Children's Spirituality? Sharing Teachers' voices

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Sherman Center Research Conference

June 2023

Funding

Background

- Holistic child development lens: centering spirituality as the core of the child

- Finding a place for spirituality in the secular classroom

- Purpose of the study: exploring teacher's understanding of children's spirituality to inform ways in which they may nurture and support it in educational settings

Theoretical Framework

- Children's spirituality as a 'life force' promoting learning, resilience, and well-being (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018; Miller, 2016; Montessori, 1949)

- Nurturing spirituality may improve behavior and has been found to be associated with developmentally appropriate practices (Mata-McMahon, et al. 2018)

- Spiritually-nurturing environments: Support children's natural curiosity, wonder, and self-expression (Adams et al., 2016; Bredekamp, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Mata-McMahon et al., 2018)

Definition of Spirituality

- The challenge of defining spirituality: ineffable, multifaceted, producing a lack of consensus

- Wide range of descriptors: connectedness, divine experiences, inner peace, transcendent connection to nature and the universe, and search for purpose (Bone & Fenton, 2015; Daly, 2004; Elkins, 1998; Harris, 2007; Hart, 2003; Haugen, 2018; Hyde, 2020; Hyman & Handal, 2006; Mason et al., 2007; Palmer, 2003; Urbanowski, 1997; Van Niekerk, 2018)

- Spirituality is linked to character, connection, caring, confidence, compassion, and competency (Benson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2006)

- Spirituality is an innate human potential to connect and relate to self, others, and the Other (Mata-McMahon, 2015)

Definition of Spirituality

From a holistic view of child development, centering the spirit of the child as the main core, spirituality is defined,

"as an innate human potential or ability to be fully present in order to connect with ourselves, with others, and with the greater Other intangible beyond us, which some call the transcendent or the divine, and others refer to as energy or Spirit. This connection affords us the possibility to relate or be in relation with the spiritual realm, and move toward finding meaning and direction in life, rediscovering our purpose as human beings (Mata, 2015) [...] spirituality [relates] to [...] knowing thyself and understanding the reason for living life, as well as with connecting and relating to everything around us (material and spiritual) in a profound and meaningful way." (Mata-McMahon & Escarfuller, in press)
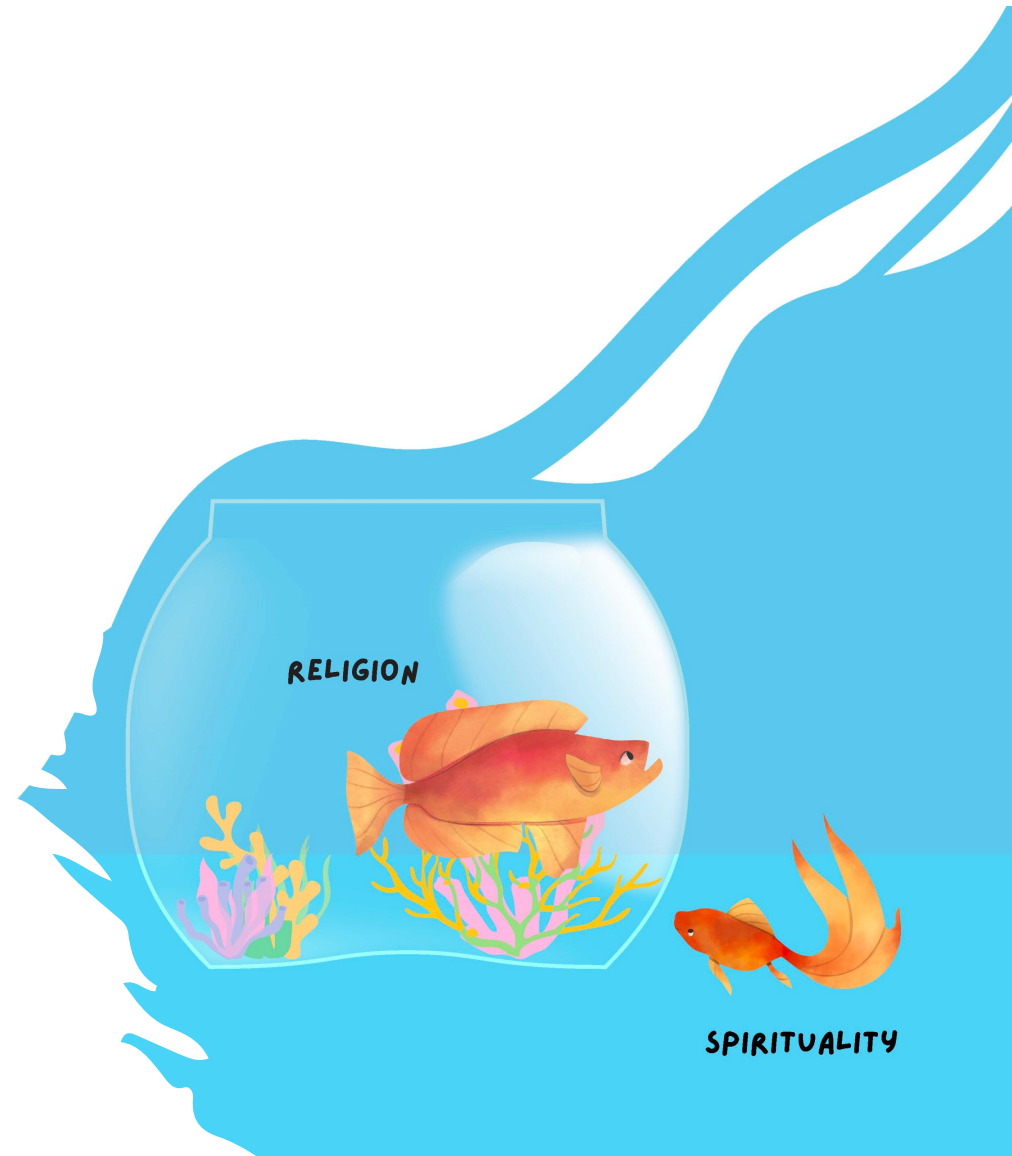
Methodology

