The spiritual growth of girls in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia: The perceptions of post-school women.

Tania Hicks

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The spiritual growth of girls in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia: The perceptions of post-school women.

Tania Hicks
Bachelor of Arts (Curtin University)
Graduate Diploma of Education (Edith Cowan University)
Master of Education (The University of Notre Dame Australia)

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Education

School of Education
The University of Notre Dame Australia
Fremantle Campus

September, 2020
Declaration

To the best of the candidate’s knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by another person, except where due acknowledgement has been made.

The thesis is the candidate’s own work and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any institution.

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Tania Hicks
Candidate
6 September, 2020
Abstract

This study provides insight into the spiritual growth of girls in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia (WA). Student spiritual growth is a fundamental priority in Catholic schools; it predicates the Church’s mission of evangelisation and aids the provision of a holistic education. Spiritual growth also enhances wellbeing through offering protective factors which may equip students in facing contextual challenges. Yet how is student spiritual growth fostered? Scholarly literature calls for further study in spiritual education (de Souza, 2016; King, 2013; Ng, 2012; Wright, 2000) suggesting a need for increased clarity about how to foster the spiritual growth of young people. This study addresses this question in the context of Catholic Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. The study explores the perceptions of a small sample of nine post-school women from three Mercy Education Limited (MEL) secondary schools in WA about the influences of their secondary schooling experiences on their spiritual growth.

Three facets of schooling emanated from the literature about spiritual growth in education: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. These facets informed the research questions underpinning the study. A qualitative study was implemented to explore the perceptions of the post-school women about their spiritual growth. The research was consistent with interpretivism principles through the use of phenomenological methods of data collection and analysis. To directly address the research questions, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the sample. Specifically, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to capture the essence of the post-school women’s lived experiences.

Six key findings emerged from the iterative process of IPA and generated theory. The post-school women perceived that their spiritual growth was influenced by the following
elements of their Mercy schooling experiences: a sense of belonging and place; fond memories; building self-efficacy; connectedness to others; a sense of hope; and, a shared belief. Despite the small sample size, the study’s focus on the essence of spiritual growth, and its universality, may enable these findings to be transferred to other settings. These findings may stimulate professional dialogue between educators, school leaders and the wider teaching community and inspire them as they strive to foster a deepening of spiritual growth of the young people they educate.
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<td>ACARA</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAGEC</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments Education Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCE</td>
<td>Congregation for Catholic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECWA</td>
<td>Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEWA</td>
<td>Catholic Education Western Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISMAPNG</td>
<td>Institute of the Sisters of Mercy Australia and Papua New Guinea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEL</td>
<td>Mercy Education Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIA</td>
<td>Mercy International Association</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCSA</td>
<td>School Curriculum and Standards Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNCRC</td>
<td>United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<td>WA</td>
<td>Western Australia(n)</td>
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# Glossary of Terms

| **Bracketing** | Bracketing involves explicating, acknowledging and setting aside pre-existing thoughts and assumptions made in everyday life to optimise the researcher’s focus on data when conducting research (Bednall, 2006). Bracketing is an integral component of the overarching process of epoche. |
| **Catholic school** | A school offering a Christ-centred, holistic education to fulfil the evangelising mission of the Church while fulfilling national and state curriculum requirements (CCE, 1977; CECWA, 2009). A Catholic school is jointly funded through national, state, and fees-based funding. |
| **Epoche** | The process of bracketing, or explicating and acknowledging pre-existing thoughts and assumptions, which are later reintroduced, investigated and tested in the interpretative process during research (Gadamer, 1989). |
| **Ethos** | The nature or disposition that describes the characteristic spirit or tone of a community as evidenced in its aspirations and attitudes (Ethos, 2019, para. 1). |
| **Faith** | A potentially powerful property that moves people to belief, sometimes without rational evidence. Faith may be based on spiritual conviction rather than on evidence, and it may stem from a belief in the doctrines of a religion (Faith, 2019, para. 2). |
| **Hermeneutics** | The study of interpretation of meaning from a text (Schwandt, 2015). Hermeneutics traditionally involved detailed analysis and inquiry of literary and religious texts; however, it has evolved to include the study of various components or parts of a text in order to comprehend and appreciate the text in its entirety (Neuman, 2011). |
| **Homeroom Teacher** | A teacher responsible for the daily pastoral care of a class of students from the same school year and house (or faction). |
| **Idiography** | A focus on the ‘particular’ of a subject, and the detail of that particular (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Idiography involves fine grained, detailed analysis. |
| **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)** | A research methodology, grounded in phenomenology, which is idiographic, interrogative and inductive in its exploration of human experience (Smith et al., 2009). |
| **Interpretivism** | A research paradigm which focuses on understanding the human experience through consideration of the meanings people make in interpreting behaviour and situations to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). |
| **Mercy ethos** | The nature that articulates the characteristic spirit (Ethos, 2019, para. 1) of a Mercy school community, demonstrated through its attitudes and values. The Mercy ethos reinforces the Catholicity (MEL, n.d.b) and defines the identity and distinctive education in the Mercy tradition of a Mercy school. |
| **Phenomenology** | An approach to research founded in individuals making sense of reality in relation to a phenomenon, even though this knowledge may be incomplete (Husserl, 1931, 1970). |
| **Religious** | To be spiritual in a particular way as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religion, usually including a sense of transcendence and participation in a local faith community (Rossiter, 2018). |
| **Religiosity (or religious spirituality)** | A form of spirituality clearly tethered to religion and involving engagement in religious rituals and practices in a faith community, religious thinking, and, personal and communal prayer (Rossiter, 2018). |
| **Sense of place** | The affective experience of a person in a specific setting (Najafí & Shariff, 2011; Steele, 1981). A sense of place encompasses the characteristics and components of a physical place or location, as well as the feelings people experience when they visit, see, or hear that place (Qazimi, 2014). A sense of place also encompasses the attachment people may have with regards to a particular community in a particular environment (Qazimi, 2014). |
| **Spiritual** | The natural dimension to life comprised of thoughts and emotions in relation to a transcendence, a creator, a sense of meaning and purpose, love and care for self, others and the natural world (Rossiter, 2018). |
| **Spiritual development** | The ‘developmental engine’ that generates a search for meaning, purpose and connectedness resulting in the change, growth or maturation of a person’s spirituality (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003) possibly along a linear continuum. |
| **Spiritual growth** | A positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from connectedness with oneself, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018). |
| **Spirituality** | The way the thinking and behaviour of a person is expressed through the moral/spiritual dimension of the individual (Rossiter, 2018). |
Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisors, Professor Chris Hackett and Doctor Christine Robinson. Your wisdom, encouragement and enthusiasm have been instrumental in seeing this thesis come to fruition and I am tremendously indebted to you both. You have each taught me so very much throughout this journey. Your positivity, insight and care have meant the world to me. Thank you.

To all in the School of Education at the University of Notre Dame (Fremantle), my sincere gratitude for your support and encouragement. I feel blessed to have been a part of such a caring and collegial community. My sincere thanks also to Mercy Education Limited and the three Western Australian Mercy girls’ secondary schools for their willingness to participate in this study. My heartfelt thanks to the post-school women from these schools whom so generously shared their schooling experiences. I also acknowledge the support of the Australian government Research Training Program throughout my candidature.

My profound gratitude to the Very Reverend Doctor Sean Fernandez and Mrs Helen Chaffer for their faith-filled companionship throughout this journey. As living examples of the spirit of Mercy you have been a wonderful source of inspiration. So too, sincere thanks to my students and teaching colleagues whom have buoyed my confidence with ongoing curiosity and avid support for the study.

To my loving family and friends, a very special thank you. To my Mum and Dad (dec) whom encouraged me to pursue a career in education, my eternal thanks. To William, Sarah and Jessica, thank you. Your understanding, patience and cups of tea have nourished and sustained me. I am forever grateful for your love and support.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the classroom teachers whose hard work and steadfast delivery of an authentic, holistic Catholic education in the Mercy tradition gently nurtures the lives of the students they teach. May your efforts be forever blessed.
Chapter 1

The Research Question Defined

1.1 Introduction

This study focused on the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. Specifically, this study explored the perceptions of post-school women from Catholic, Mercy Education Limited (MEL) schools in Western Australia (WA) about the influence of their secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth. In exploring the topic this study sought to reveal the influences critical to the spiritual growth of secondary school girls in MEL schools in WA.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research question of exploring how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia. After describing the question and the type of education as founded on the Mercy ethos (MEL, n.d.b), the topic and study purpose will be outlined. An overarching research question and three subsidiary research questions are developed. From these questions, an outline of the research design is given. The chapter then discusses the significance of the study and acknowledges its limitations. The context of the research shall be explained, including the situational context of the three Mercy schools involved in the study, and the policy context of Catholic education in WA. Finally, the structure of this thesis shall be outlined and a reflexive statement made before the chapter is concluded.
The format of Chapter 1 is outlined below:

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1.2 The Research Question

The study arose from a desire to address the research question of exploring how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. There appears to be a paucity of literature on the influence of secondary schooling on student spirituality (de Souza, 2016; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Wright, 2000). Similarly, there appears to be a gap in the literature on the influence of Mercy schooling on secondary student spiritual growth. This study responded to the call of scholars in the field who have called for further research about the influence of schooling on spirituality (de Souza, 2016; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Wright, 2000). The research explored the perceptions of post-school women from three Mercy girls’ schools under the governance, or authority, of MEL in WA.
Crucial to this study are the terms: spirituality; spiritual growth; and, spiritual development. These terms are discussed further in Chapter 2. However, they are foregrounded here as a means of contextualising the research question. The term ‘spiritual growth’ pertains to the positive change associated with a person’s ‘spirituality’. The English word spirituality is derived from the Latin word ‘spiritus’ meaning life, breath or courage that gives one vitality (Lindholm, 2014). Such a derivation connotes the positive life enriching qualities of spirituality.

The term spirituality is seemingly complex in that literature has produced multiple descriptions of the concept (Eaude, 2009; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017). Spirituality is described as a journey towards being in relationship as one with the Other (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008) which may be unlocked through unleashing an “individual’s inner spiritual dynamism” (CCE, 1977, para. 30). Significantly, spirituality is the movement beyond the individual self to seek meaning and purpose in human experiences (Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). Although a person’s spirituality may develop or regress depending upon a range of factors, spirituality is integrated into life experiences (Eaude, 2003), rather than developed along a linear continuum.

Spiritual growth pertains to the deepening or enrichment of a person’s spirituality, rather than a decline (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018). Conversely, terms such as spiritual dormancy, stagnation or atrophy connote the decline or loss of an individual’s spirituality. Spiritual growth, however, connotes an improvement or a change for the better for an individual. In the context of this investigation, spiritual growth is a positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from connectedness with oneself, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018).
The term ‘spiritual development’ is similar to spiritual growth in that it may “focus on spiritual change, transformation, growth, or maturation” (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003, p. 210). Spiritual development is the ‘developmental engine’ that generates a search for meaning, purpose and connectedness (Benson et al, 2003; Brooks, Michaelson, King, Inchley, & Pickett, 2018). Spiritual development may also connote the movement of a person’s spirituality along a linear continuum, comprised of a series of stages of development (Fowler, 1981). In this opening chapter it is significant to highlight that this study focuses on spiritual growth, which is viewed as possessing a non-linear trajectory.

Spiritual growth results in positive health outcomes, such as an improved sense of self-efficacy, that provide protective factors in facing life challenges (Eaude, 2009; Hackett, 2015). Spiritual growth is evidenced by young people developing their inner strengths and a sense of empathy to reach outwards (Hackett, 2015) and make a positive difference to the lives of other people and/or the natural or wider world, in addition to their own lives. However, in strengthening the connectedness or relationship with oneself, spiritual growth is characterised by a sense of selflessness, rather than self-centredness (Hackett, 2015).

Student spiritual growth is a priority in a Catholic school. The education of the ‘whole child’ in a cognitive, social, emotional, physical and spiritual sense, aims to provide students with opportunities to foster their spiritual growth (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia [CECWA], 2009). Providing students with opportunities for enriching their spirituality is deemed essential (CECWA, 2009), especially in helping them navigate the myriad contextual challenges they may encounter living in modern Australia (de Souza, 2016; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Eckersley, 1998, 2005).

Here it is perhaps pertinent to note that spirituality may or may not occur within the context of a person’s practice of religion (Rossiter, 2018). Religiosity or religious spirituality
is a form of spirituality clearly referenced to religion, involving engagement in religious rituals and practices in a faith community, religious thinking, personal and communal prayer (Rossiter, 2010). It is the aim of the Catholic school that students have a connection to God (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988; CECWA, 2009) and this relationship is fostered through faith-based experiences such as Catholic feast day celebrations (Vatican Council II, 1965a), retreats, the provision of prayer experiences, liturgy, sacraments and the subject of Religious Education (CCE, 1988; CECWA, 2009). Religion may provide the framework in which a person’s spirituality occurs (Buchanan, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). However, spirituality may also occur outside or separate to a person’s religion (Gellel, 2018; Rossiter, 2018).

It is clear that spirituality leads to human flourishing through building resilience and improving wellbeing (Eaude, 2009). It is also clear that fostering student spiritual growth underpins the mission of evangelisation that lies at the heart of the Catholic school (CECWA, 2013). Yet there appears to be a paucity of literature about how secondary students’ spirituality may be enriched (de Souza, 2016; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Gellel, Wills, & Yust, 2018; Wright, 2000), and herein lay the research question.

In obtaining perceptions about spiritual growth, the decision to interview post-school women, rather than current students from MEL girls’ schools in WA, was intentional. Firstly, the reflections of post-school women highlighted the opportunities they experienced for spiritual growth across the breadth of their secondary schooling. Students currently at school had not yet completed their secondary school journey. They would not have had the benefit of being able to reflect upon their secondary school journey in its entirety, unlike post-school women (Robinson, 1977/1996). Secondly, and most significantly, aspects of childhood spirituality may be amplified in adulthood when reflection on these earlier years is a potent force in solving problems related to seeking value and meaning in life (Adams, Hyde, &
Woolley, 2008; Robinson, 1977/1996). Although adult reflections of spirituality may be embellished or biased given the potential difficulty in recalling or articulating a memory from the past, they should not be ignored (Robinson, 1977/1996). The process of recalling memories during reflection suggests these memories are significant (Robinson, 1977/1996).

Additionally, “it is only in late adolescence or adulthood that autobiographical memories are represented in detailed and coherent fashion, and successfully knitted into a life story” (Bauer & Larkina, 2016, p. 1364). This notion suggests the study’s specified age range of the post-school women, of between 20-30 years, was apt. Furthermore, memories from childhood pertaining to spirituality may deepen throughout life (Ault, 2001; Robinson, 1977/1996). In this sense, aspects of the post-school women’s secondary schooling that influenced their spiritual growth during their school years may have deepened their spiritual growth over time.

Exploring the perceptions of post-school women about how their secondary schooling influenced their spiritual growth was evidently beneficial. Specifically, the influence of Mercy secondary schooling on the spiritual growth of emerging young adult women was explored. Accordingly, the foundations of Mercy schooling and the ethos underpinning Mercy education will be explored before consideration of the topic and study purpose.

1.3 Education Founded on Mercy Ethos

The three schools included in the study are the only Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. Each of these girls’ schools was founded by the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters of Mercy were founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley, in Dublin, Ireland (Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia & Papua New Guinea [ISMAPNG], 2020a). McAuley established the House of Mercy in Dublin to support the poor and marginalised in Irish
society through the provision of religious and social support, and education (ISMAPNG, 2020a). McAuley’s ministry underpins the ethos of the schools (MEL, n.d.b, n.d.c) as they operate in WA today.

Ursula Frayne founded what is now known as the education ministry of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea (ISMAPNG) in Perth, Western Australia, in 1846 (Mercy International Association [MIA], 2020). From this foundation, a network of Mercy schools evolved, providing a Catholic education for generations of young people founded on the Mercy tradition (MEL, n.d.c). From the 1950s many Australian Mercy Congregations amalgamated, and in 2011, the ISMAPNG was formed. Mercy Education Limited (MEL) was registered with Australian Securities and Investments Commission in 2011 to meet changes in government requirements regarding educational ministry. The ISMAPNG Institute leader and Council appoint the directors of the MEL Board to manage the Company (MEL, n.d.a).

The Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea fully sponsors eight schools in Victoria, one in South Australia and the three schools in Perth, WA, in which the post-school women interview participants received their secondary education. These three schools offer Catholic secondary education to girls inspired by the Mercy ethos. The word ‘ethos’ originates from the Greek word of the same name. Ethos refers to the nature or disposition that describes the characteristic spirit or tone of a community, as evidenced in its aspirations and attitudes (Ethos, 2019, para. 1). The Mercy ethos, infused throughout the education of the Mercy schools, reinforces their Catholicity (MEL, n.d.b, n.d.c) and defines their identity and distinctive education in the Mercy tradition.

In particular, the Mercy values promoted by each school underpin the ethos of each school because they influence the tone and spirit of the Mercy school community. These
Mercy values are Gospel values which underpin the education offered at the MEL schools (MEL, n.d.c). The Mercy values not only reflect Gospel values, but are also inspired by the practical example of the Sisters of Mercy foundress, Catherine McAuley (ISMAPNG, 2020a; MEL, n.d.c). Two of the three schools in the study promote five values and the other school promotes six values. The values of all three schools include: compassion; excellence; justice; integrity; respect; courage; hospitality; and, service. The infusion of the values across the curriculum influence the spirit and tone of the respective school communities. In this way, the Mercy values underpin the Mercy ethos of the schools.

1.4 Topic and Study Purpose

The purpose of the study was to explore the perceptions of post-school women from three MEL girls’ secondary schools in WA about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. The study involved individual semi-structured interviews with three post-school women from each of the three Catholic MEL secondary girls’ schools in WA. These three schools were chosen because of their commonality in offering secondary Years 7 to 12 schooling, to girls only, in the same geographical region of Perth, WA. The three schools are the only MEL schools in WA.

It was anticipated that in exploring the participants’ lived experiences, the data generated would clarify how spiritual growth may be fostered in Catholic girls’ secondary schools, specifically those in the Mercy school tradition. As the aim of the research was to add to the knowledge about student spiritual growth by identifying the influences critical to student spiritual growth in Mercy secondary schooling, identifying these influences provided clarity on this issue in the context of the Mercy girls’ secondary school. In doing so, the research contributed to filling the aforementioned gap in the literature in this particular area.
1.4.1 Protective factors of spiritual growth.

In identifying the influences critical to student spiritual growth, this study is pertinent in countering contextual factors affecting young people in contemporary society. For example, the mental health decline of young people in Australia (Bullot, Cave, Fildes, Hall, & Plummer, 2017) is a poignant concern. Nurturing spirituality, however, may protect students from contextual challenges that erode their mental health (Eaude, 2009). Conversely, spirituality may be hindered by various contextual factors, such as materialism, secularism and pluralism in the modern world (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). These factors potentially erode social cohesion and cause a sense of disconnection among young people (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012) which in turn stifles spiritual growth (CCE, 1997).

However, through undergoing spiritual growth over time, people may cultivate ‘spiritual capital’ comprised of “resources of faith and values” (Grace, 2010, p. 125) which will aid them in facing contextual challenges. Spiritual capital is “a form of spirituality in which the whole of human life is viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God” (Grace, 2010, p. 125). It is a form of spirituality tethered to religion and as such, is achievable in Catholic schools. However, this process requires careful consideration given many Catholic school students are distant or disconnected from their faith (Rossiter, 2018). They may need re-orientated or revised pedagogical and curriculum approaches (Robinson & Hackett, 2019; Rossiter, 2018). In particular, Rossiter (2018) calls for a re-framing of the way Religious Education is taught, such that educators respond “to the opportunity to enhance young people’s spirituality whether it is religious or not” (p. 37).

Similarly, a positive youth development (PYD) approach, whereby “young people’s wellbeing is focused on developing their inner strengths or traits to deal with the challenges of life” (Hackett, 2015, p. 73) is an example of an approach that may be employed in the Catholic school where education of the whole child, particularly in a spiritual sense, is a
priority (CCE, 1977). However, the success of this approach depends on “the quality and consistency of culture in which students are immersed” (Hackett, 2015, p. 80). It is clear the associations between spirituality and positive health outcomes are apparent yet warrant further empirical investigation (Brooks et al., 2018).

Catholic schools are called to form students spiritually (CECWA, 2009; National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC], 2017). Church documents emphasise the importance of the Catholic school in fostering student spiritual growth in the face of contextual challenges (CCE, 1977, 1988, 1997, 2014). As educators are called to renew their mission to overcome the spiritual poverty afflicting many young people in today’s society (CCE, 2014) the potential significance of the study’s findings in quelling spiritual poverty in contemporary society is evident. The findings of this study may assist educators in fostering student spiritual growth so they may equip their students with protective factors to face contextual challenges.

1.4.2 Schooling influences on student spiritual growth.

Church and other literature on student spiritual growth is broadly categorised into three areas: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy (CCE, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997; CECWA, 2009; Kessler, 2000; Ng, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). The literature demonstrates that these three areas influence student spiritual growth. These three areas are related to the overarching study topic as they are aspects of schooling that may have influenced the spiritual growth of the post-school women interviewed in the study. These three aspects emerging from the literature are consequentially embedded in the subsidiary research questions.
1.5 Overarching and Subsidiary Research Questions

The study is founded on the overarching research question:

What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?

The subsidiary research questions for the study include:

1. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth?

2. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth?

3. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth?

1.6 Research Design

The research design of this study was informed by the nature of the research question. In addressing this question of how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA, a qualitative study was developed. This study upheld the exploratory nature of the topic in addressing the research problem and the corresponding overarching research question and three subsidiary questions. Qualitative research involves understanding the meaning of human experience (Sarantakos, 2013). This subjective approach to research is dynamic because the researcher undergoes a prolonged and intense study of a human experience (Creswell, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013).

As mentioned, the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth were collated through conducting individual semi-structured interviews with three post-school women from each of the three Mercy schools in
WA. Snowball sampling by the alumni of the three schools, in liaison with the researcher, determined the selection of the nine participants. The interviews were conducted and then each one was transcribed verbatim. To nullify comparison and to ensure anonymity the names of the schools were de-identified. Likewise, the post-school women participants were issued pseudonym names to ensure anonymity. As qualitative research involves the close study of data in the form of words, the approach was apt in studying the participants’ words generated from interviews.

In keeping with this approach, a methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to analyse the data collected from the interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis focuses on exploring how participants make sense of their lived experiences, with the researcher assuming an active role in the process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The inter-subjective meaning making characteristic of IPA involves the researcher working with the participants in trying to understand their viewpoints and in turn providing them with a voice, rather than merely describing their lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). More information about the research design, and this methodology specifically, is explained in Chapter 3.

The findings that emerged from the study addressed the research question, as well as the corresponding overarching research question and subsidiary questions. The research findings highlight the significance of the study, which will now be outlined. The findings may also be related to the situational and policy contexts of the study, discussed in Section 1.9.

1.7 **Significance of the Research**

The significance of this research was two-fold. Firstly, the study gained feedback regarding how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary
schools in WA. In addressing this research problem, the study contributes to the aforementioned paucity of literature in this area. Scholarly literature calls for more study into the effective provision of opportunities to nurture student spirituality (Brooks et al., 2018; Gellel et al., 2018; King, 2013; Ng, 2012; Vialle, Walton, & Woodcock, 2008; Wright, 2000). The identification of the pedagogies, relationships and culture that may enrich adolescent spirituality in the secondary school is needed so that educators are well equipped to foster the spiritual growth of their students (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012), and in doing so effectively fulfil the requirements of the *Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia* (CECWA, 2009). In gathering feedback about holistic spiritual growth in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA, the research question was addressed and a contribution was made to literature.

Secondly and of equal significance, the study revealed new knowledge about student spiritual growth that will support schools in upholding the Church’s mission of evangelisation. Specifically, it reveals what a small sample of post-school women think about how their spiritual growth was influenced by their Mercy secondary schooling experiences. The faith foundation of the Catholic school complements spiritual growth. Enriching student spiritual growth, through a curriculum that integrates faith and culture, and faith and life, underpins the Catholic school focus on the education of the human person with Christ at its foundation (CCE, 1977, 1997; NCEC, 2017). The research findings may be used to enrich student spiritual growth in MEL girls’ secondary schools, and potentially the broader educational community.

1.8 Limitations of the Research

The researcher acknowledges that the study and its boundaries may be perceived as limited in two ways: the choice of a small purposive sample may limit transferability; and,
variation in the location and mode of the interviews undertaken may be perceived as inconsistent. Firstly, the small, purposive sample of nine women may be considered limited in terms of size. However, this sample is not intended to be representative of all students from MEL or other Catholic girls’ secondary schools and for this reason, transferability is limited (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Through its phenomenological approach, the study focused on the essence of an experience rather than representation of a group of people (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, participation was voluntary and only captured the lived experiences of post-school women who were willing to share their schooling experiences. The experiences of those who did not volunteer may have potentially differed, and the perceptions of these particular post-school women was not captured, thereby also limiting transferability.

Secondly, the intention was to interview each of the participants on-site at their respective schools; however, three of the nine post-school women requested their interviews were conducted in places more convenient to them given their work and study commitments. One of these requests included conducting a phone interview as a participant had relocated interstate. As the snowball sampling undertaken had indicated each of these women may provide rich data, the researcher elected to fulfil their requests. However, the variation in interview location and mode may be viewed as a limitation with regards to consistency.

1.9   Context of the Research

The research investigation is situated within the context of Catholic MEL girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia. In this section, the context of the research is divided into the following sections:

1.9.1   Situational context of the three MEL schools in the research project; and,

1.9.2   Policy context of Catholic education in Western Australia.
1.9.1 **Situational context of the three MEL schools in the research project.**

As mentioned, the three schools that the study participants attended are the only schools fully sponsored by ISMAPNG in WA. They are three of 12 schools across Australia fully sponsored by ISMAPNG. Each of these schools is located in the city of Perth, WA. To limit comparison and to ensure anonymity, the names of these schools were de-identified. Furthermore, given the small sample size of the study, the ‘voices’ of the post-school women participants were the focus of this study, rather than the three schools. Specifically, the focus of the study was on exploring the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling experiences on their spiritual growth. The voices of the nine post-school women were honoured and prioritised at all times. Given the small sample size, the researcher was careful to nullify the potential for any comparison between the three Mercy schools the post-school women attended.

The eldest of the three schools was founded in the same year the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Perth, in 1846 (MIA, 2020). The other two schools were founded shortly after in 1929 and 1938. The first school to be founded by the Sisters of Mercy in Perth in 1846, was also the first school in Australia to be founded by a religious congregation. Seven pioneer Mercy women, led by Sister Ursula Frayne, founded the school (MIA, 2020) in a small cottage. The school rapidly expanded and they were educating up to 100 students by the end of their first year. Inspired by the way their founder, Sister Catherine McAuley, proclaimed the Gospel in word and action, the Mercy Sisters worked tirelessly to educate young people (MEL, n.d.c; MIA, 2020). From here the Sisters of Mercy established the other two Mercy secondary schools in WA, as well as nine Mercy schools in Victoria and South Australia.

The three WA MEL schools differ in their composition. However, the schools are common in that they each deliver a Catholic secondary education spanning Years 7 to 12 for girls in the Mercy tradition in the same city. Of the three schools, one of them offers a girls’
secondary education for Years 7 to 12 only. Another one of the schools offers education for girls from Years 5 to 12, including boarding facilities for secondary students in Years 7 to 12. The remaining school offers co-education from pre-Kindergarten to Year 6, and girls’ education for Years 7 to 12. This school also offers secondary boarding facilities.

1.9.2 Policy context of Catholic education in Western Australia.

Each of the three girls’ secondary schools in the study are Catholic schools that educate young women in the Mercy tradition. The Catholicity of the schools is a defining feature that lies at the core of the education they each offer. Although governed by MEL, the three schools are expected to fulfil the requirements of the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009). This document is promulgated by the Catholic Bishops of Western Australia to outline the role of schools and educators in implementing the evangelising mission of the Church (CECWA, 2009).

1.9.2.1 Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia.

The responsibility for Western Australian Catholic schools is held by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Western Australia. The Bishops of Western Australia lead four dioceses: the Archdiocese of Perth and the Dioceses of Geraldton, Broome and Bunbury. The three schools in the study are located in the Archdiocese of Perth. As part of their roles, bishops are called to evangelise through the provision and management of systemic instruction (Vatican Council II, 1965c). Through the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009) the Bishops propose a holistic education in forming Christian women and men “committed to the love, compassion and justice of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (para. 6).

The Bishops and the Major Superiors of Religious Orders established the CECWA in 1971 to coordinate decision making and management of Catholic education throughout
Western Australia. The CECWA is responsible for generating state-wide policies, assisting the Bishops with Catholic schools in their respective dioceses, and to work on behalf of the Catholic community towards the benefit of Catholic school-aged children (CECWA, 2009). The CECWA is required to recognise and provide for religious institutes that operate Catholic schools in WA (CECWA, 2009). As mentioned, MEL is the governing body of the three Mercy schools in the study who were founded by the religious institute known as the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy. The CECWA is also required to respect the particular charisms of WA schools operated by religious institutes (CECWA, 2009) such as the Mercy charism (ISMAP, 2020b) of the three schools in the study.

The expectation that every Catholic school strives to provide a distinctly Catholic education originates from the evangelising mission of the Catholic Church (CECWA, 2009; Vatican Council II, 1965b). In WA, this process is facilitated through the CECWA. As mentioned, all Catholic schools in WA are required to adhere to the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009). This document is integral because it upholds the Church’s mission of evangelisation. This notion is explicated in the Parable of the sower “And the seed sown in rich soil is someone who hears the word and understands it; this is the one who yields a harvest and produces now a hundredfold, now sixty now thirty.” Matthew 13: 23 (New Jerusalem).

Evangelisation is the nexus of the Catholic school that underpins the vision of Catholic education (Vatican Council II, 1965b). As the “duty of educating belongs to the Church” (Vatican Council II, 1965b, Chapter 3, para. 14) the Catholic school plays a pivotal role in society. The Church “has a visible and social structure as a sign of her unity of Christ” (Vatican Council II, 1965d, Chapter 4, para. 44) and in striving to reflect this notion “the Catholic school is in a unique position to offer, more than ever before, a most valuable and
necessary service” (CCE, 1977, para. 91). This service needs to incorporate the three central aims of a Catholic school (Vatican Council II, 1965b) outlined below.

A Catholic school is called to:

create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith. (Vatican Council II, 1965b, Chapter 8, para. 25)

Catholic schools are called to be good schools in that they contribute to the development of young people “through education, particularly to the formation in Christian conscience and virtue” (CECWA, 2009, para. 6). Furthermore, Catholic schools seek to “make a distinctive contribution in the provision of educational excellence in WA. They do so within the context of Catholic teaching and practice” (CECWA, 2009, para. 6). In striving to be good schools, Catholic schools are also required to fulfil national and state curriculum requirements in addition to their primary purpose of evangelisation (CCE, 1977; CECWA, 2009).

1.9.2.2 National and state curricula.

As well as being Catholic schools governed by MEL the three Mercy schools, which the post-school women study participants attended, each operate within a national and state policy context informed by international and national research on education. Like all Australian schools, the three schools are required by federal and state governments to prepare their students for the 21st Century by teaching the mandatory national and state curricula (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2016a; School
Curriculum and Standards Authority [SCSA], 2014). Consequentially the three MEL schools are required to teach the Australian and WA curricula. As the WA curricula encompasses the national curriculum (SCSA, 2014), schools are able to concurrently cover the objectives of the national and state curricula. The WA curricula has been contextualised and tailored to suit WA students (SCSA, 2014).

Overarching the national and state curricula, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration as declared by Australian education ministers, outlines educational goals all Australian schools are required to strive to attain (Council of Australian Governments Education Council [CAGEC], 2019). For example, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration states that it aims for all young people to become “…confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners,” and “active and informed members of the community” (CAGEC, 2019, p. 4). This notion underpins the Australian and WA curricula, which includes seven general capabilities and three cross-curricular priorities with the aim of forming confident and productive young Australian citizens (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014). These general capabilities span all learning areas in the schooling years and they serve to support students in acquiring skills and developing dispositions for deep learning. The general capabilities also serve to support students to build capacity to function successfully in contemporary society.

In WA, the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA) oversees the implementation of curriculum, assessment and reporting of standards of achievement for all WA school students from Kindergarten to Year 12. As mentioned, the WA syllabuses have been contextualised and tailored to suit Western Australian students and teachers (SCSA, 2014). Like the Australian curriculum, SCSA aims to shape Western Australian students into active and informed citizens who will positively contribute to society (SCSA, 2014). To achieve this aim, SCSA promotes the following values across the curriculum: integrity;
fairness; equity; transparency; and, respect (SCSA, 2014). SCSA also supports the development of student creativity and confidence (SCSA, 2014). Herein perhaps lies an opportunity to foster student spiritual growth as providing students with opportunity for exercising creativity whereby they use their imagination potentially enriches their spiritual growth (Nye, 2017). However, the WA curriculum does not explicate this notion.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration specifies the spiritual wellbeing of young people as a goal (CAGEC, 2019, p. 6). However, neither the Australian curriculum (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012) nor WA curriculum include this goal, nor refer to religious or spiritual experiences. Yet the integration and interconnectedness of faith, life and culture is a distinctive feature of Catholic education (CCE, 1977). The Catholic school needs to include spiritual and religious dimensions in conjunction with the general capabilities so that students are provided with the skills, knowledge, dispositions and behaviours to function as Catholic women and men in the 21st Century (CCE, 1988; McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

1.10 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters:

Chapter 1 The Research Question Defined
Chapter 2 Review of the Literature
Chapter 3 Research Design
Chapter 4 Findings
Chapter 5 Discussion of Findings
Chapter 6 Implications and Recommendations

A more detailed outline of each chapter follows as an overview of the research project.
1.10.1 Chapter 1: The research question defined.

This first chapter identified the research question of how, explicitly, student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. The chapter identified a paucity of literature regarding the influences critical to student spiritual growth in the Mercy girls’ secondary school. The study explored the research question through addressing the overarching research question:

**What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?**

Chapter 1 also discussed how the study explored three subsidiary questions to support the overarching research question. These subsidiary questions were derived from the literature on the topic. The overarching and subsidiary questions shaped the study in that they underpinned the questions discussed in semi-structured interviews conducted with a small sample of post-school women from three MEL girls’ secondary schools. The nine participants were asked to voice their perceptions about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the overarching and subsidiary questions. Consideration was then given to the significance of the study and an acknowledgment of its limitations.

Chapter 1 then considered the influences of situational and policy contextual factors on each of the three MEL schools involved in the study. Central to the Catholic school, the significance of the evangelising mission of the Church was outlined in relation to the three schools in the study. The schools’ Mercy heritage and ethos was also contextualised within this broader Catholic framework. This section also discussed the influence of national and state curriculum requirements on the three schools involved in the study. Finally, this section outlines the format of the study, before providing a reflexive statement and concluding.
1.10.2  **Chapter 2: Review of the literature.**

Chapter 2 reviews empirical and scholarly literature in the field of spiritual growth with a focus on literature related to the educational context of the study. Firstly, literature pertaining to the phenomenon of spiritual growth is examined. It is through this literature that the definition of spiritual growth framing the study is derived. Secondly a review of literature denotes three areas pertaining to the spiritual growth of students: school culture; student-teacher relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. These three areas emerging from the literature inform the research questions at the core of this study.

1.10.3  **Chapter 3: Research design.**

The theoretical framework underpinning the research design of the study is outlined in Chapter 3. The chapter begins with a review of the research question. The conceptual framework is presented to illustrate how the literature, reviewed in Chapter 2, informs the overarching and subsidiary research questions of the study. Key theoretical elements of the study are then explained, including the characteristics and reasons for adopting: a subjectivist ontology; an epistemology of constructivism; an interpretivist paradigm; and, a methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). In particular, the selection of IPA is considered in detail, including the situation of the researcher within the process.

The research methods involving data gathering and analysis are then explained and justified in the context of the study. The use of semi-structured interviews is explored as a means to extract rich data for the study. The significance of epoche, sampling and the use of a pilot interview and then explained. Theory generation and the employment of IPA in data analysis are also explicated. Chapter 3 concludes with the consideration of ethical aspects pertaining to the integrity of the study. A reflexive statement is also included to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the research process.
1.10.4 Chapter 4: Findings.

The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4. This chapter opens with a summary of background information related to each of the study participants to help readers contextualise the findings of the study. The chapter then reveals the findings related to the participants’ understanding of the term ‘spiritual growth’. Again, this information is presented as a means of contextualising the subsequent findings of the study. These findings are presented in the order of the three subsidiary research questions. Finally, the findings are synthesised to address the overarching research question, resulting in six key findings. The chapter concludes with a reflexive statement to reiterate the involvement of the researcher in the analysis process.

1.10.5 Chapter 5: Discussion of findings.

Chapter 5 opens by outlining the findings presented in Chapter 4. The six key findings, which address the overarching research question, are discussed in relation to extant literature. Subsequently the theory generated from the key findings is explicated. The chapter concludes with a reflexive statement to again situate the reader in the context of the study, and to discuss the researcher’s critical reflection of the findings discussed in the chapter.

1.10.6 Chapter 6: Implications and recommendations.

Chapter 6 reviews the key findings of the study in relation to the overarching and subsidiary research questions. The implications of the study are then outlined in relation to theory and further research, methodology and policy. This chapter highlights the contribution of this study in addressing the overarching research question. Four recommendations arising from the findings are explained. Following, the strengths and limitations of the study are examined, before the chapter concludes with a final reflexive statement. This statement
highlights the impact of the research journey on the researcher, and in particular, how the journey altered her assumptions and thoughts about the spiritual growth of young people.

1.11 Reflexive Statement

The intention of this reflexive statement is for the researcher to acknowledge her position within this study from its beginning. Through the employment of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in the study, the researcher was actively involved in the collation and analysis of data. Her role in this IPA study was overt. Therefore, the context of the researcher is an important consideration to declare as the background context of the researcher may influence the direction of the study. However, the intention of this reflexive statement is more than declaring any bias and values embedded in the study (Creswell, 2014) possibly due to contextual influences, such as personal background and life experiences, shaping the researcher’s interpretation of data. Rather, the researcher’s role is declared to situate the reader in the researcher’s context.

The researcher declares and acknowledges her position in this study. She is a secondary school teacher with experience teaching in the government and Catholic sectors. She was employed in a Mercy Education Limited school in Perth, Western Australia at the time of conducting this study. More background contextual information about the researcher is provided in further reflexive statements made in following chapters throughout this thesis. In particular, Chapter 3 provides a detailed reflexive statement in relation to the research design.

1.12 Chapter Summary

This first chapter sets out the rationale for exploring student spiritual growth in Catholic Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia. The research question highlighted a lack of clarity about how student spiritual growth is fostered in Catholic
secondary schools, specifically Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. To address the research question, the study sought to explore the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling experiences on their spiritual growth.

The following chapters of this thesis will draw upon a phenomenological approach to explain the results of this study. The significance of the study lies in its identification of the influences critical to student spiritual growth. As mentioned, there is perhaps little known about how student spiritual growth is fostered in the Catholic school due to a paucity of literature on the topic. This study contributes to literature in this field. To contextualise the situation, Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the topic.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

2.1 Introduction

The focus of this study is on the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. In exploring this topic, the study aims to address the research question of learning how, explicitly, student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia (WA). The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relevant to the research topic. The literature examined in this review was approached in a broad manner to capture what is known about spiritual growth in extant literature. As there appears to be an absence of scholarly and empirical literature on the specific topic of the influence of Mercy schooling on student spiritual growth, this broad approach to the literature was deemed appropriate in the context of the study.

This literature review is structured in the following format. The chapter begins by exploring a central concept to this study: the phenomenon of spiritual growth. The working definition of spiritual growth encompassing this study emerges from this literature, and it is explained at the conclusion of the first section of the literature review. The overarching research question underpinning the study also evolves from this literature, and its derivation from the literature is explained at the conclusion of the first section of the literature review.

Following, the literature review focuses on student spiritual growth with regards to three aspects of education: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. These three areas have been chosen because extant literature on spiritual growth highlights these three areas as significant in education (Catholic Education Commission of
Western Australia [CECWA], 2009; Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1977, 1988, 1997, 2014; de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008). The three subsidiary research questions emerge from this literature. Each of these subsidiary research questions is explicitly stated throughout the chapter.

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>Exploring the phenomenon of spiritual growth</td>
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<td>2.3</td>
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<td>Spiritual growth and teacher-student relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Spiritual growth and curriculum and pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>Conceptual framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Chapter summary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2 Exploring the Phenomenon of Spiritual Growth

As mentioned in Section 1.2, spiritual growth pertains to a positive change associated with a person’s spirituality. Spiritual growth signifies the deepening or enrichment of a person’s spirituality, rather than a decline (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018). Consideration of literature about spirituality is integral given the interrelationship between people’s spirituality and their spiritual growth. Yet the literature describes spirituality in multiple ways (Eaude, 2003; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017) suggesting the term is complex and elusive in regards to an agreed definition among scholars. Regardless, the vitality, dynamism and possibly divine nature of spirituality potentially “provides humans with a greater consciousness or understanding of life” (Mata, 2015, p. 17). Spirituality is dynamic and holds
immense power in unlocking the potential of individuals so they may flourish (Eaude, 2009; King, 2013).

In particular, there is a lack of consensus in defining youth spiritual health (Brooks, Michaelson, King, Inchley, & Pickett, 2018). It is noteworthy, however, that the protective health benefits to be gained from spirituality may be especially beneficial to adolescent females (Brooks et al., 2018). This notion is contextually relevant given the apparent subjective wellbeing decline experienced by adolescent females, in comparison with their male counterparts, over the last decade (Brooks et al., 2018; Bullot, Cave, Fildes, Hall, & Plummer, 2017; Mission Australia, 2015). Further, “issues of meaning, purpose, vocation, relationships, and identity are particularly salient during adolescence” (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003, p. 210) for adolescent females, and males. So, it is perhaps pertinent that adolescent spirituality is fostered, despite its seemingly elusive and complex nature.

As mentioned, in the context of this study, spiritual growth is a positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from connectedness with oneself, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018). As spiritual growth pertains to the deepening of a person’s spirituality, it is dependent on the provision of spiritual nourishment through multiple factors, such as lived experiences, including relationships with other people and the wider and/or natural world and God. This form of nourishment is craved by humanity; just as the body needs food and water to flourish, human beings also thirst for spiritual nourishment so they may spiritually grow (King, 2013). Spiritual nourishment is the metaphorical ‘food’ necessary for spiritual growth (CCE, 1977, para. 29-30; CCE, 1988, para. 99) which is a natural part of life.
2.2.1 Spiritual growth as a natural dimension of life.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* [UNCRC] (1989) refers to the universal nature of spirituality in identifying the spiritual wellbeing of children in Article 17 of the convention. The UNCRC (1989) reference to spiritual wellbeing in this global document highlights that children possess a natural spiritual capacity. The inclusion of this reference infers that this spiritual aspect of children’s wellbeing is significant, and requires nourishment and warrants protection (UNCRC, 1989). Article 17 also refers to the physical, moral, mental and social domains of wellbeing (UNCRC, 1989). The inference made by the UNCRC (1989) is that these five natural aspects of health and wellbeing are distinct from each other, yet complementary.

Spiritual growth is a basic human need; humans require ongoing spiritual nourishment, particularly throughout adolescence (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Wright, 2000) so they may flourish “during the first two decades of life” (Brooks et al., 2018, p. 388). Multiple scholars report that spirituality benefits wellbeing (Brooks et al., 2018; King, 2013) and learning (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; King, 2013), strengthens human development (Benson et al., 2003; Kim & Esquivel, 2011), builds resilience (Brooks et al., 2018; Kim & Esquivel, 2011) and aids identity formation during adolescence (Wright, 2000). The capacity for spirituality is inherent in every human being, yet it requires realisation and activation and “its awakening and development during childhood is of great importance” (King, 2013, p. 6).

Evidently, scholars deem the spiritual growth of children and adolescents is an essential and natural dimension of life.

Over time, scholars have claimed the universality of spiritual awareness is an innate aspect of the human experience (de Souza, 2016; Hardy, 1965; Hay & Nye, 2006; Robinson, 1977/1996) which fuels spiritual growth. English scientist Alister Hardy (1965) proposed that human beings are innately spiritual beings. Furthermore, he suggested “the power we call
God may well have some fundamental link with the process of evolution...the living stream of evolution is as much Divine as physical in nature” (Hardy, 1965, p. 283). Hardy (1965) suggested God, as a transcendent being, underpins the evolution of life. This statement suggests human relationality with the transcendent is innate and an aspect of evolution. More will be discussed about the relationship between religion and spiritual growth in Section 2.2.2.

English scholar, Edward Robinson’s (1977/1996) work supported the notion that humans possess a natural capacity for spiritual growth. Robinson’s (1977/1996) publication, The Original Vision, is considered significant in the field of spirituality research and other studies have since been premised on his research. Robinson’s empirical study relied on adult recollections of childhood memories and experiences. He found that children were inherently spiritual beings. Although some scholars have questioned the reliability of his study (Hay, Nye, & Murphy, 1996), Robinson’s work is largely considered seminal in the field of research on spirituality. The findings from subsequent work conducted by Coles (1990) supported Robinson’s (1977/1996) hypothesis that children are inherently spiritual in nature. Coles’ (1990) empirical study centred on how children interpreted spiritual matters. His research demonstrated that children were naturally spiritual in that they were in possession of a sense of wonder and curiosity, and they were naturally predisposed to seek answers as to the meaning of life (Coles, 1990).

Robinson’s (1977/1996) investigation involved adult interview participants recalling childhood memories that were of religious significance to them. He found that an innate spiritual capacity was eroded as children transitioned to adulthood and became less spiritually conscious. As secondary school students are adolescent students transitioning to adulthood, this aspect of Robinson’s (1977/1996) research provides insights applicable to the context of this study.
2.2.2 Religion and spiritual growth.

The relationship between spiritual growth and religion is contentious given varying interpretations of the meanings of the two terms. However, there is a clear delineation of the religious aspects of life from the spiritual by some scholars (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018). This division underpins the holistic and inclusive description of spiritual growth framing this study, which is articulated at the conclusion of the literature reviewed about the phenomenon of spiritual growth. Religion is described as a framework or institution within which people practice their faith (Buchanan, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). Spiritual growth is described as a positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from a sense of connectedness one has to oneself, others, the wider world and possibly also to a transcendent other, such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018). This description acknowledges spirituality is an integral aspect of being human which may not necessarily be restricted to a relationship with God nor confined to the religious parts of life (de Souza, 2016). The relationship between people’s spiritual growth and their participation in religion is distinct, yet complementary.

A person’s innate thirst for spiritual growth is pertinent in exploring the relationship between religion and spirituality. Religion may open one to a spiritual life, or conversely, spirituality may be reflected in a person’s practice of religion, even though religiosity and spirituality may be viewed as independent of each other (Mata, 2015). Regardless, the innate thirst for spirituality is a necessary starting point for this growth to occur within religion (Miller, 2000). Some scholars propose that belief in God and spirituality are more closely interwoven and interdependent concepts. This notion is encapsulated in Miller’s (2000) assertion that “above all, spirituality is an intimate connection to God” (p. 40). However, belief in God may or may not be connected with people’s participation in organised religion, but rather to a sense of the spiritual or the notion of a transcendent other such as God in their
lives (Miller, 2000). The extent to which people’s religions may influence their spiritual growth, and vice versa, in the secondary Catholic school is worthy of close examination in the context of this study.

In modern Australia, many students and their families may be distant or disconnected from their religion, yet possess strong spiritual lives (Rossiter, 2018). This paradoxical issue warrants further exploration given the religious context of this study into the influence of Catholic, Mercy secondary schooling on student spiritual growth. The point at which spirituality may overlap or intersect with religion can be expressed through the term ‘religiosity’. Religiosity refers to a form of spirituality clearly tethered to religion and involving engagement in religious rituals and practices in a faith community, religious thinking, and, personal and communal prayer (Rossiter, 2018). (See Table 2.2).

Table 2.2
*Summary of Relationships Between the Constructs Spiritual, Religious, Spirituality, and Religiosity adapted from Rossiter (2018, pp. 15-16)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual</th>
<th>Religious</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The spiritual is a natural dimension to life.</td>
<td>Being religious is to be spiritual in a particular way as informed by the beliefs, practices and traditions of a religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spiritual comprises of thinking and feeling in relation to transcendence, a creator, a sense of meaning and purpose, love and care for self, others and the natural world.</td>
<td>It usually includes a sense of transcendence and participation in a local faith community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The religious is informed by a theology and morality is religiously motivated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The religious participates in ritual life and prayer, as well as relating to religious symbols, art and music.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spirituality

- Spirituality is the way the thinking and behaviour of an individual is expressed through the spiritual/moral dimension of the individual.
- Humans have a genetic capacity for spirituality.
- Spirituality may or may not be expressed.

Religiosity (or religious spirituality)

- Religiosity is a spirituality tethered to religion whereby an individual engages in religious activities and thinking, such as personal and communal prayer and participation in religious rituals in a faith community.
- Religiosity is a spirituality informed and motivated by religious beliefs and commitments, involving engagement with the self and Other.

Spirituality, however, pertains to one’s search for meaning and purpose in life or one’s religious experiences of inner life (Hyde, 2008). Büssing, Föller-Mancini, Gidley and Heusser (2010) reinforce that spirituality concerns an individual’s search for purpose and meaning in life in an open manner. In contrast, they stipulate that the institutional approach of religion presents people with a closed system of beliefs and practices in which to organise their collective experiences. Despite debate as to whether or not spirituality, and the associated phenomenon of spiritual growth, is inclusive of religion, fostering the spiritual growth of students in the context of the Catholic school underpins the evangelisation mission of the Church (CCE, 1997). This notion is a paramount consideration in the context of this study given the post-school women study participants attended Catholic, MEL schools.

In describing religion as a framework or an institution within which people practise their faith (Buchanan, 2012) consideration of the word ‘faith’ is needed. Faith is a complex term and scholars have grappled with reaching consensus as to a definition (McNamara Barry, Nelson, Davarya & Urry, 2010). However, discussion of faith is apt given its connectedness to spirituality and spiritual growth, as well as religiosity and religion, and its pivotal role in Catholic education (Buchanan, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). As mentioned, faith is described in biblical teachings as a potentially powerful property that moves people to belief,
sometimes without rational evidence. The Bible states “only faith can guarantee the blessings
that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities that are unseen” (Heb. 11:1, New
Jerusalem Version). Faith may play a role in a person’s spiritual growth as faith may be based
on spiritual conviction rather than on evidence, and it may stem from a belief in the doctrines
of a religion (Faith, 2019, para. 2). Faith and religion may overlap, or faith may occur
exclusively of religion, particularly in secular society (Buchanan, 2012). In this sense, faith
and spiritual growth share a commonality.

As indicated, when children and adolescents are offered the opportunity for spiritual
nourishment, they may also experience an openness, connection, or affiliation with religion
(Mata, 2015). In this respect, the research into faith development by American theologian
James Fowler (1981) is relevant and significant. Although he did not approach his research
from a religious perspective, Fowler’s (1981) work illustrated a link between faith, religiosity
and spiritual growth, and his interpretation of the word faith is clearly related to these
He asserted that faith is developed through human experience and maturation, and he
proposed human beings traverse six distinct stages along a hierarchical continuum as they
strive to make meaning of their lives (Fowler, 1981).

