

Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this investigation was to understand educators' practices, both intentional and incidental, to promote the spiritual development of children aged 3 to 4 years in Catholic childcare. Spirituality is a complex phenomenon that literature describes as presenting a definitional challenge (Eaude, 2009; Harris, 2007; Tacey, 2004) and, as such, a qualitative approach that afforded a narrative style was most appropriate. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as the specific qualitative approach for this investigation. To comprehensively understand and interpret the experience of the educator, three data gathering strategies were employed: semi-structured interviews with educators; observations of the educators' practices; and collection of documentary data in the form of educators' planning documents. As explicated in Section 3.8 of Chapter Three, each data set was analysed separately. Both interview data and observational data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Documentary data, in the form of educators' planning documentation, were analysed using qualitative content analysis.

Chapter Four: Findings presented the findings from the interview and observational data thematically, as super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes (see Table 4.1 & Table 4.2). Findings from the qualitative content analysis of the documentary data were presented using a coding frame (see Figure 4.1), consistent with this method of analysis. This chapter seeks to critically discuss the findings to understand educators' practices to promote children's spirituality. In doing so, this chapter is structured around the three research questions that guided this investigation:

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?

Following a response to each of the three research questions, paradoxes that emerged across the data are addressed.

5.2 Key Findings

Figure 5.1 illustrates the key findings in response to each of the three research questions.

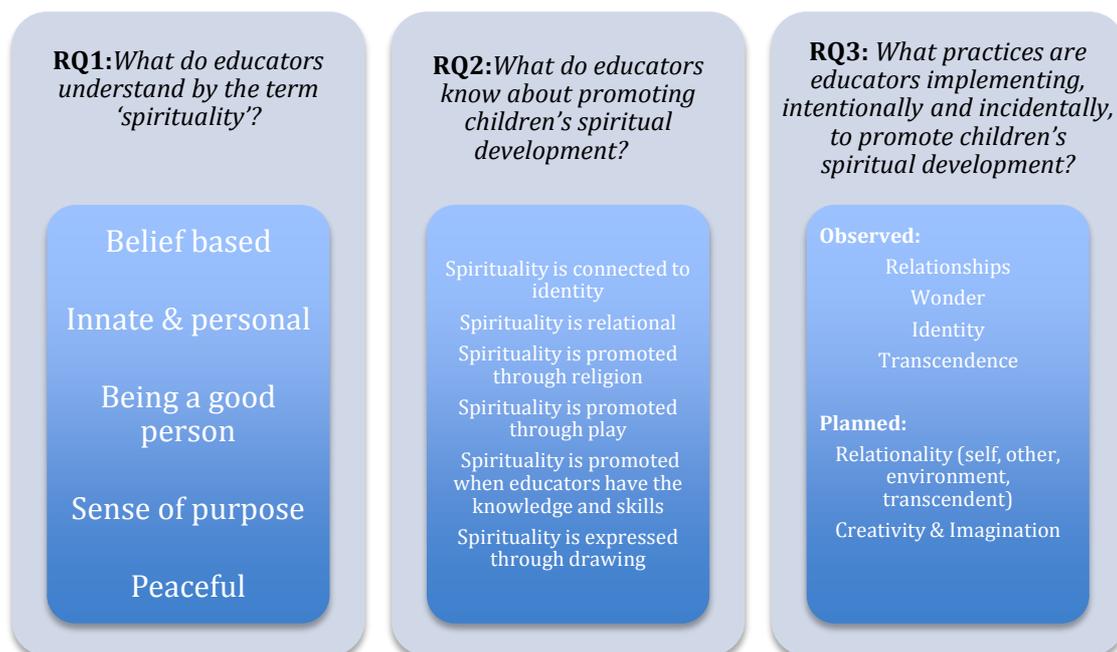


Figure 5.1. Key findings in response to each of the research questions.

5.2.1 Educators’ understandings of the term ‘spirituality’: Key findings.

Determining what educators themselves understood by the term ‘spirituality’ was gathered through semi-structured interviews. The most qualified educator for each

room, referred to as the lead educator, formed the participant sample. The lead educator was either a teacher (holding a four-year university teaching degree) or they were working towards this qualification. In all cases the lead educator held responsibility for the planning, documentation and implementation of the 3 to 4-year-old program. Existing literature suggested that educators must have developed and reflected upon their own sense of spirituality if they are to be able to provide opportunities to nurture the spirituality of the children they teach (Adams, 2009; Champagne, 2001). All educators in this investigation expressed difficulty when asked to describe a spiritual experience and to articulate their understanding of spirituality. Despite prompting for more detail or depth to the responses provided, educators' descriptions of spirituality were limited. The limited nature of educators' responses suggested that they either had not been provided, or sought, opportunities to develop and reflect upon their own spirituality. Toward the end of the interview, educators were asked about the professional development they had undertaken to ascertain any formal opportunities they may have had to reflect on their spirituality. It was clear from the responses provided that spirituality was absent from the professional development undertaken and largely also absent from initial teaching qualifications. Only one educator recalled spirituality as a topic within an undergraduate unit of study. Therefore, educators' understandings of spirituality were a result of the individuals' own personal experiences, rather than as a component of their qualifications. If educators are not provided with formal opportunities to develop and reflect on their own spirituality and additionally, if they themselves do not seek personal opportunities to do so, the task of attending to children's spirituality, as articulated in the literature (Adams, 2009; Champagne, 2001), is a challenging one.

The key findings in response to research question one, as illustrated in Figure 5.1, are focused on the analysis of the second interview question that explicitly asked educators to describe their personal understandings of spirituality. Spirituality was understood by educators to be connected to their own beliefs; perceived as innate and personal; concerned with being a good person; connected to their sense of purpose; and described as peaceful. These key findings are discussed in Section 5.2.1.1 through to 5.2.1.5 by providing insights gained from this investigation and with reference to existing literature.

5.2.1.1 Belief based.

Educators specifically used the word ‘beliefs’ when attempting to describe spirituality. When provided with the opportunity to elaborate on the basis and nature of these beliefs, educators’ articulation illustrated a narrow understanding of spirituality. Educators’ responses focussed on belief in God – singular. Although some educators spoke broadly initially, mentioning their belief in ‘something more’, their elaborations resulted in an explanation of their belief in one God. Consequently, educators demonstrated that their understanding of spirituality was predominantly of a religious nature and, more specifically, that this religious understanding was limited to a Christian religious interpretation.

Educators’ understandings of spirituality as connected to religious beliefs, and more specifically Christian religious beliefs, presented several limitations: that, for educators spirituality existed, not in a secular sense, but in a religious sense and second, that this religious sense was not multi-faith, it pertained only to Christianity. Additionally, as the overwhelming response to understanding spirituality related to religious beliefs, no connections were made to cultural beliefs and this emerged as the third limitation within educators’ responses.

With regard to the first limitation, educators connected their belief in ‘something more’ to what literature described as relationality with a transcendent or Ultimate Other (Hay & Nye, 1998; Long, 2000). Although relationality with a transcendent is a characteristic of spirituality found in existing literature, educators’ identification of this relationship as the predominant form of spirituality suggests they held a narrow understanding of the range of ways that spirituality can be interpreted. Interestingly, when asked explicitly about the connection or distinction between spirituality and religion, educators agreed that these two concepts were in fact distinct. Although educators emphasised the distinction between spirituality and religion, stating that one could be spiritual and not religious, the analysis of all interview responses revealed that educators were unable to validate this response.

In explaining spirituality as comprising a relationship with a transcendent, educators did not refer to spirituality as a component of religions other than Christianity, leading to the second limitation in educators’ understandings of spirituality. Educators all named the Ultimate Other ‘God’ in their explanation of spirituality being based on beliefs. In doing so, educators illustrated that for them, spirituality was a characteristic of Christian religions. Interestingly, educators acknowledged that belief in God was not confined to a particular religious tradition. However, in the way they described God, educators were illustrating a particularly Christian understanding of spirituality. In articulating one God, educators did not demonstrate any knowledge of spirituality as a characteristic of other world religions. For example, excluded from educators’ descriptions of spirituality were Hinduism that believes in many Gods and Buddhism that does not believe in any God or Gods.

Understanding spirituality as connected to their own Christian religious beliefs was further represented when educators recounted a spiritual experience of their own,

in response to the initial interview question. Educators blurred the lines between spirituality and religion by frequently selecting a specifically Christian religious experience when asked to recall a spiritual experience. Educators spoke of experiences of being at Mass in a church, attending Catholic rituals such as a Baptism, praying to God as well as drawing on their religious beliefs during difficult times such as the loss of a family member. It is recognised that providing a Christian religious experience as their chosen spiritual experience could be related to the unique religious context of the centres. The Catholic context of the childcare possibly influenced the responses that educators provided and these can be connected to what Rossiter (2011) articulated as religiosity. Religiosity is described as a spirituality clearly referenced to religious beliefs (Rossiter, 2011). Educators working in the context of Catholic childcare clearly articulated a sense of religiosity, rather than a secular understanding of spirituality.

The third limitation that emerged from educators' articulation of spirituality as based on their Christian religious beliefs was the omitting of cultural understandings of spirituality. In focussing on beliefs from a religious perspective, educators failed to articulate any understanding of spirituality as connected to culture. Indigenous culture, as an example, is described in the literature as having a land-based spirituality (Baskin, 2016). For indigenous cultures, spirituality involves the interconnectedness between life and land (Baskin, 2016) and so in contrast to religious beliefs, spirituality is expressed through the beliefs and traditions of the culture. The work of Skamp (1991) can also be drawn upon when discussing spirituality in a cultural sense. Skamp (1991) describes spirituality as having both a vertical and a horizontal connectedness. The horizontal is a relationship with the environment whilst the vertical connectedness is a sense of relationship to the generations of the past and those of the future and this is a significant relationship particularly for indigenous cultures. Regardless of the presence

of indigenous children within the centres, indigenous culture is central to all Australians and requires both acknowledgement and addressing.

Additionally, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* (Department of Education and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) outlines ‘cultural competence’ as one of eight pedagogical practices for early years’ educators. To practise cultural competence, educators must “respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16). The *EYLF*, as a nationally mandated document, sets out the requirement for educators to understand and communicate with diverse cultures as well as to promote children’s cultural competence. To promote children’s cultural competence includes nurturing children’s cultural backgrounds and making other children aware of diversity. However, cultural competence did not feature within educators’ understandings of spirituality.

5.2.1.2 Innate and personal.

Educators identified spirituality as an innately human characteristic. Educators’ responses that contributed to this theme were brief with little elaboration provided on this characteristic of spirituality. The identification of spirituality as innate transpired from educators’ responses that acknowledged the spiritual capacity alongside other developmental capacities (cognitive, emotional, physical and social). Educators described spirituality as a part of being human, a capacity within everyone, and as a personal attribute.

Acknowledging the spiritual capacity alongside the other developmental domains (cognitive, physical, emotional and social) is present within existing literature. Empirical research, such as the work of Robinson (1983), Coles (1990) and Watson (2000) all emphasise the innateness of spirituality in their investigations. Extensive

scholarly literature also supports this, for example the contributions of Hyde (2010), and Kim and Esquivel (2011). Of significance to the context of this investigation, the innateness of spirituality is explicitly noted in international policy, specifically within Article 17 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). More recently at the national level, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) explicitly states that, “children’s learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9).

Identifying the spiritual capacity as intrinsic to being human is a notable contribution from the educators in this investigation. However, it is also noteworthy that other than stating it to be so, educators were not able to elaborate on the nature or purpose of the spiritual capacity nor did any educator connect the spiritual capacity with the other developmental domains. As stated in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9) children’s learning and development is holistic with the developmental domains being viewed as interwoven and interrelated. A holistic approach to learning and development, advocated for in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) understands the way that the developmental domains are in relationship. Literature supports holistic approaches in education and there is an abundance of literature that explicates the relationships among the developmental domains (Cameron, 2009; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2006; Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2012; Wittmer, Petersen & Puckett, 2013). Specifically, the emotional and social domains of development are described as connected to spiritual development. Literature connects spiritual development with the concepts of identity development, (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; MacDonald, 2009; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012) positive wellbeing and the development of resilience (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery & Colwell, 2006;

Ratcliff & May, 2004; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012). Educators demonstrated little understanding of the connectedness between developmental domains. Specifically, no mention was made of the relationship among the spiritual, social and emotional domains. However, in a subsequent question regarding their beliefs and practices within early childhood, educators did describe their pedagogy as being socially and emotionally focussed. Educators valued attending to the social and emotional development of children, articulating that this is “first and foremost” (Educator 2: Centre C), suggesting that educators understood that attending to children’s social and emotional needs would assist their holistic development.

