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Meaning in life through children's eyes:

**The views and experiences of eight year old children
in Israel**

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Summary

The study reported here originated in my therapeutic work with children at risk and my search for a therapeutic approach which would help them develop the inner strength to cope with their difficulties. The concept of 'meaning in life' as a source of strength has been extensively and richly studied among older age groups, both with respect to the different personal meanings which everyone finds in their life and with respect to the effect on one's life of possessing a sense of 'meaning in life', but it has been neglected almost entirely among children. As a result, the aim of this research was to further knowledge about the concept of 'meaning in life' for children. Due to the paucity of research with children regarding this issue, it was needed to first establish that meaning in life was at all a relevant and researchable concept for children. Consequently, the primary research questions were as follows:

Does the concept of 'meaning in life' have relevance for children? Relatedly, what are the (dis)connections between children's understandings of their own lives, and what matters to them, and, the adult concept of 'meaning in life'?

To examine these over-arching questions, the following four sub-questions were devised:

- What do children think are the most important and meaningful things in their lives?
- What do children think is the best way to live life?
- What nature of goals and purpose do children have for their lives and do they believe that they have character traits and strengths which would help them to fulfil their goals/purpose?
- How do children's individuality and the differences between them show themselves in their perspectives on meaning in life? To what extent is gender associated with variations in response?

The research adopted a Constructivist-Phenomenological approach, with the aim of getting as close as possible to the children's own perceptions and experience of their world.

Thirty eight-year-old children in their third year at two primary schools in different neighbourhoods of the same central Israeli city were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. This data collection approach was complemented by two creative elements: a short

semi-humorous story told at the start to set the tone of the interview, and a picture drawn at the end of the interview by the children to illustrate what was important in their life. Some interviews were carried out individually and some as a group. The data analysis method chosen was Smith's (1996) and Smith and Osborn's (2008) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

This thesis makes two original contributions to knowledge. The first is the discovery that meaning in life is as pertinent a concept among children as it is among adults. Children may not understand the concept of 'meaning in life' in as full a way as an adult might, but they do have clear and well-shaped opinions about the most important things in their lives (e.g. family and friends) and how they should best live (e.g. by helping others and living in peace). They have goals and plans for the future (e.g. Ambitions to become a pilot or teacher) and they believe that they have traits and strengths that will help them in reaching their goals (e.g. that being wise, kind or curious will help them in life).

The second important contribution is methodological: the research technics developed in this study (the semi-structured interview enriched by story-telling and picture-drawing) has provided what appears to be a reliable way of generating valid responses from the participants. It could be used by researchers in the future to further understanding about how children perceive the notion of meaning in life.

Overview

Chapter 1, Introduction: Sets out the therapeutic stance which the author brought to this research and how this stance links up with the research topic and the research methodology, a linkage which clarifies the research stance.

Chapter 2, Literature Review (Philosophy): Explores the development of the concept of 'meaning of life' from classical through to modern and post-modern philosophy, transforming along the way into the construct 'meaning in life', the chief contribution to its clarification in the modern period being made by existentialist philosophers.

Chapter 3, Literature Review (Psychology): Reviews the relevant literature, placing the emphasis on Logotherapy and later Positive Psychology. Definitions, conceptualizations and indicators developed to elaborate the topic of meaning in life are set out. Research studies are reviewed which have established the positive effect on one's life of having found meaning in life and the negative effect of finding no such meaning. The studies into 'meaning in life' among adults and adolescents are reviewed. The paucity of meaning-in-life research among children is examined compared to wellbeing research. The research questions are explained.

Chapter 4, Methodology: Explains the epistemological stances of qualitative research, the Constructivist-Phenomenological paradigm, and more specifically, the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, IPA. Research ethics are discussed and in particular the ethics of research with children, especially as related to the present study.

Chapter 5, Research Methods: The ethics observance measures taken by this study are set out. The chapter then reviews the research population of children selected for the study and the research methods/techniques used; story-telling and picture-drawing and a semi-structured interview. The interview questions are set out, as well as the procedure for conducting the interviews. The methods deployed to achieve data triangulation and trustworthiness are set out and the data analysis process explained, from identifying themes and categories into which the children's responses can be grouped, through to the detailed deployment of the IPA scheme.

Chapter 6, Data findings: Sets out the main findings from the children's responses to the research questions. The themes and categories raised by the children are reviewed in some detail. Variations in responses are discussed.

Chapter 7, Discussion: Sets out the research questions once again and the findings with respect to each question, discussing the findings in light of the literature on the issues involved. Three primary conclusions are set down, (a) the concept of meaning in life is indeed live and relevant to eight-year-old children; (b) methods/techniques have been devised for this study which make the concept researchable amongst children of this age; (c) the findings of this study are inseparable from the methodology deployed to obtain them.

Chapter 8, Conclusions: Offers a reflective and personal overview of the research process and lays out the contributions to knowledge made by the study, its limitations, and its practical and theoretical implications for education, child psychotherapy and further research.

Bibliography

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The focus of this research is meaning in life through children's eyes, an interest that has its roots in my profession as a therapist in arts, working for many years with at-risk children. The thesis draws on this professional experience to explore how children find and make meaning in their life. The design and construction of the thesis combine three components of my approach to therapeutic work with children. My working method is humanistic in that it makes the child the focus of, and chief actor in, the therapeutic process; my approach is also cognitive in that it centers on the importance of how the child makes sense of their life; and existentialism and Logotherapy, both of which approaches emphasise meaning in life as a source of motivation and resilience.

This chapter offers a brief survey of the therapeutic stance I have put together over the years and which, as stated above, provided the impetus for this research into concept of 'meaning in life' among children. The chapter analyses the concept of meaning in life from the philosophical and psychological points of view and sets out how this concept can be used as a source of resilience by children at-risk. The chapter goes on to ask why so little research has been conducted to date into the place of meaning in life among children, considering whether the difficulty is one of methodology or of conceptual content. The issue of the age of the children researched in the present study is broached, setting out the author's well-grounded confidence, rooted in therapeutic experience, in the capacity of eight-to-nine-year-old children to understand, be interested by and answer questions about what is personally meaningful to them. The study's research questions are derived from the theoretical sources discussed and the issues of research into and with children.

1.2 Therapeutic approach as theoretical anchor

My current therapeutic stance is informed by my many years of training and practising in Israel, as a child therapist, including group supervision and the influence of several schools of thought. The first and by far the most important factor has been my understanding of the *position of the child* in therapy. In my professional work as a therapist, I have always been more attracted to approaches which put the individual patient at their centre, seeing the patient as equal in status and value to the therapist. From this perspective, the therapist is not all-knowing but rather someone who helps patients find their inner voice, and the therapist-patient encounter is what Buber (1964) would term an '*I-Thou*' encounter (a term coined by Buber, relating to the person-to-person direct encounter between one human being and another). This approach is advocated and validated by humanist psychologists, such as Rogers (1951) and Maslow (1943), by constructivist researchers such as Mahoney (1991) and Niemayer (1995). This therapeutic approach also resonates with other theoretical constructions of childhood and of researcher-child relations as discussed by sociologists such as Morrow and Alderson (2011).

All these positions imply a particular ethical stance, key to which is an open verbal and non-verbal dialogue between therapist and child in which the child is an active partner. The move towards behavioural, cognitive and emotional change is then the outcome of the two partners' joint choice, of shared objectives and agreed ways of reaching them.

Another proponent of this therapeutic stance is the Cognitive school. This approach, which argues that people's feelings derive far more from the messages they choose to send themselves than from what is happening around them in reality (Beck, 1963, Ellis, 1959), makes the child a partner in therapeutic decision-making:

The therapist and the patient collaboratively set the agenda for the session by deciding what items will be discussed..... Summarizing session content encourages feedback and asking the patient to summarize information makes the patient an active participant in the therapeutic process.

(Mason, 2007, p. 249)

A further component of my approach to therapeutic practice is the use of art materials and artwork. 'Art therapy' covers a number of schools of thought, the mainstream approach being

represented perhaps by Naumberg (1973). Her thinking regards artwork as a projective tool. The patient's creative work allows unconscious materials to emerge, and the interpretation and working-through of these materials carries forward the therapeutic process. My use of artwork is somewhat different from this and derives from the child-centred therapeutic approach described above. I use creative activity - artwork, music, drama, movement, bibliotherapy - as a tool for communicating with the child, as an alternative language, on the premise that creativity is a language that often comes far more naturally to the child than words, and I try to avoid interpretation as much as possible:

The process of using drawing in therapy can be a way of seeking information in trying to understand how this particular child perceives and conceives his or her own world. However, according to the cognitive-constructivist approach, drawings must be interpreted carefully, with the help of the child's explanations and comments.

(Hamama & Ronen, 2009, p.100)

Also, and no less important, working with art materials enables therapist and child to connect to the child's strengths and creativity and not only to their pathology, distress or vulnerability. Kramer (1958) represents this thinking, arguing that the creative process itself is therapeutic and the role of the therapist is to be an ally to the child's creative daring. She stresses the holistic and integrative qualities of the creative process: artistic creativity allows us to really experience what is happening to us and not merely talk about it.

1.3 'Meaning in life' as starting point for research

The construct of 'meaning in life' from an existentialist and therapeutic point of view has been central to me ever since my studies towards my first degree in Psychology and Philosophy. The first encounter was with the existentialist philosophers. Kierkegaard (1983) raised questions as, 'what is most important in life?' and 'what things are worth living for and dying for?' Camus (1978) asked, 'what is the meaning of life in an absurd world?' Sartre (1990) discussed the issues of men and women condemned to liberty and referred to the freedom to create the meaning of their own life.

Psychology posed more personal questions as to the meanings each individual has to look for and find in their life. The philosophers and psychologists Viktor Frankl and Irvin Yalom bridged the two disciplines, considering aspects of existentialist psychology as it applies to meaning in life.

Frankl (1970) set out the importance of 'meaning in life' to the existentialist debate in his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. In reviewing his experiences in a concentration camp during the Holocaust he sought to find some kind of meaning in surviving such inhumanity. Love, he said, gives point to life. He perceived that, in the beauty of nature, camp inmates found relief and meaningfulness. Life, he argued, furnishes people with opportunities for finding meaning; in creativity, love, relationships, in the experience of beauty in art or nature. But even in a life all but devoid of the opportunity for creativity and pleasure, he argued, one can find meaning through moral and enlightened behaviour, in acceptance of suffering. Frankl called his approach 'Logotherapy', the therapy of meaning. It is a therapy which sees humans as beings whose chief aspiration is to make a reality of the meaning they perceive in the world and their values, not beings whose life is merely constructed of the satisfaction of drives and instincts.

According to Yalom (1980), the problem of the role of meaning in life lies in two arguments which are directly contradictory. The one is that men and women need meaning in their life: that a life devoid of meaning, goals, values and ideals causes the individual great damage and distress. The second is that the world offers us no absolute answers: there is no external truth in a universe which is unplanned and undesigned. So that the problem for human beings is, at bottom, how and where do people who need meaning in their life find it in a universe lacking in meaning. To this end he set out a method of therapy based on existentialist principles which make use of creativity and try to give meaning to the patient's life. He proposed that the encounter between therapist and patient stresses the process of what occurs between them and the subjectivity which is at the root of all psychotherapy.

Yovel (2001), a psychiatrist and existentialist, considered the individual and subjective nature of finding meaning:

Where does meaning come from? Always from within, from the mind. Meaning in life is totally subjective, varies from individual to individual and often from one phase of life to

the next....What bestows meaning on life? Many find point to their life in their relations with the people they love...people can even find it in their relationship to God....One way or another, meaning is individual and personal and everyone has to find it within themselves.

(Yovel, 2001, p.17)

Reker and Woo (2010) clarified the (dis)connection between a person having an overall sense of 'meaning in life' and there being meaningfulness in respect of specific or discrete aspects of life:

It is not meaningful to talk about life as a whole as having meaning; life only contains meanings that are actualized through specific activities, quests, and goals...however, to achieve an enduring type of personal meaning, specific sources need to be integrated into a larger and higher purpose.

(Reker & Woo, 2010, p. 1)

This linking of the philosophical and psychological approaches to understanding 'meaning in life' has enriched my therapeutic understanding and strengthened my belief in the need to connect people to what is meaningful to them, both as a personal resource and as a therapeutic strategy. However, a 'full' understanding of how to deploy this approach and of the linkage between meaning in life and resilience emerged only gradually as I continued to work with at-risk children, with children with behavioural problems, children who objectively came from a most painful reality, of neglect and abuse. In their daily life and in school these children might behave passively or aggressively but most often they are apathetic, lack of vitality and energy, and display a sense of helplessness. They functioned at a minimal level, so much so that I felt that they had given up on desire and hope. They conveyed the feeling that they just tried to get through each day and that nothing was really of importance. I could find no trace of enthusiasm, desire, caring, meaning.

At this point I understood that changing these children's interpretation of the events in their life (which would be the Cognitive school's strategy) was inadequate to helping them out of their pain and distress. I began a new approach, trying to connect them to what had positive

meaning in their lives, things that meant something to them. I tried to help them find a point to living, as a way to help them feel good with themselves, tried to improve their self-image and their belief in themselves and their surroundings. Deploying this strategy directed my therapeutic and supervisory interventions to places where patients could find meaning in their lives and, in my understanding, I thus helped them build up the coping resources and resilience they needed to manage life's reality. Helping children locate and connect to things which are meaningful in their life can constitute a pivotal intervention which provides them new strength to cope with problems. Hence, meaning in life relates to resilience, as Gilligan (2000) claimed that even small changes - an experience of success, a supportive teacher, some reinforcement of their self-image - can affect how a child copes with difficult circumstances. The changes she referred to are connected to the children's personal meanings.

Connecting to the personal meaning in life as a source of inner support and strength thus took its place in my approach to therapy alongside the Cognitive approach and the use of forms of creative self-expression.

1.4 Research questions

My experiences, as outlined above, highlighted a need to reach a more profound understanding of this new therapeutic strategy in order to find more effective therapeutic answers to these children's needs, answers that would better connect them to their sources of strength, to their abilities and aspirations. The idea was that connecting to the personal meanings in life could be one of these inner resources. This linkage between doing research and my own therapeutic and ethical convictions awoke an intense curiosity in me. I found support for this idea in Gadamar (2003), who argued that only someone who is profoundly and personally engaged in their (hermeneutic) research is likely to come up with meaningful results. As a therapist that believes in involvement in therapy, I found this subject of inquiry; meaning in life, a subject that interests me personally and professionally, as a subject for research and therapy as well.

The premise for my research - that children (like adults, but in a different way) seek and find meaning in life - was based on 25 years of therapeutic work with children, and close acquaintance with how children think. This belief in the great importance of connecting to

meaning in life as a source of support and resilience sent me to look for theoretical materials and research studies in the subject as it concerned children. To my great surprise there were almost no publications on the subject of 'meaning in life' among children. Contemporary research into meaning in life among adults is extensive and rich but the single study of children in this context was twenty years old (Taylor & Ebersole, 1993). Why was this? Did it reflect an assumption that children do not find meaning in life, perhaps that they are not sufficiently self-aware, or that their stage of cognitive maturation did not allow them to grasp the full meaning of the construct 'meaning in life'? This perspective contrasted with an extensive literature on the sociology of childhood (for example: Mayall, 2008, James, 1995, Scott, 2000, Uprichard, 2007) which emphasises children's competence and expertise in their own lives, and also was at direct variance with my own knowledge about children's abilities, wishes, hopes and thoughts. The paucity of researches in this field of children and 'meaning in life' meant that my first step had to be to determine whether the concept of meaning in life was indeed as much present in children's lives as in adults'.

My confidence in the children's abilities to understand and take part in a study into the important notion of meaning in life, and my commitment to the importance of listening to children speaking in their own voice about which they find meaningful, even if they don't entirely grasp the phrase or concept 'meaning in life' itself, together with the insight that the more input we have from the children themselves on what preoccupies and disturbs them the better we can tailor our interventions and tools to their needs and pains, helped me arrive at the decision to undertake such a research study.

I chose to focus my research on middle childhood (eight-year-old children in the third year of primary school) as I wanted to hear the voices and views of children before they started facing the issue of meaning in life as part of adolescence and the identity issues that go with that phase of life (Erikson, 1950). My practice experience has suggested to me that younger children are particularly responsive to therapeutic intervention as the damaging events and relations which they have experienced are more recent in time and so have had less opportunity to become embedded in their ways of being'.

In addition, I chose to focus on research with Children in the general population, rather than children in a clinical or therapeutic population – those who might be framed as 'at-risk'. This stemmed from my wish – at a first stage of exploring childhood meanings in life, to understand

'ordinary' meanings in life in middle childhood, rather than focusing on the meanings that are made of extra-ordinary childhoods, disrupted by neglect, trauma or mental health issues.

My primary research questions were:

- Does the concept of 'meaning in life' have relevance for children? And relatedly:
- What are the (dis)connections between children's views of their own lives, and what matters to them, and, the adult concept of 'meaning in life'?

To answer these two key questions I drew up four sub-questions based on how the issue of meaning in life is conceived in relation to adults (see Literature Review in Chapter 2) - finding personal meanings in life, the search for the best way/s to live; setting life goals; confidence in one's own abilities and resources and adopting a positive view of things.

The first of these four sub-questions was:

- *What do children think are the most important and meaningful things in their lives?*

This question relates to sources of meaning, to personal meanings in life, to the things which give point to each individual's personal life. The premise, articulated by Frankl (1970), Yalom (1980) and others, is that meaning is individual. Numerous research studies have been carried out with the aim of identifying and mapping the sources of individual life meanings, on the premise that uncovering these personal meanings will permit us to explore both the existence of meaning in life (Reker & Wong, 1988) and to identify similarities and differences in this context.

The second sub-question was:

- *What do children think is the best way to live life?*

This question tries to broaden the understanding of children's thinking about the complex subject of meaning in life, and connects them to a global, holistic meaning, one that relates to other people, to society, to values, see, for instance, Frankl (1970), Yalom (1980) and Baumeister (1991) who all drew a linkage between meaning and values, and Layard (2007) who linked together happiness, meaning, wellbeing and values. Wong (1998) found that people have a wide range of experiences when asked to describe an 'ideally meaningful life'.

These categories of experience included goals, relatedness, and experiences like self-transcendence. The thesis explores how these ideas might be made relevant for children.

The third sub-question was devised in order to explore the extent to which 'meaning in life' featured in children's lives as it is said to do in the literature on adults: related to the goals and objectives people set for themselves, the inner strengths, their emotional state and character traits they felt they had and which might help them attain these goals.

- *What nature of goals and purposes do children have for their lives and do they believe that they have character traits and strengths which would help them to fulfil their goals?*

Many studies have found that these constructs are strongly associated with meaning in life. Very strong associations have been reported between having meaning in one's life and the capacity to set goals for oneself and work towards achieving them, between having meaning in one's life and belief that one has inner strengths and resources, between having meaning in one's life and the capacity to control one's feelings and stay on the whole satisfied with life and oneself (see Literature Review).

The last of the four sub-questions was:

- *How do children's individuality and the differences between them show themselves in their perspectives on meaning in life? To what extent is gender associated with variations in response?*

Studies into the sources of meaning in life have explored for the points of similarity and disparity between groups by culture, gender, age and other factors. In the present study I look for the differences between boys and girls on the subject of meaning in life, agreeing that gender is one of the differentiating factors in meaning-in-life which deserve research attention.

Davis (1998) warned that if our aspiration is to learn from listening to children and at the same time show respect for their rights, then we must take into account that there are all sorts of children from all sorts of cultures, all having their own wishes and expectations. 'Children' do not constitute a monolith. The study reported here is only the second of its kind and of necessity therefore is exploratory in this emergent field.

1.5 Approach to research

The methodology adopted for the present study is a constructivist-phenomenological one. The goal of the constructivist researcher is to get as close as possible to grasping how participants experience their worlds, while remaining aware that the researcher's own attitudes, point of view and objectives are inseparable of the research process. This understanding has similarities with my understanding of the therapeutic process as set out above, which stresses the mutual responsibility of therapist and patient and the importance of how the patient interprets and composes his/her own world.

The object of the phenomenological paradigm is to understand the meanings people ascribe to events. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996, Smith and Osborn, 2008) is a method of data analysis which recognises that there is no possibility of attaining a complete and direct understanding of the participant's world, since the researcher cannot be removed from the picture and the research perforce contains the researcher-participant relations. This is congruent with my approach to therapy as set out above, attaching great importance to the children's interpretations at the same time as remaining aware of and constantly re-examining my own interpretations.

To complete the picture which links the research approach adopted for the present study with my therapeutic stance requires a third element—the demands of research with children. Morrow and Richards (1996) claimed that the power relations typical of research with children can be mitigated by techniques which invite the children to feel a partner in the research process. James (1995) too, suggested deploying creative research techniques and proposes relying more on stories and painting pictures than on straight interviewing, since these are means of communication which come easily to children. I followed this advice in a way that came naturally to me as a therapist in arts, by incorporating both story and picture, and by making my interview a semi-structured one, as Kvale (1996) called it: *Conversation as Research*.

1.6 Summary

This chapter sets out the personal and professional reasons which led me to undertake research into this topic: it surveys the theories underpinning the study as well as the methodology chosen for carrying it out; methodological decisions relating to the age and nature of the children taking part are explained; the very idea of whether and how research can be conducted with this age group is surveyed and brief answers to the perceived problems are given.

The following chapters will go more deeply into the issues which have been broached here. The next two chapters provide a wide survey of the published literature on meaning in life and the concept's variants, as well as of the constructs perceived to be closely related to it. There follows a chapter on the study's chosen methodology, including an extensive exploration of the particular methodology of research among children and the ethical issues this raises. Next comes the study's research design, including the creative and verbal research techniques/methods chosen. Subsequent chapters set out the data analysis and research findings and discuss the significance of these findings.

Chapter 2: philosophical underpinnings

2.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview of the philosophical traditions regarding the concept of meaning of/in life (including an explanation of the differences between 'meaning of life' and 'meaning in life'). The varied approaches of the western philosophical tradition to the question of meaning of life are overviewed, and the varied answers philosophy gives; from classic philosophy, through modern philosophy to post-modern philosophy, when different formulations of the issue lead to different answers to it.

2.2 Meaning of life: classic philosophy

The issue of whether and how life can become meaningful has been considered by many thinkers, but theologians, philosophers and religious figures alike have all regarded it as inseparable from questions related to life's nature, goal and purpose. That is to say, establishing the meaning of life can only be decided after understanding, defining and conceptualising human life itself (Plato, 1964; Aristotle, 1973). This is not to say that the meaning of life is not one of philosophy's central preoccupations. On the contrary, as something that both provides and underlines the mental strength needed to cope with life's struggles, it clearly is central. A perspective which paves our path to the 'good life' (a term coined by Plato and methodically elaborated by Aristotle), must be derived from the manner in which we conceptualise human life: establishing the meaning of life is seen as a corollary of life's essential nature (or purpose).

Plato and Aristotle (both approximately 300 BC) argued that humankind aspires to the good. To fulfil the meaning of life, therefore, is to respond to this human nature, that is, to pursue a steady determined aspiration to the good. Many celebrated thinkers have followed this tradition. However, Plato and Aristotle differ in interpretation. Plato believed in the superior reality of ideas over the material, visible world and argued that we can aspire to the good by learning and acquiring knowledge (Plato, 1964). Aristotle, however, who did believe in the world and its visible reality and material things, argued that the path to the good lies in fulfilling our human

potential (the whole potential, human beings being compounded of both matter and soul) (Aristotle, 1973).

Since the question of the meaning of life derives from definition of the essence of humankind, understandings of the meaning of life changed when monotheism took over. If life is understood as the product or creation of a Creator God then it would follow that its meaning is worship of the Divine (Leibowitz, 1999). Divine worship is not, therefore, an arbitrary, theologically-ordained duty to prove loyalty (or faith) but the only thing that connects humankind to his real nature and origin. For theology, which finds God in the very nature of humankind, giving meaning to life is to connect with that God by worshipping Him. Examples of this way of thinking are numerous throughout history—from the Bible through the New Testament to Hassidism and so on.

2.3 Meaning of life: modern philosophy

Alas, God is dead. And we are the ones who killed him

(Nietzsche, 1969, p.108)

We, who insisted on understanding everything, have turned revelation into the revelation of reason in the world. God has become dispensable. But now, it is no longer enough to shift the focus and to come up with a different answer as to the question of the meaning of life, a change of paradigm is needed, since the significance of this insight (*God is dead*) lies precisely in the disappearance of the single, absolute point which makes possible a fixed and stable essence, purpose and meaning. On the connection between the philosophical concept of 'God' and the single point which connects and anchors all meanings, Wittgenstein's famous statement has much to say: "If you have found a meaning to your life then you can call it God". (Wittgenstein, 2006, p.32). The more philosophy leans towards universal principles, the more it tends to believe in one fixed universal human nature, common to all humankind, and the more it stands by a single answer to the question of 'the meaning of life'. And the more philosophers are divided on the nature and purpose of life, the more will they be divided as to its meaning. However the philosophy of existentialism, inaugurated with the statement 'God is dead', shifted the emphasis from human nature to human existence. '*Existence precedes essence*' is one of existentialism's core ideas (Sartre, 1949; Heidegger, 1995; Camus, 1978).

The bestowing of meaning to life was liberated from the necessity of conforming to a predefined nature because the perception was that there is no singular, fixed, universal nature.

2.4 From meaning of life to meaning in life

At this stage in the development of philosophical thinking one can see how the issue of the 'meaning of life' has transformed into its modern version, 'meaning in life'. Given that there is no external point of rest to which one can refer to give human life a stable 'ready-made' meaning, which awaits people even before they are born, people can, indeed must; they may not shirk this task and a duty, endow their life with meaning. As the writer Henry Miller said:

Life has to be given a meaning because of the obvious fact that it has no meaning.

(Miller, 1941, p. 5)

As soon as the meaning is no longer handed down by an objective single and exclusive entity external to humankind, humankind has no choice but to create the meaning of their life for themselves. On the one hand, therefore, the traditional fixed meanings which dictate the meaning of our life have vanished. On the other hand, humankind is given the potential to endow their life with the meaning that they set for it, for example, through study and learning, the beauty of art, or right and obligation (Camus, 1978). From now on, humankind will live a meaningful and purposeful life only if they themselves have the strength to devise meaning and purpose and fill these with original meaning. As Sartre said, meaning is created and fixed by the choices humankind makes (Sartre, 1949).

Still, secular modern philosophy takes a number of differing approaches to exploring the question of the meaning of life. We can identify three such points of departure:

1. The epistemological: lays emphasis on knowledge and consciousness and therefore places the uniqueness of human beings in their ability to think, speak, conceptualize, name, recognize and understand. Plato and Aristotle as the founders of this tradition and Hegel is one of their greatest disciples (Hegel, 1977).

2. The ethical: lays emphasis on moral acts and therefore places the uniqueness of humanity in its ability to act not only in response to physical needs, lusts and personal benefit but also in response to a quality that has not merely an 'animal' but an ethical dimension. Only when it so conducts itself is humanity not acting passively, from mere mechanical causality, but in freedom (Kant, 1954; Levinas, 1969).
3. The poetic: lays emphasis on creativity and therefore places the uniqueness of humankind in their ability to create, invent and produce: they create a world and they create themselves (Nietzsche, 1985).

Even within existentialism, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche do not agree. Kierkegaard laid down that faith is the metaphysical basis of life ; it will lead humankind to a significant 'leap', a leap in meaning, a leap of faith, a leap requiring *action* from belief, that is, ethical action (Kierkegaard, 1983). Nietzsche, by contrast, in *The Gay Science*, stated that aesthetics is the metaphysical principle of life. In this light he stirred humankind to *create* their life as a skilled work of art, to create the meaning that follows from the aesthetic principle (Nietzsche, 1969). In contrast to both of these, Heidegger made consciousness his metaphysical life principle, one that leads people to be aware of themselves and their world, so that they *know* what they want in it and from it and act accordingly (Heidegger, 1995).

Further, if '*God is dead*' then death hovers over all that is human. If people do not partake in some divine eternal infinitude then they are finite and mortal. Now death constitutes the inevitable horizon of all human thought (Heidegger, 1995). This acknowledgement of a final end in the death of the self becomes the trauma which establishes meaning, authenticity and resolution within existence. Schopenhauer (1946), Sartre (1949), Camus (1978) and Heidegger (1962) all set up suffering and finitude as the centre of human existence and assumed that meaning in life lies in the acceptance of suffering and working through it. Frankl (1970) stressed the importance of finding meaning *in* life even in circumstances of hardship and suffering. A Holocaust survivor, he used his own life-story to illustrate how men and women who, on the face of things, should have lost all semblance of humanity in the concentration camps, discovered mental and spiritual powers within themselves, so that they not only survived but even found meaning to their lives in what they experienced as a hell on earth.

2.5 From modern to post-modern philosophy

In the Western world, the Holocaust certainly 'contributed' to the crisis as to 'meaning in life' by sundering faith in goodness, in the pre-eminence of human beings over beasts, in human progress and in all the other ideals and interpretations by which the West had built up its 'civilization' (Levinas, 1995). At the same time, the West became aware of its imperialist and colonialist predilections, of its scorn for the 'Third World', of its utilitarian and capitalist tendency to exploitation, all of which left no room for any belief but in economics and the 'bottom line' (Carnap, 1950). This obviously contributed to the crisis over meaning in life. In addition, all the different 'revolutionary' political attempts of right and left (attempts which celebrated some imminent utopia) at best collapsed and at worst led to terrible catastrophe (Derrida, 1994), so that the crisis of faith in hitherto accepted meanings necessarily came to include a crisis of faith in the possibility of revolution and any profound change.

It would seem that this sundering of belief is still deepening and worsening as we enter the post-modern age, in which any ideology is so heavily suspect that there is no way for us to commit to any absolute, comprehensive and fixed truth or meaning (Althusser, 2008). This crisis not only offers no new and meaningful answers, it apparently allows no one to offer new meaningful answers to the question of meaning in life (Wittgenstein, 2006). It would seem that issues of the meaning *of* life/meaning *in* life, more than ever, still require a great deal of work to make sense of them.

But philosophy reached this point from a second direction also, one that created a bridge to psychology. The philosophical tradition which began with the imperative to 'know' and 'know oneself' (the Socratic "*Know thyself*", for example (Plato, Phaedrus, 1975)) retained this imperative all the way to Descartes' '*I think, therefore I am*' (1976). Humankind, whose essence was defined as thought, could think themselves, contemplate themselves, acknowledge themselves, acknowledge the truth, and reach full self-knowledge. This traditional conception was totally overturned once Nietzsche in philosophy (for example, 1872/1985) and then Freud in psychology (1920/1968) conceived of the subconscious. From this moment on humankind could not know themselves fully, nor did a self-aware consciousness retain its exclusivity or even its centrality in the life of the mind (Merleau-Ponty, 2006). The frontiers of human knowledge of necessity changed absolutely once humankind could no longer absolutely know even themselves: the unconscious required a new epistemology, a new theory of knowledge,

with a new founding premise (Heidegger, 1995). The boundaries of knowledge shifted. These insights have brought philosophy to acknowledge the inevitable partiality of every explanation, the lack of sure foundations to every ascription of cause, the impossibility of knowing anything through to its end, and thus to make the principled and necessary choice to abandon any constructive effort to construct 'everything', to take everything into account, to offer a hermetic and all-inclusive method. For example:

The discourse of truth is quite simply impossible. It eludes itself. Everything eludes itself, everything scoffs at its own truth, seduction renders everything elusive. The fury to unveil the truth, to get at the naked truth, the one which haunts all discourses of interpretation, the obscene rage to uncover the secret, is proportionate to the impossibility of ever achieving this. ...But this rage, this fury, only bears witness to the eternity of seduction and to the impossibility of mastering it.

(Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 1987, p. 73)

The post-structuralist and post-modernist era is, therefore, preoccupied with issues of boundaries and impossibility and, given this, struggles at a very profound level to set up any sort of principle as the basis of meaning or truth (Deleuze, 1990). Any such principle which is not subjective-individual (and, as such, not the subject-matter of philosophy but of psychology) and which claims for itself universality, must of necessity be a dogma, that is, an arbitrary, baseless stipulation devoid of justification (for example, Derrida, 2002).

Chapter 3: psychological underpinnings

3.1 Introduction

This chapter gives an overview to the psychological views on the concept of meaning in life (section 3.2) followed by a summary review of the research conducted into this issue (section 3.3). Section 3.4 considers the repercussions of finding, or not finding, meaning in life. Section 3.5 discusses research among young people, and since the focus of the present study is meaning in life among children, a review is made of the extremely sparse literature relating specifically to children's views about meanings in their lives. The question of the paucity of research with children on this topic is discussed. In section 3.6 the research questions and the rationale for them are presented.

3.2 Meaning in life- theoretical perspectives

This coming section reviews the literature on the concept of meaning in life as it appears in different psychological approaches. After covering leading theorists, such as Maslow, Adler and Jung, it moves on to Frankl and Logotherapy, which placed 'meaning in life' centre-stage, and then Yalom, who is an existentialist psychologist. In the contemporary period, along with the Logotherapy, came the constructivism and Positive Psychology, whose theoretical approaches are close to that of Frankl with respect to meaning in life.

From its very beginnings, psychological theorists related mostly to the issue of meaningful life as 'meaning in life' and not 'meaning of life', in other words they saw it as a personally held and constructed meaning, although it was only later that there was direct reference to this definition in the literature.

A number of significant psychological theorists have paid attention to the concept of 'meaning in life', including Maslow, Adler, Erikson and Jung. Maslow held that finding a sense of meaning in life is a '*supreme motive*' vital to our healthy functioning (Maslow, 1943, Battista, 1996). He saw meaning in life as an inner quality that flourished only after '*lower-level*' needs, such as security and food, had been satisfied (Maslow, 1943). There are substantial differences

between his definition and that of Frankl, who considered there to be meaning in life even when no 'lower' needs are fulfilled (for example, inside the Nazi camps). Like Frankl, Adler treated meaning in life as a spiritual task to which human beings were committed (Adler, 1964, Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Such meaning, he said, was a core perception, one of the pillars of human existence.

When psychology refers to the meaning in life as a basic need and not as a luxury it tends to connect lack of meaning to a lack of mental or emotional health. Maddi (1967), for example, argued that the search for meaning is a fundamental human motivation and that a feeling of meaninglessness leads to mental illness. Erikson argued that the lack of a sense of meaning or purpose in life generated psychological distress (Erikson, 1950). Like them, Jung (1966) felt that a sense of meaninglessness made it impossible to lead a full life, which was close to illness. Jung (1993) believed that one of the key causes of neurosis was a lack of meaning and purpose in life: "As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being." (Jung, 1993, p. 326).

For Frankl (1970) finding a meaning in life was necessary to survival, a pre-eminent need of human life. Man has a '*desire for meaning*'; an inner drive to find a meaning in life (Frankl, 1966), which, if unfulfilled, leaves an existential vacuum (Frankl, 1966, Maddi, 1967). Without this sense of meaning people lose interest, effectiveness and any belief in the importance of what they are doing (Ruffin, 1984). Frankl set the issue of establishing a meaning in life at the very centre of his teaching, regarding the '*desire for meaning*' as a primary force and not a '*secondary rationalization*' of desires (Frankl, 1970). When the basic needs are not satisfied, he argued, the higher needs are all the more urgent. In contrast to Maslow (1943), Frankl posited that humankind was made up of three dimensions; body, mind and spirit. Humans are imprisoned in the bodily dimension, driven by needs in the mental dimension, while in the spiritual (the noetic) dimension they are free to shape their existence. The noetic dimension comprises all which is unique to humankind; existential meaning, freedom of choice, conscience, commitments, morality, non-physical love, the pursuit of goals, ideas, imagination, a sense of humour, faith. Finding a meaning in life is a voluntary act and is brought to fruition by self-realization, creativity, acting, experiencing, loving or rising above oneself. Frankl called the theory he developed Logotherapy—therapy through meaning—which worked by guiding the patient towards identifying the particular meaning of their life.

Although Frankl asserted that every human being has their own personal meaning he divided these meanings into three main categories; the creative, the experiential and the referential. Meaning can be found through creativity (for example painting), experience (such as contemplating the beautiful, loving, listening to music, hiking in the countryside), and through acceptance/ coping / struggling (the way people refer and respond to their surroundings and to what happens to them). Even in states of illness meaning can be found in living with the illness or, as Frankl puts it (1970), in the decision to accept suffering and/or die with dignity.

Frankl believed that humankind can choose how to relate to its own situation. If one can find meaning in suffering one can cope better with it (Lukas, 1995). When the drive for meaning is blocked, an "*existential void*" results, which is liable to generate a "*neogenic neurosis*" (Frankl, 1985), that is, spiritual distress. This neurosis is not pathological but an existential despair, a desperate struggle to find meaning to life (Frankl, 1967). He argued that, even in the sickest person, there remains a healthy kernel, which is the human spirit, and that even in psychosis Logotherapy can be used to appeal to this healthy core (Guttmann, 1999).

The existential psychologists, taking their inspiration from existential philosophy (see above), also referred to the psychological aspect of finding meaning in life. Yalom, for instance, claimed that to avoid anxiety one has to connect to one's own unique meaning (Yalom, 1980). But he went further. He argued (1980) that meaning has the function of relieving our anxiety at the struggle with a life and a world which lack defined structure. People need, he said, a comprehensive perceptual framework and a set of values they can base their actions on and these two needs are supplied by finding a meaning in life. Frankl (1970) in his *Man's Search for Meaning* famously quoted Nietzsche that:

He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.

(Frankl, 1970, p. 123)

According to Frankl (1970) grasping meaningfulness in life is individual and subjective, differing from person to person and from moment to moment. It is not the circumstances of life that determine one's situation but rather one's self and the way one formulates and defines for

oneself how to cope with life and being. The key thing, therefore, is to find the unique meaning in life at each given moment. Yalom put this in the following way:

One of the most important tasks in our life is to invent a meaning solid enough to support life, and then to carry through the sophisticated exercise of denying that it is we who invented this meaning for ourselves.

(Yalom, 2002, p.152)

Schmidtz(2002) agreed in slightly different words: "What you really want is a purpose you can embrace as your own, but also one that will be recognizable as a real purpose independently of the fact that you embraced it as such" (Schmidtz, 2002, p. 202).

Adler regarded finding meaning in life as each person's unique response to life, the thing that made everyone different from every other, which made everyone special and individual. Human beings are not merely a product of their environment but the shapers of it (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). This outlook is rooted in constructivist theory, the concern of which is each individual's personal story, their subjective experience and their scale of values (Neimeyer, 1995). Constructivism holds that 'reality' is subordinate to humankind's perception, to their beliefs, thoughts, ideas and ideologies.

With Frankl, the constructivists argued that mankind is a being in search of meaning (Mahoney, 1991; 2003) and that human experience in fact expresses a sort of knowing which stems from this personal bestowal of meaning (Bannister, 1977; Guidano, 1991; Mahoney 1991).

Constructivism recognizes the central importance of meaning in the quality and continuing emergence of human life. Meaning reflects a basic human need for order, relationship and hope.

(Mahoney, 2002, p. 749)

Baumeister (1991) had an interesting theory about the components of the quest for meaning. According to his theory meaning fulfils four basic needs, which constitute four patterns of guiding motivation. Satisfying these four needs will help people to find their life meaningful. In contrast, people who cannot satisfy one or more of these needs will likely report their life

insufficient in meaningfulness. The four needs are: the need for purpose, the need for values, the need for a sense of efficacy (the belief that one can make a difference) and the need for a basis for self-worth (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005).

Reker and Wong (1988) developed a concept of the "personal meaning system," which is based on Maddi's (1967) and Frankl's (1970) conceptualizations of personal meaning and which combines these with Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory. Here we can see constructivism and existentialism coming together. Wong (2012) further developed the concept of meaning by proposing a multidimensional structure to personal meaning — the *Pure* model. He proposed that four ingredients define meaning: purpose, understanding, responsible action and enjoyment or evaluation:

Purpose includes goals, directions, values. A question representing this ingredient would be: What really matters in life?

Understanding is the cognitive component and includes a sense of coherence, making sense of situations. Questions representing this ingredient would be: How do I make sense of the world? What am I doing here?

Responsible action is the behavioural component. It includes appropriate reactions and actions, doing what is morally right. A question representing this ingredient would be: What is the right thing to do?

Evaluation of the emotional components includes assessing the degree of satisfaction in a given situation. Questions representing this ingredient would be: Am I happy with how I'm living? Have I achieved what I set out to do?

It is evident from the foregoing that thinkers from many different schools have addressed the issue of meaning/meaningfulness. True, the existentialists made 'meaning' a core and immanent component of their thinking but the humanist psychologists and the constructivists have also accorded it an important place.

Over recent years interest has reawakened in the issue of 'meaning in life', perhaps because of the greater focus in psychology on positive psychology, personal strengths and resilience (Steger et al., 2006). Schulenberg et al. (2011) commented on this that the importance of meaning/purpose in life to the human condition has grown beyond Logotherapy to become a core component of positive psychology. But Logotherapists would view this claim with doubt:

At a conference on 'The Future of Logotherapy' held by the Viktor Frankl Institute in Vienna in 2012, the Director of the Arizona Institute of Logotherapy, Dr. Leo Michel Abrami, gave a lecture on 'How positive psychology 'stole' from Logotherapy'. He argued that the concept of 'happiness' as Seligman (2002) presents it, making meaning one of its key components, is a concept whose roots and even substance originate in Frankl's and Logotherapy's view of the importance of meaning in life. Whether this is true or not, we find a renewed interest in conceptualizing and researching this field, though sometimes this new interest is called by different names.

3.3 Meaning in life: empirical perspective

3.3.1 Introduction

The renewal of psychology's interest in the issue of finding meaning in life has brought with it a variety of research studies: studies which deploy conceptualization, quantification and evaluation to look into the components and characteristics of meaning; studies which explore the connections between meaning and related concepts (meaning's conceptual environment); studies into the personal resources from which people derive meaning; and studies into the importance for people of finding or not finding meaning in life. Comparative studies to reveal differences in meaning in life by gender, age and culture then come under the spotlight. All these constitute in effect aspects of the one need — to grasp the meaning of 'meaning in life'.

3.3.2 Meaning in life: conceptualizations

From philosophical question to empirical question

The issue of meaning in life has been widely ignored by empirically oriented social scientists until recently because of their preference for objective data rather than for feelings and subjective experiences. It has also been neglected because of the prevailing notion that the subject 'meaning in life' relates primarily to the puzzling, philosophical question 'what is the meaning of life?' This 'eternal quest', as old as mankind, is indeed ipso facto out of reach of modern objectivistic scientific methodology. However, the existential and psychological significance of this most important of all questions is revealed when it is rephrased by any individual who asks

'what makes my life worth living?' In a similar way, the subject of meaning in life becomes accessible to empirical investigation when the focus is shifted towards the questions 'what are the components of an individual's experience of her or his life as meaningful?' and 'what are the conditions under which an individual will experience her or his life as meaningful?'