Fowler’s (1981) continuum included the following faith development stages:
intuitive-projective faith; mythic-literal faith; synthetic-conventional faith; individuative-
reflective faith; conjunctive faith; and, universalising faith. A person moves along the
continuum, possibly advancing as far as a self-transcending, universalising faith of the fullest
maturity in the final stage. Fowler’s (1981) six-stage theory is preceded with a period of
development he called ‘undifferentiated faith’. This pre-stage is characterised by an infant’s
basic sense of trust and safety, and the mutual experience of love and care between child and
parent (Fowler, 1981).
Fowler’s (1981) research, based on nearly 600 interviews with children and adults of varying ages and religious backgrounds, drew on the works of developmental theorists such as Piaget, Erikson, and Kohlberg. However, Fowler (1981) differentiated his theory claiming it covered different domains of knowing, distinct from Piaget’s cognitive stages or Kohlberg’s moral stages. Fowler (1981) did not prescribe fixed ages that people arrive at each stage. Rather there is fluidity in traversing the continuum and some children may overtake the progression of adults depending on multiple factors such as life experiences. However, applying Fowler’s theory, as a guide, the secondary school student may typically enter secondary school while exhibiting the characteristics of Fowler’s (1981) Stage 2 mythic-literal faith, and graduate while possessing qualities typical of Stage 3 synthetic conventional faith. Some secondary school graduates may even reach the individuative-reflective Stage 4 faith, typically experienced at some point in young adulthood. See Table 2.3 for an explanation of these three particular stages of Fowler’s six-stage theory.

Table 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mythic-literal (@ 10 years of age)</td>
<td>• A child embraces the stories and beliefs that symbolise belonging to her/his community.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Symbols are one dimensional and literal in meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• This stage is linear, characterised by capturing life meaning through stories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The ability to think logically is developed and the individual is able to view the perspectives of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthetic-conventional (@adolescence)</td>
<td>• A person is acutely tuned to expectations of significant others, while concurrently forming her/his own identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Beliefs and values are deeply felt, even though the person may not be fully aware.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interpersonal perspective taking emerges, leading to self-consciousness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fowler (1981) has been criticised for his assertion that faith development is invariant, hierarchical, and sequential. For example, Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventris (1993) asserted that Fowler’s ‘stages’ of faith should instead be viewed as ‘styles’ of faith, which may be situated alongside each other, rather than being sequential and hierarchical. Additionally, Slee (2004) suggested that Fowler’s (1981) model of faith development was gender-biased. Although Fowler’s (1981) study included male and female adults and children, Slee (2004) questioned whether the faith development theory applied equally to males and females.

Furthermore, Fowler’s (1981) colleague, Gilligan (1982), asserted that girls and women more typically demonstrate affective qualities, such as demonstrating care and responsibility for others. It is perhaps pertinent to note here that Fowler’s (1981) study was premised on the cognitive, rather than affective, domain. Gilligan (1982) did not directly reference Fowler (1981), perhaps because her study was published very close in time to Fowler’s publication. However, her study of adolescent and young adult women indicated that females may think differently to males. Gilligan (1982) argued that both male and female perspectives should be included in determining developmental pathways. Her focus on the female perspective of relationships is perhaps contextually relevant to the focus on the perceptions of post-school women in this study.

Nevertheless, Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory complemented the notions that spiritual growth is innate, involves personal and communal relationality and may sit
within or outside a religious framework. Similarly, contemporary scholar Gellel (2010) posited that spirituality is a natural and fundamental human attribute “which is the underlying force of human existence both at the communal level and at the individual level” (p. 44). He stated that human spirituality is intrinsic, ineffable and “is found outside prescribed boundaries” (Gellel, 2010, p. 44). Gellel drew an analogy between religion and languages. As human beings use languages to communicate ideas, they use religion to experience and express a sense of the spiritual (Gellel, 2010). Languages have been a means of human communication for millennia, just as religions have been a means of expressing human spirituality. In this sense, Gellel’s (2010) work suggests religion may complement and support spiritual growth. In the context of the Catholic school, the Catholic religion underpins the curriculum and holistic education of students, fostering their spiritual growth.

However, Gellel (2010) argued that although religions impart order and structure and provide humanity with a sense of meaning to life and the universe, they “are not the only way of accessing spirituality” (p. 47). Religions are testimony to humanity’s “innate search for the ultimate in everyday life and, in many cases, beyond it” (Gellel, 2010, p. 47) and they are passed on from generation to generation (Smith, 1991). Furthermore, Gellel (2010) posited that in striving to deliver a holistic education, there has been debate about the placement and construction of spiritual education in the curriculum, and he suggested there has been difficulty in reaching a consensus about approaches, programs and pedagogy in education because of disagreement about how ‘spirituality’ may be defined.

The research clearly demonstrates that scholars appear to continue to struggle in reaching a consensus about the relationship between religion and spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008), and the lack of distinction between the two concepts is viewed negatively by some scholars. For example, the aforementioned empirical studies by Coles (1990) and Robinson (1977/1996) in the previous section were similar in how they
viewed spirituality as a component of religion; however, Hay, Nye, and Murphy (1996) view
Coles’ lack of distinction between children’s spiritual and religious experiences as a
limitation of his study. Regardless, the studies conducted by Robinson (1977/1996) and Coles
(1990) clearly articulated the innate spiritual capacity of children. Other scholarly literature,
such as Gellel’s (2010) work, evolved from this foundational work.

2.2.3 The relationality of spiritual growth.

Multiple scholars have asserted the universal relationality of spirituality (Coles, 1990; de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Robinson, 1977/1996). Coles’ (1990) work was affirmed by the empirical study conducted by Hay and Nye (2006). In particular, Hay and Nye (2006) found that the spirituality of children was supported by a sense of connection with the self (I-Self), other human beings (I-Other), the natural world (I-World) and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (I-God). Like Coles’ (1990) study, Hay and Nye’s (2006) study involved the observation of young children and highlighted the universal relationality of spirituality.

Hay and Nye (2006) developed the term ‘relational consciousness’ to describe what lies at the heart of children’s spirituality. Relational consciousness evokes “meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight” (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 109). The term ‘relational’ was chosen as Hay and Nye (2006) found that children described their spirituality in the context of relationships with their inner-selves, other people, other things in the wider world and God. The research of Hay and Nye (2006) is considered significant in the field of spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008). Subsequent studies have reinforced the clear links they established between relational consciousness and spirituality.
Relational consciousness is an awareness of the self in a relationship that transcends the I-Other relationships to include relationships such as I-Self, I-World and I-God (Hay & Nye, 2006). The children in Hay and Nye’s (2006) study were aware that being in relationship with someone or something was special as it “added value to their ordinary or everyday perspective” (p. 109). This state of consciousness transcends everyday levels of alertness and mental activity in that it connotes a meta-consciousness reflective in nature (Hay & Nye, 2006). Hay and Nye’s (2006) study established relationality as being at the essence of spirituality (de Souza, 2016), and as such, a core component of spiritual growth. Hay and Nye (2006) claimed there are three types of spiritual sensitivity describing the way young people demonstrate or articulate their relationality: awareness-sensing; mystery-sensing; and, value-sensing.

Table 2.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness-sensing</td>
<td>Here-and-now</td>
<td>Appreciation of the vividness of the present moment in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tuning</td>
<td>Raised awareness or stream of consciousness in heightened aesthetic experience. For example, listening to music, feeling ‘at one’ in nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flow</td>
<td>Concentrated attention that gives way to a liberating feeling whereby an activity seems less demanding as action and awareness merge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focusing</td>
<td>Experience of the ‘felt-sense’ or being in touch with emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mystery-sensing</td>
<td>Wonder and awe</td>
<td>Fascination or wonder, and/or fear or awe of an aspect of the world. For example, an aspect of the natural world such as a sunrise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Imagination</td>
<td>Cognitive use of creativity that engages the senses, and possibly involves fantasy, to make meaning of what is beyond the known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-sensing</td>
<td>Delight and despair</td>
<td>Expression of ideas attached to a value or worth of delight or despair in everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate goodness</td>
<td>A sense of ultimate goodness, perhaps stemming from trust in another (e.g. mother) in childhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Making sense of the world in a cognitive and intuitive sense. Related to a search for identity, particularly in adolescence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three types of spiritual sensitivity articulated by Hay and Nye (2006) are presented in Table 2.4. The centrality of relationality in spirituality is reiterated by other scholars who have asserted the primary importance of relationships and connectedness to young people’s spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Harris & Moran, 1998). In particular, Harris and Moran (1998) highlighted ‘justice’ as an integral role in relationships with regards to the spirituality of young people. They claimed that the instinctive human inclination towards connectedness indicates that justice is a special quality, and as such it deserves to be viewed as a loyal, faithful and essential quality in our relationships (Harris & Moran, 1998). A sense of justice, and similar notions such as morality and ethics (Eaude, 2016), are evidently important aspects of the relationality between the inner-self, others, the wider world and God.

The research highlighted that, in particular, the behaviour of the self in relation with others is a factor influencing spiritual growth. Eaude’s (2016) contention that morality aids a sense of connectedness to others illustrates this notion. He claimed there are two forms of ethics informing morality: ‘duty ethics’ regarding what is considered right as against what is considered wrong; and, ‘virtue ethics’ regarding a deeper search by an individual as to what is good for not only her/himself, but for society as a whole. Collectively, research has suggested relationships are a key component of spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2016; Harris & Moran, 1998; Nye, 2017) and as such, are a key component of spiritual growth.
De Souza (2016) claimed relationships were at the foundation of her study of the spirituality of young people. She stated spirituality involves being deeply connected to other people, and “for some, to something beyond the physical world” (de Souza, 2016, p. 17). She also called for attention to be given regarding the quality of relationships “if spirituality was to be nurtured and allowed to grow” (de Souza, 2016, p. 17). De Souza (2009) asserted Hay and Nye’s (2006) notion of the relationality of the self with the inner-self, other people, the wider world and possibly with God, is pivotal in spirituality. She stated, “it is these relationships that invigorate and animate the individual’s life as s/he moves forward on her/his spiritual journey” (de Souza, 2009, p. 181). She acknowledged that in exercising relationality, an individual person reaches out to people who are familiar, and then onwards to people with whom s/he is unfamiliar, before reflecting inwardly “as the individual discovers new parts of him/herself that resonates with what they have learnt of the Other” (p. 181). This journey potentially generates empathy and compassion in the outward relationship and self-knowledge in the relationality with the inner self (de Souza, 2009).

Further, de Souza (2009) stated that in some instances, religion forms a framework that may nurture and provide an avenue for spiritual expression. In forming a connection with spiritual growth, religion may overlap with spiritual growth, and for some people, the distinction between them is blurred (de Souza, 2009). De Souza (2016) noted the literature that highlights relationships as being integral to spirituality, such as Hay and Nye’s (2006) study, largely emerges from a religious context. However, she stated that literature from a secular context, such as Eckersley’s (1997) study, also identifies relationships as an aspect of human spirituality based on connectedness and relationships (de Souza, 2016). Regardless, the connectedness of human beings to their inner selves, others, the wider world and possibly with a transcendent other is a striking commonality in the literature on spirituality (de Souza,
2009, 2016; Eaude, 2016; Eckersley, 1997; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). Consequentially, each of these aspects of relationality will be explored in greater depth.

2.2.3.1  **Relationality with the self.**

The human ability to reflect on one’s inner life, or the I-Self as described by Hay and Nye’s (2006) research, is imperative for spiritual growth to occur (de Souza, 2016). In his discussions with the children interviewed in his study, Coles (1990) also highlighted the power of reflecting inwardly:

> These intensely personal visionary moments, as I think of them, sometimes conveyed softly or tersely, sometimes rendered with eloquence and compelling power, are times when a mix of psychological surrender and philosophical transcendence offers the nearest thing to Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” I can expect to see. (p. 148)

Spirituality is a journey of self-discovery requiring inner reflection in the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). This process involves the individual moving beyond the inner core of the Self to find commonalities that bind her/him to the Other (de Souza, 2016). The capitalisation of the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in this context denotes a sense of wholeness in the inner self (or Self), and the connectedness of the inner self to the Other in a union whereby one feels whole or at one with the Other (de Souza, 2016).

This inner transformation facilitates discovery of strong interconnectedness and relatedness with others, which in turn, results in “a deepening knowledge with a heightened awareness of the inner Self and encourages a deeper connectedness to the Self” (de Souza, 2016, p. 31). The duality between the Self and the Other may disintegrate and culminate in the Self merging with the Other to experience a sense of oneness or ‘Ultimate Unity’ (de
De Souza (2016) stated “the movement towards Ultimate Unity is an ever-swirling spiral built with layers of connectedness/relationships which span a lifetime – the spiritual journey” (p. 32). However, a sense of connectedness to the Other may only flourish if a strong foundation is formed within the Self in the first instance (de Souza, 2016).

Hay & Nye (2006) described the I-Self relationship as a person’s quest for meaning, identity and purpose in life. The I-Self relationship is not to be confused with self-efficacy, which refers to a person’s self-belief in the capacity to perform the behaviours needed to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997). However, the two concepts may be related in that self-efficacy may spring from within the I-Self relationship. The I-Self relationship is an aspect of spiritual growth which is pertinent to adolescence (de Souza, 2016).

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of the adolescence when discussing spirituality and the corresponding process of spiritual growth. For example, spirituality is an innate, ontological, multifaceted, universal phenomenon that develops during adolescence as the individual searches for identity and meaning in life (Hyde, 2010; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; King, 2013; McDonald, 2009; Lindholm, 2014). Specifically, adolescent spirituality is pivotal in nourishing teenagers’ thirst for meaning and identity, as it enables young people to maximise their potential in life (Gottlieb, 2006; Wright, 2000). Adolescent students therefore require spiritual nourishment delivered in an engaging, accessible, authentic and caring manner by educators (Wright, 2000).

Eaude’s (2009) scholarly work regarding spirituality highlighted the importance of identity, and, in particular, considered the pursuit of happiness and optimising mental and emotional health. He proposed that this pursuit is best achieved through searching for meaning (Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006), which is the nexus of spiritual growth. Eaude (2009) proposed that “the discourse of spirituality emphasises the search for meaning and
connectedness, and less concern with oneself” (p. 195). He stated that happiness, mental and emotional health, and wellbeing are by-products of the adolescent search for meaning in life, that involve three distinct stages (Eaude, 2009). Hyde’s (2008) empirical study on spirituality affirmed these three elements from the discourse of spirituality. Happiness, mental and emotional health each comprise a spiritual dimension based on the commonalities discussed in literature (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008).

In the first stage of searching for meaning and purpose, people question their identity and purpose in life. This initial stage “involves the creation of a coherent narrative, a process of meaning making. This is, always, simultaneously individual and social” (Eaude, 2009, p. 189). In this sense, interpreting meaning about life is influenced and constructed within a tradition and culture (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009), such as family, school, and wider society.

Secondly, a search for meaning is necessary (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). Making meaning is retrospective (Hull, 2001) because “we understand events, if at all, only with hindsight” (Eaude, 2009, p. 190). Further, the search or quest for meaning provides a sense of fulfilment leading to happiness, rather than the meaning making resulting directly in happiness (Eaude, 2009). Thirdly, connectedness is described as being an essential element of relationality with the inner self. A person gains meaning from interpreting experiences through reflection inwardly as well as outwardly with other people (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008).

This final stage of searching for meaning and purpose in life may then lead onward to a person achieving complete wholeness. However, de Souza (2016) argued that it is not until a strong foundation is constructed within the inner self that a sense of connectedness to others can flourish, as a person journeys to Ultimate Unity or complete wholeness. This
notion is supported by Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial theory whereby a person is thought to move through eight successive psychosocial stages of identity development. Erikson asserted that identity formation involved “creating a coherent sense of self and who one is in relation to the world” (Sokol, 2009, p. 145). Each stage of Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial theory presented the individual person with a form of conflict that needs to be resolved. Once passing this turning point, the individual will progress on to the next stage. However, if the conflict is unresolved, the person does not move forward along the growth continuum (Sokol, 2009).

Erikson (1968) defined ‘identity’ as a sense of who one is as an individual, and in the context of how that individual contributes to society. In this sense, the relationality of adolescents with others, in addition to the I-Self relationship, is an integral aspect of their identity formation. Critics of Erikson’s psychosocial theory suggest that it is unfortunate he did not assign a range of chronological ages for adolescence, childhood or adulthood (Waterman, 1993) although it may be hypothesised that his version of adolescence refers to middle and senior year secondary students aged from 12 to 18 years (Sokol, 2009). Some critics (Arnett, 2000; Sokol, 2009) proposed Erikson’s (1968) stage of adolescence should also encompass present day emerging adults up to 25 years of age because “there appears to be considerable overlap with the social tasks of adolescence that Erikson describes” (Sokol, 2009, p. 141). For this reason, Erikson’s (1968) writing about identity formation in the years immediately following secondary school has been encompassed here in his writing on adolescence. Additionally, his work was composed in an era during which attending college or university was less common than in contemporary society, and this notion “has direct implications because of the emphasis he placed on vocational identity” (Sokol, 2009, p. 141). However, it is the notion of adolescence as a stage of development, rather than a chronological age, that aligns with this study.
Erikson’s (1968) research on identity formation during adolescence is relevant in the context of this study. He stated:

I shall present human growth from the point of view of the conflicts, inner and outer, which the vital personality weatheres, re-emerging from each crisis with an increased sense of inner unity, with an increase of good judgment, and an increase in the capacity “to do well” according to his own standards and to the standards of those who are significant to him. (pp. 91-92)

Erikson’s (1968) contention that an individual person undergoing and resolving conflict may benefit from the process in multiple ways, affirmed Eaude’s (2009) assertion that in spiritually questing for meaning, purpose and identity in life, a person may benefit from improved resilience and wellbeing. These spiritual growth by-products, stemming from a sense of fulfilment and/or contentment, are protective factors discussed further in Section 2.2.6.

Erikson (1968) proposed that identity formation is the primary psychosocial task, or conflict to be resolved, in adolescence. Identity formation is a pivotal component in the adolescent stage of human development (Gottlieb, 2006) and as such is closely interwoven with adolescent spiritual growth (Wright, 2000). When adolescents are able to assess their personal attributes to overcome their perceived conflicts and align these with outlets for expression available in their context, identity has been formed. However, when adolescents are unable to resolve conflict, they experience what Erikson (1968) termed ‘role confusion’. Changing biological, cognitive, and social factors influence nearly all adolescents and may cause them to experience role confusion to varying extents; however, most young people take
action to resolve these issues (Sokol, 2009). More literature is reviewed about identity formation in relation to teacher-student relationships in Section 2.4.5.

2.2.3.2  

**Relationality with others.**

The I-Other relationality is a key component of spirituality (Champagne, 2001; de Souza, 2016; Hart, 2003; Hay, 2006; Hay & Nye, 2006). The empirical study by Canadian scholar Champagne (2001) underpinned this notion. In observing and listening to the ordinary and everyday conversations and experiences of children, Champagne (2001) suggested spirituality involves a search for integrity and unification between the I-Other. The individual person gathers inner strength to fuel a strong connectedness with the other. In undergoing this process, a person moves towards a sense of wholeness. Empirical research affirmed that children are consciously intuitive and relational in their spiritual search for meaning and purpose in life (Champagne, 2001; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 2006).

Similarly, Hart’s (2003) empirical study suggested that children have rich spiritual lives, particularly because of their interactions with other people. An American psychologist, Hart’s (2003) research involved in-depth interviews from children about their personal experiences of spiritual moments. His research also included written accounts from adult recollections of their childhood experiences. Hart (2003) identified five spiritual capacities that appeared to flow naturally from children: the I-Other relationship; wisdom; a sense of wonder and awe; seeing the invisible or unseen; and, contemplation regarding the ultimate questions of life. He argued that children were able to feel empathy and compassion for the Other, whether the Other was found in an element of nature or another human being (Hart, 2003).

Hart (2003) challenged the thinking of some developmental theorists in asserting that children are capable of caring and being concerned about others, rather than exhibiting
self-centredness. He also asserted that the spiritual is often presented through research as being separate from this world, yet for some children, the Other world is imbued in the present moment and entwined with the child in a sense of wholeness. Hart (2003) used the phrase “between you and me” (p. 67) to refer to how understanding of spirituality is relational as “the spiritual life is lived out at the intersection of our lives” (p. 67). His research heralded Hay and Nye’s (2006) contention that relationality is at the core of spiritual growth.

Human spirituality is evidently fostered through the innate capacity of the I-Other relationality; that is, how people find their place in the world in relation to those around them (Myers, 1997). The I-Other relationality describes young people’s relational consciousness regarding their connectedness to other people. In this context, the development of the ‘whole’ person depends upon the relationships s/he has with the significant others in her/his life (Myers, 1997). These relationships may be positive or negative in enabling holistic development (Myers, 1997).

 Humans seek relationality with other humans for sustenance and nourishment to survive (de Souza, 2016; Hay, 2006). From the womb, human dependence and relationality with others is evidently an aspect of the human experience. Hay (2006) stated:

The physical and emotional intimacy of relationship both inside and outside the womb is intense and it is immediate. It is very obvious that the biological process of becoming a human being is the extreme opposite of an isolated, abstract affair. It is here, in this most natural of processes, that relationship and relational consciousness is made manifest as the primordial mode of being-in-the-world. (p. 141)

The research regarding the I-Other relationality demonstrated that it is an integral component of spirituality, and therefore a significant feature of human life (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009;
Hay & Nye, 1998, 2006). Hay and Nye’s (2006) claim that spirituality is primordial and a natural component of the human condition, with relationality at its core, underpins the connectedness of the Self with the Other. In this context, the Other refers to relationships to the Other in society, the world, and the environment.

A sense of belonging, whether or not it results in positive outcomes for an individual, exemplifies the I-Other relationality. The work of Hay and Nye (2006) described how spirituality is influenced by the sense of belonging established in peer relationships. Belonging to a supportive community of significant others is essential for spirituality to grow (Love & Talbot, 1999; Myers, 1997). As this relationship helps an individual person find her/his place in the world (Myers, 1997), the connectedness with this particular Other is deeper than a superficial friendship or association with a person or group of people. Peers may take precedence in identity formation during the adolescent stage of development (Fowler & Dell, 2006). This notion reinforces the pertinence of this study, as gleaning the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of the peer group on their spiritual growth throughout their secondary schooling, may provide insight that affirms or challenges the literature in this area.

The influence of the peer group in shaping identity formation during adolescence highlights an important aspect of the I-Other relationship with regards to spiritual growth. Young people may depend on significant others in their lives as they seek clarity and confirmation about their identity (Fowler & Dell, 2006). However, Fowler and Dell (2006) asserted that adolescents may be unable to view themselves and their relations with the Other from a third-person perspective. This notion originated from Fowler’s faith development theory (Fowler, 1981) which was covered in Section 2.2.2. The notion regarding difficulty in seeing a third-person perspective of the I-Other relationality is a defining characteristic of the ‘synthetic-conventional’ stage of faith. This stage is typically experienced during adolescence
and fits in a continuum as a transitional period between earlier and later stages of faith
development in childhood and adulthood (Fowler & Dell, 2006). An inability to see a
relationship with the Other from a third-person perspective may result in an “overdependence
on the mirroring and evaluations of influential significant others” (Fowler & Dell, 2006, p.40).

Another point regarding the I-Other relationality is that in the transition from
county to adolescence, girls tend to develop a greater vocabulary and interest in
interpersonal relationships, and they progress faster in emotional awareness and interpersonal
connectedness, than boys (Gilligan, 1982). To an extent, this point may be relevant in the
context of this research project involving girls’ education. However, faith development and
spiritual growth may vary with maturity (Fowler & Dell, 2006) between a group of similar
aged children or adolescents, or even adults. Lastly, “culture may affect socialisation
practices” (McNamara Barry et al., 2010, p. 317) resulting in prosocial or antisocial
behaviour. Peer group culture may affect an individual person in positive or negative ways.

2.2.3.3 Relationality with the environment.

Relationality with the natural world is an important component of spirituality
(Capra, 2010; Harris & Moran, 1998; King, 2013; Wilson, 1984) and, as such, is integral to
spiritual growth. Wilson (1984) stated “the natural world is the refuge of the spirit, remote,
static, richer than even human imagination” (p. 11). An entomologist and Pulitzer Prize
recipient, Wilson’s (1984) work was a study of the interconnectedness of humankind to other
living species, exemplifying the I-World relationality. He affirmed the need for human beings
to nourish their connection with the natural world and he suggested humanity benefits in a
spiritual sense from immersion in this world. Wilson (1984) used the term ‘biophilia’ to
describe human beings’ “innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (p. 1). He
claimed that “to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place greater value on them, and on ourselves” (Wilson, 1984, p. 2). The natural and emotional relationality between human beings, and other living organisms, aids survival and fosters a broader human sense of contentment and fulfilment (Wilson, 1984).

Harris and Moran (1998) considered the interconnectedness of human beings with elements of the natural world here on Earth, and beyond, with regards to humanity’s interconnectedness with the universe. They emphasised that justice is an essential component of spirituality, because it is an integral aspect of relations between humans and elements of the non-human universe, such as the land, the oceans, the planet and the air in the atmosphere (Harris & Moran, 1998). Likewise, Capra (2010) affirmed the human connection to the natural world is an essential aspect of spirituality, necessary for spiritual growth. He declared that human “connectedness, relationship, and community are fundamental concepts of ecology” (p. 9). He went on to explain that human interconnectedness and a sense of belonging are the essence of spirituality (Capra, 2010) and these attributes may be extended beyond human relations with other humans, to human relations with the natural world.

There appears to be a paucity of empirical literature on the relationality with the environment, particularly with regards to the educational setting. However, scholarly research has suggested that in schools, spirituality may be fostered in pedagogical activities whereby students are immersed in nature (Lee-Hammond, 2017; King, 2013). Human immersion in nature potentially amplifies time, space and reverence for the natural world and may provide students with a sense of calm (Louv, 2008). King (2013) proposed that immersion in nature is paramount in unlocking the spiritual potential of young people through developing a sense of stewardship and ecological awareness. Immersion in the natural world has the potential to arouse feelings of wonder and awe (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 2006; Louv, 2008; King, 2013; Robinson, 1977/1996) that foster spiritual growth. This notion will be discussed further in
Section 2.5.2. As a component of the I-World relationality and the human connectedness to the environment, consideration of a sense of place is also pertinent.

2.2.3.3.1 **Sense of place.**

The concept of a ‘sense of place’ is expressed in disciplines such as landscape architecture, environmental psychology, anthropology, geography, and sociology. Despite some commonalities, scholarly definitions of the term are diverse. Broadly, a sense of place may be defined as the affective experience of a person in a specific setting (Najafi & Shariff, 2011; Steele, 1981). That is, a sense of place refers to the characteristics and components of a physical place or location, as well as the feelings people experience when they visit, see, or hear that place (Qazimi, 2014). A sense of place may “allude to the complex relationship between humans and their environment” (Qazimi, 2014, p. 307). This relationship may evoke a sense of attachment or belonging to a specific environment (Najafi & Shariff, 2011), which may foster spirituality (Counted & Zock, 2019). Tacey (2000, 2003) more broadly refers to a spirit of place. The Australian landscape, for example, may evoke a sense of the sacred (Tacey, 2003) for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (Lee-Hammond, 2017).

In a geographical context, sense of place may be described using the term ‘topophilia’, meaning the particular bond people possess in relation to a place or setting, resulting in a variety of responses pertaining to the senses and varying in intensity (Najafi & Shariff, 2011; Tuan, 1974). Sense of place may also be referred to as ‘place attachment’, which means the symbolic relationship a group of people possess in relation to a particular place of cultural significance to them (Low, 1992). People’s attachment to places comprise their relationships to places, as well as the separate, but interrelated attachment people may have with regards to a particular community in that environment (Qazimi, 2014). Essentially, the duality of the concept of a sense of place encompasses the bonds a person may possess in
relation to a place, as distinct, yet closely related to a person’s sense of place or belonging within a particular social group in a particular environment (Qazimi, 2014). In this way, sense of place is relevant to human relationality with others (de Souza, 2016), as well as with the environment. The concept has been included in this section with regard to relationality with the environment.

Eaude (2009) wrote about the significance of human attachment to physical and social settings, particularly in childhood, and the corresponding influence on behaviour and emotional regulation. He qualified his thinking by stating that attachment is only one component influencing behaviour; behaviour is also influenced by a person’s current environment and their experiences. Of note with regards to a sense of place, Eaude (2009) stated that “gestures, responses, symbols, the physical environment all manifest, and contribute to, the expectations which adults have of children, and which shape their identity” (p. 193). He suggested that the most significant influences on students may be unseen. Eaude (2009) went on to articulate that particular elements of the school setting may affect children’s attachment to it, and the sense of belonging they feel towards it:

The work displayed, the small rituals of classroom life, the arrangement of furniture all help to create an atmosphere where children are made to feel secure (or otherwise), where they belong (or not), and to what extent they are expected to be active or passive. (p. 193)

An individual may experience attachment to the physical and social environment (Qazimi, 2014) such as the classroom environment and the children’s sense of belonging to the class. In this way, the I-World relationship varies according to the context in which a person is in at any one particular point in time (de Souza, 2016).
Other scholars reported on the need of human beings to ascertain their place in the world through consideration of their interrelationships with others (Morrison, Tay & Diener, 2011) in addition to their sense of place in the physical landscape. Perriam (2015) suggested that these dual components of a sense of place are integral in understanding the relationship between place and wellbeing. She discussed the significance of ‘therapeutic landscapes’ of spiritual significance and reports their positive influence on wellbeing and the healing of people with medical illnesses. Perriam (2015) reported that “individuals and groups experience connection with a place of healing or with others whose presence has a similar meaning. The process of connection is complex, involving social, emotional and spiritual engagement with others” (p. 28).

Multiple scholars have called for more study to be conducted regarding a sense of place (Counted & Zock, 2019; Najafi & Shariff, 2011; Perriam, 2015). In some instances, experiencing a sense of place evokes a sense of wonder and awe (Hay & Nye, 2006; Wilson, 1984) which may in turn influence spiritual growth (Counted & Zock, 2019). As there appears to be a paucity of literature, especially about the link between spiritual growth and sense of place, more study in this specific area is perhaps warranted.

2.2.3.3.2 Sense of place of Indigenous Australians.

Given the Australian setting of the study, consideration of the Australian Indigenous peoples’ spiritual growth and their relation to the physical environment is pertinent. Although it is unknown if any of the post-school women participants in this study are of Indigenous heritage, a small percentage of Indigenous students presently attend the three Western Australian Mercy schools (ACARA, 2016b). However, as none of the study’s participants reported a link to Indigenous spirituality, this notion has not been extensively explored in the literature.
It is acknowledged, however, that Indigenous Australians traditionally and culturally demonstrate a spiritual connectedness to the natural world, including the land and sea and its respective flora and fauna, in addition to the kinship of each other (Lohoar, Butera, & Kennedy, 2014). The literature on the spirituality of Indigenous Australians shows the I-World relationship is a core component of their spirituality (Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Lee-Hammond, 2017; Lohoar et al., 2014) and illustrates the significance of a sense of place and belonging to this particular group of people in Australian society. Australian secondary students learn about this notion in their secondary schooling (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014).

2.2.3.4 Relationality with the transcendent.

As mentioned in Section 2.2.2, spiritual growth may occur within or outside of a religious context. However, scholars as far back as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment have proposed that a form of higher awareness, “different from and transcending everyday awareness and which has a positive function in enabling individuals to survive in their natural environment” (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 22) has influenced humanity in a spiritual sense whether tethered to religion or not. Zoologist Alister Hardy (1965) hypothesised that the spiritual nature of human beings has aided their survival over time. Humanity has been in possession of an innate spiritual capacity across millennia and prior to the development of multiple major world religions (Armstrong, 1993; de Souza, 2016). Research has supported the notion that human beings naturally seek relationality with the transcendent, and this literature demonstrates the I-God relationship (de Souza, 2016, Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008) is a component of spiritual growth.

As mentioned, spiritual relationality with the transcendent may or may not be derivative of a particular religion. Rather, relationality with the transcendent is a human capacity to transcend the ordinariness of everyday life (de Souza, 2016). The human desire to
cultivate a sense of the transcendent is not merely an addition to the human condition, but may instead be its defining feature (Armstrong, 2009). Armstrong (2009) stated that being at one with the Other is a transcendent mystery the depth of which cannot be measured. This notion about a sense of complete wholeness or unity, asserted by Armstrong (2009), echoed de Souza’s (2016) contention that a sense of unity with the Other may result in ‘Ultimate Unity’ as the transcendent dimension of life is drawn from the core of human existence. Relationality with the transcendent is not bound or limited by religion as the human desire to search for the absolute may not involve a search for the divine (Armstrong, 2009). Accordingly, in the context of this study, relationality of the transcendent is viewed as either occurring separately to religion or overlapping with religion.

2.2.4 The felt sense of spiritual growth.

Many scholars draw on non-verbal aspects of our being in describing aspects of spirituality (Berryman, 2001; Nye, 2017; Wright, 2000). Spirituality is described as possessing an ethereal quality in that it is a felt-sense experience difficult to express in words (Nye, 2017). The ethereal felt sense and the non-verbal aspects of spirituality underpin the aforementioned description of spiritual growth outlined in Chapter 1 which frames this study. That is, the relationship with one’s inner self, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being is potentially an ethereal felt sense, unable to be articulated verbally.

2.2.5 The fragility of spiritual growth.

Some scholars have associated a degree of fragility with the concept of spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2017). Nye (2017) proposed that spirituality is child-like in that “it is vulnerable, and can even die if neglected, ignored or misunderstood” (p. 6). This quality was supported by Hyde (2008) through his research conducted across three Victorian primary schools. His qualitative research, involving three 45-minute meetings with 35
children, involved the application of Gadamer’s (1989) approach to hermeneutic phenomenology, resulting in clear findings. Hyde (2008) found that the participants in his study expressed their spirituality in different ways and from an early age. He posited that if the spiritual dimension of the child’s life “is not listened to, nurtured and fostered, it can become suppressed and damaged by socially and historically constructed processes” (Hyde, 2008, p. 59).

Building on this notion, Nye (2017) asserted that some children may increase their hunger for spiritual nourishment when faced with life crises (p. 91). Nye (2017) cited an incident involving the reaction of students when a classmate’s parent died of cancer exemplified how challenging life experiences may provide students with catalysts that may either develop or impair spiritual development. This notion will be further explored in Section 2.2.7 with reference to the shadow side of spiritual growth. The way a crisis is addressed in the school setting may influence student spiritual growth and this notion provides further impetus for the research investigation.

2.2.6 The protective factors of spiritual growth.

Fostering the spiritual growth of young people is integral in helping them navigate the challenges of the modern world. The protective factors offered by nurturing spirituality, such as improving wellbeing and building resilience (Eaude, 2009; Kim & Esquivel, 2011), may fuel spiritual growth and help address the crisis of youth wellbeing in contemporary Australia. Pluralism, consumerism, and secularism in contemporary society potentially erode a sense of community (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). Further, individualism and materialism have contributed to “worsening trends in psychosocial problems” (Eckersley, 1998, p. 7) in young people. These factors, coupled with the moral fragmentation of society and family breakdown may cause a sense of disconnection or spiritual poverty among youth (CCE, 1997).
Additionally, a widening wealth distribution (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2019), increases in mental illnesses and substance abuse are other contextual factors that present serious challenges to young people (Bullot, Cave, Fildes, Hall, & Plummer, 2017; Eckersley, 1998, 2005).

However, spirituality may assist adolescents in coping with these socio-cultural challenges through aiding their mental health (Eaude, 2009). The importance of fostering spiritual growth is exemplified through an analogy of physical and mental health. Physically active people build their strength and fitness to deal with physical challenges, and similarly, people who nourish their mental health may be able to better cope with adversity than people who possess less robust mental health (Eaude, 2009). Fostering the spiritual health of young people is a protective factor guarding them against potentially erosive negative behaviours (Brooks et al., 2018; Eaude, 2009; Hackett, 2015).

Aiding spirituality facilitates multiple benefits for the individual, including enhancing wellbeing, strengthening human development, and increasing resilience (Benson et al., 2003; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; King, 2013; Mueller, 2010; Ng, 2012). Furthermore, nourishing the spirituality of students enhances learning in that it fosters deep learning (Robinson & Hackett, 2019), critical thinking, problem solving and creativity skills (King, 2013; McEwan, 2008; Ng, 2012). The research evidently supports the notion that supporting student spiritual growth in an educative setting is essential.

The protective factors of spiritual growth are crucial in maximising the potential of adolescents. Spirituality may be a “source of ambition, pushing people to reach their fullest potential” (Sifers, Warren, & Jackson, 2012, p. 206). It is beneficial not only for the individual, but for wider society as it fosters a sense of responsibility and discipline that facilitates interpersonal relationships and personal growth (Sifers et al., 2012). Brooks et al.
(2018) proposed that these interpersonal relationships and connections are significant in protecting health during adolescence. The long-term benefits of spiritual growth for the individual and society are clear (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Sifers et al., 2012).

It follows that young people require the opportunity and skills to foster their spiritual growth and in turn aid their mental health. Fostering the spirituality of young people may help them find a sense of purpose, meaning and connectedness in life (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Wright, 2000). Aiding student spiritual growth may also help them feel empathy for others, rather than self-centredness (Hackett, 2015; Rossiter, 2018) and lead to a sense of contentment or happiness through improved wellbeing and resilience (Eaude, 2009; McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

2.2.7 The shadow side of spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth focuses on the ‘lightness’ of spirituality, and results in the aforementioned protective factors benefitting the individual and society. However, it is acknowledged that spirituality is fragile (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2017) and this fragility is revealed through the shadow side of spirituality. This ‘shadow’ refers to negative characteristics of spirituality whereby emotions such as despair and destructiveness impede the spiritual growth of a person and may develop into a sense of disconnectedness (de Souza, 2016). Consideration of the dark side of spirituality is warranted in the context of this study, given the prevalence of the spiritual shadow in everyday life and its negative influence on spiritual growth. De Souza (2016) called for more study into this lesser known shadow side of spirituality.

The spiritual shadow emerges from Carl Jung’s (1953) theory of the human shadow. Jung (1953) described this human shadow as the inferior element of a person’s personality, or persona, including the social role a person plays to assimilate with a group to whom s/he
wishes to belong. Socialisation may cause a person to repress or relegate some of her/his defining characteristics or unique talents to the shadow, resulting in inner conflict (Hyde, 2008). The conflict between the persona and shadow “contribute to an unfolding and to a depth and richness of life” (Hyde, 2008, p. 152) that a healthy personality is able to balance in everyday life. Where there is an imbalance, the shadow may overpower and inhibit spiritual growth, preventing a person from being her/his authentic self.

In his study of primary school children, Australian scholar Brendan Hyde (2008) observed that in some of his discussions with children they appeared to mask their inner feelings through seemingly idle chatter or giggling. Hyde termed this behaviour as ‘trivialising’ and explained that it “referred to the avoidance of confronting issues of meaning and value in life, as well as making light of such issues” (Hyde, 2008, p. 150). In trivialising, the students were displaying their shadow side of spirituality, perhaps due to feeling awkward in speaking their true thoughts in front of their peers, or perhaps due to not being able to articulate their feelings. The shadow side of their spirituality had emerged (Hyde, 2008). This darkness becomes a problem only if the shadow side assumes control for too long, to the detriment of the individual’s persona and spiritual growth (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008).

Another issue Hyde (2008) cited as detrimental to spirituality was material pursuit emerging from the negative effects of materialism and consumerism on young people. De Souza (2016) linked this notion to the shadow side of spirituality. She stated:

One factor that appears to prompt disconnectedness and therefore support the emergence of the shadow is living in the materialistic culture of today. This could be because the attractions and distractions of a consumeristic society soothe and manipulate the physical Self and therefore are too hard to resist. Or it could be that the busyness of life
allows people to avoid delving into the depths of their Being where shadows may lurk; thus, they can avoid the discomfort and/or fear associated with such an activity. (p. 97)

The influence of contextual factors such as materialism and consumerism on student spirituality warrants further research in this area (de Souza, 2016). Another observation about the shadow of spirituality is Tacey’s (2006) assertion that contemporary society dwells on the positive aspects of spirituality, ignoring the shadow. Tacey (2006) called for greater attention, respect, and appreciation to be given to the shadow so that its capacity for destruction is considered alongside “its capacity for vitality, growth and transformation” (p. 61). Tacey’s (2006) acknowledgement of the powerful capacity of the spiritual shadow aligns with Hyde’s (2008) claim that the shadow is able to promote richness and depth in making meaning of life.

2.2.8 Overarching research question.

The research has revealed that spirituality provides multiple benefits to the individual and society (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Kessler, 2000). Spirituality offers students protective factors and it leads to human flourishing (Eaude, 2009). These protective factors may be pertinent in meeting multiple socio-cultural contextual challenges facing young people in contemporary Australia (Bullot et al., 2017; Mission Australia, 2015). As mentioned, some of these protective factors include building resilience (Brooks et al., 2018; Kim & Esquivel, 2011), improving wellbeing (Brooks et al., 2018; King, 2013), aiding identity formation during adolescence (Wright, 2000) and strengthening human development (Benson et al., 2003; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). Also, of significance, is the notion that spirituality fulfills an essential human need (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006). The phenomenon of spiritual growth warrants further study.
As student spiritual growth underpins the mission of evangelisation that lies at the heart of the Catholic school (CECWA, 2013), it is an essential element of every Catholic school. Scholars call for more research in the field of student spirituality so that educators may in turn be equipped with the skills, knowledge and resources needed to make a positive difference in their students’ spiritual lives (de Souza & Hyde, 2007; Hyde, 2008; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Ng, 2012). The following working definition is based on commonalities expressed in the extant literature reviewed thus far. As indicated in Chapter 1, this definition frames the research investigation: spiritual growth is a positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from connectedness with oneself, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018).

The overarching research question of this study evolves from the literature in that it is based on a desire to know how the spiritual growth of students is fostered. To narrow the focus of the research, the question is specific to a MEL girls’ secondary school context. The following overarching research question underpins the study:

**What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?**

This study responds to the call of scholars in the field who have advocated for further empirical research pertaining to the influence of schooling on student spiritual growth (de Souza, 2016; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Hyde, 2013). Following exploration of the phenomenon of spiritual growth, the literature review will now explore aspects of spiritual growth pertaining to education.

Literature from Church documents about student spirituality in education is broadly categorised in three areas: school culture, teacher-student relationships, and school
curriculum and pedagogy (CCE, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997; CECWA, 2009). The Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009) clearly delineated and emphasised these three areas. Catholic school educators in Western Australia are called to implement the vision of the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA, 2009). In conjunction with the Mercy ethos (Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia & Papua New Guinea [ISMAPNG], 2020b), this vision forms the educational foundation of the three MEL schools the study participants attended.

Other research also highlights school culture, teacher-student relationships, and school curriculum and pedagogy as integral aspects of student spirituality (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hackett, 2015; Hyde, 2008; McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015; Rossiter, 2018; Wright, 2000). Accordingly, these three areas frame the remainder of the literature review. The first area reviewed is school culture in relation to student spiritual growth.

2.3 Spiritual Growth and School Culture

The culture of a school may be defined as the core values, beliefs, traditions, and symbols which give meaning to the school community, and influences the lives of students, teachers, and parents (Flynn, 1993). Church literature emphasised that the Catholic school is inspired by faith which is imbued throughout every aspect of school culture. Enriching student spiritual growth, through the integration of faith and culture, and faith and life, underpins the Catholic school focus on the education of the human person with Christ at its foundation (CCE, 1977, 1997; NCEC, 2017). Although individuals may actively shape their own spiritual growth, the interaction between them and the culture in which they are immersed is a powerful partnership (Benson et al., 2003). The culture of a Catholic school provides a mechanism through which students, teachers and parents find meaning through relationships (Flynn, 1993).
2.3.1 Influence of school religious climate on spiritual growth.

The religious climate of a school influences student spiritual growth (Barrett, Pearson, Muller, & Frank, 2007; CCE, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Hyde, 2013) and it will therefore be an area of focus in this literature review. Barrett et al. (2007) asserted that “schools play a key role in the social development of adolescents, and students’ religious beliefs and behaviours are influenced systematically and observably by the type of religious climate with the school” (p. 1024). Furthermore, the Catholic school’s primary mission of evangelisation is becoming increasingly paramount in nourishing student spiritual growth, especially given the disconnection of many Catholic families from their faith culture (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012).

The culture of a Catholic school, where students are immersed in the elements of school life “which are concerned with the broader ethos of the Catholic school and parish community, such as opportunities for prayer, liturgy and worship” (Hyde, 2013, p. 43) supports the spiritual growth of the whole child. Teachers who are faith role models in the way they privilege and nourish their interactions with students also influence the religious climate of the school (CCE, 1988, para. 96). Teachers influence school climate through their words and actions, and this notion will be further explored with regards to teacher-student relationships in Section 2.4.

Many socio-cultural influences, such as technology reliance, the influence of the mass media, secularism and political, religious and cultural pluralism, appear to work in opposition to the Catholic school culture based on Gospel values (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). Modern Australian society is in need of the protective and healing properties spirituality offers the youth of today, such as building resilience and buffering “individuals from the gamut of challenges that may occur, even fostering physical, mental and behavioural health and happiness” (Sifers et al., 2012, p. 206). A strong spiritual foundation may improve
wellbeing and foster resilience and creativity to help deal with life challenges (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). The religious climate of the Catholic school is a medium that serves to foster student spiritual growth (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Rossiter, 2018). This notion is perhaps pertinent given the wellbeing challenges facing contemporary Australian youth (Eckersley, 1998, 2005; Stanley, Richardson, & Prior, 2005).

2.3.2 Sense of belonging and community.

Religious socialisation in the Catholic school may help build a sense of belonging and community for students (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012) that in turn, aids their spiritual growth. Furthermore, the nature of Catholic schools, whereby students receive religious and spiritual nourishment in a Catholic culture based on Gospel values across the breadth of the curriculum, influences school culture (CECWA, 2009, 2013; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). This Catholic culture underpins human relationships reflective of Gospel values in the school setting, through the Christian witness of staff and their interactions with students, parents, and fellow teachers (CECWA, 2009). The Catholic culture also builds a sense of community and belonging (CECWA, 2009). These cultural influences, although difficult to quantify, may contribute to spiritual growth. This study provides data that increases clarity regarding the influence of school culture on spiritual growth.

On this note, Barrett et al. (2007) asserted the generalisation that “schools play a key role in the social development of adolescents, and students’ religious beliefs and behaviours are influenced systematically and observably by the type of religious climate with the school” (p. 1024). Some scholars claim the Catholic school’s evangelisation mission, and its Catholic identity and ethos, is increasingly paramount in providing student spiritual growth, especially given the disconnection of many Catholic families from their faith (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). This assertion may be correlated with the 2016 Australian census results, published by the
Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). This census revealed the number of people identifying as Catholic declined 2.7% between 2011 and 2016 (ABS, 2017). However, the ABS census statistics do not reveal whether or not these people drifting from the Catholic faith were regular Mass attendees. Perhaps some people loosely affiliated themselves with being Catholic in their past but had since cut that affiliation. Furthermore, Mass attendance is merely one source of spiritual nourishment, albeit an integral source (CECWA, 2009).

However, the trend away from Mass attendance (Rossiter, 2018), along with many other aforementioned socio-cultural factors, may inhibit the spiritual growth of young people attending Catholic schools. Schools provide their students with an otherwise inaccessible opportunity for spiritual growth when they provide their students with the opportunity to attend Mass (CECWA, 2009). School culture and the sense of community and belonging embedded in Catholic schools through participation in Mass and other similar liturgical opportunities, contribute to student spiritual growth (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). In this study a school’s culture is influenced not only by religiosity in a general sense, but also specifically through the Sisters of Mercy cultural heritage underpinning each of the three MEL schools attended by the study participants.

2.3.3 Influence of Mercy ethos on school culture.

The word ‘ethos’ originates from the Greek word of the same name, meaning the nature or disposition that describes the characteristic spirit or tone of a community (Ethos, 2019, para. 1). The three Western Australian MEL schools share a common ethos founded on their Sisters of Mercy heritage (Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia & Papua New Guinea [ISMAPNG], 2020b) which potentially infiltrates their respective school cultures. This ethos, inspired by Catherine McAuley in striving to meet the needs of the marginalised and vulnerable in society, tending the sick and aged, and educating the young, lies at the heart
of each Mercy school (ISMAPNG, 2020b). The introductory aim and vision of the MEL (n.d.b) charter, which all Mercy schools are obliged to follow, underpins the Mercy ethos:

The aim of all Mercy schools is to be true to Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, who wanted first and foremost for her schools to live and to teach the Good News revealed in Jesus Christ. Our commitment to Catherine’s vision as a lens through which to embrace the Gospel message inspires our schools to strive for excellence in learning and achieve student success. (para. 1)

The MEL charter outlines the values underpinning each Mercy school and the education offered (MEL, n.d.b). The Mercy ethos is characterised by values such as justice, compassion, hospitality, excellence, integrity and service, based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, that operate as guiding principles in shaping the education offered (MEL, n.d.b). The MEL charter also specified five aspects of Mercy schooling as being integral to the education offered:

- We are a faith-centred Catholic school in the Mercy tradition inspired by Catherine McAuley.
- Our school leadership is visionary and shared.
- We are learning-centred and foster a culture of excellence and continuous improvement in our teaching.
- We foster our students’ growth as competent, confident, independent young adults.
- We value the engagement of parents and the wider community.

(MEL, n.d.b, paras. 2-6)
Each of these aspects is indicative of the Mercy ethos because they each reflect the nature and disposition of the type of education being offered at Mercy schools. Religious socialisation in the Catholic school may help build a sense of belonging and community for students that, in turn, aids their spiritual growth (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). In this sense, the Mercy ethos is an aspect of religious socialisation that influences school culture.

2.3.4 Subsidiary research question 1.

The research indicated that school culture is a factor affecting student spiritual growth, although there appears to be limited empirical evidence available, particularly regarding Mercy schooling. The findings generated from the research project contribute to the literature on this topic. The following subsidiary research question is therefore pertinent to the study:

What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth?

The second aspect pertinent to education, on which the extant literature on student spiritual growth focuses, is teacher-student relationships. The literature on this aspect will now be explored.

2.4 Student Spiritual Growth and Teacher-Student Relations

Literature in the field of student spiritual growth has highlighted the importance of the teacher-student relationship as fostering or inhibiting student spirituality (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Nye, 2017; Palmer, 1999). The following six factors, highlighted in research, are perhaps worthy of consideration in relation to the Catholic girls’ secondary school context of this investigation: interpersonal relationships (CCE, 1997; Kessler, 2000); the provision of space in teaching and learning relationships (Nye, 2017); power relationships (Dillen, 2011;
Ng, 2012); intimacy and trust (Nye, 2017); support in search for identity (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; MacDonald, 2009); and, Christian witness (Miller, 2006; Vatican Council II, 1956b). These six factors pertaining to teacher-student relations will now be explored.

2.4.1 **Interpersonal skills in teacher-student relationships.**

Adolescent students require “personal relations with outstanding educators” (CCE, 1997, para. 18). Enhancing student spiritual growth through interpersonal relationships modelled on Christ are integral “for the teacher does not write on inanimate material, but on the very spirits of human beings” (CCE, 1997, para. 19). It follows that authentic consideration of the ‘whole child’ by the teacher is integral in every teacher-student relationship. Students need to feel supported, safe and be given opportunities to flourish in a cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual sense (CECWA, 2009). Whether or not students have a religious affiliation, their spirituality is pivotal to their development as whole people (De Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008; Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017).

