

## A Preliminary Study on Using the “Little Box of Big Questions (2012)” for Children with Social, Emotional, Behavioural and Moderate Learning Needs

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### Abstract

Listening to children is comprehensively acclaimed and embedded in Educational Psychology practice and moral, pragmatic and legal perspectives, and professional guidance exist to enforce this practice. Whilst a variety of tools have been explored for listening to children using various techniques, research is yet to focus on using philosophical/spiritual listening approaches with children with special educational needs. This paper targets this specific area by exploring the experiences and impact of using a spiritual listening tool, The Little Box of Big Questions (2012), and follow-up questions to enable reflection opportunities. Data was collected over four sessions with four children aged 13 to 14 with social, emotional, behavioural and moderate learning needs who attended a specialist school for moderate learning needs. Semi-structured interviews, alongside a teacher focus group, informed the thematic analysis, with findings suggesting that relationships, education and feelings about themselves and others not only play a role in students' lives but are also areas of perceived improvements following the sessions. Implications for educational psychologists were discussed, including a greater understanding of the use and impact of The Little Box of Big Questions with children with special educational needs to elicit aspirations, enable goal setting and motivate change.

### Keywords

Spiritual listening, social emotional and behavioural needs, special educational needs, moderate learning needs, impact, change, little box of big questions, empower, experience.

### Introduction and Background

Previous literature identified the importance of listening and researching the voices of those with special educational needs (SEN) and in particular, social, emotional and behavioural needs (SEBN) (Davies, 2005; Tangen, 2009; Thomas, 2007), as it was argued that their communication could be unconventional and social status marginal (Corbett, 1998).

Current guidance offered by the SEN and Disability Code of Practice asserts that “high aspirations are crucial to success — discussions [...] should focus on the child or young person’s strengths and capabilities” (DfE & DH, 2014, p120).

Morally, individuals have a right to have their opinions heard (Davie & Galloway, 1996) and taken into account; students with SEN can expand their deficits and further reduce their capacity if their views are not acknowledged (Lloyd, 2005).

Pragmatically, listening to children’s perspectives could empower and afford them opportunities to change their lives; increased motivation, independence, perception of control, knowledge of individual strengths and difficulties, and personal responsibility for progress and change are some of the positive effects when listening to children (Roller, 1998).

Techniques developed to listen to children include the Mosaic approach (Wigfall & Moss, 2001), children's drawings analysis (Holliday, Harrison, & McLeod, 2009), the Student Report and Excluded Pupils' Report (Gersch, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2001; Gersch, Holgate, & Sigston, 1993; Gersch & Nolan, 1994; Gersch, Pratt, Nolan, & Hooper, 1996) and child video production (Haw, 2008; Nind et al., 2012). Introduction of the Children's Commissioner, alongside a shift toward conducting research *with* rather than *on* children (Clark, 2005; Clark 2007; Kellet, 2005) have contributed to this practice.

A relatively popular research area is exploring opinions of those with SEBN or moderate learning needs (MLN) (Cefai & Cooper, 2010, Clark, Boorman, & Nind, 2011; Flynn, Shevlin, & Lodge, 2011; Michael & Frederickson, 2013; O'Connor, Hodkinson, Burton, & Torstensson, 2011; Sellman, 2009; Taylor-Brown, 2012; Kellett, Aoslin, Baines, Clancy, Jewiss-Hayden, Singh, & Stradgwick, 2010; O'Keeffe, 2011; Ross, 2004), with a more restricted research field focusing on the views of those with both needs (Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Norwich & Kelly, 2002). Nonetheless, the studies available suggest that students with SEBN/MLN are able to reflect and express meaningful perspectives on their experiences.

In 2004, OFSTED (2004, p. 10) introduced the expectation that education should promote children's spiritual development<sup>1</sup> and respective whole-school approaches were consequently developed (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Hart, 2008; Hay & Nye, 1998; Nye, 2009; Singleton, Mason, & Webber, 2004). A newer but growing perspective has developed the idea of spiritual listening as a means for spiritual development (Gersch, Lipscomb, Stoyles, & Caputi, 2014). Gersch, Dowling, Panagiotaki, and Potton (2008) argue that spiritual listening<sup>2</sup> offers a deeper understanding of the root of children's thinking and knowing what they value can give an insight into how to better support them.

A more limited body of research used spiritual listening to explore children's views. The Little Box of Big Questions was developed (LBBQ, Gersch, et al., 2008; Gersch & Lipscomb, 2013; Gersch et al., 2014; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012). Gersch et al. (2014) suggest that LBBQ might be used as an intervention and propose an empowerment, decision-making and action-planning staged model, informed by Heath and Heath (2013), including articulating ideals and motivations, identifying long-term aspirations and formulating plans. Nonetheless, research in this area is still in its infancy and is yet to focus on children with SEN.