(Debats & Drost. 1995, p. 359)

Existential meaning in life: measurement and indicators

Many measures of meaning have been developed in order to assess perceived meaning in life. The purpose of constructing and distributing 'meaning in life' questionnaires is to measure people's sense of meaning in their life by a range of indicators.

One of the earliest measuring scales, based on Frankl's theories, was developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964)- the Purpose in Life test (PIL). The test emphasises perceived meaning, purpose in life and how these constructs relate to wellbeing (Schulenberg, 2011). The test measures 'the degree to which the subject experiences a sense of meaning and purpose in life' (Crumbaugh, 1968, p.74) and evaluates life goals, ambitions, and future plans (Jim et al., 2006). The PIL is used by researchers who are interested in studying the construct of meaning and is most widely used as a 'meaning in life' scale (Steger, 2006). It has generally demonstrated good convergent validity with measures of wellbeing and distress, as well as good internal consistency (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). It is positively associated with constructs such as life satisfaction, happiness, self-acceptance and emotional stability, and is negatively correlated with depression and anxiety (Sculenberg, 2011).

The Life Regard Index (LRI) is another tool. It was created by Battista and Almond (1973) who, having explored different theories of the experience of meaning in life (Auhagen, 2000), constructed a new questionnaire as an alternative to the PIL.

It [the LRI] assesses meaning in life independent of personal values, and is based on a conceptualization of meaning in life as a commitment to goals and, in turn, one's feeling of fulfillment.

(Jim et al., 2006, p.1356)

Battista and Almond wanted to draw a line between meaning in life and personal values. Meaning, they said, is tied to actions and a commitment to goals. This contrasts with Baumeister (1991), who conceives of values as linked to meaning, arguing that meaning can be grasped only by meeting needs, of which one is the drive towards values. Another quality linked to meaning is purposefulness, something Battista and Almond agreed with. The LRI has been found to be strongly associated with the interpersonal dimension of wellbeing. Debats and Drost (1995) found an association between effective coping with stressful life events in the past and a sense of meaningfulness as measured by the LRI. The LRI was developed from a concept of positive life regard which was defined by Zika and Chamberlain as 'an individual's belief that he is fulfilling a life-framework of life-goals that provides him with a highly valued understanding of his life' (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992, p.186).

A third measurement tool was developed by Antonovsky in 1987. It does not measure meaning in itself but coherence, of which meaning is one ingredient. According to Steger et al. (2006), Antonovsky's (1993) Sense of Coherence scale (SOC) measures a person's coping disposition. The construct behind the scale comprises three components, each supposed to be essential in coping with psychological stressors. A person who possesses a strong sense of coherence has the basic trust that life in general is meaningful, manageable and comprehensible. Antonovsky's tripartite understanding of meaning ties it to the ability to comprehend the world and act within it. His argument is that people who have a strong sense of coherence perceive events in their life as meaningful and believe that in the future things will continue to be meaningful (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992).

King et al. (2006) also related to the need for order and coherence as the way to a meaningful life: "Lives may be experienced as meaningful when they are felt to have significance beyond the trivial or momentary, to have purpose or to have coherence that transcends chaos." (King et al., 2006, p.179).

Most of the research dealing with meaning has used these three measures. Yet other tools have also been developed. For example, Steger et al. (2006) developed the 'Meaning in Life Questionnaire', a relatively short tool that comprises two subscales: search for meaning and presence of meaning. The Presence of Meaning subscale, comprising five items, represents the extent to which individuals feel their life is already purposeful and meaningful. Other tools have been developed for a specific investigation, a specific population, or a specific issue

within meaning in life, and some research has been done by means of qualitative interviews (Jim et al., 2006).

This summary makes it clear that the scales developed to measure meaning in life have used a variety of constructs such as goals, quality of life, happiness and others and that the researchers have sought to define and grasp the notion of meaning in life by tracing the connections between these constructs and meaning. The ultimate objective of constructing questionnaires and scales to measure meaning in life has been to prove that 'meaning in life' is a construct which can be assessed and measured. The different ways of measuring the construct also demonstrate its importance as a source of resilience in a range of situations (for more on this see below). At the same time, it must be borne in mind that when this construct is measured by questionnaires and scales something gets lost and that is the appreciation of the individual point of view, which is so critical when dealing with 'meaning in life'. This is why it is so useful to adopt a research approach which combines a quantitative component, which quantifies and assesses compares and comes to conclusions about connections and causes, together with a qualitative component which tries to penetrate to the depth of the experience of meaning in life as the individual experiences it. The resulting combined picture is all the fuller and more complex.

3.3.3 Related concepts

The quest for a definition of meaning in life has also taken the route of examining related and similar concepts, which indeed have often proven hard to distinguish from the construct of meaning in life itself, as the following definitions exemplify. Ho et al. (2010) defined Meaning in Life as a sense of one's life having a purpose, a sense of coherence or understanding of existence, while for Reker & Wong (1988, p.221) meaning in life is- "...the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of fulfillment." And Steger defined 'Meaning in life' as:

The extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceives themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.

(Steger, 2009, p. 682)

Meaning in life and purpose/goals

Purpose in life refers to having goals that one would like to accomplish. Many researchers equate purposefulness and meaningfulness, and regard having a sense of meaning as similar to having purpose/goals in life. Ryff (1989) connected a meaningful life with having goals, intentions and a sense of direction, and regarded purpose in life and personal growth as defining features of positive mental health. Reker et al. (1987) believed that "Having a sense of personal meaning means having a purpose and striving towards a goal or goals." (Reker et al., 1987, p. 44). Emmons (2005) referred to personal goals as the units of a meaningful life, while Feldman and Snyder stated that 'People bring meaning into their lives by setting goals that exemplify values' (Feldman & Snyder, 2005, p. 403).

Other researchers have posited 'purpose' as a core concept of which meaning is a part. Purpose has been distinguished by scholars as a higher order concept which provides a context from which an individual's goals and sense of meaning can emerge (Damon et al., 2003). According to McKnight and Kashdan (2009): "Purpose is a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviours, and provides a sense of meaning." (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009, p.242).

The views of all the scholars cited in this sub-section demonstrate the great importance of 'purpose' in relation to meaning in life. Nonetheless, caution is required as purpose can be understood in different ways. It is my view, for instance, that in the context of meaning in life purpose is closely linked to other constructs shortly to be discussed. For example, I would say that it is closely tied to 'hope' since it is difficult to set goals and purposes without hope, without confidence in the future and in oneself, without a positive view of life, and so on. As Frankl (1970) put it in his *Man's Search for Meaning*:

What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.

(Frankl, 1970, p. 166)

Meaning in life and hope

Meaning and hope are very closely related concepts according to Snyder (1997), who developed a scale to measure hope (the Hope Scale) and linked hope and meaning by saying that "an understanding of hopeful thinking may provide conceptual and empirical insights into what meaning means" (Feldman & Snyder, 2005, p. 418). Feldman and Snyder examined the relations of the concepts meaning in life and hope and offered evidence that hope can be conceptualized as a component of life meaning. They argued that hopeful thinking is at the heart of the construct of meaning itself, and they connected together hope, meaning and goals: "Hopeful thinking may be the process by which the bricks of meaning – goals — are assembled into a solid foundation of life meaning." (Feldman & Snyder, 2005, p. 418).

Absurd as it may sound, Frankl too accepted the linkage between meaning in life and hope, claiming that the loss of hope had destructive effects. Hope, as he used the word, manifested itself not merely in the narrow sense of hope for one's own individual future but hope for a better world (Frankl, 1970).

Among children, hope has been identified as a source of resilience and associations have been reported between hope and setting and achieving goals, and between hope and self-efficacy.

Children's hope is defined as a cognitive set involving the beliefs in one's capabilities to produce workable routes to goals as well as the self-related beliefs about initiating and sustaining movement toward those goals. Both components must be assessed together so as to obtain an overall sense of the child's hope.

(Snyder et al., 1997, p. 401)

Kashdan et al. (2002) also tied hope to self-efficacy and both these to resilience. Thus, hope on the one hand, is tied in with goals, self-efficacy and resilience and, on the other hand, with meaning in life.

Meaning in life and happiness

Happiness is the core concept of Positive Psychology. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi cited a number of constructs as contributing to Positive Psychology, one of which is happiness:

The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past), hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present).

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5)

However, some claimed that the construct of happiness is not properly differentiated from similar constructs used to define it. For example, Diener (2000) argued that 'a good life' is also called 'subjective well-being' (SWB) and sometimes 'happiness'. On this issue Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi said:

In practice, subjective well-being is a more scientific-sounding term for what people usually mean by happiness. Even though subjective well-being research relies primarily on rather global self-ratings that could be criticized on various grounds, its findings are plausible and coherent.

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 9)

Layard (2007) related to happiness as 'feeling good' and claimed that the concept of happiness is very time- and culture-dependent and, moreover, that there is heavy societal and cultural pressure to label oneself as 'happy'.

As for the connection between happiness and meaning in life, Baumeister (1991), in his, *Meanings of Life*, connected happiness and meaning by saying that a meaningful life is a prerequisite for happiness. Seligman (2002) related to the issue of meaning and happiness in his book, *Authentic Happiness*, by saying that meaning, along with positive emotions and engagements are the three building blocks of happiness. Layard (2007) also agreed with the connection between meaning and happiness, saying that "people who achieve a sense of meaning in their lives are happier than those who live from one pleasure to another." (Layard, 2007, p. 22). I too agree with that, believing that that is one of the differences between

meaning and happiness, and thus I side with Frankl that the search for meaning is an inner need, the "desire for meaning" as he puts it. In this light, it cannot be, as Layard claimed about happiness, that it is time- and culture-dependent. What are time- and culture-dependent are the sources of meaning, that is the specific things that people find important.

Ebersole & Quiring (1991) argued for a clear distinction between happiness and meaning in life, insisting that someone can possess a strong sense of meaning in life but not be happy. In support they quote Frankl who reported camp inmates in terrible pain but who nevertheless held on strongly to the meaning they saw in life.

Further evidence for the linkage between happiness and meaning in life is provided by the questionnaires constructed to evaluate and measure happiness. These questionnaires are based in part on other questionnaires constructed to evaluate meaning in life, and there are clear similarities between the responses people give as to what causes them happiness and as to what is meaningful to them. None the less the two concepts are not identical.

Meaning in life and quality of life

For millennia thinkers have pondered the question, what is the good life? They have focused on criteria such as loving others, pleasure, or self-insight as the defining characteristics of quality of life.

(Diener, 2000, p. 34)

Further, he added, the concept of quality of life and the way it is defined are governed by the fact that people want to feel that they are leading a good life. The way they subjectively define their 'quality of life' allows everyone to decide for themselves what the concept means.

Hughes (2006) compared meaning, affect (happiness and satisfaction) and quality of life and found that meaning was more basic to quality of life than affect. Meaning gave people a sense of purpose, a sense of their own value and validity and a perceived coherence. All these form the basis of relationship networks and social integration and are vital to the quality of life.

Meaning in life and life satisfaction /positive affect

Life satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of overall quality of life, according to Diener and Diener (1995). Different studies state that having meaning in one's life is key to a positive affect and contributes to a happier and more satisfying life. Some of the researches relate to causal connection. For example, a recent series of studies has produced strong evidence that positive affect and positive moods may predispose persons to feel their lives are meaningful (King et al., 2006). And some of the researches relate to connections between the concepts. For example, experiences of meaning and purpose were associated with both positive affect and less negative affect (King et al., 2006).

Other researchers have found connections between meaning and satisfaction. Peterson et al. (2008) found that meaning predicts family cohesion and family satisfaction. Research on meaning in life has also revealed a positive association between meaning in life and life satisfaction (Steger et al., 2006; Steger & Kashdan, 2007; Chamberlain & Zika, 1988; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). The linkage between meaning in life, life satisfaction and positive affect appears very clear and natural, while the connection between these three concepts and happiness reinforces the linkage between happiness and meaning in life.

Throughout the research literature, scores on measures of LS are often used to indicate happiness or unhappiness in general, positive evaluations of LS are linked with happiness and the achievement of the 'good life', whereas negative evaluations of LS are associated with depression and unhappiness.

(Proctor et al. 2009, p. 584)

Meaning In life and wellbeing

Another concept closely related to meaning in life is wellbeing. According to Ritsner and Kurs (2006) 'Wellbeing is a holistic perspective that relates to a person's existence'. Empirical research on meaning in life has revealed consistent and positive correlations between meaning in life and many measures of wellbeing (Reker et al., 1987; Ryff, 1989). Wellbeing is divided into subjective and objective wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing is eudemonic. It is understood as the degree to which a person is fully functioning and feels his life not only as good but meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Bauer et al. 2008).

Zika and Chamberlain (1992) found a strong correlation between a strong sense of meaning in life, psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction:

Meaning in life may function in several ways to influence wellbeing. The constructs are closely linked at an affective level, and the cognitive and motivational components of meaning are likely to play an intervening role in affecting psychological outcomes.

(Zika & Chamberlain, 1992. p. 135)

Kiang and Fulighni (2010) agreed, claiming that meaning in life has been identified as a fundamental dimension of eudemonic wellbeing. Other studies, too, show that meaning and purpose in life are key requisites for psychological wellbeing (Zubair, 1999; Ryff, 1989; Wheeler et al., 1990).

As Leath stated: "A review of the work of several research groups (Debats, Zika & Chamberlain, and Ryff), helps to support the view that both meaning in life and wellbeing are addressing aspects of the same underlying phenomenon." (Leath, 1998, p.15).

Avrill summed up the issue as follows:

Psychological wellbeing is not simply the absence of suffering; rather, it involves an active engagement in the world, a sense of meaning or purpose in life and connection to persons or objects beyond oneself.

(Avrill, 2002, p. 182)

Meaning in life and attachment

Bowlby's attachment theory (1982) is very important for understanding psychological functioning in childhood and adolescence. Bowlby and others who have researched attachment (e.g., Ainsworth, 1969) have often focused on the concept of 'attachment style' and way the individual relates to 'significant others', as well as on the individual's beliefs about themselves and their world (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). The thrust of much early research was an investigation of the expressions of attachment patterns in interpersonal behaviour and the quality of close relations (Ainsworth, 1969), and while attachment theory has developed over

the intervening decades, concern about the importance of early relationships for emotional adjustment and development continues to be central to the theory (Mikulincer, 2005).

The connection between attachment and meaning in life has not been researched, but we can take as a starting point the fact that relationships between people (family members, friends, couples) have been found by innumerable studies (for example, Reker and Wong, 1988, Bar-Tur et al., 2001) to be a key factor in meaning in life. Thus, while the focus of this research is not on attachment theory, this emphasis on relationality is highly relevant to understanding meaning in life. Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) summed up their own research:

Focusing on intimate interpersonal relations, attachment theory does not aspire to address all aspects of personality development. However, it is an open-ended theory and, we hope, open enough to be able to comprehend new findings that result from other approaches."

(Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991, p.10)

Meaning in life and resilience

There are different definitions of resilience. For example, Goldstein and Brooks (2006) defined resilience as:

The capacity of a child to deal effectively with stress and pressure, to cope with everyday challenges, to rebound from disappointments, mistakes, trauma, and adversity, to develop clear and realistic goals, to solve problems, to interact comfortably with others, and to treat oneself and others with respect and dignity.

(Goldstein & Brooks, 2006, p. 3)

They added that that resilience should not be considered merely in relation to situations of adversity but indeed as an ability that every child, indeed every person, needs to have at their command. Smith (2006) added that resilience is not a fixed trait; it is instead a dynamic,

contextual process developed as a result of the interactions between individuals and their environments.

Although it seems obvious that meaning in life and resilience are connected, this connection has not yet been researched enough. The studies that did connect meaning and resilience named 'meaning in life' as one of the protective factors in life. For example, Masten and Reed (2002) stated that meaning in life is found to be one of the resilience factors identified by researchers. Breitbart et al. (2004), who investigated the connection between spirituality and meaning in life, also found that both of these are factors in resilience in the face of the mental distress of imminent death, and Ivey et al. (2011) stated that "Meaning and purpose are key to resilience" (p. 211). Wong and Wong (2012) in the chapter 'A meaning-centered approach to building youth resilience' said that meaning and purpose should be included as a path to resilience. Park agreed to that saying that:

Not only does global meaning, in its interaction with the environment, inform appraisals of crisis, but it also determines individual's responses to those crises. That is, global beliefs, goals and a sense of meaning influence how individual deal with and recover from highly stressful events.

(Park, 2012, p. 408)

Benard (2004) related to personal resilience strengths, and sense of meaning is one of them:

This category of interrelated strengths ranges from goal direction to optimism to creativity to a sense or meaning and that one has a place in the universe. These assets based on an orientation toward a compelling and bright future, are probably the most powerful in propelling young people to healthy outcomes despite adversity.

(Benard, 2004, p. 28)

Purposefulness and resilience have been found to be connected and, as noted above, purposefulness has often been identified with meaning and resilience. Although only few studies have found a direct linkage between the concept 'meaning in life' and resilience, it should be considered that all the studies reviewed here, and which have demonstrated the

importance of meaning of life to physical and mental health, to life satisfaction and to other important qualities, are in effect understanding meaning in life as a key ingredient of resilience.

To sum up this sub-section on Meaning and Resilience here is a statement that seems to bring together many of the constructs that it has discussed:

... We have contended that meaning is powerful both for remedying the bad and for enhancing the good. True, meaning is most urgently sought by victims and sufferers, because the need to reduce suffering takes precedence over most other human motivations. But that is only one side to the story of meaning. Happiness, fulfilment, generativity and other forms of positive wellbeing are the essential focus of positive psychology and meaning is integral to all of them.

(Baumeister & Vhos, 2005, p. 616)

For my thesis, I have decided to remain faithful to the concept of 'meaning in life' even though, as this review has evidenced, there exist many related and similar notions. I have chosen to stay with 'meaning in life' out of my belief in its importance in our lives and the critical effect that finding meaning to life has on our mental and social functioning.

3.3.4 Sources of meaning in life – measures and evaluations

Life is a house. Meaning is what you do to make it home. Giving life meaning is like interior decorating.

(Schmidtz, 2001, p. 212)

Alongside the realisation that meaning in life is a source of personal strength and that it is strongly related to wellbeing and quality of life, there has also established itself the understanding that each individual finds for themselves different sources of meaning. An entire field of research has grown up to explore and understand the personal factors behind individual choice of meaning. The questionnaires and interviews concerned with the sources of meaning in life were developed to explore the things that give people a sense of meaning in their life. Some of these studies will be reviewed below.

Sources of meaning are the areas of a person's life from which meaning is derived and they vary by sociodemographic background, developmental stage (De Volger & Ebersole, 1983), culture, gender and ethnic background (Yalom, 1980, Bar-Tur et al, 2001) as well as personal ingredients such as character traits, self-acceptance (Westerhof et al., 2004) and life experience (Kiang and Fulighni, 2010). Baumeister agreed:

A meaning of life can be considered as the outcome of a negotiation between the individual and the social system. Meanings of life may be created by individual people but people are themselves products of society.

(Baumeister, 1991, p.9)

Reker (2000) defined sources of meaning as "the different content areas or personal themes from which meaning is experienced." (Reker, 2000, p. 42). Research suggests that meaning can be derived from a wide variety of sources and different researchers have categorized the sources of meaning in different ways (for example: De Volger & Ebersole, 1983; Reker, 2000; Reker and Wong, 1998).

According to Westerhof et al. (2004) meaning can come from —

- a. Sources within the person (character traits, self-acceptance, pleasure, fulfilment, tranquillity);
- b. Relationships (sense of connectedness, intimacy, high-quality relationships, altruism, service, communal consciousness);
- c. Physical integrity (health, appearance, functioning);
- d. Activities (work, leisure, hedonistic activities);
- e. Material needs (financial security, meeting basic needs, possessions).

And they added:

Besides these five more specific elemental sources of meaning, a holistic view of life consisting of general values and beliefs can be distinguished as an important aspect of personal meaning (enduring values or ideals, judgments of life as a whole, humanistic concerns, religion, traditions and culture, self-transcendence, and existential themes such as finitude and aging).

(Westerhof et al., 2004, p. 753)

Reker and Wong (1988) identified 12 sources of meaning:

1. Basic needs, such as food, shelter, safety
2. Leisure activities or hobbies
3. Creative work
4. Personal relationships (with family or friends)
5. Personal achievement (education or career)
6. Personal growth (wisdom or maturity)
7. Social and political activism
8. Altruism
9. Enduring values and ideals (truth, goodness, beauty and justice)
10. Traditions and culture
11. Legacy
12. Religion

It is evident that though the categorizations differ their content is quite similar. There is broad consensus among researchers in this field as to the key sources of meaning in life at all ages.

From very disparate sample populations and data collection procedures, there nevertheless seems to emerge a general consensus as to the major sources of meaning in life for all age groups. These include personal relationships, personal growth, creativity, achievement and success, freedom from hardship, altruism, seeking enjoyment (hedonism), religion (belief) and legacy.

(Bar-Tur et al., 2001, p. 254)

The attempt to locate shared categories from which people draw meaning in life is to be expected: it is very tempting because it has a unifying goal—to find the common denominators between people from different cultures, age groups and gender. But we must take care not to pour out the baby with the bath-water. The 'shared' is a priori no more important than the disparities and the individual. I review below studies into culture-, age- and gender-dependent disparities but there are other influential differentiating factors too which have yet to be researched, such as family relations, character traits, and others.

Dimensions of meaning: Breadth and depth

Researchers have also gone into the depth and breadth as dimensions of meaning.

'Breadth':

Breadth of meaning is indicated by the numbers of sources from which meaning is derived from (Reker, 2000). Reker and Wong (1988) proposed a breadth dimension based on the possibility that an individual will draw meaning from several valued sources and that the greater the variety of the sources, the greater will be their overall sense of meaning. Most people find meaning in several sources and not one source alone. For example: when people were asked to list everything that gave their life meaning, in DeVolger & Ebersole's study in 1985, they found an average of 4.26 content categories. Reker (2000) found that participants with high meaning breadth had higher scores on measures of personal meaning and psychological wellbeing, compared to those with low meaning breadth.

In my opinion the notion of breadth in this context stems from the idea that a person who can find meaning from multiple sources accords, overall, a more prominent place to meaning in their life. The benefit, furthermore, is that if one source of meaning fails (health, say, or marital relations) there is a good chance that other sources will 'make up' for the failure, so that the person will not feel that all meaning has been lost to them. On the other hand, I would say that the concept of breadth has been taken too far. It is very easy to see, and particularly so among children, that one individual may find almost all their meaning in one aspect of life without this implying at all that they ascribe a lesser place to meaning in life as a whole.

'Depth':

One definition of 'depth' dimension is the level of self-transcendence attained by an individual (Reker and Wong, 1988). According to their theory, there are four levels of depth into which sources of meaning can be classified: (1) Hedonistic pleasure activities and comfort; (2) Devoting time and energy to acknowledging and appreciating one's own potentialities; (3) Serving/helping others and commitment to social and political issues; (4) Connecting to cosmic meanings and ultimate goals. Of these the first is deemed the shallowest and last the most profound. This line of thinking was endorsed by a study by Reker (2000), which found that participants who derived meaning from the highest levels reported a higher overall sense of

life-meaning and greater life-satisfaction and fulfillment than did those whose meaning came from the two shallowest source levels.

Reker and Wong (1988) contended, indeed, that breadth and depth of meaning together comprise one's personal meaning system: "The personal meaning system of an individual who has available a variety of sources of meaning and who strives for deeper levels of personal meaning will be highly differentiated and integrated". (Reker & Wong, 1988, p. 226).

O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) also found evidence of differences in depth of meaning.

Another way of classifying depth of meaning has been suggested by De Volger and Ebersole (1981). They asked people to write about the sources which provide their sense of meaning. Meanings which the participants described in broad terms and in greater complexity and detail the researchers defined as 'deeper' while meanings, undigested or fixed meanings were deemed 'shallow'. The distinction between their approach and Reker and Wong's (1988) was that they drew no connection between different meanings and their depth (e.g. materialistic-shallow vs. spiritual-profound) but instead attributed depth or shallowness to the way people described what was meaningful to them.

The various studies which have sought to map the categories and components of meaning and their breadth and depth have done so in different ways. One way was by presenting subjects with structured self-administered questionnaires composed of items suggesting potential sources of meanings (Bar-Tur et al., 2001). Other strategies adopted have been open interviewing and asking for free description, for instance, asking participants to write an essay about the strongest meaning in their life and to cite a concrete experience associated with it (Ebersole and De Volger, 1981).

I find the whole treatment of the ideas of breadth and depth to be problematic. The number of studies into the issue is not large and the very idea of ranking sources of meaning by some dimension, which is more profound, strikes me as too judgmental, even when the basis of the ranking is the person's own rating of the depth of their choices. My standpoint is that for each individual different aspects and issues of life are meaningful and that there is no comparing the depth in any two individuals of even what appears to be the 'same' source of meaning, much

less the depth of their attachment to meaning in life as a whole. Each individual has made their choice for different reasons and in a different emotional context.

Similarities and dissimilarities

The need for meaning in life may be existential but the sources which enable people to feel that they are leading a meaningful life (or not) are individual and vary with one's personal surroundings.

People do not exist in isolation. They have families, live in communities, and share ethnic, gender and professional backgrounds that generate specific meanings.... The relative importance of specific sources of meaning may thus vary from person to person, from young to old, from woman to humankind, and from one culture to another.

(Bar-Tur et al., 2001. pp. 255-256)

The philosopher, Schmitz argued that the value of meaning lies, surprisingly, in its mutability: 'Meanings need not last and meanings do change'(Schmitz, 2001, p. 203). Meaning must change, he said, because at every age new things become meaningful and even meanings which persist through life do not need to be fixed. Meaning changes with environment, age, circumstances and other factors.

Several studies have been carried out to examine the differences between sources of meaning in different populations and particularly in different age groups. All of these, without exception, report that the most significant source of meaning in life is relationships. After this first priority, differences in the order of priority have been noticed. In researches that took place in the United States, Ebersole and DePaola (1987), for example, reported among the elderly the next most significant category of meaning is health, whereas the categories of growth and life-work do not appear at all. DeVolger & Ebersole (1983) on the other hand, after investigating young students, found the reverse, that health was a minor category and growth and life-work the major ones. This seems the entirely logical concomitant of normal life-cycle developments. In a research that was conducted in Israel, Bar-Tur et al. (2001), however, compared men and women, Arabs and Jews, the young and the elderly, and found only minor differences and that all population groups ranked interpersonal relationships and self-fulfilment as the most significant categories. The young attached more importance than the elderly to materialistic

concerns. Between men and women the only category that was significantly different was being with animals, which was more important for men than for women. Bar-Tur et al. summed up as follows:

The emergence of significant ethnic differences for some of the sources of meaning and similarities for others supports the idea that sources of personal meaning may be best evaluated by means of a tailor-made instrument generated by the ideas and values of a specific culture.

(Bar-Tur et al., 2001, p. 266)

Damon et al. (2003) found that Socioeconomic and social-status differences could also influence meaning, and related to studies that found connection between higher income and being married with higher sense of meaning.

In a research that was conducted in Australia and Canada, Prager (1996) compared the findings of his study in Australia with those of Reker (1988) in Canada and could find no major differences at all between the same age groups in the two national samples. Both samples gave the highest ranking to personal relationships, to meeting personal needs and to preserving values and traditions, with the Canadians ranking leisure activities somewhat higher than the Australians.

It seems that the differences uncovered between populations are not large (e.g. between the USA, Canada and Australia). Even in the Bar-Tur et al. study in Israel, which compared religious groups, urban with rural, high with low education, all the groups nonetheless inhabited the one country so that one may assume extensive intercultural influences between them. This leads to the idea that to really isolate the group-specific perceptions of meaning in life there is a need to compare population groups which differ more widely, for instance in comparing western cultures to less individualist ones. Another idea to explore is using more sensitive methods that differentiate perspectives on meaning in life within and between population groups.

3.4 Connections and implications of a meaningful life

3.4.1 Introduction

This section reviews the repercussions of finding, or not, meaning in life. First to be reviewed are the positive effects and correlations of having meaning in life. Then come the negative effects and correlatives of not having meaning in life. Some researchers report connections between concepts while others go as far as to report causality.

3.4.2 Leading a meaningful life

Many scholars have researched the correlatives of having a sense of meaningfulness in one's life. They have done so among people in practically every possible sphere of life, both in the specific circumstances of crisis, strain, disability and illness, as well as in the more general spheres of individual functioning and mental wellbeing.

Meaning in life and illness: Collie et al (2006) concluded that having a sense of meaning in life helped women to cope better with breast cancer. (*'Coping- the cognitive and behavioural strategies that individuals enact to manage their stressful encounters and attendant negative emotions'*, Park et al, 2008, p. 21). Breitbart et al. (2004) stated that a sense of meaning helped people in coping with terminal illness in general. Another study demonstrated a positive association between having found meaning in life and the response to medication among hospitalized asthma sufferers (Asagba & Ajayi, 2005). But the association between meaning in life and health is not one-way. Not only is a sense of meaning in life conducive to better health but effective coping with stressful life events in the past is associated with a current sense of meaningfulness, as measured by the LRI (Debats et al., 1993).

Park et al (2008) found a sense of meaning was associated with the quality of physical and mental life: "... expanding the questions to the context of a chronic, progressive and ultimately fatal illness broadens our understanding of the centrality of life meaning in the quality of those living (and dying from) life-limiting illness". (Park et al., 2008, p. 24).

Researchers into bereavement also reported on the great importance of drawing on meaning in life as a way of coping with loss. People who find meaning in a loss appear to command more

positive meaning and have better emotional adjustment (Davis & Hoeksema, 2001). A typical quote is:

Meaning was defined as a major shift in values, priorities, or perspective in response to the loss. Statements reflecting meaning indicated such changes as a greater appreciation for the loved one, an enhanced sense of living in the present, a perception of life as fragile and precious, or a commitment to enjoying life.

(Bower et al., 1998, pp. 980-981)

However, a study into the association between meaning in life and trauma and bereavement discovered that the importance of the search for meaning and its failure stretched far further than its role in the mourning process:

That most people do search for meaning and that many seem to despair at their inability to find meaning suggest that we are getting at some deep psychology issue that has implications not only for how we understand grief and trauma, but also for mainstream social and personality psychology.

(Davis & Hoeksema, 2001, p. 738)

Yalom (1980) reported that in his work with terminally-ill cancer patients he discerned how profound was the significance of meaning to human existence. He saw many times that those patients who had a deep sense of meaning had a much fuller life and could cope with death with less despair than those who could see no meaning in their lives. People who can find meaning in life in traumatic and difficult life events are psychologically healthier than those who can see no meaning in what has happened to them. An example came from the work of Yan-Pan et al. (2008) who studied reactions to stress situations. They assessed the adaptation of students from different countries to the culture and customs of the foreign country they had travelled to study in and found that finding meaning in life predicted a positive affect in acculturation.

Many other studies have reported that finding a meaning in life correlates with a higher quality of life and a better relationship with oneself and others. In the healthy population, research confirmed a positive association between finding life to be meaningful and the components of a

good quality of life. Several studies have shown meaning in life positively linked to life satisfaction (Zika & Chamberlain, 1992), striving for achievement (Steger et al., 2009) and self-esteem (Rathi & Rastogi, 2007). Debats & Drost (1995) stated that: "Meaningfulness was found to be strongly associated with contact with self, others and the world." (Debats & Drost., 1995, p. 359).

Some researchers have reported causal relations. For example: King et al. (2006) stated that "the implication is clear that meaning in life contributes to a happier life" (p. 179). Ryff (1989) found empirical evidence that meaning in life contributes to wellbeing and that achieving a sense of meaning has significant implications for development. In Hughes' study (2006), *Affect, Meaning and the Quality of Life*, he stated that finding a meaning in their life gives people purpose, importance, validity and coherence. Meaning, according to Hughes (2006) is the basis for their social relations, their happiness, satisfaction and quality of life.

All the studies quoted above endorse the association between a found meaning in life and the ingredients of quality of life, a finding which supports the argument of existentialist theorists that meaning in life is important for preventing psychopathology.

3.4.3 *A meaningless life*

Many studies have pointed to the connection between having no sense of meaning in life and a string of negative attributes — psychological distress (Steger et al., 2006), a greater need for therapy (Battista & Almond, 1973), depression and anxiety (Debats & Drost., 1995), drug abuse and suicidal tendencies (Harlow et al., 1986; Kats, 1986), as well as a sense of emptiness among drug and alcohol abusers (Fogell, 2005). According to Sivraman (2003) the lack of life-goals leads to a sense of no meaning, which in turn leads to nihilism, cynicism, apathy and suicidal tendencies. The lack of a sense of meaning in life has been found to predict depressive symptoms in a healthy population (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005). Meaning in life correlated negatively to depressive and anxiety symptoms (Riichilo & Masahiko, 2006). A study of a population of psychiatric patients found a statistically significant negative association between meaning in life, life satisfaction and well-being to suicidal thinking (Heisel & Flett, 2004), and that perceptions of meaning in life were most protective against suicidal thoughts among the participants (seniors with depression): "These findings supported the contention that

perceptions of meaning or purpose in life are protective against suicidal cognitions among a heterogeneous sample of older adults." (Heisel & Flett, 2004, pp. 128-129).

Studies of geriatric populations have demonstrated a negative association between finding meaning in life, despair and depression (Garcia & Claudio, 1988, Prager et al., 1997).negative association was also found in the opposite direction; A study of a non-geriatric population found a joint causative effect of depression and perceived external focus of control on a sense of no meaning in life (Phillips, 1980). Zika and Chamberlain (1992) found a strong negative relation between lack of meaning and mental pathology. Meaninglessness was associated with a state of alienation from self, others and the world (Debats & Drost, 1995).

3.5 Meaning in life with Young people and children

3.5.1 Researching young people about meaning in life

Introduction

This section reviews empirical research carried out in relation to meaning in life among young people. It identifies studies demonstrating the positive effects having a sense of meaning in life can have on, among other things, young people's development. The negative effect of a lack of meaning is also considered. This section additionally discusses the distinction drawn between the search for a sense of meaning in life and having found meaning, a distinction which is especially relevant to young people for whom a search for meaning in life is often a great preoccupation.

The meaningful life and young people

Erikson (1968) theorized that a sense of purpose helps young people to resolve an identity crisis by offering a meaningful ideal they can dedicate themselves to. Ryff (1989) suggested that achieving a sense of life meaning has significant implications for young people. Kiang and Fulighni's study (2010) of young people's sense of meaning in life reported that having found meaning in life was positively associated with self-esteem, academic adjustment, daily wellbeing, ethnic allegiance and exploration. Meaning in life was found to serve in general as a

positive resource in young people's lives. For example, a study of young people evicted (with their families) from their homes during Israel's evacuation of its Gaza settlements found that young people with a strong sense of a meaning in life displayed fewer psychiatric symptoms (Sorek, 2006).

Damon et al. (2003) stated that a sense of purpose or meaning is a developmental concern during adolescence. Burrow & Hill (2011) agreed and claimed that young people with greater purpose and commitment report increased life satisfaction, emotional wellbeing and goal-directed thinking. Burrow and Hill's (2011) research was designed to test the claim that "establishing a purpose in life serves as identity capital during adolescence and emerging adulthood". (Burrow & Hill., 2011, p. 1200). Their conclusion was that a committed sense of purpose is indeed a developmental asset for young people.

The study into indicators of wellbeing during childhood and young people indicates that purpose is a fundamental component of youth psychology (Fattore et al., 2009). Rathi and Rastogi (2007) found that meaning in life appears to be a strong predictor of good subjective health and psychological wellbeing in young people, And Damon et al. (2003) researching the development of purpose during adolescence, stated that their findings confirm the centrality of meaning and purpose in young people's development.

Lack of meaning in life

An association has been found between a perceived lack of meaning in life and young people's drug abuse (To & al., 2007, Zikri & Addad, 2000, Addad & Himi, 2008), with heavy drinking (Newcomb & Harlow, 1986) and behaviour problems (Hazani, 2003). Harlow et al. (1986) found that depression and self-derogation can lead to lack of purpose and meaning and Damon et al. (2003) saw that personal effects of purposelessness may include self-absorption, depression, addictions and psycho-somatic ailments, and social effects of purposelessness may include behaviour problems, inability to sustain interpersonal relations and more.

Steger et al. (2009) found a connection between meaninglessness and psychological distress among young people, Kinnier et al. (1994) found that low scores on purpose in life test correlated with depression and suicide and substance use among young people, and Brassai

et al. (2010) reported that meaninglessness was associated with a poor psychological health; high psychosomatic symptoms, poor psychological wellbeing and quality of life.

The search for meaning in life

Steger et al. (2006) discussed two aspects of meaning in life, the presence of it and the search for it. Kiang and Fulighni argued that these are two different concepts with different implications for the individual.

Presence of meaning refers to the degree to which an individual finds his or her life to be meaningful, whereas search for meaning refers to an active exploration into finding a sense of meaning.

(Steger et al. 2010, p. 1253)

All three aspects; searching for, finding and establishing meaning in life, have a key developmental role to fulfil in young people's lives and several researchers have looked into these issues;

To et al. (2010) stated that finding meaning in life and establishing a philosophy of life are critical to young people's development. Fry (1998) has made the case that search for meaning starts during adolescence and contributes importantly to identity development. In her research with young people, Fry found evidence of an intrinsic motivation for self-knowledge, personal meaning, self-esteem, and the desire to improve the human condition. Steger et al. (2011) researched connections between having meaning in life and searching for meaning in life, and hypothesized that- "The interplay of search for meaning and presence of meaning reflects, or at least parallels, developmental crises that are a normal, healthy part of maturation".(Steger et al., 2011, p. 179).

A study by Kiang and Fulighni (2010) involving young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds found differences in the presence of meaning. Latin American and Asian-American young people reported higher levels of presence of meaning than young people of European background. Young people of Asian-American background reported a higher degree of search for meaning than Latin American and European-American youth. Overall, searching

for and establishing a meaningful direction in life appears to be developmentally adaptive for young people.

Damon et al. (2003) researching 'The Development of Purpose during Adolescence' related to the importance of finding out what is the specific source of meaning to young people.

...existing research on categories of purpose does not shed light on cultural, socioeconomic, or historical-cohort differences that might affect the kinds of purposes that young people resonate to..... For the sake of scientific understanding as well as educational and child-rearing practice, gaining knowledge about this matter is the first order of business.

Among many reasons for this is that such understanding will help us provide realistic and psychologically useful guidance to young people who are having difficulty finding purpose in today's world.

(Damon et al., 2003, p. 126)

Brassai et al. agreed to that, saying that-

...the findings from the present study draw attention to meaning in life as a protective/resilience factor for adolescent psychological health and health-related behavior. Thus, they point to the need to better understand meaning in life as a protection in positive youth development.

(Brassai et al., 2010. p. 49)

3.5.2 Research into meaning in life among children

Neither the theoretical nor the empirical literature has looked much into this group, though Meaning in life is very important to children. Benard (1991) concluded that children defined as resilient appeared to have constructed a sense of meaning and personal agency in their lives, have clear and directed goals and also inter-personal problem-solving skills. A research study by Salter and Stallard (2004) looked for the possibility of posttraumatic growth in child survivors of road traffic accidents. The results showed that almost half the children demonstrated aspects of posttraumatic growth which reflected their having found meaning in their life.

The single direct study that I have found into the meaning of life among children is Taylor and Ebersole's (1993). The authors asked 26 children, six to seven years old, in one first-grade class: *"In your whole life what is most important to you?"* and then asked them to tell a story illustrating their choice and to draw a picture of it. The authors reported detecting twelve categories of meaning, of which nine had been employed by Ebersole and DePaula in 1987:

1. Relationships (including family, friends and romantic relationships)
2. Service (the desire to help others)
3. Belief (religious, political or social)
4. Obtaining (materialistic preference)
5. Growth (finding meaning through self-improvement, reaching goals, developing talents)
6. Health (maintaining physical or mental health)
7. Life work (occupation, job, work, schooling for children and young people)
8. Pleasure (e.g. general expression of pleasure, happiness, contentment)
9. Miscellaneous (a few statements that do not fit in any other category)

The last three were additional categories developed for young people by DeVolger and Ebersole (1983) and were:

10. Activities (sports, hobbies),
11. School achievement (grades or advancement)
12. Appearance (how one looks to others or the clothes one wears)

The researchers concluded that the children from their research were definitely capable of giving clear and lucid answers to questions about meaning in their life.

The above summary shows that research into meaning in life among children has been sparse in the extreme and it begs the question why an area of investigation which, among adults, has proved so fruitful and has attracted so many scholars should have been neglected where children are concerned.

Taylor and Ebersole (1993) reported that the young age of the children in their research presented them with two problems. The first was methodological: in studies of older age groups the participants had written their replies, whereas in Taylor and Ebersole's study the responses

came in the form of conversation and drawings. The second difficulty derived from their respondents' stage of cognitive development —would they understand what was being said to them when asked to talk about meaning in their life? They decided to solve this problem by posing an 'easier' question. Instead of asking: "*What is your deepest life meaning*" they asked: "*In your whole life, what is most important to you*" (p.1100), even though in their opinion this wording did not parallel accurately enough the concept of meaning in life.

3.5.3 *The paucity of research among children*

To answer this question one needs to analyse the difficulties researchers have faced in researching children, in general, and meaning in life among children, in particular. Looking at how a related concept, wellbeing, has been researched among children in numerous studies might shed a light on the paucity of research about meaning in life.

Wellbeing and children:

The concept of wellbeing among children has been extensively researched. While wellbeing is not the same concept as meaning in life, the two are related. Ben Arie and George (2001) have identified over 130 reports designed to document and monitor the wellbeing of children.

The UNICEF-Innocenti Research Centre has been conducting research around the world for many years now into the variables pertinent to children's welfare, such as poverty, social welfare services, scholastic achievement, wellbeing, and others. A report issued in 2011 by 'Save the Children UK on behalf of Save the Children and UNICEF' was entitled *Every Child's Right to be Heard: A resource guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*. Its chief message was that children's voices had to be given a hearing and that children could and needed to participate in research studies on issues pertinent to their interests

The Committee on the Rights of the Child considers that recognising the right of the child to express views and to participate in various activities, according to her or his evolving capacities, is beneficial for the child, the family, the community, the school, the state and democracy.

