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Educators' practices for promoting the spiritual development of children aged 3 to 4 years, in the context of Catholic childcare centres in Western Australia

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Chapter One: The Research Defined

1.1 Introduction

Attending to the spiritual capacity of young children is considered an essential component of a holistic approach to education and care in the early years (Adams, Bull & Maynes, 2016; Kiessling, 2010; Love & Talbot, 1999). Holistic approaches are premised on nurturing the ‘whole child’ through the provision of opportunities for children to develop across the cognitive, social, emotional, physical, creative, moral and spiritual capacities of the human person (Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009, p. 14). In the face of pressure to prioritise cognitive development that can be easily measured (Eaude, 2016) research has drawn attention to the inter-relatability of development and the need to take a more holistic and integrated approach to learning in the early years (Cameron, 2009), that is, one that includes children’s spiritual development.

Australia’s paradigm shift from a focus primarily on cognitive educational outcomes toward an understanding of the need for development to be nurtured across all capacities, had been acknowledged in the Australian national landmark document *Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* [EYLF] (DEEWR, 2009). Significantly, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) document was the first nationally mandated framework implemented in ‘prior-to-school’ settings that explicitly addressed the education and care of children aged birth to 5 years. Additionally, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9) advocates for an integrated and holistic approach in the early years with the first explicit acknowledgement that adopting a holistic approach to children’s education and care includes attending to their spiritual development.

The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) document is significant to this current research as it clearly articulates the responsibility of educators to attend to children's spirituality. Educators are tasked with ensuring that children work towards achieving five *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcomes whilst following prescribed principles and pedagogical practices. Educators working with children aged 3 to 4 years, who are the focus of this investigation, now require a clear understanding of the construct of spirituality and how it can be promoted. If educators are mandated to attend to the spiritual development of children as part of their holistic development, then educators require the knowledge and skills to do so. Currently, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) identifies spirituality as a component of children's development, but provides little by way of advice to educators on what constitutes spirituality and more specifically, the way that spirituality could be promoted within young children. Additionally, existing research on children's spirituality has predominately focussed on middle childhood (Adams, Bull & Maynes, 2016). This research sought to fill this gap in nurturing young children's spirituality by investigating educators' practices to promote 3 -4-year-old children's spiritual development in the context of Catholic childcare. This chapter outlines the significance of this research for theory, methodology, practice, policy and future research. The situational and political contexts of the investigation are also presented. At the conclusion of the chapter, an outline of the thesis structure is provided.

1.2 The Research Problem

This investigation makes an original and significant contribution to existing research in the field of children's spirituality. The Australian early childhood landscape has undergone significant change since the introduction of the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) as part of a larger national approach to raise quality across early years' settings. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) explicitly articulates the need for educators to attend to

children's spiritual capacity as part of their holistic development, with little advice on how this can be achieved. Additionally, the context of Catholic childcare is unique to this study. The operation of childcare centres within the Catholic school system is a new phenomenon in Western Australia and therefore largely unrepresented in existing empirical studies. The Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA), with its delegated authority from the Catholic Bishops, governs the office of Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) and outlines policy (such as *Early Childhood Education Care Policy 2-B6* (CECWA, 2013a)), the requirement for educators to address the holistic nature of the child. However, as with the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009), CEWA provides little advice regarding pedagogical practices relating to the promotion of children's spirituality to assist educators in this task. A further distinguishing aspect of this research is the specific focus on educators' practices to promote 3 and 4-year-old children's spiritual development. Several studies exist that have attempted to describe spirituality (Bradford, 1999; Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 1998) and to measure children's spiritual development (Moore, Gomez-Garibello, Bosacki, & Talwar, 2016; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012) although most have focussed attention on middle childhood as opposed to early childhood, under 8 years of age (Adams, Bull & Maynes, 2016). Scholarly and empirical literature exists that provides practices for educators to assist children's spiritual development within the context of a school (Bone, 2005; Kessler, 2000). However, few studies have addressed the practice of the educator with children below school age, under 5 years (Champagne, 2003; Goodliff, 2013). Additionally, scholarly literature makes the suggestion that educators are often unfamiliar with the concept of spirituality and how to address the spiritual needs of their children (Hyde, 2016). This investigation sought to explore these existing gaps in empirical research by investigating the practices of

educators to promote children's spirituality (aged 3 to 4 years) in the context of Catholic childcare in Western Australia.

