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# But First, Spirituality: Spirituality and Religious Education in Western Australian Catholic Early Learning Contexts

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**Abstract:** In Western Australia (WA), Religious Education (RE) is a mandated learning area within the compulsory years of the Catholic school sector. RE is advocated as a curriculum subject, timetabled for and assessed alongside other subjects and focussed on developing religious knowledge and understanding. In addition to the RE lesson, faith development, or catechesis occurs through the intersection of RE and other faith-based activities in the Catholic school. In the early learning centre that caters for children prior to compulsory schooling, there is no formalised RE curriculum and educators are tasked with raising the religious awareness of children as opportunities arise. This paper presents findings from research that explored educators' understandings of, and practices in, promoting children's spirituality specifically in connection to RE. As a result, the paper advocates for spirituality as the starting point for developing young children's religious beliefs. In addition, it became evident through this investigation that understandings of spirituality, religiosity and RE continue to be complex and educators require assistance to disentangle these if they are to intentionally promote children's spirituality, and subsequently, their religious beliefs.

**Keywords:** spirituality; religious education; early learning; faith-based schools; early childhood and care; early years education



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## 1. Introduction

The educative nature of Religious Education (RE) is agreed upon by many (Gellel 2019). However, there is also the formative aspect of RE, which for some is a necessity and for others is described as a 'hope' (Groome 2000). The nexus between formation and education is made more explicit in the early years of development as children learn holistically (Robinson et al. 2018); they experience their learning and don't necessarily separate learning 'about' something with 'experiencing' it and 'living' it. Early childhood research specifically in the field of spirituality recognises the spiritual capacity as part of holistic development, identified as innate and therefore residing alongside the other developmental capacities (physical, personal- social-emotional, cognitive-language). The spiritual capacity thus requires nurturing for an individual to thrive (Benson et al. 2003). The connection between nurturing a young child's spirituality whilst addressing their faith-based needs through RE was the impetus for this investigation. The researcher sought to contribute to discourse on the under-represented context of educators working with 3 to 4 year old children attending faith-based centres, through the lens of spirituality.

In Western Australia (WA), the context in which this research occurred, RE occurs as a learning area in Catholic schools from Pre-Primary (the first year of compulsory schooling) through to the final year of secondary school, Year 12. As a learning area, RE is afforded the same time in the curriculum schedule and expects the same rigour as other learning areas. Many Catholic schools in WA provide education and care in the prior-to-school setting, such as an early learning centre, which caters for children aged 2 to 4 years of age; these centres formed the sample for this research. In these co-located, Catholic early learning centres, there exists no formal RE curriculum. However, educators are encouraged to raise the

religious awareness of children in their centre by making religious connections to events and experiences as they arise. In these early years of development, research suggests children to be naturally spiritual (Adams 2009), engaging in wonder and seeking relationship with others as well as answers to their 'big questions' (De Souza 2016). The findings presented in this paper emerged from this larger investigation that explored spirituality in-depth and subsequently, the scope of this paper is to present findings pertaining to how the educators' understood spirituality and young children's spirituality in connection to religion. Findings are presented that pertain specifically to how this understanding of spirituality translated to their practice in promoting Religious Education in the early years' room at their centre. As the applied methodology for the research was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the role of the researcher in the research is overt. As such, this paper is explicit in presenting the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interpretation of their own experience—a double hermeneutic (Smith et al. 2009).

## 2. Spirituality Is an Innate Human Capacity

The seminal work of Coles (1990) provides the foundation for understanding spirituality as innately human. Coles' large-scale empirical work with children contributed the natural ability of children to engage in spiritual matters and this gave rise to further research premised on his foundations. Spirituality is widely acknowledged in the literature as an innate capacity (Adams 2009; Eaude 2009; Hart 2003; Hyde 2010); Bellous and Csinos (2009) refer to every person comprising of a 'human spirit', a spirit that resides as a capacity within a human development. However, as with the other developmental capacities (physical, social-emotional, cognitive-linguistic) the spiritual capacity requires nurturing; it must be awakened if it is to be realised (King 2013).