(Lansdown, 2011, p. 5)

Yet still, for all the wide hearing given to children's voices, there are still researchers claiming that their voice is not being sufficiently heard: Morrow and Mayall (2009) stated that although "a start has been made towards using a range of indicators on children's wellbeing" (Morrow and Mayall, 2009, p. 224), the choice of indicators and the way data is collected does not necessarily reflect children's thinking but our way of thinking about what is wellbeing to children. Fattore et al. agreed: "To what extent are existing wellbeing indicators a reflection of what we adults construct as the appropriate boundaries of childhood, rather than what children actually do and want?" (Fattore, 2007, p. 11).

A study conducted by Sixsmieth et al. (2007) into perceptions of children's wellbeing among children, parents and teachers, reported different answers from the three age groups. The researchers conclude that children's perceptions of their own needs have to be given their own voice: "Definitions identified from the literature are usually conceptions by adults that mediate our understanding of children's wellbeing, as opposed to children's own constructions of wellbeing." (Sixsmieth et al., 2007, p. 512).

Part of the explanation for this may be rooted in assumptions and prejudices about children's cognition and their ability to comprehend abstract concepts. Some researchers might expect younger children not to have the capacity for abstract thought. For example, according to the thinking of children aged 6-11 is concrete and egocentric. Though at this age the child has some understanding of abstract concepts, it is limited (Piaget, 1977). However, children at this age do display logical thinking and can understand connections, causes and results. They can also control their emotions and display self-control (Feldman, 2001). Astington et al. (1988) also found that pre-school children are capable of perceiving and evaluating other's opinions, of identifying other's intentions and beliefs, and that they make social judgements.

Friends and friendship become more important to them when they enter school. Erikson (1950) for example, argued that when children start school, social relations move centre-stage. This is when the child's family-bounded world suddenly expands to include school, friends and teachers. The child at this stage must cope with challenges entailed and resolved by the peer group. This also involves the need for well-developed cognitive ability. If they have this range of cognitive ability why is there a paucity of research into meaning in life among children?

Perhaps the topic is thought too philosophical for children to grasp: Asking them about how they apportion their day—what they do in their leisure time, how much they talk to their parents—these are direct, concrete questions which a child of any age can understand and answer. But questions about deeper-lying topics—their opinion about their wellbeing, their values, their attitudes and perceptions about the best way to live, their hopes and the meaning they find in life—perhaps researchers expect these to be too complex or too undefined for them and so do not ask.

It is possible that children do have meaning but that it might be constructed and expressed differently than by adults. If this is so then researchers need to find ways to uncover what meanings life holds for children. Taylor and Ebersole (1993) raised the possibility of conducting research among younger children. They cited Erikson's theory of a child's stages of development, according to which at the 3rd stage (from age 3-4 up to school age) children are already beginning to sense themselves as 'persons', understand their place in the family, have some understanding of the wider society, show awareness of goals and try to realise them. If all this is so, speculate Taylor and Ebersole, then perhaps even at this age it is possible to probe for children's personal meanings. The problem as they perceive it is one of methodology. If methodological challenges are the other part of the explanation for so little research being done into children's meanings, then it is important to consider which research tools might facilitate translation of the necessary concepts into 'children's language' so that they can understand and collaborate in their own ways.

A third part of the explanation for the absence of meaning-in-life research among children is that the data collection methodology for the research topic among older age groups relies mostly on questionnaires and structured interviewing, methods which are not suitable for children (see Methodology and Methods chapters).

Another interesting point is that, despite this lack of research into children's thinking on meaning in life, numerous educational-counselling programmes have been compiled in the field of meaning in life and the related concepts of happiness, values and personal growth. Seligman (2009) for example, reported programmes implemented in numerous schools which "teach the elements of positive psychology: resilience, gratitude, strengths, meaning, flow, positive relationships and positive emotion" (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 304). He cited as one example, the Penn Resiliency Program which covered over 2,000 children and adolescents

between the ages of 8 and 15. Layard (2007) cited a programme in the Oxford area of the UK implemented by a range of schools calling themselves "Values Schools" whose goal is to use the study of values to teach children to control their emotions and practice self-reflection. However, unlike the programmes cited by Seligman, this UK programme has not been research evaluated yet. Layard called for a national policy which will invest in schools which try to encourage positive traits in their pupils. Seligman et al. commented:

When nations are at war, poor, in famine or in civil turmoil, it is natural that their institutions should be about defence and damage, about minimising the disabling conditions of life. When nations are wealthy, at peace and in relative harmony, however, they, like Florence of the 15th century, turn to what makes life worth living, not just to curtailing the disabling conditions of life, but to building the enabling conditions of life.

(Seligman et al., 2009, p. 307)

Other researchers and theoreticians have come to the conclusion that finding meaning in life (or similar concepts) is crucial for children: "The acquisition of goal directed hopeful thought is absolutely crucial for the child's survival and thriving." (Snyder et al., 2002, p. 259). However, none of them have themselves researched meaning in life among children despite the developing understanding of the importance of children's voice, the recognition of their competence as research participants and the increasing use of participatory and creative research methods.

In summary, then, there is no justified reason for meaning in life among children to have been ignored. The researchers' reservations about children's cognitive abilities do not stand up well as long as creative and participatory methods are used. My exploration of this topic among children is justified and validated by the lack of existing research compared to the rich and extensive philosophical and psychological literature on related issues among adults, including meaning in life,. I conclude, therefore, that there is no good reason why my personal and therapeutic interest in the issue of meaning in life within this age group should not be taken into the domain of systematic research.

3.6 Meaning in life: addressing the Research questions

The goal of this research study is to find out about meaning in life through children's eyes. The overarching research question is: Does the concept of 'meaning in life' have relevance for children? Further: What are the (dis)connections between children's understandings of their own lives and what matters to them and the adult concept of 'meaning in life'?

I drew up four sub-questions to help me grasp what place meaning in life has in children's lives and thinking. In deciding on these sub-questions I drew on the various linkages made between meaning in life and goals/purpose, character traits and personal strengths, between meaning in life and concepts such as values, happiness and hope, always bearing in mind the necessity of maintaining the distinction between these concepts.

- *What do children think are the most important and meaningful things in their lives?*
- *What do children think is the best way to live life?*
- *What nature of goals and purposes do children have for their lives and do they believe that they have character traits and strengths which would help them to fulfil their goals?*
- *How do children's individuality and the differences between them show themselves in their perspectives on meaning in life? To what extent is gender associated with variations in response?*

The first research sub-question explores the sources of meaning in life and thus connects to the professional literature as described earlier. The literature on the topic is extensive and multifaceted. Some researchers have tried to map the key themes and trends characterising the central sources of meaning in life (for example: Ebersole & DePaula, 1987), some have compared one population or population group with another, (the distinguishing variables being mainly age and culture), (for example: Prager, 1996). Others have turned attention to the aspect of 'personal meaning systems', trying to measure the extent to which different people have meaning in life, mainly deploying the variables of 'breadth' and 'depth' (for example: Reker & Wong, 1988).

The theoretical premise underpinning the exploration of the sources of meaning in life is that meaning in life is neither external nor uniform but constructed in each individual from multiple sources and factors and that it is these personal and individual meanings which have to be identified in order to understand the bond between the individual and meaning in life.

The second research sub-question takes a more comprehensive perspective to the issue of meaning in life. The theoretical premise underpinning this exploration is that meaning in life is intimately connected to a person's overall world outlook and values, to their need to contemplate the nature and content of their own life (for example: Frankl, 1970). The relevant research studies in this case are, for example, those which have concentrated on developing, validating and testing the 'Purpose In Life' (PIL) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964), which investigates meaning in life in relation to people's attitudes and opinions, and also research studies into the linkage between meaning in life—as measured by the PIL and like tools—and how people cope with adversity, as described earlier (for example: illness- Collie et al., 2006; loss- Davis & Hoksema, 2001). Other facets of meaning in life examined by scholars are Layard's (2007) argument for the need to educate people in values as a means of furnishing them more meaning in life and hence happiness, or Baumeister's (1991) identification of four needs; one of them is the need for values, which he claimed that people have to feel before they can find meaning in their life.

The third research sub-question asks the children what they believe about their own abilities and character traits. Do they believe, for instance, that they have character traits that will help them build the future they want? What, indeed, do they want from life? What goals do they have? This section of the interview with the children also asks about the balance of happiness and unhappiness in their life and how they manage their emotions, for instance, how long does it take them to get over a disappointment?

The roots of these questions are found in the Positive Psychology literature. The questions clearly link up with Baumeister's (1991) emphasis on the two of the four needs: self-esteem and self-efficacy, with Seligman's (2002) approach to happiness, with Snyder et al.'s (1997) perceptions about hope and goals.

The fourth research sub-question does not probe for different perspectives on 'meaning in life', but looks for the variations in the children's responses by gender and in order to understand better the way children grasp 'meaning in life'.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Methodological approach

4.1.1 Introduction

This chapter first discusses the importance of the choice of research paradigm. It briefly compares the Positivist with the Interpretivist/Constructivist paradigm. It then reviews the choice for the present study of the qualitative research, the Constructivist and Phenomenological stance and the choice of IPA- Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis as a methodology for data analysis. Research with children and research ethics are discussed in general and with specific reference to children and to the present study.

4.1.2 Paradigm

Researchers' decisions about the study they want to conduct depend on the beliefs and views they bring to the study (their ontology). The ontology represents the paradigm that the researchers bring to the research. Guba & Lincoln defined a paradigm as-

A set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the 'world', the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts.

(Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 107)

Ponterotto (2005) agreed with them and defined a paradigm as "A set of interrelated assumptions about the social world which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of that world." (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 34). Thomas (2009) related to paradigm as consisting of two approaches to knowledge - how we seek knowledge and how we use it.

Researchers use a paradigm to choose the theories they will proceed from, the questions their research will ask, and as a guide to choosing their research methods and designing the study; selecting the data gathering tools, the research sample (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

4.1.3 *The Positivist Paradigm vs. Constructivist Paradigm*

From the 17th century onwards positivism was the reigning epistemological paradigm but by the mid-20th century onwards its hegemony has been attacked so generally that no single paradigm can be now said to be sharply defined and unequivocal. Certainly positivism has lost its predominant status (Shalsky & Alpert, 2007). A number of attempts have been made to define the currently dominant paradigms. Following Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Guba and Lincoln (1994, 2000) have defined five basic paradigms—the positivists, the post-positivist, critical theory, constructivism and the participatory paradigm. Thomas (2009), on the other hand, talked of only two key paradigms, the positivist and the interpretivist, differentiated by their methodology, methods and the way their findings are presented.

Positivist premises are the beliefs that reality can be objectively described, that the purpose of research is to create objective knowledge, to grasp facts without bias and that this can be achieved by external observation by an observer free of personal involvement: "For the naïve realist what appears to us via our senses is what is real, and that is what is impressed on our mind." (Dunne et al., 2005, p. 19). Their basic premise is that we live in a uniform, stable and coherent world which contains truth (Thomas, 2007; 2009).

Positivists believe that it is possible to describe what is 'out there' and to get it right. The goal of their research is to produce objective knowledge; that is, understanding that is impartial and unbiased, based on a view from 'the outside', without personal involvement or vested interests on the part of the researcher.

(Willig, 2010 p.3)

Thomas (2009) argued that the interpretivist paradigm belongs to the social universe, a universe which is not home to sharp and precise definitions and which differs from individual to individual. Since researchers in this universe are interested in people and in understanding their ways of thinking and behaving, it is logical to pursue the in-depth investigation of

individuals, there is less need for discussion of variables and categorization and there is no expectation of the objectivity pursued by positivism.

Social phenomena exist not 'out there' but in the minds of people and their interpretation. Reality cannot be defined objectively but only subjectively: reality is interpreted social action.

(Robson, 2002, p. 23)

Schwandt (2000) also objected to the concept of an empirically provable objective reality. He declared that knowledge and truth are created by the human spirit, not discovered by it, that reality is multifaceted and alterable and, in spite of what our common sense tells us, there is no real world that existed before human mental activity and human symbolic language came along and was independent of this activity and language.

I agree with Schwandt's position as expanded by Bruner (1987). The latter argued that when people recount the story of their life to themselves it is shaped by their culture, their social context and by the facts of the story. Adding to that the Cognitivist approach, claiming that the story is also shaped by the thoughts and interpretations which each person applies to their life and its story, then any attempt to arrive at some 'objective truth' is doomed from the outset, certainly in the context of the research encounter, involving as it does the participants with their attitudes, perceptions and thoughts and the researcher with his or her own assumptions, perceptions and attitudes.

4.1.4 Positioning my research methodology

As a proponent of the Cognitivist approach to psychotherapy I believe in the power of thought over the way we live life and experience our world.

The power of thought manifests itself in the beliefs which guide us throughout our life (Beck, 1963; Ellis, 1959). By acknowledging children's beliefs and thoughts about meaning in life and the way they relate to this issue we can better understand children and then use this understanding to improve our methods of deploying 'meaning in life' in our intervention and therapy with them.

This approach links easily to the Interpretivist/Constructivist stance which understands the world as ever-changing, subjective and relative: "The implication here is that we are not dealing with a fixed and exterior social world, but a world of meaning where the actors are constantly in the process of social construction. (Dunne et al., 2005, p. 15).

The choice of phenomenological research approach also reflects my therapeutic approach, which insists on trying to grasp the thoughts, wishes and difficulties of the child patients through their own eyes. In the phenomenological research approach the meaning of a phenomenon lies in how it is perceived by observers, and the constructivist viewpoint too holds that reality is subject to people's perceptions of it, and hence to their beliefs, thinking and ideas.

4.1.5 *Qualitative Research*

Qualitative research concentrates on human experience in natural surroundings. Since reality is interpreted differently by each observer it is critical to acknowledge the points of view of the participants themselves and how they understand things. This is why qualitative researchers tend to be preoccupied with meaning and to ask process questions: they are interested in how people behave, think, feel and function, how they interpret their world and how they explain their individual worldviews. The researcher's purpose is to grasp the quality and structure of experience (Willig, 2010, Smith & Osborn, 2008): "The phenomenon of understanding lies at the heart of the qualitative enquiry enterprise". (Schwandt, 1999, p. 451).

The non-objective nature of qualitative research necessitates careful inquiry into the researchers themselves, since they are one of the key research tools and data-gathering instruments. The researchers being involved in the research process must constantly check the effect of their opinions and outlook on the interpretation of the data collected. They must remember that their main goal is to increase the store of knowledge and not to air their views or judgment on the topic being researched (Willig, 2010; Robson, 2002; Thomas, 2007 and others). While it is recognised that researcher will influence data analysis, transparency about the researcher's ontology and epistemology, at least opens this to scrutiny and adds reflexivity. As I see it, my research question as to what things in their life children identify as the most meaningful, is closely and directly linked to the qualitative research approach and, within that, to the phenomenological approach, which focuses on the question—what is the nature of human experience (Shkedi, 2003).

4.1.6 *Constructivism*

The origins of the constructivist approach go back to the origins of philosophy itself two thousand years ago, when the Greek Epictetus declared that "We are not disturbed by events but by our outlook on events" (Epictetus, 1976, p. 34). Shakespeare voiced a similar idea in his line "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 50).

Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and others have also contributed to the constructivist vision (Phillips, 1995). One of the first psychological theorists identified with constructivism was George Kelly, who claimed that "A person's processes are psychologically channelled by the way in which he anticipates events" (Kelly, 1955, p. 469). Kelly saw all people as 'personal scientists' engaged in anticipating the world. The constructivist cognitive psychologist Piaget theorized that knowledge is not transmitted from person to person as it is, but that there is rather a process of knowledge acquisition in which a child, as he encounters stimuli, constructs his own personal knowledge in the light of his previous cognitive knowledge and the context in which this process takes place. In this way, the mind builds and branches out day by day. The process of knowledge acquisition requires the child to be active and to integrate existing knowledge and skills with new knowledge. In this way the learner constructs his knowledge by fashioning a web of semantic connections between current and new knowledge, or as Piaget calls it - assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1966).

The notion that humankind constructs meanings and as such is active in the construction of their knowledge was further elaborated by Vygotsky, who expressed the opinion that complex human functioning has an element of mediation via consciousness: humankind does not react spontaneously and reflexively to situations but rather their reaction is mediated via their consciousness, which re-shapes any given situation (Vygotsky, 1978). Kant expressed a similar idea, according to Hamilton:

Human perception derives not only from evidence of the senses but also from the mental apparatus that serves to organize incoming sense impressions ... Human claims about nature cannot be independent of inside-the-head processes of the knowing subject.

(Hamilton, 1994, p. 63)

Within constructivism are a number of divergent currents, all of which have in common the premise that we perceive reality via an organized structure of consciousness, which represents our search for order and predictability in the external world and our need to find anchors for our activity in that world (Neimeyer, 1995). The perception of reality in its broadest sense: cognitive, emotional and behavioural, is based on a network of constructions. Experience is the basis on which we construct meaning. In the course of daily life people interpret the world around them and bestow meaning and enter into interactions on the basis of these meanings (Shkedi, 2003).

Willig (2010) discussed the idea of not having one particular 'knowledge' but many kinds of knowledge. This suggests to me, that it is not necessary to look for one special ultimate meaning in life, but that people find many different meanings, personal meanings, in their lives.

What we perceive and experience is never a direct reflection of environmental conditions but must be understood as a specific reading of these conditions. This does not mean that we can never really know anything; rather, it suggests that there are 'knowledges' rather than one 'knowledge'.

(Willig, 2010, p. 13)

Willig went a step further by defining the researcher's role in the light of constructivist epistemology:

Research from a social constructionist perspective is concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality that are available in a culture, to explore the conditions of their use and to trace their implications for human experience and social practice.

(Willig, 2010, p. 7)

Constructivist approaches to research is holistic, in that it aspires to understand phenomena and situations as complete entities (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The departure point for constructivist research is the researcher's personal interest in his research question. The research reflects the researcher's and their research participants'

constructions and the interaction between them. It does not presume to reflect any objective human reality (Gergen, 1999). Constructivist research's core premise is that nothing is 'correct' and 'incorrect', that there is a place for 'other' knowledge and that there is no place for the evaluation and ranking of knowledge by type (Sabar, 2001).

Bruner (1990) claimed that this tendency to bestow meaning is congenital. Meaning is the product of an individual reflexive process by which humankind awards meaning and judges his constructions by their practical effectiveness, their internal coherence and the confirmation they receive from significant others. His constructions must, among other things, provide an interpretation of the key experiences in his life and constructions that do not satisfy these demands have to change (Neimeyer, 1995).

The researcher's role is to try, as far as possible, to see the participant's experience through the subject's own eyes, remaining aware all the time that the researcher's own eyes are not entirely opinion-free; they are full of their own experience and interpretations of that experience. This is one of the junction points between the constructivist and phenomenological approaches and it seems to me that my thesis sits between these two epistemologies.

4.1.7 *Phenomenology*

Although the origins of the phenomenological paradigm go back to Kant and Hegel, the founder of phenomenology is considered to be Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Vandenberg, 1997). Heidegger, a pupil of Husserl, offered the term 'dasein' = 'being there' to clarify the idea of phenomenology (Heidegger, 1999). Among Heidegger's successors were Sartre (1996) and Merleau-Ponty (2006), who broadened and deepened the theory's scope and developed it in the direction of existentialism. Another student of Heidegger and Husserl was Levinas, whose position on the meaning of life I described above. However, despite these illustrious beginnings, the phenomenological method did not really establish itself until the 1970s:

This methodology had not yet established itself as a variable alternative to the traditional scientific approach in psychological research However, in the 1970s phenomenological psychologists established a praxis which is a methodological realization of the phenomenological philosophical attitude.

(Stones, 1988, pp.141- 142)

What is phenomenological methodology? The phenomenologist wants to understand how the world appears to others (Trochim, 2001) and uses the term 'phenomenon' as a general means of describing the substantive understanding someone has of real things and events in the world (Van Manen, 1990).

From a phenomenology point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human being. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching-questioning-theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world.

(Van Manen, 1990, p. 5)

Since phenomenologists do not acknowledge such a thing as objective truth, they do not do research in order to seek out 'truth' but to learn how their research participants perceive the world around them (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The phenomenological researcher tries to explore personal experience or personal perception (Smith, 2008). This being so, the object of phenomenological research studies is subjective experience — to try to grasp and describe what happens to people in those people's own terms (Shkedi, 2003). The premise in Phenomenology is that knowledge lies in the meanings people attach to their lives. Phenomenology wants to depict phenomena not explain them (Schwandt, 2000, Gubrium & Holstein, 1995). As Smith puts it:

For phenomenology, the individual is a conscious agent, whose experience must be studied from the first person perspective— the experience of a meaningful life world.

(Smith, 2008. p. 12)

It is clear that the phenomenological research paradigm is fully consonant with the questions my study is designed to answer, namely: What meanings does life hold in children's eyes? What do they think is the best way to live? What strengths/powers do they ascribe to themselves? Believing as I do that children are conscious agents, with their own experiences, opinions and views, my need as a researcher is to hear the children's own voices, to hear and divine what their take is on these issues.

4.1.8 *IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

The IPA approach, which represents a combination/fusion of the two points specified previously, sprang from the phenomenological one. Smith (2004) said that this approach comprises three components: it represents an epistemological standpoint; it proposes a set of guidelines for conducting a research study; and it takes in an extensive body of research knowledge.

Willig (2010) describes IPA as-

...A version of the phenomenological methods that accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to the research participants' life worlds. Even though it aims to explore the research participant's experience from his or her perspective, it recognizes that such an exploration must necessarily implicate the researcher's own view of the world as well as the nature of the interaction between the researcher and participant. As a result, the phenomenological analysis produced by the researcher is always as interpretation of the participant's experience.

(Willig, 2010, pp. 56-57)

IPA researchers want to understand their participants' experience from their own point of view, to learn their world. Their research is designed to expose an area of concern in great and rich detail (Smith & Osborn, 2008) on the understanding that researchers themselves are under the influence of their own ideas and knowledge. In other words, two stages of interpretation are involved: first, the participants try to make sense of their world and then the researcher tries to grasp this understanding of theirs.

In some respects IPA resembles other approaches, such as the hermeneutic method of text interpretation for example (Gadamar, 2003). The premise of the hermeneutic method is that all understanding is interpretation and that a battery of presuppositions and opinions shape how each person interprets their world and any given issue in it. In the interview context, this ongoing process of interpretation engages the speaker and their interpreter (the interviewee and interviewer) in a dialogue on the issue which has brought them together. Since objective understanding is impossible and all understanding is rooted in two different worlds—of the speaker and the listener—the dialogue has to be one between equals standing on common ground. The hermeneutic experience is a pillar of any cultural structure.

The foundation of IPA approach is utter respect and commitment to humans as cognitive beings, with verbal and affective resources and a strong linkage between what they think and feel and what they say. IPA researchers have to accept, nonetheless, that whereas on some occasions they must try to grasp the participant's emotional and mental state from what the participant says, there are other times when they must do so from what has not been said. The researcher must always remain alert to what is not being voiced, and not only to what have been tolled. Perhaps because there are issues the interviewee is unaware of or has ignored, but which are evident to the researcher from their analysis of the interview text. Alertness to both these aspects, the said and the unsaid, can generate a richer understanding and do more justice to the interviewee (Smith, 2004). This distinction recalls Rikur's (1970) distinction between the interpretation/ hermeneutics of doubt and the interpretation/ hermeneutics of meaning. It also recalls the distinction between the exploration of meaning, which is governed by the nature of the experience being researched, and the exploration of suspicion, where the aim is to 'read between the lines' and so penetrate to a deeper level of interpretation. Indeed Smith (2004) admitted to being influenced by hermeneutic methodology.

Another approach which Smith acknowledged as influential on him is the cognitive approach:

Thus, IPA and mainstream [cognitive] psychology converge in being interested in examining how people think about what is happening to them but diverge in deciding how this thinking can best be studied.

(Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54)

And a third source of influence is Grounded Theory: "(In IPA)...Themes are said to emerge and categories are identified in a way that invokes grounded theory methodology rather than social constructionism. (Willig, 2010, p. 70).

Smith (2004) defined the characteristic features of IPA as follows:

Idiographic: A small number of participants are researched and each case analysed separately before cross-analysis. The reader should grasp the generic themes but also the world of each individual participant.

Inductive: Themes emerge from the data analysis. The researchers do not attempt to test specific hypotheses and the techniques of enquiry are flexible enough to allow unanticipated topics to arise.

Interrogative: the focus of the data analysis is to research each subject's psychology, and hence a contribution is made to psychological theory.

The shortcomings of this research approach, said Willig (2010), lie in the centrality of spoken language to understanding the meaning of the interviewee's experience to him. For language not only describes an experience, it adds meaning intrinsic to the words used. Thus it shapes reality and removes the original experience further from us. It is precisely in this aspect that my data collection methods might have an advantage, for I use not only verbal text but also the children's drawings, which are an alternative mode of communication. They complement direct verbal communication and provide an alternative route to accessing experiences.

4.2 Participant's voice

4.2.1 Research with children

Research is our main way of acquiring informed knowledge about our world and, since children make up a large part of the world's population, one way to acquire knowledge about them and their lives would be through engaging them in the research process. Children have been interrogated, measured, questioned, evaluated and put to all sort of tests in order to gain an overall understanding of how they develop (Christensen & James, 2000). That they have often not been treated as partners in research derives from perceiving them as: "adults in the making" (Morss, 1996, p. 158).

As adults in the making they are seen as a set of future potentials for adulthood, their present state of being, people in their own right, is made less significant by the future perspective.

(Ebrahim & Muthukrishna, 2005, p. 80)

As research subjects, children have often been perceived as passive, as persons who cannot answer for themselves, and information about them has usually been collected from their care

givers—parents, teachers, all who surround them and care for them. Much fewer studies have been made which investigate their own ways of thinking, their own declared positions and sayings (Christensen & James, 2000). It has often been assumed that children cannot be relied on to give reliable answers about themselves because they are seen as too young with too limited cognitive abilities. Adults considered them too biased and their views not relevant or trustworthy (e.g. Qvortrup, 1994; James, 1995; Uprichard, 2007).

However, this approach has been changing at the same time as children's rights have taken greater prominence. The change can be seen in government policy: in many countries the official statistics-gathering agencies have constructed special questionnaires for children so that they can take part in research studies (Borges et al., 2000).

This acknowledgement of the need for children's voices to be heard has emerged from the realisation that, as research partners, children have equal rights with other age groups and also from a growing awareness of the importance to research of the subjective perspective in general and among children in particular (Qvortrup, 2004). She adds:

While the idea of children being in a waiting position remains forceful, we should use the time to prepare a future childhood that it is worthwhile for future children to be waiting for. It doesn't help children too much that they are 'our future' and 'future adults' and 'the next generation'.

(Qvortrup, 2004, p. 270)

The insight that renders children a place not as transitional beings enables us to investigate childhood from a cross-cultural perspective and compare it with other life-cycle stages. Scott painted a similar picture and also suggested we contemplate childhood as a life-cycle stage in its own right.

Once children are viewed as competent social actors in their own right then it clearly makes sense to ask them about their contributions and participation in social and economic life.

(Scott, 2000, p. 89)

Uprichard (2007, p. 303) said that "children and childhood are always and necessarily 'being and becoming'", and argued that there is a tension between being and becoming. While it is very understandable, she said, that the 'becoming' is problematic ethically and from other points of view, it is equally problematic not to treat children as people who in the future will be adults. In this light she proposes taking a stance that integrates both aspects of children. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) also argued that this does not mean that the differences between adults and children should be ignored, rather it means giving children the respect due to the 'lead actors' in research which concerns them directly. Bianchi and Robinson (1997), for example, researched 9-11 year-old children about their activity time and found them quite capable of being a direct source of information. Mayall's (2000) study discussed current studies which claim that children are capable of reliably reporting their experiences and that they make themselves very clear as to what captures their attention and what does not. In other words, one can learn a lot just from listening to them, knowledge that if approached by other paths might not necessarily be voiced at all. Furthermore, there are studies showing that children have opinions considerably different from what their parents think they have (Scott, 2000). The latter study highlights topics on which children's voice is crucial to decision-making, such as divorce, risk factors, siblings, resilience, and others.

A review of research into the assessment indicators of a child's state and situation shows that researchers' approach has shifted over recent years so that they now relate not only to children's hardships and survival needs but also focus on their welfare and wellbeing. Lippman (2007) averred that researchers around the world are now making it a high priority to develop indicators of positive welfare. Ben-Arieh (2005), too, described research studies which have measured the positive elements of children's life situations and not merely the negative ones. This is how the editors of *Research with Children* sum up the issue of researching children:

In his book 'Little Prince' (1945), Antoine de Saint-Exupery writes that grown-ups cannot on their own understand the world from the child's point of view and therefore they need children to explain it to them. This is wise advice indeed for childhood researchers. Only through listening and hearing what children say and paying attention to the ways in which they communicate with us will progress be made toward conducting research with, rather than simply on, children.

(Christensen & James, 2000, p. 9)

4.2.2 *Research Ethics*

Research ethics are usually discussed just after the exposition of research methods but I have chosen to introduce them earlier as they are not a separate issue but an integral part of the thesis' epistemology and central to my positioning as a researcher of children.

Ethics refers to rules of conduct, typically to conformity to a code or set of principles.

(Robson, 2002, p. 65)

Robson argued that in the past no one raised issues of ethics, for the consensus was that research was value-free and objective and that it merely described what was (Robson 2002). More recently, the assumption of research objectivity is no longer taken for granted and it is evident that the researcher's perceptions and values play a role, so ethics has become a live concern and all possible ethical problems have to be probed and answered. Every research study has to set criteria to guarantee its ethical quality (Peled & Liechentrirt, 2002). Sussex University has its own ethical standards and guidelines for research and I shall refer to these in my section on the ethics of research with children. This is all the more true with regard to qualitative research based on close personal relations between researcher and researched and their mutual intimacy. This research necessitates the strictest of ethical perspectives (Sabar, 2001).

Some of the ethical issues that qualitative research has to face are:

- Invasion of individual privacy;
- Exploitation of the research participant's time and energy;
- Reward and profit;
- The balance of power between researcher and research participants (Robson. 2002, Thomas, 2009).

The researchers should take special care regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, while publishing the research, by using pseudonyms, initials or any other solution that is agreed by both sides. Another issue needs to take care of is the restoring and saving the written/taped materials in a safe reserved place.

Sabar (2001) suggested dealing with these issues by empowering research participants in the following ways:

- Give them all the information they need to come to an informed decision as to their participation in the research;
- Treat them with respect;
- Select a research methodology that allows the participants' voice to be heard;
- At the end of the research, share your thoughts and data analysis with them- and take their views into account in analysis and formation of conclusions

One of the tactics deployed to avoid misunderstanding interviewees or accidentally identifying them is to give them the researcher's text to read and comment on. In the next chapter I describe how I returned to the children to verify that I had understood them as they intended. This corroboration not only solved the ethical problem but added to the data's validity, as I set out in the next chapter.

Alpert and Shlasky (2007) consider the outstanding ethical responsibility of a researcher to be rendering the most exact representation to the voice of the other (the research participants). The very fact that we researchers take it upon ourselves to portray the ideas and perceptions of others lays on us the obligation to do so faithfully. If to this we add that any thesis is inevitably shaped by the researcher's own vision then the effort put into faithfully representing the other voice must be all the greater. Alpert and Shlasky add that, as social researchers, we are required to maintain good societal norms and the standards and criteria of ethical research. Butler (2002) agreed. He has drawn up a code of ethics for social work research which he considered as having no less status than the code of ethics for social work itself.

Another ethical issue which Alpert (2007) raised and which has to be faced is that the researcher's own views may cause him to respond differently to different interviewees, in accordance with the content the interviewee expresses.

The Ethics of Research with Children

When the participants in research are children all the above ethical issues become more challenging. The issue of the ethics of researching children is of course a crucial aspect of the whole subject of research with children. For me, researching children has to do, first of all, with the epistemological paradigm and, in this regard, the first requirement is to hear the children's own voice, to treat them as 'social actors' with rights and opinions of their own.

Many researchers consider research with children as ethically complex because of the great gap in power and status between researcher and child. Children as a group are considered to be disadvantaged and disempowered. Morrow and Richards (1996) described researchers who regard children as being biddable and manipulable, much 'weaker' than the researcher, in a word, vulnerable. Their physical weakness and lack of knowledge and experience makes them dependent on the adults around them. They have no economic or political power or rights as citizens. Scott (2000) added that because of all these factors children cannot usually stop the researcher, correcting their thinking and, arguing with their ideas. We, as researchers, must take this into consideration. Morrow & Richards (1996) condemn this attitude and remind researchers not to assume that children are a homogeneous group who think alike and act alike.

Conceptualising children as less competent in this way is unhelpful, and it is important to see it critically, because it has provided teachers and parents (and sociologists) with powerful normative models of what children are (or should be) like. It reflects a cultural reluctance to take children's ideas seriously, which in itself is not surprising, given that- at the macro-social level at any rate- adults tend to trivialize and devalue children's acts as a matter of course.

(Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 98)

Alanen (1992) compared research with children to men researching women. Just as the male point of view influences how the researcher handles his study and, in this case, how he perceives and analyses a woman's world, so when an adult researches children, their angle of view will be different from a child's and they will examine and analyse children's thoughts through the prism of their own thinking. This issue is relevant both to the ethical aspect — the

children's words may not be heard exactly as they intended them—and to the issue of research objectivity and hence to the study's reliability. Morrow & Richards (1996) remind the researchers not to assume that children are a homogeneous group that think alike and act alike.

Before the research study can begin, the researchers must get consent for their interviewing. When dealing with children permission must be obtained from their parents. But, ethically, children should give their own consent to participating in the research, which means that they have to understand what the research is about and for. They have to decide whether they want to take part in it (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

The manner of conducting the research is influential. Mayall (2000) described the way the researcher should treat the child participants in data collection and analysis. Researchers must give the children a sense of comfort and security throughout the fieldwork. They should use humour, seek the children's advice on how the study might be improved, show appreciation for them giving their time and replies, pay careful attention and remember to thank them. They should let the children themselves dictate the agenda, which will make them feel more at ease, more secure, and in this way their responses will flow from their own world of associations. Questions to them must be worded with great clarity. Leeuw & Otter's research, in 1995, found that children's replies were considerably affected by the clarity of the questions put to them. And if the children do not find the questions interesting, their replies may be irrelevant and inaccurate, which might affect research reliability.

The issue of data confidentiality is complex and sensitive in any research but all the more so when children are the participants. For then not only is the researcher responsible for the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview and the interview data but also for the physical and emotional security of the child, a security which can at times clash with the first responsibility, when it requires the researcher to report material which has come up in an interview to the authorities (the parents and/or the welfare or education systems). It goes without saying that when such a circumstance arises the researcher has to move with due caution, considerate of the child's own rights and wishes (Niel, 2005).

It has been suggested by Mayall (2000) that the differential power relations between children and adults is most problematic when it comes to interpreting and analysing the data. Because, no matter how much it is possible to involve child participants at earlier stages, the interpreting and analysing stage is usually entirely in the researcher's hands.

Thomas and O'Kane (1998) suggested ways of involving children even at this stage. Their first suggestion is to use data collection instruments which allow children to say what they want to say on the research topic, that is, to avoid questionnaires and closed questions. In my research I took this advice and allowed my child participants to both draw and talk freely about the research topic and to choose when they wanted to draw (and what to draw) and when to talk. My interviews were composed of open questions which allowed the children to set the pace of the interview. Thomas and O'Kane also recommend that researchers return to the children with the data analysis and ask them to comment on it, which allows them to both make their answers more precise and to confirm or alter the opinions they gave earlier. I did exactly this and expand on this issue in the Findings chapter.

Piaget's description of how he treated the children in his research studies offers sound ethical guidance:

.....many of our children became absorbed in the game to the extent of treating me completely as one of them. ... The interrogatory, moreover, requires extremely delicate handling, suggestion is always ready to occur, and the danger of romancing is ever present. It goes without saying that the main thing is simply to grasp the child's mental orientation.

(Piaget, 1977, pp. 162-163)

Morrow & Richardson (1996) concluded: "Researchers need to be aware that ethical considerations are on-going, and that ethical dilemmas may arise at any stage of the research and not just at the point of contact with research participants". (Morrow & Richardson, 1996, p. 95).

From Sussex Research Ethics Standards', Guidelines and Procedures: Research involving children:

- Informed consent for research with children must also be obtained from those with parental responsibility for them in law.
- Participation in the research should be made as rewarding and enjoyable as possible.
- Interviewing children should be undertaken in areas where the researcher and the child are not entirely alone to protect the researcher as well as the child.
- Feedback on the findings should be given in ways that are meaningful to the participant.

Morrow and Richards (1996) also set out in their article the directions they think research with children should be taking-

Ethical guidelines call on researchers to avoid undue intrusion, and using methods which are non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory, and which encourage children to interpret their own data, might be one step towards diminishing the ethical problems of imbalanced power relationships between researchers and researched at the point of data collection and interpretation.

(Morrow and Richards, 1996, p. 100)

However, choosing creative data collection and analysis methods in no way exempts the researcher from his ethical obligations: Even though one may select creative research instruments one should still remember to respect the images the child-interviewees use (i.e. not suggest alternative images the researcher thinks more appropriate, not show doubt about the images the child uses, not seem to mock) and let them elaborate on these images as the interview proceeds.

I believe that, in the long run, my study can help reinforce children's inner strengths and resilience by helping them connect to the meanings they find in their life. There has already been a short-term benefit. Taking part in this research empowered the children: the feeling that their thoughts and attitudes were important enough for a researcher to come and listen to, letting them talk about their inner feelings about life, something they were not used to talking about, made them feel good, made them feel important and, as they said, "had some influence".

Chapter 5: Methods

5.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the research methods deployed in the present study, beginning with the measures taken to ensure that research ethics were carefully observed. A tabulation and a figure of the research design are presented and the research population is described, explaining why children of a particular age and number (in total and for each interview) were chosen, as well as how the schools and classes were selected. Then the pilot test is described and the research design and process are set out. The research techniques are reviewed—the semi-structured interview and the questions put to the children, the story-telling and the drawing, the reason for having individual or group interviews, as well as the way each child was interviewed. I set out my doubts before starting, the location chosen, the recording of the interviews, interview duration. Interviewer-interviewee relations are discussed and how to ensure that the voice of each interviewee is heard. Ways of validating the research are described, e.g. triangulation, and issues of trustworthiness, transferability and authenticity are reviewed. Finally, the data analysis methodology is presented: first, a charting and a figure of the process of data analysis are set out, then an explanation of interview transcription and recording; identifying themes and categories, the use of frequencies and writing up the report. This chapter sets out the research methods used for the present study.

5.2 Maintaining ethical standards

Any research study in Israel involving children has to be authorized by the Chief Scientist on the Ministry of Education. In my case, the Chief Scientist asked that I send a letter to the parents of all the children concerned setting out the aims and design of the research and how to get in touch with me, should they want to (see Appendix 1). Only once I had the signed consent of the earners (see Appendix 2) was I permitted to make contact with the children. At this stage I met with the children to tell them about the research and asked them to take part, making it clear that they could back out at any stage.

One, two and three children were interviewed at a time, partly as the children wanted (detailed explanation further on). The interviews took place in a room they were familiar with and which was entirely unthreatening. The interviews were taped only after the children in each interview agreed (the parent had also agreed to this in signing the consent form). I promised to keep all the data confidential and demonstrated to them how I would do this—by always using a pseudonym when quoting from an interview or showing a drawing, by not quoting an interview in full, by deleting the child's name from the picture they drew and by storing all interview material under lock and key.

All interviews were conducted in an easy-going and respectful atmosphere and at 'eye-level'. I met with the children a second time two months later to check with them that I had understood them correctly.

5.3 Outline of research process

Stage	Objective	Method
Preparation for research	Obtain official approval for research study from the Chief Scientist, Ministry of Education	Request approved for research with 8-year-old schoolchildren, providing a letter of consent is signed by the children's parents
	Conduct pilot test	Observing the Chief Scientist's directives, conduct interviews in a third school of similar characteristics to the others recommended by the Ministry of Education.
	Agree research design and procedure with schools.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consult with the Ministry of Education inspector responsible for the relevant schools. 2. Request approval of school governing boards for research study. 3. Agree research procedure: (a) talk to teachers, (b) Send out consent form to parents for signing, (c) Preliminary classroom talk and interviews with pupils. 4. Agree full interview timetable. 5. Agree interview room.
	Start fieldwork. Coordinate with class teachers.	Talk to teacher of selected class in each school; agree a timetable/ procedure adjusted to teaching programme.
	Get consent of parents	Send letter to parents (Appendix A) explaining research study and requesting consent to interview their child.
	Make first contact with children and set out the project.	Once parental consent received, go into each class (as per agreement with teacher) and explain about the interviews planned and interview method (individual or with friend/s, as they wish and as class timetable permits).
Conducting fieldwork	Conduct interviews.	<p>Interviews had three segments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Story-telling as an opening to the interviews 2. Semi-structured interviews 3. Drawing at the end of the interview of the most important things in life. <p>After completing interviews with one school (about three weeks) the interviews at the second school started.</p> <p>- All interviews took place in the same pre-selected room according to the timetable recommended by the school and lasted about one academic hour.</p>
Following fieldwork	Data analysis	<p>-Transcribe interviews and begin data analysis, at the same time do interviews at second school.</p> <p>-Complete data analysis. (see table 2, p. 104)</p>
	Share data analysis findings with children.	Return to each class to share data analysis findings with children, (a) to confirm and validate the findings and (b) for ethical reasons, to make the children part of the research study which needed them.
	Write up thesis.	