1.3 Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this investigation is:

What are educators' practices for promoting the spiritual development of children, aged 3 to 4 years, in the context of Catholic childcare centres in Western Australia?

In addressing the overarching research question, the following sub-questions arose from a review of the literature:

Research Question 1: What do educators understand by the term 'spirituality'?

Research Question 2: What do educators know about promoting children's spiritual development?

Research Question 3: What practices are educators implementing, intentionally and incidentally, to promote children's spiritual development?

These three research questions collectively responded to the overarching question that guided this investigation.

1.4 Context of the Research

This research is situated within the context of Catholic childcare for 3 to 4-year-olds in Western Australia. In this section, the background and context of the research is separated into the following sections:

1.4.1 Situational context of the childcare centres in the investigation; and

1.4.2 Policy context of early childhood and Catholic education in Western Australia.

1.4.1 Situational context of the childcare centres in the investigation.

Changes to government educational policy in Western Australia, through the *Education and Care Services National Law (WA) Act (2012a)* have allowed for the introduction of childcare centres under the jurisdiction of the school sector, such as Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA). The CEWA has provided alternative care arrangements for school aged children (such as before and after school care) for eight years (CECWA, 2008). However, the introduction of childcare in the form of long day-care centres, catering for children from 6 weeks of age to 4 years, commenced in 2010 (CECWA, 2010), in anticipation of the 2012 legislation. Compulsory schooling within Western Australia begins at age 5 (pre-primary) with many WA Catholic schools offering a 4-year-old kindergarten program for a minimum of 15 hours per week (CECWA, 2013a). As a result of the CEWA's initiative to provide childcare prior to school age, children are entering the Catholic sector at a much younger age. Concurrently, educators in Western Australia are mandated, by the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009), to attend to the spiritual capacity of the children in their care. In relation to this investigation, the context does not currently address the practices of the educator in explicitly promoting the spiritual development of children aged 3 to 4 years. If educators working with this age group are expected to attend to the spiritual capacity of children in the same way they attend to their cognitive or physical capacities, educators must first understand spirituality and recognise how to engage with it. When educators have the knowledge to understand the spiritual capacity as a dimension of the whole child, they can subsequently focus the development of professional skills to implement practices that promote children's spirituality.

At the time of this investigation, there were three childcare centres operating as long day-care centres and administered by CEWA, within Western Australia. These three centres formed the specific context of this research. These centres are referred to

as ‘long day-care centres’ within CEWA to distinguish them from other care options. Two centres are located on an existing Catholic primary school site and one was located on an independent site with no physical connection to a primary school. Each centre provides for children across the birth to 5 years age range, which includes children aged 3 to 4 years, who were the focus of this research.

A qualified teacher is required within the centre, as part of the Australian government’s (2009) *National Quality Standard (NQS)* legislation that is used to regulate childcare services. A qualified teacher is deemed to be a person holding a four-year tertiary degree in early childhood education and is required to be in attendance at the centre for six hours of the day (Australian Government, 2013). Under the guidance of the qualified teacher, other educational staff, holding either diploma or certificate level qualifications, work with the children. The three centres that formed this investigation differed in regards to the number of rooms, age ranges of these rooms, number of staff and qualification level.

The qualified early childhood teacher, named the ‘lead educator’, formed the participant group for this investigation. In exploring the lead educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development, it was necessary to consider the individual training and qualifications of each participant. Once employed within Catholic childcare, all staff members participate in professional development related to early years education and care. This professional development is offered to the centre and the centre manager selects topics most suited to the needs of their staff. The centre manager is the staff member who oversees administrative functions at the centre. At some centres this was also the role of the lead educator. Examples of professional development include: following a play-based pedagogy; strategies for early intervention; and, working with children with special needs. CECWA’s *Annual*

Reports for 2013-2015 outline that most professional development offered over this time was in relation to implementing the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) and the *National Quality Standard* (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009b). No professional development on the explicit topic of spirituality, the spiritual aspects of children's lives or spiritual development had been offered to centre staff over this time period. In addition to the professional development on offer regarding early years education and care, it is compulsory for all staff to partake in modules provided by CEWA on the mission of Catholic education and the faith story of the particular centre (CEWA, 2016). This professional development explores the role of Catholic education, what it means to work in a Catholic context and the specific culture of the centre (for example: learning about the history of the centre and the story of its patron saint or founder; how staff at the centre can live the gospel values). For the two centres located on a primary school site, professional development was most commonly undertaken with primary school staff.