When spirituality is conceptualised as a universal trait (Mata-McMahon et al. 2020) it is more clearly understood as distinct from religion or faith and therefore a secular construct. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) explicitly identifies spirituality as one aspect of a child's development; one that requires protection and nurturing. Article 17 states that Government must 'ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'. Further to this, Article 23 states the need to incorporate children's cultural and spiritual development in decision-making. Article 27 reports, "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" and Article 32 advises the right of the child to be free from exploitation and hazards that may impact their physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. The explicit mention of the spiritual capacity alongside the other human domains (physical, cognitive, emotional and social). This secular Convention speaks to the innateness of spirituality and reinforces research in the field that attests spirituality as pertaining to all people, regardless of culture or faith. Mata (2014, p. 8) affirms this view, stating that spirituality "provides humans with a window to greater consciousness and more profound understanding of being, meaning and purpose". It is therefore, through the spiritual capacity, that the cultivation of religious belief begins.

## 3. Spirituality Is Nurtured and Promoted in a Variety of Ways

Spirituality is experienced and expressed in a multitude of ways with existing research affirming the need to attend to children's spirituality by affording opportunities that have a spiritual potential (Bone 2008). Of significance in existing research is the centrality of connectedness and relationship in the description of spirituality (Gellel and Calleja 2022). The work of Harris (2007) draws attention to relationships and belonging as components of young children's spirituality. Hay and Nye's (2006) contribution to understanding the complex nature of spirituality is commonly adopted and is premised on the notion that relationality is central to spirituality. Hay and Nye (2006) articulate relationality in connection to self, others, the world and a transcendent element. When considered in this

way, spirituality becomes the experience of a sense of connectedness one feels inwardly, then with other people, to the natural world and with a God, which for some begins with a feeling of 'something greater' that can lead to religious beliefs. Similarly, Bone (2008, p. 266) adopted the following description of spirituality in her research with young children;

spirituality is a means of connecting people to each other, to all living things, to nature and the universe. Spirituality is a way of appreciating the wonder and mystery of everyday life. It alerts me to the possibility for love, happiness, goodness, peace and compassion in the world.

Bone (2008) explicates this description further by describing spirituality for young children as experienced as spiritual witness, spiritual in-betweenness and the spiritual elsewhere. These descriptions, although named differently, align with more contemporary research that describes the various ways young children may express their spiritual capacity. The relationship to self and self to other (spiritual witness) is drawn upon in the work of Gellel and Calleja (2022) as they affirm the use of silence and contemplation (Ng 2012) as well as empathy and compassion (Giesenberg 2007) as spiritual expression. The relationship to self specifically aligns with the connection made in existing literature between identity construction and spirituality (Sifers et al. 2012). The liminal state of spiritual inbetweenness coined by Bone (2008) is referenced in the more recent work of Mata-McMahon et al. (2020) as the spontaneous and often child initiated moments that give rise to questions of meaning and purpose, of interaction with the environment (Mata 2014; Robinson 2019) and that facilitate a sense of belonging (De Souza 2016). The experience of wonder and awe (Dowling 2005; EAUDE 2009; Schein 2017; Robinson 2022), of mystery and of engaging with imagination and creativity (Adams 2009; Schein 2017) is what Bone's (2008) terms the spiritual elsewhere and this is connected to the notion of 'becoming', a key overarching aim of the Early Years Learning Framework in Australia [EYLF] (DEEWR 2009).

Adams (2009) suggests educators working with children must be attuned to children's 'spiritual voices' given the multitude of ways in which children experience and express their innate spirituality. It is about a spiritual potential and therefore educators are tasked with offering a range of opportunities that might 'awaken' young children's spirituality. In this paper, RE is the lens through which spiritual opportunity is investigated.

#### 4. Religious Education, Religiosity and Spirituality: What's the Connection?

The term 'Religious Education' is context-laden and subsequently requires definition in any research into its applicability or structure. As aforementioned, in the WA context, RE is deemed a learning area in the Catholic schooling system, treated as a curriculum, time-tabled and taught by a primary generalised or secondary specialist teacher. In the early years prior-to-school setting, RE is provided at the level of raising children's religious awareness. This approach to RE is not uncommon, with other Australian and international diocese adopting RE as a learning area focussed on content delivery. The distinction across states and nations most frequently lies in how faith is understood and the role that faith plays in RE. In WA, faith development, or catechesis, is viewed as the role of the entire Catholic school, of which RE comprises one part (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia 2009). In other contexts, catechesis is described as a key function of RE.

