



How U.S. Early Childhood Educators Understand Children's Spirituality: A Framework of Essence, Origin, and Action

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Abstract

This study explores in-service early childhood educators' understanding of children's spirituality. Utilizing the recently validated instrument, *Early Childhood Educators' Spiritual Practices in the Classroom (ECE-SPC)*, responses to the question, "What do you understand children's spirituality to be?" were analyzed. Participants included 318 educators working in secular educational settings with children ages zero to eight years across 36 U.S. states. Findings reveal a multilayered understanding of children's spirituality. Through a grounded theory approach to data analysis using in-vivo codes in initial and axial coding, participants' responses were organized in a response framework comprised of three main categories of understanding spirituality: (1) as Essence in itself (f 208), (2) as its place of Origin (f 122), and (3) as Actions in relation to others or as ways in which it is practiced (f 86). This framework contributes to constructing a shared understanding of children's spirituality to build efforts toward promoting holistic development and intentionally nurturing the spiritual domain.

Keywords Early childhood educators · Children's spirituality · Educator perceptions · Secular settings · Definition of children's spirituality

Introduction and Purpose

The early childhood classroom offers children numerous opportunities to make meaning of the world by engaging in inquiry-based explorations (Katz et al., 2014; Masteron, 2021). Young children constantly follow their curious minds, searching for answers to make sense of the world and themselves physically and spiritually (Mata-McMahon

et al., 2018). Early childhood educators, as influential figures in children's lives, are uniquely positioned to support children's sense-making of the world. This study explores how early childhood educators understand children's spirituality, as well as their thoughts on how to nurture children spiritually in secular classrooms. A broader goal of this line of inquiry is to investigate how the spiritual flourishing of children may relate to outcomes including self-discovery and emotional and mental health.

The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood educators' understandings of children's spirituality by analyzing 318 qualitative responses to an open-ended question, part of a more extensive mixed methods study. Preliminary findings from 33 participants indicated that educators understand children's spirituality as related to building connections with self and others, practicing virtues such as love, forgiveness, and compassion, and making meaning of the world through questioning and curiosity. Other common yet less frequent themes about children's spirituality were God and religion, self-awareness, mindfulness and presence, humanness, and inner feelings (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020). By analyzing data from 318 participants from 36 states, the present study significantly expands the

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understanding of early childhood educators' conceptions of children's spirituality in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Maria Montessori described children's spirituality as the 'life force' catalyzing learning (Montessori, 1949), recognizing that each child has a spiritual domain alongside a physical and cognitive domain (Miller, 2019). More recently, children's spirituality has been linked to holistic development (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018, 2020), buffering against stress, and supporting resiliency (Miller, 2016). The physical and emotional effects of stress may be ameliorated by spirituality (Kim & Seidlitz, 2002), and children may feel an emptiness in its absence (Leutenber & Schein, 2017) associated with bullying and narcissistic behavior (Fowler, 1981; Palmer, 2004; Schein, 2018).

A spiritually nurturing environment provides specific support and programmatic features identified in the extant literature, which can be observed and assessed in secular/non-religious classroom settings (Mata-McMahon et al., 2023). The same programmatic characteristics associated with nurturing children's spirituality are also present in descriptions of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), such as facilitating children's creative expression, play, and project work, all supported through nurturing relationships (Bredekamp, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The conceptual similarity between an environment that is developmentally appropriate and one that is spiritually nurturing has caused scholars to caution that the rejection of nurturing spirituality in the early years may reinforce recent trends that are undermining children's holistic development, such as narrowed approaches to skill-based academic assessment and the loss of time for arts, music, and play (Haslip & Gullo, 2018; Mata-McMahon et al., 2018). Research suggests that DAPs related to the teacher, curriculum, and school culture (Bredekamp, 2016; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009) are protected in a spiritually nurturing environment by valuing the child's sense of wonder, curiosity, and joyful self-expression, among other qualities associated with holistic development (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018).

Despite emerging evidence that a spiritually nurturing environment is associated with promoting holistic development, there is concern that the absence of a consensus definition of children's spirituality may hinder the early childhood education profession from adopting a more intentional and comprehensive approach to nurturing spirituality (Adams et al., 2016; Gellel, 2018; Hyde, 2008). While some scholars conclude that a consensus definition of spirituality is unlikely or not possible due to beliefs that it is elusive, encompassing, and subjective (Adams et al., 2016),

other scholars argue that a shared definition of children's spirituality could be constructed by analyzing the patterns that emerge from large scale survey research until stable, repeating themes describing children's spirituality have been identified and then integrated into a representative definition (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020). Such a definition would represent the collective views of those surveyed, creating an increasingly acceptable secular description of children's spirituality that the profession could understand and adopt, serving as the basis for more intentional and widespread efforts to nurture the spiritual domain.