1.4.1.1 Specific context of each of the Catholic childcare centres.

Centre A is an early learning centre operating on a Catholic school site. The early learning centre is a separate building to the school and contains a long daycare program (under 2 years), an Out of School Hours Care program, a pre-Kindergarten (3-year-olds) and a Kindergarten program (4-year-olds). At Centre A, children are arranged into one group of 3-year-olds and three groups of 4-year-olds. The 3 and 4-year-old programs are both in operation between 8.30am and 3.30pm. Before and after this time children are either in the Outside of School Hours Care program with children aged between 2 and 5 years, or not on site. The 3 and 4-year-old programs are all led by a teacher educator, referred to as the lead educator, with additional educators assisting in the room. The 3-year-old program is offered for two days per week. The 4-year-old program operates five days per week.

Centre B is a long day care centre operating on a Catholic school site. At Centre B, children are in a free flowing environment that includes children from 2.5 years to 4 years of age. The 3 and 4-year-old Kindergarten programs are embedded within the operational hours of 6.30am and 6pm. Children are in attendance for either a half day (either am or pm) or a full day, and the program is in operation five days per week. The programming and planning is undertaken by a teacher educator, referred to as the lead educator. However other educators in the room assist in both the development and delivery of the program.

Centre C is a long day care centre, not attached to a Catholic school but governed by the CEWA. Centre C operates as a long day care centre in operation from 6.30am to 6.30pm, five days per week. At Centre C, children are arranged into rooms according to age, with two groups of 3-year-olds and one group of 4-year-olds. The 3-year-old programs provide half days (9 – 12 pm) whilst the 4-year-old program is in operation between 8.30am and 3.30pm. Both the 3-year-old and 4-year-old programs are developed and delivered by a teacher educator, referred to as the lead educator.

1.4.2. Policy context of early childhood and Catholic education in Western Australia.

Catholic childcare in WA operates within a national policy context, driven by international and national research on education and care, as well as a local policy context, framed within Catholic education. The explicit connection of education and care in the early years, through the introduction of Catholic childcare centres, is a move in line with national initiatives (CECWA, 2010). This section provides an overview of national and localised policy that underpins practice across the early childhood sector. The specific policy context of Catholic Education in WA is then explored. In particular, CEWA's aim to contribute to children's faith development through the provision of religious instruction alongside catechesis, is discussed. Figure

1.0 illustrates the timeline of events that have led to the initiative of Catholic childcare within Western Australia and which are referred to in this section.

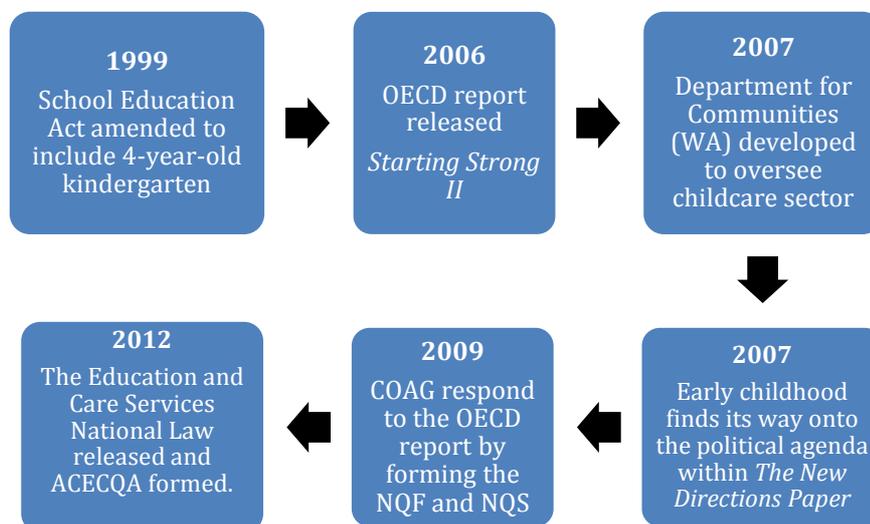


Figure 1.0. Timeline of events leading to the development of Catholic childcare.

