

PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND SPIRITUALITY IN ARMENIAN
EARLY ADOLESCENTS INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY-BASED
SERVICE PROJECTS: A CASE STUDY

BY

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PHD IN HOLISTIC CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of a Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Center (CDC) in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects. Thirty-two children from one CDC participated in this qualitative research study.

Child participation includes both involvement in an activity and the process of giving children a voice or including them in the decision making. The children collaboratively chose, planned, and implemented a community-based service project while the research team observed the process. Then the children evaluated the projects and their roles in it through focus groups and interviews. The data showed that when the children were given the opportunity for self-determined community service projects, they were able to participate both by having a voice and being actively involved in every step of the project planning process: choosing the problem, designing the action plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating their work.

Using Shier's Centro de Servicios Educativos en Salud y Medio Ambiente (CESESMA) model (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017) as the theoretical framework for empowerment, the study looked at how the research participants perceive empowerment in three areas: development of capabilities and knowledge, creation of conditions and opportunities for empowerment, and personal attitudes and self-esteem. Capabilities the children identified included practical skills, teamwork, and surprise at what they could accomplish. Conditions included friendships and the support of leaders as they gave the children a voice, guided and redirected them during discussions,

encouraged them, and gave them practical support when asked. The children described the changes in their behavior and attitudes and identified the attitudes of happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility, and accomplishment. Results affirmed the theoretical framework for empowering children in this age group.

Children's spirituality was measured according to Hay and Nye's (2006, 65) categories of spirituality as relational consciousness: awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing. Awareness sensing was noted through the children's language as they spoke about God's character and their response to God. Mystery sensing was seen as the children spoke of dreams, wishes, or things beyond their comprehension. The children demonstrated value sensing through expressing compassion, kindness, goodness, generosity, gratitude, and love.

All three concepts—participation, empowerment and spirituality—were shaped by doing community-service projects. Whether the children spoke of helping others, helping the environment, helping themselves, or helping with God, active participation, true empowerment, and spiritual awareness were all present. Cause-effect, rationale, means-end, and attribution relationships were identified. However, the interrelationships were multi-directional, demonstrating there is no simple way to describe them. The concepts co-exist, at times acting independently of one another, but at other times woven together.

The study recommends that Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs, faith communities, and educators be more intentional to include child participatory activities and service opportunities in their programming as a part of holistic development, building awareness, and encouragement of children's spirituality in those activities. NGOs and

FBOs involved in child participation are encouraged to consider that children are spiritual beings and incorporate spirituality into their conversations.

CERTIFICATION OF PROOFREADING

I, Sheryl Grunwald (name of researcher), certify that this dissertation has undergone proofreading and editing by Ms. Jenny Torgerson, an authorized proofreader of the Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

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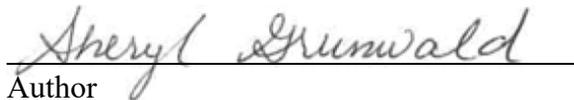
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DEDICATION

From the very beginning I dedicated this dissertation journey to God as an offering. May it be pleasing in your sight. All honor and glory belong to you, Lord.

To my parents, who encouraged me from my youngest years to pursue excellence in education but did not live to see its culmination. Thank you for believing in me. I know you would be so proud.

And to children everywhere who long to have their voices heard to make a difference in the world. You are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do. Go for it!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
SIGNATURE PAGE	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CERTIFICATION OF PROOFREADING	vi
COPYRIGHT STATEMENT.....	vii
ACADEMIC INTEGRITY COMMITMENT	viii
DEDICATION.....	ix
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	x
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES	xx
LIST OF TABLES.....	xxi
ACRONYMS.....	xxii
CHAPTER I: THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction.....	1
Background of the Problem	2
The Context of Armenia	8
Statement of Purpose	13
Statement of the Problem.....	14
Research Questions.....	14
Theoretical Frameworks	16

Brief Description of the Research Design	21
Significance of the Study	22
Assumptions of the Study	23
Definition of Key Terms.....	24
Scope and Delimitations of the Study.....	26
Outline of the Dissertation	27
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES	29
Introduction.....	29
Historical Background of Child Participation	31
Child Participation	33
Changing Perceptions of Children and Youth	35
Elements for Healthy Child Participation	38
Empowerment Theory	39
Youth Empowerment	42
Theoretical Frameworks for Youth Empowerment	43
Empowerment Theoretical Framework for this Study.....	45
Capabilities	46
Conditions and Opportunities	47
Attitudes	49
Empowerment and Service	51
Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Child Participation and Empowerment	54
Children are Whole Beings, Created in God’s Image.....	55
Children are Called to Love God and Love their Neighbor.....	56

Children are Part of the Body of Christ	57
Children have God-given Spiritual Gifts and are Able to Serve	58
Children are Filled with the Holy Spirit and able to Respond to Him....	58
Children are Part of the Great Commission.....	60
Children’s Spirituality.....	60
Elements of Spirituality	64
Researching Children’s Spirituality	65
Faith-Based Community Service	68
Spirituality, Empowerment, and Service	70
Early Adolescent Development	72
A Spiritual Perspective on Development.....	73
Physical Development of Early Adolescents.....	76
Cognitive Development of Early Adolescents.....	77
Social-Emotional Development of Early Adolescents	79
Community Service and Early Adolescent Development	81
Summary.....	82
CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES	85
Overview.....	85
Description of Research Methodology.....	85
Research Design.....	88
Selection of Research Assistants.....	91
Selection of Research Participants	93
Development of Instruments.....	95

Pilot Study.....	95
Field Procedures.....	97
Ethical Considerations	97
Informed Consent.....	98
Avoiding Harm to Participants	98
Anonymity and Confidentiality	99
Welfare of the Research Staff.....	99
Avoiding Manipulation or Exploitation.....	100
Permissions and Consent	100
Training.....	102
Remuneration	104
Data Collection and Recording.....	105
Field Observations	105
Interviews.....	107
Focus Groups	109
Data Processing and Analysis.....	112
Validity and Reliability.....	113
Summary.....	114
CHAPTER IV: PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA.....	115
Introduction.....	115
Research Limitations.....	116
Demographic Characteristics of Participants	120
Child Participation.....	125

Child Participation in Choosing the Project.....	129
Child Participation in Project Planning.....	136
Child Participation in Project Implementation	139
Child Participation in Project Evaluation	143
Non-Participation.....	145
Interpretation of Findings Related to Participation	148
Children’s Empowerment	152
Capabilities and Knowledge	155
Skills	155
Teamwork	157
Surprise	158
Conditions and Opportunities	158
Leader Gives Voice.....	159
Leader Guides.....	160
Leader Redirects	161
Leader Encourages.....	162
Leader Gives Practical Help	163
Friendship	164
Personal Attitudes and Self-Esteem.....	165
Happiness.....	165
Eagerness	167
Initiative	168
Responsibility	168

Confidence	169
Accomplishment	169
Change	171
Interpretation of Findings Related to Empowerment.....	173
Children’s Spirituality	175
Awareness Sensing	179
God’s Character	179
God Helps	179
God Provides.....	180
God as Creator	181
God Sees/is Present.....	181
Children’s Response to God	182
Please God	182
Love God	183
Spiritual Activities	183
Unprompted Spirituality	184
Mystery Sensing.....	185
Value Sensing	186
Compassion.....	187
Kindness.....	190
Goodness.....	190
Generosity.....	191
Gratitude	192

Love	193
Interpretation of Findings Related to Spirituality	193
The Core of Service/Helping.....	197
Helping Others	199
Helping the Environment.....	200
Helping the Broader Environment	200
Helping the Immediate Environment.....	201
Helping Myself	202
Helping with God.....	202
Interpretation of Findings Related to the Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality.....	203
Summary	207
CHAPTER V: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	208
Introduction.....	208
Summary of Findings and Conclusions	208
Participation	210
Empowerment.....	212
Spirituality.....	214
Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality	216
Recommendations for Practice.....	220
Recommendations for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs.....	220
Recommendations for Faith Communities	225
Recommendations for Educators and Schools.....	228

Recommendations for NGOs and FBOs Involved in Child Participation and Empowerment	229
Recommendations for Further Research	229
APPENDICES	232
A. Location Map of Yerevan, Armenia	232
B. Process for Designing and Implementing the Community Project	233
C. Field Observation Checklist	234
D. Protocol for Children’s Focus Groups	235
E. Protocol for Interviews with Children	238
F. Protocol for CDC Leader Focus Group	243
G. Research Assistant and Translator Confidentiality Agreement	244
H. Consent Form for Research Assistants	245
J. Informed Consent Letter for Parents of Participants	246
K. Assent Form for Research Participants (Children)	247
L. Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval	249
M. Letter of Permission for Director of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries .	250
N. Letter of Permission for Local Director of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Center in Yerevan, Armenia.....	251
O. Consent Form for CDC Leader Focus-Group Participants	252
P. Guidelines and Good Practices for Child Participation	253
Q. Outline for Training Staff in Facilitating Child Participation.....	254
REFERENCE LIST	255
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	278

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality as they Pertain to Service	14
Figure 2: Shier’s Framework for Youth Empowerment	17
Figure 3: Hart’s Ladder of Participation.....	33
Figure 4: Circle of Participation	38
Figure 5: Spirituality and Religion	61
Figure 6: Pathways between Spirituality and Civic Engagement	70
Figure 7: Research Design.....	90
Figure 8: Focus-Group Writing Activity	111
Figure 9: Ages of Participants.....	122
Figure 10: Gender of Participants	123
Figure 11: Participants’ Regular Involvement in a Faith Community.....	124
Figure 12: Sponsorship of Participants	125
Figure 13: Group 1 Project Implementation: Collection and Delivery of Food.....	140
Figure 14: Group 2 Project Implementation: Cleaning Church Yard.....	142
Figure 15: Lara’s Self-Evaluation of her Level of Participation	148
Figure 16: Luse’s Drawing of Before and After the Project.....	164
Figure 17: Angel’s Drawing of Before and After the Project.....	165
Figure 18: Jane’s Drawing of Before and After the Project	170
Figure 19: Hakob’s Drawing of Before and After the Project.....	171
Figure 20: A Summary of the Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality.....	218

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants	121
Table 2: Child Participation Codes and Definitions	127
Table 3: Group 1 Project Voting Results	131
Table 4: Group 2 Project Voting Results – Round 1	133
Table 5: Group 2 Project Voting Results – Round 2	134
Table 6: Children’s Empowerment Codes and Definitions	152
Table 7: Children’s Spirituality Codes and Definitions.....	176
Table 8: Helping Codes and Definitions.....	198

ACRONYMS

APNTS	Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary
CDC	Child Development Center, also called Kids Club
CESESMA	Centro de Servicios Educativos en Salud y Medio Ambiente
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
NCM	Nazarene Compassionate Ministries
NGO	Non-Government Organization
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
PYD	Positive Youth Development
SWB	Spiritual Well-Being
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

In September 2020, longstanding tensions between Armenia and neighboring Azerbaijan flared up, resulting in war. With thousands of displaced families pouring into the capital city of Yerevan, residents had to dig deep into their own resources to aid those who had lost everything in the conflict. While some people opened their homes to host displaced families, others donated practical items. In an effort to help those in need, leaders at a Church of the Nazarene Child Development Center (CDC) took action. They issued an invitation to the families of the children attending the CDC—many of whom do not attend the church—to donate food, water, hygiene items, and toys for children. Henry (name has been changed) came from a poor family and was himself a sponsored child at the CDC. Yet soon after the call for donations went forth, Henry arrived with his mother to drop off a package with food and other hygiene items. After his mother placed the donation in the collection box, Henry carefully placed a small chocolate on the top of the box. He told the leader that he had spent his own money (about ten cents) buying the chocolate and wanted to share it with another child who was suffering because of the war (Artsrunyan 2020). In spite of his own financial limitations, Henry chose to generously and lovingly share a small gift with someone he saw as more needy than him. The CDC's initiative empowered Henry to serve, he actively participated in the project, and his

service reflected spiritual qualities of compassion and care for others which was seen by his leaders as a demonstration of God's love.

Henry's seemingly generous action gives rise to several questions. What motivated Henry to act? Did he experience a sense of empowerment when he was given an opportunity to help others? Did he act upon a spiritual conviction or prompting? Did he talk about his plan to help with his parents or others? Perhaps all three—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—played a role in Henry's ultimate act of service. But how and to what extent did they relate to one another?

Background of the Problem

I have worked with children for decades as an elementary school teacher, a volunteer, and as a children's pastor in a Protestant Christian church. As a school teacher, I regularly observed children desiring to be useful. The children in my kindergarten classroom eagerly assisted me with many classroom tasks, but they also suggested ideas and participated in practical activities to help others. As a children's pastor, I desired that children's eyes and hearts would be opened to the opportunities for them to serve God in the church, but also to be "on mission" for God by taking initiative to serve in the community. Through service, children are "empowered to discover and exercise their gifts, and in an atmosphere of trust they are able to take initiative and gain confidence in their service and in their role and place in God's mission" (Shaw and Constantineau 2013, 221). Unfortunately, I quickly learned that not everyone in the church and community shared my passion, leading to significant challenges as I sought to help others understand that children had much to offer.

My current work as a global trainer of children's workers has taken me to more than thirty nations in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. As people who work with children share their struggles with me, their comments share a common theme: there is an unspoken assumption in many churches that serious ministry is carried out by adults, not by children. For the most part, children are seen as the future of the church but have little to contribute to the present ministry of the church. Therefore, children often go unnoticed or are dismissed as being unimportant to the "real" work of the church. They are considered objects of ministry, not agents of ministry. Even though these same children may serve and exercise leadership responsibilities in their schools, clubs or sports teams, their perspectives, abilities, and gifts generally are not seen as relevant to the church.

Every faith community wants the next generation to become followers of the faith. Typically, programs designed for children in those faith communities spend much of their time focusing on cognitive knowledge—learning about God, the teachings of the Bible (or other sacred texts) or the beliefs of their faith tradition. Nonetheless, they may not provide opportunities for the children to test their beliefs and appropriate those truths into their personal faith. Yet, particularly for children, a vital component of spiritual development is learning by doing (McConnell 2007, 249). Strommen and Hardel's (2000, 95) research indicates that involvement in service has proven to be a better predictor of faith maturity than participation in Sunday school, Bible study, or worship services. Participating in ministry opportunities such as service projects, outreach events, or mission activities allows children to take what they have learned about God and see it applied in real-life situations (Carr 2008, 206). As children debrief their experience with significant adults in their lives who can help them see meaningful spiritual connections,

practical experience solidifies faith in ways that a classroom can never do. Service appears to deepen faith when done in the context of a faith community.

At the same time, children are motivated to serve, whether or not they belong to a faith community. Henry's story and my own experience with children give evidence of a deep desire within children to help others or make a difference in the world around them. When children offer to help, they do not perceive themselves as having the limitations adults might place on them. In a non-empirical study of elementary-age children serving within a church context, Carr (2008, 208) concludes, "It is clear to children that God wants 'us' to serve, and that 'us' includes children." Barna (2003, 74) notes that when children develop the habit of service at a young age, the effect on their attitudes and perspectives of service often results in a lifetime of helping others. Tollestrup (2007, 190) points out that until children are given an opportunity to participate, "a rich resource lies undiscovered and remains only latent." The existing motivation and potential within children can be released and developed through engaging in service.

Over the past twenty-five years, the rise of multiple Christian movements and networks focused on children and youth (e.g., the International Sports Coalition, Viva Network for Children at Risk, Global Children's Forum, 4/14 Movement, Global Children's Prayer Network, 1for50, World Without Orphans, and Lausanne's Children at Risk issue network and Children and Family issue network) are indicative of the global church's awakening to the need to intentionally invest in the next generation. In the last decade a number of these movements have begun focusing more closely on children serving as agents in God's mission in the world. The 4/14 Movement has adopted the framework of rescue, reach, root, and release, articulating the ultimate goal of

encouraging, supporting, and equipping children so that they can become all they were created to be (4/14 Movement 2021). Lausanne’s Children at Risk issue network describes ministry to, for, and with children-at-risk (Lausanne Movement n.d.), articulating the need for children to be seen as partners and co-contributors. The 1for50 Movement has a vision to reach, disciple and empower children to become influential kingdom champions (1for50 2022). The Global Children’s Forum has developed initiatives that include partnering with children (Global Children’s Forum n.d.). While the terms vary, the focus is the same: for children to fully embrace their calling as Christians, they need to be resourced and supported—empowered—to be agents and co-agents in the work of God’s Kingdom. In that respect, the Christian faith community appears to be becoming more aware and supportive of what society in general is saying about the value of children’s participation and empowerment.

Since the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 and Hart’s (1992, 8) “Ladder of Children’s Participation,” there has been a growing acceptance and interest in children’s participation in community development and social change. In its most basic form, child participation involves giving children a voice and listening to them—allowing and encouraging them to make their views known on the issues that affect them, and then taking their views into consideration in the decisions made (UNICEF 2002, 4). But participation is much more than consultation. Over the past thirty years, children have become active contributors in community development issues (e.g., health care, education, poverty, children’s rights, disabilities, child labor, abuse, and exploitation, etc.), evidenced by research addressing their participation in all aspects of community-based initiatives. “Children have proved

that when they are involved, they can make a difference in the world around them. They have ideas, experiences, and insights that enrich adult understanding and make a positive contribution to adult actions” (UNICEF 2002, 9). The more recent introduction of the term ‘co-production’ reflects the collaborative nature of child participation, pointing to the growing value placed upon children’s service in the community, not only for their own well-being and development, but for the well-being of society.

Child participation or co-production goes hand-in-hand with the empowerment of children. Empowerment refers to having the resources to exert control over one’s environment or reach goals and the feeling or mindset that one can do so (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005, 125). When children engage in community-based projects through being heard and given knowledge, skills, opportunities, and support, their sense of empowerment can grow (Shier 2015, 213). However, even though youth empowerment has been a focus of much research, a broader focus that includes children’s empowerment is not as common (Ebbing 2010, 8), demonstrating that more research is needed in applying theories of empowerment to children.

How do children’s empowerment and/or participation connect with spirituality? My review of literature found very limited scholarly research exploring the spirituality of participation or empowerment in general and scant references to youth or children’s spirituality in studies addressing their participation and empowerment. This, too, points to a gap in the research.

Research into children’s spirituality has become increasingly popular in the past twenty years, using non-faith-based definitions for spirituality, such as “relational consciousness” (Hay and Nye 2006, 109), and other definitions that include two common

themes: self-transcendence and relationality—with self, others, the world and perhaps with the transcendent (Allen 2008, 7; de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012, 339). The expanded definition of spirituality (beyond faith traditions) opens the door to study the innate spirituality of children, whether or not they express their spirituality from a religious perspective. However, to my knowledge, research into children’s spirituality has rarely addressed the role of spirituality in participation and civic engagement or service within the community. Lehmann’s (2019, 21) investigation on how young adult spirituality may influence engagement in community service projects notes, “... evidence on spiritual outcomes of service-learning is primarily theoretical.” His research recognizes the lack of empirical studies to support the relationship between spirituality and service in the community. Some children’s studies measure “well-being” in empowerment or development (Cicognani et al. 2015; Grealish 2013; Huscroft-D’Angelo et al. 2017), but well-being is not specifically tied to the spirituality of children.

Additionally, my review of literature found very little scholarly research that looks at children’s participation, empowerment, or community-based service from a faith community’s perspective or with a view toward understanding the role of spirituality in service. However, as Crocker and Glanville (2007, 269) point out, children and youth are some of the most effective resources in community development. “Filled with creativity and energy, children and youth have the ability to network, mobilize, and multiply resources, which in the hands of Christ can bring *shalom* to their communities.” The implicit and anecdotal understanding of spirituality’s connection to children’s participation and empowerment must be considered more closely.

The need for research is evident. Serving in ministry is considered a part of discipleship and faith development, but even though children are eager to serve, many churches are not recognizing children as partners in ministry, giving them a voice, nor providing meaningful opportunities to serve. In the world of community development, children are participating in social issues and their voices are being heard, but research is limited on the relationship of spirituality to their participation and empowerment. Global Christian movements for children are seeing the need to empower children as agents in service within and beyond the church, but little research has been done to document what empowerment of children for ministry looks like in a faith-based context and how it relates to their spirituality.

The Context of Armenia

Armenia was an unexpected choice for the research for this dissertation. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of the program with which I had planned to partner, I turned to the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Department for assistance. The department consulted with its regional directors and identified two locations in Eurasia with Child Development Centers (CDCs) that were actively involved in community service projects. Both locations received an overview of the proposed research. The Armenian team agreed to host me and participate in the research project. With little previous knowledge of Armenia, my next step was understanding the cultural context for the research.

With a population of approximately 2.8 million (World Bank 2023), the Republic of Armenia is located in the southern Caucasus region of Eurasia, surrounded by the nations of Georgia to the north, Iran to the South, Azerbaijan to the east, and Turkey to

the west (see Appendix A for location map). Its location between the Black and Caspian Seas along the traditional Silk Road trade route between Europe and Asia has made it a strategic and desirable location for competing empires (Bakhchinyan 2017, 23). Rarely in its 2,500-year history has Armenia been independent (Mandryk 2010, 113). Over the centuries, the land inhabited by the Armenian people has been dominated by a succession of empires: Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, Russian, Mongol, and Soviet (Bobelian 2009, 17). After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia became an independent nation, and 98% of its population are ethnic Armenians (CIA.gov 2022).

The history of Armenia is notable, in part, because of the adoption of Christianity as its state religion early in the fourth century, the first nation in the world to do so. A century later, Armenians developed their own written language. Both have helped to keep Armenian history and cultural identity intact through the centuries (Keshishian and Harutyunyan 2013, 387). Despite continued changes in governments ruling over them, “... the Armenians rarely succumbed to assimilation, and instead obdurately maintained their unique language, religion, and heritage” (Bobelian 2009, 18). Today almost 95% of Armenians call themselves Christian (CIA.gov 2022).

The fierce cultural and spiritual identity of Armenians has also led to great hardships and suffering through the centuries (Whooley 2010, 80), even in recent history. An estimated 1-1.5 million Armenians were killed during the Armenian genocide (1915-1917) at the hands of the ruling Ottoman Turks, while millions more were uprooted, resulting in unimaginable suffering and loss (Bobelian 2009, 52). Diplomatic tensions and economic sanctions with Turkey remain to the present day. At the same time, Armenia remains in a struggle with Azerbaijan over control of Nagorno-Karabakh, a

primarily ethnic Armenian enclave within the territory the Soviet Union gave to Azerbaijan (CIA.gov 2022). Although there have been intermittent clashes over the years, the thirty-five-year ceasefire between the two nations was broken in September 2020, leading to war, and a November 2020 ceasefire brokered by Russia was violated several times in 2022 and 2023. Azerbaijan's September 2023 attack of Nagorno-Karabakh has seen more than sixty-eight thousand people (half the population) flee to Armenia rather than be under Azeri (Muslim) rule (Council on Foreign Relations 2023). Armenia's political position between two potentially hostile neighbors results in close diplomatic ties with Russia (Mandryk 2010, 113), also complicated by Russia's current conflict with Ukraine (Council on Foreign Relations 2023).

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a collapse of both Armenia's economy and the value system existing in the Soviet society, leading to an increase of crime (Proactive Society 2011, 2) and poverty. Since then, Armenia has rebounded economically and now ranks 129th of 212 world economies (World Population Review 2023) with accelerated economic growth since 2017. In spite of that, a significant number of Armenians still face economic hardship, with 26.5% of the population still living below the national poverty line and unemployment sitting at 12.6% (World Bank, 2023).

The family unit is very strong and integral to Armenia's collective culture (Ghazarian 2023). Even though children are highly valued in Armenian culture (Aprahamian 2022), families face challenges. Domestic violence is one of the most pressing problems (Proactive Society 2011, 2). There is a marked difference between cities (where half the population lives) and villages. Poverty and lack of development are rampant in rural areas (Mktchyan 2023). Because of unemployment, many fathers have

left Armenia to work internationally, especially in Russia, leaving mothers to raise their children. Sometimes fathers even find a new family in the place where they work and rarely return to visit their Armenian children (Mktchyan 2023). A 2016 study of Armenian youth found that they are dependent upon their parents—financially and morally—and under the social pressure of their communities, particularly in rural areas (Mkrtichyan, Vermishyan and Balasanyan 2016, 9). Children generally do not have a voice in the family until they are adults (Ghazarian 2023).

The Armenian Apostolic Church, part of the oriental Orthodox tradition, is the official church of Armenia, and for most people, to be Armenian is to be Christian. In the most recent census (2011), 94.8% of Armenians identified as Christian. Within that group 92.6% belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. The remainder of Christians are Catholic, other Orthodox, or Protestant. Only 1% of Armenian Christians identify as Evangelical. The remaining 5% of the population claim other religions (i.e., Muslims, Yazidis), no religion, or unspecified (CIA.gov 2022). The Armenian Apostolic Church's clergy have different perspectives about other religious organizations.

Some ... are considered completely unacceptable, which include Jehovah's Witnesses and sometimes the Mormons and Evangelical denominations, while the acceptable religious organisations are usually the traditional religions, mainly Catholicism, and those churches which do not actively preach. The attitude of many of the clergymen of the Armenian Church is based on the Church's perception of Armenian identity, according to which 'an Armenian is the follower of only the Armenian Apostolic Church' (Sargsyan and Ter-Gabrielyan 2014, 26).

They label any religious group that deviates from the historical beliefs as a "sect."

Children born into the Armenian Apostolic Church are considered members of the church, but in practical terms there is no real focus on children. In churches that do offer programming for children and youth, those who teach focus on teaching the history and

traditions of the faith with the goal of keeping people in the faith. Armenian Apostolic Church history is also taught in the public schools (Sargsyan and Ter-Gabrielyan 2014, 34). There is little or no Bible teaching (Gulesarian 2023). Children who attend church services with their families typically light candles to pray and then leave.

Nazarene Compassionate Ministries (NCM) walk alongside local Nazarene churches around the world in their efforts to meet the needs of children, families, and communities (NCM n.d.). In Armenia, NCM's child-focused ministries are based on a holistic child development model, providing children with opportunities to grow up healthy, receive an education, gain social skills, and develop spiritually (NCM 2017, 4). Armenian Nazarene churches have opened four Child Development Centers (CDCs), also known as Kids Clubs, that welcome all children who wish to join. Many of the children who attend are from economically or socially disadvantaged families and receive sponsorship funds based on family situations and conditions: single parent families, sick family members, families with many children, families dealing with social problems or abuse, children living with grandparents, etc. The Kids Club program includes Bible teaching from a Protestant perspective, education in life topics, physical games, creative expression through crafts, and nutritious lunches. Leaders of the Kids Clubs note that children become interested in serving in their pre-teen years (Lao 2021), and while leaders have created service projects for children in the past, they have never given children a participative voice in the project choice or plan. Thus the opportunities for true participation leading to empowerment have been limited. At the same time, even though they teach the children from a Christian perspective, there has been no documented

research on the spiritual motivations or effects of engaging in community service projects.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality in ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Child Development Centers in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. Although there is significant research in the areas of youth empowerment, participation, and civic engagement, less research has focused on child empowerment, and virtually no research studies have been found that explore the connections between participation or empowerment and spirituality in children when they engage in community-based service. By observing and listening to children's experiences and reflections on engaging in a community-based service project, this study seeks to discover how participation, empowerment, and spirituality interrelate as children choose, plan, and implement their service projects.

What is the relationship between participation and empowerment? Between empowerment and spirituality? Between spirituality and participation? Figure 1 illustrates these questions as the three concepts encircle the common activity of community-based service.



Figure 1: Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality as they Pertain to Service

The findings of the research will be shared with Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Department and the Armenian Nazarene Child Development Centers to inform their holistic program development for children.

Statement of the Problem

The problem investigated through this research study is: What are the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Child Development Centers in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects?

Research Questions

Several questions guide the research process using various methods of qualitative data collection.

1. Who are the select ten- to thirteen-year-old children in the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Center (CDC) in Yerevan, Armenia, participating in this research study according to the following demographics?
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender
 - c. Involvement or non-involvement in a faith community
 - d. Sponsorship in the CDC
2. In what ways are select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, able to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based service projects?
3. In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, perceive empowerment related to the following factors through engaging in community-based service projects?
 - a. Development of capabilities and knowledge
 - b. Creation of conditions and opportunities
 - c. Personal attitudes and self esteem
4. In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, express their spirituality through engaging in community-based service projects according to the following categories?

- a. Awareness sensing (alertness to spiritual, metacognitive matters)
 - b. Mystery sensing (wonder, awe, and imagination)
 - c. Value sensing (delight, despair, goodness, meaning)
5. What is the evidence of interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects?

Theoretical Frameworks

No single theoretical framework addresses all three concepts of child participation, empowerment, and spirituality. Therefore, this research study uses separate definitions and theoretical frameworks when addressing each of the three concepts.

The aspects of the research study related to empowerment are framed by Shier's CESESMA model of youth empowerment (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017), chosen because it was developed and tested in a non-North American collective culture—Nicaragua. Shier's model embodies both internal and external aspects of empowerment in the linking of three factors: capability/knowledge, conditions/opportunities, and attitude/self-esteem (Shier 2015, 213), illustrated in Figure 2. According to Shier's research, conducted with thirteen- to twenty-year-olds, all three factors must be present in order for a child or youth to be empowered. As such, his model supports the three foundational components of empowerment theory: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral (Zimmerman 1995, 588).

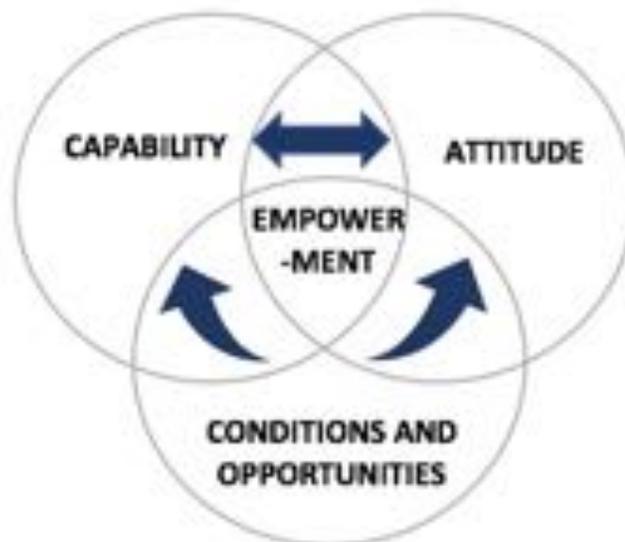


Figure 2: Shier's Framework for Youth Empowerment (translated by Shier from CESESMA-UNN 2010, 44)

Shier (2015, 213) defines capability as the ability to do things, and it includes both the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge or information needed to take action. The category of “capability” reflects the interactional (or cognitive) aspect of empowerment (Zimmerman 1995, 588), the development of an understanding of what must be done to effect change, including decision-making, problem-solving, and resource mobilization. As young people gain knowledge, strengthen existing skills, and learn new ones, they become competent in their ability to think and act for themselves as well as learn from their own and others’ experiences (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Lerner 2005; 2018; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018). While the specific skills, knowledge, and capabilities are unique to the projects developed by the participants in this study, children and youth who are involved in participatory activities or projects may develop knowledge and skills in communication, decision making, conflict resolution, negotiation, goal setting, resource management, and teamwork (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Ledford et al. 2013; Shier 2015; 2019; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

According to Shier (2015, 213), conditions and opportunities refer to the creation of a context that supports a young person's ability to do things, which correlates to the behavioral component of empowerment theory—the actions and participation one must take to make a change (Zimmerman 1995, 588). Researchers have identified several conditions that lead to the empowerment of youth, including the creation of a safe environment and structure, opportunities to belong or be in community, supportive relationships with adults, and the ability to have control over decisions and actions (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe 2011; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Liebenberg and Roos 2008; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018). In addition, opportunities for meaningful service or community action must be offered (Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Royce 2009; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Evidence of these positive conditions and opportunities for meaningful community action are noted throughout this research study as the children participate in designing and implementing a community-based service project.

Shier (2015, 213) observes that when children or youth see themselves as capable of taking action and affecting an outcome, this self-recognition leads to higher self-esteem. His identification of the category of attitude/self-esteem correlates to the intrapersonal (or emotional) component of empowerment (Zimmerman 1995, 588), the manner in which people think about their ability to achieve an outcome in their life and the perceptions and confidence that one can make a difference. Over the past two decades multiple researchers have identified several attitudes that either lead to or result from empowering activities: self-confidence, self-efficacy, an attitude of “Yes I can,” willingness, optimism, commitment, inner strength to confront and overcome obstacles,

love for others, setting an example to others, and a sense of purpose in life (Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2018; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; 2019; Zeldin et al. 2016; Zimmerman et al. 2018). While youth can be encouraged, attitudes leading to empowerment cannot be given to youth and children. They must grow and develop. This study notes the attitudes expressed by research participants who participate in community-based service projects as part of understanding the extent of the internal empowerment they feel.

To allow for a broader interpretation of children's expressions of spirituality beyond religious faith, the theoretical framework guiding the research into participants' spirituality is based on Nye's definition of children's spirituality as "relational consciousness" (Hay and Nye 2006, 109; Nye 1998, 235). It is relational because it involves a child's connectedness to self, other people, things (environment), and a transcendent dimension, often named God. It is consciousness or perceptiveness because of the child's keen awareness of these relationships (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, 14-15; Hay and Nye 2006, 109; Nye 1998, 237-238). "In this 'relational consciousness' seems to lie the rudimentary core of children's spirituality, out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight" (Hay and Nye 2006, 109).

Hay and Nye's (2006) research identified three main categories of spiritual sensitivity, which refer to different realms in which children can have spiritual interactions. The first category, awareness sensing, refers to paying attention to the here-and-now, focusing, and feeling "at-one" with something outside oneself. It includes an alertness to spiritual, metacognitive matters. The second category is mystery sensing, which includes the concepts of wonder, awe, and imagination, helping children enter into

aspects of life experience they cannot comprehend. The third category, value sensing, refers to the feelings or emotions that measure what is of value, including delight, despair, an ultimate goodness, and meaning. The categories serve to describe the range of experience or sources from which children can draw to express their individual spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006, 114). Hay and Nye's (2006) three categories form a theoretical framework from which aspects of spirituality are identified and measured among the participants throughout this research study.

The concept of child participation in this study is based upon the commonly understood definition of child participation, which has two components. It includes children's involvement in an activity, but participation also refers to the process of giving them a voice and including them in authentic decision making (Thomas 2007, 199; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 390). Therefore, the two components—voice and activity—serve as the framework from which participation is measured.

Children in the upper elementary grades, generally from ten to thirteen years of age, are the focus of this research study. Often referred to as “tweens,” they are not yet adolescents but may not really see themselves as children any more. They are at a unique and transitional period of life in all areas of their development as they move from late-middle childhood to early adolescence (11-14 years of age) (Berk 2014; McMahan and Thompson 2015), meaning there is much potential to draw from them. Insights from child developmental theories are also relevant for understanding the participants of this study and the reasons for selecting this particular age group.

Brief Description of the Research Design

This qualitative research study uses a single case study approach involving several methods of data-gathering. A case study method is the preferred research strategy when the main research questions are *how* and *why* questions, when the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon, and when the researcher has little or no control over the behavioral events (Yin 2018, 3). By gathering data from multiple sources, a case study becomes a rich source of information for understanding the case in its context. This research study uses the qualitative methods of field observations, interviews, and focus groups to maximize the depth of understanding of the case.

The case study participants are ten- to thirteen-year-old children who attend a CDC (Kids Club) run by Nazarene Compassionate Ministries in Yerevan, Armenia. All participants have parent/guardian permission to participate and have given personal assent to be part of the study.

In Phase 1 of the study, Kids Club leaders guide children through a process of identifying needs in their community. Then children choose, design, and implement a community service project to meet that need. During this phase, data is collected through the research team's field observations. In Phase 2, following the implementation of the service project, the qualitative data collection comes through children's focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In addition, testimonies and a focus group with the Kids Club leaders enriches the data. The use of different data sources and methods aid in data triangulation.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. First, since the research focuses on children's spirituality, empowerment, and participation, it contributes valuable data in the field of holistic child development due to its focus on physical, social, emotional, and spiritual facets of children. While many studies have researched the benefits of child participation (Ebbing 2010; Johnson 2017; McKernan et al. 2019; Ozer, Ritterman and Wanis 2010; Shier 2015; Torres-Harding et al. 2018), I have found little evidence that connects children's participation or empowerment to their spirituality. This study attempts to give a fuller picture of those interrelationships.

Second, this research study broadens the application of youth empowerment theory to a younger age group and helps to strengthen the application of the theoretical framework with early adolescents. Therefore, the concept of empowerment will be applied to children, which is not commonly mentioned in the literature I reviewed.

The study also is significant in its deliberate choice to define and measure children's spirituality more broadly than traditional religious definitions, such as church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, etc. This choice enables children who do not have strong religious affiliation to participate in the study and allows for the application of the results beyond a specific faith community. Although Armenians are predominantly Christian in their religious orientation, children may express spiritual concepts that are not specifically tied to Christianity. Nye's definition of spirituality allows those expressions to be heard and documented, giving a broader picture of children's spirituality that can inform non-faith-based research. At the same time, for children who are part of a faith community, the results contribute to the understanding of the spiritual

dimension of engaging in community service projects, potentially aiding faith communities in considering community-based service as part of the faith development of their children.

Focusing the research on children is significant for children, because it gives them an opportunity to have their voices heard, their ideas implemented, and their efforts noticed. It is hoped that giving children the opportunity to fully participate in the process leads to a stronger feeling of empowerment for the children in the study.

The results of the study are significant for increasing the global body of research related to children's studies and children's spirituality, and specifically adding to research coming from the nation of Armenia. A 2022 study on vulnerable youth in Armenia found no recent published research looking at factors related to well-being and resilience of young people in an Armenian setting (Devenish, Hooley and Mellor 2022, 135).

The study also is significant for the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, Armenia, in understanding their child-development programs in the nation to better serve their holistic development, as a report of the findings will be shared with them.

Lastly, the study is of tremendous significance to me, the researcher, in my ministry training and equipping of children's ministry leaders to reach, disciple and empower children in Asia and beyond. The results can also be shared in global children's ministry networks to which I belong.

Assumptions of the Study

This research study makes the following assumptions:

1. Children's voices and perspectives are valuable and can be heard to better understand and address the needs and issues in their contexts.

2. All people are spiritual beings, including children, regardless of their religious affiliation. Spirituality is an innate part of being human.
3. Children can be empowered for service and through service. They have the capacity to bring positive change to the community.
4. Children are willing to be involved in community-based service projects as well as being research participants.

Definition of Key Terms

Case Study. A case is a bounded system, a group of interrelated parts that create an organized whole (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 580). Case studies look intensively at the chosen topic or unit of study, seeing it from as many perspectives as possible in order to understand how the parts of the system work together (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 58). The bounded case in this case study is early adolescents attending a Nazarene CDC in Yerevan, Armenia.

Child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a human being below eighteen years of age (UN General Assembly 1989, 4). According to the World Health Organization, “adolescence” refers to children between the ages of ten and nineteen (WHO 2022).

Child Participation is the process whereby children can meaningfully share in the decisions that affect their lives and the life of their community (Hart 1992, 5). It includes their involvement in an activity, but participation also refers to the process of giving them a voice and including them in authentic decision making (Thomas 2007, 199; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 390).

Community-Based Service Project, which encompasses community service and civic engagement, involves engaging in the life of the community or neighborhood. The engagement may be seen as simply as ‘unselfish acts of caring and kindness’ or be a form of civic activism that addresses social problems and seeks positive social change (Scales and Benson 2005, 339). Service projects are projects designed to help or do work for others. In the context of this study, community-based service projects are conducted in the broader local context or neighborhood surrounding the CDC attended by the research participants.

Early Adolescents are children between the ages of eleven and fourteen years (McMahan and Thompson 2015, 9).

Empowerment is both external and internal. External empowerment is a person’s actual ability to control his/her environment, while internal empowerment is the feeling that he/she can do so (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005, 125). External empowerment is achieved through the development of skills and abilities, along with the creation of conditions and opportunities for action. However, empowerment is as much an internal process “through which self-belief, self-confidence, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, perseverance and solidarity take shape within the person” (Shier 2017, 20). Both external empowerment and internal empowerment are relevant to this research study.

Faith Community. A “community of people of the same religion; specifically, a group of people leading a communal life according to their religious faith” (*Oxford Online English Dictionary*, s.v.). It can refer to a specific congregation in a church, synagogue or mosque, or the general gathering of people of a particular religion.

Interrelationships refer to the way in which two or more things are connected and affect one another. Interrelationships can take many different forms in qualitative literature and are not limited to cause and effect or coexistence (Spradley 1979, 111).

Spirituality. Hay and Nye (2006, 109) define children's spirituality as "relational consciousness." It is relational because it involves a child's connectedness to self, other people, things (environment), and a transcendent dimension, often named God. It is consciousness or perceptiveness because of the child's keen awareness of these relationships (Hay and Nye 2006, 109; Nye 1998, 237). Children's spirituality is observed through interactions that give evidence of awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing (Hay and Nye 2006, 113).

Youth. There is no universally agreed upon age parameter for youth. The United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, understanding that "youth" is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence" (United Nations 2013, 1). Since many of the studies in the literature review refer to youth or young people, not children, the term is included.

Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted with ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending one CDC in Yerevan, Armenia (see Appendix A for location map), during the months of February and March 2023. Because of limits due to the location of the study and the number of children attending the CDC, thirty-two children took part as research participants and subsequently do not represent a complete cross-section of children of that age group living in Yerevan, Armenia. The research was also limited to children who

gave personal consent and whose parents/guardians gave permission to participate in the study.

While some of the qualitative data was obtained through observations over several weeks, data gathered from focus groups and personal interviews was limited by the children's openness to share their ideas, experiences and thoughts. Language was an additional limitation, since the research participants only spoke Armenian. In an attempt to mitigate this limitation, I trained an Armenian young adult as a research assistant who facilitated the focus groups and interviews, allowing children to freely speak in Armenian to someone closer to their age while I took notes via simultaneous translation (see Chapter III).

The study is very specific in the program from which it draws participants, since non-Apostolic evangelical churches make up only 1% of the Christians in Armenia (CIA.gov 2022). Therefore, the research findings are limited in their generalization to other programs working with children in Armenia, whether programs are offered through the Armenian Apostolic Church or other non-government organizations. Generalizations of the findings to other cultures and to other nations also may not be possible.

Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter I describes the topic of the research study: exploring the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene CDCs in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects. It identifies the problem and explains theoretical frameworks upon which the research is built.

Chapter II gives a broad overview of the review of literature relevant to the research topics of child and youth participation, youth empowerment, and children's spirituality and how they relate to one another with regards to civic engagement or service within the community. It also considers biblical and theological perspectives on child and youth empowerment, lending support to the holistic nature of empowerment. In addition, literature on early adolescent development (physical, cognitive, psycho-social and faith development) demonstrates the strategic importance of service in the community for children of this age.

