

**EDUCATORS' PRACTICES FOR PROMOTING THE SPIRITUAL
DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AGED 3 TO 4 YEARS, IN THE
CONTEXT OF CATHOLIC CHILDCARE CENTRES IN
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

Submitted by

**Christine Robinson
Student ID: 9911081**

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the
Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**The University of Notre Dame Australia Fremantle Campus
2017**

Abstract

The Australian early years' mandated document, the *Early Years Learning Framework* (Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009), outlines the need for educators to attend to children's spiritual capacity as part of a holistic approach to the early years (p. 9). Additionally, policy that governs the Catholic sector (such as *Early Childhood Education Care Policy 2-B6* (Catholic Education Commission Western Australia [CECWA], 2013a)) reinforces this requirement for educators to attend to the holistic development of children, inclusive of their spiritual capacity alongside the cognitive, social, emotional, physical, creative and moral capacities. Consequently, educators employed in Catholic childcare are tasked with attending to children's innate spirituality. However, how this can be achieved is not clearly articulated in current policy or framework documents (Grajczonek, 2012a). The present study examined educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development within the context of Catholic childcare in Western Australia and with a specific focus on children aged 3 to 4 years of age.

A qualitative approach with a social constructivist theoretical perspective that utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and qualitative content analysis (QCA) was employed in this investigation. The investigation yielded insight into educators' understandings of spirituality and their knowledge regarding the promotion of children's spiritual development; the practices educators employed, both intentionally and incidentally to promote children's spirituality; and the practices that educators planned for to promote children's spirituality. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, observations of practice and through QCA of educators' planning documentation. IPA and QCA were employed as both theoretical perspectives underpinning the research as well as tools for data analysis.

Findings from this investigation resulted in the generation of key theory pertaining to educators' understandings of spirituality and their practices to promote children's spirituality. In essence, early childhood educators possessed limited knowledge regarding spirituality. Educators were limited in their ability to articulate spirituality and, subsequently, their ability to articulate their practices to promote children's spirituality was hindered. Educators' practices demonstrated that children's spirituality was promoted incidentally and without intentionality. It became evident that although educators did know something about promoting children's spirituality, both spiritual formation and information about spirituality is required to enable educators to intentionally and effectively plan for children's spiritual opportunities. As spiritual moments are often child initiated and spontaneous, educators must also possess the skills to discern incidental moments within each child's day that are open to spiritual possibilities.

Declaration

The Thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the Thesis. It contains no work which has previously been presented for an award of the University or any other educational institution.

Signed: *C. Robinson*

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Jan Grajczonek. Jan, thank you for your patience, motivation and for sharing your immense knowledge with me. I appreciate the time and effort you have invested in me, and in supervising this research. Your professionalism and wisdom is inspiring. I feel privileged to have had you as my mentor.

My sincere thanks also goes to Dr Dee O'Connor. Dee, thank you for your time and support throughout my research journey. Your advice has been invaluable! To my Dean, Professor Michael O'Neill and my colleagues, I am privileged to work amongst such wisdom. I am so very grateful to you all for sharing with me your knowledge, your skills, your time and your humour- all of which has kept me going when the journey has felt arduous.

I would also like to acknowledge the participants of this investigation, without whom this research would not have been possible. I am grateful to Catholic Education Western Australia for supporting this investigation through the provision of access to the Centres that participated in this research.

To my family, I am eternally grateful. Thank you for instilling in me a love for learning and a belief that I can achieve all I desire. Your constant support and encouragement has made this dream of mine a reality and I am forever grateful to you. To Paul, you met me when I had already begun this journey and you have not only supported me along the way, you have made it our journey together. Thank you for your understanding, encouragement and perspective. I also really appreciate that you found so many hobbies to immerse yourself in whilst I disappeared for hours to write.

