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2017

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

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Chapter Six: Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to investigate educators' practices to promote the spiritual development of children aged 3 to 4 years within the context of Catholic childcare in Western Australia. At the time of this investigation, Catholic Education Western Australia (CEWA) offered the provision of childcare across three centres, and these centres formed the specific context for this investigation. Further framing the context of this investigation was the nationally mandated *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* [EYLF] (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009). The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) outlined the requirement for educators working with children from birth to age five, to attend to children's spiritual capacity as part of an holistic approach to care and education, although with limited articulation of how this can be achieved (Grajzonek, 2012b). Educators, who formed the participant group in this investigation, were those recognised at the centre as the lead educator. The lead educator was the most qualified for each room, either holding a four-year university teaching degree or 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.

In addition to the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) which outlined the role of the educator in attending to children's spirituality, existing literature espoused the need for further research into the ways in which children's spirituality can be nurtured or developed (Adams, Bull & Maynes, 2016). As such, this research has addressed a significant gap in the literature. Specifically, this research focussed on the practices of the educators, working with 3 and 4-year-olds, and therefore utilising the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009), to promote children's spiritual development.

This investigation yielded insight into educators' personal understandings of spirituality, their knowledge regarding children's spiritual development and educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development. These insights responded to the three research questions that framed this qualitative inquiry. Uncovering the understandings and experiences of the participants was central to the research design, as this was a qualitative inquiry with a social constructivist theoretical perspective and located within an interpretivist paradigm from a phenomenological perspective. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed as both a theoretical framework for the investigation as well as tool for data analysis. Utilising three research methods, namely: semi-structured interview, observations of practice and qualitative content analysis (QCA) ensured the collection of rich data in response to each of the research questions. Analysis of data, as outlined in Chapter Three, included the use of IPA for the interviews and observations, and QCA as a tool for the analysis of the documentary data. Chapter Five provided a critical discussion on the findings whereby each of the research questions were explicitly addressed. A summary of the major insights, and subsequent contribution to theory generated as a result of this investigation, is outlined in Section 6.2.

6.2 Research questions answered: contribution to theory generated

The discussion in Chapter Five reviewed existing literature to clearly ascertain new insights gained as a result of this investigation. In this section, these new insights are outlined in response to each of the three research questions. Additionally, the theoretical contributions of these insights are explicitly illustrated.

Research question one sought to investigate educators' personal understandings of the term 'spirituality'. Literature has advocated the need to inquire about educators'

interpretations of the elusive term ‘spirituality’ to better understand their practices to promote children’s spirituality (Zhang, 2012). With literature also espousing that educators are often not themselves familiar with the notion of spirituality or how to attend to the spirituality of their students (Hyde, 2016), this initial research question provided critical insights into the personal experiences and understandings of educators that influenced their practices with children. Table 6.1 presents the contribution to key theory generated in response to research question one, as a result of the insights gained from this investigation.

Table 6.1

Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question One

RQ1 What do educators understand by the term ‘spirituality’?	
Key Theory Generated	
<p>Early childhood educators must have an understanding of spirituality that reaches beyond their own personal perceptions if they are to promote <i>all</i> children’s spirituality. A connection exists between the Catholic context of the childcare centres and the educators’ personal understandings of spirituality. Educators in the three centres emphasised a Christian understanding of spirituality that omitted a sensitivity towards religious and cultural diversity. Additionally, educators’ understandings of spirituality had been formed through their own personal experiences, as opposed to having received any professional development on the topic. 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.</p>	
i) Spirituality as a Christian construct.	Educators understood spirituality from a specifically Christian perspective.
ii) Educators’ personal understandings of	Educators provided no elaboration on spirituality in connection to other world

spirituality influence practice.	religions or that reflected their own cultural competence. In omitting a sense of cultural competence, including religious diversity, from their understandings of spirituality, it is possible to question whether educators viewed all <i>EYLF</i> (DEEWR, 2009) pedagogical practices through a specifically Christian lens.
iii) Educators' understandings of spirituality were formed through personal, not professional, experiences.	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.

The second research question moved beyond the personal understandings of spirituality held by the educators, to focus on their knowledge regarding children's spirituality. Specifically, educators were asked about their knowledge regarding how children's spiritual development could be promoted and additionally, the response to this question was informed by the observations of their practice. Findings in response to research question two highlighted both the connections and distinctions that educators made between spirituality for themselves and the promotion of spirituality for the children in their rooms. Table 6.2 presents the contribution to key theory generated in response to research question two.