Furthermore, despite agreement that the spiritual capacity was intrinsic to being human, educators were unable to elaborate on this capacity in the same way they did when describing development across the social and emotional capacities of children. Educators mentioned the personal nature of spirituality, commenting that it was central to a person’s being. The sense of connection to self, to person’s sense of being, is recognised as a relational characteristic of spirituality, detailed by Hay and Nye (1998) as the ‘I-Self’ relationship. Educators, aside from acknowledging the existence of spirituality as innate and personal, were not able to elaborate further on the components of this ‘I-Self’ relationship. Elements of the ‘I-Self’ relationship that included the other developmental domains did arise in response to subsequent interview questions pertaining to research question two, discussed in Section 5.2.2. Responses regarding educators’ understandings of spirituality as innate and personal were limited to the acknowledgement that the spiritual was a component of the whole child.

It is necessary to acknowledge that in describing spirituality as part of being human, as innate, educators appeared to demonstrate an understanding of spirituality in

a secular sense, and to therefore go beyond a religious understanding. However, despite educators stating spirituality to be an innately human characteristic, all elaborations that followed contained a strong sense of their own religiosity (a religious spirituality). This insight calls into question whether educators were in fact personally religious or that the religious context of the centres influenced their practices, especially given that not all educators were Catholic (see Chapter One).

5.2.1.3 Being a good person.

It would appear that educators not only understood spirituality in terms of beliefs or characteristics, but also in terms of action. The insight that spirituality encompassed the act of being a good person was clearly evident from educators' responses. Educators moved beyond their previous, more conceptual, understandings of spirituality as an innate human capacity based on beliefs, to explain that a further characteristic of spirituality involved action. When articulating the innateness of spirituality, educators stated that it was central to a person's sense of being. In elaborating on spirituality as concerned with being a good person, educators were articulating spirituality to involve a particular way of being.

Being a good person implies having a values system and is connected to an individual's sense of morality. When spirituality is described in this way, it is concerned with the application of personal beliefs and values; it is the way an individual behaves in relation to others (Watson, 2000). Educators initially responded with broad phrases stating that spirituality involved 'being good' and 'doing good'. When prompted to explain the meaning of these phrases, educators described personal attributes of showing kindness, being generous, sharing, being respectful and accepting people for who they are. For educators, these attributes characterised a particular way of being that was understood as connected to spirituality.

An anecdote, provided by Educator 8: Centre A (Chapter Four, Section 4.2.2.3), illustrates the connection that was made between spirituality and values in action. Educator 8: Centre A chose to recount the anecdote when attempting to explain her own understanding of spirituality. The focus of the recount was the attribute of kindness. Kindness, Educator 8: Centre A explained, had been a focus in her room and at the end of a day she witnessed the independent act of kindness by a child, giving away his stickers to others. In choosing to recount this anecdote as a means of articulating her own understanding of spirituality highlighted the sense of values she perceived as inherent to spirituality. Educator 8: Centre A clearly valued kindness and viewed this to be connected to spirituality. Furthermore, the educator described her own feelings of pride in observing the child demonstrating kindness to others. The work of Hay and Nye (1998) is pertinent to Educator 8: Centre A's response. Hay and Nye (1998) acknowledged the value component of spirituality specifically in their 'value sensing' category (one of three categories they identified including 'awareness sensing' and 'mystery sensing'). One element of the value sensing category refers to an individual's sense of 'goodness' and this category draws attention to the relationality of the individual with others, however the 'other' is defined (other people, environment, God). Essentially, Educator 8: Centre A, whether conscious of it herself or not, was recounting a child engaged in 'value sensing'.

When describing the attributes of being a good person, educators in this study connected these attributes and values with their own religious interpretation of spirituality. Whilst articulating that spirituality involved action, educators described this action as based on the values connected to their religious beliefs. As presented in the findings, Educator 2: Centre C stated, "You know, I generally associate it with being a good person. You have these values behind you that are, well they're gospel

values aren't they. Being respectful, being kind and being a good person." Explicitly mentioning the gospel values as a guide for being a good person highlights two key findings: first, reference to the gospel values illustrates educators' sense of a religious spirituality –religiosity. Second, and again illustrative of the narrow understanding of spirituality shared by educators, this sense of religiosity was referenced specifically to Christianity. Similar to the way educators described both the innateness of spirituality and its connection to beliefs, educators limited their responses to a Christian perspective, offering no elaboration of how being a good person may be connected to other religions or cultures. As educators' responses focused on values connected to the teachings of Jesus, understandings of spirituality failed to acknowledge the existence of morals and values outside of Christianity. It was evident that, for educators, spirituality was not just about being a good person but about being a good Christian person.

Eaude's (2016) contribution to the connection between spirituality and morality can be drawn upon to add to this discussion of 'being a good person' as a characteristic of spirituality. Eaude (2016) considered spirituality as premised on morality or vice versa. Educators identified values as inherent to spirituality but these values went beyond beliefs to involve action. The actions described by educators, such as sharing, being generous, showing kindness and being tolerant of others all align with Eaude's (2016) exploration of duty ethics (what I ought to do) and virtue ethics (how can I live a good life). Eaude's (2016) explanation of both duty and virtue ethics becomes significant later in this chapter when educators' understandings of their practices to promote children's spirituality is explored.

5.2.1.4. Sense of purpose.

It was evident from educators' responses that, for them, spirituality was linked to having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. To have a sense of purpose and

meaning in life involves a quest or search (Adams, 2009; Miller, 2000). A sense of purpose, as a component of spirituality, stirs a person from within to ask fundamental life questions such as, “Who am I?” and “What is my influence?” Educators described spirituality as concerned with knowing who you are and who you want to become.

Describing spirituality as concerned with knowing who you are, suggests educators understood the connection between identity development and spirituality. The construct of identity involves the development of the self, referred to by Hay and Nye (1998) as the ‘I-Self’ relationship. Relationality with the self is an evolving process where an individual seeks to find answers to questions such as “Who am I?” Educator 1: Centre B described this as including “the sort of person you want to be” indicating that it is not restricted to who a person is at a particular time. Rather, having a sense of purpose also includes a future focus - who they want to become.

Furthermore, Educator 3: Centre C elaborated about spirituality being connected to a person’s sense of purpose by providing the example of Nelson Mandela. Educator 3: Centre C spoke of how Nelson Mandela had a strong sense of identity, stating that, “he knows what his main views are and he just knows what he’s supposed to be doing and things like that...It’s like having your identity, your meaning in life, just having a purpose. Knowing that purpose.” It was evident from Educator 3: Centre C’s response that spirituality was intrinsically connected to the deepest levels of the self and therefore central to the development of identity.

The theme of identity is closely tied to the concept of belonging. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) explicates belonging as, “knowing where and with whom you belong...Belonging acknowledges children’s interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities” (p. 7). To belong involves the sharing of a person’s identity with others and therefore implies a social dimension that goes beyond

the ‘I-Self’ relationship to include ‘I-Other’. When Educator 3: Centre C chose to draw on Nelson Mandela as an example of a spiritual man, one with meaning and purpose, it is possible to view this choice as a result of Nelson Mandela’s contribution to humanity, although this was not explicitly stated. The process of an individual finding “their place and purpose in the world” (Adams, 2009, p. 115) is one of meaning-making (Hay & Nye, 1998) that requires an inward search as well as an outward relationship with others.

Relationships are central to the development of identity and to belonging; it is what Hay and Nye (1998) referred to as relational consciousness. The inward relationship of ‘I-Self’ that facilitates identity development and contributes to a sense of belonging involves a search that is intrinsically connected to an individual’s quest for identity and purpose (Eaude, 2009). Educators provided no elaboration that included a sense of relationship with others when describing a sense of purpose as a characteristic of spirituality. The social dimension of having a sense of purpose that includes the impact or influence an individual has on another, is common within literature that addresses this characteristic of spirituality (Adams, 2009; Eaude, 2009). Bradford’s (1999) category of ‘practical spirituality’ specifically addresses this connection between the search for meaning and social commitment. However, educators did not connect having a sense of purpose with relationships or as part of a social dimension. Educators understood having a sense of purpose as a personal characteristic of spirituality.

5.2.1.5. Peaceful.

As a means of articulating what they understood by the term ‘spirituality’, educators generated a range of descriptive words that focused on how spirituality was experienced, or felt for them personally, and these were suitably portrayed by the theme ‘peaceful’. As stated previously, educators had difficulty articulating their own

understanding of spirituality. To overcome this, educators took to describing spirituality in terms of the way it was experienced or felt as connected to the experience they had recollected when asked about a spiritual experience. The educators used the experience they had recollected to assist them in articulating how they understood spirituality.

Educators spoke of spirituality enabling feelings of comfort and a sense of happiness. Being content and feeling relaxed were also described as features of a spiritual experience. The connection between spirituality and happiness resonates with existing literature (Bradford, 1999; Eade, 2009; Howell, Passmore & Buro, 2013). In particular, this connection is made within Bradford's (1999) category of 'human spirituality'. A 'human spirituality' according to Bradford (1999) is one that meets the needs of the individual at a human level. In this instance, the pursuit of happiness is a component of the individual's humanity concerned with the need to be content and to have a positive sense of wellbeing. The development of a positive sense of wellbeing is further elaborated on in the work of Howell, Passmore and Buro (2013) where happiness is viewed both as a component of the positive development of wellbeing and spirituality. Educators were unable to explicitly articulate the connection between feeling happy (when experiencing something spiritual) and the development of wellbeing. However, Educator 5: Centre A appeared to recognise, at the very least, that spirituality provided the opportunity to develop positive dispositions and feelings of contentment by stating that peace, as a characteristic of spirituality, was the absence of worry and concern.

Many educators recalled a spiritual experience that they described as personal and reflective. In articulating how they felt during these personal and reflective experiences, educators described feeling at peace and content. Often the experience

included quiet moments and some also incorporated music. Literature asserts the connection between reflective moments, which can include music and mediation, as a medium for spiritual connection (Bellous & Csinos, 2009). The descriptions provided by educators further highlighted their understanding of spirituality as personal, emphasising an inward relationship; a relationality of 'I-Self' (Hay & Nye, 1998).

Educators not only described their spiritual experience as peaceful and personal, but many also explained that this personal moment occurred whilst in a community. The community that educators referred to was a Christian religious community. Educators moved from a secular understanding of spirituality (as moments of feeling peaceful) and then continued to provide a particular religious context and understanding of spirituality. Educators provided examples such as attending their child's Baptism and attending Mass in a bush setting. Educators explained how they felt peaceful in these moments that provided a personal, individual experience whilst simultaneously being in community. Educators' elaborations of feeling at peace whilst in a Christian religious community highlighted their own sense of religiosity as well as the understanding of spirituality from a specifically Christian perspective. In addition, the examples provided by educators could further suggest that the Catholic context of the centre influenced their responses.

5.2.1.6. Summary of educators' understandings of spirituality.

A key finding in response to research question one was that educators understood spirituality as referenced to Christianity - a Christian religiosity. It would appear from this finding that there exists a connection between the Catholic context of the childcare centres and the educators' personal understandings of spirituality; the Catholic context of the childcare may have influenced educators in providing Christian religious understandings of spirituality or it could be that these educators were drawn to the Catholic childcare centres because it aligned with their religious beliefs. What is clear

is that educators understood a Christian religious spirituality for them personally. When articulating spirituality to be based on beliefs, innate and personal, about being a good person, connected to a sense of purpose and as a feeling of peace, educators communicated a Christian perspective.

Additionally, a finding emerged regarding the gap that existed in educators' responses. In emphasising a Christian understanding of spirituality, educators provided no elaboration on spirituality in connection to other world religions or that reflected their own cultural competence. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) articulates cultural competence as a pedagogical practice for educators, yet it was evident that educators did not perceive this practice to be connected to spirituality. Although educators' initial interview responses often began in a secular sense, explanations that followed became narrow with spirituality being described from a Christian perspective. In omitting a sense of cultural competence, including religious diversity, from their understandings of spirituality, it is possible to question whether educators viewed all *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) pedagogical practices through a specifically Christian lens.