Early years' education and early years care have historically existed as dichotomous services. Education has, and continues to be, governed by the Education Department within each State in Australia. In 1999, the *School Education Act* (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2012b) added kindergarten (4-year-olds) and pre-school (5-year-olds) to their mandate and therefore, childcare was beyond the scope of their responsibility. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) led the initiative towards the integration of education and care in WA, in 2009, at the national level. COAG's (2009a; 2009b) initiatives were based on international research and centred on improving quality in the early years of children's development.

COAG responded to international findings from the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation's [OECD] (an international organisation composed of 34 democratic countries) report, *Starting Strong II* (2006). The OECD conducts research at an international level that focuses on a nation's economic investment. In

particular, the OECD explores the long-term forecast of individual's ability to contribute to the economy. In the *Starting Strong II* (2006) report, the OECD articulated the economic viability of nations and ranked countries on their investment in the early years as a way to predict long-term success for individuals and society. As a nation, Australia performed poorly in regards to investment (OECD, 2006), ranking 23rd out of 25 countries (Cameron, 2009) and this was addressed by COAG. Subsequently, early childhood education and care found its way into the Australian political agenda. The Prime Minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, released a New Directions Paper, *The Australian Economy Needs An Education Revolution* (Australian Labor Party, 2007) that explicated the OECD's (2006) findings and articulated the need for systematic changes within the early childhood sector. In 2009, the realities of these changes came to fruition with the release of the *National Quality Agenda* [NQA] (COAG, 2009a). The *NQA* (COAG, 2009a) outlined a range of initiatives that would work toward raising quality and consistency in the early years. Specifically, the *NQA* (COAG, 2009a, p. A-2) outlined a number of key principles including the need for streamlined governance arrangements with clear roles and responsibilities. Of significance, the *NQA* (COAG, 2009a, p. A-2) explicated the need to integrate education and care and to implement a *National Quality Standard* as a means of ensuring continuous quality improvement within centres.

As articulated in the principles from the *NQA* (COAG, 2009a), a key component was the development of the *National Quality Standard* [NQS] (2009). The *NQS* (COAG, 2009b) contained seven quality standards that centres would be expected to adhere to, and be externally assessed on. These standards, outlined by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] (2012) are presented in Table 1.0.

Table 1.0

National Quality Standards

STANDARDS	TITLE
STANDARD ONE	Educational program and practice
STANDARD TWO	Children’s health and safety
STANDARD THREE	Physical environment
STANDARD FOUR	Staffing arrangements
STANDARD FIVE	Relationships with children
STANDARD SIX	Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
STANDARD SEVEN	Leadership and service management

Following on from the development of the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b), *The Education and Care Services National Law* (2012a) was passed by the Western Australian government. *The Education and Care Services National Law* (2012a) responded to the governance arrangements within the *National Quality Agenda* (COAG, 2009a) that sought to improve quality and consistency through integrated service delivery in the childcare sector. To achieve an integrated approach to education and care, *The Education and Care Services National Law* (2012a) set out six objectives that articulated the terms of reference. Most notably, the purpose of the *Law* (2012a) was to “promote continuous improvement in the provision of quality education and care services”(p. 26) through the establishment of a “system of national integration and shared responsibility between participating jurisdictions and the Commonwealth in the administration of the national education and care services quality framework” (p. 26). In addition, the *Law* (2012a) explicitly stated the intention of the Western Australian

Government to ensure the “safety, health and wellbeing of children attending education and care services” (p. 26).

The *Education and Care Services National Law* (2012a) provided a framework for childcare centres to be operated by the school sector. The *Law* (2012a) also provided a platform for the implementation of a national regulatory authority that would oversee the registration and assessment of centres against the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b). This regulatory authority, named as the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], was formed in 2012, and their brief, as outlined within the *Education and Care Services National Law* (2012a, p. 164), includes: assessing education and care services against the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b); to ensure compliance by services and individuals to the *Law* (2012a); and to promote continuous quality improvements across the education and care sector. Essentially, ACECQA, as a national authority, works with State based representatives to ensure that the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b) is adhered to within each individual centre.