## Aim of Study

The current study explored the experiences and perceived impact of spiritual listening on children with social, emotional, behavioural and moderate learning needs when using LBBQ and follow-up reflection opportunities. It specifically focused on:

- a detailed analysis of students' experiences of using LBBQ, and
- the impact of LBBQ on student's lives.

A critical realist epistemology was employed, adopting the view that although a reality (LBBQ) exists "out there", the way we see it is shaped by us and the context in which we are trying to explore it.<sup>3</sup>

## Method

The study used a two-phase design:

1. exploration of experiences of students gathered from their answers to LBBQ questions and feedback after each session, and
2. exploration of the LBBQ's perceived impact on student life as reflected by students and their teachers.

The first phase was organised over 6 to 12 weeks and contained four individual sessions accessed by each participating student. The session structure followed the pattern recommended in LBBQ's administration booklet. Specific modifications were made as suggested by the pilot study and the research focus which were: increased probes and language modification throughout the sessions; evaluation of the session experiences with suggestions for future sessions; and goal setting at the end of each session. One LBBQ topic (explained below) was explored per session. Individual students' answers to LBBQ questions over the four sessions constituted the data used for further analysis.

The second phase gathered data from the participating students and their teachers. The students were interviewed individually about the LBBQ's impact at the end of the fourth session. Their teachers also participated in a focus group two weeks after the majority of student data collection, which explored their perceived changes for the students.

Inductive horizontal thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse participant data gathered using LBBQ, interviews and focus group transcriptions.

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1 Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude (2003:3) defined spiritual development as "the developmental 'engine' that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution". (Although folk psychology might use "spiritual" and "religious" interchangeably, the current study states no connection between these terms.)

2 Spiritual listening is defined by Gersch, Dowling, Panagiotaki, and Potton (2008, p. 226), as "an attempt to ascertain, not simply the child's views, but more specifically their views about the meanings they attach to their lives, their essential drives, motivation and desires".

3 Comprehensive details of the study are available in Robinson (2015).

## LBBQ tool

LBBQ was developed by Gersch and Lipscomb (2012) to explore significant issues that underlie the essence of children's meaning and purpose in life. It contains questions on four topics: identity; important people; meaning and purpose; and thinking and planning. Each topic contains four cards with a main question on one side and follow-up questions on the other<sup>4</sup>. The tool includes a dictionary of key terms and an administration booklet.

## Participants

Five participants were selected from a secondary school for pupils with MLN in a diverse Greater London Local Authority where listening to children was a Service priority. The participants were identified by the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator and followed specific selection criteria: each had a Statement of SEN, with both MLN and SEBN. They were aged between 13 and 14 years old and were able to communicate verbally. One student withdrew involvement, and the final sample consisted of four participants: one female and three males. Their educational attainment ranged from Performance Level 8 (working below the National Curriculum) to Level 3 (expected for Year 4 students). The participants had a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

## Ethical Considerations

Before the study commenced, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee. The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) and the Division of Educational and Child Psychologists' Professional Practice Guidelines (2002) were followed.

## Findings

The analysis was shaped by the dual research focus:

the analysis of students' experiences of using LBBQ, and

the impact of LBBQ on students' lives.

The findings below follow these two strands.

### 1. Using LBBQ

The following themes, based on LBBQ sessions data, were identified (as per Table 1, Figure 1).

- Relationships
- Feelings
- Spirituality
- Money
- Technology
- Hobbies
- Government
- Future Plans
- Meaning and Purpose
- School