Whilst a large body of research is clear in articulating the distinct relationship that exists between spirituality and religion, much still exists that entangles these two concepts. The possible intersection of spirituality and religion can be expressed through the use of the term 'religiosity'. Religiosity is a more agreeable term in literature, describing both a growth in faith and in understanding (Congregation for Catholic Education 1977, 1988). Most notably the work of Rossiter (2011) is cited in discourse on religiosity as he describes the interconnectedness of faith and knowledge that is central to the term. Religiosity, Rossiter suggests, is articulated as a spirituality that is directed by religious beliefs. Religiosity is as an avenue for spiritual expression referenced to a particular religion. In a Catholic school context, religiosity occurs through the integration of faith, life and culture (Congregation for Catholic Education 1977). In this way, RE forms one element of faith development,

drawing on the child's innate spirituality and accessing religious knowledge through RE. Reid (2011) warns that "spirituality cannot be a substitute for religious education" (p. 12) and as such, delineating the terms is a necessary task.

## 5. Research Design

The research investigation was informed by a qualitative design as the strengths of a qualitative approach lie in its ability to engage in depth with a subject and to examine social processes (Babbie 2020). The driving question was; what are educators' understandings of, and practices in, promoting young children's spirituality? The researcher sought to uncover the educators own understanding of the phenomena of spirituality and to then understand their lived experience of it personally and in the professional context of educating 3 and 4 year old children within faith-based centres. As such, it followed that the research would take a social constructivist epistemology and a phenomenological interpretivist theoretical perspective. Phenomenology is centred on "thinking about what the experience of being human is like . . . and which constitute our lived world" (Smith et al. 2009, p. 11). The interpretivist paradigm places focus on meaning making and process, therefore aligning with a phenomenological perspective. A more specific methodological approach to this research was subsequently selected that combined the phenomenological perspective with the understanding that such an approach seeks to "explore the . . . experiences, ideas and feelings of participants" (Kervin et al. 2006, p. 37), namely, interpretivist phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA was selected as the most appropriate methodology and tool for analysis as it is a particular qualitative approach concerned with both the lived experience of the participant and the role of the researcher.

IPA is grounded in the work of Husserl (1970) and he is considered the father of phenomenology. From his works, Heidegger (1978) developed a more sociological context to IPA, leading to a combination of the interpretative with the hermeneutic. Consequently, research within this framework involves the social world of the participant (Larkin et al. 2008). Likewise, the researcher cannot completely remove himself or herself from the context, or social world of the participant and must therefore employ techniques in an attempt to remove bias. Literature on IPA emphasises the concept of 'persons-in-context', the notion that the person (the educator in this research) cannot be separated from the context (early learning centre) in which they are living. IPA employs the use of the technique 'bracketing', which is a means for the researcher to put aside (to bracket) their own preconceived ideas, thoughts and assumptions (Smith et al. 2009). The task of consciously setting aside these possible biases, through the use of a researcher journal, works to legitimate the data collection and analysis. A researcher journal for the purpose of bracketing was employed in this investigation.

## 6. Participant Sample

A purposive and exhaustive sample was selected to undertake this research. The criteria for inclusion was educators leading in 3 and 4 year old rooms within faith-based early learning centres in WA. Regarding the centres, only three existed at the time of this investigation and all three were included. Within each centre there was a variety of rooms for 3 and 4 year old children. Centre A included 4 rooms; Centre B included 2 rooms; and Centre C comprised 2 rooms. The lead educator within each of these rooms was approached to participate in the research. The lead educator was determined by qualification and responsibility. These lead educators held the responsibility for the planning, teaching and assessment within that room. Qualifications for these lead educators varied and ranged from holding a 4 year Bachelor of Education qualification to a Certificate III Vocational Training Certificate. There existed a possible nine lead educators and all nine consented to participating in the research, thus forming the sample.

Despite the small sample size, as the population for inclusion was exhausted, the data presented provides an accurate representation of the group. Smith et al. (2009, p. 56) suggests IPA allows participants the opportunity to provide " . . . a rich, detailed, first

person account of their experiences". Furthermore, studies in IPA call for a small number of participants so that data collected can be more detailed, gaining a deeper insight into the experience of the participant's world.