- Research Design: Mixed-methods approach, using the recently validated Early Childhood Educators' - Spiritual Practices in the Classroom (ECE-SPC) instrument (Mata-McMahon, et al., in press) for data collection

- Research Question:

   How do in-service early childhood educators understand children's spirituality?

Data Collection

- Instrument: the ECE-SPC includes 5 sections: Spiritual Views and Practices, Activities and Curriculum, Classroom Environment and Schedule, Interactions and Experiences, Demographics. Excluding demographic information, all sections include both rating-scale items (34) and open-ended questions (5) (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018, 2020)

- Focus: Responses to Q7, "What do you understand children's spirituality to be?"

- Scope: Analysis of 318 responses from early childhood educators

Participants

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 363)

Characteristic	n	%
Age (n = 355)		
22 - 32	56	16
33 - 46	143	40
47 - 60	121	34
61 and above	35	10
Gender (n = 361)		
Female	338	94
Male	23	6
Race / Ethnicity (n = 355)		
Asian (Asian, Middle Eastern, Indian)	8	2
Bi-racial	3	<1
Black or African American	52	15
Hispanic or Latinx	18	5
Native American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	2	<1
White	272	77

- 365 early childhood educators across 36 states

- Diverse participant background: Gender, racial or ethnic background, role, years of experience, student age groups, school settings

- This paper focuses on the 318 responses to the ECE-SPC Q7

Data Analysis

Table 2

Codebook organized by Response Framework Group and Category (N = 318)

Response Framework Group/Category	f
Essence	208
Mystical	106
Self	62
Values	23
Purpose, Meaning & Role	17
Origin	121
External	71
Internal	50
Action	86
Toward Others	48
Toward their Surroundings	13
Religious Mindset & Practices	12
Meditation & Mindfulness	6
Playing & Discussing	6
No Answer	32
Children do not Understand Spirituality	4

- Use of in-vivo and open coding, focused and axial coding following the grounded theory approach

- Intercoder negotiated agreement and triangulation for data analysis reliability

Findings – Response Framework

- Different perspectives in responses: as **Essence** of spirituality, **Origin** of spirituality, and spirituality as **Action**

- Different categories, codes, and subcodes emerged under these three different approaches to question response

Findings – Essence

- Most common type of response (frequency: 208)

- Categories included:
  - Mystical
  - Self
  - Values
  - Purpose, Meaning & Role

"Their belief in God and how this impacts their actions and the actions around them." (R 94)

"They were made by god and can ask god to live in them and learn to live for Christ and know him as their savior as they grow ." (R 100)

Table 3
Codebook Response Framework: Essence (N = 318)