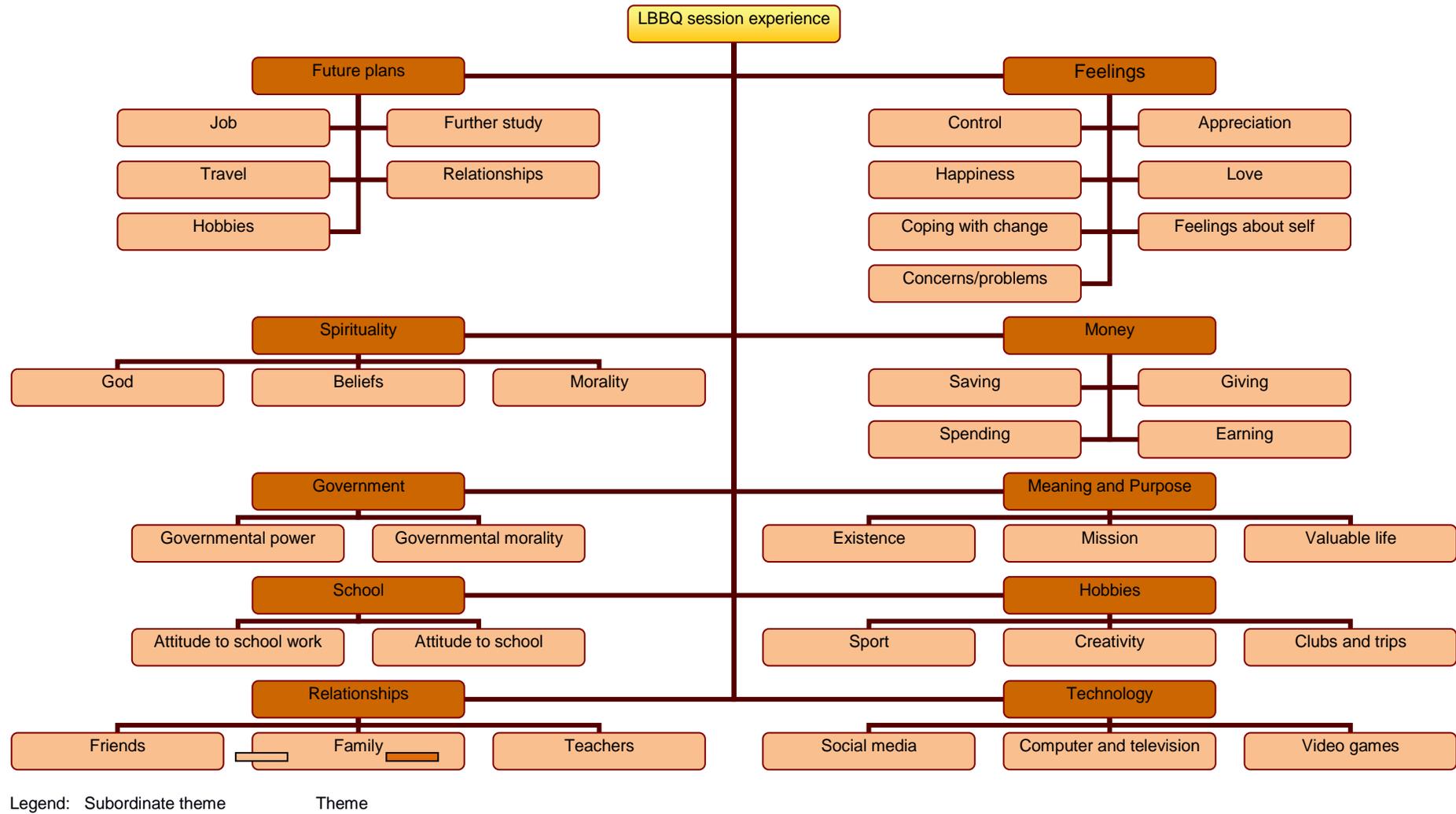
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<sup>4</sup> Examples of questions are: What is special or unique about you or makes you different from others? Who is special to you? Do you think people are on the planet for a reason? What makes a "good" life or a life well lived?

Table 1. Themes arising from the analysis of the LBBQ sessions

Theme	Label	Description
a	Relationships	Who is important to the young people and the roles that they play in their lives: teachers, family and friends
b	Feelings	Feelings about themselves and others: love, control, change, happiness, concerns and appreciation
c	Spirituality	Views on spirituality: God, morality and beliefs
d	Money	Views on money: spending, earning, saving and giving money, now and in the future
e	Technology	The role that technology plays in the lives of young people: computers/television; social media and video games
f	Hobbies	The activities enjoyed: sport, clubs and trips and being creative
g	Government	Views on the role of the government: morality and power
h	Future plans	What the young people hope and plan for their future: job, studying, relationships, hobbies and travel
i	Meaning and purpose	Views about their meaning and purpose: existence, mission and what is important for their lives
j	School	Views on education: attitude to school and attitude to school work

Figure 1. Thematic map representing the experiences of LBBQ sessions



a. **Relationships** focused on friends, family and teachers, who seemed most important for the students. Friends were seen as special, intricate presences in students' current and future lives, who reciprocated feelings, added value and made for a happy life. The majority of students wanted their friends' support when making big decisions for their future, and they were also seen as sources of protection and as role models. Although friends were preponderantly peers, one student also identified a toy that they had made, to be a friend. Activities shared with friends included chatting in school, buying food, travelling and playing sport. An important means of communication was social media, and school and family connections seemed to be the key way in which students made friends.

