

“I JUST STARTED PRETENDING THEY WERE THERE AND THEY JUST KEPT  
STAYING WITH ME”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY INTO PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGED  
CHILDREN’S PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSE AND FUNCTIONS THEIR  
IMAGINARY COMPANIONS SERVE FOR THEM, PARTICULARLY IN SCHOOL AND  
WITH SCHOOL WORK.

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## **Abstract**

Children's imaginary companions are a very common yet surprisingly under-researched phenomenon. This qualitative study investigates children's perceptions of their imaginary companion(s) and uncovers the functions they serve for the children, especially in relation to academic demands made by school. The research process is explored in detail and some particular considerations involved when conducting research with children are outlined. Seven children aged between seven and ten (primary-aged pupils), who had a current imaginary companion, participated in semi-structured interviews and themes were identified from interview transcripts. Findings derived from a thematic analysis reveal two over-arching themes, namely 'the child's relationship with their imaginary companion(s)' and 'problem-solving'. Several separate sub-themes contributed to these two over-arching themes. The findings are discussed in relation to children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Although only two boys reported their imaginary companions being at school, others helped with homework; therefore most of the imaginary companions in this study help with school work. They provide answers, offer reassurance that answers are correct, embody self-talk techniques, suggest approaches/strategies, provide visual cues and offer ready-made characters for stories. Implications of the findings for educational psychologists and practitioners are highlighted and areas for future research into imaginary companions are suggested.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Children's imaginary companions are a very common yet surprisingly under-researched phenomenon (Taylor, 1999). Therefore only a relatively small amount is known about why children create imaginary companions and what functions they serve for their creators. In my view it is intriguing that such an ordinary experience in children's development has not attracted more investigation. As a practising educational psychologist I have worked with a small number of children who reportedly have an imaginary companion. This has led to my renewed interest in the role that imagination plays generally in children's development and particularly the purposes that imaginary companions serve in the lives of their creators. The child's quote included in the title of this thesis highlights my underlying ethos that children are central to this research.

This study offers an opportunity to glimpse into the fantasy world of children and introduces the imaginary companions of the children who participated in this research. Children aged between the ages of seven and ten (primary aged pupils) who had a current imaginary companion participated in this study. Its primary aim was to investigate the children's perceptions of their imaginary companion(s) and to uncover the possible functions they serve for the children, especially in relation to academic demands made at school.

This chapter provides further explanation of the title and defines key words and terms that are used throughout this thesis. The significance of the topic in relation to educational and child psychology is outlined before the research is introduced.

#### **1.1 What is an imaginary companion?**

A common definition used for imaginary companions by researchers is:

“...an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment.” (Svendsen, 1934, pg. 988).

Although this definition is from dated literature it still nevertheless captures what I understand to be an imaginary companion. However, the phrase 'imaginary companion' has been used as a term which includes not only invisible characters but also objects that children personify. The variety of interpretations and subsequent implications for research findings are explored in the literature review. However, it is important to note here that research in this area has shown some distinct differences between the possible functions that different types of imaginary activity might serve, particularly impersonation (for example, Taylor 1999; Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup, 2000; Taylor et al, 2004). For this reason, this study limits its scope to invisible characters which have been created by the children's imagination and are independent of external characters which could have an element of being donated in some way, such as toys or fictional/non-fictional characters.

Throughout this thesis the use of 'he' and 'she' are used interchangeably to ensure a gender balance when describing general ideas. The terms 'imaginary companion' and 'imaginary friend' are used in the same way and refer to the same phenomenon. The latter term is the one most commonly used when talking with children about their imaginary companions.

## **1.2 The significance of imaginary companions and the rationale behind this study**

Children do not simply imitate or reproduce the characters and events they have experience of; they exhibit a well-known ability and inclination to invent imaginary characters and act out fantasy scenarios. Sometimes children's pretend play is coordinated with the pretending of peers, but they also pretend when they are alone. Imaginary companions provide a particularly interesting example of developing imaginative skills because they are usually created spontaneously by children and often assume important roles in children's lives. While research into imaginary companions is limited, the studies that have been completed offer tantalising insights. Some of the research which has focussed on imaginary companions has explored the incidence of imaginary companions but this has often been quantitative and not placed much emphasis on the child's perspective, despite children being at the centre of the experience. These quantitative studies have missed the essence of the complex experience of having an imaginary companion and as a result, it could be argued that



findings have tended to be less informative. However, qualitative approaches have been more revealing as these have explored children's imaginary companions in more depth, offering a rich picture into the world of imaginary friends as well as considering some of the meanings they have for their creators. More current research in this area has found that the experience of creating and maintaining an imaginary companion is idiosyncratic, unique and highly individualised (Taylor, 1999).

Alongside the limited research that has studied imaginary companions as a phenomenon in their own right, there are a number of studies that have looked at imaginary companions in relation to other areas of child development. Such areas include language acquisition (Harris, 2000), fantasy/reality distinction (Bouldin and Pratt 2001; Sharon and Woolley, 2004); theory of mind development (Harris, 1991) and socialisation (Gleason, 2002). All of these areas are related to child development and educational psychology and contribute to our understanding of how children develop cognitively, socially and emotionally. Research that leads to new knowledge and a deeper understanding of these areas could provide ideas and further avenues of investigation that may help support children with their learning as well as with their social and emotional development. Research findings could also help guide the responses of adults who care for and work with children.

It could be argued that certain research questions in some previous studies on imaginary companions may have been driven by expectations or assumptions that were sometimes too specific for a childhood experience that so little is known about. The research question reflected in the title of this thesis is intentionally broad as this study is more concerned with openly exploring the children's experience of having an imaginary companion than it is with testing specific research questions. This is partly due to the limited body of research and literature relating to the area of imaginary companions. Also, as some of the existing research demonstrates, several interesting findings have emerged that were not predicted and I want to maintain this openness in my research.

Broadly, this study aims to gain insight into the functions and purposes that imaginary companions serve from the perspective of the child, particularly when in school and in

relation to school work. Talking to a child about their imaginary companion(s) offers a chance to explore the thoughts and feelings of the child and investigating this phenomenon from the perspective of the child is a contemporary way to examine this experience. In contrast to some other studies investigating this phenomenon, this study takes a qualitative stance as it is concerned with detail and the quality of the distinctive experience of having an imaginary friend. This sheds light on the purpose they serve in a way that a quantitative study could not. A qualitative approach lends itself particularly well to exploring in-depth the phenomenon of imaginary companions and it is hoped that this study will make a valuable contribution to the existing research base in the area. Of the limited research into imaginary companions there is extremely scant attention given to the role these companions play for their creators in school and with school work. Only speculative links or passing comments have been made to the relevance of findings to the school-life of children. It is expected that what is learned from this study will help our understanding of, and response to, the children who create imaginary companions, especially when they are in a school setting.

Based on previous research, it is possible to tentatively assume that there may be links between imaginary companion creation and social, academic and emotional reasoning, some gender and age differences and the important role that pretend play has in children's development. These areas of theory and practice are highly relevant to educational and child psychologists as well as to other educational practitioners. It is surprising that research into imaginary companions is so limited considering how common the experience is in childhood. This, along with the other areas outlined above, contributes to the rationale for selecting this subject area for investigation.

The children who participated in this study were aged between seven and ten. Interviews were conducted with seven children, two girls and five boys, as well as a pilot interview with one other girl. A semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions was used to help draw out enlightening answers from the children. Interview transcripts were then analysed using inductive thematic analysis which searched for semantic themes from a constructivist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes that emerged from the interviews were then linked back to the research literature and discussed in relation to

certain areas of educational and child psychology. Conclusions were then made about the findings of this study in relation to relevant research within the field of psychology and to the literature.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature related to the study of imaginary companions. This review includes evaluating key research studies and looks at how the literature links to the primary overarching research question which is 'what are the children's perceptions of the purpose and functions their imaginary companions serve for them, particularly in school and with school work?' Both theory and research are included in the literature review and links are made that are relevant to the decisions taken in the design of this study. Within the literature review there is an introduction to the topic of human imagination along with a brief outline of some of the research and theory that explores the role of imagination and pretend play. The research on imaginary companions is then introduced, along with their links to psychopathology as well as research conducted with normative samples. The variety of definitions used in the research is discussed before exploring the reported incidence of imaginary companions. The characteristics of children with imaginary companions as well as the characteristics of imaginary companions themselves are then looked at. The review of the literature ends by considering what the research tells us about the psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions and the possible purposes and functions they might serve for their creators.

The methodology is presented and discussed in Chapter Three and contains explanations of the adopted epistemological and ontological approach as well as the rationale behind the methodological and analytical tools used. This chapter also includes details regarding the child participants, information from the initial sample identification questionnaire, methodological procedures and the processes involved in generating themes during analysis. Details regarding the interview format, data collection and analysis along with some advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methods are also located in this chapter. Chapter Three ends with a section containing some of the main ethical considerations that were thought about and implemented during the design and process of the research.

Chapter Four provides key findings from the interviews which are presented as themes. Themes that emerged from the interview transcripts are described and supported by evidence in the form of verbatim extracts from the actual interviews. Children's drawings of their imaginary companions are also located in this chapter.

A discussion of the main findings in relation to the research questions and to the literature takes place in Chapter Five. This chapter also includes sections on initial observations, as well as some limitations of the study and general discussion points related to involving children in research. Theoretical areas such as independent work skills, motivation and self-regulatory processes (such as self-verbalisation) are interwoven into the discussion in relation to the findings of this study and the phenomenon of imaginary companions.

Conclusions are drawn in Chapter Six and suggestions about future avenues for further research are offered as well as reference made to the implications for educational psychologists and their practice.

This study aims to make some original and engaging contributions to the existing research base into imaginary companions. It is also anticipated that some of the findings will also add to further understanding in certain areas of children's development within wider fields of psychology. Entering the imaginary world of children during the process of this research has proven to be a thought-provoking, charming and thoroughly fascinating exercise.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the published research into imaginary companions and reviews relevant key texts in order to establish what is known about imaginary companions and the children who create them. It also looks at the research exploring the psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions and what the research tells us about some of the purposes and functions they serve for their creators. This chapter considers theory and research in relation to the research questions with links between these questions and the literature being offered. In addition to studying imaginary companions, the literature on developmental psychology in relation to children's social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as children being participants in research was examined.

This review is based on research and information taken from books relating to these fields as well as journals from The British Psychological Society, The Association of Educational Psychologists and other relevant academic and peer reviewed journals. Online sources including PsycINFO, OVID, ERIC and Google Scholar were used with key word searches including the terms 'imaginary companions', 'imaginary friends', 'fantasy', 'pretend friends', 'pretend playmates' and 'imagination' amongst many others. Initially a search for more current literature was made, limiting the scope to research written in the last ten years, but due to the limited amount of information on imaginary companions this time frame was extended. The literature search was extensive and all feasible avenues were explored in order to help ensure that there were no significant gaps in the information obtained. The following sections include the main areas that are pertinent to this research and links are made to the decisions taken in the design of this study as appropriate.

#### **2.2 Imagination and research on the significance of imagination and pretend play**

Imagination can be thought of as being the capacity to transcend one's current time, place and/or circumstance in one's mind (Taylor, 2011). Imagination represents the mind's natural

capacity for fantasy and visualisation and is a powerful resource for invention and creativity (Hart and Zellars, 2006). It is largely free from objective restraints and can appear to be limitless; indeed Albert Einstein once said, "Imagination...is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world" (Viereck, 1929). In common usage, 'creative' and 'imaginative' often serve as synonyms to describe innovative ideas/objects or the people who are responsible for them, for example 'she is so creative/imaginative'. However, in psychological research 'imagination' is a broader term that encompasses the ability to think about what might have been, to plan and anticipate the future, to create fictional worlds, to become absorbed in the narratives created by others and consider remote and close alternatives to actual experiences (Taylor, 2011). As far as we are aware, imagination is a distinctly human phenomenon.

One of the few contemporary academics who has theorised about and researched children's imagination is Harris (2000). He argues that 'pretence, fantasy and wishful thinking', what he terms 'the work of the imagination', has been very much underestimated by influential psychologists such as Piaget (1962). For example, he argues that Piaget's concept of 'pretend play' seems to be viewed by him as being "a primitive and temporary phase of maladaptation that will be outgrown in the course of development" (Harris, 2000, pg. 5). While Piaget (1962) considered pretend play to be a sign of immature thinking which is outgrown as the child matures, Harris (2000) takes a more constructive stance about the role of imagination, viewing its development as being crucial to emotional, social and cognitive growth. Harris notes three reasons for this more positive view of imagination:

- Pretend play starts to emerge from the age of two years and becomes increasingly elaborate thereafter; drawing on knowledge the child has gained so far about how the world works.
- Pretending is a very widespread and distinctive feature of human childhood, unlike primates and other animals, which leads to questions about its biological and/or evolutionary significance.

- The absence of or minimal engagement in imaginary activities, including pretend play, is an indication of problems. Harris gives the example of children with a diagnosis of autism, where difficulties in flexible thinking, communication and social understanding frequently pose complications for them in coping with daily life and with relationships.

Harris (2000) argues that imaginary companions, along with personification and impersonation, are evidence of what he terms 'sustained role play', which he conceptualises as a high-level form of imaginary activity that influences development. Harris theorises that through 'sustained role play', children imagine different possibilities which ultimately lead to a developed concept of reality. He proposes that pretend play requires children to draw knowledge from their causal understanding of the physical and mental world and that taking a step back from reality (what he terms 'suspension of objective truth') does not necessarily mean there is cognitive distortion. For example, if a child 'dries' a teddy after 'bathing' it, she is suspending what she knows to be real (the teddy is not actually wet) but is maintaining the suspension in belief in order to sustain the role play. Harris argues that alternatives to reality may be linked with a move towards objectivity rather than away from it and role play constitutes a more sophisticated mode of thinking than Piaget would give it credit for. He states that:

"Thus contrary to Piaget, I conclude that children do possess a genuine imagination - the type of imagination that we all exercise when we entertain fictional possibilities. Just like readers of fiction, they deploy their understanding of the causal regularities of the real world to make sense of the novel possibilities that occur within that make-believe framework. Indeed, I would argue that the evidence from children's pretend play suggests that the disposition toward fiction is remarkably deep-rooted. It begins to emerge toward the end of the second year, at around the same time as speech itself" (Harris, 2000, pg. 27).

Joint pretend play is a central feature of early social relationships and the ability to take on roles and share imaginary games with others is all part of being a successful playmate to other children. The complex processes involved in pretend play are a rich means by which children begin to understand the beliefs, desires and intentions of others. This 'theory of mind' has been a particular avenue of interest for researchers and theorists. When a child develops an understanding of the mental states of others this allows the child to predict

another person's behaviour on the basis of what they think that person's beliefs and intentions are. Pretend play demonstrates children's ability to 'mind read' (Baron-Cohen, 1995) others and to empathise with others as well as understand that others feel and think different things to them. Goswami (2014) makes the point that as children grow older less time is spent actually playing than is spent negotiating the plot and each other's role in the game. She argues that sharing imaginary worlds, 'reading' the intentions of your friends and discussing cooperatively how to fit everyone's actions and mental states into the game has beneficial effects on the development of a 'theory of mind'.

Goswami (2014) notes that children aged two will plan pretend games in advance and search out the props that may be required. When this happens, I believe that they are not only using their cognitive and language skills when planning these games (going beyond thinking in the 'here and now' but to a possible future and using language to inform others) but are also developing their emotional skills (for example, by managing their own feelings if their suggestions are rejected) and their social skills, such as cooperation and negotiating (for example, deciding that a stick will be a 'horse' rather than a 'flying broomstick'). By imagining that objects are something other than what they *actually* are, pretend play fosters the development of 'symbolic capacity' where the child is operating in an imaginary world with symbolic objects. Goswami (2014) makes the important point that symbolic representations (such as words, drawings or photos) are an important aspect of human culture and are often how knowledge is transmitted through the culture (this has links to Vygotsky's, 1962, idea that culturally produced artefacts, such as words, are key for the transmitting of knowledge). Through pretend play, understanding symbolic representations can also develop an understanding of reality itself and so it seems crucial to emotional, social and cognitive growth as Harris (2000) claims.

### **2.3 Definitions of imaginary phenomena and reported incidence**

#### *Definitions of imaginary companions and other imaginary phenomena*

In the literature there is some variation as to what is included under the term 'imaginary companion'. As noted in Chapter One, the phrase 'imaginary companion' has been used as a term which includes not only invisible characters, but also objects that are personified by



children. The use of the term 'imaginary companion' in this study refers to an invisible character which the child has created from their own imagination. Svendsen (1934) offered an operational definition which has served as a useful reference point for researchers in this area. The definition she used is,

“...an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment” (Svendsen, 1934, pg. 988).

This captures what I understand to be an imaginary companion and 'invisible characters' are the focus of this research.

However, some subsequent researchers, although making reference to Svendsen's definition, have chosen to modify it to varying degrees. Most common (for example, Taylor, Carlson and Gerow, 2001; Taylor et al, 2004; Majors, 2013) is the inclusion of 'personified objects'. 'Personified objects' can be defined as items that have an objective existence that a child endows with a stable 'personality'. Children interact with their personified object and treat it as 'real', with it often being used as a prop in their pretence. Personified objects used in this way by children are commonly dolls or stuffed toys, but they can also be more idiosyncratic objects, such as a chest of drawers (Taylor, 1999). Impersonation is an imaginary activity that has been studied too and is referred to in Svendsen's quote above. Most children act out a variety of roles in their pretend play, whether by themselves or with other children but sometimes children engage in a kind of impersonation that is more enduring, for example, a child who pretends he is 'Batman' every day for months. As referred to in the previous section, Harris (2000) argues for the bringing together of imaginary phenomena, maintaining that they serve similar developmental purposes for the child. He defines imaginary companions as being one (albeit an especially intriguing one) of three forms of 'sustained role play', the other two being impersonation and personification. To add to the debate about what it is we are actually investigating; it is relevant to note here another form of imaginary phenomenon where children create an elaborate imaginary

world, otherwise known as a 'paracosm' (Cohen and Mackeith, 1992). Paracosms are only occasionally referred to in imaginary companion research, suggesting they may be quite rare, although both Hoff (2004-2005) and Majors (2009) report paracosms being present in the imaginary lives of the children participating in their research. Some paracosms are inhabited by imaginary companions, by imaginary animals or both. Another form of imaginary phenomenon also worth noting here is when a group of children jointly construct imaginary friends and/or worlds. Although very rarely mentioned in the literature, Burton (2010) found "several instances" of this type of imaginary activity in her research, although she does note that the numbers were "not overwhelming".

The various imaginary phenomena that are included under the term 'imaginary companion' have obviously had an effect on the reported incidence, which may help explain the widely differing reported incidences stated in the literature. It may also have impacted on our consequent understanding of the reasons why children engage in these different types of imaginary activity. When different types of imaginary phenomena are included under the same blanket term it has the potential to lead to a misunderstanding of the possible reasons behind their creation as well as the possible functions these types of experiences have for children and their development. Some writers, such as Klausen and Passman (2007), have highlighted the need to use clear definitions to distinguish between the different types of imaginary phenomena. They suggest that the term 'imaginary companion' be used to describe pretend companions with no physical basis, 'personified objects' for objects that children pretend have a personality and 'pretend companions' as a term that includes both. This is a sensible idea and would make it clear what imaginary phenomena are being investigated. This study only investigates invisible characters which have been created by the children's imagination and does not include any which are personified objects.

#### *Reported incidence of imaginary companions and factors influencing their reporting*

The variation in the reported incidence rates of children with imaginary companions is partly due to differences in the definitions used by researchers as described above. As noted by Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000), and as would be expected, when multiple forms of

imaginary companions are included in the definition their incidence rises. Using Svendsen's definition, relatively few children were identified and Taylor (1999) notes that only 13.4% of the children in Svendsen's study were found to have an imaginary companion. However, later research such as Singer and Singer (1990), which includes objects that children personify, suggests the occurrence of imaginary companions is as high as 65% of the pre-school population. Bouldin and Pratt (1999) sent questionnaires to parents of children aged three to nine. Of the 478 completed only 7% of children were reported as having one or more current imaginary companion, with 10% having had one or more imaginary companion and the remaining 83% reported as never having had an imaginary friend. Bouldin and Pratt used the definition of invisible characters only as being imaginary companions. A recent study by Gleason and Kalpidou (2014), where they interviewed 72 three to six year olds and their mothers, also found more modest figures reporting that 9.7% of the children had imaginary friends, while 27.8% had objects they personified. Although the numbers of invisible characters in these two studies are low, caution must be shown as these studies gathered information about the children's imaginary companions mainly through the reports of the parents (parental reporting is explored later).

Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) included invisible characters as well as stuffed animals and other toys in their definition of imaginary companions, justifying this decision by stating that "in most current research on imaginary companions, special toys are included" (pg. 180). They found that 28% of three and four year olds had an imaginary companion and of the children who met their criteria roughly half of the imaginary companions were invisible and half were based on toys. Taking into account other research in the area, they state that this figure (28%) is a more global estimate of how common pretend friends are in children up to four years of age. Interestingly, Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) claim that they were surprised to find that, when they interviewed 100 of the same children when they were six and seven years old, 32 of these children had created an imaginary companion after the age of four. This finding is noted as being significant as it had been presumed that imaginary companion production reaches a 'peak' at around four years of age. This led Taylor, Carlson and Gerow to state that if all cases of imaginary companions created by children up to the

age of seven are considered, the percentage of the children in their study was 63%, an estimate that is similar to that of other researchers such as Singer and Singer (1990). In their study of 100 children, Taylor et al (2004) found that 65% of children up to the age of seven had imaginary companions at some point in their lives. (This figure of 65% included personified objects as identified by parents. When only invisible friends are included, the figure drops to 37%). Of particular relevance to this thesis is that Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) note that the majority (81%) of these later developing imaginary friends were invisible. This lends some credence to my decision to include only invisible companions in my research as I am interested in exploring the experience of and purposes for imagining an invisible character, rather than the creation of a personality for a special toy.

The age of the children included in the research is also a factor in the reported incidence of imaginary companions. Much of the research (for example, Harter and Chao, 1992; Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup, 2000) had tended to focus on young children as it had been commonly assumed that imaginary friends were more prevalent in pre-schoolers. However, recent studies have shown that imaginary companions are created by school-aged children and that they are more common (albeit in a more private form) in this age group than previously thought (for example, Taylor, Carlson and Gerow, 2001). There has been some research with children in middle childhood (for example, Hoff, 2004-2005; Burton, 2010; Majors, 2013) and in adolescence (for example, Seiffge-Krenke, 1993; 1997). The variation in reported incidence rates for different ages was illustrated in Pearson et al's study (2001) in the UK. Pearson et al (2001) found that of nearly 1800 children aged between five and twelve years, 46.2% reported having, or having had an imaginary companion. The aim of the study was made very clear, namely "to collect basic data on the prevalence of imaginary companions from a large number of children aged between 5 and 12 inclusive, including measures of creativity and sex" (pg. 15). In the introduction it is implied that more girls than boys would report having an imaginary companion and the study also set out to investigate the link between creativity and experiencing an imaginary companion. This research stems from a positivist position with data being quantitative and analysed using statistical procedures. In order to measure creativity the 'Uses Test' (Ward, 1968) was used where children were

asked to write on a customised form all the possible uses they could think of for four visually presented everyday objects. Children completed this as part of classwork and the children filled in the forms simultaneously. Following the 'Uses Test', the interviewer asked each child individually "in their normal classroom place" the standardised question: 'Some children talk to a friend that nobody else can see, this person is often known as an imaginary friend. Have you got an imaginary friend?' The child's response ('yes' or 'no') was recorded on the child's 'Uses Test' form and collected. The authors found that out of 1795 children who took part, 502 (28%) reported having a current imaginary companion and 327 (18.2%) reported having experienced one in the past. Of the 829 children who reported experiences of imaginary companions 52.2% were girls and 47.8% were boys, which the authors claim to be statistically significant, adding support to their supposition that "girls are more likely to experience imaginary companions than boys" (pg. 21). Of course this could also be interpreted as more girls *say* they experience imaginary companions more than boys. There were no significant differences found in the creativity scores between children who reported imaginary companions compared with those who did not. Pearson et al (2001) conclude,

"The study lends support to the notion that experiencing imaginary companions is a part of mainstream child development, being far more common among children than previously thought...imaginary companions appear to be experienced by children older than previously assumed and not confined to preschoolers" (pg. 21).

A strength of this particular study is that it investigated the reporting of imaginary companions from children of differing ages. They found that 33-43% of children aged five to nine reported current imaginary companions. Interestingly, there was a noticeable decline in reported incidence with age with 19% at age ten and 9% at age twelve. However, these figures, as Pearson et al (2001) acknowledge, may be an underestimate. They note that some of the older children were reluctant to answer the question about their imaginary companion in the classroom, with some children letting the researcher know that they had answered 'no' in the classroom when they later reported having an imaginary companion. This research did not seem to take into account how children's answers were influenced by the immediate presence of their peers and children answering 'yes' or 'no' was taken at face value (this element of research design is explored in the discussion chapter). It is also not

clear what steps the researchers took to inform the children about the purpose of the research, whether they gained their informed consent or whether the children could choose to participate or not. Hoff (2004-2005), in her study of 10 year olds with imaginary companions, similarly reports that some were embarrassed and spoke of feeling ashamed when being interviewed about them. The large quantitative sampling of simply asking children whether they have an imaginary friend or not is methodologically flawed but studies of this type can provide valuable information about the reported incidence of imaginary companions.

These research studies helped to shape my decision to include children in the primary school-age range, that is five to eleven year olds, in order to help add information and insight into the growing body of knowledge into the imaginary companions of children of this age. Pearson et al's (2001) study in particular confirmed my decision to use a qualitative approach in order to explore the depth and texture of the experience of having an imaginary companion from the child's perspective and to explore the phenomenon of imaginary companions in their own right, rather than looking for links to other areas such as creativity.

Another factor contributing to differences in reported incidence could be due to the differing methodologies that are used. Researchers have used a variety of methods for collecting information about imaginary companions including parent reports, retrospective reports and interviewing children. Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup's (2000) study is an example of research that exclusively uses parent reports. In their article, reference is made to previous research where three varieties of imaginative activity (invisible friends, personified objects and impersonation/extensive role play) are sometimes linked, being subsumed by the overarching category of 'imaginary companions'. For the purposes of this research Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) note that they limited their definition to invisible friends and personified objects and they distinguished between these two types rather than treating them as 'identical entities'. The participants in this study were mothers of 78 pre-school children attending two university-affiliated pre-schools in the USA. All the mothers in the two pre-schools were sent letters explaining the purpose of the study and were

subsequently contacted by telephone. If a mother indicated she was willing to participate, Svendsen's (1934) definition of an invisible imaginary companion was read out and she was then asked if her child had such a friend. If the mother reported that her child did not appear to have an invisible companion the experimenter then asked about personified objects – where she was told that many children have an object of which they are fond, such as a stuffed animal or doll, which they seem to animate, and the mother was asked if her child had a similar friend that they interacted regularly with. For the purposes of this research the imaginary companion had to be present in the child's life for a minimum of one month. Mothers who reported that their child had an invisible friend or a personified object were invited to participate in an interview. A semi-structured interview was conducted with questions being asked relating to the stability, identity and characteristics of their child's invisible friend or personified object. It was found that incidences of imaginary companions were 19% and personified objects were 23%. The authors presented the findings in terms of the similarities and differences between the two types of imaginary companions and the potential correlates of having an imaginary companion. In general, it was found that relationships with personified objects were more frequently orientated vertically than horizontally, in that the child took on a nurturing, parent like role for the companion, whereas relationships with invisible friends were egalitarian, like 'real-life' friendships. The authors tentatively speculated that the functions provided by both types of imaginary companions are different, with invisible friends offering the rehearsal of skills needed in social interactions while personified objects provide opportunities for nurture, perhaps providing feelings of competence for the children.

Parents are not always aware of the presence of their child's imaginary companions (Taylor, Cartwright and Carlson, 1993) and one main criticism of Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup's (2000) study is the use of parental report as the sole method of data collection. The authors did recognise the impact this had on the research. They mentioned this being a limitation of the study, in terms of children not sharing details of their imaginary lives with parents, and that parents may be biased in their reports according to their own interpretation of their children's behaviour, which should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. No reference is made to whether children were asked for their consent for their imaginative

activities to be shared for the purposes of this study and it appears to be assumed that the consent of the mother was also taken as including the consent of the child. In one of the results tables, detailing the 'stability and ubiquity' of invisible friends and personified objects, it was noted that only 20.8% of the mothers reported that the child's invisible friend attended school; this was an implication for my study as this figure is quite low, suggesting data about imaginary companions at school could be limited. However, as I decided to include only child reports in this research a higher number than this was anticipated as children may experience their imaginary companion at school without their parents' knowledge. Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup's (2000) research highlights some of the possible differences in the functions and qualities of invisible friends compared to personified objects and confirmed my decision to include only invisible characters in this study.

Some research, such as that conducted by Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001), involves interviewing both children and their parents. Their research involved interviewing three and four year olds and their parents twice, with the two interviews occurring one week apart. At the time of the first meeting an explanation of imaginary companions was presented to the children in a standard way as well as to the parents in an attempt to increase reliability. This explanation included invisible "completely pretend" friends as well as stuffed animals or dolls. In the second interview the researchers attempted to clarify earlier responses of both the parents and the children. The researchers claim that this was in an attempt to find out if the children were consistent in their descriptions but also used the second interview to ask children about imaginary companions that parents had described in the first interview but the children had not mentioned. This raises an obvious ethical concern as the children may not have wanted to discuss this imaginary friend and would have preferred it to stay private and known to family members only. However, this concern is swept aside by the authors as they claim that when asked they were "uniformly successful in eliciting descriptions from the children...maybe these children simply had not understood our original question" (pg. 186). A strength of this research is that it includes parent reports as well as children's and so could be viewed as being more robust as information obtained is corroborated from two separate sources. Ethical considerations aside I decided to include only child reports in my study as exploring children's perceptions is the aim of the research. Indeed, as Taylor, Carlson and



Gerow (2001) acknowledge, "Although parent report is useful, we believe the best sources of information about imaginary companions are the children themselves. Parents often do not know many details or they make assumptions about their children's pretend friends that turn out to be false" (pg. 182). Although parent report can be useful to verify the presence of an imaginary friend some research (for example, Hoff 2004-2005; Burton, 2010) has included only child reports and these have influenced the design of my research.

As expected, research that includes retrospective reporting will also raise the incidence of imaginary companions. Burton (2010) found that out of 73 children aged between six and eleven, 78% reported having, or as having had an imaginary companion. Burton's study included only children with imaginary companions and did not include those with personified objects. However, retrospective child, parent or adult accounts could also be influenced by loss of recall and so reported incidences may be conversely lower. Using child reports detailing their current invisible imaginary companions as the basis of this research was decided upon in light of some of the literature reviewed above.

In conclusion, the various definitions of imaginary companions along with differing methodologies employed have had a significant impact on reported incidence. The common assumption that imaginary companions are primarily found in young children may have contributed to the scarcity of research with school-aged children and adolescents. However, more recent research has found that they are more prevalent in older children than previously thought. The role of imaginary companions in children from normative samples has also received surprisingly little attention from researchers. Therefore our knowledge about the forms and functions of imaginary companions in childhood and their significance for development is limited. As discussed, much of the research to date that has focused on imaginary companions has included or excluded personified objects. More recent research has highlighted the need to consider other forms of imaginary phenomena, particularly impersonation, to establish whether they perform similar developmental functions as Harris (2000) maintains, or whether these functions are distinct. It could also be argued that paracosms and shared/jointly constructed imaginary friends or worlds also need to be

included in the imaginary phenomena to be investigated. It would seem that there is a continuing need to establish clear definitions and agreed terms for the different types of imaginary phenomena being studied. This would help to record incidence more accurately as well as help to clarify any distinct functions along with any common purposes that each type of imaginary activity serves for children developmentally. Later in this chapter, the contribution of existing research to our understanding of imaginary companions and the functions they may serve will be examined.

#### **2.4 Early research on imaginary companions and links with psychopathology**

Early research into this area, for example, Bender and Vogel (1941), Nagera (1969), and Benson and Pryor (1973), involved clinical populations, that is people who had been identified as having psychological and/or emotional problems for which they were being treated. It is important to note that people with psychological and/or emotional problems were not usually referred to clinicians *because* they had imaginary companions; but clinicians such as Bender and Vogel, and Nagera, noticed the reporting of imaginary companions in some of the children and adults they worked with, which led to them researching their role and purpose. In comparison, early research conducted by developmental psychologists sought to determine whether, for example, children with imaginary companions are more intelligent or creative when compared to children without them (Terman, 1926; Kalyan-Masih, 1978). The number of children involved in these studies was often relatively large and reported findings were mostly positive on the normality of the experience for children in normative samples. However, as noted by Majors (2009), these approaches to early research in this area were not primarily concerned with the characteristics of imaginary companions or their purpose and it may have hampered a better understanding of imaginary companions as a phenomenon in their own right. As Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson (1973) comment:

“The psychoanalytic tradition of exhaustive analysis of single clinical cases with imaginary companions may have contributed to the frequent association of imaginary companion phenomenon with psychopathology. Contrariwise, with its traditional focus on normative development and external reality, child

developmentalists have ordinarily neglected the complex motivational bases for such a phenomenon and emphasised its essential normality” (pg. 72).

Indeed this “frequent association of imaginary companion phenomenon with psychopathology” may have contributed to the negative stereotyping of children who have created an imaginary friend as being ‘lonely’, ‘isolated’ or even ‘disturbed’ in some way.

In some areas of popular culture the possession of an imaginary friend may be viewed as being linked with a tenuous grip on reality or even be associated with symptoms of mental health conditions such as schizophrenia or dissociative identity disorder (Taylor, 1999).

