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"My mind is not in my brain": exploring consciousness with children using creative research methods

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ABSTRACT

The focus on the brain over the last few decades has seen an overclaiming of the human condition through brain-based research. Researching consciousness is an enquiry into who we are, our subjective experiences and our relationality with others and the world. In typical and child development research, materialist orientations dominate the field, assuming brains as the manufacturers of consciousness. Qualitative research has the potential to engage children in consciousness research, while interrogating typical constructionist, realist and materialist orientations. In this article we discuss using creative research methods for exploring aspects of phenomenal consciousness, such as self and mind, with children in a UK primary school. We share findings in relation to how children understand consciousness, how consciousness bears on self for children in the study, and how children experience and perceive the mind/body.

KEYWORDS

Children; consciousness; creative research; mind; self

Introduction

In this article we discuss using creative research methods for exploring aspects of phenomenal consciousness, such as self and mind, with children in a UK primary school. Researching consciousness is an enquiry into who we are, our subjective experiences and our relationality with others and the world. Often in qualitative research, selves, bodies and minds are approached through constructionist, realist or biological orientations (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2024; Thomas & Durston 2025). In this way, research can assume consciousness and self to be textually constructed (Aaltola 2019) or as a biological entity with a precise centre and location (Harris 2021). In typical consciousness and child development research, materialist and/or physicalist orientations dominate the field, assuming brains as the manufacturers of consciousness – despite the ongoing and critical issue of how subjective experiences emerge from physical brains (Albahari 2016; Chalmers 1995). The increasing appeal to

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brain science in child development excludes the epistemological authority children have over their own experiences of consciousness. Brain-based research carries hegemony and has influenced policy in recent decades. For example, the ACE agenda (Adverse Experiences in Childhood, see Felitti et al. 1998) or the 'first three years movement' (Hart & Risely 1995), are initiatives which focus on links between adverse experiences, deprivation and their impact on brain development. This focus on the brain over the last few decades has seen an overclaiming of the human condition through biologized and reductionist lenses (Macvarish, Lee, & Lowe 2014).

Challenges towards brain-based science in child development highlight 'the danger of over-stated brain claims leaching out beyond the laboratory into other areas of social life' (Macvarish, Lee, & Lowe 2014). Biologized claims to truth over consciousness and child development also have a strong foothold in service development and provision in areas such as education and social work. The brain-based approach can silence children through physicalist research methods and affords adult experts decision-making powers to act on behalf of children. Children are not recognised as knowers (Murris 2013) of an unreachable knowledge (Arendt 1971) that adult scientists may not have access to. Explorations *with* children around the nature of consciousness, taken to include how they experience their selves, bodies and minds, carries increasing importance and may act as a timely corrective to the brain-based trend. Having access to how children experience aspects of consciousness, may support how we understand the nature of child (Bacon & O'Riordan 2023).

Knowledge acquired through children's experiences and insights may better inform how services for children are designed (Clark 2010), more so, when we bring into focus aspects of consciousness, self and mind, not often attended to in qualitative research. For example, recent studies show some children to experience transcendental phenomenon (see Thomas 2022a, 2024) where their sense of an individual self dissolves into a unified field of being (Leone & Parmentier 2014; Taylor & Egeto-Szabo 2017). Experiences of this nature contradict typical constructionist and – at the opposite end of the spectrum – brain-based orientations towards consciousness and self. Often, these kinds of experiences are silenced and left on the margins of social research (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2023, 2024). How children experience consciousness and self, warrants further investigation when developing support mechanisms, instead of starting from uncritical assumptions about children and consciousness.

In this article, we explore consciousness with children from a position of mystery, from the *not-really-knowing* position, offering affordances for children's experiences and insights to define its meanings through the research process. We invited children to theorize about the nature of consciousness from their own experiential vistas. Through the article, we set out why it's important to explore consciousness qualitatively, with the very agents assumed to produce it, and show how it can be achieved with children by using creative research

methods. We argue that consciousness research *with* children demands qualitative and creative research approaches. Qualitative research, in its accommodation of a plurality of approaches and methodologies (Mazzanti & Freeman 2022), has the potential to capture and access a range of knowledge(s) often missed in brain-based research. When children explore self and consciousness, their experiences can plunge beneath, or transcend beyond, their personal narratives (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2024). Creative research can push the boundaries of constructionist enquiry when verbal narratives cannot capture experiences that are none/pre/post conceptual, timeless, non-chronological and non-referential with things in the social and material world (Thomas 2024). We share findings in relation to how children understand consciousness, how consciousness bears on self for children in the study, and how children experience and perceive the mind and body. We claim that findings from the research challenge typical views of consciousness as the property of an individual self, that has implications for brain-based research and current service provision. We report on teachers' views about children's involvement in the research and changes made to the school's curriculum, resulting from children's experiences of, and insights about consciousness.

Consciousness

Consciousness is one of those contentious words that can mean different things depending on the discipline or perspective one takes, discussed everywhere and its definition not really discussed enough (Velmans 2009). In philosophy, the sciences, and across research disciplines, consciousness has no generally accepted definition. Consciousness is viewed as one of the most enigmatic problems in fields such as philosophy, cognitive science and the neurosciences (Durston & Baggerman 2017). In everyday discourse, consciousness is a term used to distinguish between being conscious or unconscious, or knowing and being aware of something (Blackmore & Troscianko 2018). More broadly, consciousness is synonymised with subjective experiences, for example, the taste of tea or seeing the colour red. Despite the lack of consensus on consciousness, scholars agree that the core and most problematic aspects concern subjective experiences (Forti 2021) and the hard problem of subjectivity (Goff & Moran 2021). Yet there has been a lack of attention paid to consciousness by scholars who deal with the subjective (Forti 2021), for example, in fields such as qualitative research and social science. Subjective experiences, self and subjectivity are a primary area of interest in qualitative research, as they constitute the generation of data based on the epistemological authority of people and their subjective, living experiences (Thomas & Durston 2025).

Brain-based approaches can further neglect the socio-cultural, environmental and institutional forces which can influence how we perceive self, others and be in-with-as the world. Our conscious lives 'are the sea in which we swim

[. . .] and an understanding of consciousness has to be reflexive' (Velmans 2009, 3). The neglect of institutional reflexivity in understanding consciousness has seen it extensively studied through western physicalist science, as a search for the neural correlates of consciousness (Seth & Bayne 2022). The search for consciousness has primarily involved attempts to identify a biological footprint motivated by an implicit consensus that consciousness is produced by the brain (Durston & Baggerman 2017). The case for consciousness as an epiphenomenon of the brain is motivated by the connections made between impaired brain activity, such as when damaged or under anaesthesia, and a reduction or loss in consciousness. The brain is therefore theorised as a necessary condition for consciousness (Walach & Römer 2011). Critics interrogate the role the brain may play as a producer of consciousness, despite their interconnectedness. For example, recent studies in cognitive science suggests how the assumption that consciousness disappears in deep sleep is oversimplified, noting empirical and theoretical reasons for the continuation of consciousness in deep states (Windt, Nielsen, & Thompson 2016). We may not be *aware* of all we experience, rather than an absence of consciousness that signifies its discontinuation (Windt, Nielsen, & Thompson 2016). Shifting focus from the importance of the brain as the producer of consciousness, invites reflexivity and exploration into understanding its mysteries.