The close and extended family also featured greatly in the students' lives, with roles not only to fulfil material, social and emotional needs but also to define their purpose and mission in life. Some students felt the reason they were on the planet was because of their family and to have their own family, which would make for a good and valuable life. Others felt their mission was to be guided by and help their parents. The reciprocal relationship with the family was eloquently present, from acts of everyday care to physical aggression manifested towards those attempting to minimise their family's role: "It's about like protective of my family or being kind and that. Helping them ... if they are struggling with something". Last but not least, relatives dying appeared in conversations, suggesting potentially deep feelings and concepts explored by LBBQ.

Teachers' importance varied from playing a pivotal to a minor role, dependent on the strength of the above two relationships. They contributed in varying degrees to a good life, with key roles related primarily to emotional support and comfort, rather than learning: "and they make me feel calm and secure. So I come here." A secondary role identified was their authority in planning and controlling what happened in students' lives.

b. The **feelings** students explored were related to love, concerns/problems, happiness, appreciation, control, coping with change, and feelings about self. Relationships, and also hobbies and religion, evoked love. Aspirations for the future or a range of activities such as playing with a toy, travelling, music, being healthy, working to achieve a goal or daily life satisfactions (e.g., football team wins) were contributing to one's happiness. The appreciation in students' lives varied from global (e.g., everyone and everything were "special") to specific fulfilments, which met basic and complex social, personal and spiritual needs. In opposition, concerns were expressed on specific aspects such as travel, fear of objects, sleepovers, social contact with the opposite sex, or television programmes.

The extent to which participants felt in control was widely spread. Feelings and reactions were interestingly perceived to be under their control, whereas things outside control were the past, future and interactions with the family. The success of coping with change was dependent on the familiarity with change and support received. The students' descriptions of change span from "shocking" to "awkward" and "changes, that's all our life ... we have to change". Lastly, feelings about self were mainly related to strength, rather than difficulties, but also to their SEN. Although the students' concept of "special" was linked to their conception of SEN, their accounts of problems were not comprehensively represented, possibly due to the positive focus of the LBBQ. Problem-solving tools such as giving space, having a calm attitude, communicating to adults and compromising were described to improve coping.

c. The participants defined their **spirituality** in relation to religion/beliefs and morality. For some, believing in God and practising faith duties defined their spirituality. Beliefs for, belonging to and showing appreciation to an entity (religious, fate or self-thought) were strongly represented. Only one participant believed in self-determination. Morality seemed to be understood as appropriate behaviour with regards to the opposite sex, right and wrong and the consequence of behaviours; interestingly, the students did not always show concern for those consequences occurring.

d. Having "lots of money" was considered important, though there were diverse opinions on how to spend it, including giving **money** to charity, friends or family and religious pilgrimage, and buying material goods that contributed to a comfortable life. Although saving money was mentioned, the preferences for immediate spending or for giving it to parents prevailed, suggesting potential difficulty to budget.

e. **Technology** served several purposes, generally related to improving students' emotional wellbeing as it drew on their abilities and engaged or distracted them when upset. Social media played a unique role in enabling the students to communicate with friends outside school and contributing to a good life. Although video gaming was positively appreciated, it was also identified as a potential source of stress.

f. Specific sport- and art-related **hobbies** were an important source of empowerment for participants and were identified in future career prospects or even in reasons of existence. They had benefits in focus, satisfaction and achievement, or stress moderation. Participating in clubs offered the prospect of a good life, by giving the students the opportunity to improve and make social, emotional and romantic connections. Sport role models were seen as important in inspiring work and focus.

g. Interestingly, the **Government** also featured in two responses and was seen as a powerful entity due to voting and exerting decisions around right and wrong: "Sometimes the government choose for you if you don't make the right choice". A sense of over-paternalistic government was also hinted at, with it deciding specific future routes.

h. When talking about their **future plans**, the students acknowledged the importance of practising life skills, whilst getting a job and studying were seen as unpredictable and, at times, nebulous concepts. Whilst they had ideas about future jobs and grasped the importance of having alternative options, planning further study was generally focused on the near future, with some avoidance related to longer-term planning: "You have to work hard... People don't realise it — some people don't have a job. Have to work hard. Some don't go to school and learn. You do have to work hard."