Finally, a further finding was the identification of how educators had come to their understanding of spirituality. It was found that the understandings of spirituality that emerged were almost solely based on the educators' own life experiences, as opposed to any formal professional development on the subject. With only one educator recalling the topic of spirituality from an undergraduate unit of study and no professional development opportunities reported, educators had only their life experiences to draw upon. No opportunities for spiritual reflection and development had been provided to them as educators.

5.2.2 What educators know about promoting children’s spiritual development: Key findings.

Both interview data and observational data were utilised to respond to research question two. Research question two focussed on determining educators’ knowledge about promoting children’s spiritual development. Figure 5.2 provides an overview of the super-ordinate themes that resulted from the analysis of both the observational data as well as the interview questions pertinent to this research question (Interview question three: *How do you think children express their spirituality?*; Interview questions four and five analysed collectively: *How do you think children’s spirituality can be promoted and nurtured?*; *What types of opportunities do you think you provide in your room to assist children to develop within the spiritual domain?*).

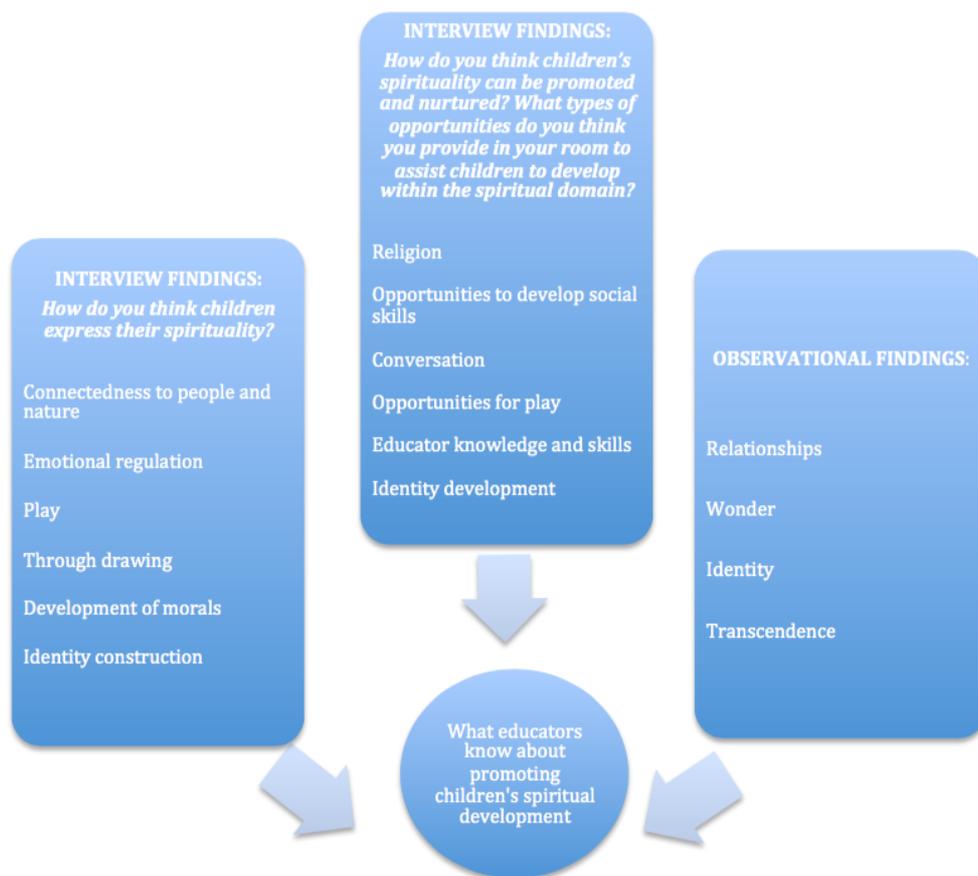


Figure 5.2 Emergent themes from the interview and observational findings in response to research question two.

To facilitate the critical discussion of findings concerning educators' knowledge about promoting children's spirituality, it was necessary to synthesise the themes illustrated in Figure 5.1. Commonalities as well as distinctions emerged from the findings regarding what educators could articulate about promoting children's spirituality and what was observed that educators knew through their actual practices. To synthesise the interview themes, an initial process of identifying similarities occurred, for example, 'identity construction' emerged in the findings from interview question three and 'identity development' emerged from the findings to interview questions four and five. 'Identity' was also an emergent theme from the observational data. As a result, 'spirituality is connected to identity' was formed as the synthesised theme. Figure 5.3 illustrates the process of synthesising the interview themes. The observational themes are presented in Figure 5.3 where they align with the interview themes, that is, where similarities were found. The connections or distinctions between themes from the interview data with themes from the observational data are discussed within each synthesised theme in Sections 5.2.2.1 through 5.2.2.6: spirituality is connected to identity; spirituality is relational; spirituality is promoted through religion; spirituality is promoted through play; spirituality is promoted when educators have the knowledge and skills; and spirituality is expressed through drawing.

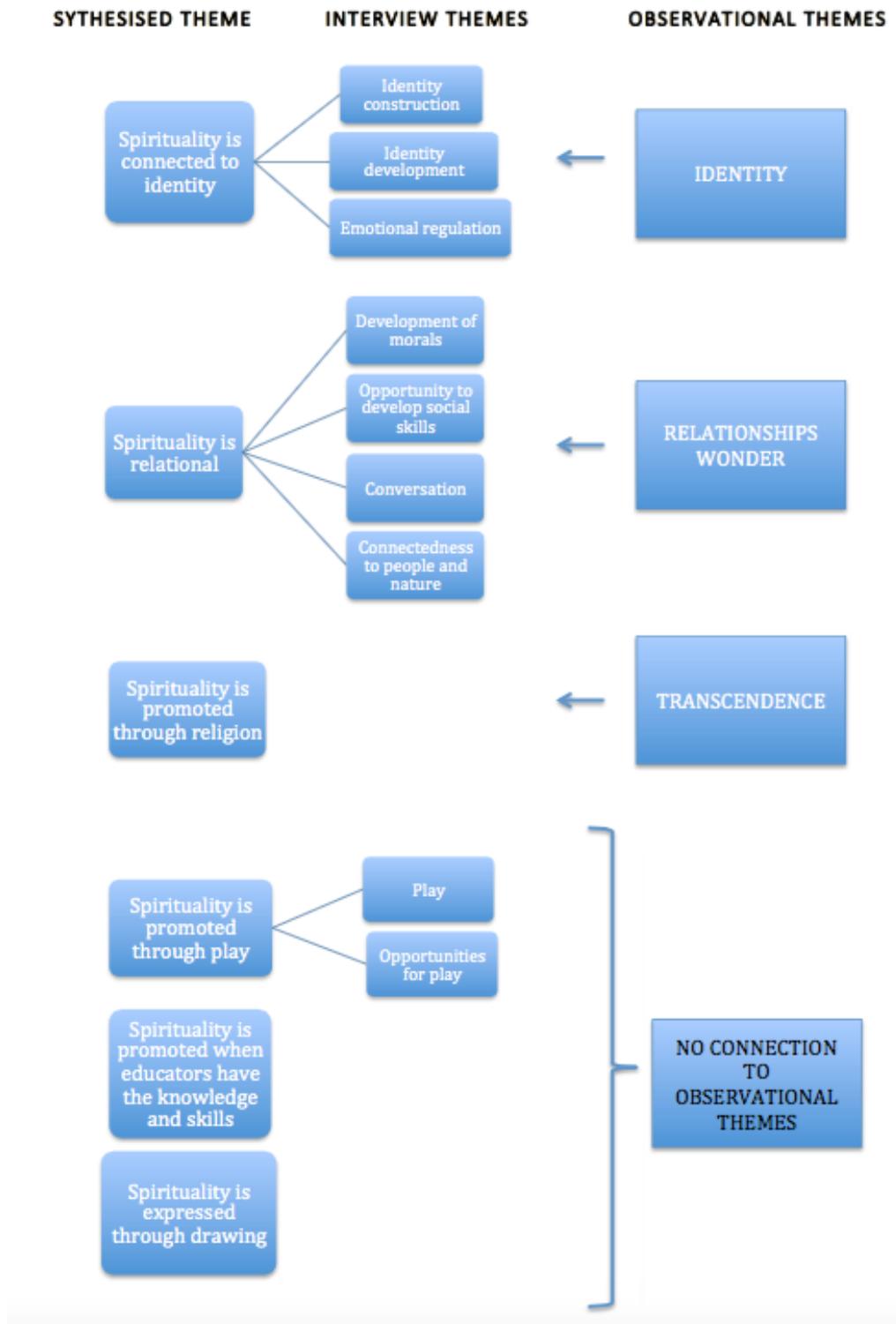


Figure 5.3 Synthesis of interview and observational themes in response to research question two.

5.2.2.1 Spirituality is connected to identity.

‘Spirituality is connected to identity’ emerged as a key finding across both the interview and observational data. Educators articulated, and were observed in practice, promoting children’s sense of identity as a means of promoting their spiritual development. Identity is a broad term, described within the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) as concerned with questions such as “‘Who I am’, ‘how I belong’ and ‘what is my influence?’” (p. 20). Children’s identity is developed when they perceive themselves to be respected and worthwhile; when they develop secure attachments with others; and as they come to understand their own culture, heritage, gender and contribution to the world (DEEWR, 2009). Essentially, identity is so integral to the person, that it embodies a relationship with the self.

Educators articulated that they understood children expressed their spirituality through their identity. Specifically, educators identified that in facilitating children’s positive self-perception and sense of belonging, as components of their identity, they could potentially promote children’s spiritual development. In particular, educators spoke of the need to facilitate children’s self-awareness and to implement strategies that encouraged children to find out about their heritage. The findings from the interview data resonate with existing literature on spiritual development.

The connection between spiritual development and identity development is well documented in the literature (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; MacDonald, 2009; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012; Watson, 2000). Spirituality is recognised as having an inward focus (Watson, 2000) that Hay and Nye (1998) describe as an awareness of the ‘I-Self’ relationship. The ‘I-Self’ relationship involves an exploration of the self (Adams, 2009) and thus features a quest for identity (Eaude, 2009). Encompassed within literature linking spirituality with identity are the constructs of resilience and wellbeing (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery & Colwell, 2006; Ratcliff & May, 2004;

Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012) as well as the search for meaning (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen & Roehlkepartain, 2012; Eade, 2009). Watson's (2000) study, previously mentioned, found that participants described spirituality to be deeply connected to their core or intuitive self. Comparably, educators in this investigation explained the need to facilitate children's development of their inner self, in an attempt to promote children's spiritual development. Educators identified the need for children to develop self-awareness, to understand and manage their own emotions, to understand right from wrong and the consequences of their actions as a means of assisting their identity and therefore for the promotion of spiritual development.

It is particularly noteworthy to draw attention to educators' articulation of children's emotional regulation as a means of expressing their spirituality. Several existing studies pose that spirituality can act as a protective factor against mental illness as children are more able to respond positively to adversity when they have developed a positive sense of self (Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012). Educators in this study referred to emotional-regulation as a component of identity that they sought to facilitate. Specifically, educators described facilitating children to solve their own conflicts, manage their own emotions and to respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Although educators did not articulate whether they were aware of spiritual development acting as a protective factor, they were evidently aware that a connection exists between facilitating children's identity and promoting their spirituality.

Observational findings reinforced educators' understandings that children aged 3 to 4 years required opportunities to develop their own identity. Educators were observed attending to children's development of resilience, self-regulation, facilitating their wellbeing and encouraging independence. Facilitating children's resilience and the ability to self-regulate emotions were both articulated and observed as practices

that educators used to promote children's spiritual development. Resilience was facilitated when educators encouraged children to persevere with tasks. Educators were observed facilitating children's ability to self-regulate when they attended to their emotional needs, speaking with children about ways to communicate their feelings and to express them appropriately (see Chapter Four Section 4.3.3).

Educators did not explicitly state the facilitation of wellbeing and independence as responses regarding how children express their spirituality or what they could do to promote this capacity. The observational findings, in contrast, illustrated that educators understood wellbeing and independence to be connected to the development of the child's inner self, and therefore these were viewed as connected to spiritual development. When individuals have a strong self-concept, they are more likely to cope with difficult life events by drawing on their spiritual capacity (Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012). When individuals develop a sense of satisfaction or a sense of happiness, wellbeing is promoted (Eaude, 2009).