Table 6.2

Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question Two

RQ2 What do educators know about promoting children’s spiritual development?	
Key Theory Generated	
<p>Early childhood educators do know something about children’s spirituality. However, their knowledge was limited and they did not possess the language to effectively articulate what they did know about children’s spirituality. Furthermore, educators’ limited knowledge and articulation necessitated their inability to connect spirituality (as a potentiality within all children and a capacity requiring attention) with their understanding of early years’ pedagogical practice. As educators mostly received no formal education on the concept, their own personal experiences of spirituality formed the basis of their knowledge.</p>	
<p>i) Educators do not possess the language to describe their pedagogical practices that promote children’s spirituality.</p>	<p>Educators are, at the very least, unsure of how spirituality can be promoted. Pedagogical practices could be named. However, explanations illustrated a limited understanding of the how these pedagogical practices were connected to children’s spirituality.</p>
<p>ii) The relationship between spirituality and religion was a difficult construct for educators to articulate.</p>	<p>When asked explicitly, educators described that spirituality could exist autonomously from religion. Despite stating this distinction, educators’ descriptions of their personal spirituality was from a religious perspective and similarly, their explanations of how to promote children’s spirituality demonstrated their difficulty in describing the relationship between spirituality and religion.</p>
<p>iii) Educators’ explanations conveyed that religious beliefs and practices existed</p>	<p>Educators possessed a limited understanding of the existence of spirituality as a human capacity that can be drawn upon to raise religious awareness. In premising spirituality on religion,</p>

initially and could be used to raise spiritual awareness.	critical characteristics of spirituality were omitted (such as wonder and awe) as well as an understanding of spirituality that is inclusive of a range of religions and cultures.
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Research question three focused on both the intentional and the incidental practices that early childhood educators employed to promote children’s spirituality. Insights gained in response to research question three therefore also explicitly responded to the overarching research question that guided this investigation: *What are educators’ practices for promoting the spiritual development of children, aged 3 to 4 years, in the context of Catholic childcare centres in Western Australia?* Research question three provided insight into the planned practices of the educator as well as allowing incidental practices to arise. Table 6.3 presents the response to research question three.

Table 6.3

Key Theory Generated in Response to Research Question Three

RQ3 What practices are educators implementing, intentionally and incidentally, to promote children’s spiritual development?
<p>Key Theory Generated</p> <p>Children’s spirituality was promoted by early childhood educators incidentally and without intentionality. Pedagogical practices that were employed by educators were chosen from educators’ understanding of appropriate early years practice, and by default, some of these practices also promoted children’s spirituality. Children’s spirituality was not intentionally or explicitly promoted.</p>

<p>i) Planning documentation lacked intention and so did educators' practices.</p>	<p>Educators' planning documentation lacked essential detail. The absence of explicit learning outcomes or intentions regarding the specific nurturing of children's spirituality followed through to educators' practices. Explicit planning for children's spirituality was also absent.</p>
<p>ii) Educators must have the skills to discern moments of spirituality.</p>	<p>Children were observed taking the lead with spirituality. As such, children require the affordances of both space and time, by the educator, to facilitate their spirituality. Curricula and assessment demands resulted in educators being removed from children's play experiences. Play is a key way in which children's spirituality could be promoted. Educators were disengaged in terms of the intentionality of play experiences provided, as well as in value-adding to children's play during the play opportunities observed.</p>
<p>iii) Facilitation of relationships was a central component of educators' pedagogy.</p>	<p>Educators' practices illustrated their focus on facilitating children's sense of relationality. The I-Self and I-Other relationship were emphasised and the I-World relationship was the least observed. Educators addressed what literature refers to as the 'shadow side of</p>

	<p>spirituality’ by engaging children in explicit learning experiences when these less desirable characteristics emerged (anger, frustration). However, educators’ focus on relationality was observed as an early childhood pedagogical practice rather than an intentional means of promoting children’s spirituality.</p>
<p>iv) The potential of wonder to promote children’s spirituality was not understood by educators, or it was not realised.</p>	<p>Educators articulated wonder as a component of spirituality and they engaged children in moments of wondering. However, wonder was at the level of pondering, rather than offering children an experience of wonder.</p>

6.3 Implications

Several implications emerged as a result of this investigation into educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development, in the context of Catholic childcare. These implications became evident through the generation of key theory in response to the research questions that framed this inquiry. Implications for theory, for methodology, for policy, for educators’ practice and for research are identified in the following Sections 6.3.1 through to 6.3.5. Following the presentation of implications, recommendations are made.