Other future plans involved travelling, either for pleasure, work or just as a step towards independence; having a family; and living either with friends or with parents.

i. Participants' **meaning and purpose** in life were related to their mission of having a fulfilled life; there was a wide range of explanations of existence, from fulfilling parents' will, to the survival of the species and helping people. A valuable life involved meeting people, not being racist, seeing the world, friends, and helping people. A good life involved activities such as playing football, having fun, having children, travelling the world, having a job, getting experience, getting a car and having achievements respected.

j. The attitude to **school** fluctuated from being constrained by family and/or school via behaviour systems, to being internally motivated to learn. "If you don't learn, you won't have anything to do in the future, so like you can get ready". Perseverance was an important feature of school work ("When it's wrong, I try harder"), with teachers supporting learning and motivation. Learning words, art, physical education, design and technology and English were amongst those enjoyable subjects, with reading being disliked. The students also recognised their talents in design and technology, information and technology, art and science. Some felt proud of their school achievements and saw themselves as role models: "Like, for example, if you do work and other people don't do work so they see a person who does do work and you succeed in lots of subjects so they like start doing it as well." One student identified education with her mission in life and having a good life.

#### Summary of using LBBQ

The participants showed understanding of and reflected in various degrees of depth about what was important to them. A golden thread emerged and covered interests, talents, what makes for a valuable life, and planning specific paths for career and hobby development and progress. However, a lack of empowerment and control was also suggested in a number of themes. The value of relationships also played a significant part in students' accounts.

Overall, LBBQ was an adequate tool to access students' distinctive concepts and understandings of their world, though various degrees of scaffolding needed to be used. Additionally, although topics such as bereavement were not directly targeted by LBBQ, its questions appeared to touch on deep, metaphysical concepts, highlighting hidden areas on which the students had an opportunity to reflect.

## 2. The impact of LBBQ

The LBBQ was perceived to bring improvements for students related to

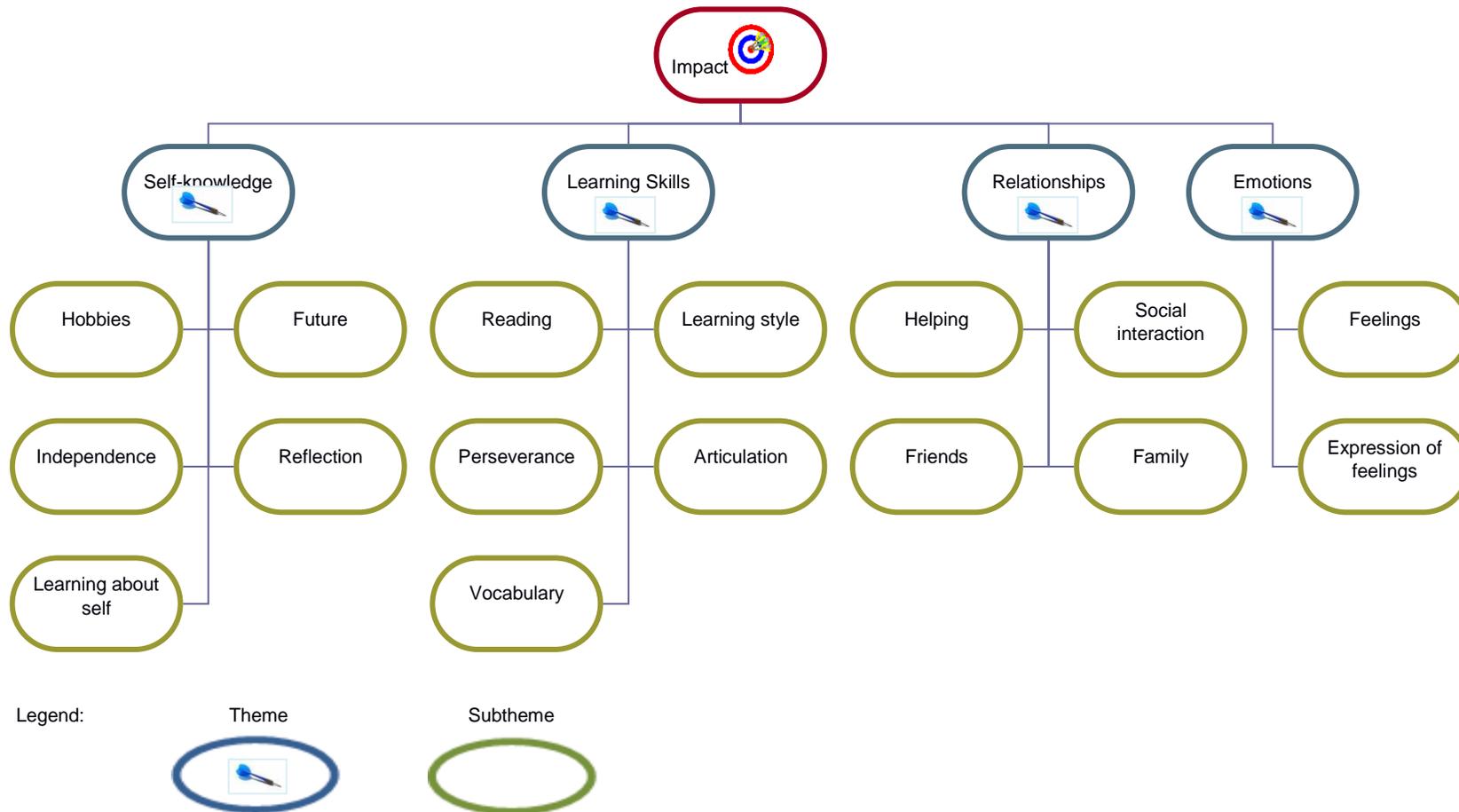
- learning skills
- relationships
- emotions, and
- self-knowledge.