Table 1- Outline of Research Process

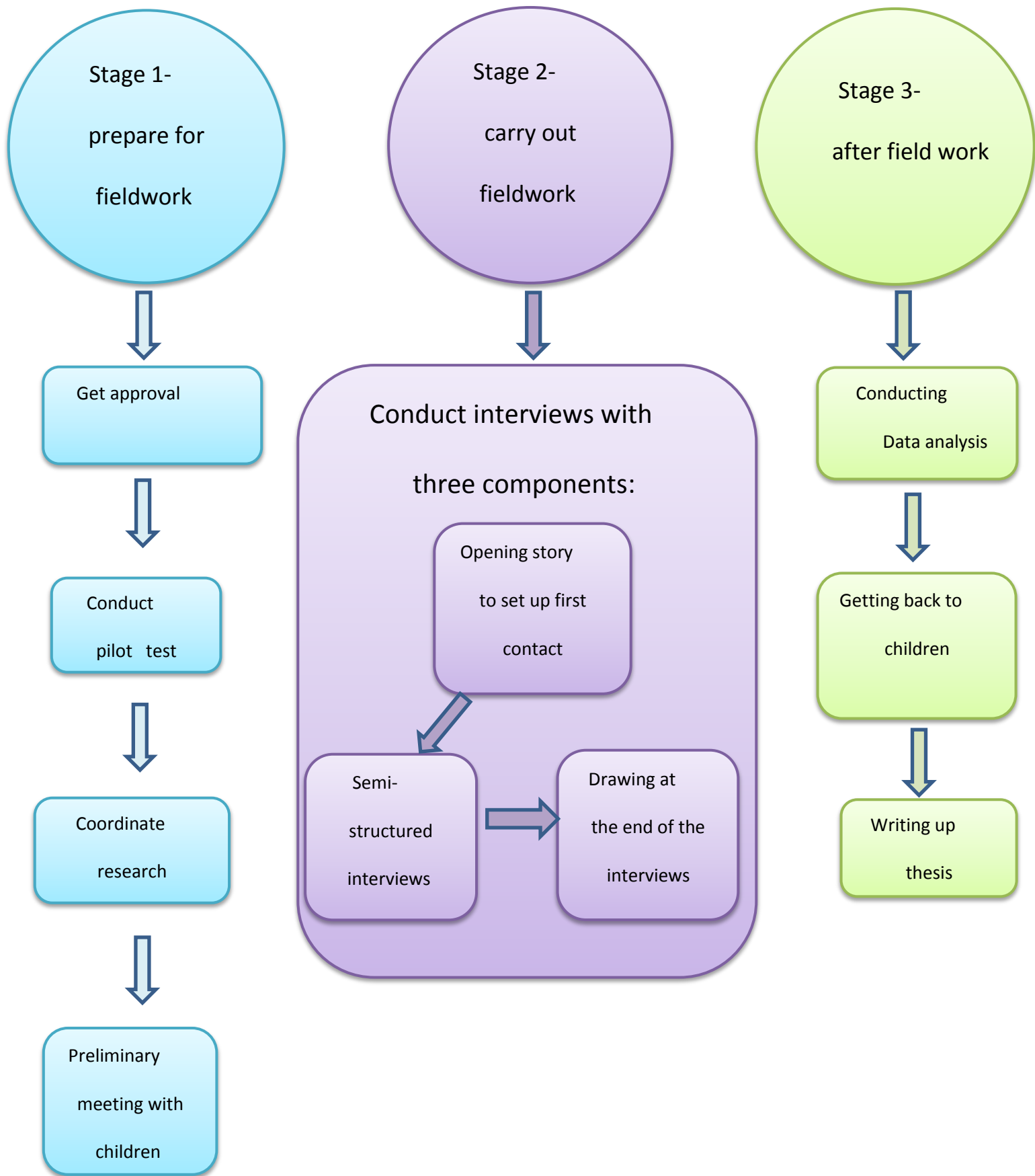


Figure 1: Three-stage research design

5.4 Research Population

5.4.1 The choice of the Children's age

I chose to focus my research on middle childhood (eight-year-old children in the third year of primary school). This is an age when the children's cognitive abilities are already mature enough for understanding abstractions, and when the ability to generalize is emerging (Piaget, 1977). They are already coping with complex intellectual and social tasks which build up their self-esteem (Erikson, 1950) and have the capacity for judgment and social cognition (Selman, 1980).

Friends and friendship in middle age childhood

Plotnik (2001) argued that primary school children are heavily concerned with their place in the society of their peers, with their wish and desire to be part of a social peer group, which is, in turn, part of the community, society and culture they live in. Parker et al. also related to middle childhood, where "children's understanding about friendship begins to indicate a maturing appreciation that feelings and intentions, not just manifest actions, keep friends together or drive them apart" (Parker et al., 2006, p. 427). Many researchers stressed the importance of middle childhood as a time of social growth for children, as Sullivan (1953) argued that friendships enabled a model of interpersonal sensibility to develop which would form the basis for later spousal relationships and parenting. The children have not, however, reached the developmental age when, according to Erikson (1950), they become preoccupied with issues of self-identity and the search for the meaning and point of life.

This is why I found this age so interesting for research into meaning in life. It is an age when, on the one hand, there is sufficient cognitive and social understanding (for example, Vygotsky, 1978), even if the conceptualizing is rather concrete, and, on the other hand, when the children have not yet started to become directly involved with the issue of their own self-identity, which, as happens in adolescence, makes individuals search for the meaning in their life.

5.4.2 *Piloting the study*

Piloting was an important phase arising from the development of the research questions, for the following reasons. First, the research was concerned with meaning in life in middle childhood, and so I aimed to study a population of 8-year-old children. It was important to find out if the research topic—meaning in life—was indeed relevant, interesting and meaningful to this age group, and that the topic could be usefully studied at this age. Second, the questions to be put to the children were taken from questionnaires to adults and then adjusted for children by modifying their wording, making it more concrete and specific. It was necessary to assess (a) whether children could understand, connect to and respond to these questions, and (b) that the questions tested for what they were designed to test for. Finally, the intended interviewing method was semi-structured, with the planned questions, taken as noted above from questionnaires, to be posed in the form of a conversation/dialogue, or as Mayall called it, a 'research conversation' (e.g. Mayall, 2000, p. 110). Here again it was necessary to test whether the questions fitted into this interview- conversation method (Kvale, 1996), that they followed each other in logical sequence, and were such as to encourage dialogue.

With these considerations in mind, the following steps were taken: Once the Chief Scientist had authorized the study, a school with similar characteristics was approached - an urban city, location in central Israel, similar socio-demographic catchment population - to the schools already selected for the full study.

Having talked things over with the headmistress and teaching staff of the selected school and obtained the permission of the parents of the selected year-3 class (eight years old) to talk to their children, on a regular teaching day I went into that class and requested the children's permission to participate in a research on the topic of meaning in life. In the class we held a discussion on what were currently the most important things in life to them and would remain so. The children were asked to make a drawing of these things in the classroom if they wanted. When they had done that a number of children (ten in all) who had shown interest in being interviewed were invited to an interview, either on their own or in a small group.

At this stage the whole interview procedure differed from the form it took in the full study: (a) the use of a drawing as the preparatory stage to the interview, whereas later the drawing usually came last; (b) The drawings were made in the full class (see above) whereas later they

were made within the one-to-one interview framework. There were two reasons for these differences. First, at this stage I had not had the idea of using story-telling as the way to engage the children's interest and decrease power relations. Second, there was no need at this stage to analyse the children's replies, as I did for the full study. The aims were as set down above—to confirm that the questions were relevant and appropriate to the children, that they could understand, connect to and respond to these questions, and that the questions tested for what they were designed to test for. So I was less concerned with the structuring of each individual interview and each child's individual drawing.

At this pilot stage the children's enthusiasm for the idea of doing a drawing about the subject of 'meaning in their life', was already evident, as was their willing engagement with the research topic in the interviews. They made it very clear to me that 'meaning in life' was a very relevant and important concept to them.

Analysis of the pilot study with respect to the children's responses showed me that they had indeed given direct responses to the questions about meaning in life and that these replies in large part matched the replies given by adults to the same questions. I returned to planning the full study with increased confidence in the questions I wanted to ask the children and the form in which I wanted to ask them.

However, I was not yet completely convinced in using drawing as the opening gambit for the interviews. While the drawing met the goal of having the children make direct, unmediated contact with the research topic, it seemed inadequate as a means of establishing the same contact with me as researcher. I feared that an insufficiently personal connection with me would lead the children to give me the answers they thought I wanted to hear and less the answers they wanted to give. Mayall (2000) described similar dilemmas, which she tried to solve by spending more time with the children, including particularly fun time, and engaging in shared creative activities with them, all this in addition to asking them directly to help him better understand what childhood is.

It was only later that I had the idea of opening with a humorous story as a way both of getting into the topic and of creating a more personal, 'eye-level' connection with the children and thus a deeper connection to the theme of meaning in life.

5.4.3 *The choice of schools*

The full research study was conducted in two primary schools in one of the biggest cities in the centre of Israel which differed somewhat in their intake population. School A served a population, of which the large majority were Russian immigrants, either new immigrant to Israel who had arrived not more than a few years before or born in Israel to Russian immigrant parents. In terms of socioeconomic circumstances, the research population from school A is at a low-to-middling level, the parents working long hours to make a living at jobs of a lower status than their qualifications entitled them to. It contained a large representation of three-generation households, single mothers living with their parents and children in the one flat. School A is in the centre of the city and was once held to be one of the city's best but with the town's massive expansion and the exodus of the 'flower' of the better-earners to the new western suburbs, the city centre has been left to the new immigrant communities. In terms of schooling most of the parents have higher education, so that the population presents a contrast — its socioeconomic level is fairly low but its educational level is fairly high.

School A has special meaning for me as I was a pupil at this school, and worked there as a therapist later on at the beginning of my career. I turned to this school on the first place because of these reasons, knowing, that once I had obtained approval from the Ministry of Education's Chief Scientist's and the city's Education Department I would have the full cooperation of the school itself, and so it proved.

I chose to interview children from a second school so as to make research population more heterogeneous and avoid the bias that might creep in from researching a single institution. In this there was an attempt to meet Seidman's criterion of population 'sufficiency' (2006). He argues that the research participants should reflect the full range of variance in the given research population and that this can usually be achieved by choosing a large enough number of participants. For this reason I turned to school B, a school on the far side of city that was found by asking the supervisor to recommend a school with a different demographic from that of the first school. She recommended a school in the 'new neighbourhood', in the western and 'better' part of city, serving a population in the middle-to-upper economic range living in a prestigious neighbourhood. The parents are mostly self-employed professionals, some with higher education, some not, and all living in houses rather than high-rise apartment buildings.

But in educational terms the parents are no more advantaged than those in the centre of the town. Both schools serve secular families (not religious). This second school too gave me all necessary cooperation.

5.4.4 *The choice of classes*

The Ministry of Education's Chief Scientist's demand was to send out informed consent forms to the parents of the children as a condition for interviewing them (see Appendix 1).

After talking with the two headmistresses it was decided to send out the informed consent forms to the parents of one of the two classes of the year-three children in each school: Having worked extensively with children I knew how much they liked personal encounters such as the research interviews were intended to be, and how important it was not to disappoint them. So the decision was taken to interview only one class in each school, in order to avoid the situation where children, having got their parents to sign the informed consent form, were then not interviewed because I had already interviewed all I needed. The choice of each class was random. A fortnight later I returned to the schools to collect the signed informed consent forms. About half the parents of the children in each of the two classes had got their parents' signature, 16 in one and 14 in the other.

The second stage was to talk with the form-teacher of each chosen classes to explain them the background to the research. Both gave their approval and consent. So I came into each class in the middle of a lesson and explained to the children that I was doing some research, that I wanted to hear what they thought on various subjects, what interests them, and that, if they were interested in taking part, I would take each of them for an interview. At this stage this was all they were told. The children wanted to participate in the research and they all came to interview with a great will.

5.4.5 *Number of participants*

Ten individual interviews and eight interviews with either two or three children, altogether 30 children—18 girls and 12 boys, were conducted. The choice of the type of interview to conduct and which type was appropriate to which child was made according to research requirements and the child's own preference, as Section 5.5.3 explains.

I had considerable doubts about the sample size. Having interviewed thirty I wanted to carry on and interview more. The children enjoyed it and, to tell the truth, so did I. I was very willing to push on but at the same time felt that the last interviews had been adding less and less information. Several scholars (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Glazer & Strauss, 1967) have mentioned this 'saturation point' when the researcher begins to hear the same data over and over and is not learning anything new. In my case this became particularly apparent in the last of the interviews which I conducted after I had already begun the data analysis and constructing the analytical categories: the interviewing had reached saturation point.

5.5 Research methods

5.5.1 Multimethod approach

The two main data gathering techniques used in this research were interviewing and drawing pictures, with the story serving as an introduction to the interview and the picture-drawing as an extension of the interview, which gave the interviewee the opportunity to express themselves other than in words. Eder & Fingerson (2003) argue that a good reason for using the interview technique with children is when the research topic, no matter how relevant and important, would not come up in the children's day-to-day spontaneous conversation. In the context of my research, interviewing was the most logical means of getting to hear what the children had to say about what was meaningful in their life.

Combining a variety of techniques also makes the data collection process more pleasurable and interesting for both participant and researcher and also has the bonus of making the information gathered deeper and wider (Punch, 2002). Morrow and Richards (1996) added that the opportunity of triangulating sources helps to avoid ethical and methodological pitfalls of misunderstanding the interviewees, particularly important for the present study given that research questions were concerned with understanding *meaning* – and meaning in life particularly – for children.

5.5.2 *Creative methods*

Story-telling

Story-telling has been used for centuries as way of communication. Story-telling is used on the premise that a story evokes a range of mental responses which lead to identification with a literary figure (see for example, Bettelheim, 1980, Cohen, 1990). Tzoran (2000) argued that for both children and adults story-telling can be an 'intermediate area' where there is no need to distinguish between internal and external, reality and imagination.

Using a story to start an interview stemmed from a number of reasons which will set out after telling the story:

A long long way away from here there is a planet of alien beings. All the beings on it, all of them green of course, are new to the universe and, being so, don't know or understand all sorts of things about life. So they called a meeting and the king of the aliens called for three volunteers to take a journey of exploration — to discover what things are the most important in life. What is the best way to live? What can help them live better? [I then describe the journey the 3 aliens take, how they reached Earth and landed in different continents, and how the third alien landed in Israel, in the city R]. One of the aliens made the way to this school [i.e. the school hosting my research] and at the school the alien met — [and here I pause and most of the kids exclaim joyfully] "the alien met me/us"—and the alien asked this/these nice child/children: "I need some help please. I need to know what's the best way to live, what are the most important things in life? Can you tell me something about yourself/selves? What do you want to do when you're older? What makes you happy?"

The words of the alien I render in standard 'alien-speak, that is, in a metallic voice which you can imagine from all the space movies, and this voice the children find very funny.

This story serves, as I said, as an intro to the interview and is the first contact I establish with the children.

Smith and Osborn (2008) strongly recommend a gentle, informal start to the interview process, one which puts the interviewees at ease, before starting in with direct questions. The hope is that interviewees who feel comfortable and at ease will generate a better interview.

This opening story was extremely important for creating my first contact with the children. The children knew that the story is a legend and were very pleased to cooperate with it. Both they and I knew that I was using it to start a conversation with them but the story and the way I told it sparked their interest and created an atmosphere of fun and pleasure which dispelled any tension and perhaps even altered the power/authority relations somewhat. I was no longer some unfamiliar adult but a woman who knew how to be funny and tell stories. This came as a relief to the children and they began to talk. I think that if I had begun more 'formally' and started straight in with questions the interview would have flowed much less easily and been much less communicative.

Starting with a story about aliens meets a number of aims. The 'alien from outer space' is a familiar figure from books and films and so familiar to my audience. Every child has associations of their own with space aliens but for most of them the image is of someone small and short (and usually green). This alien doesn't know much about anything and is looking for someone to guide him/her. And perhaps, as such, can be identify with.

Bettelheim (1976) described how figures from fairy-tales invite their child audience's identification, even unconsciously, That the alien is searching for answers to his questions also invites identification, as well as enabling the listening children to assume the role of the ones possessing knowledge, able to extend help. In this way I empower them.

Drawings

For children drawing is one of their most natural ways of expressing themselves, often better and more free-flowing than the spoken word. This is because it is entirely common for children to love making pictures:

The advantage of using drawing with children is that it can be creative, fun and can encourage children to be more actively involved in the research The drawing themselves are rich visual illustrations which directly show how children see their world.

(Punch, 2002, p. 331)

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that at around seven years of age children begin to control the symbolic meaning of a drawing, and thus, drawing can be an effective research, as well a cultural and linguistic, tool. Children's paintings and drawings have been collected for analysis in psychology and psychiatry for years as diagnostic and therapeutic tools but few have used them as an alternative means of understanding children and their experience, and even fewer have made room for the children's universe of interpretations of their own paintings and images (Thomson, 2008). Veale (2005) described how the use of creative methods, such as drawing and drama, helped to research children in Rwanda and helped the researchers to better understand the children after the trauma they experienced.

The way I use drawing in this research study and in my therapeutic interventions is not based on projection. I do not make interpretations of what the child has tried to draw but rather use the drawing as a tool through which the child can explain more about themselves. My starting assumption is that only the child can truly explain what their drawing is about: "The drawing is a personal expression and so is its meaning." (Di Leo, 1983, p. 5).

The purpose in introducing drawing is then, as noted, to enable the children to express themselves in another mode, a more fun one perhaps, certainly a more natural one and one in which the child is my equal, perhaps even my superior, being better trained in the use of this pictorial mode. As Sapkota & Sharma (1996) described: "... The adult-child power imbalance

was relatively reduced by giving full control to the child. This in turn enhanced their confidence". (Sapkota & Sharma, 1996, p. 61).

Further advantages of introducing a second mode of self-expression were to obtain extra information and to cross-validate the information from one mode against that from the other, as Reavey & Johnson (2008) explained:

Using visual data does require its own specific attention to issues of validity, interpretation, ethics and the relationship between the research and the researched, but it also permits a greater engagement with 'multi-modal forms of communication in order to enrich understandings of social and psychological phenomena.

(Reavey & Johnson, 2008, p. 297)

Drawing constituted an essential component of the interview. After they had finished answering my questions I usually asked the children to make a drawing of what was meaningful in their life. Then, I asked if they wanted to explain their drawings to me. Sometimes their answers elaborated on the preceding interview, other times they just told me what they had drawn. In some interviews, the drawing entered into the interview process earlier. In every case they were very pleased to be asked to make the drawing and even explained what they were drawing as they drew it.

Children were asked at the end if they would be willing to leave the drawing with me but that if they really wanted to take it away with them that was also O.K. Most of the drawers were happy to leave the drawing with me, others found this a problem and some of these hastened to make a second drawing to leave with me, so that they could take the other one with them. Thinking back, I could have photographed all the pictures and so spared the children this dilemma. I asked the children's permission to display their drawings, without names of course, in the thesis or in different presentations, but I didn't promise that this would take place. They all wanted very much for their picture to go on display. Given the ethical considerations discussed in Chapter 3, it was very important to me that the children found the interview enjoyable and I

must state that this was achieved: they were actively involved and seemed to enjoy the interest in what they thought. For all that, the drawing at the end was clearly the most fun part for them.

5.5.3 *The Interviews*

Individual / group interviews

one-on-one, one-on-two and one-on-three interviews were conducted.

The rationale for the individual interview was to allow room for a personal interaction that might yield responses of a different kind. One-on-one encounters can sometimes evoke a quality of relationship that groups do not, partly because group meetings can pressurize children into all saying the same or similar things (O'Kane, 2000).

In an individual encounter one can enter into the interviewee's every nuance and thus probe more deeply than group interviews permit, where statement follows statement and topics can flow on from one to another without the chance to give adequate attention to any one of them. That is exactly what happened in one of the one-on-two interviews, where only at the data analysis stage did I notice that one of the two boys had not answered two questions. I was sure that this had happened because his partner had answered them and then immediately, in a sequence of association, moved onto the next topics, and neither I, the interviewer, nor the second boy noticed the gap.

The aim in every one-on-two and one-on-three interview was to reduce my own 'impingement' on the children's responses to a minimum, whether this impingement be their need to 'tell me what I wanted to hear' as adult and authority or to demonstrate their cooperativeness. I thought that at that age issues would emerge naturally in the course of the dialogue among the children without the necessity of my intervention. Scott (2000) described this potential of the group interview to bypass the interviewer role and so reduce the effect of the unequal power balance, the disparity of perspective, age and status between child and adult which can make it hard for a freely-flowing conversation to emerge. On the other hand, O'Kane (2000) asserted that if children are interviewed in groups, they might influence each other. But it can be also an advantage, as the children might prompt each other about forgotten or shameful things.

In practice, all three types of interview process and data proved very similar. The children cooperated equally in each. In the one-on-two and one-on-three interviews there did indeed sometimes develop a conversation among the children and in almost every interview there were passages in which I ceased to be the centre of attention. At other times it felt that most of the dialogue passed through me, even when the children were responding to each other's responses. The conversations which developed proceeded from the questions which I had put and in most cases centred on relevant issues. Examples of conversations that developed between the children: In an interview with three boys, a conversation developed about the death of the grandmother of one of them and the way he had coped with it. Another instance of such interaction came when two girls scolded a third for not paying attention in class and so making sure that she would not make anything of her life. These dialogues came not in direct response to my questions but as in conversation that developed spontaneously between the children.

Choosing the type of interview to each child

The criteria for deciding between individual or group interview were (a) what the children said they preferred, (b) my sense of what suited them best (did the child want to come with a friend, as some of them asked to; did they feel comfortable coming on their own or were too shy; did they 'want the floor to themselves'), (c) the classroom situation on any given day — some children could not be taken out of certain lessons; some lessons were given in small-group mode and it wasn't convenient to interview a group of children at the same time, and (d) the teacher's own advice and needs, of course.

The semi-structured interview

In this form of interviewing the researchers come to the interview with a prepared list of questions but can suit the order in which they put the questions to contingencies; they can offer explanations, pass over questions which seem irrelevant or add questions which seem to be called for (Robson, 2002). Flick (2009) added that this is an interviewing mode which demands of the interviewer's artistry in holding the balance between raising the issues they want the interviewees to address and giving due attention and sensitivity to what the interviewees want to talk about. This is something that cannot be prepared for in advance.

Barriball & While (1994) recommend semi-structured interviews with respondents who have limited understanding of English. A semi-structured interview is, likewise, best for children whose vocabulary is perhaps not sufficiently developed to understand every type of question. Thus, using alternative words to suit each child's understanding was more appropriate in the current research to interview the children who participated.

Smith and Osborn (2008) described a semi-structured interview composed of open questions which do not push the interviewee towards a certain type of answer. This approach to interview data collection enables researcher and participants to slide into a free-flowing dialogue and thus into topics and issues which the interviewees/dialogues themselves throw out. In this way the interviewees become the experts on the topic under discussion and it is the researcher's job to give them the maximum encouragement to voice their 'expertise'. This tactic and notion was absolutely central to my interview planning. The key aim was to give the children the feeling that they were leading the process and that they were the experts on themselves. This was the point of the alien in the introductory story about the alien, that had come to be instructed, to receive expertise in living life. A semi structured interview, said Smith and Osborn (2008), allows more flexibility and empathy and, as a bonus, collects richer data.

The Interview Questions

The interview questions were devised after reading the different questionnaires put to adults on meaning in life, attempting to 'translate' those questions into the context of eight-year-old children. So, when I came to each interview with a list of questions and was guided by it but did not always follow the order of that list and did not always ask all the questions on it. I tried to adjust each question to the child in front of me and when he/she responded in a way which took the issue off into different direction I generally went along with them and listened to what they wanted to say. There was one interview, for example, which rather 'took off' from the preplanned topic when the child began talking about his fears. On the other hand, the interview content always remained connected to the things that were most important to the interviewee.

The questions were:

1. What are the most important and meaningful things in your life?

Under this overall heading were many questions like — What are the most meaningful and important things in your life?; in your whole life, what would you say is most important and meaningful to you?; What makes you happy?; What makes you feel good and be happy?; What makes people happy?; What do you want in life? What would be a perfect world for you? What would you tell an alien being are the most meaningful things in life?

These questions were based on studies and questionnaires in the published literature designed to explore the sources of meaning in life, for example, Ebersole and DePaula (1987), and on questionnaires like the Purpose in Life test (PIL), developed by Crumbach and Maholic, (1964) and the Life Regard Index (LRI), developed by Battista and Almond (1973). The questions are corresponding to that composed for the Taylor and Ebersole study (1993) with children: "What are the things most important to you in your whole life"? I asked questions designed to reinforce the connection between the children's definition of the important things in their life and their definition of meaning in life, which is something more complex for young children to grasp.

2. What is the best way to live?

Under this heading came questions such as — What is the best way to live in this world?; What would you tell an alien being was the best way to live?; How would you recommend to an alien being to act so as to live a good and best sort of life?; What helps you live best?; What is the best way to live one's life?

These questions were touching on their understanding of what is the best way to live in order to try and get an idea of their values, perceptions, understandings and desires. The questions derive from studies and questionnaires which drew a connection between values and attitudes on the one hand, and meaning in life on the other, and which explored the way people assess their life for the amount of meaning in it. For example: the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) Developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick (1964).

3. Probing the strengths/powers the children feel they possess for living a meaningful life:

Under this headings came questions such as - Do you have character traits which will help you in your future? What traits?; What is the balance of happiness and unhappiness in your life?;

Do you think about your future life and plan it?; What profession do you want to go into?; How much effort are you ready to make to achieve your goals?; Do you think there are good things in store for you in life? What traits the alien should have in order to get what he wants?;

These questions derive from studies and questionnaires which traced a connection between meaning in life and the strengths, resources and character traits which a person thinks they have (for example, Peterson and Seligman's index about 'character strengths', 2004), on the assumption that people, who find meaning in life, regards themselves as more happy than unhappy, is ready to make an effort to achieve their goals and thinks about their future and plans it. Battista & Almond (1973) for instance, claim that people who feel their life is full of meaning create for themselves both a present and a future context, both goal-oriented, and which they work to realise.

In addition, more 'open-ended' questions were asked: If you met a fairy what would you ask her for? What hero figure would you like to be like? What would you tell an alien being about your life?

The purpose of these questions was to invite the child to reply more spontaneously and less direct with regard to these issues. The questions yielded a wide variety of responses which were divided into themes and then into categories within those themes.

5.6 The interviewing phase

5.6.1 Before interviewing: thoughts and doubts

Although I came to the research with a lot of motivation and interest, I had some doubts before I started. I have worked with children for more than 20 years, but these are children I don't know, and more than that, they don't know me. How much would the children cooperate with me? Would they agree to answer my questions at all? Could I overcome their will to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear? Could I overcome the balance of authority separating us? Could I separate my role here, as researcher, from my usual role as therapist? On the basis of my extensive interactions with, and my knowledge of children, I assumed I would have no

problem getting their cooperation and forging a relationship with them, but would I find any significant meaning in their replies? Is 'meaning' something children relate to?

5.6.2 During the interview

Place

Punch (2002) said the location of the interview can affect the child's responses. Interviews in a school might induce children to think they need to give the 'right' answers, so the implications of the interview setting needs to be addressed. Aware of this possibility, I tried to minimise it by looking for a quiet room not associated with tests and exams and by arranging the room so that it had a nice, quiet atmosphere. I put colours and paints on the table, set out the chairs so that all participants, children and researcher, were equal, and so on. Each school allocated me an interviewing room where we would not be disturbed. In the first school this was a room inside the school's own library, a very pleasant and quiet corner. In the second school the room was inside the staff-room and frequently used for small-group reinforcement lessons so that the children were quite used to working in it individually or in groups. The children seemed perfectly at ease in both rooms.

Recording the interview

Smith & Osborn (2008) said that it is not possible to do IPA interviewing without tape-recording. Writing down the responses instead of tape-recording them blocks the natural flow of the conversation and prevents the researcher noting nuances.

I came to the interviews equipped with a tape-recorder and paper and pens. Before we started the children were told that I was going to record our conversation so as not to forget anything they said. The issue of recording the interviews was mentioned before in the letter of consent sent to their parents and in the group talk to the children at the school before interviewing began, but I wanted to be sure they were really O.K. with it. I promised that no one else would hear the recordings but they were not much bothered with that. Some of them asked at the end of the interview to listen to the recording and did so for a few minutes but they were mainly out for the fun of hearing their own voices and identifying who said what. Not a single child voiced reservations about being recorded and if they had I would of course have not turned the machine on.

I backed up the recording with note-taking throughout the interview. I noted points and responses which seemed especially meaningful; words and statements that recurred and verbal and non-verbal responses (e.g. the way they made their drawing, the way they sat, facial expressions and their intonation in making certain responses) to what was said, and any other point which I thought might later prove significant.

Length

Most of the interviews lasted 40-50 minutes, the verbal exchanges taking about 35-40 minutes and the drawing about 10-15 minutes.

Cooperation: the children's voice

The children came to the interview knowing that they were going to participate in a research study and that I was interested in hearing their opinions about the things that concerned them. I decided not to explain before the interview that I wanted to hear their opinion about meaning in life in case they tried to prepare answers in advance.

All the children were very cooperative. They were very happy to come to be interviewed and were always disappointed when the interview came to an end. Was this only because I had taken them out of a lesson? Maybe, in some cases, but certainly not in all: it felt that they wanted the opportunity to talk. One girl (one of a trio interviewed together) made this explicit in the middle of the interview, saying 'How nice it is to be able to talk'. One girl had not been in school on the interviewing days and when I came back later to the meeting with the whole class insisted that I take her to an individual interview, which I did. When I came back for the meeting with all the interviewees the children welcomed me with great joy and even remembered my name (this was after a two-month lapse). All this is to me evidence that they did indeed find the interviews both fun and important.

Sabar (2001) said that many interviewees want their ideas recorded because they want, through the agency of the research, to have their say and so exert some influence. It is my belief that in the day-to-day round of children's lives—large chunks of which are spent in the classroom, that is, in listening, speaking up when required, being tested, then going home, going to afterschool activities, looking after siblings, playing computer games — the opportunity to reflect and discuss other matters, different from their usual concerns, matters which allow

them to voice opinions, this opportunity is rather rare. In this research study, it feels, they seized the opportunity with both hands.

Cooperation: my own voice

To this one must add, of course, that both interview process and interview topic must be of interest to the children. And it was my impression that they did indeed get very interested in the conversations that developed. Adjusting my style of speech to their style was key to this success and to their willing cooperation and also key to their forgetting to ingratiate themselves with me in favour of taking part in the general conversation. For this one has to use the children's own terminology, what is known as 'children's jargon'. I had to use the correct slang but on the other hand, not be perceived as an adult trying to speak their language without knowing the latest expressions.

Intonation was also very important, as well as the pace of my speech and my tone of voice. All the above enabled to make a genuine connection with the children.

Ramsey (2009) suggested that good interviewers use metaphors to clarify questions, that they personalize communication when possible, that they ask open questions and dialogue questions (which require some reflection and deeper thought) and that they talk directly, honestly and with real interest in what the children have to say. I believe I have done all that in my interviews. I truly wanted to hear and learn what the children thought about the issue of meanings in their life, and I think they felt this.

5.7 Looking at the data

5.7.1 Validating the data

A number of strategies help the qualitative researcher achieve reliability and validity, some of which I have already mentioned.

One of the most important strategies is triangulation, which is corroborating data and conclusions by making use of multiple data sources and multiple data collection modes. A second key strategy makes use of the participant's feedback on the researcher's interpretations

and is called interpretive validity or internal validity (Yin, 2009). Lincoln & Guba (1985) called this internal validity 'trustworthiness'. A further means of validation is to check the factual accuracy of participants' reports by asking colleagues to validate descriptions and conclusions. This use of external checks is called external validity or in Lincoln and Guba's terminology (1985) 'transferrability'. They are referring to the extent to which theoretical explanations in a piece of research correspond to the data gathered by the researcher. The more 'transferrable' the data the more credible and defensible they are (Maxwell, 1992). Another concern in this context is reflexivity. The researcher has to be very self-aware of the bias he/she can introduce and be critically reflective of it. As part of this effort, the researchers try to understand their own point of view as much as that of the interviewees and try to assess how much their own point of view structures meanings, thoughts and actions (see for example, Van Manen, 1990).

Authenticity is another way of validating the data according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) and it relates to giving voice to all the participants. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explained authenticity:

To act affirmatively with respect to inclusion, and to act with energy to insure that all voices in the inquiry effort had a chance to be represented in any texts and to have their stories treated fairly and with balance.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 207)

Triangulation

Denzin (1978) talked about methodological triangulation; the employment of more than one data collection method. Grieg, Taylor and Mackay (2007) stated that triangulation strengthens data: "Triangulating the findings from several different perspectives, such as using multiple data sources for the same finding, can strengthen data that would be weak if presented singly, but are robust if reinforced from different strands of enquiry". (Greg et al., 2007, p. 140).

Thomas (2009) supported this argument: "The argument for corroboration, for the need for alternative kinds of evidence, each corroborating the other, is to my mind even more powerful, and triangulation is really simply about corroboration". (Thomas, 2009, p. 112).

The ways in which I have tried to triangulate my data are as follows:

- (a) Using three interviewing modes —one-on-one, one-on-two and one-on-three interviews.

The assumption was that getting similar answers from different types of interviews strengthens research validity.

- (b) Using interview data in different ways — verbally (semi-structured interview) and nonverbally (drawing).

The assumption was that getting similar answers from different data sources (verbal and non-verbal) strengthens research validity.

Trustworthiness

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) interpretative validity or internal validity refers to the degree to which the researcher has adequately understood their interviewees' inner world and represented that world in their research report. The researcher is obliged to carefully examine their interpretation of, and insights into, their interview data.

It was done in the following way: About two months after the interviews I went back to both schools and talked to the children about my findings from all their interviews with me. I set out the analytical categories I had arrived at and asked if they had any comments, additions or objections. This was not done in the context of a one-on-one interview, on the assumption that after a lapse of two months they would not remember what they had said in their interview and also because this sort of feedback is not natural to children. On the other hand, by seeking this feedback within the large group of all the interviewees from the one class, I gave them a new sort of pleasurable experience. Each child who had referred to a particular category wrote his/her comment on the blackboard and then the whole group discussed it. In this way I arrived at a deeper and broader understanding of the children's thinking and they arrived at a deeper and broader understanding of the issue under discussion, and both parties had fun doing so. The form-teacher was also an active participant at this stage and much enjoyed hearing her pupils' thoughts and responses.

Transferability

External validity, or transferability, was achieved by checking at every stage of the data analysis with another researcher who examined my mapping and categorization and reviewed the conclusions I had come to. Other colleagues were also involved for consultation on particular sections of the transcriptions and categorizations. Transferability can also be achieved by the correspondence of the data gathered by the researcher to relevant theoretical propositions. The findings and conclusions from this study were looked at in light of what other researchers in the field had found, like Ebersole and DePaula (1981) and Taylor and Ebersole (1993) and others. There were similarities and disparities that will be discuss the Findings section.

While one may hope that separate research studies will generate similar findings and so strengthen transferability, one must remember that 'meaning in life' in the one individual is dynamic and personal and changes across the life-span, and all the more so between different people.

Authenticity

Authenticity is achieved in the research by giving voice to all views of the participants, The study achieved authenticity by ensuring that the voice of every child participant was heard and represented in the categories developed from the raw data. Quoting from the raw interview data—single sentences or longer excerpts—added to the authenticity.

5.7.2 Data analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) described three phases which the researchers go through on their path to data analysis: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. The first phase is relevant to my research and it begins, in effect, with the decisions taken on sample composition and on where the research participants will be interviewed and which data collection approaches to choose. Data control, they say, begins here and is an integral component of data analysis.

The process of data analysis is described below, and summarised in Table 2

Stage	Objective	Method
A- Preparing Data	Transcribe data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listen to tapes and transcribe them. - Check transcriptions against second listening to tapes.
	In-depth study of each interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Read interview thoroughly to get first impression. - Re-read and write down thoughts, comments and impressions in margin of transcript
B- Analysing within case	Preliminary identification of categories.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Draw out themes and topics which recur over each interview. - Note categories which emerge from text (colour highlight them).
	Consolidate categories and sub-categories and organise the interview material accordingly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Re-read each interview and list all categories occurring in it. - Organise the interview material accordingly.
	Review categories in terms of their frequency with each child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Count how many times each child refers to each category (indicates importance of categories).
C-Cross-case Analysis	Consolidate and hone categories across interviews.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review one interview against another, each time adding more interviews until a complete cross-sectional picture emerges. - Define categories broadly and divide into sub-categories in accordance with cross-comparisons between interviews and the frequency of each category and sub-category
	Review each interview in light of number of categories raised.	Examine similarities and differences between interviewees in terms of number of categories raised.
D-Validating the data	Have other researchers validate categories.	Two other researchers read the transcripts to identify categories and so validate (or not) the first researcher's conclusions.
	Have children validate the categories.	Present the categories to the children interviewed to see if they agree that they properly represent their views.
E- Writing the analysis	Write up data analysis.	<p>Write up analysis in two stages:</p> <p>Stage 1: more descriptive. try to enter the interviewees' world to close in on the meanings they attach to each concept and category.</p> <p>Stage 2: Researcher adds her own interpretations and decides what goes into the final report and what not.</p>

Table 2 - Process of Data Analysis

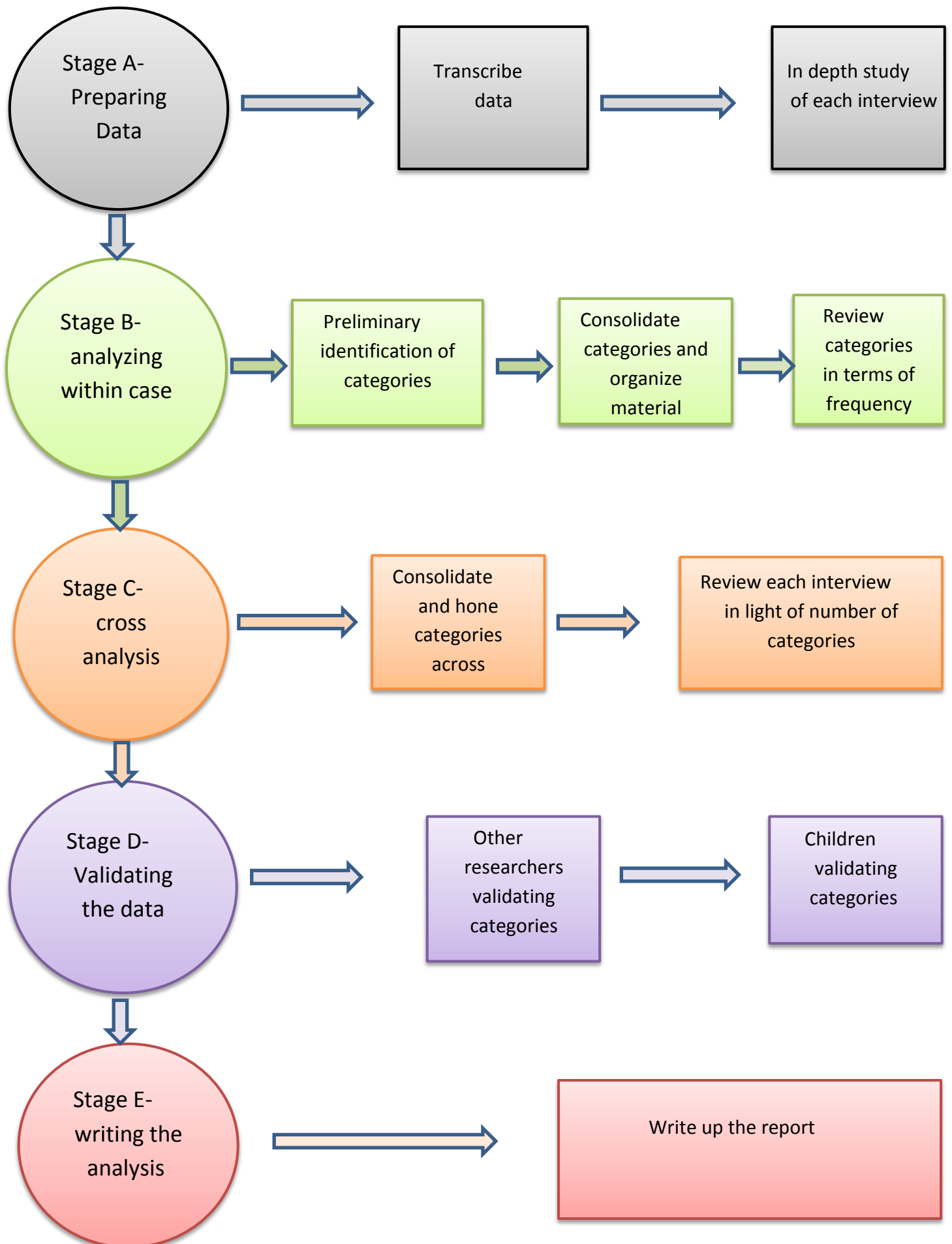


Figure 2: Five stages of data analysis

Transcribing the data

In order to transcribe the interviews I listened to the recording, typed everything said and then listened through again to check that I had not overlooked even the smallest remark or word. Then I read the transcription right through, and again a second and third time.

It is important in the first stage of the analysis to read and reread the transcript closely in order to become as familiar as possible with the account.

(Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 67)

Kvale and Brinkmand (2009) made the point that in the transition from live interview to the recording we lose some of the authenticity and vitality of conversation, and in the second transition to the transcription we again lose, this time the verbal and non-verbal nuances one picks up in face-to-face encounters. The recording doesn't show facial expressions, when faces show interest and happiness, impatience, when the interviewees are talking or drawing seriously and with attention to detail and when they are just 'going through the motions'. In the transition from recording to transcription one also loses the tone of voice, the expansiveness and the enthusiasm a live voice creates, as well as any indifference. A great deal of information goes missing in the process of transcribing and this 'missing link' has to be taken into account. True, but a great deal remains: the intonation of the speakers can often recall their facial expression. Even re-reading the transcriptions today I can still recall those expressions and intonations, the very atmosphere of each interview (after all, I was there). And I would add that the children's drawings also play a vital role here in that they preserve something of what gets lost in the transition from speech to the written word.

As data collection proceeds, further episodes of data reduction occur (writing summaries, coding, teasing out themes, making clusters, making partitions, writing memos). The data reduction process continues after field work, until a final report is completed.

(Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10)

Identifying themes and categories

After becoming extremely familiar with the material, Ideas had begun to spring up which gradually established themselves and a degree of organization appeared.

Reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, I at first did not try to classify them or find logic, just made lots of comments in the margins, began to detect similarities and responses which recalled other responses, within the specific text, words which kept recurring. In every interview I looked for relevant topics and responses. My main thrust was to remain open to every impression, not to screen out anything.

I drew on Smith & Osborn's (2008) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a method of data analysis. After getting first impressions about each text, I began drawing out themes and topics that recurred throughout an interview, for example, relationships with friends, which recurred in multiple forms. Willig (2010) described the process: "Some of the themes will form natural clusters of concepts that share meanings or references, whereas others will be characterized by hierarchical relations with one another. (Willig, 2010, p. 58).

The process demands moving backwards and forwards between the list of themes trying to compose and the original texts: "Once each transcript has been analysed by the interpretative process, a final table of superordinate themes is constructed" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 74).

At this stage I cross-analysed all the texts. As this process developed one idea was connected to another and there was a need to take a 'broader' perspective, one that embraced several interviews, then several more and then all of them. Then I tried to take a perspective which covered all the categories which kept recurring. From my point of view the material organized itself into clusters organized around a single topic or issue and from these clusters categories emerged. All the children's answers which corresponded to a given category were rather crudely included in these categories. Then I started tabulating questions and answers into table-form so as to bring the material into a semblance of order and make it easier to display findings. This corresponded to Strauss and Corbin's (1998) stage of Axial Coding, where the categories began to be interconnected. Major categories were established and defined exclusion and inclusion criteria for them. Some responses obviously belonged to a certain category but there were others which could have been placed in several or in none. What to do with them? Where to place them?