COAG’s drive towards integrated service delivery, through the bridging of education and care, facilitated CEWA’s provision of childcare services. CEWA historically focused on the ‘educative’ dimension of schooling with Catholic primary schools in Western Australia typically enrolling children from Kindergarten (4 years of age, pre-compulsory) through to Year 6. The ‘care’ dimension, as opposed to education, was perceived as the role of the family in conjunction with the parish in informal settings, such as through offering pastoral support to families. ‘Care’ in terms of the ‘prior-to-school’ setting was perceived as the role of the childcare service under the jurisdiction of the Department for Communities, which historically had no affiliation with the Catholic education system. In relation to the context for this investigation, two levels of policy govern the provision of Catholic childcare: at the

national level (Education and Care Services National Law, 2012a; *National Quality Standard*, 2009b) and at the local level (CECWA policy).

At the national level, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) mandated framework resides within the *National Quality Standard* (COAG, 2009b) legislation. Specifically, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) is contained within Standard One: Education Program and Practice. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) is mandated for use across birth to age 5 contexts and outlines the principles, practices and outcomes for working with children aged birth to 5 years. This mandated framework addresses quality practice in the early years and, as mentioned previously, is explicit in including the spiritual capacity of the child. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) explicitly states that educators are to consider, and provide for, the spiritual aspect of children's lives and learning (p. 14) and that a holistic approach to young children's learning must include attention to the spiritual capacity "as well as the physical, personal, emotional and social aspects of learning" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) is a pivotal document within the context of this research. As Grajczonek (2012a) pointed out, "*The Early Years Learning Framework* document's explicit inclusion of the spiritual is undoubtedly significant. It is a forward step to have this important aspect of children's lives both acknowledged and advocated in a national document of this calibre" (p. 159). Whilst the inclusion of the spiritual capacity in a mandated framework is perceived as a positive contribution to early years education and care, the ways in which this spirituality can be promoted by educators is not as clearly articulated (Grajczonek, 2012a). The limited nature of the inclusion of spirituality within the framework, and lack of direction for educators, adds to the gap in existing knowledge that this research sought to address.

In relation to the specific context for this study, Catholic childcare, the CEWA has limited policy articulating the responsibilities of educators within the centres and

the way centres function (CECWA, 2013a). Whilst CEWA does state that new facilities operate as an extension of the Catholic school, it is not explicit in stating how the mission of the Catholic school, and Catholic education, are reflected in the practices that occur for young children in the centre. The information that does exist regarding the pre-compulsory years (under 5 years of age) is largely procedural, relating, for example, to enrolment processes. The *Early Childhood Education Care Policy 2-B6* (CECWA, 2013a) does not specifically address centres, although the *Policy* (CECWA, 2013a) does contain specific information on the 3-year-old programs offered at Catholic schools, in particular, stating enrolment procedures into these programs do not relate to enrolment into the school. Rather, parents must formally apply to enrol their child/ren into the school program. In addition, the *Policy* (CECWA, 2013a) outlines that although entry into the 3-year-old program is open to non-Catholic families, priority is given to Catholic families from the local parish. The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) report *Catholic Schools in Australia* (NCEC, 2016) illustrates that thirty percent of children enrolled in Catholic schools identify as non-Catholic. Although this report pertains to the compulsory years of Catholic schooling, rather than prior-to-school settings, the statistic provides some insight into the possible religious demographic at the Catholic childcare centres.

The policy that addresses the centres specifically, the *Early Childhood Education Care Policy 2-B6* (CECWA, 2013a), draws from the *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) and states that:

Catholic schools play a vital part in the life of the Church in Western Australia by contributing to the holistic development of our young through education. Early Childhood Education and Care are integral in laying the foundational blocks on which children 'develop a Gospel vision of themselves and society'

(para. 6)...Catholic schools recognise parents as children's first and most influential educators. (CECWA, 2013a, p. 1)