The 'hard' sciences and its prevailing empiricist paradigm has dominated research, positioning qualitative enquiry as 'soft' and non-scientific (Watt, 1996). Physicalist world views in the form of a 'neo-positivism' (St Pierre 2014) carries hegemony over health, social care and education research. In this way, subjective experiences are measurable, and any issues reside within the child. Theory-neutral approaches in science afford researchers with 'a common language and methodology for researchers and different theoretical and metaphysical commitments' (Seth & Bayne 2022). Demarcating methodology from epistemic and ontic concerns influenced the early field of qualitative research, that reduced its function to measuring subjective experience. The historical roots of qualitative research are planted in a logical empiricism motivated though its aim to be recognised as a legitimate science (Pierre 2014). Neglecting enquiry into the nature of consciousness in fields such as qualitative studies, may be a result of the ways science is motivated, enacted and valued in the modern world – a way that is dismissive of othered epistemologies, methodologies and philosophies (Thomas 2022b). Recent methodological and ontological turns in the field of qualitative research addresses traditional approaches and neo-positivism, through a research alchemy (Ptolemy & Nelson 2022) which includes creative, interdisciplinary and interconnected practices. Qualitative Research as a field has grown to involve populations that are typically excluded from research, or at best,

positioned as objects and passive subjects. Devolving power to participants and facilitating active agency are aspects of contemporary qualitative studies which attend to the tensions and complexities when doing research differently.

Consciousness when examined through experimental models, can exclude peoples' experience of it and, therefore, neglect any epistemic authority of the agents who are assumed to produce it (Thomas 2022a; Zahavi 2018). Gallagher (2010) suggests consciousness should be defined through phenomenological description, where it may be characterized by intentionality, phenomenality and non-reflective awareness. Consciousness can also be understood as 'the sense of self and the sign of life in natural intelligence' (Wang 2012). Consciousness is viewed as a boundary phenomenon, traversing psychological and social worlds in psychosocial studies (Stanley et al. 2015), or as a subjective field-at-large, the ontic principle itself, in recent philosophical models of the universe (Kastrup 2018, 2019; Shani & Keppler 2018). What we are interested in, is how children experience and understand consciousness. Aside from the issue of a scarcity of children's involvement in the study and philosophy of consciousness, children may have plenty to teach us about the nature and experience of it (Thomas 2022a, 2023).

Asking questions about the nature of consciousness with children has philosophical, research and practice implications. Researchers don't often ask questions about consciousness or self in studies with children (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2023). Interdisciplinary orientations are vital for exploring the nature of consciousness with children. As Stanley et al. (2015) note, research in critical and social constructionist psychology [and sociology] understands consciousness as a relational, social and historical function 'but often neglects its phenomenology' (62). When consciousness is viewed in reductionist terms, there are implications for how we understand self, children, their experiences, and their relationships with others and the world (Bacon & O'Riordan 2023; Thomas 2022a). Conversely, when a no-self is proposed, children's agency becomes jeopardized. The 'festival of misunderstandings' (Strawson 1999) around definitions of self and consciousness, renders it as something ignored or taken for granted in social research studies. When children are invited to enquire into their self, children's insights and intuitions challenge already-theorized ideas about what and where consciousness *is* (Thomas 2022a). Asking children to enquire into their sense of self, as an aspect of consciousness, is participatory, part ethnographic, and part philosophic – linking to areas of epistemology and ontology (Thomas 2022a).

Research with children: consciousness & art

Psychosocial interests in the experiential vis a vis emotion, feelings, sensations and materialities, requires 'innovation such as visual methods,

autoethnography and memory work' (Stanley et al. 2015) – methodologies used for some time now in the field of childhood studies (Fane et al. 2018; Literat 2013; Little & Little 2022). A growing body of work advances qualitative research with children through participatory and post qualitative methodologies (Dan et al. 2019; Murris 2013). Collaborative research with children carries an ethos of transformation, through the engagement and empowerment of children who are often placed on the margins of research (Dixon, Ward, & Blower 2019; Marcu 2016; Shamrova & Cummings 2017). Like most transformative agendas, participatory research can be fraught with challenges and paradoxes, seen in the tensions between agency for children and the structural, relational and contextual conditions that can restrict children's power (Papadopoulou & Sidorenko 2022). The knowledge turn in qualitative research sees shifts in the values of methods and data (Punch 2002). For example, using creative methods in research with children can afford more accurate representations of children's experiences (Umoquit et al. 2011). Using creative research methods has the potential to devolve power to children, while providing opportunities for researchers to co-uncover meanings and dimensions of experience not often attended to in social research (Thomas 2024). For example, arts-based methods used in digitally mediated spaces are shown to facilitate children's inclusion, creative engagement and dialogue (Lomax et al. 2022). Creative research methods are multi-modal, involving music making (Ledger & McCaffrey 2015), drama (Shabtay 2021) and puppets (Coyne, Mallon, & Chubb 2021). Byrne et al, (2020), use rap music as an effective research method for researching with children and young people from disadvantaged communities – as an embedded mode of local youth culture. Inviting children to represent their views through photographs is shown to be valuable (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Digital, disposable or video cameras can be used with children, facilitating visual and multi-layered data that can be co-interpreted with children (Kullman 2012).

Research with children challenges traditional approaches and reconfigures methodologies, experts and subjects (Dan et al. 2019). Douglas & Carless (2018) argue for the value of art-based research in psychological contexts, showing three distinct waves of engagement – 'interdependent engagement with people and place, aesthetic engagement with sense-making processes and emotional engagement with and of audiences' (156). Recognition of the limitations for traditional research methodologies, has encouraged researchers to adopt more inclusive and creative ways for involving children in research. Using arts-based methods in qualitative research can offer affordances for 'alternative possibilities that fuse the creative and imaginative possibilities of the arts with social science' (Cole & Knowles 2008 – cited in Almqvist and Vist 2019). Alternative forms of expression are used in arts-based research such as film, sculpture, dance, poetry and theatre, often combined with more traditional research methods (Almqvist & Vist 2019). Creative approaches to

research opens the debate around who can be a knower, what can be known and what constitutes and validates knowledge (Stanley & Wise 2013).