## 7. Research Methods

The larger investigation from which the findings emanated comprised three methods of data collection; semi-structured interviews with each of the nine participants; observations of the educators' practice on two separate occasions and for two full days; then the collection of their planning documents for a two week period. As the findings presented in this paper focus solely on the interview data, only this method is outlined in detail.

Semi-structured interviews provided insight into the educators' personal understandings of spirituality and their professional understandings and practices in promoting children's spirituality. The interviews were the first method of data collection, following which the observations occurred and then the collection of planning documents. Qualitative interviews can take many forms and this investigation, in employing IPA, selected the semi-structured format as most suited. Semi-structured interviews comprise a number of prepared questions and afford the researcher the opportunity to probe and to follow the direction of the topics raised. IPA, is "a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participant's responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which arise" (Smith 2008, p. 57).

The interview questions were informally piloted with educators who were not in the participant sample. Once piloted, minor changes were made to wording and sequencing and a final ten interview questions comprised the semi-structured format. Interview questions included, for example, *Can you recall a spiritual experience of your own? And What is the relationship between spirituality and religion for you?* Interviews lasted approximately one hour in duration and occurred in person.

## 8. Ethical Considerations

The researcher safeguarded the well-being of the participants by ensuring that ethical standards were maintained. All ethical requirements were adhered to when conducting this investigation. Participants were invited to partake in the research; no one was obliged. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the research at any time, without consequence. Procedures to de-identify data were strictly adhered and this ensured the confidentiality of participants. Ethical Approval for this research was granted through the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University.

## 9. Analysis Process

IPA was the selected methodological approach and it naturally followed that IPA would inform the process of data analysis. IPA provides a systematic structure for analysing qualitative data and this was applied to the interview data. Interviews were digitally recorded, de-identified and later transcribed. The interview transcripts therefore formed the data set for applying IPA. Bednall's (2006) stages for IPA were specifically applied and these outlined a process of iterative reading of each transcript, coding topics of significance on each occasion. Topics of significance were linked to form themes, creating a set of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes as they arose. The final step in the process involved re-integrating any notes taken as part of bracketing and then re-reading the transcripts in light of this bracketed information. Final themes were then noted. IPA seeks to "encourage reflective engagement with the participant's account. Inevitably, the analysis is a joint product of the participant and the analyst" (Smith et al. 2009, p. 80) and therefore the re-integration of bracket information is a crucial step in overtly recognising the role of the researcher in the research. Specifically, bracketing is an assurance of the integrity of the data. Bracketing requires the researcher to engage in reflexivity; to make an effort to understand the participants' personal worlds, as much as possible, by consciously recognising sources of bias. Shaw (2010) describes the reflexive process as an "explicit evaluation of the self"

(p. 234). The themes that emerged from the process of IPA, and that fit within the scope of this paper, are presented and then discussed in light of the extant literature.

## 10. Findings

As specified in the background to the research, this paper is focussed on the presentation of findings pertaining to the interview data collected. Specifically, responses gathered that contribute to understanding educators' own interpretation of the relationship between spirituality, religion and subsequently the teaching of RE are drawn upon. The findings of the research in its entirety are beyond the scope of this paper, which aims to present responses and understandings of spirituality as it was, or was not, connected to religion and RE.

Demographic information was gathered in the semi-structured interview and revealed the following; of the nine participants, all identified as Christian but six stated they were Catholic. Information on years of experience was not gathered. However, in the interview participants indicated their experience with professional learning of which four reported having received professional learning in the area of RE and only one in the area of spirituality.

During the semi-structured interview process, educators were asked; *What is the relationship between spirituality and religion for you?* Six of the nine educators responded with a description that placed spirituality and religion as connected constructs, rather than dichotomous. The educators initially spoke of the two constructs as separate and then elaborated to articulate a relationship between the two terms. Most commonly, spirituality was pronounced as an innate component of being human, something that they viewed everyone had as a potential within them. In contrast, religion was viewed as a choice; a personal decision to believe in a specific set of religious traditions and beliefs. As an example of the type of response that contributed to this theme, the following remarks are presented;

"Anyone could choose to be religious, but is more of a choice than spirituality."  
(Educator 1: Centre B)

"Spirituality is like what you're like on the inside. What you believe, who you are as a person. Whereas religion is more the stories about from the Bible and the Catholic practices, that sort of thing, the physical part of it . . ." (Educator 7: Centre A)

"Well, I personally think that they're very closely connected but I understand that they can exist separately to each other. Religion obviously needs spirituality but spirituality can exist without religion. So for me, personally, I think that believing in something supports my notion of myself as a spiritual being . . ." (Educator 5: Centre A)

Educator 9: Centre A articulated a response that also made reference to the specific early years context:

"Within early childhood as well, everything's sort of combined together. So I sort of say that spirituality is developing their sort of kindness and inner peace as well. And we bring religion in with it as well . . . sitting silently and thinking about our thoughts . . ."

