AN EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF A PROCESS WHICH PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES FOR SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION AND DEVELOPMENT

Cora O'Farrell BEd, MEd, MREd

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the award of EdD

Supervisor: Dr Sandra Cullen

School of Education Studies

Dublin City University

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of EdD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not, to the best of my knowledge, breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Abstract

Cora O'Farrell

An exploration of children's experiences of a process which provides opportunities for spiritual expression and development.

International research studies of children's spirituality attest to the vibrant spiritual potential of children and the importance of nurturing such potential. Spirituality has a vital personal, social and political function and recent policy documents relating to children's development in Ireland, place an emphasis on supporting children's innate spiritual capacities for their wellbeing. The implementation of such rhetoric however is not always visible in practice. The purpose of this study is (i) to explore the spiritual characteristics exhibited by Irish primary school children and (ii) to elicit their views with regard to a process which provides an opportunity for the nurturing of their spirituality. The landscape of children's spirituality is explored through engagement with literature on foundational studies of children's spirituality, the debate surrounding attending to the spiritual with children in a school context, approaches to nurturing children's spirituality, and the role of religious education in spiritual development. Rooted within a critical realist ontology and a constructivist epistemology, the study implements a case study research design. Godly Play is used as a tool for providing a setting in which children's agency; enquiry and creativity in the spiritual domain can be observed, interpreted and reported upon. Data collection took place in two primary schools and involved individual and focus group interviews following a series of Godly Play sessions. Template analysis was used to inductively identify themes in the data. The rationale for situating this study within the context of a Judeo-Christian understanding of the transcendent is outlined and ethical requirements are adhered to throughout the research process. Grounded in the research participants' own experience and perceptions, the findings are largely consonant with the literature in terms of the spiritual characteristics exhibited by these Irish children, the sense of secrecy regarding their relationship with the numinous and how they grapple with issues of an existential nature. In addition, the findings indicate that children value engagement in activities of a spiritual nature. This study adds to the bank of knowledge on children's spirituality and offers a unique perspective from an Irish context. It complements other research projects that engage with the voices of children and so contributes to a fuller picture of children's development.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study details an exploration of children's experiences of a process which provides opportunities for spiritual expression and development. The process employed in the research was Godly Play, which is recognised as a methodology that nurtures children's spiritual capacities (Berryman, 1991; Nye 2009; Hyde 2010). This chapter presents an overview of the background to the study, commencing with its rationale and scope which include a consideration of the impetus for the research; the aims of the study: its delimitations and limitations; and a brief overview of Godly Play. It then outlines the research design and includes a profile of the research participants and settings. The chapter concludes with an overview of the layout of the thesis and a synopsis of the contents of each of its chapters.

1.2 Rationale and Scope of the Research

The rationale for the research is rooted in the researcher's role as a religious educator. Each year while teaching a course on Catholic liturgy and sacraments to student teachers, the researcher has asked the students to state their position with regard to whether or not preparation of primary school children for the celebration of the sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist and Confirmation should be removed from the primary school setting. Given the level of negative media attention in relation to time devoted to this practice and the declining numbers of practising Catholics in Ireland, one might expect that participants would vote to remove such preparation from the primary school. On the contrary, the vast majority of these young adults opt to retain preparation for the sacraments within the school day. The merits and demerits of this position, although interesting, are not the subject of discussion here but rather the sentiment expressed by many students in their rationale for adopting such a position. They describe their own home contexts as places where matters of a spiritual nature were not attended to and that without the input and facilitation of the school; they feel that they would have lost out on a valuable part of their nurture. Some use the language of their 'right to religion'

being disrupted if the school no longer has a role to play in their formation and it is clear that they valued opportunities to engage in such spiritual formation during their time in school. These opinions resonate with the researcher's own experience as a primary school teacher, Godly Play trainer and parent, who witnesses children readily engaging in activities which support their spiritual development.

The immediate voice of children is missing from both perspectives above and also from the majority of discourse relating to Irish children's spiritual development. The dominant voices are those of adults seeking to either assert the place of spirituality within an educational setting or those who are opposed to any type of spiritual formation occurring in schools. Approaches to the spiritual or religious lives of children are predominantly determined by adult opinions alone which are built on adult concepts, adult rationality and adult experience (Dillen 2014). Some adults' experiences are of an indoctrinatory form of religious education and they may base their assertions on recollections from their school days, maintaining the perception that such an approach still endures. Some are consequently critical of the place of religious education in schools and often call for its removal or at least a change of approach in the manner of its delivery.

Religious Education (RE) has occupied a privileged position in the Irish primary school curriculum since the inception of the national school system (Hession 2015; Renehan 2014). However the nature of RE is currently being challenged against the backdrop of changed demographics and a shortage of school places (Coolahan, Kilfeather and Hussey 2012). Calls have been made for a reduction in the hours dedicated to RE and some favour a move towards a phenomenological approach to RE. The positioning of formative and phenomenological modes of religious education in such binary opposition is overly simplistic (Jackson 2009) and this study operates from a paradigm which views religious education as being neither wholly phenomenological or purely formative, but rather operating along a spectrum.

As attested to by the student teachers above, the spiritual and religious dimension of children attending schools under denominational patronage has been attended to even when such attention may not have occurred at home. A suspension of formative components in school in favour of a purely phenomenological methodology may not be sufficient to adequately address the spiritual needs and preferences of primary school children.

1.2.1 Aims of the Research

The primary purpose of this study is to give voice to children and to conduct an exploration to ascertain if the sentiment expressed by many of the student teachers and the researcher's own perception are reflected in the views of a cohort of primary school pupils i.e. to see if primary school children value opportunities to engage in experiences of spiritual formation in school and not just a purely phenomenological approach. The research also seeks to describe some of the spiritual characteristics exhibited by the research participants and to investigate how these relate to children from other jurisdictions as chronicled in international literature. The following are some of the questions which the research seeks to address:

- Are there children in the sample population for whom this way of working is satisfying?
- Are there children in the sample population for whom this way of working is not satisfying?
- Are responses in two different research sites similar?
- Are there noticeable differences in levels of engagement between children from families where spirituality or religion is important, and families where it is not?
- Is it possible to glean from the data whether Irish children exhibit similar spiritual characteristics to children who were participants in empirical research in other jurisdictions?

In short, the purpose of the research is twofold. It intends to -

- give voice to children about the value they ascribe to activities of a spiritual nature
- describe the spiritual characteristics exhibited by the cohort of children involved in the study.

1.2.2 Significance of the Study

Many studies of children's spirituality have been conducted internationally (Coles 1990; Hay and Nye 1998; Hyde 2008; Hart 2003; Champagne 2003) but there is a dearth of such research in Ireland. It is hoped that this study will contribute to an understanding of the characteristics of the spiritual potential of Irish children. It is also an aspiration of the research to contribute to debates concerning different forms of RE from the perspective of Irish children's voices and the values which they attribute to a process which nurtures their spiritual potential.

1.2.3 Limitations and Delimitations

A possible limitation of the research was bias since the researcher was heavily invested in the process of data collection and analysis. According to Stake (1995), in order to remain aware of one's bias; reflexivity, a process of reflection and examination is of the utmost importance. This was achieved in the research by means of reflective records maintained by the researcher throughout the process.

A further possible limitation is the relationship which was built up between the researcher and the children as she engaged in Godly Play sessions with them over a lengthy period. The children may have felt that they should produce the answers that will please the researcher. In order to counteract this, the researcher will ensure that the space is safe for the children to express their views. Indeed this is an essential tenet of Godly Play.

There were other limitations to the study which emerged as a result of the timing of data collection which coincided with hectic times (December and June) in the host schools, with activities such as concert preparations, testing and graduation ceremony rehearsals etc. all making it difficult to acquire suitable times, which also

slotted into the work commitments of the researcher. In addition, the layouts of some of the classrooms which were made available to the researcher were not very suitable for Godly Play and there was a variation in teacher commitment to the study. Finally three research participants left the school before data collection took place.

The research is delimited to an exploration of the spiritual characteristics exhibited by children who are pupils in two Catholic schools and who partake in RE classes in those schools. As such, it does not include children who opt out of Catholic RE classes.

1.2.4 Godly Play

Godly Play was chosen as the principal tool in the research for providing a context where the spiritual capacities of children could be observed. Godly Play is an approach to Christian religious education which was devised and developed by Dr Jerome Berryman in the 1990s. Berryman describes Godly Play as an invitation to come and play with God and he says that it provides a means of 'playing a game that can awaken us to new ways of seeing ourselves as human beings' (1991, p. 7). Godly Play provides children with a language to seek meaning in life. It is used in churches, schools and other settings throughout the world. As a teaching methodology it can hold the tension between maintaining the teaching of the Christian tradition while at the same time honouring the agency, enquiry and creativity of children.

The researcher is an accredited trainer of Godly Play and has extensive experience utilising the methodology in a number of different settings. She recognised its suitability for tapping into children's spiritual potential in a manner appropriate to the task of this research project. She conducted numerous Godly Play sessions with children throughout the period of the research which involved her visiting classrooms and engaging with stories from scripture with children. Each of these sessions typically lasted for approximately an hour and they provided the

foundations upon which the entire process was built. A fuller description of Godly Play and its essential elements is contained in the literature review of this thesis.

1.3 Research Design

1.3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

The research is situated within the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of critical realism. As such its ontological perspective is critical realism and its epistemological viewpoint is that of social constructivism. Critical realism was chosen for its capacity to navigate the terrain between a robust realist ontology which a theistic worldview encompasses, and honouring the innate spiritual capacities of children to engage in their own way with an invitation to respond to the Christian story.

1.3.2 Methodology

The methodology employed was a 'collective case study' design (Stake 1995). Case study as a strategy was deemed to be most suitable for the research since it facilitates an in-depth exploration of a case over a long period of time. Stake's collective model of case study assisted the researcher in clarifying the issues which were the focus of the research i.e. the spiritual characteristics of the children in the study and the value they attributed to the Godly Play process. Stake's collective model also allowed for the research to be conducted in more than one setting. Case study design employs multiple sources of evidence which are especially suitable when working with children, in order to provide as many means possible for the children to express their opinions.

1.3.3 Data Collection

The research was conducted over a three year period and was situated in two school contexts. The two schools were chosen because of their similarity to one another. Both schools are urban schools; both are schools under the patronage of the Catholic Church; both have designated disadvantaged status, both are mixed in terms of gender; both have a heterogeneous school population with children of

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various ethnic and religious backgrounds; both are innovative with a range of exciting projects in operation in their schools; both schools are welcoming of researchers.

Three distinct phases characterised the data collection process of the study: Phase One was the pilot phase and took place in June 2013. Phase Two occurred during the school year 2013/2014. Phase Three was conducted in the 2014/2015 school year. The research process was an iterative one with each phase informing the next. The movement from Phase One to Phase Three was one of going deeper into the material and working with a priori themes which emerged during each phase. Tables 1-3 provide an overview of the three phases and include the purpose and process of each phase, as well as the participants involved at each phase and the mode of data collection.

Phase One	
Purpose	To check the viability of the research To glean teachers' perspectives of the process of Godly Play
Participants	Two classes of children in School A (4th class, aged 10-11)
Process	The researcher visited the classes over a period of three consecutive weeks during June 2013 and conducted Godly Play sessions with each class The two class teachers were interviewed after the three weeks
Data Collection	Interviews with the two class teachers Researcher's own observation notes

Table 1: Phase One of the research

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Phase Two	
Purpose	To investigate the value children attribute to Godly Play sessions To observe spiritual characteristics exhibited by the children
Participants	One sixth class (11-12 year olds) and one second class (8-9 year olds) in School B
Process	The researcher visited the classes between November and June 2013-2014 and conducted ten Godly Play sessions with each class. Two sessions were conducted with sixth class during which the children were invited to write about their experience of Godly Play
Data Collection	Survey Children's writing Conscience Alley drama technique Focus group interviews

Table 2: Phase Two of the research

Phase Three	
Purpose	To facilitate more in-depth investigation of the spiritual characteristics exhibited.
Participants	Two second classes in School A Two third classes in School B
Process	The researcher visited the classes between November and June 2014-2015 and conducted ten Godly Play sessions with each class.
Data Collection	Focus group interviews 'Free' Godly Play sessions with groups of three children.

Table 3: Phase Three of the research

1.3.4 Data Analysis

The form of data analysis which was utilised to analyse the data was Template Analysis (King, 1998). This approach allows for a good deal of flexibility in the data collection and its identification of a priori themes and emergent themes was very suitable for the different phases of the research. King describes Template Analysis as being an iterative process where revisions are made en route and where the project is modified as it progresses. This flexibility is consonant with the process which the study required.

1.4 Layout of the dissertation

This thesis contains six chapters, each of which addresses a different aspect of the study. Chapter one has provided the background to the research and an overview of the research process.

The Literature Review is presented in two chapters:

Chapter two addresses the emergence of the child's voice through developments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the field of Childhood Studies. It also includes an exposition of the policy context in relation to children in Ireland and explores the socio-cultural context within which Irish primary school children live.

Chapter three explores the landscape of children's spirituality and includes an exposition of foundational studies of children's spirituality. It addresses the debate surrounding the place of the spiritual within education. The chapter then moves more specifically into the area of children's spirituality rooted within the domain of religion and concludes with an overview of Godly Play, the approach which was used in this research to create an environment where the spiritual capacities of children could be observed, reported upon and analysed.

Chapter four details the research design process. It explains the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research. It charts the decision making process concerning the choice of case study as an appropriate methodology and

details the methods for data collection and analysis. There is an also an overview of ethical issues in relation to the research and the chapter concludes with an outline of the data collection and data analysis procedures.

Chapter five presents the findings of each phase of the research process. The three phases are presented in chronological order and each is followed by a discussion of the findings from that particular phase.

Chapter six begins by addressing the questions which were posed from the outset of the research outlined in Chapter 1. It then gives an overall summation of the research process. It moves on to suggest how the study contributes to the academy and proposes some directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2
Reviewing the Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses perspectives of childhood of relevance to the study. It begins by tracing key catalysts in privileging the voices of children in research. This includes a consideration of international children's rights legislation and the emergence of a new sociological paradigm for the study of childhood. The policy context within Ireland is addressed and the level of attention paid to the spiritual domain of childhood within policy documents is considered. Prominent Irish research projects which give voice to children in spiritual matters are next described. Then the socio-cultural backdrop to the research is outlined. This focuses on issues of relevance to the study such as religious identity and the educational context. The chapter concludes by providing an overview of religious education (RE) in primary schools in Ireland.

2.2 Emergence of the Child's Voice

> How we are seen determines in part how we are treated, how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation (Dyer 1993 p. 1)

Christensen and Prout (2005) use Dyer's quotation above when describing how representations of children in the past have happened on their behalf rather than by themselves. Children have had little or no influence over their own social representation and their lack of visibility and muteness in social and cultural studies have often been obscured by their centrality in western culture (Christensen and Prout 2005, p.43). However cultural and political understandings of the nature and needs of children in society have undergone significant change over the past few decades resulting in the emergence of a new discourse of the child as a rights' bearing citizen and one whose voice should be heard (Woodhead 2005).

2.2.1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) can be viewed both as a catalyst and an expression of this new perspective. The UNCRC is

a global movement for the empowerment of children which was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1989. It is a treaty consisting of fifty-four articles which provides guiding principles for the accordance of certain rights to children. Although it was not the first convention or declaration on children's rights, and there have been others since, it is recognised as the pivotal proclamation and is the single most ratified of all UN conventions (Gearon 2006, p. 196). It is the first international human rights instrument to recognise explicitly the civil rights of children (Inter-agency Working Group on Children's Participation 2008, p. ix). The UNCRC is underpinned by four guiding principles: protecting children against discrimination; acting in the best interests of children; guaranteeing the right to survival and development; and giving voice to children. All articles in the Convention fall under the remit of one or more of these principles. The following articles which privilege the voices and opinions of children are of particular relevance to the present study:

- Article 12 which gives children the right to participate in decisions which affect them
- Article 13 which provides children with the right to freedom of expression
- Article 14 which gives them the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the freedom to manifest one's religion in an appropriate manner.

Recognition of the potential limits of children's abilities is encompassed in Article 5 of the Treaty:

> The State has a duty to respect the rights and responsibilities of parents and the wider family or others involved in the upbringing of the child in a manner appropriate to the child's evolving capacities (UNCRC 1989).

Some argue that if the incremental nature of such 'evolving capacities' is not recognised, there is potential to limit the capacity of children to creatively express their own agency in certain instances (Smyth, Lyons and Darmody 2013; Kilkelly 2010). This points to a tension between respecting the wishes of parents while at the same time allowing children to have their say in issues which affect them.

The treaty espouses a holistic view of children and three articles are cited as being important for the spiritual well-being and development of children. These articles, 17, 27 and 32 pertain to children having access to appropriate information for themselves; having the right to an adequate standard of living; and being protected from economic exploitation. In this sense, the spiritual development of the child is connected to the material, physical needs of the child. Schweitzer (2005) is critical of the disconnection from the educational endeavour (which had been the vision of the UNCRC's predecessor, the *1924 Geneva Declaration on Protection de l'enfance*) and he questions why such an essential aspect of human development, i.e. spirituality, is acknowledged in general but denied or at least neglected for all purposes of education (p.105). A further criticism which is sometimes levelled at the UNCRC is the non-involvement of children in the final construction of the treaty. This has led Hill and Tisdall (1997) to suggest that it remains very much 'what adults think children's rights should be, not which children think' (p. 32).

Nonetheless the concept of childhood delineated in UNCRC signalled a fundamental change with regard to how children were viewed at that time. Such a change was transformative, as it flowed counter to traditional adult/child and teacher/pupil hierarchies (Waldron and Oberman 2016). It represented a movement from a view of children as the 'property' or 'appendage' of adults towards regarding them as developing citizens with their own rights which need to be recognised (The Children's Rights Alliance 1997). Consequently a better understanding of children as valued participants in their families and communities began to emerge (Hart 1992). The UNCRC has been a vital instrument in ensuring that children today are heard in relation to all sorts of issues including opinions in matters of teaching, health, family separation and child protection. Children now have more opportunities to express their views and to shape their experiences than ever before in history (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008).

2.2.2   Childhood Studies
At the same period during which the UNCRC was adopted, Childhood Studies, a new sociological paradigm for the study of children and childhood, was beginning

to take shape. The nomenclature of this field is addressed differently by various writers but the more inclusive definition favoured by Woodhead (2005) is the one adopted here. This definition encompasses both the study of 'children' and studies of 'childhood'. Childhood Studies was a significant factor in elevating the status of the child in scholarship and it garnered attention in the literature from various fields including sociology, psychology, education and theology (Greene and Hogan 2005). Prior to this, from the turn of the twentieth century, the discipline of psychology had dominated the field of studies of children and the influence of developmental psychology in particular was immense (Woodhead 2009). However an increased dissatisfaction with the assumptions and methods of mainstream, developmental psychology led to the emergence of this different lens through which children and childhood were viewed. Instead of children being the *objects* of study and viewed as *passive* recipients of knowledge, it was recognised that children are *active agents* in their own right.

Prior to the emergence of Childhood Studies most disciplines in the arts, humanities, social and medical sciences, although acknowledging the need for a specific focus on children, failed to perceive children as a separate social class or conceptual category. Children were viewed as occupying a transitory stage on the way towards future adulthood - as 'becomings' rather than 'beings'. Lenzer (2000) contrasts this deficit in scholarship with the commercial arena within which childhood was readily recognised as a distinct market (p.182).

As well as conceptualising childhood as a distinct social class, another major motivation for the new academic field of Childhood Studies was to give voice to children. Qvortrup (2009) highlights how the voices of children had been largely underrepresented before and perhaps even repressed. Understandings of the child were almost exclusively constructed by adults (Lenzer 2000, p.185). Within Childhood Studies the voice of the child emerged as a dominant driver of research and it became manifest along a continuum which, according to Shier (2001), ranges from listening to children, supporting them in expressing their views, taking their views into account, involving them in decision making processes, to children

having power. An emphasis on qualitative research accompanied this development (Frones cited in Smith and Greene, 2014).

Critical analyses of giving voice to children have arisen in the work of James (2007), Komulainen (2007), and Mazzei and Jackson (2009). These analyses are outlined in an article by Spyrou (2011) who suggests that instead of detracting from the value of children's voice research, acknowledging and reflecting on the situated character of children's voices and their limits can, potentially, contribute to new, more productive ways of producing and representing children's voices (p. 152).

A further pillar of Childhood Studies was the impetus to encourage a more holistic understanding of children and to overcome potential disciplinary fragmentation of research concerning children. Lenzer (2000) is critical of a single perspective on childhood, whether it comes from the humanities or sciences, because it is considered to be incomplete:

> We cannot arrive at a comprehensive understanding of children by simply accumulating, aggregating or adding up segmented findings from a far-flung variety of inquiries in the various disciples (p. 183).

While this interdisciplinary thrust became a hallmark of Childhood Studies, one of the disciplines which seems to be lacking in engagement with others, is that of childhood spirituality. Boyatzsis (2003) conducted content analyses of several social-science outlets (journals pertaining to social science research on religion, as well as major databases in psychology and sociology) over a six year period to ascertain how much scholarship was devoted to religious and spiritual development. He found that there was a serious neglect of the area and he called on researchers to rectify the imbalance between the place of religion in human development and the attention it receives in social science scholarship (p. 216). King (2013) also points to the fact that even within the vast literature which is specifically focused on spirituality itself, studies on children's spirituality are less numerous and are often not even listed in classic, core texts (p. 4). In an edited compilation, *Key Thinkers in Childhood Studies: Reflections on the Making of a Field*, prominent activists in childhood studies were interviewed about their work (Smith and Green, 2014). A myriad of different fields are referred to by the 'key

thinkers' e.g. children's agency, physical environment, social justice, medicine, architecture. However a notable absence from the many themes and subjects encompassed in their respective studies was that of children's spirituality. It will be clear from the literature review conducted for this thesis that much international research has been conducted into children's spirituality which merits a more prominent inclusion in the broader context of spirituality and Childhood Studies literature.

2.3 The Irish Policy Context

As detailed above, the UNCRC has led to a change in focus from viewing children as objects of concern, to active participants in their own lives. It has impacted on policies and practices at national levels (Devine 2013, p. 284). The impact in Ireland, coupled with a move towards privileging the voice of children with regards to their spirituality and religiosity, is traced next, from the time of Ireland's ratification of the UNCRC in 1992.

2.3.1 Children's Rights Alliance

In endeavouring to fulfil its obligations in accordance with the UNCRC, the Children's Rights Alliance was established in Ireland in 1995. Since its inception it has brought together a range of non-governmental organisations concerned with the rights and welfare of children. Its raison d'être is to campaign for the full implementation of the UNCRC thereby ensuring that children's rights are respected and protected in Irish laws, policies and services. The Alliance publishes an annual Report Card, which tracks Government progress on its stated commitments to children. An example of relevance to the present study is taken from the third and fourth combined report *Are We There Yet?* (Children's Rights Alliance 2015). It refers to Article 14 of the UNCRC, which obliges states to 'respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion' and the rights and duties of the parents or guardians, 'to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child'. The Children's Rights Alliance report points out that a child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is protected under Article 42.2.1 of the Constitution of Ireland but that the Constitution provides for parents or guardians to

provide direction on the exercise of this right. As such it does not provide any qualification to take account of the child's 'evolving capacities' and is therefore inconsistent with Article 14 of the Convention (p.32). In the context of the specific case of opting out of RE, this is in contrast to the situation in Austria where a pupil's right to decide to withdraw from RE becomes active from the age of fourteen (Richardson et al. 2013, p. 240)

2.3.2 National Children's Strategy (*Our Children, Their Lives*)

Since the time of the establishment of the Children's Rights Alliance, a number of reports and policies have issued from departments with various remits for children's affairs. The National Children's Strategy, *Our Children, Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children 2000) was the first comprehensive national strategic policy for children which encompassed statutory and non-statutory providers of services for children. The National Children's Strategy (hereafter referred to as 'the Strategy') emanated from a consultation process undertaken with parents, groups working with children and some children themselves. The Strategy is underpinned by the UNCRC and seeks to progress implementation of the Treaty in the Irish context.

The 'whole child' perspective is adopted by the Strategy which recognises the capacity of children to interact with and shape the world around them as they grow up. It identifies nine key developmental dimensions (physical and mental health; emotional and behavioural well-being; intellectual capacity; spiritual and moral well-being; identity; self-care; family relationships; social and peer relationships; and social presentation) all of which must be addressed if a child is to enjoy a satisfying childhood and make a successful transition into adulthood (ibid, p. 10).

The Strategy specifically addresses spiritual and moral well-being as including 'feelings, experiences and beliefs that stimulate self-awareness, wonder, reverence, moral and aesthetic sensibility and questions about the meaning and nature of life and death'. It recognises that for many children this is supported by 'traditions of belief, observance of religious duties and attendance at designated places of

worship' (ibid, p. 27). For all children, it says, acknowledgement, validation and promotion of the spiritual dimension to their lives is needed from their peers, their parents and other significant adults.

The three primary goals of the Strategy were to give voice to children, to improve supports and services for children and to gain a better understanding of children through research initiatives (p 11). The first goal of the Strategy in terms of giving voice to children in matters affecting them has been advanced by initiatives such as the establishment of the National Children's Office in 2001; the appointment of an Ombudsman for Children in 2004; the provision of fora (including Dáil na nÓg (youth parliament) and Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils)) for the facilitation of children's participation and consultation on local and national agenda issues, and legislative reforms of the youth justice system, through the Children Act 2001.

With regard to the second goal of furthering supports and services for children, the National Children's Office was expanded in 2005 with the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs which was afforded a full ministerial position in 2008. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has responsibility for overseeing implementation of the National Children's Strategy and coordinating Government policy on children. In 2012 a referendum was held in order to create a constitutional imperative to strengthen children's rights in Ireland. Its passing signalled a movement from a welfare-based approach, to a rights-based approach which was child specific (Hayes 2002, p.14).

The third goal of the vision of the National Children's Strategy was to to gain a better understanding of children through research initiatives. Two significant pieces of work advanced this agenda - (i) the development of a set of child well-being indicators and (ii) the instigation of a longitudinal research project, *Growing Up In Ireland*.

2.3.3 National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators

The development of a national set of child well-being indicators was preceded by a review of international literature on child well-being indicators. Several authors

(e.g. Pollard et al. 2002; Bornstein et al. 2003) are cited as stressing the necessity not to view well-being as uni-dimensional but rather to recognise a multiplicity of areas. Most indicator sets cited from the literature include the domains of health or physical well-being, education or cognitive development and economic security or economic well-being. In addition social, psychological, behavioural and emotional development/well-being formed a part of most frameworks, as well as family and social relationships and the community. Spiritual well-being was cited in the report as appearing less frequently in frameworks and was classed as an 'interesting variation' by the authors (Hannafin and Brookes 2005, p.19). This observation is out of kilter with the National Children's Strategy (2000), which consistent with its 'whole child perspective', identified spiritual and moral well-being as one of nine key dimensions of child development. According to the Strategy, if a child is to enjoy a satisfying childhood and make a successful transition into adulthood, all nine dimensions must be addressed (p. 10). The 'interesting variation' observation is also contrary to findings from international research such as that of Rees, Francis and Robbins (2005):

> ...the independent significance of religious affiliation and prayer in relation to sense of purpose and overall well-being suggests that a strong spiritual dimension to young people's lives might act as a protective factor, promoting well-being and mitigating the impact of other factors such as poverty and family change (p. 28).

In order to complement learning from the literature review part of the process, data from national census and other relevant sources were also elicited in the preparation of the well-being indicators. In addition a research project, *Children's Understanding of Well-being* (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2005), was conducted. Its aim was to ascertain the views of children with regard to well-being. The findings from this children's study indicated that children have a breadth of perspective in relation to well-being. They emphasised the centrality of interpersonal relationships with family and friends and pointed to the value of having activities or things to do. They also mentioned a plethora of other aspects of their lives such as sports, phones, pets, music, bed, books and indeed religion.

The next stage in the process of arriving at a national set of well-being indicators involved the compilation of an inventory of key domains which encompassed the learning from the literature review, interrogation of national statistics and the children's study above. This resulted in a list of fifty six indicators which was distributed to a panel of experts who had been selected to take part in a methodological process, the Delphi technique, whereby consensus is sought through a series of rounds of questionnaire surveys. Information and results were fed back to the panel members between each round. The aim of invoking such a process in this instance was to generate agreement on the most important areas (approximately thirty) of children's lives that could be examined by the national set of child well-being indicators. 'Spirituality and religion', e.g. religious service attendance, as a category was included in the list of first round indicators.

The results from the first round yielded a high average rating across the majority of areas with just nine of the fifty six key areas receiving an average rating of less than seven out of ten. Spirituality and religion was one of those seven and its average rating was 5.89 leaving it second last on the table of priorities, just ahead of 'pets'. In the next round of the Delphi process, spirituality was omitted from the twenty six indicators which were presented. However, an opportunity to include those areas which had been eliminated in Round 1 was given to the panel of experts. Despite this offer, the area of spirituality was not chosen by the panel of experts for inclusion in the final set of indicators unlike the category of 'pets and animals' which was deemed to be of sufficient priority to be included in the final set.

