that particular interview techniques such as puppet interviews and statement ranking were more effective when interviewing about spirituality than about other aspects. However these methods should not be discounted for other interview topics. It is likely that the abstract nature of the topic of spirituality, and flaws in the types of questions asked during the interviews, had an impact on the results of the study. Interview methods that allow direct questions seemed to work better than the use of more abstract questions. This may be due to the nature of the topic or the children's disability. More research would be needed in this area to allow us to arrive at an accurate conclusion on cause and effect of interview questions and disability.



The results found many similarities to previous work undertaken by Hay and Nye into children's spirituality. This would also seem to support Hardy's (1965) biological view of spirituality in that all the children expressed their own spirituality. Although it was a small sample, none of the children taking part expressed an absence of spirituality, even though some of the children expressed their doubts about the notion of 'God'. For example Jane: *'I do and I don't believe that God made it'* and David: *'I don't really know who he is'*. The results also support Hay and Nye's (2006) theory of related consciousness. The interview data revealed that all the children expressed their own unique spirituality. Nye (1999 p.66) described relational consciousness as:

- 1) *an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness relative to others interview passages (SEE ABOVE) for that child, and that*
- 2) *this appeared in how the child saw him or herself in relation, to others, own self, God and their environment*

All the children's interview data revealed these aspects as described by Nye (1999 p.60). This would support the theory that relational consciousness may be a common thread in children's spirituality. However, whilst all the participants demonstrated aspects of spirituality such as connectedness, the characteristic of transcendence was less obvious in the case of some participants. This may be due to flaws in the interview questions or developmental difficulties in the participants due to their disability. Further research into children's spirituality, especially disabled children's spirituality is needed in order to investigate these issues further.

The research also aimed to investigate ethical implications which may arise when working with disabled children in research activities. The study discussed three main ethical issues: the participants' right to withdraw, informed consent and confidentiality. The study found that when the participants' ethical rights are explained in an accessible manner, disabled children are capable of understanding their basic ethical rights. Education researchers are

becoming increasingly aware of disabled children's ethical rights, and much of the research which is conducted in this field is done to a high ethical standard. Giving participants ethical information in accessible forms allows them to make their own decisions on participation and allows them to regain power. Recent changes in the law and child protection guidelines may mean that now researchers have to think more carefully about particular ethical issues such as confidentiality and disclosure. Researchers have to ensure that information and explanations of confidentiality and disclosure are carefully considered when discussing these issues with young or disabled participants.

Research into children's spirituality is growing but researchers should recognise that some groups, such as disabled children (Swinton, 2004) are being left out of this type of research. As with all small scale research projects it is difficult to make definite and generalisable conclusions which can be used for an entire population. In this research the topic area and sample are both so broad that it would be impossible to make decisive conclusions about the nature of disabled children's spirituality. At the moment the research that is being conducted in this area can be used as a basis for further research, giving researchers theoretical, ethical and methodological basis for their individual projects.

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## **Appendix 1: A list of interview questions and prompts**

*Me:* My puppet (name) sometimes asks me some very difficult questions. Can he/she ask you them to see what you think?

*Me:* Puppet x also asks me lots of questions about my family. He/she often asks ‘*what makes a family?*’ (Topic: connectedness to others)

Prompts:

Can you tell me who is in your family?

Do you have any brothers/sisters/cousins?

What types of things do you do with your family?

*Me:* Puppet x says that he/she likes me looking after him. He/she wants to know ‘*who looks after you?*’

Prompts

Does *Mum/Dad\** look after you? (\*Italics depends on who the children have named in previous question) (Topic: Connectedness to self)

*Me:* Puppet x also wants to know ‘*who looks after other people?*’ (Topic: transcendence/connection to others)

Prompts:

Who do you think look after *Mum/Dad\**?

Who looks after Me/Chris/Elaine?\*( other people at PHAB club)

*Me:* Puppets x says that sometimes he/she feels that someone/thing looks after them that they cannot see. ‘*Do ever think/feel that there is someone/thing looking after you that you can’t see?*’ (Topic: Transcendence)

Prompts:

There are lots of things we can’t see but we know that they are there like the (see if the children can think of anything).....wind/air/planets/our hearts/brains?

Is there anyone that you can’t see that you think looks after you?

What about invisible friends? Do you have any?

*Me:* Sometimes he/she asks me *'How did the world get here?'* (McCreery, 1996) X (child's name), what do you think? (Topic: transcendence)

Let/see if the child answers.

Prompts:

How did things like the sky and the sea and trees get here?