Teachers may nourish spirituality through fostering student yearning for the following experiences: a deep connection to self and others; meaning and purpose; silence and solitude; transcendence; joy; creativity; and, a call for initiation such as rites of passage (Kessler, 2000). However, curriculum and pedagogy are insufficient in maximising student spirituality without strong teacher-student relations to deliver them (Kessler, 2000). Authentic teacher-student relationships, based on trust and respect, where teachers cultivate awareness and compassion of the yearnings of the whole child, (Hyde, 2008; Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017) are essential in fostering spiritual growth.

Büssing, Föller-Mancini, Gidley and Heusser (2010) considered the way students perceive particular qualities in their teachers, providing insight as to how the teacher-student relationship influences student spirituality. Their study involved an anonymous survey of 254
students from four different high schools located in the same area of West Germany. Büssing et al. (2010) concluded that female adolescents valued conscious relationship interactions, and qualities such as compassion and generosity, more so than their male counterparts. The research also highlighted that female students valued particular qualities in their teachers. Büssing et al. (2010) also found that female students were more likely to pray for others than their male counterparts.

However, the small sample size of the study by Büssing et al. (2010) may not reflect the broader context. Comparison of the teacher qualities and practices valued by Australian female secondary school students, compared with the female contingent of the study by Büssing et al. (2010), may provide some insight into the influences on female spiritual growth. Similarly, Kessler’s (2000) American study may be considered limited given it was largely based on her own observations. Other research supported the notion that interpersonal relationships are valued by students, albeit in a broad sense (Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2017; Palmer, 1999, 2003). The research demonstrated there is perhaps scope to conduct further research regarding the influence of teacher-student relationships on student spiritual growth.

2.4.2 The provision of space in teaching and learning relationships.

The provision of physical, emotional and auditory space in teaching and learning also reflects an appreciation of the need to foster open, safe, communicative, and meaningful teacher-student relations (Nye, 2017). For example, a teacher may provide children with auditory spaces through leaving gaps after they have spoken, thus providing them the space to talk more if desired (Nye, 2017). Allowing auditory space also includes the privileging of silence. Nye (2017) writes “Children who choose not to speak are not spaces where ‘nothing’ is happening” (p. 45).
2.4.3 Power relationships.

The perceived power balance in teacher-student relationships appears to influence how young people respond to spiritual growth opportunities in the school setting. Dillen (2011) analysed the influence of pedagogical power dynamics through reference to ten scholarly articles, including three of her own. She promoted the notion that young people respond more favourably to methods where power is shared between students and teachers (‘power with’), rather than teachers exerting ‘power over’ students through teaching content that may be perceived as fixed or unalterable from an authoritative source, such as the Catholic Church (Dillen, 2011).

In addition, stimulating the power within students may empower them to realise their inner strength and optimise development and expression of their spirituality (Dillen, 2011). Teachers who provide pedagogical experiences whereby they exercise power with and/or within students (Dillen, 2011; Nye, 2017) reinforce Ng’s (2012) recommendation for teachers to work as facilitators with the students, rather than as authority figures exerting power. Privileging how the teacher and student relate with each other, rather than prioritising lesson content, is also integral in the teacher-student relationship (Nye, 2017). One may question to what extent variation of the teacher-student power balance may be deemed conducive or prohibitive in aiding student spiritual growth? This notion is discussed in Section 5.2.4.2 with regards to the influence of teachers who exhibit non-authoritarian demeanours.

Paradoxically, one may assume that teachers who exert overt authority in exercising power over students, perhaps through their actions, words, and prioritising of lesson content, may inhibit student spirituality (Palmer, 2003). Fostering spirituality is perhaps achieved through balancing the teacher-student power relationship, so that students feel empowered to explore their spirituality in an environment characterised by inclusivity and respect for all
(Dillen, 2011). The teacher-student relationship, being one of respect and authenticity, and exemplifying a listening ethos, highlights the need for teachers to relate to their students in a non-authoritative manner (Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2017). The teacher who acts as a facilitator, with a non-condescending approach to relationships in the classroom, promotes a non-individualistic approach to spirituality that honours the dignity of all people in the said relationship (Ng, 2012; Nye, 2017).

Educators who privilege how the teacher and student relate with each other (Nye, 2017), rather than exercise a hierarchical, authoritarian stance or constantly prioritise lesson content, evoke due consideration of the spiritual dimension of education in “teaching with heart and soul” (Palmer, 2003, p. 376). This important human aspect of teacher-student relationships is closely entwined with the following theme arising from the literature, that of intimacy and trust in relationships.

2.4.4 Intimacy and trust.

Intimacy and trust in teacher-student relationships is premised on teachers providing students with opportunities to “come closer, delve deeper, take risks and pursue passions” (Nye, 2017, p. 53). Trust is essential if children are to feel safe in the learning space. Teachers also need to exercise trust in the process. Teachers may need to place their trust in God, in the children they work with and in their faith, and they do not necessarily need to have all of the answers and know what to say, especially when in dialogue with young people (Nye, 2017). Through the analysis of post-school women’s perceptions about teacher-student relationships, this study provides insight into the influence of intimacy and trust in these relationships on student spiritual growth in the secondary school.
2.4.5 Support in search for identity.

Helping students forge positive identities from the multiple and conflicting influences in their lives is perhaps an integral component of education, best delivered by teachers with strong interpersonal skills (Kessler, 2000). Adolescence is a turbulent period of human development, potentially characterised by immense change centred on identity formation and shaped by spiritual growth, family, community, lifestyle, and religiousness (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; MacDonald, 2009). Mueller (2010) explained that the formation of personal identity and faith is foregrounded because “teens are attuned to the expectations and judgements of significant others, such as family, teachers, and peers, but will need to develop an independent perspective through self-examination…” (p. 199). Identity is evidently both a personal and social construction shaped by a variety of factors, including the influence of interpersonal relationships with others.

It appears the teacher-student relationship may influence the identity formation of the secondary student (Mueller, 2010) yet there appears to be limited empirical research that explicitly investigates the extent to which the teacher-student relationship is significant to student spiritual growth. The research does highlight that the relationship between the Self and the Other is pivotal to identity formation, as suggested by MacIntyre’s (1997) assertion that “the story of my life is always embedded in the story of the communities from which I derive my identity” (p. 259). Teachers, along with the peer group, family, other school influences, and the media, are some of the influences secondary school students may use to derive their identities (Fowler, 1981). Gottlieb’s (2006) contention that spirituality is entwined with identity formation reinforces the significance of spiritual education at this crucial stage of adolescent development. However, teachers may require assistance in helping students gain an understanding of “the relationships that define their life-world and which also define them” (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012, p. 250). The research about identity formation...
highlights the various relationships influencing identity formation (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; MacDonald, 2009; Mueller, 2010). However, there appears a paucity of empirical literature about the significance of the teacher-student relationship with regards to identity formation and spiritual growth.

2.4.6 Christian witness.

Catholic school educators are called to model Christ in word and witness (Miller, 2006; Vatican Council II, 1956b) and their good work in this respect “is a fundamental sign of God’s presence in the Catholic school” (CECWA, 2009, para. 98). Through owning and revealing strong Catholic identities and imitating Christ in word and action, teachers are fundamental influences in students’ spiritual growth (Giersch, 2009). Conversely, teachers who exhibit inconsistent or haphazard efforts in living according to Gospel values (CCE, 1988) may inhibit student spirituality because hypocrisy and failure to model Christian virtues through word and witness disengages students and erodes their respect for the individual and the institution (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). In this way, teacher support of the Catholic ethos through Christian witness influences not only teacher-student relationships, but also the previous theme derived from the literature, that of school culture (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). This study provides insight about how student spiritual growth is influenced by the Christian witness of teachers.

2.4.7 Subsidiary research question 2.

Despite a paucity of empirical evidence with regards to Mercy schooling, the research asserted that teacher-student relationships influence student spirituality (Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017; Palmer, 2003) and specifically, spiritual growth. More research on this aspect of schooling is perhaps warranted to add to the literature so that educators may be well informed as to explicitly how the relationships they share with their students influence
student spiritual growth. Therefore, the following subsidiary research question emerged from this part of the literature:

**What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth?**

### 2.5 Student Spiritual Growth and Curriculum and Pedagogy

#### 2.5.1 Curriculum.

The curriculum reviewed here encompasses the Catholic curriculum taught in every Catholic school (CCE, 1977) followed by the national and state curricula deemed mandatory by the Federal and State governments in Australian schools (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014).

##### 2.5.1.1 Catholic curriculum.

In fulfilling the mission of the Church, Catholic schools evangelise through the integration of faith, life, and culture. The Catholic schools’ curricula and pedagogy are distinctive in that they include forming spiritual and religious capabilities (CCE, 1997; McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015). The *Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia* (CECWA, 2009) articulated that in fulfilling the Church’s mission of evangelisation, Catholic education focus on a distinctively human formation, centred on the life and teaching of Jesus, within a Catholic faith tradition.

While there has been some resistance to the provision of spirituality and its role in education in the Australian public education sector (de Souza & Hyde, 2007) a point of difference with Catholic schools is the support they offer students through the Catholic ethos imbued across the curriculum. For example, the secular Australian values in the Australian curriculum, when complemented by the Gospel values, may work to provide students with an
opportunity for spiritual growth grounded in the Catholic faith (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

A Catholic curriculum fosters spiritual growth not only in the subject of Religious Education, but across the broader dimension of the Catholic school (CECWA, 2009). Many scholars have suggested that this style of a holistic approach to spirituality is integral in enhancing the spiritual lives of young people (Hyde, 2013; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; King, 2013; Ng, 2012; Rossiter, 2011). A holistic, spiritualised curriculum is also thought to address an authentic human need, especially in the turbulent phase of adolescence (Wright, 2000), and as such should be an educational priority (CECWA, 2009, 2013).

Furthermore, a Catholic curriculum promotes the purpose of learning. The purpose of studying school subjects in the Catholic school is not only the attainment of knowledge for learners, but their acquisition of Christian values and discovery of truth (CCE, 1997, 1988). Opportunities for spiritual growth across the broader dimensions of the Catholic school may facilitate holistic learning from the Catholic curriculum. The collaboration of all subjects “each with its own specific content” (CCE, 1997, para. 14) contributes to the spiritual growth of students. Student integration of subject knowledge across the curriculum in view of Gospel teachings, coupled with learning about Christian virtues, facilitates student spiritual growth as a Christian person (CCE, 1977).

Some scholars question the effectiveness of fostering student spirituality in the Catholic curriculum. For example, Buchanan (2012) called for an increased emphasis on the faith dimension of Catholic education, as distinct from the focus on religion. This shift in emphasis requires fostering student spiritual growth in the holistic sense, as against predominantly delivering lesson content about religion. Faith is closely related to spiritual growth in that an individual person may exercise faith as part of her/his spirituality.
Buchanan (2012) called for a re-consideration of how an emphasis on faith may be undertaken in the subject of Religious Education, in particular. This approach looks beyond the solely intellectual and academic elements of education, such as learning about religion, and is holistic in nature. Imbuing student spiritual growth in the Catholic curriculum reinforces a “commitment of one’s whole being to the Person of Christ” (CCE, 1997, para. 50). The holistic education of the whole child underpins the notion of delivering a distinctively Catholic education. Each individual human being is at the heart of Christ’s teaching and this notion “expresses the centrality of the human person in the educational project of the Catholic school” (CCE, 1997, para. 9). Fostering student knowledge and understanding of the moral and ethical dimensions of life, informed by Gospel values, is needed across the curriculum to support student spiritual growth. Many scholars suggest that this holistic approach to spirituality is integral in enhancing the spiritual lives of young people (Hyde, 2013; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; King, 2013; Ng, 2012; Rossiter, 2011).

Finally, in nurturing the growth of the whole child to become a fully integrated human being, the Catholic school needs to evoke the “inner spiritual dynamism” (CCE, 1977, para. 30) of each student. Holistic Catholic education needs to encompass opportunities for students to experience spiritual growth (CCE, 1977; CECWA, 2009). Catholic schools employ the curriculum, in conjunction with pedagogies, to promote and explore these student spiritual growth opportunities.

2.5.1.2 State and national curricula.

In striving to be good schools, Catholic schools need to adhere to government legislation requirements in addition to their primary purpose of evangelisation (CCE, 1977;
Catholic schools are required by the Federal and State governments to prepare their students for the 21st Century by teaching the mandatory national and state curricula (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014). Accordingly, the three MEL schools that the participants in this study attended are required to teach the Australian and Western Australian (WA) curricula. As the WA curriculum encompasses the national curriculum (SCSA, 2014), WA schools are able to ensure the objectives of both the national and state curricula are covered. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the WA syllabuses have been contextualised and tailored to suit WA students (SCSA, 2014).

The national and state curricula include the explicit teaching of seven general capabilities and three cross-curricular priorities prescribed to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills to learn to function successfully upon leaving school so they may positively contribute to wider society (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014). The general capabilities include:

- Literacy
- Numeracy
- Information and communication technology (ICT) capability
- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal and social capability
- Ethical understanding
- Intercultural understanding

(ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014).

The cross-curricular priorities include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia

Sustainability

(ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014).

The state curriculum outlines the knowledge, skills, understandings, values and attitudes that WA students are expected to acquire throughout their education (SCSA, 2014). At this point in time, the state and national curricula cater for kindergarten to Year 10 students only (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014). Western Australian senior students in Years 11 and 12 use the WA secondary curriculum pertaining to senior years’ students, which is outlined in the SCSA (2014) document *Curriculum Framework*. Other states and territories also use their own curriculum for the senior years of secondary school (SCSA, 2014).

Although Catholic schools are required to teach the mandated state curriculum (SCSA, 2014) they are primarily called to fulfil the evangelising mission of the Church through the integration of faith, life and culture (CCE, 1977, para. 9). As mentioned, the Catholic curriculum underpins the Church’s mission (CECWA, 2009). The Catholic school is distinctive in that spiritual and religious capabilities sit in addition to the general capabilities and cross-curricular priorities defined by the state curriculum, so that students are provided with the opportunity to be formed into not only young women and men who are able to contribute to 21st Century society, but young, fully integrated Christian women and men “who are responsible and inner-directed, capable of choosing freely in conformity with their conscience” (CCE, 1977, para. 31).

There is scope for the Catholic school to develop spiritual and religious capabilities and teach them in addition to the personal and social capabilities of the state curriculum (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015). In this regard, scholars have highlighted the need to avoid reinforcing a worldview of modernity with a focus on the individual, rather than a Catholic
worldview with a focus on the individual as part of a community (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). Students may benefit from educational activities where they develop a sense of selflessness, rather than self-centredness (Hackett, 2015). Encouraging students to develop a sense of empathy and reach outwards to others may be attained through educational experiences such as service-learning programs (Hackett, 2015). Spiritual and religious capabilities are essential elements of the Catholic school and as such “always remain an aspiration to students in Catholic schools” (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015, para. 5). Without spiritual and religious capabilities, the school would no longer be fulfilling its evangelising mission nor nurturing the whole person (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). Furthermore, fostering spiritual capabilities enables students to develop a sense of meaning and purpose through deep learning (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

The development of spiritual capabilities in young people is expressed in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the subsequent Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council [CAGEC], 2019). The national and state curricula (ACARA, 2016a; SCSA, 2014) strive to attain common educational goals as set out in these declarations by Australian education ministers (CAGEC, 2019; MCEETYA, 2008). The spiritual wellbeing of young people is identified as a goal with reference to young Australians becoming confident and creative individuals (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9). However, the national curriculum does not make specific reference to the spiritual wellbeing of students (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). Neither does the state curricula make reference to this aspect of the declaration. This omission of the spiritual dimension in national and state curricula emphasises the need for Catholic schools to provide students with spiritual growth opportunities in the distinctly Catholic curriculum to fulfil their evangelising mission (CECWA, 2009).
2.5.2 Pedagogy.

Put simply, pedagogy refers to the method and practice of teaching and involves the instruction of students (Pedagogy, 2019, para. 1). The curriculum is delivered to students by teachers employing pedagogical processes. With regards to this study, there appears to be limited empirical literature about pedagogical processes and how they may influence student spiritual growth. However, the aforementioned work of Hay and Nye (2006) and Hyde (2008) highlighted that student spirituality is fostered through pedagogies that encourage student imagination. Later work by Nye (2017) also supported this notion. Significantly, critically engaging, inquiring and experiential pedagogy appears to support spiritual growth in secondary students (Hackett & Lavery, 2010, 2011; Rossiter, 2018).

2.5.2.1 Critically engaging, inquiring and experiential learning experiences.

Holistic spiritual growth of the whole child may be achieved through the provision of critically engaging and inquiring learning (Rossiter, 2018). Critically engaging and inquiring learning is often student-centred and experiential in design. Students are empowered to assume the responsibility of problem-solving, rather than relying on teachers to solve problems for them (Hackett & Lavery, 2010, 2011; Rossiter, 2018). This pedagogical style caters for the vitality and egocentricity of teenagers, as its self-directed nature empowers them in their learning and nourishes their search for identity and meaning in life (Wright, 2000). However, student-centred pedagogy needs to be outward focused. While students need to be given the opportunity to learn about themselves, they need to engage with serving others to avoid becoming self-centred and self-absorbed (Hackett, 2015; Rossiter, 2018; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Revich, & Linkins, 2009).

The benefits of experiential and critically engaging, inquiring pedagogy in aiding student spiritual growth is supported in scholarly writing. This style of pedagogy potentially
awakens and fosters spirituality (Barrett, 2016; de Souza, 2016; Hackett & Lavery, 2010, 2011; Louv, 2008; Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielsen, 2009; Rossiter, 2018), especially when students focus on serving others and making a positive difference to the lives of others and the natural world (Kim & Esquivel, 2011). It is noteworthy that adolescent spiritual growth is intertwined with the sense of worth that emerges from helping others and contributing to society (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Yust, Johnson, Sasso, & Roehlkepartain, 2006). Experiential learning through service, such as student leadership, is fostered through relationality with others (Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Hine, 2013) and it is perhaps this aspect that provides students with an avenue to spiritual growth. Other examples of experiential and/or critically engaging and inquiring pedagogy may include cultural immersion, peer support, student ministry (Hackett & Lavery, 2010, 2011), co-curricular and immersion in nature programs (King, 2013). Experiential learning may foster deep engagement through play, encouraging ownership of scripture stories through self-discovery rather than teacher instruction (Hyde, 2010).

Empirical evidence has suggested the teacher as a ‘facilitator’, rather than an ‘instructor’ evokes the innate spirituality of children that may otherwise not be awakened (Hay & Nye, 2006; Ng, 2012). This style of teaching complements critically engaging, inquiring and experiential pedagogies. The interplay between pedagogical practices, such as student-centred experiential learning, and the teacher-student relationship is evidently pertinent to this notion. Ng’s (2012) literature-derived spiritual development program designed to capture the learning reflections of 52 English primary school students found that relational and experiential sense of spirituality is fostered through “silence, focusing, meaning, questioning, kinaesthetic awareness, use of one’s imagination and communication and sharing” (p. 167). Despite the small sample size of student participants, Ng’s (2012)
assertion that certain teacher skills, such as undertaking a ‘facilitator’ role, evoked the innate spirituality of children that may otherwise not have been awakened.

The research of Hay and Nye (2006) also supported the notion that the teacher ‘facilitating’, rather than instructing, may position students to be more open to the opportunity of spirituality. Their investigation into the spiritual lives of English state primary school students was based on a small sample of 38 students. Care was taken to include equal numbers of boys and girls, and three quarters of the sample had no religious affiliation in an effort to reflect wider English society. However, these aspects of the study, coupled with the focus on primary rather than secondary schooling, makes it difficult to draw similarities with the Catholic secondary girls’ school context of this study.

However, Nye’s most recent (2017) publication, premised on the earlier study by Hay and Nye (2006), proposed some themes in common with other scholars. Honouring the learning process or journey or quest in educating, rather than the final product, may foster a love of learning (Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2017). Critically engaging, inquiring and experiential pedagogical approaches support this style of learning. For example, students may lose themselves in discovery of a new skill or be filled with awe when learning about the natural world (King, 2013; Nye, 2017). The counter suggestion is that enjoyment of the moment may be diminished if teaching and learning emphasised outcomes, final products, and test scores, rather than the freedom of total immersion in the learning process that experiential learning offers, for example.

Finally, the research suggested that critically engaging, inquiring and experiential pedagogical approaches may foster a sense of wonder, and possibly awe (Louv, 2008). In turn, this sense of wonder and/or awe may foster spirituality through providing opportunities
for discovery and surprise, through asking and inviting questions and by creating memorable experiences (Hyde, 2008; McEwan, 2008; Nye, 2017).

### 2.5.2.2 Imagination

Fostering the imagination of students may help them to be “open and willing to go deeper” (Nye, 2017, p. 49) and may therefore aid their spiritual abilities. Encouraging imagination may facilitate student appreciation of the layers of meaning and foster their spirituality as they learn about the world around them, even though many adults are uncomfortable in utilising imagination and may have feelings of inadequacy when encouraging young people to use their imagination (Nye, 2017). However, Nye (2017) posited that the humility of such people may actually create a priority for a child’s “spiritual exploration and creativity” (p. 50).

The mastery of certain skills in the classroom may also require student imagination, and in this way, nurturing student imagination may result in beneficial learning outcomes. For example, understanding and interpreting symbolism requires the formation of mental images or concepts that are not readily present or obvious to the senses to make meaning (Gellel, 2010). Earlier work by Geertz (1966) established that religions provide symbols to aid human understanding of existence and are presented in such a manner that humans accept the ideals put forward by them as factual and realistic. Nevertheless, people need to be able to deconstruct symbols in order to be able to draw meaning from them, and this deconstruction requires imagination. Gellel (2010) explored the concept of reading and understanding religious symbols to aid spirituality, and he argued for the inclusion of symbol literacy in the subject of Religious Education to facilitate student appreciation, understanding and openness to the spiritual.
2.5.3 **Subsidiary research question 3.**

Student spirituality is fostered through a spiritually holistic Catholic curriculum (CECWA, 2009) with pedagogical activities that are critically-engaging, inquiring and experiential (Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Hyde, 2010), and which foster imagination (Nye, 2017). However, there appears to be a paucity of literature regarding the perceptions of students as to what they perceive aids their spiritual growth regarding curriculum and pedagogy, particularly concerning Mercy schooling. Consequentially, the following subsidiary research question emerged from this part of the literature:

**What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth?**

The relationship between this subsidiary research question, the other subsidiary research questions and the overarching research question is illustrated in the conceptual framework.

2.6 **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the research design illustrates the relationships between key components of the study. This framework presents the way the research informs the overarching and subsidiary research questions. A review of the literature about the phenomenon of spiritual growth resulted in the overarching research question probing explicitly how student spiritual growth may be fostered in girls' secondary Mercy schooling. This question was addressed through exploring the perceptions of post-school women on the topic. The topic lay at the heart of this study and corresponded with the overarching research question.
The three areas which arose from the research about student spiritual growth underpinned the central research topic and overarching research question. These areas included: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. The overarching and subsidiary research questions that arose from the literature review are embedded in Figure 2-1 to conceptualise the relationship between the literature and this study.

Figure 2-1 Conceptual framework
2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed extant literature concerning student spiritual growth in education. A broad approach was taken to the topic because to date there appears to be neither scholarly nor empirical literature on the specific topic of the influence of Mercy schooling on student spiritual growth. The paucity of literature in this particular subject area validated the need for this study and also suggested an opportunity for further research in this area. The clear gap in the literature on this specific topic underpins the overarching research question.

In approaching the literature in a broad manner, firstly a description of the phenomenon of spiritual growth was considered and its key elements were outlined. These elements included: spiritual growth as a natural dimension to life; the relationship between religion and spiritual growth; the relationality of spiritual growth; the felt sense; the fragility of spiritual growth; the significance of the protective factors of spiritual growth in overcoming problems in contemporary society; and, finally the shadow side of spiritual growth. These elements were considered in forming a broad description of spiritual growth that frames the study. The derivation of the overarching research question from this research was then explained.

Further exploration of the research revealed three significant areas in relation to student spiritual growth: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. These three areas emerged from the literature review because they dominate themes in Church and other literature on the topic. The three areas accordingly frame the study’s subsidiary research questions, which were generated from gaps in this literature.

The first of the three subsidiary areas explored was school culture, and in particular, religious socialisation and the climate of the Catholic secondary school setting and its
influence on student spiritual growth. The effects of a sense of belonging and community and the Mercy ethos were then considered. The paucity of empirical literature about school cultural influences and their effect on student spiritual growth presents an opportunity to perhaps clarify assumptions and assertions made on this topic.

Likewise, the research revealed there is scope to further investigate the influence of teacher-student relationships, and in particular, the Christian witness of teachers and its influence on student spiritual growth. The research on these topics highlighted the importance of strong interpersonal relationships in the school setting. Insight gained from the perceptions of post-school women, who have had the benefit of maturity to reflect on their school experiences as part of the study, affirms ideas raised in this literature.

Literature concerning curriculum and pedagogy was also reviewed. There are evidently a variety of pedagogies that educators may employ in the classroom and beyond to foster the spiritual growth of their students, while also fulfilling Catholic school curriculum requirements. The literature reviewed collectively asserted the benefits of critically engaging pedagogical practices, in particular. The perceptions of post-school students about the influence of curriculum and pedagogical approaches on their spiritual growth clarifies the assertions made by the literature, providing insight as to the extent to which these aspects of their Mercy schooling were effective.

In concluding the literature review, it is apparent that the research on student spiritual growth describes key aspects of the phenomenon, yet there appears a clear gap in the literature regarding student spiritual growth in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia. The subsidiary research questions arising from the literature reviewed underpin the conceptual framework for the study, which was outlined at the end of this second chapter. In Chapter 3, the research questions are explored through an examination of the research design.
The chapter will explain the theoretical perspectives underpinning the research investigation and describe the methods that were employed to undertake the study.
Chapter 3

Research Design

3.1 Introduction

The research design of this study was informed by the nature of the research question (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2014). This chapter explains the design of the study in addressing the research question of how, explicitly, student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. In investigating this research question, gaps were identified in the literature in Chapter 2 which shaped the overarching and subsidiary research questions. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 3-1.

![Figure 3-1 Relationship between research question, literature, overarching and subsidiary research questions](image)

The chapter begins with an overview of the overarching and subsidiary research questions underpinning the study. The chapter then explains and provides a rationale for selecting and applying the theoretical framework chosen to underpin the study. The
theoretical framework supports the research design and the decisions taken in conducting the study. This section includes a detailed explanation of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology chosen to facilitate the study. Following, the methods appropriate to an IPA methodology are outlined regarding: data gathering; data analysis; and, ethical considerations. The chapter also includes a reflexive statement and concludes with a summary. The empirical evidence generated from the study design responds to the research question of how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy secondary girls’ schools in WA.

Table 3.1

*Chapter Overview*

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3.2 Overarching and Subsidiary Research Questions

The study was founded on an overarching research question and three subsidiary research questions. The overarching research question emerged directly from the literature and underpinned the study:

What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?

To address this question, the following subsidiary questions were derived from the literature review:

Subsidiary Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth?

Subsidiary Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth?

Subsidiary Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth?

As mentioned, Church and other literature indicated these three areas were significant in influencing student spiritual growth. Each of these questions probed the perceptions of post-school women about specific aspects of their schooling that may have influenced their spiritual growth. Analysis of this study data provided insight into the topic through the post-school women’s perceptions affirming or challenging various aspects of the literature.

The overarching and subsidiary research questions were exploratory in nature because they sought to explore the perceptions of post-school women about the study topic. The research questions were also experiential as they were based on the women’s schooling
experiences. The overarching and subsidiary research questions sought to gather information about the influence of the women’s schooling experiences on their spiritual growth to address the research question of how, explicitly, student spiritual growth occurs in Mercy girls’ secondary schools.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

A framework refers to the structure of an interrelated and/or interconnected set of concepts, assumptions, practices and/or values that form a way of interpreting reality (Schwandt, 2015). As mentioned, the theoretical framework supports the research design and the decisions taken in conducting the study. The framework for this study comprised multiple components that worked to form meaning. The hierarchical structure of the theoretical framework (Figure 3-2) illustrates the various components of the research design in relation to each other.

![Figure 3-2 Overview of research design: Theoretical framework](image-url)
A subjectivist ontology, epistemology of constructivism and interpretivist paradigm were selected to underpin the research because these theoretical components complemented the exploratory and experiential nature of the overarching and subsidiary research questions (Sarantakos, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The methodologies and methods chosen were informed through the qualitative design and they were also appropriate to the experiential nature of the research (Sarantakos, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). A phenomenological perspective was employed, and the specific phenomenological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) chosen was apt given the exploratory and experiential nature of the investigation (Sarantakos, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Each of the components of the theoretical framework are explained and justified in this chapter.

### 3.3.1 Ontology and epistemology

The first two hierarchical levels of the theoretical framework of this study included the ontology, followed by the epistemology. Ontology refers to “the philosophical study of the nature of existence, being, or reality; it is the study of problems surrounding whether a certain thing exists” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 221). In this sense, ontology alludes to what a person thinks reality looks like and how s/he views the world (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). As mentioned, the ontology of the study was subjectivist. Subjectivism is a doctrine whereby the judgements made through an individual speaker’s perceptions or opinions or similar are considered to be nothing more than a matter of personal opinion (Schwandt, 2015). However, research regarding phenomenology by Husserl (1970) demonstrated that subjectivity is thought to be an ‘ultimate’ reality given that an individual person is not wholly independent of the real world, rather a part of it. The individual person, or subject, knows and experiences the world and is able to articulate his/her version of reality of that world. This version or perception of reality is coloured through her/his judgements (Schwandt, 2015).
Following the subjectivist ontology of this study is an epistemology of constructivism, as shown in Figure 3-2. Epistemology refers to the study of the justification and nature of knowledge (Schwandt, 2015). Constructivism refers to how human beings make sense of experience and gain meaning through interpretation (Schwandt, 2015). This process of constructivism, whereby human beings actively construct meaning to help make sense of knowledge, may be influenced by multiple contextual factors. A constructivist worldview holds that human beings seek to understand the world in which they live and work and “they develop subjective meanings of their experiences — meanings directed toward certain objects or things” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The constructivist approach to the study suited subjectivism because it considered a particular property or characteristic of an object or experience, in this instance, the essence of student spiritual growth.

In exploring connections and interpreting phenomena of the spiritual growth experiences of post-school women throughout their secondary schooling, the chosen epistemological approach supported the study, as there is no singular true interpretation in employing constructivism (Crotty, 1998). Possible interpretations were gleaned from the multiple subjects or post-school women participants, from each of the three Western Australian Mercy schools. Rather than applying a narrow focus and merely placing meanings into just a few ideas or categories, there was scope to study the complexity of the post-school women’s perceptions because of gaining multiple and varied meanings (Creswell, 2014).

Constructivist research prioritises the participants’ views of the situation being studied. This type of research is inductive in nature as a theory evolves from the research, rather than the research being built on a theory (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). To facilitate participant construction of meaning, questions are broad, general and open-ended (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). As the women in the study generated meaning from social interaction through engagement with the world they were trying to interpret, historical and social
contextual influences were considerations in the process of meaning making. However, in considering the participants’ context, a researcher also needs to consider the influence of her/his own experience in making interpretations (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). The constructivist approach of the research enabled in-depth study of the perceptions of the post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth.

3.3.2 Qualitative nature of research.

The constructivist epistemology underpinning the research design facilitated meaning making (Krauss, 2005) and shaped the qualitative nature of the study. Qualitative research is a term used to broadly describe all forms of social inquiry that involve the study of “understanding the meaning of human action” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 256). In qualitative research, reality is subjective and perceived and interpreted differently by people as human beings create systems of meanings to make sense of their world (Sarantakos, 2013). This type of research relies on the researcher making interpretations, as was the practice in this study where the researcher played an active role in meaning making. Qualitative research, such as this study, is subjective and value-laden or normative (Sarantakos, 2013). Section 3.3.4.2 explicates this process in detail with explicit reference to the study.

Qualitative research is dynamic as the researcher embarks on a prolonged and intense study of a human experience (Creswell, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013). The study characteristically involves examination of the situation being studied in a holistic sense, as well as through close and intense scrutiny of the intricacies and complexities of individual elements of the situation. For example, in addition to the close analysis of a participant interview, the researcher may analyse additional participant interviews and consider the influence of the setting of the situation being studied, as was the practice in this study.
Participant data is typically collected in the field or in the participants’ setting (Creswell, 2014). This notion was upheld in this study whereby participants were interviewed in a location they deemed comfortable and convenient, in the school they had attended or an alternative venue, offering a quiet and private atmosphere. Section 3.3.5.5 provides more information regarding the participant interviews.

Qualitative research involves the close study of data in the form of words and this characteristic was apt to this study. One of the defining qualities of qualitative research is that it focuses on social methods of research. Utilising a social method of research was deemed appropriate in seeking the perceptions of post-school women in the study as it enabled the researcher to focus on their words to extract meaning. Further, the meaning of qualitative research is also uncovered through consideration of the word ‘quality’, meaning an “inherent or phenomenal property or essential characteristic” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 257) of an object or experience. In this study the ‘experience’ involved the schooling experiences of the post-school women, and in particular, the influence these experiences had on their spiritual growth. Capturing these schooling experiences was paramount to addressing the research question.

The exploratory and experiential nature of the study suited the emergent nature of the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2014). The process was emergent in the way the researcher adjusted or altered phases of the process upon entering the field and collecting data (Creswell, 2014). Initial research plans were revised as the study evolved. Creswell (2014) stated “the key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information” (p. 186). This study also illustrated the inductive nature of qualitative research as theory was generated from the research.
Scholars stress the importance of the qualitative researcher highlighting the voices of participants; the researcher should focus on learning from the meaning a participant articulates about a concept, problem or issue, rather than the meaning the researcher brings to the research (Creswell, 2014; Punch, 2005; Sarantakos, 2013). In this regard, the researcher in this study exercised reflexivity to identify the influence of any perceived biases, values or contextual influences which influenced her interpretation. Further information pertaining to exercising reflexivity is outlined in Section 3.3.6.

3.3.3 Interpretivism.

This study inferred the qualitative nature of the research design, indicating the suitability of an interpretivist paradigm to frame the study. This approach was selected to meet the exploratory objectives of the study in focusing on the lived experiences of the post-school women. The interpretivist paradigm suited this style of qualitative research whereby the meaning a person attributes to a human or social experience is explored (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with multiple participants. Ideas were generated by the post-school women participants as they addressed the interview questions and made sense of their lived experiences. As indicated, this approach was inductive as patterns of meaning emerged from the process and generated theory (Creswell, 2014).

Interpretivism focuses on understanding the human experience in that it considers the meanings people make in interpreting behaviour and situations to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). In this way, interpretivism supported this study. Furthermore, interpretivist researchers uncover meaning through careful consideration of participants’ views (Creswell, 2014) while also acknowledging the influence of their own life experiences
on the research (MacKenzie & Knipe, 2006). Interpretivism complemented the subjectivist ontology and constructivist epistemology of this study.

The interpretivist paradigm, or way of thinking, framed the research process and included the methodology and methods used to reveal meaning and comprehend the viewpoints conveyed by texts (Neuman, 2011). A paradigm is a model or framework for understanding what is observed and how people come to understand what they observe (Babbie, 2007). The emphasis of the interpretivist paradigm is on the process of meaning making, rather than the outcome. Although texts comprise written objects such as books, they also include conversation or dialogue and narrative when recorded and transcribed (Neuman, 2011), such as the interview transcripts of the individual semi-structured interviews with each of the post-school women participants in this study. This process of research in the interpretivist paradigm is idiographic as the researcher focuses on investigating a small number of subjects in detail. In this study, the small sample of post-school women were the subjects studied in detail.

Interpretivism involves a process of construction and reconstruction to understand the behaviours, beliefs and context of people’s experiences. The process that enables this construction, reconstruction and consequential meaning making is interpretation (Hennink et al., 2011; Sarantakos, 2013). The process “involves reflective assessment of the reconstructed impressions of the world, and integration of action processes in a general context, which will constitute a new unit” (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 40) or meaning. Interpretivism primarily focuses on understanding perceptions, behaviour or experiences of people, such as the post-school women in this study. The concept of ‘understanding’ underpins this research paradigm.

Interpretivism involves consideration of two different perspectives of understanding: the researcher’s perspective and the perspective of the study sample. Understanding that is
related to the perspective of researchers involves the researchers using their own frames of reference in exploring the issues of a study, and is broadly referred to as understanding (Hennink et al., 2011). However, understanding that is related to the perspectives of the study sample is referred to as ‘Verstehen’ (Hennink et al., 2011). Sarantakos (2013) stated that “Verstehen relates to the views, opinions and perceptions of people as they are experienced and expressed in everyday life” (p. 40). Verstehen implies that an interpretative stance is taken to produce meanings and learn the views of individual or groups of people in relation to an object or thing (Sarantakos, 2013) thus it is a central concept employed in qualitative research. This study employed the researcher’s understanding and Verstehen. The researcher used her own frame of reference in exploring the issues, while she also sought to understand the context of the post-school women and articulate their perceptions using their own words (Hennink et al., 2011).

3.3.4 Methodology.

In this study the post-school women assigned subjective meanings to their schooling experiences in relation to their spiritual growth. Accordingly, the study was supported by utilising a phenomenological methodology known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The researcher was interested in not only the way that the post-school women made sense of their world, but how they assigned subjective meanings to it in order to address the research questions. Phenomenology supports research whereby the subjective meaning is emphasised. More will be explained about IPA in Section 3.3.4.2. Firstly, the methodological concept of phenomenology will be explained.

3.3.4.1 Phenomenology.

Phenomenology was deemed an appropriate methodology in the context of this study, because the aim of phenomenology is to make sense of reality in relation to a
phenomenon, such as spiritual growth, even though this knowledge may be incomplete (Husserl, 1931, 1970). The work of one of the founders of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1931, 1970), reinforced this aim and highlighted the importance of focusing on the centrality of the subjective experience. In this study the centrality of the subjective experience was the perceptions of the post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling experience on their spiritual growth.

Three characteristics of phenomenology from the literature were deemed apt for this study. These three characteristics are also deemed integral by scholars in the field and they include:

1. Individual people and their articulation of the phenomena or things being studied;
2. The influence of contextual factors; and,
3. The process of meaning making (Heidegger, 1978; Husserl, 1931, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009; Spinelli, 2005).

These characteristics were relevant to this study because, firstly, the researcher sought to gain a deep understanding of the lived experience of each participant’s schooling experiences in relation to spiritual growth, and in doing so studied individual people and their articulation of a phenomena. Secondly, as the researcher was an educator with teaching experience in a Mercy secondary schooling context, it was appropriate to utilise an interpretative style of phenomenology whereby the researcher’s role was recognised. In this sense, contextual factors were a consideration in the study. Thirdly, employing bracketing enhanced the meaning making process. That is, the process of acknowledging the researcher’s role within the research context was undertaken to limit bias and is described by Husserl (1970) as ‘bracketing’. The role of bracketing as part of ‘epoche’ in this study is
explained in the following paragraph, as well as in Sections 3.3.5.5 with regards to data collation, and in Section 3.3.6.1 regarding the steps of IPA.

An overview of the history of phenomenology highlights the evolution of the defining characteristics of the methodology and provides further insight as to its apt choice in underpinning the study. The philosophical school known as phenomenology originated in the early twentieth century and was founded by Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl (1931, 1970) refined phenomenological methodology, specified its conditions and purpose, and elevated its status to “a fundamental philosophical procedure that would become the cornerstone of his approach” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 6). Husserl (1970) pioneered what became known as ‘the phenomenological method’. This method involved focusing on the phenomena being studied in the conscious mind of a person, while clarifying her/his role in the process of constructing meaning by concurrently setting aside, or bracketing, any thoughts that may influence interpretation of the phenomena (Spinelli, 2005). Husserl’s (1970) phenomenological method illustrated the rule of epoche.

Epoche involves the process whereby initial biases are set aside, or bracketed to suspend any assumptions and prejudices, and instead focus solely, and without interference, on the immediate data of the experience (Spinelli, 2005). Husserl (1970) asserted that prior knowledge should be separated in the interpretative process to limit any irrelevant influence and thus limit bias (Spinelli, 2005). However, phenomenologists such as van Manen (2014) have subsequently questioned the purpose of bracketing within epoche. Although van Manen (2014) advocated the need for “critical self-awareness with respect to the assumptions that prevent one from being as open as possible to the sense and significance of the phenomenon” (p. 191), he also recognised the impossibility of completely suspending one’s own judgements. Assumptions and judgements were best acknowledged and explicated, rather than merely eliminated, as part of the process of epoche (van Manen, 2014).
Gadamer (1989) proposed that it was in acknowledging assumptions, judgements and/or prior understandings through bracketing that the researcher was then able to test or investigate them through engagement with the phenomenon. In undergoing this process, the researcher’s understanding may be challenged and extended, carving the way for rich and new layers of meaning to evolve (Hyde, 2008). Epoche and bracketing were employed in this study to limit the potential for bias, given the researcher’s Mercy school teaching experience. Significantly, however, this epoche process also optimised data interpretation through testing and investigating the prior understandings and assumptions which had been bracketed. Epoche was a key feature of Husserl’s (1970) work.

This study is also supported by Husserl’s (1931, 1970) work because it is centred on a human experience. Husserl’s (1931, 1970) study of how people related to scientific concepts such as physics and psychology emphasised what is central to phenomenology: the human experience of the world. The central focus of this study was the human experience of spiritual growth. Husserl’s (1931, 1970) work formed the basis of transcendental phenomenology and was descriptive in nature. He focused on “the careful examination of human experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Another form of phenomenology that supports the study was developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a university student of Husserl’s. Heidegger’s (1978) work, although clearly influenced by the Husserlian strand of phenomenology, was characteristically hermeneutic, interpretative and existential in design (Spinelli, 2005), rather than descriptive.

Heidegger’s (1978) hermeneutical approach to phenomenology clearly supports this study in the way that it sought to gain meaning through the analysis of interview transcriptions. Hermeneutics refers to the theory, art or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning from a text, such as a work of art, a biblical or classical text (Schwandt, 2015). In viewing phenomenology through a hermeneutic lens, Heidegger (1978) held the belief that
experiences may be interpreted in multiple layers of depth ranging from a surface level through to deeper, possibly hidden meanings. Heidegger (1978) believed that bias could not be eliminated and he considered the role of the researcher or interpreter as integral in the meaning making process, as is the case in this study. Despite the differences between the approaches of Husserl and Heidegger to phenomenology, their approaches are common in that they are each “an investigative approach that encompasses a variety of similarly focused perspectives whose shared concerns are directed towards a methodologically structured investigation of our experience of the world” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 7).

The interpretation of the interview transcripts in this study was integral because they addressed the overarching and subsidiary research questions. Analysis of the interview transcripts is supported by the inductive phenomenological process and the findings generate a theory that addresses the research questions (Smith et al., 2009). However, phenomenologists concede that there cannot be a correct or true interpretation as to do so would necessitate direct knowledge of an ultimate reality (Spinelli, 2005). One may be influenced, to varying extents, “by consensus viewpoints agreed upon by a group of individuals, or by a whole culture” (Spinelli, 2005, p. 8). Regardless, interpretation of human experience remains at the heart of phenomenology whether this interpretation is individual or shared.

Furthermore, in analysing data such as the interview transcripts in this study, there can be no true interpretation of reality as there is a physical objective reality that remains separate from human consciousness (Spinelli, 2005). Spinelli (2005) summarises phenomenology by stating it “is concerned with the relationship between the reality which exists outside our minds (objective reality) and the variety of thoughts and ideas each of us may have about reality (subjectivity)” (p. 31). There exist shared variables as the human biological condition facilitates experience of material stimuli of objects, or phenomena or
“things”. However, as each person’s experience of the world is different from other people, due to myriad biological and contextual factors, each individual human being experiences a unique, solitary phenomenal reality. In the context of this study, the participants’ schooling experiences varied from each other for a variety of reasons. The researcher acknowledges that each participant’s version of reality was unique. The process of bracketing and epoche was integral for this reason. This notion is explicated in Section 3.3.6.

Addressing the overarching and subsidiary research questions was also supported by employing a more specific theoretical approach that synthesised the phenomenological perspective while highlighting the participants’ voices. As indicated, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen as the theoretical methodology to employ in this study. IPA is a recognised phenomenological approach within qualitative research. With regards to this study, it is significant that “the essence of IPA lies in its analytic focus” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). In outlining a data analysis method, IPA allows the participants’ voices, in making sense of their experiences, to be the central focus of analytic attention to address the research questions.

### 3.3.4.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was deemed an apt methodology for this study because the analytic process places an emphasis on the role of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009) and it is this aspect of the methodology that makes it distinct from other qualitative methodologies. The role of the researcher in interpreting the interview transcripts in this study will be explicated in Sections 3.3.5 and 3.3.6. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was pioneered by scholars such as Clark Moustakas and Jonathon Smith in the 1990s (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, 1996). This methodology is commonly used in psychology
studies (Smith et al., 2009) particularly in health psychology (Shaw, 2011). However, IPA is also suited to other fields of research, such as education (Joseph, 2014; Noon, 2018).

Another reason why IPA was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study was because IPA research involves recording, exploring, understanding and interpreting the perceptions of human beings to gain insight into the phenomena being studied (Smith et al, 2009). It was an apt choice in interpreting the perceptions of post-school women regarding the influence of their Mercy schooling experience to provide insight about the phenomenon of spiritual growth. Additionally, IPA supports the qualitative nature of the study and its overarching and subsidiary research questions because it is idiographic, interrogative and inductive in its exploration of human experience (Smith et al., 2009). Perhaps these three key characteristics situate IPA as an apt methodology in educational research because human experience is inherent in educational research. The educational setting provides the researcher with a plethora of subjective experiences. Noon (2018) suggested IPA is well suited to the field of educational research, in addition to other researchers in the field (Joseph, 2014; Robinson, 2017).

In IPA the emphasis given to the participants’ voices, such as the voices of the post-school women interviewed in this study, is complemented by making sense and drawing meaning from these voices. In this sense, an IPA researcher seeks to make sense of a participant’s lived experiences through attaining an insider’s perspective (Noon, 2018). To achieve this aim, IPA draws upon the key principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Noon, 2018; Smith & Osborn, 2015). The relevance of each of these theoretical research approaches, with reference to IPA, will now be examined to demonstrate how they each underpinned the methodology employed in this study.
As phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of human experience, it provides researchers with a robust and deep source of ideas about how to explore, comprehend and draw meaning from the study of lived experience, or in the instance of this study, the influence of Mercy schooling on spiritual growth. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is founded in phenomenology as “it is concerned with exploring experience in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2009, p.1). Husserl’s (1931, 1970) writing on phenomenology highlighted the need for researchers to go back to the things people articulated when describing their experiences, so that the significance of these things could be closely examined to facilitate in-depth meaning making. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis follows and upholds Husserl’s (1931, 1970) assertion in this regard as it focuses on the things people mention that may be significant in unlocking meaning (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1).

This study employed IPA as a means of understanding an everyday lived experience that holds significance for people (Smith et al, 2009). In being underpinned by phenomenology, IPA is inductive in nature. In this way, IPA is theory generating rather than being based on a hypothesis. Participants are considered experts as they describe and explain their lived experiences first hand, while the researcher actively listens and allows their voices to be heard (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher does not presume to know the experiences, thoughts, feelings or opinions of participants, rather these aspects emerge from the research (Smith et al., 2009). In rigorously employing IPA, this study reflects this notion. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe the lived experience of participants. Participant responses were received openly without anticipation or expectation, with the researcher maintaining flexibility in questioning participants. Themes emerged from the data, rather than the study being grounded on the presupposition of a hypothesis. However, IPA differs from its phenomenological foundations, as it also draws on hermeneutics and idiography to aid in-depth analysis of the data collated.
Hermeneutics refers to the study of interpretation of meaning from a text (Schwandt, 2015). Hermeneutics traditionally involved detailed analysis and inquiry of literary and religious texts; however, it has evolved to include the study of various components or parts of a text in order to comprehend and appreciate the text in its entirety (Neuman, 2011). An IPA methodology exemplifies a double hermeneutic or interpretative process as the subjects of the study, the participants, make sense of their world, followed by the researcher then decoding this meaning (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) about the object. In this study, the object is the participants’ spiritual growth experiences influenced by their Mercy schooling.

As IPA focuses on the exploration of how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, the researcher assumes an active role within the interpretation process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This methodology supports “interpretative endeavour because humans are sense-making organisms” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). The process of inter-subjective meaning making involves the researcher working with the participants in trying to understand their viewpoints and in turn providing them with a voice, rather than merely describing their lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In this sense, IPA “provides us with a rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend lived experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p.11). While phenomenology is used to reveal meanings, hermeneutics evidently goes further in that it fosters interpretation of the meaning (Joseph, 2014). IPA researchers explore beyond the text to interpret the experience and facilitate meaning, and in doing so, they consider the contextual factors influencing the participant, as well as themselves (Joseph, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

Clearly, the researcher’s role is instrumental in an IPA study. Smith and Osborn (2015) reiterate that “the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (p. 41). In emphasising the role of the researcher, IPA is different to other theoretical perspectives. Indeed, literature emphasises that IPA is a dynamic
process because researchers play an active role, while concurrently being immersed in the social world of the participants (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). As mentioned, the researcher in this investigation employed epoche and bracketing to acknowledge and limit bias, while testing prior assumptions, so as to challenge and extend her understanding of the phenomenon under study. This notion will be covered in more detail in Section 3.3.5.1.

The role of the researcher employing bracketing in IPA demonstrates the interrogative nature of IPA. In looking inward and interrogating the self in terms of considering personal assumptions, thoughts and feelings, the researcher is consciously minimising bias while seeking to unlock meaning (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, IPA is interrogative in the manner in which it upholds the participant’s interpretation of lived experience, and therefore utilises a flexible method of collecting data by focusing on the voice of the participant, and probing areas of potential interest as they arise rather than rigidly adhering to a set of questions (Smith et al., 2009).

As mentioned, IPA also draws on idiography to aid in-depth analysis of data. Idiography focuses on the ‘particular’ of a subject, and the detail of that particular (Smith et al., 2009). The idiographic nature of IPA means that this type of methodology facilitates detailed and in-depth attention to the particular of a lived experience, and how this detail is understood by a small, purposive sample that has been carefully selected (Smith et al., 2009). The emphasis is on the evolving process rather than the outcome. The method is idiographic in that the sample size is deliberately small to capture the essence of the participants’ lived experiences. Correspondingly, the sample size of this study is small, with just nine participants.
As IPA is explicitly idiographic, each case, or participant interview in this study, received detailed analysis, followed by the identification of similarities and differences between different cases. The “fine grained accounts of patterns of meaning for participants reflecting upon a shared experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 38) meant that shared themes were found while the distinctive nature of individual participant voices were still heard, causing slight thematic variations. Furthermore, idiography facilitated magnification of the details of particular cases, and the associated meanings derived from them, rather than hypothesising causal relationships (de Visser & Smith, 2006).