Chapter III describes the research design and methodology proposed to gather the data for this qualitative case study. An important component of this chapter is the ethical considerations for doing research with children.

Chapter IV presents and analyzes the data as it relates to the research questions. It includes demographic information about the research participants, categories and codes that emerge from the data, and an interpretation of the findings.

Chapter V gives a summary of the research findings, along with conclusions and recommendations arising from the research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Introduction

Although significant research has been done in the areas of youth empowerment, child participation, and civic engagement over the past thirty years, and although there is a growing body of research on children's spirituality, very little research has been conducted that explores the relationships between the three concepts when it comes to children, particularly early adolescents. In a literature search of Social Science Abstracts, PsycINFO databases, and six key journals on child and adolescent development from 1990-2002, seeking to determine how extensively the topics of religion and spirituality were being addressed in published studies, Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude (2003, 206-207) discovered that fewer than one percent of the articles addressed issues of spirituality or spiritual development among children or adolescents. By broadening the key-word search to include terms related to religiosity and church, they found that the numbers only increased slightly. Causey (2017, 29) notes that many of the research studies that include items of religion or spirituality only include them as one of a number of variables, rather than as a central research focus. Youth empowerment literature rarely mentions any connection to spirituality. Donnelly et al. (2006, 241) is one exception, highlighting connections between spirituality and civic engagement. The demonstrated

gap in research relating participation, empowerment, and spirituality of early adolescent children forms the focus of my research study.

Chapter II provides a broad overview of the literature relevant to the research topics of child and youth participation, youth empowerment, children's spirituality, and how they relate to one another with regards to civic engagement or service within the community. It begins by briefly exploring the history of child participation, including key articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in order to frame a discussion on child participation. The concept of child participation is defined, along with the salient trends in research into effective child participation over the past thirty years. It includes research identifying the changing perceptions toward children and youth as partners in community-based service.

Because child participation is closely related to empowerment, the chapter then looks at empowerment theory, including youth empowerment theory. After several theoretical frameworks for youth empowerment are identified, the youth empowerment framework developed by Shier (2015; 2017) is explained in more detail as the theoretical framework for empowerment in this study. Shier's three main concepts which lead to youth empowerment—capabilities, opportunities and conditions, and attitude—are examined in detail, including research studies that address each of the three concepts. Since the focus of this research study is on service in the community, the literature review also includes research into the positive relationship between child/youth participation or empowerment and service in the community. Criticisms of child participation and empowerment are also addressed.

This chapter also considers biblical and theological perspectives on child and youth empowerment, identifying six biblical themes that align with key tenets of youth empowerment theory, lending support to the holistic nature of empowerment.

Children's spirituality is another key focus of this chapter's literature review. After considering definitions of children's spirituality, both religious and non-religious, it examines the research identifying universal elements of children's spirituality and the ways in which children's spirituality has been measured in research. Since the focus of this study is on spirituality's connection to service in the community, the literature review also includes studies identifying relationships between child and youth spirituality, empowerment, and service in the community, including faith-based community service.

Children ten to thirteen years old are at a unique and transitional period of life in all areas of their development as they move from late-middle childhood to early adolescence (11-14 years of age) (Berk 2014; McMahan and Thompson 2015). Therefore, the final topic in the chapter reviews their holistic development, proposing they are innately spiritual beings and that all development flows from that core. Developmental theorists, including Piaget, Vygotsky, Kohlberg, Erikson, and Bandura help to better understand the participants of this study and the strategic importance of service in the community for children of this age.

Historical Background of Child Participation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), introduced in 1989 and ratified by every nation except the United States of America, is the most globally recognized and respected statement regarding the protection and care of children. Articles 1-42 of the UNCRC describe a range of basic human rights for every

child. Marshall and Parvis (2004, 13) suggest a helpful framework for categorizing these rights:

1. Rights to Protection – from abuse, neglect and exploitation;
2. Rights to Provision – of services to promote survival and development; and
3. Rights to Participation – in decisions about matters that affect them.

From the perspective of the UNCRC, these rights must be realized for children to develop to their full potential. As children's rights to protection and provision are acted upon and fulfilled, it allows for appropriate child participation.

The conceptual ideology of children's rights to participate in social life as a citizen and, in particular, the importance of listening to the child's point of view did not begin with the UNCRC. It was suggested prior to World War II by Korczak (Jarosz 2018, 36). Korczak's values of equality, collaboration, and partnering with children, lived out in his work as principal of an orphanage in eastern Europe, are reflected in the UNCRC and have become core assumptions of children's participation and empowerment today (Jarosz 2018, 43).

The introduction of the UNCRC has profoundly influenced the field of child participation (Hart 1992, 6). Articles 12-14, in particular, provide a foundation for defining child participation. Article 12 speaks of the right for every child to express his/her views in matters concerning him/her and have his/her views considered and taken seriously according to their age and maturity, Article 13 addresses the right to freedom of expression, and Article 14 expresses the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (UN General Assembly 1989, 4). The understanding and practice of child participation has been developing dynamically over the past thirty years in practical and

research-related conversations as nations and organizations have grappled with the extent to which children have the right and responsibility to be involved in issues that affect them and their communities (Hart 2013; Jarosz 2018; Johnson 2017; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2009). A closer look at research frameworks and issues related to child participation inform this research study.

Child Participation

Hart (1992) was one of the first to suggest a framework for understanding child participation. His “Ladder of Participation” (see Figure 3) described levels of child participation ranging from non-participation (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) to child-initiated, shared decisions with adults (Hart 1992, 8).

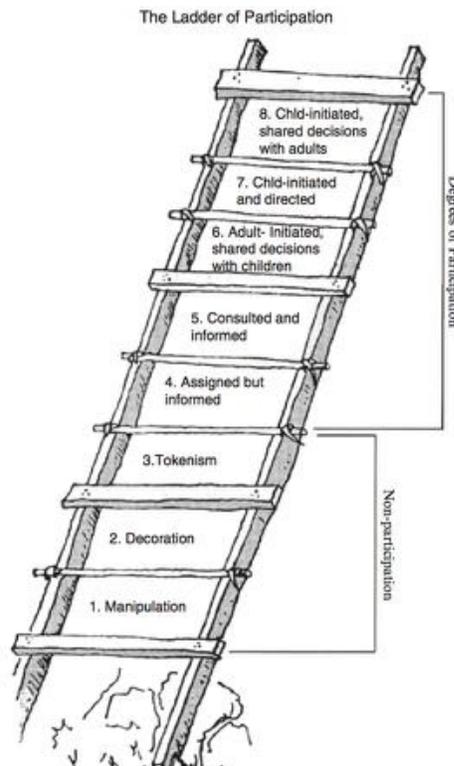


Figure 3: Hart’s Ladder of Participation (Hart 1992, 8)

Although there have been many critiques of Hart's theory in the years since it was introduced, the "ladder" provided an initial framework and vocabulary for discussing child participation and empowerment that has framed much of the thinking about children's participation up to the present day (Thomas 2007, 204).

Hart defines child participation as the process whereby children can meaningfully share in the decisions that affect their lives and the life of their community (Hart 1992, 5). It includes their involvement in an activity, but participation also refers to the process of taking part in decision-making (Thomas 2007, 199). UNICEF proposes that meaningful child and youth participation requires four things: space to form and express views, voice to express those views through different media, an audience to listen to their views, and influence or the appropriate action on the view (Lansdown 2018, 13). Clearly, the key component of child participation is giving young people a voice and including them in authentic decision-making (Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 390).

As researchers and practitioners have sought to clarify their definition of child participation, two main focuses have emerged. The first sees shared decision-making as the goal, while the second focuses on giving power to children (Thomas 2007, 205), suggesting that there is an element of child participation that is predominantly social, and a parallel focus that is more political (Thomas 2007, 206). The social emphasis of child participation is evident from a recent review of studies referencing the concept of child participation in child welfare by Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen (2021, 4). They report that terms such as collaboration, cooperation, consulting, involvement, engagement, listening, and children's voice are being used synonymously or in addition to participation. In some contexts, child participation has been equated with active

citizenship (Cockburn 2013; Jarosz 2018) or called “co-production” (Aked and Stephens 2009, 1). As can be seen, in the thirty years since Hart created his “ladder,” child participation has come to be understood as complex and multifaceted, affecting social, political, and personal spheres, and informed by multiple disciplines and theories (Cahill and Dadvand 2018; Skauge, Storhaug and Marthinsen 2021; Thomas 2007; UNICEF 2002; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010).

Changing Perceptions of Children and Youth

While the field of child participation continues to develop and expand, opposition exists. The concept of allowing children and youth to participate challenges some of the traditional views of children as “dependent ‘becomings’” who belong to parents or other adults (Warming et al. 2019, 39). Traditional views have focused on the superiority of adults over children and the necessity of protecting children, therefore rendering the independent rights of children unnecessary (Hegar 1989, 373). Some of the traditional views of children can be attributed to culture, and Hart (1992, 5) notes that cultural values and attitudes toward children have proven to be a major factor in their participation or non-participation. Differing perceptions of the capacity of children and youth have led to tensions when considering their participation.

One tension that has surfaced in research into child and youth participation relates to perceptions of young people’s ability or readiness for meaningful participation (Cahill and Dadvand 2018, 243). When adults hold power and are ultimately responsible for decision-making, they may find it challenging to consider sharing power equitably with young people (Jennings et al. 2006, 44), which can be a significant obstacle to participation. Yet equitable power-sharing between adults and children allows for

cooperation and collaboration, shifting the perspective from “for children” to “with children” (Jarosz 2018, 34). In addition, children do not have very much social capital that might enable them to be taken seriously or even to take themselves seriously (Thomas 2007, 212), which may lead to their voices being ignored or silenced. Some practices labeled “participatory” do not actually empower children and youth or give them a voice (Thomas 2007, 204). Johnson and West (2018, 8) explain the significance of people’s perceptions of children in the following way:

If children are seen as “little-people-in-the-making” who need opportunities to practice participation in order to become good future citizens, then the processes of children’s involvement and the subsequent impact on the participants when they are young adults is of more interest than the impact of the children’s engagement in public services. If, however, children are seen as social actors and rights holders, their views and potential impact on public service decision-making must be taken into account. As social actors, children are recognised as having their own perspectives and abilities that can and should influence decision-making as they are now, as children.

Meaningful participation may require a shift in perception to see children being ready and able as children.

A second tension exists regarding whether child and youth participation is helpful or harmful to society (Cahill and Dadvand 2018, 243). Until the 1990s the predominant lens for conceptualizing adolescents was a deficit model, and programs were designed to address youth problems through rehabilitation. Since that time there has been a shift to focus more on the rights, strengths, and positive contributions of youth and children (Jennings et al. 2006, 32; Lerner 2005, 12), leading to capacity-building and participatory practices that empower youth. Rappaport (1981, 21), whose seminal work is central to empowerment literature, sees empowerment of young people as a way to resolve the tension between needs-based and rights-based approaches to youth programming.

However, much work remains to be done. A 2009 study of adolescents in several community-based programs highlights the general agreement among youth that a negative stereotype of young people still persists (Royce 2009, 76). Adults' limited perceptions must change for children and youth to experience healthy participatory activities.

A third tension arises from opposition to the concept of children's rights and child participation and empowerment. Stephenson (2003, 58) reports that criticism of the UNCRC largely comes from fundamentalist Christians, Mormons, and Muslims who see Articles 12-14 as "the institutionalization of rebellion by vesting children with various fundamental rights which advance notions of the child's autonomy and freedom from parental guidance." Their concerns are based on a perceived erosion of parental rights in support of children's rights delineated in the CRC (Brewster 2011, 195).

While the UNCRC confirms that children have a right to express their views and have their opinions taken seriously, it does not state that children's views are the only ones to be considered (Brewster 2011, 197). Article 12 states: "Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously" (UN General Assembly 1989, 4). Marshall and Parvis (2004, 19) explain that the right described in Article 12 "is not so much to *make* decisions as to *contribute appropriately* to the decision-making process." This distinction is very important; the Article does not give children the right to make decisions for themselves, alleviating the concern of parents that the participation of children in all matters that affect them could undermine the authority of parents. Age-appropriate participation is fluid and contextual; the views of the child will carry more weight as they

mature and grow older. Just because the child is given the freedom to express his or her views, that freedom is qualified by whether the child wishes to express the views.

Participation is a right, but it is not a duty (Marshall and Parvis 2004, 235).

Elements for Healthy Child Participation

While it is important to recognize the rights of children to participate and overcome existing challenges, participation also needs to be done in a healthy manner. Tearfund has created a framework for healthy child participation called the “Wheel of Participation” (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004, 14), illustrated in Figure 4. The center of the wheel represents respect. When adults listen to what children say, ask for their opinions, explain decisions and actions, and treat all children equally, they communicate respect to children. Three spokes radiate out from that central hub, representing elements that adults need to offer to children: opportunities, responsibilities, and support. The presence of all these elements enhances healthy children participation.



Figure 4: Wheel of Participation (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004, 14)

A growing body of research indicates that the most effective type of child or youth participation is what is termed a “youth-adult partnership,” where youth and adults

collaborate in every aspect of a group decision-making process (Jennings et al. 2006; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013; Zeldin et al. 2014). Zeldin, Christens and Powers (2013, 388) describe youth-adult partnership as “the practice of: (a) multiple youth and multiple adults deliberating and acting together, (b) in a collective [democratic] fashion (c) over a sustained period of time, (d) through shared work, (e) intended to promote social justice, strengthen an organization and/or affirmatively address a community issue.” Zeldin et al. (2016, 1639) note that when children and youth see themselves in strong partnership with adults, have a voice in decision-making, and have support from adults, they report higher levels of personal empowerment. The practice of mutuality reflects the belief that adults and young people bring different ideas, perspectives, and experiences to the table, benefitting all (Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010, 101; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 392). Healthy adult-child partnerships are a key element leading to healthier child participation.

Zeldin et al. (2014, 337) point out that research consistently links participation with the development of empowerment. The two concepts are closely related, which leads to an exploration of what is meant by empowerment.

Empowerment Theory

The term “empowerment” was introduced by Rappaport into the fields of social work and psychology in the early 1980s (Rappaport 1984, 1). Rappaport sees terms of empowerment from three perspectives: definitions of how people do or do not experience control over their lives, the conditions or settings that lend to people feeling empowered, and the passage of time (Rappaport 1987, 135). Thus, understanding empowerment necessitates that people be studied within their context, as empowerment takes on

different forms in different people, cultures, and contexts (Grealish 2013, 14).

Empowerment has become a common term in multiple fields of study, including women's studies, health promotion, community development, international development, and in youth studies (Grealish, 2013; Lardier et al., 2020; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Shier 2017).

Definitions of empowerment vary, depending on the context in which it is used (Grealish 2013; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Rappaport 1984; Zimmerman 1995; 2000). In its broadest sense, empowerment refers to individuals, families, organizations, and communities “gaining control and mastery, within the social, economic, and political contexts of their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life” (Jennings et al. 2006, 32). As such, empowerment encompasses a much broader perspective than the psychological concepts with which it may be compared or confused, such as self-efficacy, competency, or self-esteem (Zimmerman 1995, 590). Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005, 130) assert that in order to be empowered, people not only need to possess the resources to reach their goals, but they also need to have the mindset that they can reach them. Thus empowerment is both the ability to control one's environment—external empowerment, and the feeling that one can do so—internal empowerment (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005, 125).

This sense of internal empowerment is also called psychological empowerment (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995; Zimmerman 1995; 2000) and includes the belief that one has the resources, energy, and competence to accomplish goals or effect change (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005, 125). Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005, 136) argue that when a person experiences success in reaching

goals or bringing about change, the positive emotions can lead to a greater sense of well-being and the desire to pursue further goals, an indicator of psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is expressed in widely diverse ways depending on the context, the population, and even the developmental stages of individuals and communities, so its definition should be context-specific (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570; Zimmerman 1995, 586).

Empowerment occurs at multiple levels, including individual, community, and organizational, and outcomes can be both individual and collective (Jennings et al. 2006; Shier 2017; Zimmerman 2000). In describing the outcomes of empowerment, Zimmerman (1995, 588) identifies three interrelated components: intrapersonal (or emotional), interactional (or cognitive), and behavioral. The intrapersonal component refers to the manner in which people think about their ability to achieve an outcome in their life—the perceptions and confidence that one can make a difference. The interactional component refers to developing “critical awareness” of the forces impacting one’s life and an understanding of what must be done to effect change—decision-making, problem-solving, and resource mobilization. The behavioral component speaks of the actions and participation one must take to make the change. Because empowerment is experienced differently by individuals, communities, and organizations, and because it can fluctuate depending on the context, as was mentioned earlier, it is difficult to seek a common standard by which to measure it; diverse contexts require different content related to each of the three components (Zimmerman 1995, 586-7; Zimmerman et al. 2018, 21).

While empowerment is a theoretical model providing a framework to understand and approach social change at the individual, organizational and community levels, it is also a value orientation. “Theories of empowerment include both process and outcomes, suggesting that actions, activities, or structures may be empowering and that the outcome of such processes result in a level of being empowered” (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 570). Practical applications of empowerment are evidenced in political, economic, resource, health, and spiritual domains, although Shier (2017, 7) found that the spiritual domain only appears in the reports of faith-based NGOs, where it refers to strengthening of religious commitment or adoption of faith-based values. By connecting individuals to the larger social environment, they can become active in the decision-making process, bringing improvements to their lives and communities.

Youth Empowerment

While empowerment theory has been developed in adult contexts, it can also be applied to youth. Like marginalized adults, children and youth can develop values and perspectives that involve feelings of control and the ability to take action regarding issues that affect them (Hegar 1989, 378). Thus, youth empowerment has become one branch of empowerment theory—the term “child empowerment” was rarely mentioned in this literature search, and Shier (2017, 3) notes that the term empowerment is seldom defined well in relation to children.

The general components of empowerment theory can apply to youth. Like adult empowerment, youth empowerment can be understood at the individual, community, and organizational levels (Zimmerman 2000, 44). Young people individually gain and develop skills, and they grow in awareness so they can work with others to positively

impact their communities. Organizations that provide opportunities for youth to gain the skills to take control of their lives also benefit from those empowered young people.

Ledford et al. (2013, 1) recommend dividing youth empowerment theory into two facets.

The first focuses on the process of empowering, which includes giving opportunities for young people to develop skills, solve problems, and make decisions that affect change.

The second facet focuses on the result of the empowerment process or the activities designed to empower youth. Consequently, youth empowerment is both a process and a developmental outcome, meaning it evolves but is also a final attribute (Paxton, Valois and Drane 2005, 186).

Theoretical Frameworks for Youth Empowerment

Much of the research and practice surrounding youth empowerment and youth participation has not necessarily been connected to theoretical frameworks (Cahill and Dadvand 2018, 243; Perkins and Zimmerman 1995, 572). At the same time, while many child and youth-focused programs or interventions use the term empowerment, “most fail to explicitly apply an empowerment-based theoretical framework that guides the content or theory of change expected in the program” (Zimmerman et al. 2018, 21).

Hart’s (1992) “Ladder of Participation” (see Figure 3) was the first theoretical framework created to explain the scope of child and youth participation. Using eight rungs, Hart described a continuum of participation from non-participation (manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) at the bottom of the ladder to full, child-initiated, shared decisions with adults at the top of the ladder (Hart 1992, 8). While Hart’s model has been criticized as being too hierarchical (Cahill and Dadvand 2018, 244; Hart 2008, 23) and based on adult models (Malone and Hartung 2010, 24), it has provided a framework of

possibilities and vocabulary to discuss youth participation and empowerment (Cahill and Dadvand 2018, 244).

In the past three decades, often building on or in reaction to Hart's model, several other theoretical frameworks for youth empowerment and youth participation have been created (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Cahill and Dadvand 2018; Cargo et al. 2003; Chinman and Linney 1998; Jennings et al. 2006; Johnson 2017; Lerner 2005; Shier 2015; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Drawing from multiple disciplines and research, the models seek to integrate, with varying emphases, the three general components of empowerment theory: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral.

The Adolescent Empowerment Cycle (AEC) centers on three dimensions: adolescent participation in meaningful activities, positive reinforcement from adults throughout the process, and opportunities to learn new skills (Chinman and Linney 1998, 399). Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010, 112) propose the Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (TYPE) Pyramid. The TYPE Pyramid acknowledges degrees of empowerment within the interaction between youth and adults, concluding that "pluralistic" shared control leads to the greatest empowerment of youth. Youth Empowered Solutions (YES!) uses a three-pronged approach in its application of youth empowerment theory: "develop skills, gain critical awareness, and participate in opportunities that are necessary for creating community change" (Ledford et al. 2013, 2). The Circle of Courage, drawing from indigenous cultures, identifies four aspects youth must experience within a community context in order to thrive: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013, 68).

In response to some of the weaknesses of previous models and in an attempt to address the dynamic, changing nature of relationships, power, and context in youth empowerment, Cahill and Dadvand (2018, 248) have created the P7 model, which includes the domains of purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place, and process in a machine-like structure. Shier (2015; 2017) pictures empowerment as three intertwined circles: capability/knowledge, conditions/opportunities, and attitude in his CESESMA model (Shier 2015, 213). All of the above-mentioned frameworks highlight psychological (internal) empowerment, but all stress that empowerment is more than simply increasing skills and confidence, pointing also to engaging youth in critical social (external) empowerment.

Empowerment Theoretical Framework for this Study

This research study uses Shier's CESESMA model (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017) as its theoretical framework for understanding empowerment. Shier's model was developed cooperatively between Centro de Servicios Educativos en Salud y Medio Ambiente (Center for Educational Services in Health and Environment) or CESESMA—a children's rights organization in Nicaragua—and the University of the North of Nicaragua through extensive research with thirteen- to twenty-year-old children and youth. It embodies both internal and external aspects of empowerment in the linking of three factors: capability, conditions/opportunities, and attitude/self-belief (Shier 2015, 213), as shown in Figure 2 on page 17. According to Shier's research, all three factors must be present in order for a child or youth to be empowered. As such, his model supports the three foundational components of empowerment theory suggested by Zimmerman (1995, 588): intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral.

Capabilities

The first factor necessary for youth empowerment is capability. According to Shier (2015, 213), capability refers to the ability to do things, and it involves both the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge and information needed to take action. Shier's description expresses the interactional (or cognitive) aspect of empowerment (Zimmerman 1995, 588), the development of "critical awareness" of the forces impacting one's life, and an understanding of what must be done to effect change, including decision making, problem solving, and resource mobilization. As young people gain knowledge, strengthen existing skills, and learn new ones, they become competent in their ability to think and act for themselves as well as learn from their own and others' experiences (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Chinman and Linney 1998; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lerner 2005; 2018; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

Jennings et al. (2006, 48) assert that young people are not really empowered if they lack the capacity to address things like the structures, processes, values and practices of the issues being addressed. Therefore, they propose that encouraging critical reflection on the institutions and sociopolitical processes of society and providing opportunities for participation in those processes lead to youth being fully empowered (Jennings et al. 2006, 47).

Becoming competent or achieving mastery develops the capacity of children and youth. While the specific skills, knowledge, and capabilities are unique to any given project or activity, children and youth who are involved in participatory activities or projects develop knowledge and skills in communication, decision-making, conflict resolution, negotiation, goal setting, resource management, and teamwork (Eccles and

Gootman 2002; Ledford et al. 2013; Shier 2015; 2019; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Adults and peers help to prepare youth through direct instruction but also through mentoring and scaffolding, helping them build skills, mastery and competence (Wong, Zimmerman and Powers 2010, 101; Zeldin et al. 2014, 338). The result is children and youth who grow as leaders and become equipped to be change agents.

Conditions and Opportunities

The second factor leading to youth empowerment, according to Shier, are conditions and opportunities. Conditions and opportunities refer to the creation of a context that supports a young person's ability to do things (Shier 2015, 213), which correlates to the behavioral component of empowerment theory—the actions and participation one must take to make a change (Zimmerman 1995, 588). Researchers have identified several conditions that lead to the empowerment of youth, including the creation of a safe environment and structure, opportunities to belong or be in community, supportive relationships with adults, and the ability to have control over decisions and actions (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe 2011; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Liebenberg and Roos 2008; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018). In addition, opportunities for meaningful service or community action must be offered (Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Royce 2009; Zimmerman 2000; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

One favorable condition is the creation of a safe environment and structure. Since empowerment of children and youth usually happens in the context of programs created for them, providing a safe and welcoming environment is key in creating optimal conditions to foster that empowerment (Jennings et al. 2006, 41). If children and youth

experience a physically and psychologically safe space, they will feel more free to express their opinions, try new skills and roles, be creative, and step up to challenges (Cargo et al. 2003, S70; Eccles and Gootman 2002, 129; Jennings et al. 2006, 41).

The opportunity for children and youth to belong or be connected is another key condition leading to the growth of empowerment (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lerner 2005; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013). Young people like to have a place or a group in which to belong, so for many children and youth, being part of an organization or a group with other children and youth builds identity, self-worth, and social well-being (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013, 67; Cicognani et al. 2015, 24; Eccles and Gootman 2002, 132; Shier 2015, 213). They experience support from peers and the leaders who are part of the group (Shier 2017, 17), which helps them build a network of relationships that will carry them beyond any specific projects (Hegar 1989, 379). Shier (2015, 213) asserts that when youth feel they are part of a team, they can more easily begin addressing the issues or problems affecting them or the community around them.

A third favorable condition for empowerment is supportive relationships with adults. Researchers agree that having close, positive, supportive relationships with adults that model or exemplify empowerment aids the feelings of empowerment in children and youth (Busing 2011; Cargo et al. 2003; Hegar 1989; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; 2017; Wong, Zimmerman and Powers 2010; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Adults exemplify empowerment through equitable power sharing with young people, including providing opportunities for children and youth to make decisions affecting them, with adult support for their

autonomy (Busing 2011; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Johnson 2017; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010). Adults also are a primary source of positive reinforcement when they work together with youth to make decisions and plan activities (Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010, 108). Liebenberg and Roos' (2008, 588) research revealed that when preadolescent leaders in a school setting were not supported by adults, it had a negative effect on their well-being and empowerment. Adult support and guidance are essential, but they must maintain a balance of providing support without dominating decision-making and control (Jennings et al. 2006, 45; Royce 2009, 76; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010, 109).

Children and youth desire to engage in activities that excite them, challenge them, have relevance to their interests and have a positive impact (Jennings et al. 2006, 43; Royce 2009, 78). Therefore, they must have opportunities to practically apply their skills and knowledge in real-life contexts, meaningfully participating or engaging in community-based activities and initiatives. When children and youth participate in meaningful civic engagement or social action, they experience empowerment as change agents (Cargo et al. 2003; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman 2000; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

Attitudes

The third main factor leading to empowerment in Shier's theoretical framework is attitude. Shier (2015, 213) observes that when children or youth see themselves as capable of taking action and affecting an outcome, this self-recognition leads to higher self-esteem, which correlates to the intrapersonal (or emotional) component of empowerment (Zimmerman 1995, 588), the manner in which people think about their

ability to achieve an outcome in their life—the perceptions and confidence that one can make a difference. Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005, 130) explain that in order to be empowered, people not only need to possess the resources to reach their goals, but they also need to have the mindset that they can reach them.

Over the past two decades multiple researchers have identified several attitudes that either lead to or result from empowering activities: self-confidence, self-efficacy, an attitude of “Yes I can,” willingness, optimism, commitment, inner strength to confront and overcome obstacles, love for others, setting an example to others, and a sense of purpose in life (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; 2019; Zeldin et al. 2016; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Cahill and Dadvand (2018, 249) observe that children and young people develop their sense of self, in part, from the ways they are seen and treated in their everyday contexts. If they are seen or “positioned” as leaders and contributors versus dependent followers and passive recipients, they will perceive themselves more positively and develop a stronger sense of empowerment. Shier (2017, 20) recognizes that “much of what we call ‘empowerment’ is an internal process, through which self-belief, self-confidence, motivation, critical thinking, initiative, perseverance and solidarity take shape within the person.” Children and youth can be encouraged, but attitudes leading to empowerment cannot be given to them. They must grow and develop.

As attitudes of empowerment grow in children and young people, they have a positive impact on the development of character (Huscroft-D’Angelo et al. 2017, 548; Lerner 2018, 267). However, youth empowerment encompasses a much broader perspective than the psychological concepts or character qualities with which it may be

compared or confused, such as self-efficacy, competency, self-esteem, or personal character development (Thomas 2007, 200; Zimmerman 1995, 590). Empowerment leads to young people's sense of agency that they can make a difference in their own lives and in the world around them, so that they contribute positively to their own lives and the enhancement of their communities (Lerner 2018, 267; Zeldin et al. 2016, 1638).

Empowerment and Service

As has been outlined, empowerment and participation find full expression through involvement in action or service within the community and society. Both empowerment and participation of children and youth have found a broad scope of applications and, as such, are referred to by a variety of terms. Depending on the focus, child and youth participation and empowerment include—and may be called—community service, civic engagement, service learning, co-production, ministry, or mission. A closer look at each of the terms helps guide understanding of their focus.

When children and youth engage in community service, their actions can be as simple as acts of kindness or as complex as social activism to address societal problems. In a survey of 146 organizations, Kirby et al. (2003, 6) found that “most participation is locally based in small organisations or agencies and is more likely to involve generic youth work of community regeneration than other areas” of service. Their findings reveal that twelve- to sixteen-year-olds are the age group most commonly participating in community service, which supports the need for early adolescent empowerment. Whatever the activity undertaken, the goal of community service involvement is the desire to foster an “altruistic and civic ethos” (Larson, Hansen and Moneta 2006, 850). Research findings support the connection between participating in community service

opportunities and the growth of social and moral responsibility in children and youth (Larson, Hansen and Moneta 2006, 850). Barna (2003, 74) notes that when children develop the habit of service at a young age, the effect on their attitudes and perspectives of service often results in a lifetime of helping others. Child and youth engagement in community service opportunities is seen to have positive developmental outcomes and, therefore, to be an important part of healthy development (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006, 2; Scales and Benson 2005, 339).

Civic engagement, as defined by Lenzi et al. (2013, 45), refers to “the feelings of responsibility toward the common good, the actions aimed at solving community issues and improving the well-being of its members and the competencies required to participate in civic life.” It includes children’s and youth’s contribution to their community, society, and country (Donnelly et al. 2006, 240), but often focuses upon the realm of political engagement, voting, and volunteering, which can include community service projects. Dempster, Stevens and Keefe (2011, 8) suggest that “when civic engagement experiences are grounded in and responsive to local community concerns, they are particularly powerful.” The power lies in its bidirectional impact—young people shape society through civil engagement, and civil society shapes youth in positive ways, helping them grow in their competence, confidence, character, connection, and compassion (Lerner et al 2006, 63; Scales and Benson 2005, 339). That being said, Nicotera and Bassett (2015, 20) note that there is limited empirical evidence related to programs promoting civic engagement and leadership in preadolescent youth.

Service learning, most commonly used in the educational system, is a method of teaching using experiential learning outside the classroom. Students apply academic

skills and knowledge to meet demonstrated needs in their community and then reflect on their experience, which fosters greater civic responsibility and transformation of perspective (Obasi 2008, 10, 41; Tobias 2013, 121, 127). Civic engagement as education can be traced back to John Dewey's theory of experience (Hildreth 2012, 919). Through service-learning experiences, students explore their communities, think critically, and commit to social action that produces change. When it includes social action and reflection, service learning becomes transformative and empowering (Obasi 2008, 53). "At its best, service learning can create circumstances in which young people develop a deeper understanding of their world and themselves and an improved sense of purpose, justice, agency, and optimism" (Claus and Ogden 1999, 70). Research on the positive effects of service learning can be found at all levels of education, from early childhood to post-secondary.

More recently the term "co-production" has been used in some contexts (Aked and Stephens 2009, 1). Co-production refers to "working together to produce a product, service, or activity" (Rathbone et al. 2018, 5). By allowing young people to have their voices and opinions heard, and by drawing upon their life experiences, it can lead to services and support that are more suited to their needs and life situations (Rathbone et al. 2018, 12).

From the perspective of faith communities, community service is termed ministry or mission and is considered part of faith development or serving God. In an unpublished longitudinal study from Luther Seminary identifying key factors that help Christian young people stay engaged in faith, two of the six factors related to mission and service: (1) apprenticeship (training youth to do specific ministry), and (2) service to the world as

part of the church's ministry (Hampton 2020). Kirk and Thome (2011, 122) maintain that it is not enough to simply offer a mission or service opportunity. Young people need the guidance of supportive adults to make sense of thoughts and emotions they experience when engaged in service. Steers (2016, 213) explains that effective experiential learning, which happens when serving the community, includes encountering God and others, reflection, and agency to act within a supportive community, leading to transformation. "The 'doing' becomes part of the being, as it reorients learners' sense of self and world" (Steers 2016, 214).

Ledford et al. (2013, 3) suggest three reasons for including children and youth in community activities or initiatives. First, young people are involved in and impacted by the issues with which communities wrestle. Second, their developmental stage can lead them to be a part of making change happen in the issues they care about. Third, they grow in empowerment as they are involved in making decisions, developing skills, and cultivating compassion for others. When community service, civic engagement, service learning, ministry, and mission are infused with principles of youth participation and empowerment, it leads to action that produces change within the youth themselves and in the community.

Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Child Participation and Empowerment

While the concepts of child participation and empowerment are most often described from sociological or developmental perspectives, correlations are found in the teachings of the Christian Scriptures. The Bible is filled with examples of children and youth being given a voice, being empowered, and engaging in God's mission, fulfilling

God's purpose and, in many cases, bringing about societal change: Joseph (Genesis 37ff), Samuel (1 Samuel 3), David (1 Samuel 17), Naaman's servant girl (2 Kings 5:1ff), Josiah (2 Kings 22), Esther (Esther 1-10), and Daniel (Daniel 1). Each of these young people exercise a choice in responding to God's call but make a profound contribution to God's work in the world around them—his mission (Segura-April et al. 2014, 17).

In addition to biblical examples of children and youth who were empowered to make a difference, several biblical principles, drawn primarily from Protestant theological traditions, support the concepts of child participation and empowerment to be agents of change in the contexts in which they live.

Children are Whole Beings, Created in God's Image

In Genesis 1:26-27 [NRSV] God said, "Let us make humankind in our image." The *imago dei*, or image of God, is stamped upon every person, including children. While the meaning of the *imago dei* has been interpreted in numerous ways by theologians throughout church history (Balswick, King and Reimer 2005, 30; Vorster 2011, 3), a common conclusion is that humans are beings with equal worth and inherent dignity (Vorster 2011, 22), a conclusion that includes children. Because they have equal worth and dignity, their voice and participation have value.

In addition, in God's eyes, children are whole beings. They may be developing physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, but they are not incomplete or inferior. Bunge and Wall (2009, 106) quote Cyprian, a third-century church father, who describes children being just as much human as adults and saying "All men are like and equal, since they once have been made by God; and our age may have a difference in the increase of our bodies, according to the world, but not according to God" (*Epistle LVIII*).

To Fidus, On the Baptism of Infants). Ephesians 2:10 [NIV] says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Because children are fully human, they are created to do good works, just as adults are. There is nothing to suggest that this verse applies only to adults or to the future work of children. As whole beings made in God’s image, children can do good works on God’s behalf, which corroborates with core tenets of child participation and empowerment.

Children are Called to Love God and Love their Neighbor

When Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he replies, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39 [NIV], cf. Mark 12:29-31). The commandment to love God and others is a calling for all who follow Christ, whether young or old. Bunge (2008, 36) points out that Martin Luther uses Christ’s commandment as part of the foundation for his theology of vocation, emphasizing that all believers, including children, have a calling and are to express their faith in works of love and service within the family, the church, and in the broader community. “Here you have the true Christian life, one where faith is active in love (Galatians 5:6). It expresses itself joyfully and lovingly and results in the freest possible service” (Luther 2012, 419). Children can actively express love to others as agents of hope and transformation, which is consistent with child participation and empowerment.

Children are Part of the Body of Christ

The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the Christian faith community in Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Children's place in the body of Christ is understood differently from three theological traditions (May et al. 2005, 54-56). In the sacramental tradition (Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox churches), Christians practice the sacrament of infant baptism as an act of removing the effects of original sin which brings children into faith, which is later "confirmed." The covenantal tradition (Presbyterian, Methodist, Reformed churches) sees a child's baptism as a sign of a covenant between God, the child, and the church, including parents. "The promise of the gospel is announced to the child (who does not comprehend it at this time) with the intention that the child will 'complete' his/her baptism in future faith and repentance" (May et al. 2005, 56). Christians in the conversional tradition (Pentecostal, Baptist, fundamentalist churches) believe that people, including children, enter into a relationship with Jesus through individual repentance of sin and acceptance of Christ as their saviour. Whatever the theological tradition, children are part of the body of Christ.

In describing the body of Christ, Paul states that one part of the body cannot say to another, "I don't need you" (1 Corinthians 12:21 [NIV]). He explains that the weaker parts are actually indispensable, and the parts that might be thought as being less honorable are treated with special honor (1 Corinthians 12:21-23). Children certainly may be perceived as being a weaker part of the body by virtue of their smaller physical size, which makes them more vulnerable, their lack of mental maturity and knowledge, which can be equated with lack of spiritual maturity, and their limited influence in the eyes of adults (Segura-April et al. 2014, 12). Yet, extrapolating from Paul's teaching, children

are indispensable, not for the future of the church but for the present. Their presence and voice are necessary to the well-being of the whole body.

Children have God-Given Spiritual Gifts and are Able to Serve

The Bible says the Holy Spirit gives gifts to all believers (1 Corinthians 12:7ff, cf. Ephesians 4:7). Therefore, children who are believers receive gifts from the Holy Spirit as part of the body of Christ (Greener 2016, 167). “No place in Scripture do we see any indication that spiritual gifts are given only to adult believers, nor do we see any indication that a child ... should wait until a certain age or time to use their spiritual gifts” (Carr 2008, 199). Although children may not yet know what their spiritual gifts are, they can be empowered by being given opportunities to explore and exercise their gifts. 1 Peter 4:10 [NIV] says, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” The spiritual gifts children receive are for the purpose of serving others. Therefore, all believers, including children, are capable of serving and playing a role in God’s kingdom work (Graves, 2006, 182). Youth empowerment theory does not acknowledge God-given spiritual gifts, but it agrees with the potential capacity for children and youth to serve in impactful ways with their passions and abilities, given the opportunity.

Children are Filled with the Holy Spirit and Able to Respond to Him

The gift of the Holy Spirit is for all who believe (Acts 2:38), including children. On the day of Pentecost, Peter’s sermon, quoting the prophet Joel, indicates that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will be upon all people: young and old, sons and daughters,

men and women (Acts 2:17-18; cf. Joel 2:28-29). Green (2008, Loc. 2778) asserts that there is no escaping the inclusion of children in the “all people” mentioned in Acts 2:17.

The Holy Spirit that children receive is the same as what all believers receive, and children can be filled and respond to the Holy Spirit. Gidney (2008, 19-20) writes,

The Holy Spirit is truly ecumenical in so far as he does not exclude believers who are under twelve from being able to be part of his anointed and blessed workers for his kingdom. All are included in the possibility of receiving the work and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. We cannot say that this is usual, or a majority phenomenon, nevertheless, we also cannot say that it is not. We have to say merely that it seems to be possible, and therefore we should, as a church, consider it, and encourage the formation of children in whom such things can be.

A. H. Francke, an 18th century theologian, believes that children have a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that many adults do not, as expressed in “Der Beruff Gottes nach dem Unterschiedlich Alter der Menschen (The Profession of God According to the Different Ages of People)” (*Sonn-Fest-und Apostel-Tags Predigten*, 5th ed. 1715. 1:392-398).

Bunge (2001, 270) summarizes Franke’s beliefs as follows: “It is almost easier for the Holy Spirit to move in the hearts of children than in the hearts of adults, and that children can have rich spiritual lives. . . . Thus, children are able to accept the call at any time, even when they are young.” While empowerment theory does not acknowledge the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit as a source of empowerment, the fact that it is called “empowerment” speaks of power, which is what the Holy Spirit gives to Christians to accomplish God’s mission (Acts 1:8). Children who are believers can hear, respond, be filled with, and be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do God’s work in the world.

Children are a Part of the Great Commission

While child participation and empowerment encourage social action and societal change, Christians believe there is no other way to bring about holistic transformation than through the gospel message. Jesus proclaims good news to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, healing for the sick, and the time of God's favor (Luke 4:18) as he describes God's kingdom. In his Great Commission, Jesus gives the command to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19 [NIV]). Children are part of those nations, so the Great Commission includes children. As followers of Jesus—disciples—children can share the gospel and what they have learned in their faith journey with others, making disciples of others.

The above biblical and theological principles demonstrate that many of the main tenets of child participation and empowerment align with and are supported by the Christian faith and Scriptures. Crocker and Glanville (2007, 269) suggest that Christian children and youth can be some of the most effective resources in community development. "Filled with creativity and energy, children and youth have the ability to network, mobilize, and multiply resources, which in the hands of Christ can bring *shalom* to their communities." With clear Christian faith-based support for children's participation and empowerment, the focus now shifts to understanding children's spirituality.

Children's Spirituality

The concept of children's spirituality is vague, with much confusion and disagreement on how best to define and measure it (Allen 2008; Boyatzis and Newman 2019; de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012; Hemming 2013; Hyde 2008; Mendez and

MacDonald 2017; Yust et al. 2006). Hart (2003, 8) describes the attempts at defining spirituality akin to “trying to hold water in our hands.” Some researchers and theologians look at spirituality from a religious perspective, particularly Christian, and have defined children’s spirituality as “knowing and experiencing God” (Anthony 2006, 33), “honoring the soul – the sacred space God has already placed within children” (Logan and Miller 2017, 13), having “a full awareness of the presence of God – not just knowledge about God” (Csinos and Beckwith 2013, 41), and “God’s ways of being with children and children’s ways of being with God” (Nye 2009, Loc. 282).

While spirituality and religion share much common ground, they are not synonymous (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, 12; May 2019, 4; Sifers, Warren and Jackson 2012, 209). May (2019, 4) describes them as two overlapping circles, shown in Figure 5.

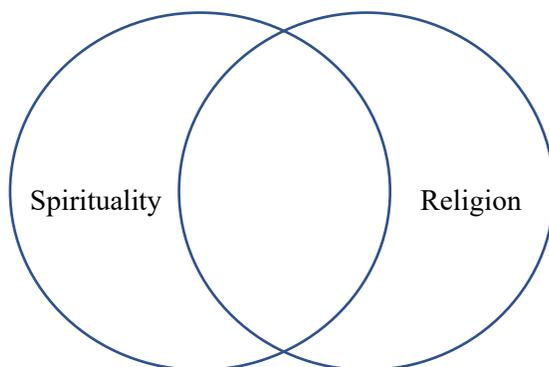


Figure 5: Spirituality and Religion (May 2019, 4)

One circle represents the doctrines, beliefs, and practices of religion, while the second circle, representing spirituality, includes the experiences of awe, wonder, and the metaphysical apart from reference to God. Research into children’s spirituality over the past twenty-five years has broadened the definition of children’s spirituality beyond religious contexts, beginning with the ground-breaking work of Nye (1998).