6.3.1 Implications for theory.

This investigation has contributed to the body of research on spirituality in early childhood and, more specifically, assisted in narrowing the understanding of

spirituality by focussing on the practices of educators working in the early years. Furthermore, this investigation has contributed to the existing empirical investigations by revealing early childhood educators' narrow understanding of spirituality as well as the lack of intentionality in their practices regarding spirituality. These insights have implications for future theoretical developments. Key insights that emerged from this investigation reveal the need for two theoretical approaches to spirituality: information on spirituality and formation in spirituality. To promote children's spirituality requires an educator to have developed a personal sense of spirituality, that is, to have experienced spiritual moments in their own lives – spiritual formation. Educators must also have the knowledge and skills to reflect on their own spirituality and the ability to use these experiences, alongside their early years' pedagogical practices, to create and facilitate spiritual opportunities for children. Educators require an understanding of spirituality that is both human and religious within the context of Catholic childcare, that is, they require information on spirituality.

This research yielded a further implication for future theory regarding spirituality. Specifically, this investigation distinguished between spirituality and religion, despite the religious context of this investigation being Catholic. As such, theory generated from this investigation can aid the development of future theoretical understandings that premise spirituality as an innate capacity from which religious understandings can develop.

6.3.2 Implications for methodology.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and qualitative content analysis (QCA) were both employed as methods for data analysis. In utilising IPA, this investigation contributed to the expansion of this method. The use of IPA outside of

psychology and in the field of education is considered contemporary (Smith, 1996). Although IPA has been used in the general field of spirituality (Jirasek et al., 2017; Joseph, 2014), this investigation contributes to the expansion of IPA to the field of early childhood education. Utilising IPA within this investigation has implications for future research on spirituality that may adopt this specific methodology. The key features of IPA, that include it being inductive, interrogative and idiographic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) were well suited to this investigation on a construct that is universal and embedded in relationality.

The use of QCA required the construction of a post-analysis coding frame that contributes further implications for methodology. As recommended by Schreier (2012), the post-analysis coding frame explicitly illustrated both the characteristics of spirituality identified from the review of literature and alongside the findings from this research. As such, the post-analysis coding frame has implications for future studies by providing a tool for research.

6.3.3 Implications for policy.

Educators' practices are shaped by policy. When policy, and the frameworks that reside within these, does not descriptively articulate its terms, such as 'spirituality', the result is confusion and misunderstanding. This investigation revealed that early childhood educators knew very little about practices they could employ to promote children's spirituality. Educators were confused about how spirituality could be promoted and about the relationship between spirituality and religion. Policy and frameworks must address this confusion. Currently the *EYLF*'s (DEEWR, 2009) statement that the spiritual capacity must be attended to as part of children's holistic development, and the limited definition it provides (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14) does not

adequately support educators in promoting this capacity. Implications for policy pertain to educators' need for knowledge on the characteristics of spirituality, how spirituality can be expressed in early childhood and strategies they can employ to promote children's spirituality if they are to effectively, and intentionally, promote children's spirituality. Furthermore, if spirituality is to be understood as a universal and non-linear capacity, then it must be separated from the term 'development' within future policy and framework documents.

6.3.4 Implications for practice.

Four implications for practice emerged from this investigation. First, it was evident that the Catholic context of the centres shaped, to some degree, educators' understandings of spirituality. Furthermore, the Christian religious understanding of spirituality that permeated educators' responses omitted a sense of religious diversity and cultural competence. Consequently, it is possible to question whether educators viewed all the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) pedagogical practices through a specifically Christian lens. Essentially, educators working in Catholic contexts must realise the spiritual capacity in every child, regardless of culture and religion. That is, educators must realise both the human and the religious dimensions of spirituality. Doing so will assist children of other, or no religious affiliation, ensuring that all children are afforded the opportunity for their spirituality to be promoted.