Contents

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iv
Acknowledgements	v
List of Figures	xi
List of Tables	xii
Chapter One: The Research Defined	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 The Research Problem	2
1.3 Research Questions	4
1.4 Context of the Research	4
1.4.1 Situational context of the childcare centres in the investigation.....	5
1.4.1.1 Specific context of each of the Catholic childcare centres.....	7
1.4.2. Policy context of early childhood and Catholic education in Western Australia.	8
1.5 Significance of the Research	18
1.5.1 Significance for theory.....	19
1.5.2 Significance for methodology.....	19
1.5.3 Significance for practice.....	20
1.5.4 Significance for policy.....	21
1.5.5 Significance for further research.....	21
1.6 Structure of the thesis	22
1.7 Chapter Conclusion	23
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature	25
2.1 Introduction	25
2.2 Exploring the Phenomenon of ‘Spirituality’	25
2.2.1 Spirituality as an innate capacity.....	26
2.2.2 The relationality of spirituality.....	30
2.2.2.1 Relationality with the self.....	32
2.2.2.2 Relationality with others.....	34
2.2.2.3 Relationality with the environment.....	36
2.2.2.4 Relationality with the transcendent.....	37
2.2.3 Expressions of spirituality.....	39
2.2.3.1 The shadow side of spirituality.....	41
2.2.4 The distinction between <i>religious</i> and <i>spiritual</i>	43
2.2.5 Research question one.....	48
2.3 Promoting Children’s Spiritual Development	48
2.3.1 Research question two and three.....	55
2.4 Contemporary Educational Perspectives Influencing Practice in Early Childhood	56
2.4.1 Historical theory impacting contemporary perspectives.....	56
2.4.2 Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory.....	58
2.4.3 Contemporary perspectives of the child.....	60
2.4.4 Contemporary approaches to education.....	62

2.4.5 Alternative approaches to education.....	66
2.4.6 Steiner Waldorf theoretical perspective.	69
2.4.7 Reggio Emilia approach.....	71
2.4.8 Research question three.	73
2.5 Chapter Summary	73
Chapter Three: Research Design.....	75
3.1 Introduction.....	75
3.2 Research Questions.....	75
3.3 Conceptual Framework	76
3.4 Theoretical Framework.....	76
3.4.1 Qualitative research.....	77
3.4.2 Interpretivist paradigm.....	79
3.4.3 Phenomenology.....	80
3.4.3.1 Variations within phenomenological approaches.	81
3.4.4 Interpretative phenomenological analysis.....	84
3.4.4.1 Idiographic.....	86
3.4.4.2 Inductive.	86
3.4.4.3 Interrogative.....	87
3.4.5 Bracketing in IPA.....	89
3.5 Participants.....	91
3.5.1 Centre A.....	92
3.5.2 Centre B.....	92
3.5.3 Centre C.....	92
3.6 Research Methods	93
3.6.1 Semi-structured interview.....	96
3.6.1.1 Semi-structured interview design.	98
3.6.2 Observation of practice.	100
3.6.3 Qualitative content analysis	103
3.7 Data Gathering Strategies	105
3.7.1 Gathering of interview data.....	106
3.7.1.1 Researcher journal use during interview data collection.	108
3.7.2 Gathering observational data.....	109
3.7.2.1 Researcher journal use during observation data collection.	110
3.7.3 Gathering of documentary data.	112
3.7.3.1 Researcher journal use during documentary data collection.	113
3.8 Data Analysis	114
3.8.1 Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview data.....	115
3.8.2 Interpretative phenomenological analysis of observational data	123
3.8.3 Qualitative content analysis of documentary data.....	126
3.8.3.1 Researcher Journal use during qualitative content analysis.	132
3.9 Integrity of Data Analysis.....	133
3.9.1 Reflexivity.....	133
3.9.2 Triangulation of data.....	135
3.9.3 Trustworthiness and dependability.....	136
3.10 Ethical Considerations.....	138
3.10.1 Data storage.....	139
3.11 Reflexive Statement.....	139