Nye's (1998) qualitative research with six- and ten-year-old children from various faith backgrounds, including those with no religious faith, draws on perspectives from developmental psychology to understand children's spirituality. In her analysis of the diverse spiritual expressions through conversations with the children, Nye identifies the core category as "relational consciousness" (Hay and Nye 2006, 109; Nye 1998, 235). It is relational because it involves a child's connectedness to self, other people, things (environment), and a transcendent dimension, often named God. It is consciousness or perceptiveness because of the child's keen awareness of these relationships (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, 14-15; Hay and Nye 2006, 109; Nye 1998, 237-238). "In this 'relational consciousness' seems to lie the rudimentary core of children's spirituality, out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight" (Hay and Nye 2006, 109). From data collected, Hay and Nye (2006, 141) find strong support that spirituality, in all its expressions, including religious awareness, is natural. It grows out of an innate awareness or biological predisposition and is part of being human.

Hay and Nye (2006, 99) note in their research that two types of children's dialogue are significant: first, dialogue that uses religious ideas and language, and second, the non-religious dialogue that demonstrates that the child is engaged in something greater than the ordinary. A child may find ways to express their spirituality through organized religion. However, if spirituality is a universal human condition (Coles 1990, 37; Hay and Nye 2006, 141), it will exist and find expression regardless of whether or not a child belongs to a religious tradition or believes in God (Adams, Hyde and Woolley 2008, 13; Hyde 2008, 59). It can be part of both religious and non-religious

experiences (Hemming 2013, 76). Hay and Nye (2006, 63) suggest that spirituality, being innate, comes before religion. Boyatzis (2012, 153) agrees, saying, “children are spiritual beings first and then are acculturated (or not) in a religious tradition that channels intuitive spirituality into particular expressions (rituals, creeds, etc.) that have been passed through the faith tradition.” Thus, research into children’s spirituality is broadening from a reliance on religious indicators and language to focus more on children’s perceptions and awareness, awe and wonder, feelings, and emotions (Hemming 2013, 76; Hyde 2008, 59).

In a review of religious and non-religious definitions of spirituality, Allen (2008, 7) identifies the existence of the same two common themes: self-transcendence and relationality—with self, others, the world, and perhaps with the transcendent (see also de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012, 339; Donnelly et al. 2006, 239; Yust et al. 2006, 8). More recent reviews (Boyatzis and Newman 2019, 161; Mata-McMahon 2016, 141) continue to support these two overarching themes. Yust et al. (2006, 8) express the themes in the following way:

Spirituality is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred—something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced, formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious narratives, beliefs, and practices, and is shaped by many influences in the family, community, society, culture and nature.

In addition to asserting that being spiritual is part of being human and that it is related to, but not defined by, religion or faith, the definition proposes that spirituality involves growth and change. Consequently it must be actively nurtured. The focus of spirituality is on one’s connectedness (with others or the Other) and sense of meaning and purpose, rather than specific religious beliefs, knowledge, or practices, and it is embedded in

relationships and community. A relevant component of this definition to the current study is the assumption that “spirituality is expressed in ethical behavior. A full understanding of spirituality should not only be inner; it should also be manifested in the ‘outer life’ of ethical behavior and action” (Yust et al. 2006, 8-9). The definition of spirituality begs the question of how one can measure spirituality.

Elements of Spirituality

Research into children’s spirituality has identified elements and categories that flow under the core understanding of spirituality as relational consciousness. Hay and Nye’s research, first published in 1998 and revised in 2006, identifies three main categories of spiritual sensitivity which refer to different realms in which children can have spiritual interactions (Hay and Nye 2006, 65). The first category, awareness sensing, refers to paying attention to the here-and-now, focusing, and feeling “at-one” with something outside oneself. It is an alertness to spiritual, metacognitive matters. The second category is mystery sensing, which includes the concepts of wonder, awe, and imagination that help children enter into aspects of life experience they cannot comprehend. The third category, value sensing, is the feelings of emotions to measure what is of value, including delight, despair, an ultimate goodness, and meaning. The categories serve to describe the range of experience or sources from which children can draw to express their individual spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006, 113). Hay and Nye’s (2006) categories form a framework from which spirituality can be identified and measured.

Similar to Hay and Nye, Hart’s research into children’s spirituality identifies five spiritual capacities through which their spirituality seems to flow: “wisdom, wonder/awe,

the relationship between one's Self and the Other, seeing the invisible, and wondering in relation to the ultimate questions of life" (Hart 2003, quoted in Hyde 2008, 55). In a study of adolescent spirituality, Benson and Roehlkepartain (2008) conclude that awareness or awakening is a key process helping contribute to the development of spiritual identity, meaning, and purpose (Shek 2012, 3). Seeking to measure spiritual well-being, Gomez and Fisher (2003, 1976) look at feelings and behaviors in relationships with oneself, others, the transcendent, and nature, "that in turn provide the individual with a sense of identity, wholeness, satisfaction, joy, contentment, beauty, love, respect, positive attitudes, inner peace and harmony, and purpose and direction in life." Their emphasis on relationship and their identifiers in each of the four relational categories align with much of Hay and Nye's (2006) research. As research into children's spirituality continues beyond religious contexts, basic common elements of spirituality in children have been confirmed. Hay and Nye's (2006) theoretical framework, with its three categories for identifying elements of spirituality—awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing—is used as the basis for identifying the spirituality of children in this research study.

Researching Children's Spirituality

The seminal study on children's spirituality was published by Robert Coles (1990). Coles engaged in conversations with children from ages eight to thirteen from different countries, cultures, and religious traditions (Catholic and Protestant Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, and non-religious). He did not focus on their religious practices but on how they express themselves as spiritual beings (Coles 1990, 37). Coles came to the conclusion that spiritual awareness is a universal human condition. Nye's

(1998) research was ground-breaking in the area of children's spirituality because it deviated from framing spirituality through religious language, opening doors to broader explorations of spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006, 114). These early studies contributed to an understanding of the way children make meaning of their spirituality and the aspects of their lives that children deem valuable, pointing to the importance of listening to their thoughts (Mata-McMahon 2016, 143).

Research in the field of children's spirituality has expanded to several disciplines: psychology, education, philosophy, neuroscience, theology, and medicine (Hyde 2008, 9). However, research is still limited. A literature search of more than 181,000 articles and abstracts conducted by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003, 206-207) reveals that less than 1% of the literature on children and adolescents from 1990-2002 examines topics related to religiosity, spirituality, and spiritual development. Mata-McMahon's review of empirical research in children's spirituality published from 2005-2015 identifies three main categories of research in children's spirituality: (1) studies looking at spiritual meaning-making and children's relationship to/with God, (2) studies examining children's spirituality in the educational context, and (3) studies looking at the formation of identity and a sense of faith (Mata-McMahon 2016, 142). The review still notes the "scarcity of empirical research conducted with young children" (Mata-McMahon 2016, 140).

One challenge in measuring children's spirituality empirically is developing appropriate measurement tools. Although several quantitative measures of spirituality have been developed by researchers (de Jager Meezenbroek et al. 2012, 336), they focus primarily on adults and adult development and are not necessarily appropriate for

children and youth at their stages of development (Mendez and MacDonald 2017, 123). Attempts to measure indicators of spirituality in children and adolescents (moving beyond traditional religious indicators) have led to the creation of several different quantitative measurement tools.

The Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire, or SWBQ (Gomez and Fisher 2003), has been developed for and tested with youth from eleven to sixteen years of age in Australian secondary schools. The Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM), expanding on the SWBQ, was originally used with Australian secondary-school students but also has been found to be successful with eight- to twelve-year-old primary-school students (Fisher 2010, 111) and has been tested in multiple nations (Fisher 2021, 3699). It has even been adapted for younger children with the title “Feeling Good, Living Life” (Fisher 2004). The Religiosity and Spirituality Scale for Youth was tested on children and youth from nine to seventeen years of age in the context of an American Catholic school (Hernandez 2011). The Youth Spirituality Scale (YSS), developed with American youth in mind, seeks to be inclusive of youth from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds (Sifers, Warren and Jackson 2012, 209). The Junior Spiritual Health Scale was tested by children eight to eleven years old in Wales (Francis, Lankshear and Eccles 2021, 199).

While quantitative measurement tools have helped measure aspects of children’s spirituality, Boyatzis and Newman (2019, 170) recommend the use of qualitative methodologies when studying children’s spirituality, asserting that using a multi-method approach is the best way to capture the richness of children’s spirituality, allowing the child’s own words and activities to be the source of insights. Qualitative methods allow

us to “‘hear’ children’s thoughts regarding what spirituality means to them, and how they pay attention to spiritual aspects they deem of value as well as how they make sense of the lived experiences and practices that allow them to come to a conceptualisation of the inexplicable and of God” (Mata-McMahon 2016, 143). Qualitative studies in children’s spirituality have focused on methods such as interviews, focus groups, drawing, observation and photography to elicit children’s perspectives (Coles 1990; Hay and Nye 2006; Hemming 2013; Zimmerman 2019).

Mendez and MacDonald (2017, 123) note that culture must be considered when developing theories of spirituality, when constructing measurement tools, and when generalizing findings beyond the culture from which they are obtained. In testing the Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised (ESI-R) with a group of Peruvian school children eleven to sixteen years of age, they did not have the same results and had to modify the tool to achieve adequate validity and reliability (Mendez and MacDonald 2017, 122). Research into children’s spirituality must consider and attend to culture at every stage (Csinos 2018, 64). At the same time, children’s spirituality research must expand to include diverse cultures and religions around the world (Boyatzis 2008, 48).

Research confirms that aspects of children’s spirituality can be measured both qualitatively and quantitatively. Therefore, the next section explores spirituality’s connection to service within a faith-based perspective.

Faith-Based Community Service

Almost every world religion encourages some form of service or other-helping behavior (Yeung 2017, 112), which has implications for children and youth who participate in faith communities. Research has demonstrated a positive relationship

between religious participation and community service of adolescents. Youniss, McLellan and Yates' (1999, 243) data shows that many American young people view religion as important, and those who do so are more likely to do service in the community than those for whom religion is not important. Involvement often comes through church-sponsored projects, but data from their seminal study strengthens the case that young people who are serious about their religion become engaged in the betterment of communities.

Faith communities and religious organizations provide communities of trusting relationships between people who share common values, which leads to greater civic mindedness (Donnelly et al. 2006, 244). Youth who actively participate in their faith communities gain “social capital” and are more likely to become civically engaged. Social capital refers to “the social networks, social trust and norms that support individuals in their efforts to work for the mutual benefit of the community” (Donnelly et al. 2006, 241).

However, the ultimate goal for most religions goes beyond the development of active citizens; their focus is preparing their people, including their young people, to be followers of that faith (Heffner and Beversluis 2002, xi). Therefore, the types of volunteer activities in which people in faith communities may choose to serve are prioritized. Yeung (2017, 133) points out, “[T]hey may value certain forms of altruism, e.g., voluntary activities with implications of human significance and humanitarian concerns,” and notes that they will select activities that enable them to live out their belief system, such as helping the poor, caring for the vulnerable, etc. The faith community

guides children and young people to understand that God can use them for meaningful service as they use their strengths, gifts, and passions (Moncauskas 2012, 148).

Even when not connected to a faith community, young people's service in the community may help to create deeper spirituality through such things as a growing awareness of the social inequities, a greater feeling of empathy for those they serve, and a transcendence of self that leads to moral and ethical reflection (Donnelly et al. 2006, 246).

As this study seeks to identify the interrelationships of participation, empowerment and spirituality as they relate to service, the literature exploring these relationships is now highlighted.

Spirituality, Empowerment, and Service

In a search of relevant literature, Donnelly et al. (2006) have sought to determine the relationship between spiritual development and civic engagement, which is an expression of service in the community. Their results are highlighted in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Pathways between Spirituality and Civic Engagement (Donnelly et al. 2006, 241)

A growing body of research supports the positive relationship between religious involvement and community service or civic engagement (Donnelly et al. 2006; Youniss, McLellan and Yates 1999), which was also described in the previous section. Donnelly et al. (2006, 244) explain it in the following way:

Many religious organizations provide a set of shared core values that are civic-oriented, such as charity and compassion. This is especially important for youth during the period of identity exploration. In addition, these values are prescriptive in calling them to action and providing opportunities for them to get involved in service work.

While not as common, there is some empirical evidence of the link between spirituality and civic engagement outside of organized religion (Matsuba and Walker 2004, 413), identifying how increased spirituality can lead to deeper beliefs and moral commitments to think beyond oneself (Donnelly et al. 2006, 249). However, there is less evidence to support the thought that civic engagement can lead to increased spirituality (Donnelly et al. 2006, 246). Service may challenge young people's perspectives and cause them to think differently about others, issues, and the world, which can lead them to ponder spiritually.

The findings of Donnelly et al. (2006, 248) suggest that there is a bidirectional influence of spirituality and civic engagement, but they recognize that it is a relationship that has not been fully explored by research. At the same time, they note that much of the existing research has focused on Western societies and the Judeo-Christian religions. One study by Hemming (2013) looks at primary-school children in the UK, exploring how their everyday practices and experiences within the school environment “demonstrate their potential as spiritual agents and citizens” with implications for participation in decision-making at school (Hemming 2013, 75). He notes the dearth of literature

focusing on spirituality when regarding ways children act as social agents in school settings. Studies linking spirituality, empowerment, and/or child participation when children serve in the community are not common. In an attempt to address the gap in the literature, this research study seeks to explore the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when Armenian early adolescents engage in community-based service projects.

Early Adolescent Development

Why focus on early adolescents? Children from the ages of ten to thirteen years—the age range on which this research study focuses—are at a unique and transitional period of life in all areas of their development as they move from late middle childhood (six to eleven years of age) to preadolescence or early adolescence (eleven to fourteen years of age) (Berk 2014; McMahan and Thompson 2015). Early adolescents vacillate between childhood and teenage thoughts, interests, and maturity as they enter a time of significant rapid change. Developmentally, their bodies go through puberty, their minds shift from concrete to abstract thinking, the emotional center of their brain develops faster than their logic, relationships with friends become more important to them, and they begin to work through their identity and beliefs.

It is essential that early adolescents be looked at as whole beings when considering their development: spiritual, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional (see Luke 2:52). Estep (2010, Ch. 1 Loc. 258) explains a holistic approach to human development from a Christian perspective, describing the image of God in humans—the *imago dei*—and how it relates to holistic development. “The *imago Dei* is a holistic image—one which takes humanity in whole. We cannot separate our physical, material

existence from our mental or spiritual life, nor can we regard one as being more “real” than the other.” All developmental domains must be considered together.

A Spiritual Perspective on Development

Research into spirituality has found strong support that spirituality is a universal human condition. It grows from an innate awareness or biological predisposition and is part of being human (Boyatzis 2012, 153; Coles 1990, 37; Hay and Nye 2006, 141;). Yust et al. (2006, 8) describe spirituality as “the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence.” But the concept of humans’ innate spirituality can be traced through the writings of Christian theologians as well.

Augustine was the first to speak of ‘prevenient grace’ (Stewart 2014, 131), which later became a central tenet of Wesleyan theology. It refers to the grace of God in a person’s life that precedes conversion (McGrath 2001, 356), pointing to spiritual activity that is not dependent on development. In his sermon “On Working out our own Salvation,” Wesley (1979, 512) states, “Every man has a greater or lesser measure of this [preventing grace]....Every one has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world.” Schleiermacher writes of humans having a lower and a higher consciousness. The higher consciousness is the point of contact with God and the essence of distinctively human being (Devries 2001, 341). Devries (2001, 342) notes that in Schliermacher’s *Practical Theology*, he states, “Already in the child’s first consciousness of his relationship to his parents is religion—it is the spiritual feeling of dependence, and religion is only an enhancement of that.” (*Die praktische Theologie nach den*

Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt SW I/13:412).

The concept of innate spirituality has deep theological foundations.

Spirituality can be seen as the core of children’s development. Downs (2005, quoted in Tan and Tan 2017, 112) proposes that children’s development “should be viewed with the spiritual domain as the ‘being’ of the child, and the other [developmental] domains as ‘entry points’ to form and express their development.... Hence, a child is said to be developing holistically when the ‘spiritual being’ is given space to express itself in the fullness of the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural.”

If children are innately spiritual, their spirituality does not “develop,” but it must be actively nurtured (Yust et al. 2006, 8). Miller-McLemore (2010, 40) observes that spirituality does not develop in the same way as other parts of our bodies and minds from immature to mature, and growing up does not guarantee spiritual maturity. “Spirituality evolves in more curious, less obvious, less quantifiable ways. In fact, spirituality, like philosophical imagination, rests on a freshness or vitality that is as likely to be lost in adolescence and adulthood as gained” (Miller-McLemore 2010, 40). Spiritual growth is more than intellectual understanding; it includes changes in one’s awareness of and relationship with God or a transcendent other, thus transforming the understanding of the material world, relationships with others, and values (Donnelly et al. 2006, 239; Hay and Nye 2006, 50ff).

Several theorists—including Fowler (1981), Wangerin (1986), and Westerhoff (2000)—have sought to describe the way humans grow in faith, which is one expression of spirituality. Each theory suggests there are stages to faith development, a similar

approach to other developmental domain theories. Fowler's (1981, 4) theory of faith development, with six stages, is most commonly known. Fowler defines faith as a way to give meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up a person's life. Thus, for Fowler, faith is a feature all humans possess as they seek to find and make meaning, whether or not it finds expression in religion. In that respect his theory supports researchers describing spirituality as innate. In explaining faith as a universal construct in human development, Fowler (1981, xiii) says,

We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith. How these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture. Faith is also shaped by initiatives from beyond us and other people, initiatives of spirit or grace. How these latter initiatives are recognized and imaged, or unperceived and ignored, powerfully affects the shape of faith in our lives.

The development of faith, according to Fowler, depends on the nurture children receive.

While faith development theory can be helpful, it is important to understand two key limitations. First, all faith development theories are descriptive theories, not prescriptive, meaning theorists have observed children and sought to describe the way faith has been manifested. Second, faith development theories focus on children who are being nurtured in faith or being raised with spiritual teaching, so they may not apply to children who grow up without regular teaching or examples of faith in their lives (Zimmerman 2022). Hay and Nye (2006, 57) challenge the stage theory of faith development, citing its narrowness, "coming near to dissolving religion into reason and therefore childhood spirituality into nothing more than a form of immaturity or inadequacy." As this study's interest is in the spirituality of early adolescents, it will not focus on faith development theory.

Since holistic development, according to Downs (2005, quoted in Tan and Tan 2017, 112), is when the ‘spiritual being’ is given space to express itself in the fullness of the physical, cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domains of development, it is beneficial to consider what early adolescents look like in each of those developmental domains.

Physical Development of Early Adolescents

Physical development includes changes in body size and proportion, brain development, perceptual and motor capacities, and physical health. In early adolescence the production of hormones leads to the onset of puberty, characterized by rapid physical growth and sexual awareness. Girls tend to start their growth spurts approximately two years before boys, meaning they often are physically taller and more physically developed than most early adolescent boys their age (Berk 2014, 363). Reproductive organs begin to mature in both girls and boys during early adolescence, along with growth of body hair, breasts (girls), facial hair and deepening of the voice (boys). The rapid bodily growth may lead to lack of coordination and feelings of awkwardness, which can impact self-esteem and willingness to engage in activities.

In addition to the bodily and hormonal changes that occur during puberty, biological transformation in early adolescence includes major changes in neurological development, starting with an overproduction of gray matter or nerve cells called “synaptogenesis,” which peaks around eleven to twelve years of age (Goldfus and Karny-Tagger 2017, 175). After synaptogenesis, two changes occur in the brain. First is the reduction of neurons and the synapses connecting them, known as “pruning” (Siegel 2013, 81). Neurons and their synaptic connections operate according to the principle of

“use it or lose it.” Unused synaptic connections will be discarded or pruned away, but active ones will be strengthened (Goldfus and Karny-Tagger 2017, 176). The second significant transformation is myelination, which allows information to flow more quickly and synchronized (Siegel 2013, 82), strengthening the linkages between different parts of the brain. The activities in which a young adolescent participates will be myelinated and strengthened, or “hard-wired” into their brain (Goldfus and Karny-Tagger 2017, 177). The plasticity of early adolescents’ brains—the ability of neural networks in the brain to change through growth and reorganization—makes this age a tremendous window of opportunity for young people to learn and grow (Goldfus and Karny-Tagger 2017, 181). According to Walsh (2004, 37), it “makes sense to encourage adolescents to get involved with service projects and volunteer opportunities while major brain circuits related to social relationships are blossoming and pruning.”

The prefrontal cortex gradually develops its “executive” function throughout adolescence, lending to more complex thinking and behavior, but it is not mature, evidenced in tasks that require inhibition, planning, judgment, and self-regulation (Berk 2014, 367). Because adolescents can be very passionate about the things they believe in (Kirk and Thome 2011, 99), great potential exists for channeling that passion into meaningful issues and causes. Therefore, supportive adults can play an important role in guiding decision-making and actions to help empower early adolescents in community-based service.

Cognitive Development of Early Adolescents

The cognitive domain is another component of the holistic development of early adolescents. According to Piaget’s cognitive development theory (Inhelder and Piaget,

1958), at around eleven or twelve years of age, children transition from the Concrete Operational stage to the Formal Operational stage of thinking. The Formal Operational stage (age eleven onward) is characterized by the ability to think abstractly, to consider the hypothetical as well as the real, and consider many perspectives on a problem (Berk 2014, 382). As abstract thinking grows, early adolescents develop third-person perspective-taking, or the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes, a mental achievement that changes the way they experience themselves in the world (Dean 2004, 30). This view enables them to understand civic engagement or service in the community on a deeper, broader level. Hart (1992, 32) points out that the ability to take the perspective of others is a key factor affecting children's ability to participate effectively.

Kohlberg (1981) has built some of Piaget's ideas about children's moral judgment and created a cognitive-developmental theory of moral understanding. His stages of moral development focus on how a person reasons about a situation. Moral development moves from externally-controlled morality at the preconventional and conventional level to defining morality in terms of abstract principles at the postconventional level (Kohlberg 1981, 17-20). His stages of moral development help shed light on the internal or external motivation children exhibit when engaging in community-based service.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1998) challenges Piaget's perspective on cognitive development being individually-based. Vygotsky theory focuses on the ways social and cultural contexts affect children's cognitive development, particularly in the case of language. One aspect of Vygotsky's theory that is pertinent to early adolescents in this study is his 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1998, 201), described as a range of tasks that are too difficult for a child to do alone, but possible with the help or

support of a more skilled partner (Berk 2014, 167). Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding—offering a level of support within that zone of proximal development—aligns with research on the importance of adult support in optimizing child participation in community-based service.

The cognitive changes in early adolescents also impact their identity and sense of belonging. The capacity for third-person perspective taking may lead early adolescents to become very self-conscious of what others may think of them—an “imaginary audience” (Berk 2014, 386) which can inhibit the feelings of empowerment. Additionally, their cognitive development gives them an increased capacity for introspection and deeper friendships (Maas 1996, 56). That increased capacity for introspection, including reflecting on their successes and failures, can influence early adolescents' self-confidence and engagement in activities (Eccles 1999, 32). Cognitive and social development go hand-in-hand. Social-emotional development is the next domain to be considered.

Social-Emotional Development of Early Adolescents

Erikson looks at human development through a psychosocial lens, suggesting there are “eight ages of man,” each with a crisis needing to be resolved (Erikson 1963, 247ff). Middle childhood (seven to eleven years) is a time of Industry vs. Inferiority. During this time children are learning to become competent and productive, developing a sense of moral commitment and responsibility (Erikson 1963, 259-260; Berk 2014, 330). If children develop well, they emerge from middle childhood with a sense of industry, feeling they have mastery and competency in a number of skills. If they struggle in middle childhood, they are left with a feeling of inferiority, which becomes magnified during adolescence (Berk 2014, 330). Early adolescence represents the beginning of a

period of extensive self-analysis and evaluation that eventually leads to the development of an integrated identity, an understanding of who one is as an autonomous individual. This stage is called Identity vs. Role Confusion (Erikson 1963, 261), a time when youth explore various life possibilities, followed by commitment (Berk 2014, 402), ultimately leading to a sense of their identity.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory views social development as something that happens through observation, modeling, and reinforcement. As such, learning is a social activity. As children observe and imitate people who demonstrate a given behavior and are reinforced for doing that behavior, the frequency of doing that behavior increases. Children admire and therefore tend to imitate competent, powerful models—especially older peers and adults (Berk 2014, 265). Based on Bandura's theory, if community-based service is a behavior adults wish children to develop, significant adults must model community-based involvement and positively reinforce what children do to help children grow in that social skill.

Because early adolescents are growing in autonomy and identity development, Zimmerman et al. (2018, 21) propose it is an opportune time to invest in opportunities for positive development. As the world of early adolescents expands to encompass more peers, adults, and activities outside the family, the broader network plays a role in building or threatening their confidence and engagement in tasks and activities (Eccles 1999, 32). Relationships play an important part in helping adolescents form their identity because of the social and ideological support they offer (Erikson 1963, 262-263). "For children, social groups provide a space where they can demonstrate competence, independence and self-worth. For youth who are older than twelve, social interaction in

group settings serve as a staging ground for experimentation with and merging of different ego identities” (Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010, 109). Erikson (1968, 132) asserts that early adolescents need to be affiliated with a group of peers, which will manifest in their conformity to group norms. The group itself is strengthened when members exert conformity pressures on each other, which could be described as peer pressure. In a study of faith-based youth groups, Larson, Hansen and Moneta (2006, 860) found high rates of positive developmental experiences that could be attributed to the combination of social and ideological support.

Community Service and Early Adolescent Development

Child and youth engagement in community service opportunities is seen to have positive developmental outcomes and, therefore, to be an important part of healthy development (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006, 2; Scales and Benson 2005, 339). Based on findings from developmental theory, Quinn (1999, 103) suggests that early adolescents need opportunities for physical activity, the development of competence and achievement, growth of self-identity and autonomy, positive social interaction with peers and adults, and meaningful participation in activities. Because early adolescent brains are in a state of rewiring, it is a season of opportunity. Therefore, Walsh (2004, 37) asserts the importance of encouraging adolescents to get involved in volunteer work and community service. The growth in mutual perspective taking and the broadening of social networks to encompass peers, adults, and activities outside the family opens early adolescents up to work with others, to think through and act upon issues, including social justice issues, and to consider if, what, and why they believe (Dean 2004; Eccles 1999; Hart 1992; Yoder 2020; Zeldin, Petrokubi and Camino 2008). Providing opportunities to

participate and enhance positive development in early adolescence builds skill and compassion and helps prepare youth for successful futures (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Ledford et al. 2013; Quinn 1999; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

Summary

Over the past thirty years significant research in the areas of child participation, youth empowerment, positive youth development, and civic engagement has been carried out. Research into children's spirituality is a growing field of study. Still, as this literature review has revealed, there is very little research that explores the connections between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when early adolescents engage in community-based service.

This chapter has provided an overview of the literature relevant to the research topics of child and youth participation, youth empowerment, children's spirituality, and how they relate to one another with regards to civic engagement or service within the community. It began by looking at the field of child participation and how it has developed since the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child. The key component of child participation is giving young people a voice and including them in authentic decision making. In order for that to happen, research supports the view that traditional perceptions of children and youth need to change.

Because child participation and empowerment are closely related, the chapter provided an overview of empowerment theory, including youth empowerment theory. Empowerment is both the ability to control one's environment—external empowerment—and the feeling that one can do so—internal empowerment (Diener and Biswas-Diener 2005, 125), and encompasses three interrelated components: intrapersonal

(or emotional), interactional (or cognitive), and behavioral (Zimmerman 1995, 588). The youth empowerment framework developed by Shier (2015; 2017), used as the main theoretical framework for this research study, was described in detail, along with the review of research supporting his three main concepts which lead to youth empowerment—capabilities, opportunities and conditions, and attitude. Since this research study focuses on empowerment and service in the community, literature exploring the relationship between child participation or empowerment and service in the community was also introduced.

To bridge the topics of participation/empowerment and spirituality, biblical and theological perspectives on child and youth empowerment were considered. Scripture and Christian theology describe children as being made in the image of God, created to do good works. They are called to love God and love their neighbor. Believing children are part of the body of Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, and gifted by the Holy Spirit for service to the body of Christ and beyond. The biblical principles demonstrate how the concepts of child participation and empowerment align with and are supported from a faith perspective, lending support to the holistic nature of empowerment.

The literature review in this chapter also focused on children's spirituality, looking at research that defines spirituality from a more innate and universal perspective rather than being confined to a religious framework. If all children are spiritual beings, they express their spirituality through "relational consciousness" (Hay and Nye 2006, 109), including awe and wonder, delight or despair, awareness of something greater beyond themselves (a higher being), ultimate good, meaning making, etc. (Hay and Nye 2006, 65). Studies identifying relationships between children's spirituality,

empowerment, and service in the community, including faith-based community service were reviewed.

Early adolescents, innately spiritual, are at a unique point in their physical, cognitive, and psycho-social development. As such, they are ready to participate and to be empowered to become partners in community transformation, pointing to the strategic importance of involving them in community service. What remains to be discovered are the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality as children serve.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality in ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Child Development Centers in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. This chapter presents the research methodology and design that was implemented for this study, along with the procedures used in data collection and analysis. It also explains the rationale for and special ethical considerations when doing research with children.

Description of Research Methodology

This research study used a qualitative case study approach. According to Yin (2018, 3), applying a case study method is the preferred research strategy when the main research questions are *how* and *why* questions, when the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon, and when the researcher has little or no control over the behavioral events. A case is defined as a bounded system, a group of interrelated parts that create an organized whole (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 580). Case study research looks intensively at the chosen topic or unit of study, seeing it from as many perspectives as possible to understand how the parts of the system work together (Johnson and

Christensen 2014, 58), aiding the researcher in obtaining a more holistic answer to the research problem (Baškarada 2014, 1). It “ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter and Jack 2008, 544). The bounded case in this case study is the early adolescents attending a Nazarene Child Development Center in Yerevan, Armenia.

Case studies can include qualitative and/or quantitative data (Yin 2018, 3). When both qualitative and quantitative data are used in a single research study, it is called mixed-methods research. While the original research design for this study used a mixed-methods approach by employing questionnaires as well as qualitative methods, I was advised to simplify the design. Therefore, I incorporated several of the questions from two questionnaires—the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure, or SHALOM (Fisher 2010), and the Positive Youth Development (PYD) Student Questionnaire (Lerner et al. 2005; Lerner, Phelps and Lerner 2008)—into the focus group and interview questions. The final research methodology included only qualitative methods.

Qualitative studies in the areas of participation, empowerment, and spirituality of children have used case studies, observations, focus groups, Photovoice, structured and semi-structured interviews, and creative expression (Böök and Mykkänen 2014; Dempster, Stevens and Keefe 2011; Hay and Nye 2006; Hemming 2013; Johnson 2017; Madrigal et al. 2014; McTavish, Streelasky and Coles 2012; Nicotera and Bassett 2015; Royce 2009). Boyatzis and Newman (2019, 170) recommend the use of qualitative methodologies when studying children’s spirituality, asserting that using a multi-method approach is the best way to capture the richness of children’s spirituality, allowing the

child's own words and activities to be the source of insights. In a study on youth voice and civic participation with twelve-year-olds in Italy, Dallago et al. (2010, 50) use both quantitative and qualitative methods to elicit the richest data. A literature review of studies related to student voice and leadership conducted by Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe (2011, 13) points out that the methodologies used for eliciting student voice most often tend to be qualitative, although mixed methods research is also employed.

A major strength of case studies is the gathering of data from multiple data sources (Yin 2018, 110). By gathering data from multiple sources, whether qualitative, quantitative, or both, a case study becomes a rich source of information for understanding the case in its context. Using multiple methods for qualitative data collection also increases the credibility and validity of the results because it can reduce errors that may occur when gathering and analyzing data using only one method. This combining of multiple sources of data such as interviews, observation, and document analysis is called triangulation, and triangulation strengthens the rigor of a qualitative study (Yilmaz 2013, 323; Yin 2018, 128). In this research study, three qualitative data-gathering methods are used: interviews, focus groups, and field observations.

The research design also included the opportunity for a few older children (from fifteen to seventeen years of age) to serve as co-researchers (research assistants). One of the primary strengths of using children as researchers is their ability to “overcome intergenerational barriers and elicit perspectives from their peers in a way that is not possible for adults” (Bradbury-Jones 2014, 44). It was hoped that using young people as researchers would garner responses that were not possible for adults to obtain, thus helping to collect richer data. However, it did not become a reality for this study.

Research Design

This qualitative case study investigated the question: What are the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Child Development Centers in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects? Several questions guided the research process, utilizing various methods of qualitative data collection.

1. Who are the select ten- to thirteen-year-old children in the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Center (CDC) in Yerevan, Armenia, participating in this research study according to the following demographics?
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender
 - c. Involvement or non-involvement in a faith community
 - d. Sponsorship in the CDC
2. In what ways are select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, able to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based service projects?
3. In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, perceive empowerment related to the following factors through engaging in community-based service projects?
 - a. Development of capabilities and knowledge

- b. Creation of conditions and opportunities
 - c. Personal attitudes and self esteem
4. In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, express their spirituality through engaging in community-based service projects according to the following categories?
- a. Awareness sensing (alertness to spiritual, metacognitive matters)
 - b. Mystery sensing (wonder, awe, and imagination)
 - c. Value sensing (delight, despair, goodness, meaning)
5. What is the evidence of interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects?

The design and flow of the research study is illustrated in Figure 7.

Before the research began, training was held for two groups. The first training was for the Kids Club leaders working with the children participating in the study. It gave them an overview of the research study and introduced them to a four-step process adapted from Save the Children (Lansdown and O’Kane 2014, 24), where children design and implement a community-based service project (Appendix B). I also trained my research assistants according to the topics described below in the field procedures.

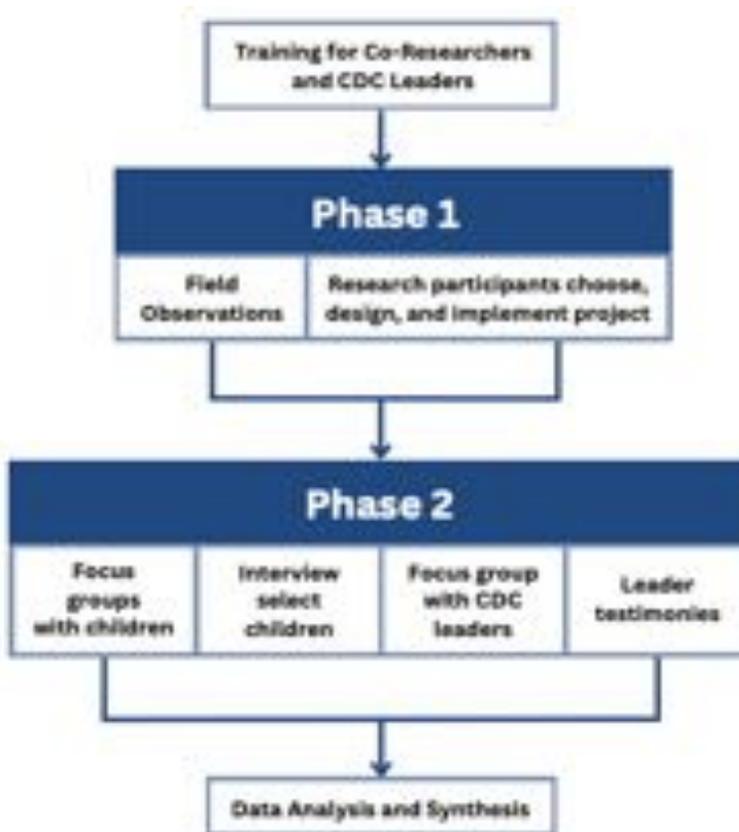


Figure 7: Research Design

In Phase 1 of the study, one Kids Club leader used the four-step project-planning process to guide the children to identify needs in their community, select a service project in response to a need, and then design and implement the project to meet that need.

During the process of choosing, designing, and implementing the project, the research team (one research assistant, one translator, and I) did field observations related to the research questions (Appendix C). The research assistant and I sat in different parts of the room taking notes, while my translator sat with me and did simultaneous translation of the discussions. Because the children in the targeted age range for this study were already divided into two groups for Kids Club, we decided to keep them in their two groups for the process, which led to two different service projects. Therefore, a second research

assistant was used to help with observations during the project implementation step because the children did their projects in separate locations.

Phase 2 of the research study occurred after projects were completed. The research team facilitated three children's focus groups (Appendix D), gathering data to answer research questions 2, 3, and 4. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine children to explore more deeply their experiences related to spirituality, participation and empowerment in the process of designing and implementing their community project (Appendix E). Interviews lasted approximately 20-30 minutes per child. While literature on qualitative research does not agree on the sample size, the general agreement is that the sample size should be sufficient to reach data saturation (Gentles et al. 2015, 1782). Based on the responses of the children, we felt that we were close to data saturation at that point.

In addition to children's interviews and focus groups, we also recorded testimonies from five leaders who assisted the children during the implementation step of their projects as a means of triangulating the data. Moreover, at the end of the process, the Kids Club leaders participated in an evaluative focus group to hear their perspectives on the process and its impact on the children (Appendix F). Throughout the study, I met weekly with the research team to corroborate our notes, translate my assistants' notes into English, and make adjustments to the research design as needed. I also kept a reflexive journal throughout the entire data-gathering process.

Selection of Research Assistants

Since the research was conducted in Armenia, a non-English-speaking country, it was necessary for me to hire a translator and research assistants. The translator was

recommended by the local church hosting the CDC and was hired after meeting with me. The Kids Club staff felt it would be better to have a female translator as she would be less threatening to the children. My translator was a twenty-nine-year-old native Armenian from Yerevan who attended the host church, so she was familiar with some of the children in the Kids Club. She possessed two essential skills. First, she felt comfortable working with children and was able to build rapport with them, being seen as non-threatening and approachable by the children. Second, she had the capability to do simultaneous translation, which she did during all group discussions, focus groups, and interviews.

In addition to the translator, I originally had hoped to identify three or four children from fifteen to seventeen years of age who were former Kids Club attendees to be co-researchers (research assistants). In consultation with the Armenian leaders, we agreed that would not be possible for cultural and logistical reasons. Consequently, we identified two university students as research assistants who were not immediate family members of the research participants. My primary research assistant was a twenty-one-year-old female who attended the host church and worked with youth. Her good rapport with young people was essential since she had to facilitate the focus groups and interviews. The second research assistant, used primarily in Phase 2, was a nineteen-year-old female who also attended the host church. Both research assistants spoke English, so it was easy for me to communicate with them throughout the research process, even when the translator was unavailable. Research assistants were required to attend training, which included a review of the importance of all ethical considerations, to learn how to conduct research for each phase of the study in which they were involved.

The use of research assistants that were slightly older than what originally had been planned did not appear to weaken the results. The children appeared to relate well with them and were open to answer their questions.

All research assistants and translators signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix G) before they were accepted as part of the research team. Research assistants also signed a consent form (Appendix H).

Selection of Research Participants

Sampling is the selection of data sources from which data are collected for the purposes of answering the research question (Gentles et al. 2015, 1775). Gentles et al. (2015, 1778) observe that the most commonly described means of sampling in qualitative literature is purposeful or purposive sampling, “a sample chosen ‘on purpose’ because those sampled meet specific criteria” (Terrell 2016, 75), which can provide rich insights into the research problem. The criteria for participants for this study were very clear and specific:

1. Children from ten to thirteen years of age
2. Currently registered participants in the identified CDC
3. Have parent/guardian permission and give personal assent to be involved in the research

The CDC divides the school-age children into three age-based groups, and the two older groups met the age criteria for this study. Although two children in one of the groups were below the targeted age range for the study, they were included as research participants rather than exclude them from their group for eight weeks. We agreed to allow all the children in both groups to take part in the community-based service project

process (Phase 1). Then the children who had parental consent and gave personal assent would participate in the focus groups and interviews (Phase 2). The final number of research participants was thirty-two, meeting the goal of thirty to forty participants for the study. All children who attended the Kids Club on the day focus groups were conducted had parental consent and gave personal assent to being part of the focus groups.

Sampling for the individual interviews was more challenging. The goal was to interview ten children, seeking to have equal numbers of boys and girls and representatives of the younger and older groups to ensure a cross-section of all participants, using stratified random sampling to select children for interviews. Stratified random sampling divides the population being studied into mutually exclusive groups, then selects a random number from each group (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 356). However, some parents expressed that although their children could participate in the focus groups, they did not want their children to be interviewed, which decreased the number of children from which to select. Because the school spring break had begun, several more children were absent from Kids Club on the day scheduled for interviews. Therefore, we used convenience sampling, identifying children who were available and willing to be interviewed (Johnson and Christensen 2014, 363), while still seeking a balance of boys and girls and representatives of the younger and older groups. The final sample of interviewees included nine children: four boys and five girls, four from Group 1 and five from Group 2.

All six Kids Club staff were invited to and participated in a leaders' focus group, and five of the six leaders who helped the children during the project implementation step

consented to record a short testimony of what they observed while the children implemented their projects.

Development of Instruments

The instruments created to assist in qualitative data collection included a field observation checklist (Appendix C), focus-group discussion protocols for children (Appendix D) and Kids Club leaders (Appendix F), and semi-structured interview questions for children (Appendix E). The open-ended questions used in focus groups and interviews allowed for guided conversation, gave freedom to the participants to answer as fully or briefly as they wished, and provided the research assistant with opportunities to follow up or ask clarifying questions. The children's focus group and interview protocols were translated into the Armenian language, and key questions were back-translated to ensure the accuracy of the translations.

Pilot Study

A pilot study is “a small-scale implementation of a larger study or part of a larger study” (Given 2008, 624). It can be used to determine the feasibility of the study, to test the data collection procedures and instruments, or to identify potential study participants. Since this study focused on children and since it was being done in another culture and language, it was necessary to pilot test the focus group and interview protocols.

It was hoped that five to ten children from another CDC in Armenia who were in the target age group but not participating in the research study would be available to help pilot the focus group and interview questions. Although they would not go through the entire process of identifying and implementing a community service project, participants

would be asked to reflect upon a past service project they had done and answer the focus-group questions to check for ease of understanding. In addition, one or two of the pilot-study participants would be interviewed to provide feedback on the clarity of the interview questions.