Parental concerns about whether an imaginary friend is a positive feature in a child’s life or a more negative trait that should be discouraged still persist (for example, Newman, 2008).

However, more recent information in the media and public realm seems to be counteracting this negative stereotype, viewing having an imaginary friend as being a common and natural part of healthy child development. Furthermore, some make reference to research that shows, for example, that children with imaginary friends have been found to be more articulate and creative with higher self-esteem (Tucker, 2014; Supernanny Team, 2014).

Alongside the association with psychopathology, there seems to have been some common misperceptions that may also have discouraged research in this area, including the following:

- a) Imaginary companions are assumed to be relatively rare. Reported numbers vary but some research suggests the occurrence of imaginary companions is as high as 65% of the pre-school population (Singer and Singer, 1990; Mauro, 1991).
- b) Imaginary companions have been assumed to be a possible indicator of problems such as ‘extreme shyness’ or disassociative type mental health issues, despite literature showing that the absence of imagination is unusual in human development, not its presence (Harris, 2000).
- c) Imaginary companions are presumed to be private fantasies that children might be reluctant to share with strangers, such as researchers (Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson, 1973).

However, a recurring theme of research into imaginary friends is that the invention of an imaginary companion per se does not seem to be indicative of psychopathology or of emotional disturbance. Clinical case studies involving children who have been subjected to trauma and/or abuse have also tended to show the beneficial role fantasy plays in helping these children cope constructively with their experience(s). Taylor (1999) notes that contrary to popular opinion, the creation of an imaginary companion in response to trauma and/or abuse is an adaptive strategy, providing love when faced with rejection from others, listening when others are not available and being trusted as someone who will not repeat what is disclosed. In view of this perspective, it is hardly surprising that children who are traumatised create imaginary friends.

McLewin and Muller (2006) looked at whether the presence of imaginary companions, along with the existence of trauma, could be a potential early marker of pathological dissociation. They view dissociation as behaviours that are “associated with lapses in psychobiological and cognitive processing” (pg. 533) and that people could experience a ‘split’ in their psyche when exposed to overwhelming trauma. Although viewed as a normal coping mechanism when such trauma occurs, current conceptions consider dissociation to represent pathology if it persists as the primary coping mechanism. Severe dissociative disorders, such as dissociative identity disorder, can alter identity and the person’s behaviour is not controlled by conscious thought at times. McLewin and Muller (2006) note that imaginary companions are more common in individuals with dissociative identity disorder than the general population and comment that whether or not imaginary companions play a specific role in the development of dissociative disorders has remained unclear. They suggest that a child may create an imaginary companion to ‘split’ off a memory, feeling or aspect of themselves and note that some writers have suggested that if a child ‘chronically’ relies on an imaginary companion in this way, they may eventually take on fully-fledged personality – or ‘alter’ personality. Of relevance here is the study detailing research by Taylor, Hodges and Kohanyi (2002-2003) on adult novel writers. They report on their research of 50 adult novel writers. Generally, they found that the writers scored more highly than population norms on measures of dissociation, empathy and recalling childhood imaginary companions. Twenty

one authors remembered having imaginary friends, five of which continued to be current, while twenty nine did not recall having such a companion as a child. Taylor, Hodges and Kohanyi state that 92% of the writers studied reported the dissociative experience of 'illusion of independent agency', where the writers described their characters as being autonomous, existing and acting outside of the authors' control. Furthermore, when describing their fictional characters, the adult authors often experienced their creations as having their own thoughts, feelings and actions. Taylor, Hodges and Kohanyi suggest that this 'illusion' may indicate expertise in the fantasy domain, adding to the authors' ability to write creatively and that higher levels of dissociation in adults are not necessarily indicative of pathology. It appears then that dissociation may occur in children and adults and is not necessarily an indicator of problems. Psychopathological dissociation is more usually diagnosed in adulthood, though research shows that it is a response to childhood trauma (McLewin and Muller, 2006). McLewin and Muller emphasise the importance of trying to distinguish between the imaginary companions of those who go on to develop a dissociative disorder with other imaginary companions that are common in childhood. They maintain that earlier identification of a dissociative disorder with appropriate treatment has a better prognosis than later identification and treatment in adulthood. Majors (2009) notes that knowledge of the distinctness of the imaginary companions in these cases as opposed to those in the normative population could aid in the earlier identification of individuals developing a pathological dissociation and seems a reasonable proposition. Taylor (1999) does acknowledge that in some cases an alter personality of those who are diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder can be traced back to the imaginary friend created in childhood that was invented to help the child cope with abuse and/or trauma. However, unlike alter personalities, imaginary companions do not take over the child's body and do not operate outside of the child's awareness. Overall, Taylor's research (1999) implies that the creation of an imaginary companion can usually be interpreted as a positive sign of mental health. This idea is revisited in section 2.7 where research on childhood imaginary companions is explored, which questions some of the misconceptions arising from their perceived links to possible future psychopathology, and which views the creation of an imaginary friend as being a positive feature in the typically developing population.

### *Research with normative samples*

The need for the exploration of the nature and purposes of imaginary companions in normative samples has been identified by some developmental psychologists. Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) comment:

“Although researchers studying imaginary companions frequently provide details such as the species or physical characteristics of these creations, the manner in which pretend friends fit into children’s lives has largely been uninvestigated ... Whether imaginary companions are playmates, advisors, or in need of caretaking (or all three!) has not been well-established, nor has their prevalence in children’s lives” (pg. 420).

Research into imaginary companions of children from mainly normative samples, for example, Mauro (1991), Taylor (1999), Pearson et al (2001), and Gleason (2002), have found them to be a relatively common feature in children’s lives and a healthy part of development. Research into the imaginary companions of children from normative samples has been connected to a diverse range of areas in the field of psychology, including cognitive development (Harris, 2000), social skills (Gleason, 2002), theory of mind (Taylor and Carlson, 1997; Davis, Miens and Fernyhough, 2011), problem-solving (Harris, Ford and Clark, 1990), coping and competence (Gleason and Kalpidou, 2014), reality/fantasy distinction (Bouldin and Pratt 2001; Woolley, 1995, 1997) and the development of imagination and creativity (Taylor, 1999). These studies have tended to focus on the differences (or not) between children who have imaginary friends and those who do not. Few studies have placed imaginary companions at the centre of the research, exploring the child’s experience of having an imaginary friend as well as investigating the possible functions and purposes they serve for their child creators. However, some research has done just this (for example, Taylor, 1999; Hoff, 2004-2005; Majors, 2009 and Burton, 2010) and their research is detailed in later sections of this chapter as they share similar research aims with this study. This study aims to add to the small but growing body of knowledge relating to the experience of having a current imaginary companion from the child’s perspective. It also aims to uncover some of

the possible functions and purposes imaginary companions serve for primary aged school children from a normative sample.

## **2.5 Characteristics of children who have imaginary companions**

Developmental psychologists, mainly in the USA, have used normative samples, particularly with pre-school aged children. Much of the research has been to compare children who have imaginary companions with those who are reported not to have them in order to see if there are any clear differences between these two groups. Research from this standpoint has sought to examine whether children with an imaginary companion compare more or less favourably with their peers who do not have such a friend on a number of social, emotional, cognitive and psychological dimensions, such as social skills, creativity and fantasy/reality distinction. The age and gender of the children who invent imaginary companions are also sometimes referred to in the literature and these are factors that are reported as being significant on occasion. The findings have been varied and sometimes contradictory. Examples of such studies are outlined below.

### *Comparison studies where differences have been reported*

Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson (1973) were interested in investigating the factors associated with the presence or absence of imaginary companions in pre-school aged children. Analysis of the self-administered questionnaire completed by 222 parents found that 73% of children with imaginary companions were either the eldest sibling or an only child compared with 49% of children who were reported not to have imaginary companions. Also, 61% of children with imaginary companions were reported as having no siblings at the time the imaginary companion was created. Whilst recognising that imaginary companions might serve a range of purposes for children, they concluded that overcoming loneliness is a key purpose served by imaginary companions. Bouldin and Pratt (1999) found the parents of three to nine year olds reported some differences in children with and without imaginary friends. A self-administered questionnaire (adapted from the questionnaire used by Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson, 1973) was completed by 478 parents. A larger number of

children with imaginary companions were reported to be first born children, to be very imaginative, to incorporate myth in their play and to explain events as 'magical'. Bouldin and Pratt note that findings were consistent with Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson's study as children with imaginary companion experience were more often reported to be very imaginative and to be first borns compared with children without an imaginary friend. However, the prevalence of children reported as having an imaginary companion was "much lower" (17% in total – 7% with a current imaginary friend and 10% having one in the past) than in other studies. The authors suggest that this may have been due to the questionnaire not focussing solely on imaginary companions and, as parent reports were used, they acknowledge that parents may be a poor source of information regarding imaginary companions and may even have shown bias against reporting imaginary companion experience in their child.

Harter and Chao (1992) in a study of 40 pre-school and kindergarten children found that teachers rated children who had imaginary companions to be less competent and less socially accepted by peers. (This second point seems to be echoing a view that children create imaginary friends to overcome loneliness as suggested by Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson, 1973). They also found that girls created incompetent imaginary friends in relation to themselves, while boys created imaginary friends who were more competent than them and were idealised. The authors suggest that this might reflect two different mechanisms for handling issues of mastery and competence. By way of contrast, various research studies have shown that children with imaginary companions, far from being lonely, are generally sociable and imaginative children (for example, Taylor, 1999). Singer and Singer (1990) noted that children who were identified as being 'highly imaginative' (this group included children with imaginary companions) were the ones who initiated games and were *more* likely to play with others. Mauro (1991) found that children with imaginary companions (including toys and invisible ones) were less shy and had more real friends than children without imaginary companions. Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) report on the results of research investigating the relation between having an imaginary companion and social-cognitive



understanding and conclude that children who create imaginary characters are advantaged in terms of social-cognitive understanding.

Gleason and Kalpidou (2014) interviewed 72 three to six year olds and their mothers about the children's coping strategies and competence. They found that imaginary companion presence and type (both invisible friends and personified objects) did not indicate differences in coping and competence when compared to those children without an imaginary companion. They did find however, that children with egalitarian relationships with their imaginary friend chose more constructive and prosocial strategies and teachers rated them as more socially competent than children with hierarchical child/imaginary companion relationships (with the child 'in charge'). The authors suggest that the type of relationship the child has is more important than imaginary companion presence per se, with egalitarian relationships being more akin to 'real-life' friendships, offering children the opportunity to practice social skills such as negotiating and compromising. Gleason (2004) compared the peer acceptance of pre-school children with imaginary companions and with objects they personified to that of their peers without such companions. Sociometric measures were administered to 88 children to uncover the three classmates they most liked to play with. Teachers nominated a peer for each child who participated in the study with whom the child rarely or never played with. No differences were found on social preference scores, number of positive nominations or number of reciprocal friendships children had. However, while children with personified objects had positive nominations, they also received more negative nominations. Gleason notes that the statistical significance of this was 'weak' and concludes that overall children with personified objects were not significantly more likely to be negatively nominated by their peers. She does suggest, however, that more research is needed to explore whether this finding may be indicating underlying differences in the social cognitive processes used in the creation of personified objects as compared with other imaginary companions. She concludes that, "the results of this investigation suggest that concerns about children's creation of an imaginary companion as a way to compensate for poor or non-existent friendships should be put to rest" (pg. 209).

In her study involving older children in Sweden, Hoff (2005) found that out of 69 children aged ten, 52% reported having an imaginary companion. It was found that, in the subgroup of 26 children where sibling data was obtained, no children were an only child. Of these 26, 10 were first born and 16 were middle or last-born. Slightly more girls than boys reported having an imaginary companion. Personified objects were also included on the questionnaire used to gather information from the children. The children with imaginary companions were found to be more creative on some measures of creativity and they also gave themselves lower ratings on self-image. This is in contrast to the study done by Pearson et al (2001), referred to above, where no significant differences were found in the creativity scores between children who reported imaginary companions compared with those who did not. Pearson et al note that, of the children who reported experiences of imaginary companions, 52.2% were girls and 47.8% were boys, which the authors claim to be statistically significant, adding support to their supposition that “girls are more likely to experience imaginary companions than boys” (pg.21).

#### *Comparison studies where no differences have been reported*

Bouldin and Pratt (2002) report on a study where they asked 74 mothers of children aged between three and eight (37 children with an imaginary friend, 37 without) to complete standardised scales relating to their child’s fears, anxiety level and temperament. They found that mothers’ ratings indicated no differences between children who had imaginary companions with those who did not on the fear and temperament scales. However, the scores for anxiety were “slightly elevated” in the children with imaginary companions but the mean scores were still within the “normal” range. Bouldin and Pratt conclude that the presence of an imaginary companion may be associated with some difference in levels of anxiety but there was no evidence to suggest that children with and without imaginary companions differed on the emotional dimensions of fear, anxiety and temperament. It should be noted that this study only used mothers’ reports and did not include any self-reporting by the children so its findings should be treated with some reservations.

There were no significant differences in parent reports, in the study by Manosevitz, Prentice and Wilson (1973), of the number or type of behaviour problems experienced by children with and without imaginary companions. Taylor et al (2004) investigated correlations between having an imaginary friend and “emotional understanding”, “various personality variables” and/or “perceived competence” at the age of 7 years. They found “very few” distinctions between children with and without imaginary friends on any of these factors.

Taylor et al (2004) found that the gender difference in reported incidence of imaginary companions at four years of age was no longer apparent when they studied some of the same children when they were aged seven. They note that, “...by 7 years of age, boys are as likely as girls to report a history of having had an imaginary companion” (pg. 1182). In their study, Pearson et al (2001) found that of the 829 children reporting an experience of an imaginary companion 52.2% were girls and 47.8% were boys which represents a fairly even split, although the authors state that this is “statistically significant”. It could, of course, be argued that the girls in their study were more comfortable discussing their imaginary lives with researchers than the boys were. Hoff (2004-2005) presents data that illustrates that out of 26 children aged ten, 14 said that their imaginary companions were secret – of these, 7 were girls and 7 were boys. This could suggest that as children get older girls get as secretive about their imaginary companions as boys do. Of course, younger children may also prefer to keep their imaginary companions private; Taylor et al (2004) note that 27% of a sample of 100 children reported imaginary companions that their parents were unaware of, with one explicitly asking the researchers not to tell her mother about hers. Carlson and Taylor (2005) found that girls aged three to four years old were more likely to have imaginary companions, whereas boys of the same age tended to impersonate characters. The age of the children as well as the private nature of imaginary companions may help explain the gender difference in the reported incidence of imaginary companions. There may also be some gender differences in the types of fantasy play in which young children engage.

There have been a number of studies investigating similar characteristics to those referred to in the previous section, where no differences have been found between children with

imaginary companions compared to those reported not to have them. Some researchers, such as Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001), argue that children with imaginary companions are more similar than dissimilar to children reported not to have them, and conclude that,

“Overall, children with imaginary companions do not seem very different from children without them. They are not regularly found to be more intelligent or creative and they do not appear to have more psychological problems than their counterparts without imaginary companions. The similarities between children with and without imaginary companions are more striking than their differences” (pg. 191).

### *Children’s ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality*

One area that has been the focus of relatively more research has been to explore children's ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality; this has sometimes included comparisons between children with and without imaginary companions. Reports that children’s imaginary friends are often treated as separate individuals who sometimes require physical space, such as at the dinner table or in the child’s bed, (for example, Mauro, 1991), have led some researchers to suggest that these children may experience a degree of fantasy/reality confusion. Bouldin and Pratt (2001) conducted a study which investigated the ability of children to distinguish between reality and fantasy and whether the presence of an imaginary friend impacted on this. A total of 80 children aged four to eight years participated in the study, half with imaginary companions and half without. Children were invited to help the experimenter write a story about a monster. This took place in a room where a tent was present. After the child had helped the experimenter with a description of the monster, the experimenter asked him/her if they thought the monster could live in a cave that was the same size as the tent. This drew the child’s attention to the tent and at this point a silhouette of a monster was projected onto the tent. Children were then asked questions which included finding out if they believed that the monster could be real. Bouldin and Pratt found that a significant number of the children with imaginary companions thought that an imaginary concept (‘the monster’) could be reflected in reality. However, a large number of children who did not have an imaginary companion also thought this and Bouldin and Pratt hypothesised that this was due to children’s “levels of credulity”, rather than the absence or

presence of an imaginary friend. They concluded that children with imaginary companions were no more likely to confuse reality and fantasy than children who did not have them. Major methodological flaws can be detected, including the questionable ethics of placing children into such an unexpected and potentially scary situation and adult collusion reinforcing the pretence state. Also, a fear response does not equate to distortions in reality/fantasy distinction. Many adults experience fear responses (such as increased respiration and heart rate) when, for example, watching frightening films but this does not mean there is confusion about reality and fantasy. If adults can be affected in such ways, then it is reasonable to assume that it would not be different for children.

Woolley and Wellman (1993) suggest that thinking “errors” concerning fantasy/reality distinction disappear around the age of four. In a series of experiments, Harris et al (1991) demonstrated that children aged four and six were able to distinguish between real and imagined objects and events, even when the object was “emotionally charged”; where the child was asked to imagine a monster chasing them. However, criticisms of this work include ethical questions about exposing children to fear inducing situations and methodological flaws, such as a lack of clear indication when the pretence element of the study was over. Taylor (1999) comments that child confusions regarding the boundary between reality and fantasy are most prevalent in contexts where other people present or collude in fantasy or pretend with them. Adults sometimes actively encourage pretend play in everyday life and go to great lengths to perpetuate concepts such as Father Christmas and the Tooth Fairy. Taylor (1999) proposes that the creation of an imaginary companion may *increase* children’s awareness of the distinction between reality and fantasy and comments that,

“...they (children) appear surprisingly sophisticated in their ability to negotiate the boundary between fantasy and reality. For example, 3- and 4-year-old children are impressive in their early understanding of the words “real” and “pretend” and their ability to answer questions about the differences between real and pretend entities and their understanding that imagining is a private mental process occurring in a person’s mind” (Taylor, 1999, pg. 87-88).

When Taylor (1999) asked children to sort a variety of objects into ‘real’ and ‘not real’ boxes, children as young as three were 75% correct. For example, the vast majority placed dogs,

houses and bears in the 'real-life' box and ghosts, monsters and witches in the 'make-believe' box. Taylor (1999) has conducted a range of interesting and insightful investigations into imaginary friends but some of her research is somewhat anecdotal.

Different conclusions have been drawn in other research with regard to reality/fantasy distinction. In a study of four year olds, Taylor, Cartwright and Carlson (1993) found that children with imaginary companions had similar abilities to their peers in distinguishing fantasy and reality. Indeed the children in this study with imaginary friends often explicitly labelled them as "just pretend". As noted above, Taylor (1999) found that even children as young as three are very capable of distinguishing between what is real or pretend; this also refers to their imaginary play with others including their imaginary companions. More recently, Taylor and Mottweiler (2008) note that in a study of 86 children with invisible friends, one child seemed to think that her imaginary companion was real, while two more children were a little unclear, such as saying "sometimes he turns real and he talks real so everybody can hear him". They note that these three children "stood out" in marked contrast to the other 83 children who showed no indication of any confusion. Indeed, they state that, "the same child who tells an interviewer about a bossy talkative elephant that the child claims to be able to see and hear, will quite likely, in the next breath, smile at the researcher and remind her that it is all just pretend" (pg. 54). Taylor (1999) concludes that children with imaginary companions know their imaginary friends are not real and are not more likely to confuse fantasy and reality than those children who do not have such friends.

#### *The diversity of children who have imaginary companions*

When considering why so few variables looked at in their study correlated with having a history of imaginary companions, Taylor et al (2004) note that the children with imaginary friends were "a very diverse group". They state that their descriptive data suggests that,

"...imaginary companions do not fall into neat categories with respect to their physical characteristics, personality, function, or anything else...the diversity of this type of play presents challenges to researchers who would like to find out how having an imaginary companion is related to social understanding, theory of mind, personality or other variables of interest" (pg. 1183).

The diversity of children's imaginary companions may reflect the particular individual and idiosyncratic reasons for their creation as noted by Taylor (1999). The characteristics and diversity of children's imaginary companions are considered in section 2.6 of this chapter. However, Majors (2009) makes an interesting point that Taylor et al (2004) appear to be saying that the children in the study were a diverse group, but then go on to describe the variation in the children's imaginary companions rather than the children. Majors argues that children with imaginary companions are “not a homogenous group in terms of age, or in cognitive, social and emotional development” (pg. 30). She notes that, in connection with her research, she encountered children and young people aged between two and fifteen who had current imaginary companions. Along with this she notes that some children were reported by their parents to be highly imaginative, sociable and early talkers while other children had speech and language difficulties, and/or learning difficulties. Majors (2009) argues that, “It appears that children with imaginary companions would need to be grouped according to their characteristics as well as those of their imaginary companions in order for correlations to be meaningfully investigated” (pg. 31). However, even seemingly ‘straight-forward’ characteristics of the children in studies, such as age or gender, can in themselves be seen to influence their reported incidence before other more nebulous characteristics, such as ‘creativity’ are considered. This, along with factors outlined earlier, such as the varying definitions of imaginary companions and differing methodologies used, will continue to make it difficult for researchers to meaningfully investigate the phenomenon of imaginary companions.

To conclude this section, research with children from normative samples, shows no evidence that children with imaginary friends are isolated or lonely. Studies where birth order and sibling absence/presence have been mentioned have found no clear link with these factors and the creation of an imaginary friend. Boys and girls both create imaginary companions but there may be some gender differences in the types of fantasy play in which young children engage. Older children have been found to have imaginary companions but they are often more private in nature than the imaginary friends of younger children. Several studies show that children with imaginary companions are accepted by peers, are sociable and have

'real' friends too. The research essentially indicates that children with imaginary companions know that their imaginary friends are not real and are not more likely to confuse fantasy and reality than other children. Although a few comparison studies have shown some differences between children who have imaginary companions with those who do not, there is variation and often contradictory findings in the results, for example with regards to creativity. A number of studies have found no significant differences on a variety of social, emotional and cognitive dimensions and it could be argued that there are more similarities than differences between the two groups.

## **2.6 Characteristics of imaginary companions and some functions they serve**

Imaginary companions can often present to adults as being unusual or exotic in nature, yet they are a common childhood experience (Taylor, 1999). The diversity of forms taken by imaginary companions has made it difficult for researchers to make generalisations about them and what it means to have one. Gleason and Kalpidou (2014) noted that the variety of forms and the richness of the details that children provide about their imaginary companions make systematic descriptions of their functional significance "rather challenging". Nevertheless, information gathered about them has begun to develop our knowledge of imaginary companions and shed some light on the possible purposes they serve for the child. This section reviews the literature to identify what is known about the characteristics of imaginary companions and considers some of the possible purposes they serve for children.

Some imaginary companions are humans around the same age as their creators, while others are humans with unusual characteristics, such as being an invisible 160 year old business-man (Taylor, 1999) or a 91 year old man who is only 2 feet tall but can 'hit bears' (Taylor and Mottweiler, 2008). Other children create imaginary friends that are animals or more exotic creatures, such as a cyclops or a blue-skinned girl. Some studies report that children frequently create a same sex imaginary companion, and while girls sometimes choose a male imaginary friend, boys do not tend to create girl imaginary companions (Singer and Singer, 1990; Taylor et al, 2004; Carlson and Taylor, 2005). Taylor (1999) provides some detailed anecdotal examples of children's imaginary companions, such as:



“One 4-year old who participated in our research told us about two invisible birds named Nutsy and Nutsy (a male and a female) who lived in a tree outside her bedroom window. According to the child, the two Nutsys had brightly coloured feathers, were about 12 inches tall and talked incessantly. Sometimes the little girl was irritated by the clumsy and generally raucous behaviour of these birds, but usually their silliness made her laugh. The child’s parents were well aware of the Nutsys; they regularly observed their daughter talking and playing with them, and they were frequently informed about the Nutsy’s opinions and activities” (Taylor, 1999, pg.8).

Such a description of creatures that are invisible to others but played with for extended periods of time generally fits the definition of imaginary companions used in this study. For this girl it would seem that her imaginary bird friends provide entertainment but it is interesting to note that she was “sometimes” irritated by them, suggesting that these imaginary companions did not always comply with their creator’s wishes. Some descriptions are even more elaborate and detailed (too much so to be quoted at length here) but they do illustrate the ‘depth and texture’ of the experience of having an imaginary friend.

Taylor and Mannering (2007) make reference to the 592 descriptions of imaginary friends they collected from children aged three to twelve in the course of their research. Of these 592 descriptions, 236 (40%) were of “special toys or objects that seemed to function as imaginary companions”. The remaining 356 (60%) were invisible companions and are of relevance to this study. They claim that about 34% of these were “regular everyday” girls and boys. However, another 16% of boys and girls had special or magical powers, like they could fly or change shape, or they had unusual characteristics, like blue skin or a tiny size. Their sample included descriptions of invisible animals (15%), which could typically talk or otherwise communicate with the child. About half of these invisible animals also had magical powers or special characteristics, such as one child who had an imaginary friend who was “an invisible flying dolphin who lived on a star, never slept and could fly very fast”. Taylor and Mannering note that, in addition to invisible people and animals, children reported other categories of imaginary companions but these were less frequent. Their sample included superheroes, ghosts, angels and spirits (8%) with another 7% being “unique”, such as a “cyclops who travelled the world”. Taylor and Mottweiler (2008) also noted the “enormous” diversity of descriptions collected and describe invisible companions such as a

flying cat, “a very small invisible boy who is completely white and lives in the white light of a lamp” and “an invisible talking egg with spiky hair and a human body”. Some authors have compiled tables showing some of the characteristics of the imaginary companions, for example, Taylor, Cartwright and Carlson (1993) showed the sex, age and size in relation to the child, along with descriptions of the hair, eyes and clothes of the imaginary companion. Perhaps this is an attempt to identify particular similarities but in the table these are difficult to identify, for example, “eyes” range from usual eye-colours such as green or blue to “multicoloured”, “white” or “ugly”.

Two articles (Hoff, 2004-2005; Majors, 2013) of particular relevance to this study as they share similar aims, also include tables illustrating some of the characteristics of the imaginary companions of the children who participated in the studies. Both of these articles are also of relevance as they are qualitative in design and use child perspectives gathered through the use of interviews. Both analysed transcripts of the interviews to identify themes. Hoff (2004-2005) includes a table, detailing the name and sex of the imaginary companion along with their “characteristics”, “contents of play”, “influence”, “play location” and whether they were secret. Again, similarities are difficult to ascertain, such as the imaginary companions ranging in form from being “a human boy” or “dolphin” to “a mouse walking on two legs from Mars” or a “dragon, only those with brown eyes could see”. Of relevance to this study is that of the 26 imaginary companions detailed only seven specifically were identified as being played with at school, with one being at school “in a bag”. The imaginary friends, along with the ‘contents of play’ as tabled by Hoff, illustrates their diversity in terms of their form as well as their possible function (the functions identified by Hoff are discussed later in this chapter). Majors (2013) used semi-structured interviews with eight children aged between five and eleven. She then used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis on the transcripts of the interviews to explore both individual and cross-case themes. In the table contained in her article, Majors included details of the imaginary companions, including their name, age and gender. Majors also included whether the imaginary companion shows “independent will”, whether they are known to the child’s family or “to select others” and the “purposes served”. Out of the eight children, seven had had more than one imaginary friend. The imaginary companions took both human and animal form (horses and puppies)

and their ages ranged from “baby sisters” to “male adult”. The vast majority of imaginary companions showed “independent will” and most were known to family, with about a third of all the imaginary companions being known to “select others”. The “purposes served” were indicated by numbers and the codes included “overcome boredom/loneliness /entertainment”; “friend/playmate”; “express/release upset feelings”; “support for problem situations” and “wish fulfilment”. Some of the imaginary friends served a number of these purposes, while others performed only one. Again, the imaginary companions differ in terms of both their characteristics as well as their function. This article confirmed my decision to investigate imaginary companions from the perspective of the child by using semi-structured interviews.

Burton’s (2010) study was of particular interest to me as her research had very similar aims to mine and was also qualitative in nature. Burton conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 children between the ages of six and eleven. The focus of her research was on invisible imaginary companions and did not include personified objects. The children who took part in her research either had a current invisible imaginary companion or had had one in the past. Despite the small sample size there was variation in the characteristics of the imaginary companions; this was evident in the children’s reports as well as their drawings. The imaginary companions consisted of humans, ghosts, animals (a cat, a dog, horses, monkeys and a lion cub) and fantasy animals including a pink bear, a unicorn and an elf. Burton notes that with such diversity, “making generalisations about what constitutes an imaginary friend and what kinds of purposes they serve is an extremely challenging task” (pg. 77). However, by analysing each interview on a case by case basis (like Taylor, 1999) some of the functions imaginary companions serve from the perspective of the child were uncovered. Burton notes that there were some common patterns between cases and identified several themes during her analysis. Some of the functions that imaginary companions serve for the children in her study include, problem-solving at different levels (practically with homework and emotionally, with social situations) by ‘talking through’ problems with another; providing an outlet for “over-coming everyday constraints and restrictions” (such as the imaginary companions having powers, special appearances or

items that were coveted by the creator, who then lived vicariously through the imaginary friend, or as having skills that the creator wanted, such as being good at football) and were a constructive way to alleviate periods of boredom by serving the function of being a form of entertainment, amusement and fun through imaginative play. Of particular relevance to my study was the theme Burton (2010) identified as being “academic problem solving and cognitive development”. Burton found that the imaginary companions served a function of “assisting with homework” and this was a “very common” theme for both boys and girls in the sample. She notes that imaginary friends sometimes made homework more entertaining while, on other occasions, they offered an opportunity to talk through problems in order to facilitate solutions. Burton suggests that, “the act of talking through an academic problem with an imaginary friend requires the use of complex cognitive skills such as the articulate use of language and organising thoughts into a coherent order” (pg. 69). She argues that in previous research there has been “little previous reference” to the idea that imaginary friends could play a role in the solving of academic tasks, especially with homework which usually involves independent working and self-reliance. For the children who participated in her study, “imaginary companions appeared to play an adaptive role in solving academic tasks, particularly those tasks that participants had to rely on their own resources to complete” (pg. 69).

Therefore not only do imaginary companions come in all shapes, sizes and species, but they also seem to perform a wide range of functions. Older invisible companions may provide an element of support, which may be linked to self-esteem, as Hoff (2004-2005) notes, “The illusion of having support seems to increase self-esteem, and with greater self-esteem, the chances of actually succeeding increase” (pg. 163). While animals or smaller friends may be nurtured and cared for, which may increase the child’s feelings of competence and so improve self-esteem through feelings of mastery. Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) found that the children in their study with invisible companions were more likely to have multiple invisible friends, whereas children with personified objects were more likely to have just that one as their imaginary companion. They also noted that the majority of invisible companions were human, whereas the majority of personified objects were animals – perhaps this is due to the majority of the toys acting as personified objects being stuffed toy animals. Gleason,

Sebanic and Hartup (2000) reported that the relationship children had with invisible companions differed to the one with personified objects as children tended to have equal relationships with their invisible companions while they nurtured their personified object.

Taylor (1999) argues that the diversity of imaginary companions is considered to be a normal variation of the phenomenon. However, she speculates that it is sometimes possible to make relevant conclusions about the services an imaginary friend provides beyond the function of companionship by examining the match between the child and the companion on a case by case basis. Although acknowledging that imaginary companions have features that appear to be designed to meet the idiosyncratic psychological needs of their child creators, Taylor (1999) cites the following common reasons for the creation of an imaginary companion:

1. Fun and companionship.
2. To alleviate loneliness.
3. To improve a sense of self-efficacy/competence or provide opportunities to give nurturance.
4. To overcome restrictions or limitations in the real world.
5. To avoid blame/deferment of responsibility.
6. To overcome fears.
7. As a response to trauma.
8. As a means of communicating with others.
9. As a method of processing interesting or significant events and people.

Hoff (2004-2005) found that the main function of imaginary companions is to be “inner mentors” who “appear to assist children in their identity formation work” (pg. 161). Hoff identified a large number of separate functions but five main categories were: 1) Comfort or

substitute for company, 2) Motivation and self-regulation, 3) Self-esteem enhancement, 4) Extended personality and 5) Life quality enhancement. Each of these categories is described in detail in her article. Findings of the many different forms of imaginary companions and the many different functions that appear to be idiosyncratic to the particular child is consistent with Taylor's (1999) work. Hoff's article confirmed my decision to investigate imaginary friends from the perspective of the child by using semi-structured interviews. This research also confirmed my decision to use a pilot to trial the interview schedule in order to assess its suitability and to include children up to the age of ten. Also, as Hoff's finding that "motivation and self-regulation" was one of the main functions of imaginary companions, this had obvious links to my research in relation to investigating if and how imaginary friends provide support with school work.

It is important to note that several studies have commented on the more unfriendly aspects of some imaginary companions (for example, Taylor, 1999; Taylor and Mannering, 2007). Taylor and Mannering (2007) note that some imaginary companions do not always comply with the child's wishes and sometimes surprise the child or even boss them around. In their sample, 1% of imaginary companions were predominantly 'mean' or frightening to the child, for example, "an invisible big blue furry thing that had red eyes, no clothes and was six feet tall...he was really scary". Majors (2013) also notes that some imaginary companions in her study were not always compliant but suggests that non-compliance on the part of the imaginary companion seemed to increase the child's interest in them. Majors (2009) also comments that, while all the children in her study reported pleasurable interactions with their imaginary friends, three children reported "unfriendly behaviours" from some of their imaginary companions. Majors states that her analysis revealed that, "these interactions served a positive purpose in enabling the child to deal with social situations which had caused them upset" (pg. 95). She goes on to say that for these three children the imaginary friends, for example, helped to "express angry feelings safely and to explore feelings and issues regarding name-calling and bullying" (pg. 100). It could be that children may re-play or 'talk through' such a situation with their imaginary friend in a way that gives them an opportunity to either rehearse what they may do differently next time a similar situation

arises or to re-enact the upsetting situation with a different (more favourable) outcome, as a form of wish fulfilment.