A summary of these areas is available in Table 2, Figure 2. Below is a description of the specific effects experienced.

Table 2. LBBQ sessions perceived impact theme

Theme	Label	Description from student data	Description from teacher data
1	Relationships	Relationship development with friends and family, development of social interaction skills and helping behaviours.	Improved student relationships with the opposite sex.
2	Learning skills	Development of reading, articulation, perseverance and vocabulary and learning style acknowledgement.	Improved vocabulary and concentration.
3	Self-knowledge	Reflection on their lives, future, hobbies, independence and learning about themselves.	Considering the future, recognising steps to the future, independent thinking, taking responsibility.
4	Emotions	Changes in their feelings from session participation and wanting to talk about their feelings with others.	Change in emotions from attending sessions, increased expression and discussion of feelings.

Figure 2. Thematic map of LBBQ sessions perceived impact



Both the students and teachers observed improvement in a number of learning skills, including vocabulary development and understanding of words, but also the students showing extended curiosity of the themes discussed. The students set very specific goals through the sessions, related to both learning and social interaction (e.g., to read sessions questions, develop articulation, work in a less distracting environment, eye contact, talk with the opposite sex, ask questions, help their family), and goal-specific improvements were observed by adults. Interestingly, the only improvement not reported by the adults was related to family relationships. This may be because the teachers may not discuss family matters with students, or perceived behaviour changes may not be apparent.

Emotions was another area in which LBBQ seems to have a positive influence, with students being observed to be calmer and less upset about transitioning to the next year. The students themselves found the talks reassuring and positive. Last but not least, the questions supported the students' self-understanding and forward thinking, as it opened discussions about the future, alongside the understanding that the present was a building block to their future and the use of breaking goals into steps.

Overall, these findings suggest that LBBQ could improve areas of importance for students, namely relationships, education and feelings about themselves and others. Through exploring these areas, the students were able to also identify improvements and successfully change parts of their lives.

## Discussion

### Using LBBQ

This study suggests ten key areas of importance for children with SEBN and MLN in their lives: government, relationships, meaning and purpose, future plans, spirituality, hobbies, education, feelings, money and technology. Findings from Gersch et al. (2014) also generated ten themes. Nonetheless, whilst some themes mimic Gersch et al.'s study, meaning and purpose, feelings, government and education seem to be specific to the population with social, emotional and moderate learning needs (Table 3 offers further information). These specific themes suggest a very important role of the school as a unique environment for children with social, emotional and moderate learning needs to socialise and form relationships, experience success and achievement, alongside studying to gain skills and work towards their future; additionally, these children have an increased awareness of the Government's potential paternalistic role, in comparison to their peers in mainstream schools. Of further interest is that some of Gersch et al.'s (2014) themes did not arise in this study's data — they are: bereavement, disability/death/illness, growing up/changes and protecting others. While participants in this study mentioned them in various conversations, the emphasis was in relation to other themes such as relationships, future plans and areas for development. Specific to disabilities, the students did not perceive SEN as a distinct part of their current identities, but raising these issues served to highlight important areas of their life and in their possible (future) selves.

Table 3. Comparing generated themes to those found in Gersch et al.'s study (2014)

Theme	Gersch et al. (2014)	This study
1	The importance of helping, loving and protecting others	Feelings - Feelings about themselves and others: love, control, change, happiness, concerns and appreciation
2	The importance of role models, family, friends and teachers	Relationships - Who is important to the young people and the roles that they play in their lives: teachers, family and friends
3	Equality, discrimination and unfairness	Government - Views on the role of the government: morality and power
4	Growing up and related changes	Education - Views on education: attitude to school and attitude to school work
5	Ways of solving problems and using technology	Technology - The role that technology plays in the lives of young people: computers and television, social media and video games
6	Future life plans; leading a good life	Future plans - What the young people hope and plan for their future: job, studying, relationships, hobbies and travel
7	Sports, winning, success and achievement	Hobbies - The activities enjoyed: sport, clubs and trips and being creative
8	Religion, the supernatural world and prayer	Spirituality - Views on spirituality: God, morality and beliefs
9	Dealing with death, illness and disability	Meaning and purpose - Views about their meaning and purpose: existence, mission and what is important for their lives
10	Money: Spending and giving.	Money - Views on money: spending, earning, saving and giving money, now and in the future