I discovered that other Armenian CDCs were far from Yerevan and that the leaders did not have the capacity to connect with the children outside of their scheduled programs during the timeframe we required, so they were not available to pilot test the questions. Moreover, all the children of the targeted age range in the host CDC were engaged in the research project. As a result, we decided to pilot test the questions with teenagers from the church who agreed to work with me and the translator.

The pilot group consisted of seven participants from fourteen to seventeen years old who gave feedback as they answered the questions for both protocols in light of a service project they had recently completed. Much of their feedback related to questions about spirituality. For example, one of the original interview questions said, “Think about the spiritual part of who you are. Did your spiritual life influence how you did the project? If so, how?” The pilot group struggled to answer the question, saying if teens could not understand the question, ten-year-old children would not. They also commented that in Armenia spirituality is equated with going to church, so the children would not understand “spirituality” in an abstract way. Therefore, we decided that using the term “God” would make the questions related to spirituality clearer to the children since 95% of Armenia’s population identifies as Christian. Their feedback aligns with Csinos (2018, 64) who asserts that research into children’s spirituality must consider and attend to culture at every stage. The use of the term, “God,” did focus many of the

comments later made by children into a religious framework, but using the broader definition of spirituality in this study gave space for non-religious comments to be identified and included.

The pilot group also felt that the focus group and interviews had too many questions for children. Consequently, I removed a few questions from both protocols and adjusted some of the interview questions so they were not identical to questions asked during the focus group. I also moved one activity (where children would point to their level of involvement on the four-step process diagram) from the focus group to the individual interviews because the pilot group suggested that the children's responses could be influenced by what their friends did. The pilot group also gave feedback about using the term "nicknames" for children to rename themselves. It is not a common practice in Armenia, and it has a negative connotation, so they recommended we simply give the children the freedom to choose another name if they would like, which we did. Even though the pilot study participants were a few years older than originally planned, their feedback sharpened the focus group/interview questions and general data-gathering process, making it more culturally relevant and age-appropriate.

Field Procedures

Ethical Considerations

As the volume of research with children grows, so do the discussions surrounding the ethical issues (Butschi and Hedderich 2021, 4). Since this research study included children as research participants, high ethical standards were essential. Traditionally, ethics in research fall into three main categories: (1) ensuring informed consent of research participants, (2) avoiding harm to participants, and (3) maintaining the

confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their responses (Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele 2012, 242). All three areas were considered throughout the entire research process: the design, sampling, recruiting, data collection, and analysis. For the purposes of this research study, several ethical guidelines suggested by Laws and Mann (2004) for doing research with children were implemented.

Informed Consent (Laws and Mann 2004, 33)

Research with children requires a two-step consent process. Therefore, we began by asking the parents or guardians of participating children to give their consent (Appendix J). Then the participating children gave their assent to be part of the study (Appendix K). Both parents and children were given information and an explanation of the purpose of the study, how the children would be involved in the research activities, and how the information would be used (Alderson and Morrow 2020, 130). Parents received written information about the study from the Kids Club leaders while the children were told verbally by the Kids Club leaders in age-appropriate language and given time to ask questions. Both parents and children understood that participation was voluntary and that their children could withdraw at any time (Bradbury-Jones 2014, 76).

Avoiding Harm to Participants (Laws and Mann 2004, 29)

I recognized my responsibility to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of the children participating in the study. The best interests of the children must be the overarching consideration, minimizing any potential risks to children, including embarrassment, privacy, sense of fear, failure, or coercion (Freeman and Mathison 2009, 35). Therefore, the research team and I were careful to follow the child-

protection guidelines established by the local CDC. In addition, children were reminded that participation in the study was optional, that they did not have to answer questions if they were uncomfortable, and that they could stop at any time. No interviews were conducted with only one child and one interviewer in the room.

Anonymity and Confidentiality (Laws and Mann 2004, 36)

It is very important to protect the identities of the children in the study. Therefore, participant names have not been used. During focus groups, all the children were given the option of choosing their own pseudonym, which delighted them. For those who chose to keep their own name, a pseudonym was assigned to them during the data analysis. Children were informed that everything they said would be kept confidential and not discussed with other children or leaders except the research team (Alderson and Morrow 2020, 130). The research team also explained why interviews or focus groups were being audio-recorded and gave the children the option to not be recorded if they were uncomfortable. Two of the three focus groups were not recorded because the children objected to it. Recordings and research notes were only seen/heard by the research team and translators, and all digital files were stored on my computer. Hard copies of documents have been kept in a secure location. All research assistants and translators signed a Confidentiality Agreement (Appendix G).

Welfare of the Research Staff (Laws and Mann 2004, 40)

The research team followed the CDC codes of conduct regarding child protection, both for the participating children's sake and to protect themselves. Equipping them also

increased their well-being. Research assistants were trained in their roles and responsibilities and had weekly times to debrief with me throughout the research study.

Avoiding Manipulation or Exploitation

Since the children were actively involved in service projects, care was taken to not manipulate, deceive, or force them to work in a dangerous way. Hart (1992, 9) notes that if children do not have an understanding of the issue and their subsequent actions, it becomes manipulation. After the research project was explained to them, the children were allowed to choose the project they would implement, plan the action steps, choose their level of activity during the implementation, and work under the supervision of an adult leader. No children were forced to participate in the work being done, and leaders ensured work activities were done in a safe manner.

Permissions and Consent

An application for review of the research design and risk factors was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of APNTS on July 22, 2022, a necessary step to take before proceeding with the actual research. The application was approved on August 5, 2022 (Appendix L).

When doing research with an organization, the gatekeepers—the people who must give consent before the researcher can enter the setting—must be contacted first (Glesne 2011, 57). Therefore, I first contacted the leadership of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Department to obtain official permission to conduct the study (Appendix M). Written permission was given via email on July 19, 2022. Following that initial permission, I wrote to and obtained written permission to do the

research on July 24, 2022 from the Yerevan Church of the Nazarene, the local church hosting the CDC where the research took place (Appendix N).

Before the research began, the Kids Club staff introduced me to the children and shared why I would be with them for two months. The Kids Club director and I agreed that we would allow all children in the target age group to participate in the process of planning and implementing the community-based service project, after which we would obtain consent from parents/guardians for their children to participate in Phase 2 of the research: the focus groups and interviews. By that time parents were familiar with me and knew about their children's service projects. Rather than sending home the parent consent forms with the children (Appendix J), the Kids Club director communicated the information to parents via a WhatsApp group, the regular way she conveys information to all parents. Following that, as parents came to drop off or pick up their children from Kids Club, they signed a paper copy of the consent form and had time to ask the director questions. A few parents gave electronic consent, which was noted as well. All parents gave consent for their children to participate in focus groups, but a few asked that their children not be individually interviewed.

Although an assent form was created for children (Appendix K), it is not customary for children to sign documents in Armenia (Devenish, Hooley and Mellor 2022, 140). Therefore, to record the children's assent, we made a list of all the children's names, reminded them of the purpose of the research and then allowed them to put a checkmark by their name if they were willing to participate in focus groups. All the children present that day gave their assent.

Kids Club leaders gave verbal and written consent to record a testimony and/or be involved in their focus group (Appendix O).

Training

The training of research assistants was adapted from an outline set out by Bradbury-Jones (2014, 32). Training was conducted on two separate days. The first training day focused on understanding the flow of the study and skills required for Phase 1. Because there was only one research assistant for most of Phase 1, training was done more informally than originally planned, focusing on her needs, abilities, and questions. Day 2 of the training, conducted with the main research assistant one month later, focused on skills required for Phase 2 of the research. The second research assistant for Phase 2 was asked to do observations and note-taking, so her training followed Day 1's plan. The outlines of the two training sessions are as follows:

Day 1: Introducing the Study

- Introductions and relationship-building
- About the study: explain the research question, the three key concepts of participation, empowerment, and spirituality, and the four-step community service project process
- The role and expectations of a research assistant
- Introduction to the research methods and how they are used in the study: field observations, interviews, and focus groups
- Timetable/Dates for conducting the research and expected number of hours of commitment

- Ethical matters: ground rules, ensuring safety, child protection procedures, confidentiality, consent
- Practice field observations
- Data-handling
- Sign consent and confidentiality documents

Day 2: Preparing for Phase 2

- Being a good interviewer
- Interview protocols and practice
- Conducting focus groups – facilitation skills
- Focus group protocols and practice
- Reflection

We discussed but were not able to practice the focus-group facilitation before my research assistant conducted the focus groups. Throughout the research process, I met regularly with my research assistant(s) to provide information, support, and guidance to help them hone their skills in observation and interviewing. We also debriefed after each focus group and interview and made adjustments to improve.

All the Kids Club leaders were given an orientation to the research study and its key concepts, whether or not they were directly helping with the research participants. The orientation was adapted from material created by Save the Children (Lansdown and O’Kane 2014) familiarizing them with the four-step process of choosing, designing, implementing, and evaluating a community-based service project, illustrated in Appendix B. While only one of the leaders ended up facilitating the process with the research participants, other leaders helped by sharing projects the children have done in the past

and suggesting the best activity for helping the children start talking about the community and its needs. During their orientation it became clear that there was confusion surrounding the term “community.” Was it the church, their street, the school, etc.? The lack of clarity and perhaps ambiguity in the translation of the word led us to simplify what we said to the children, just calling it a serving project. After the initial orientation, I worked closely with the leader facilitating the project-planning process with the children. We met weekly to evaluate the children’s progress, problem solve, and discuss how she would facilitate the next step. This informal, need-based training seemed to best fit her needs and the research requirements.

Remuneration

Reimbursement, compensation, appreciation, and incentives are very real issues for children, and payment needs to be country-, culture-, and context-sensitive (Bradbury-Jones 2014, 60). Gifts for the children were determined in consultation with Kids Club leaders. All children who participated in the focus groups received a special snack. The nine children who did individual interviews (and the friends who accompanied them) received a large candy bar and a souvenir from Canada. We planned a pizza party for all the children to celebrate the completion of the research, but I was not able to stay in Armenia long enough to make it happen.

Research assistants received fair compensation for their work. After consulting with the CDC staff, my primary research assistant received a gift card to a local mall for an amount that reflected the number of hours she had worked. The second research assistant only helped for one day, so she received a personal gift. The benefit of gaining skills and experience as researchers were added extras but were not considered the

payment for services rendered (Bradbury-Jones 2014, 59). Translators, including those who translated documents and transcribed audio recordings, were paid according to the agreed-upon rates per hour or per page.

Data Collection and Recording

Demographic information about the research participants was provided by the Kids Club director from their Kids Club registration forms: age, gender, sponsorship status, and attendance or non-attendance at a church. The remainder of qualitative data collection came from field observation notes, interviews, and focus groups.

Field Observations

Being present during the process of designing and implementing the community service project gave the research team the opportunity to observe the children and their leader in each step of the process. An observation checklist, based on the research questions for this study, was provided to each research assistant (Appendix C). Both research assistants and I had separate notebooks where we kept our field notes. Research assistants wrote rough notes of their observations in Armenian while they were with the children, then expanded them and added reflexive comments. Notebooks were then submitted to me weekly, after which my translator orally translated the notes into English while I transcribed them. The assistants' notes were compared with my observation notes to give a more complete description of what we observed. Questions and clarifications were discussed weekly with the assistants. We regularly sought to create field notes using a "thick description" (Geertz 1973). Rather than just reporting facts or behaviors, a thick

description explains the context as well (Holliday 2007, 75) to help the data to be more easily understood by an outsider.

Holliday (2007, 88) suggests that researchers should seek to see the familiar as strange and not take for granted what is seen. Since the research was done in a culture unfamiliar to me, I found it necessary to consciously challenge my personal assumptions. Separate from field notes, I kept a research diary to create a record of my behavior and emotions throughout the research, including such things as what was surprising, intriguing, confusing or disturbing to me (Glesne 2011, 77). One example comes from the day the children implemented their service projects and we conducted the focus groups.

I was shocked at all the kids that came. . . . I started getting pretty nervous because the older group, which was usually nine to eleven kids, had fifteen kids in attendance. There's no way I can do a good focus group with fifteen kids and I told Anna that, but she said it would not work to divide them or do it next week. They wouldn't remember what they did. So I had to prep for a focus group of fifteen kids. . .

The set up wasn't ideal—two rectangular tables end to end to make a long table. Again, when [my research assistant] asked the kids if we could record, all of the boys and some of the girls said no. Grr. Now we had to try to capture it all ourselves again. I felt like everything was rushed—that people just wanted to be done.... Several times my assistant had to stop and reprimand some of the boys, and moved one of them at one point. . . . There were many distractions with people walking through the room, kids looking for their siblings because Kids Club was over, two kids had to leave for other clubs. Then my translator left the room for a few minutes to deal with something. I wondered if there was any integrity to the process. It was starting to feel like a gong show. The kids were tired and wanted to go because they'd been at Kids Club for four hours already. My assistant was getting a bit cross with them too because they wouldn't listen, but the group was too big.

So I look at the whole thing and wonder if I got anything worthwhile. But I think of some of the other people who have interviewed kids and remember that you often have to wade through a lot of chatter to glean a few nuggets that are pertinent. I must hold on to that truth and move forward from there (Personal Research Diary, March 18, 2023).

Interviews

Vogt, Gardner, and Haefele (2012, 36) state that interviews are an effective research method “when you are seeking knowledge that is best obtained from members of your target population because it is subjective or internal to the people interviewed; when you seek in-depth answers from research participants ... [and] your questions probe difficult or sensitive matters of meaning and belief.” Since this research study sought to understand children’s participation, their perceptions of empowerment, and their expressions of spirituality, individual interviews were an important data collection method. Following the children’s focus groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine children using a series of open-ended questions (Appendix E). The interview questions provided the general direction for the interview, but the research assistant leading the interview knew that questions could be asked in any order or elaborated upon as the interviewee provided relevant information or details.

The power issues that occur between an adult interviewer and child interviewee can have a significant impact on the data collected, particularly in my situation where I could not speak the language of the children. Mackie (2012) points out that children may have a tendency to say what they believe the adult interviewer wants to hear. To mitigate that possibility, three strategies were employed. First, my research assistant (a young adult) was trained to conduct the interviews with the children so the interviews could be done in Armenian. Because she had been observing the children for several weeks and occasionally helping the leader facilitating the process, the children were familiar and comfortable with her.

A second strategy to help the children to express themselves as freely as possible was to have them draw and talk about their drawing. Brown et al. (2020, 2) explain that visual methods are some of the most effective ways children have for expressing their experiences, particularly when they do not speak the same language as the researcher. Using photos, creating maps, drawing, etc., can open a window into understanding the way children view their world. Inviting children to create a picture or drawing related to their experience can help them to express their feelings or ideas when they may not have the words to do so (Ellis 2006, 113; Laws and Mann 2004; 64; Norrlander 2017, 24). Additionally, the use of “get-to-know-you” activities with children, including drawing, is supported by several researchers (Ellis 2006, 118; Freeman and Mathison 2009, 95; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett and Bottrell 2015, 106; Laws and Mann 2004, 65). This study included asking participating children to create a “before and after drawing” (Ellis 2006, 119) at the beginning of their interview to facilitate reflection and recall of their experience with the community-service project. Surprisingly, many of the children interviewed did not enjoy drawing. Only five of the nine children completed the drawing, and many of them commented on their poor drawing skills as they drew. The other four children asked if they could write their response instead of drawing it, and they were given permission to do so. At the end of the 20- to 30-minute interview, the children were asked whether or not they wanted to keep their picture/writing. If they did, we asked permission to photograph the picture before they left.

Third, the children were given the option of having a friend with them when they were interviewed to help make them feel more comfortable. Since the interviews were conducted during Kids club, eight of the nine children brought a friend from Kids Club.

The one child who did not bring a friend had come early, so no other children were available to accompany her. The presence of a friend who sat beside them seemed to make the interview more relaxed and conversational, although the friends were reminded not to answer the questions. In particular, children would consult their friends while they were doing the drawing activity and an activity where they put stickers on a picture of the four-step process to indicate how actively they participated throughout the process. At the end of the interview, the interviewer asked each friend if they also wished to share any thoughts about the community-service projects. Some children gave brief comments, and it seemed to make the friends feel included even though they were not fully interviewed. At the end of the interview, we gave the interviewee and the friend a large candy bar and a small Canadian souvenir to thank them for their participation.

With the permission of the children being interviewed, all interviews were audio-recorded, and I took notes while receiving simultaneous translation. I wore a headset and sat to one side of the room rather than in front of the children. My translator was on the other side of the room so she could speak softly into her microphone without disturbing the interview process. I did occasionally interrupt the interviews to ask a clarifying question or if I felt a child had more to say than what my research assistant had probed. Generally, however, I kept all my comments to myself until the end of the interviews. All interview recordings were transcribed and translated so I could compare them with my own interview notes.

Focus Groups

Focus Groups are a form of interviewing that “capitalizes on communication between the research participants in order to generate data” (Kitzinger 1995, 299). Focus

groups, usually composed of people who share certain characteristics, allow participants to hear one another and build on the comments of others in the group which, for some people, makes it easier to share their thoughts. The relatively small number of participants makes it easier for all group members to communicate, raising the potential for useful data to be collected (Macdonald 2012, 41).

Focus groups were conducted immediately after the children completed their service projects, giving every child a chance to share their thoughts and feelings about the process of choosing, designing, and implementing the project (Appendix D). We conducted three focus groups. The younger group (Group 1) had collected food for two needy families, so they divided into two groups (1A and 1B) to visit the two families and deliver the food. Therefore, we kept Groups 1A and 1B separate for their focus groups. Group 1A had six children and Group 1B had ten children. The older group (Group 2) had fifteen children, and I asked the Kids Club leaders if we could divide them into two groups to make facilitating the focus-group discussion more manageable. However, they informed me that there was no time to do a fourth group, so our only option was to facilitate one focus group with all fifteen children.

All focus groups discussed questions related to the research questions and concluded by doing a writing activity with images, which also helped the quieter children express themselves. The final results of the writing activity for two of the focus groups are illustrated in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Focus-Group Writing Activity

My primary research assistant led the focus groups while a second research assistant and I observed and took notes. I wore a headset so my translator could move around the room to hear the children better as she simultaneously translated the discussion. If something was unclear, or if I felt that the facilitator should rephrase a question, it was requested in the moment. The children did not appear distracted by my interjections since they were familiar with the research team. Each focus group lasted approximately 45-50 minutes. We asked permission of all three groups to audio-record their discussion. Only Group 1A gave permission to do so. Following the focus groups, my assistant's notes were translated and compared with mine to provide a more comprehensive description of the discussion. The audio-recording was transcribed and translated so I could compare it with written notes for more accurate data.

A special snack was provided for all the children. The first two groups were given the snack at the beginning of their focus group because they were hungry. The third group received their snack at the end of the discussion because they had eaten their lunch just before the focus group began.

Following the completion of Phase 2, I also conducted a short focus-group discussion with the six Kids Club leaders (Appendix F). We held it after eating lunch together, a weekly occurrence. I facilitated the discussion using a translator. With the permission of the group members, we audio-recorded the session. Because most of the leaders had not been part of the project-planning process, I only asked half of the questions from the protocol. Then I met separately with the leader who facilitated the process with the children to ask her the remainder of the questions individually. Five leaders also shared personal testimonies of their experiences helping the children implement their projects. They were recorded, transcribed and translated to add to data collected from the children.

Data Processing and Analysis

The data to be processed included field observation notes from my research assistants and me as well as transcripts and notes from interviews, testimonies, and focus groups. Additionally, there were drawings and pictures created by the children during their interviews. After all the Armenian language data was translated and transcribed, I compiled all the data and began the process of data analysis using open coding. Open coding is “the interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically. Its purpose is to give the analyst new insights by breaking through standard ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena reflected in the data” (Corbin and Strauss 1990, 12).

While I already had some broad categories related to the research questions, I set them aside, allowing the data to drive the coding process. Generally, the coding was done line-by-line, but some anecdotes and stories were coded by paragraph. MAXQDA2022 software was used to help analyze the data. After going through all the data twice doing open coding, I began organizing codes into categories (axial coding), looking to identify emerging themes related to the research questions, along with their significance to the research problem (Holliday 2007, 9). At this point I introduced the broad categories related to the research questions and organized the data under the key concepts of helping/service, participation, empowerment, and spirituality. From there I could identify emerging themes from the data that answered the research questions. I defined all codes, categories, and sub-categories and selected a quote from the data to serve as an illustration for each code (see Chapter IV).

Validity and Reliability

Validity, broadly speaking, is the “soundness” of a research study (Given 2008, 909), while reliability is described as the “dependability, consistency, and/or repeatability of a project’s data collection, interpretation, and/or analysis” (Given 2008, 753). In qualitative research, the term “credibility” often is used instead of “validity.” Yilmaz (2013, 323) states that, “employing multiple data collection methods to study the same setting, issue, or programme increases the credibility of the findings by eliminating or reducing errors linked to a particular method.” This study employed several of the strategies for promoting reliability and credibility suggested by Merriam (2009, 229): (1) triangulation using multiple researchers, sources of data, and data collection methods to confirm findings; (2) adequate engagement in data collection, leading to data saturation;

(3) researcher's reflexivity; critical self-reflection regarding assumptions, worldview, and biases; and (4) rich, thick descriptions. Triangulation through the combination of interviews, focus groups with children and adults, testimonies, and field observations contributed to rigorous qualitative research, ultimately leading to a more credible and dependable study.

At the same time, my reflexivity was a key component of data collection and analysis. Cleary (2013, 66) states that research should be composed of two inquiries: that which allows you to collect the data, and a second inner inquiry that critiques your ethics and research process. I sought to constantly identify my own standpoint when analyzing the data (Cleary 2013, 197), so that past experience, expectations, or cultural bias did not color the interpretation of data toward a particular conclusion.

Summary

A qualitative case study fit the parameters of this study which investigated the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality in ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Child Development Centers in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. This chapter described the rationale for using a qualitative case study and outlined the research design for this study. It explained each of the qualitative methods employed: field observations, focus groups, and interviews. It carefully outlined the selection of participants and research assistants and described how the pilot study was done. Because this study was done with children, careful attention was given to describe the ethical issues involved to protect and care for all participating children as part of the field procedures. Finally, it outlined the procedures used for data collection, processing, and analysis.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Introduction

This chapter contains the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the research data on the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality in ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassion Ministries CDCs in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. Before presenting the results, I highlight the key limitations arising from the research to help frame the interpretation of the results.

The research data is presented in the framework of the five research sub-questions. First, I present the demographic characteristics of participants in this study to help provide an understanding of the children participating in the research. Then each of the three key concepts—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—are presented, giving the children the opportunity to share their perspectives through drawings, focus groups and individual interviews in addition to observation notes from the research team. The data analysis includes the categories, codes and definitions identified for each of the three themes, including quoted examples from the children. Interpretation of the data is also included. Following the exploration of the key concepts, evidence of

interrelationships among the three concepts is presented as they connect to the core theme of the study: service/helping.

Research Limitations

Several important limitations were identified during the research. Time was a key limitation. The entire project-planning process was done once weekly over seven weeks in 30- to 40-minute segments during Kids Club, which limited the amount of progress that could be made in brainstorming, choosing, planning, etc., each week. Furthermore, the time of year, with an impending spring school break and preparations for Easter activities, limited the availability of the children during and beyond Kids Club hours. Ideally, the process would have run more smoothly if the two groups could have completed their projects on separate days and held their focus groups the week after they had completed the project, but the calendar did not allow it. My translator and research assistants also had limited availability outside of Kids Club hours, and I was unable to extend my stay in Armenia beyond two months, so all nine interviews were conducted on the same day, one after the other, giving little time to reflect or modify the process as we worked with the children. Had we more time, we may have spread out the interviews over a longer period of time or done follow-up interviews with some of the children to get more information.

The opportunity for children to do meaningful evaluation was also truncated due to time constraints. Since the focus groups were held on the same day as the project implementation, the children did not have the space or opportunity to step back and look at the entire process they had engaged in over the previous five weeks. They gave suggestions on what had gone well and what they would change about the project

implementation, confirming they felt safe sharing their opinions with others. However, there was no time to consider what might be the next step based on their current experience. Lansdown and O’Kane (2014, 24) suggest a five-step process, including planning next steps following evaluation, but this research only used the first four steps. If the groups had had more time to debrief and evaluate what had happened with guidance from their leaders, the children may have reflected more on how to address the challenges they faced throughout the project to make future projects better or offer plans and suggestions for next steps. Kirk and Thome (2011, 122) maintain that young people need the guidance of supportive adults to make sense of thoughts and emotions they experience when engaged in service. It appears that a deeper learning opportunity may have been missed by not evaluating more extensively with the children.

A second limitation relates to language translation. All activities were conducted in the Armenian language, so interpretation of all spoken and written language was dependent upon my translator and transcriber. Temple and Edwards (2002, 6) note, “Like researchers, interpreters bring their own assumptions and concerns to the interview and the research process. The research thus becomes subject to ‘triple subjectivity’ (the interactions between research participant, researcher and interpreter).” Although my translator provided simultaneous translation for me during all the children’s sessions and interviews, I was dependent on what she heard and how she understood what she heard in the discussions. My research assistant also took notes during all discussions to help bridge any gaps that may have been missed by my translator. On the implementation day my translator and both research assistants went with the groups doing family visits. I was left with the children cleaning the church yard. Although I could observe what the

children did and how they interacted, I had no translation of their conversations, limiting the real-time data. The individual children's interviews were facilitated by my research assistant for ease of conversing with each child. Because of the slight time lag in simultaneous translation, I missed some opportunities to interject and ask the interviewer to go deeper or to clarify children's responses because she had already moved on to another question.

Third, the data gathered from observations, focus groups, and interviews, while robust and informative, was insufficient to accurately indicate trends in participation, empowerment, or spirituality related to the demographics of the children's age, gender, sponsorship, or regular attendance at a church for the following reasons:

1. The observations were conducted over a five-week period and focus groups conducted on week five. Attendance varied each week, so some children were only present to engage with certain parts of the process. When fewer coded segments are attributed to absentee children, it cannot give an accurate representation of their degree of empowerment or spirituality.
2. The organizational structure of the Kids Club and the number of children involved in the research study necessitated that children go through the process in two completely separate groups. Since each group created different projects, their planning and implementation processes differed, making it more difficult to compare the children as a whole group.
3. During Phase 1 of the research the research team did not audio record the group discussions; they simply observed. Therefore, even though two research team members took notes, some parts of group discussions were missed, particularly

when multiple children spoke simultaneously. Additionally, at the beginning of the process the research team did not know the names of every child, so they were not always able to accurately assign a child's name to specific comments.

4. Two of the three children's focus groups did not give permission to record the focus group, so the data from those discussions was gleaned solely from the written notes of two members of the research team. The information was less detailed than it would have been with a complete transcript of the focus group. Researchers were not always able to hear or capture every child's comment, particularly with Group 2, who had fifteen children in their focus group.
5. Each focus group did an activity which asked the children to write down changes in what they learned, felt, how they saw God, and what they wanted to do. It was conducted anonymously, so even though rich data was gathered from every child, it was impossible to know which child wrote each comment or to ask for clarification for comments that were unclear.
6. Only nine children out of thirty-two participants were interviewed individually. Therefore, their names are connected to more coded segments than other children in the study. Interviewing more children may have given a more complete picture.

The limitations of time, language and incomplete demographic information have implications for the data interpretation and must be kept in mind as the research results are discussed. Keeping these limitations in mind, the first research question asks: Who are the select ten- to thirteen-year-old children participating in this research study according to the demographics of age, gender, involvement or non-involvement in a faith community, and sponsorship in the CDC?

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

All research participants attend the same CDC (Kids Club) run by a Church of the Nazarene in Yerevan, Armenia. The majority of participants live in the community surrounding the church so they are able to walk to the Kids Club and are very familiar with the local community. The Kids Club divides children into three groups according to age, and the middle and older groups fit the demographic criteria for this research study.

The research was divided into two phases. During Phase 1 of the research, the research team observed the two groups as they worked through a process of choosing, planning, and implementing a community service project (Appendix B). The process by which each group chose and planned their project was facilitated by Anna, a Kids Club leader. Other leaders assisted with the implementation. My role during Phase 1 was simply observing and taking notes on all that was being said and done during the process. Phase 2 of the research occurred after the projects were completed. During Phase 2, we conducted three children's focus groups and nine individual interviews with children whose parents had given their consent and who had given personal assent to being part of the research study. In addition, I conducted one focus group with Kids Club leaders and obtained individual testimonies from five leaders who assisted the children in implementing the projects.

The demographic information included in Table 1 describes the children who were part of Phase 2, including their age, gender, regular attendance at a church, and sponsorship to attend Kids Club. Names have been changed to protect the identity of the children.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Name	Group	Age	Gender	Attend Church Regularly?	Sponsored?
Annie	1A	11	F	no	no
Arpi	1A	10	F	no	yes
Ashot	1A	11	M	no	yes
Edgar	1A	9	M	no	yes
Gayane	1A	11	F	no	no
Hugo	1A	11	M	no	no
Maria	1A	11	F	no	yes
Aaron	1B	11	M	no	yes
Angel	1B	11	F	yes	no
Dalita	1B	10	F	yes	no
Gevor	1B	12	M	no	yes
Gregor	1B	10	M	no	yes
Luse	1B	8	F	yes	yes
Nane	1B	11	F	yes	no
Sophie	1B	11	F	yes	no
Susie	1B	11	F	no	no
Tigran	1B	11	M	no	no
Armen	2	12	F	yes	yes
Arsen	2	13	M	no	yes
Dawit	2	12	M	yes	yes
Hakob	2	11	M	yes	yes
Jane	2	11	F	no	no
Lara	2	12	F	yes	yes
Levi	2	12	M	no	yes
Malena	2	12	F	no	yes
Mary	2	12	F	no	no
Michael	2	12	M	no	yes

Name	Group	Age	Gender	Attend Church Regularly?	Sponsored?
Narek	2	12	M	yes	yes
Sam	2	13	M	no	yes
Sevam	2	12	F	no	no
Taline	2	12	F	yes	yes
Valot	2	12	M	no	yes
TOTALS			F-17 M-15	Yes-11 No-21	Yes-20 No-12

Thirty-two children participated in Phase 2 of the research study, seventeen from the middle group (Group 1) and fifteen from the older group (Group 2). Because of the nature of Group 1's service project, they were divided into two groups for the implementation step of their project. While the study targeted ten- to thirteen-year-old children, two participants (6.2%) were outside the age range. Those two children were still invited to participate in the research so they would not be excluded from their Kids Club group. The majority of the children (78.1%) were 11-12 years old. The age breakdown is shown in Figure 9.

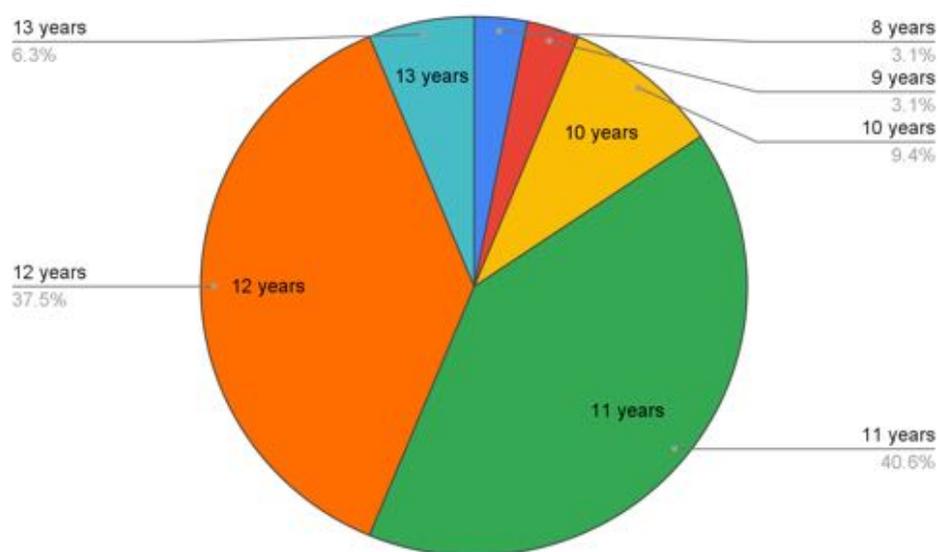


Figure 9: Ages of Participants

In terms of gender of participants, there was an almost equal divide between male and female participants: 17 females, or 53.1%, and 15 males, or 46.9%, shown in Figure 10. These numbers are slightly different from the national numbers of males and females from ages 10 to 13 years in Armenia: 47.4% female and 52.6% male (World Population Review 2024).

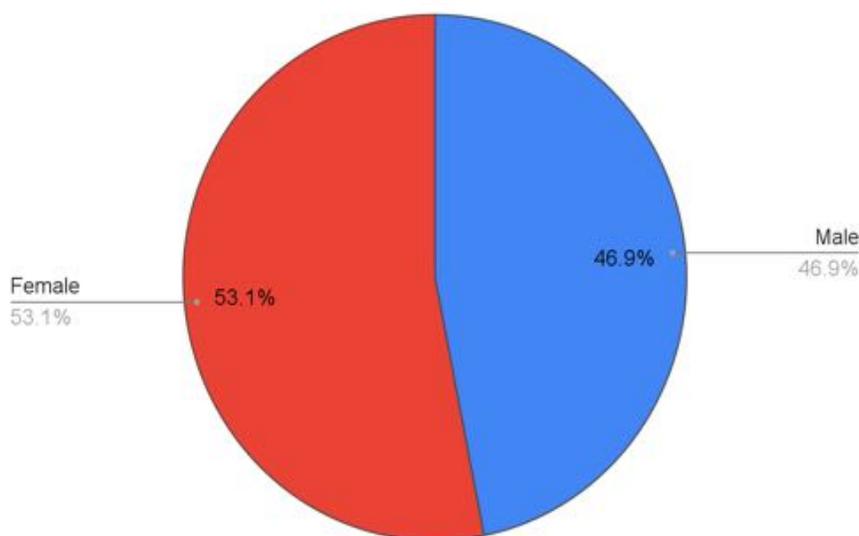


Figure 10: Gender of Participants

A third demographic factor is the regular attendance or non-attendance at a church. The majority of the children attending the Kids Club do not attend the host church. Some attend other protestant or evangelical churches in Yerevan but two thirds (65.6%) are from Armenian Apostolic Church background and do not attend church on a regular basis. The Kids Club leaders consider them “unchurched.” Of the nine children who participated in the individual interviews, five attended a church regularly and four did not. The demographics of regular involvement in a faith community are shown in Figure 11.

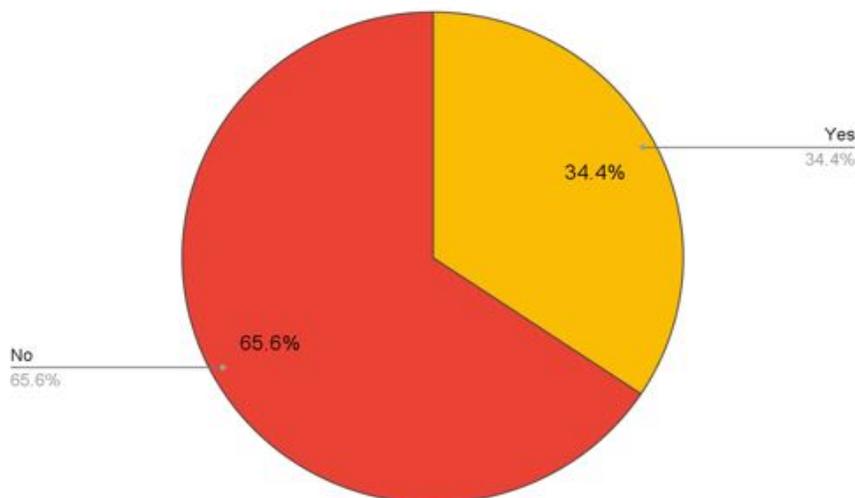


Figure 11: Participants' Regular Involvement in a Faith Community

Sponsorship, the fourth demographic factor, is very important for the children who come from economically disadvantaged homes. The CDC leadership determines which children should receive sponsorship based on family situations and conditions: single parent families, sick family members, families with many children, families dealing with social problems or abuse, children living with grandparents, etc. Being sponsored enables the children to fully participate in all the activities of the club. The community where the Kids Club is located is not a wealthy community. It is characterized by Soviet-style apartment complexes rather than individual homes, and many small businesses are found throughout the community. Almost two thirds of the children in this study, 62.5%, were sponsored, illustrated in Figure 12. The remaining children's families had sufficient resources to pay the Kids Club fees.

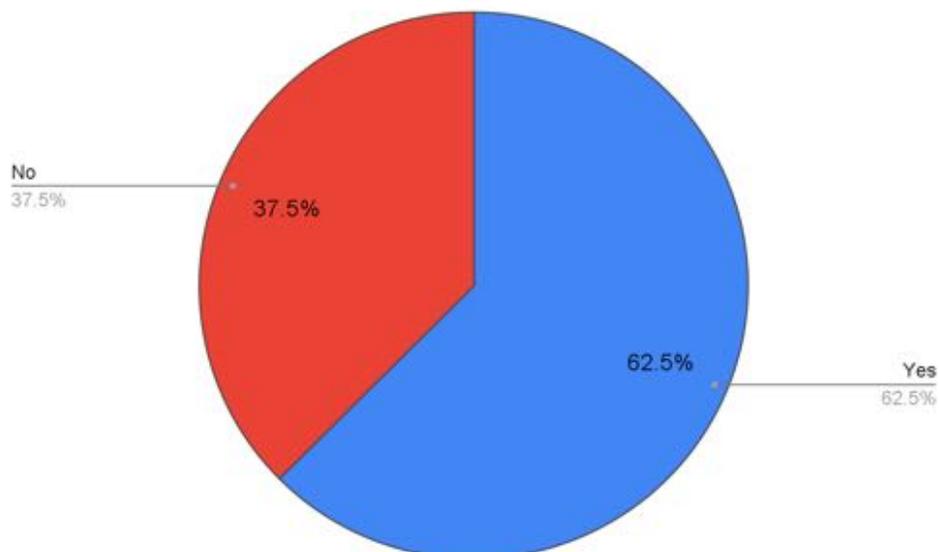


Figure 12: Sponsorship of Participants

The demographics of age, gender, church participation, and sponsorship give a picture of the participants in the study. However, the limitations of the study, described earlier in this chapter, explain that the data gathered from observations, focus groups, and interviews was insufficient to accurately indicate trends related to the demographics of the children's age, gender, sponsorship, or regular attendance at a church for the following reasons: irregular attendance of participants, inability to capture all the children's comments, a key feedback activity where the children responded anonymously, and interviewing select children, not all.

The research results now turn to the three key concepts for the study: participation, empowerment, and spirituality. The first key concept measured by the data is child participation.

Child Participation

Child participation is the process whereby children can meaningfully share in the decisions that affect their lives and the life of their community (Hart 1992, 5). It includes

their involvement in an activity, but participation also refers to the process of giving them a voice and including them in authentic decision making (Thomas 2007, 199; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 390). Research question #2 asked: In what ways are select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, able to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based service projects? During Phase 1 of the study, two groups of children chose, planned, and implemented a community-based service project. Group 1's service project was collecting food for needy families and then visiting those families to deliver the food. Group 2's project was cleaning and refreshing the courtyard around the church building. During Phase 2 of the study, the children evaluated the projects and their roles in it through focus groups and interviews. Since the definition of participation includes both their involvement in an activity and the process of giving them a voice or including them in the decision making, voice and activity formed the two main categories under which open codes were organized. Codes were organized further according to the step in the project-planning process: choosing, planning, implementing, and evaluating. Non-participation was also noted. Codes, definitions, their frequency, and examples are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Child Participation Codes and Definitions

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Voice: Children are given opportunity to speak and are included in the decision making of the service project.	Choosing	Children suggest ideas, examples and opinions about the selection of the service project.	90 coded segments	“Before [doing this project], I had many thoughts that I wanted to say, but when there was no project, I couldn’t express the thoughts that I had, but now I had the opportunity to share my thoughts” (Sam, age 13).
	Planning	Children suggest ideas, examples and opinions in planning the service project.	131 coded segments	“Let’s divide into two groups, one can visit the family with children and the other the elderly” (Aaron, age 11).
	Implement-ing	Children suggest ideas, examples and opinions while doing the service project.	0 coded segments	
	Evaluating	Children share reflections, opinions, and suggestions after completing the project.	25 coded segments	“I am very happy, because everything we did was good” (Jane, age 11). “What didn’t I like? I liked everything” (Hakob, age 11).
	Non-engagement	Children do not participate by sharing ideas or opinions	18 coded segments	“Some kids just had blank faces. One boy, Edgar, had his head down and commented ‘I don’t care’” (Observation Journal, Group 1, February 11, 2023).

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Activity: Children are physically involved in the activities surrounding the service project.	Choosing	Children are involved in the act of selecting the service project	29 coded segments	“Each child got three post-it notes, and they were instructed to put them beside the ideas they would like to do” (Observation Journal Group 2, February 25, 2023).
	Planning	Children are active in the preparatory steps of the project	32 coded segments	“If we want the decision to be fair, then write papers that say ‘elderly’ or ‘children’ and then each person chooses a paper. Then no one will be left out” (Hugo, age 11).
	Implement-ing	Children are active in the work of the project	52 coded segments	“I brought one full bag of food” (Angel, age 11). “We were assigned to do the painting, but we could do everything, help others, and finish fast” (Jane, age 11).
	Evaluating	Children take part in evaluating the project.	20 coded segments	“[Next time] bring stronger garbage bags. The ones we had were too thin for the branches” (Sam, age 13).
	Non-engage-ment	Children do not participate in the activity	4 coded segments	“When it came time to write on the four symbols and put them on the poster, one boy just left all four symbols blank” (Observation Journal, Group 2, March 11).

Child Participation in Choosing the Project

When Anna, the Kids Club leader, asked the children if they would like to do a service project in the community where they would plan and implement it themselves, the immediate response of the children in both groups was an enthusiastic “YES!” Sam (age 13) later commented, “Before coming here, I had many thoughts that I wanted to say, but when there was no project, I couldn’t express the thoughts that I had, but now I had the opportunity to share my thoughts.” His confession showed his desire to have his voice and ideas be heard, which is an essential element of meaningful child participation (Lansdown 2018, 13), but he lacked the opportunity to do so. Children were eager to share their ideas about serving, and both groups took time to talk about the needs they noticed in the community and changes they would like to see. From that point of reference, the first step was to brainstorm potential service projects, which was done in two separate sessions.

The ideas suggested by the children in Group 1 demonstrated their awareness of issues in the community: poor/needy families, lack of recycling, orphans, the environment, planting flowers/trees, caring for birds, feral dogs, and concern for the church building where the Kids Club meets. The following excerpts illustrate the rapid-fire flow of Group 1’s brainstorming sessions:

Angel: Let’s collect items and help families in need.

Luse: Let’s sort out the garbage and recycle.

Ashot: Let’s make wooden crafts.

Nane: Let’s build birdhouses.