Arts-based research can further facilitate research into experiences of consciousness that go beyond the typical five sense-sensorium, personhood, time and space (Thomas 2024), or when children represent life-changing experiences such as severe illness and near death (O'Connor & Thomas 2024; Thomas & O'Connor 2023). For example, play research methods were used to engage children in research about their experiences of staying in a critical care ward. At the time of research, the children were staying in the post intensive care ward. Children in ICU are not often invited into research about their own experiences in critical care (O'Connor & Thomas 2024), so the research carried an importance for understanding children's needs, experiences and insights while staying in the ICU. The researchers engaged children ages 4–16 years through small world play items, art and ipads (O'Connor & Thomas 2024; Thomas & O'Connor 2023). Children reported rich conscious experiences at critical points in their care (for example, when seriously ill and in/near death). These experiences transcended their usual sense of reality, and children struggled to represent their experiences through narrative talk (Thomas & O'Connor 2023). Art and play afforded opportunities for children to represent their experiences in non-linear, metaphorical and symbolic ways (O'Connor & Thomas 2024). Art-based methods present more than a communicative opportunity. Creative research offers the potential to expand the representation of experience beyond everyday narratives, offering affordances for a rich exploration of consciousness.

Setting up the study

Children are apt philosophers, unafraid to ask the big metaphysical questions such as Who am I? or what is death? (Murris, 2013; Thomas 2023). Some adult philosophers may claim that children cannot do philosophy, based on assumptions made about children's capacities for intelligence and logic (Murris 2013). Not all philosophers take this position. Such was the case with Dutch philosopher, Fred Matser, who contacted the researchers to seek support for engaging children in philosophical dialogues. Fred believed that adult philosophers could learn about consciousness from the experiences of children. The researchers saw the philosophical dialogues as an opportunity to explore with children, how they experienced and intuited consciousness.

As researchers, we are interested in the topics of the nature of consciousness, self and being child (Bacon & O'Riordan 2023; Thomas 2022a, 2024). As researchers in childhood studies, social science and linguistics, we were also dissatisfied with assumptions made about children and human beings. We recognised how social research with children, young people and adults, excluded important philosophical enquiry, around the very agents who are

involved in research. We also recognised our own philosophical leanings, inspired by our own living experiences and past research with children. Our research highlights how researchers may be missing opportunities to access aspects of consciousness and self, that children had identified in past studies (Thomas 2022a, 2023, 2024). We already saw the potentials for exploring consciousness with children and the ways it can generate new knowledges around what it means to be human and our subjective experiences.

When researchers are directly acquainted with the object of concern, in our case how children can experience aspects of self and consciousness (Thomas 2022a, 2024), it's important to apply a high degree of ethical reflexivity (Warin 2011) – to avoid the agendas, assumptions and researchers' beliefs impacting on the research moment. Typical reflexivity can focus on the relative subject which perceives, conceptualises and identifies with other objects (taken to include mental and material objects and selves). When facilitating children to self-enquire beyond the relative self, of personhood, the researcher also needs to self-enquire. We refer to this as 'transpersonal reflexivity' (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2023), a reflexive move which sees the researcher aware of, and discerning of, the forces which assemble in the creation of a relative self. For example, through transpersonal reflexivity, there is a deeper level of awareness of the researcher and the sense of an individual and discrete entity (Thomas 2021, 2022a, 2023). Becoming witness, not only to the researcher's agenda, aims and power-over, but also to the assumed cartesian subject with a precise centre and location (Thomas 2021).

Setting up the study required interdisciplinary discussions with philosophers, scientists, researchers, schools and children and young people (see Table 1). We tested the idea with children already involved in research, gaging whether the topic may be of interest to children. Approaching the school involved conversations with teachers around the aims for the research and the activity (philosophical dialogues). Teachers advised the researchers on which children and classes might engage well with the study (and would be available). We recognise how research in schools can raise challenges for engaging children ethically. For example, children can feel obliged to take part or may not have opportunities for informed consent. School contexts have unspoken rules and a high degree of asymmetrical power relations between adults and children. To address this, we ensured teachers were briefed on the importance for children's choices to be involved and the necessity for processes such as informed and rolling consent. The research process is outlined in Table 1:

Research sessions were conducted in a UK primary school based in North England. The school is in a small village and serves children in surrounding areas. Following discussions with teaching staff, the aim was to invite children into the study from different age groups, on the premise that they may experience consciousness and self in different ways (due to age, social influences etc.). All children from the reception class were invited to take part (ages

Table 1. Timeline of research activity April-May 2022.

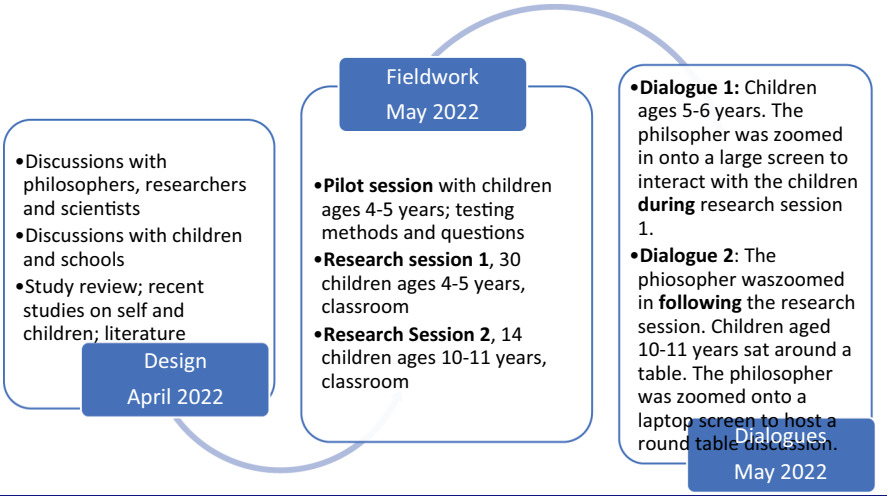

Table 2. What is consciousness? semantic themes and examples across the data.