Category/ Code	f
Mystical	106
God	50
Higher Power	16
Something	9
Greater Power	8
Mystery Wonder & Awe	8
Jesus	6
World-Universe	6
Awareness of Creator	1
Guiding light	1
Heaven & Angels	1
Self	62
Self-awareness	8
Understanding feelings	7
Understanding self	7
Belief in self & Self-esteem	6
Connection to self	6
Character & Temperament	3
Freedom	3
Self-exploration	3
Being Creative	2
Calm and Peace	2
Perspective of self and surroundings	2
Self-expression	2
Center self	1
Conscience & Personality	1
Cope with issues	1
Development	1
Feel safer	1
Values	23
Kindness	13
Joy & happiness	5
Empathy	2
Love	1
Play	1
Purpose, Meaning & Role	17

Findings – Origin

- Second most common type of response (frequency: 121)

- Categories related to defining spirituality as having an **External** or **Internal** source of origin.

"I believe children's spirituality is how they are brought up and what the parent believes." (R 62)

Table 4
Codebook Response Framework: Origin (N = 318)

Category/ Code	f
External	71
Taught by Others	61
Learning about Right & Wrong	6
From Culture	3
From Experiences	1
Internal	50
Innate-Inherent-Natural	30
Within Self	12
Individual-Own	8

Findings – Action

- The third type of response (frequency: 86)

- Actions considered spiritual:
  - Toward Others
  - Toward Surroundings
  - Religious Mindset & Practices
  - Meditation & Mindfulness
  - Playing & Discussing

"How they connect with the people and environments around them." (R 281)

"Treating others with respect, following rules as not to infringe on anyone else. Doing their best." (R 315)

Table 5
Codebook Response Framework: Action (N = 318)

Category/ Code	f
Toward Others	48
Respect	9
Love & Loving	8
Connection to others	5
Care	4
Good	4
Relationships	3
Ability to think of others & feelings	2
Acceptance	2
Equal treatment	2
Grateful	2
Kindness	2
Forgiving	1
Honesty	1
Toward their Surroundings	13
Connection to Surroundings	5
Connection to Nature	4
Appreciation of the World	1
Religious Mindset & Practices	12
Meditation & Mindfulness	6
Being Present	2
Playing and Discussing	6
Play and engage with others	3
Questions of Life & Death	1

Conclusions

- First comprehensive study of early childhood educators' views on children's spirituality in the U.S.

- Importance of spirituality for safeguarding developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education

- Spirituality is conceptualized as Essence, Origin, and Action, still strongly understood as related to a belief in God even in secular environments

- Clear evidence of early childhood educators supporting and nurturing children's spirituality in secular educational settings across the country

Future Research

- Analyze Q7 data by groups
- ECE-SPC instrument validation study (in press)
- ECE-SPC national data (500 U.S. educators)
- ECE-SPC instrument adapted and translated to Spanish and other languages to compare different populations

**Early Childhood Educator's Spiritual Practices in the Classroom (ECE-SPC)**

Instructions: Answer the following questions thinking about your role as an educator, the educational environment in which you teach, and the curriculum and activities you design and implement for the children with whom you work.

Section I: Spiritual Views and Practices

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Uncertain (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1. Spirituality is important to me, in my life.	○	○	○	○	○
2. Spirituality is important for children.	○	○	○	○	○
3. Schools should nurture children's spirituality.	○	○	○	○	○
4. Children's spirituality should be nurtured only at home.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Spirituality is an inherent domain of human life.	○	○	○	○	○

References
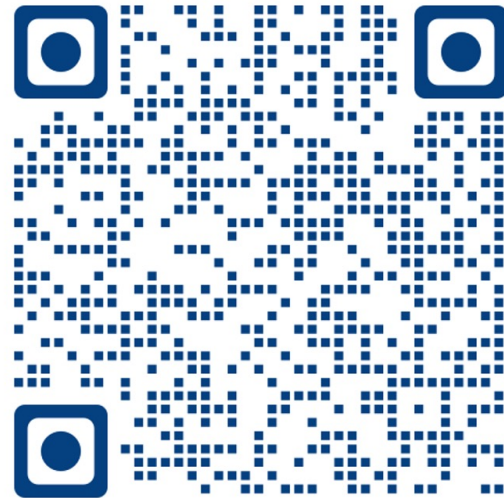
Thank you!

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