Were they always here?

Were they made? How?

*Me:* Another question that he/she asks is *'what's at the end of the sky?'* (McCreery 1996).

(Topic: transcendence)

See if the child answers.

Prompts:

The sky is so big what do you think comes after it?

Do you think there is anything at the end of the stars?

The moon and the planets are in the sky. We can't see the planets like Mars do you think there is anything else in the sky we can't see?

What do you think the stars are made of?

If the children mention 'God' at any point in this I will ask.

*Puppet x wants to know if God is close or far away?* (Topic: transcendence)

Prompts:

What makes you think that God is close/far away?

Are there any times/places when you think God is closer/further away from you?

At the end of the puppet questions all the children will be reminded of their right to withdraw and be asked if they want to carry on or stop the interview.

### Vignettes

There will also be some vignettes which I have created based on the work of Finch (1987). These vignettes are created so that the story has a series of short stages with questions following each stage.

*Danny/Dan is 8. She/he goes to school and sees her/his friends. Danny/Dan tries to be nice to everyone even to people that aren't her/his friends.*

Q) Is Danny/Dan a good girl/boy?

Q) Should we try to be nice to other people?

Q) Why

*Dan/Danny thinks that we should try to be nice to other people so that then people will be nice to her*

Q) Do you think that Dan/Danny is right?

Q) Why?

*Dan/Danny also thinks that if you are nice to other people nice to other people nice things will happen to her.*

Q) Is she/he right?

Q) Do you try to be nice to other people? Why?

*Jo is 7. She/he has lots of friends at school but she/he also has an invisible friend that others can't see?*

Q) Do you have any invisible friends?

Q) Do you have any friends others can't see?

*Jo likes to talk to her invisible friend if she/he has any worries or is in trouble.*

Q) Who do you talk too if you are worried about something?

Q) When do you think Jo might talk to her invisible friend?

Q) Who do you think Jo's invisible friend is?

*Jo does not feel lonely very often because she/he has he/his invisible friend to talk to*

Q) Do you ever feel lonely?

Q) When?

Q) Who do you talk to when you feel lonely?

*Ali's dog, Rex has died. She/he is very upset.*

What could we say to make her feel better?

*Ali doesn't understand why her/his dog has died.*

You say to her, Rex died because.....

I will check if the children wish to continue with the interview or leave. I will also remind them about the 'stop' and 'ssh' card.

### Diamond Ranking

*Me:* What makes a friend? (Topic Connection to others)

Prompts:

Can you tell me who your friends are?

Why do you like them?

*Me:* What reminds you of nature?

Prompts:

What about things like the sea or trees?

*Me:* What does the word spirituality mean?

Prompt

I know it's a really big word but what do you think it might mean?

*Me:* What reminds you of God?

Prompt

Can you think of places or times that may remind you of God.

### Statement Ranking Activity

- 1) I think friends are important.
- 2) I think that there is something greater than me
- 3) I believe in heaven.
- 4) There is no such person as God.
- 5) I believe in angels
- 6) I try to be a good boy/girl
- 7) If you are sorry you will be forgiven
- 8) I think that I have a good relationship with God
- 9) I think that an invisible power watches over me
- 10) My family are the most important people in my life
- 11) When someone dies they go to heaven

- 12) I pray a lot
- 13) When I pray God listens.
- 14) God is there when I need him
- 15) I am part of the universe
- 16) I am important to God
- 17) Everyone should be nice to one another
- 18) I can tell God anything
- 19) I like being with people
- 20) There is good and bad in everyone
- 21) The world is a beautiful place
- 22) God gave me my family so that we could look after each other
- 23) I sometimes feel lonely
- 24) God is good
- 25) God loves me

**Appendix 2: Consent Letter for pilot study**

17<sup>th</sup> March 2008

Dear Parents,

I am currently in my first year of a four year PhD at Birmingham University. My PhD is in education and inclusion, and my main topic is about inclusion of disabled children and their families in faith communities.

To complete my first year of study I have to complete an extended piece of research. This will be an investigation into gaining children with disabilities views on the topic of '*aspects of self and things that are important to me*'. For this I need to complete a pilot study. The pilot study will entail testing interviewing techniques which may be used in the actual study. These techniques have been design to hopefully be fun for children and allow them to express themselves.