A phenomenological method such as IPA was advantageous in this study “because of its perceived capacity to process authentically the subjective and the value-laden from a small, purposeful, non-representative sample group” (Bednall, 2006, para. 4). The rigour of the IPA methodology was apposite for extracting, interpreting and explicating participants’ perceptions of their spiritual growth experiences in their Mercy secondary schooling. Furthermore, “IPA is especially valuable when examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 41). Given the apparent complexity in defining spirituality (Eaude, 2003; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017), using IPA as a methodology for this study was deemed apt. In summary, literature describes IPA as being idiographic, inductive and interrogative (Smith et al. 2009). Each of these characteristics suits the qualitative nature of this study. The following table, Table 3.2, outlines the features of IPA employed in the research.
Table 3.2  
*Features of IPA Employed in the Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature of IPA</th>
<th>Description of Feature</th>
<th>Connection to the Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>The focus is on participants as being experts of their own experiences</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe participants’ experiences in an open manner without anticipating any particular type of response. The researcher was permitted to exercise flexibility in questioning the participants.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The feelings, thoughts, experiences, opinions of the participants emerge from the research, rather than being presumed from the outset.</td>
<td>The analysis process allowed for themes to emerge from the data, rather than presupposing a hypothesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutics</td>
<td>The researcher is required to look inward, initially interrogating the self so that any preconceived assumptions, thoughts, feelings or opinions can be put aside (bracketing) to avoid interference in the interpretative process.</td>
<td>A researcher journal was used to assist in putting aside any preconceptions or assumptions held by the researcher (bracketing).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The interpretation of the participant is privileged.</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection so that there was flexibility in questioning participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idiography</td>
<td>It focuses on particular people in a particular context.</td>
<td>The research focused on the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. The post-school women were between 20-30 years of age and had all attended Mercy secondary schools in WA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is concerned with the fine-grained detail and systematic data analysis</td>
<td>The research focused on the ‘particular’ of the lived experiences of these post-school women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A small sample is used to enable in-depth analysis.</td>
<td>Nine post-school women participated in the study. This small number of participants was chosen to enable in-depth analysis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.5 Research methods: Data gathering.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is best suited to data collection methods that “invite participants to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). Although a subjective judgement, ‘rich’ data suggests that participants are given ample opportunity to “tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 56). In the context of an IPA study, the word ‘rich’ connotes in-depth, detailed explanations of experiences. The data collected in this study comprised interview transcriptions of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the nine post-school women participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method because of their capacity to extract rich data (Smith et al., 2009). This style of interview utilised the features of IPA outlined in Table 3.2.
The relationship between the research method and data collected in response to the research questions is illustrated in Figure 3-3. The section following outlines the following aspects pertaining to data gathering in this study: sampling, semi-structured interviews, a pilot interview and the collation of interview data. Firstly, an explanation of epoche and bracketing is given because they are embedded in the data gathering process. They are also part of the data analysis process, referred to later.
3.3.5.1 **Epoche and bracketing.**

The role of the researcher is recognised and acknowledged in the data collation and analysis processes in IPA (Smith et al., 2009). In this sense, the role of the researcher is overt in IPA. Employing epoche and bracketing in the IPA process aids the researcher in conducting a close study of the essence of a phenomenon, without being impeded or influenced by particular thoughts or assumptions. These elements are separated, or bracketed, to improve the researcher’s active listening and focus on the voice of the participant (Smith et al., 2009).

Epoche is the overarching process of which bracketing is a part. Epoche involves the bracketing, or acknowledgement of assumptions which are then set aside, and later reintroduced into the interpretative process (Bednall, 2006). In suspending researchers’ assumptions and thoughts, their perceptions may be explored without the influence of these pre-existing assumptions and thoughts (Schwandt, 2015). Bracketing involves setting aside or acknowledging the assumptions made in everyday life. Performing bracketing enables increased “focus on the phenomenology of conscious acts such as perceiving or remembering” (Schwandt, 2015, p. 22). Later, the bracketed parts may be investigated and tested through engagement with the phenomenon (Gadamer, 1989) resulting in the evolution of new layers of meaning (Hyde, 2008).

The employment of epoche in IPA is an ongoing analytical process (Patton, 1990) and it is a means by which reflexivity may be achieved. Bednall (2006) describes epoche in its preliminary stages, as the bracketing of various parts of a core human experience to help identify the significance of each core feature in isolation, while concurrently separating it from the researcher’s own personal feelings and thoughts. Placing one part of something larger into brackets signifies it may be treated separately from the other parts. Epoche and bracketing were used by the researcher in this study to optimise listening to participants.
during their semi-structured interviews. Listening actively during each interview, having already acknowledged prior assumptions and pre-existing thoughts through bracketing, allowed the researcher to focus specifically on what participants were saying, and to offer appropriate prompts and/or probing as needed.

Later in the process, epoche and bracketing were used by the researcher to help with interpretation in the analysis of data. Pre-existing thoughts and assumptions were re-visited and tested to add richness to the process of interpretation. Smith et al. (2009) assert that bracketing of particular fragments potentially facilitates deeper levels of analysis as each fragment will be viewed or interpreted separately from surrounding information. Here a series of reductions offering a particular lens or way of seeing, “thinking and reasoning about the phenomenon at hand” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 14) helps the researcher avoid making assumptions while focusing on the extraction of rich meaning. This eidetic reduction, whereby the ‘essence’ of the phenomena is extracted, allows the researcher to focus on the essence of the phenomena, while the preconceptions of the event will be consciously minimised (Smith et al., 2009). Once the meaning(s) of bracketed information is deciphered, its wider context may be considered. This surrounding information shapes the researcher’s perception of the bracketed part. The final part of the epoche process involves reintegrating the bracketed part with the whole and synthesising it with the researcher’s thoughts and feelings to make “interpretative conclusions” (Bednall, 2006, para. 14). Comprehensive use of the researcher journal facilitated efficient recall of thoughts and feelings of significance.

The researcher journal, which was kept throughout the entirety of the research process, provided the researcher with a means to record feelings, ideas and thoughts that helped with the IPA process. For example, the researcher recorded feelings and thoughts soon after each of the interviews. Recording impressions and ideas that arose from each of the interviews helped identify where epoche was necessary or where themes emerged (Bednall,
Keeping a research journal enhanced critical thinking of the interviews and as the sequence of interviews evolved, it helped identify thematic patterns and ideas that were of significance. Although not a data collection tool as such, journaling was an important tool used to maximise the benefit of epoche and bracketing (Bednall, 2006).

In this study, it was intended that through epoche and bracketing, the researcher would become more fully conscious of specific aspects each of the participants have intentionally chosen to mention about their spiritual growth experiences. Bracketing complemented and enriched the analytical process by recognising and magnifying “the essence of meaning of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Bednall, 2006, para. 15). When put to one side, a component of a human experience that the researcher may otherwise have taken for granted, enabled the researcher to focus on the interpretation of that experience (Smith et al., 2009). The “phenomenological inquiry continually is open to questioning assumptions and preunderstanding” (van Manen, 2014, p. 191). This opening up and testing of assumptions is an integral part of the process of phenomenological reflection (van Manen, 2014).

Bracketing was employed in the study to acknowledge, and in doing so, limit researcher bias. The researcher’s teaching experience in a Mercy secondary schooling context may have influenced her interpretation of the post-school women’s perceptions. The researcher journal was used throughout the duration of data collection to limit bias. For example, the journal was used to record: personal views on the participants and their responses; impressions of the interview settings; and, thoughts that arose from the researcher’s teaching experience. In facilitating the process of epoche, the researcher separated knowledge and teaching experience of student spiritual growth in Mercy girls’ secondary education, and then drew on this knowledge and experience when synthesising it with the bracketed component to make an interpretation. Epoche “allows for empathy and
connection, not elimination, replacement or substitution of perceived researcher bias” (Bednall, 2006, para. 15). Epoche allowed the researcher to draw on experience at the appropriate time to enrich analysis.

Epoche and bracketing were employed as an integral part of the IPA process in this study. In the collation of the interview data, bracketing was employed so that the researcher was able to focus specifically on the voice of each of the participants, rather than being distracted by preconceived thoughts or assumptions. Epoche and bracketing enabled deep and detailed analysis of the participant interviews in analysing the data gathered. The role of the researcher was overt and acknowledged through the use of bracketing and epoche. In IPA, the researcher strives “to understand what an experience (object or event) is like from the participant’s perspective” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 361). This methodology was suited to this study as it sought to understand and interpret the perceptions of a small sample of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth.

3.3.5.2 Sampling.

As the main concern in IPA is to “give full appreciation to each participant’s account” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 364) sample sizes are usually small to enable in-depth and detailed analysis of each case. Multiple scholars have asserted that fewer participants studied in-depth is more effective than a study characterised by more participants and broader, comparatively shallow and more descriptive analyses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al, 2009). Sarantakos (2013) suggested that purposive sampling was necessary in IPA given to gain rich data, rather than canvassing a larger sample population where this richness may be compromised. For these reasons, the sample chosen for this study was small and homogenous.
The sample for this study comprised three post-school women from each of the three Mercy Education Limited (MEL) schools in Western Australia (WA). These three schools are the only MEL schools in WA. The schools provided consistency in the type of secondary education offered. The education at each of these schools is not only a Western Australian Catholic girls’ secondary education, but an education inspired by the Mercy ethos. There was also consistency geographically, in that the schools were located in the same city in Western Australia. The sum total of nine post-school women participants fulfilled a recommendation by Smith et al. (2009) of a sample size of between four to ten participants. This small sample size is recommended for a rigorous IPA study, whereby the interpretation of the essence of the phenomena is honoured and the study moves beyond a mere description of phenomena (Smith et al., 2009).

Volunteers to participate in the research investigation were sourced from each of the three schools’ alumni organisations through snowball sampling. This method of sampling identified particular people who knew people who would potentially provide rich information (Punch, 2014). As mentioned, the choice to interview post-school women instead of secondary school girls was deliberate. Post-school women have completed their secondary schooling and were therefore able to comment on the entire duration of their secondary education, unlike secondary school girls who would have yet to finish their schooling.

Furthermore, the adult reflection of childhood spiritual growth experiences is a powerful force in solving problems related to seeking value and meaning in life (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Robinson, 1977/1996). Post-school students, between 20 to 30 years of age, were deemed to be suited to providing valuable insight into the research question given their adult maturity, as well as their moderately recent connection with school life (Robinson, 1977/1996). The high degree of homogeneity, and small size of the sample group,
limited the quantity of data for analysis. These factors suited the IPA methodology as they avoided “potentially subtle inflections of meaning” (Collins & Nicholson, 2002, p. 626).

The data collection method of semi-structured interviews also complemented the IPA methodology as it privileged the subjects involved in the study. It worked to give ‘voice’ to these post-school women through providing them with the opportunity to share reflections of their spiritual growth experienced in secondary school. Data collection of the nine participants’ interview recordings and verbatim transcripts was manageable. Saturation point was achieved given the optimal number of participants for a study employing a methodology as intensely personal as IPA. The small sample size allowed the researcher to focus on an in-depth analysis of each individual participant case, and in turn, “highlight the individuality of particular experiences” (Noon, 2018, p. 76).

3.3.5.3 Instrument.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the research method for this study as they provided scope for in-depth probing of an issue or topic where the objective was “to capture people’s individual voices and stories” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 110). This type of interview suited the study’s overarching and subsidiary research questions. Punch (2005) asserted that specific questions emerge in a semi-structured interview as the interview unfolds and “the wording of those questions will depend upon the direction the interview takes” (p. 170). The flexibility of the semi-structured style of interviewing allowed the researcher scope to focus on the voices of participants and explore their stories about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. Semi-structured interviews are apposite “when seeking information on individual, personal experiences from people about a specific issue or topic” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 109).
Interviews were chosen as the instrument to gather data to address the research questions in this study because they are an effective instrument to access people’s perceptions, interpretations of experiences and the meanings they make from these experiences (Punch, 2014). Interviews are common data collection tools in qualitative research (Punch, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Sarantakos (2013) outlined nine key elements common to qualitative interviews, summarised in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3
Summary of Methodological and Technical Elements of Qualitative Interviewing (Sarantakos, 2013, pp. 280-281).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodological and Technical Elements</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td>Qualitative interviewing employ methods in which researchers reflect upon their subjective approach to the world and consider the implications of the knowledge they produce for social life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalism</td>
<td>Qualitative interviewing focuses on studying reality as it is manifest in everyday life events and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primacy of the respondent</td>
<td>The respondents are considered experts who provide valuable information. They are not merely a data source, but are as important as the researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of standardisation</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews are unstandardized, allowing respondents freedom to express their views without being impeded by external limitations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews employ a readiness to change and adapt the course of study as required by the research. The interviewer typically engages in open discussion with the respondent, and stimulates, rather than dominates discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>The qualitative researcher follows, rather than leads, the course that emerges through the interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life as process</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews ascertain aspects of personal experience as illustrated in everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grounded (data-based) theory</td>
<td>Qualitative interviews usually aim to develop a grounded or data-based theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explication</td>
<td>Findings emerge through the study. Findings are interpreted during the process of interviewing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sarantakos (2013) asserted that these elements required competence on the part of the interviewer, and particularly on the part of the respondent, in verbalising perceptions and opinions. As this study was qualitative in nature, these nine elements of qualitative interviewing were considered in the planning and execution of the interviews.

Inviting participants to offer rich and detailed accounts of their experiences was supported by establishing interview protocols. Creswell (2014) suggested interview protocols were developed in advance of an interview to ensure it ran smoothly. He recommended the following considerations in planning interview protocols:

- interview details such as date, time, place, interviewer and interviewee;
- introduction and welcome to interviewee;
- key questions;
- probe questions and prompts, as needed;
- adequate response time;
- conclusion, including invitation to respondent to make further comment; and,
- statement of thanks.

Interview protocols in this study were developed and executed in alignment with these guidelines recommended by Creswell (2014). These interview protocols are outlined in Appendix A. The interview protocols detail the anticipated stages of an interview from its beginning to the conclusion. These protocols were approached in an open manner, respecting the assertion by Smith et al. (2009), that the interview process is iterative and ideas may change and develop throughout the process.
Similarly, guiding questions for this study were composed with the idea that they may be changed or developed by the researcher. The schedule of guiding questions is also located in Appendix A. The guiding questions were based on the overarching and subsidiary research questions. Question 1 in the interview was a closed question and merely asked the respondent to verify the year she graduated from her Mercy Education Limited schooling. It was anticipated this question was an easy starting point for each participant. Questions 2, 3 and 4 were aimed at helping the respondent generate and articulate memories of her schooling, while also building rapport and trust between the interviewer and participant as the conversation progressed.

Questions 5, 6 and 7 focused on the central topic of the study: spiritual growth. It was anticipated that by this point of the interview each participant may have remembered some aspects of her schooling she would be able to relate to her discussion of spiritual growth, thus building her confidence in responding. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that as an “interview progresses and the participant warms to the exercise and relaxes into it there is likely to be a move from the descriptive to the affective, from the general to the specific, from the superficial to the disclosing” (p. 68). With this natural progression in mind, Questions 8, 9 and 10 were specific in nature and focused on the three areas arising from the literature about spiritual growth: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. Their inclusion at the end of the interview was deliberate. It was anticipated this ordering of questions would help the participants more easily generate and articulate their responses than placing these questions earlier in the interview.

The researcher was cognisant of maintaining a natural progression or rhythm and flow throughout the interview to maximise the interview dynamic (Smith et al., 2009). Question 11 was added following the pilot interview to provide participants with an opportunity to add anything they considered significant to the study that they had not already
mentioned. It provided a natural conclusion to the interview and supported the emphasis on fully “hearing” the voice of the participant. Furthermore, Hennink et al. (2011) asserted that interviewees may feel the strongest rapport with the interviewer at this end point in time of the interview. In this way, it was anticipated that Question 11 provided an opportunity to capture any additional thoughts the participant may have at a point in time that she felt comfortable sharing them.

As part of the IPA process, the interviewer needed to use the interview protocols and guiding questions in a flexible manner. The role of the interviewer was to be an active listener, or an active co-participant, who focused on following the concerns of the participant who was “the experiential expert on the topic” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 64). At times, the interviewer needed to abandon the schedule and instead follow a path set by the participant (Hennink et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009) in order to explore a topic or issue in depth. Similarly, the interviewer was conscious of listening carefully and asking short prompting questions such as ‘can you explain?’ or ‘please tell me more’, “subtly guiding the interviewee to tell their story” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 129). Probing also aided retrieval of in-depth information from the post-school women interview participants (Hennink et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). There are different types of probes at the researcher’s disposal: topical; motivational; reflective; expansive; and, silent (Hennink et al., 2011). The researcher utilised these probes in the interviews to aid the extraction of information.
Table 3.4
Types of Probes in Semi-structured Interviews (Hennink et al., 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Probe</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Topical       | Support open-ended questions as they remind the interviewer to ask about certain topics or related issues, in the instance they are not mentioned by the interviewee | **Open-ended question:** Please explain the significance of the memento you have brought with you today?  
**Topical probe:** Why is the memento special to you? |
| Motivational  | Utterances of a few words by the interviewer to encourage the interviewee to keep speaking, while acknowledging what is being said and signalling active listening | Yes  
Ah-ha |
| Reflective    | Calls on an interviewee to repeat or clarify an issue through offering more information | So, just to clarify, what you are saying is… is that correct? |
| Expansive     | Calls for more information or requests an example of an issue | Can you please give me an example of that type of situation? |
| Silent        | Remain silent or pause to allow the interviewee time to think, reflect and consider the issues being discussed, before responding | Pause of 5-10 seconds or longer if needed. |

A summary of the five types of probes, according to Hennink et al. (2011) is outlined in Table 3.4. Probing supports the retrieval of rich data (Hennink et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

As mentioned, Smith et al. (2009) asserted that semi-structured interviews potentially result in the production of rich data. Punch (2014) supported this notion in stating that interviews offer participant constructions of reality and are “one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others (Punch, 2014, p. 144). Semi-structured interviews are apposite for exploring people’s interpretations of lived experiences (Punch, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). They exemplify “many of the characteristics of a prolonged and intimate conversation” (Punch, 2014, p. 148) and they suited the qualitative nature of this study. In
employing an IPA methodology, interviews are characteristically intense, involved and lengthy (Noon, 2018). The nine interviews in this study reflected these attributes. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 50-60 minutes in length, and the participants spoke in-depth and in detail about their lived experiences during their secondary schooling. The intensity of some of these experiences will be detailed in the next chapter. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate means of collating data in this study.

3.3.5.4  

Pilot interview.

The researcher conducted a pilot interview prior to the commencement of the nine semi-structured interviews. The pilot interviewee was chosen from one of the two schools involved in the study where the researcher had not taught, so as to negate any potential conflict of interest. The pilot interview enabled an opportunity to ensure that the interview protocols and guiding questions (Appendix A) functioned adequately and that potential problems were identified and modified as appropriate. Slight adjustments were made to the wording of some questions, and probing questions were identified to help maximise the effectiveness of the interviews.

Following the conclusion of the pilot interview, the researcher reflected on the interview setting, interview protocols, guiding questions and participant responses. The researcher journal was used to record these reflective thoughts within 24 hours of the pilot interview. Upon further reflection in the days following the pilot interview, more notes were added to the journal. The researcher was then able to make adjustments to the guiding questions with a view to improving the richness of participant responses. For example, the following exert from the researcher journal resulted in the researcher having some probing questions on hand, ready to use when asking the participant about teacher-student relationships:
In the pilot interview the participant tended to generalise when speaking about teacher-student relationships. Upon reflection, I wondered if my question ‘Please describe the influence of teacher-student relationships on your spiritual growth during your secondary years’ was too open-ended. When a participant is speaking about teachers, I think it pertinent she specifies the qualities she admired or appreciated in her teachers in order to qualify her thoughts, and prevent me from making value judgements and assumptions about what I think she may be thinking or inferring. Should this occur in another interview I will probe the issue by asking the participant to specify a particular quality she admired in the teacher.

Furthermore, the wording of some of the questions was adjusted and certain phrases were deliberately used to evoke rich participant responses. The word ‘Mercy’ for example, was inserted in Questions 2, 3 and 4. Similarly, the phrase ‘Mercy ethos’ was used in probing Question 8 about school culture. These adjustments were made as a result of the following exert in the researcher journal:

When I mentioned the term ‘Mercy ethos’ after we had concluded the pilot interview, the participant’s face lit up and she offered even more information that I did not have the chance to record, as we were at this point signing out of the college at the reception desk. I suspect the term Mercy ethos to be useful in evoking participant memories and in increasing participants’ understanding of the influence of school culture. I think I should emphasise the ‘Mercy’ aspect of schooling where possible in my questions, and to achieve this end, I also think I need to refer to the Mercy ethos.
As indicated, the researcher added an extra question (Question 11) to conclude the interview as she felt the ending was too abrupt. The researcher felt that participants should be given the opportunity to add any points they thought may be of significance to the study topic they had not already mentioned. This additional question was in keeping with the open-ended nature of the interview questions.

Using the researcher journal following the pilot interview enabled the researcher a means by which critical reflection was facilitated. As a consequence, improvements were made to the guiding questions to strengthen the interview process before the commencement of the first interview.

3.3.5.5 **Collation of interview data.**

The individual semi-structured interviews with the post-school women participants in this study generated data. In maintaining the IPA focus on the participants’ voices, each of the interviews was recorded digitally. Listening to these recordings enabled the researcher to be fully immersed in the world of the participants. Listening to the recordings also facilitated active listening which in turn helped the researcher improve and adapt future questions based on participant contributions. Furthermore, digitally recording each interview enabled the researcher to focus on the participant responses and the flow of the interview questions, rather than handwriting participant responses.

The digital recordings made by the researcher were each professionally transcribed verbatim to form the data for analysis. The verbatim transcription of interviews supported the semantic process of analysis (Hennink et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Producing a “word-for-word replica of the words spoken” (Hennink et al., 2011, p. 211), including pauses, speech fragments, verbal gestures and fillers such as ‘um, ahh, you know’ in an interview aids interpretation of what is said as these elements potentially convey meaning and
understanding. Given the importance of the transcripts in data analysis, each verbatim transcript was checked for accuracy and completeness by the researcher. This checking involved listening to each of the recordings in their entirety while following the transcripts and identifying inaccuracies and omissions (Hennink et al., 2011). Each participant was issued with a copy of her interview transcript for checking.

In the early stages of data collation, the transcripts were de-identified through the removal of identifying information, such as the names of schools and teachers. Pseudonym names were issued to each of the post-school women participants. To ensure confidentiality throughout the duration of the study, electronic and hard copies of the transcriptions were stored in a locked filing cabinet and a password protected computer. These transcriptions were later accessed for coding in the data analysis stage of IPA.

It was anticipated that gathering data through the personalised style of an individual semi-structured interview would encourage the participants to share their thoughts about their spiritual growth. As an interview setting may influence a participant’s experience regarding comfort and security in speaking (Hennink et al., 2011), prior planning of the location and desired atmosphere of an interview was undertaken. Where possible and convenient to the participants, the interviews were conducted on site at the respective schools. It was intended that these settings may engender a feeling of nostalgia and connection for the post-school women which may prove beneficial in recalling experiences of significance to their spiritual growth.

Six participants were able to be interviewed at their respective schools and three participants elected to be interviewed in an alternative location. One of these interviews was conducted by telephone as the participant had relocated interstate. Each interview was conducted in a quiet setting where either party was unlikely to be interrupted. This quiet and
private interview atmosphere “helped to ensure confidentiality, enhance participant comfort, prevent interruptions and eliminate the possibility that the presence of others may contaminate data” (Noon, 2018, p. 76).

Smith et al. (2009) recommend researchers familiarise participants with their expectations regarding interviews in advance of conducting them, and seek to make arrangements that are conducive to the participants. The initial contact to participants was made by the alumni of each of the schools in the study or the researcher. Prospective participants were invited to participate on a voluntary basis. Following this initial contact, the researcher contacted each of the participants prior to the interviews to discuss the logistics of the interview and to ensure each participant was comfortable with the arrangements.

This prior contact with the participants also provided an opportunity to outline the aims of the research project, address questions and establish a rapport with each participant. Participants also received written copies of a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) and a Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) in advance of their interviews so that they were able to familiarise themselves with the study and the expectations regarding their involvement. Additionally, the participants received a written copy of the guiding questions at least one week prior to their respective interviews, thus allowing time for them to reflect on the questions in preparation for the interview.

It is integral that qualitative researchers establish, build and maintain rapport with their interviewees (Hennink et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009). Establishing rapport with interviewees is deemed essential as it may help them “feel more comfortable to share their thoughts or personal feelings with the interviewer” (Hennink, 2011, p. 125). Upon the recommendation of Hennink et al. (2011), the researcher allowed time at the start of the interviews to become acquainted with the interviewees through making friendly small-talk,
while also ensuring the seating plan was conducive to building rapport. As body language is an indicator of rapport (Hennink et al., 2011) the researcher was also mindful of this element of interviewee-interviewer interaction throughout the interviews. The researcher acknowledges this element was not a consideration in the one interview conducted by telephone. In this instance the researcher was especially mindful of voice tone and volume in establishing and building rapport.

Rapport between the researcher and participants was built as each of the interviews progressed. In particular, rapport was built when some of the participants shared mementos they had been invited to bring along to their interviews. These mementos were items of personal significance from their schooling. The purpose of the mementos was to provide focal points upon which to open the interview and facilitate discussion. The significance of some of the participants’ mementos offered insight (van Gennip, van den Hoven, & Markopoulos, 2015; Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010) into the topic being studied. In some instances, a participant’s memento provided ongoing insight by igniting items of conversation multiple times throughout the interview. One participant forgot to bring along her memento to her interview, yet she was still able to describe it in detail to the researcher. Similarly, the participant whose interview was conducted by telephone described her memento to the researcher in detail. The participants’ mementos offered insight about the influence of their schooling on their spiritual growth. They were useful stimuli for recalling memories of schooling experiences and generating rich, idiographic data.

In keeping with IPA, open-ended questions were used to guide discussion and encourage reflective interviewee participation (Smith et al., 2009). The interviews in this study consisted of 11 prepared questions (see Appendix A). These questions were supported with prompting and probing questions where necessary. For example, Question 4 stated, “Was your Mercy secondary schooling special in any way?” Participants required time to
think about this question before responding, so silent probing, through maintaining a pause following the question, was beneficial. Probing questions were then asked to help facilitate participant responses. For example, “Why was this event/experience/etc special? What made it special?” Depending on the response, further probing was executed. For example, “How did it make you feel? What else do you remember about that day/experience?” In being guided by the participants’ responses, the researcher moved flexibly between the questions on the interview schedule.

3.3.5.5.1 Researcher journal use during collation of interview data.

Although not a form of data, journal entries made throughout the collation of interview data assisted in bracketing (see Section 3.3.5.1). When listening to the words of a participant, the researcher’s assumptions and pre-existing thoughts and ideas were bracketed to enhance the listening experience (Smith et al., 2009). These researcher thoughts, ideas and assumptions were recorded in the researcher journal. Employing bracketing enables the researcher to focus wholeheartedly on listening to the participant, having acknowledged prior assumptions. The researcher journal is an important tool in IPA as it is typically referred to during data analysis.

In this study the researcher journal was used mostly prior to the commencement of an interview and then at its conclusion. The researcher journal was used just twice during the nine interviews, as the researcher was cognisant of avoiding distraction while listening to the participants. Journal entries typically outlined the researcher’s thoughts and assumptions about participants prior to the interviews, based on the communication with them preceding the interviews. The researcher also recorded her thoughts and assumptions regarding the three schools the participants had attended, based on her prior teaching experience and visits to
these schools, as she felt her perceptions of the schools may possibly influence her perceptions of the participants.

As indicated, on two occasions the researcher journal was used during an interview to note an interruption or a topic of conversation that the researcher felt may be unrelated to the questions asked, and therefore unrelated to the investigation, albeit an interesting or intriguing comment. Noting it down enabled the researcher to later recall the point and ascertain whether or not it was relevant to the study or not. If deemed irrelevant, the point was omitted from the study. Bracketing allowed the researcher to acknowledge potential bias, and then disassociate from it, so that listening was unimpeded (Smith et al., 2009). In the final stages of data analysis, the researcher journal information was used in de-bracketing (Bednall, 2006). This process is explained in Section 3.3.6.1.

At the conclusion of every interview the researcher found a quiet place alone to reflect on the interview. Journal entries at this point typically included “immediate thoughts and perceptions on a range of matters such as where the application of epoche seemed necessary or some common themes of significance were developing” (Bednall, 2006, para. 23). The purpose of the journal was not to compare the interviews, rather support the IPA methodology through hearing the distinctive voices of each of the participants. Shared or common themes only “became active components” (Bednall, 2006, para. 24) in the researcher’s thinking during the interpretative process in data analysis.

3.3.6 Research methods: Data analysis.

Data analysis occurred following the conclusion of all of the interviews. To have commenced data analysis prior to this point in time may have jeopardised the integrity of any remaining interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methods, such as coding, bracketing and epoche (Smith et al., 2009), were employed throughout this phase of the
study. The way in which data analysis was conducted is explained in the following section. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the data.

3.3.6.1 IPA of interview data.

In employing IPA in this study, the researcher worked to understand the participants’ experiences from their perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The researcher considered the perceptions of the post-school women regarding the influence of their Mercy schooling experiences on their spiritual growth, through close analysis of each interview. In keeping with IPA, each individual interview was digitally-recorded, so the researcher was able to later study the transcription of the recording and maximise her immersion in the hermeneutic, or interpretative process.

In analysing the interviews, epoche and bracketing were employed to capture the essence of the voices of the post-school women. This aforementioned process involved separating past experience and/or knowledge of the researcher until a point whereby it was reintegrated with the participant responses to more fully appreciate their views. The researcher utilised IPA by employing Bednall’s (2006) six stage framework to analyse the interview transcripts. This framework, summarised in Table 3.5, enabled extraction of the essence of the participants’ lived experiences and provided insight from the interviews.
Table 3.5
*Bednall’s Six Stages of IPA (Bednall, 2006, paras. 27-34)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1: Iterative reading and flagging items</td>
<td>Interview transcripts were read multiple times and items flagged as themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2: Establishing topics of significance</td>
<td>Flagged items were grouped together or coded to form topics of significance (codes). Bracketing occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 3: Establishing thematic linkages</td>
<td>Coding of themes was refined. Items identified as significant were re-evaluated. This part of the process ensures bracketing has occurred effectively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 4: Examining the flagged items for meaning</td>
<td>Interview transcripts were re-read to check the identification of major themes and to ascertain their meaning. From this process, super-ordinate themes were determined.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 5: Reintegration or de-bracketing (most significant point of epoche)</td>
<td>Bracketed information was revisited and tested, in conjunction with evaluation of researcher journal entries, to consider and inform theme interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 6: Fashioning the units of the study</td>
<td>The meaning of themes, and the connections between them, were explored. Sub-ordinate themes were determined within the super-ordinate themes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each of the interviews in the study was transcribed by a professional transcription service. As mentioned, each interview participant was issued with a copy of her respective transcript for checking. The researcher commenced Stage 1 of Bednall’s (2006) IPA framework by listening to each of the recordings to check the manuscripts for accuracy. Amendments were made as required. In several places throughout the interviews, interviewees had made comments about activities they had experienced in their secondary schooling that were incorrectly transcribed. They had been marked as ‘inaudible’. The researcher was able to identify these errors and make the corrections accordingly, so that the data was comprehensive and correct. The researcher read all nine interview transcripts to ensure they were accurate before progressing any further into analysis. Throughout this
process the researcher was immersed in the data, as she listened to the audio recordings of the interviews while concurrently reading the transcripts. In keeping with this framework, a form of coding was employed to ‘flag’ or highlight significant topics within the interview transcripts. Flagging of items occurred in this first reading of the transcripts in Stage 1.

Stage 2 of the analysis involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts. Items that had been previously flagged were checked and noted as possible themes depending on their presence within other transcripts (Bednall, 2006). To uphold the exploratory nature of the study, themes were not predetermined. Rather than focusing on theme description and repetition, emphasis was given to capturing the essence of the meaning in order to authentically exercise the principles of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, in fully capturing this meaning, the researcher endeavoured to understand how the participants interpreted their world (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). This second stage of analysis also served as a check that no items had been omitted in Stage 1. In Stage 2, the transcripts were annotated with flagged items, or codes, as they emerged. Annotations were performed on every script regarding information pertinent to each of the research questions. For an example of an annotated extract of an interview script, see Appendix D.

To an extent, the three subsidiary research questions influenced the emergent themes because they guided participants to three specific areas of their Mercy schooling: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy. For example, interview questions probing the second subsidiary research question influenced themes to emerge from the interview data. See the following table, Table 3.6, for an example of the initial coding of interview transcripts.
Table 3.6
Example of Initial Coding of Interview Transcripts

Subsidiary Research Question 2: What are the Perceptions of Post-school Women about the Influence of Teacher-student Relationships on their Spiritual Growth?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Coding</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring, nurturing</td>
<td>(Julia) …they cared about where we were going in life. And they nurtured all our own qualities and each individual perspective, even though we were, really, we were just students, but they recognised our own qualities, our own opinions, and, kind of helped guide us because they genuinely cared about where we were going and the path that laid ahead, I guess… [Researcher probes: When you say they {your teachers} genuinely cared about where you were going, how did you know that? What were some things that, maybe they said, or did?]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>(Julia) …If I turned to [teacher name deleted] you could tell he genuinely cared, just because he would always meet us outside our [subject name deleted] classroom and greet each one of us as we came into the class. If we ever walked in late for any reason, he would greet us individually, and it wasn’t in a way to, kind of say “Hey, you’re late. What are you doing?” kind of thing. It was a genuine hello. And after, he would come check on you and see how, if everything was okay…and always made sure to check in on us…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-authoritative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stage 3 involved drawing together the initial codes to establish thematic linkages. Across the breadth of the nine transcripts, the initial flagging of items revealed codes such as: caring and nurturing teachers; non-authoritative teachers; teachers who exercise presence; teachers who exercise trust; and, teachers who demonstrate openness. These items, that were initially identified as being of significance, were re-evaluated. This part of the process ensured that the practice of bracketing had occurred effectively.

Stage 4 followed this process of making thematic linkages between the codes. Data collated from the nine interviews were combined. Interview transcripts were re-read again to check that all items were flagged and codes were identified. As a result of this process, major themes, known as ‘super-ordinate’ themes, were determined. The identification of patterns
between emergent themes, known as ‘abstraction’, was employed to develop these super-ordinate themes. These higher-level themes were used to identify a cluster of like themes (Smith et al., 2009). Thematically linked codes were grouped together to form a common theme which was broader and inclusive of the range of codes. For example, the aforementioned items initially flagged regarding teacher-student relationships, were grouped together as a super-ordinate theme titled ‘connectedness to teachers’.

Additionally, the researcher considered the meaning of codes developed and checked these codes were inclusive of the initial items flagged in Stage 1. Ascertaining the meaning of the super-ordinate themes emerging from the process was also pertinent in this stage. The process of epoche, bracketing and eidetic reduction, mentioned in Section 3.3.5.1, aided the identification and interpretation of themes that captured the essence of spiritual growth. Codes that initially emerged across all transcripts were amalgamated to create super-ordinate themes, as shown in Table 3.7.

Table 3.7
Example of Further Coding of Interview Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Codes from Subsidiary Research Question 2: What are the Perceptions of Post-school Women about the Influence of Teacher-student Relationships on their Spiritual Growth?</th>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Connectedness to teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-authoritative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role model</td>
<td>Teacher role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Inspirational teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 5 of the IPA process, as outlined by Bednall (2006) involved the researcher undergoing the process of de-bracketing, which is the most significant point of epoche. The bracketed information, which was recorded in the researcher journal throughout the data collection and analysis phases, was revisited to establish whether it had influenced the emergence of the initial codes and subsequent super-ordinate themes. All comments in the researcher journal were considered in this stage of analysis. For example, the researcher’s personal comments and assumptions about the schools and the participants were reviewed in addition to the notes made regarding the interview process. Reviewing all journal comments limited potential bias and illustrated the reflexivity of the IPA process. (See Section 3.5).

Reflexivity was exercised early in the analysis process, in Stage 2, and then later, in Stage 5, regarding the interpretation of comments made by Jemima about one of her Mercy schooling experiences. Jemima explained how she had experienced disappointment in the manner in which she was taught Religious Education in one of her senior years of schooling. The researcher had recorded the following journal entry after her interview with Jemima:

One of Jemima’s RE teachers appeared to have negatively influenced her
and she was critical of the teaching methods used by this teacher. While
I appreciated her honesty, I was conscious of trying not to make
assumptions about the situation…I will need to bracket my thoughts
when analysing this component of the interview.

Without bracketing during Stage 2, the researcher’s assumptions about this situation may have influenced the critical analysis of Jemima’s comments and the determination of topics of significance and codes. However, bracketing enabled these assumptions to be acknowledged and set aside during analysis so that Jemima’s perceptions of the experience were honoured and her voice was fully heard. During Stage 5 of the analysis process, these
journal comments were revisited to consider and inform theme interpretation. De-bracketing was an essential part of the IPA process as it allowed the researcher to acknowledge and test her own personal assumptions, which potentially added richness to the process of interpretation.

Stage 6 of Bednall’s (2006) IPA process focused on fashioning the units of the study. This final phase involved exploring the meaning of themes and the connections between them. Subordinate themes were also determined in relation to the super-ordinate themes. These subordinate themes stemmed from the initial codes, which were subsequently thematically linked and issued broad, super-ordinate themes. Not every super-ordinate theme contained a subordinate theme(s). The super-ordinate and subordinate themes are presented in Chapter 4. The themes are supported with extracts to form a narrative account of the study to convey the spiritual growth experiences of the participants from their secondary schooling, along with “interpretative commentary of the researcher” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, para. 25). Quotations from participants are embedded in an explanation of the themes in the narrative account so that readers may appreciate the significance of the quotations first hand. Concurrently, the quotations highlight the voice of the participants, thus supporting the ideological stance behind the IPA methodology employed. The synthesis of multiple data sources works to foster a detailed interpretation of the meanings and address the research question directly.

3.3.6.2 Theory generation.

The open-ended, qualitative nature of the theoretical framework and, in particular, the focus on capturing the essence of the spiritual growth experiences of each of the post-school women facilitated the generation of theory following data analysis. This capacity for
theory generation was in keeping with the qualitative approach to research and the specific methodology of IPA. The theory generated from the study is outlined in Section 5.3.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The investigation commenced following ethics approval from The University of Notre Dame Australia’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Ethics approval was also sought from the three schools governed by Mercy Education Limited. The Chief Executive Officer of MEL had given prior approval for the study. Finally, approval was sought and gained from the principals of the three MEL schools involved in the study.

Interview participation was voluntary. Informed consent of participants was obtained before the commencement of data collection. To ensure ethical practices were upheld, the following steps were taken:

- Participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form that outlined the purpose of the investigation.
- Approval was sought from participants to publish the data gathered for the study provided participant names and any other identifying information was not disclosed.
- Only participants who provided consent were involved in the project.
- Data was de-identified and pseudonyms were provided in all forms of data collation, to ensure confidentiality.
- Participants were informed they were able to withdraw from the study at any time of the research project.
- The research met all ethical requirements outlined in obtaining ethical clearance.
• As the researcher was employed as a teacher at one of the schools in the study, interviews were not conducted with any participants whom the researcher had taught.

• Participants were issued a copy of their interview transcripts for checking.

Although the description of spiritual growth framing the study was positive, because it focused on schooling influences that enriched or deepened spiritual growth, provision was made for the participants in the event that they recalled disturbing memories of their schooling. These provisions were outlined in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B). In the unlikely event that a participant experienced distress, she was:

• under no obligation to answer a question if she experienced discomfort;
• free to withdraw her consent at any time and opt-out of the interview; and,
• she was provided with contact details for support organisations such as Lifeline and Beyondblue.

In addition, notes, transcripts, digital recordings and coding were stored securely at all times in a password protected computer and locked filing cabinet. These resources will be kept for a period of five years from the publication of the research thesis, after which time they will be destroyed. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher, who was employed at one of the schools in the study, acknowledged that she may have to report uncomfortable findings to her employer. To achieve transparency in this regard, she exercised methods of credibility, transferability and confirmability in relation to the trustworthiness of the study.

3.4.1 Trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness refers to the validity of a study (Sarantakos, 2013). Qualitative researchers need to apply a variety of measures to ensure validity of their work (Creswell, 2014; Sarantakos, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). In a qualitative study, trustworthiness involves
the researcher checking for the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected (Neuman, 2011). For example, and as mentioned, in this study participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcriptions for checking following their respective interviews. Additionally, the researcher checked each interview transcription for credibility. These measures were taken to ensure validity of the data gathered. Three components of trustworthiness contributed to the trustworthiness of this study: credibility; transferability; and, confirmability. These components will now be outlined in relation to the study.

### 3.4.1.1 Credibility.

The credibility of methods employed in data collection and analysis (Sarantakos, 2013) warranted consideration. Multiplicity of data collation and analysis serves to strengthen trustworthiness of the research (Yin, 2009). In this study, in-depth analysis was required to optimise rich data sourced from individual semi-structured interviews. As asserted by Sandelowski (1995), this process resulted in the discovery of a new and richly layered depth of understanding of experience. Conducting semi-structured interviews with participants from across the three different schools provided more comprehensive results and led to greater completeness in addressing the research question, thus minimising potential gaps in the research (Sarantakos, 2013).

As researcher experience in observation, interviewing and communicating may increase confidence and credibility in the process (Law et al., 1998), the researcher’s role was instrumental in this study. In this instance, the researcher’s role as an educator with 20 years’ experience in the field of education was considered beneficial in conducting the interviews with the post-school women. This experience was also considered beneficial with regards to the researcher’s role being integral in facilitating the double hermeneutic nature of an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009). The execution of a pilot interview in advance of the nine
interviews afforded the researcher the opportunity to trial the questions and then make some adjustments to aid facilitation of participant responses. The pilot interview also allowed the researcher an opportunity to practise her interviewing skills. These skills included:

- ensuring the participant felt comfortable and safe in the interview surrounds;
- empathetic listening;
- establishing and maintaining rapport with the participant;
- prompting the participant where appropriate;
- using probing questions as needed; and,
- ensuring the digital recording device worked satisfactorily.

3.4.1.2 Transferability.

This study was specific to nine participants from three schools and it was not representational of all post-school women from Mercy girls’ schools. Through this small purposive sample, the study attempted to capture the essence of a human experience, in this instance the spiritual growth of the nine post-school women throughout their secondary schooling. However, the insight gained about the post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth was sufficiently detailed for comparisons to be made in other research contexts.

Transferability to other contexts may be established and maximised through the purposive, homogenous sample as emphasising the essence of the participants’ lived experiences may be universal in that they connect people with a sense of what is it to be human (Smith et al., 2009). Thick description of the findings of data, supported with participant quotations, ensures transferability while also minimising misinterpretation. Rather than generalising, readers may “assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional
and experiential knowledge” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 4). Using rich, thick description of the findings provides detailed descriptions of the setting and/or may offer multiple perspectives about themes, thus enhancing validity (Creswell, 2014).

3.4.1.3 Confirmability.

Confirmability was ensured through detailed description of the research methods and framework employed, justifying the approach taken. Trustworthiness of the study was also maintained through employing IPA in the data collation and analysis stages, in addition to an IPA methodology underpinning the theoretical framework of the study design. As anticipated, the application of epoche, bracketing and eidetic reduction enabled the researcher to capture the essence of the post-school women’s spiritual growth influenced by their Mercy secondary schooling. Confirmability and reflexivity were facilitated through epoche, bracketing, and eidetic reduction, as well as member checking of interview transcripts, regular debriefing with university supervisors, and ongoing self-reflective journaling. Consideration of literature on the topic contextualised the study. Conclusions were drawn that met the study’s aims and objectives through close examination of the themes which emerged from the data set of the nine post-school women.

3.5 Reflexive Statement

The intention of this reflexive statement is more than declaring bias and values embedded in the study (Creswell, 2014). The intention of this statement is to acknowledge the researcher’s context was an important component of this IPA study. In qualitative research, the researcher “reflects about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (Creswell, 2014, p. 186).
This reflexive statement is provided to illustrate how the background context of the researcher may have shaped the direction of the study.

The researcher acknowledges her position in this study and provides some contextual information accordingly. She commenced her secondary teaching career in a government secondary high school, and worked in two different government high schools in her formative years of teaching. At the time of conducting this study, she was employed in a Mercy Education Limited girls’ school in Perth, Western Australia. In both educational systems in which she has taught, the researcher held teaching and leadership positions pertaining to the pastoral and academic wellbeing of students. She has completed post-graduate studies in Religious Education. These studies and her experience in educating young people, led her to a desire to explore student spiritual growth in MEL schools in Western Australia.

Given the nature of her experiences, it was likely she was in possession of bias and made assumptions when collecting data. To facilitate impartiality, a researcher journal was used to bracket this information throughout the data collection stage of the study. In keeping with IPA, this bracketed information was revisited and tested in the data analysis stage of the project to optimise the process of interpretation.

3.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explained and justified the research design used to explore the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. The design followed a constructivist approach and interpretivist paradigm, which informed the methodology and methods. A phenomenological perspective was employed. The specific phenomenological approach of IPA was chosen as apt for the study, given its exploratory and experiential nature. In particular, the recognition of the researcher’s
role, through bracketing, in exploring a human phenomenon such as spiritual growth was identified as a pertinent aspect of this study, further justifying the choice of IPA. The primary method of data collection included individual semi-structured interviews with a small, purposive sample of post-school women between 20 – 30 years of age, who had attended three Western Australian Mercy Education Limited schools. The researcher journal was also used throughout the data collection stage, as well as across the data analysis stage, thus upholding the principles of IPA.

This research design facilitated exploration of the perceptions of post-school students who attended Catholic MEL schools about the influence of their secondary Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. As fostering student spiritual growth is deemed essential in Catholic schools (CECWA, 2009) determination of the factors crucial to student spiritual growth through a study of this nature was critical. Following, Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study from the interview data collected. These findings will then be discussed in Chapter 5 with regard to the research questions that guided the study.
Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings are reported from the study of how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia. As outlined in Chapter 3, the research question was addressed through exploring the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth. Data were collected from nine individual semi-structured interviews with three participants from each of the three Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. Interview transcriptions were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As hermeneutics is a defining characteristic of IPA, the process involved the researcher interpreting the participants’ life experiences. In doing so, the researcher consciously relied on sourcing multiple and apposite participant quotations to allow the voices of the participants to be fully heard (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The intention was two-fold: firstly, to privilege the voices of the participants; and, secondly, to allow readers the opportunity to form their own interpretations of the data rather than the researcher exercising undue influence.

In the remainder of this chapter, the findings are reported in relation to the overarching research question and the three subsidiary research questions. In the first part of the chapter, the findings are presented in summary form. Contextual information about the participants is presented followed by findings related to the participants’ interpretation of the term ‘spiritual growth’. The findings pertaining to the post-school women’s perceptions about the influence of school culture, teacher-student relationships, curriculum and pedagogy on
their spiritual growth are then presented. Lastly, the findings related to the three subsidiary research questions are synthesised to address the overarching research question.

Table 4.1
*Chapter Overview*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Summary of findings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participant information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Participant interpretations of the term ‘spiritual growth’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Findings related to post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth.</td>
<td>Subsidiary Research Question 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Findings related to post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth.</td>
<td>Subsidiary Research Question 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Findings related to post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth.</td>
<td>Subsidiary Research Question 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Findings related to post-school women’s perceptions about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth.</td>
<td>Overarching Research Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Reflexive statement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Chapter summary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the findings, a reflexive statement is made. This statement was also presented at the end of Chapter 3 to outline how the researcher journal was re-visited throughout the data analysis to ensure transparency of the process and to acknowledge the researcher’s role in the investigation. Re-visiting bracketed information affords deeper insight into the emergent themes (Bednall, 2006). This chapter includes a reflexive statement to highlight use of the researcher journal in the final stages of data analysis in the process of de-
bracketing (Bednall, 2006). Finally, the chapter is summarised to conclude. The connection between the findings and the overarching and subsidiary research questions is then discussed in the following chapter.

4.1.1 Summary of findings.

In essence, the findings revealed 17 super-ordinate themes and 19 sub-ordinate themes that emerged from the interview data in response to the three subsidiary research questions. These themes are illustrated in summary form in Table 4.2. Examples of interview responses from the post-school women have been selected and included as evidence of the themes in this table. Initially the interview transcriptions were annotated by highlighting or coding items of significance. An extract of an interview transcription annotated with individual codes is shown in Appendix D. The process was iterative in that items were subsequently grouped into common themes, thereby forming the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes from the responses to each research question. Further throughout this chapter, these themes are explained and supported with specific examples sourced from the voices of the post-school women participants.

To limit bias, the researcher made a deliberate effort to include interview response examples from all participants when illustrating the super-ordinate themes. In exercising this reflexivity, it was anticipated any tendency by the researcher to favour the opinion of a participant would be minimised and the voices of all participants would be heard. In Table 4.2, the evidence from participants is displayed as short quotations with the pseudonym names of the respective participants assigned to the quotations. The types of responses that the post-school women provided, as evidence of the super-ordinate themes, are reflected in these quotations.
The number of post-school women responses comprising each super-ordinate theme is either expressed in written form, or displayed in numerical form in parentheses, in Table 4.2 and throughout the presentation of the findings in this chapter. Sub-ordinate themes were determined for many super-ordinate themes. In some instances, however, sub-ordinate themes were not present in super-ordinate themes. The assignment of sub-ordinate themes depended upon the range of participant responses in relation to each interview question.

Table 4.2
*Findings from Interview Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Sub-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Participant Interview Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal journey</td>
<td>Positive force</td>
<td><em>...having to use your inner strength to keep going.</em> (Sally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entwined with religion (7)</td>
<td>Mercy values and heritage</td>
<td><em>I think, for me, spiritual growth was more to do with, like, again, religious space...</em> (Gemma)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness and connectedness (4)</td>
<td>Relationship with God</td>
<td><em>I think I see God as...just present in my daily life...He’s in me and around me...He just is.</em> (Annika)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Giving back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are the Perceptions of Post-school Women About the Influence of School Culture on their Spiritual Growth?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Sub-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Participant Interview Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious culture</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>...it wasn’t frowned upon if you were identifying with being religious...</em> (Annika)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>...we were taught religion...and it was a sensitive approach...</em> (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of place (9)</td>
<td>• Openness to God and/or others • Gratitude • Peace and stillness</td>
<td>• <em>there’s just something about being outside that kind of inspires that introspectivity [sic] and you can’t help but kind of be at peace…</em> (Sophie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive community of teachers (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>And I think it’s just, yes, such a supportive community.</em> (Sophie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercy values and ethos (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• <em>...the Mercy ethos is instilled through the values…the [Mercy] values…</em> (Jane)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional findings</td>
<td>• Academic focus • Behavioural expectations</td>
<td>• <em>...there was a huge academic push behind it.</em> (Annika)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What are the Perceptions of Post-school Women about the Influence of Teacher-student Relationships on their Spiritual Growth?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Sub-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Participant Interview Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Connectedness to teachers (9) | • Supportive and caring • Non-authoritative • Presence • Trust • Openness | • *...they cared about where we were going in life.* (Julia)  
• *...the support that he provided me...really helped me persevere and get through.* (Jane)  
• *...it felt like quite a lot of responsibility at the time as well had been entrusted in us.* (Sophie) |
| Teacher role models (6) | | • *...[teacher’s name deleted] was a huge, huge role model for me.* (Sally) |
| Inspirational teachers (5) | • Positivity | • *...[teacher’s name deleted]...always saw...a positive part to everything.* (Gemma) |

**What are the Perceptions of Post-school Women about the Influence of Curriculum and Pedagogy on their Spiritual Growth?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Super-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Sub-ordinate Theme</th>
<th>Participant Interview Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging and community (9)</td>
<td>• Sisters of Mercy</td>
<td>• A sense of unity… I think everyone knew they belonged there but it was really – we were now one team with cohesion. (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Cohesion and unity</td>
<td>• It showed me… what I could become. (Rebekah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fond memories (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• ...but it was just so nice to reflect on all those memories… (Julia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy (9)</td>
<td>• Perseverance</td>
<td>• My strength to be able to do things that I didn’t think I would maybe have the confidence to do or the ability to do… how to, like, empower myself. (Jemima)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity (8)</td>
<td>• Belonging</td>
<td>• ...I think the opportunities it created. (Sally)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• ...the experience as a whole, all the people around you... and the opportunities. (Jemima)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving back through service (8)</td>
<td>• Sense of accomplishment in giving back</td>
<td>• ...it was definitely a sense of accomplishment and a way that I could help… (Jane)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• More so… the importance of giving back, I think. (Julia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• And when I finally got to do it [altar serve], it was a connection with God... (Mary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic curriculum (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• ...I think knowing that God will always be there. (Rebekah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reflection and awareness (6)</td>
<td>• Growth from disappointment</td>
<td>• I learned more by not getting Head Girl than getting it. (Rebekah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life lessons (5)</td>
<td>• Collective experiences</td>
<td>• ...so that was a really good lesson in learning...what do I lack? (Jemima)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creative and critical thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• So I think it was just good, good [sic] form of affirmation as well. (Gemma)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.1.2 Participants of this study.