## **2.7 The psychological and developmental significance of imaginary companions**

Pretence and imagination seem to play a positive role in children's development. Many theories have been used to explore the psychological and developmental purposes served by children's imaginary companions and other imaginary phenomena. Research investigating imaginary companions as a phenomenon in their own right has been scarce but a growing interest in this area has led to some noteworthy insights. It seems that developmental psychologists have mainly been interested in broadly studying aspects of children's imaginative play and how this contributes to cognitive, emotional and social development. However, some of this research (for example, Harris, 2000) makes specific reference to children who have imaginary companions and this has contributed to our understanding of the psychological and developmental significance of them.

### *Research linking imaginary companions to various areas of children's social, emotional and cognitive development*

Taylor's (1999) seminal work offered several insights into the possible functions imaginary friends may serve for the children who create them. What was particularly unique about Taylor's work was the qualitative approach she took to her research. She used multiple sources, by interviewing the parents of children who reported having an imaginary friend to verify the children's accounts and had repeated interviews with children, to help counteract the possibility of children spontaneously inventing an imaginary companion when asked whether they had one or not. Her work has provided in-depth information about imaginary companions and captured some of the more idiosyncratic details of this childhood experience. Taylor's (1999) research has been able to portray some of the uniqueness of the experience while still being able to make some generalisations about the nature of imaginary companions and the motivations their creators have for inventing them, as noted in section 2.6. Theories that Taylor (1999) has proposed include imaginary friends not only being

interesting partners in play but as also providing a reference point when bargaining with parents, for example, "Bla Bla doesn't have to finish his dinner, why should I?" (pg. 62) and as being a way for communicating information that a child is reluctant to give directly, for example, "Poh is afraid he will go down the drain when he takes a bath" (pg.62). The use of puppets and talking through difficult events in the third person is a well-established therapeutic technique (for example, Edington, 1985; Porter, Hernandez-Reif and Jessee, 2009) and to talk in the third person is less personalised. Taylor (1999) acknowledges that drawing conclusions about the needs imaginary companions meet is a complex task because the companions are so diverse themselves. However, she speculated that it was sometimes possible to make relevant conclusions about the services an imaginary friend provided by examining the match between the child and the companion on a case by case basis.

Past research that has focussed on the differences between children with and without imaginary friends has suggested that imaginary companions are positive in the typically developing population. Examples included children who had created imaginary companions were more sociable and less shy (Mauro, 1991) and showed more positive affect in their play with other children (Singer and Singer, 1990). Some research has investigated particular aspects of the child's relationships with their imaginary friends and others. For example, Gleason (2002) compared the purposes served by imaginary companions, personified objects and real friends in terms of fulfilling social 'provisions'. Gleason tested hypotheses connected with "conflict resolution", "instrumental help" (which was defined as assistance with tasks that were perceived to be beyond the child's own level of competence), "power", "companionship" and "aspects of nurturance". Gleason (2002) tentatively speculated that the functions provided by both types of imaginary companions are different, with personified objects providing opportunities for nurture, perhaps providing feelings of competence for the children, while invisible friends offer the rehearsal of skills needed in social interactions. The rehearsal of skills needed in social interactions seems to be a significant function of invisible friends. In some cases, imaginary companions are idealised with the imaginary companion being compliant with every wish of the creator. Yet, children do not always imagine their pretend friends to be so agreeable. Whilst children generally describe their imaginary companions as being friendly, some also report that they are



difficult at times (Taylor and Mannering, 2007; Majors, 2009). This could potentially provide a safe opportunity for the re-enactment of conflict resolution situations as alluded to in a previous section. Friendships can also introduce various moral issues for children, like cheating or not sharing fairly, and learning to negotiate these moral dilemmas as well as learning how to respond appropriately to them has benefits for pro-social development (Goswami, 2014). Interactions with imaginary companions can be a safe place to explore some of these issues. Also, engaging in quasi-interactions with imaginary friends might give children who create them some more advantages in their social development. Enacting both sides of a relationship requires a child to imagine the feelings and thoughts of the other as well as the self. This has ramifications for theory of mind development as it acknowledges the perspectives of others and recognises that they may be different from their own. Indeed, Taylor and Carlson (1997) found that a high proportion of impersonation and/or imaginary companionship was significantly related to better performance on theory of mind measures in four year olds, independent of verbal ability.

Recent theoretical and empirical work on children's developing knowledge about mental life, along with theory of mind development, has led to interest in the functions imaginary companions serve and their potential for providing information about emotionality. As noted by Goswami (2014), it is now well understood that having friends and playing with them is important for developing children's understanding of the emotions of others. The ability to recognise and respond to another person's emotions plays a key role in friendships; for example, being able to sense when a friend is upset and knowing what is likely to comfort or amuse them, makes a child a popular friend. It is reasonable to assume that children's interactions with their imaginary companions are an important way for the rehearsal of these skills as well as for considering a variety of scenarios or situations which are played out within a safe forum. Harris (2000) ponders the question relating to what extent children's fantasy life is guided by unfulfilled desire and emotional needs. He notes that a commonly held view is that children create imaginary companions to satisfy some need for friendship that is 'thwarted' in some way but the correlation between lack of 'real' friends and the invention of imaginary ones is very weak. He goes on to argue that "it is not the emotional needs of children that give rise to the invention of an imaginary character or

scene, but rather that such inventions give rise to various emotions” (pg. 189). Thus imaginary friends may provide children with an opportunity to experience a wider range of emotions than they would otherwise be exposed to if imaginary companions were not a feature in their lives. For example, Burton (2010) found that imaginary friends provide an outlet for “over-coming everyday constraints and restrictions” so they can give the child an opportunity to ‘live vicariously’ through the antics of their imaginary friend. Mauro (1991) suggests that children make a certain amount of emotional investment in their imaginary friends and they certainly do appear to be very important to the children who create them (Taylor, 1999). This importance is summed up by Majors (2009), who writes that,

“It is clear that children's imaginary companions were significant to them. I would suggest that this was because they served a range of important purposes for the children including a pleasurable retreat, dependable companions, wish fulfilment, entertainment and play” (pg. 81).

Hoff (2004-2005) found that imaginary companions perform several “emotional” functions for the children that include emotional support in the form of giving comfort or helping to endure boredom, loneliness or fear of darkness. They also served as being supportive in terms of motivation and self-regulation, but sometimes they could be a motivator to disobey parental rules; Hoff gives the example of a girl who ate chocolates from an advent calendar because her imaginary friend “made me”. A main theme identified was that of “self-esteem enhancement” which had seven subcategories, including using imaginary friends as scapegoats to pass on blame to or as protégés to increase feelings of competence. Hoff also notes that imaginary companions could also help with tragic or horrifying events by helping the child to feel more in control. She notes that,

“the ability of imaginative children to invent an inner device that provides them with the psychological and emotional support that their outer environment has failed to adequately provide is a fascinating phenomenon” (pg. 180).

Majors (2013) also makes reference to imaginary companions acting as emotional support, helping three of the older children in her study to defuse angry or upset feelings and, as Hoff found, offering support when the children experienced difficulties in their lives.

The presence of an imaginary companion has also been implicated in the development of cognitive abilities and problem-solving skills. Hoff (2004-2005) found that imaginary companions, in some cases, were experienced as assisting the children with school subjects, acting as “school mentors”. As noted earlier, one theme Burton (2010) identified was “academic problem solving and cognitive development”. Burton found that imaginary friends served a function of “assisting with homework” by either making it more fun or by offering an opportunity to talk through problems in order to facilitate solutions. The ability to make generalisations and adapt knowledge for different contexts is an important skill to acquire when learning. Vygotsky (1962) claimed that psychological functions are acquired at first in the context of a social practice before they are internalised (using self-talk) and then used autonomously by the individual. Seen in this context it can be suggested that imaginary companions could act as a vehicle for social practice, involving building on language acquisition, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution or any other number of skills which need to be learnt and refined. Imaginary companions offer children a relatively safe avenue for this practice with minimal risks. Harris (2000) commented that role play with an imaginary friend can feed information into the child’s own knowledge and planning system, “By feeding pretend input into the child’s own knowledge and planning mechanisms, considerable cognitive economy is achieved” (Harris, 2000, pg. 35). He gives examples of benefits such as language acquisition as if a child took on the role of another, including mimicry, then speech would require sentence construction. Harris (2000) suggested that imaginary companions may play a role in the development of more cognitive skills as well as social reasoning skills and they can offer significant benefits to a child’s development.

To conclude this section, pretence and imagination seem to play a positive role in children’s development. Imaginary companions seem to be a significant factor in children’s social, emotional and cognitive development. They not only offer companionship, but by offering similar opportunities as real-life interactions they are safe forums for children to rehearse certain skills. Imaginary companions are very important to their creators and children seem to invest a great deal in them.

## **2.8 Summary and conclusions regarding the literature**

The literature has suggested that the creation of an imaginary companion is generally a positive, natural and common childhood experience. The research also suggests that imaginary friends can play a significant and important role in the development of a wide range of social, emotional and cognitive skills. The range and types of the imaginary friends created by children are remarkably diverse and individual experiences of such companions are unique and idiosyncratic. The various studies reviewed have shown that fantasy is 'alive and well' in the lives of school-aged children. Despite the evidence that they seem to be a common childhood experience, there are very few studies that specifically examine the functions they serve. As research into imaginary companions has evolved so have the questions about their purpose and significance. Many new avenues and research questions have arisen from the studies where the most interesting findings have appeared to be unexpected or were side products of the original focus of the investigation.

Reviewing the literature has been an interesting activity as research findings have often been inconsistent or even contradictory. The lack of consistency between research studies in terms of reporting findings along with, for example the definitions used, methods used to collect information about imaginary companions as well as the age of children, has made it challenging to identify common links. However, although the research and theories explored have been diverse, there do appear to be a number of consistent themes arising. Generally, there is at least some consensus that imaginary companions assist in children's developing understanding of reality along with supporting various aspects of social, emotional and cognitive development as well as providing friendship and company. They offer children opportunities to rehearse social interactions and are a source of comfort as well as entertainment.

Research with a quantitative stance has provided interesting data about the reported incidence of imaginary friends along with a better understanding of the age range of children with imaginary companions. However, it has been unable to provide in-depth and detailed information into the motivations of children who create imaginary friends and the purposes

served by such creations. I have critiqued the assumptions underlying these methods earlier in this chapter and it should be noted that children with imaginary companions do not form a homogeneous group anyway. Qualitative studies however, have provided valuable insights into the individual motivations for creating an imaginary friend as well as uncovering some of the various functions they provide for that child. Although each experience is unique, the literature reviewed above has shown some common functions and purposes that imaginary companions serve.

The intention of this study was to gain insight into the functions and purposes that imaginary friends serve from the perspective of the child, particularly when in school and with school work. This present study carries out an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the characteristics of the imaginary companions of a small sample of school-aged children in order to add to the small but growing research base in this area. As this study was conducted with a non-clinical sample it is hoped that the creation and maintenance of imaginary companions is more usually viewed as a positive and 'normal' aspect of human development rather than as a possible early sign of future psychopathology. It is anticipated that this investigation will add to the understanding of different aspects of child development and psychology and make a valuable contribution to the existing research base as it examines the creation of imaginary companions on a case by case basis whilst exploring common themes. Also, the children who participated in this study are seen as being reliable witnesses to their lives as being experienced by them and their perspective is at the heart of this research.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter explains the process of the research and provides details of and reasons for the methodology selected for use. It also contains a critical evaluation of the main techniques used, namely semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. The research process is explained in detail in order to provide transparency as well as to recognise the researcher's position throughout. It is important to consider both of these aspects as it could be argued that research is always influenced by the views of the researcher (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2005) and transparency not only shows the integrity of the research process but also allows for robust evaluation of the research (Elliott, Fischer and Rennie, 1999).

The main research questions and aims are stated before the epistemological and ontological perspectives that underpin the research are outlined. This makes explicit the theoretical influences that led to the choice of selected methodologies. A section is then included which explores some of the issues involved when children are participants in research. This is followed by an account of the procedure of introducing the research to the parents and children and details of the sample, including information regarding the initial sweep for appropriate participants using a questionnaire. Further details are then provided about the seven children who participated in the research interviews and the subsequent analysis. Ethical considerations are discussed at the end of this chapter.

#### **3.2 Research questions and aims**

- What are the characteristics of children's imaginary companions?
- Do the imaginary companions created by children attend school with them and if not what happens to them during the school day?
- Do the imaginary companions created by children remain the same in school or alter in some way from how they are outside school?

- What purposes and functions do imaginary companions serve for children, particularly at school and with academic tasks?

These research questions are broad as this study is more concerned with the exploration of phenomena rather than testing specific research questions. This is partly due to the limited body of research and literature relating to the area of imaginary companions. Also, as some of the existing research demonstrates, several interesting findings have emerged from investigations that were not predicted and I want to maintain this openness in my research. The study is taken from the perspective of children in relation to *their* experience and this remains paramount as they are at the centre of the experience.

The main aim of the study is to examine and investigate what purpose imaginary companions serve from the perspective of the child, particularly when they are in school and with academic demands. As a practising educational psychologist I have worked with a number of children in recent years who have reportedly had an imaginary companion. This has led to my renewed interest in the role that imagination plays in children's development but particularly the role that imaginary companions play in the lives of their creators. It is expected that this study will add to the growing body of research that explores children's perceptions of, and their interactions with, their imaginary companions and so will contribute to our understanding of their developmental and psychological significance. It is also anticipated that findings will further aid our understanding of, and response to, the children who create imaginary companions.

### **3.3 Epistemological and ontological perspectives**

#### *A brief overview of research in the social sciences*

There are various ways of approaching and conducting research. The study of human beings and the research carried out in order to understand them in various situations/contexts has resulted in different methods being used. These methods make complex assumptions about cultural, social and personal activities. Researchers approach a question from a particular standpoint within a particular paradigm. This influences the way any situation is interpreted

as well as the method(s) used to collect and analyse data and the way in which the research is evaluated. Indeed, the standpoint influences the very question which is asked at the outset of the research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). It is usual for researchers to state their position so the transparency will not only show the integrity of the research process but also allow for robust evaluation of the research.

Paradigms can be understood as the way of looking at the world and therefore provide a lens for how to interpret and explain it (Mertens, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) provide the idea that a paradigm can be thought of as a 'net' that contains the researcher's epistemological, ontological and methodological premises. This notion helps the researcher to identify his/her position along these three lines. The researcher's ontological and epistemological positions will inform the theoretical perspective that is chosen, with the paradigm acting as an overarching framework that the research operates in.

Two broad paradigms have emerged within educational and psychological research, namely the natural science paradigm (positivism) and the interpretive paradigm (constructivism). Positivism has an underlying belief that the social world can be studied broadly in the same way as the natural world resulting in findings that seek to explain causal links and claims for objectivity. The social world can be explained in terms of discovering what is 'out there' and is considered to be value-free. Constructivism, by contrast, claims that there are multiple, socially constructed realities and findings seek to uncover and explain the meanings people ascribe to their situations and activities, in the contexts they are in. Subjectivity is thought to be more important than objectivity as there is not one universal truth but many truths interacting with each other. At best, research in the 'unfixed' constructed world of education can only assign meanings and try to interpret and explain (Hartley, 2009). Research with a positivist slant tends to produce quantitative data, while qualitative data is often the result of research with a constructivist slant. So,

"in a nutshell, the contrast is drawn between quantitative research which is seen to be appropriate to the physical world (and wrongly applied to the personal and social) and qualitative research which addresses that which is distinctive of the personal and social, namely, the 'meanings' through which personal and social reality is understood" (Pring, 2004, pg. 45).



As a researcher, I place myself firmly in the constructivist paradigm as I prefer to do research *with* rather than *on* people and place great importance on the meanings that people give to their experiences.

Writers such as Rowbottom and Aiston (2006) argue that the “false” dichotomy between positivist and interpretive camps has been enshrined in educational research and research students have to choose which camp they feel more at ease in. However, they propose that this moves the focus away from the vital point of “good” inquiry which is developing a critical approach to the knowledge claims made in published research. It could be argued that political and historical factors are still influencing *what* is researched and *who* conducts the research, as well as *how* the findings are distributed and *who* reads it. Grieg (2001) suggests that we should not be too concerned with arguments about the relative merits of differing genres in research and states that research skills are vital and useful in the role of educational psychologists. Greig notes that research skills that support their work with children and young people, teachers and at Local Authority level include evaluation, research “mindfulness” and critical analyses of research findings which are used to shape practice.

This brief overview frames the next sections where the epistemological and ontological positions of this research are explored, which inform the methodology used.

### *Epistemological position*

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of knowledge which involves thinking about the nature of knowledge itself, how it can be acquired and about the validity and reliability of the claims made to knowledge (Willig, 2008). This subject is very complex but draws on a rich philosophical tradition developed over time. It is important to acknowledge the epistemological position taken by the researcher as it represents the researcher’s position about what kinds of things it is possible to find out (Willig, 2008). Epistemology also asks questions about the relationship between the knower and what can be known (Moore, 2005). It is important to recognise how the researcher has come to be

researching the researched, as well as why it is important to them and what prior knowledge they bring with them to the research, in addition to taking into account the influence made by their standpoint within a particular paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

From a positivist standpoint, the researcher and the subject of the research are thought to be independent and not influenced by each other. Thus the researcher must remain neutral in order to prevent their own biases or values from influencing the research and strives to achieve this by following prescribed procedures rigorously. From an interpretive/constructivist standpoint, the researcher and subject of the research influence each other and are interactive. Subjectivity is favoured over objectivity and rigour is thought to come from being clear about the methodology and the context that the research took place in, as well as being explicit about the interpretations about the data in the reporting of the research (Mertens, 1998). Truth and meaning are seen to be constructed with our engagement with the world and through our interactions with other people and their ideas (Crotty, 2005). However, it is important to note that interpretivist researchers have their own understandings and are, like the objects of study, members of a particular culture at a specific moment in history (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The epistemological position adopted for this study is that of constructivism as I agree with Moore (2005) that “although the world may exist physically independently of people, truth and meaning cannot” (pg. 106). This research aims to report the experience and the reality of participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and moves beyond seeing the child participants as ‘merely’ interesting sources of data, but rather as reliable witnesses to their own lives as individually experienced by them. The epistemological basis of this study does not include a focus on how meaning is created in the broader social context; as such a small sample would not lead to valid generalisations, but rather focuses on individual psychologies and motivations while tentatively uncovering common themes.

Qualitative research tends to be interested in people’s experiences (Willig, 2008). Qualitative researchers tend to be concerned with the quality and texture of experience rather than with cause-effect relationships. Therefore, a qualitative approach was selected as the main aim of this study is concerned with gaining in-depth and multi-faceted information regarding

the unique and idiosyncratic experience of creating an imaginary companion. In terms of the analysis of the data, the nature of thematic analysis led to this being chosen as an appropriate option for analysis in this piece of research. Thematic analysis has the flexibility to offer detailed information about the meanings created by individuals but can also identify common patterns across people's experiences. Further details regarding the epistemological position of the research can be located in the 'Data Analysis' section in this chapter as this describes the type of thematic analysis being used and why.

### *Ontological concerns*

Ontology deals with questions relating to what exists or can be said to exist and can be "understood as related to questions about the nature of being and the form of reality" (Moore, 2005, pg.106). So while epistemology asks 'how can we know?' ontology deals with the question, 'what is there to know?' (Willig, 2008). Ontological concerns can be considered to be fundamental as it is impossible not to make at least some assumptions about the nature of the world (Willig, 2008). Also, since both ontological and epistemological issues tend to emerge together (Crotty, 2005) the researcher's epistemological and ontological positions cannot be seen as separate from each other. However, it is important to recognise and explore the ontological assumptions made by the researcher depending on their standpoint within a particular paradigm.

While a constructivist epistemology does not focus on whether a reality exists independently of the knower, constructivist ontology questions the notion that there is an objective reality that *can* be known (Mertens, 1998). This can be a very uncertain way of looking at the world and so critical realism resulted as a "perspective that combines the realist ambition to gain a better understanding of what is 'really' going in the world with the acknowledgement that the data the researcher gathers may not provide direct access to this reality" (Willig, 2008, pg. 13). An ontological assumption for critical realists is that an external reality exists independent of our own individual beliefs and understanding but the epistemological position taken is that knowledge of this reality is only knowable through the human mind

and is only possible through our understandings and interpretations (Snape and Spencer, 2003).

Research from an interpretive/constructivist standpoint holds that reality is socially constructed and that there are multiple and flexible perceptions of reality which change over time and in different contexts (Mertens, 1998). It is important to consider the 'constructs' of the 'objects' being studied (in this case 'children' and 'imaginary companions') as well as current discourses surrounding these 'objects'. The standpoint taken in this research is that the children are viewed as active agents (Moore, 2005) who have *created* and *maintained* an imaginary companion, with the aim being to uncover detailed information about the unique and idiosyncratic experience of doing so. Imaginary companions are commonly recognised in western societies, to the extent that they can be described and discussed (Majors, 2009) but they are invisible and, as such, have no objective basis in reality. The main aim of this study is to explore the children's perspectives of their imaginary companions and to uncover some of the various purposes and functions they serve for the children who create them.

### **Children as participants in research**

As noted above, the children in this study are viewed as participants in the research not as 'objects' to be studied. As the main aim of this study is to investigate what purpose imaginary companions serve from the perspective of the child, the children's experiences are central to this study. Also, I view children as being credible sources of information and therefore the information they give is deemed to be a valid viewpoint. I agree with Kellett and Ding (2004), who write on research with children in middle childhood, that: "Children are themselves the best source of information about matters that concern them, so collecting data directly from children is preferred as secondary sources may not be able to orient sufficiently to the children's perspectives." (pg. 165). Majors (2009) comments that it is worth noting that not all researcher psychologists would appear to share this view. Much of the research by developmental psychologists on children's imaginary companions taking place in the USA has been primarily quantitative and has not focused on the 'depth' of the

experience of creating an imaginary companion. This could be argued to reflect a research tradition in which:

“Children's individual experience is typically not valued as a focus of research since it is perceived as unreliable and idiosyncratic. In its urge to assess and measure the child, some mainstream developmental psychology has sought to homogenize the experience of children.”(Greene and Hogan, 2005: xii)

It could therefore be argued that children and their experiences are explained under the general category of them being ‘children’ and that their individual lives and development are not studied in detail. Furthermore, it could be argued that children seem to be valued for their potential and what they may *become* but are undervalued in terms of their present perspectives and experiences. However, more contemporary approaches view children as not merely ‘becomings’ but as ‘beings’ in their own right (James and Prout, 1997). These approaches, which not only value children’s experiences in their own right but also respect children’s capabilities (Alderson and Morrow, 2004), are reflected in Children's Rights legislation and guidance, such as in the Convention for the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which enshrines children’s rights to participate. This study aims to emulate the theoretical assumptions of these more contemporary approaches as I view children as being reliable and capable participants in research which focuses on their lives as individually experienced by them. It is also important to note that some writers, such as Taylor (1999), recognise some idiosyncratic reasons behind the creation of imaginary companions and I would most certainly welcome any idiosyncrasies uncovered in this study.

Finally, when involved in research with child participants, it is important to recognise the potential power imbalance between the adult as researcher and the child as subject (Christensen and Prout, 2002). This study places great importance on seeking and listening to the views of children and I also consider this to be a central feature of my role as an educational psychologist (for an overview of the knowledge, role and skill set required of educational psychologists in England at this time please see BPS, 2015). Throughout the research process I was able to draw on my skills such as developing rapport with children, using language and questions that the children could understand, actively listening and

facilitating the interaction. The first three, as noted by Majors (2009), are identified by Greig and Taylor (1999) as being particularly important when interviewing children. During the interviews I was constantly aware of the potential power imbalance but, as noted earlier, due to the limited research at a detailed descriptive level of children's imaginary companions, I was genuinely able to say that I did not know much about imaginary companions and would like to know more about them (Majors, 2009). Like Majors (2009) I anticipated that this perspective would go some way to redress the power imbalance between the adult researcher and child participants. However, as Kellett and Ding (2004) mention, a more realistic approach when carrying out research with children is to invite children to help us understand their perspective but not deny power issues and this was the position I adopted throughout.

### **3.4 Methodology**

Methodology can be regarded as the strategy or plan of action for the research, while methods provide the 'tools' used for data collection. The methodology should be informed by epistemological and ontological positions and drawn intrinsically from the paradigms mentioned in the previous sections. This study was designed to focus on and capture the quality and texture of the experience of having an imaginary companion so a constructivist approach was adopted as this seeks to uncover and explain the meanings people ascribe to their activities. This study undertakes a qualitative research approach and qualitative data is often the result of research with a constructivist slant. Furthermore, only a qualitative methodology would have fully captured the essence, diversity, ideas and feelings related to the experience of having an imaginary companion. A qualitative approach also implies particular forms of research design and methods. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), "the word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings" (pg. 10). However, the epistemological basis of this study does not include a focus on how meanings about imaginary friends are created in the broader social context; as such a small sample would not lead to valid generalisations, but rather it focuses on individual psychologies and motivations while tentatively uncovering common themes.

From an interpretive/constructivist standpoint, the researcher and subject of the research influence each other and are interactive. The children in this study are viewed as participants in the research not as 'objects' to be studied. This is research *with*, not *on* children and this ethos is a central and important feature of this study. However, it is also recognised that my position as an adult researcher cannot or should not be unacknowledged and the sense that I make of the information gathered is recognised in the research process (Willig, 2008). From a constructivist position subjectivity is favoured over objectivity and rigour is thought to come from being clear about the methodology used as well as being explicit about the interpretations about the data in the reporting of the research (Mertens, 1998). The detailed account of the research process contained in the following sections of this chapter addresses this issue of rigour. After much deliberation, it was decided that the methods best suited to be used within this constructivist methodological framework, would be semi-structured interviews to gather data and the use of thematic analysis to uncover common themes.

### **3.5 Methods**

Focus groups were considered but ruled out as children may have been reluctant to share information about their imaginary friends in front of others. Also, interviews conducted in a one-to-one setting meant that confidentiality was easier to maintain. Overall it was reasoned that using semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection was highly applicable to this research due to the unique and personalised experiences of the participants. Also, as this study has aspects of both confirmatory and exploratory elements, interviews allow the flexibility to explore both of these factors (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

#### *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviewing is the most widely used method of data collection in qualitative research (Willig, 2008) and is a valid way of seeking the perceptions and views about children's experiences. Semi-structured interviewing is compatible with a wide range of data analysis methods and this flexibility may well have contributed to its popularity. Semi-structured interviews were selected to gather data as they provide a logical structure

to the questions while allowing the flexibility to deviate from the script if needed. Their adaptability also allows for the participant to speak more widely and provides the child with opportunities to introduce new and interesting points to the conversation. Indeed, as imaginary friends are a highly unique and idiosyncratic experience to each individual, this was thought to be an excellent way to obtain depth and detail from the children.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), a semi-structured interview can be considered to be more like a 'conversation' rather than a formal event with predetermined response categories, such as in a job interview. They also add that this method is based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research that the participant's perspective should unfold as the participant views it, rather than as the researcher views it. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is the researcher whose research questions drive the interview. Willig (2008) commented that:

"The interviewer needs to find the right balance between maintaining control of the interview and where it is going, and allowing the interviewee the space to re-define the topic under investigation and thus generate novel insights for the researcher" (pg. 22).

A carefully constructed interview schedule can help to maintain this balance and the interview schedule (contained in Appendix E) was largely adapted from Burton (2010). This was not in an effort to replicate that study but a lot of her questions were appropriate for the purpose of this study and her interview schedule had successfully been used in her research. The interview format for my research was submitted to and accepted by a rigorous psychology ethics board. It was also piloted before use to help make sure that it was fit for purpose. The questions asked were influenced by the theoretical perspectives adopted in this study. The interview started with some 'warm-up' questions which helped to build rapport with the children. The subject of imaginary companions was then introduced using concrete questions which were relatively easy to answer. These included questions regarding where the imaginary companion 'lived', what he/she looked like and how long the child had had the imaginary friend. Questions were then asked about the imaginary friend in school and in relation to school work. Towards the end of the interview, more abstract



questions were asked, such as what participants liked and disliked about their imaginary companions and why they thought other people might have imaginary friends.

The questions helped to maintain a structure but I attempted to place an emphasis on the child's narrative and experience in order to encourage the dialogue to flow. I also set aside the assumption that questions and answers can be understood in the same way by the interviewer and the interviewee. To this aim I adopted the symbolic interactionist perspective that "social actors in any social situation are constantly negotiating a shared definition of the situation; taking one another's viewpoints into account." (Foddy, 2001, pg. 20). I saw my role as creating a space for the child to speak freely and openly about their imaginary friend(s) and I strove to ensure that this was a collaborative partnership as far as possible. However, as this interview was a 'social situation' it was framed within certain social norms associated with participating in an interview. I felt that the onus was on me to facilitate the conversation as it was assumed that I have had more experience of an interview situation than the children would have had. I was conscious that the children were gauging my response(s) to their comments and there is a possibility that some things were said (or even left unsaid) by their perceptions of my expectations as the 'researcher'.

However, face-to-face interviews offered the opportunity to adapt my lines of enquiry, to explore 'new leads' and to follow up intriguing responses (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Also, nonverbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, were noted during the interviews, which added to my understanding of the conversation. Finally, children were offered the chance to draw a picture of their imaginary companion(s) and this provided an opportunity for the children to express their perspective through a medium other than language.

#### *Disadvantages of using semi-structured interviews*

To use the flexibility that semi-structured interviewing offers requires skill in the interviewer; it also helps if the interviewer has experience of conducting interviews. Interviewing is sometimes considered a 'soft' technique but soft techniques in qualitative data collection

are deceptively hard to use well (Robson, 2002). Interviewing can be assumed to be 'just' a matter of talking to another person, asking a few questions and waiting to be told everything needed to know to complete the research (Payne, 2000). Each interview is unique and this lack of standardisation introduces concerns about the reliability of the data gathered. Issues of validity are raised as interviewees may only reveal what they want to reveal and/or may not know the motives behind their actions. Furthermore, in this study, as interviews were conducted through the medium of language, there was the potential for the children's descriptions of the 'richness' of their experience to be limited by their vocabulary and/or language skills. Attempts to take these issues into consideration were made and exploration of the issues surrounding the reliability and validity of this research are contained in Chapter Five. As an educational psychologist, I consider seeking and listening to the views of children to be an important and central part of my role. In the interviews I fully drew on my skills of developing rapport with children, using language and questions that the children could understand, listened carefully and engaged fully in the interaction. I did not ask leading questions and attempted to eliminate cues which could lead the child to respond in a particular way. Some children required more prompts from me to fully answer questions than others but all participated enthusiastically. As the children transmitted their experiences, thoughts and feelings about their imaginary companion(s) through language, I am fully aware that they may have a different meaning or may have communicated a different 'reality' to me than what they intended. This factor was considered throughout the analysis phase and the words the children used were carefully considered.

Another difficulty with interviews is that they can be time consuming. Interviews can vary in length and those running under 30 minutes run the risk of not being valuable and anything over an hour may place too many demands on interviewees (Robson, 2002). All of the interviews in this study lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. I took responsibility for keeping to time within acceptable limits while allowing the interview to move at an appropriate pace. For some research it can be difficult to recruit participants but this was not an issue as all of the children had self-identified and indicated that they were willing to talk about their imaginary friends. Recruitment and retention of participants was straightforward but gaining

parental consent caused some difficulties and resulted in fewer interviews taking place than was anticipated. However, parental consent is vital in research involving child participants.

Transcribing the interviews was also a time consuming process. The estimated time needed for transcription was accounted for during the planning of the research and despite the time cost, the data that was achieved was very detailed and of a high quality.

### **3.6 Research process and data collection procedures**

1. I approached the staff in a mainstream primary school, where I worked as their named educational psychologist, to explain the purpose of the study and to ask if they were interested in participating. The school's Head Teacher and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) agreed to the school's participation and dates were arranged for me to visit the school to begin the research process. This school was selected as it is a large school that would offer a wide range of participants from varying backgrounds. Staff at this school also showed a high degree of motivation to allow pupils to participate in the research, which suggested they would engage well with the research process. The study was limited to one primary school due to logistical reasons, mainly to do with time and geography.
2. A letter (based on Burton, 2010) was sent to all parents of the children in Year 2 (age 6 to 7), Year 3 (age 7 to 8) and Year 5 (age 9 to 10) informing them of the research (Appendix A). These year groups were selected in order to obtain a range of ages in the sample. The parents of fifteen children, eight girls and seven boys, returned slips expressing a wish that their child did not participate; these children were not included when the research was introduced to children.
3. An initial sweep was then conducted in order to identify the children who reported having, or having had, an imaginary companion(s). A simple questionnaire was given out to the children in the selected year groups while they were in their classroom. The questionnaire asked the children's name, sex, whether they currently have an

imaginary companion or have had one in the past and if so, whether they would be willing to talk about it. A question was also included to gain consent for me to ask their parents if I could talk to them if they had an imaginary companion and would be willing to talk to me (Appendix B). Before the questionnaires were handed out, I introduced myself and asked what children knew about 'research' and 'universities'. I then gave a verbal explanation about research and what the study was about. I also clarified that the children understood what an imaginary friend is; this was done by asking some of the children to explain what they think an imaginary friend is to the rest of the class before reading out a definition at the end. The definition (based on Majors, 2009) read out to children was: "Imaginary friends are invisible friends that some children play with or talk to but that nobody else can see. We don't know much about these friends, but we do know that they are often special and important to the children who have them. We have now found out that older children as well as younger children have imaginary friends. This questionnaire is to find out if any of you have an imaginary friend or friends, or have had, and whether you would be willing to talk to me about them if you do, or have had one. If you do not want to fill in the questionnaire, you do not have to, and you can miss out any question that you do not wish to answer. Whether you choose to complete the questionnaire or not, please hand it in when asked so it can be collected. Thank you."