This was evident, for example, in the practices of Educator 5: Centre A who was observed speaking with children about giving compliments that she termed 'warm fuzzies', and in doing so was facilitating children's wellbeing. Reflection was also observed as a practice that indicated educators' knowledge of how spirituality could be promoted. Reflective opportunities afforded children the opportunity to feel calm, to become more self-aware, to look inward and to reflect on their actions and relationships, and therefore these opportunities assist children's overall sense of wellbeing (Barblett & Maloney, 2010). Similarly, educators encouraged children to be independent, again demonstrating their knowledge of children's need to develop their sense of agency and voice, intrinsic to development of the self. Educators' use of

routine and the provision of choice were observed as promoting children as capable and competent and therefore contributing to their identity development.

Overall, although educators were evidently aware that spirituality and identity were connected, their articulation of this connection lacked detail. Several characteristics of identity development provided by the educators echoed central themes in literature on children's spirituality (Nye, 2009; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012). The inability of educators to add depth to these characteristics (such as wellbeing and the search for meaning), as well as those characteristics that were omitted from the responses (such as deep personal questioning (Miller, 2000)) indicate that educators are, at the very least, unsure of how spirituality can be promoted through children's development of identity.

5.2.2.2 Spirituality is relational.

Educators demonstrated their knowledge of the relational nature of spirituality. When asked how children express their spirituality and how spirituality could be promoted, the 'I-Other' relationship was emphasised. Educators, during the interview, echoed the notion of spirituality being a personal experience that reveals itself in community (Love & Talbot, 1999). Similarly, observations of educators' practices revealed a strong focus on children's relationality with others. Educators' recognition of the relational as a characteristic of spirituality is evident in existing literature (Harris, 2007; Hay & Nye, 1998; Myers, 1997). Although literature identifies several components to relationality (self, other, world, transcendent), educators' most commonly referred to aspects within the theme of relationality were the sense of connectedness amongst children and between children and nature (I-World).

Encompassed within educators' understandings of spirituality as a relational construct was a focus on connectedness with people through conversation. Conversation was clearly valued by educators with several educators' articulating the

provision of time for conversation to occur as well as highlighting the importance of everyday conversation as a means they were aware of to promote children's spiritual development. In acknowledging conversation as an aspect of relationality, educators elaborated on the importance of educators modelling how to engage others in conversation as well as facilitating conversations between children. Further to this, observations of educators' practices illustrated that the facilitation of conversations was utilised by educators as a key practice for the promotion of children's spirituality.

Conversation as an aspect of relationality with others is connected to the understanding in the literature that relationships, both negative and positive, impact children's holistic development (Myers, 1997). Conversation, as a component of relationship, provides for the sharing of ideas, information and experiences – a sharing of the self. The facilitation of social conversations, particularly those that encourage sustained shared thinking, are a recognised essential feature of high-quality early childhood pedagogy (Sylva, Taggart, Siraj-Blatchford, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, Gilden & Bell, 2007). Everyday conversations offer the potential for spiritual development (Bone, 2005). When educators responded that through the facilitation of conversations they were able to promote children's spirituality, they were touching on the connection between 'I-Self' (identity) and the concept of belonging (Harris, 2007). Conversation as a feature of relationships assists children to feel that they belong to a community, and this is recognised as a component of spirituality (Harris, 2007).

The identification, by educators, of conversation as a component of relationality that can be facilitated to promote children's spirituality is significant. Educators clearly understood that by assisting children to engage in conversation with their peers and educators, they were also assisting children's sense of belonging and attending to their spiritual development. However, whilst identified, little detail was provided regarding

the nature of these conversations, such as the topics of conversation and the particular skills inherent to conversation and how these could be connected to spirituality.

Within the theme of relationality, educators blurred the concepts of morality and social skill development when describing that both were understood, for them, to be avenues for promoting children's spiritual development. Interview findings suggested that educators themselves were unclear of how to separate social skill development from morality. Friendship also emerged as a construct when educators described both concepts. Educators tended to explicitly refer to the provision of opportunities for children to develop their social skills, which then commonly led to an example involving friendship. Educators contributed examples of social skills that they facilitated such as; resolving conflict, facilitating sharing and encouraging children to invite others into play. The 'I-Other' relationship is a sense of connectedness with people that goes beyond the notion of friendships to be concerned with how a person finds their place in the world, in relation to those around them (Myers, 1997).

Relationality with other people is much more than having the skills to be in relationship, instead involving a consciousness, or awareness, of *how* the self is in relationship. It is necessary to acknowledge that the development of friendships, and the skills to be in relationship with others, are considered appropriate pedagogical practices given the age of the children in this investigation (3 to 4-year-olds) (DEEWR, 2009). However, at a deeper level, educators were unable to articulate any knowledge of how their facilitation of children's friendships assisted their opportunity to attend to children's spiritual development.

In contrast, morality is understood in the literature as distinct from the concepts of friendship and social skills development. Morality can be described as comprising 'duty ethics' that is, distinguishing right from wrong and 'virtue ethics' that is

concerned with what it means to be ‘good’ both as an individual and for society (Eaude, 2016). Morality involves reflective thought and action, requiring an iterative process whereby understanding what is moral is reconceptualised as an individual has new experiences (Eaude, 2016). Educators contributed responses regarding children’s spirituality that illustrated an understanding primarily focused on ‘duty ethics’ and this understanding comprised values that blurred with the concepts of friendship and the development of social skills. This could be seen particularly in Educator 2: Centre C’s response, “I think more so in the values...you know...being kind to friends.” Educator 2: Centre C identified the opportunity to promote children’s spirituality through developing values and then connected this to the concept of friendship.

Similarly, other educators included values such as compassion, kindness and respect as components of morality linked to spirituality. For example, Educator 3: Centre C responded that “Being kind to each other, sharing, speaking nicely, respecting others, that sort of thing” were the values that she promoted to attend to children’s spiritual development. Findings suggest that educators were able to connect these values to the development of morals, yet morality encompasses so much more. The depth to morality, such as that referred to in ‘virtue ethics’, was not evident in educators’ understandings regarding children’s spiritual development. However, when describing their own personal understanding of spirituality, educators referred to ‘being a good person’, inclusive of both duty and virtue ethics (See Section 5.2.1.3). Specifically, the notion of awareness – a conscious reflection on one’s own actions, was not provided in educators’ explanations of morality as a means of promoting children’s spiritual development. In essence, educators did not possess the language to articulate the dimensions of morality and how, whilst complementary, morality is distinct from the skills of social development and friendship.

Children's moral sensitivity is espoused in Hay and Nye's (2006) category 'value sensing' as describing children's awareness and expression of good and bad. Describing spirituality in connection to morality acknowledges the relational dimension (Hyde, 2008) as an individual outwardly expresses their understanding of what is right and what is good. 'Value sensing', as a category to describe children's spirituality, is concerned with moral dilemmas of right and wrong, and includes the quest for ultimate meaning (Hyde, 2008). Although educators did not specifically mention children's ability to respond to moral dilemmas within the concept of morality, the anecdotes used by educators suggested their awareness of this connection. In particular, Educator 8: Centre A retold an observation where she had witnessed a child demonstrating kindness to others by making a choice to share their stickers. This anecdote was discussed in Section 5.2.1.3 as an illustration of the educators' personal understanding of spirituality as concerned with being a good person. Additionally, this same anecdote illustrates Educator 8: Centre A's interpretation that this act of kindness, by the child, was a right or 'good' choice, suggesting that spirituality was connected to morality. Educator 8: Centre A was able to more easily articulate her own understanding of spirituality by describing it in relation to promoting children's spiritual development.

Educators moved beyond the 'I-Other' relational aspect of spirituality, when the 'other' is a person, to include relationality with the natural environment. An awareness that the natural environment provided an opportunity to promote children's spiritual development was clearly evident in the findings. However, similarly to the before mentioned aspects of relationality, educators experienced difficulty finding the language to explain this connection, providing little depth to their responses. Educators demonstrated an understanding that children enjoyed experiencing a connection with

the natural world, which literature asserts can “ultimately lead to increased happiness and well-being” (Howell, Passmore & Buro, 2013, p. 1683). Educator 5: Centre A relayed the following observation in an attempt to describe her knowledge of the way children express spirituality:

Children express it in many different ways. Something that we do often, actually, is go out into the senior school playground and we’ve got these beautiful big trees there and the children call the one tree the Grandpa Tree and they go out and hug it and feel the rough bark and will lie down under his branches and look up. And I probably refer to the tree as a ‘he’ as well so that the children have evolved from that their idea of the Grandpa Tree. They really love it and it’s very special to them to be able to go out to it. So I think that’s one way that children show their spirituality.

There are several insights to be gained from Educator 5: Centre A’s response. First, the response illustrates her knowledge of the ‘I-World’ aspect of relationality as a characteristic of spirituality. The sense of connection between an individual and the natural environment is acknowledged in existing literature that asserts sensitivity to nature as central to spirituality (Louv, 2012). In regards to children’s spirituality, the work of Harris (2016) can be drawn upon. Harris (2016) identifies that the provision of “enriching outdoor space that offers opportunities to experience nature” (p. 91) is a means of nurturing children’s spiritual awareness. Children are drawn to the sensory experience that the natural environment offers (Harris, 2016). Educator 5: Centre A’s response indicates an understanding of the need to provide time for children to be engaged with the physicality of nature as a practice for promoting spiritual development.

Secondly, the naming of the tree is significant. The personification of the tree, in particular the selection of ‘Grandpa’ further emphasises the relational aspect of spirituality. Intergenerational relationships are identified as important to spirituality (Harris, 2016; Powell, 2009). The relationship between child and grandparent is often described as a nurturing, caring relationship where children are afforded the opportunity to experience an appreciation for the past (Daleo, 1996; Harris, 2016). Whether the naming of the tree was initiated by the educator or the children, the educators’ facilitation of the name ‘Grandpa Tree’ suggests an understanding of children’s desire to feel connected to nature, as a means of expressing their spirituality.

Educator 5: Centre A, whilst describing relationality with nature as a component of children’s spiritual development, illustrated a further key understanding – the role of wonder within spirituality. Wonder is the basis of spirituality (Fuller, 2006; Wolf, 1996). Following her account of the Grandpa Tree, Educator 5: Centre A was probed regarding why the children may have liked the tree. Educator 5: Centre A added, “With children, it’s a sense of wonder and awe for sure...It really is wonder-*full*.” The experience of wonder directed at nature is a recurring theme in literature. Nature offers the opportunity for curiosity, joy and fun, facilitating imaginative play and inquiry (Harris, 2016). Wonder is relational in that it causes an individual to go beyond the perspective of the self to ‘wonder’ about new possibilities (Fuller, 2006; Harris, 2016). Essentially, a sense of connectedness to nature opens an individual to an appreciation of the natural beauty of creation (Harris, 2016). Children are described as natural ‘wonder-ers’, with an innate desire to engage with the surprises and joys of nature (Harris, 2016) as was evident in Educator 5: Centre A’s response.

It is worth noting that although educators’ explanations overall were brief regarding their knowledge of the connection with nature as a characteristic of

spirituality, relationality with the natural environment did feature within educators' own recollections of a spiritual moment. Educators themselves associated moments in nature, such as being close to the ocean or in a bush setting with a spiritual experience. Paradoxically, nature featured more prominently in educators' own experiences of spirituality than in their responses regarding children's spirituality.

To summarise, three key findings emerged within educators' identification that children's spirituality is relational. First, findings clearly illustrated that the language of spirituality was beyond the scope of educators' discourses. Educators were able to identify but not explain or describe what they knew about promoting children's spiritual development. Observational data illustrated that educators engaged children in relational practices that provided an opportunity for spiritual development to occur. However, it is also necessary to consider that relational practices during observation may have been based on early years' pedagogical practices rather than from a spirituality perspective. The practices adopted by educators that emerged from the observational findings are discussed in Section 5.2.3.

The second key finding pertains to educators' limited knowledge on the relationship between child and nature as a characteristic of spirituality. The awareness that a connection to the natural environment is somehow related to spirituality was evident, although not explained. In addition, educators placed more emphasis on the 'I-World' relationship for their own spirituality in comparison to their knowledge of children's spiritual development.

Finally, the connection to wonder as a characteristic of spirituality, linked particularly to relationality with nature, was limited. Children's enchantment with the natural environment and the sensory opportunities it afforded were recognised as offering an opportunity for spiritual development. However, these explanations

illustrated a limited understanding of the foundational role of wonder within children's spiritual development.