Spirituality has been described and defined in a multitude of ways as a fundamental human condition opposite of materiality, an internal state of being, a felt connectedness and relationship with self and other-than-self, having divine experiences, the experience of meaning, a relationship with God, a feeling of inner peace and security, a transcendent feeling of connection to all living things and nature and the universe, an eternal yearning to be connected with something larger than the ego, a way of life with a transcendent quality, and an urge to search for one's purpose and fulfill it, among others (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). Additional areas of development associated with a spiritual or religious life include caring, compassion, connection, character, and competency (Benson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2006).

An operational definition of spirituality conceptualized by early childhood scholars (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018, p. 4) states:

Spirituality, or the spirit, is the innate light or life within that is nurtured through love, facilitates connections and relationships and expresses itself by ways of wonder, joy, and compassion, among many other virtues and manifestations. It follows that the spirit expresses itself in everyday moments and interests. It also follows that spirituality can be cultivated and nurtured by providing a beautiful environment, loving relationships, opportunities for joy and wonder, and by fostering the emergence of virtues (character strengths) expressing the spirit.

From a holistic view of child development, the spirit of the child is centered as the life force influencing all other developmental domains (Montessori, 1949). This understanding of the centrality of the spirit to human growth, along with a review of the current literature, shapes the definition of spirituality used by the present study 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 connecting and relating to everything around us (material and spiritual) in a profound and meaningful way (Mata-McMahon & Escarfuller, 2024, p.17).

Teachers' Understanding of Children's Spirituality

Despite spirituality being universally valued by all cultures throughout history (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), only a handful of smaller studies have examined how teachers understand children's spirituality. For example, in one study, 11 pre-service teacher candidates described spirituality as an inner component of the self, guiding the self to discover purpose and meaning (Mata, 2014). Other themes included understanding oneself and connecting with others and nature. However, these teacher candidates appeared to describe adult spirituality rather than a distinct view of children's spirituality. When asked how to nurture children's spirituality in school, they encouraged a connection to nature and "calming the mind in order to reflect and ponder" (p. 6), using exercises including breathing, reflection, meditation, and yoga.

In a different study, six early childhood educators were found to regard spirituality as an important part of development (Mata, 2012) in which being spiritual was related to belief in God and religious practice or as non-religious in the form of connection to the divine, the universe, and others. To nurture spirituality in school, this group of educators spoke about letting students consider deep thoughts and unanswered questions, alternative views, interconnected relationships, and one's place in the world. They spoke about nurturing wonder about the world, immersing children in beauty, and creating a caring community where children feel a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, Schein (2012) examined how 12 early childhood educators conceived of children's spirituality, finding that they regard it as a developmental domain that can be developed in three stages, leading to the emergence of a self-sustaining system. These stages included (1) loving and deep relationships to support a child's growing self-awareness and connection with all of reality, (2) opportunities for spiritual moments with time for joy, awe, wonder, and inner peace, often experienced in nature, and (3) empathy, acts of kindness and reverence (as respect and responsibility towards others, one's surroundings and one's deeds). Spiritual development was also related to children

asking big questions that help them relate to something larger than themselves.

Lastly, Greenfield (2018) stated that the "spiritual life of a child emerges in relationship with a caring adult" (p. 6). In her study, twenty-four early childhood educators described children's spirituality as relating to the "soul and essence that defines us" and as an "aspect of humankind that seeks justice, celebrates diversity, and is creative" (p. 8). Early childhood educators also described spirituality as inner energy, self-knowing, what connects us to the environment, and as a non-tactile feeling. Teacher preparation programs have not generally embraced or taught these conceptualizations of the inner life of the child and its outer expressions in human behavior (Greenfield, 2018).

Given the small sample sizes of the studies surveyed above, much remains to be learned about how early childhood educators understand and describe young children's spirituality and how this understanding may broaden conversations with pre-service and in-service educators about child development and how it is nurtured, informing teacher preparation programs in how to best support educators in this topic.

Methods

Research Design

The data presented here stem from a more extensive ongoing study validating and using the *Early Childhood Educators' Spiritual Practices in the Classroom (ECE-SPC)* instrument for data collection (Mata-McMahon et al., 2023) using a mixed-methods approach to analyze both open-ended and rating-scale type questions.