Within this theme, one of the six (that had responded about the distinct yet connected relationship between spirituality and religion), also referenced the significance of the early years for spirituality as a starting point for religion.

"Well, for small children, spirituality would come first because they have no concept of religion at that age . . . all children have come from somewhere so whether we come from somewhere knowing about that somewhere and then forget about it as we grow older, I don't know." (Educator 5: Centre A)

Two of the nine educators responded that spirituality and religion were synonymous. Educator 6: Centre B, as an example, continued to use the terms spirituality and religion interchangeably within the interview. Educator 4: Centre C explicitly stated that spirituality and religion were the same, referring to spirituality as a religion. The following response was provided:

“I think they’re pretty much the same to me . . . Spirituality is a religion as well. Even saying like, ‘You’ve seen ghosts’ or whatever, I still think it’s connected to your religion . . . I think they’re the same pretty much.” (Educator 4: Centre C)

One participant viewed spirituality and religion as completely dichotomous.

When the educators were asked to speak about the ways they promoted children’s spirituality, several themes emerged (religious beliefs and practices; opportunities to develop social skills; conversation; opportunities for play; educator knowledge and skills; identity development). The theme ‘religious beliefs and practices’ emerged from a range of interview responses that mentioned faith-based rituals and the teaching about the beliefs of the specific religion that informed the centre’s mission and ethos. Eight of the nine educators contributed to this theme. As an example of the types of responses analysed as contributing to this theme, the following statements are presented:

“Of course being a [faith-based] centre we do the prayer before our meals. We go to the Church at Easter time . . . ” (Educator 4: Centre C)

“Well, even prayer is spiritual. The prayers that we say everyday. We’ll say a morning prayer, a morning tea prayer, a lunchtime prayer.” (Educator 8: Centre A)

The beliefs of the Catholic faith were also mentioned within this theme. Talking with children about God and Jesus was provided as a way of promoting children’s spirituality:

“We make them aware of God and creation and how they can relate to other people as Jesus taught us.” (Educator 7: Centre A)

“We talk about God, and we use stories, like the nativity.” (Educator 8: Centre A)

Two of the nine educators articulated that there were children in their rooms that identified as being of ‘no religion’ or were of other religious traditions than that promoted in the centre. Despite this, the educators only focused on the specific faith tradition of the centre and nurtured spirituality in this way. For example, Educator 5: Centre A remarked that:

“Most of our children would be Catholic and a few are non-Catholic but we do our [faith-based] religious songs and we pray”.

## 11. Discussion

### 11.1. Spirituality and Religion: Disentangling the Terms

This investigation contributes to the discourse on disentangling spirituality from religion, as was made evident in existing literature. In doing so, this paper presents an original contribution by making clear that the complicated relationship between spirituality and religion continues to exist. Although many of the educators were able to articulate some kind of connection between the two separate terms, the ambiguity in understanding the terms and the way they were actualised within their faith-based early learning centre was present. This ambiguity is not surprising, given the existing discourse has explicated confusion amongst scholars. Specifically, the educators’ comments regarding spirituality being a religion or stating that spirituality integrates with everything in the early years, illustrates this lack of clarity. To facilitate understanding spirituality and religion as autonomous constructs that can be connected within faith-based contexts, it is necessary to understand spirituality as core to being human. Coles (1990) aptly describes it in this way, “the child’s house has many mansions—including a spiritual life that grows, changes, and responds constantly to the other lives that, in their sum, make up the individual we call by name and know by a story that is all his, all hers” (p. 308). When spirituality is understood as

part of holistic development (Robinson and Hackett 2022) and as a capacity that facilitates relationality with self, others, the world and a transcendent (Hyde 2008), then it can become the vehicle through which religious beliefs can develop. To draw then on the work of Rossiter (2011), religiosity speaks to how spirituality within a faith-based centre might be actualised.