This is reminiscent of a description provided by Hyde (2009) in the Australian context. He writes about attending a student well-being forum where for the most part the focus was on cognitive, social and emotional dimensions in relation to well-being. Hyde describes how a few of the presenters noted the importance of the spiritual dimension and each time Hyde waited with bated breath to see what elaboration might ensue. However none was forthcoming. Although disappointed by this neglect, Hyde was not surprised, as despite the rhetoric and high profile which research on the benefits of the spiritual dimension to the resilience and well-

being of Australian youth has received, at a practical level, the spiritual dimension is often brushed over (p. 855).

It could be argued that the omission of the spiritual dimension from the list of indicators of children's well-being represents a watershed moment for Ireland since contrary to the original intention of the National Children's Strategy with regard to the whole child perspective, subsequent policy documents on children's development pay scant attention to the spiritual aspect of their development. The two examples below serve to illustrate this ongoing deficit.

(i) Well-being in primary schools - Guidelines for Mental Health promotion which issued to primary schools in 2016 cites leading experts in the field of children's positive mental health and well-being such as Barry and Friedli (2008):

> Positive mental health for children is part of their overall health and is inextricably linked with well-being. It is usually conceptualised as encompassing aspects of emotional (affect/feeling), psychological (positive functioning), social (relations with others in society), physical (physical health) and spiritual (sense of meaning and purpose in life) well-being (p. 9).

However, despite this, there is just one mention of RE which is the subject area in which the spiritual is most explicitly addressed. Instead the subject of Social Personal and Health Education is seen as the principal vehicle through which all aspects of children's well-being can be catered for.

(ii) Better Outcomes Brighter Future (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2014) which is the current national policy framework for children and young people also omits to give due consideration to the spiritual aspect of children's make-up. Figure 1 which was generated by searching through the document for frequency of terms associated with well-being, indicates the relative frequency of aspects of children's development in the document. It is clear that social and economic terms dominate the text and that the spiritual domain of children's lives receives scant attention in the framework document.

Figure 1: Better Outcomes Brighter Future: frequency of terms

The relative non-importance of the spiritual domain of children's lives was also evident at the launch of the framework document. At that event, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs' speech centred on the rhetoric of children as possessions and seedlings for future economic prosperity. Speaking about the necessity to do better for all children and to improve outcomes for all children she said the following:

> And this must be seen not as just aspirational It should be seen as a policy imperative as an absolute must in economic terms, because our children are our present joy and our future wealth…Supporting childhood is building for Ireland's economic future. (Launch of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Future* - Minister Frances Fitzgerald's speech, 2014)

The thrust of the Minister's speech lends support to Devine's (2013) contention that children's value in educational and other settings is increasingly derived from their capacity to produce, excel, self-regulate as well as consume (p. 282). It highlights tensions around the added value of children as productive citizens and valuing children in and of themselves.

2.3.4 *Growing Up in Ireland* - longitudinal research project

As well as the development of a national set of child well-being indicators, the drive to gain a better understanding of children through research initiatives was supported by the instigation of a longitudinal research project, *Growing Up In Ireland* (ESRI 2008) which is a seven year project following the progress of 8,500 nine-year olds and 11,000 nine-month olds. The study describes itself in the following terms

> *Growing Up in Ireland* is a national study of children. It is the most significant of its kind ever to take place in this country and will help us to improve our understanding of all aspects of children and their development

Despite this claim to address 'all aspects of children and their development' the study seriously neglects the spiritual lives of children. A simple key-word search throughout its documents reveals the complete absence of the word 'spiritual'. As regards the more specific domain of religion, it was acknowledged by Greene et al. (2010) that from the outset, data pertaining to religion would not be sought:

> 'Although cultural and religious values are an important part of the macrosystem, detailed information on these elements is not a focus of this study' (p. 26).

No reason for such exclusion is proffered. Each year since 2009 an annual research conference has taken place during which researchers who have drawn on data from the *Growing Up In Ireland* data sets, present papers on a range of topics including health, parenting, education and socio-emotional well-being. The scope of the project for contributing to a greater understanding of children's spirituality has been curtailed by the omission above and *Growing Up in Ireland* is yet another lens through which children in Ireland are viewed which neglects the spiritual component of their lives.

2.3.5 Policy Context in Ireland - a summary

There appears to be a general reluctance at a macro policy level in Ireland to engage with the spiritual aspect of children's development in spite of a clear acknowledgement of the importance of the spiritual to the lives and well-being of children. The reasons for this hesitance are unclear but this researcher posits that the close marriage between the spiritual and religious in Irish society is a contributing factor. For many the spiritual and the religious have been synonymous and as secularism becomes an increasingly prevalent facet of Irish society, religion is becoming marginalised. It is worth noting though that the neglect of the spiritual component is not peculiar to Ireland. Rees, Francis and Robbins (2005) assert that there is a case for current approaches in the UK and overseas which view well-

being in emotional, social and material terms to also incorporate a spiritual dimension (p. 28).

2.4 Irish Studies of Children's Religious Socialisation

Whilst there has been a general neglect of the spiritual component of childhood development in research and policy discussed above, two recent studies, *Religious Education in Multicultural Society* (Smyth, 2010) and *Children's Beliefs and Belonging* (Kitching and Shanneik, 2015), both address the religious domain of Irish primary school children and give voice to children in this regard.

2.4.1 Religious Education in Multicultural Society (REMC)

Religious Education in a Multicultural Society: School and Home in a Comparative context (*REMC*) is a cross-national European research project which is concerned with children's religious socialisation. Participating countries were Ireland, Scotland, Italy, Belgium (Flanders), Germany and Malta. Its purpose was to provide a holistic understanding of the interaction between home and school in shaping the formation of religious and other beliefs among children (Smyth 2010, p. 2). The project was born out of the neglect of children's agency when it comes to analysing the issue of religious identity within Europe (ibid. p. 101). The research adopted the position of viewing children as active agents in their socialisation (ibid. p.205). This position was reflected in the research process itself which was qualitative in nature and which in addition to including parents and teachers, also drew directly on children's own experiences rather than viewing them merely as passive recipients. The study was innovative in its exploration of the perspectives of younger children of primary school age, 11-12 year olds, in relation to their religious identities. Within the Irish context, five Irish primary schools were included in the study (three Catholic schools, one Church of Ireland and one Educate Together). Parents, teachers, and some other relevant stakeholder contributed to the data by means of interviews. Data was collected from children by means of focus group interviews as well as questionnaires. The research took place during 2008 and 2009.

A review of the findings of the study has yielded the following themes which are of most direct relevance to the present study - children's agency in relation to their religious identity; perceived religiosity; opinions of religious and moral education (RME); discussions about beliefs and values.

2.4.1.1 Children's Agency

The children involved in this study were found to be active agents in their religious development (ibid. p.128). They negotiate their own religious meanings and develop a personalised set of beliefs, in the context of, but not determined by home and school (ibid. p.102). Such findings diverge from theories which emphasise parental 'transmission' of faith. Whilst the child's religious affiliation is strongly related to that of their parents, especially their mothers, children's own beliefs cannot necessarily be 'read off' those of their parents and of school context (ibid. p.123). In addition children who assume their parents' religious affiliation do not necessarily do so uncritically (ibid. p.126). Children in the study generally felt that children should be able to choose their own religion, though some moderated this by saying such choice should occur at a certain age (ibid. p.126). A number of children identified themselves as having different beliefs to those of their parents, and children from both faith and non-faith backgrounds indicated that questioning and reflection of world views was important to them (ibid. p.125). Constraints to children's freedom of expression regarding their own religious identity include the school they attend (ibid. p.116), age constraints (ibid. p.126) and the degree of choice afforded to them by their parents (ibid. p.114).

2.4.1.2 Perceived religiosity

The majority of children across all of the case study schools described themselves as 'very' or fairly religious' and religion was seen as a source of comfort and security in the children's day to day lives (ibid p.123). However the researchers observed that conceptions of themselves as religious is highly fluid in nature among the children (ibid. p.125) and just a significant minority of children report praying at least daily (ibid. p.111). Perceived religiosity appears to be gendered in nature

with girls tending to report being more religious than boys. This complies with the adult population in the study where fathers were seen as generally less religious than mothers (ibid. p. 123). Two thirds of children see their religiosity as being of a similar level to that of their mothers.

2.4.1.3 Religious and Moral Education (RME)

Religious and Moral Education (RME) was a compromise term used in the context of this cross-national study to denote the subject area in primary schools which deals with religion, morals and values. In Ireland it included RE from a denominational context, Catholic and Protestant, as well as *Learn Together* the ethical education programme taught in Educate Together schools.

Data from the case study schools concerning RME which children received in school regardless of the specific form it took, were generally positive (ibid. p. 116). Stories were recorded as the children's favourite aspect of RME. The vast majority of the children interviewed indicated that they would still take RME class if they did not 'have to' and many children suggested that they would like to see more time devoted to the subject area (ibid. p. 118). This is an important finding in the context of debates concerning the nature of RE and it is hoped that the present study can contribute further insight into this aspect.

2.4.1.4 Discussions about beliefs and values

The majority of children reported talking to their parents about beliefs and values at least occasionally and the prevalence of discussion increased with the cohort of children coming from families with a strong affiliation to particular religious institutions. Specific events such as sacramental preparation were seen as prompting more discussion than day to day issues (ibid. p. 113). In general it appeared that children were less likely to talk to their friends than parents about beliefs (ibid. p. 120). On the whole, Catholic children were 'somewhat more likely to 'never' talk about religion with their friends than others', something which the authors attribute to 'the taken for granted nature of the majority faith' (ibid. p.120).

However those Catholic children who felt very highly engaged in their religion were most likely to engage in discussion about beliefs and values (ibid. p. 120).

2.4.2 Children's Beliefs and Belonging

Children's Beliefs and Belonging: A Schools and Families Report details research conducted by Kitching and Shanneik (2015) which formed a substantial part of a larger research project entitled 'Making Communion: Disappearing and Emerging Forms of Childhood in Ireland'. The larger project was centred on the broad theme of First Holy Communion and sought to add further to current understandings of children's lives and experience in Ireland (Kitching and Shanneik 2015, p. 8). Kitching and Shanneik's study involved an examination of the beliefs and values of 7-8 year old children and also addressed the forms of belonging available to them in both religious and nonreligious terms. Fieldwork for this part of the research was conducted in four school communities (three under Roman Catholic patronage and one under the patronage of Educate Together) over six weeks in 2013. Data was collected by means of a mix of whole class activities and interviews with two to four children in 'friendship groups' (ibid. p. 9). Approximately one hundred children participated in classroom based and/or in-depth focus groups.

Findings from the study indicate that most of the 7-8 year old children implicitly trusted and invested in the guidance and experience of adults regarding a range of aspects in their lives including moral principles, formal religious knowledge, traditional obligations and sacred practices (ibid. p. 11). However, similar to the *REMC* study, children still showed considerable capacity themselves to interpret the culture of home, school and religion personally (ibid. p.11). These findings are validated in a similar study of the beliefs and belonging of second grader children preparing for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, in the U.S. Beste (2011) conducted her research in a Catholic school setting and her findings concur with both Irish studies' views of children simultaneously being influenced and influencing their social context. Beste found that children were not simply passively absorbing textbook materials and parroting what their teacher emphasised. They were instead

focusing selectively on certain ideas presented by their teachers and textbooks and synthesising these themes with their own experience (Best 2011, p. 344).

Kitching and Shanneik's report yielded some interesting findings in relation to the celebration of First Communion. The majority of children in Catholic schools tended to see First Communion as a 'normal part of growing up' (ibid. p. 39) and it represented a significant 'benchmark' in their lives (ibid. p. 45). They viewed Catholicism as the universal religion and it was implicit in the language of many children in Catholic settings that being non-Catholic was a 'failure to live up to the norm' (ibid. p. 39).

Apart from First Communion, religious practices were not viewed as a prominent facet in the children's lives. The majority of Catholic children in the study reported going to Mass infrequently and reports of routine family prayers were uncommon (ibid. p. 17). There was little suggestion from any child participating in the study that religious tradition, observance or discussion was their defining experience of family life. (ibid. p. 27). Nonetheless many children of Catholic background implicitly held theist views (ibid. p. 17).

Kitching and Shanneik found that the children in the study drew from a range of sources in an effort to make sense of the world:

> Regardless of strength of identification, frequency of religious observance, ethnic or national background, children actively drew together different traditions with more contemporary narratives to make sense of the world beyond home and school. They fused mythical, quasi-historical, scientific, civil administrative and popular cultural images and stories to explain the world and help continue the process of identity formation…Even when they deployed religious understandings, children almost always drew upon other sources of knowledge, including scientific knowledge, children's books and popular culture to make sense of these issues (ibid. pp. 20- 21).

This finding concurs with Inglis (2007) who spoke of an emerging 'smorgasbord' approach to Catholicism in Irish society and echoes Schneider's (2003) reference to 'spiritual dabblers' using a variety of religious and nonreligious symbols.

Certain assumptions are made in the *Children's Beliefs and Belongings* study without clear evidence presented to the reader of how such conclusions were reached. For example, where there was discontinuity between practices in school and at home, such as with prayer practices, Kitching and Shanneik attribute a child's non-questioning of such discontinuities to disengagement on their part, or due to a lack of personal choice (Kitching and Shanneik 2015, p. 13). Where children identified the formality of some religious settings as inhibitive to an exploration of religious themes and ethical questions, Kitching and Shanneik conclude that children are regarded as 'visible in non-religious domains, and as 'passive' or unknowing in relation to the more formal cultures in which ethical and religious principles are circulated' (ibid. p. 14). This contradicts findings from the REMC cohort of participants' views of RE lessons within schools which could fall into this category of 'formal culture'.

Some assumptions in the Report also seem to expect that the children possess critical skills beyond that which might be expected of them at their stage of development e.g. where many of the children did not 'actively, consciously or consistently use formal categories to identify religiously' (ibid. p. 16). In addition some expressions used in the Report require qualification in the sense in which they are used in the Report e.g. 'non-religious ethical views' (ibid. p. 23); 'formal religion' (ibid. p. 15); 'gendered benchmark (ibid. p. 45)'; 'cultural Catholicism' (ibid. p. 45)

Some similarities in the findings from the *Children's Beliefs and Belonging* study and the *REMC* study have already been mentioned. In addition, children alluded to God and church community as protective and nurturing and as instilling feelings of safety and security (Kitching and Shanneik 2015 p. 35). Children in this study, also in common with the *REMC* study, were found to have expressed religious beliefs and belonging in subtle, contextually different and fluid ways (Kitching and Shanneik. p. 15). In contrast to the older children in the *REMC* study, the children in this study did not appear to raise religious or moral themes explicitly with their families (ibid. p. 27) The authors posit two possible reasons for this: either the

younger children felt little sense of agency or else that children in the study may not have prioritised religious affiliation, belief or belonging when giving accounts of family.

2.5 Ireland's Socio-cultural Context

According to Richie (2002) the individual child can only be understood in relation to the socio-cultural context in which the child lives (p.32). With this in mind, the broad socio-cultural context, with a particular focus on religious identity and education, is explored next.

2.5.1 Religious Identity

Ireland's population embraces a variety of religious and secular perspectives (Byrne and Kieran 2013). Census statistics from 2011 (at the time of writing, data for Census 2016 are not yet available) indicate that the percentage of people ticking the 'No Religion' box has increased by 45% since the previous census in 2006. As well as constituting 5.9% of the total population, this cohort now represents the fastest growing category in the 2011 census data on religion. and is the second largest grouping in the state behind Catholics (Byrne and Kieran 2013, p.30). According to Irish sociologist Joseph Ruane (1998) secularisation has been occurring in Ireland in an ad hoc and incremental manner since the 1970s. Ruane's understanding of secularisation is 'the differentiation of society into sacred and secular spheres, including separation of church and state, and the increasing cultural importance of the secular relative to the sacred sphere' (p.252). Whilst Ruane states that there is ideological support for state-church separation, he asserts that such support is weak. This view is affirmed by the fact that the majority of the population (84%) continue to define themselves as Roman Catholic in the 2011 census.

However, interpretation of religious affiliation as declared in official statistics is not straightforward. Grace Davie, writing in 1994, identified a mismatch between religious values that people professed and their actual churchgoing and religious practices. She coined the phrase 'believing without belonging' to describe this

phenomenon (Davie 1994). Her observation is helpful in discerning the dissonance in data pertaining to religious identity, such as in census data, and data relating to religious practice. For example, a simple comparison between the percentage reduction in those identifying as Roman Catholic in 2011 and 2006 (just over 2%), and recent statistics from a report prepared for the Dublin Diocese which showed a 20% reduction in weekly Mass attendance in the Diocese (O'Donovan, 2015), illustrates that there are many who self-identify as believing in the Catholic faith tradition but who don't necessarily belong to its community of practice.

Secularisation is a complex concept and bland usage of it as a reference to the disappearance of religion from a society can obscure important complexities in people's cultural attachment to and engagement with religion (Smith 2010, p. 2). Morris' (2003) account of secularisation in the British context refers essentially to de-Christianisation. He identifies three key strands of secularisation: (i) institutional marginalisation (i.e. the disentanglement of church and state relations) (ii) institutional attenuation (a decline in church attendance) and (iii) cultural displacement (the removal of Christianity as a primary reference point for public and private morality. Speaking of secularisation, Hanegraaff (1999), whose point of reference is also Christianity, says:

> The whole of historical developments in western society, as a result of which the Christian religion has lost its central position as the foundational collective symbolism of western culture, and has been reduced to merely one among several institutions within a culture which is no longer grounded in a religious system of symbols (Hanegraaff 1999, p. 151)

Hanegraaff prefers to view secularisation not as a decline or disappearance of religion but as a thorough transformation of religion under the impact of new developments. Schweitzer (2007) concurs that the understanding of secularisation simply as a loss of religion is not sufficient. In his opinion, secularisation should not be narrowed to a sense of having no interest in religion at all, or being atheistic, but that it necessitates the recognition of religious pluralisation and religious individualisation as contributing to a better overview of the concept.

Ruane's (1998) treatment of Catholicism in Ireland is helpful in understanding that homogeneity cannot be assumed and that pluralisation and individualisation are operational even within this tradition. Ruane posits that Catholicism in Ireland has become differentiated under five strands: traditional, liberal, non-conservative, radical and post-Catholic secular. *Traditional* Catholicism most closely reflects pre-Vatican II Catholicism in Ireland and can be identified in those who adhere to religious practices of devotion such as regular rosary recitation, patterns, stations and display of religious statues and iconography in their homes. Dating from the 1960s adherents to the *Liberal* strand have a continued concern with the sacred. They remain loyal to Catholicism as a religion and to the church but are very critical of the institution of the church. They are open to institutional separation of church and state but oppose secularisation at the general cultural level. *Neo-conservative* Catholicism which emerged in 1970s and 80s strongly supports the church's role in Irish society e.g. education and health provision. Adherents oppose secularisation and moral relativism. *Radical* Catholicism inspired by Liberation Theology dissents from the State's fundamental economic philosophy and seeks to address the needs of the most marginalised in society. Its concern is with social justice. The final strand is the *post-Catholic secular* strand, Ruane further sub-divides this group into two distinct categories: those who have a loss of faith but who nonetheless rear their children as Catholics (this first group shows little interest in secularism and may even oppose it) and the second group of Post-Catholic secularists who strongly favour secularism.

According to Ruane, Liberal Catholicism is the dominant strand in Ireland and the post-Catholic strand is small although its strength is exaggerated by its high media profile. Although Ruane's work dates back to 1998, his propositions are still relevant and much of what he has written has been borne out in the writing and research of others (e.g. O'Mahony, 2013; Inglis 2007; Mc Guckin 2009). This information is helpful to the present study in identifying the types of contexts from which children attending Catholic schools in Ireland may reside. Data obtained from the *REMC* (Smyth, 2010) study assists further in building a profile of parents of children attending primary schools in Ireland. Most parents would appear to fit

Ruane's category of post-Catholic secular (first group - i.e. those who have a loss of faith but who nonetheless rear their children as Catholics, who show little interest in secularism and may even oppose it). The *REMC* study found that parents' beliefs and practices were seen as fluid (Smyth 2010, p. 104). They may have been raised as Catholics and still framed their identity in that way; however they had a 'fluid relationship with their childhood religious affiliation' (ibid. p. 105). Only a small minority of parents regularly attended religious services and attendance at Mass was largely confined to major religious festivals or sacramental celebrations. Many parents expressed a desire to provide their children with a religious grounding from which they could develop their own religious outlook. In addition some parents rejected Catholicism and were of 'no religion'. Those falling into this group either belonged to no particular religious denomination but yet had a spiritual worldview or rejected a spiritualised perspective on the world (p. 107). Finally, the majority of parents in the REMC study did not perceive any tension between the religious, moral and value messages children receive in school versus the worldview they themselves imparted at home (p. 47).

Ruane's observations about the exaggerated strength of the post-Catholic strand due to its high media profile are also accurate. Such high profile has resulted in an increased tendency towards intolerance of religion in the public square and has prompted some to exercise a form of secular indoctrination which may be as damaging to society as the religious indoctrination of the past. Speaking at a conference organised by Boston College ('Faith in the Future: Religion in Ireland in the 21st Century) Baroness Nuala O'Loan, former police ombudsman for Northern Ireland criticised the Irish media for being 'aggressively hostile' to the Catholic Church (Irish Times Monday April 18th Patsy Mc Garry 2016)

> 'Journalists seem, on occasion, to have abandoned the careful, nuanced use of language in favour of wild sweeping assertions which fuel the lack of understanding of what Catholicism is about, and encourage virulent anti-Catholicism'.

This movement from religious dominance to secular values in many facets of Irish society has prompted a call for changes to the educational system in Ireland which is described in the next section below.

2.5.2 Education Context

The majority of primary schools in Ireland are denominationally owned and managed. This situation which is recognised in the Constitution of Ireland and the Education Act 1998 is a product of Ireland's history and the belief systems of the Irish population (Coolahan, Kilfeather and Hussey 2012, p. 1). According to Smyth, Darmody and Lyons (2013) legacies such as the date when schools were first established, the State's formation and its subsequent role in education, as well as the position and involvement of the Church all contributed to shaping the educational context in Ireland and indeed elsewhere in Europe (Smyth 2010, p. 12). Ireland's primary schools were set up in 1831 as part of a national school system which was State supported. The original intention expressed in the founding document, the Stanley Letter, was that all primary schools would be interdenominational in character (Renehan 2014, p. 13). However by the turn of the twentieth century the national school system had de facto become denominational, with the vast majority of schools under the control of patrons of a particular denomination. The exceptions to this were nine model schools which were directly under the patronage of the Minister for Education. Patrons typically supplied land for schools to use and made contributions to the costs of building and running schools. The State paid its teachers and laid down the curriculum to be taught in schools, apart from RE curricula which was the responsibility of the patron. The Constitution of Ireland which was enacted in 1937 consolidated the role of denominational patrons in the education system (Article 44.2.5). The State continued its supportive role in providing 'for' education and although it maintained the right to establish schools (Article 42.2) it was not until 2008 that it became involved in direct provision of new primary schools (Renehan 2014).

This situation of almost exclusive denominational education at primary level endured until 1978 when the first multi-denominational school was set up and was followed in subsequent years by more such schools under the patronage of *Educate Together* which is currently the patron of seventy seven schools. Another patron body, *An Foras Pátrúnachta* was recognised in 1993 and has governance of sixty three schools; among them are denominational, multi-denominational and interdenominational schools, which teach through the medium of the Irish language. *Community National Schools* were established in 2008 and there are eleven such multi-denominational schools which have been under the temporary patronage of the Minister for Education and Skills since that time. Patronage will transfer formally to Education and Training Boards (ETB) in September 2016.

Although the past four decades have witnessed an increase in diversity of patronage, 96% of the nation's primary schools are still managed by denominational patrons with the vast majority of these being Catholic schools (90%). A minority of the population is not happy with the current arrangements for school patronage and consider that their human rights and rights as citizens are being infringed by current arrangements (Coolahan, Kilfeather and Hussey 2012, p. 38). Denominational schools are entitled to give preference to pupils of their own faith when allocating school places although this practice is normally only invoked in instances where there is an acute shortage of school places. Consequently most denominational primary schools, apart from the two Muslim schools in Ireland, have children of different religious beliefs and world views attending their schools (Smith 2010 p. 33).

The near monopoly of denominational school patronage in Ireland is at odds with the makeup of its population as discussed above. Bolstered by immigration during the 90s, a more diverse population in terms of culture and belief systems prompted calls for the restructuring of primary school provision (Martin 2011; ICHR 2011). Such calls were strengthened by the scarcity of school places in some heavily populated urban areas as well as the fact of Ireland being non-compliant with a number of international conventions to which it was a signatory (Coolahan, Kilfeather and Hussey 2012, p. 1). This culminated in the establishment of a Forum

on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, in 2011, by the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn, T.D. The Forum completed its work in 2012 with the presentation of a report which was informed by oral and written submissions from key stakeholders, including some children, and interested parties, as well as a review of relevant documentation and data. The Report reiterated the complexity of the question of patronage and its recommendations concerning divestment centred on such a process commencing in areas where there was a stable population and a demand for diversity of schools. This recommendation coupled with a newly introduced process for the establishment of new schools sought to ensure that a diversity of beliefs and practices could be catered for in a diverse range of school contexts. It was anticipated from the outset that the divestment process and the establishment of new schools process could be both slow and minor in terms of making an impact.

It was within this context that the Forum focused on the subject of Religious Education. In primary schools under denominational status in Ireland RE has been predominantly catechetical or formative (Mc Grady 2013, p. 81). Such an approach presents challenges for a diverse population within a relatively homogeneous schooling system. Particular concern was expressed for some 1700 schools which were classed as 'Stand Alone' schools. A Stand Alone school was defined as a denominational school serving local communities in which it is not possible to provide a second school (Coolahan, Kilfeather and Hussey 2012, p. 2). Mawhinney (2007) points to the primacy of the principle of avoiding geographical monopoly or dominance by a religious non-state provider. To ignore this principle, she says, 'risks either violating the human rights of a minority or restricting the religious rights of a majority' (p. 403).

2.5.2.1 Religious Education in Irish Primary Schools

The Forum Report (2012) traced the history of RE within the national school system and explained how initially the period for Religious Instruction had to be clearly signalled by the placement of a large notice with the words 'Religious Instruction' on the door of the classroom. Not all pupils had to take part and a

conscience clause for parents who wished to opt their children out of Religious Instruction was there from the outset. The converse side of the displayed notice contained the words 'Secular Instruction' and was displayed at all other times. However as the denominational character of schools became more pervasive this practice ceased and the place of Religious Instruction was given primacy in both the 1946 and 1965 Rules for National Schools. The 1965 Rules further identified religious instruction as 'by far the most important subject' and according to Rule 68, 'a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school' (Department of Education, 1965). The 1965 Rules also gave explicit recognition to the denominational character of schools and this was the first formal recognition of the status quo. This position was further affirmed in the new curriculum which issued in 1971 and which promoted an integrated approach to education. With the integration of all subjects across the curriculum, the distinction between the secular and religious instruction disappeared. Together with Rule 68, this integrated approach ensured that the school day was legitimately infused with a religious and spiritual ethos and associated practices.

The 1971 Curriculum was replaced by the Revised Curriculum in 1999. The spiritual dimension of children's lives is given prominence in the Revised Curriculum:

> The curriculum takes cognisance of the affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious dimensions of the child's experience and development. For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience. This conviction comes from a shared perception that intimates a more profound explanation of being, from an awareness of the finiteness of life and from the sublime fulfilment that human existence sometimes affords. The spiritual dimension of life expresses itself in a search for truth and in the quest for a transcendent element within human experience. The importance that the curriculum attributes to the child's spiritual development is expressed through the breadth of learning experiences the curriculum offers, through the inclusion of religious education as one of the areas of the curriculum, and through the child's engagement with the aesthetic and affective domains of learning (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 1999, p. 27).

As can be seen from the above quotation, provision for the subject of RE was included in the Revised Curriculum and it was named as one of the seven subject areas contained in the new curriculum. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA - the body charged with curriculum development) allocated a period of 2.5 hours per week at all class levels to the subject. The content and assessment of the subject remains the remit of the respective patron bodies and religious education curricula and programmes differ in Irish primary schools depending on the patronage of the school.