4. Questionnaires were collected and one child was chosen at random to pilot the interview schedule. The data obtained from this was not used for analysis. The pilot helped to clarify that the interview format and questions were appropriate, with no changes being made, and that it would provide useful information from the children.
5. The questionnaires of those children who had self-identified as having an imaginary friend and who indicated that they would be happy to talk with me were sorted into a separate pile. Out of these twelve were selected at random. The questionnaires were organised into year groups and sex in order to ensure a gender split and to identify four children from each class. Two boys and two girls from each year group were chosen at random. A letter (based on Burton, 2010) explaining the purpose of

the study and consent forms were sent to the parents of those children in order to gain consent for each child to take part in an interview about his/her imaginary friend(s) (Appendix C).

6. Interviews were conducted at school in a small empty room in a one-to-one setting to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Verbal clarification was sought at the start of each interview to make sure that the child was still happy to participate in the interview and written consent was obtained (Appendix D). A brief was given at the start of each interview (Appendix E contains the interview script and questions) and the interview began. I checked with each child that it was acceptable to them that the interview was recorded. The interview was recorded using an electronic voice recorder. During the interview I made notes about any relevant body language, such as gestures, on the interview script for each child. The interview included questions about when the child first started to have an imaginary friend and what the friend 'looked like'. Each interview lasted between 25 and 45 minutes. At the end of the interview, the child was invited to draw a picture of their imaginary friend(s). All the children were willing to do this and their drawings are located in Appendices F to L. Finally, I debriefed participants and thanked them for taking part in the interview. A 'thank you' note and stickers were offered.
7. The interviews were confidential and anonymised. During transcription participant's names were replaced with randomly assigned pseudonyms. Although the children's names have been changed the names of the imaginary companion(s) have been retained, with the exception of 'Mark' whose imaginary friend had the same name as him. Other features which could possibly lead to the identification of the children were removed, such as place names, and the names of other people the participants spoke about were changed.

### **3.7 Sample details**

Out of a total of 129 children 114 questionnaires were completed, as parents of 15 children returned slips expressing a wish that their child did not participate in the research.

*Year 2 (Aged six to seven years old)*

A total of 33 children filled out questionnaires and 16 stated that they had a current imaginary friend with 17 stating that they did not have, or have had, an imaginary companion. Out of the 16 that indicated having an imaginary companion, 10 were willing to talk to me and for me to also ask their parents for permission.

*Year 3 (Aged seven to eight years old)*

A total of 48 children filled out questionnaires and 33 stated that they had a current imaginary friend with 15 stating that they did not have, or have had, an imaginary companion. Out of the 33 that indicated having an imaginary companion, 26 were willing to talk to me and for me to also ask their parents for permission.

*Year 5 (Aged nine to ten years old)*

A total of 33 children filled out questionnaires and 16 stated that they had a current imaginary friend with 17 stating that they did not have, or have had, an imaginary companion. One girl ticked all the 'yes' boxes but her parents contacted the school the next day as their daughter had been a little upset in the evening as she 'had made it up and didn't want to get into trouble'. Another girl wrote "sort of/sometimes" on the questionnaire and so these two questionnaires were not included in the sample of children to select for interview. Of the remaining 15 that indicated having a current imaginary companion, 9 were willing to talk to me and for me to ask their parents for permission.

Table 1 shows details of the potential sample and the eventual sample size.

**Table 1 – Sample selection information**

<b>Year Group</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total from year group</b>	<b>Current IC</b>	<b>Not willing to take part</b>	<b>Total sample from which to select</b>
<b>2</b>	18	15	33	16	6	10
<b>3</b>	21	27	48	33	7	25*
<b>5</b>	18	15	33	15	6	8*

\* One Year 3 girl and one Year 5 boy indicated that they had a current imaginary companion and that they would be willing to talk to me about them but as they were known to me in my role as educational psychologist for the school these two children were removed from the sample from which to select children to interview.

Out of the sample of children who self-identified as having an imaginary companion twelve were selected at random. The questionnaires were organised into year groups and sex before selection in order to ensure a gender split and to identify four children from each class. Two boys and two girls from each year group were chosen and letters were sent to their parents in order to gain their written consent (Appendix C). Consent slips were returned confirming agreement for one boy in Year two, one boy and one girl in Year three and two boys and one girl in Year five to participate in interviews. Slips were returned for a girl in Year two, a girl in Year three and a girl in Year five not giving parental consent to participate in interviews. The remaining parents who had not returned their slips were contacted by school via text but replies were not forthcoming. Six children were then interviewed. One girl in Year three was interviewed and it was revealed that she had had her imaginary companion for only three weeks, about the time when I had visited school to discuss the research. In the interview it transpired that she had invented her 'friend' after hearing about my research and so her data is not included in the analysis.

In an attempt to complete the proposed twelve interviews, as only five valid interviews had been completed, other children were randomly selected from the sample and letters were sent to seek the consent of their parents to participate. Two consent slips were returned for a Year two boy and a Year five girl confirming consent. These two children then participated in interviews. Parents who did not return the slips were contacted by school via text but no response meant that further interviews could not take place. The seven interviews that took place form the basis for the analysis of this research.

### **3.8 Participant details**

Table 2 shows a breakdown of the demographics of the seven children who participated in interviews and includes details of their imaginary companions. Pseudonyms were assigned and the children are listed in alphabetical order in regard to this pseudonym.

**Table 2 – Demographics of the children interviewed**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age and year group</b>	<b>Details of imaginary companion(s)</b>
Ann-Marie	Female	10 years old: Yr 5	'Daisy' and 'Lilly' – human girls of similar age to Ann-Marie
Callum	Male	7 years old: Yr 2	'Billy Bob' – a monkey of similar age to Callum
Chloe	Female	10 years old: Yr 5	'Tanya' and 'Melissa' – human girls who are 14 and 16 years old
John	Male	7 years old: Yr 2	'Steve' and 'Clara' – human adults who are 1,000 years old and are married to each other
Mark	Male	10 years old: Yr 5	'Mark' – human boy who is the same age as Mark
Toby	Male	9 years old: Yr 5	'Bob' – human boy the same age as Toby
Tom	Male	8 years old: Yr 3	'Max' – human boy the same age as Tom and 'Nuts', a puppy aged 5

Due to the higher than anticipated number of children who stated that they had a current imaginary companion I decided to only include them in the sample. Children who indicated that they had had an imaginary companion that was no longer present were not included when participants were randomly selected. This was in an attempt to explore children's current experiences rather than have the children speaking about their imaginary companion(s) from a retrospective position. While it was my intention to have an equal number of both boys and girls in the final sample it was not the intention to control for gender in order to find differences because this is a small sample and statistical inferences cannot be made. However, in the analysis, some themes emerged in the girls interviews that were not so present in the boys and vice versa.



### **3.9 Data analysis**

In qualitative research, it could be argued that data analysis begins as soon as the researcher engages in a social interaction with the research participants. Charmaz (2006) states that “as we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions” (pg. 10). During the interviews, I was aware that I was beginning to make some sense of the experiences shared but this process was further developed during the transcription of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed, and notes that were made during the interviews were added to include any relevant non-verbal information, such as gestures/facial expressions, tone of voice and where words or phrases were emphasised by the child. All of these added to my understanding of the meaning conveyed during the conversation and how the children described their experience of having an imaginary friend (please see Appendix M for an extract of an interview transcript). These transcripts formed the data set(s).

Once the interviews had all been transcribed, thematic analysis was carried out to analyse the data. Thematic analysis differs from other qualitative methods, such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Grounded Theory, as it is not theoretically bound. In this sense, it offers flexibility as researchers do not have to subscribe to the theoretical commitments that are implicit in those other methods. This flexible and less prescriptive approach means that the method and analysis can be tailored to fit the purpose of the research questions. The epistemological basis of this study does not include a focus on how meaning is created in the broader social context and so IPA was not chosen as the methodological framework or method for analysis as this would have involved a deeper level of analysis than was envisaged for this study. As this research has aspects of both confirmatory and exploratory elements, the use of Grounded Theory was declined as thematic analysis offered the flexibility to explore both of these factors (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It was also not the purpose of this study to be directed towards theory development, which analysis using Grounded Theory aims to do.

As thematic analysis is not attached to any one epistemology, in some ways it can offer a more accessible form of analysis, particularly for those with limited experience (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method which reports the experiences and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructivist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences effect a range of discourses operating in society. The focus of this research was to explore children's interactions with their imaginary companions in order to report their experiences of and their reality of having an imaginary companion. It also attempts to portray the quality and texture of their experiences and it was anticipated that thematic analysis would capture this well. While this study explores individual psychologies and motivations, thematic analysis also offers the opportunity to identify themes or patterns *across* data sets, as well as within. So the nature of thematic analysis means that it was an appropriate choice of analysis for this piece of research, as the information sought needed to be detailed as well as identifying common patterns in the children's experience.

By using Braun and Clarke's (2006) template for analysis, it was anticipated that the methodology for this piece of research would be transparent and robust. Alongside using Braun and Clarke's (2006) template I studied Burton's (2010) research in detail as this provided an example of how their template could be used. It is important to be clear about what is going to be done with regards to the analysis, why it is being done and the often omitted 'how' (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Issues of the validity of the research and difficulties evaluating it will arise where methodological use has not been made explicit. With this in mind, a number of choices had to be made about the nature of the thematic analysis that was going to be used for this research. These are taken from Braun and Clarke (2006):

### *Decision 1*

#### *What counts as a theme?*

A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions. Codes can be thought of as labels for assigning 'units of meaning' (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to information gathered and it is important to look for the prevalence within and across data sets. However, more instances of a theme across the data set do not necessarily

mean this theme is more important or crucial than others. My own judgement as to what constitutes a theme is recognised throughout the analysis and evidence for the identification of themes is shown through children's quotes.

### *Decision 2*

#### *A rich description of the data set versus a detailed account of one particular aspect*

With a rich description of the entire data set a sense of the predominant themes is captured. These themes should be an accurate reflection of the content of the whole data set but it can result in some depth and complexity being lost. However, for a doctoral research project such as this, it is less likely that this drawback would occur. A rich description of the themes present in the entire data set can be valuable when investigating an under-researched topic as new themes may be uncovered. The alternative to this would be to provide a more detailed, nuanced account of one particular theme or group of themes within the data which usually relates to a specific question or area of particular interest. After careful thought, a rich description of the data set was chosen as this was a better fit for the purpose of this study as the research questions are so broad. I have not presented any specific hypotheses about possible findings to the research questions and I wanted to keep the analysis open in order to explore all possible themes that may emerge from the data. Also, a rich description is particularly appropriate to under-researched areas, such as imaginary companions, as new themes may emerge during the analysis. I also did not want to be constricted by analysing only a particular theme as this research aimed to have an exploratory element to it.

### *Decision 3*

#### *Inductive approach versus theoretical approach*

An inductive approach involves identifying themes or patterns in a 'bottom-up' way, while a theoretical approach uses a 'top-down' style (Patton, 2015). In the former, the themes identified are strongly linked to the data itself and emerge from the data, while in the latter approach, themes are sought that fit into the researcher's pre-existing coding framework and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven. The theoretical approach tends to provide a less rich description of the entire data set and focuses on a more detailed analysis of some

aspect of the data. For this reason, an inductive approach was selected for the analysis; this is also more compatible with the second decision point. With an inductive approach, a research question can evolve through the coding process and my original research questions were broad and exploratory in nature. An inductive approach would be more relevant to such research questions as well as to capture some of the depth and texture of the experience of having an imaginary companion. It would have been challenging to use a theoretical stance on such an under-researched topic anyway and may have even restricted the findings.

#### *Decision 4*

##### *Semantic versus latent themes*

This involved making decisions about the 'level' at which themes would be identified, at a semantic/explicit level or at a latent/interpretative level (Boyatzis, 1998). A semantic approach identifies themes at an explicit or surface level of meaning. The researcher is not looking for anything beyond what the participant has said. The analytic process involves a progression from description, such as showing patterns of semantic content, to a summary which attempts to interpret or theorise the significance of the patterns and their meanings. In contrast, the identification of latent themes starts to identify the *underlying* ideas or conceptualisations that are theorised as shaping the semantic content of the data. This involves more interpretative work, less description and more theorising. For the purposes of this research, a semantic approach was selected as the transcriptions offered a rich picture through the language used. While this research was primarily involved with generating ideas from the data, the semantic approach, as it transpired, also offered the possibility for some tentative interpretative work in the later stages of analysis.

#### *Decision 5*

##### *Epistemology: essentialist/realist versus constructionist*

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis can be conducted within both of these epistemological positions. An essentialist/realist approach assumes that meaning is transmitted through language in a straightforward way, while in contrast to this, a

constructionist approach looks at how meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced.

As discussed in previous sections the epistemological position adopted in this research is one from an interpretive/constructivist standpoint, where knowledge of 'reality' (in this instance, the experience of having an imaginary companion) is only knowable through the human mind and is only possible through our understandings and interpretations (Snape and Spencer, 2003). In the analysis a constructionist approach was used to tentatively interpret the children's experience. The constructionist approach enabled me to maintain my awareness that the children's use of language may have had a different meaning or may have communicated a different 'reality' to me from what they intended. This factor was considered throughout the analysis phase as the words the children used were carefully thought about.

Each of these decision points help to explain the justifications for choices regarding the analysis of the data for this piece of research. The research questions were thought about in regard to each decision made.

Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a step by step guide on how to use thematic analysis in psychological research and present an evidence-based argument for its use. The six steps outlined in their paper were used, along with reference to Burton's (2010) example, and this offered a robust yet flexible guide during analysis.

Analysis involved constant movement back and forth between all of the interview transcripts and the coded extracts and notes made of the process were an integral part of the analysis. This also meant that the analysis was not linear but an iterative process. It also helped to remember that the qualitative analysis guidelines used are just that and are not rigid rules.

The six steps used in the analysis were the following (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

1. *Familiarisation of the data* – The interviews were transcribed, with notes that were made during the interviews being added to include any relevant non-verbal information, as well as laughs, pauses or sighs. The transcripts were then read while the recordings were being played in order to ensure the transcripts were accurate.

The transcription and reading of the completed transcripts is considered to be an important stage of the process of analysis and it is recognised that the transcription process is in itself an interpretive act where “meanings are created, rather than simply a mechanical act of putting spoken sounds on paper” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pg. 88). Each interview transcript was read through several times and initial thoughts and ideas were noted. This was time consuming but it formed the foundation for the rest of the analysis.

2. *Generating initial codes* – This involved coding interesting features of the data in a systematic way over the whole data set and gathering data applicable to each code generated. In this case, they were mainly semantic in content but also tentatively interpreted for meaning, as previously discussed. Each interview was then re-read and extracts from the interviews were placed into a table and initial codes were ascribed to each extract (see Appendix N for examples). As noted above, Miles and Huberman (1994) comment that coding is intrinsically linked to analysis as it organises the data into ‘units of meaning’. Extracts were then organised according to the initial codes and some ideas for themes emerged from this process. In instances where individual extracts had multiple codes they fitted into a variety of categories and this helped to both establish relationships between codes and to identify recurring themes. From these codes a thematic map was developed, which is a visual representation of the initial themes of the analysis (Appendix O). The creation of a thematic map formed part of the process model being used, based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidance, and it proved to be a useful tool during analysis. It was a coherent way to present initial themes in pictorial form. It should be noted that most data sets will contain contradictions and anomalies (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and these were noted to add to the analytic process as it evolved.
3. *Searching for themes* – This involved collating the codes into potential themes and gathering extracts that were relevant to that theme. This allowed a broader focus for generating themes from the codes identified. The use of visual representations, such

as mind maps, helped me to establish relationships between themes and identify which codes supported or invalidated the theme. From this, over-arching themes emerged and sub-themes were categorised under these. During this phase I considered if there was sufficient evidence in the data for each particular theme as well as considered extracts that may contradict a potential theme. As noted above in 'decision 1', questions were asked about what constitutes a theme and I was aware of my own judgements throughout this part of the process. I kept referring back to the research questions and considered what each theme would mean as well as carefully considered the way children spoke about their experiences.

4. *Reviewing the themes* – This involved checking whether the coded extracts matched with the proposed themes. Some themes were rejected because there was insufficient support for them while others were so inter-related that they merged into one. The initial thematic map was added to and changed to reflect this part of the process. This stage also involved the coding of additional material that was missed during the earlier stages of analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe the process of coding as 'an on-going organic process' and note that it can be difficult to know when to stop. They suggest that once refinements no longer add significant findings it is up to the researcher to make a judgement about when useful data has ceased to emerge.
5. *Defining and naming themes* – This involved on-going analysis to refine themes, including generating definitions and looking at how the over-arching story was developing. At this point a fairly coherent and detailed thematic map was produced (Appendix P) and final checking of definitions helped to ensure that the essence of the data was fully captured. Each theme needed to fit into the overall story that the data was conveying and be clearly linked back to the original research questions. Inter-rater 'reliability' was considered and Hoff (2004-2005) notes that in order to increase the reliability of the themes identified during her analysis, another researcher read through the transcribed interviews in order to gain a second view on whether the results categories were representative of the interviews. In order to do

this in my research, another educational psychologist read through the transcribed interviews, along with the themes identified, in order to gain her opinion on whether the themes reflected the interviews. She confirmed that they did.

6. *Producing the report* – Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the results, discussion and conclusions should provide a concise, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the 'story'. They go on to say that the task of the write up is to tell the complicated story of the data, while providing assurance of the merit and validity of the analysis of the data. There should be adequate examples of evidence to support the themes and extracts used should capture the 'essence' of the discoveries and be embedded within the analytic narrative. This means that the findings should be an argument in relation to the research question and not just a description. In the write up attempts were made to address these points and considerations.

#### *Advantages and Limitations of Thematic Analysis*

There are a number of limitations for the use of thematic analysis. Firstly, it is difficult to find good examples of thematic analysis because it is often not explicitly named as the method of analysis. Some writers, such as Boyatzis (1998), view thematic analysis not as a specific method but as a tool to use across different methods, while Holloway and Todres (2003) identify "thematizing meanings" as one of the few shared generic skills across qualitative analysis. Thematic analysis is not currently popular (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and it does not seem to possess the prominence that other techniques do, such as IPA or Grounded Theory. In thematic analysis a potential pitfall is not applying enough analytic narrative; so if the analysis is just a string of extracts or themes based around the interview questions, this would obviously not be a rigorous analysis. Also, themes must be adequately supported so that analytic claims are robust. While thematic analysis offers flexibility, the drawback to this is that the researcher can be left with difficult decisions about the course the thematic analysis should take. It is important to be transparent about and stay true to the epistemological and theoretical decisions made about analysis by the researcher in order for the analysis to be robust and have value.



Thematic analysis offers a range of advantages providing the researcher is clear and explicit about the choices made and 'how' it is done (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Thematic analysis offers the advantage of flexibility so that the method can be tailored for the purposes of the research questions. It is also a relatively easy and quick method to learn so researchers with limited qualitative experience are able to access it. The use of step by step guidelines (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and Burton's (2010) example certainly helped me to make sense of the transcripts and to uncover what the data was revealing at varying stages. Thematic analysis can be used to summarise key points from a large amount of raw data and I found this to be an advantage in my research. Another advantage that thematic analysis offers is that it can highlight both similarities and differences and it allows for the generation of unanticipated findings and insights.

Overall, what is paramount is that the method used is fit for the research questions and after careful consideration I concluded it was, as it appears to be the most appropriate method to provide answers to the research questions. The decision points noted above show how the method and analysis have been adapted to maximise robust results in a way that more prescriptive techniques, such as IPA and Grounded Theory could not offer.

### **3.10 Ethical considerations**

Strict ethical guidelines were adhered to during all stages of this research. The proposed research was submitted to the rigour of the university ethics board for approval before data collection commenced. The research procedure for obtaining consent and protecting the rights and wellbeing of participants was informed by ethical guidelines drawn up by the British Psychological Society (2009) and the British Educational Research Association (2011). Participants were given information about the purposes of the research, confidentiality, and of their right to withdraw at any time. It was not considered necessary to deceive the participants about the nature of the study and the research process was transparent throughout. Parental consent was sought as participants were under the age of eighteen. All parents of the children in the selected year groups were contacted by letter in order to introduce the research and were given an opportunity to request that their child did not take part in the initial stage, when the research was being introduced to the children (Appendix

A). An information sheet and consent form was sent to the parents of the children selected for interview (Appendix C). The children also gave their verbal and written consent to be interviewed – this was sought before the interview commenced (Appendix D).

In accordance with the guidelines, steps were taken to protect participants. I recognised that studying imaginary companions had the potential to sometimes include discussion of topics considered to be personal and private. It was also possible that children may be revealing information and perceptions that they had not, up until this point, shared with anyone else. It was felt that the semi-structured nature of the interview would help to reduce any potential discomfort concerning what could be sensitive issues. However, owing to the nature of the interview questions and subject topic, it was anticipated that it was unlikely that distress would occur. In the interview script (Appendix E), participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time and to decline answering any questions if they didn't want to. During the interview, I had planned that if a participant showed any signs of discomfort or distress, they would be reminded of these rights and the interview would have been terminated if necessary. I had arranged with the SENCo, before the interviews began, that a familiar member of teaching staff of the child's choosing would be available immediately if required during the interviews, as these were conducted in school time. The child would be asked about their preferences regarding teaching staff in the event of the interview being terminated. Time was also given at the end of the interview for debriefing and the children were informed that should they wish to discuss any aspect of the interview at a later date that someone would be made available in order for this requirement to be met. Throughout the interview process I was vigilant to the child's cognitive and emotional state but no interview was terminated and all of the children said that they had found it a positive experience to discuss their imaginary friend(s) with me.

Participants were also reminded that the data set would be anonymised and was confidential and that they could withdraw the data they provided for the study up until the point it was anonymised should they wish to do so. Although the names of the imaginary companions have been retained, in order to protect the children's confidentiality, during the

analysis and writing up stage of the research their names have been substituted for randomly assigned pseudonyms. The intention was that this would assist in reflecting the children's presence as being central to the study (rather than using the more clinical "child 1" or even "participant 1") as the perspectives and experiences of the children were embedded in the data collected and represented throughout. It would also make the children's presence explicit in the research.

The only exception to confidentiality would have been if a child disclosed a child protection issue; this potential issue was discussed with the SENCo during the planning stages of the research. Although it was anticipated that a disclosure was unlikely it was considered to be prudent to think about the protocols before the (possible) event happens (Williamson et al, 2005).

A key ethical question raised by Alderson and Morrow (2004) is whether the research can be explained to children in terms that they can understand in order to give informed consent or to decline to be interviewed. It was possible to explain the purposes of the research in simple terms, namely to find out about imaginary friends, what they are like and to explore possible reasons why children have them. All the children in the classes appeared able to understand and respond to this. I ensured that children consented to their participation throughout the research process by checking at every stage that it was still acceptable to talk with them, as I agree with Alderson (2004) who points out that 'informed' consent should not be viewed as a 'one-off' event, but rather as an ongoing process.

As the perspectives and experiences of the children were central to this research, another ethical consideration was raised by Cooklin and Ramsden (2004) who suggest that those wanting to access children's perspectives need to engage them in active conversations aimed at eliciting their true opinions, rather than those that may be sought or expected. They point out that many children expect to comply with rather than disagree with professionals and that children's concept of 'consent' may be influenced not only by their age and maturity but also by any associated anxiety, their previous experience, the degree to

which they may expect and/or wish to hand over control and their family's cultural traditions including how far the child might expect to take part in any personal decisions. Some children indicated on the questionnaire that they had an imaginary companion but they did not want to talk to me and this was respected. Cooklin and Ramsden (2004) assert that 'informed' consent from a child necessitates both that they have been helped to understand the relevant issues, and that they know that their opinion matters. This requires the adult to demonstrate, through discussions with children, that their views matter and ensure that their views and experiences are treated with respect. This process calls for interaction skills on the part of the professional/researcher that free the child from any expectation of compliance to adults and this approach was adopted throughout the process.

However, as David, Edwards and Alldred (2001) point out, the involvement of children was almost assured before I gained their consent more formally, as they were present when I introduced the research to the class. Being aware of this, I reminded children as the research progressed that they did not have to 'join in' if they did not want to. In a school setting, non-participation may be difficult and in recognising this I agree fully with Roberts (2000), that "...there is an onus on us to make participation in research, at whatever level, an experience which is at best fun, and at worst, does no harm to young people" (pg. 238).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides key findings from the interviews, including supporting evidence in the form of verbatim extracts from the interviews. These are presented as themes.

#### 4.2 Identified themes

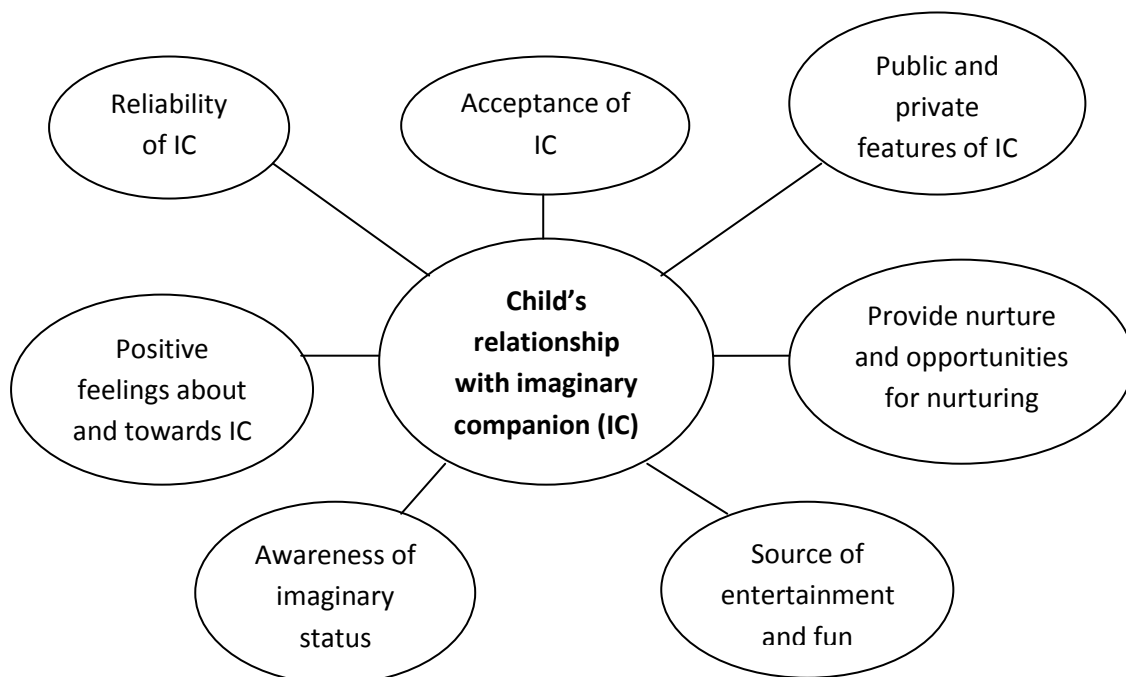
There were a wide variety of themes that emerged from the data and these themes could have been grouped into several categories. Themes that emerged were eventually grouped under two over-arching themes. The ideas behind each theme are explained and quotations are provided as evidence supporting each theme. The verbatim extracts are often a sample of the evidence for each theme as a number of quotes could have been used.

The two over-arching themes identified were:

1. Child's relationship with imaginary companion(s), and
2. Problem-solving.

#### 4.3 Child's relationship with imaginary companion(s)

Figure 1 – Thematic map illustrating over-arching theme 1 and sub-themes



The children's relationships with their imaginary companion(s) seem to be very important to all of them. All the children spoke positively about their imaginary companions and no child in this study reported having negative interactions with their imaginary friends.

The seven sub-themes that emerged from the interviews are described below.

#### **4.3.1 Positive feelings about and towards imaginary friend(s)**

This theme was present through several codes, as explained in section 3.9, and was identified in the analysis through quotes from the interviews. Children spoke fondly about their imaginary friends and all the children expressed positive feelings towards their imaginary companion(s). These feelings are reflected in comments such as,

*Ann-Marie: "...they make me just really happy...and they would never shout at me, we would never have an argument or anything, we would just always be friends".*

*Jude: "What kind of personality has Max got?"*

*Tom: "Well he's got a very funny one, and he's kind and he likes to play with me and he's my friend".*

*Jude: "Is Bob fun to have?"*

*Toby: "Yeah".*

*Mark: "He's a nice guy".*

Also the participants seemed to find it difficult to express any negative feelings towards their imaginary friend(s), even when asked directly.

*Jude: "Is there anything that you don't like about Billy Bob?"*

*Callum: "No".*

*Jude: "Is there anything that you don't like about Mark?"*

*Mark: "No, there's nothing I don't like about him".*

*Jude: "Is there anything that you don't like about Max and Nuts?"*

*Tom: "Well, no, no".*

*Jude: "So you like everything about them?"*

*Tom: "Yes".*

Jude: *"Is there anything that you don't like about Lilly and Daisy?"*

Ann-Marie: *"Not really, I dunno... [grimaces a little and laughs slightly]...that's a hard one really. Well, sometimes I want to play with Dai.. no Lilly, and then Lilly doesn't know and then she starts walking off and like, you know, how I'm not like, like sure, but I still like that, she, they, no I don't really have anything that's really bad about Daisy...or Lilly".*

It is interesting to note that the majority of children spoke about things that they had in common with their imaginary companions, such as sharing an interest in the same things, and five of the children had imaginary companions the same age as them. Comments illustrating this point include,

Ann-Marie: *"Well...I like them because they're like the same as me really but they're not exactly the same".*

Toby: *"He's got a good appetite like me..."*

Ann-Marie: *"well...Daisy likes wearing earrings...like me".*

It could be that having some common features with their imaginary companion(s) made it easier for the children to relate to them and to identify with their imaginary companion(s). If the child imagines that they have a personal affinity through shared common features and/or interests then their imaginary companion is therefore likely to understand the creator's experiences. This could be because perceived common characteristics, while not essential, can support the development of friendships through a sense of common identity. I tentatively suggest that this serves to strengthen the relationship with the imaginary companion and may even contribute to the child's developing self-concept. It may help them to consider and even confirm their own identity. For one child this seems to be especially true as his imaginary companion is 'exactly' like him,

Mark: *"[He's]...exactly like me".*

Jude: *"Oh, exactly like you?"*

Mark: *"Yes, it's kind of like a clone of me".*



Some children spoke of the appearance of their imaginary companions more than other children did. The children were able to describe their imaginary friend(s) and all were able to draw them. Some comments about their imaginary companion's appearance seemed to reflect wearing items of clothing that the child perhaps covets, for example,

Toby: *"...he wears blue Converse All Stars..."*

While for other children doing 'grown-up' activities with their imaginary companions may be providing an outlet for exploring elements of 'growing-up' in a safe way. This feature was particularly present in the girls and is reflected through comments such as,

Chloe: *"Well...Melissa has like blonde hair, um...she's very pretty, she's tall, um...she's very thin and Tanya is just like, she's got brown hair and she likes wearing make-up and she's tall as well...well they kind of, I like watching videos with like make-up and stuff and they like doing that...they also like help me choose clothes."*





Ann-Marie: *“Lilly has chapped lips so she wears a lip balm...that’s the colour...it’s shimmery [as drawing Lilly’s mouth]...and Daisy is wearing lipstick...” [draws pink on Daisy’s mouth].*

Chloe’s imaginary companions were older than her, so these more ‘grown-up’ female characters, while still sharing some characteristics with her, may be providing a stepping stone to maturity. For the girls they may be providing a female role model for ‘growing-up’ and for what the girls perhaps would like to be doing and/or could imagine themselves doing in the near future. It is also possible that having an imaginary friend who in some ways is similar to yourself, promotes confidence.

#### **4.3.2 Reliability of imaginary companion(s)**

Several codes in the interviews contributed to this theme and participants made a number of references to their imaginary friend(s) reliably being there when they were needed, as the following quotes illustrate,

Tom: *“Well I...well for Nuts I whistle and for Max well he’s usually up in my room just reading books and listening to music under my bed so I just go and see him”.*

Chloe: *“They just like, they kinda just come when I need them, they appear.”*

Jude: *“So if you think of him...”*

Mark: *“He just comes”.*

Jude: *“OK. So he’s there when you need him?”*

Toby: *“Yeah and when I’m at home he’s always there”.*

Jude: *“Are there any times when you want to see them but they don’t come?”*

Ann-Marie: *“Um, no, there’s never been a time like that”.*

Jude: *“So they’re usually with you?”*

Ann-Marie: *“Yeah, they’re always, yeah, whenever I call Lilly and Daisy then they’re always there”.*

Some children reported having ‘special’ ways to call their imaginary friend when needed, as demonstrated in the following extracts,

Jude: *“So he doesn’t have to go to school?”*

Tom: *“If I don’t have any friends to play with I just pull out my imaginary phone and just like call him and he just comes for me...I just call him and he comes”.*

Jude: *"If you want to see Bob, how do you find/call him?"*

Toby: *"I do my secret signal".*

*[Toby shows Jude the signal – moves his hands together to make a 'face' with his thumbs and index fingers to make a 'mouth', with his little fingers making a 'tongue']*.

Jude: *"OK...and that's how you get him when he's not with you? That's how you call him?"*

*[Toby nods]*.

Jude: *"So are there any times that you want to see Bob and he doesn't come? Or does he always come when you do the secret sign?"*

Toby: *"He always comes when I do the secret sign".*

Often children reported that 'just' imagining their imaginary friend was present was enough to summon them but one imaginary friend had a unique mode of transport,

Jude: *"So...does Bob come to school with you?"*

Toby: *"Only when I do that" [Shows secret sign]*.