Aaron: Let’s put photos of Ashot on the birdhouses. Then they can say ‘made by Ashot.’

(Group 1, February 11, 2023)

Nane: Let’s do charity to help people. Collect packages of food and then send.

Leader: Send or visit?

All: Visit!

Angel: Maybe visit an orphanage.

Leader: By law we are not allowed to take food to orphanages.

Hugo: Let's serve and plant trees so there are more green areas.

Leader: It's important that the project is implemented by you.

Hugo: Let's feed the street animals (dogs). We can take bones with us.

(Group 1, February 18, 2023)

Of the sixteen children present in Group 1, nine of them shared ideas aloud, and their leader, Anna, wrote the ideas on a board. By writing the ideas down, it demonstrated to the children that their idea was worth considering, giving them a voice. At times Anna gave reasons why an idea was not feasible. The children were never pressured to respond, and some chose not to share ideas in the group.

The next step in the process was to select the service project their group would implement from the ideas they had brainstormed. Zeldin, Christens and Powers (2013, 390) point out that a key component of child participation is their inclusion in authentic decision-making. To encourage all children to actively participate in the decision-making, every child was given three Post-It notes. Each Post-It represented one vote, and the children were instructed to vote for the project(s) they wanted to do. Children could put all three votes on one project or choose three different projects. The children took turns going up to the board in groups of two and voting. Every child participated in voting - another indicator of giving them a voice and including them in authentic decision-making. The final results are shown in Table 3.

Some of the children cheered when they heard they would gather food for needy families and then visit them. Everyone agreed that they were happy with the project.

Table 3: Group 1 Project Voting Results

No.	Project	Votes
1	Decorate the facility	8
2	Create a sparrow mural on church wall	0
3	Learn new worship songs	3
4	Decorate church walls with Bible verses	0
5	Make and frame a puzzle	2
6	Gather food for a needy family and visit them	18
7	Recycle garbage	3
8	Wooden craft - birdhouse	3
9	Feed street animals	1
10	Decide a place to visit	7

Group 2 was more talkative than Group 1 during the idea-generation step. When Anna explained that they would get to choose, plan, and implement their own project, Sam (age 13) remarked, “I love these kinds of things. We did these kinds of projects in the past.” It was difficult to capture all the ideas that the children were calling out because sometimes multiple children spoke at the same time, but their responses, once again, demonstrated an awareness of some of the issues and needs in the community: bad roads, litter, planting trees/flowers/vegetables, needy families, Syrian refugees, war, and concern for the church building where the Kids Club meets. The following excerpt illustrates how they were participating and using their voice, not only with their own ideas, but also sharing their opinions about others’ ideas:

Jane: Let's renovate the playground in the park.
 Sam: Let's renovate the road in [another community] with asphalt.
 George: How are we going to do that?
 Leader: Remember that you kids will be implementing the project.
 Lara: Let's plant trees and flowers.
 Sam: Let's create an app to help us do our classes and homework.
 Levi: Can we erase that idea?
 Unknown: That's not realistic because we'd have to write the code.
 Leader: Remember all ideas are welcome right now.
 Hakob: We can refresh the mural in the church yard and make the exterior part of the church more beautiful.
 Jane: Let's expand the hours of the Kids Club.
 Levi: We don't have any problems. Everything is good.
 Jane: Let's have a cleaning day and clean the whole city. Let's clean Russia!
 (laughter)
 Narek: Let's switch roles [with leaders] for one day in Kids Club. Let the kids lead it.
 Jane: Maybe that will help us to become more responsible.

(Group 2, February 11, 2023)

Of the twelve children in the group, eight participated in the discussion, which showed they were comfortable in expressing their thoughts and ideas. In an effort to save time, voting on the project was done slightly differently for Group 2. Instead of three Post-It notes, each child took turns just saying which project(s) would get their three votes. Although it was an easier way to vote, it seemed that the children felt more pressure to say and do what their friends were doing, especially as the voting progressed. The results of voting can be seen in Table 4.

The results of the vote were quite surprising. Even though their leader, Anna, repeatedly reminded the children that they should think of projects that would benefit the community/others, the top vote went to two ideas that would benefit themselves or the Kids Club.

Table 4: Group 2 Project Voting Results – Round 1

No.	Project	Votes
1	Renovate neighborhood playground	0
2	Plant trees and flowers	0
3	Create a homework app	0
4	Beautify the church facility	0
5	Expand the hours of Kids Club	9
6	Switch roles with Kids Club leaders	9
7	Renovate the facility	1
8	Grow vegetables	2
9	Help a needy family	1
10	Help soldiers with food	3
11	Competition in Kids Club	3
12	Go sightseeing	7

Interestingly, the winning ideas reflected the children's desire to have their voices heard in the programming and nature of the Kids Club, speaking to Hart's (1992, 5) definition of child participation as the process whereby children can meaningfully share in the decisions that affect their lives. However, because the focus of this research was on choosing a project that would serve the community, Anna had the group evaluate whether their choice benefitted themselves or others. The children agreed that the choices were more for themselves than others, so they decided to vote a second time. The results of the second vote are shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Group 2 Project Voting Results – Round 2

No.	Project	Votes
1	Renovate neighborhood playground	2
2	Plant trees and flowers	0
3	Create a homework app	0
4	Beautify the church facility	1
5	Expand the hours of Kids Club	0
6	Switch roles with Kids Club leaders	0
7	Renovate the facility	2
8	Grow vegetables	4
9	Help a needy family	7
10	Help soldiers with food	20
11	Competition in Kids Club	0
12	Go sightseeing	0

Armenia is in active conflict with neighboring Azerbaijan, and most children know men serving as soldiers. Although the results overwhelmingly supported helping soldiers with food, it opened up controversy, as Sam (age 13) adamantly opposed it:

Sam: How do we send food to the border?

Jane: Let's grab a big box and collect clothes and also weapons for soldiers.

Sam: Soldiers have everything, they don't need anything.

Dawit: Let's send sweet things.

Sam: My neighbor's son is in the army and he is not hungry. He is full.

Leader (To everyone): Why did you choose project #10?

Dawit: We need to help our soldiers so they will win the war.

Hakob: Because I've heard they don't have a place to sleep and they sleep on the grass.

Jane: When we help our soldiers, we help ourselves.

Dawit: Let's buy medicine and send it to the soldiers.

Malena: We need to strengthen them.

Levi: During the attacks they need weapons and food so they will be full while fighting.

(Group 2, February 18, 2023)

Some children could not explain why they had voted for the project. Had they simply responded to peer pressure?

The children had expressed their voice, but after the session ended Anna shared her concern that the project was not feasible for the children to do. The children needed to be redirected without negating their opinions. The following week she met with the group and guided them to reconsider their choice.

Leader: Don't forget that our choice was helping soldiers along the border. Are we able to do that? Can we give what we gather?

Children: No. We are not allowed to go to the border.

Child: Could we send it?

Leader: Who do we trust to send it with? How will we know if it will reach the soldiers?

(February 25, 2023)

Eventually the children agreed it was not possible for them to implement the project they had chosen. Anna asked if they would like to vote once more, this time using the Post-It notes. The children agreed, they crossed out the projects on the list that were self-serving or not feasible, and the project receiving the most votes was #4 – Beautify the church facility (11 votes).

Some of the children expressed how difficult they found the task of choosing a project. Lara (age 12) explained why it was a challenge. “We needed to think, we needed to see what we could do and also choose one project to be implemented from ten options.” Jane (age 11) also commented on how difficult it was to choose because all the projects were so very good. But every child interviewed expressed that they had been very active, both in voice and activity, in the choosing step of the process. Even though

the interviews were held several weeks after the process of choosing, they could still recall ideas they had suggested at this step in the process.

Child Participation in Project Planning

Once the groups agreed on their service project, the next step in the process was planning how they would implement the project. Although this Kids Club has done community service projects in the past, the choice of project and planning was always done by the leaders. Asking the children to plan the project was a new experience for them. Their leader, Anna, regularly reminded them that it was their project, and she would not dictate the plan.

Anna guided Group 1 in their planning by asking them questions. Two children volunteered to be secretaries, taking notes of their plan. When discussing who they should visit, Luse (age 8) was the first to suggest they divide into two groups. After talking about different kinds of families to visit, Aaron (age 11) said, "Let's divide into two groups, one can visit the family with children and the other the elderly." Together the children agreed to that suggestion.

The second question Anna asked was, "What kind of food should we take with us?" At that point the ideas began flowing non-stop, with several children talking at the same time and the volume of the conversation rising, suggesting a high level of buy-in for most of them. The first suggestions were general: food, clothes, toys. But then they began to think of what might be good for each of the targeted families: sweets, small toys, and school supplies for the family, coffee and sugar-free juice for the elderly. Some of the girls did not share ideas with the whole group but they whispered their thoughts to the secretaries, demonstrating that they still felt their voice was important even if they were

too shy to speak up in the larger group. The list of food supplies included rice, oil, eggs, bread, chicken, vegetables, and noodles. The children agreed to gather food and supplies for the next two weeks.

Anna then asked them, “Where will we visit?” Luse (8 years) responded by asking, “How will we find the families?” Because the children were not sure they would be able to find families, Anna then asked them if they would trust the Kids Club leaders to find the families to visit. The children readily gave permission to the leaders to find the families, and everyone agreed on the date for the visits.

Next, although Anna had suggested they wait to decide who would visit each family until the following week, Aaron asked to do it that day. Hugo (age 11) added, “If we want the decision to be fair, then write papers that say ‘elderly’ or ‘children’ and then each person chooses a paper.” The children agreed with Hugo’s idea to divide themselves into two groups for visiting. When some children were unhappy with the family they chose, Anna encouraged them to go home and think about it before deciding if they would change to the other family. Even though Anna’s questions guided the planning, the children still shared opinions, made decisions and gave ideas that were implemented.

The following week, as the children of Group 1 began bringing donations of food, they had to decide which food items would go to each family. Anna allowed each child who brought food to suggest which family would receive it, another example of giving a participatory voice to children. Other children added opinions and suggestions, often multiple children talking at once, showing their comfort in sharing ideas. After the donations were sorted into two boxes, the discussion continued about what else the children could bring, including some creative suggestions:

Angel: Don't forget to think of things that are good for the elderly, such as oatmeal, not just things for the kids.

Dalita: Let's take [porridge].

Luse: Can we take a meal?

Leader: It would spoil too easily.

Nane: Can I bring a new school bag? I have one I haven't used.

Leader: Yes.

Angel: Let's take ties for hair and hair decorations for children.

Tigran: Fruit.

Child: Dough for pizza! But then we need to bring the ingredients for the pizza too (laughter).

(Group 1, March 11, 2023)

The children were very excited, knowing they would visit the families and deliver the food the following week, implementing their plan to serve the community.

After the challenge Group 2 had in choosing their community service project, planning what they would do went far more smoothly. Once they agreed that they would beautify the church yard, Anna asked for two volunteers to be secretaries and then asked the group how they could improve the facility, reminding them it was too early in the season to plant flowers or trees. They had several ideas of what they should do:

Lara: We need to clean the facility.

Hakob: Repaint/refresh the paintings [murals] outside.

Narek: Prune the dry branches and clean up the leaves.

Sam: I will bring a pruner.

Nare: Let's try to fix trees that are not growing straight.

Malena: Paint a new picture, paint the stairs.

(Group 2, February 25, 2023)

Anna then guided them to think of what supplies they would need to do the work, and the children suggested items like trash bags, gloves, paint, brushes, sponges, buckets, soap, a shovel, etc. Armen (age 12) suggested that they write everything they needed on a list and everyone pick something to bring. The secretaries proceeded to do that. The more they talked about the plan, the more creative the ideas became. Sam (age 13) suggested they make a poster that read, "Don't litter." Valot (age 12) said, "Let's put a garbage bin

outside so people will throw garbage in it.” Narek (age 12) added, “And one for recycling paper, plastic, and metal.” The more they planned, the more they thought beyond the act of cleaning to helping solve the problem of litter in the area around the church.

At their next meeting they reviewed the tasks needing to be done. Anna asked each child which task they would like to do. Each child chose their preferred task, and the secretaries recorded it. Letting them choose their task gave each child a voice, and every child actively participated in choosing. The children agreed to come early the following week to implement their plan to be sure they could finish the service project during Kids Club hours. The creative, proactive ideas generated—the poster, garbage bin, etc.—were not mentioned as tasks to be done, so they were not considered in the final plan.

Both groups exhibited healthy participation through voice and activity in the planning step of their projects. Although it was impossible to capture what every child said—some only shared with the person sitting next to them, while at other times many children were shouting ideas at the same time—it appears that most, if not all, children present for the planning step participated in some way. They shared many ideas, worked through questions of what was needed, who would provide it, how and when they would implement the plan. Even though leaders gave guidance to the plan, the ideas for the plan came from and were agreed upon by the children themselves.

Child Participation in Project Implementation

Because of the impending spring school break, both groups had to implement their projects on the same day, since many children leave the city for the break. The children were asked to come to Kids Club one hour earlier than usual so their groups could complete the projects that day and also have their focus-group discussion with the

research team. Sixteen children from Group 1 and fifteen children from Group 2 arrived early, a higher attendance than had been seen any other week of Kids Club.

The children in Group 1 brought even more food for their families on the day of their visits. Some children expressed surprise at the amount of food they were able to gather (Figure 13), giving evidence to how actively the children participated in the project. Everything was put into bags, and both boys and girls eagerly picked up the heavy bags to carry them to the homes they were visiting. Group 1A visited an elderly woman living in a nearby apartment, and Group 1B visited a family with two young children, traveling a short distance by taxi. The Kids Club leaders had asked the local municipality to help identify families in need of social assistance, so they were not connected to the church in any way. One Kids Club leader and one research assistant accompanied each group.



Figure 13: Group 1 Project Implementation: Collection and Delivery of Food

Group 1A had six children—two boys and four girls. They struggled to carry the heavy bags, but when their leader offered to help, they responded, “No, we are fine. We are doing OK. It’s not heavy at all.” They wanted to do it themselves, even though they had to walk a distance and there was no elevator to the elderly woman’s third-floor

apartment. During the fifteen-minute visit the children were quiet and polite, introducing themselves and listening to the 85-year-old grandmother share her story and give advice. She was overwhelmed by the amount of food she received, saying it was too much for her, so she gave each child an apple to thank them for coming. Ashot (age 11) was the only child who asked her questions. After leaving the apartment, the children shared that they were very happy they helped the grandmother.

Group 1B had ten children—four boys and six girls. When it was time to go for the visit, the four boys came and grabbed the bags of food, not wanting the girls to help. Although there was very little room in the two taxis, the children squeezed in with all the bags, saying they were OK. The family they visited had two young children, ages three and six years. The group crowded into the tiny living room with the family, introducing themselves, sharing about the Kids Club, and telling stories as their leader prompted them. The mother of the family also spoke words of thanks and advice. A special moment happened as the group was leaving. “Nane brought a backpack and we left it in their house, and the mother came and said there is a backpack that you left, and when we said that it is for them, the mother became very emotional. The backpack was full of school supplies and the children ran to see [what was in it]” (Angel, age 11). As Group 1B returned from the visit, the children commented on how happy the family must feel as they opened the bags to see what was for them.

Before the fifteen children in Group 2 began doing their project work, they reviewed the jobs they had signed up to do, made sure everyone had gloves, and then immediately got to work (Figure 14). One team filled buckets with water and began washing the murals and railings. A team of boys began gathering dead leaves and pine

needles, quickly filling several trash bags with debris. Another team swept and cleaned. Later, teams began painting the railings and refreshing the paint on the murals and walls. Most children knew what they had to do, and they appeared to work well together, showing a lot of enthusiasm for their project. Jane (age 11) commented, “We were assigned to do the painting, but we could do everything, help others, and finish fast.”

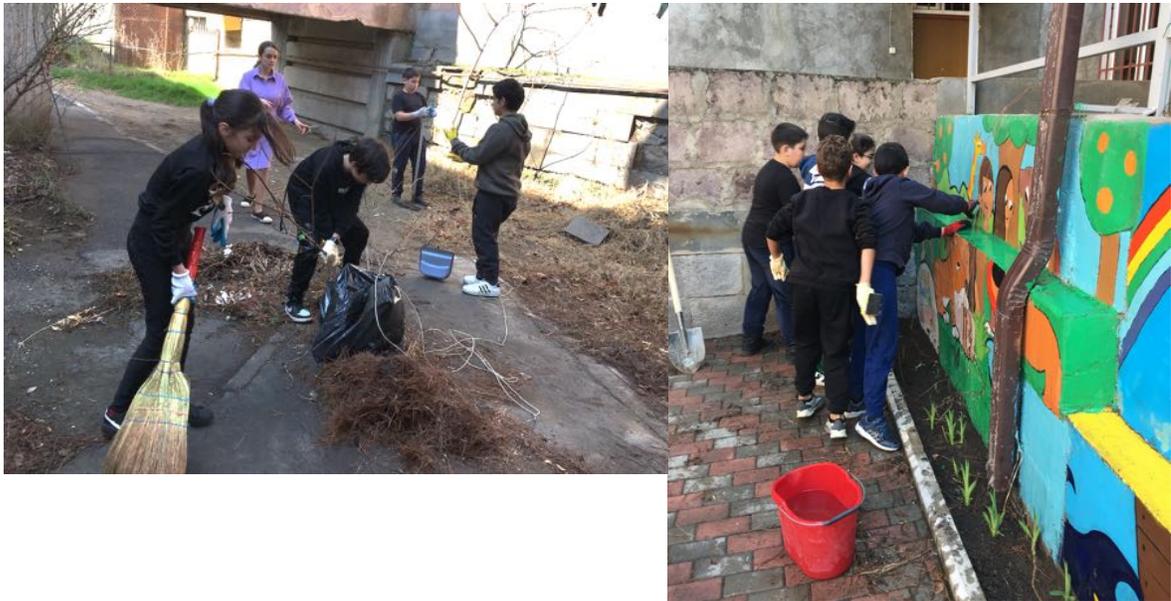


Figure 14: Group 2 Project Implementation: Cleaning Church Yard

At first the children worked independently without any supervision, and some children were not sure how to do the task they had signed up to do. One boy picked up a shovel and tried to clean the flowerbed with it. Eventually a Kids Club leader came and showed him how to clean the flowerbed with his hands. After she arrived, the clean-up became a bit more intentional, but she was careful not to take over the project. Another leader organized the paint for the children, gave guidance on what to do, and then let them do it. Both examples point to the need for leader support, an aspect of empowerment that will be discussed later in this chapter. Cleaning the courtyard and refreshing the painting took about two hours, and the children were very happy with what

they accomplished. When asked what was their favorite part of the project, Hakob (age 11) replied, “Doing it ourselves,” Lara (age 12) said, “Cleaning the yard,” and Jane (age 11) remarked, “After all the difficulties, to have great results.”

Stephenson, Gourley and Miles (2004, 14) identify three elements adults need to offer children in healthy child participation: opportunities, responsibilities, and support. The implementation of the projects demonstrated all three of those elements. The successful completion of the projects demonstrated that children’s voices had been heard and taken into account, and the high attendance and enthusiastic work on the projects indicated participation through action.

Child Participation in Project Evaluation

Project evaluations were conducted through focus-group discussions immediately following the completion of the projects and individual interviews conducted a week later. The children were asked what they liked or did not like about the project and what they would change if they could. In general, the children focused on the implementation step in the process, presumably because they had just finished the projects earlier that day. Their willingness to share what they saw as positive and negative demonstrated their comfort in speaking honestly with one another.

Each group definitely pointed out what they did not like. Group 1A, who visited the elderly woman, had trouble finding the correct apartment. Edgar (age 9) commented “We went to the wrong entrance.” Maria (age 11) did not like carrying the heavy bags. Edgar, Arpi, and Annie all talked about the apartment’s elevator not working. Group 1B’s biggest challenge was not enough room in the taxi, according to Aaron, Tigran, and Gregor. Nane (age 11) also suggested, “If we knew [in advance] there were two girls we

could have taken clothes and things.” There were more issues raised during Group 2’s debrief. Some issues were very minor. Jane (age 11) did not like finding worms in the soil, Hakob (age 11) did not like cleaning up after dogs, and Sam (age 13) said the garbage bags were too thin for the branches. But two bigger issues also surfaced. Group 1 finished their family visits before Group 2 finished cleaning the church yard, so when Group 1 returned, leaders encouraged them to help Group 2 with the cleaning while waiting for their focus group to begin. While some of Group 2 appreciated their help, such as Malena (age 12), who said, “The help of the middle group was important,” others saw them as interfering. “I didn’t like when the middle group came to help what we had already started.” “The younger kids wanted to destroy the mural of Noah.” The second issue related to some of the boys quitting and going inside before the clean-up was finished, which bothered some of the girls. Lara (age 12) complained, “The girls were carrying the garbage, not the boys,” and Malena (age 12) pointed out that some boys left in the middle of the clean-up. Armen (age 12) added the younger kids worked better than their group. The boys defended themselves, saying they did help with the garbage. Sam (age 13) said, “We took an opportunity to rest a bit.” Both Valot and Arsen (ages 13 and 12) said they were helping with everything, but people were not appreciating their work. Their leader later explained that there were too many children for the jobs left to do, so some children took a break.

In spite of all these comments, when asked what they would change, almost every child said, “Nothing,” or “Everything was great,” and the suggestions for change were unrelated to the issues raised. In Group 1, the suggestion from both 1A and 1B was to visit other families. Angel and Aaron (from Group 1B) wanted to visit the elderly, too,

and Edgar (from Group 1A) suggested they also help a family with children.

Surprisingly, when Group 2 was asked what they would change, they did not focus on either of the big issues they had raised. They simply suggested adding more paintings or murals to the walls (Malena, Michael), planting flowers and trees, or bringing other items to make the job easier, such as stronger bags or pruners (Sam). Only Jane commented again about the boys not helping, but she did not suggest a solution for next time.

Non-Participation

While it is easy to note the active participation of children, not every child shared the same level of enthusiasm or engagement. Some children did not participate, although their reasons for non-engagement differed and were not tied to any demographic variable. Sometimes it was tiredness or lack of energy, particularly when their group met at the end of Kids Club just before lunch. One day I observed,

Group 1 was more subdued [than Group 2], but one reason could be because it was at the end of the day and they were tired and hungry. Only about half of the [16] kids engaged in the conversation generating ideas. Energy levels were low. Some kids just had blank faces. One boy, Edgar, had his head down and commented, “I don’t care” when asked if he had ideas.

(Observation Journal, February 11, 2023)

A possible second reason for non-participation is personal quietness or shyness. In both groups I observed that some girls said nothing during the discussions. At times they would quietly talk to the girl beside them but not volunteer the information to the whole group. However, when they were given the opportunity to write their response during the focus-group discussions, the quietest girls spent the longest time writing. That indicates a level of shyness and discomfort speaking in a larger group, but when given a safer way to share, they readily participated. Molina et al. (2009, 160) have found when doing

participatory research with children that activities done in small groups enable children to feel more confident to participate and that using a mix of oral, visual and written activities help children express their perceptions and ideas.

A third reason for non-participation was genuine disinterest, primarily observed from non-verbal cues. Group 1 was predominantly girls, and some of the boys rarely engaged in any discussion. Observation journal notes during the process recorded:

“Annie, Gevor, Susie, Gregor, and Edgar haven’t participated at all. Gregor and Edgar especially appear disinterested” (Group 1, February 18, 2023).

“Gevor and Gregor seem unengaged. Gevor put his head down on the table, Gregor leaned back with his arms folded. It was such a stark contrast to everyone else leaning forward on the table” (Group 1, February 25, 2023).

“Through this whole discussion the boys were very quiet. They did not suggest anything” (Group 1, March 11, 2023).

“Three of the [four] boys basically said nothing for the entire focus group interview, and two of them looked very disinterested” (Group 1B, March 18, 2023).

It is difficult to know the reason they remained unengaged during the process. It could be they did not have ideas or opinions about what to do or bring. In my research journal I pondered if they were even interested in doing the project, but when there was activity, such as voting, they participated, and all the boys showed up to implement the project, which demonstrated a degree of participation at the activity level.

Group 2’s boys were far more vocal throughout the process, but a few who only attended Kids Club occasionally and who had not been part of the planning process came for the project implementation day. My observation journal noted,

During the focus group, three boys I barely knew just sat and said nothing the whole time. I could tell they were not interested in the evaluation process and I wondered why they even agreed to be part of the interview. Was it peer pressure? Curiosity? When it came time to write on the four symbols and put them on the

poster, one boy just left all four symbols blank. But we had given them the option of sharing or not sharing, so leaving the papers blank was acceptable (Group 2, March 18, 2023).

While their non-participation may be due, in part, to disinterest, their absence throughout the process could also have been a factor.

Overall, in spite of a few children choosing not to engage in aspects of the process, the majority of the children demonstrated participation, evidenced through sharing thoughts and opinions throughout the choosing, planning, and evaluation steps, through their physical activity in donating items and working, and through their own self-reflection. When the nine children who were interviewed were asked to put stickers to show the level at which they participated in each step of the process—the center of the picture representing very engaged and the edge representing not engaged—all children placed stickers near the center of images of the four steps, as illustrated by Lara's example in Figure 15. Their responses indicated their perception of being moderately to very engaged, participating throughout the process.

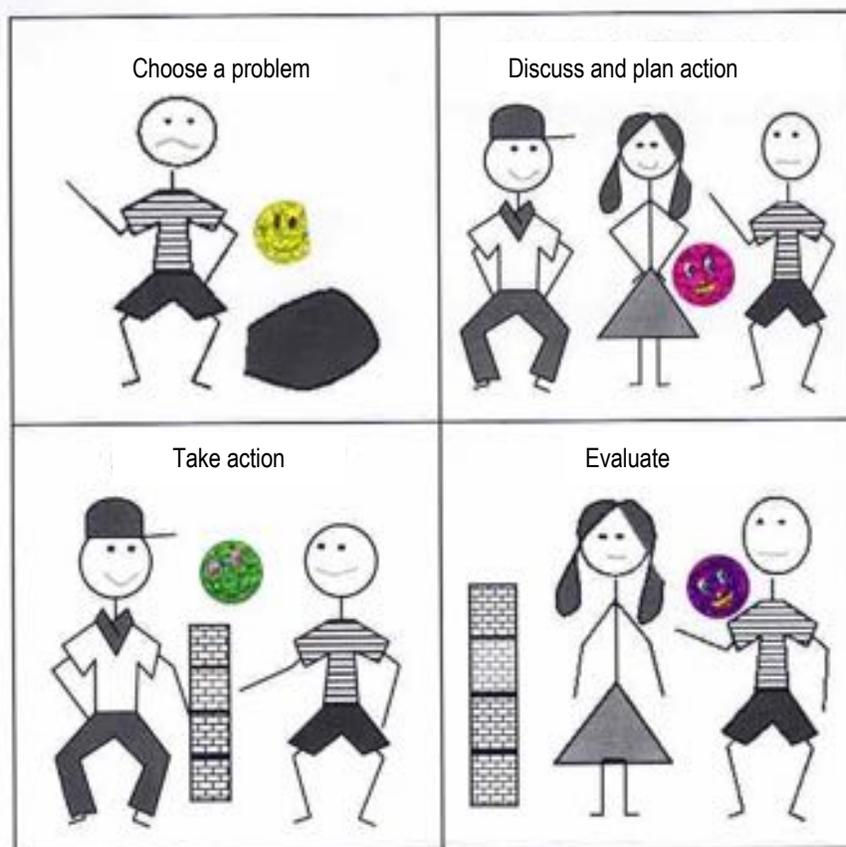


Figure 15. Lara's Self-Evaluation of her Level of Participation

Interpretation of Findings Related to Participation

Children in this study were given the opportunity to select, design, implement and evaluate a community-based service project. The data clearly demonstrates that children successfully participated throughout the entire process by being given a voice and being included in authentic decision-making as well as being involved in implementing the project, which aligns well with the definition of child participation found in literature (Thomas 2007, 199; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013, 390).

In child participation and empowerment research, questions arise as to the appropriate level of adult involvement (Hart 1992; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010),

and this study was no exception. Since the children had never planned a community service project on their own, their leader, Anna, chose to guide them by asking questions or redirecting them. For example, when the children in Group 1 were not sure they would be able to find families to visit, Anna then asked them if they would trust the leaders to find the families and the children agreed. Had the decision been left solely to the children, they may or may not have succeeded in finding two families or become discouraged in trying to do so. Anna's supportive guidance when the children were not sure they could do it themselves helped them to continue progressing with the plan. Her course of action supports youth-adult partnership research which asserts that shared control, giving youth a voice but collaborating in decisions, with adults providing support and scaffolding as needed, can provide optimal conditions for youth empowerment and positive youth development (Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010; Zeldin et al. 2014; Zeldin et al. 2016).

It is possible that some decisions could have been done more collaboratively, such as having a few children work with Anna to identify families, or more child-led, such as training children to lead the brainstorming and choosing exercises. Given the time constraints of planning and implementing the projects, and given the age and experience of the children, Anna's course of action seemed appropriate. Even though her questions and suggestions guided children's choices and project plans, children were still able to share opinions, make decisions, and give ideas that were implemented, which on Hart's Ladder of Participation would correspond partly with #6 – Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children and #7 – Child-initiated and directed (Hart 1992, 8). Anna's involvement supports Zeldin et al. (2016, 1639), who note that when children and youth

see themselves in strong partnership with adults, have a voice in decision-making, and have support from adults, they report higher levels of personal empowerment.

It was interesting to observe the growth of creativity in both groups as they discussed and planned their projects. In both cases, the longer children talked, the more creative their ideas became. Group 1 suggested more specific types of food and personal items for each of the families they were visiting. Group 2 began to think beyond the act of cleaning to solving the problem of litter in the area around the church. The fact that ideas became more creative as the discussion progressed suggests that giving children a voice and affirming their responses may encourage them to reflect more deeply on the issues at hand and how they might address it. Other researchers agree that if children and youth experience a physically and psychologically safe space, they will feel more free to express their opinions, try new skills and roles, be creative, and step up to challenges (Cargo et al. 2003, S70; Eccles and Gootman 2002, 129; Jennings et al. 2006, 41). The Kids Club provided a safe space for them to share their thoughts and creative ideas.

Attendance on the day of the project implementation seemed to affirm children's perception of the importance of serving the community. The fact that every healthy child who was part of the Kids Club came (the four absentees were sick)—a larger attendance than any other week—showed evidence that children wanted to be part of implementing their community service projects, even if they had not been involved much during the planning steps. One of the sick children dropped off a donation of food the morning of the project implementation even though she could not visit the family. Their eagerness to participate supports research by Jennings et al. (2006, 43) and Royce (2009, 78) who say that children and youth desire to engage in activities that excite them, challenge them,

have relevance to their interests and have a positive impact. Looking more broadly, the attendance and engagement in the implementation step of the project affirms research that has found when children and youth participate in meaningful civic engagement or social action, they experience empowerment as change agents (Cargo et al. 2003; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman 2000; Zimmerman et al. 2018).

Non-participation was noticed in both groups, most often in the discussion times, and several reasons were proposed: fatigue, shyness, or disinterest. It is significant to note that children who were quiet during the discussions willingly participated in the activity of voting for projects and came for the implementation day, indicating a level of interest and engagement. For children who appeared disinterested in the planning process, giving them the option of silence seemed appropriate, since part of giving children a voice is permitting them to not speak if they so choose. However, a few of the oldest boys in Group 2 had not been part of choosing and planning the project due to absence, so they lacked the experience other children described, making them essentially outsiders. Their responses—or lack thereof—in the focus group seem to reflect Royce's (2009, 83) findings that the more active and engaged a youth is and the more dimensions of meaningful participation employed, the more likely they will experience a level of empowerment.

Participation was the first key concept measured in the research study. The second key concept explored by the data, often closely connected to participation, is empowerment.

Children’s Empowerment

Using Shier’s CESESMA model (see Figure 2 in Chapter I), illustrated by three linking factors leading to empowerment (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017), research question #3 asked: In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, perceive empowerment related to the following factors:

1. Development of capabilities and knowledge
2. Creation of conditions and opportunities for empowerment
3. Personal attitudes and self esteem

After doing initial open coding, the three factors listed above formed the categories for organizing the codes to answer the research question. A fourth category, change, was added to capture the expressed changes noted by the children as a result of doing their service projects. The resulting codes, definitions, and examples can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Children’s Empowerment Codes and Definitions

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Capabilities and Knowledge: The ability to do things, the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge or information needed to take action (Shier 2015, 213).	Skills	Skills learned or developed by children while planning and implementing the project and their feelings about those skills.	29 coded segments	“I learned that we should help a person who needs help” (Child in Group 1B). “I didn’t know that I could work so well with the shovel” (Hakob age 11).
	Teamwork	The importance of working together or in unity.	20 coded segments	“Teamwork. We did it together, and the result was visible” (Armen, age 12).

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
	Surprise	Learning or experiencing something unexpected during the project.	15 coded segments	“I was surprised that we could bring together so much food” (Annie, age 11).
Leader Support: Leaders create a context that supports the children’s ability to do things (Shier 2015, 213).	Leader gives voice	Leaders create conditions for children’s ideas and opinions to be heard.	21 coded segments	“You have the freedom to decide what you will do” (Leader Anna, Group 2, February 25, 2023).
	Leader guides	Leaders give ideas to help the planning process move forward.	47 coded segments	“Now what do we need? Who is going to bring everything?” (Leader Anna, Group 2, February 25, 2023).
	Leader redirects	Leaders correct or suggest a different direction or alternative idea.	12 coded segments	“First of all, we as a group chose to go somewhere, but Anna told us that it is more like that you are doing something for you, but the purpose of our project is to do something that can be helpful for the community and people” (Lara, age 12)
	Leader encourages	Leaders speak words that affirm or motivate the children.	10 coded segments	“I believe you can do it and are capable of helping others” (Leader Anna, Group 1, February 25, 2023).
	Leader gives practical help	Leaders are acknowledged for their active role in planning or implementing the project.	33 coded segments	“I know that they also brought food. They also helped us find the place for us to visit” (Angel, age 11).

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
	Friendship	Children note the importance of being with peers or doing things together.	16 coded segments	“We helped each other, we didn’t leave our friends alone” (Jane, age 11).
Personal Attitudes and Self Esteem: Children see themselves as capable of taking action and affecting an outcome (Shier 2015, 213).	Happiness	An expressed feeling of joy related to the service project.	65 coded segments	“I was happy to help the needy family” (Luse, age 8).
	Eagerness	Expressing excitement and willingness to be involved in the project.	48 coded segments	“You can assign me more tasks because I don’t want to do nothing after cleaning the paintings” (Narek, age 12).
	Initiative	Not waiting to be asked to do something, but acting on their own volition.	12 coded segments	“Edgar wanted to carry all the bags [of food] himself” (Kids Club Leader).
	Responsibility	Understanding what must be done and accepting the task.	14 coded segments	“I understood that [doing the project ourselves] is a serious responsibility, and we need to approach it seriously, because we are taking a serious step” (Lara, age 12).
	Confidence	The expressed feeling that “I can do it!”	10 coded segments	“If we want, we can do everything by ourselves” (Armen, age 12).
	Accomplishment	Expressing that the goal was accomplished or they did well.	8 coded segments	“I was happy that we could participate in this project, everything was successful, there was no rain, and our plan didn’t fail” (Jane, age 11).

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Change: An expressed difference between the way children saw themselves before they did the project and the way they are now.	Change of attitude or behavior	A noted difference in feelings, skills or activity, whether positive or negative.	19 coded segments	“I started to help my mother. Before I was not doing that. Now I am helping with everything” (Malena, age 12).
	Future response	An expressed desire to do something different in the future.	9 coded segments	“I wish we could implement another project” (Child in Group 2).

Capabilities and Knowledge

In Shier’s model of empowerment, capabilities and knowledge refer to the ability to do things, the development of skills, and the acquisition of knowledge or information needed to take action (Shier 2015, 213). Through focus-group and individual interview questions and activities, children were able to share the skills and knowledge they had gained and developed throughout the project. Since the project implementation and focus groups were conducted on the same day, most children’s responses focused on the tasks they did that particular day.

Skills

Twenty-nine coded segments were assigned to “skills.” Groups 1A and 1B, who collected the food and then visited needy families, focused on helping. When asked to write down what they have learned from the project, 13/16 children wrote that they learned something about helping others, either focusing on *how* to help others (“I learned kindness.” “I learned to help others.”) or that they *should* help others (“I learned that we

should help a person who needs help.” “If I have something, candy for example, and other children don't have it, I should share.” “I learned that we should always help people if we have bread. Share your bread with a hungry person and give it.”). One child wrote, “We shouldn't complain about what we have,” suggesting they had learned gratitude or compassion. The responses of the children demonstrated the perception that they had learned some practical skills in helping others. At the same time, they learned the importance of helping others, which points to a growth in knowledge.

Group 2, who cleaned the church yard, had very different responses to the questions related to skills and capabilities. Several children were very clear on the cleaning skills they gained: “I learned to clean in a more efficient way,” “I learned to clean fast,” and “Tidiness.” During individual interviews, a few children commented about very specific skills they learned. Valot (age 12) learned to paint and Sam (age 13) learned to sweep better. Hakob (age 11) laughingly replied, “I didn't know that I could work so well with the shovel.” Sam, Jane, and Malena reflected on their personal capacity to work. Sam said, “[I learned] that I have the ability to work.” Malena (age 12) saw how her learning extended beyond the service project as she explained,

Malena: I started to help my mother. Before I was not doing that.

Interviewer: Ahaa!

Malena: Now I am helping with everything.

Interviewer: You mean, you took the helping skills from here to your house?

Malena: Yes.

Some of the children in Group 2 also commented on broader lessons learned. Three children connected their cleaning project with helping the environment, indicated by comments such as, “I learned that we should protect nature.” One child mentioned learning how to plan, which showed their awareness of the entire process of preparing the

project, and another mentioned teamwork, a skill which needed to be exercised throughout the process, saying, “We learned to be united, to listen to each other and help each other.” And one child’s comment, “We learned to help others and do things that are pleasing to God,” showed their awareness of a spiritual dimension in their activities.

Teamwork

Shier (2015, 213) identifies teamwork as one of the capabilities developed that helps children feel empowered. The code “teamwork,” with twenty coded segments, was never mentioned by Group 1, but it was a consistent theme for Group 2, who realized that working together was an important skill for completing their cleaning project. While planning their project, they made sure that even the absent children were assigned jobs. On the implementation day I observed that most children seemed to know their job, and at the beginning they worked well together. The Kids Club leader working with Group 2 concurred, even though she recognized their teamwork was not perfect. When asked what they liked about the project, at least eight children mentioned working together or unity as their favorite part of the project, exemplified by these comments:

“I like most that we were working very united” (Hakob, age 11).

“Teamwork. We did it together, and the result was visible [you can see the results]” (Armen, age 12).

“[My friends and I] were assigned to do the painting, but we could do everything, help others and finish fast. . . . We helped each other. We didn’t leave our friends alone, we didn’t say you do it alone, for some to work harder than the others, all of us equally were doing everything and were helpful” (Jane, age 11).

“We did everything well because we all knew what to do” (Levi, age 12).

“The united work” (Sam, age 13).

Even though some girls complained about boys not helping toward the end of the project, and those boys expressed offense that their efforts were not appreciated, the theme of

unity and working together still rose to the top as a skill they valued and developed in their project.

Surprise

A final aspect of capabilities and skills indicating empowerment relates to the surprise expressed by the children at what they were able to accomplish, noted in fifteen coded segments. “I was surprised that we collected so much food” (Nane and Annie, age 11). Group 1’s surprise with all the food they collected helped them realize what they were capable of doing and made them more excited to complete the project. It also reinforced their generosity, which will be discussed in the spirituality section of this chapter. In Group 2, some children were surprised that they could work as hard as they did, such as Jane (age 11), who commented, “That I could work that much. . . . I help my mother, but that much was surprising.” The children’s expression of surprise over what they actually accomplished indicates their sense of empowerment.

Conditions and Opportunities

Conditions and opportunities refer to the creation of a context that supports children’s ability to do things (Shier 2015, 213). Opportunities for action were described in the child participation section of this chapter, indicating a strong relationship between participation and empowerment. Researchers have identified several conditions that lead to the empowerment of young people, including the creation of a safe environment and structure, opportunities to belong or be in community, supportive relationships with adults, and the ability to have control over decisions and actions (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe 2011; Eccles and Gootman 2002;

Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Liebenberg and Roos 2008; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018). All of those conditions were present during the research study, supporting the existing research. Since the conditions were primarily created by the Kids Club leaders, codes were clustered under the category of leader support and explored the ways leaders created space for children's empowerment. One additional code, friendship, was also identified.

Leader Gives Voice

One of the ways leaders created an environment that supported the children's ability to do things was through giving the children a voice, noted in twenty-one coded segments. The leader, Anna, acted in specific ways to create an environment for the children to feel safe and comfortable to speak. For example, when the children were brainstorming ideas for projects, someone rejected an idea another child suggested. Anna affirmed the original idea, reminding the group that all ideas were welcome at that stage of the process. Such support encouraged the children to continue giving input. She also gave voice by writing all their ideas on a whiteboard, communicating acceptance of the ideas. When the groups moved to the planning stage, Anna sat down at the table with the children, a posture that showed equality with them, and encouraged the children to share their ideas. She implemented the children's suggestions, such as dividing Group 1 into two groups and determining how Group 2 would assign tasks and supplies to bring. Anna constantly reminded both groups that it was their project, and she would not dictate the plan, saying comments like, "You have the freedom to decide what you will do" (Group 2, February 25, 2023). Jennings et al. (2006, 41) talks of the importance of a safe space

for children to express themselves and voice their opinions. By giving children a voice, Anna encouraged them to speak up and step into responsibility.

Leader Guides

Although leaders gave the children a voice, part of their supportive role was giving guidance to the children throughout the process. To guide the children in the selection and planning of their projects, Anna facilitated the discussions through asking questions. With Group 1, she made comments and asked questions like, “Think about how you will plan and what needs to be done to succeed with your project” (February 18), “What do we need to take with us? Think of what to bring for an elderly couple and a family with children” (February 25), and “We don’t want to burden our parents or force them to buy things” (March 11). Group 2 was guided through questions like: “Can you implement it?” (February 18), “Now what do we need? Who is going to bring everything?” (February 25), “Who will do the jobs?” (March 11). At the end of each session Anna would recap the children’s decisions and action steps to help prepare them for the next step in the process. The children recognized the importance of the leader’s guidance in the success of the project. When asked how their leaders helped, Armen (age 12) said, “In organizational matters.” Angel (age 11) admitted, “[Anna] helped us to think,” and Nane (age 11) stated, “She also gave us an idea to think about ideas ourselves and to go to help those people. Without comrade Anna we could not help those people.” Zeldin et al. (2014, 338) describe effective youth-adult partnership as sharing power as well as preparing youth through scaffolding and instruction. Anna’s guidance demonstrated both power-sharing and scaffolding. Through the use of questions and suggestions, Anna guided their planning to success.