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from evidence from the interview transcriptions in relation to the research questions. The names of participants, schools, and
any other identifying information, were de-identified in the transcriptions prior to analysis. De-identification included issuing pseudonym names, or removing the specific names of teachers or schools, and referring to them in a generic sense only.

As information gleaned from the post-school women may help readers contextualise the participants’ responses, Table 4.3 presents the following information regarding each participant: pseudonym name issued; year of graduation; day or boarding student status while at school; occupation; and, religion.

Table 4.3  
*Participant Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym Name)</th>
<th>Year of Graduation</th>
<th>Boarder or Day Student</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annika</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Physiotherapist</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebekah</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Teacher, pursuing further tertiary study (Law)</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Boarder</td>
<td>Physiotherapist</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Paralegal</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Tertiary student (Education)</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Tertiary student (Engineering)</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemima</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Tertiary student (Commerce, Communications &amp; Media)</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The graduating years of the post-school women spanned 10 years from 2007 to 2016. The age range of the participants spanned 20 to 29 years, thereby fulfilling the study’s parameter of each participant being between 20 to 30 years of age. Of the nine post-school women, one was a boarding student, representing approximately 11% of the total study population. This percentage is broadly indicative of the total number of boarding students in proportion to the total number of day students of the three schools combined. The occupations of the post-school women indicate they have all received or are presently receiving a tertiary education. Eight out of the nine women identified as being Roman Catholic. One woman identified as being agnostic.

4.1.3 Participant interpretations of the term ‘spiritual growth’.

Listening to the post-school women’s interpretations of the term ‘spiritual growth’ was deemed essential because spiritual growth is the phenomenon explored in the study. Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the participants’ interview responses. They defined spiritual growth as: a personal journey (8); entwined with religion (7); and, an awareness and connectedness (4). The post-school women’s responses illustrated that their understanding of the phenomenon was aligned with aspects of the definition framing the study because these super-ordinate themes reflected crucial aspects of this definition. These super-ordinate themes are outlined with supporting evidence from the participant’s interview responses.

4.1.3.1 Personal journey.

Most of the post-school women (8) perceived spiritual growth to be a personal journey. In the following excerpt, the type of response given to this question is exemplified. In this example Sophie described spiritual growth as a personal journey involving reflection and introspection:
obviously, a very personal thing…and I think it means very different things to different people…some people are better or not better at it, but some people are quicker at getting to a certain point than others…I see it as a lot of reflection…and sort of introspectiveness…at different points kind of looking back and thinking about what certain things meant and what they might mean in the future.

Other participants also highlighted the personal nature of this journey through describing spiritual growth as a process by which one grows to move towards becoming whole. Julia explicitly stated that spiritual growth involved, “…becoming whole and staying grounded”. Julia also related spiritual growth to searching for meaning and purpose in life. She stated “…but developing, kind of, that meaning and purpose and doing things…that give you purpose, essentially”.

Another post-school woman, Jane, commented, “I think spiritual growth is…a very personal journey and it’s the experiences you’re exposed to that help you develop that relationship with God, within yourself”. While Gemma described spiritual growth as a part of one’s life journey. She said, “… I would tie it [spiritual growth] into that [personal growth] because I think everything is just tied into your journey into growth”. Collectively the participants’ responses were common in that they spoke of the personal nature of spiritual growth occurring over time.

One sub-ordinate theme emerged from similar comments made by two of the post-school women. Both participants noted the positive force spiritual growth exerted on them. Sally, for example, described spiritual growth as a personal journey in which inner strength was needed to overcome challenges. She stated, “… you know, having to use your inner strength to keep going”. This comment inferred Sally’s inner strength perhaps resulted in her
being able to exercise resilience and persevere to be able to keep moving forward. Similarly, Jemima identified that spiritual growth helped her to move forward:

> I think spiritual growth is about recognising…the sort of spirituality, I suppose that works for you. And then inputting that into your life, and being able to learn from that and build off of that…and use that to kind of motivate you forward and…really making sure that that’s what you believe in, and that’s what’s gonna push you forward…

### 4.1.3.2 Entwined with religion.

Most of the post-school women (7) referred to religion as being a component of spiritual growth. For example, Sally commented:

> I was talking to my mum about this because she is…a scripture teacher at home, so she’s always had, like, a lot of faith, and we’ve grown up having those values and…we’d go to church, but I don’t think spiritual growth is necessarily always going to church…I think spiritual growth is being, like, open-minded to different beliefs and values that impact the way you live, live out your life, I guess.

Her comments suggested spiritual growth is entwined with religion, but also at times a separate entity.

Similarly, Gemma stated how she personally considered spiritual growth as being entwined to religion, rather than separate from it, “I think, for me, spiritual growth was more to do with, like, again, religious space rather than…outside of that”. Some of Gemma’s comments suggested she perhaps felt her more recent connectedness to religion was inadequate. Although these comments do not refer to Gemma’s secondary schooling
experience, rather her present situation, they have been included here to indicate the importance she evidently assigned to religion as a component of her spiritual growth. For example, Gemma commented that she felt her connectedness to religion was not strong in the context of acting on opportunities she had been offered through her parish subsequent to leaving school, “I don’t think my, like, religious basis is that strong. Um, I don’t feel comfortable because I don’t feel preaching what I don’t really, really practise”. She went on to say how her parish priest had tried to encourage her to take up these opportunities, such as developing a youth group:

…they’re like, “No, that makes you the perfect candidate [laughter] for this.” And I was like, “Does it [laughter]?” Like, I just felt really uncomfortable. But again, that would be part of personal growth and like, other forms of spiritual growth for me as well.

Two of the post-school women linked their understanding of spiritual growth to the Mercy values and heritage of their schools, and this particular understanding forms a sub-ordinate theme. Mary spoke about how learning about the Mercy values as part of her schooling aided her understanding of spiritual growth:

Spiritual growth – so obviously continuously…developing…in spiritual values. I guess my spiritual values were mostly Mercy values. So the Mercy nuns. I guess when people get stressed, particularly in high school, a lot more girls turn to religion as well – especially during exam periods… you need to learn about the values of the school. And the values of the school as driven by the Mercy values. So, you should be, and I don’t want to use the word forced, but you should be encouraged to
learn it. And if you don’t want to learn those values, there’s other schools that may be more beneficial for you.

Annika also spoke about the Mercy values and heritage as being significant to her understanding of spiritual growth:

Once I got to school…the teachings were there a lot more and the sort of structure behind it was there a little bit more. And just having the Mercy Sisters as the root. This is what we believe in and this is the direction that we take. So, it was like it was the spirituality in action.

Additionally, comments were made by Jane, Annika and Rebekah regarding their respective relationships with God. Although stemming from a religious foundation, these comments were deemed more pertinent to the following super-ordinate theme of awareness and connectedness and so they have been articulated in that section as a sub-ordinate theme.

4.1.3.3 Awareness and connectedness.

Some of the post-school women (4) spoke of spiritual growth as an awareness and connectedness to the self, others and with God. For example, Sophie recalled how her awareness of consciously reflecting became apparent to her in the middle of her secondary schooling, “And I think, I got, I became a lot more aware of that [tendency to reflect], I would say, probably around the Year 10 mark…” As mentioned, a sub-ordinate theme emerged from this super-ordinate theme regarding the connectedness between the self and God.

Three participants spoke of spiritual growth as developing a relationship with God. Annika, for example, stated, “I think I see God as…just present in my daily life…He’s in me and around me…He just is”. Jane related how she believed that life experiences helped
develop a relationship with God, “…and it’s the experiences that you’re exposed to that help to develop that relationship with God within yourself”. Rebekah explained how she was the only one in her immediate family who was baptised Catholic and sent to a Catholic school. She attributed her mother’s choice to baptise her as a gift from her grandmother, who was Catholic:

I think my family, my parents...aren’t religious really... there was no sense of, I think, spiritual connection and I was the only one in my family that my mum gave, um, sent me to a Catholic school and baptised me...because my grandmother was...she [Rebekah’s mother] gave it to me because she thought if I had no one left that I – or nothing left, I’d perhaps might have God. And I think that’s a lovely thing to think of for someone who has no religion. And so it was that I, I didn’t have anyone in my family or my friends but I think school...I think school fostered my spiritual belief...That there was more to life than just, I think...The nine to five and the going out...But school gave me that...wanting to live a life of service and to find...maybe a deeper sense...A connection with God.

The comments by these three post-school women exemplify how the women understood spiritual growth as forging a connectedness with God.

Another sub-ordinate theme emerging from the super-ordinate theme of awareness and connectedness was the notion of giving back to a community. Two of the post-school women mentioned this notion. Rebekah stated:

I remember thinking if I was born in another lifetime, I would become a nun. I just think I would go and help people...And I think I find it’s
maybe hard now because…I don’t necessarily want money. I’m not driven by money…I’d just like to go and help people.

Similarly, Annika commented that service underpinned her understanding of spiritual growth. Here she explained how service to others within her school community influenced her spiritual growth and helped to build a sense of community:

But I think it was more of the individual experiences that we had going along. And like, I come back to that idea of service again. And even just service to each other as well. And as that sort of sense of giving back to each other as we went through, even if it was just something as simple as, like, sharing notes for a test or something like that. There was no, like, “It’s me against you.” It was like, “We are all in this together.” So it was sort of that sense of community in that respect. I actually think that I didn’t recognise how much I’d been given spiritually until I left school.

During the analysis process, the researcher journal comments were revisited regarding the post-school women’s interpretations of the term ‘spiritual growth’. The following two journal extracts were made following the interview with Sophie:

In answering the first few questions of the interview, she [Sophie] seemed to focus on religion, and the religiosity of the school climate. I think she expected the interview to be about spiritual growth as being entirely and exclusively related to religion.

I listened to her response to Question 5 and then explained that the definition of spiritual growth framing the study was inclusive of religion; however, the definition also considered elements outside of religion.
Despite stating this point, this participant continued to associate spiritual growth almost exclusively with religion throughout the interview.

These two extracts are significant because they signified the researcher’s views of the participant’s interpretation of the question. The extracts overtly acknowledge that the researcher made an assumption that the participant was unable to differentiate spiritual growth from religion. This assumption may have influenced the analysis of this segment of the participant’s response. However, the de-bracketing process limited bias by facilitating a means by which the researcher could identify and set aside her assumptions when analysing the data, thereby enabling themes to emerge from it.

Similarly, the de-bracketing process was integral in analysing the data of other participants. For example, the researcher’s bias in assuming a participant was unable to differentiate between being religious from being spiritual:

Early on in the interview I felt Mary perceived being religious as being spiritual. I think she thought to be spiritual you need to be religious.

Even after we discussed the definition of the term spiritual growth that framed the study, she did not differentiate between the two terms.

Throughout the analysis process this researcher bias was identified and disregarded in order that the respective voices of the participants were honoured.

The iterative process of bracketing made the researcher aware of her bias through the assumptions she made. Through de-bracketing, the researcher was able to focus on the participant responses in detail and depth and minimise the disruption and distortion of any underlying assumptions. The researcher acknowledges she made an incorrect assumption that some of the participants, such as Mary and Sophie, could not differentiate between the two concepts. Paradoxically, the high proportion of participant responses citing religion when
articulating their respective definitions of spiritual growth indicates that the participants perceived religion as being a key component of their understanding of spiritual growth. Indeed, seven of the nine participants identified religion as being a component of spiritual growth. Perhaps the close interrelationship between spiritual growth and religion which the post-school women described indicated the influence of the religious culture of their schooling experiences.

4.2 Findings related to Subsidiary Research Question 1

The findings in this section are applicable to Subsidiary Research Question 1 (SRQ 1), “What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth?” Four super-ordinate themes emerged from the participant responses to SRQ 1: religious culture; a sense of place; a supportive community of teachers; and, Mercy values and ethos. Additionally, two separate ideas arose from an individual participant. These ideas included: the academic focus of a school; and, behavioural expectations. The researcher felt it appropriate to acknowledge rather than dismiss these items, even though they were not aligned with the four super-ordinate themes. They have been included at the conclusion of the section as they may provide further insight into the notion of school culture.

4.2.1 Religious culture.

All of the post-school women (9) referenced how being immersed in a religious school culture underpinned by a shared belief had influenced their spiritual growth. Sophie expressed how she felt the religious culture of the school was initially challenging for her because it was unfamiliar, yet she found it interesting in her senior years at school. She stated:

…so when I came, I moved here from England when I was like, 12, and I hadn’t really had any exposure to religion prior to that. So I think
coming into a school that is very religious based and obviously, learning, going through the whole way doing religion [Religious Education] so in Year 11 and 12, as well, was really interesting to me.

Mary also commented about the religious culture of the school through the instruction of the subject of Religious Education (RE). She spoke of how this subject was taught with sensitivity toward students. Mary stated:

…obviously…we were taught religion [RE]…and it was a sensitive approach particularly, I guess, with teenage girls…and there was quite a bit of sensitivity between the girls themselves. Obviously, some were quite Catholic, religious, and went to church…on a weekly basis. Where some weren’t.

Sally articulated how she felt the culture was religious in nature through describing how the religious aspects of the school were an expected part of school life:

I think culture was huge. A very big part of…being at school…I think it was just kind of an expected thing…and it was just…very normal to have…the different things that we did. So, like, going to Mass on Thursdays or going to Mass in boarding…doing, like a homeroom prayer, going to…opening Mass, all those events, like it was just…a normal thing.

Sally went on to articulate how she felt it was special serving as a Eucharistic minister in school Masses in her final year at the school. She mentioned she felt it was important being actively involved in the Mass in this capacity. She said, “And I think, like, going into Year 12, because I was a Eucharistic minister, having a role in the Mass…and I think being involved, yeah, it holds a lot more importance…”.
Annika spoke of how the religious foundation of the school helped provide the students with a safe place in which to grow. She stated:

We were safe and we were coming from a place where we were able to grow and not be criticised for it as well...it wasn’t frowned upon if you were identifying with being religious; or it wasn’t frowned upon if you said, “No, I do believe in God. That’s something I do.” Whereas I think that a, a lot of experiences of my friends when they sort of were going to different schools were like, “Oh, no, no, we don’t talk about God. That’s not something we open up about.”

4.2.2 Sense of place.

All of the post-school women (9) referred to feeling a sense of place throughout their schooling experience and they described how this feeling had contributed to their spiritual growth. In some instances, feeling a sense of place was associated with a connection to: the physical landscape of the school buildings and/or grounds; an aspect of nature; or, a sense of place within the school community. Underlying the attachment to these places was a sense of belonging. These elements were deemed applicable to SRQ 1 about culture because they were related to the beliefs and values of the school community or the creation of a particular atmosphere or environment that was conducive to spiritual growth. For example, Annika described feeling a sense of place in the school gardens. She highlighted how she felt connected to God being in nature as she recalls sitting with her peers in the school gardens:

I just remember [the grounds] being lots of green grass. And it was sort of sheltered, I think just the canopy of the Jacarandas because it was the two big ones, and there was two [sic] big canopies... it kind of created this little area that was not under cover as such, but under the trees. And
this just beautiful rolling lawn. I remember it being so big… And secluded… And I think that we definitely took it for granted then. But being in a place which is so naturally lovely, you’d, I’m often reminded of the presence of God in our lives.

She also described how the physical buildings evoked a sense of place that reminded her of the past inhabitants of those buildings. In articulating their ideas, many of the post-school women inferred aspects of the school environment created a sense of belonging. For example, Annika described how one of the original buildings of the school, built initially to house the Sisters of Mercy, was used for her music and history classes:

And being able to practise [music] in the old building too… I spent a lot of time in this, this old building between history and music. And that’s being a part of something you can just imagine them [Sisters of Mercy] sort of being present here as well. And I think when you’re singing in this, these, building [sic], there is something else. There’s sort of… something special.

Another interview participant, Sophie, also articulated a connection with the physical setting of the school buildings. She mentioned how she was relieved to find the physical setting of her school had not changed since her last visit to the campus, just a year earlier. Her response indicated she felt the physical setting of the school was important to her:

It [the school] brings back a lot of memories. It’s always scary when you come back to places and you think it’s going to be, like, vastly different. Like, I think someone who came back, who came here, like a decade ago when we didn’t have this whole building…it would be amazing but it would be something like, “Oh, where’s the school that I went to gone?”
But it still feels very like, I could come back here tomorrow and be a student again and it would be perfectly normal.

Jemima also referred to the physical setting of her school when commenting on how special the school was to her upon returning. She stated:

But, no, it's really special…You kind of just…walk in and you can remember everything. And, like, the school hasn't changed too much since I've left…And, you know, like, you walk up and just under the cross over there like, that's where we, like, took photos and for muck-up day [last day of school]…It's just…really special coming back…, it's really special, I think, just 'cause [sic] the memories and the feelings that it sort of evokes.

Three of the post-school women articulated how they felt an openness to connect with God and/or others heightened by a particular sense of place. For example, Julia commented about how being at church frequently at school, as part of her Mercy schooling, influenced her connectedness with God:

I think it’s that openness and having a constant connection that I really learnt and…most of these lessons, I have kind of really understood after leaving school and understood their importance. So…in school…I was at church all the time and I was surrounded by that connection with God through…that Mercy education.

Mary spoke of feeling an openness to others when placed in a new and unfamiliar environment off-site from her school while on a retreat.
Mary said that the retreat, held at a monastery in rural Western Australia, had:

A very open and trusting atmosphere, I think…Because you were – you were all vulnerable. It’s a new environment. We had to get up at 6.00 AM with the monks and go to the monastery. Forcing anyone to be in a different environment is going to hopefully…force them to open up a bit.

Similarly, Gemma recalled attending a retreat off-site from her school in a bushland setting:

We just think a bit clearer, I think when we’re out amongst all the green… everyone just gathers around. And I think there’s a different light conversation in what we’re able to bring up with each other as well and different ways that we can, like, enlighten people…I think a change in environment… just kind of… clears your mind and makes it more open with the environment as well. I think people are more accepting to new ideas and new perspectives.

Given these women’s statements about the atmosphere of a particular place helping to open their minds, this notion was deemed a sub-ordinate theme to the super-ordinate theme of sense of place.

Gratitude was another sub-ordinate theme arising from the responses where a sense of place was discussed. Rebekah, for example, showed an appreciation for her school grounds:

I think the surroundings we have, the grounds…something – one of the reasons why I just looked at the school and just thought, “I would love to go here. This is beautiful and look at the girls. Look at them and everything they have.” So I think I’ve always, from the start, had this
sense of gratitude and I’ve always been very proud of our grounds…that we got to spend so many years here.

Similarly, Jane commented that she felt a sense of gratitude from nature:

Definitely respect for the environment, which is another…value of Mercy education. But just becoming to appreciate the nature and everything around us and making sure to…look after what we’ve been given because, you know it’s not going to be around forever. So, making sure to really…appreciate what we’ve been given.

Sally also conveyed gratitude regarding the natural environment visited throughout her Mercy schooling secondary years, “Well, I always loved going running every day on the foreshore…and just appreciating nature. And I’ve always, always done that…”.

Another sub-ordinate theme merging from the super-ordinate theme of sense of place was peace and stillness. Many of the post-school women spoke about how a particular sense of place evoked feelings of peace and stillness that fostered their spiritual growth. Julia spoke about this feeling at length when describing the influence of the school gardens on her:

…but just having that lush [school] garden made everything feel…so grounding and connecting and there were always…points of reflection…it was more so just a feeling that kind of, I think, carried through the gardens and…I think, I remember sitting in my English class, which was on maybe the third level of the building and we’d look out to the, it looked out to the chapel and that beautiful tree, kind of… just in front of it and just had that sense of peacefulness that kind of ran through…the gardens and the college. It was just lovely.
Similarly, Sophie described the influence of attending Mass outdoors during her schooling:

But…I remember when we, I think it was the term Mass that we used to have out near the river, and I always really loved those. Just being out under the Birch trees forming kind of, like, a canopy and, like, the dark, cool shade of it was really, it was just really pretty and… like a good time for reflection, I think…

Sophie went on to describe the influence of this sense of place in evoking peace and stillness:

I think the, again, that sense of unity. And I think there’s just something about being outside that kind of inspires that introspectivity [sic] and you can’t help but kind of be at peace when you’re in that kind of situation, I think. So, and just kind of the quietness of it. Like everyone is just focused on this one person speaking, and speaking quite profoundly about God and, and spiritually… I think it’s quite hard to find that [sense of tranquillity] outside of that experience. Like it was quite specific to that experience.

4.2.3 Supportive community of teachers.

Most of the post-school women (8) perceived teachers to be instrumental in shaping school culture. The connectedness to teachers the participants experienced during their schooling was evidently influential. Gemma stated, “So I think the school’s culture is quite defined by the teachers, so they have to live and breathe it as well”. The women identified the support offered by teachers as an aspect of the school culture that influenced their spiritual growth. For example, Sophie stated, “…every teacher I had here was just incredible and I remember looking up to them (sic) a lot. And I think it’s just, yes, such a supportive
community”. Julia described how she felt the care delivered by some of her teachers influenced her:

…they cared about where we were going in life. And they nurtured all our own qualities and…each individual perspective, even though we were really, just students. But they recognised our own…qualities, our own opinions, and…kind of helped guide us because they genuinely cared about where we were going, and…the path that laid ahead, I guess.

Annika spoke about the importance of the homeroom teacher in offering pastoral support to students. Throughout Annika’s schooling ‘homeroom’ was a class of students from the same year who belonged to a particular House within the school, and who met with their homeroom teacher each morning to share a prayer, distribute important notices and get organised for their day ahead. Annika described the atmosphere in the homeroom as ‘safe’. She mentioned she had the same homeroom teacher for her first three years at the school:

We had her consecutively for three years, which was so beautiful. And she was always very good at sharing things like the prayer…And it was just sort of the pastoral care side of things in the morning and the ethos and the – if somebody was upset or there was something going on that you were there for them, and there were teachers who you could speak to…So you, you felt quite safer in that homeroom environment.

Jane linked the support from the staff to fond memories of her schooling, “…and having the support from the staff and the fellow cohort is just what made, made your time here memorable”. She explained how she felt it was challenging to meet the expectations regarding secondary education; however, she explicated how a supportive environment reduced the severity of the challenge, “It’s such an uneasy time because there’s so much
riding on your secondary education and...when you’re provided with such a supportive experience, it makes it that much easier to get through”.

Similarly, Jemima outlined how the support offered by teachers made a difference to her schooling:

I think because in Year 12, obviously – well, it seems like the stakes are so much higher and there’s a lot more stress and...a lot of other things to think about, especially, ‘cause you’re moving forward, and you’ve got to start making decisions for yourself. So it’s quite – it can be quite hard, obviously, to try and make those decisions. So having that support there from all of the teachers was really nice. And especially when the work was harder too...knowing that they were always there to support you, and they wanted you to do your best.

Rebekah outlined how support was offered by teachers through fostering a sense of belief in students. She stated:

Whenever we had...meetings or something [for a service group] we...wouldn’t have it in...a classroom. We would go up to the boardroom and we would sit in the chairs and it would be structured like a meeting. Things like that belief and we would get responsibilities and we were asked to...run the clubs or the teams...more so than just be a part of it...Belief in young girls, I think.

Sally commented:

I think the teachers at school are amazing...in terms of...building you and creating a supportive environment...And I’ve always felt that...I
could do anything I wanted…could be anyone I wanted to be in this
[school] environment…Very comfortable and supported.

4.2.4 Mercy values and ethos.

In addition to discussing the religious culture of the school in a broad sense, most
participants (7) identified the Mercy values and/or ethos as being an influential aspect of their
schooling. This notion emerged as another super-ordinate theme related to a shared belief.
The Mercy values and ethos are aspects of school culture as they are related to the schools’
central values. Jane’s response was indicative of the women’s responses with reference to this
super-ordinate theme. She spoke at length about the Mercy values:

I think because the culture of the school is always trying to reflect that
Mercy ethos and get in touch with that Mercy ethos, and I think that
because we were always exposed to it and it was intertwined into all our
experiences you really do take that Mercy ethos with you in everything
that you do once you’ve graduated from the school.

Jane went onto articulate that the Mercy ethos was evident in the Mercy values. She explains
that it was an expectation that these values were upheld:

…the Mercy ethos is instilled through the values…but then it’s also in
the way that you treat others with respect. It’s the way that you converse
with both staff and students. It’s in every aspect of all that you do and I
think that instead of it being explicitly taught, it was something that was
expected, and it was expected that you become a person that shows that
Mercy ethos…It’s not something that’s explicitly drilled into you, it’s
just an expectation that you personally want to uphold and that the
school wants you to uphold as well.
Jane summarised her thoughts on the centrality of the Mercy values to her schooling, “…we’re always brought back to those six values and then it’s (sic) instilled within everything that you do”.

Jemima outlined how reflecting on the Mercy values contributed to her spiritual growth:

…that [reflecting about Mercy values] really contributed to my growth, because, obviously, those values are about more than just yourself. So, um, being able to think about that and, and ponder on that really helped contribute to how I…give back to everyone, other than myself sometimes, you know.

Mary commented, “…the culture of the school was obviously derived from Mercy values”. Gemma identified the culture of the school through the Mercy values:

…I really liked it. I think we had a lot of focus with our Mercy values, so it’s always around us, so always throughout the college. Like, in our diary, I think…in Year 12 they gave us the opportunity, or Year 10 to design our diary [school homework diary] and have… the core values and everything through it. And obviously, like Catherine McAuley’s quotes and things. So, I think everywhere it was really fluent with us. Which was good.

However, Gemma continued to outline how she felt some students may not have been able to connect the Mercy values with the wider aspects of the school, such as sporting and artistic pursuits.
Gemma stated:

I think with Mercy values, a lot of people think it’s…like, religious focus, and that’s how they’re displayed and how they show it. And…not all students are accustomed to that line of, of thinking and that line of displaying things, but I think we could have shown them, like, our sporting side, our art side, and things like that whereas, I think a lot of it was religion based and religion oriented. And I think we may have steered some people away from – or, like, just making more people aware to the broader ways of showing it through different aspects of our high school life.

Julia expressed gratitude for the influence of the Mercy values from her schooling. She stated that her Mercy schooling was special because:

It shaped who I am today. It was in that secondary education, I learnt a lot of key values, which I still hold close to me today, and it was where I kind of set my, um, can’t think of the word for, but like a motto for my life kind of thing…walk with empathy and respond with Mercy. And that was something that I’ve taken away with me and held with me all this time. And I think it’s those key values of, like, service and justice and respect that I’ve really held with me that made it so special…it wasn’t so much the physical words, but it was more what they represent and how I live my daily life that…it impacted so heavily.

Two of the women spoke about the significance of the Mercy value of ‘service’ in relation to school culture and the Mercy ethos. Sophie commented about serving others through servant leadership. She stated, “Supportive and obviously, very spiritual…Big. Like, a phrase that
sticks out all the time is servant leadership...that was a big part of the sort of Mercy ethos in school”. Rebekah also commented on the Mercy value of service in relation to school culture.

She stated:

…but it’s [school culture] more than just the, the essays and the maths tests and – but it’s more about, um, the person that you are. I think that it gives you, um, an understanding of living with respect and, um, and living a life of...service, living for others, being respectful...How to give back to others.

Rebekah went on to articulate how she felt the Mercy culture of the school enabled her to see how to make a positive difference to others through focusing on the small things in everyday life:

But it was just all the little things that you did every day and the way you treated others and...the way that you, um, lived your life...day to day. The small things so much as the big things. I think maybe that’s what my Mercy education maybe gave me...when I went, you know, on to this conference, I came back thinking, “I've got to do something big.” And then realising that it wasn’t about the big things but it was about the little things…

4.2.5 Additional findings in response to SRQ 1.

In addition to the super-ordinate themes that emerged in response to SRQ 1, some comments made by a participant, Annika, are worthy of consideration. Although unrelated to these super-ordinate themes, these additional findings potentially add deeper insight into the findings. Although these findings are individual, rather than commonly found across the interview participants, they indicate the range of thoughts the study participants held
regarding school culture. The two additional themes include: academic focus; and, behavioural expectations.

4.2.5.1 Academic focus.

Annika highlighted the academic focus of her school when describing the culture, “I think in just a really simple sentence, the school culture, that there was a huge academic push behind it. And I think that was really important”. To an extent, it is ironic that Annika made this point, as she went on to say, “…the culture – it’s funny because my experience was so based upon my involvement with the music program and involvement with the co-curriculars”. Nevertheless, she spoke about the academic program as being significant, and she also articulated how there were opportunities to be involved in many different activities across the school, “…so, the culture was very open and it was about, I suppose there was this sharing mentality and this – you were allowed to excel…It was a growth culture, I suppose”.

4.2.5.2 Behavioural expectations.

With reference to the discussion about school culture, Annika also mentioned that behavioural expectations were clearly delineated in her school. She outlined an incident she had witnessed in a classroom where some students had behaved poorly towards a teacher. She recalled that she was pleased when she later found out that the students had been disciplined. Annika stated:

And the expectations and the behaviours were really set out. And I think that there needs to be that level of limitations on people who do the wrong thing. That there has to be expectations and punishments and – or not punishment, consequences. And restorative practice, you know.
4.3 Findings related to Subsidiary Research Question 2

This section reveals the themes to emerge in relation to Subsidiary Research Question 2 (SRQ 2), “What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth?” Teacher-student relationships were frequently discussed across the interview questions. Participant comments made in relation to teacher-student relationships, and their influence on spiritual growth, resulted in three superordinate themes: connectedness to teachers; the importance of teacher role models; and, inspirational teachers.

4.3.1 Connectedness to teachers.

All of the post-school women (9) spoke of connectedness to teachers. They described certain teachers from their secondary schooling who had influenced their spiritual growth. As connectedness is embedded in interpersonal relationships, the data are perhaps unsurprising given participants were called upon to reflect on their relationships with their teachers. Four sub-ordinate themes emerged from their responses to this super-ordinate theme: supportive and caring; non-authoritative; presence; and, openness and trust.

Six of the women spoke of how the support and care offered by a teacher(s) had influenced them. Mary explained how a teacher who showed care towards every student in one of her classes exemplified the types of comments made by the participants regarding this sub-ordinate theme. Mary stated, “…she was just the sweetest, most wonderful woman that took extra time with every student. And it was a…class of very mixed abilities. Um, and you could just see she really took concern for every student”.

Jane described how one of her teachers demonstrated support for students by running tutoring sessions which were open to all students who felt they needed extra help. She stated, “…the support he provided me…really helped me persevere and get through. And
I think without his support I would have really struggled”. The same teacher expressed care for students by embedding stillness and reflection into lessons to help students relax and focus:

…just making sure that we had that time to go before the class started, just take a time to step away, just breathe, just reflect on the day and reflect on things that are really, um, eating away at us and just have a moment to just reflect and calm down before we get into that lesson.

Julia described how some of her teachers clearly demonstrated their care for students:

…they cared about where we were going in life. And they nurtured all our own qualities and, um, each individual perspective, even though we were – really, we were just students, but they recognised our own, um, qualities, our own opinions, and um, kind of helped guide us because they genuinely cared about where we were going, and, um, our – yeah, the path that laid ahead, I guess.

Another sub-ordinate theme regarding connectedness to teachers was the non-authoritative approach of teachers. Four of the post-school women commented on the effectiveness of this approach regarding the teacher-student relationship. Paradoxically, Mary explained how one of her teachers limited the support she had previously offered a student leadership group in achieving a task. The students were required to prepare and perform an Easter liturgy for the school community. It was only upon reflection that Mary realised the benefit of the teacher withdrawing the level of support previously offered. Mary stated:

…the support [of the teacher] was there but not so much as we’ve had beforehand…she wasn’t telling us what to do. Encouraging us to do things but with very little guidance…I guess, in preparation for the real
world…I was very angry at her for not helping and [laughter] very frustrated. But looking back on it…we accomplished it on our own without…what we thought would be support.

Mary went on to recount a different teacher who was also non-authoritative in her approach to students:

…she was in her 60s and she spoke to the students as if we were her friends and very open conversations [sic] with the girls…it was a very fun class but definitely the best scoring class because I just really appreciated the extra lengths she was going to.

Similarly, Sophie mentioned that two of her teachers spoke to herself and other students in a non-authoritative manner, “I always felt like I could talk to them sort of on a one-on-one level as well. You never thought, felt (sic) like they were talking down to you which I think is really valuable as well”. Gemma outlined how she thought a non-authoritative and open relationship between teachers and students was important, “Like, I felt really, um, almost equal with them [teachers]. Like we could talk…and discuss, like, whatever problems I had…and they were really open with me as well”.

Teachers who exercised a distinctive presence, making themselves approachable and accessible to students, also had a positive impression with regards to student spiritual growth. This sub-ordinate theme emerged from the responses of four of the post-school women. Some of Sophie’s comments illustrated this notion, “…he was just there all the time. Like, he was just – couldn’t get away from him if you tried…He definitely had a presence about him…So, he was just, yeah. There for you, I suppose”. Jane’s response also echoed the comments made about presence, “But knowing that he [the teacher] was there, was someone I could turn to, was really, really beneficial”. Jane went onto explain the teacher would sit with students and
help them with his particular subject matter, as well as anything else they had a problem with. He was accessible and approachable to students. Jane explained that the teacher enabled, “…for us to come to and sit with him and not only just talk about the curriculum, but anything that we had a problem with”.

The importance of trust in the teacher-student relationship was another subordinate theme to emerge from the responses of three of the post-school women. Jemima’s comment below illustrates the importance of trust, “…there was a lot of trust between, like, myself and, and the teacher…So I really, um, valued her opinion and her belief in me. That really, yeah, did amazing things”.

Two of the post-school women commented on how the actions of teachers showing trust in them by holding them responsible for their classwork or particular tasks in co-curricular activities had a positive influence on them. Julia explained how her Year 12 mathematics teacher allowed her class to work outdoors, and in doing so, held the students responsible for getting their own work done. Julia explained, “… it’s nice to be able to be trusted enough to go out and still get all your work done, if not more – while relaxing and connecting”. Sophie shared a similar story related to her involvement in the school drama production. She said the trust the teacher placed in the team of students working on the drama production resulted in a sense of accomplishment and achievement. Sophie recalled the experience:

I think especially the drama production in Year 12 was a big one
…because I remember we built the set ourselves and…we did all the sound and lighting ourselves as well. So…it felt like quite a lot of responsibility at the time as well had been entrusted in us. So yeah.

When that was over it was like wow, I actually did that. That's pretty cool.
Another sub-ordinate theme to emerge from connectedness in the teacher-student relationship was openness. Three of the post-school women spoke about how their teachers displayed an openness which had influenced them. For example, Annika relayed how openness was a quality she admired in her teachers:

I think the teachers that I connected mostly with were the ones who were open and who were willing to, not just be right all the time or not just teach all the time…I think the teachers that were willing to share a little bit with you were the ones that I really remember.

Sally recounted how she was influenced by a teacher who displayed an openness to life beyond academia, “I think, sometimes, in school you can be very narrow-minded in, you know, in the school part of it. So, it’s good to… be informed that, you know, there’s other things to do with life rather than just school”. Rebekah, who is now a qualified teacher, reiterated this openness about teaching being more than academic learning:

…it was again, the sense of belonging, um, and that desire just, um, to be more for others than just, um, you know, the grading of papers. And I think that’s why all my stuff – I enjoy relief teaching a little bit more because I get to foster relationships and, and almost that’s it…and less about the academic goals.

She was the only post-school woman to mention how a sense of belonging was an aspect of the teacher-student relationship. Rather than omit her comment about belonging, it has been included here as it was linked to her statement illustrating the notion of openness. Furthermore, consideration of a sense of belonging, with regards to the teacher-student relationship, may provide a deeper insight into how student spiritual growth is fostered.
4.3.2 Teacher role models.

When articulating their perceptions of how teachers had influenced their spiritual growth throughout their secondary schooling experience, a number of the post-school women (6) articulated ideas suggesting teachers were important role models for students. For example, Sally stated, “I think she [the teacher] was a big role model in the way she lived her life…and very openly was very strong about her faith and what she believed in”. Jemima spoke highly about a teacher who taught her the value of service. She commented that the teacher was not a teacher involved in the service-learning program at her school as part of her teaching position. Rather, she was a Performing Arts teacher. Jemima explained how this particular teacher did service in her own time in a school in a developing nation:

She goes every year. So, seeing her so passionate about that…was really incredible. Because a lot of the time as well, for service kind of in general…the teacher who runs the service, her main thought is service all the time throughout the whole year which, obviously…that’s her job and she loves it…But for my [Performing Arts] teacher, she had so many other things. And…she was able to do so many other things that she was passionate about but also have such deep passion for this…school [overseas where she completed service], as well.

Jemima went on to explain that this teacher did not rant about her service. She said:

It just showed me that…caring for others, maybe…doesn’t have to always be so in your face all the time. Like, it can be behind the scenes…it’s also a very personal thing. So, you don’t need to talk about it all the time.
Julia explained how she was positively influenced by teachers who role modelled the Mercy values:

> And I found that in the teachers that I remember most from my school experience, they were the people who, like, lived and breathed those [Mercy] values. They weren’t people who just talked about them and didn’t actually…believe them. They were people who had that…meaning and purpose in life…you could just see it.

Rebekah outlined how one of her teachers influenced her spiritual growth through believing in her and helping her realise her potential. She described him as an important role model in her life, stating:

> I think he will always have the biggest influence on me just for…giving me, opening up, I think, my life to, to realise my potential and just, yeah. That’s exactly the kind of life I wanted to have…the relationships that…he had with people and the role model that he was and that I wanted to be like that and…I haven’t found anyone like that…But…I think I…I…appreciate my schooling just because of those kinds of individuals and those experiences.

Rebekah also explained how this particular teacher spoke about Catherine McAuley as a role model to help inspire the students to reach their potential, “…we would look at…Catherine McAuley and…focus on those lives and used it almost as, like, how could we live like that?”.

She also attributed her decision, to study teaching, to this particular teacher who she saw as a role model:

> And he worked so hard for all of us and, and giving us the best possible role models and giving us opportunities…that I just thought “Whatever I
do in my life, I want it to be somewhat similar to the role that he has.”
And I think that was why I almost…I didn’t know that I wanted to do
teaching and…even now I look back on it and I go, “Oh.”

4.3.3 Inspirational teachers.

Some of the post-school women (5) expressed how they felt that teachers who
inspired and motivated them helped to foster their spiritual growth. Gemma explained how
she appreciated being motivated by her sports teachers to achieve her potential. She stated:

I think a lot of the sports teachers really…pushed me physically, um,
instead of just mentally…so then kind of just giving you the pep talk and
the boost and the knowledge of what you gotta do and how you gotta do
it, and cooperating with your teammates and things is really important.

Gemma also noted how the positivity of one of her teachers had inspired her.
Gemma was one of three of the post-school women who spoke about positivity in relation to
particular teachers. This notion of positivity was subsequently labelled a sub-ordinate theme.
Gemma recalled:

…the [teacher] always had an opportunity for me or always saw,
like, a positive part to everything. So, if there was a problem, like, we’d
do this, and, and if there was a roadblock here, we’d go to plan B…She
always saw the best in people…She just always brought light and kind of,
like, happiness to everywhere that she went. So, nothing was too serious
that she couldn’t handle…So I think her personality and the way she
thought about things and around things really influenced me in how I
think and organise and kind of problem-solve today.
Similarly, Annika described the positivity of her experiences with her teachers in a broad sense, “And I think it’s a testament to the schooling that you can look back on all of my individual teachers and say I had a real positivity experience [sic] with everybody”. Sally articulated how she was influenced by the strength of faith possessed by one of her teachers. She commented, “I think she [the teacher] was very positive in that sense”.

4.4 Findings related to Subsidiary Research Question 3

In this section the themes related to Subsidiary Research Question 3 (SRQ 3), “What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth?” are outlined.

Based on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, specific subjects, activities or programs, including their content and the way in which they were taught, potentially influence student spiritual growth. Accordingly, participants were asked to articulate their perceptions regarding aspects of their Mercy schooling, pertaining to curriculum and pedagogy, which they feel influenced their spiritual growth.

Ten super-ordinate themes emerged from participant responses to SRQ 3:

- belonging and community;
- fond memories;
- self-efficacy;
- opportunity;
- giving back through service;
- leadership;
- Catholic curriculum;
• self-reflection and awareness;

• life lessons; and,

• affirmation.

Examples the post-school women discussed in relation to curriculum and pedagogy stemmed from activities and programs in and beyond the academic subjects taught in the classroom. For example, they spoke of experiences whereby their spiritual growth had been fuelled through co-curricular activities, service-learning programs, leadership opportunities, camps, retreats, reflection and a variety of other opportunities they were afforded throughout their schooling.

4.4.1 Belonging and community.

All of the post-school women’s (9) responses indicated the importance of them experiencing a sense of belonging and community throughout their secondary schooling. This notion is consequentially a super-ordinate theme. Emerging from belonging and community are the sub-ordinate themes of: the Sisters of Mercy; and, cohesion and unity.

Clearly illustrating the sense of belonging her Mercy schooling had provided her, Rebekah stated, “It showed me, yeah, what I could become…And I think I would not have been given the same opportunities and the same sense of belonging had I just maybe been in another school where – yeah”. Similarly, Jane outlined how being involved in co-curricular and service-learning activities fostered a sense of belonging and community, which in turn, influenced her spiritual growth. Jane stated:

I think the more you got involved in whilst you’re at school the more that sense of belonging was made apparent to you. I think that the school in itself, because it’s such a community-based school, is, you do feel
such a sense of belonging. And that when you take a step back and you do reflect on your secondary education, you do think, “Wow. I was part of such a professional and engaging community whilst I was there and I was so lucky…to experience what I did because I felt like I belonged.”

Jane also highlighted that she thought a sense of fun and teamwork were important elements of some school activities, which she said contributed to her spiritual growth. She stated:

…everything that you did that was co-curricular was – had a fun aspect to it but at the end of the day, it helped you to grow as a person, which I believe helped me to grow within my spiritual growth.

Jane emphasised that her connectedness with others in a team situation was influential:

Um, so just being out on the field and having that sense of team and those relationships that you build with students that you probably wouldn’t normally come into contact because it was such a broad range of people, from [Years] 7 to 12…

Jemima also mentioned teamwork as being a medium through which she learnt to have fun and form relationships with others that led to a sense of belonging and community. Jemima recalled her participation in school sporting teams with fondness, “It was fun really, wasn’t it? Um, just being in a team like, being – yeah. Still having all…those relationships and friendships”. Sophie recalled how she felt a sense of belonging to her cohort or year group upon attending activities with her year group off-campus from her school. She stated:

I always really enjoyed camps actually. Not that one where we actually have to camp [laughter]. But whenever we went away, I just always
really enjoyed getting away with…the cohort. Because we would do things, again, that you wouldn't necessarily do in the day-to-day at school especially the one to [a Western Australian monastery] because I've never really been anywhere like that before. So, I think doing that especially with your year group was quite special.

Rebekah spoke of how a sense of belonging was an integral part of her Mercy schooling experience. She articulated how she did not realise the sense of belonging she attributed to her schooling until she had left the school. Rebekah related the Mercy values to a sense of belonging. She stated:

…and I look back right now and I think I almost…knew that what I had at the school and, everything it gave me and that sense of belonging. I always knew that…I wouldn’t – it would be very hard to replicate it anywhere else from now on…the support, I think just that – I think the courage and the inclusivity and the honesty and all these [Mercy] values…

Rebekah went on to state how her schooling was special because of the way students were treated by teachers. She also referred to the Sisters of Mercy as role models. She commented:

…and we were driven and we were treated like leaders. And…definitely this teacher in particular that…created all of this and would create challenges where it wasn’t about…writing an essay but it was about, you know, finding your learning style and…how to be the best version of yourself and following these amazing women [Mercy Sisters] that we would follow the lives of.
Annika also related the Mercy Sisters to a sense of belonging. She stated:

I think that just having the order of the Mercy Sisters as the heritage, as the cultural tradition was really special for me because it sort of, it gave me, I come back to this idea of that belonging. It gave me something to belong to…And it comes back to the community who are there, the students who are there, and the teachers who are there and the way that the charism…engages people in the action of spiritual, of the Mercy traditions.

Julia’s comments about her connection with the Sisters of Mercy throughout her schooling may also shed light on fostering a sense of belonging and community. She affirmed:

Definitely, always having that…presence really kind of…let you see someone [a Mercy Sister] who was so dedicated to their own spiritual growth that they’d chosen that kind of as a vocation, their dedication to God…it was almost like having a face to a name, essentially. We’d learnt so much, that to then see people who were so dedicated to that walking around the school and being able to chat to them and – they were always so lovely, so it was nice.

Given three of the post-school women referred to the Sisters of Mercy as being related to a sense of belonging and community, this aspect was deemed a sub-ordinate theme.

Three post-school women explicitly spoke about how their experiences of cohesion and unity within a group of people, as part of their schooling, influenced their spiritual growth. This notion was accordingly labelled a sub-ordinate theme. For example, Annika spoke about how she felt being together as a Year group for retreats, reflection days, camps and assemblies was significant to her spiritual growth, “You know, I really enjoyed those
[experiences]…they were important. They were really good for bonding. And those are the times that you do remember just sitting…all together as a whole cohort and just, yeah – being all together”. She went on to state:

And I think being together in…those community settings was…really important for me because it kind of takes the… it’s not just about you. It’s you’re all in this together. You’re sort of…forming relationships with everybody, and you sort of see in action when we do things like the Amnesty International [co-curricular letter writing activity]. We were raising money for…different organisations or the wheelchairs or…collecting for…Lent and things like that. That it’s a whole – if everybody does something, that’s when it becomes powerful. It’s not just you on your own. So, I think that being together is really important.

Similarly, Sally commented that her Indigenous immersion school trip experience of working alongside her peers towards a common goal for the Indigenous community they were visiting taught he the importance of cohesion and unity, “It was always…about a team”.

Mary recounted how a Year 12 student leadership activity to design, plan and execute a liturgical performance in front of the school for an Easter liturgy was significant in shaping her spiritual growth:

So, I wrote up a little script and all the prefects had to perform it. But I remember…it was for an Easter vigil…just before the long weekend. There was very minimal teacher support there. And I remember writing it and the prefects didn’t really want to perform it because it was a bit embarrassing and the songs were a bit dorky…but I think…in the end it happened and we all had the big palms and we were singing the songs.
And that was big spiritual growth ‘cause all the girls were quite happy with themselves and there was a lot of recognition and acknowledgement from the peers and from the heads and the leaders of the school. And it was spiritual growth for the prefects as a team. And it was because obviously the start of…that really stands out to me because it was something we all did together. And it wasn’t just this individual growth. It was…for all of us as a sort of unit. A sense of unity…I think everyone knew they belonged there but it was really – we were now one team with cohesion.

Participant comments about experiencing cohesion and unity with others, including the Mercy Sisters, as part of their schooling experiences illustrate the potency a feeling of belonging and community may have on students.

4.4.2 Fond memories.

During their interviews, all of the post-school women (9) articulated fond memories of their Mercy schooling originating from a plethora of varied activities, subject lessons and programs in the school. For example, Julia recalled the Masses and liturgies she had attended in her school’s chapel, “It’s [the school chapel] lovely, and have [sic] lots of fond memories there as well”. Similarly, Jemima explained how she and her friends still recall memories of their schooling experiences:

…it was definitely special. Um, it’s kind of going back to, um, what I was saying earlier, like about the relationships that you build…And even now, like, my friends and I still talk about it all the time and, like, talk about all the memories.
Five participants expressed fond memories when explaining the significance of their mementos they each shared with the researcher during the interview. Gemma’s comments regarding her memento exemplified the women’s responses. She described how a notebook she kept represented fond memories of the connectedness and sense of community she shared with others at the school. Gemma stated:

My little memento was really just – I had a little notebook that everyone wrote a note in on the last day of high school. That to me was really significant because everyone just wrote down kind of the good things about high school together, the good memories – what you’ve done well, how you’ve all connected.

Julia described how a Mass booklet she had kept from the funeral mass of a teacher was special in evoking memories of her schooling. She stated how the Mass booklet, “…holds more significance than the – just the physical words inside it I think”. Julia recalled, “…it was kind of – it was a beautiful Mass, but it was just so nice to reflect on all those memories…”. Annika recounted the memory she has of when she gave her final speech as Head Girl at her Year 12 graduation. She shared with the researcher a written copy of her valedictory speech she had retrieved from her blazer pocket. Annika spoke about her speech:

And I remember thinking that it would be so beautiful if we could stay together. I think I said, “May we never become strangers. May we always remember where we come from and how far we’ve been together.” And just sort of that sense of, I say belonging, and that sense of fulfilment that really we kind of had it from that first year…that night was very emotional.
4.4.3 Self-efficacy.

All of the post-school women (9) spoke of developing self-efficacy through participating in various activities, programs and experiences throughout their Mercy schooling. Mary’s response exemplified this super-ordinate theme:

I think, um, I definitely felt… a sense of independence from Year 8. I was quite awkward and shy like most of the girls. But because of the opportunities that was given [sic] in the school leadership roles, I was able to become more independent, and happy within myself.

Annika spoke of how she felt she grew from feeling safe in the school environment where she was also given opportunity for reflection.

It was just like I was here [at school], and this was a safe place… how did it help me grow? I think when we were given the opportunity to reflect on ourselves as well. I was a bit of a passive – I was a little bit passive as a kid, I think. And I took in a lot of information, and it was not until I really wanted or wanted to turn it around that I started to really define myself.

The sub-ordinate theme of perseverance emerged from the responses of three of the post-school women. They each identified perseverance as a quality they learnt and were able to practice at school. Their responses indicated perseverance contributed to building a sense of self-efficacy. Jane stated:

One of the major takeaways that I took from secondary education was that perseverance and always trying to better myself. But yeah, that was major… even within the Catholic Church with all that’s going on. Just being able to persevere and look beyond that current issue because it’s
bigger than that. You’re not focusing on that, you’re focusing on your relationship with God.