Jude: *"Only when you do the secret sign?"*

Toby: *"I pretend he rides down on the cloud and he comes and jumps off".*

Sometimes the imaginary friends' reliability was demonstrated at particular times of need, such as when being in a new class,

Tom: *"Well once when it was my first day in a new class they come to help me and um...well when it gets into the year and I settle down in that class they sort of go home and...um stay at home until I come home but if it's like my first day in a new class and I don't know what's goin' on, they sort of come and help me".*

#### **4.3.3 Provide nurture and opportunities for nurturing**

For some participants, imaginary companions provided opportunities to care for and nurture others. This appeared to provide a sense of competency as well as providing comfort towards another. For example, both Tom and Ann-Marie demonstrate care and concern towards their imaginary friends as the following extracts show,

Jude: *"[so]...at a time when you were feeling a bit lonely and you needed somebody to play with...you found each other".*

Tom: *[agrees] "and Nuts was a little bit sad 'cos his favourite dog went away to another country".*

Ann-Marie: *"Well I've got a bunk bed and...well sometimes Daisy comes up and sleeps with me and we go head to tail because she's scared sometimes when we're in the dark..."*



Daisy

Jude: "Would you like them to be at school with you?"

Ann-Marie: "Well...um, not really. I think they're better being at home because...yeah...well, it's quite a hard one really because sometimes...well it's hard at school and I don't want them to get really like frustrated or something, so I... well, yeah, I'd just like them to stay at home and wait until I come back".

Jude: "Do you think because it's hard at school you don't want them to get frustrated? So it's almost like you're protecting them a little bit?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah and if anybody hurts their feelings or anything or well, not really hurt their feelings, but something like that then they might get really upset and I don't want them to cry or anything".

Tom also spoke about how he attempted to include his imaginary friends so they wouldn't be 'left out'. Perhaps this demonstrates an understanding of how 'real' reciprocal friendships are made and sustained and so provides an opportunity for him to practice his social skills.

Tom: "...well he tells me that, well his other imaginary friends weren't nice to him at school so he just, so he just came around to my house and to find some friends and then he found this nice place called \*\*\*\*\* where I live... he went round all these houses but all these kids were mean to him 'cos they thought he looks silly and stuff so I took care of him...he came to my house...um, not really very happy and I said 'what's wrong' and he said 'no-one wants to be my friend' and I said 'I will' so I was his friend".

Jude: "Are there any particular times that you really like to see Max and Nuts?"

Tom: "Yes, definitely at Christmas and on my birthdays...at Christmas well um...I make them some presents sometimes...they just get something like a piece of wood and maybe some nails and I just put it together and then I make like...like a...and I carve it to be small and I just make like a word like 'Happy Christmas' or something and give it to them".

Along with examples of thinking about and caring for their imaginary friends there were also examples of the imaginary companions providing care and comfort to the creator. Examples included the following,

Jude: *"Are there any particular times that you really like to see Lilly and Daisy?"*

Ann-Marie: *"Um...well sometimes when I've had a really hard day at school I'm like 'Can we do something together, just us three', and do something like really nice and good".*

Ann-Marie: *"Um...sometimes I've been out with my mum and they stay at home...then I come back and I'm like really tired and everything and they just make me like um... well once they've made me a hot chocolate and given me a hot chocolate...they had help...I said to my mum 'can we...can we make a hot chocolate' and then she said 'yes' and then I...um I was just lying in bed and she put marshmallows and she was taking it up but I could see that Lilly and Daisy were helping my mum and holding the cup so it doesn't drop through anything".*

#### **4.3.4 Acceptance of imaginary companion(s)**

Perhaps surprisingly, some participants were able to identify minor irritations regarding their imaginary friends, despite being their creations and therefore being under their control.

(Although, to some degree, the children did exercise control over the imaginary companions such as being able to call upon them when needed and knowing they would be there as noted in section 4.3.2). It seems that these children chose not to change their imaginary friend even though they could have and this suggests that in some ways the imaginary companions have been provided with a degree of independent agency. There was a sense of acceptance about their imaginary friends and this could possibly be interpreted as preparation for 'real-life' friendships, which requires the acceptance of both positive and negative character traits in others. For example,

Jude: *"Would you like Billy Bob to be at school with you?"*

Callum: *"Yeah I'd like that if he would behave but I don't think he would".*

Jude: *"So, would you like them to be in school with you?"*

Chloe: *"Not really"*

Jude: *"Why's that?"*

Chloe: *"Because I think they might like bug me a bit like kinda...get me distracted a bit maybe...not really focused I guess...they'll probably get bored and they would probably distract me and make me like annoyed".*

Jude: *"Is there anything that you don't like about Bob?"*

Toby: *[Purses his lips and looks to the right] "Not how he shares the den, 'cos it isn't that big...I go there and Bob takes up most of the room".*

Jude: *"Is there anything else that you don't like about Bob?"*

Toby: *"No".*

Sometimes when the imaginary friends act in ways that the creators don't like it seems to provide opportunities for problem-solving and for developing tolerance and acceptance towards others, skills that are also needed for 'real-life' friendships. Examples include,

Jude: *"Are there any times you want to see Max and Nuts but they don't come or you can't find them?"*

Tom: *"Well...not really but once there was one time that I wanted to see Nuts but he was asleep in the living room and if you wake him up when he's asleep he does get pretty mad 'cos he starts running around pushing everything over so I've got to be really careful now, I don't let Nuts go downstairs by my new telly, I definitely don't 'cos if I wake him up by mistake he will break it and I don't want, I don't want...[that]..."*

Ann-Marie: *"...sometimes whenever I want to eat something and they don't they just say 'no' and I just say 'that's alright'. Sometimes they don't want to eat with me".*

Jude: *"So what do you do when Max does things you don't want him to do? Does that make you annoyed with him?"*

Tom: *"No. Well when he came to dancing he said 'I can't stay at home forever' I just started laughing at him and said 'I'll let you out for this one' and he said 'OK'".*



#### **4.3.5 Source of entertainment or amusement/fun**

Many codes contributed to this theme and although all of the children reported having some fun times with their imaginary companions this featured more with some children than others. Often children talked of playing with their imaginary friends as they would with 'real-life' friends and it seems that this perhaps is meeting a need for companionship as well as interacting with others when 'real' friends are not around. Examples of this include,

Ann-Marie: *"Well Lilly's...very funny and she likes smiling and likes playing with me and she's a really nice friend...Daisy's quite shy but she's really funny too...um and she likes skipping and she likes playing like sweet games...she makes up her own games...um when I'm bored then she makes her own games and it makes me happy"*.

Toby: *"He [Bob] likes watching UDL...our favourite game to play is our game where he gets like his gadget out. He makes another one for me and then we start having like a war with the light sabres, but we put these suits on where they don't affect us"*.

Mark: *"He plays with me and things like that...like watches TV with me"*.

Tom: *"Well, we both...me and Max and Nuts have good fun with Peter [younger brother] 'cos we have...um like a shed in my garden and um...we always go in it and like dress up and play with toys and stuff, in my shed, together"*.

Chloe: *"Well they kind of...I like watching videos with like make-up and stuff and they like doing that and they're kind of interested in dancing, when I'm like dancing in my room they like copy me sometimes as well"*.

Tom: *"um well... sometimes they just hide from me. When we're playing hide and seek its reeeaaally hard to find them, I have to use my imagination to find them which is very hard"*.

Tom in particular seems to have created his imaginary companions mainly for the purpose of having fun and for their entertainment value, as the following quotes demonstrate,

Jude: *"What do you like about Max and Nuts?"*

Tom: *"Well Max is funny, Nuts is really really funny...the puppy is called Nuts 'cos he likes eating nuts" [smiles broadly].*

Jude: *"OK the puppy is called Nuts...does he eat anything else?"*

Tom: *"Um, well he is nuts and he does like eating anything really, he will eat anything that comes into his sight"*.

Jude: *"Oh, right, so he's quite a hungry puppy?"*

Tom: *"No he's...just he's funny 'cos when I leave something like a sandwich on the floor he will just run up to eat it so he's like a doggie vacuum 'cos he'll eat anything on the floor"*.



Jude: *"Oh, does Nuts ever get into trouble?"*

Tom: *"Well sometimes...he's very naughty sometimes...he takes Max's dinner, when Max isn't looking he goes to get the ketchup he will...sometimes Nuts takes a chip away and runs away and eats it". [Tom and Jude laugh].*

Jude: *"It sounds like they're good fun to have around?"*

Tom: *"They are...really good fun".*

Although Tom seemed to have a positive relationship with his younger brother, often speaking fondly of their time spent together, sometimes Tom may have used his imaginary puppy to vent any slight negative feelings towards his brother that he may harbour,

Tom: *"Well I like Nuts 'cos...well when I give Nuts peaches he always goes up to Peter [younger brother], stands on the table, puts his bum to Peter's face and he trumps in Peter's face".*

Jude: *"What does Peter do then?"*

Tom: *"He just goes 'TOM!'...he thinks I'm trumping...[Tom laughs]...oh Nuts" [shakes head while smiling].*

However, this may just have been Tom's well developed sense of humour as he was even more animated when recalling amusing events. Indeed, he even explains how he imagines Max and Nuts behaving when he is at school and how he imagines his neighbour reacting,

Jude: *"When they're not in school, what are they doing?"*

Tom: *"Well they're probably at home watching telly or playing in the garden...if it's really sunny they've probably got my deckchairs out and just lying in the sun with their sunglasses on...[Leans back in chair and puts arms behind his head]... 'Cos mum and dad aren't there and no-one comes, they put some of my clothes on so it looks like someone is wearing my clothes but they can't see them, but no-one comes around".*

Jude: *"So...there are the deckchairs in the garden and your clothes are laid out as if you're wearing them but there's nobody in them". [Tom nods].*

Tom: *"Yeah, so it looks like it but it's actually Max and Nuts. Nuts probably wears Peter's tiny tiny baby clothes... 'cos he's too small for mine...no-one will notice 'cos all of them are at work except my next door neighbour, but when the dog comes he always goes 'woof woof woof' and she just goes 'come here' and tugs him away...she thinks the dog's barking for no reason but the dog's actually barking at Max and Nuts".*

#### **4.3.6 Awareness of imaginary status**

All of the children interviewed seemed to have a firm grasp of the imaginary nature of their companions, as the following quotes show,

Ann-Marie: *"I have got a best friend that's real but Daisy and Lilly are kind of like my best friends too but only I can see them".*

Jude: *"Where did your imaginary friend come from? How did they come to you?"*

Mark: *"Through my mind".*

Jude: *"Can you see Billy Bob like you see me?"*

Callum: *"No, I just imagine him in my head".*

Jude: *"Where did Melissa and Tanya come from? How did they come to you?"*

Chloe: *"I just started pretending they were there and they just kept like staying with me".*

Jude: *"...can other people see him?"*

Toby: *"No".*

John: *"He's invisible but I can see him..."*

Tom: *"When we're playing hide and seek it's reeeaaally hard to find them...I have to use my imagination to find them which is very hard... 'cos no-one else can see them, so if I have Peter helping me it's no use 'cos you can't see them".*

Mark: *"...he's kinda like invisible but I just sense that he's there".*

However, as the majority of the imaginary companions did not go to school with their creators, they still 'existed' and the participants were able to report what they thought their imaginary friends were doing when they were at school. This suggests that the imaginary companions of these children appeared to have some level of 'permanence' which seems to have contributed to a sense of the imaginary companion as having an air of reality. While some may regard as this as suggestive of fantasy/reality confusion, this does not appear to be the case. The children in this study knew that their imaginary companions were pretend, yet they did appear to be 'real' to the children. Some children, such as Tom, also understood how other people would view the situation as demonstrated in the following segment,

Tom: *"...sometimes when I'm going on holiday, they sort of go with me...Nuts sits on Peter's side on the floor and then Max sits on my side in the middle... 'Cos he's invisible the policemen can't see him so he just holds onto both of the seats and he doesn't put his seatbelt on".*

Jude: *"Oh he doesn't put his seatbelt on?"*

Tom: *"Well 'cos the policeman can't see him anyway if he put a seatbelt on it would probably look like something was there, so he doesn't really...but if he ever does I just make him sit on a box so it looks like a box has put on the seatbelt".*



#### 4.3.7 Public and private features of imaginary companions

I had anticipated that some children's imaginary companions would be known to family and friends, and that other children would have imaginary friends of a more private nature. I also acknowledge that the parents of the children selected for interview would automatically know about their child's imaginary companion(s) when seeking their consent for their child to participate in the interviews. This ethical point was considered as only children who agreed on the questionnaire to my asking their parents were included in the randomly chosen sample. In the analysis there was a mixture of both private and public features to the children's imaginary companions.

Some children reported that family members knew about their imaginary friends. Some were known to parents and not to siblings, while others were known to siblings but not to parents as the following illustrate,

Jude: *"So, who knows that you have imaginary friends?"*

Ann-Marie: *"Well my mum knows a little bit about them because she sees that I talk...and my dad does too...um I don't think my brothers really know but my grandma knows a little bit".*

Jude: *"So...who knows that you have an imaginary friend?"*

Mark: *"Mum, dad and...well she doesn't know".*

Jude: *"Who doesn't know?"*

Mark: *"Amy".*

Jude: *"...that's your sister? So, only your mum and dad know that you've got an imaginary friend?" [Mark nods].*

Jude: *"So who knows that you've got an imaginary friend?"*

Tom: *"Um...well Peter [younger brother]...me and um...well mum didn't really know but then um...I told her a couple of weeks ago".*

Chloe mentioned that her sister and friends know about her imaginary friends but that her parents don't 'really understand',

Chloe: *"Well my sister does and my friends do, um...and that's all really, yeah".*

Jude: *"What about your mum and dad? Do they know?"*

Chloe: *"I tell them sometimes...but they never really had imaginary friends so they don't really understand it that well".*

Some children seemed to prefer keeping their imaginary companion(s) private, being someone for 'just them',

Tom: *"Well my good friend doesn't know 'cos I don't want him to know"*.

Jude: *"Is there any particular reason why you didn't want [him] to know about Max and Nuts?"*

Tom: *"No...I just think it's nice to keep them a secret"*.

Jude: *"And who knows that you've got an imaginary friend?"*

Toby: *"Just me" [smiles]*.

John: *"It's a secret one"*.

Jude: *"Does anybody know that Max and Nuts are in school?"*

Tom: *"Not except me"*.

The public and private features of imaginary companions posed some ethical questions at times and these were dealt with in a sensitive way. When the parents of two of the boys selected for interview were sent consent forms both of their mothers separately approached me to inform me that they were not aware of any imaginary friends. These mothers were able to approach me as they worked in the school where the research took place. The mother's comments seemed to be done in the manner of not wanting their child to 'spoil' my research through 'making up' an imaginary companion in order to take part in the study. I was able to reassure these parents that my questions would uncover the authenticity of the reported imaginary companions and they freely gave consent for their child to be interviewed. The two children in question shared with me thoughts about other people knowing about their imaginary friends as the following two quotes show,

Jude: *"...so who knows that you've got an imaginary friend?"*

Tom: *"Um well Peter...me and um...well mum didn't really know but then...um I told her a couple of weeks ago"*.

Jude: *"Was that when I came into your class?"*

Tom: *"Yeah, just after I told her"*.

Jude: *"What did she say?"*

Tom: *"Well she said she'd never really heard of him before but it's 'cos I hadn't really told her to be honest because I like keeping him secret"*.

Jude: *"Have you told anyone else about Bob?"*

Toby: "No".

Jude: "Why not?"

Toby: "'Cos I don't want them to know I'm lonely...I'd be embarrassed".

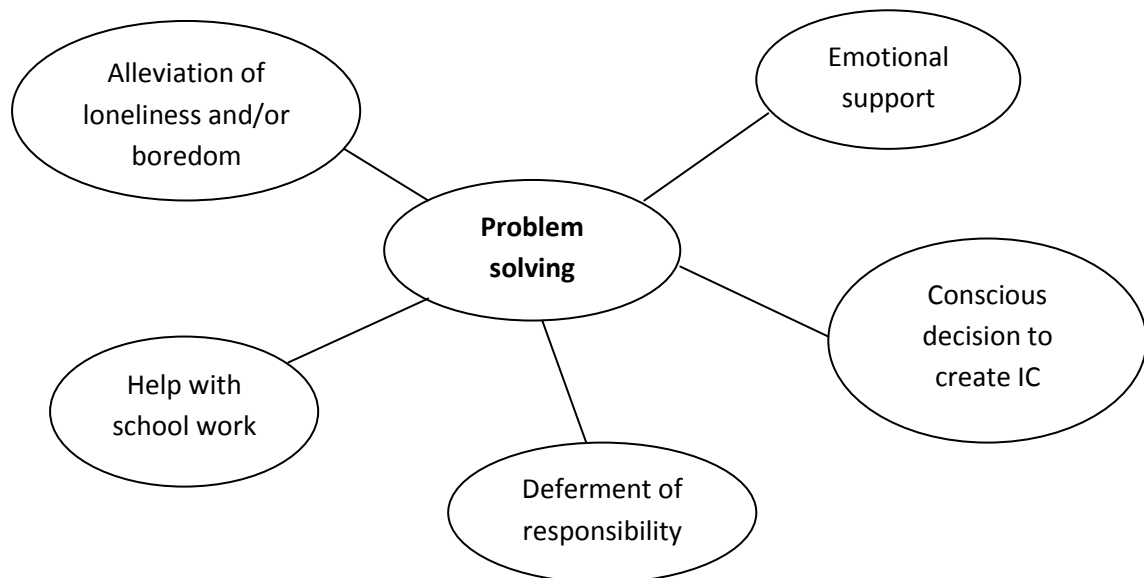
Jude: "Oh I see...has it been OK talking to me about Bob?"

Toby: "Yeah... 'cos you're doing it for a reason...the university want to find out about imaginary friends".

It seems that Tom likes to keep his imaginary companions 'secret', only sharing them with his younger brother, generally for the purpose of entertainment and as being playmates. While Toby's comments suggest that his imaginary companions were created to meet a more vulnerable need and, as he didn't want other people to know that he was 'lonely', wanted to keep them private.

#### 4.4 Problem-solving

Figure 2 – Thematic map illustrating over-arching theme 2 and sub-themes



Imaginary companions appeared to be a way to problem-solve at various different levels. The five sub-themes that emerged from the interviews are described below.

#### 4.4.1 Emotional support

On an emotional level, the vast majority of the children reported their imaginary friends providing support to help them deal with their emotions. Often this was when the children were experiencing feelings of either sadness or anger, as the following quotes show,

Tom: *"...well Max is kind and he's well...he's quite kind, 'cos when I'm sad and I come home and I'm sad he just helps me...he just says 'what's wrong?' and he helps me"*.

Jude: *"How does he help?"*

Tom: *"Well he says 'what's wrong?' and I tell him what's wrong and then he finds a way to help me...he cheers me up with something...sometimes he switches on the telly, 'cos sometimes I'm so sad I can't switch it on myself so he switches it on then puts it on my favourite channel"*.

Ann-Marie: *"Well, they're really like helpful and they make...if they see I'm really sad they make me just really happy and they make...especially Lilly 'cos she's really funny, she makes me like laugh and makes myself better..."*



Callum: *"I like him because he calms me down when I get in tantrums..."*

Chloe: *"They like...if I talk to them, they always like reply with an answer and if like I'm angry or something they'll kinda talk to me and get me calm"*.

The children appear to be making comments on the helpfulness of talking through their feelings with another as well as being 'cheered up' by their imaginary friends. These imagined interactions seem to be offering the children a way for their emotions to be accepted in a non-judgemental way as well as facilitating an emotional release.

For some children, the imaginary companions seem to be a way of externalising self-talk and perhaps serve the function of 'checking out' possible solutions, as demonstrated by this exchange with Chloe,

Chloe: *"...sometimes when I'm sad and I want to like explain what's wrong and stuff...and I just want to say it, not like keep it in".*

Jude: *"and do they help you?"*

Chloe: *"Yeah, yeah".*

Jude: *"How do they help you from feeling sad?"*

Chloe: *"They sometimes give me advice to tell my mum, like tell the teacher or tell a friend..."*

As in 'real-life' friendships most of the children expressed pleasure in their interactions with their imaginary companions and this could be seen as rehearsing friendship skills as we often share positive times with friends as well as seeking their support for more difficult emotions. Chloe explicitly said that she enjoys sharing her excited and happy emotions with Melissa and Tanya too,

Chloe: *"Sometimes...like when I'm really happy and I want to explain what happened or if it's like something really fun at school in the morning or something and I'm getting ready...really, just when I'm really excited."*

Callum's answers went against this general rule of talking through problems with their imaginary friend. For Callum, Billy Bob seems to be acting as both a regulating influence for him and as a way of externalising self-talk when he is angry, as described in the following exchange,

Callum: *"I usually talk to him when I'm having tantrums...my big brother does annoy me a lot".*

Jude: *"So when your big brother annoys you and...what happens when you're having a tantrum?"*

Callum: *"Well, I'll go up to my bedroom and sit down and try and calm myself down".*

Jude: *"...and that's when you talk to Billy Bob? So how does he help you when you're having a tantrum?"*

Callum: *"Um...I don't want to be cross in front of him...I just want to try and calm down to make it a little bit better".*

Jude: *"Ah...to make it a little bit better...and does he help you? How does he do that?"*

Callum: *"He talks to me in my head and it makes me feel a little bit better...saying 'calm down' and stuff like that".*



bill & bob

#### 4.4.2 Alleviation of loneliness/boredom

This was a recurring theme throughout the interviews which several codes contributed towards. However, the alleviation of loneliness appeared to be related to occasions that were temporary. All of the participants had at least one sibling and they talked about their 'real' friends too. Imaginary companions seemed to play a role in the alleviation of loneliness by appearing at times of boredom when others were unavailable for play, such as when friends were not around or when siblings did not want to play. During these times the imaginary friend was able to provide companionship as well as entertainment.

Ann-Marie: *"Well one day...I got really bored and I decided to have some new friends"*.

Jude: *"Can you think of any reasons why you started to have imaginary friends?"*

Chloe: *"Just because my friends have them and I just thought it would be nice company if I was by myself"*.

The majority of participants spoke about interacting with their imaginary friends when access to real friends and family was limited or when they didn't want to interact with actual people, as demonstrated by the following comments,

Jude: *"Can you think of any reasons why you started to have imaginary friends?"*

Tom: *"I don't really know...I just thought um...I asked my mum could I have a friend round and she said 'It's too warm today, everyone's probably in their back garden, they won't wanna come and play with you' so I just go 'OK' and I just thought, 'I wonder what I could do, I really wanna friend' and I just made up these imaginary friends to play with me"*.

Toby: *[at school] "...when I'm playing and I don't really want to play football or anything, I just walk around with him".*

Callum: *[would like Billy Bob to be at school] "So maybe at play if no-one's going to play with me".*

Toby: *"Well...I didn't like to get crowded a bit because in my old school...umm everybody started hanging round with me because I was a fast runner and then I didn't want them and then I um...slowed down on purpose so they could go and play with the second fastest and stuff and then I just started going round...I made Bob so I could just go round with him so I'm not exactly lonely".*

Ann-Marie: *"my oldest brother...doesn't really like playing with me 'cos he's older now and so I'm normally always playing on my own and I thought, well it is best to have friends, so I thought I could make up my own imaginary friends".*

There was only one participant who mentioned his imaginary friends appearing at a particularly poignant time, which is explained in the following touching segment:

Jude: *"Are there any particular times that you like to see your imaginary friends?"*

John: *"It was like on my birthday...no-one came to my birthday party...I sent like invitations but they didn't come and then I was so lonely and they came to my party...that's the time when they came..."*

Jude: *"Did anybody else come to your party?"*

John: *"It was just them".*



#### 4.4.3 Help with school work

Only two children reported that their imaginary companion(s) go to school with them. Both boys told me that their imaginary friends remain the same and do not change from how they are outside school. Tom explains how Max and Nuts help him in the following segment,

Jude: *"Do they help you with any work? How do they help?"*

Tom: *"Well...they sort of...if I don't know the answer, they know the answer and sometimes they don't know the answer 'cos Max always carries a calculator he just calculates it and tells me". [Tom laughs]*

Jude: *"So he's helpful in Maths?"*

Tom: *"Yeah, definitely...Nuts is helpful in literacy 'cos he always has this stupid imagination where he knows every single fairy tale and every single thing about literacy. So when it's in literacy he's really helpful 'cos he can just memorise it and tell me".*

Jude: *"So he's very good at helping you make up stories?"*

Tom: *"Yeah".*

Jude: *"Does he help you in any other way in literacy?"*

Tom: *"Um...yeah 'cos if the teacher says like 'what's a adjective' and I didn't know, sometimes he would just say [Tom whispers] he'd just whisper it to me and then I would just say it".*

Jude: *"So he knows the answer?"*

Tom: *"Yes, sometimes. He just tells me and I just tell the teacher so it looks like I knew it".*

Tom states that if he doesn't know the answer his imaginary friends provide it but it is not clear how they would know the answers when he doesn't. I tentatively suggest that this could be a way of passing responsibility to his imaginary companions as if the answer is incorrect it would not be his 'fault'. Tom's comments also show some wishful thinking as Max "always carries a calculator" and perhaps he would like to do this and is not allowed.

Toby is the other child who reported their imaginary companion being at school and he explains how Bob helps him in the following extract,

Jude: *"Can you tell me a bit more about how he does help you at school with the school work?"*

Toby: *"Well...mainly he just gets like a little voice and starts saying like...um 'do this kind of column method and add it up'. He tells me the answers, how to add it up and then I'll start going like that...doing the answer...and then I'll find out".*

Jude: *"So he sometimes gives you the answers but sometimes he gives you a clue or a different way of working things out like maybe doing a sum in a column method?"*



Toby: "Yeah".

Jude: "...is there any other way that he helps you with your school work?"

Toby: "No".

It seems that Toby's imaginary companion helps by suggesting an approach or strategy and seems to be acting as an aide memoir and so could be a form of self-talk in problem-solving. Other children talked of their imaginary friends helping them in similar ways with homework, as the following excerpts show,

Ann-Marie: "...they do help me with my Maths sometimes. I like do my Maths and then I don't know this answer...I ask my dad and then he doesn't know either so then, 'cos Lilly's quite a Mathematician... she's really good at Maths...and then she tells me how to work it out and then I get it right and then Daisy helps me with, oh some of the words...um that I have to put in like order, um...she helps me with that".

Jude: "So how does Lilly help you with the Maths though? Does she ask you questions?"

Ann-Marie: "Yes, she asks me um...add like, add like...six or something and then well she does like a really easy way to do it, to work out the answer".

Jude: "So how does he help you with homework?"

Mark: "Like um...kinda says to you words like, gives me the spellings of them".

Jude: "So he helps you to spell? How else does he help you with homework?"

Mark: "[with Maths]...he helps me to think the answers".

Jude: "So how does he do that?"

Mark: "...he asks me questions".

Sometimes the imaginary companions seem to serve the function of providing security when they give the answer but perhaps this could be a way of the children checking their own answers too, for example,

Ann-Marie: "Well sometimes...spellings I get them wrong and I'm like 'Oh dear, I got that wrong' and then they whisper and say 'You just need to change this' or something and then, and like 'Oh yeah, I know', so yeah".

John reported that his imaginary companions help him in visual ways and they may perhaps help him to understand abstract subjects and could also be a way of making learning fun,

Jude: "...you said that they help you with History? How do they help you with History?"

John: "So, if we're doing Egypt...they like show a picture of...they like dress up as everything because they're in Egypt movies".

Jude: "...so how do they help you with numeracy?"

John: *"They like turn into numbers...like answers what it is...if I didn't know what it was, it would just show me"*.

Some children copy their imaginary companion who demonstrate what to do and hence seem to be serving the function of making the instructions easier to follow,

John: *"They followed the teachers, the school instructions...they like follow the acts like the teacher does and I do it...it makes it easier"*.

Toby: *"Yeah, he shows me how to do it... 'cos when I don't really understand what they're talking about, I just look over to the side and then I can see him do what I'm supposed to do"*.

Jude: *"Oh right, while the person's talking about it, he's doing it?"*

Toby: *"Yeah, so it explains a bit more"*.

For Chloe, one of her imaginary friends provided her with a readymade character,

Jude: *"Do they help you with any school work at home? Like with homework?"*

Chloe: *"Yeah...I had to write a story and I included Melissa in it as like...as one of the people but she never really did the thing that was in the story but I just thought she was a nice character to put in"*.

Toby reported that Bob helped him with his homework but was not sure how he helped,

Jude: *"Is there anything that Bob helps you with?"*

Toby: *"Sometimes homework"*.

Jude: *"How does he help you with the homework?"*

Toby: *"When I start looking at myself and I go like that [does secret signal] like when it's like Maths questions...I start thinking of the answer and its right"*.

Jude: *"So when you do your secret signal you're thinking and it helps you to think of the answer in Maths?"*

Toby: *"mmm...I know it's really weird for some reason...most people can't think of it when I do that [does secret signal]...I don't know how it works though..."*

When Toby makes his 'secret signal' to call Bob this action might serve as a physical cue for him to switch to an imaginary mode of thought where he interacts with Bob who then supports him to think of the answer.

It seems that the imaginary companions of most of the children in this study do help with school work. They provide answers, suggest approaches/strategies, turn into numbers and offer readymade characters for stories. Imaginary friends seem to serve the function of providing security, passing of responsibility and of embodying self-talk techniques which all

help with school work. Some use their imaginary companion as interpreters of teacher instructions which seems to help them understand what to do, perhaps through the children imagining the actions needed before performing them.

For some children their imaginary companions do not help with homework at all and for differing reasons. For Callum, who seems to have created Billy Bob primarily to help him to manage his anger, his answer is short and to the point,

Jude: *"Does Billy Bob help you with any school work, like with homework?"*

Callum: *"No, I just do it myself".*

For Tom, his imaginary friends do not help with homework for different reasons, namely he can do it but if he can't he asks his parents,

Jude: *"Do Max and Nuts help you with homework at all?"*

Tom: *"No 'cos I don't really get homework that much...but if I do get homework and it's something that I really know then Max says 'I'll just sit here and watch you do it' 'cos he knows that I can do everything."*

Jude: *"...and what about the things that maybe if you were stuck with something, would they help you then do you think?"*

Tom: *"Yes...but if...and well that's why I only ask my mum or my dad for help for a really big problem".*

Chloe's imaginary companions do not help her and amuse themselves when she is doing homework. When I tentatively suggested that it might be 'cheating' in some way if they did, Chloe agreed, and her response could be seen as contributing to her moral development,

Jude: *"So when you're doing your homework, where are they?"*

Chloe: *"They're like just like reading and just like sitting down and watching me do stuff".*

Jude: *"But they don't help?"*

Chloe: *"No".*

Jude: *"...I wonder why they don't help you?"*

Chloe: *"ummm..." [looks down]*

Jude: *"Do you think maybe it might be cheating if they helped you?"*

Chloe: *"Yeah, probably".*

#### 4.4.4 Conscious decision to create imaginary companion(s)

Consciously deciding to create an imaginary friend seems to be a useful solution to a variety of problems the children reported as having, as the following extracts demonstrate,

Jude: *"...and what about your real friends?"*

Tom: *"Well I have got one really really good friend, which is my actual friend but two of my real friends aren't actually that nice to me, so I wanted some more good friends so I got Max and Nuts as well".*

Toby: *"Because...um at my old school I didn't really go round a lot playing with all the people who really want to play with everybody because they were crowded a bit too much, so I just made Bob up".*

Jude: *"Where did Lilly and Daisy come from? How did they come to you?"*

Ann-Marie: *"Well...I just...well one day I think it was I got really bored and I decided to have some new friends and I went outside and I looked at a daisy and I thought I could have a friend called Daisy and then um...I think, I dunno...I just liked the name Lilly so I thought I would...Lilly and Daisy...to make Lilly and Daisy".*

Ann-Marie: *"...my oldest brother is like really annoying and he makes me like really cross and stuff and he doesn't really like playing with me...so I'm normally always playing on my own and I thought well it is best to have friends so I thought I could make up my own imaginary friends".*

Jude: *"Can you think of any reasons why you started to think of Billy Bob?"*

Callum: *"Usually when I'm having tantrums I just get so annoyed that I thought I just could maybe get someone to help me".*

#### 4.4.5 Deferment of responsibility

It was anticipated that some children would blame their imaginary companions for their own actions as a means of problem-solving by deferring responsibility. Few children mentioned this explicitly but passing reference was made, revealing interesting functions and so it is included as a theme.

Jude: *"Do they ever stop you doing your homework?"*

Ann-Marie: *"Um...[smiles]...well they have once...I was doing this homework, I think it was Daisy that came to me and said 'can we play games 'cos you've been working for hours' and I'm like 'wait a minute' but then I just got too carried away that I started playing" [laughs a little].*

Tom: "...when Nuts does something that it could have been me, Peter always goes 'TOM!' 'cos he thinks it's me, and when there's big footsteps upstairs and dad isn't home, mum's downstairs and he's downstairs and I'm upstairs he goes "Tom, be quiet" and it's not me 'cos I'm actually playing with my Lego in my room so it's Nuts running up and down".

Jude: "So he can hear Nuts then?"

Tom: "Yeah, he can hear Nuts but he can't see Nuts".

Jude: "But is Nuts really there?"

Tom: "Well Nuts is there for me to see but he's not there for anyone else to see him".