At this stage I tried to find linkages between themes. Initially, I perceived only fundamental themes —e.g. family, friends... Then categories emerged within a given major theme and the children's replies began to fall naturally into a number of major categories. As Smith & Osborn put it: "Narrative account: here the analysis becomes expansive again, as the themes are explained, illustrated and nuanced". (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 76).

The final phase is to connect all the texts into one coherent whole, deciding which quotes and elaborations can be dropped and which included. It is a filter phase (Smith & Osborn, 2008), but the children's understanding was so rich and striking that I found it very hard to sift out even quotes that repeated points already made.

Using frequencies

It was after I had composed a list of categories and themes shared by my interviewee sample that I began to discern differences in the frequency of reference to them within a single text and across a number of texts. That is, within an interview with a single child there were topics which recurred several times and others which did not. There were topics which recurred across several children and others which did not. What does it mean when a child keeps recurring to a certain topic? What does it mean when a group of children keeps recurring to a certain topic and not to others? To find the answers to these questions I went deeper into the subject of frequencies. Measures of the frequency with which every child mentioned each category were taken, from which emerged a hierarchy of categories ranked by the number of times the category was referred to. The total number of categories mentioned by each child was also measured. The findings will be presented and discussed in the Findings and Discussion chapters.

5.7.3 *Writing up the report*

The point on which I wish to conclude this chapter is how the research findings should be displayed to the reader. This issue is connected in my estimation to the question of whether a separation can or ought to be made between the interviewees' responses and the researcher's interpretations of these responses. In qualitative research it is customary to regard the researcher as an integral component of the research who appreciably influences its findings. It goes without saying that her interpretations are integral to and inseparable from the data she

presents. Given this, it is no easy matter to draw a line between 'fact' and 'interpretation', or indeed assume a consensus that such concepts exist as an uncontested reality. It is an axiom of qualitative research that every research study is shaped and influenced by the opinions and stance of the researcher and that it is a vital characteristic of qualitative research that it gives this circumstance its due prominence.

The IPA method allows extensive room for interpretation, with the accepted starting point being that every judgement by the researcher is interpretative. Smith & Osborn (2008) expressed this by saying that the researcher is in an "interpretative relationship with the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p.66) and recommended two explicit stages to this interpretation:

Stage 1 is the more descriptive. The researcher tries to get inside the interviewee's world.

Stage 2's objective is to build an understanding of the nature of the interviewee and his meanings. To this end the researcher takes themselves out of the interviewee's own words and understandings and tries to draw deductions from them, interpret them.

Contemplating and analysing children's words and texts is somewhat different from contemplating and analysing adults' words and texts. Eder & Fingerson discussed how to do this for children's texts:

Rather than translating these words into our own language for findings data presentation we should sustain the participants' language use, as it adds new perspectives and greater depth to the data and analyses. In particular we need to let children and young people to speak for themselves in the data, as their language and speech are often marginalized in adult culture.

(Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 49)

They set out the rationale for it:

It is important to represent youth in their own terms in data analysis and presentation. Not only does this help maintain their power in the research interaction, but it preserves their conceptions and meanings in the analysis and text.

(Eder & Fingerson, 2003, p. 48)

My reply therefore as to the proper balance between the descriptive representation of the interview data and its interpretive representation would be that an important level of interpretation can be achieved but that it cannot be more than partial, limited and to a degree ambiguous. Interpretation begins, after all, with the very choice of issue for research, with the questions chosen for putting to the interviewees, and it continues with the selection of interview excerpts for inclusion in the data analysis and the way the excerpts are represented. All of these elements feature the interviewer's particular angle of view and this is, as I argued above, an important and valuable contribution to the research. At the same time an effort should be made to represent the children's voices as authentically as possible. My effort in this direction began by making the first phase of data categorization the categories identified by the children themselves (albeit filtered through the researcher's vision). Only at a later stage of the analysis did I introduce other points of view, including my own point of view on the texts proffered by the children.

Chapter 6: Findings

6.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the findings of the study. The children's views as expressed in their replies to the interview questions are set out in the order of the three research questions; first what is meaningful and important in their life, second, what is the best way to live, third the strengths and capacities the children think they have. The responses are set out in order of the frequency of the category cited in the reply, from most frequent category to least frequent. The issue of the 'breadth' of their responses is considered. A more generalized discussion of the findings in light of the literature comes in Chapter 7.

The children's responses are presented in two ways:

- (a) In the form of short quotations, when the children gave similar answers to the same question. The intention here is to characterize a 'collective', not an individual, answer and highlight a main idea, and so names and gender are not given.
- (b) Relatively long excerpts from specific interviews in dialogue form. Here pseudonyms, gender and school are given as the aim is to highlight individual unique answers. In this case, as well as using pseudonyms, the children were asked to give their specific permission for the insertion of lengthy interview excerpts into the report text. Where children's names appear they are always pseudonyms.

To separate the children's responses from my remarks and questions all the responses are printed in the *Comic Sans MS*. font, a font reflective of children in a way.

6.2 *Most meaningful things*

6.2.1 *Introduction*

Nine different categories (sources of meaning) emerged from the children's responses to the questions about the most meaningful and important things in their lives. The children's responses are presented and discussed here just as they were spoken in the interviews and confirmed by them when I met with them again later.

- **Family:** Their family held paramount importance in the children's lives. Some referred to their family as a source of support and a model to learn from. Some talked about the future family of their own they wanted to form, while some mentioned family problems—which was no less evidence of the family's importance to them.
- **Friends:** Friends were mentioned frequently and most children referred to their great significance in their lives. Some referred to their friends as a source of support while others brought up conflicts with them.
- **Creativity and leisure time activities:** Some talked about artistic activities, such as music, painting and drawing, and dancing; some talked about activity groups which they enjoyed; others talked about computer games. The common denominator referred to by all was the importance to them of free leisure time.
- **Health and security:** The link connecting these two interests was the children's concern for their safety and that of their surroundings. It would seem that this category represents issues that are a worry to the children. Frequently the two concerns were mentioned together in the same sentence.
- **Environmental issues:** This concern embraces issues relating to the importance of protecting the living environment —protecting green places, the need for parks, a worry about water supplies.
- **Material possessions:** What is at issue here to the relatively few who mentioned it is the importance of money and property.

- Relations with animals: Several children mentioned their feelings for their dog or cat and the pet's important place in their life. They also inserted stories about their pet into the interview.
- Love: Although love is an abstract and complex concept a number of children singled out its great significance in their lives.
- Faith: One girl talked about the importance of religious belief and her conversations with God in her life, citing them as a source of strength and meaning.

6.2.2 *Children's views presented by figure*

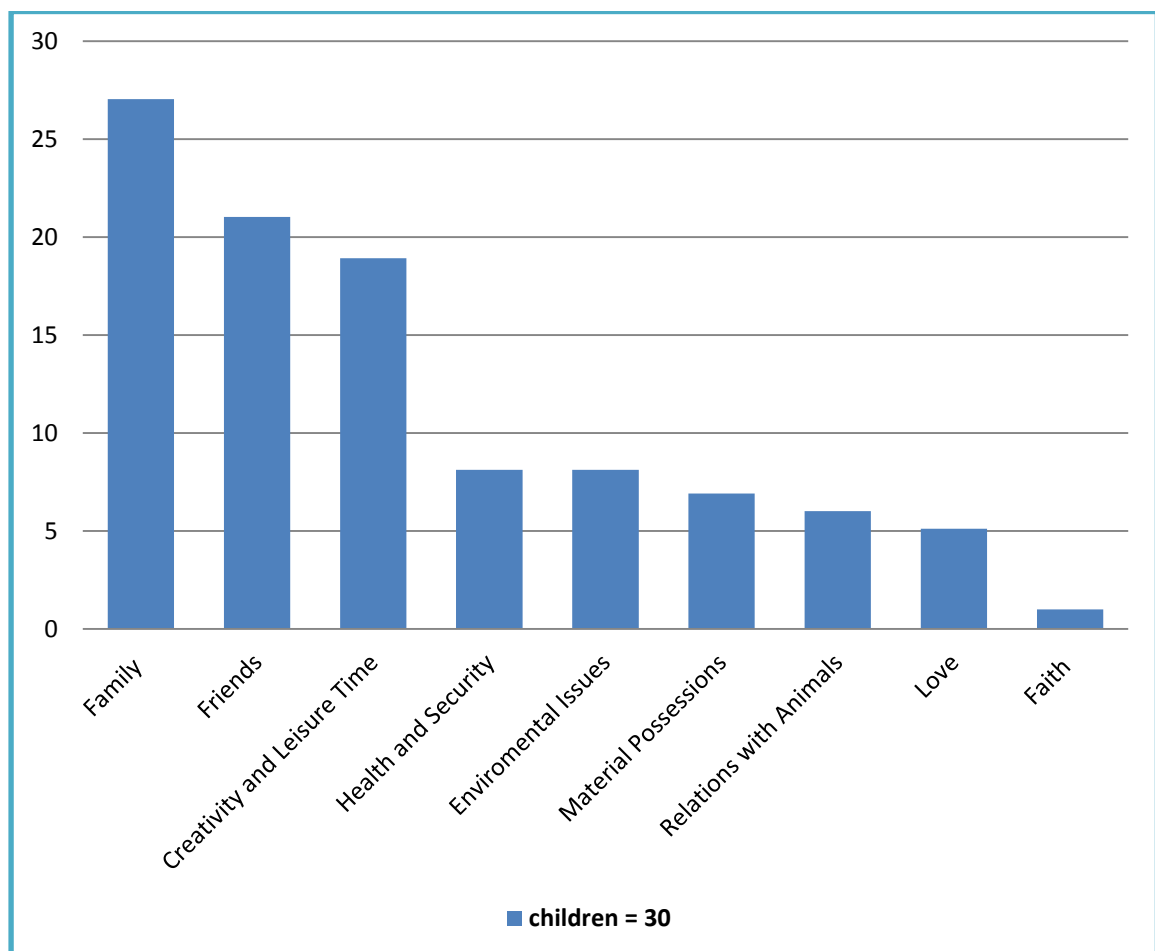


Figure 3: Children's views about most meaningful things in life

6.2.3 *Family*

The family was the category most frequently cited by both boys and girls. All the girls referred to family as meaningful in their life and three-quarters of the boys did so. A third of the children referred to family during the interview four to nine times and in response to a variety of questions. This in my opinion demonstrates the primary importance of family to children. The children referred to the family as most meaningful to them in both direct and indirect responses. Here are representative samplings of such responses.

What is the most important thing in life?

Family is the most important in life;

Family comes before everything. The most important thing in life is family and friends.

What would you explain and suggest to an alien?

I would say to an alien that he should go home to his own planet, he has parents there. He should be on his planet with his parents.

What would you ask a fairy for?

That she should watch over my family.

In conversation the children gave even more specific details and examples of their warm connection to family:

I love it when Mummy cuddles and kisses me;

Family is something that we really really love and feel inside the body.

The family makes them feel good: they get great satisfaction from family togetherness:

What makes you happy?

When my Dad comes home;

When my Mum is happy and when my Dad is happy.

What should we do to be happy?

When there's family and you go to them for the weekend;

When on Shabbat all the family sits and eats together.

The family came up in response to almost all the questions the children were asked, even when they were talking about other meaningful things in their lives. Mostly the children talked about their parents but a considerable number mentioned siblings and the extended family. Here are some examples:

What do you like to do with your family?

I play on the computer with my brother and with my sister too;

I help my Mum by looking after my brother and loving him.

The grandparents also figured at various levels of involvement:

I wish Granddad and Grandma would come back so we could be together;

I like when grandma makes me dinner and helps me with my homework

What makes you happy?

The family.

Who in the family?

Mum and Dad, Granddad and Grandma, the uncles and aunts, everybody.

As noted, the ubiquity of mentions of the family in a single interview was clear evidence of the key importance of their family to the children. Their drawings showed the same. When asked at the end of the interview to draw the most important things in their life, the largest group drew their family. Some of them drew the complete extended family, including grandparents, and even drew in the name of each person. One boy drew his house, himself in the house and wrote on it:

Come in with pleasure, I am happy to welcome you, my family.

And outside the house are all the family walking towards it.

The family was also mentioned indirectly in answer to other questions. Here are two examples:

I like to go to the family over the weekends, and to travel with them;

I want peace because all my uncles are in the army and it annoys me and upsets me that I hardly ever see them.

I detected a relationship between the number of indirect mentions of family and the number of direct references: All the children who mentioned the family as the most important in direct answers also mentioned the family indirectly, in reference to other topics. I think this is convincing evidence of the importance of the family and it reinforces the validity of the direct answers: family is the most important thing in children's eyes. It should also be noted that the references to the family were full of emotion, which points to a genuine sense of connection, relationship, love and support.

Several children mentioned the help and support given by the family of origin. The help cited is in day-to-day things. Here are some examples:

Feeding:

Mummy makes me feel happy. She helps me and feeds me. I come home and she makes me something to eat and a cup of tea and spoils me.

Coping with fears:

*When I get afraid I sometimes go to sleep with my Dad;
Granddad comes to pick me up from school and then I don't have to walk on my own when I'm afraid.*

But help is also given in wider contexts, e.g. showing children the right thing to do. Here are three examples:

*Mum and Dad help me be good;
Our parents' guide us how to get on in life;
Grandma tells me what are the right answers to give and teaches me how to respond and reply correctly instead of quarrelling with people.*

Here, we can see that the connections to the parents and to the family as a part of everyday life and day-to-day activities are definitely meaningful in the children's lives. Further, the children demonstrate complex analytical capacity- to stop and realise the importance of these relationships in their day-to-day life; the mother who cossets you, the father who helps you conquer fears, even the moral guidance parents offer for how to live your daily life.

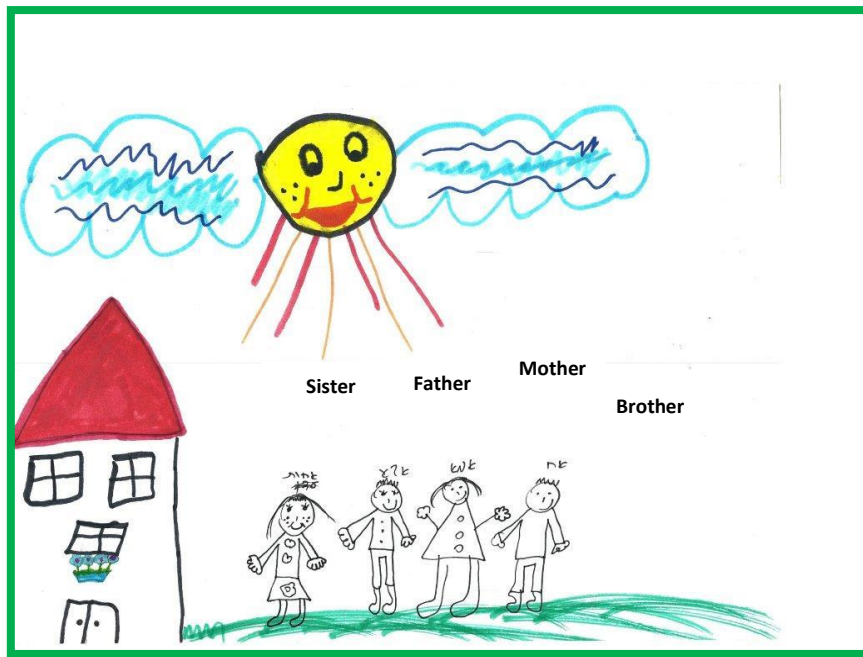


Image 1 – "My family"

This is a drawing of a girl from school A, Noya, who was interviewed together with another boy and girl. During the interview she talked about her family as most important thing in her life. The children explained their drawings to each other. The boy said that he drew a football pitch because he wanted to be a football player. The second girl explained how important friends are and drew a large planet at the centre of her drawing and wrote inside it 'Friends', and Noya explained her drawing thus:

This is my family going to visit Grandpa and Grandma. I am at their house already, I went to help Grandma to cook dinner. We like making food together.

Food preparation, which was central to Noya's bond with her grandmother, is one of the day-to-day activities which for children make up the value of 'family'. Food featured a number of times in spoken responses and in drawings relating to the topic of family. A second girl also drew the family sitting down to a meal next to the house, picturing a large table, chairs, plates and cutlery, making it clear that food was about to be served.

Within the references to family I found several sub-categories:

Family as a model

Many children cited figures in the family whom they take as models: parents, a sister, a grandfather, an uncle, an aunt, a grandmother; mostly in answer to the direct question: Who do you want to be like? Here are some examples:

Like Granddad because he's a professor and clever;

Like my Mum, she's kind and helps people;

Like all the family;

I want to be like my uncle and my grandmother, they can fix anything.

Some gave a family reply to the question: Who is your hero?

My auntie/ my uncle.

One girl suggested with respect to the alien:

He should be like his Mum or his Dad or his brother. He must have a Mum, no?

Some of the children cited family members as models in the context of their future occupation:

When I grow up I'm going to be an accountant like my Dad.

Future family

A large number of the children mentioned a future family in their replies. For instance, only children said they wanted brothers and sisters to play with in answer to the question: "What do you want to have in the future?" Some looked into the more distant future and talked of setting up a family of their own as an adult. Here are four examples:

I want to have a brother, or a sister, I don't really care which;

In the first place I want to have a family;

I want to have a good husband, a good home, a good car, good children who I love just as they are;

To get married and get pregnant and have healthy babies.

Family in the context of problems in the family

The strong relationship with the family also came up in the form of problems with it, unhappiness and negative incidents, difficulties the family was perceived as putting in the

children's way. These could be quarrels and arguments or disappointments about promises not fulfilled. Here are some examples:

I would tell the alien that there are bad things in life. That Mum shouts a lot;

That Mum says I haven't done my homework when it's not true;

When Mum doesn't let me play with my friends.

Or it could be a matter of intra-family envy:

It happens that they take more notice of your brother than you, that happens.

Or of offence given:

It really annoyed me when Granddad and Grandma didn't phone to wish me Happy Birthday. That's insulting. I told them that next year I'm not going to phone them.

These responses have been separated from the general 'family is the most meaningful' responses because, while they demonstrate a strong relationship with the family, they do so in the context of frustration and tensions. This aspect came up with seven children, six of them boys, and it is noteworthy that this is the only family-related category where the boys constituted a large majority. Certainly the number of children in this category is too small for statistical conclusions but the data are intriguing.

6.2.4 Friends

Friends were the next most frequently cited category, among both boys and girls. Most of the children who cited this category referred to the issue of friends between three to seven times, and in response to a variety of questions.

A number of children chose to draw friends when drawing the most important things in their lives. Here is one example:

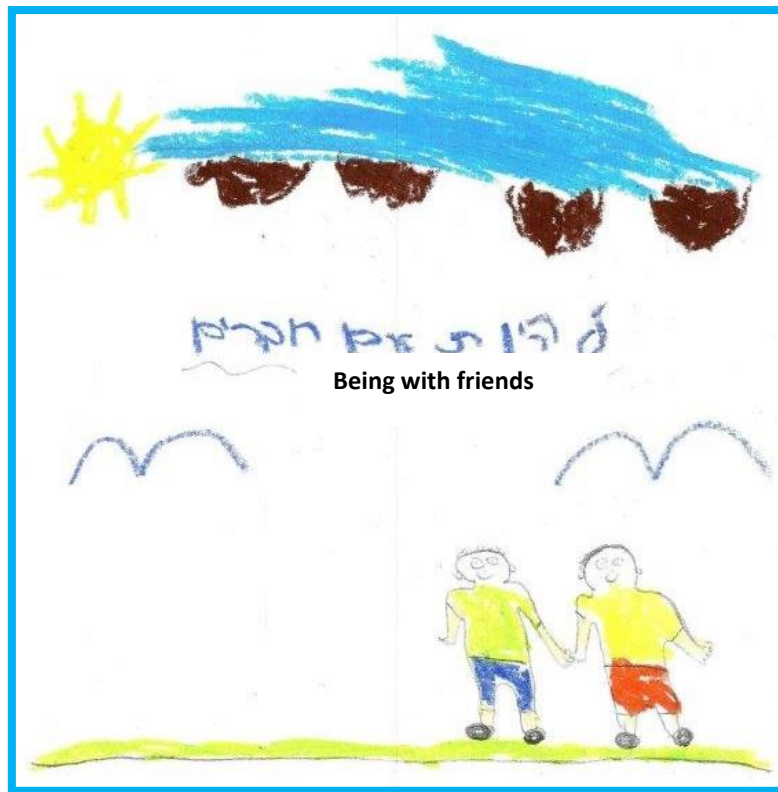


Image 2 – "Being with friends"

Yoav is a boy from school B. In his interview together with a friend, he talked a lot about the importance of friends in his life. His suggestion to the alien was:

He should go and see friends and kids and that way he'll have people to be with and he can sit on a bench with his mates...

The importance of his friends for Yoav was obvious: he mentioned the word 'friends' frequently and in response to a variety of questions. He was explicit about their great importance to him. In reply to the second question which probed for a more general perception of meaningfulness he spoke of the need not to quarrel with your friends as the best way to live. He also made a drawing of friends, showing two boys holding hands, demonstrating the close relationship between them. Above them, in response to the instruction to put in what is important and meaningful in life, he wrote "Being with friends".

It is beyond question that friends are important to children — for leisure-time activity, for support, fun and help. At these ages the peer group is very influential and significant.

Friends — as the most meaningful and significant thing in life

It is clear that children regard their friends as important and a source of meaning in life. Here are examples:

What is meaningful in life?

That I have my friends and I play with them;

Hanging out outside with friends.

What would you tell an alien are the most important things in life?

Family and friends;

That he should find himself friends and not be bored.

The very existence of friends is important. Here are some examples:

What makes you happy?

That I've got lots of friends. I've got this sort of magic, anytime I ask a kid to be my friend he wants to.

What is a perfect world?

A world with friends in it.

What would you ask a fairy for?

For lots of friends.

The children also often mentioned playing together with friends:

When are you happy?

When I'm playing and I'm with someone and not alone;

When everyone plays with me and loves me.

What do you like to do?

I like to go to friends in the afternoon and go out on the bike with them,
or to walk around the streets with them.

What would you tell an alien?

That he should be on his own planet with friends because that's more fun and they can play together. on your own is no fun and there's nothing to do.

Friends — important in the context of difficulties

Children cited friends as meaningful and significant but also did so in the context of problems. One realises how important friends are when one hasn't any or they won't play with you or when you quarrel with them. Seven children specifically mentioned trouble with friends:

I'm unhappy when they talk about me behind my back;

I'm unhappy when people won't play with me or do things with me;

It's no fun when kids are always hitting you and rowing with you.

What is a perfect world?

When kids don't refuse to be friends with you and don't row with you;

When you quarrel that's no fun.

It is clear that friends are important and meaningful, even when things are not going well, or when you have to separate from them. Here is a section of an interview with Dana and Maya, two girls from school B:

Dana: I was unhappy when we moved away from Tiberias, I left my best friend there and it took me a long time to get used to this place.

Maya: But now you've already got lots of friends here and you don't keep missing people, right?

Dana: Right, and anyway I go to visit.

One more example comes from a one-on-one interview with a girl, Inbal, from school B, who brought up the subject of friends over and over during the interview (seven times in response to various questions) and throughout the interview it was obvious how much trouble she was having with her friends and how much this affected her self-image and mood:

Me: What is important to you in life?

Inbal: First of all family. then being with friends.

Me: What do you like?

Inbal: Friends.

Me: Have you got lots of friends?

Inbal: Yes. Most of them not from school.

Me: Less at school?

Inbal: I don't know, it's hard with them; they're not with me so much. I feel I'm different, I think I'm completely different

Me: And that's good or bad?

Inbal: Sometimes one, sometimes the other. When I phone a friend almost always she can't play and then she fixes up with other girls. Katy is always saying I'm her oldest friend and then she fixes up with Alex.

Me: It sounds as though you feel insulted.

Inbal: Right. We were best friends once.

Me: What would you like to happen?

Inbal: I want to give people a potion that makes them friends with you, or to try and like other people.....

Me: What is a perfect world?

Inbal: Where everybody's friends and help each other and where everybody has a family and friends.

Me: Who do you want to be like?

Inbal: That's a secret.

Me: What makes you happy?

Inbal: A birthday party with friends.

Me: Who would you like to be like?

Inbal: My cousin Ma'ayan. She's terrific at English and she's got lots of friends at school.

This interview shows very well how important friends can be to a child. The girl makes her problems very clear, stressing over and over how important is the issue to her. The idea of a potion is serving, it seems, as a way to cope with a difficulty the girl is currently having making friends.

Even children who don't report social rejection but talk instead of hanging out long periods of every day with friends (something which definitely indicates popularity) are emphasizing and demonstrating just how key the issue of friends is to children.

Friends as source of support

Four children singled out the importance of friends as helping improve one's mood. Here are three examples from their interview:

What helps you feel good?

When friends come to visit;

Friends help you when you're down;

If the alien doesn't feel good he can play with his friends and that will help.

Two boys from school A interviewed together referred to the issue of relations with girls as something important and supportive:

Me:so you are saying friends are very important in your life?

Yonatan: You also need girls who love you. Girls are more relaxed and they look after you.

Me: and what do you think about it? (I turned to the other boy)

Ben: when you've got a girlfriend she helps you and plays with you and if she's ill, for instance, I help her. So yes, girls as friends are very important in life.

6.2.5 Creativity and leisure-time activities

Many children cited creative and leisure-time activities as meaningful in their lives. Most of them mentioned it between two to four times over the course of the interview.

Some of the children mentioned creativity as something that did them good and made them happy:

It makes me feel good, singing and dancing;

I'm happy when I'm singing, it's really fun.

Some said how much they loved a particular field of creativity:

I love making things and love painting;

I love singing and dancing;

I write songs and then set them to music. I'm good at it and I love doing it.

One girl referred to creativity's meaning in her life:

To me creativity makes the world perfect.

Several of the children referred to fun activities and activity groups they went to and which were significant for them. Here are some examples:

I love activity groups and go to a lot of them;

I'm crazy about Lego and can keep busy with it for hours;

What would you tell an alien?

I would show him all the groups—photography, dancing, acrobatics, organ playing. I like these groups a lot, they give me interesting and fun things to do every day.

There were even children who linked their current creativity to a field they would be happy to work in the future:

I love computer games and I want when I grow up or even before to invent games and invent guns. I want a book that tells you how to invent games;

I'm learning balett and the teacher said I'm good at it , and I think maybe I will be a dancer in the future.

One girl mentioned creativity and leisure time a lot more than the other children, which suggests that play and creativity was of particular importance to her. Here are some exchanges from my one-on-one interview with her. Alexandra is from school A:

Me: what makes you happy?

Alexandra: When I'm singing, and painting, and dancing also.

Me: Who do you want to be like?

Alexandra: Like my uncle, he lives in Paris playing the violin. His daughter is there too. She plays the piano.

Me: In what way do you want to be like him?

Alexandra: I want to be an artist too. I don't know whether a painter, a singer or a dancer. Some sort of artist definitely.

Me: What will you need to do to become an artist?

Alexandra: A lot of painting. I do that now; I go to a group.

Every year I'm in a different type of artistic activity. I tell my mother at the beginning of the year that this year I want to sculpt, for example. And she looks for the right place to learn it and takes me there. You see, I told you I'm going to be an artist.

Me: And you're ready to do that, make all that effort to get what you want?

Alexandra: Sure.

When asked to do a drawing of things that were important to them several children chose a leisure-time activity, such as dancing or computers as their subject. Segev, a boy from school B, who was interviewed with a friend (excerpts from his interview are given below), drew a library. During the interview, Segev mentioned several hobbies and activities like electronics, computers, and going on trips.

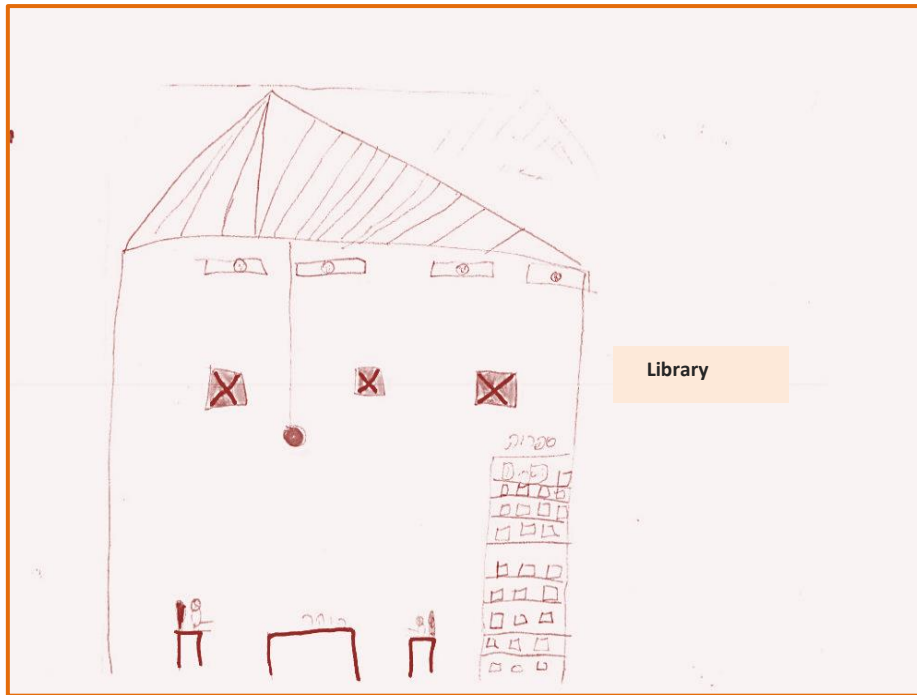


Image 3 - "I love to go to the library to read books"

Drawing a library, Segev explained:

It's important to me to read books because it develops you and it's interesting.

6.2.6 Health and security

Eight children mentioned the need to stay healthy, to feel protected and safe, to be aware of risks and preserve life. On this issue the majority were girls.

The importance of security and health appears also in mentions of the fear that something might happen to oneself, one's family, friends, the world. Here are several examples:

What are the most important and meaningful things in your life?

Important in life is to look after yourself and stay healthy;

It's important to live a long time;

It's important for everyone to have a healthy family and to be healthy;

Guard your own life;

It's important to feel secure, hurry to the shelter when needed.

Many of these mentions were in negative form — that the world might have no disasters; that people might not die or fall ill. Here are some examples:

What is a perfect world?

A perfect world is a world without illnesses and without disasters and wars, that nobody dies;

A perfect world is a world where nobody gets hurt;

it's important not to get hurt in a terrorist attack, and to take care of yourself, run to shelter when they tell you to do so;

Not being ill too much.

Many of the references to the fear of death came up with reference to the family and the fear that something might happen to them.

What do you want to happen in your life?

For my family not to die and for me too, to be healthy, not to die.

One boy told of numerous fears that troubled him and of his need to rid himself of these fears.

At the very start of the interview the first thing he said was:

I've got a secret, I'm afraid of doctors...

Here is section of the one-on-one interview with him, Victor, from school A:

Me: What can help people be happy?

Victor: To live forever. I'm afraid to die. Every day when it's time to go to bed

I'm afraid a robber will get in and kill me. Because of that when I'm grown up if they invent that people can live forever, great — and if they don't then I'll invent it.

Me: So what helps when you're afraid of a robber getting in?

Victor: Mum lets me sleep with her. But a few days ago I started sleeping on my own. Today I had a terrible dream that M., my best friend got injured and couldn't talk. I'm frightened of that too, that my friends won't be able to talk to me.....

Me: If you could send a fairy a letter asking her for something what would you ask for?

Victor: To live forever.

Me: It seems to me that the main thing is that you want to stop feeling afraid.

Victor: Once my Mum sent me to buy an ice-cream and I was very scared because I had to cross two roads. Yesterday my Mum wanted me to go to her work and I was afraid so I stayed home two hours with my cat alone and

I thought the time wasn't moving at all...Once my Grandma told me that if I watch too much television it will go up in flames. I phoned my Mum every 10 minutes but the time didn't move on at all.

Victor was very open and honest about his fears and his wanting to get over them. He is a very creative and clever boy who's interested in a lot of things. His fears do not prevent him connecting to meaning, and even forge new meanings for him, for example, the idea of inventing a way of living forever.

It is very clear that children have fears and that these fears claim a place in their lives and are therefore meaningful. In order to live well and correctly one has to stay healthy and not die. Then everything's perfect for you, especially if nobody else dies.

As one girl summed it up to my question- What is important in life?

Health and life and that people take care of me and my parents look after me.

In her drawing, she put it a bit differently, but the major idea is still the same:

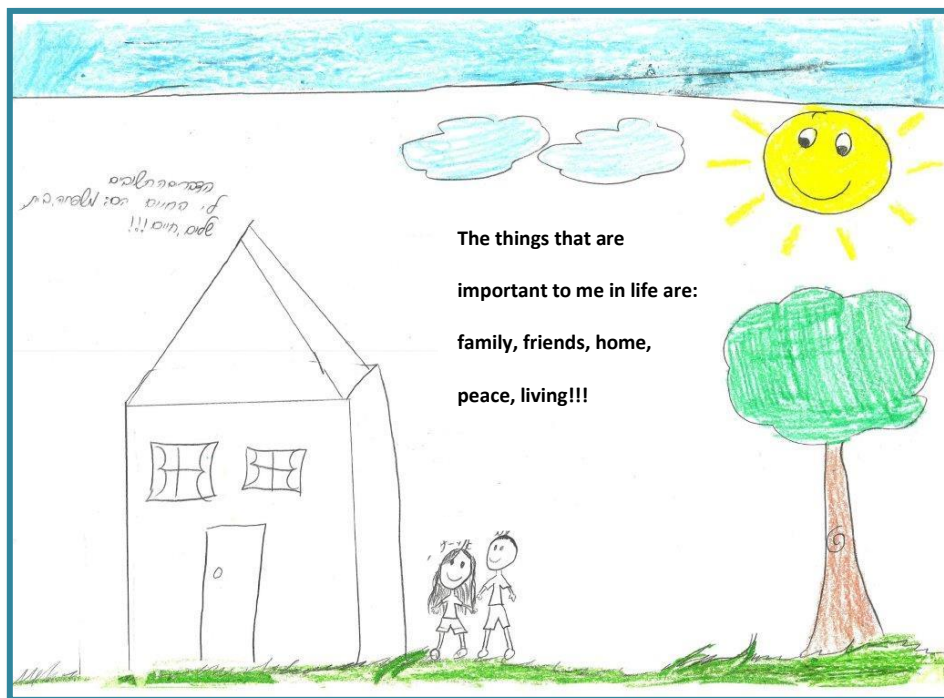


Image 4 - "Things that are important for me in life: family, home, peace and living!!!"

6.2.7 *Environmental issues*

Eight children (six girls and two boys) made reference to this topic, half of them once and the other half twice. The references came in several forms:

- (a) As the need for a clean healthy environment. Here is an example:

A perfect world is a clean world, not dirty;

Five children related to the need for healthy environment.

- (b) As the need for beautiful and green nature:

It's important in life for there to be parks and grass, somewhere to have fun and take trips;

A perfect world is a world with flowers

Four children mentioned trips and green pleasant nature.

- (c) As saving water, a key issue in Israel:

We also have to take care of the water because if we don't have water we can even die. We mustn't waste all the water because we don't have much.

One of the children said that the alien should be told that they ought to have a [Lake] Galilee. I attribute these references to an educational success in recent years in focusing on 'green' issues and saving water. Three children made such references.

- (d) In relation to poverty. Here is an example:

What is a perfect world?

Where there aren't poor people in Israel and no-one has to ask for anything because there is everything.

A more extreme such reference was:

Everyone should have money to live on. People who live on the streets I bet they don't want to live at all.

Two girls (not from the same interview) referred to this issue. Although the issue apparently belongs to the Material Possessions category the children's responses were concerned with the hardship of poverty and attempts to prevent this and so I think their correct placement is in the environmental issues category.

(e) As the metaphorical use of colour:

A perfect world is a world with no black in it, only happy colours. Without rain, only sun, everything sunny.

These statements refer more to the quality of life, not in the sense of a 'green environment' but of a bountiful environment, one good and pleasing to the eye. A similar reference came from Noam, from school B, who was interviewed with two other friends:

A perfect world is a world with flowers in it, sky, streams, yellow, where it's always warm.

In his drawing, he added dots of yellow to his picture and explained that the world needs to be shiny and bright.

When they were asked to draw the meaningful things in their lives the largest group of children chose to draw their family. But two girls (not from the same interview) chose to draw what a perfect world meant to them. Here is Hagar's drawing, a girl from school B, who was interviewed together with two girls:



Image 5 – "The perfect world of Hagar"

As she was drawing, Hagar said that in her perfect world there are flowers, bushes, butterflies, trees and a lake; and there is nature and animals because no one has yet ruined them in order

to build high buildings. In her drawing, Hagar is expressing the need for a beautiful green nature, as it appears to an eight-year-old child.

6.2.8 *Material Possessions*

Before the interviews I anticipated hearing materialistic answers much more often than I actually did. Despite my own belief that children are driven by meaning, I feared that significant value would be ascribed to materialism. I expected to hear answers, such as computers, clothes, shopping, I-phones and so on. In actuality, seven children referred to material possessions and only one boy mentioned them more than once during the interview. In six instances the material aspect was only part of a fuller answer, for example:

What do you want to have in life?

A dog, a nice house with a veranda and garden, go on trips...

Materialism was most prominent in thinking about their future family:

I'll need to have a good income;

I want to have a nice house and a nice car.

Their references to material possessions came as part of the things that grown-ups have to take care of; a living, a home, a car and, as noted, among the girls only, a husband and children.

If I exclude these references to material possessions which formed part of the needs of one's future family, then only three children mentioned material things. One boy stated:

Money is the most important thing in life.

That was his only reference to material things: for the rest of the interview he talked of other things he considered central. One girl said that she would ask a fairy for an I-phone and a pony and this too was her one and only materialistic reference within a series of major references to creativity and relations to people. And there was one boy, Eyal from school A, who was interviewed with a friend, Moshe. Most of Eyal's interview focused on the subject of material possessions.

Me: What would you say to an alien was important in life?

Eyal: *Villas and a jacuzzi, and food, your football team. Money, a lot of money.*

Moshe: *You're wrong. What's important in life is family and friends. Money isn't the most important thing in life.*

Me: What can make people happy?

Eyal: Money can help people feel happy.

Moshe: Money can help people be happy, but it's not enough. If you are sick money can't help you, if you don't have family money can't help you.

Me: What are you more, happy or unhappy?

Eyal: Unhappy, I'm unhappy when I have to go to school. Why do I have to learn things? I want to be a football player and for that you don't need school learning.

Me: Who do you want to be like?

Eyal: Like Bob Sfog (a popular cartoon character), but he's too much of a sucker, he gives people anything they ask for. For example, he makes hamburgers and gives them to everyone and doesn't make any money from it.

This boy's interview makes it clear that he is preoccupied by the subject of material possessions. It is interesting to see how the friend that was interviewed with him didn't agree with him at all, but the atmosphere of the interview and between the boys was very pleasant.

In the meeting with the children after analyzing parts of their interviews, for the purpose of giving them a chance to respond to the categories that were identified, I told one group that one boy (not from their class) had said that the most important thing in life was lots of money and property. Their response was an unambiguous: 'No way'.

One girl explained:

It's important to have money to live on, to buy food and water, but that isn't really important. It's just something you need. What's important is family and friends.

Another boy stated that it's nice to have lots of money but that's not what's important in life and explained that there's a difference between things that are nice to have and things that are really important to you.

6.2.9 *Relations with Animals*

Six children stated that animals were very important to them (four boys and two girls). That is not a large proportion of the whole sample but it should be taken into account that four of these six mentioned animals three to four times during their interview. Two of them gave animals as many mentions as family, and for another 'animals' was his second most frequent category after friends. The children who cited animals talked about the animals in their life, describing a daily routine in which their pets were a very important element:

I wake up when my cat jumps on me, I've got a whole zoo at home—
tortoises, snails, fish, hamsters but my cat is bad. He's naughty,
scratches and bites. Once he drank some of my choco and I had to go to
the kitchen and get a new choco.

They mentioned how animals improved their mood:

My dog jumps up at me when I come home even when I'm unhappy.

Their animals are important to them and they worry about them:

I'm a bit unhappy right now because my cat's got a virus.

The animals make them happy:

I love it when I get home and stroke my dog and then she jumps up at me
and pushes me over.

Their pets help them:

When I'm scared I sometimes sleep with my Dad or sometimes with my
dog.

One boy described his love of animals and his wish to make a profession out of it:

I had dogs and I used to have two cats and now there's only one dog
left.... I want to be a vet and to start working as a vet in the army already
and then do my university vet studies

All the children who mentioned animals as important in their lives had a pet at home, which they loved and cared for and took pleasure in. One even drew a picture of his pet as an important figure in his life.

Home
Family

The
Guys

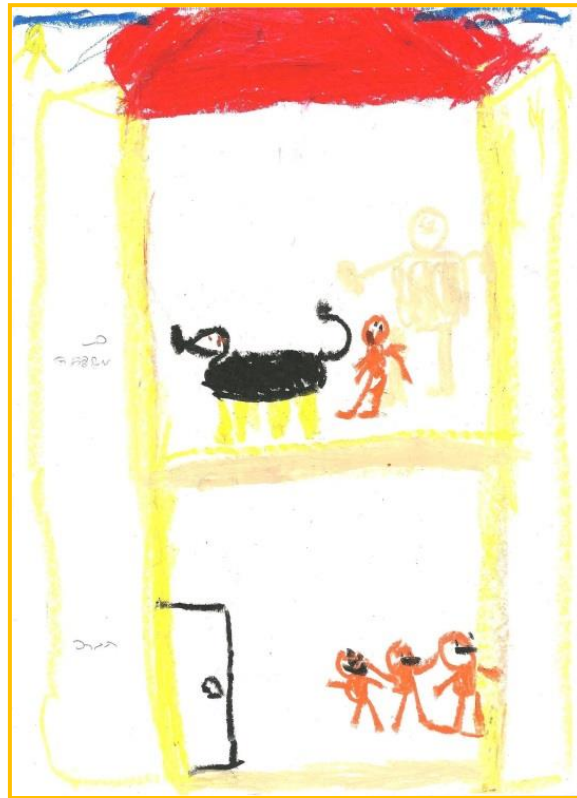


Image 6 – "Here my friends are coming to visit me at my home"

This is Nir's drawing, a boy from school B, from his interview together with two other boys. Nir's purpose in the drawing was to draw his friends coming to visit him. I asked him about the dog seen in the picture and he said:

Well, I told you before; he is one of my family, and an important one.