5.2.2.3 Spirituality is promoted through religion.

Educators articulated that children's spirituality could be promoted through religion. The connection between spirituality and religion was a theme evident throughout the findings. Educators' own understandings of spirituality (see Section 5.2.1) suggested a clear sense of religiosity, whereby spirituality was perceived from a religious perspective. This understanding of a religious spirituality resonated with educators' beliefs about how children's spirituality could be promoted and additionally, was reflective of their practice (see Section 5.2.3).

Educators described a range of religious beliefs and practices that they deemed promoted children's spirituality. Educators explained that they promoted children's spirituality when they spoke about God and when they made children aware of God's creation. Religious practices were identified more specifically, with educators naming prayer as a practice that engaged children's spirituality. In addition, educators identified sharing bible stories, going to church and undertaking the practice of saying 'God bless you' as practices for promoting spirituality.

The distinct, yet complementary, relationship between spirituality and religion was a difficult construct for educators to articulate. Although educators were able to name specific religious beliefs and practices that could be engaged to promote children's spirituality, the characteristics of spirituality that these beliefs and practices related to were not explained. Several limitations within educators' identification of religion as a means to promote children's spirituality were therefore evident. The first of these limitations lies within the identification of religion itself. Educators were unable to describe the characteristics of religion that enabled it to promote children's spirituality. The connection itself resonates with existing literature, where relationality

between 'I-God' is recognised as a feature of spirituality alongside 'I-Self', 'I-Other' and 'I-World' (Hay & Nye, 2006). Omitted from educators' responses was the understanding that the 'I-God' relationship is manifest in the sense of going beyond – beyond the self, the other and the world, to the transcendent (Scheindlin, 1999; Scott, 2003). Essentially, the connection to an 'Ultimate Other' as a relationship that transcends the experience of the 'here and now' was not overtly acknowledged by educators, suggesting that, for them, spirituality was understood to be promoted primarily through specific religious beliefs and practices.

Through educators' explanations of religious beliefs and practices that could promote children's spirituality, a second limitation in their understandings emerged. It would appear that educators had a limited understanding of the existence of spirituality as a human capacity that can be drawn upon to raise religious awareness. Rather, educators' responses suggested that religious beliefs and practices existed initially and could be used to raise spiritual awareness. This distinction is significant as, if educators premise spiritual development on religion, critical characteristics of spirituality are omitted. In particular, by premising spiritual development on religion, a key component of spirituality is overlooked – wonder. Wonder is espoused as the basis of spirituality and is described in the work of Hay and Nye (2006). Hay and Nye (2006) use the term 'Mystery sensing' to describe one of their three categories of spiritual sensitivity. 'Mystery sensing' describes children's sense of fascination, wonder, awe and mystery that can open a relationship with a transcendent (Hay & Nye, 2006). Wonder is referred to in the literature as a reaching out in response to the world (Ratcliff & May, 2004) that facilitates the 'I-God' relationship as an individual seeks to go beyond the self. Goodliff's (2013) empirical work with infants highlights the transcendent nature of wonder, stating that wonder involves "moments of care and

compassion, inner-reflection, transcendence and the meaning-making of identity” (p. 1067). The use of wonder as a characteristic of spirituality was not referred to in educators’ responses when describing that religion was a means of promoting children’s spirituality and this is viewed as a limitation within educators’ knowledge.

The third limitation within educators’ identification of religion as a means for promoting children’s spirituality emerged from their understanding of religiosity from a specifically Christian perspective. As with their own personal understanding of spirituality, educators spoke of Christian (and some more specifically Catholic) beliefs and practices as the means they adopted to promote children’s spirituality. Several educators acknowledged the presence of non-Catholics in their rooms, although this acknowledgement did not influence their responses to include other world religions. The lack of attention given to other religions presents an understanding that spirituality belongs to Christian faiths, when this is not the case. Spirituality is a universal human capacity (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Hyde, 2010) that exists separate from religion (van der Zee & Tirri, 2009; Tacey, 2000). Hodder (2007) proposes that spirituality must be unlocked from religion, it must be un-tethered to religion (Alexander & McLaughlin, 2003) to enable communication amongst varying cultures and religions. However, Hodder (2007) also acknowledges the challenge inherent in distinguishing between spirituality and religion when both are very individualised, personal constructs.

Furthermore, educators in Catholic schools are challenged to acknowledge the religious diversity present amongst the children in their rooms. *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 6) specifically addresses non-Catholics in the context of Catholic schools, outlining that educators have a responsibility to ensure the religious freedom of

individuals and to respect their beliefs and practices. Educators in this investigation were in no way disrespectful of religious diversity, though they were unable to articulate an acknowledgement nor an understanding of how spirituality could be promoted from a diverse religious perspective.

Interestingly, when asked explicitly, educators described that spirituality could exist autonomously from religion, although this was overshadowed by their descriptions of their own personal spirituality from a religious perspective and similarly, through their explanations of how to promote children's spirituality. However, literature asserts that there does exist an interconnectedness between spirituality and religion; they overlap, but do not coincide (Ostow, 2006). Commonly, literature emphasises that it is through the spiritual capacity that a transcendent relationship can develop, and thus religious affiliations can be formed - spirituality is the starting point (Bone, 2008; Bussing, Foller-Mancini, Gidley & Heusser, 2010). Educators' responses revealed that when it came to understanding religion as a means for promoting children's spirituality, they were limited either by their own sense of a Catholic religiosity or by the Catholic context of the centre. Additionally, in focusing on religion as a basis for spirituality, rather than vice versa, characteristics of spirituality that could be drawn upon to raise religious awareness were not explored.

5.2.2.4 Spirituality is promoted through play.

Implicit in educators' responses was a belief in play as the primary pedagogical practice for children aged 3 to 4 years. Unlike the previously explored themes, findings that contributed to the theme 'spirituality is promoted through play' emerged solely from the interview data, as opposed to including findings from the observation data (See Figure 5.3). Play is described as being at the heart of early childhood education and care (Colliver & Flear, 2016) and as such, is advocated for as a fundamental pedagogical approach in the early years (DEEWR, 2009). Findings were indicative that

educators' valued play as a practice within their rooms and consequently identified play as a practice for promoting children's spiritual development.

Educators' knowledge of play, both as a pedagogical practice in early childhood as well as in relation specifically to spirituality, appeared to be simplistic. This was apparent in the lack of detail that educators were able to provide when articulating how play was implemented as a practice in their room, and in attempting to connect this to children's spirituality. As with previously mentioned responses, educators demonstrated insufficient language to be able to effectively explain their practice. The level of specificity offered in regards to play was the contribution of the term 'play-based' as the leading approach to describe their practice.

A play-based approach within early childhood refers to the inclusion of play within an intentionally planned and directed educational program (DEEWR, 2009). A play-based approach upholds the characteristics of play, namely: freedom of choice, play as an intrinsically motivating task, and a focus on process rather than product (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). Educators, when asked to describe their beliefs and practices within early childhood, identified that a play-based approach best encapsulated their current pedagogy. When questioned on play as a means to promote children's spirituality and to therefore make the connection between their 'play-based' pedagogical approach and play as a practice for spiritual development, educators offered specific types of play: dramatic play and sensory play. Although not articulated by the educators, both dramatic play and sensory play engage with children's sense of imagination, creativity and encourage inquiry. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) that underpins early childhood practice explains that a play-based approach is viewed as providing a context for children's learning that facilitates curiosity and creativity and which leads to a strong sense of wellbeing. Although not explicit within educators'

responses, their focus on a play-based approach indicates some understanding of its importance for children's learning and development.

Educators' specific naming of dramatic play and sensory play in relation to promoting children's spirituality also resonates with literature that maintains the relationality of spirituality (Hay & Nye, 2006). Play can be viewed as a means for experiencing a sense of connectedness with self, others, nature and a transcendent. Through dramatic play children are afforded the opportunity to promote many of the characteristics of spirituality identified in the literature; to take on the role of another and therefore explore their own identity – 'I-Self' (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996; MacDonald, 2009; Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012); to be creative and use their imagination – 'I-Self' (Harris, 2013); and to develop cooperative skills and explore morality – 'I-Self' and 'I-Other' (Eaude, 2016). Through sensory play, characteristics of spirituality are also acknowledged; an individual engages their imagination and creativity – 'I-Self' (Harris, 2013; ter Avest & McDougall, 2014). Sensory play also offers the opportunity to experience wonder and delight (Ng, 2012) which can be directed at the natural environment (Schein, 2013) – 'I-World'. This can lead to a sense of mystery and transcendence – 'I-God' (Hay & Nye, 1998).

Educators' contribution of 'play' as a practice they understood could promote children's spirituality, aligns with literature on contemporary perspectives of the child. Contemporary perspectives, as outlined in Chapter Two (Section 2.4), conceptualise the child as capable and confident, possessing agency and voice (Leff Dahl & Hagglund, 2006; Sevon, 2015; Walton, 2015). Contemporary perspectives value children's right to be active in decision making processes and encourage independence as a component of children's identity development (Duff, 2012). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) also promotes this view of the child, advocating that children are active learners

with the capability to both initiate and lead their own learning. Educators' emphasis on choice as a feature of children's play in their rooms resonates with contemporary perspectives of the child. This was particularly apparent in Educators 6: Centre B's explanation of how play was implemented as a practice in her room:

The children get to choose what area of play they want to go to, or they can ask an educator and we can set something up for them. It's all free play, so they do what they want to do – it's teaching them to make decisions, make a choice...

Existing literature specifically addresses the role of the educator in facilitating children's play to promote spiritual development. *Spirituality in the Early Years* (Catholic Education Office Rockhampton, 2012) explicates the role of educators to awaken and nurture children's spirituality through the provision and facilitation of opportunities that support learning through play, in particular, the inclusion of experiences that engage children's creativity, imagination and sense of wonder. Although educators did not possess the language to articulate the characteristics of spirituality that could be developed through play, it is appropriate to summate that the contribution of dramatic and sensory play, as specific play types connected to spirituality, indicates an understanding of some of these characteristics inherent in play experiences.

5.2.2.5 Spirituality is promoted when educators have the knowledge and skills.

Educators demonstrated a sense of self-awareness when explicating practices to promote children's spiritual development. Educators were able to self-identify that their own understandings of spirituality and consequently their knowledge and skills for promoting children's spirituality, were limited. In particular, educators expressed confusion between the concepts of spirituality and religion, and recognised that both knowledge and skills were required to enable the promotion of children's spirituality.

Educators' own sense of a specifically Christian religiosity emerged as they explained their need for a greater understanding of knowledge and skills associated with promoting children's spirituality. Specifically, educators referred to gaining background knowledge to the bible stories they shared with the children. Educator 2: Centre C response illustrates this and additionally demonstrates her limited Christian religious knowledge that she had connected to spirituality. Educator 2: Centre C explained her need to learn specific Christian religious vocabulary such as the name for "the little table with a bible", known as the prayer table. The confusion between spirituality and religion was explicitly mentioned by Educator 5: Centre A who expressed her caution to be spiritual or religious so as not to impose her own views on the children, particularly those that were non-Catholic.

The role of the educator in nurturing and promoting children's spiritual development is apparent in literature that espouses the need for children to be presented with examples and guidance to awaken their spirituality (King, 2013). The spirituality of the child must be nurtured or it will be lost (Crompton, 1998). Therefore, when every child is viewed as having the potentiality for spirituality (Hay & Nye, 1998) and educators are tasked with attending to the holistic development of children (DEEWR, 2009), educators have a critical role to play (Harris, 2013). However, attending to children's spirituality, "demands a level of education...that is anchored in cultural awareness and formation" (Sagberg, 2008, p. 366). Findings illustrated that educators drew upon their knowledge and skills regarding early childhood pedagogical practices to articulate what they did know about children's spirituality. Educators connected with the practice of flexibility by way of facilitating children's ability to follow their interests and choose for themselves to explore, discover or sit quietly.

Educators explained that they were aware that taking a flexible approach in their room could promote children's spiritual development.

It is not unreasonable that educators turned to their understandings of early childhood pedagogical practices to attempt to explain the knowledge and skills required for promoting children's spirituality. Educators explained that no professional development had been offered or sought by them in the area of spirituality or more specifically, children's spirituality. Educators' professional development was largely focussed on early years' practice, particularly play, and within the topic of the Catholic religion. Only one educator made reference to the document, *Let the Little Children Come to Me* (Catholic Education Western Australia [CEWA], 2014) that aimed to assist educators in raising religious awareness prior to compulsory schooling (under five years of age), although no elaboration was provided on how this document connected with spirituality. With no formal learning in spirituality undertaken by educators, it is also not surprising that educators did not articulate spirituality as an essential component of the child's holistic development (Sagberg, 2008) or as a feature of the education curriculum (Zhang, 2012).