Although these quotes illustrate some passing of blame, imaginary companions also seem to be a positive influence, with the children deferring responsibility in a more constructive way, as the following show,

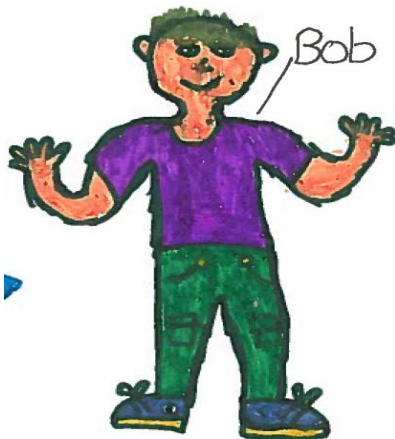
Tom: "No, they're just always...they're always smart and I'm always smart and...well just sometimes if we've been eating popcorn and watching a crazy programme sometimes they get hyper so um...and it's a school day we just come to school together and then we just put our thinking caps on and start doing it properly".

Jude: "Right, so they help you to be a bit sensible?"

Tom: "Yeah".

Jude: "Are you going to tell Bob that you've been talking to me about him?"

Toby: "Yeah 'cos I have to tell the truth with him because he's very sensitive and in his brain he's got a lie detector".



These were the main common themes that were identified from the interviews and on occasions where there was contradictory information, relevant quotes have been provided. Themes were only identified and included if they were recurring and showed up in different interviews. However, some themes contained more supporting evidence than others.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the findings and links them to the research questions as well as the previous academic studies and theories that are contained in the literature review. Some new literature is also discussed in light of the findings of this research. The limitations of the study are considered at the end of this chapter.

#### **5.2 Research questions**

- What are the characteristics of children's imaginary companions?
- Do the imaginary companions created by children attend school with them and if not what happens to them during the school day?
- Do the imaginary companions created by children remain the same in school or alter in some way from how they are outside school?
- What purposes and functions do imaginary companions serve for children, particularly at school and with academic tasks?

#### **5.3 Initial observations about the findings**

This study resulted in some interesting findings that have led to some ideas about why children create imaginary companions and what functions they seem to perform. Some of the themes that emerged uphold findings in previous studies, such as that imaginary friends provide companionship, entertainment and emotional support. The children who participated in this study were able to answer questions and provide detailed accounts about their imaginary friends as well as their imagined interactions with them. Occasionally, some of the children seemed to find it hard to answer some questions. However, this did not seem to be due to embarrassment but rather that they did not appear to have thought about the particular aspect the question was focussing on. The children who participated in this study all expressed positive feelings towards their imaginary companion(s) and they seemed to be very important to their creators. There were no reported incidences of the

imaginary companions being 'unfriendly'; indeed the children seemed to find it difficult to express any negative feelings towards their imaginary friend(s), even when asked directly. This contradicts some findings from the literature where 'unfriendly' imaginary companions have been reported, for example, Taylor and Mannering (2007) and Majors (2009).

#### *The questionnaire used to identify the possible sample*

The use of this questionnaire produced some interesting results in its own right and while this was not a quantitative study it is important to acknowledge these observations. In the Year Two group, 16 children out of 33 claimed to have a current imaginary companion, with 7 being girls and 9 boys. This represents almost 50% with a fairly even split between the genders. Very similar results were shown for the Year Five group as 16 children out of 33 also reported having a current imaginary companion, with 8 being boys and 8 being girls. However, in the Year Three group, out of 48 children, 22 girls and 12 boys reported having a current imaginary friend. This represents almost 70% with a current imaginary companion, with almost twice as many girls than boys reporting this. As discussed in the literature review, 'high season' for this sort of imaginary play has traditionally been linked to the pre-school years (Singer and Singer, 1990). However, my findings support research conducted by Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) and Pearson et al (2001), who suggested that school-aged children continue to engage in this type of imaginary activity and that the prevalence of imaginary companions in older children is more common than previously thought. The number of children in this school who claimed to have a current invisible friend lends support to the idea that imaginary companions are 'alive and well' in the lives of older children, not just pre-school age children. Overall 57% of the 114 children who completed questionnaires indicated they had a current imaginary companion. Despite the sample number being low, it does support previous research which has suggested that the incidence of imaginary companions in pre-school children could be as high as 65% (Singer and Singer, 1990; Mauro, 1991). Further research, with larger sample sizes, would have to be conducted to determine if similar numbers of older children invent or continue to have imaginary friends. Such high numbers support the hypothesis that the presence of an imaginary friend

is a 'normal' childhood experience and, as Harris (2000) astutely observed, it is the absence of imagination in childhood development that is 'abnormal', not its presence.

It is unclear why 20% more children in the Year Three group claimed to have a current imaginary companion as the children were not asked more details about their answers on the questionnaires. However, one idea could be that more children, especially girls, of this age *perhaps* spontaneously made one up. This idea came about as one girl in Year Three was subsequently interviewed and it was revealed that she had had her imaginary friend for only three weeks, about the time when I had visited school to discuss the research. In the interview it transpired that she had invented her 'friend' after hearing about my research as she thought it was "a good idea". However, this also happened in the Year Five group as one girl had ticked all the 'yes' boxes but her parents contacted the school the next day to inform me that their daughter "had made it up". Another interesting finding from the questionnaire saw no apparent difference in the ages of children who did not want to talk to me about their imaginary friend. This suggests that the children in this school did not appear to be influenced by 'privacy' or 'embarrassment', which contradicts findings such as that by Pearson et al (2001) or Hoff (2004-2005). However, all these points regarding the use of questionnaires filled out in the presence of classmates should be treated cautiously for reasons noted in Chapter Two. The children's answers could have been influenced by the immediate presence of their peers and their ticking 'yes' or 'no' was taken at face value. It is also important to note that the numbers involved in the initial sweep for children to take part in the interviews was relatively small in comparison to some of the larger qualitative studies outlined in Chapter Two and so carries little statistical power.

#### **5.4 Characteristics of children's imaginary companions**

Of the seven children who were interviewed, eleven imaginary companions were reported. For the purpose of this research only imaginary companions that had been a feature in the children's lives for at least three months prior to the interview were considered. During the interviews it transpired that the imaginary friends had been around for a lot longer than three months as the following table illustrates.



**Table 3 – Length of time the imaginary companions have been present**

<b>Name and age of child</b>	<b>Age when IC created</b>	<b>Length of time IC been in life</b>
Ann-Marie – 10 years old	5 years of age	5 years
Callum – 7 years old	6 years of age	Nearly 2 years
Chloe – 10 years old	8 years of age	2 years
John – 7 years old	4 years of age	3 years
Mark – 10 years old	4 years of age	6 years
Toby – 9 years old	7 years of age	2 years
Tom – 8 years old	“6 or 7” years of age	1 or 2 years

Only two of the children interviewed created their imaginary friends at pre-school age when they were aged four. The remaining five children invented their imaginary companions at age five or above which lends support to findings from other research, such as Pearson et al (2001); Hoff (2004-2005); Majors (2009) and Burton (2010) that imaginary companions are a feature of older children.

Two of the imaginary companions reported in the interviews were animals (a monkey and a puppy) while the remainder took human form. The high proportion of human companions is similar to that in research reported by, for example, Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) who found that the majority of invisible companions were human but differs to that found in Taylor and Mannering’s (2007) study where only 34% were “regular everyday” boys and girls. However, while three of the boys interviewed had human companions of a similar age to them, John’s human imaginary friends were unusual as they were 1,000 years old and were a married couple living in Hollywood. While the two girls both had two ‘regular everyday’ girls as imaginary friends Chloe’s were slightly older than her while Ann-Marie’s were the same age. Although both Toby and Tom had ‘regular everyday’ boys of a similar age to them, Toby’s imaginary companion had some magical powers as he could fly into school on a cloud and Tom’s imaginary friend could drive a car. The animals could talk or otherwise communicate with the children in some way and this upholds findings from research by Taylor and Mannering (2007). However, the imaginary friends talked about in my study were limited in regards to the form they took as they were only either human or animal. While some of the research discussed in the literature review shows that several imaginary companions are humans, albeit with sometimes unusual characteristics, as well as

some who take the form of animals, other children create imaginary friends that are more exotic creatures or have most unusual characteristics. The somewhat restricted forms that the imaginary companions took in this present study does not replicate findings from some other studies discussed in the literature review where more exotic or fantastical creatures were described (for example Taylor, 1999; Burton, 2010). However, some of the studies reviewed in Chapter Two were conducted with large samples and so comparisons with my study are limited due to the small number of children who participated in the interviews.

Some children spoke of the appearance of their imaginary companions more than other children did. Some comments about their imaginary companion's appearance seemed to reflect wearing items of clothing that the child perhaps covets, while for other children, especially the girls, comments were made about their physical attractiveness and as being 'pretty'. For the girls their imaginary friends may be providing a female role model for 'growing-up' and for what the girls perhaps can imagine themselves doing in the not-too-distant future with 'real' friends.

While this study did not aim to specifically investigate gender differences, some interesting factors were noted that emerged during the process of the interviews and in the subsequent analysis. The two girls both had female human companions, while the boys created male invisible friends, with the exception of John whose one female imaginary companion was married to his other male imaginary friend. The imaginary companions who were animals were male and only boys, in this study, had animal imaginary friends. This observation generally supports findings also reported by, for example, Taylor et al (2004) who found that children tend to create imaginary companions who are the same gender as them. Some interesting points about the private and public nature of the imaginary companions of girls and boys are also noted. Hoff (2004-2005) found, in her sample of 26 children aged 10 years, that 14 said their imaginary companions were secret – of these, 7 were girls and 7 were boys. This represents an equal split between the sexes. However, of the 7 children who participated in this study the two girls both stated that their imaginary friends were known to select others, while three boys said that 'no-one' knew about their imaginary companions. For one girl only some adult members of her close family knew but her three brothers didn't;

while for the other girl her sister and friends knew, but her parents did not. Two of the boys reported that their imaginary friends were known to others with one stating that his parents knew but his sister did not; while the other boy stated that his younger brother knew but his friends did not. This suggests that, for the children who participated in this study, it was more common to share information about imaginary friends with siblings of the same sex and more boys kept them private than not. However, this sample is very small and so any generalisations cannot be made.

The children's relationship with their imaginary friends seemed to be very important to all of the children who were interviewed. All the children spoke positively about their imaginary companions and made a number of references to their imaginary friends reliably being there when needed. It is interesting to note that the majority of children spoke about things that they had in common with their imaginary companions, such as sharing an interest in the same things. This is similar to findings reported in, for example, Taylor (1999) and Majors (2009). It is possible that having an imaginary friend who in some ways is similar to yourself provides validation to the child's growing sense of self and promotes confidence.

Five of the children seemed to have a fairly egalitarian relationship with their imaginary companion(s). This upholds a finding in Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup's (2000) study where, in general, it was found that relationships with invisible friends were egalitarian, like 'real-life' friendships. The interactions described in the interviews with the children for this study often sounded like 'real-life' interactions and appeared to be reciprocal in nature, especially with the human imaginary companions. Sometimes the children demonstrated care and concern towards their imaginary friends while at other times the children were supported and nurtured in return. The imaginary friends also seemed to be offering the rehearsal of skills needed in social interactions. Furthermore, the interactions that were described demonstrated that the children had a good understanding of how 'real' reciprocal friendships are made and sustained. However, there were some instances of relationships with imaginary friends that seemed to be orientated vertically, particularly with the animal imaginary companions or much older imaginary friends. As Gleason and Kalpidou (2014) note, the type of relationship that a child has with their imaginary friend(s) can show how

imaginary companions help with issues of mastery and competence. They argue that children who create hierarchical relationships might do so in order to enhance their own feelings of competence as caring for an incompetent imaginary friend may bolster self-esteem by emphasising the relevance competence of the child. In my study, for example, Callum described how he calmed himself down when angry as he didn't like to get angry in front of 'Billy Bob'. It is not clear whether this was because an imaginary monkey could possibly be scared of Callum when angry like a 'real' monkey would be and so Callum was sustaining this pretence by taking on a more nurturing/caring role, or whether he didn't want to 'lose face' by not being able to control his emotions in front of an animal that may have been perceived as being more immature than him. Either way, this could have helped Callum's feelings of competence by helping him to master his angry feelings. While, for John, his much older imaginary companions seemed to take on a guiding role and appeared to be more competent than him as they were often present during times of need, such as when John was lonely or when he felt unsure, for example when swimming. When older invisible companions provide an element of support, this may be linked to self-esteem, as Hoff (2004-2005) notes, "the illusion of having support seems to increase self-esteem" (pg. 163) and so John's imaginary companions may be characterised by their relationship with him as being primarily a supportive one.

As noted in other studies, such as Majors (2013), the imaginary companions in this research showed some 'independent will'. This theme emerged when the children were asked if there was anything that they didn't like about their imaginary companion(s). Some participants were able to identify minor irritations regarding their imaginary friends, despite the fact that they were their creations and could have altered or removed these irritations. However, it seems that these children chose not to change their imaginary friend and suggests that in some ways the imaginary companions had been provided with a degree of independent agency. When the imaginary friends sometimes acted in ways that the creators didn't like, it seemed to provide opportunities for problem-solving and for developing tolerance and acceptance towards others, skills that are also needed for 'real-life' friendships. Majors (2013) notes that some imaginary companions in her study were not always compliant and suggests that non-compliance on the part of the imaginary companion seemed to increase

the child's interest in them. However, for the children who participated in this study, this did not seem to be the case and they spoke of other aspects of their imaginary friends that they seemed to find interesting enough.

All of the children interviewed seemed to have a firm grasp of the imaginary status of their companions and there was no evidence of confusion around the distinction between fantasy and reality. This finding supported a lot of the research discussed in the literature review, that even quite young children are skilled at telling the difference between fantasy and reality (Taylor, 1999) and that children know their imaginary companion(s) are not real (Taylor and Mottweiler, 2008). The children in my research knew their imaginary friends were 'just pretend' but they seemed to have bestowed characteristics onto them that would be applicable to 'real' people too. For example, children were able to answer questions about what their companions ate, where they slept and what they wore. They were also able to answer questions based on what their imaginary companions liked or didn't like, suggesting that the children imagined them as having formed personalities. Engagement with fantasy and imagining a companion often seemed to be a creative way of providing entertainment as well as escaping the more mundane aspects of life and seemed to add enrichment to the lives of their child creators. This study confirms the idea that children know that their imaginary friends are not real and also supports previous claims that the presence of an imaginary companion is not generally an indicator of psychiatric difficulties (Harris, 2000). It is hoped that this finding will help to continue to dispel some of the unhelpful ideas that have been perpetuated about imaginary companions, which have been based on clinical case studies where mental health conditions such as dissociative identity disorder have emerged. As discussed in the literature review, this type of mental health condition is very different to the experience of having an imaginary friend and so far a lot of the research has suggested that imaginary companions are an adaptive and creative response to all sorts of experiences that children face on a daily basis.

To conclude this section, the imaginary companions of the children who participated in this research shared similar characteristics and some findings upheld those contained in previous

research. The imaginary companions had often been a presence in the children's lives for several years. They appeared to be a stable factor in the children's lives as they didn't change from how they were when they were first created, other than to age at the same rate as the children. All took the form of either a human or animal and most of the human imaginary companions, as well as the animals, were very close in age to their child creators. Some more unusual characteristics were reported though, such as one boy's imaginary friends who were a 1,000 year old married couple who lived in Hollywood, while some boy imaginary friends could fly or drive a car. While this study did not aim to specifically investigate gender differences, for the children who participated in this study, it was more common to share information about imaginary friends with siblings of the same sex and more boys kept them private than not. However, the number of children who participated in my research is very small and so any generalisations cannot be made. All the children spoke positively about their imaginary companions and they seemed to play a very important part in the lives of their child creators. Most of the children had an egalitarian relationship with their imaginary friend(s) but for two children the relationship appeared to be vertical in nature. This is probably due to the individual motivations behind the creation of these particular imaginary companions. All of the children interviewed seemed to have a firm grasp of the imaginary status of their companions but the imaginary companions showed a degree of 'independent agency.'

### **5.5 Imaginary companions at school**

In this study only two boys (28.58%) reported their imaginary companions as sometimes being at school. This figure is higher but close to Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup's (2000) finding as they found that only 20.8% of the mothers reported that the child's invisible friend attended school (although their sample was much larger than mine and only parent reports were used so any comparisons should be treated with caution). Hoff's (2004-2005) study was similar to mine as she used interviews with the children but her sample size was larger than mine. Her research found that of the 26 imaginary companions detailed in her study only 7 (26.92%) specifically were identified as being played with at school – with one being at school "in a bag". However, this represents a very similar percentage to that found in my

research and is also quite small. It could be that children do not imagine their imaginary companion(s) as being at school much and this figure could be an accurate reflection of how many attend school with their creators. It could be that, as children create imaginary friends for many different reasons, 'support at school' is only a minor factor, if a reason at all. However, talking to the children in this study may have uncovered some other reasons why imaginary friends do not go to school. One girl (Ann-Marie) described how her imaginary companions were better off being at home as "it's hard at school" and she didn't want them to get frustrated or upset. Ann-Marie appeared to be showing compassion and concern towards her companions but, as they were 'not real', didn't have to go to school like she did. One boy (Callum) reported that he would have liked his imaginary friend to be at school but he didn't think his friend would behave, mainly because he was a monkey. This suggests that Callum was drawing on his knowledge about monkeys (and how he imagines they may behave at school) while maintaining the "sustained role play" (Harris, 2000) in order to keep 'Billy Bob' as an unchanging entity. Of course, Callum could have imagined his imaginary monkey behaving at school but he chose not to and this suggests that he was accepting 'Billy Bob' as he is. The other girl (Chloe) reported that she wouldn't like her imaginary friends to be at school as they would "probably" distract her and make her annoyed. Again this suggests acceptance of the imaginary companions but it may also be Chloe's way of problem-solving as she removed the temptation of getting distracted by not imagining her friends being with her at school.

For the two boys in this study who reported that their imaginary companions were sometimes at school there are some interesting points to make. Both boys told me that their imaginary companions remain the same and do not change from how they are outside school. This suggests that these imaginary companions were created for purposes other than school work but were employed in school when needed. It also implies that the imaginary companions were treated as being 'as they were' and so would not change like an actual person could not. The imaginary friends sometimes helped with school work in the class by providing answers which the child claimed not to know. It is not clear why their imaginary friend would know the answer if they didn't but I tentatively suggest that this could be a way

of passing responsibility to the imaginary companion as if the answer is incorrect it would not be the child's 'fault'. Sometimes the imaginary friend was able to provide answers by using equipment the child doesn't have or is not allowed access to. Such an example was Tom who described Max using a calculator in Maths to find the answer before telling him. This could be wishful thinking on Tom's part as Max "always carries a calculator" and perhaps he would like to do this but is not allowed. For Toby, it seems that his imaginary friend helps by suggesting an approach or strategy and seems to be acting as an aide memoir by being a form of self-talk when problem-solving. The imaginary companions were also used at playtimes when they didn't have anyone to play with or when the game being played by 'real' friends was not to their liking. Tom also imagined his companions being with him on the first day in a new class and their presence seems to offer him reassurance when needed. The children's use of their imaginary companions at school, in different ways and at different times, seems to illustrate their ability to use their imaginary friends in other ways than those they were originally invented for. These two boys appear to have imagined their companions as being at school in ways that would be similar to how 'real' friends would be but they were kept private. It suggests the creative use of their imaginary friends while still maintaining their private nature. However, due to the extremely small sample, generalisations cannot be made and further research regarding imaginary companions at school would be needed to help uncover their significance and function, if any, for children at school.

The children in my study who reported that their imaginary friend(s) did not go to school were able to describe what they thought their imaginary companion was doing during the school day. This suggests that they were experienced by the children as being independent from them and as having a sense of continuity and stability. The imaginary companions of these children appeared to have some level of 'permanence' which perhaps reveals the children's understanding of 'permanence' as real people exist even when they can't see them and so this was applied to their imaginary friend(s) too. The imaginary companions of the two boys who sometimes went to school were also described as 'existing' in similar ways when they were not at school. Interestingly, all of the imaginary friends were available to the children when they came home from school. Some were waiting for them and some children



imagined the imaginary companions telling them about their day and what they had been up to. As sharing experiences with significant others is important in human relationships, it is suggested that these children were treating their relationship with the imaginary friends as significantly as they would other relationships. Indeed, the imaginary friends certainly seemed to be very important to the children who participated in this study.

## **5.6 Help with school work and academic demands**

As contained in the details of this theme (Chapter 4, section 4.4.3) it seems that most of the imaginary companions of the children in this study do help with school work. They provide answers, offer reassurance that answers are correct, suggest approaches/strategies, provide visual cues (such as when they turn into numbers) and offer readymade characters for stories. Imaginary friends embody self-talk techniques and seem to serve the function of providing security as they give the child the option of having someone to pass the responsibility of incorrect answers to. Some use their imaginary companion as interpreters of adult instructions which seem to help them understand what to do, perhaps through the children imagining the actions needed before performing them themselves. The imaginary friends who reportedly go to school help with school work by directly providing answers to the children sometimes. On occasion the imaginary companions suggested an approach or strategy to the child. At times, this seemed to act as an aide memoir to remind the child of a successful strategy but also sometimes seemed to be a form of self-talk when problem-solving. Some of the children who reported that their imaginary friends did not go to school talked of their imaginary companions helping them in similar ways with homework. This use of self-talk has implications for how imaginary companions may help children with school work and academic demands. The concept of self-verbalisation is where talk used during modelled learning is internalised and then used to guide actions and thoughts during self-controlled and self-regulated phases of learning. Verbalisation has a variety of benefits for both motivation and learning. It can help maintain focus and promotes attention on strategies which, in turn, helps promote encoding and retention of concepts (Schunk, 1999). Verbalisation could be viewed as a form of rehearsal and the positive effects of rehearsal on learning are well documented. Schunk (1998) comments that verbalisation can increase

feelings of personal control as students believe they can use a strategy that will help learning take place. This belief can raise self-efficacy and in turn helps to maintain motivation for learning. However, for some learners, verbalisation could be an added task that might actually interfere with encoding. This could lead to self-talk impacting negatively on learning performance due to an overload on cognitive demands. Although research in the area does not generally support this idea it is acknowledged that self-talk may interfere with learning for some children. However, self-verbalisation is usually a positive learning strategy and this study tentatively suggests that the creation of an imaginary friend might be a useful forum for practising such skills. My findings offer some support for the idea that self-verbalisation is an effective problem-solving tool and that it positively contributes towards emotional aspects of learning, such as a sense of competency and helps motivation.

Hoff (2004-2005) found that “motivation and self-regulation” was one of the main ‘functions’ of imaginary companions and my study would also support this idea. Amongst other things, the imaginary companions present in my research seemed to act as motivational aids in the completion of work by making it ‘fun’ as well as helping the child understand some work related activities. Motivation is inherently linked to the quality of learning and the drive to explore and progress cognitively and academically (Bandura, 1997). However, there are many factors that affect learning and these are not passively received by children but are transformed by them into personal self-regulatory influences. Social factors also have an effect on cognitive development and learning. The production of an imaginary companion appears to feed into all of these elements some of the time. As educational psychologists and other educational professionals understand more about the mechanisms that lie behind learning and the motivation to learn, the more effective they can be in supporting children’s learning. This can be done through encouraging factors that could potentially aid learning and cognitive development.

Schunk (1999) noted that when children’s skills increase a social-to-self transformation takes place in an interactive process in which learners adjust their social environments in order to improve achievement. Schunk (1999) argued that a key component to this process of

learning is the child's ability to internalise information that is attained from the social environment. The internalised concepts are represented mentally through visual images and verbally as meanings, rules, instructions etc. Schunk specified that this 'internalisation' is under the learner's self-regulatory control. This contrasts with non-internalised social information which is under the control of others in the learner's environment, such as teachers and classmates. Schunk (1999) maintains that the development of internalisation is crucial for long-term skill improvement as it enables the transfer of information from the initial learning setting into a set of personal self-influences that learners then use self-regulatively in order to sustain motivation and learning. Schunk's (1999) study presents a theoretical model of social-to-self interactive processes in which social influences are internalised and then used self-regulatively. Some of Schunk's theory can be applied to the production of imaginary companions as the imaginary friends in my study appeared to help the working through (internalisation) of many different types of learning. Children used their imaginary companions to process and make sense of not only academic tasks but when learning skills such as swimming and gymnastics. The children used their imaginary friends in ways that were understandable to and meaningful for them. The creation of an imaginary friend can facilitate the process of internalisation through imagined interactions and is another possible function they perform when the children who create them are in learning situations. Burton (2010) also refers to Schunk's theory and found that for some children who participated in her study this internalisation process was also a factor in their learning. While strategies which develop internalising factors that can be used self-regulatively by learners may be a useful way to promote learning, further research is needed before more robust conclusions can be made.

Regarding school work, another function that imaginary companions may perform is with fostering independent working skills for the children who create them. This research found examples of ways in which imaginary companions helped their creators with independent work tasks, including homework. Although the children seemed to feel that their imaginary companions helped them in some way to problem-solve, it was, of course, them relying on their own resources to find solutions. It is understandable that children may feel uneasy about solving academic problems alone for the first time but having an imaginary workmate

to boost confidence and 'discuss' ideas with could be a good way of fostering independent work skills. A toy or puppet could also be used in the same way as a means for the child to have problem-solving dialogues with. Encouraging a child to 'discuss' ideas with a toy or puppet during problem-solving tasks may help the problem-solving process and increase the child's independence by making this the strategy s/he tries first, rather than immediately seeking support when a problem is encountered. It uses verbalisation, as the child talks through a problem with another, and it encourages the development of self-regulatory systems as noted in the previous paragraph (Schunk, 1999). Similar techniques, such as peer support systems (for example, Brewer, Reid and Rhine, 2003) have helped to promote children's understanding of independent problem-solving and of using their initiative rather than seeking adult assistance as the first option.

Other elements that link into self-regulatory systems which promote motivation and achievement in learning are goal setting and feedback on progress. Attaining goals has been shown to have a positive effect on achievement outcomes (Locke and Latham, 1990). When learners set a goal and then pursue it, it is necessary for them to see their progress towards attaining that goal. It is the process of self-evaluating their progress that is effective in sustaining the learners' motivation and can enhance self-regulated learning (Schunk, 1996; Schunk and Ertmer, 1999). One way of indicating progress is through social feedback and as learners mature, they become better at evaluating their own progress. Imaginary companions may act as a way to self-analyse progress, particularly when social feedback is not available, such as when completing homework. There was some limited evidence in my research for this idea but it is not as well supported as findings around self-talk and verbalisation with regard to academic outcomes. The current study tentatively suggests that imaginary companions may have a role to play in self-regulatory processes, both for emotions and for learning and can aid self-reflection and self-analysis skills. This area requires further investigation but there was some evidence that suggested the imaginary companions in this study may help the development of these skills.

## **5.7 Purposes and functions the imaginary companions serve**

In view of the findings, links with some of the possible functions that imaginary companions may serve to support children with school work and academic tasks are contained in the previous section. Other areas of relevant theory and research are now offered in order to consider how findings from this study relate with some of the wider functions that imaginary companions serve for their creators that have been uncovered in previous research.

### *Cognitive development*

The presence of an imaginary companion has been implicated in the development of cognitive abilities as well as skills such as problem-solving. Hoff (2004-2005) found that imaginary companions, in some cases, were experienced as assisting the children with school subjects, acting as “school mentors”. Burton (2010) identified ‘academic problem-solving and cognitive development’ as a theme in her research. She found that imaginary companions served a function of “assisting with homework” by either making it more fun or by offering an opportunity to talk through problems in order to facilitate solutions. Burton (2010) suggests that, “the act of talking through an academic problem with an imaginary friend requires the use of complex cognitive skills such as the articulate use of language and organising thoughts into a coherent order” (pg. 69). Thinking about and articulating feelings and thoughts to an imaginary companion involves the child organising their thoughts and ideas into a coherent structure and helps develop thinking skills. Harris (2000) commented that role play with an imaginary friend can feed information into the child’s own knowledge and planning system, “by feeding pretend input into the child’s own knowledge and planning mechanisms, considerable cognitive economy is achieved” (Harris, 2000, pg. 35). He gives examples of benefits such as language acquisition and that if a child took on the role of another then speech would require sentence construction, building on language skills. Interactions with an imaginary companion will provide a forum to use and build on all of these skills.

The ability to make generalisations and adapt knowledge for different contexts is an important skill to acquire when learning and is an important part of cognitive development. Vygotsky (1962) claimed that psychological functions are acquired at first in the context of a

social practice, through interactions with others, before they are actively internalised (using 'self-talk') and then used autonomously by the individual. Vygotsky (1962) argued that socially mediated influences impact on an individual's thought and then combine with personal factors to produce learning. Vygotsky maintained that the social environment uses various 'tools' to transmit knowledge from one generation to another, such as cultural objects, social institutions and language. Cognitive change evolves from using these tools in social interactions and through internalising and mentally transforming these into symbolic representations. Davis, Meins and Fernyhough (2013) proposed that having an imaginary companion would give children many more opportunities for engaging in social dialogue, which would facilitate the development of private speech, in line with Vygotsky's theory. They found that children who had imaginary companions were more likely to engage in covert private speech compared with their peers who did not have imaginary companions. Their results suggest that the private speech of children with imaginary companions is more internalised than that of their peers who do not have imaginary companions. They also suggest that the self-generated social speech between children and their imaginary friends may fulfil a similar facilitatory role as social speech with 'real-life' partners. The imagined interactions with imaginary companions could also help develop thinking skills by imagining, and exploring with a trusted 'other', novel or alternative contexts in which to use ones current knowledge.

As noted in section 5.6 Hoff (2004-2005) found that 'motivation and self-regulation' was one of the main functions of imaginary companions and findings in my study would uphold this. When children are in learning situations, imaginary companions seem to serve the function of being a form of self-regulation. By taking on the viewpoint of the imaginary companion in a learning situation the child is able to look at the problem from another angle and this may help facilitate more possible solutions. The child also has to analyse the problem and then 'explain' it to another using self-verbalisation, which helps to focus attention. This also links into the ability to be self-reflective about one's own learning which allows skills to evolve and develop. Self-reflection also enables the learner to perceive progress which in turn increases motivation. All of these skills have a role to play in developing self-regulatory skills,

which are required for the more advanced stages of learning. The higher level of cognitive functioning that is needed for increasingly complex and more independent learning then moves into the final self-regulated level, where the learner develops their skills and adapts strategies for the personal and contextual conditions as they change. It is noteworthy that some children in this study spoke about having the assistance of imaginary companions when faced with independent work tasks, such as homework, that require a high degree of self-regulation. Having an imaginary friend appears to be a highly adaptive learning strategy and many of the children in this study spoke about the helpfulness of their imaginary friends during problem-solving tasks, both emotional and academic. However, the idea that imaginary companions play a role in the development of self-regulation in learning could be seen as being somewhat contradictory. This is because the imaginary friend is called on to assist as a perceived external entity yet it is an internally created influence. Younger children tend to be more overt in their interactions with imaginary friends than older children. This partially seems to be due to a perceived expectation that past a certain age it is no longer appropriate to have an imaginary friend so interactions occur privately. However, another contributing factor could be that as children become older, they are more skilled at self-verbalisation on an internal level and less overt verbalisation with an imaginary companion is needed to solve a problem. This area requires further investigation before more definite conclusions can be drawn about how the role of an imaginary friend contributes towards these functions in relation to cognitive development. However, it is appropriate to suggest that having an imaginary companion aids children with their cognitive development.

One intriguing finding was that some children in my research talked about their imaginary friend(s) 'telling' or 'showing' them the answers to questions which they claimed not to know the answer to. They found it difficult to explain how this actually happened. It could be that the imaginary companion is used to 'self-model' in a reflective way in order to help organise the child's knowledge, thoughts or ideas so that they can be applied. Another idea is the possibility that an imaginary companion is a safe way to problem-solve while keeping the child's feelings of competency intact. When a child is unable to work out a solution alone, then s/he has the option of seeking advice from their imaginary friend and some children in my study did this with learning tasks, especially ones they felt unsure about.

Sometimes the imaginary companion helped by 'offering' possible solutions. It is possible to speculate that if a child colludes with their imaginary companion and this still results in being unable to solve the task, then the child's feelings of competency would remain secure as they have 'externalised' the 'failure' onto the imaginary companion. Through this deferring of responsibility to the imaginary companion, the 'failure' is not as deeply internalised by the child. I suggest that this may help to keep the child's sense of competency buoyant and so s/he will feel confident to attempt future problem-solving tasks. A possible idea is that imaginary companions therefore serve an emotionally protective function and enable the child to face future challenges. However, as noted by Burton (2010), this theory of 'externalisation' is not consistent with ideas about the role that imaginary companions take in supporting the 'internalisation' of concepts for children that promotes children's learning and cognitive development. There seems to be more evidence in the research and literature to support the idea that imaginary companions aid internalisation of concepts. However, for some children in my study their imaginary companions could have played a role in the externalisation of learning although this idea is only speculation. The experience of having an imaginary friend and the motivations behind its creation are so idiosyncratic (Taylor, 1999) that it is possible they can be both helpful with modelling *and* with externalising failure, depending on the individual child and their needs. Again, further research would have to be conducted into this area, but it does highlight interesting questions about the possible functions imaginary companions serve in the lives of children and suggests possible paths for future research into this area.

#### *Emotional and social development*

As noted in the literature review, recent theory and research on children's developing knowledge about mental life has led to interest in the function of imaginary companions and their potential for providing information about emotionality. Previous research into imaginary companions has offered some intriguing ideas, such as Hoff (2004-2005) who found that imaginary companions provide emotional support by giving comfort or by helping their creator to endure boredom, loneliness or fear of darkness. Other research, for example Taylor (1999) and Burton (2010), also supports this finding. Hoff also notes that imaginary



friends could help as well with tragic or horrifying events by helping the child to feel more in control. Majors (2013) also makes reference to imaginary companions acting as emotional support, helping three of the older children in her study to defuse angry or upset feelings and, as Hoff found, offering support when the children experienced difficulties in their lives. Imaginary companions are a means by which some children process emotional events as they can take on the role of a trusted 'other' with whom to discuss such events with. Talking through emotional issues is a well-established therapeutic technique and forms the basis of strategies such as narrative therapy (Payne, 2006). Imaginary companions appear to play a role of providing a child with instant access to such discussions and may also be the child's way of trialling a discussion that is too difficult to currently have with others.