	Examples Younger children	Examples Older children
Abstract	Space, clouds, God, calm, happy, life, love, dreams	Self, me, I, mind, reality, dreams, heart, love, mystery, creativity
Symbolic	Hearts, rainbows, trees, sun	Geometrical patterns, nature (mountains), question marks
Mythical/ Imaginal	Unicorns, dinosaurs, aliens	Dimensions, other places (not in the world), imagination
Relational	Family, mother, friends, world, universe	The world, animals, friends, family
Active/ embodied	Playing out, Minecraft, music and singing, feelings and sensations	Football, social media, video game play, feelings and sensations, creatvity

4–5 years). Out of 30 children in reception, all 30 children decided to take part. The children in reception were involved in the pilot session (with informed consent) and enjoyed the creative activities and topic of exploration. Researchers facilitated rolling consent, checking in with children, ensuring they wanted to continue their engagement in the research. All children from year 6 were also invited to take part (ages 10–11 years). Out of 30 children in year 6, 14 children decided to take part. Information and consent forms were distributed to children and parents/carers. Teaching staff supported children's understandings of the research by talking through the age-appropriate consent/assent forms. Only children who had parental consent took part in the research and philosophical dialogues (all children were granted permission to take part by parents/carers). The research was granted ethical permission by the BAHSS ethics committee at the University of Central Lancashire, reference number BAHSS20403.

The pilot research session with the youngest group (ages 4–5 years) was conducted one week prior to the research. The researchers wanted to develop a rapport with the younger group and test some of the creative

research methods (see 'methods' below) that we intended to apply in research sessions. Testing creative methods with children afforded opportunities for co-design, asking children what worked well/didn't work well – and whether children had any ideas for other research activities. We set out a suite of creative activities that included arts and crafts, small world play items and musical objects and instruments. We invited children to represent, through the creative materials, what was important to them. Children drew animals, parents and the Earth, and used small play items to imagine going on holiday or taking trips into space. Children identified art and musical instruments as 'the best' activities. Teaching staff supported the pilot and research sessions which took place the following week. Research sessions with younger children lasted approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes, with philosophical dialogues (with the adult philosopher) integrated into the research session. For older children, research sessions lasted 1 hour and 30 minutes. Philosophical dialogues (with the adult philosopher) lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Philosophical dialogues

The philosopher attended the research session with younger children (Figure 1). We felt this necessary for younger children as it enabled rapport-building and afforded more spontaneous discussions with younger children. With older children, philosophical dialogues took place after the research session. Older children could reflect on the research process and their own definitions of consciousness that enabled more structured discussions with the philosopher. Sessions were recorded by a professional film maker and footage provided to the researchers for data analyses (see 'Data Analysis').

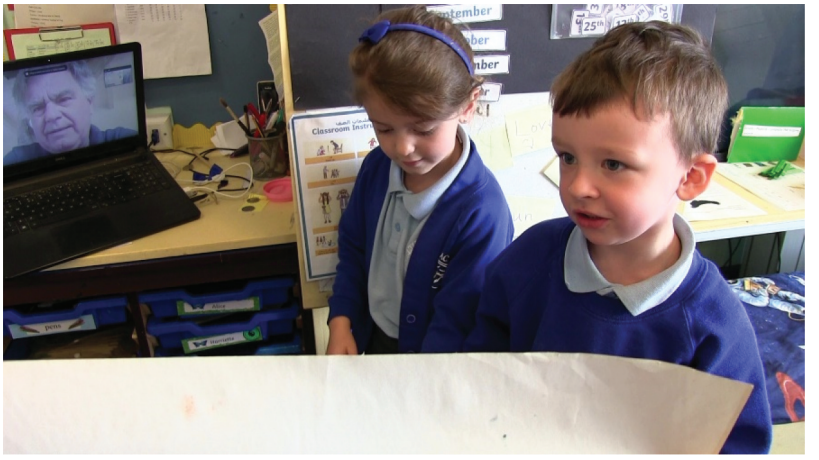

Figure 1. Adult and Children Philosophers, ages 4–5 years.

1. Imagine your attention or awareness is a camera lens. This could be like a phone camera or a normal camera
2. Now, start to adjust your focus – like the lens of a camera. Let's practice on the table (or a nearby object). Zoom your attention on to the table. Now pull your attention away. **What happens to the table?**
   [encourage the participant to explain/represent their experience of the table – and their attention/awareness]
3. Now we are going to use our cameras to look at things **inside**. The table is **outside** but inside there may be objects we can zoom in on
4. OK. Turn your camera around towards the inside. Use an inside object to practice on, like a thought or perhaps a feeling, or a sensation in your body. Zoom your attention onto the object. Now zoom out. What happens to the object?
   [encourage the participant to explain/represent their experience of the table and their attention/awareness]
5. What is that awareness/attention that can zoom in and out of inside and outside objects?

Figure 2. The take a selfie research method (Thomas 2022a).

Figure 3. Taking a selfie, ages 10–11 years.

Aims & objectives

The main aim of the research was to explore the nature of consciousness with children, asking 'What and where is consciousness'? Further objectives for the research were:

- To identify how children experience and understand consciousness – to later base philosophical dialogue from children's meanings
- To consider how children's experiences, insights and intuitions bear on the relationships between consciousness and self

Figure 4. Everything is made from love, aged 5 years.

Figure 5. Aged 4–5 years, collective art methods: what is consciousness?

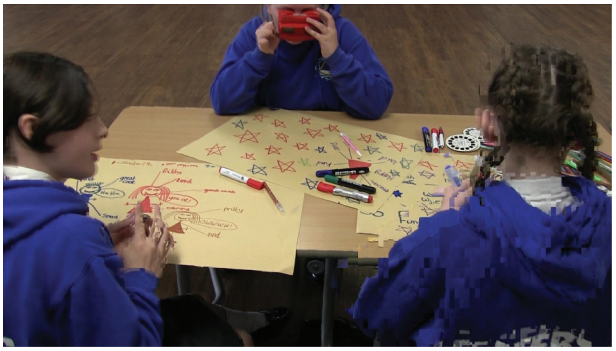

Figure 6. What has not changed? 10–11 years.

- To experiment with creative research methods with children in the exploration of consciousness
- To identify other themes emerging from children's insights about consciousness
- To examine teachers' responses and identify any potential impacts for change in school

Figure 7. Sounds of consciousness, ages 4–5 years.

Figure 8. Consciousness is 'me', ages 10–11 years.

Materials & methods

We used a collaborative research approach with children, seeing children as active agents with an authority over their own experiences of consciousness. Aspects of this approach included:

-Children supporting co-design in a pilot session prior to the research, testing, evaluating and selecting creative methods

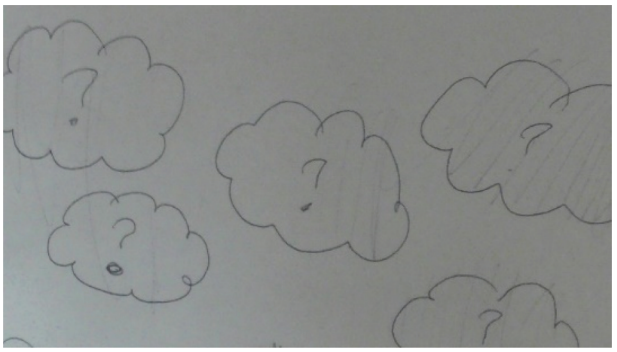

Figure 9. Question marks.