The findings that emerged regarding educators' identification that knowledge and skills are required to meet the task of promoting children's spiritual development brought with it several challenges. If educators' understandings of children's spirituality is confined to a Christian religious perspective and their knowledge of this Christian religion is itself minimal, the task of promoting children's spirituality in a way that is inclusive of children from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds appears beyond their scope. Additionally, and of greater concern, is the finding that educators possessed limited knowledge and few skills, that they could articulate, regarding the promotion of children's spirituality. When the role of the educator is

deemed pivotal to spirituality, this requires addressing. It is too great a challenge to expect educators to attend to children's spirituality, as a component of their holistic development (as required in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) document), when educators lack the knowledge and skills to firstly recognise spiritual moments in the lives of the children in their room, and to also provide opportunities to promote their spiritual development.

5.2.2.6 Spirituality is promoted through drawing.

Drawing was explicitly referred to, by educators, as a practice for promoting children's spiritual development and this theme emerged solely from the interview data (see Figure 5.3). Rather than taking a broader creative arts view, educators focused specifically on the activity of drawing as an opportunity they could offer children to promote spiritual development.

Drawing, as a component of the creative arts, is a recurring theme in the literature (Coholic, 2010; Farrelly-Hansen, 2001). As detailed by Adams (2009), children can be described as having multiple spiritual voices; the creative arts can be one of these voices. Similarly, Harris (2013) espouses that the very nature of spirituality is expressive and creative. The creative arts provide the opportunity for imagination and creativity to be expressed, and this can also lead to a sense of wonder (Goodliff, 2013; Coles, 1990). Furthermore, drawing is specifically referenced in the literature as a form of the creative arts that offers both an expressive outlet and a therapeutic experience (Farrelly-Hansen, 2001; Section 2.3).

It is noteworthy to draw attention to educators' specific isolation of drawing as a practice for promoting children's spiritual development. As stated, educators did not include a broader creative arts perspective when describing drawing as a practice. Neither did educators include drawing when they responded that play, and in particular dramatic and sensory play, afforded opportunities for spiritual development (see

Section 5.2.2.4). The isolation of drawing suggests educators' awareness of the characteristics of spirituality particular to the activity of drawing that are different to those embedded within creative arts activities that are generally collaborative in nature. Drawing is commonly an independent, personal activity, connecting it to the 'I-Self' sense of relationality described by Hay and Nye (2006).

Hay and Nye's (2006) relational consciousness was touched on by Educator 5: Centre A. Educator 5: Centre A described observing a child engaged in drawing, recalling the sense of enjoyment the child was experiencing during the activity. Educator 5: Centre A described the child's fascination with the colours and ability to be completely engaged in the activity. The recollection by Educator 5: Centre A aligns with Hay and Nye's (2006) category of spiritual sensitivity: 'awareness sensing'. Hay and Nye (1998) explicated this category as the ability of the child to be in the here and now, attune to aesthetic experiences with a sense of flow and focus and these aspects were inherent within Educator 5: Centre A's response.

Overall, educators were able to name drawing as a practice that afforded children the opportunity for spiritual development, although they were unable to align this activity with characteristics of spirituality. Educators' responses suggest a lack of depth to their understanding of children's spirituality and once again, perhaps also the language to effectively articulate what they do know. Importantly, educators' responses did demonstrate that they can name practices which hold the potential for spiritual development as detailed in existing literature.

5.2.2.7 Summary of educators' knowledge about promoting children's spiritual development.

To summarise, educators were able to articulate very little about practices that could be used to promote children's spiritual development. Interestingly, educators provided responses that connected to children's sense of relationship and

connectedness, their identity, religion, the use of play and drawing as a pedagogical practice, as well as the need for educators to be knowledgeable and skilled - all of which resonate with literature on children's spirituality. Absent from educators' responses was the ability to explicitly connect their response to characteristics of children's spirituality and this resonates with the notion that there exists a distinction between content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge explored in Chapter Two, Section 2.4.4. Consequently, a key insight in response to this research question is that, despite receiving no formal education on the concept, educators do know something about children's spirituality, suggesting that their own personal experiences of spirituality have provided this knowledge. However, they do not possess the language and depth to be able to effectively articulate this understanding and additionally, to be able to connect spirituality as a potentiality within all children, and a capacity requiring attention, with their understanding of early years' pedagogical practice.

5.2.3 Educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development: Key findings.

Research question three sought to investigate both the intentional and incidental practices educators employed to promote children's spiritual development. As such, both observational findings as well as documentary data informed the response to research question three. Observational findings presented the actuality of educators' practices, providing both intentional practices and the emergence of incidental practices. Documentary data presented findings specifically on the practices educators had intentionally planned to implement. In this section, the observational findings and findings from the documentary data are critically discussed. The emergent themes from the observation data frame this section, namely: relationships, wonder, identity and transcendence. Following this, additional insights from the documentary data are

explored, during which the connections between the ‘planned’ and the ‘actual’ are discussed.

5.2.3.1 Relationships.

The relational nature of spirituality emphasised by educators in the interview findings was reflected in their practices. Observational findings illustrated a focus on relationships as a central component of educators’ pedagogy, with practices observed that facilitated children’s development of the ‘I-Other’ relationship. Literature describes relationality as the essence of spirituality (De Souza, 2016). It is through the relational capacity of the person that an individual can experience and express their sense of connectedness (De Souza, 2016).

Conversation, as a pedagogical practice, was observed as a component of relationality, facilitating children’s spiritual development. Interestingly, educators identified conversation as a response in the interview, although the practice itself was observed as limited. Educators were observed encouraging children to share their interests with others, and the use of ‘News-Time’ was a common routine observed to facilitate this process. As previously discussed, conversations that facilitate sustained shared thinking are a recognised feature of high-quality early childhood contexts (Sylva, Taggart, Siraj-Blatchford, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, Gilden & Bell, 2007). Despite educators’ identification of conversation as a key practice for the promotion of children’s spiritual development, and the use of ‘News-Time’ for children to share something of themselves with others, a key finding that emerged was that the facilitation of sustained, high-quality conversation throughout the day was a limitation within educators’ practices. Educators’ conversations with children, or facilitation of conversations amongst children, were commonly in the form of asking knowledge and comprehension based questions that educators themselves already knew the answers to. Educators’ identification of conversation as a practice as well as their observed

practice to facilitate extend and deepen children's conversation indicates that educators lacked the knowledge and skills to effectively engage children in high-quality conversations, and it is these conversations that are most valuable to children's developing sense of relationality. High quality conversations go beyond the level of knowledge and comprehension, to require the educator to intentionally scaffold, provoke and extend children's insights (Grajczonek, 2013). Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that observational findings revealed that many instances of conversation were child, rather than educator, initiated. Children appeared to have a natural inclination to engage in conversation with educators and other children. Children's natural inclination to engage with those around them reflects Hay and Nye's (1998) understanding of relational consciousness; a perceptiveness and relatedness to other people (p. 113).

A further limitation was identified within educators' practices in regards to the use of conversation to promote children's spiritual development. Conversation, as a theme within relationality, and a practice observed as frequently initiated by the child, presented several opportunities that were missed by educators. For example, routines in each of the rooms observed that afforded the opportunity to engage children in sustained conversation were not taken. Children were observed in all rooms eating their lunch in small groups with an educator. This prime opportunity for conversation with children consisted of low level questioning such as, "is that an apple you've got there?" (Educator 4: Centre C) when the opportunity existed for sustained conversation both *with* and *between* children. As an example, the opportunity existed for educators to scaffold children's conversation about likes and dislikes of foods.

Conversation, as a practice, is closely connected to the notion of belonging, which was also observed as being facilitated by educators. In encouraging children to

engage with others and to share something of themselves with others, educators were in turn promoting a sense of belonging amongst children. Harris (2007) explains that peer-relationships play an important role in assisting children to feel that they belong to a community, as a component of spirituality. When educators were observed encouraging children to connect with each other, they were attending to children's sense of belonging as a relational construct.

The integration of music and songs throughout the day was also observed as a practice for facilitating a sense of belonging. Creating an atmosphere of belonging through creative arts (such as music) is identified in existing literature (Mata, 2006). Educators employed songs that encouraged active participation and interaction amongst children, such as Educator 5: Centre A's use of the 'Hello, how are you?' song (See Chapter Four Section 4.3.1.3). Songs also contributed to children's understanding of how to be in relationship with others by providing insight into the ways that social interactions could be fun, rather than serious. Music is described as being transformative, allowing an individual to connect with their sense of self as well as to a group (Nortje & van der Merwe, 2016). Bellous and Csinos (2009) articulate music as a practice that affords spiritual expression, and this was observed in educators' practices. Educators' use of music to facilitate a sense of belonging resonates with the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009, p.7) emphasises children's need to express themselves and to feel accepted for who they are, which leads to a sense of belonging - an integral component of human existence and one that is "a vital factor for the well-being and positive growth of most humans" (De Souza, 2016, p. 32).

The facilitation of friendships also emerged within the findings from the relationality theme of the observational data. As with conversation, the facilitation of

friendship was identified during the interview and was also observed in practice. Explicit instruction on both the characteristics and behaviours of a 'friend' were observed being taught by educators. In addition, educators were observed implementing games that would facilitate children's developing sense of friendship. Educator 3: Centre C, for example, was observed explicitly teaching children how to play a game of pass-the-parcel and then facilitating the children in playing the game. Educator 3: Centre C made comments such as: "We are all friends and so we are happy for our friend if they win a prize" and "Friends wait for their turn, they know how to share". Educator 3: Centre C focused on the development of children's social skills in connection to developing friendships. The attention given by educators toward children's development of social skills and friendship as a component of children's connectedness with each other is developmentally appropriate for this age group (3-4-year-olds) (DEEWR, 2009). In connection to children's spiritual development, Yust (2003, p. 149) supports the implementation of practices that meet the needs of children in the developmental stage in which they reside, rather than imposing adult ways of understanding and expressing spirituality.

Essentially, educators' practices illustrating a focus on the relational nature of spirituality resulted in three key findings: First, conversation was observed as a practice that educators employed to promote children's spirituality and although articulated by educators in interview findings, this was a practice that lacked depth, extension and intentionality. Secondly, educators focused on the facilitation of children's sense of belonging through the explicit teaching of friendship and through employing music and songs to encourage positive interactions amongst children. Finally, the relational aspect of spirituality observed in practice neglected the 'I-World'

relationship evident in educators' own articulation of ways to promote children's spirituality, and prominent theme in existing literature (Harris, 2016; Louv, 2012).

5.2.3.2 Wonder.

Educators were observed facilitating wonder as a practice to promote children's spiritual development. Wonder featured in two ways; through educators posing wonder questions and through the provision of opportunities that encouraged children's creativity and imagination. During the interviews, educators demonstrated a narrow understanding of wonder, providing little depth to how wonder was connected to spirituality. Similarly, educators' practices to facilitate wonder were of a limited nature. In particular, educators' use of wonder questions to engage children in the process of wondering were restricted to literature based questions, such as Educator 8: Centre A's question when reading a text aloud to children, "I wonder what will happen in the story".

Wonder featured more predominantly as a practice in connection with opportunities that facilitated creativity and imagination, as opposed to the posing of wonder questions. Fostering children's creativity and imagination were observed as practices that facilitated the experience of wonder and thus promoted children's spiritual development. Childhood wonder is described as a powerful form of spiritual expression that "shapes the way a child sees and understands the world...core of his or her spiritual identity..." (Hart, 2003, p. 53). Largely, the educators' construction of the environment determined the opportunities children were afforded to engage in creative and imaginative play and activities. In the rooms observed, the indoor environments promoted choice and freedom. Children were observed being able to self-select activities to play and engage with. Additionally, materials were available to children that encouraged exploration, creativity and the use of their imagination (See Chapter

Four Section 4.4.2.2). The activities and play opportunities available to the children were a mix of educator-directed tasks and play-based tasks. Interestingly, children were observed engaging in imaginative play, creating imaginative scenarios, by choice – children were intrinsically motivated to engage in imaginative play. Educators’ construction of the indoor environment in such a way as to facilitate children’s creative and imaginative capacities is viewed as a strength in their practice. Harris (2013) outlines the crucial role of the educator in providing environments that foster creativity and likewise, Scheindlin (1999) suggests that educators must create the conditions within which spiritual moments might occur. Similarly, English, Fenwick and Parsons (2003) articulate that “environments that promote spirituality through learning are characterized by flexibility, creativity, newness, engagement [and] reflectiveness...” (p. 124). Educators’ use of the environment to afford children opportunities to be creative and imaginative were observed as characterising these conditions.