Leader Redirects

Group 2's process was somewhat different than Group 1's because many of their original project ideas were more beneficial to themselves than others. An important aspect of leader support was redirecting them to remember the purpose for their project, noted in twelve coded segments. Anna gave several reminders, like, "Remember that you want to think of a project that benefits others" (February 25). After Group 2's first vote for a project, Anna asked the question, "Are we serving ourselves or others? Are the things that we are doing for us?" All the children except for one said, "These ideas are for us." So together they decided to vote a second time and they chose to send food to the soldiers at the border. While it definitely was a project to help others, Anna realized it was not going to be feasible for the children. In order to help them succeed, she redirected them the following week.

Anna: Together we chose and will implement a project: sending food to soldiers at the border. Sam was not happy with that choice, saying he wasn't sure we could send it. The soldiers have food and don't need anything from us. Don't forget that our choice was helping soldiers along the border. Are we able to do that? Can we give what we gather?

Children: No. We are not allowed to go to the border.

Child: Could we send the food?

Anna: Who do we trust to send it with? How will we know if it will reach the soldiers?

(Observation Journal, February 25, 2023)

Anna's work in helping them reflect on the feasibility of their project led them to eventually decide that it was not feasible. They went back to their list, crossed out the ideas that were self-serving or not feasible, and voted again, choosing to clean up the property around the church's exterior. Anna redirected them in a way that empowered them to choose a successful project.

At the end of the project, the children remembered her guidance and redirection. Lara (age 12) recalled, “First of all we as a group chose to go somewhere, but Anna told us that it is more like that you are doing something for you, but the purpose of our project is to do something that can be helpful for the community and people.” Sam (age 13) said, “[Anna helped] by giving good advice, that we should not think only about ourselves, but also about the community.” Hakob (age 11) explained, “When the children were sharing different ideas, they were always choosing whatever was good for themselves, but Anna explained to us that we need to think about helping people or the community, and everyone could change their decision and choose the right one.” Several children recognized the value of her support in redirecting them to a feasible project that benefitted others.

Leader Encourages

Adults are a primary source of positive encouragement when they work together with youth to make decisions and plan activities (Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010, 108). Therefore, encouragement is another aspect of leader support aiding in the empowerment of children, noted in ten coded segments. Throughout the planning process Anna was very intentional to affirm the ideas the children suggested, but she also was very clear to remind the children that the project was theirs, and they were the ones who would plan and implement. “It’s important that the project is implemented by you. You need to use your skills and abilities. You are smart. You can generate ideas” (Group 1, February 18, 2023). As the plan progressed, she continued to affirm the children, evidenced by her words to Group 2: “I believe you can do it and are capable of helping others” (February 25, 2023). Encouraging words communicate that the leader believes in

the children, motivating them to do it themselves. Anna's positive relationship with the children was noted by Sam (age 13), who described how Anna helped by comforting him.

Leader Gives Practical Help

The final way in which leaders supported children in their empowerment was in practical, physical assistance. Anna asked both groups of children, "Do you need help to implement the project?" (February 25), and most of the children answered yes. Anna also asked Group 1 if it would be all right for the leaders to identify the needy families and to help donate food, to which the children enthusiastically gave permission. Children could not be sent to visit someone unknown on their own, so leaders accompanied them, again providing practical help. The children in Group 1 identified all the practical ways leaders other than Anna helped: donating food, helping carry food, helping find the right home, and organizing transportation. Maria (age 11) encapsulated these feelings when she said, "They didn't leave us alone."

Group 2 was a bit more independent and confident of what they needed to do for their project. However, they still recognized the importance of the three leaders who helped them. One leader helped with the yard clean-up, showing the children how to use the tools and clean flower beds. She even went to the neighbors and offered to have the children clean their yards, too. Hakob (age 12) remarked that one of the things he liked the most about the project was how hard this leader worked. Others said she worked like a man and were clearly amazed at her example. Two other leaders assisted with the painting. Lara (age 12) appreciated the leader who "helped to mix the colors and make the colors that we need." The other leader helped paint, and Jane commented that he was able to fix part of the mural that the kids spoiled when they were painting. The practical

help of the leaders meant the children saw skills modeled, had some direction in what to do, and were able to complete the tasks they had planned to do.

Friendship

While leader support was very important, friendship emerged as another code related to conditions that encourage children's ability. Two of the interviewees drew themselves with a friend. When Luse (age 8) drew a before and after picture, she added a friend in the second picture, explaining that now she was closer to her friend Susie (Figure 16). While she did not articulate more, it appears that working together on the service project had a positive impact on relationships within the group.

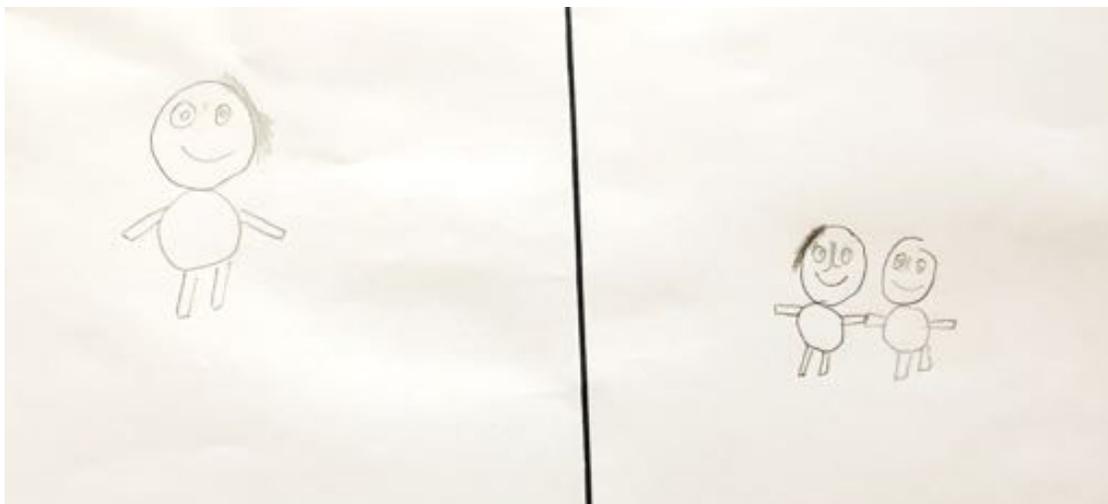


Figure 16: Luse's Drawing of Before and After the Project

Angel (age 11) drew herself with three friends in the second picture, explaining, "At the beginning I wanted to visit the elderly, before the project, when we were still thinking. All of my friends were going to visit the family with children and I was offended that they were not coming with me, and afterwards when we were already going to visit, I decided to join them" (Figure 17). Doing the project visit with friends changed her perspective.

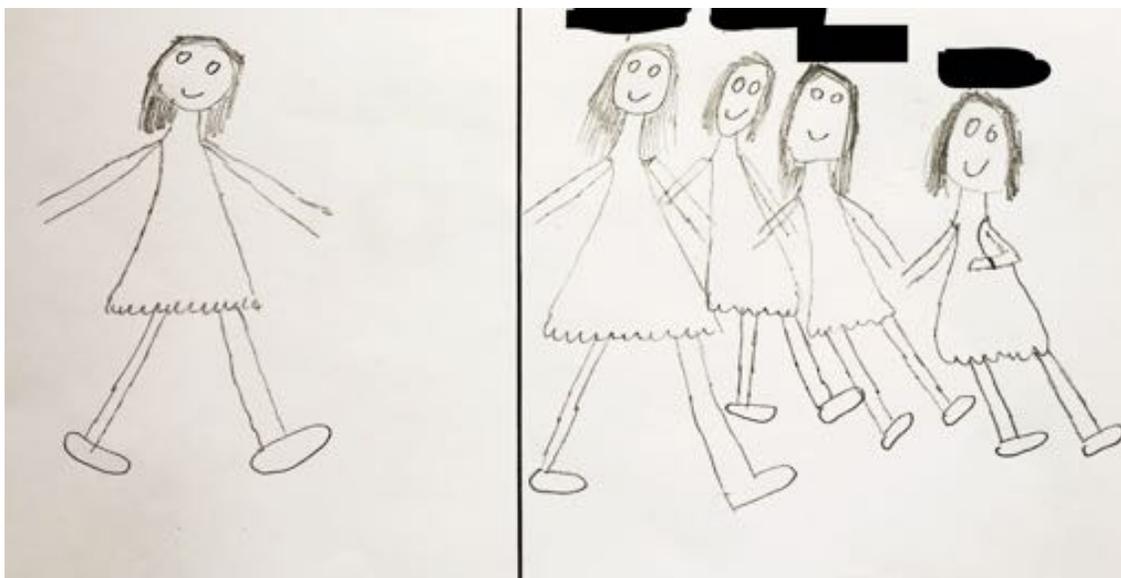


Figure 17: Angel's Drawing of Before and After the Project

Group 2 saw friendship as part of their teamwork. Jane (age 11) observed, “We helped each other, we didn’t leave our friends alone, we didn’t say you do it alone.” For her, it seemed that working together was an expression of friendship.

Through the support of leaders giving voice, guiding and redirecting, encouraging and providing practical help, and within the context of friendships, the children perceived favorable conditions leading to empowerment.

Personal Attitudes and Self-Esteem

Personal attitudes and self-esteem refer to the ways children perceive themselves as capable of taking action and affecting an outcome (Shier 2015, 213). Six main codes were identified under the category of attitudes: happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility, and accomplishment.

Happiness

By far the most common attitude expressed was happiness or joy, mentioned sixty-five times. Happiness was noted throughout the entire process. When asked how

she felt when her leaders said their group was going to implement a service project, Malena (age 12) said, “I was happy, because I could help myself and my country, as well as the neighbors.” Hakob’s (age 11) first reaction was “Good news!” and Jane (age 11) replied, “I was very happy. I didn’t think that something like this could happen.” Doing a service project was a positive idea. When Group 1 voted to choose their project and saw that the winner was collecting food to help needy families, Anna asked if they were happy with their choice. All the children shouted YES and some cheered! Luse (age 8) said, “I was happy to help the needy family.” After completing their projects, when asked how they felt as a result of doing the project, the children’s responses included happiness, good vibes, joy, and “happy to help.”

Some children described the source of their happiness. “The kids of the family were happy, so I was happy” (Dalita, age 10). “I felt happy that the children liked what we brought.” “Because grandmother was happy, I’m happy, too.” Every child interviewed said that they feel happy or good when helping others. When asked why, Hakob (age 11) replied, “When I am helping someone, I become very happy, because I know that with that I am pleasing God.” Sam (age 13) explained, “I think, when you do good things for people, you are pleased with yourself because you could help,” and Malena (age 12) said,

Interviewer: What kind of feelings do you have when you are helping others?

Malena: Joy, and the Lord sees all of that.

Interviewer: Why are you feeling happy?

Malena: That I can help people as much as I can.

The children’s happiness throughout the entire project process is a positive attitude, connected to empowerment, reflecting Shier’s (2017, 18) identification of positivity as an attitude of empowerment.

Eagerness

Children also expressed eagerness and excitement, shown in forty-eight coded segments. The day the project idea was introduced and brainstorming began, Sam (age 13) commented, “I love these kinds of things. We did these kinds of projects in the past.” He was very excited. Kids Club leaders commented that Group 2 continued to talk about the project for the rest of the day. My observation journal of Group 1 recorded, “The ideas are flying non-stop, with several kids talking at the same time. The volume suggests a high level of buy-in and excitement for most of them” (February 25, 2023). When Anna asked Group 2 who would do the jobs for cleaning, everyone began shouting. Narek (age 12) even offered, “You can assign me more tasks because I don’t want to do nothing after cleaning the paintings.” Valot (age 12) was very excited about bringing a shovel. A Kids Club leader shared, “Every day for the whole week, Valot asked at home, ‘When is the day so I will be sure to bring what I am supposed to?’”

One of the clearest examples of eagerness was their willingness to come early. Even though Kids Club normally started at 11:00 a.m., Nane (age 11) from Group 1 said, “I can get up at 7:00 and be there by 8:30.” In Group 2 the children suggested they could come as early as 6:00 a.m., and one child suggested they could come a second day during spring break if they were unable to finish everything on the assigned day. The day the groups implemented the projects, the children came an hour early, and the only children absent were those who were sick. Both groups got to work immediately, Group 1 picking up the bags of food and Group 2 starting to do the tasks they had been assigned. When Group 1A returned from their visit, the children enthusiastically reported to Anna how it went. They remembered the words of the grandmother they visited in detail and were

very excited about her advice. The leader working with Group 2 noted that not a single child complained or refused to do any work. They worked with great enthusiasm. The children's expressions of eagerness and excitement align with Shier's (2017, 18) attitude of love for what I do as a part of internal empowerment.

Initiative

Related to eagerness is initiative, acting without being asked, noted in twelve coded segments. Initiative was demonstrated by the children who volunteered to bring specific food or supplies for their project. It was noted as the children carried the bags of food without being asked or jumped into their cleaning tasks. All the leaders who worked with the children in implementing the projects commented how amazed they were at the willingness and initiative of the children to help and work. Shier (2017, 18) also identified willingness and commitment as empowerment attitudes.

Responsibility

Children expressed a strong sense of responsibility for what was being asked of them, another attitude indicating empowerment, with fourteen coded segments. Lara (age 12) said, "I understood that [doing the project ourselves] is a serious responsibility, and we need to approach it seriously, because we are taking a serious step." Other children expressed how challenging it was to choose a project, but when asked why, Angel (age 11) replied, "because we needed to think very well, to think what should be done," and Luse (age 8) said, "because everything we wrote was important." When asked how he felt when he heard their group would implement a community project, Sam (age 13) said,

Sam: Trust.

Interviewer: Trust? Why? Why did you feel like that?

Sam: Because not everyone could be trusted with the yard work. We cannot ask anyone that we don't know to come and work in our yard. Only special workers can come and work. But they trusted us, that we could do that work, and we did.

Leaders emphasized that the children were responsible for the project, and the children accepted the challenge, an indicator of a sense of empowerment.

Confidence

The attitude of confidence, noted in ten coded segments, also indicated a feeling of empowerment. Group 2 expressed confidence most often throughout the project. During the planning Armen (age 12) asserted, "If we want, we can do everything by ourselves." Hakob (age 11) remarked, "I was very happy [to hear we were doing a project], because I knew that we are older, we know what to do, and the work would be easy for us ... because each of us was sure about our abilities." At the end of the project, Levi (age 12) commented, "We did everything well because we all knew what to do," and another child added, "I think God thinks I can help others and I think the same." One child in Group 1B asserted, "I'm proud of us!" The confident, "yes I can" attitude being an indicator of empowerment has been documented by multiple researchers (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Shier 2015; 2017).

Accomplishment

Some of the feelings of confidence arose from the children's perceived success in completing their projects (eight coded segments). When Jane (age 11) drew her before and after picture (Figure 18), she explained it as follows:

Jane: Mmmm, I was happy that we could participate in this project, everything was successful, there was no rain, and our plan didn't fail.

Interviewer: (pointing to first picture) Aha, you are not smiling here, right?

Jane: At this time, I was at home thinking, 'Is it going to rain?'

Interviewer: Aha.

Jane: And I was thinking maybe we cannot do the project.

Interviewer: (pointing to second picture) Here you are happy.

Jane: Aha, because we implemented the project and finished.

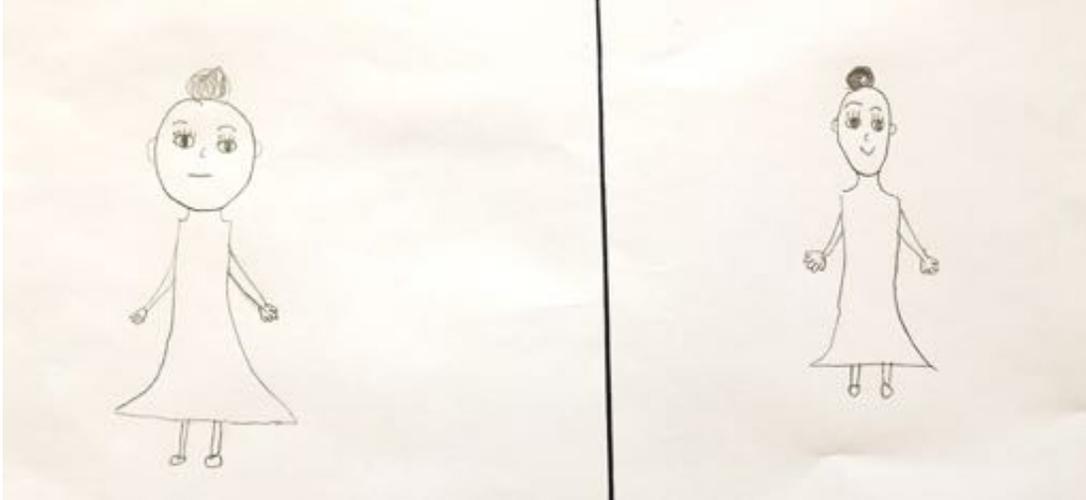


Figure 18: Jane's Drawing of Before and After the Project

Group 1 felt a sense of accomplishment as they gathered food and saw the boxes fill beyond their expectations. Edgar (age 9) happily exclaimed “We helped people!” after they delivered the food. Group 2 expressed success at completing the cleaning project. Even though it was a lot of work, Malena (age 12) said, “We are satisfied.” Armen (age 12) added, “We did it together and the result was visible,” and Jane (age 11) said, “After all the difficulties, to have great results.” Because they were able to complete their project and accomplish their goal, there was an expressed feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment.

Children demonstrated internal empowerment through their attitudes and self-esteem. Their happiness and eagerness to do the projects showed they were ready to take action. They embraced the responsibility, took initiative, and expressed confidence in being able to do it. When they saw their accomplishments, feelings of empowerment were reinforced.

Change

Shier (2015, 2017) has three main factors leading to empowerment: capabilities, conditions and opportunities, and attitudes. The data analysis of empowerment identified an outlier that did not neatly fit into the three factors but still helped to measure children’s perceptions and experiences of empowerment: change. While it may be easy to infer empowerment through observations and the children’s expressed feelings, their descriptions of change in their behavior (eight coded segments) or attitudes (eleven coded segments) and their expressed desire for future action further indicate a sense of empowerment. Angel (age 11) shared, “For example, when I see a grandmother with heavy bags, I help her to get home, and it makes me happy.” Malena (age 12) explained, “I started to help my mother. Before I was not doing that. Now I am helping with everything.” Hakob (age 11) described his before and after picture, saying, “The first picture expresses that I was not a hard worker at all. And in this [second] picture I am a hard worker (laughing) and came here, cleaning” (See Figure 19). Narek (age 12) commented, “I love working,” and Dawit (age 12) said, “I want to do good for other people.”

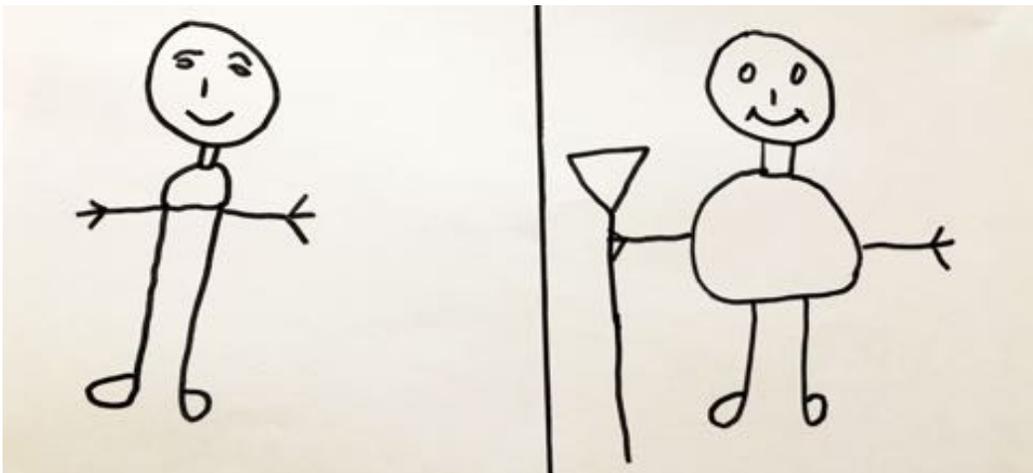


Figure 19: Hakob’s Drawing of Before and After the Project

As important as the change in attitude or behavior may be, hearing what the children wanted to do once the project was finished also became an indicator of empowerment. While thirteen children only thought of immediate personal actions (go home, rest, wash up, share with their family), and five from Group 1 wanted to go help Group 2 finish their project, nine children responded that they wanted to do more or help more people, saying things like, “I wish we could implement another project,” “I would like to help a family in need and clean again,” “visit again,” and “to help people who don’t have food and a home in our play yard.” Their desire to serve and sense of empowerment had definitely been strengthened through the project they completed.

The children in this study perceived empowerment in line with the three factors identified in Shier’s theoretical framework (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017). They described their development of skills and knowledge, particularly teamwork, and were surprised at what they were capable of doing. The project gave them opportunities for empowerment in meaningful activities, but the children perceived the importance of their leaders providing conditions for them to be empowered by giving them a voice, guiding and redirecting them, providing encouragement and giving practical support. Serving with their friends also was an important condition leading to empowerment. They expressed attitudes of internal empowerment through happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility, and sense of accomplishment. Their descriptions of positive changes in behavior and attitude and their desire to do more in the future confirm their perceptions of empowerment.

Interpretation of Findings Related to Empowerment

Shier's (2015, 2017) theoretical framework for youth empowerment was developed through research with children and youth thirteen to twenty years old in Nicaragua. In using his framework for this study, it was hoped that the application of the theory could be broadened to a younger age group—early adolescents in another cultural setting. Based on data collected from the children in this study in the three areas of skills/capabilities, opportunities/conditions, and attitudes/self-esteem, it appears that his theoretical framework of empowerment can be applied to early adolescents, strengthening data on ways to empower children. It also shows successful adaptation of the theory in another cultural context, Armenia.

Zeldin et al. (2014, 337) point out that research consistently links participation with the development of empowerment. Their assertion is supported by other researchers who use both terms (Bryere 2010; Gibbs, Mann and Mathers 2002; Hart 2013; Jayakaran and Orona 2011; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010). The findings in this study support this link between child participation and empowerment. Stephenson, Gourley and Miles (2004, 14) maintain that children need respect, opportunities, responsibilities, and support to participate effectively, which align closely with Shier's (2015, 2017) identification of capabilities, opportunities, and attitudes as necessary factors for empowerment. In this study, the children who actively participated by having a voice and through planning and implementing a community project described their growth in capabilities through knowledge and skill development. They embraced the opportunity given to them to serve the community, recognizing the importance of their leaders' support in guiding, redirecting, encouraging, and giving them practical help as they planned and

implemented the project. The attitudes that led to or resulted from empowerment in this study—happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility, and accomplishment—align with the attitudes identified by other youth empowerment research (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; 2019; Zeldin et al. 2016; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Participation and empowerment went hand-in-hand in this study.

Although both groups in this study identified the development of skills and knowledge, they differed greatly in what they said they had learned, which affirms the body of research on youth empowerment that points out that the specific skills, knowledge, and capabilities are unique to any given project or activity (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Ledford et al. 2013; Shier 2015; 2019; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Group 1 identified new skills and knowledge related to helping other people, while Group 2 identified skills and knowledge related to the physical act of cleaning/painting or working together. It is interesting to note that only Group 2 mentioned teamwork and that it was identified by more than half the children in the group, suggesting it was very significant to them. The identification of teamwork as a key skill supports Shier (2015, 213) who points out that when youth feel they are part of a team, they can more easily begin addressing the issues affecting them or the community around them. Their project—cleaning the church yard—necessitated that they do physical work together and help each other, whereas Group 1 only had the physical task of carrying the bags of food. At the same time, both groups talked about the importance of friendship or being with their peers, whether in the context of doing the work (Group 2) or visiting together (Group 1). Researchers assert that opportunities for children and youth to belong or be connected is

another key condition leading to the growth of empowerment (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lerner 2005; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; Zeldin, Christens and Powers 2013).

Gender-related comments surfaced occasionally, relating to empowerment. When Group 2 was discussing the various cleaning tasks, Sam (age 13) commented, “The majority [of our group] are girls. How are they going to help us?” I was told his perspective is cultural. “Men think that if they can do something, why should they ask for help from women? Even if girls can do things, boys think there is no need because they can do everything themselves” (Research Assistant Notes, February 25, 2023). That could explain why the boys in Group 1 wanted to carry all the food bags and not let the girls help or why the children in Group 2 were so impressed that their female leader “worked like a man” on the clean-up day. On Group 2’s implementation day, the boys and girls in Group 2 all appeared to work well together. However, when some of the boys stopped helping, girls like Lara (age 12) got upset. “The boys were not helping with the garbage bags. Girls had to carry the garbage.” Although the girls may have felt empowered to implement the project, it appeared they still had some traditional cultural role expectations.

The third key concept explored by the data is children’s spirituality.

Children’s Spirituality

The fourth research question asked: In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, express their spirituality through engaging in community-based service projects according to the following categories, identified by Hay and Nye (2006, 65):

1. Awareness sensing
2. Mystery sensing
3. Value sensing

The three categories created the framework for organizing the open-coding related to children's spirituality. The codes, definitions, frequency, and examples are described in Table 7.

Table 7: Children's Spirituality Codes and Definitions

Category	Sub-category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Awareness-sensing: The expression of an alertness to spiritual, meta-cognitive matters/God	God's Character	God helps	Children acknowledge that God has provided help.	13 coded segments	"God helped us in everything If he didn't lead us, we couldn't do it" (Michael, age 12).
		God provides	Children express that God has given things to them, including ideas and practical items.	12 coded segments	"[God] was giving us thoughts and helping us, giving us ideas" (Hugo, age 11).
		God is Creator	God is seen as creator of the world or the world is seen as God's creation.	10 coded segments	"If the Lord did not create us, we would not be able to do anything like this" (Nane, age 11).
		God sees and is present	Children express awareness of the presence of God.	7 coded segments	"[God] will see you and help you" (Edgar, age 9).

Category	Sub-category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
	Child's response to God	Please God	Children do things to make God happy.	18 coded segments	"God is happy since we did a good deed" (Child in Group 2).
		Love God	Children speak of showing love to God.	3 coded segments	"I have become kinder, and I love God more now" (Ashot, age 11).
		Spiritual Activities	Children engage in activities to connect with God, such as prayer or worship.	9 coded segments	"This morning when I woke up, I praised the Lord that I could come today" (Malena, age 12).
	Unprompted spiritual		Children speak of metaphysical or God without being asked.	14 coded segments	"Let's draw sparrows on the wall of the church because God takes care of them as well" (Ashot, age 11).
Mystery-sensing: The expression of awe, wonder or imagination		Dreams/ Wishes	Children express something they wished or imagined would happen or could not explain.	5 coded segments	"Maybe the grandmother prayed, I don't know about what, and we went" (Edgar, age 9).
Value-Sensing: The expression of emotions that measure what is of value.		Compassion	Children express awareness of others in need and express concern or a tender heart toward them.	39 coded segments	"I was happy that we were going to visit and help needy people, but on the other hand I was sad that they were living in such bad conditions and needed our help" (Angel, age 11).

Category	Sub-category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
		Kindness /Care	Children express kindness in word or action.	12 coded segments	“We helped, and now everyone is kind” (Edgar, age 9).
		Goodness	Children acknowledge that serving is a good thing to do.	14 coded segments	“I want to do good for others” (Dawit, age 12).
		Generosity	Children express a willingness to give or share with others.	13 coded segments	“[I liked] that we could go to our homes and collect things to take to those families” (Hugo, age 11).
		Gratitude	Children express appreciation for what they have	8 coded segments	“We have a home and eat good things. That family did not have good things ... We shouldn’t complain because those kids have greater needs” (Aaron, age 11).
		Love	Children express love for others.	3 coded segments	“I love everyone” (Malena, age 12).

The pilot test of the interview and focus group questions revealed that using the general term “spiritual” or “spirituality” would not be understood by the children, since for most people in the Armenian culture, spirituality is equated with going to a church. Since nearly 95% of the culture identifies as Christian (CIA.gov 2022), there is a cultural belief in the Christian God. Therefore, questions were revised to mention God specifically, such as:

- Did anything happen during the planning or implementation of the project that reminded you of God?
- Where did you see God at work during the project?
- Do you think God liked your project? Why or why not?
- Did your belief in God influence what you thought about the project or how you did the project? If so, how?

In addition, all the children anonymously wrote individual answers to the question: What have you learned about God or what God thinks of you as a result of your project?

Awareness Sensing

According to Hay and Nye (2006, 65), awareness sensing refers to a child's alertness to spiritual or metacognitive matters, including feeling "at-one" with something outside oneself. In the context of this research study, it includes their awareness of God, exemplified by Jane's (age 11) comment, "I always had faith," when asked if she had learned something about or become more aware of God during the project.

God's Character

Religious ideas and language are one of the ways children express their spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006, 99). When responding to questions about spiritual matters or God, some children described aspects of God's character, captured in the codes of God helps, God provides, God as Creator, and God sees/is present.

God helps

The most common God characteristic mentioned was God's help, noted in thirteen coded segments. Michael (age 12) was very certain. "God helped us in

everything. . . . If he didn't lead us, we couldn't do it." Malena (age 12) also said, "[God] can see [us helping people] and help us with everything." Others mentioned God's help in certain aspects of the project: ideas, direction, and action. Edgar (age 9) stated, "When you are helping people, God is helping you also, and God sees everything. . . . He will see you and help you." Maria (age 11) agreed, saying, "When we are helping people, then the help comes to us." Another child wrote, "We helped grandma, [God] will help us." It is unclear whether the children saw God's help as part of their own helping activity or if they understood God's help coming as a result of helping others, but they identified awareness of God's active help.

God provides

An awareness of God's provision was noted in twelve coded segments, representing all parts of the project process. When asked where they saw God at work, several children talked about God providing guidance and ideas in the choosing and planning stages. Angel (age 11) said, "God gave us those ideas, that we could help the soldiers or needy families, because they needed our help, and we helped them. And God was helping me there." Hugo (age 11) agreed, saying, "He was giving us thoughts and helping us, giving us ideas." Hakob (age 11) talked of God's guidance. "He showed us the right direction and what we should do," and Sam (age 13) said, "There were many other [projects] that were for us, but we chose cleaning the place, and I think the Lord told us to do that." Their description of God providing guidance, even in their thoughts and ideas, demonstrates a strong awareness of spiritual things.

Two children from Group 1 spoke of sharing gifts from God when talking about implementing their project. Luse (age 8) said, "We shared the gifts given by God with

others,” and Nane (age 11) said, “Whatever God gives me, I should share with others.” They expressed an awareness that God was the provider of the things they have. Jane (age 11) from Group 2 commented, “I was just grateful to the Lord that he gave us legs and hands [to finish faster] and gave us a great [sunny] day. We woke up, came, and implemented the project.” Dawit (age 12) said, “When cleaning the facility, we know God gave us this place, so keep it clean.” The simple acknowledgements that God had given things to them pointed again to awareness sensing.

God as Creator

Ten coded segments referred to God as the Creator or aspects of God’s creation. While one child in Group 2 wrote, “I learned that God is great and mighty,” most children talked about creation. Nane (age 11) said, “The Lord created us. . . . If [God] did not create us we would not be able to do anything like this.” Tigran (age 11) explained, “God gave us life to give and help others,” and Nane (age 11) noted “Those people [we helped] are created by God.” When asked if God liked their project, Jane (age 11) said, “Yes, because we cleaned his creation,” and Lara (age 12) replied, “I think yes, because we cleaned the world that he created.” The children appeared to have a basic awareness of God creating the world around them, and some expressed the belief that God had created them to serve others.

God sees/is present

Children also expressed awareness of God seeing them or being with them, noted in seven coded segments. Hakob, Malena and Edgar all spoke about God seeing everything, but when talking about helping others, Edgar (age 9) said, “[God] will see

you and help you.” When Malena (age 12) described her joy in helping others, she added “the Lord sees all of that.” She also mentioned God seeing when she helped others. When talking about God’s presence, one child wrote, “God is always with us,” and Ashot (age 11) explained, “God is always helping us, is always with us, he is helping us in difficult times.” An aspect of their awareness sensing was an awareness of God seeing them and being with them as they served.

Children’s Response to God

A second aspect of awareness sensing focused on children’s descriptions of how they relate to God or respond to God’s character or activity. Three codes were identified for this sub-category: please God, love God, and spiritual activities.

Please God

In focus groups, as the children responded both verbally and in writing to questions about what God thought of them/their project, they commonly responded that God was pleased or happy. Eighteen coded segments referred to God’s pleasure with them and their work, such as:

- “I think God is satisfied with me.”
- “God is happy since we did a good deed.”
- “I think God thought something good about me.”
- “God is amazed.”
- “God has a good opinion about all of us.”
- “God is very happy with me.”
- “Happiness since we helped children.”
- “When cleaning we made God happy. It’s his house.”

One child mentioned learning how to help others and do things that are pleasing to God. Hakob (age 11) elaborated on how helping others pleased God. “When I help someone, I become very happy, because I know that with that, I am pleasing God. . . . I learned

something new [doing the project], that the Lord doesn't like lazy people, he likes hard workers and that the Lord rejoices when we are doing things that pleases him." There seemed to be a common understanding among the children that serving others had impact beyond themselves or the people they served. It gave joy to God as well.

Love God

Three coded segments addressed the idea of loving God. When reflecting on the project, one child wrote, "I learned to love and respect God more." Hugo (age 11) commented on what he had learned, saying "We need to love [God] with all our mind hmmm ... and love our friends as we love ourselves." There was no specific teaching about God given during the project planning and implementation sessions, although children may have drawn their ideas from other Bible stories or from lessons they had learned in Kids Club in the past several months.

Spiritual Activities

Some children chose to mention spiritual activities they engaged in, noted in nine coded segments. On the day the groups implemented their projects, Malena (age 12) stated, "This morning when I woke up, I praised the Lord that I could come today." She was excited to do the project but included worship of God in her response. Lara (age 12) reflected on how the project changed her connection to God, saying, "Before I was praying, but not so well, but after the visit, I can say that I am praying almost every day, and if I am in a difficult situation to make the right choice, I am asking the Lord and he is helping me." Other children mentioned praying or reading the Bible more, but it was

unclear whether they were talking about what they have learned in the Kids Club in general or if it was a result of doing the community service project.

Unprompted Spirituality

While many of the children's comments about God were made in response to specific questions, it is worthwhile to note that sometimes children offered spiritual thoughts, comments, or opinions about God without being asked, pointing to an inner awareness of God or metaphysical matters. On the very first day when the children were discussing questions about the community around them, their leader asked, "What positive changes have you seen in the past year?" Gayane (age 11) responded, "I am praying more," and Sophie (age 11) said, "I read the Bible more often." After Sophie answered, Dalita (age 10) shared that she reads the Bible more now as well. Ashot (age 11) said, "I have become kinder, and I love God more now." It appears that the conversation snowballed on a spiritual theme after Gayane's response. That being said, the children's focus on personal change from a spiritual perspective indicates spiritual awareness. Of the four children in the conversation, only Sophie and Dalita attend a church regularly. Later, when the group was brainstorming ideas for projects, Ashot suggested, "Let's draw sparrows on the wall of the church because God takes care of them as well." He creatively and spontaneously expressed his awareness of God's compassionate care.

Several unprompted comments about God noted earlier in this chapter were mentioned during the general focus-group discussions and interviews. They suggest a spiritual awareness already present in the children. For example, when discussing the question about why it is good to serve others, Edgar (age 9) offered the idea that God

would help us when we help others, and Hakob (age 11) and Malena (age 12) both commented that God sees everything. When asked how the community had changed through what they did, Luse (age 8) responded, “We shared the gifts given by God to others.” When Michael (age 12) was asked if wanted to share anything at the end of his friend’s interview, his only response was, “Mmmm ... that God helped us in everything.” And Hakob’s (age 11) answer to the question of how he feels when he helps others was, “When I help someone, I become very happy, because I know that with that, I am pleasing God.” In every case, these comments were made before any of the questions about God were asked. Of the children quoted above, only Luse and Hakob attend a church regularly. The others have developed an awareness of God or a greater Other through their families, through the Kids Club, or even through their own awareness of the transcendent.

Mystery Sensing

Mystery sensing refers to having a sense of awe and wonder at life that one cannot fully comprehend (Hay and Nye 2006, 71). It also can include imagination. The category of mystery sensing was more difficult to code than other categories, since much of what was observed and spoken about tended to be pragmatic. Thus, words related to dreams, wishes, or things beyond comprehension gave guidance to this category. While only five coded segments were attributed to this category, they gave a unique window into the spiritual perceptions of the children. Jane (age 11) had only been attending Kids Club two months when they did the service project. When asked how she felt when she heard their group would implement a project, she was beyond happy. “I didn’t think that something like this could happen. . . . I just would never imagine.” Her amazement at

being able to participate in such a project appeared to come from deep within her being, and she enthusiastically engaged throughout the entire project. Annie (age 11) was one of the quieter children, but she shared, “When I was smaller, I always was watching TV and always was dreaming to do something like that, and today my dream came true.” A desire to help needy people had been planted deep within her at an early age, and the implementation of the project enabled that inner longing to be fulfilled. Edgar (age 9) had a deep insight, commenting, “Maybe the grandmother prayed, I don’t know about what, and we went.” He wondered if their visit was an answer to a prayer she had prayed, demonstrating a sense of transcendence—God moving in ways people do not understand. None of these children attend a church regularly, but they expressed mystery and wonder toward things of which they only dreamed or imagined but could not fully comprehend.

Value Sensing

Value sensing, the third category, refers to emotions that measure what is of value, causing delight or despair or giving meaning (Hay and Nye 2006, 74). In her seminal research on children’s spirituality, Nye (1998, 265) describes spirituality’s connection to values in the following way:

Values were also an important access point to spirituality as well as a vehicle for the kind of spirituality that has been particularly identified in this data. . . . Children who demonstrated a type of less self-serving sensitivity in their values and morals language often suggested a spiritual awareness (a type of relational consciousness).

Therefore, language related to children’s values and morals in this study was noted as a potential access point to spiritual awareness. Values expressed by the children were organized into six different codes: compassion, kindness/care, goodness, generosity, gratitude, and love. While not always possible, I sought to discern if the value being

expressed was a motivating value—causing the children to act—or a resulting value—surfacing or developing as a result of the action.

Compassion

The most commonly-expressed value was compassion, noted in thirty-nine coded segments. Compassion included the children's awareness of the needs or suffering of others but also expressions of tender-heartedness or concern toward those needs. Because Group 1's project was helping needy families, they expressed compassion more often than Group 2, but the children's compassion was noted in every stage of the project-planning process. When suggesting ideas for projects, children in both groups suggested helping needy families. In addition to that idea, Angel (age 11) suggested they visit an orphanage and take food to the children, showing awareness of children in need. When Group 2 talked about helping soldiers on the front lines, their rationales showed compassion, such as Levi's (age 12) response, "because I've heard they don't have a place to sleep and they sleep on the grass." When Group 1 planned and discussed what food to bring to the families, they thoughtfully suggested taking items like oatmeal or juice without sugar for the elderly since they may have diabetes. In all these examples, thoughtfulness and compassion appeared to motivate or guide the children's responses.

Visiting the needy families also awakened feelings of compassion in the children. The children in Group 1A, who visited the grandmother, were deeply touched by her personal story. During their focus group after the visit, Edgar (age 9) asked if he could share something bad that happened. "From the four children of the grandmother, two died and the other two are sick. . . . She has lived alone for 39 years." His comment was not a response to the question being discussed, so the grandmother's situation appeared to have

deeply impacted him. One child described the visit as touching, while another felt deeply because the grandmother cried during the visit. The whole group was happy they could help her. But Ashot's (age 11) interaction with the grandmother during the visit captured the essence of compassion.

Then Ashot began to ask her, "What's your name? Do you have any granddaughters or grandsons? Are you married or not? Do you have kids or not?" She began sharing something. Her son is sick. She is lonely. She has neighbors but she does not talk with them. [My co-leader] asked her when is her birthday. ... When we were about to leave, Ashot stopped for a moment and said, "May I say something?" Then Ashot said good things like typical Armenian wishes to the grandma and then he said, "I promise I will come and celebrate your birthday with you on May 4." She began crying. I asked him later, "Do you remember the month and day? He said yes, and said the day. He said, "Maybe I'll ask my mother and go visit her and take cake and visit."

(Leader Anjella Testimony)

When Ashot was asked what he liked best about the project, he said, "that we could help the grandmother and she is very happy. We also wished her very good things and we also promised her to go for her birthday on May fourth." Ashot's tender response toward the grandmother was not prompted by a leader but came from his heart, demonstrating compassion. He also wanted to extend the compassion to his mother through a follow-up visit.

Group 1B visited a family with young children, and Nane (age 11) brought a backpack filled with school supplies for the children. When they were leaving at the end of the visit, "The mother came and said you left a backpack here, and when we said that it is for them, the mother became very emotional. The backpack was full of school supplies and the children ran to see [what was in it]" (Angel, age 11). While some of Group 1B commented that they were happy to see the children happy, Angel tempered her happiness, saying, "I was happy that we were going to visit and help needy people, but on

the other hand I was sad that they were living in such bad conditions and needed our help.” She expressed a great sensitivity to the struggles of the people they visited. Nane (age 11) agreed, saying, “At first I was happy because I could help someone with something, but also it was painful for me that I should go to those children and those children don’t have anything.” The children also expressed awareness that others have more compared to themselves. One child wrote, “I felt sorry that they don’t have what I do.” Aaron (age 11) noted, “That family did not have good things. We shouldn’t complain because kids have greater needs,” and Tigran (age 11) commented, “[Our] parents give us money to buy something for ourselves. There are kids whose parents cannot do that. Maybe people who go to sleep hungry.” Their reflections demonstrated a growing awareness of and concern for the struggles of others.

When the children were asked how they have changed through implementing their project, Nane (age 11) replied, “If we see a needy/poor person in the street to help with money or with food,” and Luse (age 8) suggested, “When I see someone in the street, to help him/her, because maybe that person doesn’t have a house.” One child simply wrote, “empathy.” Aaron (age 11) shared a story about a homeless person around their playground. At first, he and his friends teased him and made fun of him. Then they realized they were not doing a good thing, so they bought food for him. Aaron said that they were really sad that they hurt that person. Participating in the project of providing food for and visiting needy families appeared to have awakened or deepened feelings of compassion in the children.