On an emotional level, the vast majority of the children in my study reported that their imaginary companions provided support to help them deal with their emotions, such as,

*Tom: "...when I'm sad and I come home and I'm sad he just helps me, he just says 'what's wrong?' and he helps me".*

The children made comments about the helpfulness of talking through their feelings with another as well as being cheered up by their imaginary friends, such as,

*Ann-Marie: "Well, they're really like helpful and they make, if they see I'm really sad they make me just really happy and they make...me like laugh and makes myself better..."*

Many of the children seemed to take comfort from the idea that the imaginary friend was a generally reliable source of comfort or entertainment. The imagined interactions seemed to offer the children a way for their emotions to be accepted in a non-judgemental way as well as facilitating an emotional release and are an important feature in the child's emotional life.

It seems that people use their imagination for a number of 'emotional' reasons and it seems to be a creative activity that is uniquely human. In my study the imaginary friends were perceived as being a source of emotional support and the children who participated talked about their imaginary companions as confidants who they could readily turn to in order to talk through difficult situations. The imaginary companions were also a source of comfort

during uncertain times and offered reassurance to their creators. Some children also spoke of sharing more positive emotions with their imagined companions, such as Chloe who said,

*“Sometimes like when I’m really happy and I want to explain what happened or if it’s like something really fun at school in the morning or something and I’m getting ready...really, just when I’m really excited.”*

This could be seen as rehearsing friendship skills as we often share positive times with friends as well as seeking their support for more difficult emotions. Friends, imaginary or otherwise, also provide us with opportunities to experience a wider range of emotions than we would if they were not present in our lives. I agree with Harris (2000) that “it is not the emotional needs of children that give rise to the invention of an imaginary character or scene, but rather that such inventions give rise to various emotions” (pg. 189).

Goswami (2014) acknowledges that it is now well understood that having friends and playing with them is important for developing children’s understanding of the emotions of others. As noted in the literature review, the ability to ‘read’ and respond to another person’s emotions plays a key role in friendships. A core feature of early friendships is joint pretend play, and the ability to take on roles and share imaginary games with others is all part of being a successful playmate. The complex processes involved in pretend play are a rich means by which children begin to understand the beliefs, desires and intentions of others. The child’s understanding of a ‘theory of mind’ (Baron-Cohen, 1995) is demonstrated during pretend play when they empathise with others and begin to understand that others feel and think different things to them. The pretend play with imaginary friends also seems to be used in similar ways as ‘real-life’ interactions and it seems reasonable to assume that they play an important role in the development of ‘theory of mind’ as well as other social and emotional skills which need to be learnt and refined. Imaginary friends not only provide an important way for children who have them to rehearse these skills but can provide an opportunity for them to consider a variety of scenarios or situations which are played out within a ‘safe’ forum. Imaginary companions can then provide children with the option of exploring a variety of imagined social exchanges and to perfect them before trying them out in the real world.

The creation of imaginary relationships is not just restricted to children. Adults regularly imagine conversations with actual people or day dream about imaginary ones (Caughey, 1984). This suggests that humans have an innate need to be social and we regularly use our imagination to help meet this need. Many of the children who participated in this study used their imaginary friend as a problem-solving tool for negotiating social relationships and they were a reliable source of company when other 'real' people were not available. Imaginary companions appeared to be a way to conceptualise relationships and they offered a safe forum in which children could explore difficult situations. Friendships can also introduce various moral issues for children, like cheating or not sharing fairly, and learning to negotiate these moral dilemmas as well as learning how to respond appropriately to them has benefits for pro-social development (Goswami, 2014). Interactions with imaginary companions can be a safe place to explore some of these issues. Also, engaging in quasi-interactions with imaginary companions might give children who create them some more advantages in their social development. Enacting both sides of a relationship requires a child to imagine the feelings and thoughts of the other as well as the self and so helps them to acknowledge the perspectives of others and recognise that they may be different from their own.

### **5.8 Reflections about children as research participants**

As this study evolved, the research process raised some thoughts regarding the participation of children. Children are a font of knowledge about their own lives and experiences and are the best sources of information about matters that concern them (Kellet and Ding, 2004). However, adult researchers can have problems accessing children's knowledge and views. As this study aimed to explore the experience of creating and maintaining an imaginary companion from the perspective of the child, accessing the children's viewpoints directly was imperative. However, there were two times when parents prevented their child from participating. These occurred when parental consent for their child to participate was asked for. As described in section 3.6, a letter was sent to all parents of the children in Years 2, 3 and 5 informing them of the research (Appendix A). The parents of fifteen children returned slips expressing a wish that their child did not participate. After discussing this issue with my tutor at university, these children were not included when the research was introduced to

the children in class. However, on two slips comments from parents were included and they provide clues as to why some parents may not have wanted their child to participate. One wrote "Sorry, I did ask (*child's name*) and he did not want to take part". This suggests that this particular parent involved her child in making a decision about whether he wanted to participate or not. This is an important point when involving children in research, as this particular child may not have felt comfortable withholding his consent and his parent may have suspected he could be swayed by peer pressure and/or would want to please the school/researcher. Another parent wrote "Sorry not to support your research but both my daughters are behind in their numeracy and I didn't want to risk disrupting their lessons on this occasion. Hope you understand and wish you well with your research". These fifteen children were not present in their class when I introduced the research. As this research took place in a school where staff were perceptive about children's feelings this was done in a sensitive way and explanations were given to them and the other children in their class. However, this highlights that some children did not have the choice of joining in or not.

When twelve children were subsequently selected for interview I wrote to each of their parents asking for their consent to this, as part of the process of rigorously seeking consent. (Appendix C). Nine consent slips were returned. Consent was given for me to interview six children and three slips were returned not giving consent. The remaining parents who had not returned their slips were contacted by school via text but replies were not forthcoming. In an attempt to complete the proposed twelve interviews, as only five valid interviews had been completed (see section 3.7), other children were then randomly selected from the remaining sample and letters were sent to seek the consent of their parents to participate. Two consent slips were returned confirming consent and these two children were interviewed. Parents who did not return the slips were contacted by school via text but no response meant that further interviews could not take place. Of course parents should be asked about their consent for their child to participate in research but these two instances resulted in some children being prevented from taking part. Is there another way we can allow children and young people to participate in research while still protecting them ethically? One idea was to consider whether 'no response' from a parent could be taken as consent but this did not feel appropriate to me as it was not a rigorous seeking of consent

and was not ethical. Another idea was to only ask parents once if they didn't want their child to participate, when the initial letter was sent to all parents of the children in the classes involved. Again, this did not feel ethical as filling in a questionnaire alongside classmates is qualitatively different from being interviewed individually and so I felt I needed parental consent for this. Perhaps I could have offered to meet with parents or phoned them directly to ask for consent rather than relying on slips but this could have posed further ethical considerations regarding their privacy or they may have felt more obliged to give consent when asked directly by the researcher when they may not really have wanted to.

Other barriers to children's participation arose from some aspects of the design of my research. I took the decision to limit the initial sweep for potential participants to three year groups. This was in an attempt to be realistic in terms of keeping the research manageable, while also ensuring a range of ages in the sample. In the school, there were three mixed Year 4/Year 5 classes so I had to think about the Year 4 children not feeling 'left out' of the research. This was explained to them when the Year 5 children were brought together as a whole group. Also two children, who indicated on their questionnaire that they had a current imaginary companion and would be willing to talk to me about them, were known to me in my role as educational psychologist for the school so these two children were removed from the sample from which to select children for interview. This potential barrier to children's participation could have been avoided if the research had taken place in another school. However, as I was the educational psychologist for that school, it gave me both easy access to and insight into how this school would have approached being involved in the research process. For those reasons this school was approached and was subsequently involved in this research.

These points illustrate how involving children in research can pose questions that research with adults doesn't, but in my view children should have as much opportunity to participate as possible. Although conducting research *with* children is important for enabling them to articulate and represent their perspectives and meanings, there is a growing movement to provide opportunities for research that is conducted *by* children. This growing trend is reflected in literature, such as Woodhead and Faulkner (2000); Alderson (2000) and Jones

(2004) and highlights particular issues such as how much responsibility it is fair to put onto children, as well as considering the instigating and conducting of the research. Kellett et al (2004) describe a study where 10 year olds took part in a programme that taught them the skills needed to design their own research. It stresses that children conducted research from a genuine child perspective and that the children succeeded in getting responses from their peers that may not have been possible for adult researchers. The children involved also disseminated their findings in an assembly and were interviewed by the press about their experiences. Some adults reported increased self-esteem and confidence in the children who had been involved in conducting this research. This illustrates that children not only have a right to participate in research but also, in doing so, it may help contribute to their overall development.

As noted in section 3.10 a key ethical consideration is whether the research can be explained to children in terms that they can understand in order to give informed consent or to decline to be interviewed. It was possible to explain the purposes of the research in simple terms, namely to find out about imaginary friends, what they are like and to explore possible reasons why children have them. All the children in the classes appeared to understand and respond to this. When children were asked 'what are imaginary friends' responses included "friends who are not real and not in the real world" and "a friend no-one else can see". Children also told me that 'research' is "to find out stuff we don't know much about" and that 'university' is "somewhere you go before you go to work". When the research was introduced to the children they seemed very enthusiastic about it and asked questions such as "what sort of questions will you ask about imaginary friends?", "have you chosen any other school?" and "do you have an imaginary friend?" All of these questions (and more) were answered honestly. Children consented to be interviewed on the questionnaire but their consent was also sought before the interview started and they were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. When I asked Toby if he had felt alright talking to me about his imaginary friend he said "Yeah... 'cos you're doing it for a reason...the university want to find out about imaginary friends" and this illustrates that he was clear about the purpose of this research. Ann-Marie also demonstrated that she understood about the research and

even extended the issue of consent to her imaginary friends. Ann-Marie asked her imaginary friends for *their* consent to talk to me about them, as the following quote shows,

*Ann-Marie: "Well I went home and I said...I'm going to be talking to a lady that...wants to talk about my imaginary friends...she said that she's going to pick somebody to talk about their imaginary friends and um...we would have to draw a picture and my mum would have to say whether it's alright or not alright to talk...and then we'll be like talking about you and what you look like and then...so I said to Lilly and Daisy...would it be alright if I could talk about you to the lady and then...um Lilly said that 'We're going to be famous'".*

### **5.9 Limitations of the present study**

The research produced many interesting findings and has given some insight into the functions and purposes imaginary companions serve from the perspective of the child. Of course there are limitations to the design and implementation of this study. This includes acknowledgement of the small sample size and generalisation of findings cannot be made without major reservations. Despite attempts to obtain a higher level of consent from parents, it was not possible and therefore the sample size is limited. A total of seven children participated in the interviews and all were from the same primary school, which limits diversity in the population of the sample. All of the children were white and British which resulted in a lack of cultural diversity. However, there were a range of socio-economic backgrounds present at the school which helped to create some variance. The children who were interviewed were not identified as having special educational needs and this helped to reduce any possible confounding variables. However, this resulted in no representation of children with imaginary friends from a special educational needs population. This could be viewed as a weakness in the study as this population was not represented in the research.

Despite the small sample size, attempts were made to make the interview process as robust as possible. Although the questions were based on previous research (Burton, 2010) a pilot interview was conducted to help establish the quality of the interview questions and to gauge whether the questions would result in useful responses from children. Questions were generally open-ended and this allowed children to elaborate on their personal experiences as they wished. However, each interview was unique and this lack of standardisation

inevitably raises concerns about the reliability of the data gathered. To help counter-act issues of instrument validity the same semi-structured interview schedule was used but it is acknowledged that each interview was different. Also the same interviewer conducted all the interviews and this views the researcher *as* an instrument (Miles and Huberman, 1994) in terms of issues about instrument validity. Other issues of validity are also raised as the participants may have only revealed what they wanted to and/or may not have known about, or wanted to share, the motivating factors behind the creation of their imaginary friend(s). Furthermore, in this study, as interviews were conducted through the medium of language, there was the potential for how children describe the 'richness' of their experience to be limited by their current vocabulary/language skills. Also, as the children transmitted their experiences, thoughts and feelings about their imaginary companion(s) through language, I am fully aware that they may have had a different meaning or may have communicated a different 'reality' to me from what they intended. This factor was considered throughout the analysis phase and the words the children used were carefully considered. As an educational psychologist, I consider seeking and listening to the views of children to be an important and central part of my role. However, when I read through the transcripts I could see where I could have asked further or different questions and although I mostly followed up intriguing comments there were a few times when I didn't.

Using questionnaires to gather qualitative information, such as Pearson et al's (2001) study, can be fraught with errors. In my study questionnaires were used to identify those children who reported having an imaginary companion in order to establish those in the potential sample from which to choose interviewees. However, the possibility of children spontaneously creating an imaginary companion was realised when I interviewed one year three girl who had only had her imaginary friend from around the time I introduced the research to her class. In the interview it transpired that she had invented her 'friend' after hearing about my research and so her data is not included in the analysis. However, this was picked up in the interview and would not have been had this research only taken children's answers on the questionnaire at face value.



There are also limitations to the use of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is much more than a collection of extracts with little or no analytic narrative. The extracts should illustrate the analytic points being made by the researcher and go beyond specific content. This was a difficult process at times and although all possible steps were taken to ensure that there was robust analytical content to the findings, it was a complicated process that relied on my own interpretation of the data. During the process of analysing the interviews, I maintained an awareness of personal values and beliefs while acknowledging that a researcher can never be totally objective. To help counter-act this, inter-rater reliability was considered and, as mentioned in the methodology chapter, another educational psychologist read through the transcribed interviews in order to gain a second view on whether the themes reflected the content of the interviews and whether the categorisation of themes was plausible. Hoff (2004-2005) notes that she did this in order to increase the reliability of the themes identified in her research and this was done in my study for the same reason. This also fits in with a guideline recommended by Elliott, Fischer and Rennie (1999) for evaluating qualitative research as providing a “credibility check”.

However, despite these limitations there are a number of strengths regarding this study and its contribution to the knowledge base about imaginary companions. Findings from this study have offered further evidence that children have, and even invent, imaginary friends at much older ages than previously thought. Five out of the seven children interviewed invented their imaginary companion(s) after the age of five and this supports research conducted by Taylor, Carlson and Gerow (2001) and Pearson et al (2001), who suggested that school-aged children continue to engage in this type of imaginary activity and the prevalence of imaginary companions in older children is more common than previously thought. Overall it was found that the number of children in this school who claimed to have a current invisible friend lends support to the idea that imaginary companions are ‘alive and well’ in the lives of older children, not just pre-school aged children. The review of published research indicated considerable variability in the imaginary companions that children invent but the children in my study did not reflect such diversity. All took the form of either a human or animal and most of the human imaginary companions, as well as the animals, were very close in age to their child creators. Some more unusual characteristics were

reported though, such as one boy's imaginary friends who were a 1,000 year old married couple who lived in Hollywood, while some boy's imaginary friends could fly or drive a car. All of the children interviewed seemed to have a firm grasp of the imaginary status of their companions and there was no evidence of confusion about the distinction between fantasy and reality. For the children who participated in this study, it was more common to share information about imaginary friends with siblings of the same sex and more boys kept them private than not.

This study also supports theories that imaginary companions are helpful in the development of social skills, including the development of theory of mind, as well as supporting children with emotional reasoning and cognitive skills such as problem-solving. This study has a strong element of looking at imaginary friends in relation to the school-life of children, and in doing so, highlights this gap in research about imaginary companions to date. Despite the limited findings in this area it nevertheless raises some interesting features, such as children's imaginary friends being at school privately, and they certainly played a significant role in helping children with academic work and their learning. The life of imaginary companions at school and their role in supporting children's learning is an interesting area for further research. While conducted with a normative sample, this research does not support the theories which suggest that the presence of an imaginary companion in itself is an indicator of psychiatric difficulties. This research supports the notion that the creation of an imaginary friend is a healthy, common type of pretend play which can play an adaptive role during development. Taylor (1999) noted that it is important to keep an open mind about the nature of imaginary friends and her research cautiously indicated that the creation of an imaginary companion can usually be interpreted as a positive sign of mental health. My research supports this basic assumption about imaginary companions. Furthermore, this research is an example of participatory research with children and as such views children as being reliable and valid sources of information about their lives and experiences.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS

#### 6.1 Introduction

In this chapter some implications about the findings and their relevance to those who work with and care for children are made. Suggestions for future avenues of further research are made towards the end of this chapter.

#### 6.2 Implications of findings and relevance for people who work with and care for children

Previous research has suggested that imaginary companions tend to have design features that appear to be customized to meet the individual psychological needs of their child creators. However, there were some commonalities between the children who participated in this study. All of the children spoke positively about their imaginary companions and they seemed to play a very important part in the lives of their child creators. All of the imaginary friends offered companionship and 'good times' and they were frequently described in positive terms, such as being friendly and reliable. They had lives independent from the child and also appeared to have their own feelings, likes and dislikes. Most of the imaginary companions offered opportunities for the children to rehearse skills, such as those needed in social situations and when learning. This research supports theories around imaginary companions being helpful in the development of social skills, theory of mind development, emotional reasoning and problem-solving. All of these areas have relevance to educational practitioners and for those who care for children. However, this sample is very small and any generalisations cannot be made without reservations.

My research also focussed on imaginary companions in relation to school and school work. Of the seven children interviewed only two boys reported that their imaginary companions went to school and only on some particular occasions. These children's use of their imaginary companions at school, in different ways and at different times, seems to illustrate their ability to use their imaginary companions in ways other than what they were originally created for. The imaginary companions who did not attend school also had a role to play with school work. Therefore, it seems that most of the imaginary companions of the children

in this study do help with school work. They provide answers, offer reassurance that answers are correct, suggest approaches/strategies, provide visual cues and be readymade characters for stories. Imaginary friends embody self-talk techniques and seem to provide security as they give the child the option of having someone to pass the responsibility of incorrect answers to. Although the children seemed to feel that their imaginary companions helped them in some way to problem-solve, it was, of course, them relying on their own resources to find solutions. This seems to have links with the children's developing sense of autonomy and their growing confidence in solving academic problems while still having the 'security' of a trusted other to rely on when needed. Imaginary friends also served the purpose of helping to keep the children's sense of competency buoyant as they could 'externalise' any lack of success onto them.

Previous research has suggested that children invent idiosyncratic stories and details about their imaginary companions that they are typically happy to share and this was found to be the case in this study. The children who participated in this study spoke readily about their imaginary friends and could answer questions about various aspects of them in detail. The use of a qualitative methodology gained in-depth and detailed information about their individual experiences of having an imaginary companion. It also shows that children are reliable sources of information and are a valid and valuable source of knowledge.

Many of the areas that have been discussed so far are related to the field of educational and child psychology. Some theories and research connected to child development have been shown to have links with imagination in general and with imaginary companions in particular. Imaginary friends, along with other imaginary phenomena, have been shown to support children's understanding of reality as well as build on their cognitive, social and emotional development. Imaginary friends are a source of support when children are faced with difficulties and they provide a valued source of friendship and company. Imaginary companions have a role to play in the child's developing sense of self and they can help some children to feel more competent, while helping others to feel supported. From a basic starting point, educational psychologists are involved in supporting children's development and in enhancing children's learning and wellbeing. From this assumption, psychologists and

others working in education would be well placed to recognise the important role that imagination plays in the lives of children and to value its unique contribution. For me, this research has also highlighted the importance of imaginative play in children's lives, including play with imaginary companions, as this gives children a space where they can be creative, entertain themselves and learn. Adults who work with and care for children could be made more aware of the importance of pretend play and of interventions to facilitate this.

As regards learning, imaginary companions have been shown to have an important role to play in the development of self-regulatory processes. Imaginary friends help children to think coherently in order to verbalise problems to and to 'discuss' possible solutions with. They also help with motivation and allow children to be self-reflective in their learning. Imaginary companions also play a role in the emotional aspects of learning as they can help some children to feel more competent while for others they offer feelings of support and reassurance. The use of such natural strategies that encompass both emotional and cognitive aspects of learning will be of great use in the classroom. It is anticipated that research about imaginary companions which highlights their positive functions will continue to be seen in the public domain. This should help to counter-act any unhelpful assumptions that were noted in Chapter Two. As the important role that imaginary friends play in children's development is increasingly recognised it is hoped that school-aged children with imaginary companions will be better understood and their imaginary friends may even be welcomed into school.

The findings from this research were based on interviews from a non-clinical population. Whilst I acknowledge the small sample size, findings support the notion that the creation and maintenance of an imaginary companion is an adaptive and common feature of 'normal' human development. However, this research may be of relevance to clinicians or researchers of clinical populations for comparison purposes. I also anticipate that findings from this research will be of use to both practitioners and researchers into imaginary companions by contributing towards the understanding of the purposes served by imaginary friends and by adding to the small but growing body of research in this area.

### 6.3 Suggestions for further research

The study has highlighted a number of areas that require further study in the area of imaginary friends. Research on this topic is limited despite the fact that having an imaginary companion appears to be a very common childhood experience. The current study tentatively suggests that imaginary companions may have a role to play in self-regulatory processes, both for emotions and for learning and can aid self-reflection and self-analysis skills. This area requires further investigation but there was some evidence that suggested imaginary companions may help the development of these skills based on self-reports provided by the children who participated in this study.

Another possible avenue for further research is the role that imaginary companions play in the internalisation processes required for learning. Internalisation is a very important aspect of learning and occurs via avenues such as language and visual images. Some of the imaginary companions discussed in this research demonstrated their role in this aspect of children's development. However, one intriguing finding was that some children in my research seemed to be using their imaginary companion(s) as a form of 'externalisation'. This occurred when imaginary friends 'told' or 'showed' answers to questions which the children claimed not to know the answer to. It could be that the imaginary companion was being used as a safe way to problem-solve while keeping the child's feelings of competency intact. It is speculated that if a child colludes with their imaginary companion and this still results in being unable to solve the task, then the child's feelings of competency would remain secure as they have 'externalised' the 'failure' onto the imaginary companion so the 'failure' is not as deeply internalised by the child. Further research could investigate whether imaginary companions serve the purpose of externalising failure for more children, or whether this was just a feature of some of the imaginary friends in this study.

Investigating the range and characteristics of imaginary companions over time would be a useful avenue of research. It would help to uncover the functions they serve for a child over time and as different events occur in their life. It would also be helpful to study the imaginary companions of older children and explore how they differ from those in younger

children. It would also provide further information about the purpose and functions imaginary companions serve by investigating their evolution and extinction over time.

More research is needed into the different types of imaginary phenomena, such as imaginary companions, impersonation and personified objects. Harris (2000) argues for the bringing together of these three imaginary phenomena, maintaining that they serve similar developmental purposes for the child. However, I would argue that these should be studied separately so we can clearly understand the reasons why children engage in these different types of imaginary activity. The focus of my research are invisible characters which have been created by the children's imagination and are independent of external characters which could have an element of being 'donated' in some way, such as toys or fictional/non-fictional characters. Also, studying other imaginary phenomena, such as paracosms, jointly constructed imaginary friends/worlds and adult use of such worlds, would help further develop our understanding of the role that imagination plays in human life and experiences.

#### **6.4 Final comments**

My limited knowledge about and understanding of children's imaginary friends was one of the main motivating factors for undertaking this piece of research. This study has provided a window into the imaginative and creative fantasy worlds of children. Many links have been made to psychological theory and previous research and some interesting avenues for further investigation have been highlighted by the findings of the study. Although conducted with a small sample, the functions that the imaginary companions of the children interviewed were identified. These functions were varied but commonalities were also found. Findings support previous research which shows that imaginary companions serve many positive and valid functions in the lives of their creators. Imagination and pretence play a positive role in children's development and imaginary friends seem to be a significant factor in children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Imaginary companions are very important to their creators and children seem to invest a great deal in them. Overall, the creative act of inventing and maintaining an imaginary companion appears to be a unique, functional, idiosyncratic and 'normal' part of development for many children and will continue to be an exciting and rich research topic.

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APPENDIX A

Letter to parents informing of research in the school (with attached form)

Dear Parent

*Research about children's imaginary friends*

This letter is to let you know about research on children's imaginary friends which is being conducted at (name) School. *I would be grateful if you could read the information below and return the form attached if you would prefer that your child does not participate.*

My name is Jude Davies and I am an Educational Psychologist who works in your child's school at times. This research is undertaken as part of my doctorate studies and it is about children's imaginary friends. Little research has been done in this area. Most studies that have been carried out show them to be a positive feature in the lives of children who have them. Studies have also shown that they are more common than we thought and that older as well as younger children have them.

An aim of this study is to find out more about the imaginary friends themselves, and about the purposes they might serve for the child, especially in school and with school work. Your child's participation in the research will be extremely valuable whether your child has an imaginary friend or not.

All children in selected classes (unless parents have indicated that they would prefer their child does not participate) will be asked to complete a short questionnaire at school. The questionnaire will ask if they have an imaginary friend(s) and, if so, would they be willing to talk to me about them. This will help to see how many children in (name) School have imaginary friends. I will then choose one child at random to take part in a trial interview to see if my questions are OK. It is intended that twelve children will then be chosen at random to interview at a later date. This interview will take place at school and will last for about 40 minutes. Children will be asked to give descriptions of their imaginary friends, say how they play or talk to them, and whether they come to school with them. The purpose of the study will be explained to each child, and also that they do not have to answer any question they do not wish to and that they can withdraw from the study at any time.

All the information given in the interviews will be treated confidentially. Children's names will not be used in any report of findings, and quotes of what the children said will remain anonymous. I am very willing to answer any questions you may have about the research. I can be normally be contacted on: (*phone number provided*), Monday to Friday. (If I am not available please leave contact details and I will get back you as soon as possible).

***Thank you very much for your help***

Jude Davies

If you would prefer that your child does not take part in the research please return the form in the envelope provided.

-----  
***Imaginary Friends Research Participation Form***

**Name of Parent** \_\_\_\_\_ **Name of child** \_\_\_\_\_

I would prefer that my child does not take part in this research.

Please return this form in the envelope provided by (*date inserted*) (Based on Burton, 2010)



APPENDIX B

Questionnaire for identification of sample

**Pupil questionnaire**

Name.....

Age.....

Year.....

Are you a

Boy  or Girl

Do you have an imaginary friend?

Yes  No

Have you ever had an imaginary friend in the past?

Yes  No

Would you be happy to talk with me about your imaginary friend?

Yes  No

If 'yes' would it be OK that I ask your parents if they are happy for me to talk with you about your imaginary friend?

Yes  No

APPENDIX C

Letter of consent to parents once child been selected for interview

Research about children's imaginary friends

Dear (Parent name)

My name is Jude Davies and I am an Educational Psychologist who sometimes works in (name) School. You may recall that that I sent you a letter dated (date of letter) informing you of research being carried out at school. (Child's name) indicated that they have an imaginary companion and that they would be willing to talk with me about it. (Child's name) has been selected at random to be included in this research. I am writing to ask you to consider if you would give your consent for (child's name) to talk with me. I have extensive experience and training in talking and working with children and young people in a positive way. It is hoped that the views of the children will provide more information about this phenomenon as it is little researched despite being extremely common.

All interviews remain nameless and the information gained will not identify your child in any way. Additionally, as all of the data will be confidential, I will not be able to provide you with a personal account of your child's responses in the interview.

I would really appreciate you returning the consent slip in the stamped addressed envelope provided at your earliest convenience. It is hoped that this research will promote further understanding of this common childhood experience. If you have any further questions then please do not hesitate to contact me on (*phone number provided*).

Thanking you in advance,

Yours sincerely,

Jude Davies

Educational Psychologist

-----  
I give consent for my child to take part in the short 40 – 45 minute interview.

(Please tick)

I do not give consent for my child to take part in the short 40 – 45 minute interview.

(Please tick)

Parental name (please print).....

Parental signature.....

Child's name (please print).....

I would be grateful if you could return the consent form in the stamped addressed envelope provided by (date inserted). Many thanks for your help.

Details about the Interview (Information for Parents)

### **Details about the interview**

The interview is planned to take about 30 – 45 minutes. As mentioned in the letter, your child has been selected at random from a group of children who have indicated that they are happy to talk about their imaginary friend and all of his/her opinions will remain completely anonymous.

The interview will take place in a small room at school and will be recorded to ensure that none of the children's opinions are missed. The interviewer is a trained Educational Psychologist who has extensive experience of working with children and young people.

The aim of the talk is to find out a bit more about the common childhood phenomenon of imaginary friends. We will be discussing the following:

- Details of their imaginary friend such as what they look like, their name, their age and where they "live".
- How long they have had an imaginary friend and what happened to the friend if they no longer have one.
- What they like and dislike about their imaginary friend.
- What sort of things the imaginary friend does to help them.
- If their imaginary friend goes to school with them and if they help in some way with school work.

There will also be time for your child to be able to ask any of their own questions.

The information gained from these interviews will make a valuable contribution to understanding why children have imaginary friends as research in this area is extremely limited.

(Based on Burton, 2010)

APPENDIX D

Consent of child

I am happy to take part in a short interview at school

I am not happy to take part in a short interview at school

Child's name.....

Child's signature.....

## APPENDIX E

### Child interview script and questions

**Child:**.....

**Date:**.....

**Year group:**.....

**Age:**.....

**Gender:**.....

#### **Introduction – Read by interviewer.**

*Hello, my name is Jude and I am an educational psychologist. Psychologists visit schools to help pupils and teachers with things to do with education, learning, thoughts, feelings or behaviour. I have come to your school today to ask some children about their imaginary friends and what it is like to have one as I am learning about what children pretend and imagine. (Remind of visit to class and form they filled in). You said then that you have an imaginary friend(s) and that you would be prepared to talk with me about them. Is it still OK if I talk with you about that? I am going to ask you some questions and record what we say here (indicate voice recorder), is that alright with you? (Gain written consent)*

*Now it is important to tell you that no one will know that it is you speaking apart from me because everything will be made anonymous. Do you understand what anonymous means? (If no, give explanation: Anonymous means that the things you say in the interview cannot be attached to you or your name. Once we have finished the interview, your name will be replaced by another one, which means that your identity is kept hidden and private. It means you can speak very freely and honestly as anything you say, good or bad, cannot be traced back to you).*

*If you decide that you really don't want to answer a question, then we can leave that one out. You don't have to tell me why you don't want to answer it. If you want to stop talking with me at any point, then just let me know and we can stop. The interview is going to last around 40 minutes and it will be just you and I having a chat about your imaginary friend. This isn't a test, so don't worry about getting anything wrong as there is no wrong or right answer.*

*All of the things that we talk about today will be just between us because we are talking about your viewpoint. However, if you told me something that I thought might affect your safety, I might have to share that with someone else so that I could make sure you were ok. Does that sound alright to you? Do you have any questions before we start the interview?*

*Turn voice recorder on – 'This is.....and I am talking with.....on (date)'.*

### **General warm-up section**

1. What do you like doing at school/what are your favourite lessons?
2. What do you like doing/ your hobbies/interests out of school?

### **Opening questions about imaginary friend**

1. Can you tell me the name of your imaginary friend/s? (Prompt – Is there more than one? Is it a boy or a girl?) Where did that name come from?
2. What does your imaginary friend/s look like? Can you describe them?
3. Where does your imaginary friend/s live and sleep?
4. How long have you had your imaginary friend/s?
5. Where did your imaginary friend come from? How did they come to you?
6. Do you know how old your imaginary friend/s is?
7. Can you see your imaginary friend/s like you see me? Can you touch or smell him/her/them?
8. If you want to see your imaginary friend/s, how do you find/call them? (Prompt: Are there any times you want to see them but they don't come?)
9. What do you like about your imaginary friend/s and what do they help you with?
10. Is there anything that you don't like about your imaginary friend/s?
11. Do you think that you would be able to draw me a picture of your imaginary friend/s?

### **Questions about imaginary friend at school**

1. Does your imaginary friend/s come to school with you? (Questions 2 – 5 if 'yes'/questions 6 – 8 if 'no')
2. If yes – what does he/she/they do at school? Where are they? (Do they help you? How? Why not? Have you ever sometimes thought that you would like them to go? Have they ever got you into 'trouble'?)
3. Do they help you with any work? How do they help? Do they sometimes not help you? Where are they at playtimes? Lunchtime?
4. If your imaginary friend/s comes to school are they the same as they are out of school? Do they change in any way? (Look like/things they say?)
5. Does anyone know your imaginary friend/s is in school?

6. If no – Where is your imaginary friend when you are in school? What are they doing?
7. Would you like them to be at school with you? Why? Why not?
8. Do they help you with school work at home, such as with homework? How?

**Duration and onset of imaginary friend**

1. When did you first start to have an imaginary friend/s?
2. Can you think of any reasons why you started to have an imaginary friend/s?
3. Are there any particular times that you really like to see your imaginary friend/s?
4. Why do you think other people might have imaginary friends?