The second implication for practice pertains to the quality of the conversations that were observed between the educators and children. Educators must be skilled in value-adding to children's conversations if children are to move beyond low-level talk to conversations that require higher-order thinking and sustained shared thinking (Sylva, Tagart, Siraj-Blatchford, Totsika, Ereky-Stevens, Gilden & Bell, 2007).

Spirituality is understood as being facilitated in day-to-day conversations that occur (Bone, 2005). However, these day-to-day conversations must be of a high quality if they are to engage the spiritual capacity of the child. The skill set required of educators in order to facilitate sustained shared thinking (Sylva et al., 2007) and deeper level conversation is connected to educators' ability to be intentional. When educators are explicitly and overtly aware of their learning intentions and the strategies; when educators can adopt to teach and develop these learning intentions and strategies; and when educators can meet the needs of the children, then there is greater potential for conversations to become spiritual opportunities.

The identification, by educators, that spirituality can be promoted through play, resulted in the third implication for practice. However, although play was articulated as a means for spirituality to be promoted, this articulation occurred in contradiction to the lack of play observed in practice. Educators named play as a means for promoting spirituality but provided little elaboration on what they understood as play, what play involved or how play was connected to the construct of spirituality. Furthermore, play in practice required intentionality in regards to educators' value-adding to children's play and at the same time, play in practice required increased space and time to grant children the opportunity for their play to develop, or to facilitate children's tuning-in (Hay & Nye, 1998). Play was already understood by educators as a key pedagogical practice. If this knowledge can be consolidated and extended to include play as a context that intentionally includes children's spirituality, the result for future practice can affect both educators and children.

The fourth implication pertains to the post-analysis coding frame (Chapter Four Figure 4.1) developed as a component of qualitative content analysis (QCA). The post-

analysis coding frame has the capacity to positively influence educators' practices. Specifically, the coding frame can assist educators in engaging in reflective practices. As a reflective tool, the coding frame provides a framework for educators to audit their own, or others', practices in promoting children's spirituality. The coding frame presents key themes in existing literature on spirituality alongside actual practices that educators employed to promote children's spirituality, enabling it to be used as a practical and educator-friendly tool. Engaging in the process of reflective practice, by using the coding frame, can provide an educator with feedback on current practice in addition to identifying possibilities for future practice. For example, an educator could reflect on the opportunities they had provided children over a week and align these with the categories of the coding frame. This process of aligning practice to the components of spirituality on the coding frame could potentially reveal gaps, missed opportunities or components of spirituality that are emphasised in practice, thus facilitating change.

6.3.5 Implications for further research.

Key insights regarding educators' understandings of spirituality and the practices they employed to promote children's spirituality contributed to existing empirical research on spirituality in early childhood. The significance of the findings from this investigation pertain to its focus on the educators' practices to promote children's spiritual development and additionally, the unique context of Catholic childcare. As such, three implications emerged regarding the direction of future research. The first of these implications relates to the key theory generated in response to research question one (see Table 6.1). As educators offered an understanding of spirituality that was specifically Christian, further research is required that includes more culturally and religiously diverse contexts as this will add to the relatively few empirical studies in

this field. Given that thirty percent of children enrolled in Catholic schools identified as non-Catholics (National Catholic Education Commission, 2016; See Chapter One Section 1.4.2), research that can add to the insights gained from this investigation by taking a multi-faith approach to educators' practices would also be beneficial in making comparisons across religious contexts.

A second implication arose from the connection made between play and spirituality. Although this connection is identified in existing literature (Catholic Education Office Rockhampton, 2012; Harris, 2016; Ng, 2012), its prominence as an early childhood pedagogical practice along with the articulation of play as a practice to promote children's spirituality by educators in this investigation, necessitates further, more targeted research. Research that specifically investigates the way in which play can offer children the potential for spiritual expression; the characteristics of play pertinent to spirituality; and the environmental play factors that contribute to play's ability to promote spirituality, all require explicit investigation.

Finally, the concept of wonder in connection to spirituality emerged within existing literature and was also evident through the findings from this investigation. It was clear that educators' understandings of wonder were narrow (Table 6.3). Wonder, the form that goes beyond a sense of pondering, was not evident in educators' practices. Although a part of wonder involves creating opportunities to reflect and to consider possibilities, at a deeper level, wonder involves mystery which comes from experiencing a sense of wonder (Chapter Two Section 2.2.3). Further research that explores the use of wonder in early childhood through a spiritual lens, can add to the findings from this investigation to explicate the gaps that exist in current practice in relation to facilitating wonder as a pedagogical practice.