A significant development in relation to RE in Catholic primary schools occurred in 2015 with the publication of the *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland* (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2015). It represents a shift in paradigm from the aforementioned catechetical approach to one more centred on educational outcomes. The aim of the curriculum is: 'to help children mature in relation to their spiritual, moral and religious lives, through their encounter with, exploration and celebration of the Catholic faith' (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015). Hession (2015) who authored the curriculum on behalf of the Episcopal Conference explains that it distinguishes educational outcomes in a way that honours the nature of Christian faith and the discipline of education (2015, p. 184). In addition the context for the spiritual development of children is clearly outlined:

> The Catholic Religious Education curriculum aims to foster a distinctly Christian spirituality. Christian spirituality is following Jesus in the practice of the love of God and neighbour. It is rooted in the experience of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Children are taught how to live their lives in the Spirit of Jesus as they encounter him in prayer, in the Word of God, in the sacraments and in their own lives. They are enabled to understand how a Christian spirituality is sustained in the community of faith, the Church. (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015, p. 19)

However despite its emphasis on educational outcomes, it is impossible to remain faithful to the tenets of Catholic RE without recourse to some formative dimension (such as prayer) as illustrated in the quotation from the curriculum above. Any approach to RE which has a formative dimension, albeit not the primary focus within an educationally driven RE curriculum, is unsatisfactory for those children

who are of a different faith or worldview to that of the school they find themselves in, with no other choice of school available to them. Whilst the right to opt out of denominational RE classes is enshrined both in the Constitution and in the Education Act 1998 (DES 2010, p. 79) children in these circumstances are nonetheless deprived of one of the subjects on the Primary School curriculum as well as being subjected to an experience described by Nixon (2006) as an 'intrusive disclosure of belief' whereby pupils or their parents have to declare their children as different from their peers. In an effort to redress this situation the Forum proposed the introduction of a programme entitled 'Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics' (ERBE). A further rationale for the introduction of such a programme was to assist all pupils to have a better understanding of a more diverse range of worldviews beyond their own. It was recommended that each Patron Body would examine its provision in this field in order to satisfy the State Inspectorate that appropriate provision was being made available. The proposed ERB and Ethics programme was in no sense intended to supplant faith formation education in denominational schools (Coolahan, Hussey and Kilfeather 2012, p. 112).

2.5.2.2 Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics (ERB and Ethics)

A consultation paper outlining the vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics was disseminated by the NCCA in 2015 and a consultation process which involved online questionnaires, discussion groups, written submissions, school visits and meetings with education partners, was initiated. The vision for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics espoused by the NCCA is:

> A pluralist and values-based education, which can enable teachers to support children in our schools to live in and contribute positively to a diverse world. The curriculum will contribute to the development of the child in five key areas: personal understanding, mutual understanding, character education, connection to the wider world and spiritual awareness (NCCA 2015, p. 10)

Four suggested approaches for the development of a curriculum for ERB and Ethics in the primary curriculum are put forward. They are (i) ERB and Ethics as part of the patron's programme (ii) ERB and Ethics integrated across curriculum areas (iii) ERB and Ethics as a discrete curriculum (iv) ERB and Ethics as having both discrete and integrated components

The consultation phase closed in March 2016 and the key messages from the consultation will be outlined in a consultation report which will be published online in autumn 2016. Access to submissions from relevant stakeholders has not been made publicly available at the time of writing. Opinions at opposite ends of the spectrum indicate dissatisfaction with the thrust of the NCCA's proposals. Atheist Ireland (2015) object to the proposed curriculum on the grounds that it is unclear how the philosophical convictions of its members can be respected given the legal framework in Ireland. Writing from the perspective of schools with a denominational ethos, this writer senses that the incompatibility of any such curriculum being taught from a pluralist perspective within schools of a denominational ethos will cause much dissent.

2.5.2.3 Curriculum Reform

The landscape of Irish primary education continues to evolve and a revision of the 1999 Revised Curriculum is underway. Prior to commencement of this work, the NCCA conducted an open online forum in which it invited stakeholders and anyone with an interest in primary education to 'have their say' on priorities for primary education. Suggestions were sought as part of the process of curriculum development. The survey was driven by the NCCA's conviction of the importance of evaluating the extent to which schools are catering to the needs of young children in Ireland today (Fitzpatrick, Twohig and Morgan 2014, p. 272).

Six priorities were identified from the 960 responses which were received. These priorities are life skills; communication skills; well-being; literacy and numeracy; motivation and engagement; sense of identity and belonging. The six priority areas intersect and overlap with one another (ibid. p. 281) and the personal and social dimensions of children's primary education features in all six (ibid. p. 282). Data from the survey identified the concept of well-being as also underpinning all six priority areas. Spirituality was recognised by the respondents among the attributes, skills and dispositions of importance to children (ibid. p. 276) and it was also linked to well-being (ibid. p. 277). The six priorities suggest the favouring of a movement away from a traditional content-based curriculum which is framed around

individual subjects, towards one with a more explicit focus on life-skills and social and emotional development (ibid. p. 269).

This suggested framework has already been operationalised in the National Framework for Early Childhood Education, *Aistear*, which was introduced in 2009 for children from birth to six years of age. *Aistear* approaches learning in a holistic manner with four central themes – well-being; identity and belonging; communicating; and exploring and thinking. The spiritual dimension of young children's learning is understood as integral to the child's overall development (NCCA 2009, p. 17). Neither RE nor spiritual education is specifically mentioned in the *Aistear* framework but they are reflected in the aims and learning goals for two of the themes:

- Well-being
  - Aim 3: Children will be creative and spiritual
    - Understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.
- Identity and belonging
  - Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended
    - Be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds
    - Understand and take part in routines, customs, festivals, and celebrations.
  - Aim 3: Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and a regard for the identity, rights and view of others
    - Be aware of and respect others' needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs.

There are no specific guidelines for time allocation for spiritual or religious education. Without clearer delineation, it is difficult to see how the place of spiritual development can be prioritised with due merit within the framework. This

coupled with the fact that much pre-service provision for teachers in early childhood settings has no content devoted to training teachers in the area of either RE or education for spiritual development, suggests that such content may become increasingly marginalised.

This consideration of the educational context in primary schools in Ireland concludes with an excerpt from a speech from another recent Minister for Education and Skills concerning the place of RE in primary schools. It illustrates how the place of RE, the subject with the most explicit focus on spiritual development in the primary school setting, is being constricted. The suggested focus in its stead leaves little room for a serious consideration of children's spiritual lives:

> And how much time should be spent on all religious education in our schools? Currently, 30 minutes of each school day is allocated to religious education. Is that enough, or is it too much? We know a few things. We want our children to develop a strong, ethical spirit, and an understanding of their place in the world. But we also want them to learn many other things. We want them to be physically active and fit, but we devote less than half of the time to PE that is devoted to religion...We understand that an early appreciation of science can engage and astound our children in wonderful ways. But science education also gets less than half the time that religion does in our curriculum. And of course there are many other calls, from philosophy to coding to modern languages and financial education, all of which it is argued should feature on the primary curriculum (Minister for Education, Jan O'Sullivan's address to Irish Primary Principals Network, January 2016).

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined two key global developments in elevating the status of children's voices in consideration of their lives - the UNCRC and Childhood Studies. The policy context in Ireland with a specific focus on the spiritual aspect of children's lives was also considered. Two prominent pieces of research relating to children's religious socialisation in Ireland were examined and the socio-cultural and educational contexts in Ireland were critiqued. It was illustrated throughout the chapter how catering for the spiritual dimension of children's lives in society and

within the specific context of Irish education is becoming increasingly diminished. The next chapter addresses the literature on children's spirituality and provides an overview of debates concerning the place of spiritual development within educational settings.

Chapter 3
Children's Spirituality: nature and nurture and context

3.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature pertaining to children's spirituality. It commences with a brief introduction to the nature of spirituality in general, including attempts by various authors to define this ineffable quality. It then moves on to address the terrain of children's spirituality in particular, commencing with foundational studies which identify children's spirituality as a universal quality. Recent international trends in the marriage of spirituality with educational endeavours, including current debates and controversies are also detailed. The chapter then moves more specifically into the area of children's spirituality rooted within the domain of religion and concludes with an overview of Godly Play, the approach which was used in this research to create an environment where the spiritual capacities of children could be observed, reported upon and analysed.

3.2 Definitions of Spirituality

It is widely accepted that humans have an innate disposition for the spiritual and spirituality like personality is a characteristic of human beings (Scheniders 2003; Hull 2002). The term 'spirituality' is an elusive concept and presents serious challenges to anyone attempting to capture its essence in a single definition. Sheldrake states that it is a word that is frequently and increasingly used but whose meaning is often ill-defined (2014, p.1). This definitional challenge is symptomatic of the ineffable nature of spirituality; the increasing range of different contexts in which it is used; the variety of conceptions of spirituality which reflect the beliefs and values of those seeking to define it; and the overall 'cultural rootedness' of the phenomenon (Wright 1997). Watson (2006) doubts the possibility of arriving at one definition which can be claimed unanimously by all and Gellel (2010) thinks that it may be counter-productive even to seek such a definition. Lewis (2000) raises the possibility of the need to invent a new term altogether but finally settles on the acceptability of 'spiritual' and calls for an acceptance of the term as part of

common parlance (p. 266). Tacey (2015) views the perennial search for a definition as somewhat futile and he favours instead attending to an acknowledgement of the spiritual such as its anthropological and psychological basis.

Despite the challenges of finding an agreed definition of spirituality, there are nonetheless a plethora of writers who have supplied a multitude of definitions and most of these definitions include four concepts – meaning and purpose, moral and ethical values, relationships and transcendence (Pandya 2015). The example below from de Souza (2009) encompasses all four concepts:

> Spirituality is a vital element of the human condition which pertains to human rationality whereby the individual experiences different levels of connectedness to Self and everything other than self. The latter includes connectedness to the Social and Communal Other, to the Physical Other in the world and to a Transcendent Other, and it is these relationships that invigorate and animate the individual's life as s/he moves forward on her/his spiritual journey. The movement comprises an outward motion to embrace others who are familiar, then moving on to connect to others who are different and unknown. As well, it comprises a 'going within' as the individual discovers new parts of him/herself that resonates with what they have learnt of the Other. Thus the path leads to empathy and compassion at the outer level and to self-knowledge at the inner level. Such connectedness promotes a sense of self and place in one's community which, in turn, provides a sense of meaning and purpose for the individual. (p. 189)

3.2.1 The Relationship between Spirituality and Religion

Historically the term 'spirituality' has been situated within the bounds of religion and its origins are explicitly Christian. In St Paul's theology, a spiritual person is someone who embraces material reality, values the body and in whom the Spirit of God dwells (Sheldrake 2014, p.6). This understanding of the concept of spirituality declined in usage between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries but re-emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century in the writings of French Roman Catholics and was consolidated in the period after the Second Vatican Council when it became the preferred term within Christian studies of the spiritual life, supplanting such terms as 'mystical theology' or 'ascetical theology' (ibid, p. 7). The term gained momentum ecumenically and was in common parlance by the 1980s. Sheldrake highlights three key understandings of the term from a Christian

perspective which emerged at that time: (i) spirituality is not about the supernatural but rather about everyday existence (ii) the spiritual life is social in nature and is not exclusively individual and interior and (iii) spirituality as a phenomenon is girded by theology and biblical studies and engages well with a variety of disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology and the human sciences (ibid p. 8).

In recent decades the decoupling of religion and spirituality has entailed the democratisation of spiritual affairs. Abraham Maslow and John Dewey both consider spirituality to be part of a person's being, therefore prior to and different from religiosity (cited in Fisher 2009, p. 71). In these terms spirituality may be viewed as 'secular, holistic and deep rooted' (Bigger 2008). The dissolution of the boundaries between spirituality and religion, described by Tacey (2004) as a 'spiritual revolution', has prompted a call to search for a common understanding of what such a universal, humanist spirituality might encompass. Benander and Carr (2006) press for philosophical clarity, noting that current definitions of spirituality in research, widely differ in assumptions between confessional (religious) or non-confessional (phenomenological); religiously tethered or religiously untethered; theologically objectivist (a real God), or subjectivist (God as a symbolic concept); independent of morality, or reducible to morality; culturally thick or culturally thin; context driven or universal; pedagogically cognitive or pedagogically affective. Carr (1995) and Marples (2006) also criticise the broad conception of the concept of spirituality and point out that it doesn't possess a rigorous philosophical and ontological framework.

Some writers use the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' interchangeably, however, many researchers define spirituality in contrast to religion. In these definitions, religion is usually defined as the organisational, the conventional or traditional, the ritual and the ideological, whereas the spiritual refers to the personal, the affective, the experiential and the thoughtful (Tirri et al. 2005). Hay (1998) alludes to the negative attitudes and presuppositions about religion which are widespread in society and how for some people terms like 'religion' and 'God' can actually get in

the way of what they understand to be their spiritual life (p. 21). In this context, the use of the term 'spiritual' with its definitional haziness can actually be helpful when including spiritual concepts into public spheres such as education.

For some writers, religion is designed first and foremost to facilitate spirituality (Pargament 2009). This view perceives spirituality as requiring something more; a context for the development of relationality which is a key dimension of spirituality (Scheniders 2003). For such advocates, spirituality is more than a mere generic capacity which can be left unattended. Gellel (2010) likens religion to a language which offers a means of expression for the spiritual. Writing about the relationship between religion and spirituality, Hull (2002) puts it rather succinctly:

> Religion as a whole is concerned with spirituality but not all spirituality is concerned with religion. Everything that is truly religious is also spiritual but there may be spirituality outside religion (Hull 2002, p. 171)

Schneiders (2003) goes further by proposing three models for describing the relationship between religion and spirituality. Firstly, religion and spirituality are disconnected from one another; they are 'strangers at the banquet of transcendence who never actually meet' (p. 164). Bigger (2008) writes of this model and he suggests that there are two major paradigms of spirituality which are in conflict, the naturalistic/rational and the super-naturalistic/mystical. He claims that adherents of either will reject the work of the other (p. 67). Secondly, according to Schneiders, religion and spirituality are related to each other in inverse proportion. In this model, the more religious one is, the less spiritual one is perceived to be (and vice versa). Thirdly, Schneiders presents how religion and spirituality can be viewed as two dimensions of a single enterprise; as partners in the search for God (2003, p. 165). Schneiders favours the third model and argues that anyone who 'takes seriously the spiritual quest on the one hand and the real resources and problems of religion on the other can situate her or himself in our religiously pluralistic environment with integrity, freedom and responsibility' (ibid, p. 165).

An intriguing element in surveying the literature on spirituality is the magnanimity on the part of writers from both religious and secular domains in terms of reaching

out and acknowledging the merits of the other's position in matters of the spirit. There is a broad consensus among all, that religion should not hold monopoly on the term 'spirituality' (Kennedy and Duncan, 2006). Those of a religious persuasion recognise that spirituality is possible beyond the bounds of religion (e.g. Rahner 1971; Hull 2002; Hyde 2008). Those who advocate a secular spirituality recognise that spirituality has its natural home in the context of religion (e.g. Wringe, 2002; Gellel 2010, Blake, 1996) and many acknowledge the potential of religions to offer pathways for nurturing and giving expression to spirituality (e.g. Bigger 2008; Blake 1996; Marples 2006; Pargament 2009).

3.3 Children's Spirituality

Studies of children's spirituality were rare until the closing decade of the last century. Indeed the term 'children's spirituality' may have been considered an oxymoron (Nye 2006). In the period prior to the 1990s any scholarly attention to the interior lives of children occurred within the context of religion. Such scholarship was dominated by stage theories of religious development where the development of religious thinking was the primary concern and Piagetian cognitive psychology was utilised as a theoretical framework (e.g. Goldman 1968; Elkind 1978; Fowler 1981; Oser and Gmunder 1991). Undoubtedly the most influential of these researchers in the area of children's religious thinking and religious education was the psychologist, Ronald Goldman of the United Kingdom. His research involved interviews with 200 children from ages six to fifteen. Goldman concluded from his research that readiness for religion was akin to readiness for the learning of reading or writing, i.e. that certain stages had to be reached before being able to move on to a subsequent stage. Religious insight, a cognate activity according to Goldman, generally began to appear between the ages of twelve and thirteen, a period which marked a change in religious thinking whereby 'Propositions, ideas, relationships, can be thought of in more abstract terms, making the language of religion decidedly easier to comprehend' (1968, p. 163). According to Goldman, children younger than this age were in a 'pre-religious' period.

Whilst there was some validity in Goldman's findings (e.g. his recognition that children of certain ages may not have the cognitive ability to process certain elements of religious knowledge), overall his work has been criticised for its methodology which was overly reliant on the verbal-linguistic skills of the children being interviewed with no consideration of the possibility of a child's religious potential in the affective domain e.g. children's imagination seen in play, stories and artwork (Mc Grady 1983). Knowledge *about* religion was equated with religious knowing or spirituality (Farmer 1992, p. 260). This excluded the possibility for example, that people with learning disabilities could exhibit religious thinking, which is contrary to other research findings (e.g. Bissonnier 1965 and subsequently Jaspard 1994 cited in Francis 1996, p. 57) where people with such challenges exhibited profound religiousness. In addition, Goldman's method of data analysis has been criticised by Slee (1986) who proposes that the validity of Goldman's findings is questionable since his methods of data analysis are subject to 'grave limitation and weaknesses' (p. 168).

Nonetheless Goldman's work left an enduring perception that children could only handle a diluted kind of religious life and that by implication, spiritual depth and valid insight belonged only in the domain of adulthood. The influence of Goldman's work was immense and adversely affected a more positive view of children's spiritual capacities which endured for decades and caused constriction within the sphere of RE. His proposal that children of different ages possess predictable cognitive difficulties in understanding religious material and religious explanations and that they experience difficulties in appreciating the metaphorical nature of parable, for example, prompted his advocates to adapt RE curricula accordingly (e.g. using his research as a rationale for excluding young children from exposure to scripture). Another legacy was that genuine expressions of spiritual depth on the part of children were considered accidental or unintentional, the exception rather than the norm (Nye 2009).

During the 1970s and 1980s, evidence which countered Goldman's claim that young children are incapable of having spiritual experiences emerged in the work of Edward Robinson (1983). Robinson, who was the director of the Religious

Experience Research Unit in Oxford, was conducting research with adults concerning accounts of religious experience in their lives. He noticed that a motif running through his findings was the sizeable proportion of accounts (500) which related to events that had occurred during childhood (as early as five years of age). These experiences had stayed in the memories of the adults for the rest of their lives and had maintained incredible significance for them. Robinson proposed that these reports of early religious experiences suggested that there is a kind of knowing which children have, that goes undetected by cognitive developmental studies. Although criticism was levelled at him regarding the accuracy of these adults' recollections of their distant childhood experiences, Robinson did not see their accounts as being coloured or modified with the passing of time. Rather he saw them as very reliable sources and he judged his respondents to be people in whom the original vision of childhood had never wholly faded: 'To them there is no question of those original events having been obscured or covered up by later reflection or analysis; the memory of them is still clear and valid' (Robinson 1983 p. 44). Mc Creery (1996) proposes that the adults in Robinson's study did not have the language available to them as children, to express the depth of their experience and that it was only in adult life that they were able to retrieve it as a spiritual experience. Robinson postulates that the original vision of childhood is obscured from people's awareness as they enter the 'spiritually obtuse' phase of adulthood and that consequently a great deal is extinguished in the experience of children too.

A more recent compilation of recalled testimonies of childhood cited by John Pridmore (2012) supports Robinson's work. Certain common themes identified by adults emerge in Pridmore's presentation e.g. the primacy of the present moment, the here and now, in childhood; the role of imagination in childhood; spiritual distress experienced by children; delight in nature; a troubled relationship of spirituality and religion; the importance of language, music and the sensory. Another researcher, Tom (2004) conducted a prominent piece of research involving adults' recollections of spiritual experiences encountered in childhood. Of significant note in Tom's work is his observation that adults' recollections were frequently accompanied by the claim that they had never shared their experience

before, in spite of the self-proclaimed significance and influence it had on their lives (p. 68).

Robinson, Tom and Pridmore's work all lack the immediate voices of children. However Robert Coles (1990) seminal ethnographic research which bears further testimony to the spiritual experiences of children is exclusively derived from the perspective of children themselves. In his book, *The Spiritual Life of Children.* Coles also challenges the adequacy of giving sole priority to cognition in efforts to understand the spiritual development of children. Whereas Robinson's work had the limitation of being dependent on distant memories, Coles' was very much immersed in the milieu of childhood. Coles, being conscious that the capacity of a child in a structured research setting could be compromised, chose to conduct his research in informal, unstructured situations. His aim was to learn their personal experiences of spirituality from children as they go about their lives, in the home, in school, at play etc. The heart of the research which took place over many years consisted of conversations with individual children, as well as groups of children, from various traditions and various cultures all over the world. The major thrust of the book therefore is narrative and consists of the telling of religious and spiritual experiences of children which are captivating and engaging. Coles presents the words of the children just as they are, and does not lay his own interpretation on them. Indeed there is no need for interpretation as from the words and images used by the children, it is clear that they have dynamic, spiritual lives. The overwhelming sense conveyed in his book by Coles, is that of enormous respect for the children he encountered and for the manner in which they affected him personally.

Another piece of seminal research in the area of children's spirituality is the work of David Hay and Rebecca Nye (1998). Hay and Nye's research moved a step beyond just listening to and reporting on what children had to say, as Coles had done, to seeking to develop a theoretical perspective of children's spirituality as well. Their research was prompted by a desire to address the inadequacy of developmental theory to give a full account of the characteristics of children's

spirituality (Hay and Nye 1998 p, 57). They also sought to right an imbalance in the literature where there was a preponderance of research with children which centred on Christian conceptions of the numinous - on God-talk rather than a broader conception of spirituality (ibid, p. 60). Hay and Nye's work was heavily influenced by the research of Alister Hardy, a biologist, who suggested that humans have a predisposition for spirituality and that spirituality was selected for in the biological evolution of the human species because of its survival value to the individual. In this conception, every child has a spiritual potential no matter what the child's cultural context may be. As such spirituality is entirely natural and logically prior to religion (Hay and Nye 2006, p. 63).

Prior to data collection, Hay and Nye devised a set of three interrelated categories of spiritual sensitivities which they hoped to explore with the children during interviews. These categories, *awareness sensing, mystery-sensing* and *value sensing* were arrived at through engagement with previous research and also following a pilot study conducted by them. *Awareness sensing* refers to an experience of a deeper, more acute level of consciousness than normal - a reflexive process of 'being aware of one's awareness' (ibid, 1998, p. 65). *Mystery sensing* encompasses awareness of 'aspects of our life experience that are in principle incomprehensible' (ibid, p. 71). It is connected to the capacity to transcend the ordinary, to embrace wonder and awe and fascination. Children exhibit this sensitivity in an absorbed manner as they interact with the world and questions emerge for them from those interactions (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, p.61). The final category, *value sensing,* pertains to what is important and of value to a person. *Value sensing* is experienced as an emotion and it involves the meaning ascribed by individuals to important issues including those of an existential nature.

Hay and Nye's fieldwork comprised of interviews with forty children aged between 6 and 11 years of age. Three interviews were conducted with each child over a sporadic period. The interviews allowed the children to engage at their own pace and in their own words and ways. In Goldman's research, children's concepts of God were found to follow the predictable cognitive stage model framework

showing that children less than twelve years of age seemed to struggle with abstract and symbolic conceptualisations of God, when formally questioned. Hay and Nye found in their research that when spontaneous discussions of this kind came up, a different picture emerged. Hay and Nye's findings also show that each child possessed their own unique spirituality in terms of characteristics and approach, which was like a 'personal signature' (1998, p. 92). Hay and Nye show that in much the same way as children's psychological features vary from child to child, the same can be said of their spiritual attributes. They point out how this calls for the need for a multi-dimensional characterisation of spirituality, since forcing individual differences into grouped patterns may misrepresent the uniqueness of the 'personal signature'. Nonetheless in spite of such a variety of characterisations, Hay and Nye identified a uniformity about the overall 'sense' of children's spirituality which allowed them to generate a key theoretical construct - 'relational consciousness' which is described by them as the most fundamental feature of children's spirituality (ibid, p. 131):

> In this 'relational consciousness', seems to lie the rudimentary core of children's spirituality, out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight (ibid, p. 109).

The term 'consciousness' entailed in 'relational consciousness' encompasses the themes of sensitivity pre-empted by the researchers during their planning phase (awareness, mystery and value sensing), but is broader than their initial conception which they had anticipated as *discrete* moments of *unusual* awareness on the part of children (ibid, p. 107). On the contrary, they found that spiritual awareness appeared as an ordinary aspect of young children's everyday experience and was evident during even banal activities. Consciousness leads to the relational which was an aspect which Hay and Nye had not anticipated sufficiently in their planning. The relational consists of four types of contexts: child/God consciousness; child/people consciousness; child/world consciousness; child/self consciousness. These contexts parallel the findings in general spirituality which refer to relationships with the self, others, world and transcendent.

Whilst Hay and Nye chose not to ground their research in an explicitly religious context, they found that there was a readiness on the part of children to draw on religious language in the task of meaning making even though many of them had a lack of knowledge or experience of formal religion (1998, p. 102). Hay and Nye concluded that it reflected a need on the part of the children for a language to articulate their spiritual experience (ibid, p. 102). At the same time, Hay and Nye noted reluctance on the part of most children to speak openly about spiritual or religious experience. This hesitance was attributed by the researchers to an embarrassment about 'straying too long beyond the acceptable confines of secular discourse' (ibid, p. 103). Some of the children spoke about a concern for being laughed at, or considered stupid for speaking in religious or spiritual terms.

A recurrent theme which emerged in conversations with the children during data collection was that of death. This discourse possessed a relational quality as children spoke about deceased relatives who they may or may not have known. There was a sense of their own finite nature in children's expressions but the language of death never instilled fear. Rather it offered a positive resource in which to frame their experiences and explorations (ibid, p. 119). Hay and Nye also report that for some children death was their key 'signature'.

Since Hay and Nye's pioneering work, others have engaged in research with children in a similar vein and their findings validate the earlier research in recognising that children have innate spiritual capacities which should be taken seriously and which merit support (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008). Tobin Hart (2003), prompted by the experience of his daughter's regular accounts of encounters with an angel, launched into a five year long research study of children's spiritual lives, partly in an effort to discover if his daughter's experience was unique. His research involved in-depth interviews and the collection of written accounts of hundreds of children and adults. Hart's findings concurred with Hay and Nye's contention that spirituality is an inherent dimension of humanity and that spirituality exists beyond the rational:

> So rather than thinking of ourselves as human beings occasionally having spiritual experiences, I find it more helpful to think of ourselves as spiritual beings having human experiences… our life is a spiritual life. It is not that some of us are spiritual and some are not; our entire existence is a spiritual event (2003, pp 7-8).

Hart found that his daughter's experiences were not unusual and that children's rich spiritual lives take all kinds of forms (2003, p. 3). He identified five general dimensions of children's spiritual experience: *Wonder*, encompassing moments of awe, profundity, insight and intuition akin to those described by the mystics. Hart asserts that such experiences are the cornerstone of a child's spiritual life (p. 48); *Wisdom* which involves both a capacity as well as access to surprising insight and intuition; *Wondering* involving radical questioning in which children reveal surprisingly sophisticated metaphysical questioning as well as such qualities as tolerance for paradox and ambiguity. In this respect Hart perceives children as natural contemplatives with philosophical curiosity (2006, p. 175); *Relational Consciousness* in which compassion and deep empathic relations are present; and '*Seeing the Invisible*' or the capacity to perceive multi-dimensionally.

In 2003, Champagne, a hospital chaplain, set out to create a 'spiritual portrait' of younger children (pre-schoolers) in order to assist her in her work setting (p. 43). She found that certain 'modes' of the children's being were revealed to her and she identified three spiritual modes of being: (i) sensitive, (ii) relational and (iii) existential. The sensitive mode of being describes how children use all of their senses in their interactions with the environment and that in order to recognise their spirituality, it is necessary to listen not only to their verbal expressions which are limited, but also to their whole body and person (ibid, p. 45). The relational mode refers to children's filiation:

> In entering life, children enter the experience of their filiation. It is a fact that their being alive, their existence is rooted outside themselves. They are born of their parents. Their experience of being the children of their parents allows for the unfolding of their existence. When relating to their parents, brothers and sisters, to their whole family, friends and acquaintanceship, adults and peers, children both receive their existence from this reality of their being related and actively participate in their own becoming (ibid, p. 50).

Champagne points out that the relational mode of being is given an even broader and deeper significance within the context of Christian spirituality. The third mode of being identified by Champagne is the existential mode which refers to children's experience of time and space. For the younger child, this is mainly an experience of here and now: 'The child lives in the present, their only available time. And in the present, the purpose of the child's life is simply to be a child' (ibid, p. 52). This may be the case with younger children but as they grow older they learn to play at the edges of their knowing and being (Berryman 1991).

Hyde (2008) is another prominent researcher in the field of children's spirituality who has researched the spiritual lives of children. He identifies four characteristics of children's spirituality: The *felt sense* which draws on the wisdom of the child's own body as a natural and primal way of knowing. It involves an awareness of the immediacy of experience and tactile, sensory activity. *Integrating awareness* refers to an emerging level of consciousness; it envelopes or integrates a previous level of awareness and is accessed through activities with a repetitive element such as meditation or mindfulness. The felt sense is a prerequisite for integrating awareness. *Weaving threads of meaning* refers to the child drawing on her or his own sense of wonder as a means by which to make sense of the world and events. *Spiritual Questing* which refers to the fact that children are seekers-looking for more than they are experiencing at that time.