Jemima shared that she felt she was given “strength to be able to do things that I didn’t think I would maybe have the confidence to do or the ability to do...how to, like, empower myself”. Similarly, Sally commented on work ethic in relation to perseverance:

…I think, yeah, capacity of being able to work hard. And I know that any challenge that I have that I can – oh, I know I’ll be able to achieve it with the skills that school has, like, provided me, educated me on.

4.4.4 Opportunity.

Most of the post-school women (8) perceived that spiritual growth emerged from opportunities they had been offered as part of the curriculum and pedagogical practices employed in their Mercy schooling. They expressed how their schooling had presented them with multiple opportunities that resulted in spiritual growth. The descriptive manner in which they recalled these opportunities indicated the experiences formed the basis of fond memories of their schooling. For example, Sally recalled with fondness memories of opportunities she was given while at the school:

I think the opportunities it created. Because I’ve come from a school that had 20 kids, then coming to a school as big as this one [Mercy school], it’s like “Wow. All these things.” I didn’t even know that you could do drama. I didn’t know you could do cross-country and all those different things.

Like Sally, Sophie’s comments were indicative of many of the women’s comments regarding opportunities connected to a particular co-curricular experience, “Well, I got a lot of
opportunities especially through our gifted and talented program to go on trips overseas and things like that. So that was always a lot of fun”. She went onto say how a leadership position also provided her with opportunity and, “…a lot of fun to be able to sort of serve fellow students in that way, I guess”. Jemima stated “…the experience as a whole, all the people around you…and the opportunities” enabled her to build relationships with others, including her immediate school peer group, her year group and teachers:

…and then it [schooling] was rewarding in terms of the relationships that I built because I came here…like friends in my year – so my group is still all really tight today…and with the staff as well, so all of my teachers.

A sub-ordinate theme which emerged from this super-ordinate theme of opportunity was belonging. This notion of belonging is linked to the aforementioned super-ordinate theme of belonging and community, and it illustrates the interconnectedness between themes. In this instance, however, belonging is specifically related to schooling opportunities. Three of the post-school women articulated how they felt a sense of belonging that fostered their spiritual growth through the opportunities they were afforded at their respective Mercy schools. Like Jemima, Annika shared how she felt the opportunities presented to her through her schooling shaped her through a sense of belonging:

And then when I came to school, there was this whole tradition, this whole world that you get opened up into and you can belong. So, it was almost like a, especially [sic] fulfilling for me because you feel like you belong to a community that has a purpose and a history and is very much linked to the local area and to young women and our role in society….
Annika commented how this sense of belonging influenced her upon arriving at the school. She described her memory of this experience with fondness:

And I was really excited to be a part of something that was bigger than myself and to come and be involved and even just having the old building is part of something that was here when the nuns [Sisters of Mercy] first set up. And I really liked that…But that sense of history, you’re living this history; and you’re a part of this active history that’s still going on.

Rebekah commented about how she was contemplating leaving her school not long after she had commenced her education. She stated, “When I started at the school…to be honest, I was contemplating leaving…I think I got a little bit lost in the first year or so here [at the school]”. However, the opportunity to be involved in a particular co-curricular club helped her build a sense of belonging that had positive ramifications for her schooling and spiritual growth. She describes her memory of how, upon joining this particular club, her feelings about school changed:

…and I think that [joining the club] was the catalyst for changing, um, everything in, to do with [sic] my school life and it really opened my eyes up too. I think the opportunities that I was given there changed my schooling and I think…it fostered my even [sic] spiritual growth and sense of belonging. So definitely the…opportunities that I got…started from that one…club and then everything else.

4.4.5 Giving back through service.

Most of the post-school women (8) who grasped opportunities to give back to people or particular causes throughout their schooling reaped positive benefits through helping
others and/or the environment. Their stories evoked a sense of hope. For example, Jane recalled her involvement in her school’s service-learning program, “…there was an underlying, ‘You’re giving back.’ You’re doing something for someone else”. She went on to say:

…so we did the food drive where we’d…give out food – or the soup drive – to the homeless…you were with a group of people that you might not have interacted with before, and it was a sense of you’re doing something for the community but you’re doing it with peers and you’re able to joke and you’re able to have fun, but you’re always giving back, you’re always doing something more.

Mary relayed how she believed that the service activities she completed during her secondary schooling had coerced her to continue making service contributions upon leaving school. She said, “…it was a need to help that was shaped by these sorts of [service] programs like poverty immersion”. Gemma spoke of giving back in a leadership capacity. She outlined how she felt that servant leadership was a means by which she could give to others:

I like helping people along their journey, and then I learn a lot from others and seeing other people and seeing how they react to different things…So to be in the mix doing, doing whatever your team is doing with them…a lot of people think you’re gonna step back and, like, they do all the heavy work for you. But being there in the mix and motivating everyone was again, another, like, large spiritual growth…

The post-school women spoke about how their spiritual growth was fostered through learning the value of service and their capacity to make a difference to others and/or the environment.
Julia spoke about this notion at length:

More so I think…the importance of giving back, I think…and how…having a social consciousness and giving back to the community around me…makes me happy and…really brightens my life…While I was at school, I was always volunteering. There were always… like I was doing co-curricular things and all that but I found that the volunteering really made me happy. We had our Mercy Service-Learning Program, and I did a lot of my volunteering at aged care facilities, and I loved that so much, and I always came away so happy from them. So I…think I’ve kind of pinned it down to that, and doing volunteering for all those years at school, really kind of helped shape me and what is important to me.

Sally also identified giving back as influencing her sense of self throughout her secondary schooling years. She stated:

…I think, like, spiritually, then connecting with others like the service to other people, like, it’s not hard in this [school] environment, it’s not hard to do so much for other people and it’s supportive. Whereas I know other people I have, like, interacted with now as an adult didn’t have that, so it’s a lot harder for them to be able to say, “How do you go and do those things?” Whereas it’s…for me, it’s, I feel like it’s a natural thing to be able to do those things now. Because it was just woven into your education when you were here [at school]…being able to help others should be a natural thing.

Similarly, Mary recalled a time while at school when she volunteered to do a service activity:
And I was the only one in the class to put my hand up. And I remember thinking that people [other students] thought it was the most embarrassing to do those sorts of activities. So that’s probably when I found my sense of self or, like, my place amongst the students of not being – needing to feel embarrassed about helping…

Four of the post-school women interviewed articulated how they felt a sense of accomplishment in giving back to a particular cause or community of people. This notion was accordingly deemed a sub-ordinate theme. Jane explained how she felt a sense of accomplishment in integrating ideas she had obtained from attending an interstate Mercy Education Limited (MEL) ‘Seeds of Justice’ student conference. She was the sole representative student from her school at the conference and she explained how she felt this opportunity was a privilege. Jane stated:

…it was all about getting in touch, in touch with social justice and how we can not only show social justice within our own lives, but bring that back to the school community. And I think that definitely opened my eyes to ways that I can help and probably got me to become more in touch with my spirituality and definitely with God.

Jane went onto describe how she implemented some initiatives upon her return to her school. In this way, her experiences illustrated how she experienced a sense of hope in addition to a sense of accomplishment through giving back:

…it when I got back, I was asked by our Head of RE [Religious Education] to implement some things in conjunction with the Year 12 leader at the time that we could introduce into the school. So, it was things like the St. Vinnie’s food appeal, the Christmas appeal, things like
that, just so we could get in touch with our community and the members within our community who were finding it tough.

Finally, Jane reflected on the effect of the experience:

…it was definitely a sense of accomplishment and a way that I could help the school to become more in touch with their social justice and to bring that out into the community…Being able to see that sense of accomplishment when you feel that you’ve helped someone else was…undescribable [sic].

Sophie related how her opportunities for leadership gave her a sense of accomplishment and giving back:

…and obviously the sense of accomplishment that comes with it [leadership opportunities], I think. And it’s just nice kind of knowing that your peers think that you’re someone who can represent them, represent the school on that level. I think I just generally think just giving back to the school community as well in those various roles.

Jemima’s description of working with a small group of students during an Indigenous immersion trip highlighted the sense of hope gained through realising the value of service to others. She recalled the trip was:

…and just the most incredible experience. Like, even looking at the photos, I get, like really emotional. So, like, I find it hard to, like, look at the photos and things like that. So that was probably the…most beneficial for my spiritual growth, I think just because, then, I’ve realised the, like, what service can do…to others…
4.4.6 Leadership.

Most of the post-school women (8) cited formal and informal leadership opportunities within their schooling as fuelling their spiritual growth through connectedness to others and/or God. For example, leadership of a co-curricular service group called Young Mercies enabled Gemma to forge a connection with students younger than herself in the school:

So again, like, with my spiritual growth it was kind of like, branched out a bit everywhere, and again, I was pretty lucky to be, again, the head of Young Mercies so I was able to connect with the younger years as well…which was quite good. And that led me to connecting with the community throughout my high school years too.

Sally’s comments also supported this super-ordinate theme. She spoke of being aware of the diversity of others in the school environment in relation to her leadership:

I think I learned a lot in my final year as Head Girl about respecting…different people from different levels. I think that was a massive learning experience. From well, you know, from the principal to the teaching level, and then to the students, and other students younger than me. So, being able to interact with different people and also know the importance of all those people…

Similarly, Julia recounted how her leadership experience helped her realise the diversity of opinions in the school setting:

…but as I grew throughout school, I learnt to understand that there were so many excellent perspectives, and I especially learnt that while on prefect council, where everyone would give their own opinion and I’d
realise that…everyone has their own perspective, and that was something that helped me connect with other people more and learn more, and then…grow spiritually as a person, I think.

Mary commented about her connectedness with God through altar serving at school Masses, “And when I finally got to do it [altar serving], it was a connection with God or the Church as a whole”.

4.4.7 Catholic curriculum.

Another super-ordinate theme to emerge from participant perceptions regarding curriculum was the influence of the Catholic curriculum on spiritual growth. Many of the nine post-school women (7) interviewed spoke of how they felt a sense of unity and community in the shared belief of God conveyed through the Catholic curriculum of their Mercy schooling. For example, Annika expressed how the Catholic faith formed a foundation in her education. The Catholic curriculum fuelled her spiritual growth through fostering a sense of belonging in a community with a shared belief:

And I think that it was almost an unconscious decision, that sense of belonging. It was like, “You don’t even need to choose.” This is – this is it [the Catholic faith], so. We were given opportunities to sort of grow from that foundation point, which was really nice.

She went on to explain how this feeling was not realised until she had left the school environment:

But I think it was – although, the growth would’ve happened at school, it wasn’t until I left – and I think I said that before that I really started to cement those ideals. But I really enjoyed that. I think when I was at
school, I took it for granted a little bit too. And I took for granted the constant, like going to Mass and going to the chapel and…even just being involved in the music program, just singing some of those choral works. Once I left school, those were activities I had to actively seek out to find. And it was something that I didn’t recognise I was getting quite as thoroughly when I was at school.

Annika also described how her participation in the school’s music program fostered her spiritual growth through belonging to a community with a shared belief. She recalled singing a blessing in the school chapel:

I think it’s again, it’s that sense of belonging in community. When you sing with other people, you have to open yourself up in some capacity. And you bond very much with the girls that you were singing with and performing with. And even the works we were doing, like the one, the Gaelic blessing which I know that the music teacher really loves, and it’s such a beautiful…arrangement of the blessing by John Rutter. It’s just, it’s a magical work. And even just singing it in the chapel, there’s a sense of lifting, I suppose. There’s this beautiful sense of lifting that when you do get to perform it in those experiences.

Similarly, Julia expressed how the Catholic curriculum fostered her spiritual growth, “…in school…I was at church all the time and I was surrounded by that connection with God through… that Mercy education”. She went on to explain how she realised, upon leaving school:

…that having that constant connection is something that was so important to my own spiritual growth, and that sense of feeling at ease
and having purpose and meaning and, um, definitely quite a nice sense of community as well that came from it [shared belief].

Rebekah articulated how the shared belief structure her Catholic, Mercy education offered strengthened her spiritual growth through learning about values and relating them to everyday life:

…I think knowing that God will always be there…and living a… Christ-centred life… I didn’t really know what it meant, but I always used to think living like Jesus. And I think whenever I came across things that weren’t going right or relationships that were hard to deal with, with friends… I always thought… How could I live more like Christ? …and I think our values…of courage, inclusivity, and honesty… I thought if I lived like that, and then I won’t have any big issues in my life. You know, I can overcome anything…

Rebekah offered some background information about her family to perhaps put her views about her schooling into perspective, stating:

…I think knowing that God will always be there…and living a… Christ-centred life… I didn’t really know what it meant, but I always used to think…what you do is learn about Jesus and it was very black and white. And then…I used to say that going to a Catholic school was…less about learning the stories of Jesus and being able to recall things…and prayers, but so much more values…to live by…and to use…as…an inspiration or just as a way of life.

Jane mentioned the academic subject, Religious Education (RE), as a source of spiritual growth. She stated, “Well, the first one [subject influencing spiritual growth] would
have to be Religious Education”. Sally discussed the Catholic curriculum in the context of the subject of RE too and outlined how she felt it was important to learn that God is always there:

…but it [RE] was more about…a discussion around…values and like, having a good conscience. And I think in terms of, like, life. I feel like you benefit more from that rather than sometimes the doctrine and…of course, it’s really interesting to learn those things. But I think transferring it into life, what’s more important is knowing what’s the difference between good and bad and knowing…that you can turn to God in times of need.

Sally also mentioned how through learning about the Catholic religion she was open-minded in learning about other faiths. She stated, “I think having these [Mercy] values and learning, obviously, this is a Catholic school, but learning about the Catholic faith allowed me to be open in learning about other faiths”.

4.4.8 Self-reflection and awareness.

This super-ordinate theme emerged from responses given by six of the post-school women, and is related to the notion of building self-efficacy. Julia recounted the experience of preparing a speech to deliver to her peer group as part of the Year 12 prefect leadership application process at her school. She explained that in writing the speech she spent some valuable time reflecting on her schooling and what was important to her:

I think, reading through it [the speech], I noticed that that was a time of self-reflection for me and it was a time where that reflection wasn’t forced upon me. I could do it. It was meaningful. It was in my own time.
She went onto state how writing the speech enabled her to reflect on what was important to her. She said, “…all the things I had learnt, and things that were so close to my heart…it was so special because it wasn’t a forced reflection, I think”. Annika spoke about how opportunities for reflection, built into retreats, reflection days and camps, fostered her spiritual growth. Her comments indicated she appreciated being given the opportunity and time to reflect. She said, “Just taking that time to think about who we were and what we wanted”.

Sally also articulated how she felt reflection was integral to her spiritual growth. She expressed how a particular teacher embedded a period of reflection each day during an Indigenous immersion school trip she had attended:

We’d talk every day when we were driving in the car about what we’d done and how we could do more, and yeah, I guess that’s where the Mercy values come in about giving more to others…And I think reflection’s huge…even going throughout your whole life, being able to, like reflect on the experience and say we did these amazing things, but what did it mean to us? What did it mean to them? And then how, how can we make it, I guess, fruitful or more beneficial to the people that are involved?

Sophie mentioned how there was an emphasis on reflection at school camps and also at the end of every term:

Especially on those camps…There was a big focus on spirituality and, and reflection at those camps…generally at the end of every term where there would just be lots of activities that would kind of help us be more
introspective and reflective…We used to do a lot of meditations in religion [RE] as well.

She recalled how some of the reflective activities she did at school influenced her spiritual growth. These activities were artistic in nature, fostering creativity. She explained, “…I think we did a few, like mandala…painting…colouring type ones…We had those kind of…days where it was like, just sit and kind of be with yourself”. Collectively, the post-school women’s comments indicated self-reflection helped build a sense of self.

Three of the post-school women spoke of a time during their schooling where they had reflected on a disappointing experience, which paradoxically resulted in growth. Growth from disappointment was therefore deemed a sub-ordinate theme. Gemma, Rebekah and Jemima all recalled experiences whereby their disappointment led to growth. The disappointment Gemma and Rebekah experienced stemmed from failing to win a leadership position in Year 12. Rebekah stated, “…when I didn’t get Head Girl…I think it was a humbling experience…I think I remember saying to my mum, I learned more by not getting Head Girl than getting it”. Rebekah went onto explain how she was able to get past the disappointment by devoting time to mentoring younger students:

…I started to get involved in a lot of things and I became recognised by, I think, a lot of the younger kids. And it was something that I never thought I’d be able to do and…I really enjoyed, I think anyway, being kind of like a mentor…

Gemma expressed how her disappointment in failing to obtain a leadership position led to increased self-awareness and reflection that in turn led to growth:

…I ran for prefect but didn’t get it. I was really, really upset about it. It’s like, “No.” Um, but a lot of that, I think, spiritual growth and, like drive
to do more and to do better was good…So maybe, like, a failure led to stronger spiritual growth and kind of self-awareness, I think that led to the growth.

Jemima’s experience of disappointment was related to experiences in Religious Education (RE) in one of her senior years of schooling. She explained how she was upset by comments a particular RE teacher made that angered her. She stated:

And for our year group, and for, particularly, a lot of those girls in that class – that really angered them…It, particularly, made me kind of lose that, maybe I’ll say trust, in religion. And ‘cause I’ve been religious, like, well, my whole life. Yeah, that was probably the first time where I really, like, questioned all my beliefs…For me, I always thought of religion as really, just say, about love for one another.

She also stated:

The Church does have its own teachings. But I just felt as though it could’ve been put in a different way to be not so hurtful…And I think it had kind of built up, because that year, as well, the teachings, in general they felt very, like, force-fed, almost. And, like, no matter what the teaching was, it felt very, like there’s no debate here. This is it.

Jemima explained how the experience of a different teacher the following year provoked her to reflect and as a consequence, fostered her spiritual growth:

This teacher taught Science, as well, and that was probably the best experience that I could have for religion [RE]. Because his way of thinking about religion, and also science, was just so different and
something that I’d never thought about before. Um, and that was really, really beneficial…So he really, really helped me. And then furthering my spiritual growth and, like, realising that it’s okay, like, and I still – I still very much believe in that…

4.4.9 Life lessons.

A number of the post-school women (5) explained how they gained life lessons through taking up various opportunities throughout their Mercy schooling. Mary spoke of learning about some of the realities of life through her participation in a week-long retreat in Year 11, including a poverty immersion overnight in the city. She recalled:

…we went for a walk down St. George’s Terrace and Wellington Square at about 8.00 or 9.00 o’clock at night. There was quite a lot of homeless people, and it was a group of 10 girls. And it was obviously something we’d never seen before. Um, and the next day we had a young woman come in, who would have been in her 20s and she was very, very thin. And she spoke about how she was bulimic. Um, she was kicked out of home and she had an abusive boyfriend. And this is things [sic] we’d never heard before. It was just what is happening right now. It was – we felt like it was very, too [sic] much information almost.

Mary continued on to describe other aspects of the poverty immersion experience:

We were quite privileged. We’d never had seen homelessness in the city on the weekends. But to see people sleeping rough and people in McDonald’s sleeping. And then to hear stories of this very young girl, probably only, you know, five or 10 years older than us. And just what
she’d had to endure and it was almost unbelievable for us to listen and hear it.

She explained how the experience helped her appreciate how she viewed other people. Mary said:

…you take into consideration that we do have a very privileged life. And we are in a minority almost. You hope not in Australia but we are still in a minority that, you know, the domestic abuse and drugs and alcohol and family issues. It’s something that we would have never seen but it’s all over Perth. It’s all over WA. So definitely impacted [sic] how I viewed other people.

Jemima outlined how she learned about herself through taking up a student leadership position, “Obviously, there’s so many different styles of leadership so that was a really good lesson in learning all that – what do I lack?”.

It was apparent that some life lessons were gained from collective experiences, based on multiple aspects of schooling. This notion was labelled a sub-ordinate theme. Three of the women specifically highlighted this theme in their responses. Julia stated:

I think it was just the kind of collective experiences that made – that allowed me to grow spiritually, because…in some co-curricular activities it was almost as if they all led in kind of different directions, and they all had that common goal of allowing you to grow and everything added something different…having a community service element, and having elements for leadership, and other co-curricular activities I think, as a whole allowed me to, yeah, really develop spiritually.
Jemima also commented on the multiple facets of her Mercy schooling that contributed to her spiritual growth. Her reflection on how she had failed to obtain a formal leadership position, yet felt compelled to keep trying, demonstrated she maintained a sense of hope:

…even though I was – kept getting declined I was still, like strong enough or, like, empowered to continue to go for it…and, I mean, something must’ve worked somehow…I think that probably is an experience throughout my whole schooling, that really, yeah, shows what, Mercy education did. Because just every single part of it, from co-curricular to, like the service and thinking about others…all contributed to making me, yeah, have a passion and have a drive, I suppose.

Annika articulated how she thought the many different groups to which she belonged throughout her education had worked to form a cohesive whole. This holistic approach to her education had made a difference to her spiritual growth. She stated:

I mean, it’s been 12 years now since I was at school. So maybe that’s why I look back and I think of it as being more of a holistic approach. But it’s all the little elements put together that made the experience so worthwhile…And it’s the…community group that’s been together as the whole year level. It’s also your Houses and your identity with your Houses as we were just saying. But it’s also what you participate in and what you become involved in that is also really important.

Annika’s comments here are also relevant to the aforementioned sub-ordinate theme of cohesion and unity with reference to the super-ordinate theme of belonging and community.
Another sub-ordinate theme to emerge regarding life lessons was creative and critical thinking. Two of the post-school women, Gemma and Sophie, made comments about this notion in relation to their learning. Sophie stated:

It wasn’t just about, you know, being academically the best. And a lot of these sort of challenges that he [the teacher] would set would kind of have that in mind, that creative thinking kind of stuff as well. So, I think that was probably a big influence on my spiritual growth.

Gemma explained how she reflected to overcome the challenge of expanding a particular service group, named Young Mercies. In her role as a student leader she was called on to engage in creative and critical thinking to devise strategies to increase the numbers of student participating in the service co-curricular group. Gemma said:

So, then we had to kind of self-reflect on what didn’t work previously, and how to appeal to a lot of the younger people and the Year 12s as well, because some people are like, “Oh my gosh, it’s, like, religious. It’s not very cool. We don’t really want to be involved in that kind of thing.” And it’s like, “Well, it’s a really good, like, learning curve for you as it is for me.” So, it gave me that option to connect with different people and connect with different beliefs and kind of see the common goal and draw them all together. Weave it through. And of course, people don’t perform or work as well, unless they don’t believe in what they’re aiming towards. So just finding, like, a common goal was a really big thing. So, we were quite successful in that year. We started a lot of different campaigns and things…and I got to learn how to be a leader.
The life lessons the post-school women outlined throughout their interviews illustrated that they were able to gain real-life experiences that would help them in their futures, thereby providing them with a sense of hope from their schooling.

4.4.10 Affirmation.

The super-ordinate theme of affirmation, through the curriculum and pedagogical practices employed in Mercy schooling, was applicable to a fifth of the post-school women. The comments made regarding this super-ordinate theme were related to building a sense of self-efficacy. The participants spoke about how they felt affirmed through their participation in various activities, subjects and/or programs throughout their Mercy schooling. Gemma’s response to this question was indicative of the type of responses the women offered. She provided an example from an activity conducted at the conclusion of her schooling prior to her graduation. Gemma described how written comments by her peers and teachers penned in a notebook she had kept from her final days of schooling, represented how she felt affirmed. She stated:

So, the other people acknowledging you, and then you either accepting and agreeing with it or denying it. So, I think it [her memento: a notebook of memories penned by students and teachers] was just good, good [sic] form of affirmation as well.

Rebekah mentioned how she felt affirmed through receiving the Principal’s Award the year she graduated from the school. In sharing this memento with the researcher, Rebekah recounted how receiving this award affirmed her involvement in the life of the school, beyond the academic subjects:

I wasn’t overly academic. There were subjects that I definitely were [sic] very average at and I struggled…I couldn’t remember things. I failed a
lot of tests. And what this Principal’s Award, I think, was – it represented more than just the academic success of the school… I think it was a celebration of my involvement at the school and everything that I was doing… It shaped me to who I was.

Jane also mentioned being affirmed by receiving an award upon her graduation from her school. She expressed her affirmation and pride in receiving the award which was given to a small number of students who epitomise the school’s Mercy values. She said, “…and I was very fortunate to be one of those people”. She went onto state how the award was given to students who, “…are able to show them [Mercy values], not only in your school life, but in your own personal life”.

Mary outlined how receiving a leadership badge in Year 8 to represent her class gave her a significant moral boost and affirmation. She stated, “It was an acknowledgement from peers…it’s that moral boost that you need…especially when you’re quite unsure of your new group and social surroundings”. Sally described how a cross-country shirt issued to her in Year 12 in recognition of contributing to the sport across a number of consecutive years was memorable and special. Her words reiterated how she felt contributing to a team sport was enjoyable in terms of helping the younger students:

…for me, like, sport was a really big part of my schooling… and it also shows like, hard work, having committed to, you know, five years of a team. And I think, as well, like, leadership, because you’re always motivating the younger girls, as well so I like that idea of working part of a team.
She went on to speak with pride in representing her school, indicating the shirt affirmed her participation in the sport, “…being proud of the school that I’ve come from. I think that was – I was always very proud to be a [name of school deleted] school girl”.

4.5 Findings related to Overarching Research Question

Seventeen super-ordinate themes emerged from the participant interview responses related to the subsidiary research questions. These themes required further fashioning to succinctly address the overarching research question. Axial coding across the subsidiary research questions facilitated synthesis of these themes into key findings. The iterative nature of IPA was upheld by embedding Bednall’s (2006) stages of analysis. Six key findings emerged from this process. An overview of this process of analysis is illustrated in Figure 4-1.
In addressing the overarching research question, the 17 super-ordinate themes were grouped to form like clusters. These clusters were issued theme titles reflective of their commonalities. For example, the super-ordinate themes of ‘Religious culture’, ‘Mercy values and ethos’ and ‘Catholic curriculum’ were grouped together under the broad theme of ‘Shared belief’. The key findings emerged from synthesising the super-ordinate themes. These key findings are illustrated in Figure 4-2.
4.6 Reflexive Statement

The reflexivity process embedded in IPA was pertinent in the data collection and analysis stage. In IPA the researcher overtly acknowledges her role in the study. The researcher strives to interpret the world of another person while concurrently striving to make meaning of her own world. The interpretation process was hermeneutic, calling upon the researcher to actively set aside assumptions and preconceptions to consciously identify bias. The data set of this study was interpreted by the researcher to decipher meaning and report the findings. Member-checking was also conducted to ensure consistency throughout the data collection and analysis process. As mentioned, the researcher journal was pivotal throughout the data collection process, and this journal was consulted throughout the data analysis process to facilitate reflexivity and minimise bias. The reflexive process was mentioned in this chapter when it was deemed it would add insight to the findings. The reflexivity exercised adds to the credibility of the findings.

A reflexive statement was made in the prior chapter to acknowledge upfront, and in an overt manner, the researcher’s position prior to the findings of the study. As mentioned,
bracketing was employed throughout data collection and in the initial phases of analysis. Finally, de-bracketing was employed during the fifth stage of data analysis. This fifth stage was the most significant point of epoche; bracketed information was re-visited in conjunction with the researcher journal entries to consider and form theme interpretation (Bednall, 2006). The de-bracketing process provided the researcher with the opportunity to reflect, revisit and test assumptions and pre-conceptions made during data collection.

4.7 Chapter Summary

The findings from this study on the perceptions of post-school women about the influences of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth were reported in this chapter. Nine post-school women from three Western Australian MEL secondary schools were interviewed individually. These semi-structured interviews were each transcribed and the nine interview transcriptions comprised the data set collected for the investigation.

The findings included in this chapter are presented in response to the overarching and subsidiary research questions. As articulated in the opening of the chapter, the findings were presented by subsidiary research questions. In following this structure, the findings illustrated the perceptions of the post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth. Specifically, they illustrated the perceptions of the post-school women regarding the influence of school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy, on their spiritual growth.

Seventeen super-ordinate themes emerged from the post-school women’s responses regarding the research questions, with multiple sub-ordinate themes also arising from the data. The findings related to the subsidiary research questions were synthesised to address the overarching research question, resulting in six key findings: belonging; fond memories; building self-efficacy; connectedness to others; a sense of hope; and, shared belief. Chapter 5
provides a discussion of the findings in response to the overarching and subsidiary research questions that guided the study. Extant literature is drawn upon to facilitate and substantiate this critical discussion.
Chapter 5

Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings are analysed and discussed in the context of the scholarly and empirical literature that informed the study. Through critical discussion of the study’s findings, this chapter seeks to explicate the research question of how student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia.

In addressing the subsidiary research questions, 17 super-ordinate themes were identified. These themes were listed at the conclusion to Chapter 4. The themes are each related to a subsidiary research question (SRQ). Through the iterative process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the super-ordinate themes were synthesised into six key findings. These key findings address the overarching research question (ORQ), as illustrated in Figure 5-1 overpage. This chapter will discuss the six key findings in light of the literature, in response to the overarching research question. As the overarching research question is the central element of the study, discussion of the findings in relation to it underpins this chapter.
Figure 5-1 Key findings in relation to Overarching Research Question

What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?

SRQ 1: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture?

SRQ 2: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships?

SRQ 3: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy?

Key Findings

- Sense of place
- Belonging and community
- Fond memories
- Opportunity
- Self-efficacy
- Self-reflection and awareness
- Affirmation
- Supportive community of teachers
- Connectedness to teachers
- Teacher role models
- Inspirational teachers
- Leadership
- Giving back through service
- Catholic curriculum
- Life lessons
- Religious culture
- Mercy values and ethos

Super-ordinate Themes

- Religious culture
- Mercy values and ethos
- Catholic curriculum
- Opportunity
- Self-reflection and awareness
- Affirmation
- Leadership
- Giving back through service
- Teacher role models
- Inspirational teachers
- Connectedness to teachers

BELONGING AND PLACE
FOND MEMORIES
BUILDING SELF-EFFICACY
CONNECTEDNESS TO OTHERS
SENSE OF HOPE
SHARED BELIEF
Prior to discussion of the key findings, the findings related to participant interpretations of the term ‘spiritual growth’ are considered. These findings frame the discussion of the key findings of the study that follow. Table 5.1 provides an overview of how the discussion is structured. Following discussion of the six key findings, a reflexive statement is made in light of the IPA methodology employed in the study. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the main ideas presented.

Table 5.1
Chapter Overview

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5.1.1 Findings related to participant interpretations of spiritual growth.

Given the term ‘spiritual growth’ is central to this study, each participant was invited to articulate her understanding of the term. This notion was specifically covered in interview question five. Following, the researcher outlined and clarified with each participant the
definition of spiritual growth that framed the study. This definition is based on the following commonalities expressed in the literature: spiritual growth is considered a positive force propelling a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose that may stem from a connectedness with oneself, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018).

The three super-ordinate themes emerging from responses to interview question five supported key aspects of the definition of spiritual growth framing the investigation. However, it is noteworthy that a high proportion of the women reflected that the religious foundation of Mercy schooling had a positive impact on their spiritual growth. Their comments indicated the religiosity of their schooling shaped their interpretation of the term ‘spiritual growth’. This influence is explained in this section where religion is referenced as being entwined with spiritual growth. The interviewees’ responses to question five indicated their understanding of the phenomenon was aligned with this particular aspect of the definition framing the study, as well as two other elements: spiritual growth is a personal journey; and, it is characterised by an awareness and connectedness.

5.1.1.1 Personal journey.

Although the word ‘personal’ is not specified in the definition of spiritual growth framing the study, the notion is inferred given it describes a personal spiritual growth process undergone by an individual. Significantly, eight of the nine women interviewed inferred spiritual growth was a personal journey. Sophie, for example, mentioned the spiritual growth involved reflection and introspection, and she used the word ‘personal’ in describing her definition of the term. Jane’s use of the word ‘wow’ in her opening statement perhaps indicated her perception of the enormity of the concept. Jane stated, “Wow. I think spiritual growth is…a very personal journey and it’s the experiences you’re exposed to that help you
develop that relationship with God, within yourself.” Her depiction of the term ‘personal journey’ in her description exemplifies the sentiments of seven of the participants and was therefore an apt choice of phrase to illustrate this super-ordinate theme. The notion of a personal journey correlates with the literature about relationality with the self that denotes spiritual growth is a journey of self-discovery. This journey involves an individual moving beyond the inner core of the Self to find commonalities that bind him or her to the Other in a quest for wholeness (de Souza, 2016).

Similarly, Julia’s description of spiritual growth as “…becoming whole and staying grounded” succinctly reinforces the literature while also inferring the personal and positive nature of spiritual growth. Comments made by Sally and Jemima also indicate the positive force spiritual growth exerted on them. Sally aligned spiritual growth to possessing an inner strength to exercise resilience and push her to persevere. Jemima also spoke about spiritual growth as being powerful in motivating her to move forward in life. Extant literature states spirituality holds immense power in unlocking the potential of individuals so they may flourish (Eaude, 2009; King, 2013) and the comments made by Sally and Jemima support this literature. Their comments also support the notion that spiritual growth is a positive force, as specified in the definition of the term framing the study.

However, most of the participants did not specifically relate the positive force of spiritual growth to fostering a deepening sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, as was articulated in the study definition (Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2018). Further, only one out of the nine participants, Julia, chose to specifically mention meaning and purpose in her definition of spiritual growth. However, a sense of meaning and purpose in relation to spiritual growth was articulated directly, as well as through inference, in comments made in response to other questions across the nine interviews.
5.1.1.2  *Entwined with religion.*

The study definition of the term refers to spiritual growth as possibly stemming from a connectedness with a transcendent other such as God. In this context, spiritual growth may or may not occur in relation to God. Spiritual growth may be inclusive or exclusive of this connection with a transcendent being. Relationality with the transcendent is not bound or limited by religion as the human desire to search for the absolute may not involve a search for the divine (Armstrong, 2009). However, seven out of the nine interviewees connected spiritual growth to religion in defining spiritual growth, possibly indicating that they thought religion was instrumental to their spiritual growth. The researcher wanted to ensure that the interviewees felt free to consider spiritual growth as operating within and/or outside of an experience of a transcendent being such as God. Consequently, following each participant’s articulation of spiritual growth, the interviewer highlighted this notion.

Even though most of the interviewees cited spiritual growth as being entwined with religion, this clarification of the study’s definition of the term spiritual growth, whereby it may be tethered or completely separate to religion, was received in a positive manner by the interviewees. This positive response denoted the participants’ acceptance of the study definition. It may be concluded that the seven women who associated spiritual growth with religion may not have initially considered that spiritual growth may be separate from religion.

Spiritual growth pertains to the deepening or enrichment of a person’s spirituality (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2018) and as such, is related to a positive change associated with a person’s spirituality. However, the literature describes spirituality in multiple ways (Eaude, 2009; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017). The multi-faceted nature of spirituality suggests the concept is complex and elusive. There appears a lack of consensus among scholars in defining the term, particularly youth spirituality (Brooks, Michaelson, King, Inchley, & Pickett, 2018). For this reason, it was perhaps unsurprising that the
participants’ responses in defining the related term ‘spiritual growth’ were also varied, albeit to a small extent.

Regardless, the high proportion of the post-school women in the study who referred to religion as being part of spiritual growth is noteworthy. These seven women clearly articulated religion as a component that defined spiritual growth in response to interview question five. However, one of the women, Sally, questioned the need for church attendance as a means to foster spiritual growth. Sally’s comments suggested her sense of spiritual growth was connected to her formation of values and beliefs that in turn influenced the way she lives her life. In separating spiritual growth from religion, her definition of spiritual growth is aligned with the study definition whereby spiritual growth may possibly stem from a connectedness with a transcendent being such as God.

Sally’s opinion perhaps infers that connectedness with God may not depend on church attendance. This suggestion is juxtaposed with the Catholic Church’s Code of Canon Law regarding Sunday as the primordial holy day of obligation (Catholic Church, 1994, paras. 1343, 2177; Vatican Council II, 1965d, para. 1246). Sally’s comments are perhaps contextually unexpected given her Catholic family upbringing, coupled with her Catholic secondary school education. Yet her comments are perhaps reflected in the underrepresentation of young people involved in Church life, compared with older generations (National Church Life Survey Research, 2019).

Another one of the post-school women, Gemma, articulated that she felt her spiritual growth was entwined with religion, but also remained a separate entity at different times. She said, “…I think, for me, spiritual growth was more to do with, like, again, religious space rather than…outside of that.” Gemma went onto state how she felt her connectedness to religion was inadequate. She cited an example of not acting on opportunities she had been
offered in her local parish subsequent to leaving school. Although these comments do not refer to Gemma’s secondary schooling experience, they suggest she attributed religion as being of importance to her spiritual growth. Mary and Annika also articulated how they considered spiritual growth was entwined with religion through associating the influence of the Mercy values and heritage of their respective schools. They considered these aspects had fuelled their spiritual growth.

Furthermore, seven of the nine participants expressed their understanding of spiritual growth as being clearly tethered to religion, rather than a secular understanding of the term, perhaps due to the religiosity of their schooling experiences. Other comments were made about spiritual growth and religion; however, they were deemed comparatively more pertinent to awareness and connectedness and are consequently in the next section. Nevertheless, these comments appear to also reflect the positive impact of the religious foundation of Mercy schooling on spiritual growth.

5.1.1.3 Awareness and connectedness.

Some of the post-school women outlined how they felt that an awareness and a connectedness to the self, others or with God was influential in spiritual growth. In particular, they spoke of spiritual growth as developing a relationship with God. Their comments illustrated that they viewed forging or developing a connection with God as an aspect of their spiritual growth. Scholarly literature states that humans seek relationality with the transcendent (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). The comments made by the post-school women exemplified this idea and supported the literature.

Some of the women also experienced an awareness and connectedness through giving back to a community through service. This notion is also supported in literature. For example, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Revich, and Linkins (2009) suggest that outward focused
opportunities to learn about the self and others, through engaging in service to others, is a rich mode of experiential, student-centred learning. Other scholars support this notion and argue that outward focused, critically engaging activities may help students develop empathy for others, rather than self-centredness, which in turn aids spiritual growth (Hackett, 2015; McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015).

To conclude, the three findings related to participant interpretations of the term spiritual growth reinforce the literature. Further consideration of the data collected beyond interview question five and across the breadth of the interview questions also supports and further explicates the definition of the term that frames the study, while addressing the overarching research question.

5.2 Key Findings

As mentioned in Chapter 4.5, axial coding resulted in the key findings emerging through synthesis of the 17 super-ordinate themes. Each of these key findings will be critically analysed in this section. To achieve this aim, the themes related to each finding will be interrogated in relation to the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

5.2.1 Finding 1: Belonging and place.

The notion of belonging and place is central to two super-ordinate themes which emerged from participant interview responses: a sense of place; and, belonging and community. This key finding was based on strong evidence from the data set in that all of the post-school women in the study articulated feeling a sense of place, and associated feelings related to belonging and community, throughout their Mercy secondary school journeys. Significantly, this finding highlighted the potency of fostering spiritual growth through immersion in nature, such as worshipping in community with others in the outdoors. Further,
the dual aspects of environment and community concurrently influenced an individual’s experience of place.

5.2.1.1 Sense of place.

All nine post-school women reported feeling that a sense of place fostered their spiritual growth throughout their Mercy secondary schooling. A sense of place was experienced by the participants in two ways: a connection with the physical landscape of their respective school buildings and/or grounds or a similar place or aspect of nature or the environment in which they received their schooling; or, through a sense of their place within the school community. Literature echoes these dual aspects of a sense of place. A sense of place may comprise a person’s attachment or belonging to a specific environment (Najafi & Shariff, 2011) and/or a sense of place within a particular community (Qazimi, 2014). This latter aspect is covered in Section 5.2.1.2, where the participants specifically report feelings of belonging and community. However, participant responses illustrate that a sense of belonging clearly underpins their attachment to environment and/or community and so both aspects are also mentioned in this section. Although participants’ responses reflect the literature about a sense of place in a general sense, due to the paucity of literature about sense of place specifically in relation to spiritual growth, it is difficult to apply literature to the participants’ comments in this area. The findings in this particular facet of the study may contribute to literature.

The term ‘place spirituality’, as used in literature, describes the human experience of making sense of the relationship between place experiences and spiritual attachment (Counted & Zock, 2019) and reflects the post-school women’s descriptions of the significance of various places associated with their Mercy schooling, and the corresponding influence on their spiritual growth. For example, Annika and Sophie described aesthetically
beautiful outdoor settings at their respective schools which they said evoked feelings of peace, stillness and connectedness to God. Annika described a particular area of rolling, green lawn under the canopy of large Jacaranda trees where she would sit with her friends during recess and lunch times. She described the area of garden as secluded, sheltered and “so naturally lovely”. She stated it was in this area that she was “often reminded of the presence of God in our lives”. The atmosphere and physical environment of this place appeared to foster an openness and connectedness with God for Annika.

Similarly, Sophie described the setting of an outdoor Mass and commented that “being outside…inspires that introspectivity [sic] and you can’t help but be at peace when you’re in that kind of situation”. Sophie was specific in stating that she felt it would be difficult to find that sense of tranquillity and connectedness with God “outside of that experience”. She described the environment as being aesthetically beautiful. Like Annika, she used the word ‘canopy’ when describing the effect of trees shading and protecting the students: “…being out under the Birch trees forming…a canopy and…the dark, cool shade of it was really…pretty and…a good time for reflection, I think…” . Her comments reflect literature that highlights the power of the natural world in providing a calming, reflective environment (King, 2013; Louv, 2008; Wilson, 1984) and illustrates the potency of a sense of place in influencing spiritual growth. Julia described how viewing the lush school gardens, trees and chapel from her English class gave her feelings of peace and stillness. She mentioned how the experience was “grounding and connecting and there were always…points of reflection”. The post-school women’s expressions of feeling peace and stillness, as well as gratitude and an openness to others and God, when in particular places at their respective schools, evidently left indelible impressions upon them.

These and other examples illustrate instances where the participants experienced a sense of place when in communion with others, such as: a class of students, an entire college
community joining together in worship or a friendship group of students sharing their break times together. The participants’ comments suggest a sense of place experienced by an individual, when in the company of a larger group, is powerful in fostering spiritual growth. Furthermore, the heightened openness to others and God many of the participants spoke about when in a particular environment, such as a bushland setting or monastery while on a camp or retreat, perhaps amplified the importance of being in communion with others. These types of experiences may help an individual feel a sense of belonging to a larger group while concurrently feeling connectedness to a place or environment. The post-school women’s comments suggest that both aspects of a sense of place, environment and community, concurrently influence a person’s experience of the place.

Conversely, the post-school women did not articulate experiencing a sense of place in situations where they were physically alone. Perhaps the women were not afforded these opportunities for solitude due to the social nature of schooling; students are generally in the company of fellow students in and out of lesson time. It is difficult to draw conclusions about whether or not students would experience the same sense of place in an environment where they were not in the company of their peers. This type of scenario would perhaps be worthy of more research to ascertain the impact of experiencing a sense of place in a particular environment in the company of others, compared to being physically alone.

Another aspect with regards to a sense of place is relationship with the built environment. Some of the post-school women spoke about how school buildings evoked strong memories that fostered their spiritual growth. Annika described how she spent a lot of time in a particular school building for the subjects of History and Music. She recalled how the Sisters of Mercy had inhabited this building in the early years of the school, and she found it special being in this same building. Annika stated “…you can just imagine them [Sisters of Mercy] sort of being present here as well. And I think when you’re singing in
this…building, there is something else. There’s a sort of…something special”. Her comments reflect a sense of belonging through a connectedness not only to the physical place, but to the memory of its past inhabitants. Again, Annika’s recollection is indicative of the dual aspects of environment and community operating concurrently in conveying a sense of place. Sophie and Jemima both commented that their school buildings had not changed since graduating from their respective schools, which evidently gave them each a sense of relief and also indicated the emotional connection their particular school settings had on each of them.

Despite documentation by scholars over many decades about the human desire for attachment to the divine in particular places, the psychology of this attachment experience is not fully understood (Counted & Zock, 2019). There also appears to be a paucity of literature about sense of place in relation to spirituality, and there is a call for more research into this particular area (Counted & Zock, 2019; Perriam, 2015). However, there is Church literature that focuses on aspects of the physical setting of schools that is perhaps relevant to the findings presented in this section about the effect of a sense of place on students.

This literature promotes the pertinence of creating a sense of place which instils an atmosphere conducive to supporting the Catholic mission and identity of schools (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988). From the moment a student enters a Catholic school, “he or she ought to have the impression of entering a new environment, one illumined by the light of faith, and having its own unique characteristics” (CCE, 1988, para. 25). These sentiments are evident in the comments made by the post-school women about the various environments they described that had influenced their spiritual growth when at school. For example, Julia commented on feeling an openness to connect with God through attending services in her school’s chapel. Similarly, Jemima referenced having photos taken on her last day of school under a cross positioned on a building wall.
Literature highlights the importance of Catholic schools utilising physical and visible signs of Catholic culture, such as symbols, images and objects (Miller, 2006). These items may include crucifixes, statues, a chapel, and other items such as artwork imbued with the Catholic ethos, possibly even in a generalised rather than overtly religious manner (Miller, 2006). As the findings of this study indicate that being in nature has the potential to evoke feelings of peace, stillness, gratitude and openness to God, perhaps the provision of places where students are able to appreciate nature is an important consideration in the design of school landscape architecture as is the selection of off-site facilities used for camps, retreats and other educational activities.

The results of the study in this section also support the notion that students benefit from being physically close to a church in proximity to their schooling. During the interviews some of the post-school women spoke of how being close to a church while at school fostered a feeling of openness to God, and peace and stillness. Church literature clearly states this notion:

> The physical proximity of the school to a church can contribute a great deal toward achieving the educational aims. A church should not be seen as something extraneous, but as a familiar and intimate place where young people who are believers can find the presence in the Lord…(CCE, 1988, para. 30).

In this study the participants referred to their respective school chapels. However, the proximity of a parish church building to a school may also influence students in this regard.

5.2.1.2 Belonging and community.

All of the post-school women reported feeling a sense of belonging and community throughout their Mercy secondary schooling. There were myriad comments that indicated the
sense of belonging they felt in relation to the school community, stemming mainly from their participation in various parts of school life. Their comments made clear that feeling a sense of belonging to the school community was integral to their spiritual growth. Their feelings of belonging and community emerged from experiencing cohesion and unity with others, and a sense of connection with the Mercy Sisters.

Evidently, there is close overlap between the super-ordinate themes of belonging and community, and sense of place. There is a sense of belonging not only to the physical environment of a classroom, but to a student’s sense of place within it. The I-World relationship overlaps with the I-Other relationship according to the context in which a person is in. As a sense of place comprises a sense of belonging to a specific environment (Najafi & Shariff, 2011) and/or a sense of place within a particular community (Qazimi, 2014), the women’s perceptions of the influence of attachment to particular groups within the school community were an important consideration to make with regards to their spiritual growth.

The post-school women highlighted how participation in various co-curricular and service-learning activities throughout their schooling resulted in feeling a sense of cohesion and unity with others. They reported that attending off-campus activities and excursions, such as retreats and camps were especially important in building community with others, such as with their Year group. Experiencing opportunities for teamwork and bonding with others they may not have otherwise had the opportunity to work alongside, were viewed as beneficial in building community. The post-school women collectively articulated a sense of cohesion and unity gained from these experiences. None of them referenced a negative experience in building relationships with others. Many of them stated how their experiences provided them with opportunities to have fun while forming relationships with others. Their reflections on the I-Other relationships they spoke about during their interviews were positive, indicating the potency of these opportunities across the curriculum in the secondary school.
The women also commented that the opportunities to build a sense of belonging and community they gained from their schooling taught them the importance of being together with others and to focus on others rather than the self. The findings in this study support the literature about relationality. Hay (2006) states that seeking relationality with others is an innate human trait and part of the human experience. Relationality with others is crucial to adolescent spirituality (Brooks et al., 2018; Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2003). Significantly, connectedness to others appears to be a crucial protective health mechanism for adolescent girls, in particular (Brooks et al., 2018). The women’s comments reflected their enthusiasm to connect with others throughout their schooling, and it appears they relished the opportunities they were given to forge these relationships.

In some instances, these opportunities were unstructured in that the students were simply given the opportunity to be together, not necessarily for a particular purpose, reason or activity, yet it enabled them to bond. Annika, for example, outlined how simply being given the opportunity to be together and converse, as a Year group, was beneficial in building community. Conversely, certain structured activities were specified as beneficial in building unity. Mary’s description of a student leadership group planning and performing a liturgical performance in preparation for Easter exemplified how a specific task fostered a sense of belonging and community to a group. She stated, “we were now one team with cohesion”. Mary’s use of the word cohesion to describe how the leadership group bonded throughout the experience, illustrated the positive effect the activity had on these students. These two particular examples illustrate that the attachment to a particular group of people within a community, whether it be a large group, such as a Year group, or a smaller leadership group, was deemed important by the participants. The examples also illustrated that in some instances, the attachment was a result of a structured activity, such as a leadership task, with a
shared goal. In other instances, the attachment resulted in a bonding experience through an unstructured opportunity to be with others at a particular time and space.

Collectively, the participants’ comments reflect that they expressed a keen desire to forge relationships with others throughout their secondary schooling. As spirituality is influenced by a sense of belonging in peer relationships (Kessler, 2000), and peers may take precedence in identity formation during adolescence (Fowler & Dell, 2006; McNamara Barry, Nelson, Davarya, & Urry, 2010), providing secondary students with opportunities to foster relationships with others is perhaps paramount. This notion is particularly pertinent to adolescent girls given that connectedness to others appears to be a significant protective health mechanism for them (Brooks et al., 2018). The post-school women’s comments support the literature regarding a sense of belonging and community in relation to adolescent spiritual growth.

The participants also articulated that a sense of belonging was fostered through a connectedness to the Mercy Sisters. The participants stated that they were influenced positively by the Sisters whose cultural tradition underpinned a sense of belonging to the traditions and heritage of the Mercy community. They also commented that they were inspired by the Sisters who were role models to them, and they were influenced by the values enacted from them. For example, Rebekah spoke about being empowered to maximise her potential. She stated that she learnt “…how to be the best version of yourself…following these amazing women [Mercy Sisters]”. Annika directly linked the Mercy Sisters to a sense of belonging. She stated, “…just having the order of the Mercy Sisters as the heritage, as the cultural tradition was really special for me because…It gave me something to belong to”.

It was apparent that the students’ connectedness to the Mercy Sisters throughout their schooling provided them with a strong sense of belonging and community to something
that was larger than themselves. The presence of the Mercy Sisters, in person and/or infused throughout school culture, is an aspect of the religious socialisation of the three schools involved in the study. Significantly, religious socialisation in the Catholic school may build a sense of belonging and community that aids students’ spiritual growth (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012). The Mercy Sisters evidently influenced the spiritual growth of the post-school women involved in this study.

5.2.2 Finding 2: Fond memories.

The post-school women’s perceptions of their Mercy schooling revealed multiple memories of their schooling. Their recollections of many of these memories were vivid in that they were able to recall minute details related with various moments in time of their schooling. The participants’ memories were seemingly valued by them. Their comments also revealed that the opportunities to create these memories were an important aspect of their Mercy schooling. Accordingly, an insight gained from the study was the creation of fond memories in fuelling spiritual growth, and importantly, the provision of multiple and varied opportunities for students to create and form lasting memories.