Whilst educators provided the conditions for spirituality to be promoted through the construction of the indoor environment, a limitation in practice during these play opportunities also emerged. Children were afforded spaces and materials that encouraged their creative and imaginative capacities. However, during children’s play, educators were mostly absent. Findings from the observational data illustrated few instances whereby educators were observed engaging with children during their play. Educators were observed rarely interacting with children during their play, and most commonly, interaction involved interrupting the play to remove a child for assessment purposes. Educators were observed calling children away from their play to participate in one-to-one assessment tasks which subsequently not only removed the child from the play (and the opportunity for the child to be engaged in sustained thinking) but also inhibited the role of the educator as facilitator and observer of play. Literature

recognises that children learn best when they are afforded social opportunities; opportunities to be actively engaged, in particular through play; and when their imagination and creativity are stimulated (Grajczonek, 2013). Additionally, literature also identifies that educators are under increasing pressure to assess (Yoon, 2015) and it was evident that this pressure impacted educators' ability to observe and value-add to children's play.

The outdoor environment was observed as a space educators used to encourage children's creativity and imagination, thus promoting the experience of wonder. Essentially, creativity and imagination were fostered in the outdoors through the provision of space and choice, as opposed to any formal facilitation by the educator. During the interviews, educators identified the role of nature in fostering wonder and this was reflected in the unstructured format educators provided in the outdoor environment. As with the indoor play observed, during the outdoor play sessions educators were also absent from children's play, taking on a supervisory role. Educators were observed as available to the children, to assist with the provision of equipment or to mediate conflict. Few instances of educators value-adding to children's play were observed (see Chapter Four Section 4.4.2.2), suggesting that educators may require further development in this area.

Combining the current investigation with previous research further emphasises the need to develop educators' understandings of how to facilitate children's sense of wonder as a characteristic of spiritual development. Coles (1990) explained that children have a natural inclination to wonder that allows spirituality to be expressed and this includes reflection, questioning and using one's imagination (Ng, 2012). Wonder and creativity, as a means of spiritual expression, are the stepping stones toward spiritual development (ter Avest & McDougall, 2014). With literature

emphasising the critical period of early childhood for spiritual expression (Goodliff, 2013) and with the recognition that children's natural spiritual capacity requires awakening in childhood to allow it to flourish (King, 2013), early years' educators must be knowledgeable about spirituality and have the skills to effectively awaken children's spirituality (Champagne, 2001).

5.2.3.3 Identity.

Educators were observed implementing practices within the following themes that connected to the development of children's identity: facilitating resilience, self-regulation development, facilitating wellbeing and encouraging independence. Educators were observed engaging in a range of intentional practices as well as taking incidental opportunities to facilitate children's development of a positive sense of identity, and this emerged as a key insight in response to research question three. Identity, as a component of spirituality was a recurring theme in the findings and was explored in the previous Section 5.2.1.4. The interview data illustrated that educators understood the connection between the development of identity and the promotion of children's spiritual development. Little depth to this connection was articulated during the interview and whilst the intention driving educators' practices relating to identity cannot be assumed, it was evident that the facilitation of children's sense of identity, and therefore also their spirituality, was a priority for educators.

Practices that facilitated children's development of resilience were observed being undertaken by educators as a component of identity development. Resilience, as discussed in Section 5.2.2.1, was facilitated when educators encouraged children to persevere positively in the midst of challenging situations and this was also observed when educators praised children for their perseverance post an event. Resilience, as a component of identity, is reflected in the literature on spirituality, specifically in relation to the 'I-Self' relationship described in the work of Hay and Nye (1998). The

'I-Self' relationship is centrally concerned with questions such as *'Who am I?'* and develops into an understanding of what an individual can overcome when challenged. Essentially, the development of resilience is tied to the development of the emotional self in constructing one's identity, leading an individual into a search for meaning and purpose in life (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen & Roehlkepartain, 2012). The development of resilience as part of the "inner realm" (Watson, 2000, p. 95) of an individual connects with literature on the shadow side of spirituality. As explored in Chapter Two (Section 2.2.3.1), spirituality is commonly articulated from a positive viewpoint. However, characteristics of spirituality, such as despair, disenchantment, anger and hurt, which can lead to disconnectedness, also exist. De Souza (2016) suggests that if the less desirable characteristics of spirituality are ignored, the resulting behaviours include irrationality and anger. Educators must therefore, attend to these less desirable characteristics of spirituality (De Souza, 2016) in order to draw on the more positive characteristics of spirituality. This drawing on the positive characteristics of spirituality was apparent in the observational findings. Educators were observed, for example, recognising moments when children's sense of doubt emerged and as a response, educators promoted the more positive characteristic of resilience. Educator 9: Centre A was observed engaging in this particular practice as she promoted perseverance and an attitude of resilience when a child was doubtful of the correct response to provide (see Section 4.3.3.1). Educator 9: Centre A demonstrated the ability to identify characteristics and behaviours of the shadow side of spirituality and to use the incidental moment that occurred as an opportunity to facilitate the more positive characteristic of resilience.

The facilitation of children's development of self-regulation was a further component of identity facilitated by educators, and which promoted spiritual

development. Literature on spirituality asserts that a strong sense of self is required if individuals are to flourish in their relationships with others (De Souza, 2016). Within the 'I-Self' relationship resides the ability to manage the emotional self, that is, to self-regulate emotions as they arise and to control the behaviours that can manifest because of these emotions. Both explicit teaching and incidental opportunities were observed being taken by educators to assist children in their capacity for self-regulation. A focus on the development of children's capacity to self-regulate their emotions is appropriate for this age group (3 to 4-year-olds) and this exists as a prominent theme within the mandated *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) articulates the requirement for children to "demonstrate an increasing capacity for self-regulation" (p. 22) and to be able to "express emotions...constructively" (p.24). Additionally, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) addresses the role of the educator, tasking educators with being actively engaged in children's emotions (p. 45). As with previous observational findings, the intention of the focus on self-regulation cannot be assumed. However, educators' explicit mention of children's ability to control their emotions as a component of identity and a means for promoting children's spiritual development during the interviews suggests that the connection was not only understood by educators, but practiced.

A further key insight emerged in relation to educators' identification of less desirable characteristics of spirituality as a means to facilitate children's capacity to self-regulate and thus promoting spirituality. The promotion of the positive characteristics of spirituality, through recognising and addressing more adverse characteristics of spirituality is a discourse gaining prominence within the literature (Adams, 2009; De Souza, 2016; Kiesling, Sorrell, Montgomery & Colwell, 2006). This practice was evident for example, in an observation taken of Educator 7: Centre A

during and after a 'News-Time' session (see Chapter Four Section 4.3.3.2). Educator 7: Centre A returned to speak with a child after 'News-Time' who had displayed anger and frustration after sharing their news with a small group. The educator recognised the incidental moment that had emerged as an opportunity to speak with the child about expressing their emotions constructively, rather than through anger and frustration. Explicitly talking with children about their emotions, as did Educator 7: Centre A, supports children's sense of self-awareness which is connected to their spiritual capacity (De Souza, 2016), which also facilitates understanding of their feelings and how these can be effectively communicated to others. Attention to children's emotions and thereby the construction of their identity resonates within Nye and Hay's (2006) category of spiritual sensitivity termed 'value sensing'.

Essentially, educators' practices to develop children's capacity to self-regulate suggests that educators understood the important role of emotional development within the construct of identity. Furthermore, practices observed support educators' articulation of their own understanding that, through facilitating children's self-regulation, they are promoting children's spiritual development.

The concept of wellbeing, as a component of identity, is closely connected to the previously discussed concepts of self-regulation and resilience. The development of a strong sense of wellbeing is facilitated by the ability to manage emotions and behaviours constructively. The development of positive dispositions, feelings of happiness and satisfaction all contribute to an individual's wellbeing, and therefore, their construction of identity. In relation to spirituality, literature asserts that spirituality can act as a protective factor due to its connection with the development of a positive self-concept and sense of self (Sifers, Warren & Jackson, 2012) as well as to the intrinsic search for meaning and purpose in life (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen &

Roehlkepartain, 2012; Eaude, 2009). The spiritual capacity of an individual is drawn upon in difficult times. Literature refers to the painful and difficult emotions that are experienced by individuals as components of the shadow side of spirituality (De Souza, 2016) outlined in Chapter Two (Section 2.2.3.1). When individuals have nurtured their spiritual capacity through the development of a strong sense of wellbeing, adversity can be managed more positively.

Educators were observed engaging in practices that contributed to children's own sense of wellbeing, and therefore, promoting children's spiritual development. Specifically, educators focussed on promoting children's intrinsic sense of happiness by promoting the uniqueness of each child. This was evident, for example, in Educator 1: Centre B's use of the 'I am special song'. Educator 5: Centre A was observed explicitly teaching the children about how to give compliments and how someone else might feel receiving one. Educator 5: Centre A called these compliments 'warm fuzzies' and children were encouraged to say 'warm fuzzies' to each other. The educator then went on to describe 'cold pricklies' as saying mean things to others.

A further practice observed contributing to children's sense of wellbeing was the valuing of children's home language. Educator 1: Centre B was observed demonstrating an understanding of how language is integral to an individual's identity by responding in an affirming manner to two children who were conversing in Vietnamese. Educator 1: Centre B's actions suggest an understanding of the need to facilitate children's developing sense of identity by supporting their wellbeing. Engaging in practices that promoted children's sense of wellbeing supports the notion that educators attended to the shadow side of spirituality (see Section 5.2.3.3; Chapter Two Section 2.2.3.1). Attending to the shadow side of spirituality is recognition of the

need to support children in dealing with difficult situation and emotions (De Souza, 2016).

The use of time and space for reflective purposes was an additional practice observed that afforded children the opportunity to develop a strong sense of wellbeing. Mata (2014) describes that the provision of time for reflection is a means for promoting spirituality by contributing to an individual's sense of wellbeing. Similarly, Ng's (2012) research with children concluded that educators must facilitate children's spirituality by providing opportunities for "silence, meaning, questioning...focusing, reflection, use of one's imagination..." (p. 183). Although educators provided the opportunity for reflection, these were limited. Opportunities that were observed being made available to children, were not explicitly encouraged by educators. A paradox subsequently emerged between educators' own understandings and recollections of spirituality, and the practices they implemented to promote children's spirituality. Educators conveyed a strong sense of the role of reflection within their own spiritual experiences. Reflective opportunities were emphasised by educators as a central way in which spirituality was experienced. The disjunction between educators' own understandings and the practices they implemented to promote children's spirituality emerged as a key insight.

The facilitation of children's identity as a means for promoting their spiritual development, was also observed occurring when educators encouraged children's independence. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) advocates for a contemporary view of childhood, one that moves away from the 'universal child' toward the perspective that children are competent, capable and with agency, thus providing for the development of children's independence as a component of their identity (Duff, 2012). Findings illustrated that educators employed several practices to encourage children's

independence. Educators facilitated children's independence by: encouraging initiative through the use of routines that provided predictability for children; implementing job rosters that afforded children the opportunity to take responsibility for the tasks in their room; and by offering choice within the daily routines, such as inviting children to have morning tea when they were hungry rather than at set times.

The use of play as a practice to facilitate children's independence as a component of their identity development was observed in all centres. However, the way in which play opportunities were offered differed across the centres and therefore, the affordance of independence also differed. When children are viewed as active learners (MacLachlan, Fler & Edwards, 2013), then play is considered a process that recognises children's intrinsic motivations and supports choice (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2010). Educators at Centre B were observed providing children with a range of play-based opportunities within the indoor and outdoor environments that were offered for children to choose to engage with. In contrast, the practices surrounding the implementation of play at other centres suggest a less contemporary understanding of the child, as children were grouped and directed to play in specific areas of the room (Educator 7: Centre A). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) advocates for play that makes use of the learning environment to encourage independence and to foster the development of the 'whole child'. Educators' practices provided a key insight into the variations that currently exist in understandings of play, and additionally, illustrate a limited understanding of how play can contribute to children's growing sense of independence and identity. Furthermore, as play emerged as a recurring theme across the interview data, being explicitly identified as a practice for both the expression and promotion of spirituality, it is interesting that the actuality of play was so varied across the centres.