The *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) is referenced throughout the *Early Childhood Education Care Policy 2-B6* (CECWA, 2013a). The *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) is a Western Australian document promulgated by the Bishops to articulate the role of schools and educators in attending to the evangelising mission of the Church. This document is primarily focussed on the school context and mentions spirituality, as a component of children's holistic development. If the centre is to be viewed as an extension to the Catholic school, the *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) is also applicable to this context. The *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) draws on international Church documents (*The Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1977); *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (CCE, 1988); and *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the New Millennium* (CCE, 1997)). These Church documents from the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (CCE, 1977) feature within the *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) to describe the evangelising nature of the Catholic school. The *Bishop's Mandate Letter* (CECWA, 2009) outlines Catholic school's role to not only provide an education for students, but to develop in students an interplay of 'faith and life' and 'faith and culture'. Therefore faith development is articulated as a central role of the Catholic school. The *Bishops' Mandate 2009-2015* (CECWA, 2009), that governs Western Australian Catholic schools, draws on the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 101) to explicitly articulate the role of the Catholic school below:

The Catholic school will be concerned with the development of students as responsible, inner-directed individuals of Christian virtue, capable of free choice

and of making value-judgements enlightened by formed Christian conscience.

Catholic schools seek to help students develop a total commitment to Christ. (p. 13)

Additionally, as non-Catholics are permitted to enrol into Catholic schools, religious diversity is addressed in Church documents, specifically, in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (CCE, 1988) which states:

The religious freedom of the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected... On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in Christian education; this is its right and duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose... (para. 6)

A key point made in the above quote is the role of Catholic schools to be open to religious diversity, respectful of individual's own religious beliefs and practices whilst offering, not indoctrinating (Grajczonek, 2012b), the opportunity to experience the Catholic faith.

Religious Education is identified in the *Bishops' Mandate 2009-2015* (CECWA, 2009) as a prominent feature of Catholic school curriculum. The national document *Australian Religious Education – Facing the Challenges* (ARE) (Holohan, 1999), written for the Catholic Bishops of Australia, describes Religious Education as a central feature of the Catholic school that assists in the achievement of integrating faith, life and culture. Religious Education is described as “a means of handing on the Christian Faith” (Holohan, 1999, p. 27) and as an educational task that is “concerned with the development of the person from within” (p. 27). This interpretation of Religious Education combines knowledge and experience, but acknowledges that catechesis (faith development) is the role of the larger school community. Catechesis is

concerned with the experiential and behavioural and is considered formational in its development (Holohan, 1999, p. 31). The Vatican promulgates the parish as the pre-eminent place of catechesis (Pope John Paul II, 1979, para. 67) and as such, the role of the parish is to support families as the primary educators of their children, including assisting families with their children's faith development (Pope Paul VI, 1965, para. 6). Holohan (1999) elaborates on catechesis stating that development of a person's faith occurs not only in the context of a school, as does Religious Education, but rather in the context of a community that includes the home and parish.

Within Western Australia, Religious Education denotes the classroom program of instruction or learning area and as such, there is a clear distinction made between Religious Education and catechesis. As a learning area, Religious Education concerns the knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith tradition, and it works in conjunction with the religious dimension (activities outside of the Religious Education lesson) of the Catholic school to develop the faith experience of students. Catechetical activities occur outside of the classroom Religious Education program (National Catholic Education Commission [NCEC], 2008). The Religious Education learning area commences with compulsory schooling at 5 years of age and therefore, there is no requirement for Religious Education in the context of this investigation (3 to 4-year-olds in Catholic childcare).

The CEWA policy, *Religious Education 2-B5* (CECWA, 2013b), outlines the purpose of Religious Education, as a learning area in the Catholic school, in line with Vatican documents. This policy is explicit in addressing Religious Education as a compulsory learning area as part of the daily teaching schedule. This schedule commences from pre-primary (5 years of age), the first year of compulsory schooling in Western Australia. The section 'Procedures' highlights the limited nature of policy