6.2.10 Love

Five of the children cited an emotional-spiritual component in their lives that was not related to a specific person. Not many children mentioned this category but choosing it at all as something meaningful and important is, in my judgment, an unusual and unobvious choice for children.

Here is a part of a one-on-one interview with Laura, a girl from school A, which deals with the issue of love:

Me: What makes you feel good?

Laura: Love and happiness make me feel good.

Me: What would you ask a fairy to give you?

Laura: I'd ask a fairy to give me a good life and that people should love me.

Me: What is important in life?

Laura: The most important thing in life is to love. To try to love people.

Me: And what can make people happy?

Laura: To be full of love inside and not to feel unhappy.

Me: What are you good at?

Laura: I'm good at loving.

One could argue that the last reply would be better placed in the theme of children's resources and character traits.

It is noteworthy that the same proportion of boys and girls gave this type of answer.

6.2.11 Religious faith

One girl (from a non-religious home) referred to the subject of God and faith. Here is a part of the interview with Lisandra, from school B:

Me: What makes you feel good?

Lisandra: I feel good when God is guiding me forward, helping me in life.

Me: How does He help you in life?

Lisandra: I go off to one side and pray and ask Him to help me.

It was obvious throughout the interview that this girl was very articulate and reflective, her interview was rich in content and she mentioned unusual traits (a positive outlook) and sensitive thoughts, like helping others or trying to prevent poverty. She mentioned God as a source of guidance and support.

6.3 *Children's views about the best way to live*

The children's views about the best way to live are presented in six different categories which emerged from their interviews.

- Live with each other in peace and with no violence:

Under this heading are included children's references to the need for peace in the world and between us (Israel) and our neighbouring states, the need for a non-violent environment for all humankind, and the need for peace and non-violence between themselves and their friends.

- Help others:

Many children mentioned the importance of helping each other and voiced willingness to do so themselves, as well as the wish to create an environment of mutual help. One of the reasons they did so was the belief that if you helped people now you would be helped when you were in trouble.

- Be a good student:

Children in this category cited their wish to invest in academic achievement now so as to realise their ambitions in the future; they talked about what it was like at school, and about the teachers.

- Understand how the world works:

Children in this category referred to the need to understand how life and the world work. They talked of the need to meet concrete needs in the world and to be more aware of its complexities.

- Positivity: Looking at the world from a positive perspective, as a way of living the good life.
- Authenticity: Be yourself and stay that way.

6.3.1 *Children's views: 'best way to live' presented by figure*

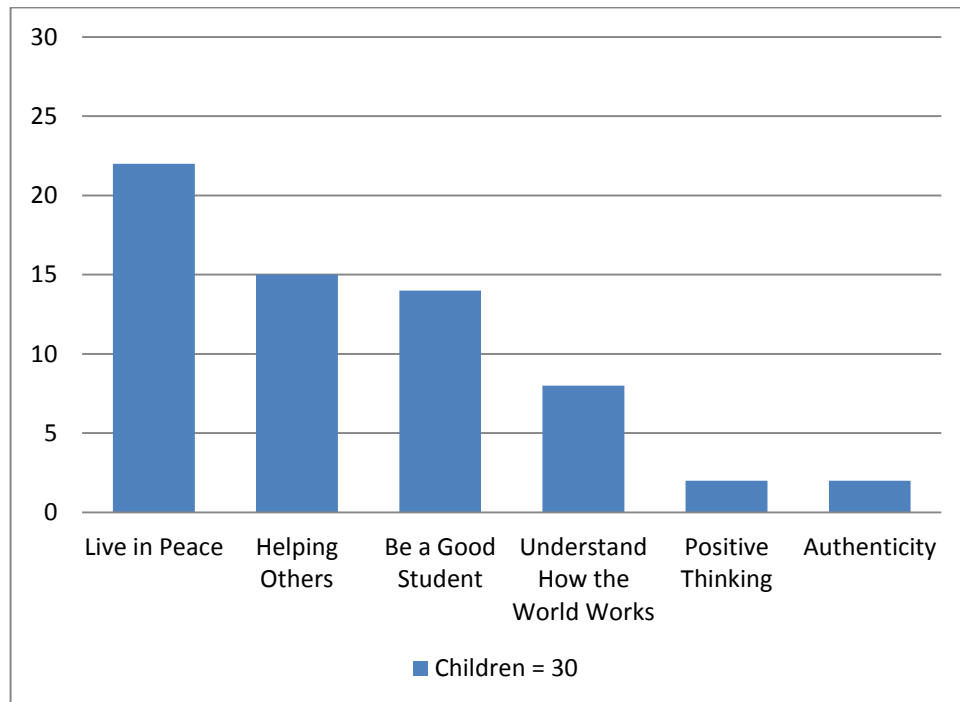


Figure 4: Children's views about best way to live

6.3.2 *Live with each other in Peace and without violence*

21 children thought living with peace and without violence was the best way to live. Of these, eight mentioned this category four to eight times in the course of their interview in answer to various questions. This frequency makes this the major response category in this section of the interviews. I identified three sub-categories and although some replies referred in the one sentence to more than one sub-category and although the category placement was not always obvious, a fairly clear tendency was visible. The first category was living in peace; the second was living without violence and the third was living in peace within the peer group.

Living in peace: The State of Israel has been involved in conflict and wars ever since. Regional peace is not in prospect and all eighteen-year-olds (all men and many women) do years of military service. Thus children are made very aware of the peace issue from a very young age.

Here are some examples from different interviews:

What do you want in your life?

Peace;

Peace and not having any wars.

What would you suggest to an alien?

I'd suggest living in peace;

To take care of peace in his world;

Peace because it's bad to have wars.

What is a perfect world?

A perfect world is a world where people love this country and live in it in peace;

A world in peace;

Where everyone loves each other and live together in peace.

What would you ask for from a fairy?

To bring peace to the world;

To make peace.

This desire for peace had both a universal perspective:

We need peace and a peaceable way of life

and a national perspective:

I'd ask for there to be peace, no more wars and that God should get Gilad

Shalit [Israeli soldier held prisoner in Gaza] back.

Specimen interview exchanges with Rotem, a girl from school B, on a group interview with another girl:

Me: What is the best way to live?

Rotem: to live in peace without killing.

Me: What do you want in your life?

Rotem: I want peace.

Me: What do you mean by that?

Rotem: That everything will be good and there are no wars with the Turks, they are fighting us.

Me: Why do you feel that not having peace upsets you?

Rotem: I want peace because all my uncles are in the army and it upsets me that I hardly ever see them. I wish the whole people could be free [of army duties] and that they would free Gilad Shalit.

One wonders whether in a country that was not at war all the time children's responses would be different. This issue will be discussed in the next chapter.

Non-violence, no wars: This aspiration for peace is directed at the State of Israel's relations with its neighbours. The wish for a life without violence is more limited in scope: even if peace is unattainable let at least there be less direct military conflict (a widespread line of thinking in Israel). At the same time this aspiration has a wider relevance, referring not only to inter-state relations but also to the abstention of people from violence in general between each other.

Here are some examples:

What is a perfect world?

Where people don't quarrel and there aren't any more disasters;
That everyone should be nice and not steal and not fight.

What is the best way to live?

To live with no wars, no guns, no fighting, no bombs.

The need for a halt to war also referred to personal aspects:

What is the best way to live?

That there are no wars and we don't have to run to the shelters;
Not to do bad things, not to be in wars, to do only good things to one another;

To live with no violence around, so that you don't need to protect yourself

Non-violence among friends: This refers to non-violence and brotherhood at the personal level of the friends in one's peer group and it is evidently connected to the children's day-to-day relations with their friends—the fights, quarrels, bullying, etc. Some of this therefore could be

included in the 'Friends' category but what justifies its separate categorization is the children themselves linking it closely to their concern for peace and non-violence in general, and not to 'friends'. Almost all the children who mentioned peaceful relations among friends also mentioned the need for peace and non-violence in the world as a whole, some of them in the very same sentence.

Here are examples:

What would you suggest to an alien?

To be friendly, not to fight or hit his friends, not to hurt people;

I'd suggest behaving nicely and not do harm, because then afterwards you get everything you want in life.

What can help people be happy?

No fighting: If someone were to come along now and hit people it's not nice to live like that, it makes them sad;

What would you recommend to an alien?

Live without quarrelling with anyone. To not hit each other, it's not worth it.

What is the best way to live?

Not to hit other people, not to do a bad thing, not to quarrel with anybody;

Give your own opinion and everyone else has other opinions and people can take their turn and so get on OK;

I want to be a nice person and if I say something nasty to one of my friends that's not being nice;

That everyone plays together and they don't quarrel;

that you can do everything you want without hurting other people, Not hitting your friends.

Exchanges from the one-on-one interview with Noa, a girl from school B:

Me: What would you say to an alien was the best way to live?

Noa: It's great when you have lots of friends. He should make friends with people, not hurt people. That helps you be better. It's a good idea to give compliments to people, make them laugh, think about them.

Me: You say that other people are very important

Noa: Yes because that way we feel good. And we get compliments and thanks back.

The wish to live without violence, not to hurt people and not get hurt, is actually a wish for communication. It is evident that for Noa, behind the wish to be on good terms with others lies the wish to be treated just as well in return— if we act OK and don't hurt others then they will be considerate of us. This is the common belief that 'Being nice makes people nice to you' and that acting friendly makes people feel friendly towards you.

One girl also put forward a way of settling quarrels that she had found worked. Here is an exchange from a group interview with between two girls, from school B:

Me: What would you recommend to an alien to do?

Rotem: He should go play with his friends, but friends can also be annoying.

Anat: So you talk about it five times, even a thousand. It's happened that after a quarrel we talked and it got settled. I simply go away to another place, I think what to say and then I come out and talk with them. With the ones I quarrelled with, I take deep breaths and relax myself.

As a whole, the children's talk within the interviews about peace and non-violence among themselves, as well as in the wider world, was very lively and full of feeling. It was evident that the topic meant a lot to them. It might be argued that the subject of what are the best values— what is the best way to live, what does a perfect world look like—would attract declamatory responses and ones designed to make the speaker look good and meet the interviewer's expectations, but I did not feel that this was happening at all.

6.3.3 *Helping Others*

This is an issue not all that distant from the previous category of non-violence and the desire for peace. Almost half the children brought the issue up as an important principle to live by. It came up in answers to questions such as:

What do you want in your life?

To help others.

What would you say to an alien being was the best way to live?

Help people who need it.

What are the important things to do?

For example, if I see someone in trouble I want to help them.

Nine children who mentioned this category did so between two to three times during the interview and the remainder once only.

Specimen exchanges from a group interview with Daphna, a girl from school B:

Me: What would you explain to an alien being about life?

Daphna: That you have to help others. Since I was born I've always helped someone. When I was little I tried to help my Mum. Today too, one of the most important things in life is to want to help...

Me: Do you think that there are good things waiting for you?

Daphna: Sure. If I do good to others then good things will definitely happen to me.

Me: If you could what would you ask a fairy for?

Daphna: I would ask that everyone should have a house and that people in Israel not be poor.

It is clear from the above and throughout the interview that concern for others troubled Daphna. Even when she was not talking explicitly about helping other people but about her wish that people should have a good life and not be poor. This is a girl who is very sensitive to others.

An interesting point is how much parents or some other model shapes children's values. Here is an example:

If I carry on being good that will help me in life. Once I went with my Grandma and we brought a woman living in the street a coat to keep her warm in winter.

It is also interesting that in this category, as in the previous one of non-violent relations, the belief was strong in the children that helping others would bring about a similar stance towards them from their surroundings:

It's important to help people as otherwise it might be hard for them and there will be no one to help them, and in the same way when things are hard for you people will help you.

As mentioned earlier, a topic such as the best way to live could be said to invite responses reflective of what the children thought was the 'right thing to say' and this is of course a legitimate and relevant concern. Nonetheless, I did detect in the children's responses genuine group norms, values and attitudes, even if some of their replies did reflect the desire to say the right thing. After all, choosing to say the right thing is also a choice which derived from their own world and its values. But I felt, as in the previous section, that a substantial proportion of the children genuinely believed in and were attracted to the rightness of helping others. It would be interesting to investigate the connection, if any, between the children's personal background and their concern for the world around them.

6.3.4 *Be a good student*

Eight children mentioned the need to be a good pupil and to behave well in school, be a good student and excel academically. This category, too, came up in response to several different questions. Here are some examples:

Recommendation to an alien:

Pay attention to the teacher when she is speaking.

What is the best way to live?

It's important to change how you behave, and behave well;

Being a good pupil.

Do you think that there are good things waiting for you?

Yes, but only if I keep getting good grades and work hard. At school I really try hard.

What makes you happy?

(To do things with Mum and Dad) and do well at school.

Half of the children who mentioned this category did so two to three times during the interview and the remaining half once only.

Here is a part of my conversation with Guy, from school A, in a one-on-one interview:

Me: What do you want in life?

Guy: To keep studying well, to be top of the class.

Me: Do you like studying?

Guy: Yes.

Me: What do you want to happen to you in life?

Guy: (For me to keep on having lots of friends) and we keep on having a good teacher, that all the class will be the best in the school, the top class.

An interesting conversation on this subject also sprang up between me and two girls, Amit and Adva from school A:

Me: What should an alien do? What can you tell him about the best way to live?

Amit...I want to tell him that life is good. I like living, and I like school.

Adva: My teacher's fantastically nice and sometimes she gives us treats. On Tuesdays she buys sweets only for the ones who behave well. That helps us behave well. The teacher uses graphs and charts to improve our behaviour. Everyone wants to behave well because of the sweets.

Amit: I would recommend to an alien to behave nicely even without the teacher and without the sweets, because then you will get everything you want in life. Things like friends and nice teachers.

Me: Are you going to have to work very hard to get what you want in life?

Adva: Yes, work responsibly, seriously, get good reports from school and not disappoint my family. Therefore the first thing is studies and family and then comes friends and university and making a living.

Rony, a boy from school B, in a one-on-two interview, gave voice to a degree of frustration with the demands of school. In reply to the question about what to say to an alien being:

Life is a bit hard, all sorts of studies when you want to do other things with your life. For instance, if they give us loads of assignments to do then I can't go all sorts of places. Once, my Mum went alone without me because I had a lot of things to do in school.

My overall feeling was that the children had definitely absorbed the fact that studies and good behaviour were things that would help them get on in life and so were important to sustain, even if the price was hard to pay, as Rony says above. It was very clear that being good at school was important to him even if, at the same time, hard to bear and not that pleasant. When a child says that he/she wants to be a good pupil this obviously at least partly reflects what they perceive their environment dictates as to what is 'good behaviour'. The children in this study were also being interviewed in their school and this may also have influenced their responses: for example, it may have made them align the interviewer with the teaching staff. Also, at the age of eight school is a prominent and important life-setting. It would be interesting to investigate this topic (a) with other age groups, for instance, teenagers who tend to have a different viewpoint about school, and (b) in a non-school setting.

6.3.5 *Understand how the world works*

Eight children (six boys and two girls) responded to my request to guide the alien in the world and explain to him the best way to live by choosing to give the alien guidance as to how the world works; its order, organization, existential needs. They pointed out that one needed to understand one's environment and the world in general and find one's place within it. Some gave concrete advice: the alien had to learn Hebrew, learn how people led their lives, solve his needs for food and security. Others gave more abstract suggestions: the alien had to appreciate that the world was a complex place and cope with the implications of this. Such responses remind one of the linkages which have been established between meaning in life and the need for an ordered, structured world. This issue will be discussed in the following chapter.

Some examples:

One boy thought to explain to the alien how to find his bearings in our environment:

I would help the alien discover our world. Where to buy the things you need, I'd teach him words in Hebrew, show him round the town, where people live.

Another boy imagined that the alien would look alien and so:

I need to explain to him where we have our eyes, nose and mouth.

One girl directed her interest to the alien himself:

I'd like to ask him where he came from. That would be interesting. Then I'd explain to him that we eat in the morning, at noon and in the evening, sleep at night, wake in the morning and rest in the afternoon. In the morning we go to school, in the afternoon we rest and eat and then go out to play a bit in the garden.

In other words, she was trying to help the alien put together a daily routine including sleep, food, study and play.

Three of the children talked about getting food and making a living:

The first thing the alien has to do is get a home, food and water;

He needs money to buy food;

He also has to find a job, earn money, you can't live and do all those things without money.

Two children referred to his need to be careful:

Tell him he also needs to be careful. He really needs a shelter, somewhere to run to when bombs are falling, so that you don't die.

Towards the end of the interview three boys, two from the same interview, came up with more abstract thinking. They said that it was important to understand that the world was complex and that one needed to accept that.

To sum up, what would you say to an alien being?

That life is both good and bad. It's good that there's everything in this world and good that you don't need to ask for anything. It's bad that there are wars;

sometimes it's difficult but it's possible, he needs never to give up;

That the world is complex and the alien should know that.

6.3.6 *Positive thinking*

Taking a positive stance to life and coping efficiently with its challenges is a widely accepted strategy for leading a good life. Two children, a boy and a girl, presented a positive outlook throughout their interview. Two children are not a lot but the attitude to life they were expressing is quite an abstract one. Here is part of the interview with Emanuelle, a girl in a one-on-one interview, from school A:

Me: What is the best way to live?

Emanuelle: The best way to live — Love and be happy and laugh and look directly for a way forward. Look forward not back.

Me: What do you mean by 'directly'?

Emanuelle: Looking forward not backwards.

Me: What do you mean by 'not looking backwards'?

Emanuelle: Not looking at bad things.

Me: And if bad things happen, not look at them?

Emanuelle: No, cope with it.

Me: How to cope?

Emanuelle: (laughs) ... Don't know.

Emanuelle's reply was so abstract (looking forward, looking directly) that I asked her more questions to see if she understood what she was saying. She did understand: her reply reflected a very coping and positive outlook on life.

Another response stemming from a similar outlook, from a boy, but put much more briefly:

If bad things happen, than cope with it. I always try to do that.

6.3.7 *Authenticity*

By authenticity is meant here the ability to be oneself, to follow one's own ideas and not be swayed by external pressures.

Two children, a boy and a girl, referred to authenticity. Here is part of a group interview with Or, a boy from school B, interviewed along with two other boys:

Me: What is the best way to live?

Or: The important thing is to live as your heart tells you to, do whatever comes along.

Me: What does it mean 'do whatever comes along'?

Or: It means that if you listen to what you really think you should do, not because someone told you, or because all your friends are doing it, then you can easily know what to do, it's not complicated.

Me: Who do you want to be like?

Or: I want to stay as I am.

Emanuelle (part of her interview is quoted above) gave the same answer:

Me: What do you think is the best way to live?

Emanuelle: Always do what is right for you and what you think, and not what others think..

This too is an example of abstract and complicated thinking, unusual at this early age.

Some of the categories mentioned above which reflect higher-order thinking will be discussed further in the next chapter.

6.4 *Goals, strengths and character traits*

6.4.1 *Introduction*

This section sets out the children's views about their personal strengths. Categories and sub-categories are defined.

Category 1: Character traits that children believe they have which can help them achieve their goals:

I detected three sub-categories:

- Valuing humanity—Traits: kindness and love.
- Valuing wisdom and knowledge—Traits: curiosity, love of learning
- Valuing transcendence—Traits: pursuing excellence and religious faith.

Category 2: Maintaining a balance between happiness and unhappiness:

Category 3: Pursue goals until they are fulfilled.

I detected two sub-categories:

- My profession when I grow up
- Readiness to make an effort to achieve one's goals.

6.4.2 *Character traits and personal strengths*

The children were asked whether they thought they had character traits that would help them in life and what these traits were. 27 of the 30 children answered this question in the affirmative. The children referred to three core values and six character traits (see Methodology chapter).

The first and most common of these was the value of **'humanity'**, which by definition includes the traits of **'kindness'** and **'love'**. The majority of the children in the study mentioned this value and described themselves as good at friendship, helping others and love. All the children who defined themselves as having the trait of humanity/ helping others/ friendship and who assumed that this would be a help to them in their future life are included in this group

The second core value I term **'wisdom and knowledge'** and covers the traits of **'creativity'**, **'curiosity'** and **'love of learning'**.

Under this heading are included children who referred to creativity as a trait that can help them in the future, one child who cited the trait of curiosity, and all who cited specific scholastic abilities (which are collected here under the heading 'scholastic strength').

The third core value is called '**transcendence**' and covers the traits of appreciation of '**beauty**' and '**excellence**', and '**religious faith**'.

'Humanity'

Under this heading are included responses in the area of '**kindness**' and '**love**'. Here are some examples of '**kindness**':

I'm good at helping people;

I'm good at helping others, other people, my family;

I help my Mum keep my sister happy and love her;

I'm good-hearted and want to help people who haven't any money;

Here are two responses referring to '**love**':

I'm good at playing with others and loving them;

I love my friends and I've got a lot of them, I'm good at making and winning friends;

Another boy, from school A, on a group interview, brought together several values and traits—love, wisdom, love of learning—and explained this combination in a unique and creative way. Here is an excerpt from the group interview with him:

Me: What good traits do you have which will help you in life?

Yaniv: I've got a lot of sense and I know loads of languages — Russian,

Ukrainian, Yiddish.. I tried to learn Chinese last year but it was too complicated. And, I am good at friendship and I know it will help me also in the future.

Me: You have many friends?

Yaniv: Lots and I've got one that I haven't even seen since kindergarten.

Me: What do you mean that you have lots of friends and it can help you in the future

Yaniv: I've got this sort of magic that if I ask a kid if he wants to be friends with me the answer is always yes.

It was quite clear from the interview that one of Yaniv's character traits was the ability to make friends, but more than that, Yaniv believed in this magic power of his which 'recruited' him friends in platoons.

Altogether, 15 children referred to the value of 'humanity', eight to kindness and seven to love. It is clear that these children are citing helping and loving others as important traits that can help them in the future and which also make them feel good about themselves in the present. These children recurred to the theme of friendship, or help, throughout the interview and not just in reply to my question about their character traits.

'Wisdom and Knowledge'

Under this value are included responses which refer to the traits of '*creativity*', '*curiosity*', '*love of learning*' and '*scholastic strengths*'.

Here are some examples to *wisdom* and '*love of learning*':

I'm clever;

I pick things up very quickly;

I'm clever and this will help me in life;

I like learning.

Six children referred to the value of wisdom and it was encouraging to see how they saw themselves as clever and good thinkers.

The children's responses that referred to '*creativity*' were all made in reference to long-term activity in a particular area of creativity:

I'm good at singing, painting, sculpture.

Three girls mentioned this element, all of whom referred to creativity several times over the course of their interview and not just as a trait that can help them in the future (see Discussion chapter).

An interesting response connected to '*curiosity*' came from one boy, proving that curiosity indeed belongs under the heading of '*wisdom*':

I take an interest in everything, in every fly that flies past, and I think that that will help me in life.

A lot of the children referred to '*scholastic ability*' listing the subjects they were good at and which would help them in their future:

I'm good at arithmetic, computers and that will help me in the future;

I like science and sport and I'm good at them.

Six children referred to their '*scholastic ability*' (some also listed the subjects they were good at, and the subject they were not so good at).

In sum, many of the children, 16 in all, claimed that they possessed traits connected with wisdom, curiosity, learning languages easily, love of learning, even their outstanding ability in this or that school subject, and that these traits would help them build their future.

'Transcendence'

Two children referred to the element of *appreciation for the beauty in life*:

I love flowers and looking at beautiful things;

I know how to find flowers and love looking at them and smelling them.

They both mentioned this appreciation as a trait they felt would help them in their future life.

'Religious faith': one child referred to this, saying that turning to God and consulting with Him could help her in life.

The capacity of the children interviewed for this study to discern in themselves character traits and abilities which they liked and admired and which they were sure could help them make the life they wanted indicates that they possess strengths and inner resources associated with finding meaning in life.

And some said they had no good traits:

Three of the children said that they didn't know if they had any good traits. I suggested that they think a little longer to see if they could think of anything, saying that I felt sure that they had some good qualities which would be useful to them in life.

One boy did manage to come up with an answer but not one with a very clear import:

I'm good at hiding. This morning when I was playing hide-and-seek no-one found me because I know which places are good to hide in. That's good, I think.

It should be noted that the boy concerned had given profound replies throughout the interview but clearly had particular difficulty with this item. I do not know enough about him to understand why he answered as he did. Perhaps he had just come in from a playground break, during which he had found a good hiding place and was feeling very proud of his success, or perhaps he was referring to something more meaningful and that success in hiding represented for him something we don't know about.

One girl said later in the interview that she had the same traits as the other girl interviewed with her. Apparently this was her solution to the difficulty of thinking of her own representative traits. She did offer 'wisdom and liking to help others' but only for the sake of giving some sort of answer. Again, there is not enough information to show that she perhaps did not understand the question or that her empty answer was due to the shyness she showed throughout the interview.

Another girl (Alona) said that she didn't have any good traits. She was upset throughout the interview, all her replies being forlorn and pessimistic. Alona is discussed in the next Section.

The fact that some children didn't give answers to questions relating to strengths and abilities could be explained or interpreted in psychological terms, according to this or that theory. But, as a qualitative researcher who has adopted a phenomenological-constructivist approach to data collection and as someone who is searching for the child's point of view, I try to 'interpret' as little as possible when the interpretation is not based on very deep acquaintance with the child, their background and their circumstances. For these reasons I do not venture hypotheses which do not emerge directly from the interview text.

6.4.3 *The balance of happiness and unhappiness*

Almost all the children stated that they were more happy than unhappy, some even giving this a numerical value. Here are some examples:

When I'm happy it lasts me even an hour or two but when I'm unhappy it passes quickly, say in ten minutes;

When something good happens to me it lasts me a day or two days but something bad less, an hour or two.

The time reference is clearly an attempt to quantify the ratio of happiness to unhappiness. Some of the children chose to give answers emphasizing how obvious the answer was. Here are some examples:

Happy, of course;

Obviously, happy;

Happier by a mile.

Several of the children did remark that some things made them unhappy. One boy mentioned incidents with friends:

It makes me unhappy when everyone's shouting and interfering with me and not giving me anything, that happens almost every day.

But then he continued:

But now I'm happier because four of my teeth are loose.

Another boy said:

Half and half. I'm happy now because I've got a birthday and my Grandma has too but I'm a bit unhappy because my Dad's abroad.

One girl referred to how her happiness expressed itself:

I laugh a lot

While another said:

When something is unhappy I'm a bit unhappy but then my face turns into a smile.

She even offered coping advice to the alien:

I do yoga and that helps me. He should try that.

Judging by the general finding in the literature that people who define themselves as more happy than unhappy are the ones who stand high on indicators of finding meaning to life, one might say that the children interviewed for this study present a strong connection to meaning and joy in life.

One girl, however, was a picture of depression throughout the interview. She explained it was because of her parents' divorce. Here are some parts of the interview with Alona, from school A, interviewed in a group interview:

Me: What are you more- happy or unhappy?

Alona: Mostly I'm sad, I'm not happy at all.

Me: Do you believe things will get better in the future?

Alona: No, I don't believe that things will get better and I don't believe that good things are waiting for me ahead.

Me: What do you wish for yourself in the future?

Alona: I wish my parents would get back together, now I'm sad all the time and my father promises me things and doesn't keep his promises.

Alona appeared indeed so sunk in the pain of her parents' separation and the disappointment of her father cancelling his promised visits (she mentioned specifically a trip they were supposed to make together for which he did not turn up) that she just did not have it in her at this time to find meaning anywhere else. The Discussion chapter will include a discussion of Alona's feelings and the ethical dilemma they put me in.

6.4.4 Future occupation

The children were asked what they wanted to do when they grew up and all the children who were asked the question and who answered it (21) knew which occupation/s interested them. Sometimes they introduced their intentions without a direct question on the subject and some had many more than one occupation they were interested in. Here are some examples:

What do you want to do when you are grown up?

I don't know, I can't make up my mind between a teacher, a painter, a cook, a singer or a dancer;

A dancer or an artist;

A doctor;

I've got lots of ideas- Singer and dancer and teacher.



Image 7- "I want to be a policewoman"

This is Noa' drawing, a girl from school B, She chose to draw her wish to be policewoman who would help and guard people. In her interview, together with two other girls, she explained what was needed to become a policewoman

First you have to finish school and then go to university, and do a lot of sport to be in shape, and to be brave and not to be afraid of thieves, and then you go to a course for policemen.

Some children had already made a clear career choice even if they did not display a full understanding of the chosen path:

When I'm grown up I know what I will be. I'll be an archaeologist with my friend. We'll search for special things. Like Columbus. My Mum also talks about a lot of people who became famous as discoverers.

One boy knew that he wanted to go to university and be like the Carmel fire-fighters (the interview took place just at the time a busload of fire-fighters were killed fighting the Carmel forest fire in Israel).

Most of the answers were creative. I got the impression that for most of the children it was not a strange idea to think about their future. Some had clearly done so before, some simply mentioned what they were finding exciting at the time of the interview — computer games, a model-airplane group—and thought they might go on with that in the future. Maybe they will.

The ability to think about a future occupation, (regardless of what it is) is associated with a capacity for planning and setting goals, and thus with finding meaning in life.

The occupational areas mentioned by the children distributed as follows: Creativity-related – nine children; family-model-related – four children; related to helping others (medicine, for example) - four children; sport-related (football, handball) –three children; status-related (famous singer, film actress, football celebrity) – three children.

Three children named an imaginary figure they would like to resemble, when I asked them about their wish for the future. Two children said they wanted to be like Superman and one said he wanted to be like Spiderman. Here is a sample answer to the question: What would you like to do in the future?

*I'd like to work with my father, And if not, then like Superman and
rescue people from death.*

Only one boy said he had no idea what he wanted to do. Nor did he know what effort he would have to make to attain his goal. This was logical: if he did not know what he wanted he was unlikely to know what needed to be done to achieve it.

6.4.5 *Readiness to make an effort to achieve goals*

One of the parameters the professional literature ascribes to people capable of finding meaning in life is the willingness to exert themselves to achieve their objectives. So the children were asked to what degree of effort they thought they would have to make an effort to achieve their goals and if they were willing to make this effort.

The relevant question sequence went usually as follows: Do you know what you want to do when you're grown up? Or- What profession do you want to work in? After getting an answer- Do you think you'll have to make a big effort to achieve that aim? And if the answer was yes- Are you ready to make that effort? Or in some cases- What will you have to do to achieve that goal?

All the children took the need for such an effort for granted and declared themselves willing to undertake it, including applying themselves to their present schoolwork and/or undertaking an intensive practice and training regime, and later going on to university study.

Some children even brought up the necessity of this effort themselves. Here are two examples: Do you think that good things are in store for you in life?

Yes, but I have to carry on studying;

Yes but I have all sorts of tasks that I have to complete before I get there — understand computers. I've got lots of books on that.

Clearly it is easy to make declarations about being ready and willing to make efforts to achieve future goals and that, in reality, such efforts require a high level of commitment. This is perhaps what the scholars are referring to who have found an association between meaning in life and commitment to achieving goals. However, at the age of these children even the declaration alone is important and can be taken as an indicator of real intention.

6.5 *Variations in responses*

6.5.1 *Introduction*

Analysis of the interview texts shows great similarities in the children's answers, the very similarities which made it possible to identify categories of importance and meaning which the children shared—family, friends, leisure time, shared values about helping others, wanting peace, being a good student. The children even shared thinking about their future occupations and the necessity of working hard to achieve this.

At the same time there was no lack of individuality and variation. Indeed the shared elements threw the individual and group differences into greater relief—differences in the way the children expressed themselves, in the categories of importance they singled out and the number of such categories, differences between the boys and the girls. There now follows an analysis of two sources of difference, the one between children who cited multiple categories of importance (i.e. the concept of 'breadth'), and the second, the disparities between boys' and girls' choices of categories of importance.

6.5.2 *Children who cited multiple categories*

This section analyses the children's responses to the first two of the three research questions—'What are the most importance things in your life'? and 'What is the right way to live'?—looking at responses of children who cited multiple categories of importance. With respect to these two questions the children answered as their thoughts took them in a context of free-flowing conversation. The children's responses to the third research question are not analysed systematically here because in that section of the interview they were asked direct questions, but their replies to that section of the interview are referred to.

Most of the children cited four to five categories (for example: family, friends, helping others, creativity, relations with animals) out of the total of 15 which emerged from the participants as a whole. In a number of extreme cases, however, children referred to many more (over seven), the following section discusses this 'extreme' group.

Five children, three boys and two girls, referred to seven or more categories, of whom two cited as many as nine to eleven. Excerpts from their interviews will be presented here.

Guy, from school A, (specimen of his interview appears in section 6.3.4) is cited in all eleven categories; *family, friends, creativity and leisure time, environmental issues, relations with animals, love, live in peace with non-violent communication, helping others, being a good student, understand how the world works, a positive attitude*. But he referred most frequently to the categories of 'family', 'friends' and 'creativity and leisure time'. The remaining references were distributed more or less evenly among the other categories.

Me: What are the most meaningful and important things in your life?

Guy: Most important is my family, then my friends, my hobbies are very important and I might get my profession out of one of them, I love to play the drums, so many important things.

Me: What is a 'perfect world'?

Guy: A perfect world is a world that is clean and not dirty. I saw on television that there is a country that there is a law to clean the country and people are not allowed to spit and they send him to jail. World that have flowers, and a world of talents, and a world with no punishments

Me: What makes people happy?

Guy: a lot of love, not having wars, only peace, no more killing each other, having a lot of Friends, helping friends, fun, doing what you love makes you happy, music makes people happy, a lot of things can make people happy.

Me: What makes you happy?

Guy: I love life and I love to sing and play the drums. I am happy when my family is happy, I am happy when I succeed, when I am given a job to do in school.

Me: What are you more, happy or unhappy?

Guy: I'm 98% happy and 20-25% sad.

Me: What do you want to be when you grow older?

Guy: I watch acrobatics and circus performers and I feel like doing that. You're like in the air with no one touching you. You're flying. Or, a drummer, or a football player.

Me: What is the best way to live?

Guy: you must live by your conscience, to do what you think and how you feel.

Me: What can help people to live in a better world?

Guy: To try again and again, to fix what they got wrong, this can help.



Image 8- "They are in the air, you see?"

In reply to the question: How would you sum up things for an alien being? He said:

Life is not so simple, you need to make an effort but that's a good thing.

Throughout his interview Guy talked fluently and rapidly, almost excitedly. It was apparent that he loved to talk and be listened to. With respect to the third research question too his answers were many and varied. For example, he mentioned a great many positive character traits which could help him build his future—being sociable and generous; the ability to control his anger; his ability to calm people when they got into difficulty and to resolve conflicts; he was good in a team; he could speak English a little. It was apparent that he took a great interest in society and

how to be successful in it. It is interesting to see the connection between the breadth of categories that Guy mentioned and the abstract and mature answers he gave.

Segev was interviewed with a friend from school B and his drawing of a library has been shown above. His interview yielded the following responses:

Me: What would you explain to an alien?

Segev: First thing, he has to get food and water and a house, then family and friends, and then he has to look for places to play in and have fun. The alien has to decide his priorities and act according to what he decides is more important than what. It's difficult but it's possible

Me: What would you explain to an alien being about yourself and what things you find interesting in life?

Segev: What interests me is flying and taking trips. I'm learning electronics and that also interests me and should be useful in life.

Me: What do you want in life?

Segev: First and foremost a family, in second place food, in third place a home and in fourth place a profession. I want to be a pilot.

Me: Do you know anybody who's a pilot?

Segev: No but I'm in an aero-modeling group and it's interesting.

Me: What are you interested at?

Segev: Every single thing interests me.

Me: Do you think that life holds good things in store for you?

Segev: I believe so, after the army I'll go to university and learn and then I'll become a pilot. Life is very interesting.

It seems as if Segev is deliberately tracing the steps of the whole pyramid of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. It is interesting that in passing from his guidance for an alien being to setting out his own scale of priorities a change occurs. With reference to the alien, in first place come the basic needs of shelter, food and water, whereas with reference to himself, he puts in first place family and only afterwards food and a home. In other words, with himself, belonging comes first. Also noticeable is that the boy seems to be, even at this early age, shrewdly weighing and

calculating his future prospects: an interest in electronics will indeed be useful to his desired future as a pilot and he already plans university studies after completing army service.

These two children, Segev and Guy, mentioned many categories and expressed them in a mature and abstract way but analysing the interviews shows a difference between the two boys: Guy is very associative in his way of speaking; every question produces many different answers that touch several categories, while Segev is very direct and brief, focused and purposeful. It would be interesting to trace a connection between the breadth of response and their different style of thinking.

In general, it can be said that the interviews with the five children who chose numerous categories were very cooperative, articulate and inquiring.

6.5.3 *Variation in responses by gender*

The relatively small number of participants in the present study does not permit firm conclusions on gender differences (or differences by any other variable) between the way boys and girls relate to meaning in life. For all that, as long as care is taken and the need for larger-scale research studies acknowledged, the divergences are intriguing.

This section will set out these divergences. First, by presenting two figures, one that breaks down the responses to the three research questions by gender and the second which does the same for the responses on the single issue of family. (The figures are presented by percentage because of the different numbers between boys and girls). The major disparities will then be discussed.

Children's views about meaning in life, by gender

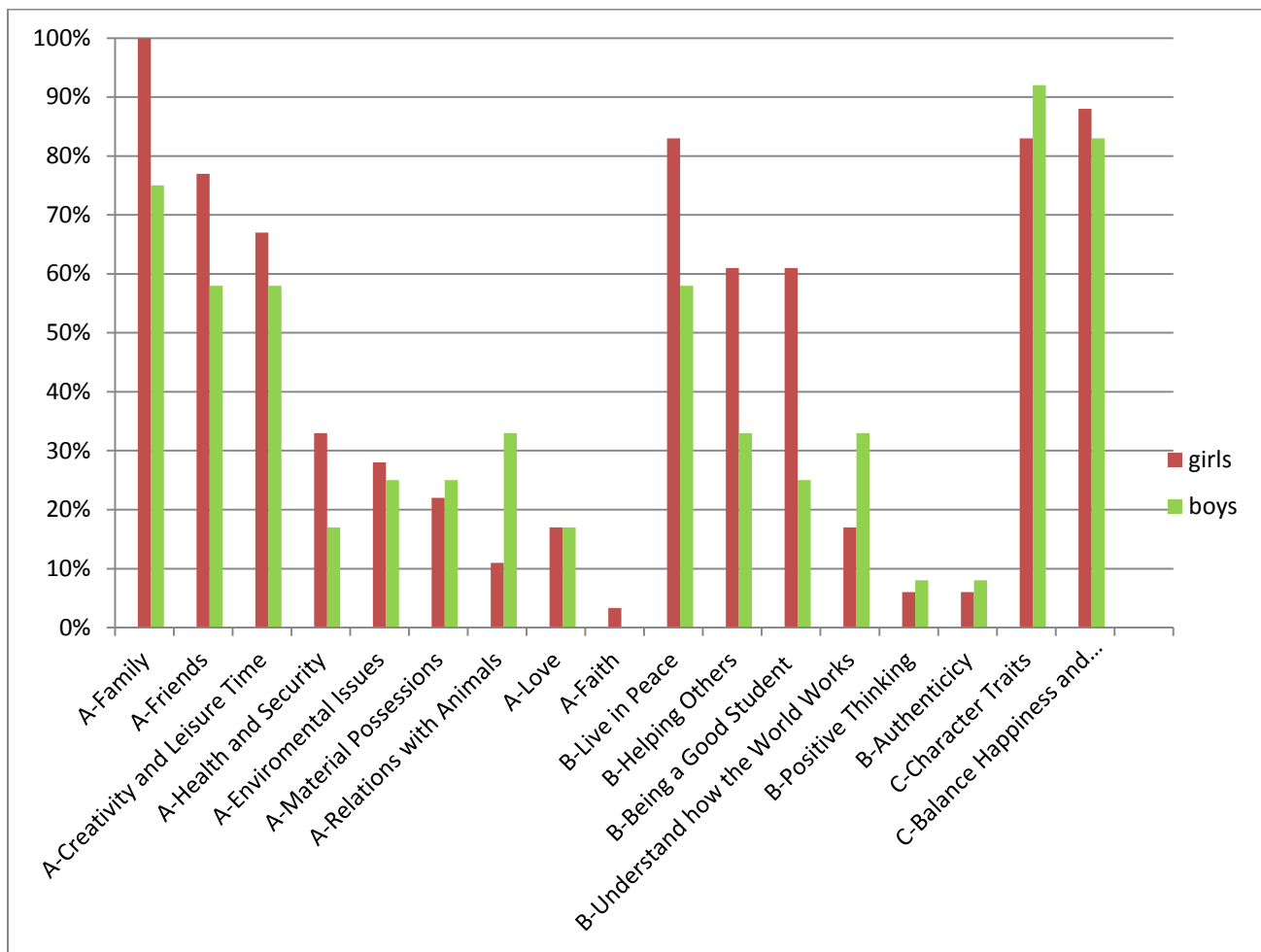


Figure 5: Children's views about meaning in life, by gender

Columns A (1-9) — Responses on what is important and meaningful in life;

Columns B: (10-15) — Responses on the best way to live;

Columns C (16-17) — Responses on character strengths.

The categories cited more frequently by girls were: family, friends, creativity, the need for health and security, environmental issues, living in peace, helping others, being a good student.

The categories cited more frequently by boys were: relations with animals, understand how the world works, and character traits.

Figure 5 shows that some categories cited on the children's own initiative were clearly cited by one gender more than the other.

I discuss next gender differences on the issues of: family, living in peace and helping others, relations with animals and understanding how the world works.

Children's views about the importance of family, by gender

Within the category of the family, the gender differences are even sharper when references to the sub-categories are taken into account.