The understanding of children's spirituality identified by Hay and Nye and consolidated through the work of Hart, Champagne and Hyde has been further developed by others who consider different aspects of the field. One such dimension is the preparation and implementation of measurement scales to assess levels of spiritual sensitivity or well-being. Stoyles et al. (2012) found that high measures on spiritual sensitivity scales correlate with a sense of well-being and they suggest that even in the face of adversity, a child with a high rating on their Spiritual Sensitivity Scale for Children (SSSC) would most likely remain hopeful and not allow themselves to be diminished personally by adversity (p. 213). Fisher (2011) through his work with assessing children's spirituality has demonstrated that

of the four sets of relationships pertaining to relational consciousness (personal, communal, environmental and transcendental), relationship with God is most important for SWB among primary school students.

3.3.1 Nurturing Children's spiritual potential

A further aspect of children's spirituality which has been developed in recent years is that of nurturing the spiritual potential of children. King (2013) indicates that in the same way training is required in order to develop latent musical or sports' potential, the spiritual potential of each human being has to be awakened, trained and practised. Culliford agrees and according to him, without nurturance, spirituality withers and atrophies (2010). Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008) suggest that the task of nourishing spirituality is one of releasing, not constricting, children's imagination (p. 46). To nourish spirituality is to allow children to question, without pressure to produce the one correct answer; it is to allow natural fascination and to know that children have a natural sensitivity that allows them to hear their inner wisdom, sometimes beyond the insights held by adults (Power 2010, p. 54). The role of the adult is paramount and Hart (2003) claims that adults who are able to wonder alongside the children they care for, open up free space in which mystery can be explored. The reciprocal nature of such encounters is highlighted by teachers in a study conducted by Kennedy and Duncan (2006). Teachers reported that through their involvement in nurturing children's spirituality they also nurture their own, because when they are alert to children's spiritual expressions this helps them to be alert to their own. Others have spoken in more depth of such spiritual reciprocity (e.g. Hart 2003; Cavalletti, 1983; Berryman 1991).

With regard to creating suitable environments for nurturing children's spirituality, Nye (2009) proposes six criteria for providing conditions in which children's spirituality can flourish. She uses the acronym SPIRIT in her presentation of these conditions which she says are all of equal importance (p. 41). Beginning with *space*, she offers guidelines for assessing the suitability of particular physical spaces. She highlights the importance of emotional space also (space to be apart

and to have different opinions, as well as space to feel closely held and safe) and auditory space including taking silence seriously. The *process* in spirituality is more important than any product. Nye calls for a true valuing of process and suggests creative arts as a suitable means of engaging in a process oriented approach. *Imagination* is the third of Nye's six criteria and she distinguishes between imaginative presentations on the part of adult mentors and enabling situations where children themselves can be imaginative and creative. *Relationships* are at the core of spiritual nurturance and Nye highlights a listening and respectful ethos as being central to building relationships. According to Nye, spirituality thrives on *intimacy* and it flourishes during opportunities to 'come closer, delve deeper, take risks and pursue passions' (ibid, p. 53). *Trust*, the final criteria is more directed towards adult mentors who she encourages to engender a trust in children and their capacities. She also addresses the specifically Christian context by reminding adult mentors to trust in God and church traditions.

Joyce Bellous writing in 2006 offers guidance on creating spiritually rich environments in which all children feel they belong. She exhorts the following five activities: *Including*, a foundation for showing up, where hospitality is offered to all and a diverse range of personalities are catered for; *Attending*, a foundation for being and meaning, whereby attention is distributed justly and meaning making is fostered; *Embracing*, a foundation for relational labour, which is a way of being present to another, so that attention is paid is to them rather than to ourselves; *Releasing*, a foundation for productive labour, which refers to timely regard for enabling children to learn on their own so that they enjoy being productive; *Remaining*, a foundation for wise ignorance, refers to the faithful constancy of 'being there'. Remaining, as an activity, is the glue that holds all five activities together (p. 110).

Kirmani and Kirmani (2009) conducted a study in order to offer advice on catering to the multiple and interconnected ways in which children's spiritual identities can be expressed. Their findings enabled them to classify spiritual identities into categories which lends further credence to Hay and Nye's (1998) 'personal

signature' conception. They propose the following seven categories which are not mutually exclusive: *Senso-centric*: descriptions from participants centred on auditory, visual and tactile encounters (e.g. listening to music); *Socio-centric:* individuals identified within this category describe their spirituality within a social context (e.g. helping others); *Eco-centric:* an inclination towards nature as a means of spiritual experience and expression; *Cosmos-centric*: involving an awe and wonder of the cosmos and its powerful mystery and presence; *Geneo-centric*: participants assigned to this category expressed their spirituality in relation to deceased family members; *Chrono-centric*: where spirituality is expressed in relation to certain times, marked by a specific event; *Transo-centric*: participants who are transo-centric seek connections between the physical and the abstract and search for ultimate truth. Overall, Kirmani and Kirmani found that spirituality cuts across religious affiliations and whilst their study focused on adults, they felt that its results have important implications for professionals working with children (2009, p. 378). They encourage teachers in particular to adopt a range of classroom strategies for integrating spiritual development across the various classifications e.g. include field experiences through nature walks and visits to woods, mountains and lakes to develop the spirituality of those with an eco-centric identity and to introduce the other children to multiple means of expression (ibid, p.380).

3.3.2 Inhibitors to children's spiritual potential

An awareness of potential inhibitors of children's spiritual potential is important and this theme is prominent in a book edited by Watson, de Souza and Trousdale (2015). Contributors cite an emphasis within society on materialism, consumerism and individualism as blocking children's spiritual development. A narrow curriculum, with performativity and standardised testing tends to promote a one-size fits all approach can be damaging to the unique personal signature of individual children; that an over-full curriculum with an insistent emphasis on pace and knowledge acquisition tends to deny opportunities for space and reflection. Ingersoll (2014), addressing the specific context of Christian worship identifies the following barriers to children's exploration of their spiritual identities: enoblement of adult faith (being dismissive of children as 'not yet' adults); reliance on content

acquisition; token opportunities for participation; adultism which prioritises adult needs. She offers the following remedies to address each named deficit respectively: centralisation of child faith; dependence on sacred experiences; shared participation; intergenerational ministry.

Hyde (2008) identifies inhibitors of spirituality in education settings, as including the trivialising of children's wondering and questioning. Teachers are frequently culprits in this respect and Yust (2011) outlines instances where she has observed teachers blocking children's wonderings by swiftly moving the lesson in a different direction (p. 4). Berryman highlights the importance of the teacher's attitude to existential issues (1991, p. 64). He identifies four kinds of existential issues: death, the threat to freedom, the need for meaning, or the unavoidable aloneness that marks us as human beings' (ibid, p. 64) and refers to them as 'the edge' or 'limit' of our being:

> The edge or limit is a line marked by paradoxes we can neither break through to escape. They permeate our everyday world. We are born, yet we die. Why? We need company, but we are existentially alone, having to be born and to die for ourselves. Why? We cry out for freedom but usually only from positions of slavery, because we are fearful of freedom. Why? We need meaning, but the meaning we know we need we often want to hide from. Why? These paradoxes box us in and bind us, but they also define who we are as human beings (Berryman 1991, p. 149).

If adults are defensive in their treatment of such existential issues, or worse if they are repressing them in their own lives, Berryman argues that it makes it difficult for children to engage with such issues.

At a macro level, Yust (2011) suggests that current cultural epistemologies centring on rationalism create a hurdle for cultivating spiritual knowledge and wisdom among children. Nye concurs and highlights how adults can be quick to offer counter arguments to explain in rational terms what they want children to believe (2004, p. 99). Hay and Nye (2006) point to what they describe as an impasse:

> For many children in primary school their natural spiritual awareness undergoes a process of becoming orphaned, steadily isolated to a greater or lesser degree from two of the major modes of cultural expression. It is isolated from religious tradition through the operation of secularisation and

also because the religious institutions sometimes seem to have forgotten their spiritual roots. Spirituality is often cut off from science, the dominant contemporary mode of reflective discourse, because conservative forms of empirical science claim to distance themselves from human subjectivity, and in some cases deny its importance or even its reality (p. 144).

Hay and Nye (1998) move on to say that this isolation is a learned isolation into which children are educated. This observation captures the challenges inherent in nurturing children's potential and points to the diminution of traditional structures such as school in the nurturing of children's spirituality. The specific case of schooling and education and how they cater for spiritual development is considered in the next section.

3.4 Spiritual Education

The agreement of writers from different viewpoints in relation to the phenomenon of spirituality has already been alluded to. However when spirituality is brought to bear on such a public enterprise as education, such cordial stances dissipate and a contested space emerges in its stead. This was the case in England and Wales during the 1990s when the place of spiritual development in education was being copper fastened in legislation. Its place had been enshrined in legislation since the 1944 Education Act which required schools to contribute to the spiritual development of the community. At that time, there was an explicit focus on Christian spirituality. Subsequent legislation, (1988 Education Reform Act and 1992 Education (Schools) Act) affirmed the place of spiritual development in education and charged the newly formed Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) with the inspection of schools' provision for spiritual development. There was confusion at the time regarding what exactly 'spiritual development' meant and what an inspection of same might entail. Ofsted clarified its remit by issuing the following definition of spiritual development -

> Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. 'Spiritual' is not synonymous with 'religious': all areas of the curriculum may contribute to pupils' spiritual development (Ofsted 1994, p. 8)

Having been divorced or untethered from a religion, a cross-curricular, humanistic or secular approach to spiritual development became policy and Ofsted in theory inspected schools on the basis of such provision. Inspection related to provision rather than quality of delivery or even content. Evidence of inconsistencies in inspection cast doubt on the proper implementation of this policy by some Ofsted inspectors who strongly linked their assessment of a school's provision for spiritual development with RE and collective worship rather than a cross-curricular universalist approach such as that advocated by Watson (2006). Indeed criticism concerning the dominance of a Christian perspective in education (e.g. daily acts of collective worship which must be Christian in character) is not just to be found in this context but also in general discourse on spirituality. Critics say that in spite of a general recognition and tacit approval that spirituality and religion are not necessarily linked, RE is still often seen as the specific locus for spiritual development.

The implementation of the above legislation prompted dialogue amongst theorists who articulated their views at conferences and by means of engagement with one another through the pages of various journal articles over the course of a decade or so. Carr (1996a; 1996b) is critical of the broad conception of spiritual education envisaged by the Acts. He is also critical of some theorists such as Hull, who he claims present an understanding of spirituality which is largely indistinguishable from the more general notion of human values. He argues that any vague 'awe and wonder' account of the nature of human spirituality or what he terms elsewhere as the 'general assimilation of spiritual to aesthetic experience' (Carr 2003), is not adequate for the provision of a coherent basis for spiritual education (Carr, 1996a).

Whilst agreeing that spiritual education is not the exclusive preserve of RE and acknowledging the role of the arts in particular, Carr cautions against 'prising spiritual education from RE and then loosely re-attaching it to almost everything under the curriculum sun' (1996a p. 83). He asks how spiritual education might be distinguished from religious and moral education and posits that a cross-curricular approach to spiritual education is untenable since it could result in 'the complete

reduction to or absorption into other school subjects and activities' 1996a p. 83). As well as being critical of a broad interpretation of spirituality, Carr's second purpose in writing is to 'insist that any substantial conception of spirituality for spiritual education must draw primarily (though not exclusively) upon the conceptual and other resources inherent in particular religious traditions' (1996b, p. 457). However, he cautions against identifying spiritual development with a narrowly confessional approach to RE.

Blake (1996) objected to Carr's conception of spirituality, which he perceives as having an undue emphasis on the transcendent or the 'extra mundane', rather than the imminent. He is also critical of Carr's effective location of the spiritual within 'Eurocentric traditionalism'. However both are in agreement about the irritation caused by loose argumentation, and the woolliness around definitions of the spiritual (Lewis, 2000). Blake, arguing from a position of atheism, views spiritual education as the preserve of specific religious traditions and sees no place for such an enterprise in the context of state schools. He is wary of the secular institutionalisation of spirituality but legitimises such institutionalisation where the context is religious.

Carr's response to Blake's article included a restatement of his position which favours a religiously affiliated account of spirituality and calls for a distinctive account of spiritual meaning. He concurs with Blake's position that no substantial notion of spiritual education can have much place in the context of secularised general education, i.e. the common school. He is also in agreement with Blake concerning the 'saccharine' vision of spiritual education adhered to by the legion of 'milk and water spiritualists' advocating guidelines of Ofsted and which leave little space for facets of spirituality which may be challenging, such as 'struggle, suffering, pain or temptation'.

Lewis (2000) is critical of both Carr and Blake for their compartmentalisation of the spiritual. Lewis advocates a more holistic understanding of the child and lists some features associated with spiritual experience which he views as being part of

what it means to be fully human: feelings of awe, wonder, transcendence, of unity and wholeness, of something more', of peace and love. He proposes bracketing questions of the origin of spiritual experience, essentially religious questions, taking what is common and significant and providing opportunities for experiencing it available in the curriculum. He does not view spiritual education as a distinct subject area but rather sees the potential for a cross curricular approach where all educational experiences may enrich spiritual sensibilities. Addressing Blake's criticism of Carr's emphasis on transcendence, and Blake's call for more focus on the imminent, Lewis views spiritual exercise as being concerned with 'seeing the transcendent in the imminent and seeing the imminent in the transcendent'. Distinguishing between the two creates a false polarity, according to Lewis, as it is precisely in the interconnections between the imminent and the transcendent that spiritual practice finds its place. Siding with Blake, Lewis is critical of Carr's presentation of the spiritual dimension in education as consisting of 'celestial fireworks' or it is nothing. Lewis acknowledges Blake's point that spiritual education is an essential 'adjunct' to the world religions, however he disagrees with Blake that spiritual education cannot be conceived of outside of religious traditions. He goes on further to say that religious traditions represent 'attempts to give the spiritual a holding form, but in doing so they necessarily ignore the essential ineffability and dynamic flux of the spiritual' (p. 271). He likens the relationship which religion bears to the spiritual as the law does to justice, or a curriculum does to the broader concept of education. Yet, without law, would justice ever come to fruition and without curriculum, what kind of education might prevail?

In a later piece, Carr (2003) returns to the subject in a more comprehensive way by providing a reflective overview of approaches to spiritual education. He distinguishes between (i) the conventional or traditional view of spirituality where spiritual life and experience acquire their identity from particular faith perspectives (ii) the postmodern conception which loosens the connection between spirituality and religion and seeks to address spiritual education in a cross-curricular manner; and (iii) the constructivist view of spiritual development which seeks to identify a general pattern of spiritual development 'predicated on the idea of a universal

human search for ego-transcendence and /or eternal truth' (p. 219). Carr presents arguments for and against each of the three views and concludes that of the three, the conventional or traditional view provides the most value in the context of arriving at an approach for spiritual education (ibid, p.219).

White (1994) argues for a secular understanding of spiritual development. He calls for the uncoupling of religion from spiritual education and cites the goal of spiritual education as being the encouragement of contemplation and wonder through the arts and sensuous experiences (p. 373). Newby (1997) also views spiritual education through a secular lens and he espouses the use of story in spiritual development and even allows for the Christian story as long as it is stripped of its super-naturalist scaffolding' (p. 283). This is not acceptable to Rossiter who says that biblical storytelling pedagogy would be misleading and incomplete if it were to concentrate purely on the descriptive details of the story as if they were historical, while neglecting to emphasise the theological meaning (2012 p. 459).

Erricker (2001) writing from the perspective of radical constructivism, calls for a different approach more akin to the third option in Carr's list of three. According to Erricker, children are to find spirituality in their own experiences and personal narratives rather than through imposed narratives such as those found in religious traditions. Crawford and Rossiter (2012) disagree with such a relativist approach and propose instead that children need to 'lean' on the ready-made meanings that their parents and key reference groups provide, until they are old enough and mature enough to be more independent in their construction of personal meaning (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, pp. 24-28).

Secularist, universalist or relativist accounts of spiritual education such as those espoused above by White, Newby and Erricker are also resisted by Andrew Wright (1998) who writes about Erricker's perspective in the following way:

> Erricker's vision of a radical postmodern spiritual pedagogy would bring about the end of religious education as we know it: Knowledge would be dislocated from reality, understanding equated with unconstrained imagination, religion reduced to solipsistic experience, and education limited to the role of stimulating private desire....It opens the door to a

resurgent confessionalism—understood as the induction of children into a single non-negotiable worldview—albeit now in a postmodern rather than traditional Christian guise ... Erricker's pedagogy leaves children in a 'moral and intellectual vacuum in which they are forced to fall back on their own resources' (p. 94).

Wright (2001) calls instead for a *critical* approach to spiritual education, one rooted in a critical realist paradigm which views reality in a contingent manner. Wright names five key principles of critical spiritual education: (i) Spirituality is a controversial issue but this does not justify a postmodern relativist stance (ii) Spirituality enhances human freedom. It rejects both modern traditionalists and postmodern progressives. (iii) Spirituality is rooted in nurture and all schools endow ultimate values (if only implicitly). There can be no such thing as a spiritually neutral institution. (iv) Spirituality must be appropriated critically: 'Nurture alone will produce only spiritually contented pigs while critical education will strive to form spiritually discontented philosophers' (p. 133). (v) Authentic spirituality demands spiritual literacy in order that pupils can engage with spiritual questions in an informed, sensitive and intelligent manner. Wright's proposal for a critical approach to spiritual education which encompasses his five principles, demands a pedagogy which is capable of holding the tension between nurturing the spiritual potential of the child, doing so in a manner which respects the agency of the child and is non-indoctrinatory.

3.4.1 Summary

The above contributions provide a snapshot of the debates concerning spiritual education. It can be seen that there are those who argue for a conception of spiritual education divorced from religion, on the one hand, (Erricker 2001; Lewis 2000) and those on the other hand who claim that it is impossible for spiritual education to be untethered from religion (Crawford and Rossiter 2010; Wright 2001; Carr 1996; Blake 1996). Some call for a cross-curricular approach to spiritual education while some espouse RE as the principal locus for spiritual education. Watson (2006) points out that much of the debate is predicated on an understanding of spirituality as a 'real phenomenon'. According to her, the detachment of the term 'spirituality' from religion has led it to take on an essentialism or universalism suggesting that

there is a real phenomenon 'out there' that the word 'spirituality' points to (Watson, 2006, p. 118). She argues rather, that spirituality is inevitably defined in the beliefs and values of the person defining it and that spirituality is therefore pluralist rather than universalist. As such Watson proposes that spiritual education cannot be integrated in a cross-curricular fashion: it requires distinct curriculum space. However, according to her, RE needs to be re-conceived if it is to offer an inclusive education for spiritual development.

3.5 Godly Play

Writing within the context of Christian RE, Jerome Berryman (2006) recognises a bind:

> Religious education appears to be caught in a dangerous dilemma. If one teaches for orthodoxy by memorisation, other-directed activities, forming habits, serious initiation, single-minded duty and mentality, then the result is a deeply centred and participatory practice. The danger that results from this approach is the formation of an orthodoxy that is rigid, close-minded, defensive and sometimes violent. The opposite extreme is also problematic. Teaching religion in a way that encourages creativity, self-direction, wonder, discovery and play to find a meaningful approach to life and death is also harmful. It can result in the ironic impossibility of being unorthodox because there is no identity or community to depart from. This approach can lead to insanity at worst and an inability to cope with life's complexities at best. This dilemma is false, however, because it is possible to teach religion in a way that is deeply centring and participatory as well as open and flexible (p. 205).

The approach suggested by Berryman for teaching religion in such a way is 'playful orthodoxy' which recognises both the playful and discovering nature of the participant as well as the need to teach for closure and orthodoxy (Berryman and Hyde 2010, p. 35).

3.5.1 Playful Orthodoxy

Berryman (1995) argues that religion is a domain of creativity and he describes the creative process as a movement with an opening (expansive tendency) and closing (conserving) phase. This creative process consists of five points according to Berryman (1995, p. 94). The first step entails the disruption of one's circle of meaning where an established understanding is broken or is challenged. This

opening may be hard or soft. A tragedy or other crisis (such as sickness or death) may force a hard opening which prompts a person to recognise that the meaning by which they have lived has been broken. A soft opening comes from wonder when one's experience of what is taken for granted or consciously committed to as meaningful is challenged. The second point in the creative process is scanning, where a new frame of meaning is sought to redress the disruption encountered in the first step. The aspiration at this point is to restore cohesion. The next step involves insight; where a new or more adequate pattern or frame of meaning is formed. The fourth step is the articulation of the insight from step three and an evaluation of it in relation to the rules and structures of the particular domain. This step involves the gatekeepers of the domain. Closure is the fifth step. Berryman says that children are good at opening meaning whereas adults are generally good at closing meaning; everyone needs to have both tendencies to make meaning well according to Berryman (ibid. p. 95).

Different people enter the creative process at different points (Berryman 2005). The first three steps in the process are attractive to those with more playful and expansive tendencies. Conservative people tend to enter the process around step four, after the insight. Berryman points out that steps four and five are most attractive to the hierarchical structures of religious traditions who seek to preserve orthodoxy. When the finite game of absolute orthodoxy demands an 'assent to the creeds rather than 'yes' to the God to whom the creeds point', heresy ensues (Berryman and Hyde 2010, p. 20). Steps four and five according to Berryman, should not lead to stagnancy since the rules and structures associated with these steps provide the scaffolding for the opening and more playful tendencies represented in steps one to three. The process encapsulates the notion of playful orthodoxy, in which both the opening and closing tendencies are honoured. Berryman views religious education as an infinite game which honours both orthodoxy and playing at the edges of knowing.

Berryman has developed a pedagogy, *Godly Play*, which honours the creative process entailed in playful orthodoxy and which can address the dilemmas of

teaching orthodoxy while at the same time providing space for children to explore the invitation offered to them in critical RE of the kind posited by Wright (2001). Berryman sums it up in typical parabolic fashion:

> When content is over-emphasised the lesson becomes distant or irrelevant history and the words worshipped instead of God. When process is over-emphasised the deep grounding in the classical language gets lost in cartoons, sparkles, high energy games, and other distractions. Godly Play emphasises a balance of content and process that is unique for each child in the Montessori manner, so a class of twenty children becomes twenty classes of one as well as a community (2013, pp. 22-23)

3.5.2 Godly Play background

Godly Play is an approach to Christian religious education which has been devised and developed by Dr Jerome Berryman, an Episcopalian priest in the United States of America. He describes, Godly Play as 'an invitation to come and play with God' and speaks of it as providing children with a language to seek meaning in life. Although developed initially for use in a Sunday school setting with children, it is now used in many different contexts and with people of all ages throughout the world.

The history of Godly Play has its roots in the Montessori tradition which emerged at the start of the twentieth century. Dr Maria Montessori had a broad vision of education which can easily be overlooked in favour of a tendency to view her work in a narrow, pragmatic sense, as merely a method or approach. Miller describes Montessori as pursuing her educational work 'with a spiritual consciousness verging on mysticism' (Miller 2002). Montessori was convinced of the spiritual nature of the child and she viewed the child as a *spiritual embryo* in need of sustenance and nurturing. She had a keen interest in religious education and liturgy as evidenced in her writing (e.g. *The Mass explained to Children*). One of the hallmarks of Montessori's ontology was her emphasis on self-motivation and intrinsic rewards rather than working for praise, grades or other rewards.

The foundational work of Montessori in the area of childhood spiritual development has been continued by one of her students, Gianna Gobbi in

collaboration with another woman, Sofia Cavalletti. Cavalletti, a scripture scholar living in Rome had little experience of working with children until she was asked by a friend to do some Bible studies with that friend's children. She was so astounded by the manner in which the child engaged with scripture and with his capacity to interpret the stories, that she dedicated the remainder of her life to developing (in collaboration with Gobbi) the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. Some of the essential characteristics of *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* include the use of materials and a prepared environment (atrium); the experiential nature of the work of the child; the attitude and remedies of the adult (the adult is not in a teacher role but rather as a facilitator of learning - the actual work of learning takes place with the child's own work with their self-chosen materials, over minutes, hours, days or months with the materials. This work may be solitary or with others); and the fidelity of the catechesis to the Catholic tradition (Cavaletti 1983).

Jerome Berryman came to Italy in 1970 for the purposes of studying the Montessori Method in the leading research and education centre for Montessori, in Bergamo. During that time, he encountered the work of Cavalletti and Gobbi. On his return to the US in 1972, he set about interpreting Montessori's work and he incorporated elements of *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* into his own conception, which evolved into *Godly Play*. In the same way that Cavalletti meticulously researched the content of her catechesis by working with children, presenting material to them, observing them, maintaining presentations which worked effectively and discarding those that did not work; Berryman likewise conducted classes and adapted his materials accordingly.

Forty years on from his first encounter with Montessori and Cavalletti, Berryman in the publication of the eighth volume of Godly Play presentations says that 'it is now time to set aside the complexity and decades of development' and he calls on his followers to 'sit back, relax, and dwell in the storytelling of these lessons' (Berryman 2012, p.6).

3.5.3 Godly Play Approach

The Godly Play approach involves children and their adult guides engaging with stories from scripture and the Christian tradition towards nourishing their moral and spiritual development. This is achieved in sessions which take place in a setting where there are quality materials at the disposal of all. A Godly Play session typically lasts for approximately an hour and is modelled on the structure of Holy Eucharist. The essential elements of the experience are: crossing the threshold; building community; presentation; wondering; response time; feast; and closure. Crossing the threshold involves moving into a distinct space where the Godly Play presentation will take place and being welcomed into that space by an adult, 'doorperson', who enquires of the children if they are ready to enter into the space. As the children are welcomed into the room they encounter the 'storyteller', another adult, who is seated. The children form a circle around the storyteller who sits on the ground and once the children are ready, presents a story from scripture (or a liturgical presentation) using figures crafted in natural materials and cloths and underlays of various textures and colours. A specific method of relaying the story is employed, using a specified script which is told by heart, with the storyteller's gaze being directed at the materials on the ground rather than at the participants.

The presentation is followed by an invitation to reflect on the presentation through a series of wondering questions posed by the storyteller. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. The wondering creates a safe environment where children can offer suggestions, explore and imagine together. The building of community is very important in Godly Play and one of its main objectives is to 'show children how to work together as a community by supporting and respecting each other in one another's quest (1995, p. 17). Children and their spiritual mentors are involved in sharing, waiting patiently, wondering collaboratively and having fun together. The period of collective wondering is followed by some response time in which the children choose some work to further deepen their response and to assist them in a reflection on what they have encountered. It could be a choice of playing with the materials from the presentation they have just witnessed; or

materials from a previous presentation; or art response materials; or reading from reference books; or just sitting in silence. This element of Godly Play is a dimension which sets it apart from other prominent methodologies used in primary schools which nurture the spirituality of children e.g. meditation and mindfulness. The children move away from the circle to engage in their selected activity. In true Montessori manner the storyteller and the doorperson do not engage with the children throughout this time. With practice and experience, the children come to learn that the motivation for this work is intrinsic and that they will not be expected to present it for approval from the adults. Children instigate interaction with the adults and not vice versa. It is a safe space for them to respond in whatever way they choose as they learn to realise that there will be no 'show and tell' afterwards. The session draws to a close with the children tidying away the materials and returning to the circle for a feast during which children are served a small drink and piece of fruit/treat by their peers. The entire session concludes with a suitable closure such as a farewell message or perhaps a prayer

3.5.4 Literature on Godly Play

There has been a dearth of serious scholarly work about the Godly Play process and writing on the methodology has really only begun to emerge in very recent years. Two reasons are speculated for this by this researcher. Firstly, it is a relatively new methodology which is just at the opening phases of its creative process. Secondly, although there are a number of academics and teachers involved in Godly Play internationally, the nature of Godly Play practitioners in the main are people who work in the field on a voluntary basis. Some writing on Godly Play tends to be descriptive in nature (e.g. Graham 2007; Stonehouse 2010) and this is helpful in disseminating information on the method to a wider audience, however a more critical approach to writing in the field emanating from practitioners is necessary.

Seaman's work (2005) is beneficial in terms of addressing teacher perceptions of Godly Play. She describes a small scale project which was sponsored by the National Society (Church of England) for promoting RE in which teachers from a group of community and Church primary schools were enabled to explore Godly

Play. Seaman's article is more descriptive than evaluative. She found that teachers were surprised by the amount of stillness and silence that was generated in a Godly Play lesson. The response time during which children were totally self-directed was liberating for both pupils and teachers, although for many teachers this was a difficult time in the sessions at first and they had to learn to trust the process and resist the temptation to initiate conversation with the children. For many teachers keeping one's eyes on the materials seemed unnatural especially in a classroom culture where engaging eye contact between teacher and pupil is the norm. Seaman found that in time, teachers began to reflect more deeply and found that they were not just rethinking how they approach RE and spiritual development, but that the experience made them rethink the whole process of teaching and learning.

Prominent writers in the field of children's spirituality have endorsed Godly Play as an appropriate methodology for nurturing the spiritual potential of children. Nye (2009) encourages the use of Godly Play since it fulfils the six conditions identified by her for ensuring spiritual foundations. Hyde (2010) found that each of the four characteristics of children's spirituality identified by him in his original research of 1998 (i.e. the felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning, and spiritual questing), were brought to the fore and nourished as a result of the Godly Play process. Cheryl Minor, a distinguished practitioner in the field of Godly Play conducted doctoral research and her findings indicate some evidence that spiritual well-being is increased when children have experience with the Godly Play method (Minor and Grant 2014). Minor's use of the Feeling Good Living Life Instrument (Fisher 2004) in her study has been criticised by Fisher (2015).