I am asking for your consent to allow your daughter to take part in the pilot study. The pilot is voluntary and completely anonymous. Nothing that your child tells me will be reported in the study as this study is about the feasibilities of the data collection techniques. The reason for me using the brownie group is that if these techniques do not work with the brownies they will probably not work with other children. The interviews will take around 15-20 minutes and will be conducted at Brownies in the weeks following Easter. If you could complete the consent form below and return it to Brownies after Easter I would really appreciate it. If you would like anymore information about this study please either see me after Brownies or contact me on [telephone]

Thank you for your time

(Beth Loader)

I..... (Print name) give my consent to allow my daughter..... (Print name) to take part in a pilot study on gaining children's views. I understand that all information is confidential and anonymous. I also understand that I can withdraw my daughter at any time during the study.

Signed .....

### **Appendix 3: Information Letter and Consent forms for main study**

Letter For Parents \* all names expect researchers have been changed

Dear Mr/Mrs Smith\*

I am writing to let you know about a study, supported by the University of Birmingham which is looking at methods of interviewing children with special educational needs (please see enclosed information sheet for more details). This research is being carried out as part of a postgraduate degree course.

Part of this work will involve meeting and talking to children at PHAB. John\* and Jane\* have very kindly allowed me to contact you to see if you would be willing for your son to take part in this research. I shall not include the names of any of the children, taking part when I write up the research.

I have included some extra information about the project. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries about the project (see information sheet for details).

There will be several children, from a variety of age groups taking part in the study from PHAB. Once the study is completed I will send all parents and teachers feedback on the results of the study.

If you are happy to take part in the research and have read the information, please complete the following slip and return it to me as soon as possible. I hope that John\* will take part in this exciting project.

Best wishes

Beth Loader

## **Appendix 3bParent Information Sheet**

### **Investigating methods of obtaining the views and opinions of children with special educational needs**

#### **Background**

What is important to children with special educational needs?

How can we find ways of asking the ‘right’ questions to get to the answers?

I am interested in finding out better ways to access the views of children about things that are important to them such as people, places, friendship, and activities they enjoy doing. Part of this is about asking whether belief or faith plays an important part in their lives. My research will specifically aim to explore:

- Ways of interviewing children to most effectively access their views on things that are important in their lives.
- This will include asking the children about friends and family, spirituality (such as ‘Do you go to church/mosque/synagogue/temple or other place of worship?’) and material things (such as toys, books, music).

#### **Who is involved and what will happen?**

Approximately 15 children will take part in the research between May 2008 and June 2008. This will involve me visiting the school to talk to children about their views on friends and family, spirituality and material things.

#### **How will this be done?**

I have already piloted questions and methods with other children to make sure that they are easy and fun to do. The children will be interviewed on a one to one basis but if they need a support worker to be present during the interview this can be accommodated. The interviews will use a number of methods including puppets, games and stories. These sessions will take around 30 minutes to complete and will take place in school.

In order to best capture children’s views I would like to tape-record interviews. Please be assured that the tapes will remain confidential to the project and will be stored in locked cupboards. I will not use individual or school names when I am writing up the research and so any comments will remain anonymous.

#### **Important information**

- All information is kept at the University of Birmingham in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- Your son/daughter can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason.



- Your participation is confidential to the project and your son/daughter will not be named in any write-up of the research.
- I have an up-to-date clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau to work with children and young people.

### **Contact information**

I am a research student based at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. If you want to talk about this project please contact me at *e mail address* or on *telephone number*. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any queries about this project

If you would like to talk to my supervisors for this project please contact:

Professor Ann Lewis at *email address* or on *telephone number*

or

Dr Sarah Parsons at *e mail address* or on *telephone number*

Beth Loader

## Appendix 4: Children's Information Sheet

### Project about 'things that are important to you': Information sheet

#### Who's doing the project?

#### To contact Beth:



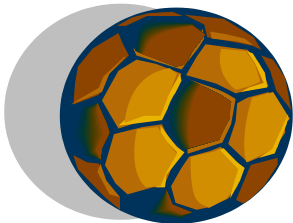
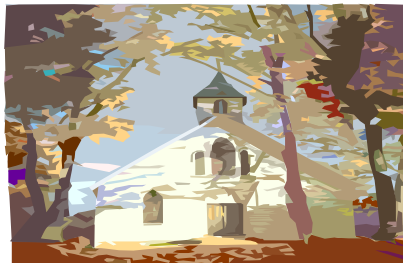
*Telephone Number*



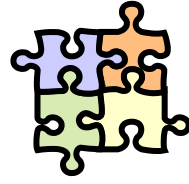
*E mail Address*

#### What is the project about?

The project is looking at what children think about things that are important to them. We will talk about things like friends and family, spirituality and things you enjoy doing.