3.12 Chapter Conclusion.....	140
Chapter Four: Findings	142
4.1 Introduction.....	142
4.2 Findings from Educator Interviews.....	143
4.2.1 Findings from interview question one.....	145
4.2.1.1 A religious experience.....	146
4.2.1.2 A personal experience within community.....	147
4.2.1.3 Experiences of nature.....	148
4.2.1.4 Reflection.....	148
4.2.2 Findings from interview question two.....	149
4.2.2.1 Belief based.....	150
4.2.2.2 Innate and personal.....	150
4.2.2.3 Being a good person.....	151
4.2.2.4 Sense of purpose.....	152
4.2.2.5 Peaceful.....	152
4.2.3 Findings from interview question three.....	153
4.2.3.1 Connectedness to people and nature.....	153
4.2.3.2 Emotional regulation.....	154
4.2.3.3 Play.....	155
4.2.3.4 Through drawing.....	156
4.2.3.5 Development of morals.....	156
4.2.3.6 Identity construction.....	156
4.2.4 Findings from interview questions four and five.....	157
4.2.4.1 Religion.....	159
4.2.4.2 Opportunities to develop social skills.....	160
4.2.4.3 Conversation.....	161
4.2.4.4 Opportunities for play.....	162
4.2.4.5 Educator knowledge and skills.....	163
4.2.4.6 Identity development.....	164
4.2.5 Findings from interview question six.....	165
4.2.6 Findings from interview question seven.....	166
4.2.6.1 Play-based.....	168
4.2.6.2 Interest based.....	169
4.2.6.3 Socially and emotionally focussed.....	169
4.2.6.4 Additional findings in response to interview question seven.....	170
4.2.7 Findings from interview question eight.....	171
4.2.8 Summary of findings from the interview data.....	172
4.3 Findings from the Observational Data.....	174
4.3.1 Relationships.....	175
4.3.1.1 Facilitating conversation.....	175
4.3.1.2 Encouraging friendship.....	177
4.3.1.3 Creating a sense of belonging.....	178
4.3.2 Wonder.....	182
4.3.2.1 Posing wonder questions.....	182
4.3.2.2 Opportunities for imagination and creativity.....	183
4.3.3 Identity.....	187
4.3.3.1 Facilitating resilience.....	187
4.3.3.2 Self-regulation development.....	188
4.3.3.3 Facilitating wellbeing.....	190

4.3.3.4 Encouraging independence.....	193
4.3.4 Transcendence.....	196
4.3.4.1 Opportunities for prayer.....	197
4.3.4.2 Sharing religious stories.....	197
4.3.5 Summary of findings from the observational data.....	199
4.4 Findings from the Documentary Data.....	199
4.4.1 Relationality with others.....	202
4.4.1.1 Belonging.....	203
4.4.1.2 Co-operation.....	203
4.4.1.3 Moral development.....	204
4.4.2 Relationality with self.....	205
4.4.2.1 Identity development.....	205
4.4.2.2 Reflection.....	207
4.4.3 Relationality with the environment.....	207
4.4.3.1 Care for nature.....	208
4.4.3.2 Appreciation of nature.....	208
4.4.4 Relationality with a transcendent.....	208
4.4.4.1 Religion.....	208
4.4.4.2 Wonder.....	210
4.4.5 Creativity and Imagination.....	211
4.4.6 Summary of findings from the documentary data.....	211
4.5. Reflexive Statement.....	212
4.6 Chapter Conclusion.....	213
Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings.....	214
5.1 Introduction.....	214
5.2 Key Findings.....	215
5.2.1 Educators' understandings of the term 'spirituality': Key findings.....	215
5.2.1.1 Belief based.....	217
5.2.1.2 Innate and personal.....	220
5.2.1.3 Being a good person.....	223
5.2.1.4. Sense of purpose.....	225
5.2.1.5. Peaceful.....	227
5.2.1.6. Summary of educators' understandings of spirituality.....	229
5.2.2 What educators know about promoting children's spiritual development: Key findings.....	231
5.2.2.1 Spirituality is connected to identity.....	234
5.2.2.2 Spirituality is relational.....	237
5.2.2.3 Spirituality is promoted through religion.....	245
5.2.2.4 Spirituality is promoted through play.....	248
5.2.2.5 Spirituality is promoted when educators have the knowledge and skills.....	251
5.2.2.6 Spirituality is promoted through drawing.....	254
5.2.2.7 Summary of educators' knowledge about promoting children's spiritual development.....	255
5.2.3 Educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development: Key findings.....	256
5.2.3.1 Relationships.....	257
5.2.3.2 Wonder.....	261
5.2.3.3 Identity.....	264
5.2.3.4 Transcendence.....	271