An article by Hemmings (2011) in the *Journal of Religious Education* announces that many schools in Australia have begun to adapt the principles of Godly Play to open scripture in the RE classroom. Like much of the literature, Hemming's article is mainly descriptive and elaborates on the methodology of Godly Play with little insight into its effectiveness or the challenges it presents in the traditional classroom setting beyond suggesting inviting a parent helper to act as doorperson. Two critiques of aspects of Godly Play have emerged in the Australian context.

Rossiter (2012) expresses some reservations regarding the extension of its use as a principal pedagogy into primary school RE. One of his concerns is that since Godly Play utilises concrete play objects in its presentation of scripture stories, this could lead to an ingraining of 'a literal/historical interpretation' which may create difficulties subsequently for both the children and their religious educators when the children's literal meanings need to be transformed into symbolic/theological meaning (Rossiter, p.3). Rossiter also raises the challenge of Godly Play teachers feeling reluctant to clarify the Christian theological interpretation because this might inhibit children's wondering (ibid. p. 6). The former of Rossiter's concerns requires a longitudinal research project to assess its proposition and the latter highlights the need for rigorous training in the methodology. Grajczonek and Truasheim (2015) question the place of Godly Play in educational contexts which are outside parish faith communities, and where it cannot be assumed that all who participate are believers coming together to 'share faith and to have that faith strengthened' (p. 1). They point out that Berryman's original intention was that Godly Play should take place in a faith community such as that of a parish. While some of their observations are very valid, one gets the sense overall from the writers that there is a degree of unfamiliarity with the practice of Godly Play. Indeed one of the criticisms levelled at it is simply inaccurate:

> … this wondering phase does not pay attention to enabling children's voice and agency as they are required to passively respond rather than initiate their own questions, confirmations and wonderings (Grajczonek and Truasheim 2015 p. 10).

In addition, they see Godly Play as belonging predominantly to early years' settings since 'children's rapidly developing cognitive and interpretive capacities' would merit a move from play-like orientation. This is contrary to practice on the ground where Godly Play is effectively utilised in a variety of settings with different age groups, young and old.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter commenced by addressing the literature on children's spirituality. It can be seen from this literature review that that from a relatively sparse field of

research into children's spirituality prior to the 1990s (perhaps influenced by the legacy of Goldman), new insights into children's spiritual lives have emerged which recognise the spiritual potential of children and their immense capacity in this domain. The place of spirituality in education was next considered and debates about such a role were presented. The chapter concluded with an overview of Godly Play, outlining its characteristics and the process of Godly Play sessions. The content of the next chapter is concerned with the methodology pertaining to the research.

Chapter 4
Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research design process. It identifies the alignment of this research with critical realism and details the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this approach. It explains why the philosophical underpinnings of critical realism rather than that of others (e.g. positivism) provide the best affiliation with this research project. This chapter also charts the decision making process concerning the choice of an appropriate methodology, Case Study, and methods for data collection and analysis. The chapter concludes with an overview of the ethical issues in relation to the research.

4.2 Philosophical Underpinnings

All research is rooted in philosophical beliefs and assumptions and the exercise of engaging with the literature concerning such philosophical underpinnings can be challenging. The primary challenge lies in deciphering the distinctive language and nomenclature of the discipline. There is an abundance of terms used and there is frequent conflicting use of such terms by different authors (Losch, 2009, p.85). The framework suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is adhered to in this study. It involves three fundamental questions which should be addressed by researchers during the design phase of their research. These questions concern the ontological understanding of the researcher (the nature of reality); their epistemological stance (how we know what we know) and the methodological approach (appropriate lens and strategies for acquiring knowledge).

4.2.1 Ontology

The philosophical underpinnings of a study are encompassed by its ontology and epistemology. These concepts are considered in a general sense first of all and then as they pertain to the present study. Ontology relates to philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality and within research there are two main ontological world views – objectivism and constructionism (Bryman 2012). Naïve realism and radical

relativism are polarised ontologies which dwell at opposite ends of the ontology spectrum from objectivism to constructionism respectively. This dual classification is simplistic and belies the complexities of ontologies which reside somewhere along the spectrum. However it is worthwhile describing each of these two major positions in order to understand other ontologies such as critical realism which represents an intermediate position between naïve realism and relativism (Barbour 1966 cited in Losch 2009, p. 89).

The objectivist approach to research was the dominant paradigm used in research for most of the last century. Its ontological assumption is realism. Realism assumes that there is a reality which can be discovered and measured objectively. This reality exists independently of us. Realism is the foundation for traditional science where 'truth' or facts are determined by scientific laws through experimentation and which can lead to generalisations (Crossan 2003). Constructionism, on the other hand assumes that the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions and thus social reality can be understood via the perspectives of 'social actors enmeshed in meaning making activities' (Heese-Biber and Leavy 2011, p.5). The ontological position underpinning constructivism is relativism. Relativists believe that reality is constructed and that there are numerous constructions of reality which evolve from culture and experience (Killam 2013). Subjective meaning is important to relativism and there is no conception of an absolute truth within this ontology (Killam 2013). It denies that reality exists beyond our knowledge of it. In this sense, constructionism favours epistemology over ontology. Since relativists deny that there is such a thing as objective truth and therefore questions of ontology and epistemology are conflated– one cannot talk about the world apart from one's knowledge of it. Crotty (1998), a prominent writer in the field of research design is guilty of this conflation as he omits ontology from his four-stage procedure for navigating through the research process. The collapse of ontology and epistemology into one is referred to by Bhaskar (1975) as the 'epistemic fallacy' whereby the nature of reality is confused with what is known of reality. However, for any theory about the nature of knowledge (epistemology) Bhaskar claims that one must have a presupposition about what the world is like.

The world cannot be reduced to what is empirically known of it. In short, realist (objectivist) ontology assumes an external reality which is objective, static and measurable whereas relativist (constructionist) ontology attests to a reality which is subjective, contextual and socially constructed.

4.2.2 Epistemology

A researcher's epistemology should flow from their ontological position. Epistemology concerns assumptions about the best way of inquiring into the nature of reality. The epistemological frameworks which correspond with objectivism and constructionism are positivism and interpretivism. Bryman (2012) defines positivism as an epistemological position that advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality (p. 28). The epistemological stance of interpretivism, according to Bryman, views subject matter of the social sciences as being different from the natural sciences and calls for a research strategy which requires the researcher to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (p. 30).

Neither an entirely objectivist stance nor a wholly constructionist position adequately addresses the requirements of this research as both have fundamental shortcomings in this respect. Clark (2008) highlights positivism's failure to acknowledge the inherent social nature of knowledge development and its neglect of any underlying unobservable, unmeasurable factors. Such a failure would deem an objectivist stance as unsuitable for a study addressing the spiritual capacities of children which are largely intangible by their very essence. In addition, the use of 'controls' in positivist research to eliminate the complexity of social contexts is unsuitable in this research and although this research will inevitably be complex, these complexities will be embraced as an inherent part of the research. Pure positivism's suspicion of the numinous (Wright 2009) is incompatible with this study which anticipates an openness on the part of children to a transcendent source. Finally it is clear that this research does not fit into an objective framework as the interplay between the researcher and participants will be strong.

On the other hand, a wholly constructionist approach is also inappropriate for this research. Crotty (1998) describes constructionism as an 'all meaningful reality… contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings, and their world, and developed within an essentially social context' (p.42). This over-privileging of an anthropocentric perspective which may be suspicious of truth claims is incompatible with the ontological assumption of this project which espouses a belief in ultimate truth (God) and which utilises a Christian form of religious education.

However there are aspects of both objectivism and constructionism which are compatible with the underlying philosophical assumptions of the research project. In common with positivism, the research is rooted in realist ontology and assumes an ultimate reality (God). The epistemological understandings of social constructionism are conducive to the study since it requires a social dimension and engages in practices which encourage exploration and active participation. A paradigm which addresses the shortcomings of both approaches and embraces their respective appropriateness for this research is required and critical realism has been selected as the most appropriate framework.

4.2.3 Critical realism

Critical realism is a philosophy of science which stands midway between a 'Positivism that has failed and a more current postmodernism, which, from a critical realist perspective is equally flawed' (Archer, Collier and Porpora 2004, p.1). Critical realism is the most prominent manifestation of realism in the social sciences (Maxwell 2012) and it is most closely associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014). However there are many advocates of critical realism within the field of social science including Archer (1998; 2004), Collier (1994; 2004), Hartwig (2007) and Porpora (2005). While there are some nuanced differences amongst proponents of critical realism, all are in agreement concerning three fundamental theses – ontological realism, epistemic contingency and judgemental rationality (Scott 2007).

Ontological realism claims that reality exists independently of our ability to perceive it. Critical realists assert that reality is complex and cannot be fully grasped. Critical realists look at the research process as a 'constant digging in the ontological depths of reality' which is taken to be layered (Alvesson 2009, p. 43). Bhaskar (1997) conceived of the existence of three overlapping layers of reality, the real, actual and empirical, each with its own distinctive properties and characteristics. The *real* refers to underlying mechanisms or structures - agencies that are independent of people and which may or may not be manifested as actual occurrences or empirical events. The real cannot be fully measured or adequately described. It can only be speculated upon. The *actual* relates to the occurrence of events if and when the mechanisms belonging to the domain of the real are activated. Whilst the real cannot be observed, the actual can. The *empirical* is the domain of experience and relates to that which can be seen or sensed by humans.

Epistemic relativism refers to the idea that our knowledge of reality is limited and is relative to the activities and belief systems of groups of people in time and space (Scott 2007). There are many variants of epistemic relativism but it is characterised by an opposition to epistemic foundationalism which posits certainty of knowledge. Epistemic relativism attests to the fallible nature of scientific inquiry (Clark 2008). Its claim is that it is impossible to acquire certain knowledge and our understanding of reality is 'partial, contingent and often simply wrong' (Wright 2009, p. 167). There is an acceptance of the possibility of alternative valid accounts of any phenomenon and all theories are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and worldview. (Maxwell 2012, p. 5). Polkinghorne posits that all that can be achieved in the scientific process will be verisimilitude, not truth and that researchers can only expect to provide an adequate account, not perfect but good enough (Losch 2009 p.91). Martin speaks of the mark of true knowledge as not being exhaustive, indubitable and unchanging, but rather that it 'heuristically prepares one to recognise the ways in which the object may manifest itself unexpectedly' (2001, p. 253).

Judgemental Rationality refers to the proposition that it is impossible not to hold a faith commitment to a particular worldview regardless of whether that faith commitment is from a secular or religious perspective- at the heart of knowledge is faith (Martin 2001). Judgemental rationality proposes further that despite the acceptance of different theories of the world, this should not imply that a particular understanding of the world has the same truth value as any other. Judgemental rationality assumes that it is possible to make informed judgements between competing truth claims (Wright, 2009). Without this assumption we may become consumed by a liberalism which sees all viewpoints as equally valid and which stifles discussion or questioning by claiming charges of intolerance and threats of undermining others' freedom. On the contrary, critical realism promotes discussion. Archer, Collier and Porpora (2004) use the simile of 'Haverim' from the Jewish tradition in order to describe the process of engaging in discussion and arriving at judgemental rationality. Within Judaism, Haverim are study partners who inspire each other's intellectual growth by 'lovingly challenging each other's claims to the truth'. Archer, Collier and Porpora say that within critical realism 'it is Haverim that we all ought to be to each other' (2004 p.19).

4.2.3.1 Critical realism in dialogue with Religion

Some of the most influential advocates of Bhaskar's critical realism hold the view that critical realism can provide a 'friendly context for entertaining religious views' and theological questions (Hartwig 2007, p.356). Indeed the work of Roy Bhaskar was pre-dated by an approach which emerged in the discipline of theology, i.e. Theological Critical Realism (TCR). TCR was developed in the 1960s against a backdrop of the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences and emanated from the work of Ian Barbour (1966). Barbour, a scientist and a theologian used the term 'critical realism' to denote a philosophical position which affirmed a world ontologically independent of human observation and the idea that knowledge of the world is fallible (Hartwig 2007). Barbour's proposition is akin to Bhaskarian critical realism as it is understood in the social sciences. Likewise he advocates a constructionist view of epistemology by recognising that the observer modulates the process of observation itself and that the quest for truth can modify the truth

that is encountered (Barbour 1966 cited in Mc Grath 2012, p. 165). Barbour's ideas were influenced by Bernard Lonergan (1957) and have been developed by among others, Polyani (1969); Torrance (1969); Polkinghorne (1991); Peacocke (1993); and Mc Grath (2001).

At the turn of the new millennium critical realism within the social sciences entered a new phase which has been labelled the 'spiritual turn'. This emanated from Bhaskar's conviction about the importance of discerning a transcendent stratum as an integral element of any account of reality. In his book *Reflections on Meta Reality* (2012), Bhaskar argued for a broader conception of the *real* to include the transcendent or what he called the 'meta' which is 'a level beyond or behind or between reality' (p. 68). Critical realism's acknowledgement of the domain of the transcendent has met with mixed reactions among advocates of the approach (Mc Grath 2012, p. 160). However it has galvanised three of its renowned disciples to call for the consideration of religious issues as live issues within critical realism and the social sciences. Archer, Collier and Porpora, 2004 request a corrective to the privilege afforded to atheism as the default position within research methodology and academia (p.15).

A greater link between TCR and Bhaskarian critical realism is advocated by Alister E. Mc Grath, a prominent Christian theologian who bemoans the mutual ignorance of many Christian theologians and Bhaskarian critical realists alike, of the considerable merits and potential of Bhaskarian critical realism for questions of theology (Mc Grath 2012). He calls for more widespread engagement and for deeper conversations and it is clear that this is a demanding request as it requires greater knowledge of their respective disciplines, from both sides.

4.2.3.2 Compatibility of critical realism with this study

Critical realism caters for the ontological understandings of this research. Ontological realism with a critical dimension is central to the research which is premised on a belief in a transcendent presence within children and a conviction that spirituality has an objective existence independent of our consciousness it. The stratified layers of reality espoused by critical realism fit well with the concept of

spirituality and observations of spiritual practices. Spirituality is real –it cannot be seen but it can be speculated upon (the real layer); although spirituality cannot be seen, its effects can be observed through events stirred by spirituality such as a child's sense of wonder which consumes their attention at a given moment (the actual); the position of the observer/researcher is captured in the third layer of the empirical.

One of the hallmarks of critical realism is its combination of realist ontology with epistemological relativism. Smith and Deemer see this as logically contradictory (Smith and Deemer 2000 cited in Maxwell 2012, p. 12). Negotiating this perceived paradox is without doubt a challenge. According to Losch (2009) the term 'critical realism' has been used in connection with different epistemological positions (p. 85). A decision was made to identify social constructionism as the favoured epistemological position for this study. This decision was influenced by and manifested through two main factors: (i) the principal tool for interaction (Godly Play); (ii) consideration of the theoretical underpinnings of critical realism by some theorists within the field of RE.

Godly Play was chosen as the tool for use during the research precisely because it can hold the tension between maintaining the orthodoxy (doctrinal propositions) of a tradition (realist ontology) while at the same time honouring the agency, enquiry and creativity of participants (social constructionist epistemology). Berryman (2013) concurs with this assertion.

Roose and Büttner (2009) writing about the process of conducting Theology with Children (TWC) contend that a realist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology are compatible and that a belief in revelation can be encompassed within social constructionism. The writers were responding to Andrew Wright's position on TWC which critiques social constructionism for its neglect of ultimate truth (Wright 2009). Wright's position regarding critical realism in the broader field of RE is also challenged by Anna Strhan (2010) who is critical of Wright's version of critical realism which gives an excessive dominance to instrumental

reasoning and is neglectful of the social reality of religion. Another commentator, Martin (2001) contends that critical realism is an especially advantageous assumptive framework because it is never content with knowledge about an object, but pushes beyond knowledge to contact and engage with whatever we know. He asserts that this is best managed by utilising constructivist strategies.

These accounts parallel the move in RE from a transmissive model which was dominant in the past to one which is more closely aligned with social constructionism, all the while maintaining the tenets of a particular faith tradition where that is required (e.g. within a denominational school context such as the research contexts for this study). This demands a sensitive and inclusive approach to epistemology, whilst maintaining a robust ontology (Shipway 2011, p.3). The following quotation from O'Sullivan (2007) effectively captures such an interplay between ontological realism and epistemological constructionism and captures the perspective adopted in this present study:

> Construction by the learner does have a part to play, during the evaluation of what is learnt and also, potentially, as a necessary accompaniment of the process of ownership of religious truth. However, in religious education, construction is only part of the process and, I would submit, of secondary importance, both in the sense that it occurs chronologically only after and in the light of the primary communication of religious truth from the religious tradition, and also in the sense that constructed truth remains, from a religious perspective, subordinate in importance to truth that is discovered and revealed. (p. 130).

4.3 Methodology

Having outlined the ontological and epistemological commitments of the research, the next decision according to Guba and Lincoln (1994) concerns the choice of a methodology which is compatible with the philosophical underpinnings. It is at the level of methodology that the great debate between qualitative and quantitative approaches becomes heightened. Descriptions of the great paradigmatic wars abound in the literature of the closing decades of the last century. However with qualitative research having received due recognition and status, the warring has abated and the situation of a détente now prevails. (Hammersley 1992) The trend in recent literature has thus moved away from the previous sparring preoccupation

between advocates of qualitative and quantitative forms of research. According to Hammersley, the juxtaposition of qualitative methodologies versus quantitative forms was an oversimplification and in his view, research methodology should not be seen in terms of competing paradigms, but rather 'as involving a complex of assumptions and arguments, some of them in conflict, and a range of strategies and techniques that have advantages and disadvantages for particular goals and in particular circumstances' (1992, p. 197).

Differing research methodologies including ethnography, action research, phenomenology and case study were considered for this current research study. They were evaluated for the instrumentality they offered and Case Study methodology was chosen as the most appropriate overall strategy for the research. According to Yazan (2015) case study is one of the most frequently used qualitative research methodologies. Robson's definition of a case study is the preferred one from the literature. He states that case study is:

> A strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (1993, p. 146).

This investigation is empirical since it involves the gathering of data. The cases, or units of analysis in question for this research are groups of children. The research involves a study of the values they attribute to a spiritual experience and the characteristics they themselves exhibit during that experience. The context is a school setting.

Yin (1984), Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) are considered to be the seminal contributors in the area of case study research (Creswell et al. 2007). Each has their own approach to case study methodology and Yazan (2015) recommends either utilising the tools offered by one of the methodologists or choosing an 'amalgam of tools from two or three of them' (p.135). With regard to epistemological stance, Merriam's commitment to constructivism is most closely aligned to this study. Although Yin doesn't provide his readers with an explicit articulation of his orientation, interpreters such as Crotty (1998) have identified his positivist leanings.

Stake's perspective is that of constructivism and non-determinalism, the latter of which is considered too loose for this study.

In terms of design, Yin (1984) explains that a case study may be exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. An exploratory case study pertains where little is known of the phenomenon; a descriptive one is useful for providing an overview of a particular phenomenon; explanatory case studies may seek out causal relationships. Stake (1995) distinguishes between intrinsic case studies where there is a desire to discover more about a unique phenomenon with distinctive qualities not found in other situations; instrumental case studies which aim to generate in-depth understanding of a more generally conceived phenomenon; collective case studies which are similar to instrumental case studies but investigation occurs through a number of cases. Stake's distinction between intrinsic and instrumental case studies is helpful in arriving at a decision concerning appropriateness or otherwise of the designs. He says that for intrinsic case studies, case is dominant and is of the highest importance. For instrumental case studies, issue is dominant (1995, p. 16). Merriam identifies three forms of case study - descriptive, interpretive and evaluative. Descriptive case studies present detailed description of the phenomenon. Interpretive case studies seek to generate theory about the phenomenon under study. Evaluative case studies include description, explanation and judgement.

Having examined the various descriptions, Stake's collective case study design was deemed most appropriate for this study as its emphasis on issue is considered to be very important. The case is the group of children. The issues are the children's spiritual experiences and qualities exhibited. Although intrinsically bound together, the latter is of more prominence in this study. The particular situation of each case is not paramount. For example, the gender makeup of the case, or the socio-economic context of the case are not considerations which are to the forefront in the research design. Baxter and Black drawing on Stake (1995) explain this nuance well:

> The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case is often looked at in depth, its

contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, and because it helps the researcher pursue the external interest. The case may or may not be seen as typical of other cases (2008, p. 547).

Stake's collective case study design also fits better than opting baldly for a multiple case study design which is focused on exploring differences within and between cases. In such an instance the goal is to replicate findings across cases. The rationale for conducting the present study in more than one context, is to ensure some validity in the research findings by seeking reassurance that a given case is not an outlier.

4.4 Conducting research with children

Various writers (e.g. Dockett, and Perry, 2007; Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2012; Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, and Robinson, 2010) have highlighted some tensions which can exist in conducting research with children. The two issues of most relevance to the present study are ethical issues and the impact of children's participation. The involvement of children in the research process involves the highest level of vigilance in relation to ethical validity. An application for ethical approval was submitted to the Research Ethics Approval Committee of Dublin City University. Having deemed that all necessary requirements were strictly adhered to, the Ethics Approval Committee granted permission for the research to proceed (c.f. Appendix A).

A further principal tension which dominated this study was that of the impact of children's participation. Broström (2005 cited in Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2012 p. 293) questions whether or not it is in the best interest of children to uncover details of their lives which may be private. He cautions against adults' research agendas usurping children's rights to privacy and protection. This is a concern which this researcher shares and one which she gave serious consideration to. Godly Play as a methodology honours both the privacy and the agency of the child. The adult leader is encouraged not to question children about their activities during the response phase of a session. In essence this research was seeking to enter this domain and to find out what was going on for the children at this point. Is this

acceptable? Would it compromise the children? In order to address this, a decision was made to separate the formal research activity from the Godly Play sessions by time and location. In addition children were invited to partake in the research and signed a consent form indicating that they were happy to take part.

According to Green and Hill 'time and trust go hand in hand' (2005, p. 17). This principle has been to the forefront in this study. The study consisted of three distinct phases and engagement with personnel in the two research sites was developed over a period of three years by means of the researcher working as a peripatetic teacher delivering Godly Play sessions in each of the schools. During that time in the schools, the researcher created a sense of trust around the work and the manner in which it was conducted. All participating teachers were very positive about the work and expressed a comfort working in the manner espoused by Godly Play. Both principals were keen for the researcher to continue the work and were very supportive of the research process.

4.5 Research participants

The participants in the research consisted of groups of children from a range of classes drawn from two schools, School A and School B. School A is a senior primary school situated in a suburb of Dublin city in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. School B is a primary school situated in another suburb of Dublin city. It is also located in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Both schools are mixed in terms of gender makeup. Both schools are under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Dublin. Whilst the research will be situated firmly within a denominational school setting, the population in both research settings is by no means homogeneous. Children in both schools come from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds and include a variety of faith traditions and different world views. Different groups of children were involved during each of the three phases of the research process which are outlined in more detail in the data collection section below. In total, approximately one hundred and forty children were involved in the study.

4.6 Data Collection

One of the fundamental aspects of Case Study research is that no one particular method is sufficient to capture the essence of the phenomena. Data collection in case study research is therefore carried out by means of multiple methods. Yin (1984) emphasises the need for data to converge in a triangulating manner and he suggests utilisation of interviews, archival records, participant observation, direct observation, documentation and artefacts. Yin also includes the possibility of using quantitative data collection methods (e.g. surveys) during the case study. Stake 1995 validates forms of evidence which are 'impressionistic' such as opinions of researchers in the early stages of the research process before any data is gathered formally (p. 49). The primary data collection tools which were used in the present study were interviews and observation, In addition data collection methods modelled on the Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001) were employed. This approach provides a useful means for including the voice of the child and assumes the competent child paradigm. It mirrors the approach and underlying assumptions of Godly Play (Berryman 1995) which offers children a number of different means of expression: art, reading, writing, silence, play, and trusts the child's own capacity to engage with the materials and produce data of benefit to the study. Data collection in this study consisted of three distinct phases.

4.6.1 Phase One of the Research (Pilot phase)

The pilot phase of the research (hereafter known as Phase One) took place in a mixed senior national school (School A) situated in a suburb of Dublin city in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. The research took place over a period of three weeks in May/June 2013. Two fourth classes (10-11 year old children) and their teachers were involved in the research. The purpose of the Phase 1 of the research was to ascertain teachers' views on the process of Godly Play and to seek their observations regarding the value which their pupils ascribed to the process, as well as the characteristics exhibited by the children. Formal feedback was not sought from the children during this phase. The primary reason for not consulting the children related to ethical requirements which had not been sought at this pilot stage. This was the first time the researcher had the opportunity to practise the art of

Godly Play within a traditional classroom setting and much of the focus was on the plausibility of conducting Godly Play in such a setting. However it was possible to glean the children's reactions to the sessions through their teachers' and the researcher's own observations. Informal opportunities for conversations with some children did occur when shifting Godly Play materials within the school, when preparing the feast with some helpers and when cleaning up afterwards. In addition, at the conclusion of the last session, a circle-time session was included and the children were asked to finish the sentence 'What I think about Godly Play is……'

Prior to commencement of the research, the researcher visited the school and spoke to the two teachers of the classes involved. The structure of Godly Play was outlined to the teachers and they were asked to assume the role of doorperson during the sessions. The importance of the teachers not acting in a disciplinarian manner, unless the behaviour of any child became unruly, was emphasised. The purpose of Phase One of the research was outlined to the teachers and they were asked to become participant observers in the process. Each teacher's permission to conduct an interview with them after the three week's input, was sought. Finally the teachers were thanked for their agreement to participate in the research. The school was subsequently visited on one day each week, for three consecutive weeks. On those days Godly Play sessions were conducted with the two fourth classes individually and the sessions lasted approximately one hour each. On the fourth week interviews were conducted with the two teachers.

A brief description of each of the classes is outlined below:

Class A - This class was a fourth class consisting of twenty children (aged 10-11). Their teacher, Teacher A, was a newly qualified teacher (NQT). The class was a mannerly, well-behaved class. Teacher A was present in the classroom for all of the sessions, apart from one part of the second session as she was dealing with a disciplinary issue which had arisen at yard time. The timing of the Godly Play sessions occurred after the morning break-time. During the break, the researcher prepared the classroom for the session, so that the room was fully set up upon the class' return from the yard. The setting up of the classroom consisted of moving desks to the side

of the room and placing the chairs in a circle. Art and construction response materials were laid out and the food for the feast was left ready for the helpers to prepare for serving. As the weeks progressed, it also consisted of having materials from the previous presentations on display for the children to work with during response time if they so chose.

Class B: This class was a fourth class consisting of twenty two children. Their teacher, Teacher B was an experienced teacher who had worked in the school for more than ten years. The class was mannerly and well behaved. Teacher B was present in the classroom for all of the sessions. Class B's Godly Play sessions took place in the morning. Since the class was in their classroom each time the researcher arrived, the class teacher adopted the practice of removing the children from the classroom for a brief walk so that the room could be set up in their absence. Upon their return, they crossed the threshold into a changed space.

The Godly Play sessions were conducted in a manner consistent with Berryman's (1991) approach as outlined earlier in Chapter 1. The presentations which took place were: Week One: The Great Family, the story of Abraham and Sarah which is told with the aid of a sandbag and figures; Week Two: The Parable of the Good Samaritan; Week Three: The Great Flood, Noah's Ark, a story which had been requested by the children following the second week.

After each session, a brief reflection on the part of the researcher regarding the process was recorded. This exercise enabled her to identify emerging themes which were subsequently pursued with the teachers in the interview process. The interviews were conducted in a very informal manner as conversations which were led by the researcher and which included prompt questions, that were sufficiently open to allow the teachers to steer them in whatever direction they saw fit.

4.6.2 Phase Two of the Research

Phase Two of the research took place during the school year, 2013/2014 in a mixed national school, School B, which is situated in a suburb of Dublin city in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. The school's population is made up of children from a number of different cultural backgrounds including many newcomer children and

children from the traveller community. Children come from a variety of faith traditions and other world views. Two classes, a second class (8-9 year olds) and a sixth class (12-13 year olds) were involved in the research. The primary purpose of Phase 2 was to ascertain the value which the children attributed to Godly Play.

Ten Godly Play sessions occurred once a week for each individual class in place of their normal RE class. Each session lasted approximately one hour. These sessions took place in a Resource Room and each class left their base classroom to attend the Godly Play sessions therein. The class teachers were present for the sessions. The final Godly Play session which included a Godly Play presentation, the story of The Passover, took place on the 11th June, 2014, in each class' own classroom.

4.6.2.1 Phase Two: Part 1

Data collection from the research participants took place in two parts over two separate days. There was divergence between what was requested of the 2nd class and the 6th class during data collection.

Part 1 (2nd Class): This occurred at the end of the final Godly Play session and it involved the children returning to their desks and writing or drawing about their experience of Godly Play throughout the year. They were invited to do this in an anonymous fashion.