The findings about the experiences of using LBBQ seem to relate to several theories. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs appears to fit the findings. For instance, when identifying what they would spend money on, several students mentioned food and a home, suggestive of initially satisfying basic physiological needs. However, when addressing what they appreciate now, many focused on their relationships. Further, when looking at what they thought would make a good life, many students expressed higher-order needs, such as achievement and being creative. It seemed that the students were cognisant of meeting their basic needs first, were appreciative of their current need for relationships being met and hoped for achievement and self-actualisation in the future. With regard to self-actualisation, the students appeared to need an opportunity and support to make

this explicit to help them plan for the future, but their proposed indicators of self-actualisation were far more than meeting basic needs, and centred on having a job and a family and being creative within their field.

Personal construct psychology (Beaver, 1996; Kelly, 1955; Ravenette, 2006) is another theory that explains some of the findings. LBBQ helped to uncover or highlight constructs for the participants, with some reflecting that they had learnt things about themselves that they had not known before.

An interesting aspect of some students' responses was that they viewed the word "special" in questions as indicating those aspects of their skills or personality as "awkward" or "different" rather than unique and particular to them in a positive way. Similarly, some questions were misunderstood or taken literally (for example, when asked why they were on the planet, they saw this question as asking why we are on earth and not another planet). This reinforced how specific experiences and discourses of students could shape understanding and how important it is to clarify the (un)shared meanings of words used. In this study, questions were adapted and clarified and the participants were helped to reconceptualise words such as "special".

The researcher conceptualised participants' constructs as roots on a tree in the thematic map. This was based on several ideas, including one student responding about their "tree of hope" which helped to tell them what to do. It also extends Lipscomb's metaphor (2010, p. 120) in which she says:

...the leaves are a visible manifestation of how healthy the roots are. Therefore, if a tree is neglected, then this will be clear in its outward appearance. Similarly, children can exhibit difficulties within learning and behaviour, and by nourishing the "roots" we can attempt to develop the wellbeing of the whole self.

This research argues that before nourishing the "roots" it is important for students to have space to identify their rooting constructs, and *they* are then well placed to begin to nourish them for themselves. This notion is particularly important for those with SEN, for whom decisions can often be made on their behalf, disempowering them and reducing their autonomy, as reflected in the participants' responses. By having opportunities to reflect on their lives, the students were able to identify some of their own "roots" that needed input and set goals. They were also able to explore and articulate other areas of their lives. Taking the lead from the students means, at this point, that those working with them could step in to offer the nourishment.

Some of the themes reflected deep and significant events and topics in the students' lives, such as bereavement. The fact that questions that did not address this topic directly elicited this response suggests that LBBQ stimulated spiritual and metaphysical issues for these students and therefore needs to be used sensitively, with preparation and consideration.

### The impact of LBBQ

The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) seems to explain the process identified in this study of highlighting areas of importance in students' lives and then identifying areas for development. Additionally, the impact of LBBQ may also align with and extend the "possible selves" research literature (Mainwaring & Hallam, 2010; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007), as the students generated possible selves which linked to current interests and, for some students, resulted in developing steps to move towards them. This demonstrates the capacity of students with social, emotional and moderate learning needs to consider possible selves when planning for the future.

The assumptions of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991) also fit with these findings. Bandura argued goal setting involves three subprocesses: self-observation, self-judgement and self-reaction. The LBBQ helped students identify what was valuable and meaningful for them, their perceived purpose and areas students enjoyed and used *these* to set goals. Using LBBQ with goal-setting opportunities, therefore, involved aspects of the strengths-based approach (Rapp, Sallebey, & Sullivan, 2005), without specifically linking strengths or focusing on identifying resources to set and achieve goals.

Last but not least, the study fits within the broader positive psychology approach (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), as LBBQ sessions enabled students to reflect on past achievements, appreciate current aspects of their lives and set goals. The study also created positive change at system levels (e.g., school, explored in this instance).

### Study strengths

A number of measures assured trustworthiness of this research.

- Some of the data was triangulated by individual interviews and a focus group. The analysis was assured by inter-coder agreement and consensus replication (through being sample checked by the authors as well as by a scientific journal editor). Regular meetings between the authors to reflect on potential biases also occurred. The corresponding author also kept a reflective diary in order to acknowledge and eliminate potential biases.
- The corresponding author spent time in students' classes; this helped students familiarise themselves with her. Where possible, sessions were timetabled to maximise participation.
- The sessions enabled the possibility of asking students to explicitly set goals, as Walsh (2008) suggested this was necessary to make the link between what they were discussing and the future.
- Asking students to evaluate being involved allowed them to become part of the research process and comment on possible improvements.