5.2.3.5 Insights into educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development gained from educators’ planning documentation.....	273
5.2.3.6 Summary of educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development. ..	276
5.3 Reflective Statement.....	277
5.4 Chapter Summary.....	278
Chapter Six: Implications and Recommendations.....	280
6.1 Introduction.....	280
6.2 Research questions answered: contribution to theory generated.....	281
6.3 Implications.....	287
6.3.1 Implications for theory.....	287
6.3.2 Implications for methodology.....	288
6.3.3 Implications for policy.....	289
6.3.4 Implications for practice.....	290
6.3.5 Implications for further research.....	292
6.4 Recommendations.....	294
6.4.1 Recommendation one.....	295
6.4.2 Recommendation two.....	296
6.4.3 Recommendation three.....	297
6.4.4 Recommendation four.....	297
6.4.5 Recommendation five.....	298
6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Research.....	299
6.6 Reflexive Statement.....	300
6.7 Closing Remarks.....	300
References.....	302
Appendices.....	316
Appendix A: Participant Information Letters.....	316
Appendix B: Participant Consent Forms.....	325
Appendix C: Interview Questions.....	328
Appendix D: Sample of Interview Data.....	329
Appendix E: Observation Template.....	335
Appendix F: Sample of Observational Data.....	336
Appendix G: Pre-Analysis Coding Frame.....	339
Appendix H: Sample of Documentation Data.....	341
Appendix I: Post-Analysis Coding Frame.....	342

List of Figures

<i>Figure 1.0.</i> Timeline of events leading to the development of Catholic childcare.....	9
<i>Figure 3.1.</i> Conceptual framework.....	76
<i>Figure 3.2.</i> Theoretical framework.....	77
<i>Figure 3.3.</i> Research method and data collected for each research question.....	95
<i>Figure 3.4.</i> Timeline of data collection.....	105
<i>Figure 3.5.</i> Steps in qualitative content analysis adapted from Elo and Kyngas (2008)	126
<i>Figure 3.6.</i> Coding frame: pre-analysis.....	128
<i>Figure 4.1.</i> Post-analysis coding frame.....	200
<i>Figure 5.1.</i> Key findings in response to each of the research questions.....	214
<i>Figure 5.2.</i> Emergent themes from the interview and observational findings in response to research question two.....	230
<i>Figure 5.3.</i> Synthesis of interview and observational themes in response to research question two.....	232
<i>Figure 6.1.</i> Representation of the connectedness among the recommendations emerging from this investigation.....	294

List of Tables

Table 1.0 <i>National Quality Standards</i>	11
Table 2.1 <i>Fowler’s Stages of Faith</i>	45
Table 2.2 <i>Summary of Relationships Between the Constructs Spiritual, Religious, Spirituality and Religiosity adapted from Rossiter</i>	47
Table 2.3 <i>Piaget’s Stages of Cognitive Development</i>	57
Table 2.4 <i>Montessori’s Stages of Development</i>	67
Table 3.1 <i>Features of IPA Linked to the Research</i>	87
Table 3.2 <i>Participant Details</i>	92
Table 3.3 <i>Credibility Assurance of Observations Linked to the Research</i>	102
Table 3.4 <i>Documentary Data for Qualitative Content Analysis</i>	113
Table 3.5 <i>Bednall’s Stages of IPA</i>	115
Table 3.6 <i>Example of Initial Coding of Interview Transcripts</i>	118
Table 3.7 <i>Example of Initial Coding of Interview Transcripts</i>	119
Table 3.8 <i>Sample Extract of Initial Coding of Observational Record</i>	123
Table 3.9 <i>Example of Grouping Initial Codes into Super-Ordinate Themes</i>	124
Table 3.10 <i>Example of Categorisation from Qualitative Content Analysis</i>	130
Table 3.11 <i>Components of Trustworthiness in Relation to this Investigation</i>	136
Table 4.1 <i>Super-ordinate and Sub-ordinate Themes from Interview Data</i>	143
Table 4.2 <i>Super-ordinate and Sub-ordinate Themes from Observational Data</i>	174
Table 6.1 <i>Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question One</i>	281
Table 6.2 <i>Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question Two</i>	283
Table 6.3 <i>Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question Three</i>	284