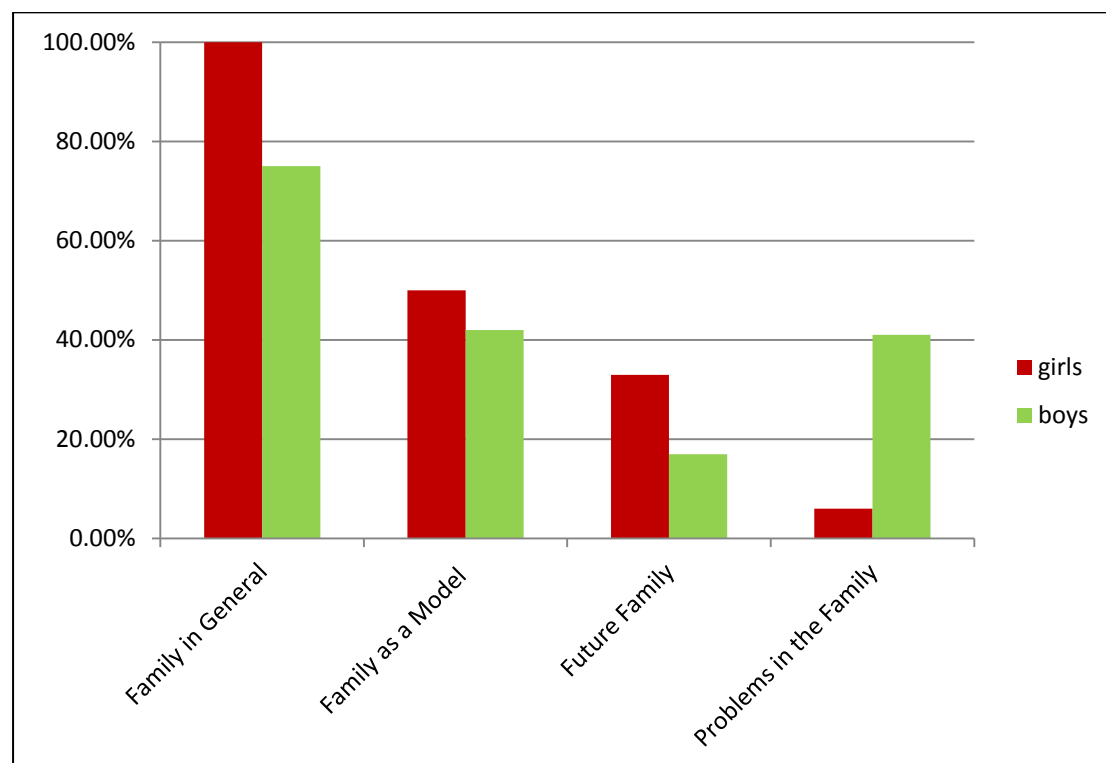


Figure 6: Responses on 'family' by gender

All the girls (18) made 'family' the most important thing in life but only three-quarters of the boys did so (nine out of twelve). One would expect that all children would choose 'family' as the most important thing in their lives. Five of the boys who mentioned 'family' as the most important also brought up the sub-category of family troubles. All the boys who mentioned troubles related to everyday troubles: getting punished, being shouted at, facing their parents' anger, being not allowed to play with friends. Do boys have more family problems than the girls?: Do they get into more conflict with their parents? Or do they allow themselves to be more open about it? Maybe it's more legitimate to talk about shouting and punishments when you are a boy? The only girl who mentioned problems in the family (Alona) referred to her parent's divorce (a year and a half before) and her being upset because of it, so even though divorces are quite

common these days, it is still not an everyday matter, as being shouted at and punished is. This difference is an interesting one which needs to be checked and unpacked and evidently only research with much larger samples can clarify it.

As for one's 'future family', two boys cited their desire for one in general terms, one of them with regard to wanting a brother for himself, while six girls talked of having a husband and children, some even going into detail about the marriage, pregnancy and other related matters. It would seem that the traditional gender division of roles is the ground for this divergence, but again, with such a small number of participants no conclusion is possible.

Other gender differences

'Live in peace' with each other and 'help others': these are two closely related pro-social categories and both are cited far more frequently by girls. If one adds the category of Friends, which shares much of the same content, relating to bonds with the other, then the divergences are even sharper. It would seem that the gender differences found in the present study match what many other research studies have found and will be discussed next chapter.

Categories cited more frequently by boys than girls

'Relations with animals': Four boys, a third of the total, chose this category but only two girls. This difference which has been frequently found in the literature on meaning in life will be discussed in the next chapter.

'Understand how the world works': six boys (out of 12) but only two girls (out of 18) cited this. Does this difference echo the known gender difference on focussed thinking and problem solving among adult men and women?

Here too there is good reason to probe deeply for gender disparities in order to differentiate the characteristics of girls and boys, as they appeared in the present research.

In sum: In this section the children's responses were analysed and compared on two variables, that of breadth (the number of categories cited) and that of gender. Only general trends were identified since the small size of the study sample did not permit finer conclusions or firmer generalizations, but even within these general trends the divergences and disparities were intriguing.

6.6 *The Drawings*

The children spoke their thoughts through their drawings as much as through speech and in this section I wish to concentrate on the drawings as a key mode of self-expression.

Usually the drawing was the final phase of the interview, after the children had spoken their mind on the most important and meaningful things in their life, on the best way to live, on the inner strengths and character traits they possessed. Thus the drawing phase was already 'loaded' with all that had gone before as the children had clarified to me and to themselves what gave meaning to their lives and what they thought about themselves in this context. They were asked to make a drawing connected to something of what had gone before—perhaps the most important thing in their life, or what a perfect world looked like or anything else meaningful.

Drawings of their family were the most frequent, ten in all. Eight of the ten displayed all the family members and the family home, sometimes a big house with all the family in it, sometimes a small house with the family members arrayed outside it. Every one of the drawings demonstrated a strong connection between the family members and the house. Either the family were looking out of the window or they were sitting round a table inside the house or they sat outside in the yard. It was rather apparent that the house itself bore great meaning. Every child put figures representing their family members into the drawing, sometimes the extended family, including the grandparents, in others only the nuclear family (many of the children interviewed were only children). Only two drawings did not display the family home. One of them, Dana's, is shown here. It is interesting to think about a possible connection between Dana's comment about her difficulty in leaving her home in Tiberias, and her drawing that doesn't include a house in it, and the family is 'on the air', but that's an interpretation that is not based enough. As she made the drawing she explained with a smile on her face that she was the queen of the house, so that although the family home does not appear as such it does appear by right of the title she gave the picture.



Image 9 - "I'm the queen of the house"

The subject next most frequently illustrated was 'friends'. Seven children selected this subject. One girl drew her friends playing with a skipping rope. Another drew three girls and when she had finished drew in a chain of flowers connecting all three and said: "I love flowers and I love my friends". A boy drew himself and his friends playing with a ball. Another boy drew himself and his friends in an amusement park with a water-slide and carousel. In most instances the drawer drew themselves and their friends playing or doing some activity together.

The next most frequent subject for drawing was creativity and leisure-time activities (five children). One displayed earlier showed a library in which the boy loved to read (Segev), one girl drew herself dancing. A boy drew a football pitch on which he was playing with famous players. All the children referred their drawing to something that had been talked about earlier in the interview.

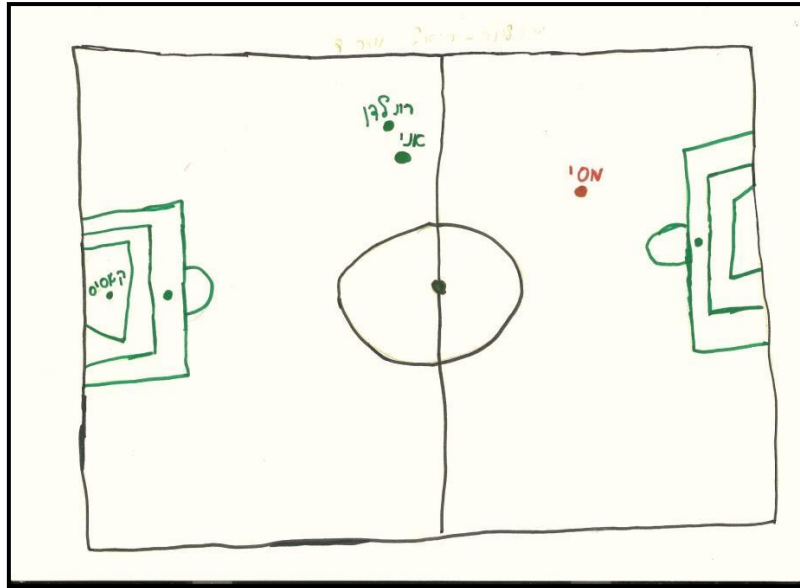


Image 10 - "I am playing football with Ronaldo, Casillas and Messi"

Two girls chose to draw their chosen future profession, one a doctor, the other a policewoman. Two other girls chose to make a drawing on the theme of the quality of the environment. One entitled her drawing 'My perfect world' while the other drew a natural panorama, talking about her love for trips and water. A boy also made a drawing of the beauty of the natural environment, explaining that he was drawing a flaming torch which would give light, as well as a rainbow over a cloud. The he added colours "to make it more colourful" and finally a water-tower.

One girl was so impressed by my story about the alien that she decided to draw a picture of her meeting the alien:

That's me and the alien, he is asking me questions and I answer him and then I teach him how to play games and we are playing together.



Image 11 - "that's me and the alien"

All the children made drawings explaining what they were drawing as they worked. If they had been interviewed together with another child or children they showed their drawing to the others. It seemed to me that drawings were a familiar and comfortable mode of communication to them and that they enjoyed making them, sharing them with others and explaining what they had made. One boy enjoyed making his drawing so much that once the interview was over he asked me to come to his classroom to show me a folder of other drawings of his.

Thus the three categories of importance most frequently cited in the interviews were also the subjects most frequently chosen for drawing. Although the themes of Friends and leisure-time activity share much content and are hard to separate I categorized them according to what the children said they were drawing.

Chapter 7: Discussion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings set out in the previous chapter in light of the results reported by other researchers. First to be considered is the children's responses to the first research question, which asked what was most meaningful and important in their lives. The same question has been asked many times of adults, although both the question and the adults' replies might have been constructed and expressed differently. The children's responses in the present study are reviewed and discussed in light of what the literature has to say about the importance to children of meaning in life. Two significant aspects in children's lives are cited which 'cut across' all three research sub-questions, the first, the predominance in children's lives of emotional bonds and the second, the importance to children of the content and regularity of their day-to-day life. The similarity is pointed out between the children's responses and the factors which the literature claims affect resilience. Gender and cultural disparities evident in the children's replies are identified. Then comes a section on the research approach and methods devised by this researcher for investigating meaning in life among children. Next the issue of 'breadth' is discussed in relation to the extent of meaning in life among the children and, finally, the argument is put forward that in the case of the present study methodology cannot be considered independently of the content of the children's responses.

7.2 'Meaning in life' as a relevant concept for children

7.2.1 The answer to the Main research question

My research goal was to study the concept of meaning in life through children's eyes. The overarching research question was: Does the concept of 'meaning in life' have relevance for children? And relatedly: What are the (dis)connections between children's views of their own lives, and what matters to them, and, the adult concept of 'meaning in life'?

The first statement I wish to make at the conclusion of this research process—and I do so emphatically—is that **one can indeed talk of meaning in life among children**. The notion is definitely valid for children and in terms very similar to those for adults. Children are capable of feeling and expressing what in life is meaningful to them and they distinguish what is meaningful and important from what is 'fun' and a source of hedonistic pleasure.

The children interviewed, in conversations notably wide-ranging and rich in content, in their words and their drawings, gave full answers to the questions put them. Their messages, both the verbal and the non-verbal, were clear and consistent. The pictures they drew related directly to the content of their talk with me about meaning in life and what was important to them as individuals. Some children drew pictures to illustrate the importance of the family and some even added a written message making this explicit (for instance, "Family is the most important thing in life"). Others drew a picture of their friends, of their dog, or of the sort of work they wanted to do when they were grown-up. All took both interview and drawing very seriously and were happy to be given the chance to state their opinion on the subject I had set out to explore.

The children were asked questions representing three aspects of meaning in life—its sources for each individual, its existential importance, that is, what links meaning in life to an individual's values and worldview, and the personal inner resources which promote the presence and strength of meaning in one's life. The children had full and significant replies to every question, demonstrating that the concept of meaning in life was both real and important to them.

The conclusion emerged from the data analysis that it was impossible to separate the content of the children's responses from the methods used to elicit those responses. This theme runs throughout this chapter and receives a final treatment in the section on methodology at the end of the chapter.

7.2.2 *Meaning in life: four research sub-questions*

The first research sub-question that the children in the present study were asked related to the sources of meaning in life: 'What are the most important and meaningful things in your life?'

The answers the children gave mentioned nine aspects of life —family, friends, creative and leisure-time activity, health and security, environmental issues, material possessions, relations with animals, love and religious faith.

Studies into meaning in life among various age groups, adults, young people, elderly couples, and young children (DeVolger and Ebersole ,1981, Ebersole and DeVolger ,1983, Ebersole and DePaola,1987, Ebersole and DeVolger,1981, Taylor and Ebersole, 1993, respectively), asked the participants to select one or more aspects of life which provided them with meaning in life and then to rank them. In some cases the participants were also asked to add a story representative of meaning in life for them, in other cases not. The aspects of life selected by adult respondents as meaningful were: relationships, service, belief, obtaining, growth, health, life work (or schooling for children) and pleasure. Additional categories developed specifically for young people were activities, school achievement and personal appearance.

As the Literature Review earlier made clear, meaning in life can be characterised in various ways and from different perspectives. With regard to its sources, it is clear that the categories differ slightly by the age, culture and gender of the participants, as well as by the research methods deployed (questionnaires, interviews), and of course by the researcher, each of whom has his/her own opinions and prejudices. For example, the Bar-Tur et al. study in 2001 reported slightly different categories of meaning, such as personal autonomy and connections with animals, but the main categories/ sources of meaning are the same for every population group. In every study by every researcher and in every age group personal relationships are rated the most meaningful element in respondents' lives. One significant disparity noted was that the elderly gave a higher ranking to health and young people cited 'external appearance', an aspect ignored by all other age groups in all studies. Apart from these disparities the similarity between the responses of the different age groups is remarkable.

In this respect the present study does not differ. '*Family*' was the most frequently cited source of meaning and almost a unanimous one. Family as a source of support, love and warmth, as a

model to be imitated now and in the future. 'Family' meant usually the nuclear family of parents and siblings but some interviewees voiced a desire for a wider family and mentioned their extended family, including grandparents and uncles and cousins whom they visited more or less frequently and who also constituted a significant element in their life. Some interviewees referred to the troubles and frustrations of family life; quarrels with siblings, the parents' divorce, envy of the parents, and these things too counted as part of the broad meaningfulness of 'family'. Reker and Wong (1988) and other researchers agreed that the concept of 'family' belongs to the category of 'personal relationships', which are the most important thing in most people's lives. Other studies include under the heading of 'relationships', sub-categories such as friends, family and spouses/partners.

In the present study, the category 'relationships' is divided into 'family' and 'friends' because of my conviction that the two constructs have different emotional meaning for children. Whereas in adulthood one's family of origin is just one more relationship, albeit a significant one, in childhood the family is the context and startpoint for everything. Children are not independent, they are 'sucklings', they cannot exist either mentally or physically without the family, so that, in childhood, I argue, it would be a mistake to equate these two sources of meaning in life. Sixsmith et al. (2007) agreed with this argument in their study of children's perceptions of their own wellbeing: the children in their study related to 'family' and 'friends' as different categories and the researchers claim that for children "the simplicity of the word 'family' hides the complexity of what the term actually denotes". (Sixsmith et al., 2007, p. 527). In the present study the children indeed related to family and friends as two separate categories. For instance, eight of the ten drawings on the theme of 'family' depicted family members in or next to the family home, a linkage which in my opinion confirms my judgement that for children 'family' is a unique concept and does not include friends.

'Friends' was the second most frequently cited important aspect of life in the present study. One could have a good time with them; they helped dispel loneliness and misery, although friends too had their difficult and annoying aspects. In several responses these negative aspects served to emphasize how important friends were to the interviewee.

Different studies point out the importance of friends and friendship to children at middle age childhood. Erikson (1950), among others, related to the importance of peer relations in middle

childhood, Sullivan (1953) discussed the importance of friends at ages six to twelve, claiming that peer group friendships enable children to test and establish matters of pressing interest—hopes, fears, sources of concern and self-value. Parker et al. (2006) made similar comments, saying that "The period from 6 years to 11 or 12 years is characterized by a great deal of change and growth in interpersonal skills and in the context and quality of children's peer relationships" (p. 425). It is abundantly clear that friends and friendships are likely to be of central importance to children in middle childhood, and that it is to be expected that friends and friendships will be prominent among the matters of greatest current meaning to them in their lives. (see pp. 52-53, 82).

Many studies emphasise the importance of relationships in people's lives at all ages. For example, Bar-Tur et al. (2001) highlight 'interpersonal relationships' and Parger (1996) also found that personal relationships, including family, friends and intimate relationships, were the most meaningful source of meaning to the participants in his study. Another interesting study conducted by Debats et al. (1995) investigated the 'psychometric properties of the Life Regard Index' (LRI), a scale developed to measure meaning in life by Battista and Alomond in 1973. This study found a strong connection between the LRI and marital status. Marriage is not relevant to the children in the present research, of course, but the importance to them of relationships and partnerships, as a whole, and the extent to which these define a satisfying and meaningful life, is remarkable.

The third most important thing in life, according to the children in the present study was '*creative and leisure-time activity*', mentioned by many as something that made them feel good with themselves. They cited, for example, painting, dancing and computer-related activities. Other researchers have also found that leisure-time activities are meaningful to a variety of age groups (for example, Parger, 1996, O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996).

These three categories—family, friends and leisure-time activities—were cited by at least two-thirds of the children and, as such, came far in front of any other category. For the interviewees they were clearly the most meaningful aspects of their lives.

'*Health and security*' came next in frequency of citation. This was a category which combined staying healthy, safe and alive (that is, to be protected from death, illness, missile

attack and other terrorist threats), both with respect to the participants themselves and their nearest and dearest. My linking together of health and security stems from my interpretation of what the children were trying to express. I judged that they were referring to their general need for a sense of security, a sense of being protected against physical harm, whether this came from the national political situation and the hand of man (war, terrorist attack) or from forces of nature (illness and death). All research studies into the sources of individual meaning in life cite health as a key element, although it is ranked higher by the elderly than by younger age groups. For example, Ebersole and DeVolger (1983), Ebersole and DePaola (1987) and Reker and Wong (1988) all reported that their samples' basic needs included shelter and safety. However, it seems fairly evident that the particular international political context in which the participants in the research have grown up (the permanent threat and actuality of war and terrorist threat, family members in the army and danger) gave particular importance to the issue of health and safety. This will be discussed in more detail below.

'Environmental issues' were mentioned as important by about one-quarter of the children, such as the necessity to save water and protect the Sea of Galilee and the natural environment in general. No other research has been reported as citing this category, at least not under this heading. The explanation is probably time and culture. The great majority of other relevant studies were made ten and twenty or more years ago when the concern for the protection of the natural environment was much less urgent and much lower on national agendas. Also Israeli schools have in recent years been 'proselytizing' pupils on this issue. However, 'nature' has come up in one earlier study. O'Connor and Chamberlain (1996) stated that they found a need to add another aspect not mentioned by other researchers—'nature', to reflect their participant's feeling for nature and its beauty.

Material possessions: All studies into what people find important in their lives mention that material possessions figure prominently on the list. Ebersole and DePaula (1987) entitled this category 'Obtaining materialistic preference' while Bar-Tur et al. (2001) termed it 'Materialistic concerns' and reported that it held more importance for young adults than for older age groups.

Relations with animals: This category was not mentioned by many children but those who did talked a lot about their love of their pets and their relations with animals in general. Another study (Bar-Tur et al., 2001) also found 'relations with animals' to be an important source of

meaning and the topic will be discussed below, in relation to gender. Several other studies, for example, Sixsmith et al. (2006), also reported the importance of pets to children.

'Love' too was mentioned by only five children but these five all recurred to it many times during their interview. For them love was a key source of meaning in life – to love, to be loved, love as something that gives meaning to life. In other studies most of the respondents who referred to love did so in the context of personal relationships—love of one's family, friends, spouse. As a concept in its own right, as an abstract idea, it occurs quite a lot in Frankl's writings (1970). Of the five children in the present study who emphasized this category, four (two boys and two girls) were interviewed in pairs and it might be speculated that one in the pair was influenced by the other. This may well have happened, that one raised the notion which the other then caught on to, but, as against this, all five children also cited other abstract concepts, such as understanding the complexity of the world, faith in God, and the need to maintain one's authenticity as the right way to live.

'Faith' was another rare category—only one girl mentioned it as a source of meaning. It came as a great surprise to me to hear God depicted as someone who could be consulted and who would render help, someone one could draw strength from, and this from an eight-year-old girl from a secular family, whose schooling was also secular. Of course, religious faith is very well established in the theological and philosophical literature as a source of personal strength (see, for example, Leibowitz, 1999), while, among the students of meaning in life, Reker and Wong (1988) also reported that religion can be a source of meaning in life.

These last three categories were cited by few children but among these few they were predominant and laden with meaning. These few children demonstrate the point very clearly that each and every individual has their own priorities as to what is important in their life.

The second research sub-question was: 'What is the best way to live?' Children are not only aware of what is personally meaningful to them but can also set out a more wide-ranging understanding of meaning in life, one which relates to attitudes, values and morality. Frankl (1970) and Baumeister (1991) both pointed out this connection between values and meaning in life, with Frankl arguing that values can guide the search for meaning and Baumeister claiming that values are one of the four possible components of meaning. Baumeister referred to the fact that there are values which state what must not be done (not to murder, not to steal) and others

which state what must be done (to help others, to share, to behave heroically). The children in the present study made the same distinction between negative values (not to hurt others, not to quarrel, not to fight) and positive ones (to help others, to keep the peace, be a good person).

The children's responses to this sub-question can be categorized into six good ways to live life: to live in peace and pursue non-violent relations; to help others; to be a good student and invest in scholastic achievement; to understand how the world works, to take a positive stance to life; and to be authentic and true to oneself. Of these, the first was the most frequently cited as the best way to live life: it was cited by three-quarters of the children. Under this heading they included *living in peace and non-violence* both on principle, as an inter-state strategy (i.e. Israel with its neighbours) and also as the best way to treat one's friends. Again, it would seem that the preoccupation with the issue of peace and non-violent relations, even among friends, is to be attributed to the fact of living in a conflict area. In violence-torn settings children are more aware of wider political issues. For example, McEvoy (2000) conducted a study in Northern Ireland with youths and found that the majority of the young people who were members of the groups interviewed had imagined and desired peace. Oppenheimer and Kuipers (2003) confirmed that differences in children's views on war and peace stem from their sociocultural environment and echo the norms and values of the society they have been brought up in, as well as the geographical region they live in.

'*Helping others*' was the second most frequent response to the second research sub-question. Many children mentioned their personal wish to help others and that 'helping others' was the best way to live. Ebersole and DeVolger (1981) reported too that the idea of 'service' was cited by many of their respondents along with the wish to help others as a source of meaning in life. So did Westerhof et al. (2004) in their study of the sources of altruism and service. Wong and Reker (1988) stated that values and ideals help one 'endure'. I believe that in the present study the children's idea of 'helping others' as the best way to live reflects, in concrete terms, this abstract idea of the value of altruism.

'*Being a good student*' and investing in scholastic achievement as a path to achieving one's goals in life was another strong response by my interviewees on being asked how best to live life. This could have been expected. Several other studies into meaning in life among young children and young people (Taylor and Ebersole, 1993; DeVolger and Ebersole, 1983) reported this idea under a category which they call 'schooling'. The wish to be a good student and

improve scholastic behaviour can also be found under the heading of 'personal achievement' in Reker and Wong's studies (for example, 1988).

Here too the three most frequent responses – 'live in peace', 'helping others', and 'Being a good student' came far ahead of the remaining responses in frequency of citation.

'Understand how the world works' is a most unique category. Most of the responses in this category were very concrete: one had to know how to manage in the world, how to ensure food and drink, shelter, a living; one had to know how what made up a regular day, when to eat, what was done at different times. But there were also responses in abstract terms: one had to appreciate the world's complexity, that there was good and bad in it, that sometimes things went well but sometimes they didn't and one had to know how to deal with both. The answer to how both these classes of response, the concrete understanding of the world and the emotionally complex understanding—were halves of the same whole is found in the meaning-in-life literature which has established a close linkage between meaning in life and the need for an ordered, comprehensible world. King et al. (2006) reported studies she made in which her respondents reported a stronger sense of meaning in their life when they felt they understood the world around them. Antonovsky's (1987) coherence approach confirmed this linkage between meaning and comprehending of the world, and so did Bruner's work (1990). The conclusion I came to was that both understandings of how the world worked were necessary to appreciate its true character.

'To take a positive stance on life' and *'To be authentic and true to oneself'*: both these last recommendations were proffered by a small number of interviewees, perhaps because both are rather complex and abstract and concepts even adults find hard to grasp and put in practice. Relevant references in the literature are to be found under the heading of 'personal growth' (Reker & Wong, 1988) or 'growth' (Ebersole & DePaula, 1987). Other researchers too have probed the values of personal growth and personal wellbeing as sources of meaning in life, such as Ryff (1989).

This citing by certain children of such difficult and abstract categories of meaning is one more confirmation that every individual finds their own sources of meaning in life; everyone has their own angle of view—more or less abstract, looking outward to interpersonal relations or mutual help or inwards to self-improvement and individual authenticity. Each and every one of the

children in my research had come to their own authentic appreciation of what was meaningful in their life.

The Third research sub-question: goals, strengths and character traits was represented to the children by a number of different questions which probed for the children's belief about the strengths and personal resources they had. The professional literature has long established a connection between meaning in life and perceived self-efficacy and happiness (e.g. Seligman, 2002), between meaning in life and setting oneself goals (e.g. McKnight & Kashdan, 2009), and between meaning in life and the ability to be happy (e.g. King & Napa, 1998). It was most interesting that the children in the present study 'ticked all these boxes'. They talked about their goals for the future, their positive character traits, their ability to control negative emotions, and their confidence in their ability to achieve their ambitions.

The above findings of the literature are the sources of the questions put to the children in the third section of their interview: (a) Do they think they have character traits that can help them achieving their goals in the future? And if so what traits?; (b) Do they have any goals for the future which connected with aspirations and future lines of work they had in mind?; (c) Do the goals demand a lot of investment of effort and are they willing to make this investment?; and (d) What are they more, happy or unhappy, and when they are unhappy how long does it take till they are happy again?

Character traits the children believe they have which can help them in life

Someone who believes in themselves and their abilities, who finds in themselves positive character traits, who connects these traits to their life goals and has faith in their ability to achieve these goals, and who is willing to make the necessary long-term effort, this is someone who has found meaning in life and will also find happiness (Seligman, 2002). Analysis of the character strengths which the children ascribed to themselves connects directly to what theory has to say about the characteristics of a person who has meaning in their life (Frankl, 1970) or who is a happy person (Seligman, 2002).

The importance of sources of meaning within oneself is also emphasized by Westerhof et al. (2004), who argued that character traits and self-acceptance are dimensions to finding meaning in life, just as Ebersole and DePaula (1987), and Reker and Wong (1988) argued that personal growth, self-improvement and developing one's talents are important sources of

meaning in life. Seligman and Peterson (2004) set out the "character strengths" (that are 'character traits that can help in life') which they deem to be typical of a happy person ('meaning in life' is one of their three components of happiness). Baumeister (1991) talked about the need for a sense self-worth and self-efficacy (besides the need for purpose and for values).

The children's responses were analysed regarding their character traits that can help them in life according to the Seligman and Peterson classification. Almost all the children answered that they had such character traits. Some cited generosity, a loving nature, a willingness to help others (Seligman and Peterson classification: 'humanity'); some cited being a good pupil, curiosity and love of learning (Seligman and Peterson classification: 'wisdom and knowledge'); and a few cited an appreciation for beauty in the world (Seligman and Peterson classification: 'transcendentality'). I am happy to report that the children's responses were full and varied and that most ascribed helpful characteristics to themselves, characteristics which they reported with happiness and pride, thus demonstrating a strong sense of their self-worth, which is so essential to meaning in life, wellbeing and happiness.

Future occupation as reflecting life-goals and the investment needed to fulfill them

The literature review makes a point of the strong linkage between life goals and meaning in life, a point made by almost every researcher into the topic of meaning in life (e.g. Ryff, 1989; Reker & Wong, 1987; Semmons, 2005). Motivation is also needed in order to fulfil one's purposes and goals (Fry, 1998; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992) and confidence in having the strengths to fulfil those goals, which depends, according to Ryff (1989) on perceived self-worth. Baumeister (1991) argued that one must feel four needs in order to find meaning in life and two of them are relevant to what is being discussed here—need for a purpose in life and need for a sense of efficacy (the belief that one can make a difference).

The children were asked whether they had a particular line of work in mind for the future. If they answered yes, they were asked if that sort of work demanded an investment of personal resources and, if so, whether they were prepared to make this investment. The majority of the children had indeed identified an occupation, even two or three, which they wanted to work in, varying from teacher to dancer, from football player to archaeologist, from doctor to policewoman. They all said that their future plans for their occupation demanded a lot of investment and that they were ready to make it. Even the boy (Ayal) who said that he wanted to

be a football player and that therefore he did not need to go to school said that he needed to invest great effort in football training. It seemed that they found the idea of fulfilling their goals and future plans exciting. I did not get the impression that they felt they needed to convince me that knew how to work hard. Maybe this was because while thinking about one's future occupation is not new to children, thinking about the kind of effort needed in order to fulfil that wish is quite new and so interesting.

The balance between happiness and unhappiness

Further questions explored the balance in the children between happiness and unhappiness. The ability to be more happy than unhappy, to keep unhappiness and sadness in balance and control it features in the research instruments I surveyed as one of the indicators of meaning in life and a capacity for happiness (Happiness Measurement Questionnaire, Fordyce, 1988). Most of the children said that they were more happy than unhappy and that when they were miserable they got over it fairly quickly. Some even cited tried and tested ways they had devised for getting over misery. There were children who stated firmly that one had to accept a full range of feelings, both joy and sadness, and that both had their place. There were others who said that they treated sadness as a minor aspect of their life. Seligman and Csikszentimihalyi (2000) claimed that the capacity to accept ones feelings for what they are and to be more happy than miserable is a key building-block of wellbeing and happiness.

7.2.3 *Major aspects in children's responses*

Two aspects stood out in the children's talk about meaning in life, aspects which they reverted to regardless of what research question they were being asked, which they referred to both directly and indirectly, and whether they were talking to me or amongst themselves. I set out and discuss these two aspects here as they expand our perception of what is really important in children's lives.

Personal Relations

Although earlier I took some trouble to justify separating the two categories of 'family' and 'friends' I want at this point to consider relationships as a whole, including family relations, in an attempt to demonstrate just how predominant is this element in children's lives.

There is not one study of personal meaning which has not placed interpersonal relations centre-stage (e.g. Ebersole and DePaula, 1987). In the present study the children talked about relations with others in different ways and in response to different questions and themes. Personal relations came up in answer to questions about sources of meaning in life, about the best way to live and about the children's own inner resources and traits of character. This category of relations with others includes of course relations with family and with friends but also with pet animals; it includes the subject of love, the need to live in peace and not quarrel, the wish to help others. In other words, it crosses six out of the total of fourteen categories mentioned in response to the first two research questions. As for the character traits children ascribed to themselves, it takes in the children who referred to the values of humanity, kindness and love, who liked helping others and playing with their friends and were good at these things. Even in the professions which the children had marked out for themselves some of the professions were cited as 'helping others', whether it was doctoring or being a new Spiderman, and that was even given as the reason why that particular profession had been chosen. Parker et al. (2006) also comment on the importance of relations to children, saying that "The period from six years to eleven or twelve years is characterized by a great deal of change and growth in interpersonal skills and in the context and quality of children's peer relationships" (p. 425).

The importance of relations with others as a crucial ingredient of life was emphasized in the concreteness of day-to-day routine—in the way your mother helped and comforted you when you were in trouble, the way your grandfather met you from school and helped you over your fears, in visiting the extended family on the weekends and eating with them, in friends coming to visit you when you were ill and as a way to lift yourself out of boredom, as hanging out with your friends or playing with your dog who loves you unconditionally. But the importance of personal relations came out in broader and more abstract ways too—in the wish for non-violent communications with others, the wish to help the other and in the confidence that the ability to love or help is of great value in life.

Reviewing all these categories and aspects, it is beyond doubt that relations with others is the heart and soul of a child's life.

Day-to-Day Activities

The second great theme in what the children had to say to me and to each other was the importance of the every-day. This emerged directly in the form of leisure-time activities and activity groups, as artistic activity and hanging out with friends, in the hours spent playing computer games at home, as well as in coping with regular conflicts—with siblings, parents, friends, in doing homework for school, and much more. All these ingredients make up the day-to-day life which occupies so much of the children's time. School life and activities are also part of it—getting good grades, doing homework, getting a pat on the back from the teacher. Some of the children's materialistic concerns can also be part of it, such as wanting all the family to have a mobile phone. So can trips outside the house to the park and further afield, perhaps even the concern for the water level in Lake Galilee, something which the broadcast news reminds every Israeli of throughout the winter months. As for the children's advice to the alien about how to live, the need to understand how the world works is drawn from how the child manages their daily round—you need food and shelter and to appreciate that the world has anxieties and fears in it, fears of there not being shelter for you and that bombs might fall on you.

It reminded me the way Kvale (1996) talked about the 'life world', how the topic of the qualitative research interview is the lived world of the participants and their relation to it; how the researcher's purpose "is to describe and understand the central themes the subjects experience and live towards." (Kvale, 1996, p. 29).

In sum, the round of children's day-to-day life preoccupies them and feeds into their perception of the world and their thinking as to what is most important.

7.2.4 Abstract thinking vs. concrete thinking

One of the issues that require to be reviewed in the context of this research is that 'meaning in life' is an abstract concept which perhaps children find it hard to grasp and refer to themselves. At which age children's thinking becomes abstract is still not fully resolved. Piaget (1977) talked about a pre-operational stage at which children already display 'buds' of abstract thinking. According to Feldman's (2001) scale, children aged 8-10 can grasp the reciprocal relations between their own and another's point of view, can review their own covert psychological

processes and anticipate the other's perspective. They can form a linked chain of points of view but cannot yet abstract from this process to the level of simultaneous mutuality. He terms this stage a stage of self-reflectivity. Bruner (1960) claimed that a child's thinking is contingent on their surroundings and develops through their activities. It is incontrovertible, however, that adults' abstract thinking is different from children's.

In the present study it was evident that most children gave concrete answers but that a minority were able to respond in abstract terms. The first research question, about the most important and meaningful things in life, attracted mostly concrete responses: family, friends, "that my friends play with me", "that my dog jumps up at me", but at the same time there were answers in abstract terms too which indicated more high order thinking, such as 'love' and 'religious faith'. Even within the concrete categories there were more abstract elements, for example, "Creativity makes the world perfect" or "Family, that's something you love and feel strongly in your heart". Abstraction sometimes appears in the form of metaphor: "A perfect world is a world of colour with no black in it".

The second research question, about the best way to live, had greater potential for abstraction and for an abstract way of thinking since the question took children away from the day-to-day towards an overarching judgement and, indeed, there were many more abstract replies. The concern for peace and non-violence was expressed both concretely ("that my uncles should come back from the army", "that they should get Gilad Shalit back", "that no bombs should fall on us") and abstractly ("that there should be peace in the world"). The category of 'helping others' also appeared both concretely (giving concrete help within the family, to friends and to the homeless poor) and abstractly (as the idea that it is important to give to others when they are in trouble). The two children who stated that positive thinking helped them and gave them meaning in life demonstrated both positive and abstract thinking: 'You have to cope with life and move forwards. Not stay stuck in your suffering' were approximately the words of Emmanuelle. And the two boys who said being true to yourself was the best way to live also demonstrated abstract thinking: 'You have to be who you are, follow the feelings in your heart.' The essential idea behind such words is an abstract one even if it is put in more concrete terms. The category 'Understand how the world works' also featured both day-to-day concreteness ("you need of find food and shelter") as well as abstraction- the need to

'understand that the world is made up of good and bad'). Sometimes concreteness was used to explain the abstraction, as for instance, Rony talking about the demands of school: 'The alien has to understand that life can be hard' and then he explained: 'There's assignments to do, a lot of homework.' Also with regard to the children's own strengths and traits there were both concrete responses, such as specific learning abilities, and more abstract and inclusive responses, such as: "I'm good at loving", "good at giving to others" and again abstract answers which were then explained in concrete terms.

As for the issue of abstract and concrete thinking among the children themselves and between the children and adults, my conclusions were that the children understood the abstract question perfectly well and responded to it in their own way and own language, some more abstractly, others more concretely. For instance, with respect to the concept in the literature of 'personal growth' (e.g. Reker & Wong, 1998, Ebersole & DePaula, 1987), no child mentioned the importance of personal growth in those words, or the importance of coping with conflict and the desire for achievement, but they did talk about aspects of life that feed into those categories. They talked about their wish to build a particular future for themselves and do well at school, which are components of personal growth. Their values and attitudes were represented concretely and abstractly, for example, the children talked about the need for peace and that no one should be poor, feelings that might well mature later into activist social or political attitudes (Reker & Wong, 1988) but which even at their age manifested a degree of societal vision. In my view the degree of abstraction in this thinking is less relevant than the meaning lying behind it. The children talked about authenticity, for example, a very abstract concept, without of course a single one of them knowing the word as such, but that was what they were talking about and they made this clear in half concrete, half abstract language.

To sum up on the issue of the children's thinking, I would say that they put forward their opinions, thoughts and points of view with great inner authenticity and integrity. The issue as to whether one or other child commanded more generalizing and abstract thinking capacity seems to me less important than the critical question of the importance to them of meaning in life.

7.2.5 *Meaning in life and resilience*

The logical but little-researched association between meaning in life and resilience has been summarised in the literature review above (see p.35-37). As noted earlier, the little research done in this field shows directly and clearly that having sense of meaning in life is a source of resilience from adversity, as well as helping one cope with day-to-day difficulties (e.g. Masten & Reed, 2002). These researchers and others indeed composed a list (agreed by all scholars, they claimed) of factors making for resilience among children. One of these factors was 'sense of meaning in life' (Wright et al., 2013). Baum (2008) also related to meaning as a protective factor and said:

... Resilience puts the emphasis on protective factors that promote health and normal development. These components may include, but are not limited to, a sense of personal safety, empathy, social (and familial) support, belonging, a sense of control, meaning in life, optimism, hope, faith or religious affiliation, and humor.

(Baum, 2008, p. 491)

Smith (2006) claimed that these factors need to be investigated and structured in terms of the individual and social culture each child has grown up in, and that each child has primary personal factors/traits which they bring to every situation and on which they rely for support.

All the questions put to the children and the responses they gave, in the third section of the interview, related to the linkage of meaning in life to resilience: Character traits that the child can rely on for support as resilience source (Smith, 2006) feature directly in the question and responses about character strengths. The ability to set clear and realistic goals (Goldstein & Brooks, 2006) as resilience source features in the question and responses about plans for the future and future occupation. Sources of social support as resilience source (Baum, 2008) feature in children's responses about sources of meaning such as family and friends. Benard (2004) argued for sense of meaning, creativity and optimism and goal direction as sources of strength and resilience and this is represented in the responses about having goals, being more happy than unhappy, and choosing creativity as a meaningful issue in life.

Gilligan (2000) listed a range of areas of life from which children can draw strength and resilience, among them creativity, a supportive school, routines which provide order and

structure, love of pets. All these areas and more are mentioned by the children in the present study as sources of meaning for them. Their emphasis on helping others can also be seen as linking to the category of 'helping and volunteering' which many studies (e.g. Harel et al, 2002) have found to be a source of resilience. In the present study sources of meaning in life, values that guide them on the right path, positive character traits, inner strengths, optimism and goals they have set for themselves all reinforce the children's resilience and furnish them support, as they do any children in their day-to-day struggle with life.

7.2.6 Children's individualities and disparities

The fourth research sub-question was: *How do children's individuality and the differences between them show themselves in their perspectives on meaning in life? To what extent is gender associated with variations in response?*

Gender differences: Most studies into meaning in life have found no important differences between men and women, but in the present study with children there were a few differences which need to be explained and the search for the explanation will show directions in which the present study could be expanded. Other studies into the reactions and attitudes of girls and boys in a variety of domains have also found disparities. Although such a small number of participants in the present study cannot be a basis for drawing conclusions and the gender disparities found may be due to variables not tested for, nonetheless, there are certain clear indications for future research to elaborate.

- Twice as many girls as boys cited 'helping others' and 'to live in peace' as the best way to live—a finding which matches many other studies which have also found that girls display much more pro-social behaviour than boys (e.g. Pursell et al., 2008; Karniol et al., 2003, Beutel & Mooney Marini, 1995).
- Twice as many boys as girls cited the need to 'understand how the world works'. This matches other findings that men and youths are more involved in goal-oriented behaviour (such as issuing instructions) and material concerns than women and girls (e.g. Beutel & Mooney Marini, 1995).
- All the girls cited family as the most important thing in their lives but only three-quarters of the boys. Does this mean that family is less important to boys? Or do boys talk less about it than girls?

- The single gender gap in this study which is matched by meaning-in-life research among adults is that regarding love for/relations with pets. Twice as many boys as girls cited the importance of their pet in their lives and the boys recurred to this theme throughout their interview. The girls who cited this aspect of life talked about it in more general terms and without marking it of particular importance to them. Bar-Tur's 2001 study also found the same significant departure between men and women and in the same direction (after controlling for cultural and age differences).

Cultural influences: In a number of domains of meaning in life the effect of their environment on the children is clearly visible. Two-thirds of the children stated that the best way to live is in peace and without war and, moreover, gave this answer to several different questions; What is the best way to live? What would you ask a fairy for? What is a perfect world? And so on. The children were referring not only to the need for peace in the world but to their own country's need for peace. Some of these answers were couched in negative terms: A perfect world is a world without war, where people don't quarrel and kill each other. Some of the children who gave this sort of answer were referring to quarrels with their friends but the great majority were thinking of peace on the international scene. As mentioned earlier, studies into children living in conflict regions do indeed report that the children are very caught up in the war situation and long for peace (e.g. McEvoy, 2000, Hakvoort & Oppenheimer, 1993).

Israel is a country in a more or less permanent state of war, where in between declared international wars there are continually smaller clashes and military episodes which the children are exposed to by the media, by talk within the family, by siblings and relatives serving in the army, or are even exposed to in the flesh when an attack takes place in their neighbourhood or a local siren warns of an imminent rocket strike. The whole country and society is caught up permanently in the subject of war and conflict. The children in the present study, eight-years-old at the time of the research, had gone through a war two years earlier, when they were six, during which they spent a lot of time in air-raid shelters, so that the prominence of their concern for peace and the need to stop wars is unsurprising.

The children's concern for health and security is evidently closely linked to their feelings about war. Almost a quarter of the children expressed the need to remain healthy, protected and not

be killed, some of them with reference to war and others with reference to illness and other hazards. The professional literature on child development states that the concept of death generally matures in children at about age nine (Piaget, 1966; Nagy, 1948) which is when they also learn to cope with threatening thoughts of death by the mechanism of repression (Alexander & Adlerstein, 1958). Smilansky (1987) found that Israeli children talked about aspects of death at much earlier ages than American or British children and also acquired the concept of death much sooner. It seems that the concern of the children in the present study with their own and their family members' health stems from fear of war, terror attacks and other life-threatening events they are exposed to, and so continuously that repression is hardly possible.