5.2.3.4 Transcendence.

Educators' practices reflected their own understandings of spirituality provided during the interviews in relation to the theme of transcendence. Reference to a transcendent is evident in existing literatures' discourse on the 'I-Other' relationship. Specifically, literature describes a sense of going beyond the self (Scott, 2003) to seek connectedness with a divine presence (Schleindlin, 1999). Connectedness to a transcendent is not confined to any particular religion, but rather is universally accessible to all faiths and backgrounds (Hodder, 2007). A key insight gained through the previous discussion of educators' own understandings of spirituality was their specifically Christian understanding of spirituality, rather than taking a multi-faith perspective, and this followed through to the practices that were observed.

Providing opportunities for children to pray were observed as a common practice educators employed that promoted children's spirituality through connection to a transcendent. Opportunities to pray were always led by the educator and occurred as part of the daily routine, often during the morning mat session, prior to eating lunch and the end of the day. The routine of praying at these times, as well as the types of prayers recited were observed as familiar to the children. Despite the observational findings indicating familiarity with the routine of prayer, in one observation of Educator 4: Centre C, a child replaced 'God' with 'Santa'. This confusion was not addressed, or not heard, by the educator. Additionally, educators were not observed entering into any form of discussion or explanation prior to commencing the prayers. Given that observational data were collected toward the end of the school year it is acknowledged that the prayers undertaken may have been previously discussed with children. However, it is noteworthy that no discussion was apparent within any of the observations resulting in prayer appearing as a routine task rather than a relational experience.

The sharing of religious stories with children was also observed as a practice educators employed that facilitated a connection to a transcendent. Stories shared by educators were always variations of the story of the birth of Jesus and generally told from literary texts, and therefore, specifically Christian. Interestingly, Educator 8: Centre A was the only educator who provided some relevance, or context, to the children prior to reading the story. Educator 8: Centre A explained to children that the bible was a text that helped people to learn about Jesus and also explained Jesus as the Son of God. Educator 8: Centre A then retold the story of the birth of Jesus orally, whilst holding the bible. Providing some context for the children and retelling the story in her own words suggests Educator 8: Centre A possessed an understanding of the Christian religion. Promoting the 'I-God' relationship through the sharing of religious stories was further supported by educators' use of drama. The story of the birth of Jesus was observed being re-enacted in all centres, although in different ways. At Centre B, for example, children were provided with the materials and space to freely select to act out the story. This aligned with educators' philosophy of practice, as play in Centre B was observed as a time of choice for children (see Section 5.2.3.3).

Omitted from the observational findings was the connection between the 'I-God' relationship and wonder, presenting a key insight regarding educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development. Literature acknowledges that wonder and awe provide a means for an individual to engage with the transcendent realm, and this is central to Hay and Nye's (1998) 'mystery sensing' category of spiritual sensitivity. Affording children opportunities to wonder results in the opening of possibilities and offers the potential to seek (Nye, 2009). When wondering is directed beyond the self, to the 'Ultimate Other', it is tied to the process of meaning-making and promotes a sense of connectedness that moves beyond the human to engage the divine (Nye,

2009). The absence of wonder within educators' practices that focussed on relationality with a transcendent, not only provides insight into the narrow nature of their 'I-God' practices, but further illustrates educators' overall limited use of wonder as a means to promote children's spirituality.

5.2.3.5 Insights into educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development gained from educators' planning documentation.

Documentary data obtained through qualitative content analysis of educators' planning documentation provided insight into educators' intentional practices. As outlined in Chapter Four Section 4.4, findings were illustrated within a coding frame that identified practices educators had planned for in relation to the themes in extant literature (see Figure 4.1). Educators' planning documentation clearly illustrated a lack of intentional planning for children's spirituality. Overall, activities or intentions that promoted children's spiritual development were of an implicit nature, with connections to themes in the literature being made through the process of qualitative content analysis, as opposed to the explicit mention of spirituality by educators within their documentation. Insights into the intentionally planned practices for the promotion of children's spirituality are discussed within the themes of 'relationality' and 'creativity and imagination'. Following this, additional insights in relation to educators' overall planning, are explored.

5.2.3.5.1 Relationality.

Relationality with others, the self, the environment and a transcendent were all evidenced within educators' planning documentation. Observations indicated that educators focused their efforts on developing children's sense of relationality with others, with little emphasis on the 'I-World' aspect. Planning did however, illustrate the intention for all aspects of relationality to be developed. In particular, opportunities that described nature-based experiences were far more evident in planning than in the

actuality of educators' practices. Planning for the 'I-Self' sense of relationality was also evident and this was the only aspect of relationality within which educators made the explicit connection to the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009), indicating that attention to the development of children's identity was addressed in 'Outcome 1: children have a strong sense of identity'.

In contrast to insights gained from educators' practices, educators planned for the inclusion of wonder questions in connection to religion, and therefore the 'I-God' sense of relationality. Although not observed, educators had explicitly planned to include within their practice specific wonder-based questions that related to the Christian religion. *Let the Little Children Come to Me* (CEWA, 2014), the leading document for educators' use to raise children's religious awareness in the early years was not referred to within educators' planning.

5.2.3.5.2 Creativity and Imagination.

Documentation illustrated that educators planned opportunities for children to engage with their own sense of creativity and imagination. Literature asserts that the provision of opportunities for children to be creative and imaginative can promote spiritual development (Harris, 2013; ter Avest & McDougall, 2014) in particular, the creative arts can offer a means of spiritual expression (Mata, 2006). Although evident, planning for these creative and imaginative opportunities lacked detail and comprised of a list of areas in the room or resources that would be provided for children as opposed to teaching and learning intentions. For example, educators listed dress-ups, construction and paints under the heading 'play' on their documentation.

The document *Spirituality in the Early Years* (Catholic Education Office Rockhampton, 2012) that was developed to assist educators in the Rockhampton diocese outlines the need for educators to provide opportunities for children to engage

with their imagination, to learn through play, to experience wonder and to ask ‘big questions’. This connection to play as an opportunity that provides children the affordances to be creative and imaginative was evident in educators’ documentation. Notably, play was articulated by educators during the interview as a practice that could promote children’s spiritual development, suggesting that educators valued the inclusion of play. As educators’ documentation included resources and materials for children’s play, rather than intentions and provocations for play, it was not surprising that the play that was observed in actuality was limited and lacked the opportunity for children to engage in sustained shared thinking (Sylva, Taggart, Siraj-Blatchford, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, Gilden & Bell, 2007).

5.2.3.5.3 Additional insights into educators’ planning.

Literature explicates that early childhood educators have a key role in embedding spiritual development when planning the classroom curriculum (Grajczonek, 2012a). Furthermore, the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) outlines educators’ central role in planning intentional learning experiences that attend to children’s holistic development, inclusive therefore of the spiritual domain.

A key insight gained from the analysis of the documentary data relates to educators’ overall lack of detail in planning and the absence of explicit learning outcomes or intentions. As such, the explicit planning for children’s spiritual development was also absent. Existing literature asserts the connection between the planning for learning intentions and teacher effectiveness (Fetherston, 2006; Hattie, 2012; Stronge, 2007). Effective teachers not only understand the content and the needs of their students, effective teachers are also prepared by implementing efficient planning strategies (Stronge, 2007). Essentially, the quality of the planning determines the quality of the lesson or activity (Fetherston, 2006) and as such learning intentions

must be planned if there is to be any opportunity for them to actually occur. The findings from this investigation suggest that the limited nature of practices observed are, in part, a result of poor planning for the explicit promotion of the children's spirituality. This is supported in the work of De Souza (2016) who explains that when educators articulate and plan for the learning outcomes for children's cognitive, affective and spiritual capacities "there is a greater probability that the learning can become a transformative experience which helps the child connect to previous learning, to their inner thoughts and to the Other..." (p. 133). If educators do not plan for children's spiritual development it is likely to result in missed opportunities.

Given educators' own personal understanding of spirituality from a narrow Christian perspective, as discussed previously, it is not surprising that a key finding was educators' planning for the 'I-God' sense of relationality with explicit reference to God through their planning for religion. Essentially educators planned for spirituality in the way that they personally understood spirituality; religiosity. Educators' overall lack of planning for children's spirituality further asserted the finding that educators are, at the very least, unsure of how to promote children's spiritual development.

5.2.3.6 Summary of educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development.

Research question three provided insight into the intentional and incidental practices educators employed to promote children's spiritual development. Educators' practices illustrated a focus on relationships, wonder, identity and transcendence. The relational nature of spirituality was emphasised in educators' practices, with the facilitation of the 'I-World' sense of relationality being the least observed. A further key insight was educators' limited inclusion of wonder, as a feature of spirituality. Opportunities for wonder were intentionally planned for, by educators, although only in connection to religious literature. Overall, planning for children's spirituality was

not explicitly evident. Essentially, practices that were observed promoting children's spirituality occurred incidentally rather than intentionally and through planned opportunities.

5.3 Reflective Statement

Reflexive statements are included throughout the thesis in the spirit of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA has underpinned both the theoretical and methodological design of this research investigation. The inclusion of reflexive statements is a further means to situate the reader within the context of the research by overtly acknowledging the role of the researcher (Langdridge, 2007). In this chapter, the reflexive statement is employed to provide insight to the reader on the researchers' own critical reflection that occurred throughout the discussion of findings within this chapter.

During the analysis of findings and the construction of this discussion chapter, the researcher journal continued to be used by the researcher to note thoughts and reflections. A key insight gained from this process was the evolving use of the term 'spiritual development' toward the term 'spirituality'. At the commencement of the investigation, the two terms were used somewhat inter-changeably, as was evident in extant literature. The term 'spiritual development' was adopted for use within the research questions on the basis that existing literature articulated spiritual development as a part of holistic development. During the process of formulating the discussion, and therefore returning to the literature with the insights gained from the analysis of findings, the researcher came to reflect more directly on the specific term 'spiritual development'. The word 'development' has several connotations, leading one to understand that, as with cognitive development, children would move through stages or criteria to demonstrate progression. Spirituality is unlike other areas of development (Priestly, 2002), it does not occur in this linear way. Rather, spirituality is promoted

and nurtured through the affordances children are provided to experience and express their innate spirituality. Nye (2009) articulates this effectively, stating that spirituality “does not necessarily go from less to more, from simple to complex” (p. 85) and therefore the term ‘development’ limits understandings of children’s spirituality to a linear type progression. In retrospect, with the insights gained through undertaking this research investigation, the term ‘spirituality’ would be selected to replace ‘spiritual development’.

5.4 Chapter Summary

There are several insights gained from this investigation, and discussed within this chapter, that illustrate subtle yet important digressions from existing discourse on educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development. Research question one yielded insight into educators’ own personal understandings of spirituality and this was found to be a sense of spirituality referenced specifically to Christianity – a Christian religiosity. Furthermore, the clear connection, for educators, between spirituality and the Christian religion eliminated any connection to other world religions or any sense of cultural competence. Additionally, it was found that the educators’ understandings of spirituality were almost solely based on their own life experiences.

Findings from research question two, regarding educators’ knowledge of practices to promote children’s spirituality suggested that, despite receiving no formal education on the concept, educators did know something about children’s spirituality. Furthermore, what they did know was developed from their own experiences. As such, educators did not possess the knowledge or the language to enable them to effectively articulate their understandings or to connect their understandings of how to promote children’s spirituality with their understandings of early years’ pedagogical practices.

Research question three yielded insight into educators' practices, both incidental and intentional, to promote children's spirituality. These insights related to the themes of relationships, wonder, identity and transcendence. Specifically, insights gained in response to research question three suggested that educators did not intentionally plan for children's spiritual development; rather, opportunities for children's spiritual development occurred incidentally, and as child-initiated experiences.

In conclusion, this chapter critically discussed the findings from this research investigation. In doing so, each of the research questions that guided this investigation was explicitly addressed. In critically discussing the key insights that emerged, existing literature was also drawn upon. The following chapter, Chapter Six, provides an overview of the key insights discussed in this chapter, and their contribution to theory. Additionally, Chapter Six presents the implications and recommendations arising as a result of this research.