Figure 10. Life/consciousness aged 4–5 years.

–Positioning children as active agents and centralising their knowledges and semiosis in the research process

-Co-interpretation of data with children (see 'data analysis' section)

Activities for introducing the term 'consciousness'

We wanted to avoid approaching children with a definition of consciousness. The researchers invited children into different activities that would enable the term 'Consciousness' to emerge and be defined from children's experiences, insights and intuitions:

Activity 1: what has changed? 10-11 years

At the start of the session, children were invited to take part in an imagination task. Children were asked to close their eyes and to try and see themselves as a small baby (Figure 12). The researchers then asked if anything had changed about who they are, from being a small baby, to who they are now. Children offered responses noted by the researchers The researchers then asked children to identify anything about them that had remained the same. Children's responses were recorded (see 'Findings, Self and I-ness).

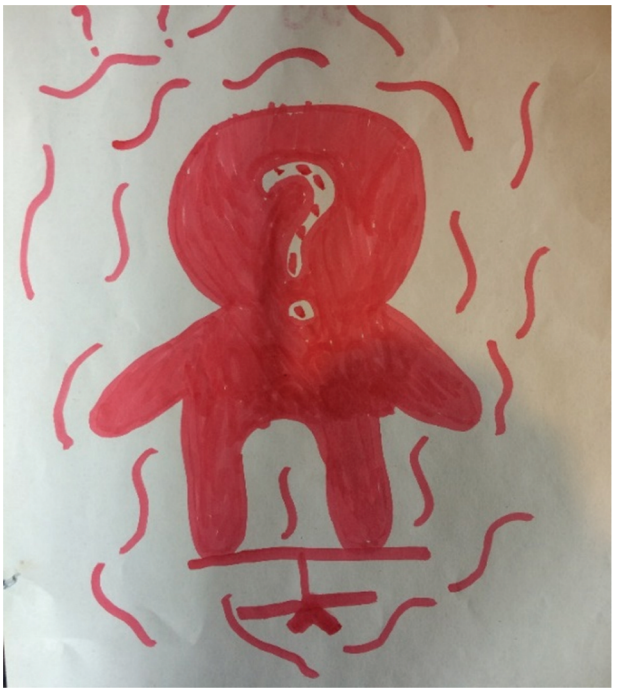

Figure 11. "Self is a mystery", aged 11 years.

Activity 2: take a selfie, 10–11 years

The take a selfie method was used to invite children to explore their own conscious awareness, sense of self (phenomenal consciousness) and phenomenal contents, before a discussion of consciousness began (Figure 2 and 3). The aim was to start from children's own meanings about consciousness garnered through their own experiences of it. The 'Take a Selfie' method (Thomas 2022a) was designed with children and young people as part of the Who am I Study undertaken between 2019–2020. This is a research method similar with self-enquiry practices that explore the question 'Who am I?', traditionally associated with Eastern Philosophical traditions (Barua 2016). More recently, self-enquiry has been used in western non-dual circles and teaching, as a means for exploring self and promoting wellbeing. The concept of the 'Selfie' is taken from the cultural phenomenon of using digital technology to capture images of the self. While 'selfies have been observed in relation to narcissism and self-promoting behaviours' (Choi & Behm-Morawitz 2018, 346), using the concept to facilitate a deeper enquiry into the nature of consciousness and self is a useful research method (Thomas 2022a). The Take a Selfie research method had been piloted with five young people aged 10–17 years in 2019.

The older group (14 children aged 10–11 years) were invited to Take a Selfie. This involved the following protocol:

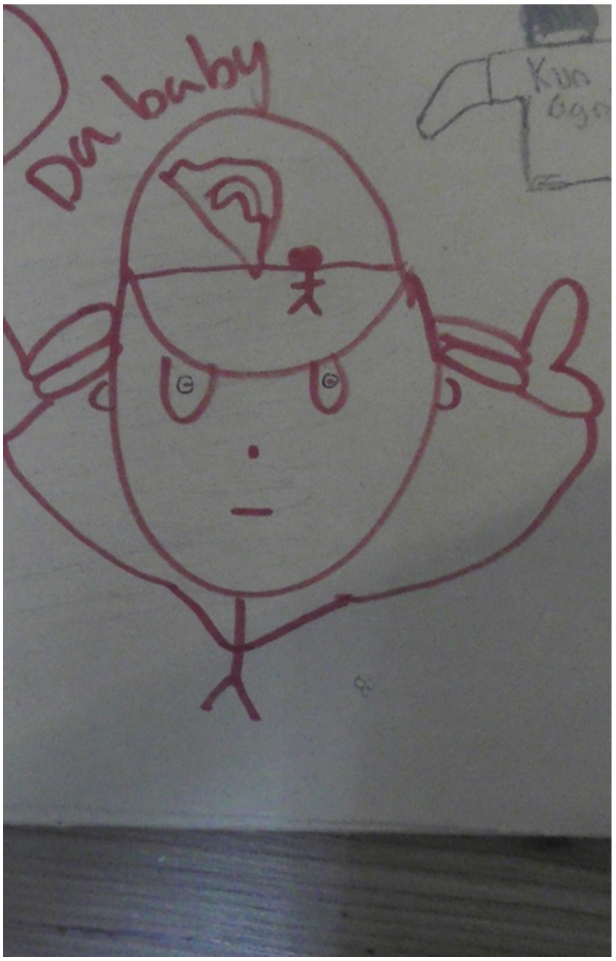

Figure 12. "What has changed?", aged 10 years.

Activity 3: our dreams, feelings and sound, 4–5 years

With younger children (ages 4–5 years) we explored the idea of consciousness through the topic of dreams, feelings and sound. The rationale for using dreams is based on the idea that dreams are familiar and safe territory for discussions with younger children. Dreams also act as an exemplar of a state of consciousness that differs from everyday consciousness, affording children to explore this aspect of consciousness. Feelings are a phenomenal object that can be examined by children themselves. We formed a circle with children. We asked if any children could remember if they had a dream the night before, and if so, could they share it. Several children shared their dreams. We asked children about differences between who they are in dreams and who they are when they are awake. We then asked children how they were feeling. Children stated that they felt happy. Using the feeling of happy, we all played a game.