Part 1 (6th Class): This also occurred at the end of their final Godly Play session and it involved the children returning to their desks and writing or drawing about their experience of Godly Play throughout the year. They were invited to do this in an anonymous fashion in the same way as second class had done. In addition to this reflective exercise, on that day, the sixth class pupils also took part in a role-play using a method called 'conscience alley' (often used in drama education). The children formed two rows facing each other with a space between them to allow an 'actor' to walk down the alley.

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Figure 2: Conscience Alley approach

The role play consisted of the researcher playing the role of an influential person in education circles who was considering banishing matters of a spiritual/religious nature from schools. The children had to try to influence the actor's conscience by providing arguments as to why or why not spiritual matters should be included in schools. They were requested to act as the conscience of the actor tossing back and forth the ideas which might run through her head and which might inform her decision. The deliberations of the children throughout the 'conscience alley' activity were recorded in audio.

Subsequent to the Part 1 sessions on that day, both class' writings and drawings as well as the contributions of the 6th Class throughout the 'conscience alley' role play, were analysed by coding the data, and emergent themes were identified. These themes were then articulated into fourteen statements about the Godly Play process and these statements formed the basis for Part 2 of the research which took place the following week on the 18th June, 2014.

4.6.2.2 Phase Two: Part 2

During the second phase of data collection, a slightly different approach was taken once again with each of the two cohorts of pupils:

Part 2 (2nd Class): Data collection with the second class consisted of focus interviews with groups of three to four pupils where information was sought from the pupils about their drawings from the previous week. The second class pupils were also presented with the list of the fourteen statements which had emerged from the previous week's sixth class contributions. The second class children were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements (thumbs up for definite agreement, thumbs down for disagreement and thumbs straight out for sort of agreement). In essence the views of the second class were being elicited in

order to confirm the validity or otherwise of the statements which had emanated from the sixth class children's written responses and also to examine whether there would be differences between the two cohorts.

Part 2 (6th Class): The second phase of data collection for sixth class pupils involved them being presented with the fourteen statements and asked to rank order them in terms of their level of agreement with the statements (one being the most important and 14 the least important to them). This was done individually by each pupil first, who placed their responses in an envelope and gave them to me. The pupils' responses were anonymous and no form of identification was sought from them. However they were asked to indicate on their envelopes whether they came from a home where they learned a lot about God (indicated by a green mark on their envelope); where God was talked about infrequently in their home (orange mark); or where God or matters of a spiritual matter held no importance at home (red). Following this, the pupils formed groups of four and carried out the same exercise, but this time they were to choose just their top four statements. The results of each group's deliberations were then brought to a whole class setting and a circle time discussion ensued – the key points of which were recorded in writing.

4.6.3 Phase Three of the Research

The purpose of the third phase of the research was to delve deeper and to allow the children to interact freely with materials from Godly Play presentations as well as the response materials. Six groups of children of varying sizes, from three to five children, took part in Phase three. There were four groups from School A and two groups from School B. Each group was gathered in a room apart from their classroom for a period of approximately ninety minutes. When they entered the room they were shown set up of the room and offered time to interact with the materials in a manner of their own choosing. The children were informed that the researcher would move around the room and chat to them at different stages if they were willing. They were also informed that the sessions were being recorded. Each session concluded with a feast.

4.7 Data Analysis

Following an investigation of literature pertaining to qualitative data analysis, a decision was made by the researcher to utilise a thematic analysis approach which seeks to define themes within the data, and organise such themes into a structure to aid interpretation (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 206). Template Analysis (King 2012), a particular form of thematic analysis, was chosen because it allows for a relatively high degree of structure in the process of data analysis but it also has the flexibility to adapt to the needs of a particular study. King describes Template Analysis as being an iterative process where revisions are made en route as possible emergent themes become visible and where the project is modified as it progresses. This flexibility is consonant with the process which this study required.

There are six main steps involved in carrying out Template Analysis: (i) A researcher familiarises themselves with the accounts to be analysed (ii) Preliminary coding is carried out (iii) The emerging themes are placed into meaningful clusters (iv) An initial coding template is designed (v) The initial template is applied to further data and is modified if necessary (vi) The template is finalised and applied to the full data set (Brooks et al. 2015, p. 203). Template Analysis also advocates the use of *a priori* themes which allow researchers to define some themes in advance of the analysis process (Brooks et al. 2015 p. 218).

Recordings from each phase of the data collection were transcribed following each distinct phase and the first three steps of Template Analysis were implemented i.e. the researcher familiarised herself with the transcripts pertaining to each distinct phase; coded the data in a fashion which was informed by a priori themes which had emerged from the literature or the previous phases (in the case of Phases 2 and 3); and placed the emergent themes into clusters. The iterative nature of the research with its consecutive phases lent well to the use of a priori themes and these were further developed following each particular phase of the research process in accordance with an adapted version of steps (iv) and (v) of the process outlined above.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of critical realism as the framework for the study, involving a critical realist ontology and a social constructivist epistemology. It explained how critical realism was chosen as it was the approach which was most congruent with the understandings espoused in this research study. The choice of methodology was case study and data collection involved interviews and the collection of artefacts. There were three distinct phases in the data collection process and these were described in the chapter. Data was analysed using Template Analysis. The next chapter presents the findings of the research.

Chapter 5

Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the research. Each distinct phase of the research from Phase One to Phase Three is outlined separately and is followed by discussion. The chapter concludes with a summary of the entire research process.

Many writers including Bazeley (2009) speak of the inherent risk to researchers of presenting findings in a merely descriptive manner without much depth. They caution against regurgitating what was said in interviews as direct quotations and presenting them as findings. King (2012) on the other hand critiques this as an oversimplification and says that there is no such thing as mere description and he claims that every description is in fact an act of interpretation. The truth perhaps lies somewhere in the middle. The findings which are presented in this chapter have emerged from analysis of the children's inputs, the researcher's own reflective records and in the case of Phase One, the teacher's feedback. Sometimes direct quotations are used which require little explanation as to interpret them would distil them to a point of non-recognition

5.2 Phase One (Pilot phase): Findings

Phase One of the research involved three sessions of *Godly Play* with two fourth classes in School A. Following a three week period of input, the two class teachers were interviewed individually. The purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the teachers' impressions of the process and to glean from them anything that they had noticed about the children in their class during the process or afterwards.

Although interviewed separately the teachers' comments were very similar to one another. Both were very impressed by the process and the materials. They were grateful that the pre-process meeting had taken place since it had clarified expectations and allowed for a collaborative partnership to be developed from the

outset. The teachers referred to the developmental nature of the process and how children had become more involved as the weeks progressed. They spoke of a desire for the process to have lasted longer as they felt that the pupils were becoming more familiar with its structure and were benefitting from their learning. They referred to the calm atmosphere which had been created during the sessions and how the children had really liked them and been captivated by the presentations:

> The kids were really drawn into it and coming over to the edge of their seats, bending to see what was happening (Teacher A)

Both teachers expressed surprise at how some of the children in their class behaved during the sessions. Teacher A spoke about a particular child in her class who was normally quiet and would not contribute much, but by the third week, she was making valuable inputs. Teacher A felt that this occurred because (i) all contributions were accepted, so the child could see that it was safe to offer suggestions without the risk of being wrong and (ii) plenty of time was given to the children to think. On the other hand, Teacher A spoke about other children in her class who would normally shout out answers, who stopped doing this. Teacher A said that she was taken aback by how well a pair of boys had worked during the sessions:

> I would have not let them sit together ... I would have said, 'No, they are going to mess' and I wouldn't have let them sit together and I was actually quite surprised that by the end of the three weeks they were actually able to sit together and then I actually felt quite guilty.

In addition, she spoke about the gentleness of the class as they handled the Godly Play materials. She said that some children, who would normally be quite 'heavy handed with stuff', engaged with the materials in a gentle fashion.

Teacher B similarly spoke about being surprised by certain children in her class:

> There was one person in particular that I thought was just going to ruin it, who doesn't like to see anybody having fun or doesn't like to see any of the others enjoying themselves and I was really proud of the rest of them for not allowing that person to spoil it for them. They remained on task and they remained engaged even though he did everything that he could think of. While your eyes were down, he was pulling at the sides and he was banging underneath the chairs - he was doing everything that he could possibly do to

spoil it for them but they were all so engrossed that eventually he had nothing left to do but watch and then became very engaged and actually asked some really interesting questions.

During the final session of the three week period, a very brief circle time was conducted with the children. The children were asked what their favourite part of Godly Play was. In her reflective record following that session, the researcher recorded that she was surprised that the children had not spoken about the feast in greater numbers as her expectation was that they would zone in on that aspect since the treats were very well received each week. This was not the case; instead the children spoke of the materials and the stories in the main. Both teachers during the interview concurred with this observation about the high value which the children had placed on the stories, and how the children had been 'drawn into' the presentations. Indeed each teacher spoke about how they themselves had been captivated by the stories too:

> Normally when an outsider comes in to do stuff with the children, you just look and you take notes. I found myself going 'Oh!' (*gasps*). I was watching it as well. I realised I wasn't actually paying that much attention to the rest of the class and I was listening to the story even though I knew it....I loved it, I loved listening to the stories! (Teacher A)

> I was completely mesmerised! I found myself going into a nice, little, calm trance while you were talking because you had a lovely way of presenting it. In particular I remember when they were going through the desert and you were making the marks in the sand and you did find yourself getting lulled into watching it. I really enjoyed it. (Teacher B)

In describing the process and the potential for it in their classroom, both teachers' narratives were infused throughout with the phrase 'as a teacher'. They suggested that the 'traditional role of teacher' was at odds with the manner of interaction between the storyteller and the class. Some of their comments are presented below:

Teacher A
> I think to do it as a teacher you have to be able to go in the way that you came in, with a totally open mind.
> As a teacher, you move on really quickly whereas you gave them loads of time. I think if I had been doing it I probably wouldn't have given them as much time and then I wouldn't have got that answer from her.
> It's difficult I think, as a teacher, when in every other subject you say 'This is what you have to do' and then they were coming up 'What do we have to

do?' and it was very much 'Well, what do you want to do?' and I think they found that kind of odd at the start.

But then when I looked at the way that you were with them, because you weren't a teacher you were able to be a lot more relaxed with them whereas I think it would be very hard for the teacher and the kids to go from being, you know, the teacher that has the rules in place, you know you're quiet for the rest of the day, to go into that relaxed...I don't know how easy it would work.

Teacher B

When they moved then, into the free play part of it I was biting my hands most of the time because I just wanted to be the múinteoir (*teacher*) and interfere. I found it very difficult to stand back and let them. I wanted to be keeping them on task, you know, particularly if they were doing pictures, it was killing me not to say to them 'Are you going to draw a picture about what you've heard?' As a teacher, I would have had to do that,

It was tricky for me to keep neutral, just to bounce back what they had said rather than comment on it. 'Look I did a picture', 'Oh, you did a picture' rather than 'Excellent! That's a lovely picture!'

The eyes (*of the storyteller*) on the materials worked. I would have been very sceptical if I had heard that first. I would have thought 'You need to be watching them like a hawk; you'd need eyes in the back of your head!

I think the fact that you have to be so different to being teacher, it needs another person. The teacher needs to be there and needs to support it and I think it's good for the kids to see you responding and to see you reacting as well but I think it's such a different role, that an external person is needed.

Finally, both teachers' observations about the children's interactions with the response materials indicated that they felt as the three weeks progressed, the children were becoming more attuned to the methodology and were beginning to engage at a very deep level during response time. This was born out in the researcher's own observations who noted that the children became very accustomed to the rituals associated with Godly Play as the weeks progressed.

5.2.1 Discussion of Findings from Phase One

The findings from Phase One of the research contain many resonances with other researchers' experiences. Seaman (2005) spoke of how teachers who were participants in her research found much of the methodology contained in the process to be counterintuitive to their normal role as teachers e.g. eyes on the materials when telling the story rather than maintaining eye contact with the

children at all times. The teachers in this study also found it difficult to trust the process and were tempted to revert to their usual approach on many occasions. Seaman's finding that in time, teachers began to reflect more deeply and found that they were not just rethinking how they approached RE and spiritual development, but that the experience made them rethink the whole process of teaching and learning; was one which the researcher in this study experienced herself. During Phase 1 of the research, there were originally three classes involved. However an interview with the third teacher did not occur because she was absent on that week and indeed for the two previous weeks. In contrast to the other two classes, some of the pupils in this class presented with very challenging behaviour at times. The particular incident in question happened while the researcher was facilitating a Godly Play session on the Parable of the Good Samaritan with this class. There was no other adult present in the classroom at the time. The following excerpt is taken form the researcher's notes:

> Class C was a fifth class and I was disappointed not to have had more opportunity of working with them. Indeed I experienced an 'aha' moment with them and I remember thinking at the time that the process of Godly Play actually captures the essence of what good teaching is all about. When working with Class C, I presented the story to them and we had some good discussion about the wondering question of 'who is a neighbour to each of the parable participants?' When the children left the circle to work on their own with the response materials, I was struck by the cruelty exhibited by one child towards the two brigands who had robbed the man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. In his response when engaging with the materials, this boy had actually hanged the figures of the two robbers using wool! During this response time a few other pupils were acting in a disruptive manner and because of their unruly behaviour, I had to cut short the response time and break from the normal routine of a Godly Play session. Instead, I called them back into the circle and re-initiated a discussion with them about 'who is a neighbour to these two?' using the two robbers hanging from the chair as a stimulus for discussion. The discussion which ensued was engaging and was conducted in a respectful manner. It was as if the class had been transformed. They listened to each other and some moved beyond their initial reaction of locking the brigands away for a very long time for the crime they had committed, towards recognising that actually the brigands are our neighbours too.

Hyde (2008), Yust (2002) and Berryman (1991) have spoken about how teachers can be inhibitors of children's spiritual development by trivialising their questions,

moving lessons along too quickly or avoiding issues of an existential nature. Findings from this study indicate that the teachers recognised that they could be a source of constriction by the manner in which they make certain assumptions about children and by the hurried nature of a lot of their teaching. A challenge which compounds complexities of engaging with existential issues with children was identified by Teacher B who spoke of the challenge of allowing children's wondering but also upholding the Catholic teaching in line with the ethos of the school. This was prompted by an incident during the wondering part of a session where the children were talking about death and what happens after we die. One particular child spoke about how his auntie had died the previous year and that since that time, a black cat had been coming into their garden on a regular basis. The boy's mother had told the boy that the cat was his auntie returning in a different guise. The researcher who was facilitating the session allowed the conversation to develop unaware of the angst that the teacher was experiencing as she was anticipating parents arriving at her door the next day accusing her of teaching their children that reincarnation is a facet of their children's faith. Rossiter (2010) has spoken about this tension also between allowing children to wonder and teaching within a particular tradition. It is an area which merits further research.

The experience of surprise on the part of both teachers with respect to the children in their classes was a theme not anticipated from the literature. This came across as a strong motif from both teachers who described how their perceptions of children were challenged; those who would normally not contribute on a regular basis began to offer valuable insights and those who would normally dominate discussions and vie for the teacher's attention pulled back somewhat. Another surprise for the researcher herself was the measured manner in which the children engaged with the wondering questions. One experience in particular stands out: the children had listened to the presentation of the Ten Best Ways (10 Commandments) and when the researcher asked the usual question pertaining to such sacred stories, 'I wonder if there's any part of this story that we could leave out and still have all that we need', a valuable discussion ensued in which the children debated the sanctity of marriage; the consequences of wanting what others have and the value of going to

Mass. Of particular note was the last of these where one child in particular argued vehemently for retaining the fourth commandment and for attending church on Sundays. When asked by the other children if he himself went to Mass, he replied that he did not, but that he recognised the value of church attendance and wanted this commandment left in as a pointer for people of the best way to live.

5.3 Phase Two: Findings

Phase Two of the research involved ten sessions of *Godly Play* in a second class and a sixth class in School B. The overall purpose of Phase Two was to ascertain the value which the children attributed to being involved in a process which contributed to the nurture of their spiritual potential. There were two parts involved in this second phase of the research process and each part was differentiated for the two different age groups. The findings for each part are presented below.

5.3.1 Phase Two, Part 1: Second Class

In Part 1 of Phase 2 of the research, the children from second class were asked to reflect on their experience of Godly Play throughout the year and to write or draw about it. The second class children chose to draw pictures. Most of the pictures depicted scenes from various Godly Play presentations which they had encountered - including the Great Family (Abraham and Sarah); The Ten Best Ways (Moses and the Ten Commandments); and Exodus. None of the children drew an image of any of the parables which had been presented to them and only one of them included Jesus in their drawing. Other pictures showed the seating arrangement during a Godly Play session (sitting on the ground in a circle). Some children wrote captions on their images in which they expressed positive feelings about Godly Play – *I love Godly Play. It is great stufe* (sic). *It is turefic* (sic). One child wrote the names of two people *Mark and Liz* on their page and had entitled it *"my own story"*.

A sample of pictures is contained in Appendix B.

5.3.2 Phase Two, Part 1: Sixth Class

In Phase Two, Part 1 of the research the children from sixth class were also asked to reflect on their experience of Godly Play throughout the year in whatever manner they desired. Most children wrote about their experience and feelings. Pupils were encouraged to stay on task and even when they said that they were finished, they were encouraged to sit in silence and engage in further reflection. Their responses contained many consistent, recurrent themes and these were analysed and coded. The fourteen statements detailed below which consist of actual wording used by the pupils, were identified by the researcher as representing the core thoughts expressed in the class' responses.

1. Godly Play is fun. It is a happy time.
2. Godly Play makes you think harder. It's very interesting.
3. I get to find out a lot of history about God
4. I like the way it gathers us all together
5. I like to share my thoughts on what I have learned.
6. I liked the feast.
7. I look forward to it every week.
8. I love all the stories we do in Godly Play
9. I love learning more about God.
10. It's lovely to hear the words of the stories.
11. It's very kind and caring.
12. I think it's very relaxing, thoughtful and soulful.
13. It's a great way to learn religion.
14. It's like as if I am close to God and I feel as if God is beside us.

In addition to the writing activity, the sixth class children also took part in a role play activity (Conscience Alley) where they were encouraged to inform the conscience of a person who was in the process of deciding whether or not to remove activities of a religious nature from the school setting. This activity yielded very strong evidence that the children value work of a religious/spiritual nature in

school and that they have a strong desire for God to be included in their everyday school lives. Some sample quotations below illustrate the sentiments of the class.

- We love God!
- Kids have great imaginations so they can imagine something else so we need to learn about God!
- If you didn't believe in God then you wouldn't have a guardian angel!
- We need to become good citizens of God's world!
- We wouldn't be here right now without God. We would be nothing without God!
- We need to learn about Jesus so that we can learn his ways!

None of the children offered an alternative argument or a dissenting voice during this role play. One child however referred to valuing God for the amount of money he had made from his Confirmation; he was quickly admonished by the rest of the group!

5.3.3 Phase Two, Part 2: Second Class

In Part 2 of this second phase of the research process, the second class children were presented with their drawings from Part 1 and were asked to comment on them if they wished. Most were willing to speak about their pictures which depicted Godly Play presentations in the main. The children were positive in their descriptions of the stories which they had drawn. One child, when asked about his picture, claimed that he had just drawn a random picture. However it soon became apparent that the child's picture was far from random and that there was a deeper meaning associated with it which he did not wish to speak publicly about.

None of the children drew images of the parables which had been presented to them but had focused instead on the stories from the Hebrew Scriptures. The reason for this may have been that it had been some weeks since they had heard a parable. Indeed many of their drawings related to the most recent Godly Play presentation which they had heard. However, interestingly during the response time at each Godly Play session, the researcher had noted that the children seldom chose parable material to work with in their own free response time.

The fourteen statements which had been generated from the sixth class children's inputs in Part 1 of the research, were read out one by one to the second class children who were asked to put their thumbs up if they agreed with the statements; thumbs down if they disagreed; and thumbs in the middle if they weren't sure. The results from this thumbs up/thumbs down activity indicated that the second class children concurred with their older school peers with regard to their sentiments about Godly Play.

5.3.4 Phase Two, Part 2: Sixth Class

One of the tasks which the sixth class children undertook during this part of the research was to prioritise in order of importance, the fourteen statements which they had produced the previous week. The prioritisation exercise entailed the children placing the numbers 1-14 next to the statements which were printed on a sheet; one signified the statement which they deemed to be of most importance and fourteen, the least important one for them. Then each of the children placed their sheets in an envelope.

The children were asked to indicate on the outside of their envelope their perceived level of religiosity in their homes using the colours green, orange or red. They were to colour green if they thought that God was very important to their family; orange if God wasn't a big part of their family and red if their family didn't value God. A couple of the children came up to the researcher at this point and said that they found this difficult. It was clear that there was a dissonance between the value they attached to God and that of their families e.g. 'I pray a lot at home but no one else in my family does…. what colour should I put down?'

The final task for the children with regard to the fourteen statements was to perform a group ranking exercise where they worked in groups to prioritise the fourteen statements. The primary purpose of this exercise was triangulation. Table 4 overleaf shows the total average ranking for each of the statements as well as the breakdown for the three categories of religiosity.

Statements	N=7	N=5	N=4	Total N=16
I think it's very relaxing, thoughtful and soulful.	4.1	4.8	6.8	4.9
Godly Play makes you think harder. It's very interesting.	5.6	6.6	6	6
It is very kind and caring	8.4	3.8	7.3	6.7
It's a great way to learn religion	4.0	7.6	9.8	6.7
I get to find out a lot of history about God	6.3	6.6	7.8	6.8
I like to share my thoughts on what I have learned.	7.3	6.4	6.5	6.8
Godly Play is fun. It is a happy time.	8.7	5.2	5.8	6.9
I love all the stories we do in Godly Play	6.4	8.2	8.3	7.4
It's like as if I am close to God. I feel as if God is beside us	8.1	8.8	4.5	7.4
I love learning more about God	7.9	10	5	7.8
I like the way it gathers us all together	6.9	6.6	12.8	8.3
I look forward to it every week	7.7	10.4	8	8.6
It is lovely to hear the words	9.7	9	7.3	8.9
I liked the feast	12.6	11	9.5	11.3

Table 4: Mean scores of the rankings attributed to the fourteen statements

The findings indicate that data from both the individual exercise and the group exercise concurred that the four most important statements about Godly Play were the following:

- I think it is very relaxing, thoughtful and soulful.
- Godly Play makes you think harder

- It is very kind and caring.
- It's a great way to learn religion.

Of the sixteen children who took part in the exercise, seven of them perceived that God was an important part of their home context. Five indicated that God had some importance for their families and four indicated that God was not an important part of their family lives. In this context, it is interesting to note that for those children who identified themselves as coming from families where there is little formal exposition to God (red column), their two highest ranking statements were: 'It's like as if I am close to God'; 'I feel as if God is beside us'; and 'I love learning more about God', whilst these were not as important for the other groups of children.

A circle time discussion followed the children's work with the fourteen statements. This discussion contained ample evidence that the children valued the process of Godly Play. They spoke about how the relaxed atmosphere and silence allowed for reflection and deep thinking. During this discussion, they spoke about how they value the opportunity to discuss these questions with one another and indeed some of the deep questions which they spoke about wanting to pursue further, came to the fore e.g. *Who created God? Do you ever think if you weren't born, what would you be doing now?*

5.3.5 Discussion of Findings from Phase Two

The findings with regard to the Feast validate the teachers' and researcher's perceptions from Phase One of the research. During Phase One, the researcher had anticipated that the Feast might be of greater significance for the children. However this was not the case and the findings from Phase Two bear this out with nine of the children placing it at the bottom of their list. Just one child identified it as being the most valued aspect of the Godly Play process. This child identified their least favourite part of the Godly Play process as the 'stories'. It would have been interesting to have engaged with this child to draw further on their perceptions and

the reasons for them. However it was not possible to identify them, due to the anonymity of the survey, beyond knowing that they perceived religion to be of some importance in their home (orange).

Three of the top five ranked statements, pertain to the cognitive dimension of children's learning. The findings show that they valued being challenged in their thinking and that they also enjoyed learning new content. White's (1994) conception of spiritual education which consists of 'the encouragement of contemplation and wonder through the arts and sensuous experiences (p. 373) appears to neglect the cognitive dimension which the children in this study identified as being important to them. The findings raise questions for Erricker's (2001) perspective too where children are to find spirituality in their own experiences and personal narratives rather than through imposed narratives such as those found in religious traditions.

One of the main objectives of Godly Play is to 'show children how to work together as a community by supporting and respecting each other and one another's quest' (Berryman 1995, p. 17). The centrality of community emerged in the findings from children's responses in this phase of the study. Communal wondering was highlighted by the children during the circle time as being important and sharing their thoughts ranked in the top half of the preferred statements. Other prominent contemporary methodologies which are used in primary schools to nurture the spirituality of children, (e.g. meditation with children, and mindfulness), appear to focus more on the child's relationship with self and with the transcendent. The other two relationships highlighted in the literature, relationship with the world and relationship with others appear to be lacking in these approaches. A comparative study between nurturing the spirituality of children through the use of one of these methodologies and that of Godly Play could yield valuable insights into the relative importance of the fourfold relationship.

The purpose of Phase Two was to ascertain the value which the children attributed to being involved in a process which contributed to the nurture of their spiritual

potential. It is clear from the voices of the children in this phase they value the process and the space in school to engage with religious content. These findings are of value in terms of informing debates about appropriate forms of RE and demonstrate that a phenomenological approach to RE may not be sufficient for their needs.

5.4 Phase Three: Findings

The purpose of the third phase of the research was to delve deeper and to observe the spiritual characteristics exhibited by the children. Six groups of children of varying sizes, from three to five children, took part in six separate sessions in this phase. The children were given time to interact freely with materials from Godly Play presentations as well as the response materials. There were four groups of children from School A and two groups from School B. Each group was gathered in a room apart from their classroom for a period of approximately ninety minutes. When they entered the room they were shown the set-up of the room and offered time to interact with the materials in a manner of their own choice. The children were informed that the researcher would move around the room and chat to them at different stages if they were willing. They were also informed that the sessions were being recorded. Each session assumed a different format with no two being the same. Each session concluded with a feast.

The findings from each of the six sessions are presented below. Analysis and discussion of the findings is suspended until after the six sessions are outlined in full.

5.4.1 Phase Three: Session 1

The first session took place in School A and the participants were Becky, Daniel, Ben, Laura and Cara. When they arrived in the room they began to work with the response materials, beads, paints, playdough etc. They chatted as they worked and seemed to enjoy engaging with the materials. At the beginning, Becky asked if she could play with the sand. While the others worked with the other response materials, she created a story using the wooden figures in the sand. She chatted to

herself as she created her story. Becky's story was modelled on the Exodus story, which the class had heard a few weeks previously, where the sea had opened up and the Israelites had crossed to freedom. Her story involved characters who were guards, some 'evil' people and some good people who were being chased. The good people were saved by the actions of Jesus (sic) who lifted the river when they arrived at it and closed it when they were safely across. When asked by the researcher if God was in this story, Becky said 'yes', that it was God who had told Jesus to lift the river.

Daniel was next to work with the desert bag and figures. He created a story which contained a synthesis of elements from some of the Godly Play presentations. Asked whether God was in his story, Daniel said 'yes', that God was at the altar. Daniel was later joined by Ben and the pair worked on another story using the figures and the sand. In this story, a sand storm had killed a group of people who were travelling together. The leader of the group had survived and he managed to rescue the dead people who were buried. Then another 'big gush of sand' came and they were all killed again including the 'good man' with the 'big heart' who had rescued them in vain. God was not in this particular story according to Ben, but when questioned as to God's whereabouts at the time of the tragedy, Daniel said that God was up in the sky and Ben added that God couldn't come down because he was 'hangin' around with Jesus!'

Laura moved to the sand next and initially she worked on her own but was then joined by Becky. Laura's story was influenced by Becky's earlier story but had been modified by her. Laura got annoyed when Becky tried to impose her ideas on the story. When asked if God was in the story, Laura said that God was listening to what was going on and that 'he was up in the sky'. Cara was the final person to work with the sand and her story also included good and evil people, the latter who drank all the water from the river. Similar to Laura, Cara said that God was 'up in the sky somewhere' and that the people were trying to figure out their own problem.

Once each child from the group had had a chance to engage with the materials, the session drew to a close with the feast. While the children were eating they chatted to the researcher about Godly Play. They recollected stories they had encountered throughout the year. A discussion about the importance of God in their lives and the manner in which they communicated with God took place. Each of the children said that God was important to them. Asked if they talked to God and if so, where or how, the children responded in different ways:

Becky: Becky speaks to God in times of trouble and when she feels in need of safety. She spoke about hearing little voices in her head, which she described as God talking to her.

Daniel: Daniel goes to church and he speaks to God there. He doesn't speak to God anywhere else, not in school and not at home.

Ben: Initially Ben answered 'no' to the question of whether or not her speaks to God. Then when he checked with Daniel whether or not he spoke to God and Daniel said that he did, Ben thought about it a little bit more and said that he talks to God when somebody dies or if somebody was in a car crash.

Laura: Laura talks to God when she's upset and when someone dies, like her great granny who had died recently. She also talks to God when she goes to bed.