*Debriefing:*

*Okay, that's the end of the session. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your imaginary friend? Is there anything you would like to ask? If you think of any questions that you would like to ask later on, you can always let a teacher know and they will contact me.*

*Thank you so much for giving up your time to help me today. It is really interesting and important to hear what people your age think about these things.*

(Based on Burton, 2010)

APPENDIX F

'Daisy' and 'Lilly' by Ann-Marie





APPENDIX G

'Billy Bob' by Callum



APPENDIX H

'Tanya' and 'Mellissa' by Chloe

Tanya



Mellissa



APPENDIX I

'Steve' and 'Clara' by John



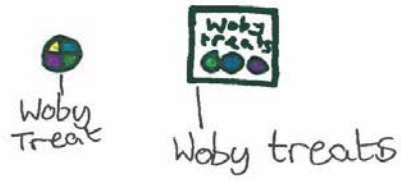
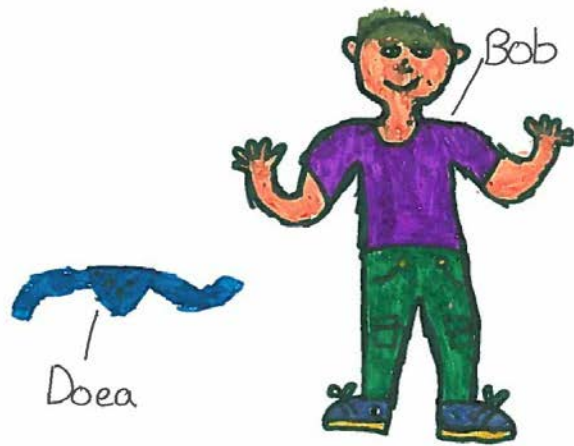
APPENDIX J

'Mark' by Mark



APPENDIX K

'Bob' by Toby



APPENDIX L

'Max' and 'Nuts' by Tom



APPENDIX M

Extract of interview transcript

Jude: "You mentioned your imaginary friends...so how long have you had your imaginary friends?"

Ann-Marie: "I think I started having them when I was five and then I, yeah I think I just kept on going, keeping them".

Jude: "So, who knows that you have imaginary friends?"

Ann-Marie: "Well my mum knows a little bit about them because she sees that I talk, and my dad does too...um I don't think my brothers really know but my grandma does know a little bit too".

Jude: "OK. Do you brothers, do they not know because you don't talk to your imaginary friends with them around?"

Ann-Marie: "I do but I think they'd just spite me being, talking to myself, because sometimes I do talk to myself too, but uh...yeah, I'm not sure really".

Jude: "But your mum and your dad know that you have imaginary friends?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah".

Jude: "But your gran knows a little bit? Can you tell me the name of your imaginary friend/s?"

Ann-Marie: "Well I've got two. Lilly and Daisy. And that's all".

Jude: "So they're girls?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah".

Jude: "Both girls. OK. And where did the names Lilly and Daisy come from?"

Ann-Marie: "Um I'm not really sure, I just like the name Lilly and Daisy 'cos they're like really sweet names and I just think that I could call them Lilly and Daisy".

Jude: "You'd like to have friends called Lilly and Daisy?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah".

Jude: "So they came to you".

Ann-Marie: "Yes".

Jude: "What does Lilly look like? Can you describe her?"

Ann-Marie: "Well Lilly's um well she always has her hair up and she always has little plaits (*uses hands to add to her description of plaits*) and then she wears two clips either side and she likes

wearing dresses and she's very funny and she likes smiling and likes playing with me and she's a really nice friend".

Jude: "Yes, so she's a really nice friend....and what about Daisy? What does Daisy look like?"

Ann-Marie: "Well Daisy's quite shy but she's got plaits either side like that (*uses hands to show me where plaits are*) and she's um well she, she's really funny too...um and she likes skipping and she likes playing like sweet games and she likes flowers and she likes wearing skirts and tops with flowers all on them and stuff".

Jude: "So Daisy's shyer than Lilly?"

Ann-Marie: "Yes".

Jude: "Where does Lilly sleep?"

Ann-Marie: "Well I've got a bunk bed and Lilly normally sleeps on the bunk bed and then Daisy... they swap over, so Daisy sleeps in the bed and then Daisy sleeps, well I think, well sometimes Daisy comes up and sleeps with me and we go head to tail because she's scared sometimes when we're in the dark so sometimes we swap around and then Daisy sleeps underneath me and then Lilly comes up and sleeps with me".

Jude: "Wow gosh, that's quite crowded?"

Ann-Marie: "Yes".

Jude: "But sometimes there's a little bit of maybe you're looking after Daisy when she's a bit scared of the dark?"

Ann-Marie: "Yes".

Jude: "and what do they eat?"

Ann-Marie: "They eat the same things as me and they um they like they share the tea with me and dinner and um...sometimes if I don't have enough I put some more on the plate and give them to them and then I...I sometimes, sometimes whenever I want to eat something and they don't they just say 'no' and I just say 'that's alright'. Sometimes they don't want to eat with me".

Jude: "So do they have a place at the dinner table?"

Ann-Marie: "Um they normally sit, Daisy normally sits there (*points to her right*) and Lilly sits next to me the other side".

Jude: "OK, so Lilly sits on your left".

Ann-Marie: "Yeah. Then Daisy sits on the right".

Jude: "Where did Lilly and Daisy come from? How did they come to you?"



Ann-Marie: "Well...I...I'm not sure really, I just...well one day I think it was I got really bored and I decided to have some new friends and I went outside and I looked at a daisy and I thought I could have a friend called Daisy and then um...I think, I dunno, I just liked the name Lilly so I thought I would...Lilly and Daisy...to make Lilly and Daisy".

Jude: "So Daisy came first because you saw a daisy and thought, 'ooh that's a nice name, I'd like a friend called Daisy, I'll invent one', and then you liked Lilly as well?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah".

Jude: "So did you think of them on the same day?"

Ann-Marie: "Um I think, yeah, I was like playing with Daisy and then a few like minutes later I thought like I could have another friend too, Lilly".

Jude: "and they've been the same since you thought of them when you were five?"

Ann-Marie: "Yeah".

APPENDIX N

Examples of initial codes

Data extract	Coded for
<p>Ann-Marie: “Well...one day I think it was I got really bored and I decided to have some new friends and I went outside and I looked at a daisy and I thought I could have a friend called Daisy and then um...I think, I dunno, I just liked the name Lilly so I thought I would..Lilly and Daisy...to make Lilly and Daisy”.</p>	<p>Alleviate boredom Decision to create IC Need for friends Creativity? Conscious decision to create ICs</p>
<p>Ann-Marie: “Well, they’re normally always with me, sometimes...um I call their names and they’re mostly um...with me normally ‘cos they like being with me”.</p>	<p>Constant companions Available when needed Feeling wanted by ICs?</p>
<p>Ann-Marie: “Well, they’re really like helpful and they make, if they see I’m really sad they make me just really happy and they make...especially Lilly ‘cos she’s really funny, she makes me like laugh and makes myself better...and Daisy, ‘cos she likes... makes up her own games...um when I’m bored then she makes her own games and it makes me happy”.</p>	<p>Helpful Emotional support/ICs show empathy Funny/amusing Creativity Alleviate boredom</p>
<p>Ann-Marie: “Well, I like, I like them because they’re like the same as me really but they’re not exactly the same and they would never shout at me, we would never have an argument or anything, we would just always be friends”.</p>	<p>Confirmation of self? No conflicts/arguments Consistent Ideal friendships?</p>
<p>Ann-Marie: “No, they don’t come to school with me but they normally stay outside and stay with my rabbits and chickens, because I’ve got rabbits and chickens. They normally stay outside with them and play with them”.</p>	<p>IC’s caring for her pets? Play with child by proxy through her pets? – being kept in mind of the IC’s?</p>

<p>Ann-Marie: “Um, well, they do help me with my Maths sometimes. I like do my Maths and then I don’t know this answer, I ask my dad and then he doesn’t know either so then, ‘cos Lilly’s quite a Mathematician”.</p> <p>Ann-Marie: “She’s really good at Maths and then she tells me how to work it out and then I get it right and then Daisy helps me with, oh some of the words...um that I have to put in like order, um...she helps me with that”.</p> <p>Ann-Marie: “Yes, she asks me um...add like, add like dunno 6 or something and then and then well she does she does like a really easy way to do it, to work out the answer”.</p>	<p>Coveted skill?</p> <p>Deferring to Lilly as she’s “better” at Maths? If answer is incorrect it’s not her ‘fault’ so passing responsibility to IC?</p> <p>Being helped and supported Help with problem-solving</p> <p>Using IC as aide memoir to strategy that has been taught?</p>
<p>Jude: “Do they ever stop you doing your homework?”</p> <p>Ann-Marie: “Um...(smiles)...well, sometimes they, well they have once I was doing this homework, I think it was Daisy that came to me and said ‘can we play games ‘cos you’ve been working for <i>hours</i>’ and I’m like ‘wait a minute’ but then I just got too carried away that I started playing” (<i>laughs a little</i>).</p>	<p>Fun/making homework more interesting?</p> <p>Deferring responsibility/IC’s want <i>her</i> to play</p>
<p>Ann-Marie: “....my oldest brother is like really annoying so and he makes me like really cross and stuff and he doesn’t really like playing with me ‘cos he’s older now and so I’m normally always playing on my own and I thought well it is best to have friends so I thought I could make up my own imaginary friends”.</p>	<p>Created IC’s for emotional support due to older brother making her angry</p> <p>Alleviate feelings of loneliness?</p> <p>Friends to help with problem-solving Resilience</p>

Ann-Marie: "I have got a best friend that's real but Daisy and Lilly are kind of like my best friends too but only I can see them".	Awareness of pretend nature of IC's Reality/fantasy distinction
Callum: "I usually talk to him when I'm having tantrums...My big brother does annoy me a lot".	Emotional support and regulation Helps him cope with older brother who annoys him
Callum: "Um, I don't want to be cross in front of him, I just want to try and calm down to make it a little bit better".	Not wanting to be angry in front of IC – a regulating influence when angry?
Callum: "He talks to me in my head and it makes me feel a little bit better.....saying 'calm down' and stuff like that".	Externalising or personalisation of self-talk techniques
Callum: "Um like usually when we're get in tantrums he just comes into my head and I try to calm down".	IC appears when he's needed - reliable
Callum: "No, he's not allowed".	IC 'not allowed' in school – acceptance of adult 'rules'
Callum: "Yeah I'd like that [to come to school] if he would behave but I don't think he would".	Would like him to be at school but don't think he'd behave – autonomy of IC
Callum: "So maybe at play if no-one's going to play with me and I'd be able to play with them".	Someone to play with at playtimes – to alleviate loneliness?
Callum: "Usually when I'm having tantrums I just get so annoyed that I thought I just could maybe get someone to help me".	Invented IC to help him when he has tantrums

<p>Chloe: "I just really just like they came.....I just started pretending they were there and they just kept like staying with me, yeah, really".</p>	<p>Awareness of difference between reality and pretend</p>
<p>Chloe: "They like, if I talk to them, they always like reply with an answer and if like I'm angry or something they'll like kinda talk to me and get me calm".</p>	<p>Emotional regulation and help to calm her</p>
<p>Chloe: "They're at home, just like doing what we do at the weekend and stuff like that...just like watching telly...running around".</p>	<p>Having fun by proxy when Chloe at school – what she would rather be doing? IC still exists when Chloe at school - permanency</p>
<p>Chloe: <i>[Wouldn't want them to be at school]</i>  "Because I think they might like bug me a bit like kinda...get me distracted a bit maybe...Um not really focused I guess really, they won't...they'll probably get bored and yeah, they wouldn't really, they would probably distract me and make me like annoyed"</p>	<p>Thinks that IC's would be a distraction at school</p> <p>Thinking how IC's may feel</p> <p>IC's would cause annoyance</p>
<p>Chloe: "Sometimes like when I'm really happy and I want to explain what happened or if it's like something really fun at school in the morning or something and I'm getting ready.....really, just when I'm really excited or sometimes when I'm sad and I want to like explain what's wrong and stuff, and I just want to say it, not like keep it in".</p>	<p>Going over important events/reliving happy times</p> <p>Sharing when excited</p> <p>Sharing and offloading when sad – using as emotional release?</p>
<p>Jude: "How do they help you from feeling sad?"  Chloe: "They sometimes give me advice to tell my mum, like tell the teacher or tell a friend or something".</p>	<p>IC's give advice – self-talk/perhaps checking possible solution(s) first?</p> <p>Problem-solving</p>

<p>John: "Ummm...then, when we go to weekends, when it's shopping, when I like... then they push me, so I can go faster round the shop, so it makes the time quicker, so we can do stuff".</p>	<p>Pushes him around shops so it takes less time – way of coping with things he doesn't like or want to do?</p>
<p>Jude: "Are there any particular times that you like to see your imaginary friends?" John: "It was like on my birthday...no-one came to my birthday party...I sent like invitations but they didn't come and then I was so lonely and they came to my party...that's the time when they came..."</p>	<p>IC's alleviate loneliness – no-one came to my party <b>QUOTE</b></p>
<p>Mark: "He's a nice guy...He plays with me and things like that...like watches TV with me".</p>	<p>Likes his IC – company and someone to be with</p>
<p>Mark: "No, there's nothing I don't like about him".</p>	<p>Acceptance of IC - Likes his IC</p>
<p>Jude: "Where is your imaginary friend when you are in school? What are they doing?" Mark: "He probably plays on his Xbox and things like that 'cos I always find when I come home the thing was on game, so he probably has been on the Xbox or on the computer...He's probably out and about walking down the road and things like that. Going on a cycle ride".</p>	<p>Having fun by proxy when Mark at school – what he would rather be doing? IC still exists when Mark at school - permanency</p>
<p>Mark: "Like um kinda says to you words like, gives me the spellings of them".</p>	<p>IC gives spellings – Deferring responsibility? Reassurance?</p>
<p><i>[When IC comes to school]</i> Toby: "He normally helps me with the work or when I'm playing and I don't really want to play football or anything, I just walk around with him".</p>	<p>Helps with work IC company when Toby doesn't want to play football</p>

<p>Jude: "Where did Bob come from? How did he come to you?"</p> <p>Toby: "Because, um at my old school I didn't really go round a lot playing with all the people who really want to play with everybody because they were crowded a bit too much, so I just made Bob up".</p>	<p>Created IC as other children 'crowding' him – someone safer to play with?</p> <p>Conscious decision to create IC</p>
<p>Toby: "Well, when there's nobody around I just start looking around, but they're mainly on the grass and then I just watch, I just look in front of me and I can see him do loads of tricks".</p> <p>Jude: "Wow, what kind of tricks does he do?"</p> <p>Toby: "Back flips".</p>	<p>IC does 'tricks'</p> <p>Entertainment/amusement?</p> <p>Coveted skill?</p>
<p>Toby: "Yeah, he shows me how to do it. 'Cos when I don't really understand what they're talking about [<i>in gymnastics</i>], I just look over to the side and then I can see him do what I'm supposed to do"</p>	<p>IC demonstrates how to do something and he copies – Visual learner?</p>
<p>Toby: "Yeah, he shares more [<i>when he comes to school</i>] because he thinks that other people can see him".</p> <p>Jude: "Oooh, can other people see him?"</p> <p>Toby: "No".</p> <p>Jude: "But he thinks they can?"</p> <p>Toby: "Yeah".</p>	<p>Credits IC as being aware of how his behaviour may look to others</p> <p>Aware of reality/fantasy distinction but putting self in IC's position?</p>
<p>Toby: "He stays at home. He sometimes gets a bit peckish and starts eating the Wobby treats, but he normally just stays in the den just playing on his gadget"</p>	<p>Having fun by proxy – doing what he would be doing if he wasn't at school?</p> <p>IC still exists when Toby at school – permanency</p>
<p>Toby: "Well mainly he just gets like a little voice and starts saying like, um 'do this kind of column method and add it up'. He tells me the answers, how to add it up and then I'll start</p>	<p>IC tells him the answer</p>

<p>going like that, doing the answer, and then I'll find out".</p>	<p>IC helps by suggesting approach/strategy to work out the answer</p>
<p>Jude: "Are you going to tell Bob that you've been talking to me about him?" Toby: "Yeah. 'cos I have to tell the truth with him because he's very sensitive and in his brain he's got a lie detector"</p>	<p>IC has feelings and has something special/unique – not usually have – 'super power'. Moral purpose – have to tell IC the truth. Development of morals?</p>
<p>Tom: "and um, well, we both me and Max and Nuts have good fun with Peter 'cos we have um like a shed in my garden and um we always go in it and like dress up and play with toys and stuff, in my shed, together". Jude: "and Peter is your real younger brother?...So who knows that you've got an imaginary friend?" Tom: "Um well Peter, me and um well mum didn't really know but then um I told her a couple of weeks ago".</p>	<p>Created to have fun with – amusement?  Brother knows about IC – shared?</p>
<p>Tom: "Well she [<i>his mother</i>] said she'd never really heard of him before but it's 'cos I hadn't really told her to be honest because I like keeping him secret to be honest..."</p>	<p>Likes keeping IC a secret – something only he has/private life separate from adults?</p>
<p>Tom: "...Sometimes he [<i>the puppy Nuts</i>] grabs hold of my leg when I'm going somewhere because he doesn't want me to leave him he says 'I'll come to the roof with Max' and he just jumps onto the roof".</p>	<p>Wants to be needed? Nurturing Nuts?</p>
<p>Tom: "um well, sometimes they just hide, they just hide from me. When we're playing hide and seek it's reeeaaally hard to find them, I have to use my imagination to find them which is very hard" Jude: "Right 'cos they're very good at playing hide and seek?"</p>	<p>Plays games with IC's – entertainment?</p>

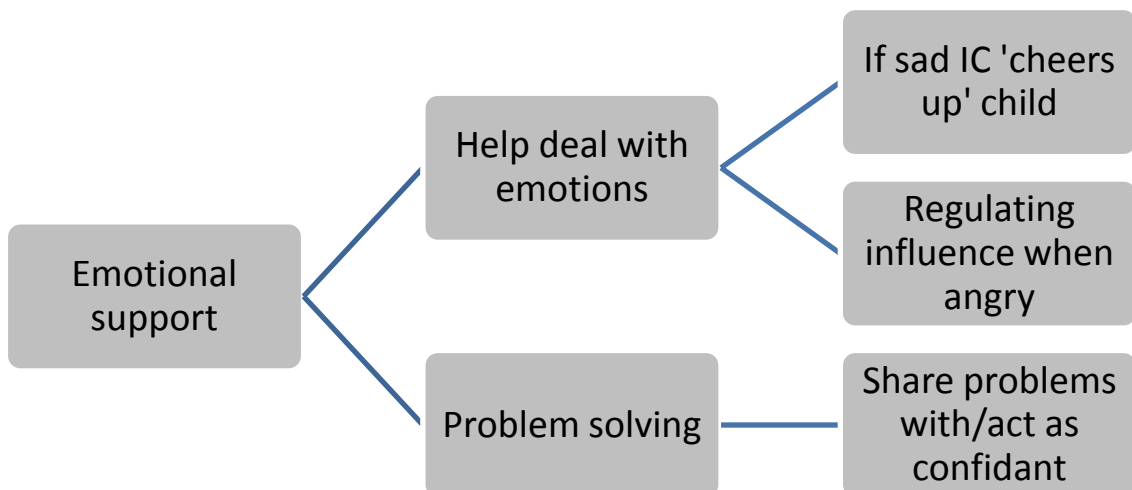
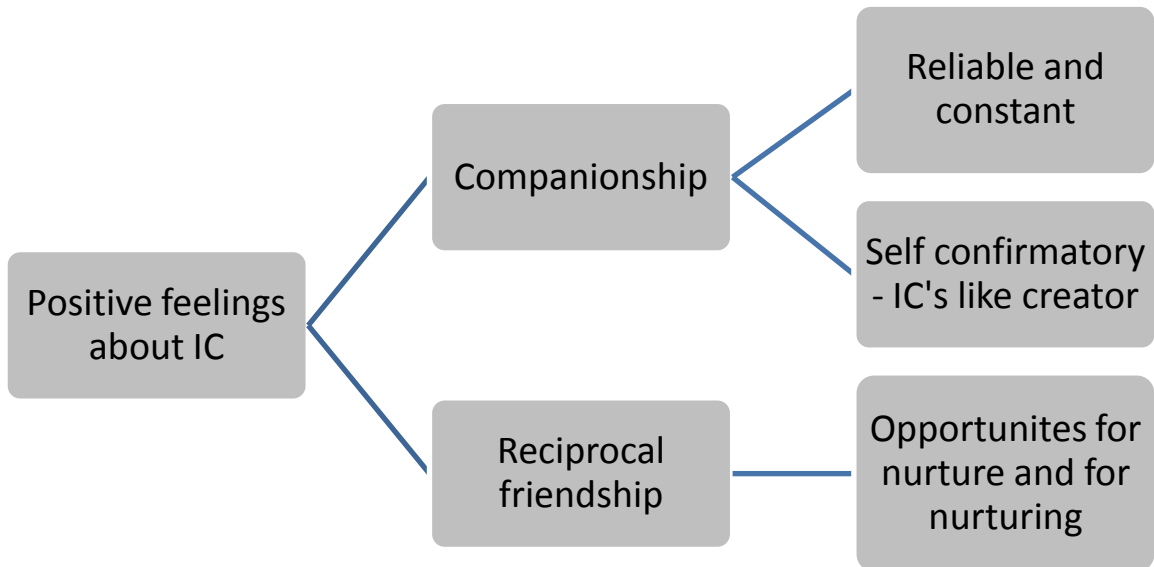


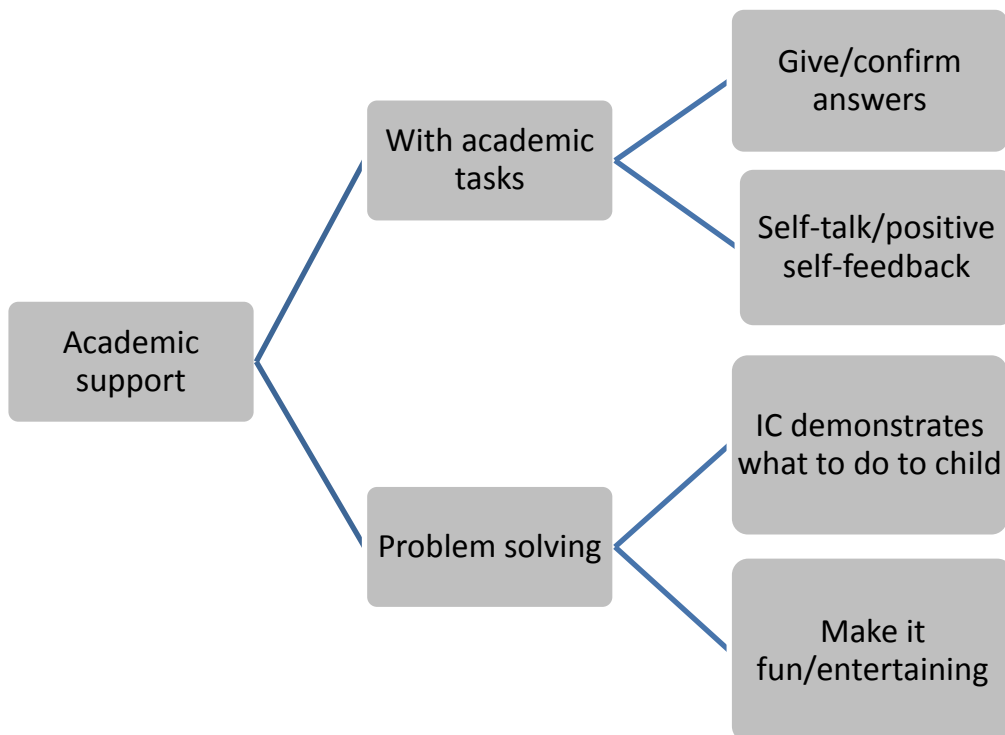
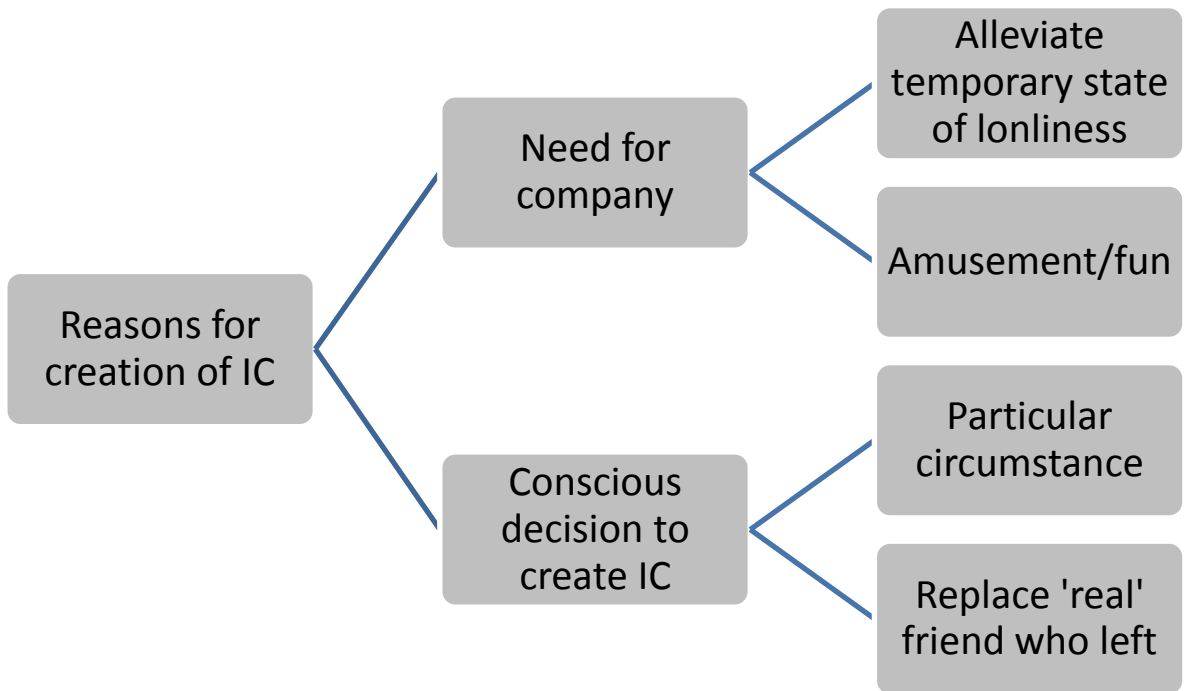
<p>Tom: "Yes, 'cos no-one else can see them, so if I have Peter helping me it's no use 'cos you can't see them"...</p>	<p>Recognise they're imaginary and no-one else can see them</p>
<p>Tom: "Well once when it was my first day in a new class they come to help me and um...in the rest of the year I sort of, well, when it's, well when it gets into the year and I settle down in that class they sort of go home and um stay at home until I come home but if it's like my first day in a new class and I don't know what's goin' on, they sort of come and help me"...</p>	<p>IC's come to school on the first day – provide support with transition to new class</p> <p>Doesn't need IC's when settled?</p>
<p>Tom: "Yeah and sometimes, when I'm trying to chase my friend the easiest thing is they just run up behind them because Max is a really fast runner and they can't see him so he just trips them up so I can catch them" <i>(Tom laughs)</i>.</p>	<p>Coveted skill?</p> <p>Helps win games/play tricks on friends</p>
<p>Jude: "Do they help you with any work? How do they help?"</p> <p>Tom: "Well, they sort of if I don't know the answer, they know the answer and sometimes they don't know the answer 'cos Max always carries a calculator he just calculates it and tells me" <i>(Tom laughs)</i></p>	<p>IC has calculator to give him the answer – wishful thinking?</p>
<p>Tom: "Nuts is helpful in literacy 'cos he always has this stupid imagination where he knows every single fairy tale and every single thing about literacy. So when it's in literacy he's really helpful 'cos he can just memorise it and tell me".</p> <p>Jude: "Does he help you in any other way in literacy?"</p> <p>Tom: "Um, yeah 'cos if the teacher says like what's a adjective and I didn't know, sometimes he would just say <i>(Tom whispers)</i> he'd just</p>	<p>IC has imagination too and extensive knowledge about fairy tales – good at helping Tom to make up stories</p> <p>Gives Tom the answer</p>

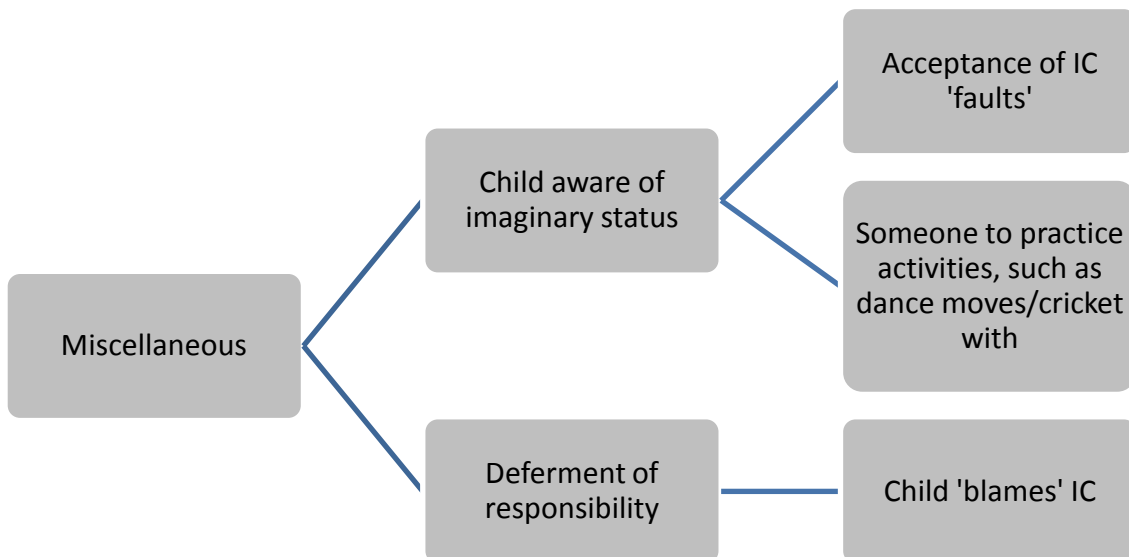
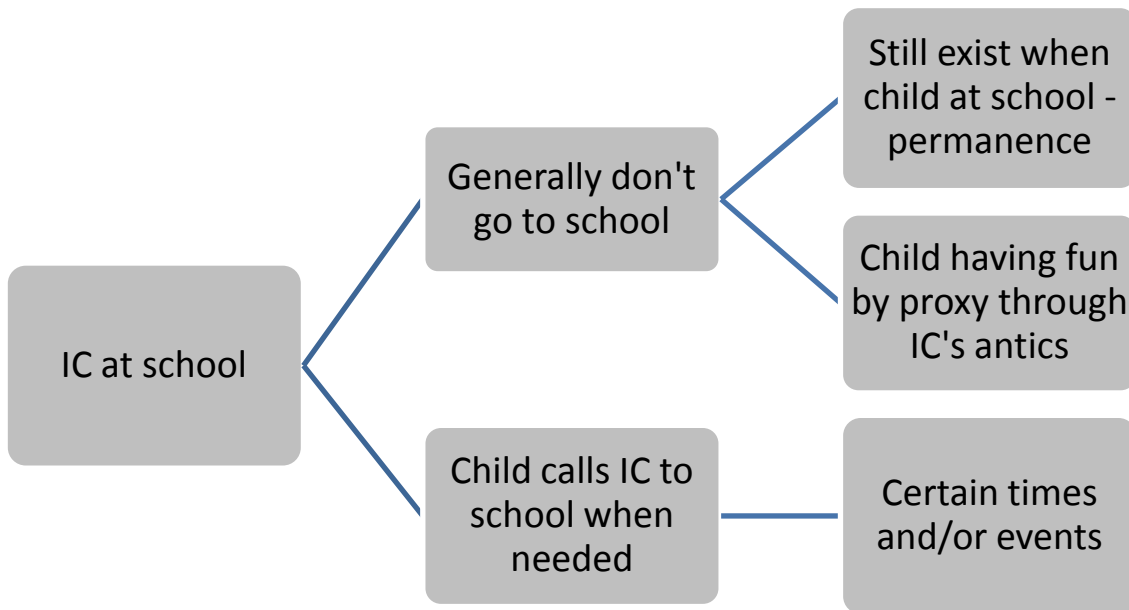
<p>whisper it to me and then I would just say it".  Jude: "So <b>he</b> knows the answer?"  Tom: "Yes, sometimes. He just tells me and I just tell the teacher so it looks like I knew it".</p>	<p>Morals? Seems content to deceive the teacher?</p>
<p>Tom: "Well they're probably at home watching telly or playing in the garden, if it's really sunny they've probably got my deckchairs out and just lying in the sun with their sunglasses on...<i>(Leans back in chair and puts arms behind his head)</i>... 'Cos mum and dad aren't there and no-one comes, they just put all their clothes on so, so they put some of my clothes on so it looks like someone is wearing my clothes but they can't see them, but no-one comes around".</p>	<p>Having fun by proxy – doing what he would be doing if he wasn't at school?</p> <p>IC still exists when Tom at school – permanency</p> <p>Practical jokes? Sense of fun</p>
<p>Jude: "Can you think of any reasons why you started to have an imaginary friend/s?"  Tom: "I don't really know. I just thought um, I asked my mum could I have a friend round and she said 'It's too warm today, everyone's probably in their back garden, they won't wanna come and play with you' so I just go 'OK' and I just thought, I wonder what I could do, I really wanna friend and I just made up these imaginary friends to play with me".</p>	<p>Created to alleviate temporary loneliness and wanted to play</p> <p>Conscious decision to create IC's</p>
<p>Jude: "What kind of personality has Max got?"  Tom: "Well he's got a very funny one, and he's kind and he likes to play with me and he's my friend ....."</p>	<p>Understands question about IC having personality – permanence</p> <p>Funny and kind – ideal friend?</p>
<p>Jude: "and what about your real friends?"  Tom: "Well I have got one really really good friend, which is my actual friend but two of my real friends aren't actually that nice to me, so I wanted some more good friends so I got Max and Nuts as well. Well my good friend doesn't know 'cos I don't want him to know".</p>	<p>Conscious decision – making positive decision to alter how situation is/imagining how he would like it to be?</p> <p>Keeping IC secret – doesn't want to hurt 'real' friends feelings?</p>

APPENDIX O

Thematic maps of the initial themes







APPENDIX P

Final thematic map