6.4 Recommendations

The key insights and theoretical understandings generated from this investigation precipitated five recommendations. These recommendations are presented from a micro to macro perspective, espousing initially those recommendations at the level of educator and moving more broadly to recommendations at the level of research.

Figure 6.1 provides a visual representation of the recommendations provided, illustrating the inter-connectedness of the various levels potentially affected by this investigation. The following Sections 6.4.1 through to 6.4.5 outline each of the recommendations.

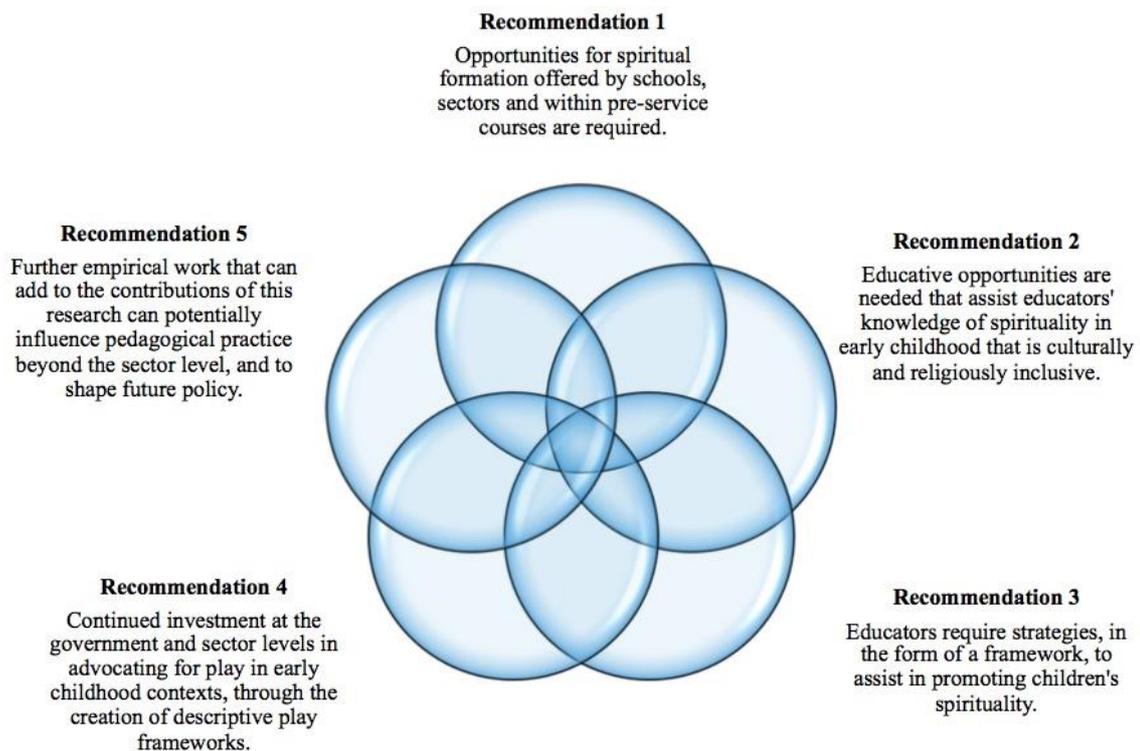


Figure 6.1. Representation of the connectedness among the recommendations emerging from this investigation.

6.4.1 Recommendation one.

Targeted professional development that affords educators knowledge about spirituality as well as the opportunity for their own spiritual formation, that is, one which includes an understanding of a wider perspective on spirituality beyond a specific Christian perspective, is recommended. This investigation revealed that educators are unable to attend to, facilitate or promote a construct that they themselves do not fully understand or have not experienced. Educators' limited ability to articulate their own adult understanding of spirituality suggested that they themselves had received little in the way of spiritual formation that went beyond the religious sense. Spiritual formation can occur through an awareness of the spiritual moments that occur in an individual's life, particularly when these moments are shared and modelled by others. This research indicated that these moments are not shared, at least not for the participants in this investigation. Educators unanimously displayed difficulty in explicating a spiritual moment in their life. Alternatively, spiritual formation can occur through structured formation offered as professional development. Educators responded that professional development in the area of spirituality had not been offered to them, rather any formation offered had been focussed on the Catholic religion. Consequently, professional development that focuses on the provision of spiritual formational development would be most beneficial to educators. It is recommended that this formation is offered at the school and centre level, sector level and in pre-service qualifications for educators, including Diploma courses. The provision of spiritual formation for educators can positively assist educators in their task of attending to children's spirituality.