5.2.2.1 Fond memories.

All nine post-school women involved in the study explained how fond memories of a variety of different experiences throughout their secondary schooling contributed to their spiritual growth. These experiences were diverse and personal in nature. For most of the women, the experiences they recalled evoked a connectedness to others and/or a place, a sense of belonging and/or an opportunity. Accordingly, some of the participants’ comments may be classified under the super-ordinate themes of: sense of place; belonging and community; and/or, opportunity. Other examples did not fit into these categories, yet
signified that memories were important in relation to spiritual growth. Therefore, this separate category labelled ‘Fond memories’ was formed.

Perhaps the aforementioned apparent overlapping of themes, present in multiple examples, illustrates the multifaceted nature of spirituality (Eaude, 2009; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017). Julia, for example, spoke of the fond memories she possessed of being in the school chapel. In a way, this example is also relevant to the sense of place super-ordinate theme. Similarly, Jemima emphasised that her Mercy schooling was special because of the memories created throughout this time. She mentioned how some of her school memories were still recalled with fondness by her friendship group, long after exiting the school. She highlighted the importance of building relationships with others when articulating her recollection of school memories.

Collectively, relationality and connectedness to others and/or place emerged as being at the core of the participants’ fond memories of their Mercy schooling. Literature reports that connectedness to others and relationality are integral in fostering spirituality (Brooks et al., 2018; de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Robinson, 1977/1996). Specifically, adolescent spiritual health is supported by a sense of connection with the self, other human beings, the natural world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God (Brooks et al., 2018). The participants’ comments regarding memories of their schooling illustrate relational consciousness in the way that they demonstrate an awareness of the self in a relationship which adds richness and value to their everyday life (Brooks et al., 2018; Hay & Nye, 2006). An insight gained in the study is that the formation of memories throughout secondary schooling appear to be an integral component underpinning connectedness to others and/or place, and relationality. It is perhaps noteworthy, that although memories are generally understood to underpin connectedness, this study highlights the potential to foster
students’ spiritual growth through providing them with multiple and varied opportunities to create and form lasting memories.

5.2.2.2  Opportunity.

The post-school women reported that the opportunities they were given throughout their schooling contributed to their spiritual growth. They expressed that the opportunities shaped their schooling, and in particular, gave them a sense of belonging. Evidently the data revealed another overlap between super-ordinate themes, again signifying the multi-faceted nature of spirituality (Eaude, 2009; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Nye, 2017). Despite this overlap, the comments made by the post-school women which comprise this theme of opportunity highlighted the importance of opportunities they had experienced in their schooling. The post-school women also outlined how various opportunities they embraced were rewarding and provided a source of fun. The opportunities they spoke about included a variety of co-curricular, leadership, service-learning and other special programs, such as programs catering for students who are gifted and talented in particular areas.

However, an insight gained from the study was that the post-school women as students benefitted from opportunities not necessarily stemming from specific groups or programs, but related to Mercy schooling as a whole. Annika captured this notion in expressing her thoughts about the opportunities her schooling provided her which contributed to a strong sense of belonging. She stated, “And then when I came to school, there was this whole tradition, this whole world that you get opened up into and you can belong…”. Her comments reflect the potency of a sense of belonging to a school community through opportunity. Julia also reflected on the holistic nature of her schooling when she stated, “I think it was…the collective experiences…”. She elaborated how multiple co-curricular activities differed in nature, yet possessed a commonality in facilitating growth.
Other participants’ comments reinforced that opportunities were embedded in multiple activities and programs offered by the schools. Some of the post-school women articulated that the breadth and depth of opportunities their respective schools offered were great in number. An inference drawn from the data was the variety and volume of opportunities was particularly important for students who had come from very small primary schools, especially some country students. Sally, for example, who had come from a primary school of approximately 20 students in a rural area, highlighted the impact of the opportunities she was exposed to in her secondary schooling was considerable compared to her primary schooling.

Another insight revealed in the data is that the post-school women’s participation in the opportunities offered by their respective schools, throughout their education, was necessary for them to realise the benefits. Some of these benefits of participating included a sense of enjoyment, belonging, and the creation of fond memories. All of the post-school women embraced various opportunities their schools offered. Perhaps this idea is aptly illustrated in an experience Rebekah articulated in relation to opportunity. She described how she contemplated leaving her school not long after commencing her education there, as she felt quite lost. However, her willingness to participate in a club at the school gave her a sense of belonging that changed the course of her schooling. She stated that she thought, “the opportunities that I was given there [at school]…changed my schooling and I think…it fostered even my spiritual growth and, sense of belonging”. Embracing opportunities on offer throughout schooling is evidently necessary in order to gain the benefits, such as a sense of reward, belonging and fun that in turn, support spiritual growth. The opportunities the post-school women recalled were the foundation of fond memories of their Mercy schooling.
5.2.3 Finding 3: Building self-efficacy.

This key finding emerged from the themes of: self-efficacy; self-reflection and awareness; and, affirmation. It was from these themes that the post-school women expressed that building self-efficacy contributed to their spiritual growth. This particular finding illustrated an important interrelationship between spiritual growth and self-efficacy. Some of the by-products of spirituality, such as enhanced wellbeing and increased resilience (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Eaude, 2009; Kim & Esquivel, 2011), build self-efficacy. However, this finding illustrated the relationship is sometimes reciprocal, as the post-school women’s comments demonstrated that building self-efficacy potentially fuels spiritual growth. Further, as the protective qualities of spiritual growth guard young people from losing self-efficacy through potentially erosive negative behaviours or experiences (Brooks et al., 2018; Eaude, 2009; Hackett, 2015), so too the experience of failure, disappointment or negative experiences may paradoxically strengthen self-efficacy and fuel spiritual growth. This notion is addressed in Section 5.2.3.2 regarding self-reflection and awareness.

5.2.3.1 Self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy may be defined as a self-belief in one’s capacity to carry out the behaviours needed to fulfil particular goals (Bandura, 1997), particularly with regards to meeting challenges. All of the post-school women in the study described experiences throughout their schooling that contributed to them developing confidence and a sense of self-belief in their abilities to rise to meet challenges. The post-school women’s self-efficacy was fostered through their participation in various activities, programs and experiences throughout their Mercy schooling.

Some of the participants related this sense of self-efficacy to developing their independence through undertaking particular activities or experiences. For example, Mary
stated that she felt she grew in independence through her involvement in school leadership roles in particular. She explicitly stated that the experience resulted in her feeling “happy within myself”, indicating a sense of contentment and positive sense of self. Other participants in the study commented that they felt their schooling taught them the benefits of perseverance towards maximising their potential and facing challenges. In turn, exercising perseverance enriched their sense of self-efficacy. In particular, Sally spoke of learning about the “capacity of being able to work hard”. Her comments indicated that she felt her confidence at facing challenges increased through realising her capacity to work hard. Similarly, Jane indicated perseverance as being a means to maximise her potential, and as a result, strengthen her self-efficacy.

The safety of the school community was an influence on one of the post-school women’s spiritual growth in relation to self-efficacy. When describing her schooling experiences, Annika emphasised how her school environment was a safe place. The importance of feeling safe in the school environment is highlighted in literature (Nye, 2017). Student spiritual growth is fostered when students feel accepted and supported in an intimate environment in which they are in a safe position to speak and share their thoughts and feelings with others (Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017). Authentic teacher-student relationships, characterised by trust and respect and where the teacher focuses on the whole child, (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2003) are integral in building a safe environment for students to interact. Nye (2017) highlights the importance of prioritising student feelings of safety to help foster healthy risk-taking, as evidenced in Annika’s comments. She commented how a feeling of safety enabled her to take risks and make a change from being passive to wanting to “really define myself”. In doing so, she also mentioned that the opportunity to reflect was important. This notion is now discussed in relation to self-reflection and awareness.
5.2.3.2 **Self-reflection and awareness.**

The data gained from this study reinforces the importance of self-reflection and awareness in the school setting. This notion was deemed integral to spiritual growth by six of the post-school women. For example, Julia described how the action of writing a speech to deliver to her peers triggered self-reflection, resulting in deep thinking and meaning-making. She indicated the reflection was not “forced”. Julia said, “It [reflection] was meaningful. It was in my own time”. Literature highlights the reflective nature of humans. Hay and Nye (2006) propose that humans undergo a reflexive conscious process whereby they become aware of being aware. They used the term awareness-sensing to describe this process. In this example, Julia becomes aware of her awareness during the act of self-reflection. In discussing spirituality, Rossiter (2010) also notes the human tendency to engage in reflection. Other scholars suggest that opportunities for self-reflection and awareness-sensing are conducive to spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Ng, 2012).

In most instances, the post-school women recalled explicit moments of reflection while partaking in school retreats, camps and aptly named ‘reflection’ days, perhaps indicating that the nature and structure of these learning experiences provided spiritual growth opportunities. Perhaps also, the facilitation of many of these learning experiences off-campus, rather than on-site at their respective schools, aided spiritual growth. For example, Sally recounted the significance of reflecting at the end of each day during an Indigenous immersion trip, and Sophie recalled “a big focus on spirituality and…reflection at those camps”. The post-school women may have benefitted from being immersed in nature or an environment they were unfamiliar with. In these instances, the women may have experienced a sense of place, as discussed in Section 5.2.1.1, that fostered spiritual growth.

The findings presented here suggest student spiritual growth is fostered when a student is in an environment conducive to self-reflection and awareness-sensing. As
mentioned, a person may experience a sense of attachment or belonging to a specific environment (Najafi & Shariff, 2011) and/or a sense of place within a particular community (Qazimi, 2014). However, there appears to be a paucity of literature about a sense of place specifically in relation to reflection and spiritual growth. In establishing that certain environments and activities facilitated student spiritual growth through self-reflection and awareness, there is perhaps scope for more research to be conducted in this area.

Also, of note with reference to self-reflection and awareness, Sophie, highlighted how the opportunity for meditation in the subject of Religious Education helped her to reflect. This example illustrates how the inclusion in a lesson of an activity, which explicitly focuses on reflection, may provide opportunity for spiritual growth. Literature supports this notion. McGunnigle and Hackett (2015), for example, suggest the religious and spiritual capabilities of the Catholic curriculum of a Catholic school provide opportunities for enriching students’ spiritual lives. For example, explicitly embedding the practice of prayer and meditation into Religious Education lessons and discussing with students how these practices may enrich the lives of Christian people (McGunnigle & Hackett, 2015) may help students understand the importance of these types of reflective activities in their own lives. Collectively, the post-school women indicated the opportunity for self-reflection and awareness, whether explicitly or implicitly built into learning experiences, in or beyond the school grounds, was integral in their spiritual growth.

This study finding also suggests that the opportunities for self-reflection and awareness embedded in the Mercy education the women received enabled them to look beyond themselves, and to the other. When contextualised with comments made by the post-school women across the breadth of each of their interviews, the examples they offered regarding self-reflection and awareness-sensing revealed they were outward, rather than inward focused. Collectively, through self-reflection and awareness the women were able to
establish a sense of self as part of a wider and larger entity. Literature affirms that outward focused learning is preferable to inward focused learning. Student-centred learning opportunities, such as self-reflection, need to be outward rather than inward focused, as reflection on the self solely inwards may result in feelings of self-centredness (Hackett, 2015; Seligman et al., 2009).

Another finding regarding self-reflection and awareness was related to overcoming failure. Three of the post-school women articulated how personal failure and negative experiences paradoxically resulted in spiritual growth. The women relayed how reflecting on negative experiences and disappointment they had experienced during their Mercy schooling had fuelled their spiritual growth. Gemma and Rebekah expressed disappointment in not obtaining a leadership position in their respective schools. Gemma stated, “a failure led to stronger spiritual growth and kind of…self-awareness, I think that led to the growth”. Jemima articulated a negative classroom experience that she claimed initially eroded her spiritual growth. It was only after reflection over time, with the help of a different teacher in the following year, that she claimed she could further her spiritual growth.

Self-reflection was evidently integral in these women realising they could experience growth from disappointment. This finding reflects the non-linear trajectory of spiritual growth. A person’s spirituality may develop or regress depending on a range of factors (Eaude, 2003). Spirituality is integrated (Eaude, 2003) into life experiences, rather than developed along a linear continuum. Opportunities for self-reflection were essential in helping the women realise their disappointment, failure or regression, and these experiences paradoxically resulted in their spiritual growth.

However, other post-school women who experienced disappointment in their Mercy schooling may have reacted differently. They may have experienced spiritual erosion. The
way a person navigates and processes disappointing experiences, may determine whether or not the experience results in growth. Perhaps the protective factors of spirituality in building self-efficacy (Brooks et al., 2018; Eaude, 2009; Hackett, 2015) are relevant here. Should students already possess a healthy sense of self-efficacy, they may be more resilient in times of disappointment compared to students with comparatively less self-efficacy (Eaude, 2009). Finally, as adolescent girls are more likely to report negative experiences related to the pressures of school, the protective factors offered by spirituality are “particularly salient for the experiences of girls and young women” (Brooks et al., 2018, p. 393). Opportunity for self-reflection and awareness is evidently integral in supporting the spiritual growth and wellbeing of female adolescent students.

5.2.3.3 Affirmation.

The post-school women indicated that feeling affirmed in their schooling endeavours contributed to building self-efficacy, which in turn fostered their spiritual growth. In the context of this study, affirmation may be defined as feeling supported and encouraged. In particular, the post-school women described how affirmation, stemming from others and/or a sense of pride in their achievements, fuelled self-efficacy and spiritual growth. Mary, for example, stated how receiving a leadership position in Year 8 “was an acknowledgment from peers”. She went on to state that the experience gave her a “morale boost” at a point of her schooling when she felt unsure of her place in her new surroundings.

Affirmation from others, such as peers and teachers, appeared to be a significant influence in some of the examples the post-school women relayed in their interviews. This notion highlights the centrality of relationality in spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Harris & Moran, 1998; Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2017). Given the potentially strong influence of the peer group in shaping adolescent identity (Fowler & Dell, 2006; McNamara Barry et
al., 2010), affirmation from the peer group is perhaps a significant factor with regards to building self-efficacy and fostering spiritual growth.

The findings in this area also demonstrate that providing opportunities for students to develop a sense of pride in their achievements is pertinent, as evidenced in comments made by the post-school women. Rebekah stated that receiving an award affirmed her involvement in the life of the school and “shaped me to who I was”. Jane expressed pride in receiving an award for epitomising the school’s Mercy values. Similarly, Sally’s pride in wearing her school’s cross-country team shirt, issued to her in Year 12 in recognition of her contribution to the sport over a number of consecutive years was evident. She recalled how this memento of her schooling affirmed her commitment to the cross-country team. Sally stated “I was always very proud to be a [name of school deleted] girl”. Perhaps of note in these examples, the post-school women cited awards and sporting experiences founded on active participation, commitment and service to various facets of school life over extended periods of time. The findings indicated that these types of awards and experiences may contribute to building self-efficacy and spiritual growth.

5.2.4 Finding 4: Connectedness to others.

This key finding of the study highlights that relationships are paramount in fostering students’ spiritual growth in the Mercy school. All of the post-school women commented in depth about their connectedness to others, especially teachers and fellow students throughout their Mercy schooling. The women articulated how their interpersonal relationships with these two groups of people in particular contributed to their spiritual growth. The perception of relationality with others being an integral component of spirituality and human life is consistent with extant literature (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006). The I-
Other relationship is pivotal in spirituality and this relationship underpins the connectedness of the Self with the Other (Hay & Nye, 2006).

Given the importance the literature attaches to relationships, the post-school women’s comments about their connectedness to others are perhaps unsurprising. Moreover, the women’s comments highlight the importance of connectedness to others in fostering student spiritual growth. The women commented about their connectedness to others in relation to: school culture, teacher-student relationships and curriculum and pedagogy. In spanning all three facets of the study, this finding illustrates how relationships are not only embedded, but integral, across the breadth of Mercy schooling. In particular, the finding highlights the post-school women attributed their connectedness to their teachers as pivotal in shaping their spiritual growth. The women articulated how their connectedness to others was fostered by the following factors: a supportive community of teachers; their connectedness to teachers; teachers as role models; being inspired and motivated by teachers; and lastly, experiencing connectedness to others and God through leadership.

5.2.4.1 Supportive community of teachers.

A supportive community of teachers was identified by the post-school women as being an aspect of school culture they felt fostered their spiritual growth. The women highlighted how their teachers, collectively, created an environment whereby they felt cared for and nurtured through the delivery of teacher pastoral care. In particular, this finding supports the notion that school culture provides a medium through which meaning can be found through relationships, as proposed by Flynn (1993). The teacher-student relationship is evidently an integral component in the provision of an environment or culture in which young people feel supported so they may thrive. Church literature highlights the importance of teachers providing pastoral care to support the holistic growth of every student (CCE, 1988,
This literature reinforces that students need to feel safe, supported and be given opportunities to flourish. The post-school women clearly referred to these three aspects of school culture when articulating how they felt the supportive teacher community influenced their spiritual growth.

The post-school women felt supported not only by individual teachers, but by the community of teachers as a whole. This component of school culture was evidently a mechanism that fostered spiritual growth through the women finding meaning through relationships (Flynn, 1993). Additionally, one of the post-school women reported she felt her teachers held a strong sense of belief in her. She indicated that this belief empowered her to take up opportunities involving responsibility. Literature supports this notion (Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017; Palmer, 2003). For example, Nye (2017) states that trust is essential if students are to be encouraged “to come closer, delve deeper, take risks and pursue passions” (p. 53). A supportive community of teachers, through demonstrating belief in students, is evidently pivotal to students’ spiritual growth.

Another post-school woman articulated that building a student-teacher relationship over consecutive years was beneficial to her spiritual growth, particularly in the way it made her feel safe and supported. This notion was framed in a positive light. Throughout the study, none of the post-school women commented that being taught by the same teacher over consecutive years was negative in nature. Perhaps the post-school women had not experienced any negative teacher-student relationships over consecutive years, or perhaps they did not choose, consciously or not, to mention this occurrence. Regardless, the notion that positive teacher-student relationships over consecutive years may strengthen spiritual growth should be noted as a factor which illustrates the power of this key finding about connectedness to others. Perhaps then, precautions need to be taken to avoid any damaging
effects a negative relationship (Miller, 2006) maintained over multiple years may exert on students, as well as teachers.

5.2.4.2 **Connectedness to teachers.**

Connectedness to teachers was reported by all of the post-school women when describing how they perceived their teachers had influenced them. The women specified four interpersonal skills their teachers used that influenced their spiritual growth. These skills included: the demonstration of care and support for students; the possession of non-authoritative demeanours; the display of openness and trust in students; and, the ability to exercise a positive presence in the school setting.

Six of the post-school women stated that the care and support offered by teachers had positively influenced their spiritual growth. This notion reflects a finding which emerged from an empirical study conducted by Büssing, Föller-Mancini, Gidley, and Heusser (2010). Their study suggested that female students valued conscious relationship interactions and qualities such as compassion and generosity, more so than male students. Although this study focuses solely on female participants, the post-school women’s identification of teacher care and support as a positive influence on their spiritual growth is nevertheless noteworthy.

The importance of teachers being in possession of strong interpersonal skills is supported by multiple scholars (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017; Palmer, 1999). Perhaps further research into the four skills the post-school women specified as influential in their spiritual growth may indicate why the women valued these particular interpersonal skills.
5.2.4.3 **Teacher role models.**

Teacher role models evidently played an integral part in fostering the spiritual growth of the post-school women. The women identified a number of teachers whom they considered important role models. In addition, one of the women identified the founder of the Mercy Sisters, Catherine McAuley, as a role model who had inspired her to reach her potential. Collectively, the post-school women attributed a number of reasons as to why particular teachers were role models to them. These reasons included modelling the way the post-school women wanted to live their own lives, and awakening in them the possibilities life offered them.

Some of the women attributed their teachers’ faith and witness of the Mercy values to be instrumental in them wanting to achieve the same sense of meaning and purpose in life through living a life of faith in action. Church literature asserts that the Christian witness of teachers influences students’ spiritual growth (CCE, 1988; CECWA, 2009; Vatican Council II, 1956b). Teachers who possess strong Catholic identities through imitating Christ in word and action, are integral influences in students’ spiritual growth (Giersch, 2009). This finding seems to reflect the literature in this regard. However, more research may be required to reveal the extent to which student spiritual growth is influenced by the Christian witness of teachers. Similarly, as teacher inconsistency or hypocrisy in living according to Gospel values (CCE, 1988) may conversely erode students’ spiritual growth, further research into the potency of negative teacher role modelling may provide more insight into the influence of teachers on students’ spiritual growth.

Literature suggests that teachers, as well as peers, family and other influences such as the mass media, may exert influence as secondary school students shape their identities (Fowler, 1981; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). As spiritual growth is entwined with identity
formation during the crucial stage of adolescent development (Gottlieb, 2006), this finding suggests teacher role models are a potentially influential force in young people’s lives.

5.2.4.4 Inspirational teachers.

The post-school women described how their teachers provided them with a source of inspiration which fostered their spiritual growth. In articulating their perceptions, the women highlighted how the positivity of their teachers inspired them to maximise their potential in a diverse range of pursuits across the curriculum. Literature (Hackett, 2015; Seligman et al, 2009) promotes the explicit teaching of positive youth formation in schools to help support the wellbeing of young people. In this particular study, the positivity of teachers was noted as a source of inspiration that inspired the post-school women. In turn, this positivity motivated the post-school women to achieve and helped them in solving problems.

The post-school women’s descriptions of how their teachers inspired them also highlighted that their teachers offered them their time and individualised attention. In doing so, this finding reinforces importance of authentic teacher-student relationships whereby teachers form strong interpersonal relationships with their students. As adolescent students require “personal relations with outstanding educators” (CCE, 1997, para. 18) authentic teacher-student relationships are paramount (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2003). Furthermore, literature suggests that curriculum and pedagogy are insufficient in facilitating students’ spiritual growth without strong teacher-student relationships to deliver them (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2003). In this study the post-school women’s connectedness to their teachers facilitated authentic teacher-student relationships. Through offering the post-school women positive experiences, time and individualised attention, their teachers appear to have provided them with a source of inspiration to achieve their potential.
5.2.4.5 **Leadership.**

In reflecting on their schooling, most of the post-school women recalled how leadership experiences connected them with others and/or God, which in turn fostered their spiritual growth. Some of the leadership experiences the women recalled were formal in nature, such as serving as a prefect or student representative councillor. However, some of the leadership experiences the women spoke about were informal leadership opportunities, such as mentoring younger students or performing a particular task for a homeroom or subject class, or a co-curricular activity group within the school. Literature (Hackett & Lavery, 2010, 2011) affirms the importance of providing students with leadership opportunities to foster understanding and empathy while serving others. Collectively, the women in this study noted how formal and informal leadership experiences helped them learn about the perspectives of other people within and outside of their respective school communities. They claimed these experiences fostered their spiritual growth through connecting with others.

Through understanding the perspectives of other people, the women articulated how they felt the depth of their connectedness to these people increased. For example, one of the women stated how she felt that the opportunity to serve on the altar at her school strengthened her connectedness with God. She indicated this opportunity served as a rite of passage for her in terms of it being a spiritually powerful experience. There are indications that this study demonstrates that the provision of formal and informal leadership experiences enriched the spiritual growth of the participants. It is therefore perhaps apt to consider the effects of different types of experiences involving leadership. As mentioned in Section 5.2.3.2, for example, failure in obtaining formal leadership roles in the school setting resulted in some of the post-school women experiencing disappointment. Yet paradoxically, this
disappointment led to building self-efficacy. More research in this area may uncover how different experiences involving leadership influence the spiritual growth of young people.

5.2.5 Finding 5: Sense of hope.

The post-school women conveyed a sense of hope through articulating experiences pertaining to service, leadership, immersion programs and in a broad sense, the collective experiences of their schooling. Their comments demonstrated that as they faced challenges presented to them through these experiences, they felt a sense of hope. Although some of the post-school women reported feeling negative emotions when facing challenges or being immersed in unfamiliar environments while serving others, they further reported that they were grateful for the experiences they had been given. Although they may have experienced negative emotions such as sadness, the opportunity to learn valuable life lessons and to give back through service resulted in their spiritual growth. They experienced a sense of hope through making a positive difference to others and/or the environment.

5.2.5.1 Giving back through service.

Young people who participate in service experiences may benefit in multiple ways (Hackett, 2015; Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Lovat, Toomey, Clement, Crotty, & Nielsen, 2009). The post-school women in this study reported feeling buoyed through making contributions to others and they reflected that learning the value of service and the capacity to make a difference to others and/or the environment positively influenced their spiritual growth in various ways. In particular, the women reported feeling a sense of accomplishment in giving back to various causes or groups of people, which in turn resulted in a sense of hope for the future.

Giving back through service reflects the importance of relationality in spiritual growth. Scholars (Coles, 1990; de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006, Hyde, 2008; Robinson,
1977/1996) assert the universal influence of relationality on spirituality. Not only did the post-school women’s service experiences provide them with an awareness of their capacity to help others, their experiences also shaped their sense of self. In explicating this notion, the post-school women’s comments highlight the potency of giving back, through service, on their spiritual growth. While reflecting, they articulated how their service experiences throughout their Mercy schooling affected their inner selves. Their service experiences seemed to provide them with opportunities to foster their connectedness and relationality with the self. Some of their comments also reflected how service strengthened their relationality with others, the wider world and with God in various ways. In this sense, this study supports the literature in affirming that service experiences, including leadership, are fostered through relationality (Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Hine, 2013; Kim & Esquivel, 2011). These experiences provide students with an avenue to spiritual growth.

Given the post-school women indicated they felt a sense of hope through giving back through service, more research in this area may provide insight as to the significance of this notion. For example, to what extent is feeling a sense of hope while giving back through service necessary in order that student spiritual growth occurs?

5.2.5.2 Life lessons.

It was apparent the post-school women gained a sense of hope through learning valuable life lessons through opportunities presented to them throughout their Mercy schooling. They claimed that their spiritual growth was fostered through gaining life lessons through the collective experiences their schooling provided. These experiences included immersion opportunities and co-curricular programs in addition to academic programs. Leadership opportunities were also mentioned, including the life lessons gained through failure to obtain a formal leadership position. In particular, the women spoke of gaining these
life lessons through the holistic nature of the curriculum. It is clear that the holistic education of the whole child across the curriculum proposed by the Catholic Church (CCE, 1977, 1997) benefits students’ spiritual growth.

Furthermore, in reporting the need to problem solve to overcome challenges, the post-school women demonstrated how critical and creative thinking was a valuable life lesson, or skill. In some instances, the post-school women appeared aware that they were explicitly taught critical and creative thinking skills, while in other instances they reported developing these skills through experience in solving a particular problem. In each instance, it was clear that the women assumed the responsibility of problem-solving, rather than relying on teachers to solve problems for them. The critically engaging and inquiring nature of the programs and activities they discussed perhaps indicates that such learning provided them with opportunities to think creatively in solving problems. Many scholars support the use of such critically engaging or experiential learning in the school setting (D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Lovat et al., 2009; Rossiter, 2018; Seligman et al., 2009; Wright, 2000). The experiences through which the post-school women gained life lessons indicates the apparent strength of this pedagogical style in fostering students’ spiritual growth.

5.2.6 Finding 6: Shared belief.

In articulating their Mercy schooling experiences, the post-school women indicated that belonging to a community with a shared belief had fostered their spiritual growth. The women’s comments indicated that their spiritual growth occurred through two aspects of the culture of the schools they attended: the religious culture; and, the Mercy values and ethos. In addition, they expressed that the Catholic curriculum of their respective schools had shaped their spiritual growth. The women highlighted that these three aspects of their education had
facilitated a connectedness with God, and they felt this shared belief in God had fuelled their spiritual growth.

5.2.6.1 Religious culture.

The post-school women claimed the religiosity and various aspects of the environment of the Mercy schools in which they were educated shaped their spiritual growth. The women commented that in particular, studying the subject of Religious Education, and the way in which it was taught, fostered their spiritual growth. The women’s comments indicated that they found the subject interesting and age appropriate. One of the women commented that she valued the inclusive manner in which Religious Education was taught to her peer group, whom she thought was diverse with regard to their Mass attendance and adhering to other religious rituals and practices. In this way, the Religious Education teacher and the pedagogy he or she employs is perhaps influential regarding students’ spiritual growth. The Catholic Church has consistently and repeatedly emphasised the pivotal role of the Catholic school teacher in exercising interpersonal relationships and behaviour modelled on Christ (CCE, 1977, 1988, 1997). This finding appears to reinforce the role of the teacher, in particular the Religious Education teacher, as being crucial in the provision of an inclusive environment offering students a shared belief system whereby their spiritual growth is supported and fostered.

According to literature, students should be immersed in the Catholic elements of school life, “such as opportunities for prayer, liturgy and worship” (Hyde, 2013, p. 43). Other extant scholarly and Church literature also suggest that school religiosity and culture influence students’ spiritual growth (Barrett, Pearson, Muller, & Frank, 2007; CCE, 1977, 1982, 1988, 1997; D’Orsa & D’Orsa, 2012; Hyde, 2013). Another aspect of religiosity was
raised when one woman expressed how it was an expectation throughout her Mercy schooling that students attended school Masses, liturgies and actively participated in prayer.

Furthermore, this same woman suggested that the opportunity to actively participate in the faith life of the school through training to be a Special Minister of the Eucharist was a significant spiritual experience for her. This encouragement to participate in a faith element of the school evidently encultured her into a community of shared belief. The woman indicated that this shared belief contributed to building a sense of community. It is apparent that immersion and encouragement to be involved in the faith life of a school potentially offers students the opportunity to be a part of a community of shared belief, that in turn contributes to their spiritual growth.

Similarly, one of the post-school women expressed how the religious foundation and identity of her Mercy schooling provided students with a safe place in which to grow spiritually. She articulated how students felt safe and open to express their opinions regarding religion. The possession of a shared belief by the school community evidently supported the spiritual growth of students. The perceptions of the post-school women of the three Western Australian secondary Mercy schools suggests that the way the schools foster a culture of shared belief fuels students’ spiritual growth.

5.2.6.2 Mercy values and ethos.

The Mercy values and ethos underpinning the education at the three Western Australian Mercy schools involved in the study appeared to denote a specific aspect of the religious culture of the schools that the post-school women deemed important to their spiritual growth. The post-school women spoke at length, and in detail, about the influence of the Mercy values and ethos on them. The ethos and values embedded in the Mercy foundation of the schools seems to have contributed to the shared belief system of the post-
school women. They were able to clearly articulate how the ethos and values infused their education in varied ways across the curriculum, although one of the women did state that she felt some of her peers may not have been able to fully appreciate how the Mercy values were relatable to everyday life. Collectively, however, the Mercy values and ethos were qualities of the Mercy schooling that clearly resonated with the women even though they had each left the environs of their schooling. In particular, the women highlighted how the Mercy value of service, and the notion of servant leadership, had a profound and lasting impact on them.

5.2.6.3 Catholic curriculum.

The Catholic curriculum emerged as a strong theme that the post-school women spoke about in relation to their spiritual growth. Their comments indicated the Catholic curriculum in which they were immersed throughout their Mercy schooling fostered feelings of cohesion and community that underpinned their shared belief in God. The women expressed a variety of ways the Catholic curriculum had supported them in learning how to apply their faith to their everyday lives, and in doing so, had enriched their connectedness with God. Some of the women commented that the subject of Religious Education was a source of spiritual growth. Further, the women also considered multiple other aspects of the Catholic curriculum as being integral to their spiritual growth, perhaps indicating the schools’ delivery of the Catholic ethos across the depth and breadth of the curriculum.

Collectively, the key finding of ‘Shared belief’ suggests that the Mercy secondary schooling in Western Australia offered to the post-school women in the study exemplifies a community of shared belief comprised of a strong religious culture, Mercy values and ethos, and a Catholic curriculum. Upon reflection the post-school women perceived that these aspects of their education contributed to their spiritual growth. Scholarly and Church literature affirms the importance of providing students with a religious school culture infused

This key finding suggests that the synthesis of religious culture, Mercy values and a Catholic curriculum forms a unique environment in which a shared belief in God, while being in community with others, fosters spiritual growth. This finding highlights the importance of connectedness with others as being an integral component of spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2016; Hart, 2003; Hay, 2006; Hay & Nye, 2006). In particular, some scholars assert the primary importance of relationships and connectedness to the spirituality of young people (de Souza, 2016; Harris & Moran, 1998; Hay & Nye, 2006; Kessler, 2000; Nye, 2017). This key finding highlights that not only sharing the same belief but also being in community with others who share this belief throughout their secondary schooling, fostered the spiritual growth of the post-school women. This finding may perhaps add to the literature in this field.

5.3 Key Theory Generated

Theory was generated from each of the six key findings of the study. This theory is summarised in table form (Table 5.2).

Table 5.2
*Theory Generated from Key Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Finding</th>
<th>Theory Generated from Post-school Women’s Perceptions of the Influence of their Mercy Schooling Experiences on their Spiritual Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging and place</td>
<td>• A sense of belonging to a place was underpinned by connectedness with the physical landscape or buildings or an aspect of nature wherein Mercy schooling experiences occurred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A sense of place was also experienced within particular communities within Mercy schools, which in turn fostered spiritual growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Experiencing a sense of place in the physical environment, while concurrently in companionship or community with others throughout the Mercy secondary school journey, generated a feeling of belonging which fostered spiritual growth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fond memories
- The creation of fond memories throughout Mercy schooling experiences contributed to spiritual growth. Relationality and connectedness to others and/or place lay at the core of these fond memories.
- The overlapping of themes embedded in fond memories, such as relationality, sense of place, belonging and opportunity, illustrates the multi-faceted nature of spiritual growth.
- The provision of varied opportunities, particularly whereby students experienced a sense of belonging and were actively encouraged to participate in the life of a Mercy school, fostered spiritual growth.
- Collectively, the opportunities taken up by students throughout their Mercy schooling aided their spiritual growth.

Building self-efficacy
- Learning about perseverance, through various Mercy schooling experiences, built self-efficacy which in turn fostered spiritual growth.
- Opportunities for self-reflection and awareness embedded in a Mercy education were deemed influential to building self-efficacy, and in turn, spiritual growth.
- In particular, opportunities for self-reflection and awareness regarding failure, disappointment and/or negative experiences built self-efficacy and subsequently fostered spiritual growth.
- Affirmation from others and/or a sense of pride in achievement throughout Mercy schooling experiences fuelled self-efficacy and spiritual growth.

Connectedness to others
- A supportive community of teachers was an aspect of Mercy school culture which fostered spiritual growth.
- Experiencing positive teacher-student relationships over consecutive years strengthened connectedness to teachers and fostered spiritual growth.
- Connectedness to teachers in Mercy schools was heightened through teachers who exhibited interpersonal skills, such as a non-authoritative demeanour, an openness and trust in students, and a positive presence in the Mercy school setting. These factors contributed to a sense of connectedness to teachers, which fostered spiritual growth.
- Positive role models, such as teachers and Sisters of Mercy who gave witness to their faith, particularly the Mercy values, were deemed influential to spiritual growth.
- Inspirational teachers and participation in leadership opportunities throughout Mercy schooling experiences also fostered spiritual growth.
| Sense of hope | Giving back through Mercy schooling service experiences aided a sense of accomplishment in helping others and/or the environment. This service evoked a sense of hope and strengthened spiritual growth. |
| Life lessons were gained through collective Mercy schooling experiences, furnishing a sense of hope which enriched spiritual growth. |
| These collective Mercy schooling experiences included a holistic and critically engaging curriculum which fostered skills such as creative thinking and problem-solving. |

| Shared belief | Being in companionship or community with others who shared the same belief fostered spiritual growth. |
| The religious culture, including the subject of Religious Education and multiple other opportunities to freely and safely participate in the faith life of the Mercy schools, fostered a sense of shared belief, which in turn influenced spiritual growth. |
| The Mercy values and ethos embedded in the Mercy foundation of the schools contributed to a strong connectedness to a shared belief system. |
| The Mercy value of service and the notion of servant leadership contributed to spiritual growth. |
| The Catholic curriculum underpinning Mercy education contributed to a sense of cohesion and community that underpinned a shared belief in God. |
| The Mercy schools’ delivery of the Catholic ethos across the depth and breadth of the curriculum contributed to a sense of belonging to a shared belief. |

### 5.4 Summary of Findings

The six key findings, which emerged from the data, were presented and discussed throughout this chapter. The study participants perceived the following aspects of their Mercy secondary schooling experiences influenced their spiritual growth:

- a sense of belonging and place;
- fond memories;
- building self-efficacy;
• connectedness to others;

• a sense of hope; and,

• shared belief.

These key findings, and their relationship to the research questions and the subordinate findings is illustrated in Figure 5-2 on the following page. The research questions which emerged from the literature are shown in the roots of the tree. Each individual tree root signifies a super-ordinate theme which emerged from the data. These aspects contribute to student spiritual growth, which is signified by the branches of the tree. The branches represent the assignation of the super-ordinate themes into clusters, through axial coding, to form the key findings. Each branch culminates in the leaf canopy of the tree, signifying the key findings. The graphic represents the post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of their Mercy schooling experiences on their spiritual growth.
5.5 Reflexive Statement

In employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), reflexive statements are included throughout the study as a means of overtly acknowledging the researcher’s role in the research process. The purpose of this reflexive statement is to situate the reader in the context of the study and to discuss the researcher’s critical reflection of the findings discussed in this chapter. The researcher journal was crucial in this particular chapter. The researcher
was able to consult the journal and reflect upon previous entries, while also noting thoughts, reflections and insights gained throughout the analysis of the findings and during the composition of this particular chapter where the findings were discussed in depth.

Firstly, the researcher acknowledges her years of service in Catholic education may have resulted in her taking for granted the potency of the Catholic curriculum in influencing students’ spiritual growth. The study revealed the Catholic curriculum fostered feelings of cohesion and community that underpinned a shared belief in God, especially when experienced in communion with others. To an extent, the Catholic curriculum is hidden given the subtlety with which it is entwined holistically across the scope of the curriculum. Based on her initial assumptions, the researcher may have downplayed this influence. However, employing IPA, and specifically the process of bracketing and epoche, ensured the post-school women’s perceptions were authentically ‘heard’. The process of epoche throughout the employment of IPA resulted in the perceptions of the post-school women participants being honoured, and the Catholic curriculum emerged as a powerful factor influencing the spiritual growth of the women.

Similarly, the researcher acknowledges that her years of teaching experience in a Mercy school may have had an impact on her own perceptions of the influence of Mercy schooling on students’ spiritual growth. As a teacher in a Mercy school, she held her own assumptions and opinions as to the various elements and aspects of Mercy schooling that she believed were effective, and conversely ineffective, in fostering students’ spiritual growth. Again, the rigorous employment of IPA, specifically bracketing, epoche and member-checking, were fundamental in ensuring the researcher did not allow her assumptions and opinions to erode the authenticity of the data collected from the post-school women. The focus of honouring the perceptions of the post-school women participants was paramount and enhanced trustworthiness of the data.
The researcher also acknowledges how her teaching experience in a Mercy school was perhaps beneficial in providing her with knowledge and operational insight as to how the Mercy heritage and culture is infused across the curriculum. When the post-school women spoke of their schooling experiences in this regard, the researcher’s experience perhaps heightened her awareness and provided her with a depth of understanding beneficial in the interpretative process. In this way the researcher may have been able to interpret the participants’ comments with a degree of clarity and precision which may not have been possible had she not been immersed in a Mercy school for a length of time.

5.6 Chapter Summary

In addressing the overarching research question, the post-school women perceived the following factors influenced their spiritual growth: a sense of belonging and place; fond memories; building self-efficacy; connectedness to others; a sense of hope; and, shared belief. These key findings emerged from 17 super-ordinate themes, which stemmed from the three subsidiary research questions. The subsidiary questions focused on the influence of school culture, teacher-student relationships and curriculum and pedagogy on spiritual growth, respectively.

The chapter opened by considering the perceptions of the post-school women regarding their definitions of the term ‘spiritual growth’. Clarification of this term was deemed important given that spiritual growth is a key term in the study. It was found that the post-school women’s definitions of the term were similar to the definition framing the study. Most of the participants suggested that spiritual growth was a personal journey, entwined with religion and associated with an awareness and connectedness. Most of the post-school women expressed their understanding of spiritual growth as being clearly tethered to religion, rather than a secular understanding of the term. Further consideration of their perceptions
suggested this understanding of spiritual growth was perhaps due to the religiosity of their schooling experiences, including the influence of the religious foundation of Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth.

There are several insights gained from this study that illustrate the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. The six key findings reinforce extant literature in the field. However, these key findings also offer slight digressions and additions to existing scholarly discussion about students’ spiritual growth in education. In particular, the study offers foundational literature specifically pertaining to the influence of Mercy schooling on student spiritual growth in a Western Australian Mercy girls’ secondary school context.

The key finding of ‘Belonging and place’ highlighted the importance the post-school women in this study attributed to a sense of place, and a sense of belonging and community they experienced throughout their schooling. The women provided some detailed examples of how they were influenced by place spirituality (Counted & Zock, 2019) especially in relation to being in the outdoors in nature, as well as in particular buildings they considered significant in a spiritual sense. Furthermore, their comments suggested that experiencing a sense of place, when in communion with others, was a potentially powerful spiritual experience. Due to the apparent paucity of literature on spiritual growth in relation to a sense of place, this finding may contribute to literature in the field.

‘Fond memories’ were also deemed a key finding of the study. Relationality and connectedness to others and/or place were elements at the core of the post-school women’s Mercy school memories. Collectively, the provision of opportunities across the curriculum also helped to foster the spiritual growth of the post-school women. They highlighted that their participation in multiple opportunities they were afforded throughout their Mercy
schooling supported their spiritual growth. Their comments suggested that these benefits may not have been gained had they not actively and wholeheartedly participated in the life of the school.

The key finding of ‘Building self-efficacy’ illustrated how learning about perseverance and being in a safe environment contributed to building self-efficacy. Self-reflection and awareness, and being affirmed by others, such as teachers, also contributed to building a strong sense of self. This finding affirmed the aforementioned key finding of ‘Belonging and place’ through the post-school women experiencing a sense of place, in relation to the place or environment where self-reflection and awareness occurred. The finding illustrated, that the opportunities for self-reflection and awareness embedded in the Mercy education the post-school women had received, helped them to look beyond themselves to the other. The provision of such opportunities is evidently important.

It is noteworthy that some of the women indicated they had experienced failure, disappointment or negative experiences which resulted in them building self-efficacy, and subsequently, their spiritual growth was fostered. Although these types of experiences may have potentially caused spiritual erosion, they evidently provided the participants with opportunities to build self-efficacy and experience spiritual growth. This finding highlighted that building self-efficacy potentially fuels spiritual growth, revealing an interrelationship between the two concepts. Although the protective qualities of spiritual growth guard young people from losing self-efficacy through potentially erosive negative behaviours or experiences (Brooks et al., 2018; Eaude, 2009; Hackett, 2015), it would appear that in some instances the experience of failure, disappointment or negative experiences may conversely strengthen self-efficacy and fuel spiritual growth.
‘Connectedness to others’ was another key finding underpinned by human relationships in the secondary school setting. This finding supported the literature about the importance of relationality in spiritual growth. The post-school women deemed their relationality with individual teachers, as well as communities of teachers, as integral to their spiritual growth. In the context of Mercy schooling, four interpersonal skills of teachers were specified as being influential to students’ spiritual growth. The post-school women also articulated that informal and formal opportunities for leadership contributed to their spiritual growth.

The post-school women’s perceptions of their schooling also revealed how the possession of a ‘Sense of hope’ influenced their spiritual growth. They perceived that their experiences of giving back to various communities through service, as well as through realising life lessons throughout their Mercy schooling, fostered their spiritual growth. While this finding affirmed the literature with regards to the benefits to young people of service activities and programs (Hackett & Lavery, 2011; Hackett, 2015; Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Lovat et al., 2009), there is perhaps scope to conduct more research regarding the implications of feeling a sense of accomplishment that the women identified as a by-product of service. With regards to learning life lessons, critically engaging and experiential learning was identified by the post-school women as a powerful means of fostering spiritual growth. Pedagogies characterised by these features are perhaps pertinent mediums in facilitating students’ spiritual growth.

‘Shared belief’ was a key finding firmly embedded throughout the Mercy schooling experiences of the post-school women. The religious culture, Mercy values and ethos, and the Catholic curriculum of the Mercy schooling experiences of the post-school women were viewed by them as a potent source of spiritual growth. Perhaps of note, this finding
highlighted, again, the importance the post-school women attributed to connectedness with others, and specifically being in community with others who share the same belief.

In conclusion, this chapter applied a critical lens to discuss the findings from the research investigation. In doing so, extant literature was revisited and considered in light of the findings. Collectively, the six key findings of this study explicitly addressed the overarching research question by directly reporting the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth. The following chapter, Chapter 6, presents the implications and recommendations arising from the key findings of the study.
Chapter 6

Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This final chapter synthesises the important elements of the study. The chapter opens with a review of the purpose of the study. The chapter then reviews the design of the research through consideration of the following elements: the paradigm framing the investigation; the methodology employed; and, the data collection and analysis methods. Following this review, the research questions are addressed and a summary of the key findings is presented. The implications of these findings are then discussed in relation to the following three areas: theory and further research; methodology; and, policy.

From the insights gained from the study, four recommendations are made with a view to improving current educational practices in Mercy schooling and possibly the wider educative community. The strengths and limitations of the study are then acknowledged and reviewed. The researcher concludes with a reflexive statement. In this reflexive statement she shares her thoughts and feelings on the topic studied: the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. Finally, some closing remarks are made about the study.

Table 6.1

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6.2 Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research was to explore the research question of how, explicitly, student spiritual growth occurs in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in Western Australia. The researcher explored the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. This research topic underpinned the overarching research question of the investigation.

**Overarching research question:**

What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?

This question was divided into three subsidiary questions, which emerged from the review of literature about spiritual growth. These questions explored the influence of: school culture; teacher-student relationships; and, curriculum and pedagogy, on spiritual growth.

**Subsidiary research questions:**

1. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on their spiritual growth?
2. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on their spiritual growth?

3. What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on their spiritual growth?

6.3 Research Design

The research investigation yielded insights into the perceptions of a small sample of nine post-school women about the influence of their Mercy schooling experiences on their spiritual growth. These women had each attended the three Mercy schools in Western Australian (WA). Specifically, three post-school women from each of the three WA Mercy schools participated in the study. The insights gained from the study responded to the three subsidiary research questions which framed the qualitative study. Unveiling and exploring the post-school women’s perceptions on the topic was central to the research design. A qualitative approach to this design was adopted as it was deemed well suited to the exploratory and experiential nature of the research questions (Sarantakos, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A subjectivist ontology, an epistemology of constructivism and an interpretivist paradigm were chosen because these theoretical components were also considered apt in upholding the qualitative nature of the investigation (Sarantakos, 2013).

In particular, the selection of the specific phenomenological approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed an appropriate choice of methodology given the exploratory and experiential nature of the investigation (Sarantakos, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). As outlined in Chapter 3, the nature of the IPA process was iterative and inductive (Smith et al., 2009). Following this process meant that the researcher set out on the research journey without certainty as to whereabouts it would lead her. In this sense, the IPA process was open-ended and complex (Smith et al., 2009).
Utilising one-to-one interviews as the chosen research method aided the collection of rich data in response to the research questions. As IPA focuses on exploring the lived experiences of participants (Smith et al., 2009), semi-structured interviews were an apt method of data collection. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for interview schedules with open-ended questions to guide the conversations. The interview process allowed the researcher to focus on capturing the voices of the participants speaking about their lived experiences. Following this structure prioritised the post-school women participants’ comments and allowed them freedom in exploring the open-ended questions in depth, rather than being possibly restricted by adhering to a more rigid interview structure.

To help facilitate the interview process, participants were invited to bring along mementos of their Mercy secondary schooling experiences. Some of these mementos included letters, pieces of project work, awards, leadership badges and various school uniform items. The discussion generated from the mementos demonstrated their usefulness in triggering specific memories of school. They were useful stimuli for the recollection of rich experiential, idiographic data and in doing so they reflected these key characteristics of IPA.

As IPA is characteristically inductive, interrogative and idiographic (Smith et al., 2009), the participants’ life experiences are open to the interpretation of not only the researcher, but all who read this study. To facilitate this process, the researcher consciously chose to allow the participants to speak for themselves by including frequent and direct participant quotations so that the voices of the post-school women study participants may be fully ‘heard’ by readers. In this way, readers are able to make sense of the participants’ making sense of their world, rather than the researcher potentially influencing readers’ interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, the use of a researcher journal throughout the duration of the study enabled the process of epoche, including bracketing, so the researcher was able to focus specifically on the voice of participants, rather than being
distracted by her preconceived thoughts or assumptions. The overt role of the researcher in the research process was acknowledged through the use of epoche in IPA.

6.4 Research Questions Addressed

Each of the three subsidiary research questions was addressed throughout the study. A summary of the findings pertaining to each question is included in this section. A short statement is then made regarding the link between the overarching research question and the key findings of the study, which are then outlined in the following section.

6.4.1 Subsidiary Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of school culture on spiritual growth?

The findings revealed the culture of the three Mercy schools in the study was shaped by four elements in particular:

- a sense of place;
- a supportive community of teachers;
- a religious culture; and,
- the Mercy values and ethos.

All post-school women involved in the study reported that feeling a sense of place, such as an attachment to a particular environment and/or community, throughout their Mercy schooling contributed to their spiritual growth. Given that there appears to be a paucity of literature about the interrelationship between sense of place and spirituality (Counted & Zock, 2019; Perriam, 2015), it is perhaps significant that this particular finding contributes to theory generated in response to Subsidiary Research Question 1.

A supportive community of teachers was also viewed by the study’s post-school women participants as being a crucial component of school culture which contributed to their
spiritual growth. The post-school women spoke of the influence that their teachers collectively provided to support students. A supportive community of teachers emerged as a pertinent cultural aspect of the Mercy schools. The women also commented that specific teachers influenced their spiritual growth; however, this particular idea is covered in response to Subsidiary Research Question 2 in the following section.

Finally, the religious culture of the Mercy schools experienced by the study participants was an aspect of school culture they deemed influential to their spiritual growth. In particular, the post-school women’s comments about the impact of the Mercy values and ethos on their spiritual growth highlighted the potency of this cultural influence operating within the schools. The Mercy values and ethos of the schools clearly and positively shaped their culture, and as such, is perhaps a distinctive feature of the education offered in a Mercy Education Limited (MEL) school.

6.4.2 Subsidiary Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of teacher-student relationships on spiritual growth?

The findings revealed teacher-student relationships were influential to spiritual growth in three main ways:

- connectedness to teachers;
- teacher role models; and,
- inspirational teachers.

Significantly, all of the post-school women reported that they felt the connectedness they experienced to their teachers had influenced their spiritual growth. The women highlighted four interpersonal qualities of teachers that they felt were effective in forging connectedness with students. These interpersonal qualities included: visible demonstration of
care and support for students; possession of a non-authoritative demeanour; display of openness and trust in students; and, manifestation of a positive presence in the school setting.

Similarly, the post-school women’s perceptions of the influence of teachers on their spiritual growth indicated that they viewed some of their teachers as role models who were instrumental to their spiritual growth. In particular, teachers who gave witness to their faith through actively living out the Mercy values, and who had awakened in the women the possibilities life offered them, were significant role models to the women. The founder of the Mercy Sisters, the Venerable Catherine McAuley, was also referred to as a significant role model.