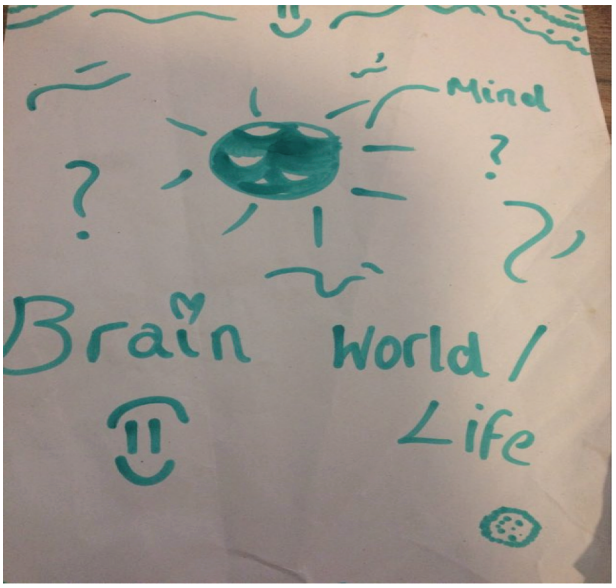

Figure 13. Minds and brains, age 10–11 years.

Figure 14. Is consciousness still there when we are asleep? Group dialogue, ages 10–11 years.

The aim was to find where happy was in our bodies. This involved self exploration of touching parts of our own bodies where we felt happiness was. The final activity was 'follow the sound'. Children were invited to play a game that involved following a single sound until it disappeared. The researcher struck a singing bowl, producing a long, pronounced sound which faded into silence. Children were asked to close their eyes and place their attention on the sound, raising their hand when the sound disappeared. The researchers then asked children, what it was that followed the sound, then knew it had disappeared. These discussions and activities allowed us to

Figure 15. "I couldn't believe their responses"! Teacher with children 10–11 years.

introduce the word consciousness. However, children in the younger group preferred the terms life or love, so we opted to stay with the word 'life' as a pseudonym for consciousness.

Art research methods

Children's art representations were centralised in the study when children attempted to represent abstract experiences and insights around consciousness and self.

Art methods with children ages 4–5 years

Following the preliminary activities (see 'Introducing the term Consciousness'), the researchers placed large, coloured paper squares and boxes of colours around the room. The researchers invited children to draw what they meant by consciousness or life, that they had experienced and theorized within the preliminary activities. Children formed groups around the large pieces of paper and drew their responses (Figure 5). Some children worked together, drawing collective representations of 'life' or consciousness. Others worked alone. The researchers asked questions while children were drawing and made notes and video recordings of the session. In pairs, children used their pictures to start dialogues with the philosopher, who asked them questions about their pictures. Integrating the philosophical dialogues with the research process supported the younger children, and the adult philosopher, to discuss what consciousness (love and life) *is* and what it means for children.

Art methods with children aged 10–11 years

Artefact tables were set up for children to sit around. The tables had paper and colours. One child noticed vintage view masters in the researchers' box and

asked if they could also go on the table. Children played with the view masters while contemplating things that had changed about their experiences of consciousness and things that had remained the same (Figure 6). The researcher continued questions from the preliminary activity (Take a Selfie), focusing on that element that had not changed (baby activity) and the awareness children analysed from the Take a Selfie activity. Children used the paper and colours to produce their responses. After the arts research session, the older children went to another room to have philosophical dialogues with the adult philosopher. Children asked the adult philosopher questions about being a philosopher and about his own view of their insights and intuitions. The adult philosopher asked children about some of their own findings from their self-enquiry, and from their artwork. Some children created further images and doodles while in dialogue with the adult philosopher.

Music & sound

Children ages 4–5 years were invited to represent their interpretations of consciousness (or 'life') through sound and movement (Figure 7). A large box of percussion instruments, shakers and bells were placed in the centre of the circle. Children selected instruments and used them to create sound. Musical instruments in research offer interactional and creative affordances for children, generating rich textures of gestural and tactile qualities, visual cues and spatial anchoring points for facilitating musical interaction (Huovinen & Rautanen 2020). The researchers asked if the children could make sounds that represented consciousness/life. The researchers then asked children to select a song that we could perform. Children selected 'If you're happy and you know it'.

Data analysis

The research produced multi-modal data sets including video, artwork and researchers notes. Data was analysed using three models for analysis: co-interpretation with children (Livari 2018; refs); language and metaphor analysis (Semino et al. 2017) and thematic analysis (Clarke, Braun, & Hayfield 2015).

Co-interpretation with children

Co-interpretation with children is a necessary part of exploring their experiences of consciousness and self. Rather than an act of member-checking (Livari 2018), co-interpretation occurs in the research moment, when children represent their direct experiences of consciousness/contents of consciousness/aspects of consciousness – through self-enquiry methodology (see 'Materials &

Methods'). Co-interpretation involved talk around image, listening, attending to silences and narrative disruptions, embodied analysis (following squiggles and shapes with fingers) and asking questions. Researchers entered the embodied and experiential space children created through their movements when locating consciousness in their own bodies. For example, the researchers mimicked the movements of children, checking that their interpretations were in line with children's experiences and insights. New and fresh research questions emerged, uniting co-interpretation with a co-design which disrupts usual linear research planning and process.

Co-interpretation is a process that can also present challenges for representation when researchers try to interpret children's experiences accurately (Tatham-Fashanu 2022; Manney 2010). The researchers brought their own knowledges to co-interpretation, noting any linguistic/non-linguistic strategies children used to represent their experiences. The researchers' shared their initial insights with children in research sessions, where children could reject, adopt or negotiate meanings. Following the sessions with children, the researchers organised children's reports about consciousness into themes, to support the analysis and for the purposes of the article. We recognise how applying adult-already-theorized-material to children's experiences of consciousness may reduce, dilute, limit or enhance children's insights. Co-interpretation involves dialogue between children's experiences and their knowledges with the researcher's experiences and knowledges. Acknowledging the potential for the researcher's interpretations to be privileged over children's in the act of academic thinking and writing, we stay close to children's insights in our analytical treatment of the data. What we offer through analysis is an alternative discourse to children's, to bring children's discourses into the space of scientific and philosophical study.

Metaphorical analysis

Children show experiences of self or aspects of consciousness that go beyond personhood and language (Thomas 2022a, 2022b). The struggle to find linguistic resources, such as words or narratives, can be seen in long pauses and deep silences children show. Fillers such as 'ah' and 'erm' can betray how language cannot always represent aspects of experience that have not been tamed and symbolised by language (De Certeau 1996). Metaphors can be useful linguistic strategies for bringing 'out of this world' experiences into the world (Thomas, 2024). Metaphors can represent one thing in terms of another, being a cognitive as well as a communication tool (Semino 2021). Metaphors are useful for mapping complex, abstract, subjective and sensitive experiences, tending to correspond 'to relatively simpler, more image-rich, and intersubjectively accessible experiences' (Semino 2021, 51). For example, older children in the research represented reality as a virtual reality, using real

world activities to represent their intuitions around the nature of consciousness (see 'Findings'). We identified how children used metaphorical language use in their verbal narratives in research sessions. Recorded audio files were examined and instances of metaphor used by children were analysed, considering their form (metaphor, simile, analogy) and function (what metaphorical language is trying to convey).