Another culturally-related topic which emerged in the present study but has in no other is that of environmental issues. Today this is a live issue all around the world, as it was not twenty to thirty years ago when the majority of the studies into personal meaning in life were carried out. The interviewees in the present study touched on the environmental issue from a number of angles—the need for a clean, green world with parks and flowers, a need which links not only to environmental quality but also to aesthetics and beauty and the quality of life. They talked about the necessity of saving water, also an extremely live issue in Israel which is in a permanent state of anxiety about the water level in the Sea of Galilee, the country's only large lake and chief natural reservoir, and which is slowly receding. Saving water is a message children are exposed to daily, in public announcements on television, in the news and, of course at school and when taking a shower, when many parents remind their children not to waste water.

7.3 Methodological approach to meaning in life

7.3.1 Gathering data from the children

I conclude from the discussion in this chapter that **there are indeed ways to gather meaning-in-life data from children**. The methods approach used to investigate the concept (story-telling, interviewing and picture drawing) proved to be effective and reliable, something demonstrated both by the way the two methods, the verbal and the non-verbal, corroborated each other and by the things the children chose to talk about, which hardly differed from those chosen by adults in similar contexts.

The Literature Review highlights a number of instruments and research methods developed to measure the existence of meaning in life, of which the primary ones still in use are the Life Regard Index (Battista & Almond, 1973) and the Purpose in Life test (Crumbaugh & Maholick (1964). Other instruments are shorter/different versions of tests to measure 'meaning in life' (for example, Steger et al.'s 'Meaning in Life Questionnaire' (2006) and the Personal Meaning Index (PMI), by Reker (2005)). Other researchers have developed methods to measure the sources of meaning in life, (for example: DeVolger & Ebersole (1981), Westerhof et al. (2004), Reker & Wong (1988)). Most of the instruments developed are the product of quantitative research studies and most are applied by questionnaires. Respondents are asked to select a source of meaning in life or select three sources of meaning and rank them according to their importance to themselves. Few studies have made use of interviewing or of open questions which invite open responses.

In the present study I wanted to give expression to meaning in life's various aspects by taking a different methodological approach from the one commonly applied. This derived firstly from my epistemological stance and my adoption of a qualitative research approach and secondly from my phenomenological interest in children's views as to what was important in life. Neither the use of questionnaires nor asking children to rank less or more sources of meaning in life by importance fitted in with this phenomenological approach for this is an approach which requires the participants, the children, to be made active partners in the research effort. The conventional research methods described above do not do this. Using them would not have furnished me a full rounded understanding of the children's thinking and views. Hence a further

conclusion from this research study is that its methodology and its research topic/content are inseparable.

The methodology comprised three techniques—a semi-structured interview, an introductory story which preceded the interview and which laid the ground for a dialogue-type communication with the child interviewees, and having the children draw a picture representing and reinforcing some element of the preceding interview. This three-pronged approach stemmed from a number of aspirations: (a) to corroborate data by obtaining it from more than one source; (b) to make the data obtained richer and more varied by multiplying its sources (Punch, 2002); (c) to avoid ethical and methodological errors due to miss-understanding the children's responses (Morrow & Richards, 1996); (d) to use data-gathering techniques tailored to children.

The primary value of the interview technique to me was that it emphasizes the dyad of interviewer and interviewee and places the research participant centre-stage, without devaluing either partner. A semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to go deeper into the interviewee's inner and outer world. Even if the interviewer arrives with a list of prepared questions the flow and direction of the interview is determined by both parties and topics can be raised which the interviewer had not necessarily intended or prepared for but which uncover a very relevant aspect of the research topic. Kvale (2007) related to the interview as a conversation, which "goes beyond the spontaneous exchange of views as in everyday conversation, and becomes a careful questioning and listening approach with the purpose of obtaining thoroughly tested knowledge." (Kvale, 2007, p. 7).

This is all the more the case when the research participants are children. Research with children requires careful thinking as to the children's place within the research project. The research design must allow their voice to be fully heard, not just as answer-giver to a questioner but as participant in a discussion and dialogue which provides full room for their thoughts and views to emerge. A structured questionnaire would not do that. When the participants in the research are children questionnaires of any sort, and abstract questions in particular, are not appropriate instruments, not only because a questionnaire might be too hard for them to read and understand but because it does not make space for their own voice and

thinking but only for their replies to given questions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). A semi-structured interview is much more suitable, with its questions borrowed from meaning in life questionnaires designed for adults and adapted to the interviewees' perceptions and manner of communication. The children's replies proved that my adaptation had succeeded: the questions had been understood and the content of the reply indeed related to meaning in life.

Using a story

Without the introductory story the ensuing interview/dialogue/conversation would have hardly been possible. The story—about an alien being sent to Earth from another planet to find out how best to live life—enabled a number of factors to fall into place. Firstly, it set a friendly, warm tone and atmosphere and set up an intriguing theme, all of which made a safe entry into the interview. Kobovi (1991) pointed out that children love stories and that the story-telling medium comes naturally to them. Kvale (2007) confirmed the importance of making a pleasant and friendly start so that the interview can flow easily from then on:

We exist in a conversational circle, where our understanding of the social world depends on conversations and our understanding of conversation is based on our understanding of the social world..... The problem is not to get out of the conversational circle but to get into it in the right way.

(Kvale, 2007, p. 144)

Secondly, the story put the children in a position of strength, in which they were to instruct this alien being in the best way to live. Rather than, as is usual for them in school, the adult (me) possessing all the answers, they instead have been made the holders of valuable knowledge. Rather than they being in the position of interviewees not sure what is the correct answer to the questions put to them, the needed instruction was in their hands. I had found no other meaning-in-life study which had made use of the story technique.

Using drawings

Nowadays quite a lot of research studies with children deploy creative data-gathering tools and drawings are increasingly being used as a means of researching children's experiences (for example, Veale, 2005). The use of non-verbal methods alongside verbal ones adds a further dimension to the dialogue. Since children express themselves easily in drawing asking them to

make one adds a child-tailored data-gathering technique and the data gathered by the one technique can be compared and corroborated against data gathered by another. New data may even emerge from deploying a second or third data-gathering technique.

The interview in the present study with Guy is a case in point. He had mentioned his wish to join a circus and even make the circus his profession but this had only been one among many other aspects of importance to him since he overflowed with ideas and had found multiple approaches to the notion of meaning in life. I would never have grasped the full weight of the notion of a circus to him had he not chosen that theme for the subject of his drawing. "Look", he said excitedly, "they're flying through the air" and only then did I realise what he had been trying to say earlier and grasp the full meaning of the circus to him.

7.3.2 *Studies Comparison*

The only other study I have located to investigate meaning in life among children is Taylor and Ebersole study, in 1993. A methodological comparison of the two studies identifies the following differences:

- In the Taylor and Ebersole study the children were asked to select one aspect of life which was meaningful to them. In the present study the children could review the whole range of sources of meaning in life without limitation.
- In the Taylor and Ebersole study the children's replies were assessed in light of existing meaning-in-life categories. In the present study the categories of sources of meaning were derived from the children's own responses.
- In the Taylor and Ebersole study the children were asked to make a drawing but the drawings were all but ignored as a source of data. In the present study the data in the drawings was fully exploited.
- In the Taylor and Ebersole study the children were asked about one aspect of 'meaning in life' – sources of meaning. In the present study the children were asked about other aspects to meaning in life besides sources of meaning.

This comparison highlights the stance of the present study, which accorded full space to the children as participants, to their thinking, to their choices and forms of expression. In other

words, this study was carefully and specifically designed to elicit a new dimension to current knowledge about meaning in life in general and among children in particular.

The uniqueness of the present study's design can be summed up as follows:

- It affords children a full opportunity to relate to the complex and abstract concept of meaning in life from different aspects by asking them questions which 'speak to them', that is the questions are relevant to and drawn from the children's own understanding of the world.
- It constructs a fruitful channel of communication to the children by deploying creative data gathering techniques which are equally relevant to and drawn from the children's understanding of the world. The techniques used are both verbal and non-verbal, deploy humour and exploit the children's virtues as research participants and the close connection established with them by the chosen methodology.

This methodological uniqueness serves to emphasize how inseparable are the responses gathered from the children from the techniques used to gather them.

7.3.3 *Response frequencies –the breadth dimension*

An interesting further way of analysing and representing the children's responses is to apply to the Reker and Wong's (1988) concept of 'breadth'. The breadth or diversity of meaning in life can be quantified to some extent by the number of sources from which a person derives that meaning (Reker, 2000). The ideal is that meaning in life be drawn from diverse sources since the more numerous the sources the greater the sense of fulfillment which can be achieved. And indeed, most people do rely on several sources of meaning rather than on one source alone. The uniqueness of the data-gathering methodology devised for the present study, together with the age of the children and the relatively small number of participants, makes it impossible to compare its data with data from earlier studies but the concept of 'breadth' is an interesting analytical tool which adds another dimension to the study of meaning in life and so it is permissible to take this tool as far as it will go in the present case.

Two frequency counts were made in the present study, (a) the number of sources of meaning in life cited by each child (breadth) in response to the first two research questions, and (b) how many times each child cited a given source of meaning.

(a) The number of sources of meaning in life cited by each child

On average the children cited four to five sources. Five children cited seven or more sources, two of these cited more than nine. Taking a particular look at these five children, it was notable that the interviews with them were particularly free-flowing and abounding in ideas, their language was particularly rich and their thinking unusually abstract. Also they were all obviously highly involved in the issue of the meaning of life. But to conclude that the children who cited fewer sources of meaning in life had less meaning in their life would require further and broader research.

(b) How many times each child cited a given source of meaning

Some children recurred to a particular source of meaning many times during their interview while other sources would be referred to only once or twice. The number of times each child mentioned a particular aspect of life turned out to signify how important that aspect was to the child concerned: the more frequently they reverted to it the more important it was to them. For example, many children mentioned family, friends and leisure-time activities many times over the course of their interview. These same three sources of meaning were cited by the great majority of children in the research. Thus, not only were they cited by most of the children, the children who cited them did so many times. It may be fairly concluded that these components of life were the most central to the children in the present study. It was also clear that some components are more social /contextual than others and that some categories/components of daily life were individually attractive.

On the other hand, there were categories which the children who cited them cited few times during their interview, such as the environmental issues, material possessions, scholastic behavior. By contrast, there were categories cited by few children but by those few children many, many times. One boy, for instance, could hardly stop talking about material possessions, another one talked a lot about his fears and there were four boys who loved to talk and recount incidents about their pet animals. Another category cited by relatively few children but very frequently was love.

Frequency of citation is definitely a reliable indicator of importance and a final point to conclude this sub-section is that since most previous studies in this field have been questionnaire-based and not interview-based they have missed the number of times a category is mentioned as an

indication of the category's importance to interviewees. I would consider this means of assessing the importance of a category to be a valuable new research technic.

7.3.4 *Summary*

The main conclusions from this chapter are as follows:

- The notion of meaning in life is highly relevant and important in children's lives, just as it is in adult lives, even though the two age groups would conceptualize and express their meaning in life in different terms.
- The research design devised for the present study to assess the existence and importance of meaning in life in children's lives has proved itself effective and appropriate for the target population and to be a design which enables one to grasp how children relate to this concept.
- The conventional separation of research design and the data gathered is, in the instance of the present study, proven to be untenable. The design of the present study is inseparable from its data content.

Chapter 8: conclusions

8.1 Introduction

This chapter overviews the whole span of the present research. It raises an ethical dilemma I encountered and sets out the contributions to knowledge this thesis makes, both with respect to its topic, meaning in life among children, and to its methodology—the techniques developed for conducting a study among eight-year-old children, and the inseparable connection between this methodology and the research content it made possible. The study's limitations are reviewed and lastly, the research's recommendations for future research, as well as for educational and therapeutic practice.

8.2 Self-reflection

8.2.1 The Journey

The starting point for this study was my therapeutic work with at-risk children. I wanted to find ways to help them out of their distress and hardship, ways which would focus on connecting them to sources of strength, to their abilities and aspirations, ways which would provide them the endurance and resilience to fight and overcome their difficulties.

The idea that connecting to the sources of meaning in life could be a protective factor and source of resilience stemmed from my own beliefs and the way I live my own life. My premise—based on years of therapeutic work—was that children seek and find meaning in life just as adults do, even if they may find different meanings and call them by different names. When they find this hard to do it is our job as therapists to help them make these connections to meaning, and so find strength.

So I set out on a journey to see if it was really true that the concept of meaning in life was as much present in children's lives as in adults'.

My therapeutic stance and approach rests mainly on child-centred therapeutic approach, humanist and cognitive standpoints and Positive Psychology. The therapist's job is to accept and contain the children's pains, fears and problems, together with the wish to help them connect to their abilities and strengths they do have, even if these are concealed under the weight of years of frustration and failure.

My journey began by devising a research approach rooted in constructivist and phenomenological perceptions which could be applied to doing with research with eight-year-old children. The similarity between the research approach which eventuated and the therapeutic approach I practice reinforced my sense that I had composed an approach which matched both the needs and nature of children, the research topic and my own views on 'meaning in life'.

The encounter with children from the general population, outside my accustomed role of therapist, surprised and moved me from beginning to end. I was fascinated by the depth of the answers the children gave and their power of self-expression, by their need to share with me and take an active part in the discussion of the topics raised. Although my declared starting point was confidence in their abilities and inner strengths I was still taken aback by the degree to which these children could make their views clear and connect to such a complex construct as meaning in life. And do this, moreover, not only as regards the meanings they had found for themselves but within a broader context of over-arching values, and in relation to their objectives for their own futures, fully confident that they could achieve those objectives.

Making an in-depth study of the literature on meaning in life from the points of view of philosophy, psychology, theory and practice has also been an amazing second journey of education and expansion of awareness. One outcome has been to reinforce my fundamental belief in the importance of meaning in life and my choice to use it in the ways I do.

During the data analysis phase, every re-reading of the data, individual and collective, provided some new insight or avenue to explore. So much so that it made me think how much information must elude the working therapist who, for lack of a record of their sessions, has no way of making these second and third readings of their texts, verbal and non-verbal.

Carrying out this study has already given me a great deal and will continue to do so, both by the new practical and theoretical knowledge I have acquired and the addition to my repertoire of methods and techniques which I can put to use not only in future research studies but in my on-going therapeutic work with children and as a supervisor of other therapists.

8.2.2 *An ethical dilemma*

Ethical dilemmas are perhaps to be expected when one is working with children, especially when the conversation is about issues, such as meaning in life, capable of provoking intimate responses.

Neil (2005) reflected on this dilemma, which I have myself encountered in the consulting room.

The potential conflict between the need to protect children from harm and the professional duty to maintain confidentiality for children as their clients is a constant concern for health care professionals working with children.

(Neil, 2005, p. 54)

This ethical dilemma arose during the present study not once but twice. In the first case, a boy spoke of his fears throughout the interview, to the extent that I was worried enough to ask him if he would agree to me talking to his teacher about it, because I believed he could get help. This was the natural solution for me, as my research had been authorized by the Ministry of Education and I was working with school therapists and psychologists. The boy's teacher knew about his fears, she had felt them in class, and after our conversation she turned to the parents to suggest sending the child to counselling.

In the second case a girl talked in her interview about her parents' divorce and sounded so depressed in her attitude towards herself and her life that I was concerned. Again I asked if she would agree for me to talk to the teacher. With her agreement, I asked the teacher if she was aware of the girl's state of mind. It turned out that her parents had separated over a year before, that she was very disturbed by it and that it had come up a lot in the classroom. I again

suggested counselling and I understand that the teacher then started the process of approaching the parents to consult with them on the issue.

In both cases, I first voiced my concerns to the child and sought their permission to break confidentiality by speaking to their teacher. Such a decision to breach confidentiality cannot be taken lightly. Child research participants trust the adult researcher and may not always or fully be aware of the implications of what they are saying. Does this mean it is better not to explore sensitive topics with children, to avoid questions which might lead them to reveal matters of concern, such as anxieties or depression? It is not a simple issue. Talking to the children can also be empowering for them by giving them an opportunity to raise their concerns. Within a child-centred approach—and with the support of my supervisor—I let myself be guided by the two children. Had they chosen not to allow me to tell their teacher, I would not have breached their confidentiality, although that would have led me into another dilemma. In these two instances, my experience as a therapist allowed me to feel fairly confident that I had recognised a situation where the child was telling me things he and she actually wanted to be communicated further. In both cases, the teachers already knew about the child's problems, so that the child had not revealed a secret to me as a cry for help, but more as a way of sharing their feelings. As with other children in the study, they were expressing their understanding and experience of life.

8.3 Contribution to knowledge

The present study is among the first of its kind to probe into meaning in life among children. The only previous study into this topic among children was made twenty years ago, when its topic was the sources of meaning in life. Of necessity then, my study was an exploratory one. In other words, its first task was to establish whether meaning in life was a real and relevant concept at all to middle age children and, if so, what was their perception of it. The fundamental question which centrally motivated this study was what role did meaning in life play for children. What aspects of life did they feel to be the most important; what did they think was the best way to live; what strengths and abilities did they see in themselves which they felt could help them achieve their aspirations—all these are aspects of the possible role/s of 'meaning in life'.

I would now argue that this study contributes to knowledge theoretically and methodologically.

8.3.1 *Theoretical contribution to knowledge*

The first contribution to knowledge is establishing that 'meaning in life' is something that children find very relevant. From every perspective - sources of meaning, connection to goals, character strengths, and positive values - the conclusion was clear and unambiguous. Children do have and see meaning in their life, the idea is meaningful to them, as it is to adults, even if conceptualized and composed differently and put into different words. The findings of the present study among children are very similar to the findings of other studies among young people and adults (e.g. Ebersole and DeVolger, 1981, Bar-Tur et al. 2001). Both children from this study and elders from other studies rated personal relations as the most meaningful element of their lives, and both age groups cited leisure-time activities, health, achievement and personal fulfilment as important sources of meaning in life. The emphases and the words used may be different but the sources of meaning are very similar.

The interview data from the present study furnish a full and rounded picture of the children's thinking and outlook on their 'meanings in life': what are the important things in life, what is the best way to live and what abilities a person needs to make a good life, to set goals and look forwards to the future. Thus I agree with various researchers, Mayall (2000) for example, who argue that children can teach adults about their own lives, about their daily round, about their fears and desires. It is our job (as adults) to let children do just that— teach us.

The sources of meaning the children found were all drawn from their day-to-day life, from their deep relations with their family, friends and pets, from their round of day-to-day activities and what they did in their free time, from their fears of war and terrorist attack, from the concerns they shared with the wider society over the quality of the natural environment, from their wish to live in always which helped people and to be good students, and make a success of their life.

The words and phrases they used were drawn mainly from the here and now. They expressed their thoughts and ideas more concretely than adults, although this varied with the abilities and personality of the individual. There were several who put forward ideas at a level of abstraction, But whether the form of expression was concrete and specific, or over-arching and abstract, it was evident that they were talking about the same concepts and sources of meaning that are defined in the literature about adults, and that meaning in life is a relevant construct for understanding their lives.

The second major contribution to knowledge is the way in which the research has illuminated the construct 'meaning in life' as a multi-dimensional, multi-faceted concept, which needs to be researched comprehensively, across all its component facets.

Numerous studies have investigated individual aspects of the construct among different population groups— its sources (e.g. Ebersole and DePaula, 1987), attitudes and views (e.g. Crumbaugh and Maholick, 1964; Steger et al., 2008), and constructed indices of the character traits which promote wellbeing (e.g. Peterson and Seligman, 2004). All these studies have looked into meaning in life from one or more aspects but not as a complex construct made up simultaneously of a variety of components. Perhaps the reason for this is that most of these studies were quantitative and questionnaire-based, in which the respondents were asked to rank the sources of meaning in their life or select such sources from a list of possibilities or were asked to state one source of meaning, without further direction.

The present study took as its starting point that the different dimensions of meaning in life have to be kept distinct. Three dimensions are to be distinguished: (a) personality-related meaning (what is important to that particular individual; what preoccupies them; what is meaningful to them); (b) meaning in life as related to universal values (what values should govern human behaviour; how life should be lived); and (c) meaning in life as it relates to the individual's personal goals and strengths and their confidence in their ability to realise their values and desires.

These three dimensions of meaning in life are represented graphically here below:

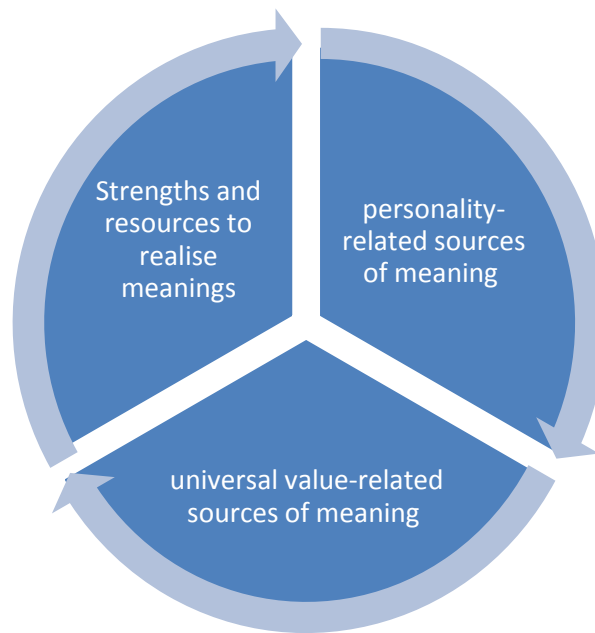


Figure 7: dimensions of meaning in life

Proceeding on the above theorisation, the children in the present study were posed questions which referred to all three of the above dimensions of meaning in life. This study explored the idea and role of meaning in life among children from all three perspectives. From what facets of life is it drawn? Where are its sources? What do children consider to be the best way to live one's life? What are the child's goals in life and what inner resources do they think they have to achieve those goals? Thus, one perspective was more narrowly focused — on specific sources of meaning — while another perspective was much broader, exploring the child's values and outlook, their life goals and their assessment of themselves.

The questions to the children reflect the dimensions of meaning that were presented above, and are represented graphically here below:



Figure 8: question to children about dimensions of meaning in life

In sum: a key contribution of this study to knowledge is its finding that the construct 'meaning in life' can and should be treated as multi-dimensional, with each of these dimensions equally relevant and significant to understanding what individuals find important in his/her life. The present study has demonstrated that children relate to all three dimensions, that associations are to be found between the different dimensions, that meaning in life can be studied among children from all three points of view and, most instructively, from a point of view which combines all three together.

8.3.2 Methodological contribution to knowledge

Another contribution this study makes relates to the research methods and techniques I devised and developed for it, which combined interviewing with creative activity, story-telling with drawing pictures, the verbal with the non-verbal.

My semi-structured interview borrowed and adapted its questions from existing meaning-in-life questionnaires, for example, the Life Regard Index (LRI) developed by Battista and Almond in 1973 or the Purpose in Life Test (PIL) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholick, in 1964. The content of these questionnaires was adapted for use in conversation with children, adapted to

an eight-year-old's level of understanding and language use. That the responses the children gave to the questions put to them were directly and accurately pertinent proves that the questions matched their level and pattern of understanding, that they accurately represented the research topic to them and that they were sufficiently clear, interesting and communicative for the children to wish to answer.

The creative activity element in the methodology began with an introductory short story, designed to make a rapid connection between interviewer and interviewee and set the tone and direction of the interview. A drawing/painting by the children interviewed ended the meeting.

The power relations between an adult interviewer and a child interviewee (see for example, Mayall, 2000) are of course a relevant issue. To minimise power relations that might have predominated over the interview the opening story took a humorous tone and invited the children themselves to take the role of information-provider, explainer and guide. The concluding drawing illustrating aspects of life of key importance to the interviewee made two contributions: it helped me, as a researcher to better grasp the aspects of meaning in life that the participants had been talking about during the verbal interview and it furnished a second response medium to corroborate/set against the verbal replies given earlier (see, for example, Thomas, 2009).

While these creative methods are not in themselves unusual (for example, Veale, 2005, Thomson, 2008), their application to meaning in life, as a construct almost unstudied in childhood, is novel. At the same time, my qualitative multi-dimensional methodology has offered new insights, by admitting the 'authenticity' of children's own perspectives on their lives.

8.3.3 The inseparability of methodology and research data

I have speculated in this thesis why almost no one had ventured to research the subject of meaning in life among children before me. My hypotheses were drawn from current scholarly thinking on child development and research methodology.

The concept of meaning in life had been thought too complex and abstract for eight-year-old children to grapple with, the consensus being that the necessary cognitive equipment was generally not in place before adolescence. The present study has demonstrated that eight-

year-old children certainly can talk about the meanings in their life, in terms of both the concrete and the here and now as well as the abstract and the overarching, both in verbal and creative non-verbal terms. The issue of the concept's abstraction proved irrelevant. This research argues that the meanings that children find in their lives, the content of the meaning-in-life concept for them, stems from their being children, from their activities as children, from their daily life and the fears which preoccupy them, from their wishes and their views on life, and that they express all this in the ways that they, as children, want and are able to, and at varying levels of concreteness. Any research therefore that wishes to explore meaning in life among children has to find a methodology which can talk to children in their own terms and allow their understanding of meaning in life to express itself. In other words, the data the researcher is looking for will not emerge without a suitably-tailored methodology. Methodology and data are inseparable.

8.4 Study's limitations

The choice of a qualitative research approach restricted the number of interviewees to thirty and necessarily made the categorization of the interviewees' responses, verbal and non-verbal, somewhat subjective. A study of this kind cannot aim to generate firm conclusions and comparability with other studies on issues such as the characteristics of different research populations, and gender- and age- and cultural differences. (Although some of these differences and similarities that have been identified and set out with due circumspection, chiefly in order to suggest lines for future research)

As against this, the small number of interviewees made it possible to reach a broader and more rounded understanding of how children conceive of 'meaning in life', something not possible with a larger group of participants. However, it can of course be questioned whether I might not have gone even deeper. Might I not have reached an even fuller understanding had I learned more about the detail of the children's lives, their individual living circumstances, socioeconomic wellbeing, migration status, daily routines, family structures and or others relevant details.

I chose not to collect prior information about the children in the research for the same reasons I chose a phenomenological approach to my research topic. I wanted to understand the

children's stories through their own eyes, through what they chose to see and speak to me about. Not knowing their detailed demographic, cultural, economic background enabled me to interview them free of these preconceptions, to attend much more closely to what they were laying out before me, free of the temptation to interpret everything they said in terms of their life circumstances. For me, the 'limitations' of a small number of interviewees and no background information were in fact advantages, especially for what the almost complete absence of prior studies made, of necessity, an exploratory research study. Future research will have to fill in the 'gaps' which my self-restricted purview left.

Another limitation is that I chose to interview the children in different sorts of interview structures—with one child on their own or three or two together. The reasons were both of necessity—that's what the children wanted—and of research methodology: multiplying the interview structures triangulates the sources of information (Greg et al. 2007; see Methodology chapter). From my experience as a therapist I knew that some children prefer a one-on-one meeting with an adult while others are constrained by it and prefer the security of numbers. Knowing how to work face-to-face with individuals and with small groups, I felt comfortable offering the children the interview format they preferred so that they would feel at ease, as well as provide me 'triangulated' data. Nevertheless, I made no great efforts to elucidate the possible differential effects of the three interview formats beyond establishing that the data content of all three formats seemed to be, overall, very similar. In the Findings chapter I discuss the issue of how one child may have influenced the other or others in two- and three-children interviews but no deep investigation of this issue was possible in the context of the present study so that this too future researchers will have to take up.

8.5 Future directions

8.5.1 Future directions for research

It is both practicable and important to expand our knowledge on this research topic to other populations and cultures and to tailor the research approach and design to each population selected.

Researching the concept of meaning in life among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds would expand our understanding of it. In the present study I interviewed children from two schools in different neighbourhoods, but my prime objective was, as stated, the preliminary one of establishing whether the concept was a real one at all to children of a certain age. Would children from a background of socioeconomic hardship, or one of neglect and abuse, have their own particular perception on meaning in life, as the above discussion of the present study's limitations hints at? This is without doubt an important question, with implications for both the therapy and education of such groups. What issues occupy their minds, what motivates them, what strengths do they think they possess, what is important and meaningful to them, what are their values? Take for instance, the interview with Eyal in the present study. Do his family's socioeconomic circumstances explain his preoccupation with material possessions? Another intriguing group to explore would be children with physical and mental disabilities, for whom the struggle to accept disability/ impairment is part of their life.

The connection between attachment and meaning in life is one of the most important issues yet to be researched, as attachment is of central importance to human development (Bowlby, 1982), an importance which becomes all the more evident as the years pass. As Mikulincer puts it (2005): "The theory of attachment is inter-disciplinary and crosses frontiers, borrowing concepts from the fields of ethology, evolutionary biology, cognitive and developmental psychology, and psychoanalysis".(Mikulincer, 2005, p. 3).

If we take into account that the key source of meaning in life at all ages is the connection to the other—to family, friends, spouse, etc. (see for instance, Taylor and Ebersole, 1993, Prager, 1996, Reker 2005), then the centrality of attachment is all the more evident, making it all the more necessary to probe the connection between meaning in life and attachment.

The present study is concerned with the issue of the existence of meaning in life among children and it investigates this issue through the sources, attitudes and personal strengths which feed into meaning in life. It does not investigate the reasons and relationships which explain why meaning in life exists or not. There is certainly great relevance to a future study into the connection between meaning in life and attachment so this would be an important issue to pursue.

Another direction for research is the family milieu. Researchers could explore meaning in life among the children of single parents, divorced parents, children in large families and one-child families. In the present study several children without siblings did indeed refer to this variable, voicing the desire for a bigger family, for brothers and sisters. Alona talked negatively about her problems with her divorced parents, saying that she had neither hopes nor aspirations nor the character traits that could help her. Would other children in the same situation or at different stages of parental divorce take a different view of their situation? Might it not be possible to link family research with meaning-in-life research?

A further important line of investigation is to strengthen the connections between meaning in life and key psychological concepts relevant to children's emotional maturation, such as two mentioned in the Literature Review, wellbeing (e.g. Sixsmith, 2007) and resilience (Gilligan, 2000). A deeper insight into the interlinkages and interdependence of these two concepts could generate more precise research and therapy tools. Perhaps, meaning in life could be used to improve wellbeing or reinforce resilience.

So few researchers have taken up the issue of meaning in life among children that there remain a huge number of productive and important seams to mine. I have named here only a few.

8.5.2 Future directions for therapy and education

It is evident from the forgoing that numerous lines of research lie open for very useful exploration but one of the most valuable contributions research could make would be the development/improvement of therapeutic and educational interventions.

I have emphasized throughout the present study that meaning in life strengthens resistance to and resilience from hardship and so may be capable of helping people cope with the downside of life. The finding that 'meaning in life' is a very relevant and present concept among children opens the way to study how children can use meaning in life in coping with stress and hardship. As been seen in the literature review (pp. 35-37), the literature on resilience has explored how children manage to develop normally in face of the severest hardships. Baum (2008), among others, has posited 'meaning in life' as a protective factor, and Wright et al.

(2013) mentioned 'faith and a sense of meaning in life' as one of the resilient and protective factors for children. According to Masten and Reed (2002): "Although important in everyday well-being, a sense of meaning in life seems to be particularly important in stressful times. Studies have illustrated how a strong commitment to core values or causes can buffer stress" (p. 409).

There are many intervention programmes designed to provide children, adolescents and adults the strengths to cope with depression, anxiety, trauma, post-traumatic experiences and other challenges. Some of these interventions derive from Positive Psychology. Seligman et al. (2009) have reported on interventions which have been tested in schools, chiefly among adolescents but also among younger children, which focus on developing the ability to cope with the pressures of daily life by developing 'character strength'. Layard (2007) has called for a national policy for schools to encourage positive traits and values. Both ideas connect closely to meaning in life, which Positive Psychology regards as one of its key ingredients. Wong and Wong reported on a Meaning-Centred Approach to Building Youth Resilience (2011) which concentrates on developing motivation, life goals, responsibility, pleasure and understanding, viewing all these as sources of meaning in life.

I would argue that research in this field which gave a prominent place to listening to what children themselves have to say would enable us to tailor interventions to what children themselves report about their needs and perhaps also to their particular circumstances, since this study raises the possibility that meaning in life varies because it is varyingly situated. Adapting interventions to fit in with the children's own perceptions and point of view would permit more comprehensive programmes, which could both identify difficulties and reinforce personal meanings and goal-orientation; could identify inner strengths and connections to values. As for work in the consulting room, the more research that is done to demonstrate the range of importance of meaning in life among children the more therapists could base their work on connecting the patient to his/her sources of personal meaningfulness as a strategy for coping with their difficulties.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A- The Letter to the Children's Parents

משרד החינוך
מנהל מחקר ופיתוח
מנהל מחקר ופיתוח
מנהל מחקר ופיתוח

לכבוד

הורי תלמידי גינת _____ בבית ספר _____

שמי יעל שרון. אני מטפלת בהבעה ויצירה מעל ל- 20 שנה, עובדת במשרד החינוך כמדריכה ארצית בתחום טיפול בהבעה ויצירה, ומרצה במכללות שונות בתחום זה ברחבי הארץ. אני לומדת לדוקטורט באוניברסיטת סאסקס, אנגליה. במסגרת לימודי הדוקטורט שלי אני עורכת מחקר בנושא 'משמעות בחיים בעיני ילדים'. מחקר זה אינו מתבצע במסגרת עבודתי במשרד החינוך.

התיאוריה שעומדת מאחורי המחקר שלי קשורה לתחום העיסוק שלי, טיפול בהבעה ויצירה, המבוסס על עקרונות הפסיכולוגיה החיובית. ברצוני ללמוד על מה שחשוב ומשמעותי לילדים, מתוך הנחה שהדברים המשמעותיים האלו יכללו בהמשך הדרך להיות מקומות מחזקים להתמודדות עם קשיים שהם נתקלים בהם. כדי להצליח לפתח את גישת הטיפול הזו, יש, בשלב ראשון, לערוך מחקר שמוכיח שאכן קיימים דברים שמשמעותיים מאוד לילדים. זו מטרת המחקר שלי. המחקר הותר לביצוע ע"י לשכת המדען הראשי במשרד החינוך.

דרך הפעלת המחקר:

בכוונתי להיפגש עם התלמידים במסגרת פרטית או קבוצתית (קבוצות של עד ארבעה תלמידים) בין כותלי בית הספר, לבקש מהם לצייר ציור (בנושא הדברים המשמעותיים בחיים) ולערוך עימם ראיון בו נשוחח על הדברים החשובים שהם מוצאים בחייהם. לשם כך, תלמידים יצאו מהשיעור בתיאום עם המורה. כמובן שילדים שלא יהיו מעוניינים להשתתף לא יחויבו לעשות זאת, והילדים שהסיכוי להשתתף יוכלו להפסיק באמצע המפגש, מבלי שייגרם להם נזק כלשהו בעקבות החלטתם. אין חובת השתתפות במחקר. הדבר יאמר גם לתלמידים.

המפגש עם התלמידים לא יארך יותר משעתי לימוד אחת.

בנוסף חשוב לציין שאין בכוונתי לאסוף פרטים מזהים על אודות הילדים, אלא רק את גילם ומינם. הראיונות יתועדו באמצעות הקלטות שמע. פרטום ממצאי המחקר לא יעשה באופן שיאפשר את זיהוי המשתתפים או את מוסדות החינוך בהם בוצע המחקר.

אשמח אם בכם/בתכם ישתתף/תשתתף במחקר. אני מאמינה שעצם השיחה על המשאים האלו יכולה לסייע בחיזוק הילד.

אם הנכם מסכימים לכך שילדכם ישתתף במחקר, אנא חתמו על כתב ההסכמה המצורף והחזירו אותו לבית הספר עם ילדכם.

אם אתם רוצים לקבל פרטים נוספים, אתם מוזמנים ליצור איתי קשר.

בברכה,

יעל שרון, 054-5962341 (ניתן להשאיר לי הודעה ב-SMS ולציין שמדובר בשאלה לגבי המחקר ואחזור בטלפון), או לכתוב לי במייל sh_mi@netvision.net.il

APPENDIX B: Parent's Approval

משרד החינוך
מחוז תל אביב
הרשמה לביטוח
המסלול 2011

כתב הסכמה

לכבוד

יחיד שרון

ג.י.

הנדון: כתב הסכמה לאישור פתרון

הנאיל והנדן שרד סחקר ולחלן: יהמחקר/משיא: ימשיעו בחיים בעיני ילדתי

והנאיל רבסשת את הסכמתי לכך שנתאסוף במסגרת המחקר פנונים (לחלן: יתחננוכי) אדוות בויבתי

שם הנדן/חבת

הריני מצהיר בזאת כדלקמן:

- א. כי מסרתי והסברתי לי את מטרת המחקר ואת הנתונים והסוגיות שידקו במסגרתו
 - ב. כי מסרתי והסברתי לי את כל המסלול על תוכן אשר נדן ישותף/עשותי בליבתי במסגרת המחקר זה
 - ג. כי התחילתי בפני שבעת איסוף הפידע במסגרת המחקר לא יירשם פרט מזהה כלשהו על אודות בויבתי
 - ד. כי מסרתי לי שפרסום הנתונים ימשה באופן שלא יאפשר לזהות את בויבתי.
- לאחר שהבנתי את כל האמור לעיל, הריני נותן בזה את הסכמתי לאיסוף הנתונים הנל על ידך.

נלהאית באתי על החתום

תאריך

שם האב/אמא

חתימה

APPENDIX C: Coding a Conversation with Two Girls

The following colour-coding of a conversation-interview between two girls from School B and me, is included to demonstrate an early stage of the data analysis, when I tried to pick out prominent themes in each individual interview, before moving on to the stage of referring and comparing one interview with others. At this stage there are sections of the interview which I did not know how to categorize, or which I ignored and set aside for a later reading and there were parts of sentences which I was not sure of. I also transcribe here marginal notes/comments I made for myself during this early reading.

The sources of meaning which arose in this particular interview were—friends (highlighted in pale blue), family (yellow), leisure-time activities (green), love and happiness (dark grey).

The best way to live: live in peace (purple), help others (dark blue), understand how the world works (pale grey).

Personal resources/strengths (more often happy than sad; conflict-resolving ability; the ability to stay calm) were highlighted in red.

INTERVIEW WITH ROTEM AND ANAT (School B)

Me: So there you are, you've met this alien. What would you want to say to him?

Anat: That he ought to bring a friend, so as not to be on his own here.

Rotem: I would like to tell him about our planet: I'll Explain to him what we do all day, how we go to school and then do afternoon activities.

(Is she talking about the need to understand how this world works? She recounts her daily timetable ...)

Me: What would you want to tell the alien about the things you like to do?

Anat: Play on the computer.

Rotem: I like playing on the computer but not all that much. It's not healthy. I like more inviting friends round and playing board games.

Me: And these are things that are important to you in life? Meaningful?

Anat: Not very, but it's good fun on the computer. Sometimes you do fun things and not always important ones.

(Not important and meaningful things, just fun things.)

Rotem: What's important is **who you're playing with, not what you're playing.**

(Friendship theme?)

Me: What would you tell him were the most important things in your life?

Anat: **Family** and **friends.**

Rotem: Me too—**friends**, and also **family**—that's the most important of all.

Me: So what then would you say to the alien is the best way to live?

Anat: **Without quarrelling, not to lose your temper and row with your friends.**

Rotem: **No killing, no hurting each other.**

Me: What would be a perfect world?

Rotem: **A world of peace, with no killing.**

Me: What do you each want from life?

Rotem: **Peace.**

Me: Peace? What do you mean by that?

Rotem: When everything is good. **No war with the Turks.** Now they're fighting against us.

Me: Where do you feel most upset by there not being peace?

Rotem: **I want peace because all my uncles are in the army and that really bothers me because I hardly ever see them. I wish the whole nation could be free, and Gilad Shalit too.**

(She mentions her family again, this time around the subject of peace)

Anat: **Because war does no good. People die from it or they live crippled.**

(Anat is in fact concerned to avoid war out of the need to stay healthy ...Perhaps her response belongs more to the theme of health and safety?)

Me: What makes you happy?

Rotem: **Family.**

Me: Who in the family?

Rotem: Granddad and Grandma, my uncles, everybody.

Anat: I've got three big brothers and that makes me happy. Because they're always spoiling me and they're really big so say they call me the Little Princess.

Me: What are you mostly, happy or sad?

Anat: Happy.

Rotem: Me too. When I'm happy it lasts maybe an hour or two but when I'm miserable it goes away quickly, say 10 minutes max.

Me: What do we have to do to be happy?

Rotem: Be with the family and go on trips with them. Or go to visit them on Shabbat.

Me: So what makes you happy is having a family?

Rotem: Yes.

Me: But say the alien doesn't have a family?

Rotem: So he should go and play with his friends, but friends can also be annoying because sometimes they don't understand you and start arguments.

(Friends are meaningful but also a source of friction.)

Anat: So you talk about it five times, even a thousand. It's happened that after a quarrel we talked and it got settled. I simply go away to another place, I think what to say and then I come out and talk with them. With the ones I quarrelled with, I take deep breaths and relax myself.

(There are several references here: to personal strengths in the form of judgment, problem-solving ability, keeping calm. Connected to interpersonal relations. Is this the theme of personal resources or of family and friends?)

Rotem: I take deep breaths and relax.

Me: What are you both good at?

Anat: At helping others.

Rotem: Helping others and family.

Rotem: I'm good at drawing, and at solving problems.

Me: Who are your heroes?

Rotem: My aunt, she's a sergeant in the army. She hands out punishments but she's not wicked. I went with her once to see and she just tells them to do things over again. Only in really bad cases she gives them a punishment.

Me: So who should the alien try to be like? Who should he look at?

Rotem: Like his Mum, or his Dad or his brother. He's bound to have a mum, no?

Anat: My Mum says I'm like her but I want to be like my big brother.

Rotem: My Mum says I'm going to be like my Auntie.

Me: What do people like doing?

Anat: Love, happiness, friends, the computer. There's also people who like flying, that's a lot of fun.

Rotem: It is fun but sometimes it makes me throw up.

Anat: Looking down from a plane is interesting.

Rotem: The best part is getting off the plane.

Rotem: I grew up in Texas, I've got family there. My Mum's family is in Texas, I go there every holiday.

Me: What do you want to be when you're grown up?

Rotem: A doctor and care for sick people.

Anat: Sometimes they don't manage to get the sick people better. But I want to be a doctor too.

Me: So how would you sum things up for the alien? He should go to his king and say...?

Rotem: That it's fun in Israel and that he should come to visit. That he should take him food to taste.