Furthermore, in a specific religious context such as that employed in this investigation, attending to spirituality from a holistic pedagogical approach opens the ability for inclusivity. The findings presented the complexity inherent in having children from multi-faith backgrounds in Catholic centres. Whilst educators responded that they did little for children's spirituality outside of the Catholic faith, this is not to imply an unwillingness or dismissiveness, but rather indicates a need for educators to better understand spirituality holistically and inclusively. As Coles (1990) contributed from his own work, spirituality is a natural inclination of the child; it is not embedded within a religious culture but integral to who the child is. If spirituality can be viewed in this way, then educators are enabled to nurture all children's spirituality rather than attending only to the spiritual needs of those referenced to the dominant religious beliefs. Bloom (2009) furthered this notion by describing spirituality as transcending cultural and religious boundaries. Religion and culture provide a framework, a lens through which spirituality can be viewed or accessed. When spirituality is framed in such a way, it is what Rossiter (2011) termed 'religiosity'. Disentangling the terms situates the educator with the potential to nurture and promote the spirituality of all children, not just those who affiliate with the dominant faith. In the process of analysing the findings it is apparent that spirituality must come first, before religious development, and this is a complex construct for educators when they have received little to no professional learning in the area.

### *11.2. Engaging the Spiritual in Early Years Religious Education*

Whilst the spiritual capacity can be viewed as an inclusive, it can also be viewed as the capacity from which relationship with the Ultimate Other, or transcendent element, can develop. As De Souza (2016), building on the work of Hay and Nye (2006) describes, spirituality is relational in that it can be experienced and expressed through a connection with self, others, the world, and for some—a God. Therefore, whilst spirituality can in one sense be described as inclusive, bridging faiths and cultures, it can also be understood as the access point where the initial relationship with a sense of something greater than the self is initiated. It is this sense of the transcendent that, if fostered, has the potential to develop into religious beliefs. In addition, the work of Yust (2003) suggests a need to ensure that educators working with children are knowledgeable about spirituality as they must 'create contexts, point the way and share the stories . . . ' (p. 149).

Of significance, the investigation findings suggest an understanding, by the educators, that RE contributes to, or at least is an avenue for, children's spiritual development. The educators identified that within their RE lessons they were afforded an opportunity to engage children's spiritual capacity. However, what was also evident in the findings was that this engagement with the spiritual capacity occurred by chance. The educators identified this connection retrospectively rather than having included experiences or opportunities as a planned and intentional means of promoting religious belief through connection to children's innate spirituality. Moreover it was that educators were able to name experiences they offered in RE lessons that might also have promoted spirituality. The unintentional nature of nurturing children's spirituality presents an opportunity to inform educators more explicitly both of spirituality, and of the role spirituality can play in promoting religious belief. In fact, Bone (2008) asserts that "attention to the spiritual may be a transforming feature of their early childhood years" (p. 274) and as such, so too can RE. If educators tapped into children's natural spirituality it could become a transforming feature of faith development; spirituality must be the starting point.

## 12. Recommendations and Conclusions

The unintentional nature of nurturing children's spirituality, evident in this investigation, presents an opportunity to develop educators' understandings; their understandings of spirituality and of how to plan for opportunities and experiences both within, and outside of, RE. A resulting recommendation that emerges from this research is for educators working with young children in faith-based contexts to access professional learning to experience and understand spirituality for themselves, before being provided with an opportunity to learn about how young children's spirituality may be the entry point for growing their religious beliefs. Personal understanding, experience and formation is the foundation for connecting and contributing to young children's spiritual and religious experience (Robinson 2020). In addition, school or sector based professional learning that integrates RE with spirituality and understandings of religiosity would assist educators in becoming articulate about their practices in nurturing children's holistic development within faith-based centres.

The findings presented in this paper, and subsequent discussion, makes clear the challenging discourse in the field of spirituality and complicated relationship between spirituality and religion. It is hoped that this research has positively contributed to the disentanglement of spirituality and religion. In unravelling spirituality from religion, the research affirms spirituality as an innate capacity from which religious beliefs can be nurtured and promotes spirituality as a suitable starting point for Religious Education in faith-based early learning and school contexts.

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**Data Availability Statement:** Data sets can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

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