that exists for specifically targeting pre-compulsory schooling (childcare and kindergarten). The policy mentions the pre-compulsory context, however only to the extent of stating that, “in three year and four year old programs, teachers are required to plan to raise the religious awareness of children through providing an atmosphere where ‘God talk’ permeates all” (CECWA, 2013b, para. 1). This is the only mention of the 3 to 4-year-old setting and the only mention is of raising religious awareness - spirituality is not explicitly stated. In 2014, a support document was released by CEWA (2014) titled, *Let the Little Children Come to Me*, to assist educators in their task of promoting religious awareness in children’s early years. This support document also does not specifically address spiritual development. However, it does provide practical strategies for assisting children in their religious awareness. Religious awareness is described in the support document as having an awareness of the presence of God and is closely tied to the specific development of the Catholic faith (CEWA, 2014). The only mention of spirituality is the recognition that “children have a natural spirituality” (CEWA, 2014, p. 5) and then the document directs this spirituality towards a religious awareness of God’s presence. For early years’ educators, this is the level of specificity that currently exists to inform their practices for promoting the spiritual development of children. The relationship between spirituality and religious education is discussed in detail within the literature review in Chapter Two.

1.5 Significance of the Research

The early childhood landscape at both the national and local level has undergone significant change with the implementation of the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b) and *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). These mandated documents task educators working with children from birth to 5 years of age with attending to their holistic development, inclusive of their spiritual capacity. CEWA’s initiative to provide centres that cater for children prior to school age (under 5 years) is supported by the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b) that

advocates for integrated service delivery. This investigation into educators' practices to promote children's spirituality (aged 3 to 4 years) within the specific context of Catholic childcare is therefore significant at a number of levels: for theory; for methodology; for practice; for policy; and for further research as outlined in Sections 1.5.1 to 1.5.5.

1.5.1 Significance for theory.

Findings from this investigation present a significant contribution to theory on educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development such as: early childhood educators' understandings of spirituality as well as the pedagogies they employed to promote children's spirituality. Existing empirical literature is predominantly concerned with defining and measuring children's spirituality (Bone, 2005; Bone, 2008; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012). This investigation is unique in its approach to focus on the practices of the educator working within a Catholic context. The investigation provides insight into the understandings and skills of the educator in promoting spirituality, within a specific religious context.

1.5.2 Significance for methodology.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provided the theoretical framework for this investigation (Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and is explored in depth within Chapter Three: Research Design. IPA also outlined a specific approach to the analysis of data (Smith, 2008; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), specifically for interview data that provided information on what educators understood by the term 'spirituality' and their experience in promoting children's spirituality. IPA was also employed for the observational data collected that provided information on the reality of the educators' practice within their centre room. IPA is most commonly used in the field of psychology and its expansion into the field of education is contemporary (Smith, 1996). The use of IPA in this investigation is significant to

future studies that seek to investigate phenomena in an educational context.

Additionally, as IPA overtly recognises the role of the researcher, this investigation's reflexive practices, such as bracketing and de-bracketing (Smith & Osborn, 2008) contribute to the expansion of IPA as a methodology.

Qualitative content analysis was utilised as a form of analysis for the documentary data collected (as explored in Chapter Three: Research Design). The documentary data provided insight into the practices that educators planned for to promote children's spirituality. A key feature of qualitative content analysis is the development of a coding frame (Schrier, 2012). The coding frame that was developed as a result of the findings from this investigation is significant both at a practice level (see Section 1.5.3) as well as at a theoretical level. As the coding frame was initially developed using existing empirical and scholarly work and then added to with the findings from this investigation (Schreier, 2012), the coding frame, as a methodological tool, provides a lens through which an exploration of educators' practices can be observed in future studies.

1.5.3 Significance for practice.

This investigation has significance for educators' practices. Mandated documents in the field of early childhood require educators to address children's spiritual needs, with limited articulation of how this can be achieved (COAG, 2009b; DEEWR, 2009). In addition, CEWA requires educators to attend to children's holistic development (CECWA, 2013a) and to contribute to the church's mission by providing for children's development of faith (CECWA, 2009). This research provides findings relating to what educators know, what they plan for and what they actually do in practice, to promote children's (aged 3 to 4 years) spiritual development in the context of Catholic childcare. These findings offer a foundation for future professional development to address gaps evident in educators' knowledge and skills. Additionally, the use of the

coding frame developed as a component of qualitative content analysis can be utilised to positively impact educators' practices. The coding frame could be utilised by educators to audit their own, or others', practices in promoting children's spirituality.