Thematic analysis

We applied a thematic analysis across the data set to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning or themes (Clarke, Braun, and Hayfield 2015), attempting to bring 'out of this world' data into the world (Thomas, 2024). Related meanings can be located across semantic fields (Fairclough 2017) in verbal, written and visual data. We identified themes by identifying meaning relations, assigning each theme to a colour code. We applied the same procedure for identifying children's definitions of consciousness (see section 'Findings' – abstract, mythical, relational, active/embodied). Grand themes were coded and used to identify similarities and differences in how children experienced and understood consciousness. The data was further used to identify correlations children made between consciousness and self.

Results

Three grand themes emerged from the data analysis: Understanding consciousness; self and I-ness; consciousness and mind and body.

Understanding consciousness

The preliminary activities (see 'Understanding Consciousness') tried to ensure any definitions of consciousness emerged from children. In addition, the activities afforded rich insights into how children experience and intuited consciousness, through self-examination into the contents of consciousness (Chalmers 1995) such as thoughts, perceptions and sensations in the body.

What is consciousness? Ages 10–11 years

During the Take a Selfie activity, children were asked 'who or what is that which zooms in and out of inside objects?' (see 'Take a Selfie'). Children responded in the following ways:

- Silence, long pauses
- Fillers such as 'erm', uhm
- 'me'

The question prompts a 'phenomenological suspension' (Leone & Parmentier 2014), affording opportunities for children to observe their awareness. Children identified awareness as 'me' or 'I' despite a suspension in phenomenal objects which constitute identity (thoughts, narratives, sense of locality etc.). In this way, children equated consciousness with self. Not a typical self or person but an experience of Ipesity or I-ness (Shani & Keppler 2018). Children did not offer any variation in their experience of consciousness at this level. Children either fell silent, used fillers or described their experience as 'me'. We therefore began exploring consciousness with older children under the premise that consciousness is equated with self or me.

The I-ness identified by children had a mysterious quality (see section 'Self and I-ness') depicted by children through question marks (Figure 9 – 11).

What is consciousness? Ages 4–5 years

Younger children intuited consciousness beyond a sense of self. For younger children, consciousness was intertwined with love and life – not life circumstances, rather life that makes things what they are, such as the life of the planet, the universe and their families and communities. Consciousness or life appeared to be imbued with purpose and meaning (Figure 4 – 10).

For younger children, consciousness was extended to the world, as *life* within and around them. This corresponds with older children's views of consciousness as 'active', or life that one is aware of and experiencing, yet differs as older children made explicit links between self and consciousness (younger children did not). Younger children's visual depictions of life/consciousness, noted as the sun, rainbows and the universe (depicted by planets and solar systems). The concept of God emerged from children:

> God is the life in us
>
> Age 4 years

Several children equated God with life. This also surprised the teacher, who later stated that God as a concept is not often used in school, and most children are from secular backgrounds. Kelemen (2004) noted how children can demonstrate a natural theism, imbuing life with a teleology – or meaning and purpose. Younger children also represented consciousness/life through the sounds of percussion instruments. The sounds started as chaotic, then found a resonance where consciousness became collective, intra-connective and harmonized – as a shared excitation of consciousness.

Understanding consciousness: children's insights

The researchers identified words and images with shared semantic relations across talk around image with all children in the study. Children's theorizations of consciousness were grouped into themes by the researchers that are set out in Table 2:

For children, consciousness pervades or is an integral aspect of being and doing in the world. Children theorized consciousness in abstract, symbolic, mythical, relational and embodied ways. Exploring the active aspects of consciousness with children highlighted similarities and differences between younger and older children. For example, older children recognised self, I, and separation between themselves, others and the world (Figure 8). Younger children experienced consciousness as a relational whole. Older children linked creativity with consciousness, younger children embodied creativity as consciousness. In the following quote, Mary, aged 11 years, tries to describe consciousness as the process of creating and the passion artists may feel when trying to bring something into the world. Mary explains the force of creativity as an inexplicable drive to do something that she enjoys:

> It's like being in water (passion to do something) and you have to get back up to the surface, like that feeling or you'll die Mary, Aged 11 years

Here, Mary analogises consciousness with water and her impulse to create as a survival instinct – signifying consciousness as creativity. Mary's metaphor may also capture the tensions between an inherent impulse to create, and the social influences which may come to bear on how older children are free to be and do. Creativity may be restrained or pushed below the surface when older children might not be free to express it, due to social, cultural and environmental forces (that some children identify with – see section 'Self and Iness'). The drowning metaphor highlights how older children tended to recognise, *conceptualise* and philosophise how consciousness may be intrinsic to themselves, others, animals, the world and the universe. In comparison, younger children appeared to *experience* consciousness as a relational whole (rather than conceptualise this), in which they are in/with/as-the-world. Where younger children synonymise consciousness with love and life, older children extend their awareness to socio-cultural objects and activities such as football, movies, social media – forces which coalesce in the production of the social self/identities (see 'Self and I-ness').

Self and I-ness

The preliminary Take a Selfie activity enabled a continuation of exploring consciousness with older children. Staying with the question 'what has not changed since being a baby' and referring to children's experiences in the

activity, children used art to represent their insights and intuitions about consciousness.

Consciousness or Self was paradoxical for children. Children knew but did not know the nature of it. This finding is similar with previous studies, with children referring to consciousness as the 'knowing I', different from their social identities or conceptual senses of self (Thomas 2022a), yet difficult to represent conceptually ('*I just know*', young person aged 16 years, Thomas 2022a). Aspects of identity were noted by children as those things that change such as ages, bodies, thoughts, interests and activities. Socio-cultural influences in children's verbal and visual narratives were detected when children identified the things that had changed. For example, older children drew and wrote social media references such as 'Tiktok'. Children seemed to include aspects of the outer world (social media, activities such as football) as part of their changing identities. Self was identified as the sense of I-ness present in their self-explorations or as the 'heart'. For older children, self is felt as a presence that is mysterious, yet, older children also identified with aspects of the outer world, appropriating socio-cultural forces into their social selves.

We invited younger children to follow the sound of a singing bowl to facilitate a similar awareness in children of their conscious attention (see 'Methods' section). Children followed the sound of the singing bowl until it disappeared. Most children in the circle became still and quiet. We asked children what this felt like to try and identify their experience of consciousness. Children offered words such as 'cloudy' making associations with sky and space. Younger children did not make the same correlations as older children between consciousness and self. Rather, consciousness and younger children's ways of being where relational with others and the world. In later conversations with the adult philosopher, older children (10–11 years) had similar insights around interconnectedness. Some older children suggested human beings to be fractals of the natural world or connected with all life on the planet. Children suggested humans are an aspect of nature, replicating natures processes.