Kindness

Kindness was noted in twelve coded segments. Ashot (age 11) commented at the beginning of the project-planning process that in the past year he had grown kinder, and his kindness was noticeable by his actions. For example, when Group 1 came together to plan their project, the first thing he did was ensure everyone had a seat. He noticed that his leader did not have a chair and gave his chair to her. Kindness appeared to motivate his actions, also shown when his group visited the grandmother, described above. He took time to ask about her family and listened carefully to her, recalling later what she had said. Other children talked about kindness as a result of helping others: “I learned kindness.” “I learned that God’s purpose for us is to be kind.” “I learned that I should be kind like God.” “I felt kindness.” Edgar (age 9) noted, “We helped, and now everyone is kind!” Angel (age 11) gave a personal example of how she now enjoyed showing kindness. “When I see a grandmother with heavy bags, I help her to get home. It makes me happy.” The children expressed how their project of visiting needy families fostered deeper feelings of kindness to others in need, and a few children also connected their kindness with God.

Goodness

Goodness, with fourteen coded segments, referred to the ways the children acknowledged that helping others was doing good or how it made them feel good. Annie and Maria (age 11) agreed that their favorite part of the project was doing a good deed for the grandmother they visited. Lara (age 12) described how she felt when helping. “I am feeling that at that moment I am doing something good. I am helping people,” and Sam (age 13) observed, “I think, when doing good things for people, you are pleased with

yourself, because you could help.” Doing good gave them joy and satisfaction. Some children said they learned about goodness by doing the project. Hugo (age 11) learned “that we need to do good things to the people, help them, and be kind towards them.” Dawit (age 12) noted a change in his attitude, saying, “I want to do good for others.” Other children expressed insights about their own goodness, writing, “We are good people, and we can help everyone,” and “[I am] a good helper.” Two children connected goodness to God. Nane (age 11) observed, “If the Lord did not create us, we would not be able to do anything like this and do good to those people,” and a child in Group 1B wrote, “God thought we did a good thing.” The children noted that helping others demonstrated the value of goodness, but goodness also appeared to surface as they served, shaping their character.

Generosity

Generosity, noted in thirteen coded segments, was a value almost exclusively expressed by the children in Group 1 as they described their willingness to give and share with others. Throughout the planning process the children suggested items they could bring for the families they would visit. When they brought food, most children brought donations for both families, not just the one they were visiting. Hugo (age 11) was excited about the project, “because we were going to make happy people who were sad, and also give them gifts. . . . [I liked] that we could go to our homes and collect things to take to those families.” Malena (age 12) from Group 2 mentioned, “I helped, brought several things. That’s why I helped, but I couldn’t bring everything, that’s why I brought as much as I could.” The eagerness to bring things and share what they had suggests that generosity was a motivating value. However, some children also wrote that they learned

generosity by doing the project. “I learned that we should always help people if we have bread. Share your bread with a hungry person and give it.” “If I have something, candy for example, and other children don't have it, I should share.” They applied their experience of being generous to the families to other situations, indicating that deeper generosity was a resulting value. Two children linked their generosity to God's generosity. Luse (age 8) said, “We shared the gifts given by God with others,” and Nane (age 11) said, “I learned that whatever God gave me, I should help others with that.”

Gratitude

Related to generosity is gratitude, noted in eight coded segments. The code was only noted in Group 1B, first mentioned in their focus-group discussion. The children were asked what changes they had seen in themselves as a result of doing the project, to which they responded:

Aaron: We have a home and eat good things, that family did not have good things. If we complain, we shouldn't complain because those kids have greater needs.

Nane: Sometimes we don't use our things but ...

Dalita: When my mom buys me clothes, I should be grateful.

Tigran: Parents give us money to buy something for ourselves. There are kids whose parents cannot do that. Maybe people who sleep hungry.

Later one child wrote, “We shouldn't complain about what we have,” and Angel (age 11) explained, “When we are doing something, we need to be careful in using things, because other children don't have that. I mean I have, but others don't have.” Their experience of visiting with a needy family caused them to reflect more on what they had, and gratitude was a resulting value.

Love

While only three coded segments talked about love, they shed light on different aspects of the project. On the first day of discussion, when asked what they would like to change in their community, one child in Group 1 commented, “People would love one another and treat each other with respect.” Living in a nation actively at war, the children are exposed to hatred and chaos regularly. It is unclear whether the national situation, local context, or perhaps the family situation motivated the child to answer as he/she did, but his/her desire to see more love expressed an understanding that something of value is missing. Children also spoke of their own love. When introducing herself, Malena (age 12) included, “and I love everyone,” suggesting that her love for others was a motivating factor. Conversely, Hugo (age 11) commented that as a result of doing the service project he learned “that we need to ... love our friends as we love ourselves.”

Interpretation of Findings Related to Spirituality

The research data confirmed that when planning and implementing their community-based service projects, children expressed their spirituality according to the three categories identified by Hay and Nye (2006, 113). They demonstrated awareness sensing through religious language as they reflected on God’s character—creating, helping, providing and being present—and their response to God through loving and pleasing him (Hay and Nye 2006, 118). They exhibited mystery sensing through wondering and dreaming, strategies identified by Hay and Nye (2006, 123). And they demonstrated value sensing through expressing compassion, kindness, goodness, generosity, gratitude, and love, sometimes as values that motivated them to act or speak

and sometimes surfacing as a result of helping. These values reflect many of the consequences identified by Hay and Nye (2006, 114, 126).

The children did not usually articulate their thoughts about or relationship with God voluntarily, but when questioned, they shared insights about who God was, how God saw them, and how they worked together with God. The name of Jesus was never mentioned, even though the Kids Club is Christian. Although some answers to the questions about God may have been offered according to what the children thought they should say, when spiritual responses were unsolicited, they appeared to reflect more of an inner spiritual awareness in the child's life. For example, when Ashot (age 11) said, "I have become kinder and I love God more now," he was tying together his love for God and his response to other people. The unprompted comments were simple observations about God, but they were woven into the work their groups were doing and so appeared quite natural for the children to articulate.

During the focus group with Kids Club leaders, they were asked if they had ever heard children talk about God or spiritual matters in connection to the projects (outside of project planning time). One leader replied,

Our children will not concentrate [or talk about] that, because for them there is a project, so they will talk about helping the community. . . . If we would ask them specifically, "What do you see about where God is working?" then they might think. But because we didn't tell them from the very beginning, they are not paying attention to that.

The leader's comment reflected the tendency of the children not to articulate their spiritual perceptions, and since many of the leaders were not with the children during the project planning and implementation, they may have not been listening for spiritual comments. However, the children's words reflected a much broader reality that what

leaders may have expected. Children were thinking of spiritual matters and paying attention to things beyond themselves even when leaders did not prompt them or remind them. It is hoped that the Kids Club leaders will be surprised and encouraged when they receive the research results, seeing a deep spirituality in the children.

In one case it was not easy for a child to talk about spiritual things. When Sam (age 13) was asked the question, “During this project, if you think about your relationship with God, what has changed?” he replied, “Many things have changed, many.” He was asked if he wanted to share an example, but he said, “No.” His response indicated that there was more happening in his relationship to God than he was willing or able to articulate. Zimmerman’s (2019, 215) research with eight- to twelve-year-old children found that they are not always able to articulate the depth of what they are thinking when talking about spiritual things. Hooton (2014, 108) agrees, saying, “Because the child’s ability to express a spiritual experience is limited, this may not indicate that the experience itself is limited.” Hay and Nye (2006, 127) also note that few children in their study had shared their spirituality with others, mostly due to fear of negative consequences. Sam’s response makes one wonder how much more the children in the study could have said about spirituality if given the opportunity or encouragement, whether through spoken language or other creative means of expression.

Some of the most interesting spiritual comments made by the children surrounded the concept of pleasing God. Several children commented that God was happy, pleased, or satisfied with them and their work, such as, “I think God is satisfied with me,” or “When cleaning we made God happy.” At one level, the children’s joy at doing good deeds was seen as giving joy to God as well. However, because there was no opportunity

to delve into the children's perceptions of God, one wonders if some children believe that God might be unhappy if they do not do good deeds. Hakob's (age 11) comment, "... the Lord doesn't like lazy people, he likes hard workers and that the Lord rejoices when we are doing things that pleases him," alludes to an understanding that God's happiness with people may be dependent upon their good deeds. Hay and Nye (2006, 118) note that sometimes religious language can be unorthodox or inaccurate when used by 'non-religious' children. In the case of the children's perspectives on pleasing God, care should be taken by leaders to ensure such perspectives are not used to spiritually abuse or manipulate children (Segura-April 2017, 381-382).

The values expressed by the children aligned with the projects they chose, similar to the skills they learned. Group 1 talked much more about compassion, kindness and gratitude than Group 2. Group 1 also focused on helping people, while Group 2 spoke more about working together and helping the environment. The difference in their experiences led to the surfacing of different values and priorities. Nye's (1998, 265) research found that values are an access point to spirituality and that "children who demonstrated a type of less self-serving sensitivity in their values and morals language often suggested a spiritual awareness." The values expressed by the children in this study—compassion, kindness, goodness, generosity, gratitude, and love—support Nye's description of non-self-serving sensitivity. They are not necessarily equated with spirituality but can be indicators of spiritual activity in children's lives. In some cases, the children were motivated to action by their values, such as Angel (age 11) who said, "I was happy that we were going to visit and help needy people, but on the other hand I was sad that they were living in such bad conditions and needed our help." Children more

commonly talked about values arising as a result of doing the project, such as how providing food for and visiting needy families awakened or deepened feelings of compassion and kindness to others in need or caused them to reflect more on what they had, resulting in deeper gratitude (see Hay and Nye 2006, 114). Yust et al.'s (2006, 8-9) review of definitions of spirituality notes that "spirituality is expressed in ethical behavior. A full understanding of spirituality should not only be inner; it should also be manifested in the 'outer life' of ethical behavior and action." The children expressed inner values, but they manifested them in their outer actions. Additionally, some children also identified God at work in the expression of those values or in what they learned as they helped others.

The Core of Service/Helping

The central core of the research study is the focus on service or helping in the community. All three key concepts of children's participation, empowerment, and spirituality are shaped by it. It is the common thread running through the observations and the children's comments throughout the research study, and therefore it informs the answers to the final research question: What is the evidence of interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children engage in community-based service projects?

The children in this research study expressed their attitudes, reactions, and learning about helping/service in the context of four key relationships: helping others, helping the environment, helping themselves, and helping with God. These four relationships formed the categories for codes related to helping, creating a foundation for examining how the three themes relate to one another. The four relationships also align

with Nye's (1998, 235) definition of spirituality as "relational consciousness," in which she describes the same four relationships: with God, others, self, and the environment.

The codes, definitions, and examples are described in Table 8.

Table 8: Helping Codes and Definitions

Category	Code	Definition of Code	Frequency of Code	Example
Helping Others	Helping others	Children describe their actions as aiding people other than themselves.	108 coded segments	"I liked that we could help that grandmother, and she became very happy because of our help" (Annie, age 11).
	Others' response	Children describe how other people respond to their acts of service.	26 coded segments	"The kids were very happy because they got a school bag" (Nane, age 11).
Helping the Environment	Helping the broader environment	Children describe their actions as something that improves the world around them.	26 coded segments	"The process of cleaning the area made the air fresher. We helped Mother Nature" (Lara, age 12).
	Helping the immediate environment	Children describe their actions as a benefit to the immediate environment where they meet.	14 coded segments	"Cleaning this small facility doesn't help the planet, but it helps the church" (Arsen, age 13).
Helping Myself	Helping myself	Children note that helping others benefits them personally.	7 coded segments	"We help ourselves when we help the community" (Jane, age 11).
Helping with God	Helping with God	Children describe God's activity with their actions.	25 coded segments	"[God] was giving us thoughts and helping us, giving us ideas" (Hugo, age 11).

Helping Others

The most common code in the entire research study was helping others, noted in 108 coded segments. The children understood that service must be done in the context of a relationship and must go beyond themselves. Both groups in the study expressed excitement to design and implement a project to serve the community, they suggested ideas for projects that helped others, they actively planned and brought the materials to help, and then they implemented the plans. They unanimously agreed it was important to help others in the community. Their participation in voice and activity throughout the project appeared to be motivated, at least in part, by a desire to help others.

When asked about what they learned by doing the project, many children responded that they learned *how* to help others or that they *should* help others. They felt joy and happiness in helping others as well as kindness and empathy for those in need. For some, the best part of the project was “that those children were happy” (Nane, age 11), or “that we could help the grandmother and she is very happy” (Annie and Ashot, age 11), demonstrating a focus on others, not themselves. Dawit’s (age 12) comment, “I want to do good for other people,” as a change seen in himself illustrated how helping others had impacted his personal attitudes. Children experienced empowerment through being given the opportunity to create their own plan to help others, through the growth of helping skills and understanding, and through their feelings of being capable of helping others. At the end of the project, they wanted to do more, exemplified by the children who wrote, “I would like to help more people.” “I would like to help a family in need and clean again.” “I wish we can implement another project.”

Helping others was reflected in the children's spiritual comments too. Several children described how God was happy or pleased that they helped others, which made them feel happy as well. One child wrote, "I learned that God's purpose for us is to be kind." Comments like, "I think God thinks I can help others and I think the same," illustrate the children's understanding that helping others was something done together with God.

Helping the Environment

Helping the Broader Environment

The theme of helping the environment was noted in twenty-six coded segments. It was seen in both groups as they brainstormed ideas for their projects, such as collecting, sorting and recycling garbage, planting trees and flowers, cleaning up a contaminated area, and helping street animals. Group 2's project, cleaning the church yard, directly helped the environment, and the children actively participated in the planning and implementation of their environmentally-focused project.

A few children commented that while doing their project they learned they should care for or protect nature. The successful completion of their project was equated with helping nature, such as Lara's (age 12) comment, "The process of cleaning the area made the air fresher. We helped Mother Nature." Tigran (age 11) observed, "If we didn't help outside, the place becomes filled with garbage," and Michael (age 12) said, "We are cleaning our country." Sam (age 13) added, "We helped the neighbors and also the community and environment." They expressed a feeling of empowerment, making a difference by helping the environment.

Helping the environment was also a spiritual activity as children reflected on the environment as something God created. Lara and Jane (ages 12 and 11) both commented that God was happy with their project because they had cleaned the world he had created.

Helping the Immediate Environment

One aspect of helping the environment was the children's focus on their immediate environment: the church where they attended Kids Club, noted in fourteen coded segments. When brainstorming ideas for service projects, both groups suggested several ideas related to caring for, decorating, or beautifying the church, which gave them a participatory voice to express their concern and desire to give back to the place where they attend Kids Club.

Lara (age 12) expressed a sense of empowerment when she said, "We help ourselves when we take care of this facility." Arsen (age 13) objected to the idea of their project having broader environmental impact, saying, "Cleaning this small facility doesn't help the planet, but it helps the church." He only saw immediate results.

A spiritual link was made as children viewed the facility as being God's house. Dawit (age 12) explained, "When cleaning the facility, we know God gave us this place, so keep it clean." Hakob (age 11) commented, "We were cleaning God's house, making people happy, cleaning the air for the people to breathe good air, and we were doing something very useful for the people." His reflection tied relationships with others, God, and the environment together.

Helping Myself

Only a few children talked about the service projects helping themselves, noted in seven coded segments. “We help ourselves when we help the community” (Jane, age 11). “When we clean the facility, we help ourselves and the neighbors” (Lara, age 12). “I was happy [doing the project], because I could help myself and my country, as well as the neighbors” (Malena, age 12). These comments illustrated their awareness that making the community better also has a personal benefit. At the same time, even though there were very few direct comments about helping themselves, every child wrote down something they had learned or how they had changed as a result of doing their project, which showed their awareness of personal benefit and growth by doing the project. Their comments related to new skills, knowledge, changes in feelings/attitudes, and understanding of God.

Helping with God

No children mentioned “helping God” in their responses. As was mentioned in the spirituality section of this chapter, the code of “God helping” was noted in thirteen segments and “God providing” in twelve segments, pointing to the children’s belief that when they served, they worked in relationship with God. Several children referred to God’s helping presence throughout the project-planning process. Angel (age 11) described God’s help when choosing the problem, saying, “God gave us those ideas, that we could help the soldiers or needy families, because they needed our help, and we helped them. And God was helping me there.” Hugo (age 11) agreed, saying, “He was giving us thoughts and helping us, giving us ideas.” Hakob (age 11) explained, “He showed us the right direction and what we should do,” and Sam (age 13) also said,

“There were many other [projects] that were for us, but we chose cleaning the place, and I think the Lord told us to do that.” Michael (age 12) commented, “God helped us in everything. . . . If he didn’t lead us, we couldn’t do it.” Their active participation and feelings of empowerment pointed, in part, to an awareness of God’s help to inspire them with ideas, guide them and make them successful, exemplified by the written comment by a child in Group 2, “I think God thinks I can help others and I think the same.”

In summary, evidence of connections between participation, empowerment, and spirituality within the context of community-based service projects exists, particularly when examined within the framework of relationships. Whether the children spoke of helping others, helping the environment, helping themselves or helping with God, healthy participation, true empowerment, and spiritual awareness were all present. The nature of the interrelationships is less clear.

Interpretation of Findings Related to the Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality

Johnson and Christianson (2014, 783) note, “When qualitative researchers use the term relationship, it has a slightly different meaning than when quantitative researchers use the term. . . . Qualitative researchers use the term relationship to refer to many different kinds of relations or connections between things, including but not limited to variables.” The data from this study revealed evidence of connections between participation, empowerment, and spirituality within the context of community-based service projects, particularly when examined within the framework of relationships. Whether the children spoke of helping others, helping the environment, helping

themselves or helping with God, healthy participation, true empowerment, and spiritual awareness were all present. But what is the nature of these interrelationships?

Spradley (1979, 111) has summarized nine universal semantic relationships used in qualitative research. Some of the relationships he identifies are seen in the data from this research study, such as:

1. Cause-effect (x is a result of y). When the children were given a voice and were able to act on their plans (participation), they developed skills, teamwork and confidence (empowerment). When the children had the support of leaders (conditions for empowerment), they were able to create plans and implement them (participation). They saw God guiding (spirituality) their decision-making process (participation), but they also expressed growth in awareness of God as a result of participating in their projects. Some children expressed their sense of accomplishment with the project (empowerment) because of God's help (spirituality), pointing to a spiritual cause, while others learned helping skills (empowerment) and then reflected that using their skill was pleasing to God (spirituality). These examples illustrate that there is no simple cause-effect relationship between participation, empowerment, and spirituality. At times each one appeared to serve as a catalyst for the others, and each one was influenced by the others when seen in the context of service/helping.
2. Rationale (x is a reason for doing y). Group 1 selected a project to collect food for needy families (participation) because they felt compassion and generosity (spirituality). Children in Group 2 made sure everyone had a job to do (participation) because they felt that teamwork was very important

(empowerment). Leaders supported the children through advice and encouragement (empowerment) because they wanted the children to have a voice and make decisions (participation). Children wanted to help more (empowerment) because they felt that God had helped them complete their projects (spirituality). At times, the rationale for activities appeared to come from their spirituality, while at other times it was from the participatory activity in which they were involved or their sense of empowerment. It is not possible to conclude that one concept consistently served as the rationale for the others.

3. Means-end (x is a way to do y). Allowing the children to design and implement a community service project (participation) was a way to empower them as they successfully completed the project (empowerment). Listening to God (spirituality) was one way to get ideas for projects or guidance for planning (participation). Allowing the children to work with friends (Group 2) or do visits with friends (Group 1), a condition of empowerment, led to more active participation of some of the unengaged children, like Gregor (age 10). Participation was a way for the children to feel empowered, but also to see how God used them in the tasks they did (spirituality). Again, the relationships between the three concepts are multi-directional.
4. Attribution (x is a characteristic of y). Leaders giving children a voice (participation) is a characteristic of creating optimum conditions for empowerment. Children actively using the skills and knowledge they have gained (empowerment) leads to greater participation. Ashot's (age 11) comment, "I have

become kinder and I love God more now,” points to his action of being kind (participation) being a characteristic of his love for God.

Spradley has identified other semantic relationships in qualitative research, but using the above four as exemplars demonstrate that while there certainly are interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when children engage in community-based service projects, there is no simple way to describe those relationships. All three concepts—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—co-exist, at times acting independently of one another but at other times woven together when children serve in the community.

These findings are significant in addressing the gap in literature on the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality, particularly with early adolescents. Data from this study supports and adds to the findings of Donnelly et al. (2006, 248), who suggest that there is a bidirectional influence of spirituality and civic engagement, but the relationship has not been fully explored by research. It speaks to Hemming (2013, 75), who notes the dearth of literature focusing on spirituality related to ways children act as social agents in school settings. Spiritual empowerment mentioned by NGOs is almost exclusively mentioned by FBOs, referring to strengthening religious commitment, adopting faith-based values, etc. (Hennink et al. 2012, 211-212). This study has provided evidence of interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality in the context of Armenian early adolescents involved in community-based service projects, with the hope of adding to the understanding and research in the fields of child participation, empowerment, and spirituality.

Summary

The question this research study sought to answer is: What are the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality in ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects?

This chapter presented the demographic characteristics of the thirty-two children who participated in this study. Then the data for each of the three key concepts—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—were presented and analyzed, including images, tables, and firsthand narratives from the children. Following the data analysis of each research sub-question, the interpretation of the findings was discussed in an attempt to answer the main research question for this study. Next, evidence of interrelationships among the three concepts was analyzed and discussed as they connect to the core of the study: service/helping. The final chapter will present a summary of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for research and practice.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of findings and conclusions on the interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when thirty-two ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects. The conclusions are followed by recommendations for practice for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs, faith communities, schools and educators, and NGOs/FBOs involved in child participation and empowerment. The chapter closes with recommendations for further research.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

The findings and conclusions have been organized through summarizing the answers to the five research questions in this qualitative case study. The first research question asked: Who are the select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia participating in this research study? Thirty-two children who attend the same CDC—Kids Club—in Yerevan, Armenia, participated in the study, seventeen females and fifteen males. The majority of the children (78.1%) were 11-12 years old. Only a few of the children in the study attend the church hosting the Kids Club. Some children attend other evangelical or protestant

churches in Yerevan, but nearly two thirds (65.6%) come from Armenian Apostolic Church background and do not attend church on a regular basis. The Armenian Apostolic Church, part of the oriental Orthodox Christian tradition, is the official state church of Armenia. While almost 95% of Armenians consider themselves Christian, and 92.6% of them belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church (CIA.gov 2022), far fewer actively practice their religious beliefs. Sponsorship to attend the Kids Club has been provided for 62.5% of the children in the study because they are economically or socially disadvantaged.

During Phase 1 of the research, I observed the children in two separate groups as they worked through a process of choosing, planning, and implementing a community service project. Phase 2 of the research occurred after the projects were completed and consisted of three children's focus groups and nine individual interviews with children. In addition, I conducted one focus group with Kids Club leaders and obtained individual testimonies from five leaders who assisted the children in implementing their projects. Findings related to participation, empowerment, and spirituality and their interrelationships were extrapolated from the data.

The data gathered from observations, focus groups and interviews was insufficient to accurately measure any trends in participation, empowerment, or spirituality related to the demographics of children's age, gender, sponsorship, or attendance at a church. This was due to multiple factors, such as irregular attendance of children through the project-planning process, anonymous comments and responses of the children during discussions and focus groups, and the fact that the two groups of

children did completely different community service projects leading to different results in their identification of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values.

Participation

Research question #2 asked: In what ways are select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, able to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of community-based service projects? During Phase 1 of the study, both groups of children collaboratively chose, planned, and implemented a community-based service project. Group 1's project was collecting food for needy families and then visiting those families to deliver the food, a response to their awareness of the issue of poverty in the community. Group 2's project was cleaning and refreshing the yard around the church building, a response to the issues of litter in the community and maintaining green spaces. During Phase 2 of the study, the children evaluated the projects and their roles in it through focus groups and interviews. Since the definition of participation includes both involvement in an activity and the process of giving the children a voice or including them in the decision making, voice and activity formed the two main categories under which codes and data were organized.

The data analysis showed that when the children were given the opportunity for self-determined community service projects, the children were able to participate both by having a voice and by being actively involved in every step of the project planning process: choosing the problem, designing the action plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating their work. Both groups talked about the problems they saw in their community, brainstormed possible projects they could do to meet the needs, and then

voted to select the project their group would do. The projects were simple, but it was the first time these children had been given an opportunity to plan a project themselves. During the planning step of the process, the children shared many ideas of how to do the project, but the plans were guided by their leader's questions: what was needed, who would provide it, how and when they would implement the plan. Even though leaders gave guidance to the plan, the ideas for the plan came from and were agreed upon by the children themselves. During the implementation step, the children in Group 1 were able to visit two families and deliver the food they had collected, while Group 2 cleaned the yard in front of the church, cleaned some of the neighbors' yards, and refreshed some of the paint and murals on the building. The successful completion of both projects demonstrated that the children's voices had been heard and taken into account, and the high attendance and enthusiastic work on the projects demonstrated active physical participation. The evaluation step of the project allowed the children to share what they liked or did not like about the project and what they would change if they could. While the children's comments focused mostly on the implementation of the projects, their willingness to share what they saw as positive and negative demonstrated their comfort in sharing evaluative opinions.

Not every child shared the same level of engagement or participation. Some children did not participate, although their reasons for non-participation varied, including tiredness or hunger, having quiet, shy personalities, being absent during aspects of the process, or their disinterest in the discussion. Overall, in spite of a few children choosing not to engage in aspects of the process, every child participated at some point, and the majority of the children demonstrated they were able to participate in all aspects of

designing, implementing, and evaluating community-based service projects. Because they had a voice, they shared thoughts and opinions throughout the choosing, planning, and evaluation steps, and because they had the opportunity to act, they physically got involved through voting for projects, donating items, working, and self-reflection.

Empowerment

Using Shier's CESESMA model for youth empowerment, as shown in Figure 2 (CESESMA-UNN 2010; Shier 2015; 2017), the third research question asked: In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, perceive empowerment related to the following factors: development of capabilities and knowledge, creation of conditions and opportunities for empowerment, and personal attitudes and self-esteem. In conversations related to capabilities and knowledge, the children identified practical skills they developed in cleaning, such as using a shovel and painting, but they also identified growth in knowledge of how to help or care for others or the environment. Group 2, in particular, commented about the development of teamwork as an essential skill. The children's surprise at all they were able to accomplish while doing their projects also indicated a new understanding of their capabilities, adding to the feelings of empowerment.

The research data identified the presence of several conditions and opportunities which created a supportive context for the children to do things. The opportunities provided were described in the participation section above. Additionally, the creation of a safe environment, being in community with others, supportive relationships with adults, and having control over decisions, all of which were noted during this study, are

conditions leading to empowerment of young people identified in broader research (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Dempster, Stevens and Keeffe 2011; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Liebenberg and Roos 2008; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman et al. 2018). In particular, this study noted the support of leaders as they gave the children a voice, guided and redirected them during discussions, encouraged them, and gave them practical support when asked. Some children also identified friendship as an important component in completing their projects, similar to earlier comments about teamwork, which connected empowerment to their feelings of belonging or being in community.

The third factor leading to empowerment—attitudes and self-esteem—refers to the ways children perceive themselves as capable of taking action and affecting an outcome (Shier 2015, 213). The main codes identified in this study—happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility, and accomplishment—align well with research identifying attitudes that lead to or result from empowering activities (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; 2018; Lerner et al. 2006; Shier 2015; 2019; Zeldin et al. 2016; Zimmerman et al. 2018). The children's happiness and eagerness to do the projects showed they were ready to take action. They embraced the responsibility given to them, took initiative, and expressed confidence in being able to do it. When they saw what they had accomplished, feelings of empowerment were reinforced.

Finally, the theme of change supported the components of Shier's empowerment theory with personal evidence. The children's descriptions about the positive changes

they saw in their attitudes or behaviors and their desire to do more to help others further indicated strong perceptions of empowerment.

Spirituality

Spirituality was measured by the fourth research question which asked: In what ways do select ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, express their spirituality through engaging in community-based service projects according to the following categories: awareness sensing, mystery sensing and value sensing (Hay and Nye 2006, 65)? Awareness sensing, a child's alertness to spiritual or metacognitive matters, was identified primarily through the religious language of the children as they spoke about God's character—helping, providing, creating, and being present with them or seeing them. Children also described ways they related to God or responded to God's character or activity, particularly expressing a desire to please God, to show love to God, and engage in spiritual activities like prayer. While many of the children's comments about God were made in response to specific questions, I was surprised by the number of times the children offered spiritual thoughts, comments, and opinions about God or spirituality without being asked, demonstrating a more innate awareness of God or metaphysical matters, such as Ashot's (age 11) project idea, "Let's draw sparrows on the wall of the church because God takes care of them as well."

The category of mystery sensing, demonstrating awe and wonder, was not noted as often as other categories of spirituality, but when children spoke of dreams, wishes or things beyond their comprehension, it opened a window into their inner being. One example was Edgar (age 9), who commented after his visit, "Maybe the grandmother

prayed, I don't know about what, and we went." His speculating if their visit was an answer to her prayer demonstrated a sense of transcendence—God moving in ways people do not understand. The mystery-sensing comments revealed deep thinking and wondering about the world which is worthy of attention.

Value sensing, the third category, refers to emotions that measure what is of value, causing delight or despair or giving meaning (Hay and Nye 2006, 74). In keeping in line with Nye's (1998, 265) research, language related to children's values and morals in this study was noted as a potential access point to spiritual awareness. The children demonstrated value sensing through expressing the values of compassion, kindness, goodness, generosity, gratitude, and love, sometimes as values that motivated them and more commonly as resulting values, which was significant. For example, they described how providing food for and visiting needy families awakened or deepened feelings of compassion and kindness to others in need or caused them to reflect more on what they had, resulting in deeper gratitude. The implementation of the community service projects changed them. Moreover, some children saw God at work in the expression of those values or in what they learned as they helped others, tying the values more closely with their spirituality. These findings support Donnelly et al. (2006, 246), who assert that even when not connected to a faith community, young people's service in the community may help to create deeper spirituality through such things as a growing awareness of the social inequities, a greater feeling of empathy for those they serve, and a transcendence of self that leads to moral and ethical reflection.

Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality

The final research question asked: What is the evidence of interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when select ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia, engage in community-based service projects? All three themes—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—were shaped by doing community service projects, and the children in this research study expressed their attitudes, reactions, and learning about helping/service in the context of four key relationships: helping others, helping the environment, helping themselves, and helping with God. These four relationships created a foundation for examining how the three themes relate to one another. Whether the children spoke of helping others, helping the environment, helping themselves or helping with God, active participation, true empowerment, and spiritual awareness were all present.

Zeldin et al. (2014, 337) point out that research consistently links participation with the development of empowerment, and the findings in this study support that relationship. In this study, the children who actively participated (having a voice and actively involved) through planning and implementing a community project described their growth in capabilities through knowledge and skill development. They embraced the opportunity given to them to serve the community, recognizing the importance of their leaders' support in guiding, redirecting, encouraging and giving them practical help as they planned and implemented the project. The attitudes that led to or resulted from empowerment in this study—happiness, eagerness, initiative, confidence, responsibility and accomplishment—were expressed by the children through participating in word and

action. Clearly empowerment and participation were interrelated. But how did spirituality relate to both of them?

In order to explore and identify further interrelationships between the three themes, this study looked through the lens of different semantic relationships used in qualitative research suggested by Spradley (1979, 111). The *cause-effect* relationship was identified several times and in different directions, illustrating there is no simple cause-effect relationship between participation, empowerment, and spirituality. At times each one appeared to serve as a catalyst for the others, and each one was influenced by the others when seen in the context of service/helping. Exploration of the *rationale* relationship showed it is not possible to conclude that one theme consistently served as the rationale for the others. At times, the rationale for activities appeared to come from the children's spirituality, while at other times it was from the participatory activity in which they were involved or their sense of empowerment. The *means-end* and *attribution* relationships for the three themes were seen to be multi-directional as well. The four relational examples demonstrate that while there certainly are interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when children engage in community-based service projects, there is no simple way to describe those relationships. All three themes co-exist, at times acting independently of one another but at other times woven together. The children's spirituality is a part of their participation and empowerment when serving in the community. Research done by Donnelly et al. (2006, 248) suggests that there is a bidirectional influence of spirituality and civic engagement, but they recognize that it is a relationship that has not been fully explored by research. The data from this study builds

upon their findings, contributing to and strengthening research connecting spirituality to child participation and empowerment.



Figure 20: A Summary of the Interrelationships of Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality

A summary of the interrelationships of the three themes explored by the research—participation, empowerment, and spirituality—is visualized in Figure 20. At the center of the diagram is the core concept of service or helping. As the participants of the study engaged in community-based service projects, they identified four domains of helping: helping others, themselves, the environment, and helping with God.

Circling the core concept of helping are the three themes on which this study focused: participation, empowerment, and spirituality. Each theme has a bidirectional arrow, indicating that its relationship with the other themes can flow in either direction or co-exist. Participation, empowerment, and spirituality are interrelated.

Outside the circle of the three interrelated themes, the categories and codes for each theme are identified. Participation looks at both being given a voice and being actively involved at every stage of the process. Empowerment, using Shier's (2015, 2017) framework, identifies the capabilities developed, the conditions assisting the children (through leader support), and the attitudes and self-esteem expressed. Additionally, the category of change in children's in children's behaviors and attitudes adds strength to the indicators of empowerment. Spirituality, based on the categories identified by Hay and Nye (2006), focuses on children's awareness sensing as they describe their understanding of God, mystery sensing as they express dreams and wishes, and value sensing that was expressed.

The interrelationships of participation, empowerment, and spirituality when children engage in community-based service projects have many practical implications.

Recommendations for Practice

Several recommendations for practice arise from the results of this research study, including recommendations for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Centers, for faith communities, for educators and schools, and for other NGOs and FBOs working with child participation and empowerment.

Recommendations for Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDCs

The Child Development Center (CDC) in this study found it very easy to incorporate the child-led project-planning process into their existing schedule. While it took more time for the children to choose and plan the project than it would have for leaders to plan it for them, the growth and change in the children's attitudes, skills and perspectives added value to the holistic ministry outcomes of the CDCs, which include education, gaining social skills and developing spiritually. The children in the study were eager to share their perspectives, evidenced by Sam (age 13) who commented, "Before coming, I had many thoughts that I wanted to say, but when there was no project, I couldn't express the thoughts that I had, but now I had the opportunity to share my thoughts." His confession showed his desire to have his voice and ideas be heard, which is an essential element of meaningful child participation (Lansdown 2018, 13), but lacking the opportunity to do so. I would recommend that CDCs consider incorporating child-led service projects as part of their holistic programming because of the range of skills, attitudes, and values children learn.

Since the process of guiding the children in planning a service project was new to the Kids club leaders, the timeline for completing the process was unknown. In addition,

the process was introduced mid-year, when the program schedule was already in place. A second recommendation for CDCs would be to include planning for such projects in advance (at the beginning of the program year) to determine the best time of year to complete it, the number of weeks it will involve, etc. Then the project will be a clear part of the plan for the CDC.

The leader who facilitated the project-planning process for the children in this study did an excellent job, but she expressed challenges in knowing how much or little to support or intervene with the children's ideas. I would recommend that CDCs create specific guidelines for leaders facilitating the planning processes, so they understand in advance how much to shape the children's ideas, particularly when helping them determine the feasibility of a particular idea. General guidelines for child participation are suggested in Appendix P. Additionally, I recommend that CDC leaders receive training in how to give children more autonomy in the planning process. For example, leaders could allow the children to generate the questions they think they need to answer as part of their plan. Then the adult can guide them to think of questions they have not considered. Such a process would empower the children much more. It is also possible that more decisions can be made collaboratively, such as having a few children work with a leader to identify families to visit. Leaders could even train some children to lead the brainstorming and planning exercises. Several NGOs that do participatory action research with children, such as Child-to-Child (Gibbs, Mann, and Mathers 2002), Child Workers in Asia (CWA n.d.), Christian Children's Fund (O'Kane and Dolan 2008), Save the Children (Lansdown and O'Kane 2014; Laws and Mann 2004), Tearfund (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004), UNICEF (Lansdown 2018), and World Vision (Tao-Joiner 2022) have excellent

resources for equipping and resourcing staff to facilitate child participation. Appendix Q includes a general outline for training staff in facilitating child participation.

I would also recommend that CDCs be intentional to tie community service projects to specific problems in the community—this is a problem that we want to help solve and this is how we do it. The children in this study expressed awareness of the issues and problems in their community, and the projects they chose for this study were excellent, but the children did not seem to make a strong connection between the problems and needs they had identified and the community service project they actually completed. Moreover, the children in this study grew more creative in their thinking and ideas the longer they talked about their projects. By being given a voice and having their responses affirmed, the children reflected more deeply on the issues at hand and how they might address it. Given more time, they could consider broader societal impact or more in-depth projects.

The local CDC included financial support for the projects in its budget, so financial expenses did not factor into the children's plans and were never mentioned as they discussed what they would do. However, that may not always be the case for every CDC. Therefore, I recommend that financial considerations be part of the planning process. Is the service project included in the CDC budget? What materials or supplies might need to be purchased to complete the project? Is transportation required? Do leaders pay from their own pocket? Is it appropriate to ask families to provide supplies or materials? Should children consider fund-raising themselves to cover expenses as part of the plan? While children may be excited to do a community service project, they may need guidance to see the financial implications of it.

The attendance and level of participation in the implementation step of the project in this study affirms research that has found when children and youth participate in meaningful civic engagement or social action, they experience empowerment as change agents (Cargo et al. 2003; Eccles and Gootman 2002; Jennings et al. 2006; Lerner 2005; Royce 2009; Shier 2015; Zimmerman 2000; Zimmerman et al. 2018). I recommend that any project chosen be something that is meaningful to the children. It is also important to have adequate supervision for the project and ensure all leaders understand the project and their roles so they do not take over doing things children can do themselves, whether during the selection, planning, or implementation of the project. If implementing the project involves a skill, time must be allowed to help the children learn and practice the skill. If a project is larger and requires weeks or months to complete, CDCs might consider planning in stages so there are short-term successes and the children remain interested and engaged.

The children involved in this study did their evaluation the same day as their project implementation, which gave excellent feedback on the implementation but did not give them much time for reflection on the entire project process. Giving the children a combination of written and spoken questions allowed them to express themselves in different ways, particularly enabling those who were quieter. It is important that CDCs consider different ways of garnering feedback from children. At the same time, if children are given more time to debrief and evaluate with guidance from their leaders, they may reflect more on addressing the challenges they experienced throughout the entire project process to make future projects better or offer plans and suggestions for next steps, as suggested by Lansdown and O’Kane (2014, 24). Since this study did not

allow time to discuss next steps, I recommend that evaluation be done in creative ways soon after the project is completed, but include time to help the children think through their own next steps—what they should do with what they have learned. Then leaders can use their feedback to build upon their learning for future possibilities.

The children in this study did not usually articulate their thoughts about God or their relationship with God voluntarily, but when questioned, they shared insights about who God was, how God saw them, and how they worked together with God. The leaders' comments that children may not connect the project to their spirituality does not reflect the reality expressed by the children. Therefore, I recommend that CDC leaders look at every opportunity to align community service projects with the spirituality of children. Service projects tie easily into biblical teaching on generosity, compassion, and serving and can be great ways to help children see God working in and through them. In contexts where leaders must be careful about religious language, they can ask general spiritual questions. For CDCs that can openly talk about God, they may include prayer as part of the planning and action.

Child and youth engagement in community-service opportunities is seen to have positive developmental outcomes and, therefore, to be an important part of healthy development (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006, 2; Scales and Benson 2005, 339). The children in this study were ready to serve more when they finished this project. Fueling that fire will help them to grow spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, and socially. Such holistic development will benefit the children, their families, and the community, as was demonstrated by the children in this study.

Recommendations for Faith Communities

While this study was based in a Christian context, recommendations can be made for many faith communities—churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.—as they work with the children of their faith community. Typically, programs and program content designed for the children in faith communities spend much of their time focusing on learning about God (or other deities), the teachings of the Bible (or other sacred texts) or the beliefs of their faith tradition, but they may not give opportunities for children to test their beliefs and appropriate those truths into their personal faith. Yet, particularly for children, a vital component of spiritual development is learning by doing (McConnell 2007, 249). Strommen and Hardel's (2000, 95) research in a Christian context found that involvement in service has proven to be a better predictor of faith maturity than participation in Sunday school or worship services. I would recommend that faith communities take a look at ways of shaping the faith of their children beyond knowledge to application, and to move beyond the walls of their faith community to serve in the broader community. The findings of this study showed that the children took what they knew about God and applied it to a real-life situation (Carr 2008, 206)—their project—even when it was not designed specifically as a “faith-based” project.

However, as this study has shown, faith communities can take a step further and allow children to fully participate in matters of the faith community or the broader community, giving them a voice in identifying problems and issues, choosing what they can do to address those problems, designing plans of action and then implementing those plans. Too often, even when churches (or other faith communities) do community service projects, the projects are decided upon by program leaders or other adults, and the

children are informed or invited to get involved. Yet when children have the opportunity to have a voice, are given opportunities to act, and have a supportive context to meet a need themselves, their sense of empowerment grows in the context of their spiritual growth. Leaders and adults should be encouraged to take a risk and give children the chance to put their faith into action, providing opportunities, responsibilities and support (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004, 14).

Segura-April (2017, 387-388) has suggested several guidelines to help churches develop their own policies and practices. These guidelines, adapted from World Vision and Save the Children, can also be applied to other faith communities. Child participation should:

- Have a continuous process of educating all church members, including children and families, about the value of child participation.
- Include listening to children and their ideas with respect and considering them in decisions that affect them both directly and indirectly within the family and church.
- Be meaningful and sustainable, contributing to the child's well-being, empowering the child to be active and responsible in the family, church, and community, according to the child's age, maturity, gender, religion, differing abilities, and context.
- Be relevant to the daily life and concerns of children and their families.
- Be voluntary; children choose whether they want to participate. It must never be tokenistic or manipulative. Children and parents should give informed consent for all activities.
- Be ethical, transparent, honest, and accountable.
- Promote the safety and protection of children at all times. Child protection policies should be developed and followed at all times.
- Be done in a child-friendly, enabling environment and with age- and stage-appropriate methodologies, considering each child's evolving capacities.
- Strengthen relationships within the family, church, community, and society, leading to transformation.
- Provide equality of opportunity for all children and be accessible and non-discriminatory.
- Be led by staff and volunteers who have the capacity and training to facilitate it effectively, safely and competently. Include children in follow-up, monitoring, feedback, evaluation, and learning cycles to improve the quality of the participation.

As the above list demonstrates, faith communities can adapt processes and activities developed by NGOs and FBOs that successfully use child participation to guide the training of parents and program leaders to help children share ideas, plan and implement projects as part of their growth in faith. Children's Community Health Evangelism (CHE), Christian Children's Fund (O'Kane and Dolan 2008), Tearfund (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004), and World Vision (Tao-Joiner 2022) are faith-based organizations (FBOs) with excellent resources in child participation. With a general framework of participatory processes, faith communities can weave in the values and teachings of their faith so that children incorporate it experientially. Steers (2016, 213) notes that effective experiential learning, which happens when serving the community, will include encountering God and others, reflection, and agency to act within a supportive community, leading to transformation. Is that not what faith communities desire to see in their children?