Finally, connectedness to teachers was forged through various teachers providing the post-school women with inspiration throughout their secondary school journeys. This inspiration was founded on the positivity of teachers who also gave their students significant time and individualised attention.

6.4.3 Subsidiary Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of curriculum and pedagogy on spiritual growth?

The findings revealed multiple aspects of curriculum and pedagogy influenced the spiritual growth of the post-school women throughout their Mercy secondary schooling. These aspects were embedded in a diverse range of curriculum and pedagogical activities across the curriculum, including activities and programs in and beyond the academic subjects taught in the classroom, such as: co-curricular activities; service-learning programs; leadership opportunities; camps; retreats; and, reflection day programs. The curriculum and pedagogy were characterised by:

- a sense of belonging and community;
- the creation of fond memories;
• opportunities;
• self-efficacy;
• self-reflection and awareness;
• affirmation;
• leadership;
• giving back through service;
• life lessons; and,
• the Catholic curriculum.

The post-school women articulated that aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy they experienced in their Mercy schooling gave them feelings of belonging and community which influenced their spiritual growth. The women expressed how they felt cohesion and unity with others when participating in a variety of structured and unstructured educational experiences. They also felt a sense of belonging and community through their interactions with various Sisters of Mercy throughout their schooling experiences. The women’s comments reflected how their schooling had taught them the importance of focusing on others, rather than themselves, through being connected with others in the various activities in which they participated.

The Mercy schools’ curricula and pedagogical experiences also provided the post-school women with fond memories that resulted in spiritual growth, largely through the way these memories forged strong connectedness to others and/or places. The post-school women’s participation in collective opportunities across the curriculum gave them multiple benefits, such as a sense of fun, belonging and reward. These collective opportunities were
the foundation of the fond memories the post-school women recalled as being significant to their spiritual growth.

The women also perceived that the Mercy schools’ curricula and pedagogies contributed to spiritual growth through building their self-efficacy. They explained how experiences embedded in the curriculum for self-reflection and awareness contributed to their spiritual growth. So too, the notion of feeling affirmed and developing a sense of pride in their achievements fostered their spiritual growth. Similarly, being involved in formal and informal leadership roles while at school helped the post-school women build a strong sense of self. They reported that leadership had helped them learn about the perspectives of others. They perceived that collectively, leadership had influenced their spiritual growth through providing them with feelings of deep connectedness to others.

Experiencing opportunities to gain life lessons and to give back through service to others and/or the environment were also noted by the post-school women as being influential to their spiritual growth. Giving back through service appeared to aid learning about the capacity to make a positive difference in the lives of other people and environmental causes, while affirming the importance of relationality with others and oneself. Life lessons derived through collective experiences highlighted the holistic nature of Mercy schooling, in addition to learning skills such as problem-solving and creative thinking through critically engaging pedagogical approaches or experiential teaching and learning.

Finally, the Catholic curriculum across the Mercy schools’ curricula and pedagogies was perceived by the post-school women as influential to their spiritual growth. The Catholic curriculum, underpinned by the Church’s mission of evangelisation, fostered feelings of cohesion and community that generated a shared belief in God. For some of the women the subject of Religious Education, and the way it was taught, was a source of spiritual growth.
Other women commented on experiences from across the breadth and depth of the Catholic curriculum including: attending Mass and being in the school chapel; learning to live like Christ; and, participating in co-curricular activities, such as music programs.

6.4.4 Overarching Research Question: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth?

To address the overarching research question, the themes which emerged from the subsidiary research questions were analysed through the iterative process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and classified into six key findings. The key findings directly address the overarching research question as they illustrate the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth. These key findings and the theory generated from them are discussed in the following section.

6.5 Key Findings

The six key findings, which emerged from the data, were presented and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. As these findings reflect the study participants’ perceptions about the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experience on their spiritual growth, they directly address the overarching research question. The post-school women study participants perceived the following aspects of their Mercy secondary schooling experiences influenced their spiritual growth:

- a sense of belonging and place;
- fond memories;
- building self-efficacy;
- connectedness to others;
• a sense of hope derived from giving back through service and gaining life lessons; and,
• shared belief.

The implications pertaining to the study and these findings will now be examined.

6.6 Implications

Several implications emerged as a result of this study into the perceptions of post-
school women of the influence of their Mercy secondary schooling experiences on their
spiritual growth. These implications became apparent through the generation of theory in
relation to the key findings, which was discussed in Chapter 5. The key findings emanated
from the research questions framing the study. The implications related to the findings will be
discussed in this section. The implications pertain to the following areas: theory and further
research; methodology; and, policy.

6.6.1 Implications for theory and further research.

Extant literature was reviewed in Chapter 5 and the discussion of this literature
ascertained new insights gained as a result of this study. This theory was generated from the
key findings of the study, as outlined in Section 6.5. The implications for this theory will be
discussed in this section as new insights are examined in response to the key findings. The
key findings of this study may yield implications for future theory on spiritual growth,
particularly in the field of secondary schooling. The evolution of future theoretical works
may be supported by the theory generated in this study.

In a general sense, this study has contributed to the body of research on spiritual
growth, and more specifically on student spiritual growth in the secondary years of education.
This study has contributed to existing empirical studies by revealing that spirituality is
fostered through multiple ways, such as a sense of belonging and connectedness to others (de
Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). The findings of this study reinforce extant literature in the field, while concurrently explicating new knowledge.

Specifically, this research study has contributed new knowledge regarding the influence of Mercy girls’ secondary schooling experiences on spiritual growth. Key insights that emerged from the study reveal that experiencing a sense of belonging contributes to spiritual growth. In particular, connectedness to a place, or a sense of place within a particular community, fosters spiritual growth. Furthermore, this sense of belonging and place emanating from Mercy secondary schooling was experienced when in community with others. This notion was also articulated with reference to the possession of a shared belief. Being in companionship or community with others throughout Mercy secondary schooling is pertinent to student spiritual growth.

The theory generated from the study pertained to experiencing a sense of place when in community with others. As indicated, the post-school women did not articulate experiencing a sense of place in situations where they were physically alone, perhaps because they were not afforded these opportunities due to the social nature of schooling. The theory generated in the study suggests being in communion with others when experiencing a sense of place propels spiritual growth. Further comparative research to ascertain the influence of experiencing a sense of place on spiritual growth, without being in communion with others, may provide further insight. For example, spiritual practices in the contemplative tradition of the Church, such as those practised in the monastic Order of Saint Benedict, may offer insight into how spiritual growth may be fostered in isolation. These practices may evoke prayerful contemplation or aesthetic experiences that promote transcendence in solitude. Regardless, the findings from this study suggest that connectedness to others is integral to spiritual growth in multiple ways. This notion was central to the creation of fond Mercy schooling memories.
The study indicated that the formation of fond memories throughout secondary schooling experiences was underpinned by connectedness to others and/or place. A further insight arising from the perceptions of post-school women about their fond schooling memories reinforces the multi-faceted nature of spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2017). The post-school women’s fond memories stemmed from a variety of overlapping themes: relationality; sense of place; belonging; and, opportunity. The way these themes overlap reflects the multi-faceted nature of spiritual growth.

The theory generated from the key findings also established that building self-efficacy, which was achieved through self-reflection and awareness, being affirmed, and learning about perseverance, contributed to spiritual growth. Some extant literature states that spirituality fosters wellbeing through building self-efficacy (Eaude, 2009). The results of this study indicate that this relationship is perhaps reciprocal, as Mercy schooling experiences were shown to build self-efficacy, which led to spiritual growth. Further study in this area may investigate this notion in greater depth.

In a general sense, the key finding of connectedness to others reinforces extant literature about the importance of connectedness to others in fostering spirituality (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). However, several ideas related to connectedness emerged from the study which may contribute to the evolution of further theoretical works. For example, the support of not just one or two teachers, but a community of teachers, was cited as an aspect of Mercy schooling which supported spiritual growth. Teachers who gave witness to their faith, particularly the Mercy values, and Sisters of Mercy, were deemed influential to fostering spiritual growth. The prominence of the Mercy values within Mercy schooling appeared to be a significant factor underpinning spiritual growth, and the references made to these values in relation to connectedness with others is an area worthy of further research.
Similarly, the collective Mercy schooling experience which provided a sense of hope may also contribute to the evolution of future theoretical works. It is perhaps noteworthy that the post-school women cited that it was the ‘collective’ experience of their schooling, in particular, which fostered their spiritual growth. The post-school women referred to this collective experience as providing them with a sense of hope through various means, such as: giving back through service; gaining various life lessons; experiencing a sense of accomplishment; and, learning creative thinking and problem-solving skills through a holistic and critically engaging curriculum. Further exploration of experiencing a sense of hope through schooling and its impact on spiritual growth may uncover the degree of potency of this type of collective experience.

The post-school women expressed how being in community with others who shared the same belief fostered their spiritual growth. This theory offers the potential for future theoretical work in the field of spiritual growth in relation to secondary schooling. In particular, the influence of the Mercy values stemming from the Mercy ethos is perhaps worthy of future research because it was a key finding of shared belief. The distinctive nature of the Mercy ethos and values is an aspect of the theory about shared belief which may shape future theoretical works.

This study also offered implications for future theory regarding spiritual growth. The definition of spiritual growth in the context of this study presented spiritual growth as possibly being distinct from a religious foundation, despite the religious context of the three Mercy schools being Catholic. Paradoxically, most of the post-school women interviewed in the study expressed spiritual growth as being clearly tethered to religion, possibly due to the religiosity of their school experiences. Theory generated from this study may assist the evolution of future theoretical works that premise spiritual growth as an innate capacity from which religious understandings may grow, particularly when exposed to a religious
environment. Theory generated from this study may also provide insight regarding the influence of music and the creative arts in stimulating spiritual growth.

6.6.2 Implications for methodology.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed as the primary data analysis method of this study. As such, this study contributed to the expansion of this research methodology. Given that spirituality is a universal human experience embedded in relationality (de Souza, 2016; Hay & Nye, 2006), the methodology employed necessitated fine-grained analysis of data about this human experience. The methodology needed to be well suited to the interpretative nature of the research. As IPA is inductive, interrogative and idiographic (Smith et al., 2009), it was an apt choice of methodology for a study such as spiritual growth.

As IPA is traditionally employed in the discipline of psychology, its utilisation in the field of education is considered contemporary, yet apt (Crawford, 2019; Smith, 1996). In a general sense, IPA has been employed in the field of spirituality (Joseph, 2014). However, this study contributes to the expansion of IPA in the context of secondary schooling, specifically Mercy girls’ secondary schooling experiences. The use of IPA in this study has implications for future research on spiritual growth that may also utilise the methodology.

6.6.3 Implications for policy.

Mercy schools operate in response to policy directions issued by the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australian (CECWA) and Mercy Education Limited (MEL). Understanding this framework is important in contextualising the policy implications of this study. Foremost, fostering student spiritual growth is crucial in fulfilling the mission of the Catholic Church in an educational setting (CECWA, 2009). The three WA Mercy schools in this study are required to deliver a Catholic education embedded with both
The aim of a Mercy school “is to be true to Catherine McAuley, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, who wanted first and foremost for her schools to live and to teach the Good News revealed in Jesus Christ” (MEL, n.d.b, para. 1). As a Mercy education is founded on Gospel values, it upholds the Bishops’ Mandate (CECWA, 2009) while being committed to “Catherine’s vision as a lens through which to embrace the Gospel message” (MEL, n.d.b, para. 1). In this way the Mercy ethos and values work to uphold the broader Catholic ethos of Mercy schools, which in turn supports the Church’s mission of evangelisation. Spiritual growth is an integral aspect of the Catholic, Mercy education offered at the three schools (CECWA, 2009; MEL, n.d.b, n.d.c).

In terms of policy implications, the Bishops’ Mandate (CECWA, 2009) promotes the spiritual and religious formation of students. However, the Mandate of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (2009) does not differentiate between these terms nor define either one of them. There is scope to clarify the distinction between the two terms to improve educators’ awareness and understanding of the them. There is also potential to explicitly articulate how spiritual formation may be implemented in schools to encourage best practice in fostering student spiritual growth. Similarly, there is no explicit reference to spiritual formation or growth in the MEL Charter (MEL, n.d.b) nor the MEL Strategic Plan 2017-2019 (MEL, n.d.c). Given student spiritual growth is crucial in upholding the ethos of MEL schools, such as the three Western Australian MEL schools involved in this study, there is scope for explicit reference to student spiritual formation and/or spiritual growth in policy documentation pertaining to MEL schools.
Another aspect of policy pertinent to this study is related to new evangelisation. In emphasising that new evangelisation is an important consideration in the contemporary educative climate, the Bishops’ Mandate (CECWA, 2009) highlights the significance of schools implementing practices which may draw people, be they parents, students or staff, who have become distant or disconnected from their faith, closer to it. Offering students opportunities for spiritual growth may be a way of helping them re-connect with God. As found in this study, the provision of some spiritual growth opportunities, even though they were untethered from religion, paradoxically opened students’ hearts and minds to the Transcendent. The Bishops’ Mandate (CECWA, 2009) calls on Catholic schools “to help awaken a sense of the sacred in their students who lack this awareness whenever this is appropriate in the curriculum” (para. 49). However, schools could utilise activities that foster spiritual growth, even if they are untethered to religion, in the hope that students are drawn closer to God in time.

Lastly the Bishops’ Mandate (CECWA, 2009) does not specify an explicit need for student spiritual growth to be an aspect of schools’ evangelisation plans. This issue may be addressed in future policy documents so that schools are encouraged to embed explicit reference to student spiritual growth in their evangelisation plans, especially with regards to fostering the new evangelisation of students, parents and staff.

6.7 Recommendations

As mentioned, fostering student spiritual growth is crucial in upholding the ethos of the Catholic and Mercy Education Limited (MEL) school systems (CECWA, 2009; MEL, n.d.b). The findings of this study are potentially useful for educators and policy-makers alike. The findings form the basis of the following recommendations, which have implications for practice concerning the provision of spiritual growth opportunities in secondary education.
Specifically, the recommendations concern policy-makers and educators, including teachers and school leaders, who are involved in designing, implementing and/or executing school curriculum and pedagogy. The recommendations also pertain to policy-makers and educators involved in monitoring and shaping school culture and teacher-student relationships.

The recommendations are made in the context of Mercy girls’ secondary schools in WA. To an extent, they may be relevant and applicable to educators and policy-makers in other regions. Of particular note, the small sample size of the post-school women interviewed in this study suggests the perceptions of these women may not be representative of all post-school women who attended MEL girls’ secondary schools. Therefore, the study results may not be transferable (Smith et al., 2009) to other post-school women who attended the three MEL girls’ secondary schools in WA, nor other secondary schools. Readers, however, may choose to determine the relevance of the findings to their particular context and draw comparisons with other schools (Sarantakos, 2013). The small sample size of this study should be contextualised when reading the recommendations.

6.7.1 Recommendation 1: Provide staff spiritual formation.

It is recommended that spiritual formation opportunities are provided to MEL school staff, as well as the wider Catholic educational sector, including early career and pre-service teachers. Scholars and religious leaders alike call for the spiritual formation of Catholic education staff (Benedict XVI, 2009; Catholic World Report, 2014; Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1982, 2014; Fic & Robinson, 2020; Franchi & Rymarz, 2017; Francis, 2018; Grace, 2010; National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC], 2017; Robinson, 2017; Scharf, Hackett & Lavery, 2020). Based on the findings of this study, the call for staff spiritual formation is affirmed. The spiritual formation of staff in Catholic
schools needs to be substantive, ongoing, authentic and explicitly embedded in the life of schools.

The provision of staff spiritual formation should first and foremost afford people the opportunity to enrich their own spiritual growth “for no one can share what they do not have themselves” (CECWA, 2009, para. 32). The Bishops’ Mandate states that “teachers need up-to-date spiritual and religious formation” (CECWA, 2009, para. 98). As indicated with regards to policy implications, the clear delineation of spiritual and religious formation, and explicit elaboration of knowledge as to how spiritual formation may be achieved in schools, may be beneficial for educators. Regardless, staff spiritual formation is integral and complements religious formation in the Catholic school context. Further, this study suggests spiritual growth has multiple benefits, such as enhanced wellbeing, self-efficacy and connectedness to others and God, and as such, should be a priority. The spiritual formation of staff is essential so that they in turn, may contribute to the formation of their students.

It is recommended that not only teachers, but all school staff have the opportunity to enrich their own spiritual growth through spiritual formation. Pre-service teachers would also benefit from receiving spiritual formation as a means of preparing them for their future teaching careers, whether in or beyond Catholic education. All school staff are an important part of the school community and as such, should promote its aims (CECWA, 2009). The Bishops’ Mandate states “anyone accepting a position within a Catholic school community accepts the role of Catholic educator who helps form followers of Christ” (CECWA, 2009, para. 92). Non-teaching staff influence school culture and to varying extents, interact with the students who attend their schools. For these reasons, their participation in authentic spiritual formation, alongside educators and pre-service teachers alike, is justifiably important and supports the Catholic ethos of schools.
Specifically, the provision of increased resources for the spiritual formation of Catholic school support staff, teachers and leaders is recommended. To facilitate this formation, it is recommended that the minimum number of accreditation hours assigned to the spiritual formation of staff is increased (CECWA, 2017; CEWA, 2014). For example, teachers working in Catholic schools should complete a minimum of 30 hours of formation across five years, rather than the present minimum requirement of 15 hours per five years, as specified in the *Accreditation Framework for Catholic Schools in Western Australia* (CEWA, 2014). The spiritual formation of Catholic school staff needs to be substantive and ongoing to ensure its effectiveness, especially in meeting contextual challenges such as new evangelisation (CCE, 2014).

To engage staff distant or disconnected from their faith, some spiritual formation should be approached from a secular stance. Consideration of a secularised spirituality which focuses on personal development may serve “as a central bridging construct between religious and secular thinking” (Rossiter, 2018, p. 17). A focus on personal development and wellbeing may therefore need to be the starting point of some staff spiritual formation. For example, wellbeing may be related to character strengths (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009) or it may emerge from positive development, whereby self-efficacy is strengthened through developing confidence, competence and connection which enables human flourishing (Hackett, 2015). In making this recommendation, however, it must be acknowledged that focusing on personal wellbeing necessitates an outward-looking approach. Looking outwards people are able to develop empathy for others and/or their environment, rather than becoming self-centred and absorbed (Hackett, 2015; Robinson & Hackett, 2019; Rossiter, 2018; Seligman et al., 2009). It is in forming connectedness to others and/or the environment, people may move closer to a relationship with God.
As found in this study, the provision of some spiritual growth opportunities untethered from religion, may paradoxically open students’ hearts and minds to God. Herein lies an example of how spiritual formation involving a focus on personal wellbeing may lead to developing a sense of connectedness to others, the environment and possibly a relationship with God. Furthermore, the cultural context of a Catholic, Mercy school may help draw staff closer to God, just as it influenced the post-school women in this study. Spiritual formation may also provide school staff with knowledge and understanding that they may then use in their education of secondary students. In the Parable of the sower Mark 4: 3-20 (New Jerusalem) Jesus highlights the healthy growth of seed occurring in well prepared soil. Substantive, ongoing, authentic and explicitly embedded spiritual formation for all staff in Catholic schools is vital in creating and sustaining healthy environments. It is on this fertile ground where the spiritual growth of staff, and in turn students, is fostered so that all may flourish.

6.7.2 Recommendation 2: Give due consideration to fostering place spirituality.

As supporting the notion of belonging and a sense of place is integral in student spiritual growth, it is recommended place spirituality is prioritised in school architectural and landscaping design. To achieve this aim schools may enhance student spiritual growth by giving due consideration to the architectural design of existing and future buildings, and the landscaping of school grounds. The findings of this study revealed that the close proximity of school buildings to school chapels or churches, is pertinent to student spiritual growth. Likewise, the educational use of space close to school chapels, whether landscaped or built space, potentially influences student spiritual growth. Careful consideration of design elements of these areas may be conducive to fostering the spiritual growth of students. Schools may also like to provide plentiful and varied opportunities for students to utilise
these spaces throughout their secondary school journeys, and this notion will be explicated in the following section.

6.7.3 **Recommendation 3: Provide professional learning to educators.**

The role of educators is paramount in the three aspects of Mercy schooling that were investigated in this study: teacher-student relationships; school culture; and, curriculum and pedagogy. The findings of the study situated student connectedness to teachers as influential to spiritual growth throughout the secondary schooling journey, while also highlighting the important role educators play in shaping school culture and curriculum and pedagogy. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that educators are provided with plentiful professional teaching and learning support and guidance so they are well equipped to foster the spiritual growth of their students. The term ‘educators’ is intended to encompass teachers and school leaders alike.

In particular, the support and guidance offered to educators needs to include targeted professional learning and resources to enrich their understanding and appreciation of how school culture, teacher-student relationships and curriculum and pedagogy contribute to student spiritual growth. In turn, educators may utilise this knowledge and understanding to achieve the following outcomes: tailor present curriculum and pedagogical offerings; create new curriculum and pedagogical approaches where they see opportunity for student spiritual growth; forge stronger interpersonal relationships with their students; and, work collaboratively to improve cultural aspects of the school.

To provide explicit guidance as to how educators may use the findings of this study to foster the spiritual growth of their students, a summary of ideas related to each of the key findings has been compiled. Table 6.3 suggests some strategies educators may find helpful with regards to fostering the spiritual growth of their students. This summary of ideas is
offered in a spirit of collegiality by the researcher and she acknowledges that educators may need to adapt these ideas to meet the needs of their particular student cohort.

Table 6.2  
*Specific Strategies Educators May Find Helpful in Fostering Student Spiritual Growth*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Finding</th>
<th>Specific Strategies Educators May Find Helpful in Fostering Student Spiritual Growth</th>
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| Belonging and place  | • Foster a sense of belonging and place by embedding, and subtly emphasising, place spirituality in curriculum and pedagogy offerings, including a sense of place in the environmental sense and/or a sense of place when in community with others.  
• Provide students with plentiful opportunities for connectedness to the natural world by utilising school grounds and gardens as classroom learning spaces, as well as places of worship and reflection.  
• Utilise off-campus facilities to immerse students in aspects of the natural world where appropriate and possible.                                                                                                                                 |
| Fond memories        | • Afford memory-making opportunities across the curriculum and encourage student participation in these activities.  
• Focus on supplying opportunities where students may experience a sense of fun and enjoyment while forging connections with others from different groups within the school community.                                                                                     |
| Building self-efficacy | • Design opportunities across the curriculum to build self-efficacy. In particular, provide plentiful and meaningful opportunities for self-reflection and awareness.  
• Create safe environments whereby healthy risk-taking is encouraged and students are able to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments.                                                                                     |
| Connectedness to others | • Undertake ongoing professional learning about optimising teacher-student relationships.  
• Foster a culture of Mercy, collaboration and excellence among fellow educators in forming collegial and supportive school communities of teachers.  
• Deliver students the opportunity to develop relationships with their teachers over consecutive school years.  
• Afford formal and informal servant-leadership opportunities to students, and staff.                                                                                           |
| Sense of hope        | • Encourage student participation in the creative arts and service activities through the provision of multiple and varied opportunities across the curriculum.                                                                                                         |
Shared belief

- Foster a culture whereby students feel connected to a shared belief through the integration of the Catholic curriculum, religious culture and the Mercy ethos and values.
- Welcome and encourage students into this living culture of shared belief through opportunities for prayer, liturgy, retreats, altar serving, Eucharistic Minister training, sacramental programs and the like.
- Offer creative and innovative means to maintain student exposure and immersion in the stories and living history of the Sisters of Mercy.

6.7.4 **Recommendation 4: Further research.**

Further research is recommended in the field of spiritual growth in education, specifically secondary education, to explicate theoretical understandings of student spiritual growth and how it may be fostered in the school context. In particular, further empirical research that can add to the contributions and insights derived from this study may influence educative practice, beyond the realm of MEL schools, to a sector level. As recommended, this further research may explore:

- ascertaining the influence of a sense of place fostering spiritual growth when experienced in communion with others, compared to being in isolation from others;
- the reciprocal relationship between spiritual growth and building self-efficacy;
- the influence of a supportive community of teachers on spiritual growth;
- the relationship between Mercy values and connectedness with others in fostering spiritual growth;
- the impact of experiencing a sense of hope through schooling and its influence on spiritual growth;
• the influence of the distinctive Mercy ethos and values in offering a shared belief that fosters spiritual growth; and,

• the influence of a religious environment, music and the creative arts in stimulating spiritual growth, from which religious understandings may also grow.

Future policy may also be shaped by this type of further research. Continued research in this field will also add depth, and possibly breadth, to established theoretical perspectives in spiritual growth, particularly female adolescent spiritual growth pertaining to secondary education. It is hoped that in recommending further research, the key insights gained from this study will be critiqued by researchers and scholars alike. On-going research and scholarship in the field of spiritual growth in education is needed to inform policy and practice that will enrich the spiritual growth of young people.

6.8 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

A strength of this study is the significance it holds in contributing new knowledge for educators and leaders in the field of secondary education, specifically, in MEL schools. This study appears to be the first of its type in that the specific topic explored has not been the subject of any prior formal research investigation. To date, there appears to be no empirical literature about the perceptions of post-school women regarding the influence of their MEL girls’ secondary schooling experiences on their spiritual growth. In this way, the study contributes new knowledge to an existing gap in the literature.

As the study is original it also contributes, in a general sense, to literature about spiritual growth, and the spiritual growth of students, particularly girls, in secondary education. Despite this apparent strength, the study is limited because the small sample size of the post-school women interviewed in the study suggests the perceptions of these women may not be representative of all post-school women who attended MEL secondary girls’
schools. As mentioned, the study results may not be transferable (Smith et al., 2009) to other post-school women who attended the three MEL girls’ secondary schools in WA, nor other secondary schools. However, readers may choose to determine the applicability of the findings and draw comparisons with other schools (Sarantakos, 2013). The small sample size, although exhaustive, is a clear limitation of the study. In gleaning the perceptions of nine post-school women, this small sample size should be contextualised when reading the recommendations.

Another strength of the qualitative study was the use of IPA as a research methodology. Utilising IPA amplified the accuracy and authenticity of the data collection and analysis research phases. A key aspect of IPA, the researcher journal, was instrumental in upholding the reflexivity of the study. The researcher journal enabled the researcher’s role in the study to be as transparent as possible in facilitating the reflexive process. The inclusion of reflexive statements throughout the study also enhanced the reliability of the investigation. The concurrent use of the researcher journal and reflexive statements throughout the study upheld the trustworthiness of the study. Collectively, the employment of IPA in this investigation was a strength with regard to maximising the rigour of the study.

Despite its strengths as a methodology well suited to a qualitative study, IPA also presented limitations to some aspects of the study. These limitations involved the interpretative nature of data collection and analysis, and in particular, the role of the researcher in this process. While the researcher made every attempt to remain impartial, her immersion in the research process, particularly in the data collection and analysis steps, meant she was actively involved in it. While conducting the interviews first hand was beneficial to the researcher being immersed in the process, this close connection may have resulted in her exerting influence, albeit unintentional, on the process. However, IPA enabled the researcher’s involvement in the process to be acknowledged. As mentioned, employing
epoche, and bracketing, as part of IPA, enhanced the interpretative process. The researcher journal also enabled the researcher to exercise reflexivity throughout the duration of the research study.

6.9 Reflexive Statement

My experience in undertaking this research has been challenging and personally rewarding. In reflecting on the research journey, I have questioned my initial thoughts and feelings about spiritual growth in the secondary school setting. As a secondary teacher, some of my initial assumptions have been affirmed by the results of this study, while other assumptions have been challenged. Some elements that emerged from the study have also surprised me.

Perhaps of greatest significance, this study has caused me to question my understanding of student spiritual growth. Keeping the researcher journal throughout the duration of the study has helped me realise the importance of ongoing personal reflection. Furthermore, the practice of epoche, and particularly bracketing, within IPA has been instrumental in increasing my awareness of the influence of my thoughts, feelings and assumptions on the interpretation of the perceptions of others. Similarly, the study has revealed to me the circular nature by which my personal understanding is influenced by, and in turn, influences, the spiritual growth of those students I teach. In this way, reflecting on the research journey has taught me the power of reflection in life-long learning. I have learnt the importance of questioning and reflecting on my own assumptions and perceptions in making meaning of the world around me.

Lastly, the participants in this study have had a profound impact on my understanding of the influence of Mercy secondary schooling experiences on girls’ spiritual growth. In interviewing post-school women, my goal to fully ‘hear’ the voices of past
students of Mercy girls’ secondary schools, was fulfilled. It is my hope that the perceptions of these Mercy women will be welcomed and critiqued by educators seeking knowledge and reflecting upon how they may make a positive difference to the spiritual lives of the students they teach. My heartfelt thanks to the nine post-school women who agreed to share their personal stories and insights about the influence of their Mercy schooling on their spiritual growth. Their willingness to participate in the study was very much appreciated. It was a joy and a privilege to meet with these young women and I thank them for their generosity in entrusting me with their thoughts and feelings about their Mercy secondary schooling experiences.

6.10 Closing Remarks

This research has contributed insight into the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy girls’ secondary schooling on their spiritual growth. Seven of the nine post-school women in the study expressed their understanding of spiritual growth to be clearly tethered to religion, despite the distinction made by the researcher that spiritual growth may be distinct from a connectedness with God. The comments made by the seven women perhaps indicated the influence of the Catholic religious foundation of Mercy schooling on spiritual growth. These comments are perhaps contextually surprising given the apparent disconnection of young people from religion, especially over the last decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018). While the researcher acknowledges the small sample size of the study limits transferability, this small sample clearly indicates that spiritual growth opportunities may be gained from the provision of a Mercy education. In turn, this growth may help young people face today’s contextual challenges.
Another noteworthy insight gained from the study was the importance of a sense of place and belonging in building spiritual growth. In particular, the post-school women participants perceived that the atmosphere and environs of the physical landscape of their educational experiences were influential to building a sense of belonging, which in turn fostered spiritual growth. Annika’s description of singing during choir rehearsal in a particular school building encapsulated the potency of a sense of place. She stated, “…it’s being a part of something. You can just imagine them (Sisters of Mercy) sort of being present here…there is something special.” Educational experiences in the outdoors in nature, and beyond the school gates, off-campus, were also deemed valuable in fostering spiritual growth. This knowledge is perhaps pertinent in designing future learning experiences whereby the spiritual lives of secondary students may be awakened and fostered in holistic and integrated ways.

Although at the end of this research journey, I hope that my understanding of spiritual growth will continue to evolve with further experience in the education sector. I look forward to future research in the field with a view to continued learning about how student spiritual growth may be enriched throughout secondary schooling. May young people today be blessed with the fruits of an ongoing desire, by educators, researchers and academics alike, to learn more about student spiritual growth. Above all, may young people always be blessed with an education rich in spiritual growth.
References


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Vatican Council II. (1965d). Pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world, Gaudium et spes. Retrieved from


APPENDICES
Appendix A  Interview Protocols and Questions

Interview protocols

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>• Welcome and thank participant for being involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Engage in general discussion/friendly small-talk to put participant at ease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide brief overview of research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Outline interview process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Inform participant audio recording will commence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start of interview</td>
<td>• Start audio recording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Continue to engage in general discussion/friendly small-talk to put participant at ease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body of interview</td>
<td>• Commence questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wait for responses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Probe, where appropriate, for further information where necessary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For example: Do you have another example of that experience?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you mean by that? Would you mind please explaining what you mean by that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Prompt where necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Continue this process of ‘ask, wait, probe, prompt’ until all questions have been asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider asking more questions, if appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>• Ask interviewee if she has any questions or further comments to make</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thank the interviewee for her participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Remind the interviewee she is welcome to view the interview transcription as soon as it is completed</td>
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Guiding questions

These questions are intended as a guide only. The semi-structured and open-ended nature of the interview is intended to provide each participant with an opportunity to share her opinion about how she thinks her schooling influenced her spiritual growth.

1. *Interviewee name* would you please tell me which year you graduated from your Mercy Education Limited secondary schooling?

2. How might you describe your Mercy secondary schooling in just a word or two, and why? For example: enjoyable, challenging, etc.

3. You were asked to bring a memento that reminds you of your school experience, to our interview today. Can you please explain the significance of the memento you have brought with you today? Why is it special to you? What memories of your schooling does it evoke?

4. Was your Mercy secondary schooling ‘special’ in any way? Would you please explain why it was special, or why not?

5. What do you understand by the term ‘spiritual growth’?
   
   Note: The interviewer will relate your definition to the definition framing the study so that you are able to understand the framework of the study.

6. Is there a particular school experience that stands out to you as being of significance to your spiritual growth? If so, can you please describe it and explain why it was significant?

7. During your Mercy secondary schooling, what do you feel you learnt about yourself in relation to:
   a. yourself
   b. your relationships with others
   c. the natural world/environment
   d. God

8. How would you describe your school and the influence it had on your spiritual growth during your secondary school years? What was school like for you?

9. Was there a specific teacher(s) who you feel had a profound influence on you, and who may have in turn influenced your spiritual growth? If so, can you reflect on the type of influence this teacher had on you?

10. Was there a particular subject, activity and/or program that influenced your spiritual growth, and if so, can you explain how it was influential?

11. Do you have anything you’d like to add about your Mercy schooling that you feel was significant to your spiritual growth?
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

The spiritual growth of girls in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia: The perceptions of post-school women

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

The research project will investigate student spiritual growth in the Mercy girls’ secondary school through exploring the perceptions of a small sample of post-school women from three Western Australian Catholic Mercy Education Limited girls’ secondary schools.

This study wishes to address the research question: What are the perceptions of post-school women about the influence of their Mercy girls’ secondary schooling on their spiritual growth? The researcher wishes to explore how you, as a post-school student of a Mercy Education Limited girls’ secondary school, perceive your schooling influenced your spiritual growth, with a view to improving student spiritual growth in Mercy girls’ secondary schools.

Why investigate spiritual growth?

Spiritual growth is a deepening awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose in life, and may include connectedness with the self, others, the wider world, and possibly with a transcendent being such as God. Spiritual growth has protective qualities such as improving well-being and building resilience, that may help address the crisis of youth well-being in Australia today. Nourishing the spiritual growth of young people is integral in helping them navigate the challenges of the modern world, especially at a time when many young people are experiencing mental health challenges, and a lack of meaning and purpose in their lives.

Although student spiritual growth is a priority in the Catholic education system, there is a need for increased clarity about how to foster the spiritual growth of young people. This study aims to generate data to address this question in the context of the Mercy girls’ secondary school.

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Tania Hicks and will form the basis of a Doctor of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia, under the supervision of Prof. Chris Hackett and Dr. Christine Robinson.

What will I be asked to do?

You are asked to participate in an individual in-depth face-to-face interview about how your Mercy girls’ secondary schooling influenced your spiritual growth. In preparation for the interview, you will be issued the interview questions at least one week prior to the interview to enable you time to reflect on what your responses may be.

The interview will take approximately one hour of your time and will be audio-recorded using a microphone or similar recording device. The interview will take place at a mutually convenient time on site at the secondary school you attended. This interview location, although yet to be determined, will be private and quiet to ensure confidentiality.
You are asked to bring along to the interview a memento of your schooling to share with the researcher. For example, you may like to bring along a treasured photograph, favourite school book, report card or school uniform item to share.

**Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?**

There is no foreseeable risk in you participating in this research project as the questions asked will not be of an intensely personal or sensitive nature. Additionally, the description of the concept of spiritual growth framing the study is positive in its focus; the investigation will focus on the schooling influences that you believe enriched or deepened your spiritual growth.

You are under no obligation to answer a question if you feel uncomfortable. You may opt-out at any point of the interview. In the unlikely event that you experience distress throughout the interview, you are encouraged to contact Lifeline (Phone: 13 11 14) or BeyondBlue (Phone: 1300 22 4636).

**What are the benefits of the research project?**

As a participant, it is hoped you enjoy reflecting on your lived experience of your secondary schooling and its associated memories. Given the aim of this project is to improve student spiritual growth, the opinions you offer about your secondary schooling will potentially benefit future generations of young women attending Mercy Education Limited secondary schools.

**To what extent is participation voluntary, and what are the implications of withdrawing that participation?**

Participation in this research project is voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

There will be no consequences relating to any decision by an individual or the school regarding participation, other than those already described in this letter. Decisions made will not affect the relationship with the research team or The University of Notre Dame Australia.

**Will anyone else know the results of the project?**

Information gathered about you will be held in strict confidence. This confidence will only be broken if required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a pseudonym name in place of your name in the research documentation. The audio-recording from the interview will be transcribed and stored on a password protected computer and/or in a locked drawer. Only the researcher will have access to this information during the project.

Once the study is completed, the data collected from you will be de-identified and stored securely in the School of Education at The University of Notre Dame Australia for at least a period of five years. The research data gathered will not be used for future research. The results of the study will be published as a thesis, and possibly also a journal article and/or book chapter.

**Will I be able to find out the results of the project?**

Once we have analysed the information from this study we will email you a summary of our findings. You can expect to receive this feedback in approximately mid-year 2021.
Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

If you have any questions about this project please feel free to contact me at . Alternatively you can contact Professor Chris Hackett at . We welcome any questions you may have about this study.

What if I have a complaint?

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Notre Dame Australia [approval number 019082F]. If you have a complaint regarding the manner in which the research project is conducted, it should be directed to the Executive Officer of the Human Research Ethics Committee, Research Office, The University of Notre Dame Australia, PO Box 1225 Fremantle WA 6959 (phone 08 9433 0943) or research@nd.edu.au. Any complaint will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

How do I sign up to participate?

If you are happy to participate, please sign both copies of the consent form, keep one for yourself and mail the other to me in the stamped self-addressed envelope provided or alternatively email a scanned signed copy to:

Thank you for your time. This sheet is for you to keep.

Yours sincerely,

Tania Hicks
Doctoral Student
The University of Notre Dame (Australia)

Email:
APPENDIX C  PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The spiritual growth of girls in Mercy secondary schools in Western Australia: The perceptions of post-school women

- I agree to take part in this research project.
- I have read the Information Sheet provided and been given a full explanation of the purpose of this research project and what is involved.
- I understand that I will be interviewed for a period of approximately one hour and that the interview will be audio-recorded.
- The researcher has answered all my questions and has explained possible risks that may arise as a result of the interview and how these risks will be managed.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
- I understand that all information provided by me is treated as confidential and will not be released by the researcher to a third party unless required to do so by law.
- I agree that any research data gathered for the study may be published provided my name or other identifying information is not disclosed.
- I understand that the research data gathered will not be used for future research.

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<th>Name of participant</th>
<th>Signature of participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
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- I confirm that I have provided the Information Sheet concerning this research project to the above participant, explained what participating involves and have answered all questions asked of me.

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<tr>
<th>Signature of Researcher</th>
<th>Date</th>
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## Appendix D  Sample of Interview Data

### Transcription results:

...[name of post-school woman deleted], thanks very much for coming in and as I would have said over the phone, the interview questions are a guide for us today and by all means feel free to go off track and add other things as they come to mind if you think they’re relevant to what we’ve been talking about. Yeah. But thanks very much for coming in and yeah. We’ll start to go through the questions. Good. So first of all, can you tell me which year it was that you graduated from here at [name of school deleted]? Yeah. In Year 12 in 2012 so six and a half years ago. Yeah.

Yes Coming up for seven. Yeah. It goes quickly doesn’t it? And how would you describe your Mercy schooling just in a word or two? Um, I think opportunity. Um, if I go a little bit beyond just one word, perhaps belief in young girls. Um, yeah. Even now, looking at the girls at this school, I see it. I– definitely opportunity, I think.

Uh-huh. And, um, what makes you choose that word *opportunity*?

Um, when I started at the school, um, I– personally, I, I, I think it was about a year or so in and, uh, to be honest, I was contemplating leaving. Um, I came from a very small, tiny Catholic school. My mum worked at my primary school. Um, I’m an only child. Um, I was a selective mute. I came into this big, beautiful school because my best friend came here and because I just fell in love with it and, um— and I think I got a little bit lost in the first year or so here. Maybe even two years and it was something I always knew that I wanted to, to become a part of and it was— it was in year 11.

You could become a part of this academic challenge. It was a club. I didn’t even know exactly what you did in it, but what happened, [teacher’s name deleted] this man who ran it, he brought it back, um, a year earlier and year tens could join.

### KEY:

- Subsidiary research
- * denotes a correction made to transcription
- Italics denote interviewer’s speech
- Non-italics denote interviewee’s speech

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #1</th>
<th>Question #2</th>
<th>Question #3</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Belief in students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional attachment</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Co-curricular activity/club</td>
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I remember the end of year nine, you could go for it and the end of year nine, I did. Um, and I think that was the catalyst for changing, um, everything in, to do with my school life and it really opened my eyes up too.

I think the opportunities that I was given there, yeah, changed my schooling and I think, um, when I look back on my education, I do think it was very different to a typical student in, um-- yeah, in the way that I think it fostered my even spiritual growth and, and sense of belonging. Yeah. So definitely the opportunities that I got, um, started from that one, yeah, club and then everything else-- yeah.

Mm-hmm.

[inaudible].

Yes. Thanks. The other word you said was 'belief' as well. In what way? What do you mean by that?

I think something like, we were given things like, we would have meetings at school and, one of the things that I got involved in was the Young Mercy Justice Tree. I think you have it at [name of another Mercy school in Perth, deleted]?

[crosstalk] one.

And yeah. Whenever, whenever we had meetings or something, we would-- we wouldn't have it in, in a classroom. We would go up to the boardroom and we would sit in the chairs and it would be structured like a meeting. Things like that, belief and-- and we would get responsibilities and we were asked to, I guess, yeah. Kind of run, run the clubs or the teams or so much-- more than just be a part of it. Yeah. Belief in young girls, I think. Yeah.

Mm-hmm. So those-- what you're describing, just to clarify, sort of student-led activities.

Yes.

Yes. And do you think that that change of setting, classroom, to boardroom, enabled that process?
Yeah. Yes.

Yes. Good. Um, were you able to bring a memento today of your schooling?

Yes.

Yes. What is it? What [laughter]--? how is it significant [crosstalk]?

I, I got the principal's award that I got in 2012.


Um, that was in 2012 and, um-- at the end. I wasn't overly academic. Um, there were subjects that I definitely were very average at and I struggled and I remember in science my human biology teacher said, um, that I needed to get my short term memory tested and then it came back as very weak. Um, I couldn't remember things. I failed a lot of tests. Um, and, uh, what this principal's award, I think, was-- it represented more than just the academic success of the school. And I think it-- um, what did I write here?

Um, I didn't get head girl and that's something that I, I went for. And I know I didn't head girl because, um, my marks [crosstalk]. Um, and this award that you get always gets given to the head girl and, um, I think it was a celebration of my involvement at the school and everything that I was doing. Um, it also meant a lot to my mom. Um, who was a single mother and worked three jobs and was told by her parents that the school down the road was, was good enough for her and was good enough for me.

So I think, um, yeah. This was-- this represented, yeah, more than just the academic, um, results. But I think people assume that's what you go to school for and I think-- yeah. Everything-- it was everything else and [inaudible] that it was more important than kind of-- yeah. It shaped me to who I was.

Yes. So you felt it was recognition for, for what you had achieved.

Yeah.
And in terms of what you achieved, were you involved in the life of the school in many other things?

Yeah. So, um, there was the academic challenge. Um, the— I— alongside the head girls, there was head of learning and head of, um, sport and ministry. Um, and I was head of learning. Um, I was in a debate team, um, in the [art?], um club and the, um, captain of the football team. And, um, uh, I got chosen in year 11 for the Young Mercy Justice [tree?] the conference over in Adelaide, um, and I think in Melbourne and— yeah. It was those things that I was involved in. Yeah. But, um, yeah. A foot in every door. I remember every day I was busy, um, and that was something that I loved. I loved going to school for those things.

Did you?

Yeah.

Mm-hmm. So those things were almost more important to you than the academic side.

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And I found I would study all night. I would be up ridiculous hours and, and, and I would get the results back and they were so entirely average and I think it used to kill me. And getting this award was kind of— yeah. It was showing me that it was more than just the grades and, yeah. Yeah.

Mm-hmm. Lovely. Would you say that your Mercy schooling was special in any way?

Yes. Um—

Can you explain why or what it was that made it special?

I think unlike, maybe other schools, um, the— what have I written?

Have a look [laughter].
TranscribeMe!

I will. I will. Um, I think that [inaudible] within me a desire to make change within peoples' lives and live a life of service. Um, you know, I, I-- when I left school-- and perhaps I didn't quite realise the impact that the school had on me until I left. Um, and everyone, I think, was so excited leaving school and, and a little bit apprehensive about what was coming. And, um, I just remember almost being in a state of mourning and calling my mom up. I remember she was at work. She [inaudible] and just crying. I don't-- you know, I don't know.

And, um, and I look back right now and I think I almost-- I, I knew that what I had at the school and, and everything it gave me and that sense of belonging. I always knew that I, I wouldn't-- it would be very hard to replicate it anywhere else from now on. And, and I have found even in the last few years feeling a little bit lost career-wise and not quite sure what I-- what I'm wanting to do, um, almost so that when I left school I, I went into, into what I thought I wanted to do which is international aid development, um, and started that at [name of university deleted] and, and I got a few weeks in and then I just went like, "This isn't for me." And, and I think that was almost because it couldn't in no way compete with the-- with the experiences that I'd had.

And I ended up leaving and I came back to [teacher's name deleted] the, the teacher and he, uh-- and he secured a, um-- just a chat with [person's name deleted] um, at [name of different university deleted] just to see, um-- He said, "You should come teach [inaudible]." And I [inaudible], "Oh, no." And, um-- and I walked in and I had a chat with him. And it wasn't even the teaching itself. And you know, even [inaudible] now, I'm not sure about being a teacher but it was that-- it was those values that kind of came up, um, in-- and that sense of community at [name of university deleted] and, and, the kind of-- it was a replication of, of what I kind of had at [name of school deleted].
Transcribe Me!

Um, you know, and he, he was chatting to me about what I could do and, and, you know, you could apply and then, um, at the end I-- he said I [inaudible] file and I pushed it over and it was just, just certificates. It was nothing academic, but it was things that I was involved in and the principal's award and, um, and after that, he said would you like-- if, if you wanted to, would you like early childhood, primary or high school? And, and, I never thought. I just said, "Primary." I said, "The, the little ones/ are my favourite. They will cry. The big ones will make me cry. So I'll stay in the middle." So, um, I, I did that and, um, yeah And he walked me over and signed me up and I always think that was-- yeah. It was meant to be from, from that. It was-- yeah.

Um, and I think ever since then I've tried to-- I've always been at this school and I've tried to, um, find, yeah, what I had in my schooling. Um, the support I think just that-- I think the courage and the inclusivity and the, um, the honesty and all these values, I think-- yeah. And that's why I stayed at the school.

And it's very different when you're a teacher. Um, but yeah. That's kind of inspired me the last few years to now study law. So I'm studying law, um, in the hopes to go into something human rights related and almost to kind of come full circle and come back to maybe, uh, like, social justice because, um, at [name of university deleted] I did the service learning social justice component and found that I wanted to implement more but found that hard at school. So yeah. Big circle, and I'm always, yeah, coming back to-- yeah.

Wow [laughter]. That's fantastic.

So a lot there.
That's, that's great. Um, a common theme is that sense of belonging. You've mentioned that a couple of times. So that's-- yeah. That-- that's obviously very important to you at school, um, here at [name of school deleted]. What are, um-- what in the school actually created that sense of belonging? Like, what sorts of, um, things or activities or whatever created that sense?

I think probably the-- many of the teachers. But one stood out in particular and that was [teacher's name deleted] and, and it was more than just the, the clubs. The academic challenge. It was, um, building us. You know, I, I became involved in the-- we went to the Rotnest camps and, um, a lot of conferences and he would make up-- and, you know, he'd have speakers come and talk us and, um-- and it was constant, we were evaluating how it could be better and what we wanted to do and; um, we just got, um, exposed just to, I think, leadership and, and charities and things that we'd get involved in and I, I just went from just not really knowing, at all what I wanted to do and feeling very lost in, in year nine and year ten and then getting this absolute-- just this support and this-- and we were driven and we were treated like leaders.

And, definitely this teacher in particular that, um, that created all of this and would create this challenges where it wasn't about, um, writing an essay but it was about, you know, finding your learning style and, and how to be the best version of yourself and following these amazing women that we would follow the lives of.

And we went on a Europe trip and, um, and we had to do things. We were very much out of our comfort zone and we'd have to write speeches and things that maybe from the outside looked incredibly normal, but I think as-- I was such a mute, I think in year seven I asked, in primary school to take my jumper off once and that was it. I didn't talk to the teacher. So I think [inaudible]-- yeah. Most people it was-- it was almost normal but to me, it was almost like realising my potential and finding it.
Yeah. Yeah. And I think, um, it wasn't even until I was going through your questions and I was thinking about them, but when I went to kind of answer them and think what would I say—and it was probably coming out really jumbled but, um, I was actually quite emotional when I thought how, um, how much it gave me and--yeah. How important it was, um, the values, yeah, that I got from it and what it meant to be a [school name deleted] girl, I think. Yeah.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. Lovely [laughter]. Um, the power of reflection. Isn't that?

Yeah. Absolutely.

Yeah. Um, what do you understand by the term spiritual growth? What does it mean to you?

I think a deeper sense of life. Understanding life and, um, perhaps where you're going. Um, I wouldn't say that I have a deep spiritual, um, understanding. I think my, my family--my parents, um, aren't religious really. My mom hasn't been involved with Catholic schools. Uh, my dad is Slovakian, um, currently living in Siberia off the land.

Oh, of course. Yeah.

Um, he's more environmental. Um, and my grandma was Hindu. Grew up in India. Um, but there was no sense of, I think, spiritual connection and I was the only one in my family that my mom gave, um--sent me to a Catholic school and baptised me, um, because my babka was and she's in Slovakia. I'm actually visiting her in two weeks.

Oh, [crosstalk].

So, um--and she gave it to me because she thought if I had no one left that I--or nothing left, I'd perhaps might have God. And I think that's that's a lovely thing to think of for someone that has no religion. And, um, so, um, it was that I, I didn't have anyone in my family or my friends but I think [name of school deleted] oh, sorry. I think I'm skipping now too.
TranscribeMe!

No. It's all right. No.
What to school?
No. Doesn't matter.

I think [name of school deleted] fostered my spiritual belief that-- yeah. That there was more to life than just, I think-- yeah. The nine to five and the going out and that really, I think caused a lot of, um, career confusion for me because I just thought, um-- I remember thinking if I was born in another lifetime, I would become a nun. I, I, I just think I would go and help people, I don't-- yeah. And I think I find it maybe hard now because they just-- yeah. I don't necessarily want money. I'm not driven by money, um, but yeah. I just like to go and help people or to be-- yeah. And then I think now I'm getting, um-- um, people often say that, you know, these trips that you go on are just-- you know, you don't know if they make the people in the surroundings, you know, stay in these-- yeah.

But it's just so many conflicting things and you don't quite know whether it helps. So I think I'm still trying to find my way back to, um, yeah, developing a deeper sense, maybe, of my spiritual identity. Um, yeah.

But [name of school deleted] gave me that, yeah, um, wanting to live a life of service and to find, yeah, maybe a deeper sense-- Yeah. A connection with God. I know that's not very deep but [crosstalk].