Mind, body and consciousness

Older children were invited to use art methods (drawing or painting) to support research dialogues with an adult philosopher and the researchers. Dialogues began from children's claims that something about consciousness remained the same while other aspects changed. Staying with this idea, the researchers asked children to explore this further. Children used sleep and being awake as two states to explore consciousness. One child suggested that consciousness disappears when we fall asleep. Several other children countered this statement, suggesting that consciousness is still there even when we fall asleep (Figure 14):

> When you're asleep you might be conscious in one way and when you're awake you might be conscious in another way Aged 10 years

In this way, children were exploring aspects of consciousness not readily accessible through self-reflective introspection. Kastrup (2017) hypothesises that all mental processes may in fact be conscious by drawing on phenomena of experiences that are not re-represented during introspection, and dissociated experiences inaccessible to the executive ego. Kastrup (2017) argues if 'consciousness is inherent to all mentation, it may be fundamental in nature, as opposed to a product of particular types of brain function' (559). One child's statement also opposed the idea that consciousness is an epiphenomenon of brain function:

> "Mind is another place it's not in your brain
>
> when you look at a brain it's just a grey
>
> and pink ball. Our mind is another place another
>
> world" Age 10 years

The above insights by children challenge brain-based science and research which informs how children are understood, educated and measured (Figure 13). Children made connections between the brain and mind but suggested these as two different aspects of consciousness – a physical aspect and a mental aspect. Children also theorised the brain to be a useful and important tool that enabled them to access intelligence ('it's good for school', aged 11 years). The mind was suggested to be a space that couldn't fit into a brain by some children. One child stated that the brain is an empty shell that is filled up by the mind. Facets of consciousness such as dreams and imagination were compared to different worlds by older children – similar with younger children who viewed their dreams as different realities.

Exploring the mind as space and place led to conversations around virtual reality and relations between mind, brain and the body. Children described their experiences of using virtual reality applications, noting how their physical bodies reacted to the virtual landscapes they explored. This enabled children to explore the mind/body problem. Towards the end of the research session, the adult philosopher asked the children if physical experience could happen without mental experience. Children referred to sleepwalking as an example of physical experience being determined by mental processes.

Discussion

To avoid adding to the 'festival of misunderstandings' (Strawson 1999) around consciousness, we circumvent defining it. As children have shown, it is something that warrants question marks. When exploring its experiential nature,

children refer to consciousness as self, life and love – extending beyond personhood, the brain, the body and the world. Consciousness, for children in the study, is something that defies linguistic representation, rendering creative methods as vital for researching its nature with children. Children show the challenges for verbally representing aspects of consciousness such as awareness/self. Creative research methods facilitated children to reflect, discern and bring into the world their representations of consciousness. Visual data can be a methodological grapple, with the 'more-than-visual qualities and capacities of images … considered to facilitate the communication of that which is beyond words or cannot be easily articulated' (Lovell & Banfield 2022). Children's images and sound making became forms of expression that fostered fruitful dimensions through which to theorize (Mazzanti & Freeman 2022). The research was not without its challenges. Creative research can have its limitations for meeting, for example, the researchers' agendas. Letting go of tightly framed, systemic research practice to make space for creativity in research can be difficult. Trying to coax, to manoeuvre topics back to the central focus, is not a smooth step. Yet, the research space when creative, is opportune for freshness and newness of insights.

Through creative research methods, children in the study demonstrated some of the tensions found in theorising childhood. For example, children identified a constructed sense of self (identity) as an experience, and an innate or primordial sense of self as an experienc*er* – a compromise almost, to 'the division between the natural child of developmental psychology and the social child of socialization' (Ryan 2012, 440) – challenging the tendency to demarcate nature from culture (Habermas 1986). The historical trajectory for theorizing childhood is one that 'zig-zags between the poles of opposition, now placing childhood at the biological end, now the social' (Ryan 2012, 440). Children seem to bring these antagonistic perspectives together – sometimes transcending these opposites – through their experiential understandings of consciousness and self, in dialogue with the wider context where the division between the biological and social has become increasingly uncertain and unstable (Ryan 2012). The uncertainty increases when ontic questions probe the nature of biology/matter and its ontic status in relation to consciousness, subjectivity and nature (see Kastrup 2018).

The question of consciousness and self is one that is persistent and highly debated across neuroscience and philosophy (Harris 2021; Strawson 1999; Zahavi 2018). Hofman (2016) notes, there is rather little consensus about what precisely amounts to a self, despite the flood of publications on the subject. Self can be viewed as sets of practices (Hofman 2016), as a discursive construct or temporary assemblages of objects, forces and fields, with no genesis (see Delueze & Guittari, 1987). Self appears to be as diverse and elusive as consciousness itself, yet like consciousness, we seem to know it so well. With consciousness sharply intertwined with self, the 'hard problem of

subjectivity' (see Goff & Moran 2021), looms large over the scholarship. Often, self and consciousness are examined within a metaphysics of materialism, where subjective experience – and therefore our sense of self – is an epiphenomenon of physical brains. There are strong phenomenological and philosophical arguments that suggest that self is not an epiphenomena of complex brain processes (see Shani & Keppler 2018; Albahari 2016; Kastrup 2018) – and children's insights in the study may further suggest this to be the case. Children in the study felt their self not as "a person, where a person is understood to be something like a human being (or other animal) considered as a living physical whole' (see Strawson 1999, 111). How children experience consciousness and self, warrants further investigation when developing support mechanisms such as therapy, systems of learning or support models.

Creative research *with* children can contribute to transformation in services for children. An example from the research is in how teachers responded to children's involvement in the research and their wisdom and insights. Teachers expressed their surprise for how children enquired into their own experiences of consciousness and theorized its nature (Figure 15).

The school have recognised the importance for exploring big questions such as what and where is consciousness or who am I. Proposed changes to the curriculum have been made that will include a philosophy hub that children can visit to enquire further or discuss metaphysical questions. Teachers recognised the potential for creative research methods for informing teaching and learning processes. Creative research facilitates children to discern and critically reflect on how they perceive and theorize self, others in the world. Seeing personhood as an experience, perhaps a resource, can enable children to reauthor their inner narratives (Thomas 2021). Agency is important for children in a world where they are at the behest of adult decision-making. Whether relative, collective or assembled, consciousness and the I of experience shouldn't become neglected when involving children in local practice or wider social transformation.

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