1.5.4 Significance for policy.

Existing policy in the form of the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b) and CEWA Policy (CECWA, 2013a) articulate the spiritual capacity of the child as a component of their holistic development, therefore requiring the attention of the educator. Furthermore, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009), as a component of the *NQS* (COAG, 2009b), outlines principles, practices and learning outcomes for educators. This investigation sought to uncover the experience of the educators working with 3 and 4-year-olds in regards to the practices they employed to promote children's spirituality, which is the detail lacking from existing policy and frameworks. Policy changes that include frameworks outlining the 'how' of spiritual development, through the inclusion of specific pedagogical practices, are a key implication from this investigation.

1.5.5 Significance for further research.

This investigation responds to several gaps that exist in empirical studies focussed on children's spirituality, and these are reviewed in Chapter Two. To enable children's spiritual development to be promoted, educators themselves must understand the construct of spirituality and have the skills to provide opportunities and experiences with the potential to promote children's spirituality; this is significant to future research. Although this investigation focussed on educators working with 3 and 4-year-old children in a Catholic childcare context, this study has significance due to its transferability to other contexts. Specifically, the scope of the study could be altered to include the birth to age 5 pre-compulsory cohort especially as the CEWA centres increase both in number (that is the number of centres within WA increase) and in size (the internal capacity of each centre). Additionally, the potential to take a more focused

multi-faith approach within secular centres could be explored in future research, utilising the same methodological perspective. Furthermore, this investigation is significant to future research that intends to investigate the knowledge and skills of the educator by utilising the research outcomes from this study as a framework.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter One explicated the research problem and its significance. The situational and political context of the research was also presented. A short abstract for each of the remaining chapters is provided as an overview to the structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two provides a review of the extant literature. Literature within the scope of the investigation included both research and scholarly literature across three themes. These three themes included: the phenomenon of spirituality; the promotion of spirituality in children; and contemporary educational perspectives that influence practice in early childhood. The research questions driving this investigation emerged from a review of each theme within the literature and these are explicitly stated throughout the chapter.

The specific theoretical framework underpinning the design of the research is explained and justified in Chapter Three: Research Design. Chapter Three begins with the conceptual framework to illustrate the linkages between the literature review in Chapter Two and the research questions. Following this, the selected qualitative approach with a social constructivist theoretical perspective and consisting of an interpretivist paradigm with a phenomenological perspective is explained. The specific selection of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is justified and its unique recognition of the role of the researcher is explained. Subsequently, the research methods of interview, observation and qualitative content analysis are explicated and these are sequenced in the order of the research question to which they respond. The

same sequence is used throughout the data gathering and data analysis sections. Data gathering strategies and data analysis techniques are comprehensively explained and their selection for meeting the aims of the present investigation is justified. The chapter concludes by addressing ethical considerations including the integrity issues inherent in the process of data collection and analysis.

Chapter Four presents the findings from the investigation. Findings are presented by data set and reflect the order in which analysis occurred. Findings from the interview data are presented initially, followed by the observational data; both of these data sets were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Findings from the documentary data, obtained through qualitative content analysis, are then presented.

Chapter Five begins with an overview of the findings presented in Chapter Four. The findings are subsequently reviewed and a cross-analysis of the data sets is undertaken to provide a critical and reflective response to each of the three research questions that guided the investigation. In responding to the research questions, extant literature is drawn upon. The chapter concludes by drawing together a number of paradoxes that emerged as a result of responding to the three research questions.

Chapter Six addresses the implications of the research findings relating to theory, methodology, practice, policy, and future research. In doing so, this chapter outlines the major contributions of the investigation in response to the overarching research question. Potential limitations inherent in the study are also addressed.

1.7 Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has introduced and contextualised the research problem. The context outlined related both to the changing nature of the early years landscape and to Catholic education in Western Australia. Early childhood education and care, once distinct, is now articulated within legislation and policy as an integrated

construct, resulting in the new initiative of Catholic childcare. Through the release of the mandated *NQS* (COAG, 2009b), educators working with children birth to 5 years of age, such as those in Catholic childcare, must implement the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). Consequently, educators are tasked with attending to the holistic development of children, including the spiritual capacity - the focus of this research. The following chapter, Chapter Two: Review of the Literature, provides a synthesis of the empirical and scholarly literature that informed this investigation into educators' practices for promoting the spiritual development of children, aged 3 to 4 years, in the context of Catholic childcare in Western Australia.