Cara: Cara spoke about feeling part of a family since she made her First Holy Communion. She said that she would talk to God if she was in complete silence and on her own.

5.4.2 Phase Three: Session 2

The second session took place in School A and the participants were Lisa, Queeva, Eanna and Eoin. The two girls began by playing with the sand while the two boys worked with the response materials. The girls tried to faithfully recall some of the presentations they had already encountered. They endeavoured to get the gestures

correct so that the story could be re-enacted properly. After about ten minutes, Queeva had to leave as she was called away to take part in some testing. Lisa continued to play on her own and remained with the sand for a further period of fifteen minutes. During that time, she chatted with the researcher about her story which showed wooden figures representing people walking a long journey through the sand. She explained how the footprints were very important because they enabled others to follow the way. She said that her favourite part of the story was when 'God came down and started talking to him'. She said that she had learned about God from the stories.

A period of six minutes complete silence followed, as Eoin began to work with the sand and Eanna and Lisa worked with the materials on an individual basis. Eoin spoke to the researcher about how he liked the parts of the story where the storyteller talked about how dangerous the desert can be. His own story creation involved figures lined up in rows opposite each other. 'I was kind of making some of these on the good side and some of these on the bad side. They were fighting like this', he explained as he demonstrated figures fighting one another. Asked by the researcher if anyone won, Eoin said that the good guys had won.

Researcher:	I wonder why the good guys won and not the bad guys?
	(Silence)
Eoin:	Because, because bad guys never win.

Eoin went on to say that he had particularly liked the story of the 'seven covenants' (Ten Commandments) because he liked the rules. Asked by the researcher if he could remember any of rules, Eanna hesitated but Lisa interjected with 'Don't break marriage!' and 'Don't even want what others have!'
While this conversation was taking place, Eanna interrupted by asking the following question: 'Excuse me. Do you believe in Charlie Charlie?' This question prompted a twenty minute discussion on various characters which bring great fear into the lives of the children.

Researcher:	What's Charlie Charlie?
Eanna:	He's a devil.
Researcher:	He's a devil?

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Eanna:	Yea and you get a page and you write Yes/ No and you do an equals sign
Researcher:	Where did you hear about Charlie Charlie?
Eanna:	Eh I heard it's like the devil and it speaks. You say 'Charlie Charlie, are you there?'
	(At this point Eoin and Lisa joined in and explained the process of invoking Charlie Charlie to be present)
Researcher:	Mmm and what do you think about that?
Eanna:	Sometimes I think it's not real. Sometimes I think it is real
Researcher:	And what do you think Eoin?
Eoin:	I don't really believe in hell so I can't really believe in devils. So I think it's fake.
Researcher:	Mmm, how do you feel about it Eanna?
Eanna:	Scared.

According to the Washington Post (May 26th, 2015) Charlie Charlie is a game/internet urban legend which became popular as a result of an incident in the Dominican Republic in early 2015, which took social media by storm. It is played by drawing an X on a piece of paper; labelling two quadrants 'no' and the other two 'yes'; placing two pencils on the 'x' and summoning Charlie Charlie by asking if he's there and asking him specific questions such as 'Am I going to die? Eanna, Lisa and Eoin were clearly frightened by the game but they also had a fascination with it which seemed to draw them in. Eanna, who seemed the most frightened by the game asked if we could play it.

Researcher:	And why would you want to do that?
Eanna:	Cos I want to see if he's real or not

In addition to Charlie Charlie, they spoke of other characters: Slenderman, Bloody Mary, Candyman and Barney each of which has a ritual accompanying it. Many of these figures are characters in video games which the children had either played or heard about. Other sources of fear were raised by the children too e.g. monsters in the attic.

The children spoke of various ways of overcoming their fear such as hugging their Mam, hiding under a blanket, or clutching their teddy. Earlier in the session when chatting to the researcher as they played with the sand, both Lisa and Eoin had spoken about God. When asked if God was important to them, both had said yes. Asked if she ever talked to God, Lisa said that she talked to God when she felt

lonely or when none of her friends were coming out to play. She said that sometimes she would go up to her room to talk to God or just sit in the sitting room or kitchen talking to God. Eoin had spoken about talking to God whenever he needed somebody to talk to: 'Well whenever I need somebody to talk to and me Mam and Dad have gone out somewhere, I pray to God and he helps me out'. Eoin had said that he often prays to God under his bed so that he won't be interrupted. Neither of them mentioned turning to God when they were scared. However with further probing, they spoke of God as a source of comfort and protection.

Researcher:	A minute ago you were saying that you'd go under your bed and pray. Would that help when you're scared?
Lisa:	Yea… You'd be like. 'Oh please leave me alone. I'm very scared!'
Researcher:	Is that the type of thing you'd say?
Lisa:	I would say that, yea.
Researcher:	And who would you say that to?
Eoin:	To pray to God, you go like that (*makes normal gesture for prayer with hands joined*). To pray to devils you go like that, I think (*turns joined hands downwards*)
Researcher:	So you're talking about the devils as being enemies of God...So who would you prefer to have?
Eoin:	God
Lisa:	God, Jesus… Everyone that's holy.

Eanna on the other hand didn't find complete solace from talking to God: 'Yea but say like you get too scared and you just pray to God and you think he's still after you…'.

At this point Queeva returned from her testing and the children informed her of the discussion. Eanna then began to play with the sand while the others worked with the response materials. He set some figures up in a line standing behind one another. There was a large gap in the line in the centre. The leader (Moses), the figure at the front of the line was leading the people through the sea according to Eanna. The people at the back were the 'bad people', Slenderman, Charlie and Bloody Mary.

Eanna:	So Moses is leading all of them to safety. He's leading everybody to safety.
Researcher:	Yea. So he's taking all of them is he?
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	So you've put them a bit apart from each other now.

Eanna:	Yea, he's the master. He's the smallest.
Researcher:	So what happens next?
Eoin:	I don't know… They spread out. They don't want to be found.
Researcher:	OK, so they were friends originally at the start and then Charlie Charlie and Bloody Mary went a bit mad, did they?
Eanna:	Yea, then Slenderman went on their side.
Researcher:	So they were all on the one side at the start were they?
Eanna:	Yea but they hated following him because they didn't want to follow him. They wanted all of them (*gestures towards the 'good people' at the front*) to follow them.
Researcher:	And who would you be following?
Eanna:	These (*points to the 'good people' at the front*). If I probably followed them (*points to the 'bad people' at the back*), they'd kill me.
Researcher:	Would you be scared of them?
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	How does it make you feel when you do the story out like that?
Eanna:	Em….. (*contemplating*).
Researcher:	How do you feel now that you've done that?
Eanna:	A little happy.
Researcher:	Why are you happy?
Eanna:	Cos good people are here. Bad people are there.
Researcher:	So they're away from each other. And have you a choice now?
Eanna:	They're stuck in me head.
Researcher:	So how are you going to get them out of your head?
Eanna:	I don't know … em.
Researcher:	So if they're stuck in your head, where are you?
	Silence
Researcher:	Are you here? Are you on this side (*good side*)?
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	So you're here but they're stuck in your head.
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	So who have we got? (*pointing to bad people*)
Eanna:	Charlie Charlie, Bloody Mary and Slenderman.
Researcher:	But you're here (*pointing to good people*). Is that what you're saying?
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	But they're stuck in your head.
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	What are you going to do? What can you do?
Eanna:	I can talk to good people, not bad people.
Researcher:	Talk about the good people and not Charlie Charlie. Do you think the leader, the master is afraid.
Eanna:	No, cos he's God.

Later in the session when the children were talking about aspects of the Godly Play presentations that they enjoyed most, Eanna referred to when Moses was talking to God. He said that part of the story made him happy.

This second session concluded with the feast and the children chatted to the researcher as they ate their treat. During the conversation, the researcher elicited from the children whether or not God was important to them. They all said that God was important to them. Both Lisa and Eoin's experience of talking to God are related above. Eanna said that he talks to God when he's bored. As Eoin spoke further about talking to God about things that scared him, Eanna said that he wouldn't be allowed:

Eanna:	My Ma…. If I said something to God real loud, she'd say 'who are you talking to?'
Researcher:	Your Ma would say that to you?
Eanna:	Yea.
Researcher:	So she'd kind of say 'nonsense, don't be talking to God!'
Eanna :	So I'd just talk in my head.

When asked if she spoke to God, Queeva was hesitant: 'I don't know'. The researcher then attempted to get a sense of the children's home context in terms of commitment to practising their faith by asking the children about church attendance and during that conversation it emerged that Queeva attends church in a weekly basis:

Researcher:	You've all made your First Communion?
All:	Yea.
Researcher:	OK, would you go to Mass now?
Lisa:	Sometimes if like I'm not doing anything in the morning but sometimes I do be doing things in the morning.
Researcher:	So how many times would you say you've been at Mass since your First Communion (*two years ago*)?
Lisa:	Since my First Communion, I'd say about 5 or 6 times.
Researcher:	Five or six… How about you Eanna?
Eanna:	Never.
Researcher:	You wouldn't be going with your family?
Eanna:	No.
Queeva:	I did this year cos my brother was making his communion, so I go like every Sunday...None of my brothers are making their First Communion next year but we're probably still going to, like, Mass.

Researcher:	Do you like it? Do you talk to God there?
Queeva:	Yea, sometimes.
Researcher:	Cos you were saying a minute ago that you wouldn't talk to God. So you might in a church maybe.
Queeva:	Mmm yea.
Lisa:	The church makes you so tired cos like it's holy and all.
Queeva:	And it makes you so sad when they say the people who've died. They're like sick and that .

When the children were asked about opportunities to talk to God in school, Eanna said that they don't get the chance because they 'do a load of work'. Asked if they would like more time to talk to God in school, all of the children said, 'yes'. Eoin who identified himself as being on the students' council said that he could make a suggestion at their next meeting about there being more time to talk to God in school. The researcher checked with the others in the group if they considered this to be a good idea:

Researcher:	And would that be a suggestion that you think would be good?
All:	Yea!
Researcher:	So what would you be asking Eoin to bring back to the students' council then?
Eoin:	Like more time spent talking to God and all.
Researcher:	And so if he goes back to the students' council and says 'we're a couple of students in our class who are saying that we want more time to talk to God, will the students' council say, 'how's that going to happen?'
Queeva:	I'd say ten minutes - stay silent.
Lisa:	10 or 5 minutes.

The session concluded at this point as the bell rang for home time.

5.4.3 Phase Three: Session 3

The third session took place in School A and the participants were Fiona, Lulu, Eugene and Luke. When the children entered the room the two girls went to play with the sand immediately, while the two boys worked with the response materials. As they were easing into their work, the researcher asked them if they had enjoyed Godly Play during the year. They all said 'yes', in one voice. The researcher asked

what it was that they had enjoyed about Godly Play. Eugene replied: 'It was real quiet and real relaxing'. A discussion ensued then about the kind of silence that was part of Godly Play. When the researcher had collected the four children from their classroom across the corridor that morning, the class was in complete silence and they were engrossed in a writing exercise. She referred to that moment as she chatted with the children:

Researcher:	So the quiet and the silence (*with Godly Play*) … you really liked that. But when I walked into your room you were all quiet and still.
Fiona:	That's cos we were all concentrating to get our final draft done.
Researcher:	Oh, OK. And would that be the same quietness now as you were describing there?
All:	No!
Researcher:	So what's different about it?
Luke:	You're getting told a story (*in Godly Play*). That's just quiet (*in the class*).
Eugene:	It just makes you calm.
Researcher:	You're saying that's different quiet from Godly Play quiet.
Luke:	Godly Play is more relaxing than that (*writing in classroom*). That's just quiet.
Researcher:	It makes you calmer.
Eugene:	It's (*pause*). It's calming (*pause*). It's hard to explain....
Luke:	This is calming cos we were getting told a story. In there, we were all working.
Researcher:	So you're working over there and when you're doing Godly Play you don't think it's work.
Fiona:	It is work, but it's more relaxing.
Luke:	We were writing. That's work. Work's so annoying!
Researcher:	And do you get a chance to have that quiet at any other times?
Lulu:	Yea on Monday when we are getting read a story, Charlotte's Web
Researcher:	So is the quiet when you're listening to Charlotte's Web the same as the quiet when you're doing Godly Play?
All:	Yea…..sort of.
Luke:	Well it's not really quiet because people are interrupting the whole time and asking, 'What does this mean? What does that mean?'
Researcher:	So was that different from your experience of Godly Play then?
Eugene:	Yea.
Researcher:	What was different?

Eugene:	Everybody's talking (*in class*) and nobody's talking at the Godly play. Most of the time when it's real quiet, everybody starts talking then. That's what I mean.
Researcher:	There was some talking in Godly Play though too wasn't there? Because when you were playing together, there used to be a bit of talking, wasn't there? There used to be three or four of you at the sand and there'd be a bit of talking going on there, wouldn't there?
Fiona:	Yea. Not too much. Not as much as like…
Eugene:	People'd be saying ….'That sand feels loooooovely!'
Researcher:	So it's the feeling as well?
Fiona:	The relaxing and the calm.
Eugene:	You just have to sit there and watch!

The children continued then with their respective activities; the girls played with the sand and the boys worked with the response materials, threading beads and colouring pictures. After about a quarter of an hour the girls began to play hide and seek with the figures in the sand. One of them concealed the figures and the other one had to find them. Eugene joined them within the space of a few minutes and eventually the four of them were playing hide and seek in two teams, Luke and Lulu versus Fiona and Eugene. This lasted for approximately twenty minutes. Then the researcher asked them if they would like to create a story using the sand. The girls chose to work together for this activity and the boys also opted to work together. A second bag of sand was made available to the boys to use. The opening words from Godly Play presentations which use the desert bag were to be heard repeatedly from the children at this stage, as they worked with the sand: 'The desert is a dangerous place'. Then the girls asked the researcher to recite the opening sequence to the desert stories for them. As the researcher said the words, complete silence descended on the room.

> The desert is a dangerous place. It's always moving, so it is hard to know where you are. There is little water, so you get thirsty and you can die if no water is found. Almost nothing grows there, so there is almost nothing to eat. In the daytime, it is hot and the sun scorches your skin. In the night, it is cold. When the wind blows, the sand stings when it hits you. People wear many layers of clothes to protect them from the sun and blowing sand. The desert is a dangerous place. People do not go into the desert unless they have to (Berryman 2002, p.60).

The children continued to work with the sand. The girls created a story and the boys played by making shapes in the sand, continually lifting their bag, settling it down

and checking to see what new shape was made as a result of the disturbance. After ten minutes, the girls asked the researcher to repeat the words one more time. By this stage the boys had returned to the response materials and were writing a list of the names of the boys and girls in their class. When the girls were ready, they told their story which was about a little girl named Ciara, who lived in the desert with her family. One day she waved goodbye to her mother and went into the desert. She came to an altar and she spoke to God, asking God if she would live forever. God replied that she would die soon. Ciara ran back to her house and told her mother that God was real and that she had just been talking to God. Her mother agreed that God was real, but dismissed her saying that God had never spoken to her. The next morning Ciara brought her big brother to the altar to prove that God spoke to her. When she got to the altar she asked 'God are you there?' There was no reply and she ran around the back of the altar but she fell into quicksand. Her brother ran back to the house to get their father and when they arrived at the quicksand, they saw a man pulling her out. The father asked who the man was: 'I am Jesus, the Son of God. And I was just helping this little girl'.

Following the narration of the girls' story, the children sat around in a circle for the feast and they chatted with the researcher who asked them initially if they were afraid of anything. Fiona, Lulu and Eugene spoke of spiders, heights and the dark. Luke said that he was afraid of nothing. Then after a moment or two he said: 'I'm afraid when I think of God… I seriously am'. The researcher asked him what he meant.

Luke:	I think of God and then I say to myself, what would people be doing if they weren't alive and alive didn't exist. Now that just sounds funny!
Researcher:	That's really very interesting. Do you come up with any answers?
Luke:	No!
Researcher:	And where do you think of these things?
Luke:	In church, I'm guessing. I actually don't know… ah, in bed!

Lulu voiced her fear of Chuckie, Annabelle and Charlie Charlie because 'they are devils'. The other children said that they were just fake. And Lulu said, 'Yea, but

still!' Nonetheless, they all talked for a few moments about games such as Charlie Charlie.

The researcher asked the children if God was important in their families and they said, 'Yes!' She reminded the children of Lulu and Fiona's story where the little girl hadn't been believed and asked the children if they would tell people that they talked to God. Lulu said that she would just keep it to herself. Asked where they might talk to God, Fiona said, in her room, Lulu said in the church and Eugene said he would talk to God somewhere private. Luke said that nobody would believe you that God talks back. Fiona agreed. They said that people would start slagging you especially in the area where they lived. The children speculated that it might be different in other areas where God might be more important and they reckoned that God is not important in their own area because right across the road there are rats as a result of people dumping and people starting fires there too. If people believed in God, they wouldn't do that, the children thought.

Researcher:	So God is good to have in places?
All:	Yea.
Researcher:	You seem to talk to God a lot. Would you go to church often?
Luke:	My family wouldn't take me.
Fiona:	If I had the time.
Luke:	We went a few times with school.
Researcher:	Do you like when you go with the school?
All:	Yea.
Researcher:	Suppose somebody said that there would be no more going to Mass during school time. Would that be a good or bad thing?
All:	Bad!

The children were beginning to tire by this stage and the session concluded with a game before the children returned to their classroom.

5.4.4 Phase 3: Session 4

The fourth session took place in School A and the participants were Noah, David and Tom. When the children arrived into the room, they sat on chairs and had a

discussion with the researcher. This discussion lasted about a half an hour. They children began by recalling what they had learned during the Godly Play presentations. They spoke about how they had all enjoyed the sessions because they had fun and had learned a lot. They zoned in particularly on the desert and the facts which they had learned about the desert. They thought that the stories had been challenging for them and they welcomed this because they felt that they would be more prepared for fourth class as a result.

Noah and David spoke most during the session. Tom was silent apart from a couple of contributions. A lot of Noah's family circumstances became manifest during the session including the following facts: His parents are separated and he spends the weekends with his father in the north of Ireland; Noah has ADHD, for which he takes medication, and he has anger management issues; Thirty members of his family have died and one of them was killed in front of his mother; His grandfather was a kidnapper and a thief; His family are only renting their home and he is worried that they might lose it and end up on the streets; He will be getting a job soon doing milk rounds in order to support his family. He will give the money he earns to his mother who will then give him some pocket money from whatever is left over; Noah's family is very religious and goes to Mass every Sunday.

The defining feature of this group session was a focus on challenges in life such as coping with anger and dealing with death. David spoke of some things which make him angry such as his younger cousin who is always pulling out of him or sometimes when he's playing football he gets angry:

David:	When I play football, loads of my friends like side-tackle me and eh I get really angry. I just want to like go over and kick them and stuff like that. But I don't….
Researcher:	Why don't you? What stops you?
David:	Cos it's the wrong thing to do and I don't want to do it.
Researcher:	Yea so do you believe… what's inside you then?
David:	I want to do it, but I don't really…..like I feel like doing it but I don't really.
Researcher:	What stops you, do you think? Is it the red card from the ref or is there something else?
David :	That wouldn't stop me like. I just wouldn't want to do it.
Noah:	It's the bad thing to do.

David: Yea it's the wrong thing to do

Noah also spoke about his anger issue and how sometimes he lifts his fist but then puts it down because he has to remind himself that 'it's not even worth it'.

The topic of death came up when the children were asked by the researcher if there was anything they were scared of. Noah immediately said that he was scared of dying. David and Tom agreed. Nonetheless Noah was stoic about dying:

Noah:	But you have to die sometime. Like you! You've almost lived a full life and then you lose it.
David:	And plus, you need to…. When you die, you're meant to die.
Noah:	You're reborn as a different person.
David:	Yea in a different world. Up there in a different world.
Researcher:	What's up there David? You're pointing up to the sky.
David:	Heaven.

Later Noah described his concept of Heaven which prompted more musings about the afterlife:

Noah:	They're all happy. They're on a vacation of their life. Up there, when they die, they come back here. Just goes over and over and over again. So like when we go down for like sixty years, we're gonna come back down with a new body and a new life.
Researcher:	Is that what you think?
Noah:	But the sad thing is that when you go up, it's blank.
Researcher:	You're gone. Do you think it's blank?
Noah:	Yea.
David:	I wouldn't say it's blank. I'd say you still have a life but it'd be a completely different one.
Noah:	D'you know what I'd hate to do. When I die I could go to hell. If I was down there, it'd literally rip me apart.
David:	But even though bad people are bad - do they still go up to heaven or is hell really a thing?
Researcher:	What do you think?
Noah:	God's gonna give them a second chance up there. And if they be bad up there…
David:	I'd say that God'd let them up either way cos like you can't change who you are…. Well you can like but….
Researcher:	What do you think Tom? You're very quiet.
Noah:	Eh, Tom's always very quiet!
David:	I think he doesn't really have anything to say.
Researcher:	No I think that you think a lot Tom. Do you? What are you thinking about what they've been saying?

> Tom: I'm thinking about all of the people that's in hell… like all the old people.

Both David and Noah then spoke about young uncles belonging to them who had died. They each described family rituals for remembering their lost loved ones. Noah's family puts a cake with candles on it by his graveside on his birthday. David's family visits his uncle's grave regularly and changes the flowers on it. On special occasions they place special objects on his grave.

The boys spoke about how God is important in their lives. David pointed out that 'if God wasn't here, we wouldn't be here'. Noah said that he prayed to God every night. David talked to God sometimes but he didn't say formal prayers. It was always somewhere private, like in bed that he chose to talk to God. He said that if his Mam knew he was talking to God that she would laugh at him and ask him why he was bothering. Tom spoke of praying for his Nanny when she was sick. He prayed that she'd get better and she did. Asked if he prayed with his family or just by himself, Tom said that he prayed alone and that he would be private about it. His Mam would think it was silly to be praying too.

After about a half an hour, the conversation ended and the boys chose the desert bag to work with. They played together as a trio for twenty minutes. During that time, they played hide and seek with the figures. They never seemed to tire of the format but kept repeating it over and over again. Two children would hide the figures and the other one had to find them. The researcher asked them if they'd like to move on to something different for the remaining time in the session. She suggested that perhaps they could create their own story or do one of the Godly Play presentations. The boys ignored her suggestion and kept playing the game of hide and seek. When she mentioned it again a few minutes later, they began to create a story with various characters but after a minute, they abandoned it and went to the table where the response materials were situated and began playing with them. They chatted to one another as they engaged with the art materials. At the end of the session, they gathered for the feast and returned to their classroom afterwards.

5.4.5 Phase Three: Session 5

The fifth session took place in School B and the participants were Karl, Donna and Eric. Of all the groups taking part in the Phase Three sessions, the members of this group were the most familiar to the researcher as she had opportunities to engage with them from an early stage. Eric and Donna exhibited clear key 'signatures' (Hay and Nye 1998) from the outset and Karl was a vocal member of the class and had presented with challenging behaviour at times.

The Great Family was the very first Godly Play presentation which took place with the class to which these children belonged. When Sarah dies in the story, she is buried in the sand and when Abraham dies later, he too is placed in the sand next to Sarah. Following the presentation of this story, there is a period of wondering with participants. One of the wondering questions is: 'I wonder if there is any part of the story that we can leave out and still have all of the story that we need'. Frequently when this question is put to groups, they suggest leaving out the part where Abraham and Sarah die. Eric, Donna and Karl's class was no exception and it was Donna who actually suggested leaving out that part of the story and she was supported by others in the class. However Eric disagreed strongly and argued that it should be retained because people die. At that time he spoke about his grandfather who was dead.

When Donna, Eric and Karl arrived in the room for this particular session of Phase Three of the research, they became engaged with the response materials, playing a game of hide and seek with the figures in the sand. They chatted as they played and Eric reminded Donna of the incident above:

Eric:	Do you remember when I kept messing your story Donna?
Donna:	I wanted to take out the parts where they die but you were like 'but everyone has to die!'
Eric:	Yea, all of them were like … they kept saying 'no' to the part where they die.
Researcher:	And what do you think about that now Donna?
Donna:	I still don't want people to die!
Researcher:	And Eric, what would you say back to Donna?
Karl:	Someone dies every day.

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Eric:	And everybody has to be born.
Donna:	And everybody has to die.
Eric:	Because if somebody doesn't die then nobody will be born. D'you get it?
Researcher:	No I don't know what you mean.
Eric:	There's the same people in the world every day.
Researcher:	Same amount of people? Same number of people?
Eric:	Yea. It's only fair.
Donna:	But there needs to be new people.
Karl:	Yea, cos if one dies, another is born.
Donna:	Yea but you get born in a different life. So say if you die, I get born in the next century.

Eric could be classed as belonging to the category of people who express their spirituality in geneo-centric ways i.e. in relation to deceased family members (Kirmani and Kirmani 2009). Eric referred to his deceased grandfather and other relations on numerous occasions. For instance, during response time to another Godly Play presentation, Eric had drawn a football with many colours on it. He showed it to the researcher and explained the significance behind the colours, each one representing a different person in his family. The yellow was for his Nan; blue for his uncle (deceased); pink for his Mam; and dark blue for his Grandad. He said slowly and sadly that he had been thinking of his Grandad who had passed away and that he was very sad about that. He paused deep in thought and then he said: 'He used to like football and I do football as well. And most of my family do football as well. And my dog died as well'. He rationalised death by saying that everybody has to die at a certain time because if they 'keeped on walking around, they'd be so tired'. Later in the session, he created a story in which one of the characters 'passed away'.

With reference to the spiritual identities of Kirmani and Kirmani (2009), Donna could be classified as belonging to the category of 'socio-centric'. Her responses involved reaching out to others and helping them. Following the Godly Play presentation of the Great Family, during response time she had made two cards. She told the researcher that they were for her friends, Donna and Tara. As she had been listening to the story of The Great Family, she was reminded of the friendship they all had with one another and she wanted to make something special for her

best friends. There were other occasions also where she exhibited such altruistic behaviour.

The conversation between Eric, Donna and Karl was steered towards a consideration of imaginary friends by Eric who spoke of having loads of such friends in the past. Karl said that he too had imaginary friends. Eric's best imaginary friend, Frank, went to hospital and died but he had another best friend, John since. Karl spoke about his imaginary friends who he talks to in his room and on his bouncy castle. Donna told a story of how she had two imaginary friends on holidays in Spain and she had brought them both back to Ireland on the boat. As the discussion moved on, Eric and Karl revealed that their imaginary friends were actually teddies. The researcher then asked them about God:

Researcher: And what about God?
Donna: God is not imaginary!
Researcher: So God is different from an imaginary friend?
Donna: He's better than an imaginary friend.
Eric: He's invisible
Researcher: And Donna, you're saying that for you God is different from an imaginary friend
Donna: He's not imaginary. He's real.
Researcher: What do you feel about that Eric? What about God? Is God different from an imaginary friend?
Eric: Yea.
Researcher: How?
Eric: He's just invisible, but he is real.
Researcher: Karl, how would you feel about that? Would there be a difference between your imaginary friend and God?
Karl: God's better!

When asked by the researcher why he might say that God was better, Karl answered that he didn't know. As the conversation moved on a little further, Karl returned to the question and posed it to the group himself: 'What do you think is better, God or an imaginary friend?', he asked. The researcher asked it of Karl himself who said again that he didn't know. Donna interrupted by saying, 'It's God, Karl, can't you see?' Then Karl himself said, 'Yea, God is better than an imaginary friend'. Later again, he posed a question to Eric, 'What age is God, Eric?' and the children wondered about that question as well as the question of what God might look like. The researcher asked the children if God was important to them and they

all said that God was important especially now since they had made their First Communion.

When asked if there was anything that scared them, Karl immediately answered, Chuckie, the dummy that kills everyone. Then Eric and Donna joined in the conversation and they brought up Bloody Mary, Charlie Charlie, Freddy Kruger and Robbie Robbie. In the same way as some of the groups in other sessions had spoken about these and similar characters, this group talked with trepidation about them. At the same time there was a fascination and Karl twice requested to play the game, in spite of his fear. Asked what they thought God might say to Charlie Charlie, Donna said that God would ask him not to be making people scared of him, to be a good person and not to be bad any more. She also spoke of heaven and hell as places where the good and bad dwell respectively.

Each child created a story and presented it to the other children. The session concluded with a feast and as they were eating their treat, they bemoaned the fact that they couldn't stay longer and they burst into spontaneous singing of the song of 'Circle of Friends', one of the hymns they had learned for their First Communion.

5.4.6 Phase 3: Session 6

The sixth and final session of Phase Three occurred in School B and the participants were Uma, Keith and Belinda. When they arrived in the room, they immediately began to play with the response materials and they chatted with one another as they played. Uma shared her news that she would be leaving the school soon, as she and her family were returning to Africa where they had come from originally. She explained that her father's work required them to leave Dublin. Uma is part of an evangelical Christian community and she spoke about how important God is to her family. She described how they watch a lot of Jesus movies and that on Saturdays they pray to God and 'sing songs and all'. Sunday is a special day when they attend church. Keith and Belinda said that they also go to church and that they talk to God at home, particularly around bedtime.