There are a number of ways to ask children what they think, including talking, stories, games and puppets.



### **Who will be asked to take part?**

There will be a number of schools taking part and children will be aged between 6 and 11 years old. If you would like to take part, Beth will visit you at school and meet you there. The project will begin in May 2008 and end in June 2008.

### **Doing the project the right way**

There are good ways of doing projects and this includes things like making sure people understand why they are doing the project and that they can stop at any time. It also means that we will tell people about what we found out in the project when it is finished, although children's names are never used when we do this. No-one else will know who has taken part in the project.

## **Appendix 5: Verbal Ethics Script**

This will be read to each child before the research begins. The italicised text indicates spoken text non italicised text is unspoken text.

*Hi my name is Beth, what's your name?*

*Do you know why I am here? I sent an information sheet to your house did you see it? (Show them the sheet) I am here to talk to you about things that are important to you. I am going to ask you about things like, your friends and family, things you enjoy doing.*

*I have a tape recorder to tape what we say. This is so I can remember what you have said. Only I will be able to listen to the tape. No-one else, including your mum/parents [depends on who gives the consent] and teachers will hear what you have said. Would you mind if I turn it on? Or you can turn it on if you like.*

*Do you want to say hello to the tape and then you can listen to your voice on the player?*

Demonstrate tape player

*It's OK to say no if you would rather not have the tape on*

If yes keep it on if no turn it off and make written notes.

*I have a few questions to ask you about your ideas on different things. It isn't a test so there is no right or wrong answer just what you think. I'm interested in what you think. If yes or OK carry on.*

*If you want to ask me any questions, that's fine. And if you don't want to answer a question that's OK, just say 'I don't know' or shake your head. Is that OK?*

If yes carry on

*Now this bit is really important. If you want to finish at anytime and go back to class that's OK. You have a special card which says finish/stop on. Do you know what finish/stop means? It means that you want to go now and not do anymore activities with me. If you want to go before we have finished just hold up that card or say Beth I want to go now and we will stop straight away. What do you do if you want to stop?*

Check they know what to do.

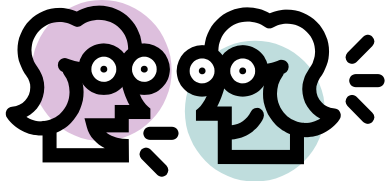
*Is there anything you want to ask me before we start?*

*Right shall we start then?*

After first data collection, children will be asked what they thought about the activity and whether they would like to do a further activity or go back to club.

## Appendix 6: Visual Consent Script

What are we going to do?



We are going to talk about things  
that are important to you.

What type of things?



Friends and

Family

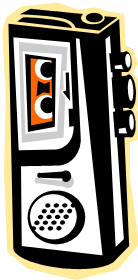


Places you like to  
go and things  
you like to do.



and spirituality.

**Is it ok to tape what we say so I can remember it?**



yes

no

**We can stop whenever you want.**



**Just hold up your card OK?**

Yes

no

**This is not a test. There are no wrong answers. OK?**



Yes

No

**I won't tell anyone what you have said to me. OK?**



**Yes**

**No**

**Is there anything you want to ask before we begin?**



**Yes**

**No**

## **Appendix 7: Thank you card and Results Information for Children and Parents**

Dear John

I just wanted to say a big THANK YOU! for helping me with my university work. You did really well and answered all the questions I asked you really well and gave some brilliant answers. You were so clever as some of the questions were quite hard. All the children that helped me gave very interesting answers and this letter is to let you know what I found out from all your interviews. You told me that:

1. Friends are very important.
2. People should be nice to each other and treat each other with respect as this is how we make friends.
3. A good friend is someone who play with you, make you laugh and helps you out when you need them.
4. A bad friend is someone that is mean to you, ignores you and goes off without you.
5. Families were very important, the job of a family is to love, do things together and look after each other.
6. The world is a beautiful place and we should look after it more.
7. Good things happen to good people and we should try to be good, but sometimes we aren't, but we should keep trying.
8. When people die they go to heaven and look after you from there. Love never dies even if you can't see the people anymore.

I'm sure that you will agree that these are really good ideas. All of you answered the questions really well and didn't find any of the different activities very difficult. Nearly all of you enjoyed using the puppets the most, which was my favourite too.

Thanks again if you want to chat about anything we did you can see me at club.