Children in faith communities also need the opportunity to debrief their experiences with leaders or significant adults who can help them see meaningful connections to their faith. When this happens, their practical experience solidifies their faith in ways that a classroom can never do. This study found that the children had many spiritual observations, but they did not necessarily express them voluntarily. Questions from the research team helped them articulate spiritual thoughts related to serving. Many of their comments could have been elaborated upon through further conversations, opening doors to teachable moments to strengthen their beliefs. I recommend that parents or leaders working with children in faith communities take the time to have intentional conversations with the children before, during, and after they engage in their community-

based service, attending to their spiritual perspectives, questions and changes that may be articulated. The children may not always be able to articulate what they have experienced, so creative means of expression, such as drawing, also can be used.

Children are ready to make a difference in the world. Faith communities can shape their eagerness within a spiritual framework as they release children to serve.

Recommendations for Educators and Schools

The educational system is very familiar with service learning, a method of teaching using experiential learning outside the classroom. Students apply academic skills and knowledge to meet demonstrated needs in their community and then reflect on their experience, which fosters greater civic responsibility and transformation of perspective (Obasi 2008, 10, 41; Tobias 2013, 121, 127). When it includes social action and reflection, service learning becomes transformative and empowering (Obasi 2008, 53). Church or faith-specific schools, schools that are sympathetic to faith perspectives, and teachers of faith working in secular schools can utilize service learning as a tool to encourage children's participation and spirituality. Where appropriate, faith perspectives could be introduced in the planning stages of the learning experience as well as brought into the reflection. I recommend that teachers can be made aware of general definitions of spirituality, realizing that children are spiritual beings. Then, as teachers debrief the service learning with the children, include opportunities for the children to share spiritual experiences or observations during the course of the service learning in a non-judgmental setting.

Recommendations for NGOs and FBOs Involved in Child Participation and Empowerment

Many NGOs and FBOs working with children and youth understand the dynamics of child participation and empowerment and have developed excellent practices that encourage both participation and/or empowerment in young people (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern 2013; Cahill and Dadvand 2018; Laws and Mann 2004; Ledford et al. 2013; Lerner 2005; Rathbone et al. 2018; Shier 2015; Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004; Wong, Zimmerman and Parker 2010; Zimmerman et al. 2018). Some of the above programs and models include discussions on the development of values, but children's spiritual lives or development are rarely mentioned. Based on the findings of this study, I would recommend that these organizations, whether they are faith-based or not, include opportunities for children to express their spirituality as part of their participatory activities or empowerment when they are involved in community-based service. It does not have to be couched in religious language, but children's awareness of metacognitive realities, their awe and wonder, and their sense of right and wrong, good and evil should be encouraged when it is noticed. Children are whole beings, and their spirituality is an innate part of their being. This study showed that spirituality was interrelated to children's participation and empowerment. Staff leading children can be trained in basic child spirituality, not necessarily to teach the children, but to encourage it when it presents itself.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this research study, recommendations for further research include the following:

1. The data for this study was gathered solely through qualitative methods. Quantitative research could build on the qualitative data to indicate growth or change in any of the three key themes of the study: participation, empowerment, and spirituality. Existing questionnaires that could be used include the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (Fisher 2010), a twenty-item instrument used to measure spiritual well-being in four different domains—personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental—and the Positive Youth Development (PYD) Student Questionnaire (Lerner et al. 2005; Lerner, Phelps and Lerner 2008), which measures five Cs: character, competence, caring, connection, and confidence. Questionnaires could be administered before a group went through the project-planning process and then again after the process was completed to quantitatively measure changes in attitudes or abilities. Thus mixed-method research could strengthen the validity and reliability of the data.
2. This case study was done in the context of one Church of the Nazarene CDC in Yerevan, Armenia. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all children involved in CDCs in Armenia or in other countries. Replication of the study in other CDCs—in Armenia, in West Asia, or beyond—could corroborate or build on the understanding gained from this study.
3. This study was done in a cultural context that is predominantly Christian in worldview. Further research could be done by replicating the study in a context that is not Christian or in a children’s program that is not being run from a Christian perspective and comparing the results to what was found in this study.

4. This study captured children's responses to planning and implementing a specific project. Longitudinal research could measure the longer-term impact of the community-based service projects, particularly on the development of empowerment and spirituality of children. The children in the study could be interviewed a second time or third time one month, six months, or a year later to see if there is a lasting impact on their skills, knowledge, attitudes, etc.
5. Longitudinal research could also include children's involvement in bigger or more significant community projects that would take a more significant period of time to complete. What might children be able to do over the course of a year? two or three years? Research could monitor what they are doing throughout the process to see what kind of lasting impact is felt on the children, the Kids Club, and the community.
6. The children in this study conducted two different community-based service projects. A comparative study could be done with two different groups of children doing the same project, enabling researchers to compare results between the two relating to participation, empowerment skills and attitudes, spiritual awareness, and possibly even demographic trends.
7. Further research is recommended for younger children. What happens when children from 6-9 years of age are allowed the same opportunity to design, implement, and evaluate a community-based service project? How do participation, empowerment, and spirituality interrelate in their experiences?

APPENDIX A

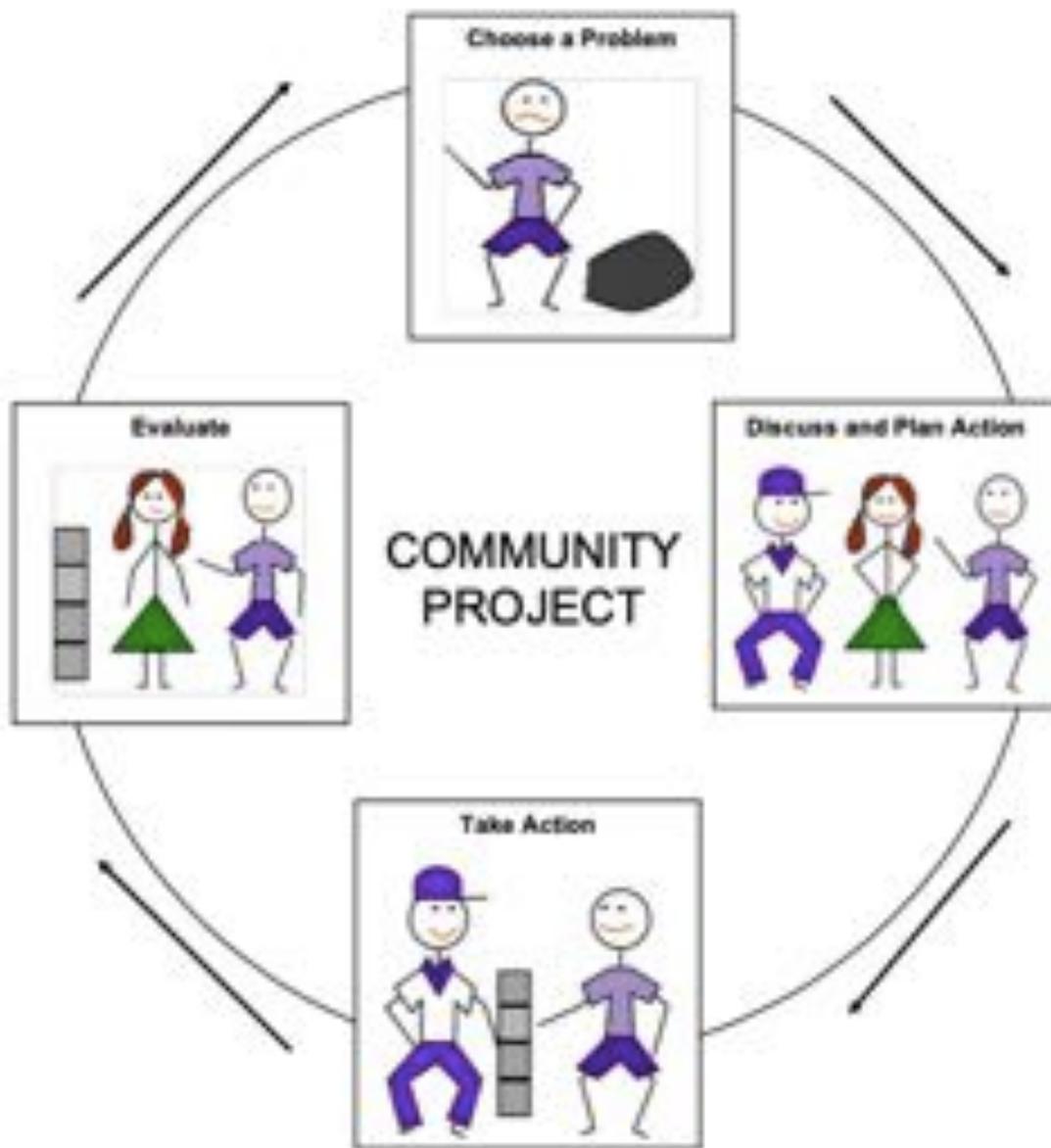
LOCATION MAP OF YEREVAN, ARMENIA



Red arrow shows the location of Yerevan, Armenia (Worldometer n.d.)

APPENDIX B

PROCESS FOR DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE COMMUNITY PROJECT



Adapted from Save the Children (Lansdown and O’Kane 2014, 24)

APPENDIX C

FIELD OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Date and Time of the Observation: _____

Place: _____

Observer: _____

The following are some of the things I will observe during the field research:

1. Setting: What is the physical environment or context?
2. Participants: Who is in the scene, how many people, and their roles?
3. Verbal: Who speaks and for how long? What is the tone of voice?
4. Behavior: What is going on? How do people interact with the activity and with one another? Is anyone not engaged?
5. Non-verbal: What non-verbal cues do respondents reveal through expressions or body language?
6. Unique: What stands out as different or unexpected?
7. Reflexivity: My feelings while observing?

Note: I will pay attention to elements that particularly relate to the research questions:

Empowerment:

- Development of capabilities and knowledge
- Creation of conditions and opportunities for empowerment
- Personal attitudes and self esteem

Spirituality:

- Awareness sensing (alertness to spiritual, metacognitive matters)
- Mystery sensing (wonder, awe and imagination)
- Value sensing (delight, despair, goodness, meaning)

Observation Notes:

APPENDIX D

PROTOCOL FOR CHILDREN'S FOCUS GROUPS

Objective:

To understand the perspectives and feelings of selected ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending NCM Kids Clubs who engaged in community-based service projects with regards to their participation, empowerment, and spirituality.

Protocol:

Before the focus groups occur, co-researchers will meet with the researcher for training, clarifying objectives, and practicing the activities and questions.

Introductory Script:

Greet everyone as they enter and ask how they are doing. My name is ____ and my assistant is _____. You also know Sheryl (researcher) and _____ (translator). Thank you for saying yes to being a part of this group discussion. Sheryl wants us to talk with you because we are interested in finding out more about your feelings, your thoughts, and your experiences of planning and doing your community project. We would really like to hear what you think today. Is that OK?

We want to be sure that we remember what you say, so we would like to record our conversation. Would that be OK? (Be sure to have agreement from all children.) You might see us making some notes to help us remember what you say, too. However, no one else is going to listen to what you say or read the notes. In fact, Sheryl will keep them locked on her computer so they are safe. Is that OK, too? We also ask that each of you promise not to talk about what other children say after we finish talking today.

After we hear from all the children who did the projects, Sheryl will write a report to help other people understand what children think about serving in the community and how it changes them. However, we will never say your real names when we talk about what you have told us. You will have a chance to choose a different name for Sheryl to use instead of your own. For example, my name is _____, but I could have Sheryl call me "Susan" in her report.

Do any of you have questions before we begin? (Turn on the recorder here if permitted.)

Ground Rules:

We have a few rules to remember for our group.

- First, there are no right or wrong answers! Isn't that great? We just want to hear what you think.
- Second, you do not have to speak in any particular order. That means a different person can speak first for each question.

- Third, there might be a question for which you do not have an answer. That's OK. Let someone else answer. And if you are not comfortable answering a question, you do not have to answer it.
- Fourth, let other children speak, too. I know that some of you like to talk more than others, but don't forget to give others a chance.
- Last, let's remember that only one person speaks at a time so that we can hear what everyone thinks.

Warm-up activity: (3-4 minutes maximum)

Give each child a folded piece of paper to make a name card.

We are going to start with a little activity. We want you to write your name on the card and put the card in front of you. This will help my assistant know your names because she doesn't know all of you. Beside your name I want you to draw an emoji showing how you feel about the service project your group has just done. When you are finished, if you have a different name that you would like Sheryl to call you in her report, you can write it on the inside of your card so others don't see it. When you're finished, you can put your pens/markers back in the container.

Focus Group Questions:

(Lay the 4 pictures of the steps of the project process on the table for the children to see.)

Over the past 6 weeks you have been involved in planning and doing a project.

Picture #1 – you started by talking about some of the problems in the community, thought of some projects you could do to meet those needs, and then chose a project.

Picture #2 – Then you made a plan of how you would do the project to meet the need.

Picture #3 – Finally you got to do the serving project!

Picture #4 – You may not have done much evaluating of your project yet, but we will do a bit of that today.

1. How did you feel when your leaders told you about choosing and doing your own service project?
2. What did you like about the project your group chose?
3. What didn't you like about the project?
4. Which parts of the project worked well?
5. Thinking back, if you could change anything about the project, what would you change?
6. Think about all the steps you took planning and implementing the project. What did your leaders say or do that helped you with the project?
7. Did they say or do anything that was unhelpful?
8. Do you think it is important to serve others in the community? Why or why not?
9. Did anything happen while planning or doing the project that reminded you of God? (Please explain.)
10. Did anything surprise you while doing the project? If so, what?
11. What changes have you seen in yourself as a result of doing the project? (It could be something you learned or did for the first time or the way you feel.)
12. How is the community different because of what your group has done?

Head, Heart, Feet (closing activity)

Give each participant four small pieces of paper—one in the shape of a head, one in the shape of a heart, one in the shape of feet, and one in the shape of a cloud. Have them write:

- (Head) What have you learned from this project?
- (Heart) How have your feelings or attitudes changed as a result of this project?
- (Feet) What do you want to do now that you have finished the project?
- (Cloud) What have you learned about God or what God thinks of you as a result of your project?

When they finish, have them tape their pieces of paper on a large drawing of a person.

Thank you for talking to us today. We really liked hearing what you thought. Next week Sheryl may ask some of you to do an individual interview just to hear more about what you think.

Provide a snack for the participants at the end of the focus-group discussion. Collect the name cards before children leave to have a record of their names and pseudonyms.

APPENDIX E

PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

Objective:

To understand in more depth the perspectives and feelings of selected ten- to thirteen-year-old children who attend Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Kids Clubs and who engage in community-based service projects in regards to their participation, empowerment, and spirituality.

Protocol:

Before the interviews occur, co-researchers will meet with the researcher for training, to clarify objectives and to practice conducting the interviews. Confirm that each child has informed consent from parents and that each child has given personal assent. Also give children the option to have someone (a friend or family member) be with them during the interview if that would make them feel more comfortable.

Introductory Script:

My name is _____. You also know Sheryl (researcher) and _____ (translator). We wanted to talk with you because we are interested in finding out more about what children think and feel when they have the opportunity to plan and do a serving project in the community. We would really like to hear what you think today. Is that OK? I want to be sure that we remember what you tell me, so I would like to record our conversation. Would that be OK? (Be sure to have agreement.) You might see Sheryl making some notes to help us remember what you say, too. However, no one else is going to listen to what you say or read the notes. In fact, Sheryl will keep them locked away on her computer so they are safe. Is that OK too?

(To say if they have a friend with them.) Welcome to your friend as well. Thank you for coming to support your friend today. As I ask them questions, I just want to remind you to let them answer the questions. I will give you a chance to talk at the end of the interview.

We are interviewing some of the other kids club children who participated in the service project as well, and after we hear what all of you have to say, Sheryl will write a report to help adults understand what children think about serving in the community and how it changes them. She will never say your real name when she talks about what you have told me. Did you choose a different name when we had our group discussion? If so, what was it? If not, would you like to choose a name now? (Let the child suggest a name if they would like.) Do you have any questions for me before we start? (Start recording if given permission.)

Introduction:

Ask: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? For example, how old are you? What grade are you in school? Tell me about your family/brothers/sisters? What do you like to do when you have free time?

Warm up activity:

Give the child a sheet of drawing paper folded in half and a variety of pencils and markers. Explain: "I would like you to draw two pictures on this paper. The first picture is a picture of yourself before you did the community serving project. The second is a picture of you today. You can include other people, places or objects in your picture as well." After the child has finished the picture, say, "Please tell me about your pictures." Ask clarifying questions as needed.

Semi-structured Interview Questions:

Say: Now I would like to ask you some other questions. Remember, if you do not feel comfortable with answering a question, you do not have to do so. That's OK. And if you do not understand something, you can ask me about it. The good news is, there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to hear what you think.

Interview Questions:

1. Think about your group's community serving project. How did you feel when you learned about doing the project? Why did you feel that way?
2. What did you like best about the project your group chose?
3. What did you not like about the project?
4. (Give the child the paper showing the 4 steps in the community project process – see below.) Now I'd like you to think about your involvement in each step of the process of planning and doing the community project.
 - a) Picture #1 – Choosing a problem: your group talked about some of the problems in the community, thought of some projects you could do to meet those needs, and then chose a project.
 - b) Picture #2 – Discussing and planning action: your group made a plan of how you would do the project to meet the need.
 - c) Picture #3 – Taking action: you did the serving project!
 - d) Picture #4 – Evaluating: your group talked about what went well or what could be done differently.

For each of these 4 steps, think about how much you were involved. (Give the child 4 stickers.) I would like you to put a sticker on each picture to show how much you were involved in each step.

- A sticker in the center of the picture shows you were very active.
- A sticker on the edge of the picture shows you were somewhat active.
- A sticker outside the picture shows you were not active.

After the child puts the stickers on the paper, ask them to share why they put the stickers in the spots they chose. Ask about their feelings during the steps as well.

5. Which parts of the project were easy for you? Why?
6. Which parts were difficult or you wish could be done differently? What would you have done differently?

7. Did Anna say or do anything that helped you during the planning of the project?
8. Did Anna or your leaders say or do anything that helped you while you were implementing the project? (Pause to check how the participant is doing. Do they need a break?)
9. How does being involved in helping others through serving projects make you feel? Why?
10. Did your belief in God influence what you thought about the project or how you did the project? If so, how?
11. Do you think God liked your project? Why/why not?
12. Where did you see God at work during the project?
13. What new skills and knowledge did you learn doing this project?
14. What have you learned about yourself?
15. Would you like to tell me anything else?

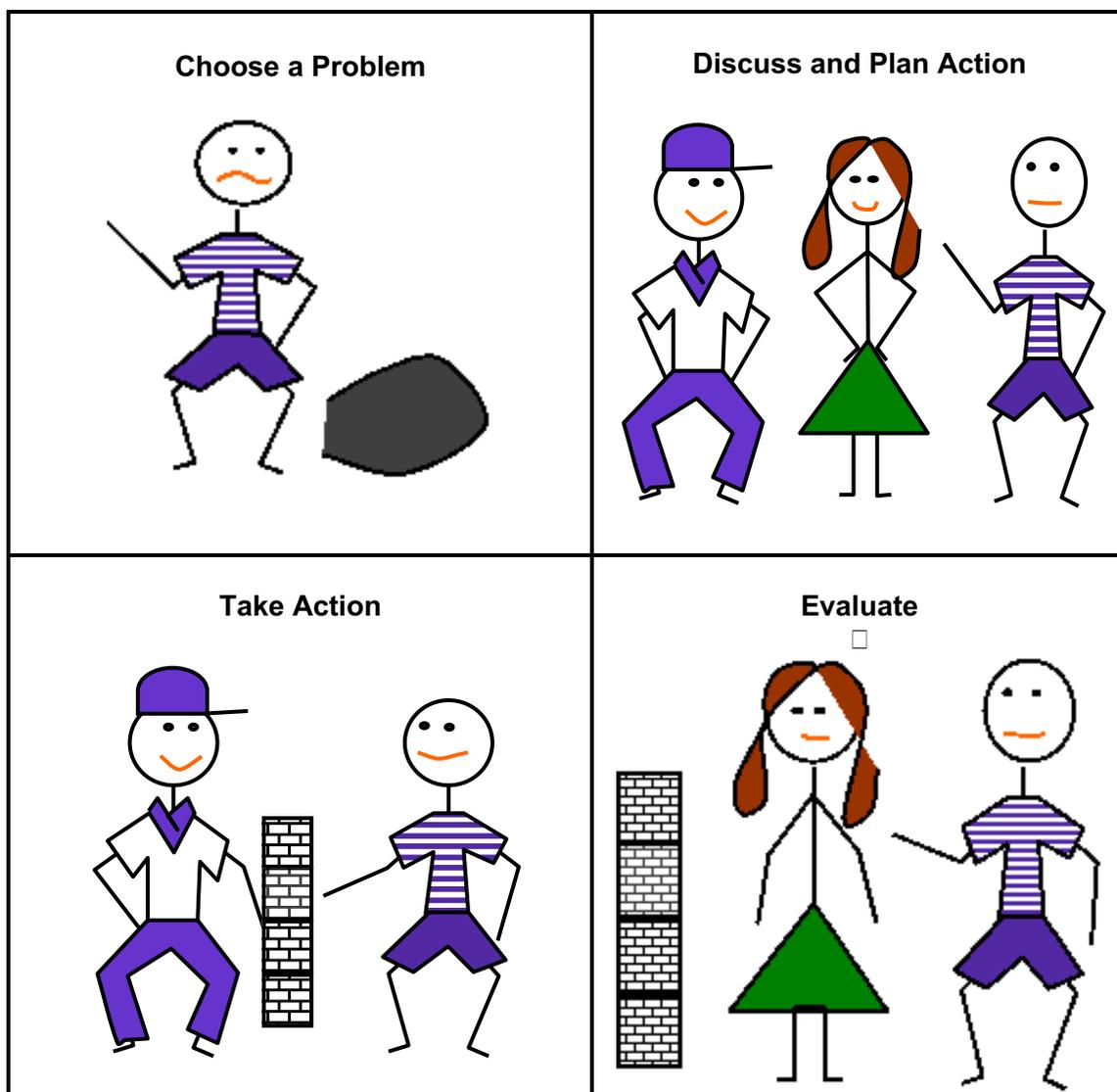
(To say if a friend is with the child.) Does your friend have anything they would like to add?

Thank you so much for talking to us today. We really liked hearing what you think about participating in the community project and how it has affected you. If you or your parents have any other questions, you can talk to me or Sheryl.

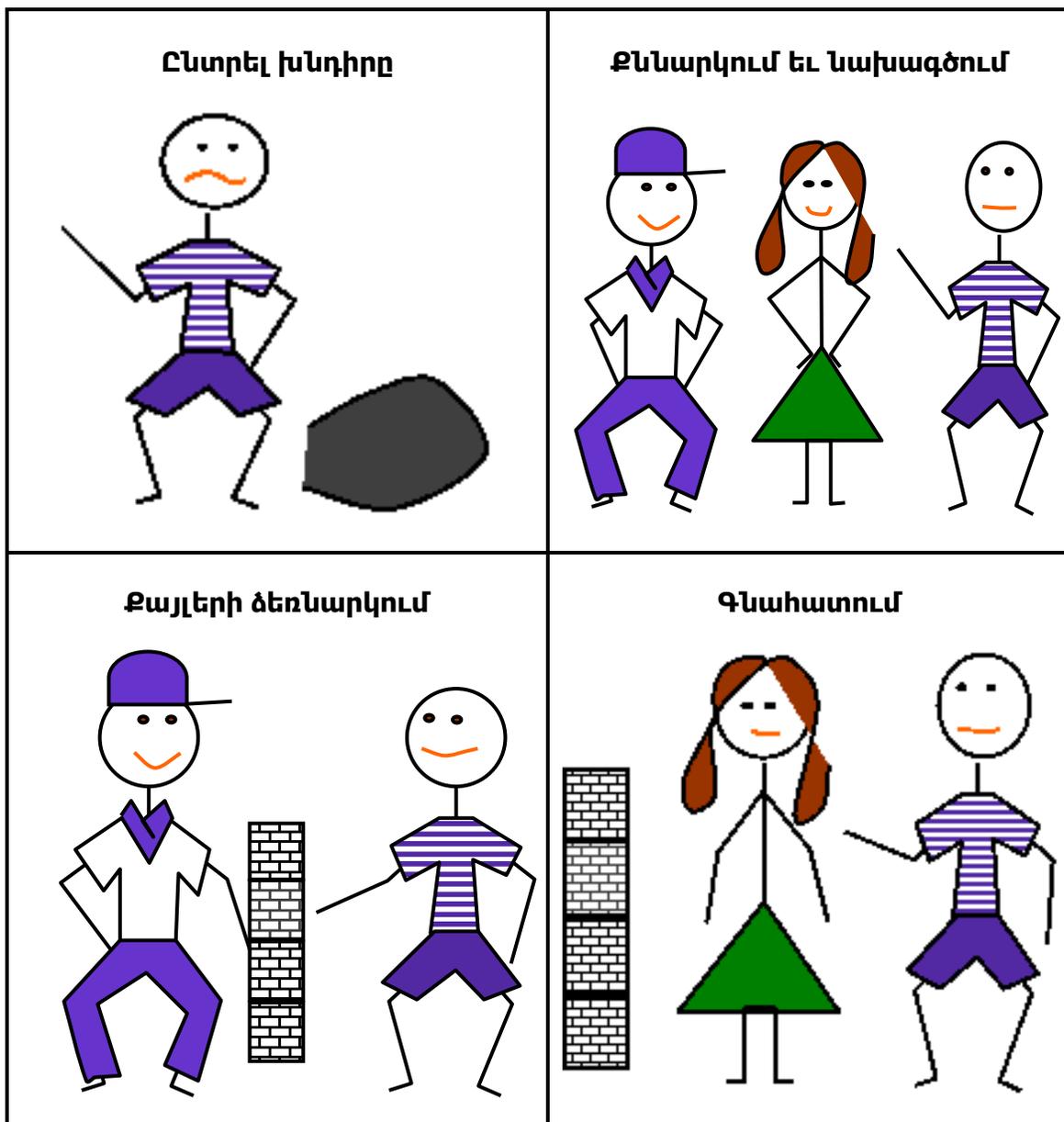
Ask the child if they would like to keep the picture they drew. If they say yes, ask permission to take a photo of it.

Give both children a candy bar and small gift before they leave to thank them for their participation.

CHILDREN'S COMMUNITY PROJECTS HANDOUT
Adapted from Save the Children (Lansdown and O'Kane 2014, 24)



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APPENDIX F

PROTOCOL FOR CDC LEADER FOCUS GROUP

Objective:

To explore the participation, empowerment, and spirituality of ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Kids Clubs in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects from the perspective of those who worked with the children.

Protocol:

Provide refreshments for the participants at the beginning of the focus-group discussion. Welcome everyone and thank them for giving their time and permission to participate in the focus group. Then briefly explain the purpose of the focus-group discussion. Explain that the focus-group discussion will be audio-recorded to help capture all that is said. Despite being recorded, all data collected are strictly confidential, and the names of participants will not be used in any reporting of this study. Ask that participants refrain from discussing the comments of other group members outside the focus group. (Turn on the recorder here.)

Ground rules

- There are no right or wrong answers.
- Participants do not have to speak in any particular order, nor does each person need to respond to every question.
- Be mindful of allowing all participants to speak.

Focus-Group Questions:

Do a short warm-up activity/question. Then go through the following questions in a semi-structured discussion.

1. Have you changed as a result of being a part of the community project? If so, in what ways?
2. (Show the community-project process diagram.) What parts of the process were most enjoyable for you? What parts were most difficult?
3. Have you noticed any changes in the children from the time they started the project until they completed it? How have you seen them change?
4. What did you hear the children say or what attitudes did they express during the process?
5. What skills, knowledge, and competencies did you see children developing?
6. In what ways did you support the children in the process?
7. Have you observed anything about the spirituality of the children or hear them talking about spiritual things while doing the community project? Please explain.
8. What recommendations or suggestions do you have from this process for future projects?

APPENDIX G

RESEARCH ASSISTANT AND TRANSLATOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, _____, agree to maintain the confidentiality of all information about any of the research participants who are a part of the research study of the Church of the Nazarene Child Development Centers, engaged in by Sheryl Grunwald, the Researcher, of The Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

I agree to:

1. Secure the confidentiality of all the research information shared with me by not discussing or sharing the content of interviews, questionnaires, observations, or focus groups in any form with anyone other than the researcher.
2. Maintain security of all the research data at any time and not repeat what a participant has said to anyone apart from the researcher.
3. Return all research data in any form to the researcher when I have completed my tasks.
4. Delete all research data regarding this research study in any form that is not returnable to the researcher.

I am aware that these measures are in place to protect the rights of the children and adults who are participating in the research study. Finally, I understand that if I violate this agreement of confidentiality, it may affect payment for my services as a Research Assistant or Translator.

I understand the above conditions of this research study, and I agree to these conditions without reservation.

Research Assistant/Translator Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

Witness Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX H

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Why are we doing this study?

A research study is a way to learn more about people. My name is Sheryl Grunwald. I am doing this research study with ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of the Church of the Nazarene Kids Clubs in Yerevan. I want to see what happens when they have an opportunity to plan a community serving project to meet a community need. I especially want to see how they feel about being given a voice to participate in the planning, how empowered they feel, and how their spirituality is part of what they do.

Why am I being asked to be a research assistant for the study?

Including youth as research assistants recognizes that youth have much to offer. You can help gather information that is difficult for an adult to get from children. You also will gain skills and knowledge that will help you in the future. The CDC leaders believe in you and have recommended you for this role.

What if I have questions?

You can ask questions at any time if there is something you do not understand.

If I say yes to be a research assistant for the research study, what will happen?

If you agree to be part of this study, you must attend two training sessions to prepare you for your role. Your responsibilities include doing field observations and helping to conduct interviews and focus group discussions with the children. You also must sign a confidentiality agreement, which means you will not talk about anything children say to you to people outside the research study. Most of the research activities will be done during the regular CDC program times. The researcher promises to support and guide research assistants through every step in the research process.

What happens after the study?

We want to keep you safe during and after the study. When we are finished, we will write a report about what we learned, but we will never use your real name.

If you decide you want to be in this study, please print/write your name below.

Signature:

Someone has explained the research study to me. I have been able to ask questions so that I understand what my involvement in the study would be. I agree to voluntarily participate as a research assistant in the research study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name: _____

APPENDIX J

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER FOR PARENTS OF PARTICIPANTS

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Sheryl Grunwald, and I am a student at the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary doing research with children in Armenia. Whenever researchers study children, we talk to their parents or guardians and ask them for permission. Therefore, we are seeking your permission to have your child participate in this research study. We also will ask your child for their assent.

The purpose of this research study is to explore what happens when ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Kids Club have the opportunity to plan and implement community-based service projects. How does it relate to their spirituality and feelings of empowerment? The Kids Club leaders will lead children through a process of designing and implementing a service project to meet a need in the community. Following the completion of the community project, the children will meet with me in small groups to talk about their experiences. In addition, some of the children will be invited to participate in individual interviews to talk more in-depth about their experience.

Most of the research will be done during the regular Kids Club program time. The small-group discussion will take approximately one hour. If your child is selected to be individually interviewed, it will take an additional 30 minutes, approximately.

The small-group discussions and the interview with your child will be audio-recorded to help me remember what your child says, but the recordings will be kept confidential, and the identity of your child will remain anonymous to protect your child. Your child also has the option of having a friend or family member be present with him or her during the interview. Participating in this research study is voluntary. If, at any point, you or your child no longer wish to participate, we will allow them to stop.

You and your child are welcome to ask me any questions you may have about the research study. By signing the consent form below, you are saying you have read and understood the information about the research study, have had the opportunity to ask questions to confirm your understanding, and voluntarily give your child permission to participate in the research study.

Parent/Guardian Signature

I, the parent or guardian of _____, have received the information and understand the research study of Sheryl Grunwald. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and understand the answers. I consent to my child's participation in this research study and understand that their participation is voluntary.

Parent or Guardian Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX K

ASSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS (CHILDREN)

Why are we doing this study?

A research study is a way to learn more about people. My name is Sheryl Grunwald. I am doing this research study with ten- to thirteen-year-old children who are part of Kids Clubs in Yerevan, Armenia. I want to see what happens when you have an opportunity to plan a community-serving project to meet a need in your community. I especially want to see how empowered you feel and how you feel spiritually when serving in the community.

Why am I being asked to be in the research study?

We can learn a lot from listening to children. We are inviting you to be in the study because you are in the age group we want to study, and you are part of this Kids Club. We want to hear your thoughts and perspectives.

What if I have questions?

You can ask questions at any time if there is something you do not understand.

If I say yes to being in the research study, what will happen to me?

If you decide that you want to be part of this study, all the children in your age group will work together with your Kids Club leaders to choose a problem or need you see in the community. You will plan a service project to help meet that need. Then you will do the service project together. When the project is finished, we will meet for a small group discussion about your experience. In addition, some children may be interviewed by me and my research assistants. During the interview, you will be asked to draw two pictures.

Then we will ask you some questions. The interview will take about 30 minutes. If you give us permission, we will record the interview to help us remember everything you say. If you would feel more comfortable having a friend or family member with you during your interview, that will be OK.

Do I have to be in this study?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. After we begin the study, if you decide that you do not want to be in the study anymore, that is OK, too. Nobody will be angry or upset.

What happens after the study?

We want to keep you safe during and after the study. When we are finished, we will write a report about what we learned, but we will never use your real name.

Assent:

If you decide you want to be in this study, please print/write your name below.

Participant Signature:

Someone has explained the research study to me. I have been able to ask questions so that I understand what my involvement in the study would be, and I agree to voluntarily participate in the research study.

Signature of Student _____ Date _____

Please print your name here: _____

APPENDIX L

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL



Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary
Ortigas Avenue Extension, Kaytikling
Taytay 1920, Rizal, Philippines

NOTIFICATION OF REVIEW APPROVAL

August 5, 2022

Grunwald, Sheryl
sheryl.grunwald@apnts.edu.ph

Protocol Title: "THE INTERACTIONS OF PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT AND SPIRITUALITY IN ARMENIAN EARLY ADOLESCENTS INVOLVED IN COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICE PROJECTS: A MIXED-METHOD CASE STUDY."

Protocol#: AR-019
IRB Review Date: July 25, 2022
Effective Date: August 5, 2022
Expiration Date: August 5, 2023
Review Type: Expedited Review
Review Action: Approved

The IRB made the following determinations:

- **Waivers:** Waiver of informed consent documentation
- **Other Documentations:** All necessary attachments submitted
- **Risk Determination:** No greater than minimal risk

Please contact me at cingsian.thawn@apnts.edu.ph if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Miss Cing Sian Thawn
Director of Research
Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

APPENDIX M

LETTER OF PERMISSION
GLOBAL DIRECTOR OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT
NAZARENE COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES

Dear Carissa Rocha,

My name is Sheryl Grunwald, and I am a student pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Holistic Child Development at the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. To complete the requirements of my degree, I am conducting research on the topic “Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality in Armenian Early Adolescents involved in Community-Based Service Projects.”

The purpose of this research study is to explore the interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality of ten- to thirteen -year-old children attending Nazarene Kids Clubs in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. The CDC staff will be trained to lead the children through a process of designing and implementing a service project to meet a need in the community. The research will include field observations and focus groups with children 10-13 years old participating in the project. Following the completion of the project, I will conduct individual interviews with a number of the children. In addition, supplementary data will be gathered from focus-group discussions with program leaders.

Through the data gathered, I hope to gain a more complete picture of how engagement in community-based service projects relates to the participation, empowerment, and spirituality of children. The key research findings and recommendations will be presented to the Nazarene Child Development Department at the Global and Eurasia level.

I request the permission of the Child Development Department of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries to conduct this research, including training of staff, interviews, and focus-group discussions with participants of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia. I assure you that I will make every effort to ensure the protection and confidentiality of the participants in the research.

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely yours,
Sheryl Grunwald

APPENDIX N

LETTER OF PERMISSION
LOCAL DIRECTOR OF NAZARENE COMPASSIONATE MINISTRIES CDC
YEREVAN, ARMENIA

Dear Anna,

My name is Sheryl Grunwald, and I am a student pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in Holistic Child Development at the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. To complete the requirements of my degree, I am conducting research on the topic “Participation, Empowerment, and Spirituality in Armenian Early Adolescents involved in Community-Based Service Projects.”

The purpose of this research study is to explore the interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality of ten- to thirteen-year-old children attending Nazarene Kids Clubs in Yerevan, Armenia, who engage in community-based service projects. The CDC staff will be trained to lead the children through a process of designing and implementing a service project to meet a need in the community. The research will include field observations and focus groups with children 10-13 years old participating in the project. Following the completion of the project, I will conduct individual interviews with a number of the children. In addition, supplementary data will be gathered from focus-group discussions with program leaders.

Through the data gathered, I hope to gain a more complete picture of how engagement in community-based service projects relates to the participation, empowerment, and spirituality of children. The key research findings and recommendations will be presented to the Nazarene Child Development Department at the Global and Eurasia level.

I have requested permission from the leadership of the Child Development Department of Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Global to conduct this research project, and I have full support from them. Therefore, I request your permission to conduct this research, including training of staff, interviews, and focus-group discussions with participants of the Nazarene Compassionate Ministries CDC in Yerevan, Armenia. I assure you that I will make every effort to ensure the protection and confidentiality of the participants in the research.

Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Sincerely yours,
Sheryl Grunwald

APPENDIX O

CONSENT FORM FOR CDC FOCUS-GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Description: The purpose of this research study is to explore the interrelationships between participation, empowerment, and spirituality when ten- to thirteen-year-old children who attend Nazarene Compassionate Ministries Child Development Centers engage in community-based service projects. The CDC staff have been trained and have led the children through a process of designing and implementing a service project to meet a need in the community. In addition to information gathered from children's interviews, discussions, and questionnaires, data is being gathered through a focus-group discussion with program leaders and testimonies.

The focus-group facilitators commit to protect the confidentiality of all the information provided by not discussing or sharing the content of the focus group in any form with anyone other than the researcher. Participants' names will not be used in the dissemination of the data.

Signing this document means you have read the information, that you have had the opportunity to ask questions and understand the answers, and that you are willing to participate in this research study.

I, _____, have received the information and understand the research study of Sheryl Grunwald. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and understand the answers. I am willing to participate in this focus group and understand that my participation is voluntary.

Participant Signature: _____

Printed Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX P

GUIDELINES AND GOOD PRACTICES FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION

1. Child participation should be sincere and genuine, not tokenism.
2. Children should not be directly or indirectly forced, but willing to participate.
3. Children should feel free to say 'no' to participation, and not blamed for doing that.
4. Children should have self-confidence and learn how to speak out and trust each other.
5. Leaders should use appealing methods to encourage or invite participation from children, such as participatory or child-to-child methods.
6. Children should be involved in planning the activities.
7. Children and adults should work together in solidarity and friendship at all levels, without barriers and/or discrimination.
8. Adults can guide children to understand if ideas or decisions are not feasible.
9. Appropriate child protection procedures should be followed.
10. Children should be able to participate in all decision making.
11. Children should receive information that help them in their decision making.
12. Adults should support children through encouragement and practical materials when needed.

Adapted from Child Workers in Asia Task Force on Children's Participation (CWA. n.d., 63-64)

APPENDIX Q

OUTLINE FOR TRAINING STAFF IN FACILITATING CHILD PARTICIPATION

1. Sensitization: Why should children participate?
2. Defining participation and its importance
3. Creating an environment that enables children
4. Key skills of Participation
 - a. Communication skills and practice
 - b. Facilitation skills and practice
 - c. Methods to involve children
5. Challenges and constraints
6. Creating a plan of action

Adapted from Child Workers in Asia Task Force on Children's Participation (CWA. n.d., 91-93)

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

2016-2024	Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary PhD in Holistic Child Development GPA: 3.98	Manila, Philippines
1992-1995	Edmonton Baptist Seminary Master of Divinity GPA: 3.82 Faculty Scholarship (1993, 1994, 1995)	Edmonton, AB
1983-1987	University of Alberta Bachelor of Education in Elementary Education (With Distinction) Minor in Special Education	Edmonton, AB
1981-1983	North American Baptist College Diploma of Biblical Studies	Edmonton, AB

Employment and Vocational Ministry

2012-present	Action International Ministries Global Children's Ministry Training Director Responsibilities: coordinate and lead training trips to ACTION mission fields and other international ministry opportunities, teach and advocate in the field of children's ministry, develop and write training curriculum, provide pastoral care and support of global leaders, serve on Children in Crisis Task Force.	Calgary, AB
2021-2022	Southeastern University Adjunct Faculty Responsibilities: Design online course content and assignments for "Perspectives on Children's Ministry Context" for MA in International Family Ministry program. Teach the eight-week course	Lakeland, FL
2005-2018	Kidzana Ministries Global Training Director Responsibilities: coordinate and lead children's ministry training teams to international settings, teach and advocate in the field of children's ministry, conduct Global Training Institutes in North America, write curriculum and develop ministry resources.	Mukilteo, WA
2005-2006	Alliance University College (now Ambrose University) Adjunct Professor Responsibilities: teach core children's ministry courses, supervise children's ministry practicum students.	Calgary, AB

- 1995-2005 **Grace Baptist Church** Calgary, AB
 Associate Pastor: Children's Ministries
 Responsibilities: give oversight and coordination to all children's ministries, recruit, screen and train volunteers, evaluate programs and curriculum, develop leadership teams, pastoral care of children, families and volunteers, coordinate parents' small groups, occasional preaching.
- 1992-1995 **Greenfield Baptist Church** Edmonton, AB
 Director of Christian Education
 Responsibilities: oversee all church educational ministries, recruit and train volunteers, evaluate programs and curriculum.
- 1990-1992 **Tsu Christian School** Tsu, Japan
 Teacher, grades 4-7
 Responsibilities: plan lessons and teach children of missionaries, develop Bible curriculum, teach English to Japanese children and adults, lead English Bible studies for Japanese.
- 1987-1989 **Covenant Christian School** Leduc, AB
 Kindergarten and Resource Room Teacher
 Responsibilities: develop yearly plans and curriculum, teach, design individual education plans for special needs students, work with parent volunteers.

Other Global Mission Experience

- 2012-present **Global Children's Forum Leadership Experience**
 Curriculum Team Member, Global Leadership Team Member
 Responsibilities: design and develop a year-long program for emerging global leaders in children's ministry, teach as part of the teaching faculty, mentor regional teams.
- 2008-present **1for50 Movement**
 Global Master Trainer, Global Leadership Team Member
 Responsibilities: coordinate and facilitate international training events, vision-casting, train children's workers and equip national trainers, develop training curriculum, mentor national teams.

Publications

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