### Study limitations

Study limitations are acknowledged to include sample size, time period and attribution of impact.

The small participant sample in this study means results cannot be generalised to a wider population. The authors recommend this as a pilot study which others should advance.

Due to several factors, the intended study time period of four weeks was not possible. Sessions' perceived impact could have been confounded by a loss of momentum or a greater reflection period. The teacher focus group took part prior to the sessions' completion for all participants, reducing the extent of observed behaviour changes for one participant compared to the others.

Regarding improvements perceived, participants felt some of the changes resulted directly from the sessions. It is nonetheless prudent to affirm that perceived impact might be a combination of the study and curriculum factors. On reflection, the authors are conscious of the impact depending not only on the LBBQ tool but also on the context, the responsiveness of the student and researcher attitude.

This study did not explore lasting effects of the sessions; it may be possible students would require regular input to motivate continued changes.

### Implications for future research

Interestingly, the participants suggested sessions being run over a longer time, with school staff facilitating and continuing discussions, and group sessions with peers. Future studies could, therefore, explore LBBQ impact with groups of students, facilitated by adults/students within school, over an extended period.

Further research could explore the long-term impact of LBBQ sessions in influencing students' possible future plans. Students may benefit from explicit help to link goals to what is important to them, their strengths and available resources in their contexts to support them. Parental perspectives on students' home-perceived behaviour changes could be a further study focus. Involving a bigger sample of students with social, emotional and moderate learning needs, with other SEN and those of different ages, would be useful in understanding whether results could be generalised to the SEN population.

### Implications for educational psychologists

Three main implications for educational psychologists were identified.

- There is an assumed duty in statutory assessments to identify a student's hopes and aspirations and outcomes as steps towards them (DfE, DH, 2014). LBBQ is a useful tool that can be used to identify this information with students. Educational psychologists are encouraged to be holistic when addressing students' identity, rather than focusing on disabilities. As students set goals based on their difficulties, it strongly encourages a focus on students' competency to contribute ideas for their own short- and long-term outcomes.
- As LBBQ seems to be beneficial for students with social, emotional and moderate learning needs, educational psychologists are best placed to train schools on how to use LBBQ. The corresponding author has already provided training to learning mentors, and a school has expressed interest in using LBBQ over extended time periods to structure student sessions and improve specific skill areas.
- Last but not least, the study demonstrated areas of importance to participants, which could highlight areas for more in-depth work by educational psychologists, to help skills and knowledge development.

### Conclusion

This article argued that students with social, emotional and moderate learning needs are able to speak meaningfully about their lives, set themselves goals and achieve them when using LBBQ. The findings strongly suggested this is possible.

This study offered a distinctive contribution to the area of spiritual listening. It has shown that spiritual listening through LBBQ can be used with students with social, emotional and moderate learning needs to identify areas of change that are important to them, both now and in the future. Students appreciated being given a space to hear their own voice, and through their participation they have contributed to developing a greater understanding of their lives that could be utilised to motivate them and identify areas they want to develop. The study has also indicated that by working with students over a period of time, using the LBBQ and providing an opportunity to set goals, the sessions were perceived to improve students' specific aspects of life, as noted by themselves and their teachers. This suggests LBBQ has the ability to promote perceived change for these students. This research has opened up possible uses for a spiritual listening tool for educational psychologists and other professionals to elicit improvements in students' aspects of life, noticeable to students and teachers.

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### Declaration of Interest

Emeritus Professor Irvine Gersch is a co-author of the LBBQ series published by Small World Publications.

The research was carried out by the first author as part of her Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology at University of East London and the research was consequently funded by the author and the university.

## Biographies

Dr Nina Robinson is an Educational Psychologist for Barnet with Cambridge Education at the London Borough of Barnet. Nina is particularly interested in helping others to hear the voices of the children that she works with, and work in the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Dr Helena Bunn works as a senior educational psychologist at Norfolk Local Authority and a principal lecturer at the University of East London. She also provides expert evidence in Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal and Court cases related to Romanian children. Her drive is improving children's quality of life (whether they experienced Romanian state orphanages or special schools, have complex medical conditions or special educational needs), and how systems can be designed to deliver improvements.

Emeritus Professor Irvine Gersch is currently Emeritus Professor of Education and Child Psychology at the University of East London and has developed the LBBQ (2012) and LBBQ2 (2015).

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