The researcher asked them if they ever get the chance to talk to God in school and both Keith and Uma answered, 'sometimes'. When questioned about occasions when they might get to talk to God in school, the children responded in the following way:

Uma:	When I'm in the toilet.
Researcher:	So do you have to be on your own to talk to God?
Uma:	Yea, I like being on my own and talking to God.
Researcher:	You like being on your own and talking to God. And what types things do you talk to God about?
Uma:	About thanking my parents.
Researcher:	How about you Keith? Would you get a chance in school?
Keith:	Yea we do it in school.
Researcher:	You do it in school? You take time to yourself and do you pray together?
Keith:	We pray together. I sometimes do the same thing as Uma. I pray in the toilet.
Researcher:	Do you? Did you ever think that other people did that?
Keith:	No!

When Belinda was asked if she prayed in the toilet, she said 'no'. The researcher asked her jokingly if she thought it was mad to pray in the toilet, and she whispered, 'Yea!'. Uma countered by saying that God doesn't mind where you talk to him and Keith agreed. Keith said that he prayed for his Mam and Dad because they 'do loads of stuff for me and my sister'.

When the researcher asked about things that scare the children, they mentioned darkness and Rottweilers. She asked them if they thought that God was with them in those scary times and they all said that they felt God's presence at all times. The conversation moved on then to people who don't believe in God. Uma felt that it was a bad thing not to believe in God or to turn your back on God which could result in you going to hell. Keith felt that it was not a bad thing not to believe in God, and that some people were 'in a different religion'.

The children asked for 'The Great Family' story to be presented to them again. The researcher presented the story and commenced the wondering questions. The children's favourite part was the end of the story (Uma and Belinda) and 'all of it' (Keith). Asked the question if there was any part of the story that they thought 'we

could leave out and yet still have all of the story that we need', the children responded as follows:

Keith:	Leave out when they died!
Uma:	Yea, leave out when they died.
Belinda:	Yea, leave out when they died as well.
Researcher:	And if we leave that out, if we leave out that part where they died, would we have all that we need?
All:	Yea.
Researcher:	And what would happen if they didn't die?
Keith:	They'd still be there with all the children with God up in heaven.
Researcher:	They'd still be there.
Keith:	With all the children.
Researcher:	With all the children. Mmm, what would that be like? People never died. Is that what you'd say? Don't let anybody die…. Or just not Abraham and Sarah?
Keith:	Don't let anybody die.
Researcher:	Don't let anybody die. I wonder what that would look like?
Keith:	That'd be weird.
Researcher:	Why do you think that'd be weird?
Keith:	When they look at them, they'd be old.
Uma:	You're dead. You're full of years.
Researcher:	Yea, do you think when you're full of years, you should die, or it's time to die?
Uma:	Yea, time to die.
Researcher:	Do you think there's a time to die?
Uma:	Sometimes.
Researcher:	What do you think Belinda?
Belinda:	What Uma was saying.
Researcher:	What Uma was saying.

When the children were asked if there was any part of the story that reminded them of themselves or their own lives, both Keith and Belinda spoke of relatives who had died. Belinda, who had been very quiet throughout the session became quite involved during the Godly Play part of the session and contributed to the wondering although not to the same extent as the other two children. The session concluded with a feast and the children chatted as they ate. Then they left to return to their classroom.

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5.4.7 Discussion of Findings from Phase Three

The purpose of the third and final phase of the research process was to delve deeper into the spiritual potential of participants and to discover what is important to them in terms of their spiritual lives, as well as observing aspects of their spiritual selves which they might reveal in a more focused setting. Phases One and Two of the research had yielded evidence to support the assertion that children valued the opportunity to engage in a process which nurtures their spiritual potential. This phase further consolidated that understanding as children across all sessions spoke about their enjoyment of the Godly Play lessons.

The most striking dimension of the children's spiritual lives for the researcher was the theistic worldview possessed by all of the children in Phase Three, without exception. This may not be surprising given that the research took place in schools under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Bishop and that all children who were involved in the Godly Play sessions were those who took part in regular RE lessons. However the convictions of the children were very strong and pronounced, which surprised the researcher on two fronts. Firstly, the passion of the children from second class through to sixth class when speaking of God, and secondly, the absence of a Christo-centric focus to their discussions and responses. The latter is somewhat at odds with the type of content children would normally encounter in their RE programme, Alive O, particularly those children in second class who were making their First Communion where the emphasis is on Christ, the Good Shepherd. The researcher noted this during response times after Godly Play presentations also, when children seldom opted to work with parable material, the only material which they had encountered, that had an explicitly Christocentric focus. This supports the work of Hart (2003) and provides further evidence that children are quite capable of relating to a transcendent God. Indeed the manner in which second class children (Session 5) were able to distinguish between imaginary friends and a Christian understanding of God lends further support to this.

When asked if they talked to their families about God, the findings from this study suggest that most of the children in Phase Three did not. Of the twenty two children

in this phase, there were just two children, Uma (Session 6) and Noah (Session 4) who described coming from homes where religion has a large role to play in their family life. Approximately a third of the children spoke of attending church on a regular basis, but most of the children neither spoke about religion in their homes nor attended church. Some spoke of potentially being laughed at by their parents if they revealed that they spoke to God. For them, their communications with God were secretive. This concurs with Kitching and Shanneik (2015) who found that children in their study did not appear to raise religious or moral themes explicitly with their families. It differs from the REMC study which found that the majority of children reported talking to their parents about beliefs and values at least occasionally.

Phase Three highlighted children's agency in matters of the spirit. Children's individual agency was evident in the differing views that many of them held from their parents as alluded to above. Children's agency as a community of learners themselves was also a strong thread running through the entire project and was noted by the researcher in her records of interactions with the children. The children almost never asked her what she thought, even when existential issues were being considered. Yet they seemed to draw what they needed from the stories themselves. The role of the researcher, as teacher, in these instances was a facilitative one.

Throughout all six sessions of Phase Three, the children exhibited a good degree of comfort when discussing God in front of their peers and with the researcher. There was openness to one another's expressions about their relationship with God and no sense of embarrassment particularly on the part of those who said that they might be ridiculed at home for speaking about God. The characteristic of 'spiritual questing' identified by Hyde (2008) was prevalent. The children listened to one another and wondered together about matters of importance to them such as death and transcendence. There were a couple of children who seemed to be searching for more and they used their peers as sounding boards or sources of wisdom to test their convictions. They also appeared to be influenced by their peers responses in

this respect: Karl (Session 6) put the question of which is better, God or an imaginary friend, to his peers; Ben (Session 2) asked his friend Daniel if he talked to God. It appeared that the children were not aware of one another's spiritual or religious landscape and that they had not engaged in such discussions with one another before. When Uma (Session 6) spoke of talking to God in the toilet, Keith realised that he was not the only person who did this. It was as if a sense of community was established through this common language.

The children touched on all four kinds of existential issues identified by Berryman (1991) and described in Chapter three of this thesis i.e. death, the threat to freedom, the need for meaning, and the unavoidable aloneness that marks us as human beings. Death was spoken of specifically and at length, during two of the sessions, 4 and 5, and was touched on in some of the other sessions also. The findings from the study concurred with those of Hay and Nye (1998) who found that there was a sense of their own finite nature in children's expressions but that the language of death almost never instilled fear. The image of 'Ciara' the character in the story created by Fiona and Lulu (Session 3) going to an altar in the desert and asking God if she would die, is particularly striking. Noah (Session 5) and some other children whose families had suffered bereavement and where the loss of their loved ones seemed a prominent part of family life, readily spoke of their deceased relatives and seemed to value this opportunity. The rituals performed by their families to remember the dead appeared to be very important for the children.

The need for meaning, the second existential issue spoken about by Berryman, has already been discussed above in connection with Hyde's (2008) conception of 'spiritual questing'. The threat to freedom was inherent in many of the discussions about the challenges and struggles present in the children's lives. This seemed to be particularly the case for some of the boys. Eanna (Session 2) talked about not being able to get the bad people 'out of me head'. It was as if his freedom or his true self was being constrained by these 'bad people'. Noah and David (Session 4) likewise spoke of the struggle of dealing with anger. It was challenging for the researcher to listen to the children in Session 3 as they described their perceptions of their local

area. Oppression which is a part of their lived experience is a very real existential issue for them and it poses an ongoing threat to their freedom. The relationship of the children with the world around them (one of the four relationships encompassed by relational consciousness) was thus characterised by some disconnect. None of the children for example, spoke of nature or the cosmos throughout the entire research project. Finally, Berryman's fourth existential limit, aloneness and loneliness, was mentioned by some of the children and a sense of connection with God appeared to be heightened at those times in particular. The process of Godly Play provided a context and opportunity for the children to speak of these existential issues.

Charlie Charlie and the other 'demonic' games which the children spoke about provided an avenue for the researcher to discuss their fears with the children. Danger and fears are very prevalent features in their lives. For most children their parents and physical objects are their greatest source of comfort when they are afraid: they spoke of the need to have something tangible to touch and feel at such times (a hug from a parent; a toy to cuddle). God was not mentioned first off by most children as a source of comfort in times of fear. There was a repulsion of danger and yet paradoxically there was an attraction to it. The phrase 'the desert is a dangerous place' appealed to many of the children and even when discussing the dangers inherent in the 'demonic' games, some of the children who were most afraid, pleaded for us to play them. Discussions of good versus evil were prevalent in the sessions also and the children were aware of the concepts of heaven and hell, and good and evil. All spoke of God, as the Good.

This study uncovered some evidence which lends support to Hay and Nye's (1998) contention that children's natural spiritual awareness has become isolated from religious tradition because 'the religious institutions sometimes seem to have forgotten their spiritual roots' (p. 144). Lisa and Queeva's description of Mass demonstrates that for them, instead of Mass being life-giving, it seemed to sap them of energy:

      Lisa: The church makes you so tired cos like it's holy and all

>Queeva: And it makes you so sad when they say the people who've
>died

Perhaps Ingersoll's (2014) remedies could lend some advice to better serve the spiritual needs of children in a church context. It was interesting to note also that the children seldom referred to their RE lessons or prayer times in school as providing a context for the nurture of their spiritual capacities. Indeed the programme in use in the schools, Alive O, was mentioned on just a couple of occasions throughout the entire research process. The children did not seem to identify a connection with what they were doing in Godly Play and what went on in their mainstream RE lesson. A number of reasons could be posited for this (e.g. perhaps RE was not taught on a regular basis), but whatever the reason, it appeared that the children did not identify their RE class as a time when they talked to God or where matters of an existential nature were discussed. The exception was the second class children who mentioned talking to God at prayertime in school.

The game of 'hide and seek' was a popular one among the children in Phase Three and had been a prominent feature throughout the entire research process also. Children hid figures in the sand and others had to find them. In seeking to access a framework which best described this activity, Hyde's (1998) concepts of the 'felt sense' and 'integrating awareness' were most appropriate. According to Hyde (2010):

>The felt sense draws on the wisdom of the child's own body as a natural and primal way of knowing. It involves an awareness of the immediacy of experience and tactile, sensory activity…. Integrating awareness refers to an emerging level of consciousness; it envelopes or integrates a previous level of awareness and is accessed through activities with a repetitive element…. The felt sense is a prerequisite for integrating awareness (p.)

The repetitive feature of the hide and seek game seemed to hold a meaning for the children and some (most notably those participants in Session 4), seemed unable to progress to a more creative phase.

Finally, the importance of silence for the nurture of spiritual potential was brought to the fore in Phase Three. The discussion which took place in Session 3, about different forms of silence was interesting and enlightening. It pointed to the need

for silence to 'just be', not with a task in hand. Uma and Keith's description of praying in the toilet struck a chord with both of them. A similar encounter happened in Session 2 when the children were talking about times of silence when they connect with God:

Eanna   In the library, I think about or talk to God.
Lisa: Sometimes I don't be reading. I do be like talking to God and then I
             like stop, and then I read, and then I stop reading and then I talk to
             God .. and when we're walking back to class and we're really quiet,
             I'd be talking to God.

It's clear that those children grab whatever time of silence they can, in order to connect with God and that this connection occurs in an informal manner.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings from the three phases of the research project. In the first phase, teachers' perspectives were accessed and the second and third phases focused on drawing directly from the children themselves. The findings from all three phases illustrate that children valued the opportunity to engage in a process which nurtures their spiritual potential. Whilst they were engaged in the process, it was possible to observe some of their spiritual characteristics including: a relationship with God; a sense of agency in matters of the spirit: a social dimension to their spirituality; the ability to grapple with issues of an existential nature; an awareness of good and evil; the desire to engage at a deeper level.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by recalling the research questions which were posed at the outset of the research process. It responds to those questions in light of the research findings. The chapter then moves on to provide an overview of the principal findings from the entire research process. It outlines possible contributions of the research to the academy and it gives suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with some words from the researcher herself.

6.2 The Research Question

The overall purpose of the research was twofold. It sought to give voice to children about the value they ascribe to activities of a spiritual nature and it also set out to describe the spiritual characteristics exhibited by the cohort of children involved in the study.

A series of questions which informed the research were outlined in chapter one and these have been addressed by the research process. The first question asked whether children would find Godly Play, the process which provided them with opportunities for spiritual expression and development, satisfying. The children's reactions to the process show that the children valued the process. They recognised it as a time apart and expressed a desire to be involved for longer periods of time. The findings suggest that all of the children found the work satisfying.

The second question asked if there were children for whom this way of working might not be satisfying. All of the children in Phase Three appeared to find the process satisfying and the overwhelming majority of children in Phase Two found it satisfying. There was no clear evidence of dissent during data collection. However one child in Phase Two who ranked the feast as their most important part of the process and the stories as their least important part may have been indicating some sense of dissatisfaction, although that was never voiced by them in conversations.

Both the researcher's own reflective records and conversations with class teachers show that there was no child who did not find the work satisfying.

The third question which was posed from the outset of the research was whether or not responses in the two different research sites would be similar. Findings from the research indicate no discernible difference between the overall responses in both schools. While this was not surprising because the schools were chosen purposely because of their similarity in terms of ethos, gender make up and socio-economic environment; it is nonetheless affirming of the research process and lends support to some generalizability of findings.

The fourth question wondered whether there would be noticeable differences in levels of engagement between children from families where spirituality or religion is important, and families where it was not. This question has not been fully answered by the research because it proved difficult to get an accurate depiction of the levels of religiosity of the home contexts from where the children came. Nonetheless it was possible to glean some information from the children themselves and based on this information, there was no discernible difference between children from homes where spirituality and religion are important and those where they are not.

The final question that was asked at the beginning of the research was whether Irish children would exhibit similar spiritual characteristics to children who were participants in empirical research in other jurisdictions. Findings from the research show that the Irish children in this study exhibited the same characteristics as highlighted in research projects detailed in the literature review. The relationships entailed in 'relational consciousness' (self, others, the world and God) were observable in the children interactions and their sense of agency with regard to their spiritual potential was marked.

6.3 Overall Findings

The research found that the children in the research project valued the opportunities they experienced for spiritual expression and development. They particularly valued 'silence' and the space which it provides for them to engage at a deep level. They exhibited a sense of agency in matters of the spirit and claimed the importance of God in their lives regardless of whether those at home held God in the same regard. The children worked collaboratively throughout the research process and valued the social context created by Godly Play. They discussed matters of importance with one another and drew from one another's' wisdom. The children demonstrated that they have a capacity to engage with existential issues and that they valued the opportunity to talk at length about these issues. Death was a particular focus for many of the conversations which took place. The children also spoke of the fears which are present in their lives and many of them exhibited a paradoxical fascination with the sources of their fears. They were attuned to the juxtaposition between good and evil.

Overall the children showed a great capacity for engaging at a deeper level and a great desire to go to that deeper level.

6.4 Significance of the Study

This study can make a contribution in a number of areas:

- It can contribute to a fuller understanding of children in Ireland. It can supplement the learning from national research projects which have neglected the spiritual dimension of children's lives.
- The study can contribute to the debate concerning the place of spiritual education in schools by showing that a suspension of formative components in schools, in favour of a phenomenological methodology may not be sufficient to adequately address the spiritual needs and preferences of Irish primary school children.
- The study has a contribution to offer to discussions about children being opted out of RE by their parents. If the competent child paradigm is taken

seriously, children's voices in this matter need to be heard. The children in this study wanted opportunities to nurture their relationship with God even though God may not have been important in their homes.

- It has been shown in the literature review, that the Irish policy context pays insufficient attention to the spiritual lives of children. This study can inform policymakers of the value which children themselves attribute to their spiritual expression and development.

- This study can be of benefit to teachers in a consideration of their role as religious educators and facilitators of children's spiritual development.

- This study will assist the Irish Centre for Religious Education to further build its repertoire of research projects emanating from an Irish context.

- Godly Play Ireland will benefit from this study as it will enable the organisation to speak about the Irish context of Godly Play from an empirical perspective.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

There are three valuable pieces of research which could emanate from this study and which would be of particular interest to the researcher:

(i) A comparative study: This research utilised Godly Play as a tool for accessing the value which children attribute to opportunities for spiritual expression and development. The researcher is aware of other pieces of research in Ireland where other tools were used. A comparative analysis between the findings from this research project and others could yield valuable findings.

(ii) Children's understandings of death: One of the themes which could be developed from this research study relates to Irish children's attitudes to death including an exploration of the importance of ritual for children in these circumstances.

(iii) Teacher's Role: The teacher's role as facilitator of children's spiritual expression merits research particularly how this might be accomplished with the assistance or otherwise, of a prescribed curriculum.

There are other research projects also which could accompany this study. It highlights the importance of dissemination of the findings for others to instigate research or for collaboration purposes.

6.3 A Final Note

Of all the self-reflection notes that were recorded during the research process by the researcher, there is one key reflection which stands out:

'The children almost never ask me what I think!'

This is surely the greatest indication of children's agency in terms of spiritual development. In the school context, this agency requires facilitation by teachers. If they assume this facilitative role, they can rest assured that the agency of the child coupled with the intervention of the Spirit will serve the child's needs.

Nurtured by the kerygma without and wonder within, the child's relationship with God is characterised by joy that puts the child in peace, that makes the child serene and calm.

(Cavalletti 1983 p. 41)

Appendix A

Ethical Approval

Ms Cora O'Farrell
School of Education Studies

9th October 2014

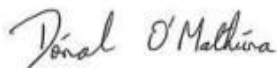**REC Reference:**   **DCUREC/2014/196**

Proposal Title: **An Exploration of Children's Experience of Godly Play. Identifying the value children attach to spiritual/religious activities and exploring what spiritual skills they possess**

Applicants: **Ms Cora O'Farrell, Dr Sandra Cullen**

Dear Cora,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal. Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Donal O'Mathuna
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B

Samples of Children's Work

Phase Two: Part 1
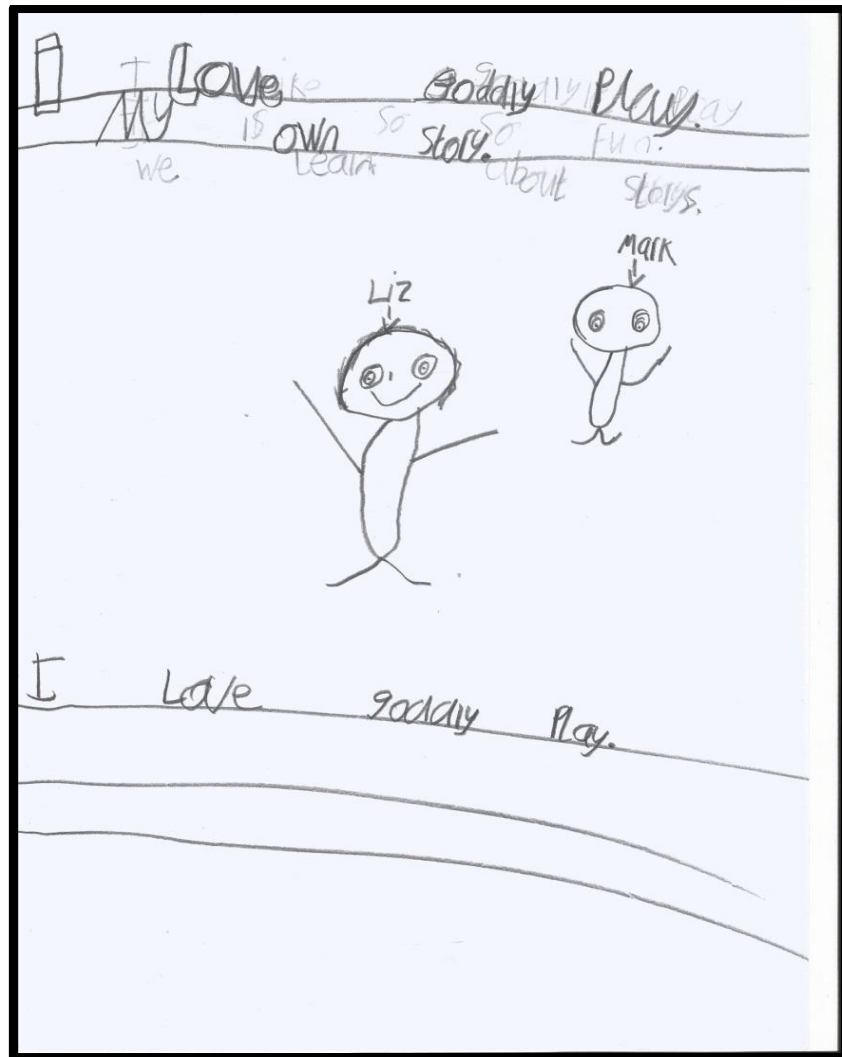
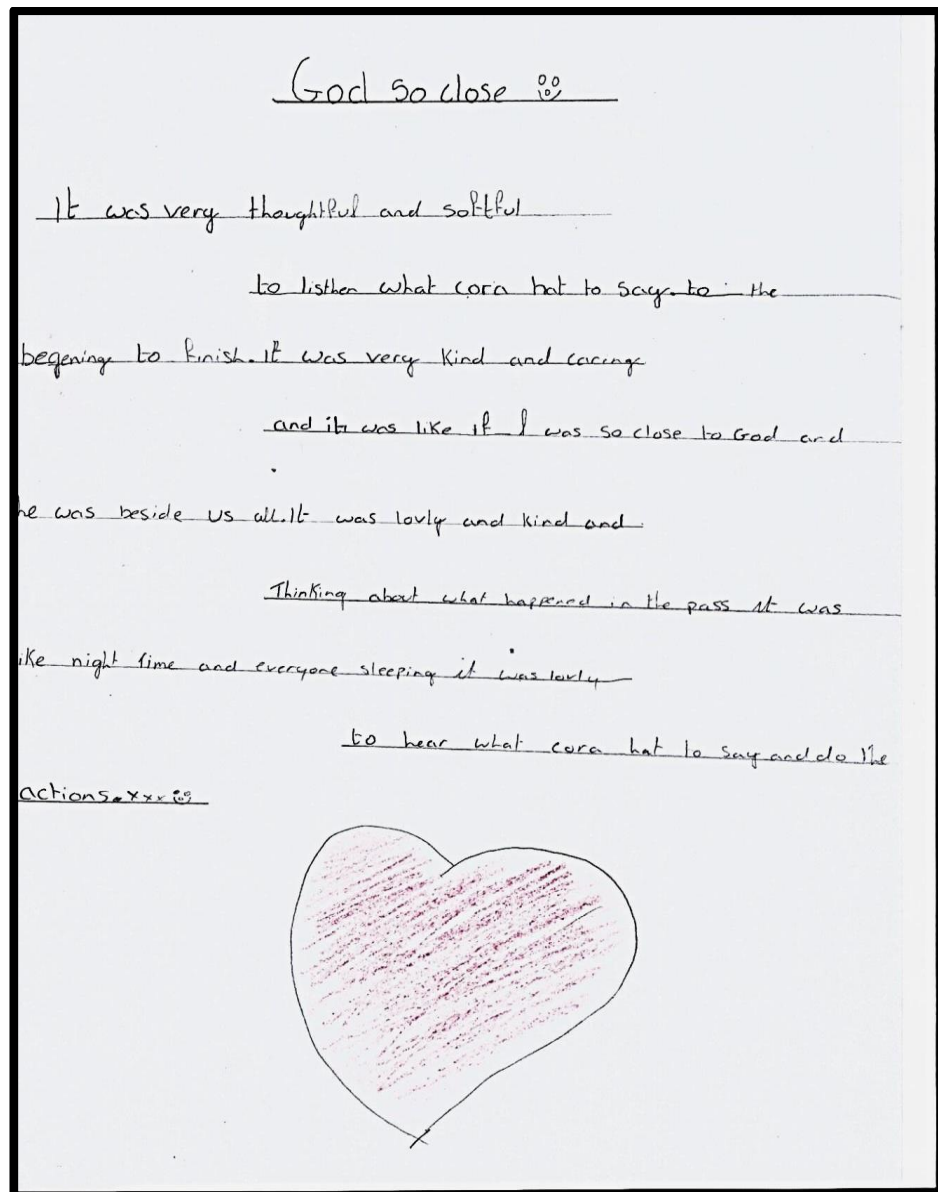A child from second class drew this image.

The child initially stated that they had just drawn a random picture but as other people described their pictures this child said that it was a private one that they didn't want to share.
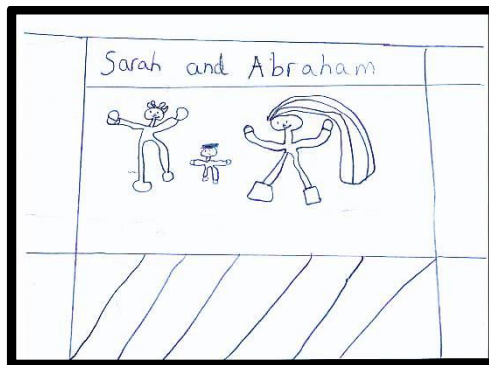
A child from second class depicts the story of Abraham and Sarah, a firm favourite of many of the children. The materials for this story were much sought after during response time of Godly Play sessions.

Two other second class children depict Godly Play presentations – the Israelites fleeing from Egypt and Moses and the Ten Commandments.

.

God so close :)

It was very thoughtful and softful to listhen what cora hat to say to the begening to finish. It was very kind and caring and it was like if I was so close to God and he was beside us all. It was lovly and kind and Thinking about what happend in the pass it was like night time and everyone sleeping it was lovly to hear what cora hat to say and do the actions. Xxx :)

A sixth class child writes about their experience of Godly Play. The serene atmosphere of the process was valued by this pupil. The class teacher was astonished by what the child had written. This child was very close to another child in the school who had died during the year in tragic circumstances
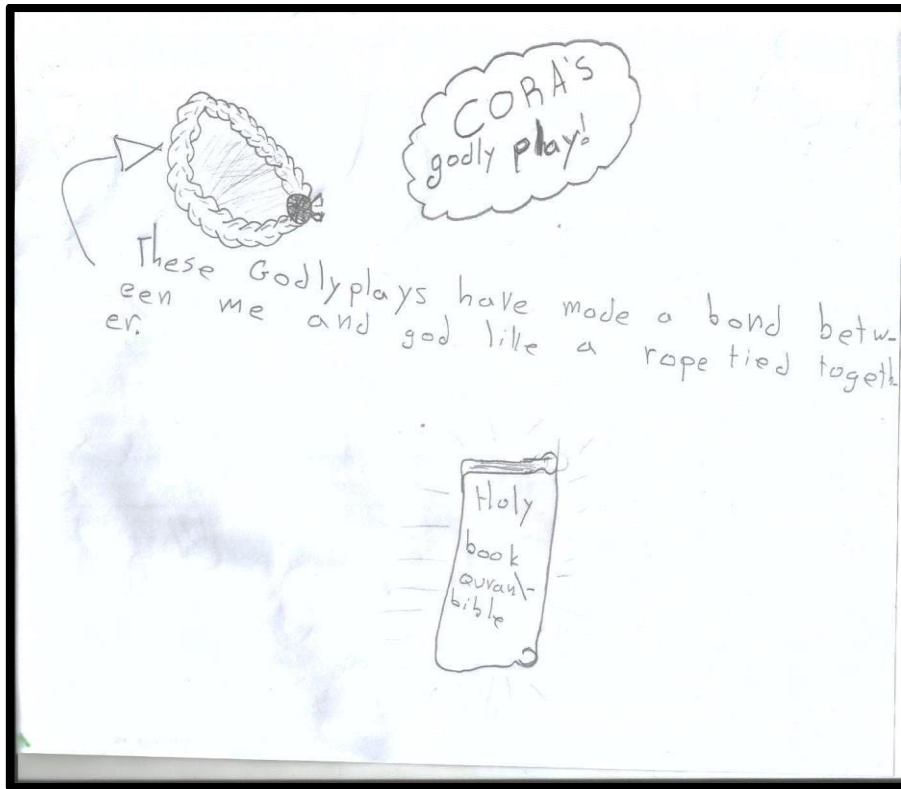
Another sixth class pupil draws on a piece of material used in one Godly Play presentation – the Circle of the Church Year which uses a gold coloured rope to describe the never-ending cycle of the Church Year – "for every beginning there's an ending; and for every ending, there's a beginning".

His depiction of the sacred text reflects his background in Islam and his exposure to the Bible in school.

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