Love Beth x



## **Appendix 7b Thank you Letter to Parents**

Dear parent,

I just wanted to say thank you for letting John take part in my research. It is all finished now, which I am really pleased about. All the interviews went really well and the children did brilliantly. They gave some really insightful answers to some fairly difficult questions. Hopefully they enjoyed taking part as much as I enjoyed interviewing them. There was lots of laughs and fun during the interviews and they all coped really well. Especially as some of them have some difficulties in listening, concentrating etc but it goes to show how capable and clever they all are. Some of their answers really surprised me as they were much more thoughtful than I had expected. They coped really well with all the different ways I asked the questions and actually pick up how to do some of the techniques a lot better than other children who I had tried them out on before.

We talked a lot about friends, family and spirituality. They had some lovely answers which included a lot of feelings and emotions. I especially loved the answer a family was made of love and being with each other, doing things together and getting on. Which I thought was brilliant. They all thought friends were important, and that we should be nice to each other to get friends. They all said we should try to be kind and treat everyone with respect but they did say this is sometimes very difficult to do. At least they are honest about that bit! Most of them thought that people who died went to heaven and they looked after you from there as love never dies. Love and friendship was a big theme in their answers which may surprise some of you! But they showed a really deep understanding of family and friendship which really surprised me. They all had a very 'karma' attitude in that good things happen to good people, which is why we should try to be good.

They all did brilliantly and you should be really proud of them. Thank you again for letting them take part as I couldn't have done it without them. If you have any questions about the research just ask me at club.

Cheers

Beth x

## **Appendix 8: Examples of Signature Phenomena**

### **Rebecca**

Rebecca is 8 years old she is physically disabled and terminally ill. She attends a state non faith mainstream school. She has a large immediate family and is the second youngest child of six siblings. The family do not attend regular worship. However Rebecca had very definite ideas about her spirituality. She expressed a sense of Karma, 'cosmic' order and justice: '*Good things happen to good people.*', '*if you love someone they will love you back*'. '*Be nice to other people and they will be nice to you*'. Her sense and relationship with 'God' was strong. In response to the statement: *There is no such person as God?* As '*there is definitely such a person as God He listens to me, he's up in Heaven watching over us.*' Her sense of spirituality was almost unwavering in its belief. '*God made the world.*' *How?* '*Just did*'. Love, death and Heaven also featured frequently in her interview. Death was not the end of life or love. Dead people looked after you. Her Grandparent's help God look after all the children as He is sometimes busy. Love is continuous after Death: '*you can't see them [dead people] but they still love you.*' Although Rebecca was certain God listened to her she did not pray. God just listened to her anyway there was no need for her to physically speak to him. Although Rebecca reported that she had a good relationship with God she had difficulty with her disability and God. She wanted to ask God why he made everyone different. She felt she was '*a bit too different*'. There was no anger in this statement but there was definite sadness and some confusion. There seemed a need for confirmation of why she was disabled, however this did not seem to affect her relationship with God as she was sure He loved her.

### **John**

John is 10 years old and has ASD. He attends a state non faith mainstream school. John's family is Catholic although they do not attend regular worship however he has received his sacraments. As with Rebecca a sense of Karma and social justice was dominant in John's interview. '*Good things happen to you but if you are bad then you get punished*'. '*If we try to be nice to be nice to each other then they will be nice and everyone will carry on being nice to each other*'. This theory that if you are nice and good to others then they will be nice to you was dominant across all interviews with all the participants. John repeatedly showed a lot of knowledge about spirituality but occasionally seemed unsure of where his own beliefs were situated. When asked particular questions such as '*How did the world get here?*' John asked '*Do you mean scientifically?*' He then gave different theories on creation including the Swiss experiment trying to create a black hole, a theory which was taken from an episode of '*Doctor Who*' and that God made it. When asked '*What was at the end of the sky?*' Again John asked '*scientifically?*' Then went on to discuss Heaven. '*Heaven, where you go when you die, u there and some people think you are re-born and some people think you just die and don't go anywhere*'. Current media influenced a lot of John's responses. *Doctor Who* was given as suggestions for how the world was created, musical bands were given as examples of families, Peter Kay and Heath Ledger were referred to when discussing heaven and death. References to media were also used by other older children in their interviews which may suggest that media influences have a part to play in children's spirituality. John also revealed

orthodox Christian beliefs for example good people went to Heaven bad people went to Hell. Interestingly many of the older children in the sample mirrored John's indecisiveness and uncertainty about their spiritual beliefs. They all wanted evidence for their beliefs although they still held them in the absence of any evidence. This is markedly different to the younger group who seemed not to need any evidence for their beliefs. This may be a characteristic of growing up and older children's belief systems evolving.