Furthermore, in addition to formational opportunities, educators require knowledge and understanding about spirituality. This knowledge and understanding

will assist educators to intentionally plan opportunities for the promotion of children's spirituality. Gaining an understanding of the characteristics of spirituality and the ways that children's spirituality can be facilitated and nurtured will assist educators in making connections between their pedagogical practices for promoting spirituality and their early childhood philosophical understandings.

6.4.2 Recommendation two.

Professional development offered to educators must emphasise spirituality as an innate characteristic from which religious understandings can develop. In this way, spirituality in its broadest sense will be advocated, thus inclusive of cultural and religious diversity. The difficulty educators presented when articulating the relationship between spirituality and religion clearly suggests the need for educative opportunities for educators. In addition, educators' narrow understandings of spirituality from a specifically Christian perspective, requires addressing.

The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) outlines the requirement for early childhood educators to understand and communicate with diverse cultures. The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) also tasks educators with promoting children's cultural competence (p. 16), suggesting that educators also assist children to become aware of, and appreciate diversity. However, as cultural competence did not feature within educators' understandings of spirituality, there are several limitations within educators' understandings of the requirements outlined in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009, p.16). It was recognised that the Catholic context of the centres may have influenced the understanding of spirituality that educators provided. Therefore, educators require educative opportunities that support an understanding of spirituality that goes beyond a definition they believe they should hold, to include a broader understanding of spirituality that has scope for a spirituality that is culturally and religiously diverse.

6.4.3 Recommendation three.

Educators require guidance on the strategies they can employ to promote children's spirituality. Educators' practices revealed a limited repertoire of pedagogical practices to promote children's spirituality. Practices educators did employ lacked intentionality and were selected as practices appropriate for the early years, rather than explicitly to assist children's spirituality. Furthermore, educators reference to the CEWA document, *Let the Little Children Come to Me* (CEWA, 2014) was limited. Existing literature has suggested that educators require a 'spiritual sensitivity' (Adams, 2009), that is, an awareness of their own spirituality and that of their children. As a result of this investigation, it is appropriate to advocate for more than an awareness; educators must be 'spiritual opportunists'. Educators require the skills to interpret spiritual opportunities when they arise and to value-add to these effectively. Value-adding to spiritual opportunities requires informed pedagogical practices and a knowledgeable educator who knows when to value-add by engaging with the child and when to value-add by affording children space, flow and flexibility. If educators are to "use a wide net to catch the great variety of forms taken by children's spirituality" as Nye (2009, p. 35) argues, then they require the knowledge and strategies to do so. It is therefore recommended that educators are provided with strategies to assist them in the task of promoting children's spirituality that is inclusive of religious and cultural diversity. These strategies could be in the form of support documentation that educators could access alongside the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009).

6.4.4 Recommendation four.

A key recommendation resulting from this investigation is the need for continued investment in advocating for play in early childhood contexts. This investment must occur at a government and then sector level for it to have an authentic and lasting

effect at the level of the educator. Specifically, targeted and strategically planned professional development is required. In addition, the creation of framework documents that articulate, more descriptively, the spiritual opportunities of play, is essential.

Play was established in existing literature as a pedagogical tool that facilitated children's spirituality (Catholic Education Office Rockhampton, 2012; Harris, 2016; Ng, 2012). In particular, literature on children's spiritual expression referred to play as a context that provided children with opportunities for creative and imaginative activities that are central to spirituality (Harris, 2013; Ng, 2012). To enable spirituality to be promoted through play, play must adhere to the description outlined in the *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9), that is, play must be offered as a context for learning that encourages conversation, investigation and independence.

6.4.5 Recommendation five.

Further research in the area of educators' practices to promote children's spirituality is recommended in order to further develop theoretical understandings regarding both children's spirituality and the pedagogical practices of the educators. Specifically, further empirical work that can add to the contributions and insights gained as a result of this research can potentially influence pedagogical practice beyond the sector level, and contribute to future policy. Additionally, continued research in this area will add depth to the established theoretical perspectives on spirituality in early childhood. Subsequently, in distilling the key insights gained from this investigation, what remains is the need for on-going research and scholarship in the hope that policy and practice will accommodate and promote children's spirituality.

6.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Research

This research was original and has significance for those in the field of early childhood education and in the area of spirituality. A strength of this research was its focus on the educator, in promoting children's spirituality, which was identified as a gap in existing literature. Through contributing research on the understanding and practices of educators, this research has made a contribution to current discourse on children's spirituality. In addition, a further strength resides in the use of IPA to inform the research methodology. Utilising IPA enhanced the rigour of both the data collection and data analysis phases of the research. In particular, the establishment of the researcher journal as a tool used throughout the entirety of the investigation overtly established the role of the researcher in the research and facilitated the ability to be reflexive. The use of the researcher journal and reflexive statements strengthened this investigation as these processes provided assurances of reliability and rigour throughout each step of the investigation.

The identification of limitations within this investigation occurred through the reflexive process that underpinned each stage of the research. Whilst IPA is acknowledged as a strength, as a qualitative approach, it also has its limitations. These limitations exist in relation to the interpretative nature of data collection and analysis. Whilst all attempts were made to ensure that the researcher remained objective, the very nature of qualitative investigation places the researcher within the context of the research. Therefore, it must be recognised that whilst the researcher attempted to bracket any personal assumptions or bias from the research, one cannot be fully aware of all pre-conceptions or their influence. It is also apparent that people's perspectives and the observations gathered provide a 'snapshot' in time and, as recognised within an interpretivist paradigm, people's perspectives are in a constant state of flux (Oliver,

2012). A further limitation inherent to investigating a new phenomenon is the small sample size. As Catholic Education Western Australia governed three centres that met the requirements of this investigation, at the time of the research, the sample size, although exhaustive, was relatively small.

6.6 Reflexive Statement

My experience of conducting this research has been both challenging and personally fulfilling. On reflection, the process reminded me of T. S. Eliot's statement, "in my end is my beginning" (Eliot, 1940, para. 23). This journey of research has been one in which I have become acutely aware of my own shift in understandings. It has caused me to reflect on my own personal understanding of spirituality and to consider how this understanding is influenced by, and influences, the spirituality of those I teach. My understanding of the ways that spirituality can be promoted, by educators, in early childhood has also been significantly impacted by the participants in this study. Understanding spirituality as a multifaceted construct, one that relates to the human as well as the religious, and as a construct that transcends the linear pathways of development assists in promoting children's spirituality in a myriad of ways. Coming to an understanding that discourse on children's spirituality must omit the phrase 'development' if educators are to truly contribute to children's spirituality in a broad, rather than linear sense, has been a remarkable insight for me as a researcher, as an academic and as an educator.

6.7 Closing Remarks

This research has contributed insight into the practices educators engage with to promote children's spirituality within a specific religious context. In focusing on the practices of the educator, this research also revealed the educators' understandings of

spirituality. These understandings informed educators' practices, culminating in the development of new theoretical understandings regarding the pedagogical practices that educators employ to promote children's spirituality.

The *EYLF* (DEEWR, 2009) has drawn attention to the need for educators to attend to children's spiritual capacity as part of a holistic approach to the early years (p. 9). To enable educators to not only attend to children's spirituality but also to intentionally and explicitly promote this capacity requires the acquisition of both knowledge and skills. Adams (2009) emphasised the need for educators themselves to have received spiritual formation if they are to nurture the spirituality of children. The insights gained from this investigation support this need for spiritual formation. Additionally, educators must be knowledgeable about children's spirituality to enable them to intentionally and effectively plan for children's spiritual opportunities. As spiritual moments are often child initiated and spontaneous, educators must also possess the skills to discern incidental moments within each child's day that are open to spiritual possibilities. To conclude, this investigation has responded to the call for further research in the field of early childhood spirituality (Adams et al., 2016). In placing the focus of this inquiry on the educators' pedagogical practices, the impact of this research augments research in the field of children's spirituality with educators' practices. Knowledgeable educators who intentionally awaken and promote children's spirituality are required if early childhood education is to truly value holistic and integrated practices.