Research Question

The broader study investigates how early childhood educators understand and nurture children's spirituality in educational settings. This paper focuses on the research question (RQ): How do in-service early childhood educators understand children's spirituality?

Data Collection

Data were collected using the ECE-SPC instrument from four of its five salient areas represented in sections I–IV. The ECE-SPC is comprised of Section I: Spiritual Views and Practices, Section II: Activities and Curriculum (educator strategies and techniques), Section III: Classroom Environment and Schedule, Section IV: Interactions and Experiences (in schools and around the community), and Section V: Demographic Information. Excluding

demographic-related questions, all sections include both rating-scale items (34) and open-ended questions (5) (Mata-McMahon et al., 2023). This paper focuses on responses to question seven (Q7) in Section I: What do you understand children's spirituality to be?

Validation

The ECE-SPC was piloted as an online survey via Qualtrics, a widely-used online data collection platform, from which 33 initial responses were collected. Subsequently, a validation study was conducted for the ECE-SPC instrument, using it to collect 365 responses. The validation study for the ECE-SPC can be found in Mata-McMahon et al. (2023).

Participants

Demographic characteristic data is presented in Table 1 and summarized next. The majority of the 365 early childhood educators who answered the ECE-SPC were female (94%), ranged in age between 33 and 60 (74%), and were White (77%). Many of them were lead teachers (43%), administrators, such as center directors (28%), or homecare providers (19%). Most respondents had four or more years of teaching experience (90%) and held at least a bachelor's degree (76%). Participants worked in public secular (46%), private secular (43%), and religiously affiliated schools (11%) and urban (35%), suburban (38%), and rural settings (27%). They worked in 36 states across the U.S. Of the 365 respondents, two did not submit demographic information, and 318 responded to Q7, comprising the data presented in this paper.

Data Analysis

Analysis of Q7 qualitative data followed a grounded theory approach in which concepts and theories are constructed iteratively (Charmaz, 2006). An inductive analysis approach was followed in which data guided researchers' interpretation. First, the process involved repeatedly and carefully reading through the data and establishing the initial round of open codes based on the frequency with which respondents mentioned various ideas related to children's spirituality, also called initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). During and after initial coding, *in vivo* codes were generated following participants' use of specific terms (Charmaz, 2006). Initial and *in vivo* coding represented the first level of analysis. The second level of analysis included focused coding, through which salient codes were examined within and across responses. Focused coding was used to identify the most frequent and significant initial codes to identify patterns (Charmaz, 2006). The third level of analysis included axial coding (Charmaz, 2006) to arrive at

concepts, categories, and subcategories across responses. Lastly, theoretical coding (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to begin conceptualization by relating prior levels of identified codes to each other and integrating them into a response framework.

To ensure intercoder reliability (Lavrakas, 2008), three researchers individually analyzed the responses and coded and recoded the data, engaging in the process of intercoder-negotiated agreement by corroborating each analysis with the others. This process involved comparing codes and reconciling coding discrepancies (Campbell et al., 2013) until all researchers agreed upon the final coding book.

Findings

The findings presented correspond to data collected from the ECE-SPC instrument Q7: *What do you understand children's spirituality to be?* The analysis of the 285 responses collected, adding the original 33, resulted in a total of 318 respondents and showed differences regarding the initial themes arrived at, which pointed to building connections, practicing virtues, and making meaning (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020).

While analyzing the responses to Q7, researchers found that participants approached the question from distinctively different perspectives. Some respondents spoke of the essence of spirituality, reflecting on what it meant at its core; others shared where they thought spirituality stemmed from, explaining where it originates for children; and others reflected on how spirituality prompted children to act toward others and their environment. Noting these different approaches to responding to the question, a response framework was developed, including three types of responses: those focused on the core essence of the concept of children's spirituality (grouped as *Essence*); those focused on the source of children's spirituality, and where it originates from (grouped as *Origin*); and those who identified children's behaviors that could be considered spiritual, as well as actions to engage in and develop spiritually as the way in which they defined children's spirituality (grouped as *Actions*). These broad types of responses included different categories, codes, and subcodes. The summary of findings by groups and categories is presented in Table 2 by frequency.

Essence

The response framework group of *Essence* was the most frequently found in the data, with a frequency of 208. In this group, categories included *Mystical* (f 106), *Self* (f 61), *Values* (f 23), and *Purpose, Meaning & Role* (f 11). See Table 3.

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
Highest Education Completed (n=362)		
High school diploma/GED	13	4
Some community college or CDA	36	10
Associates degree	36	10
Bachelor's degree	60	17
Bachelor's degree + teaching license	55	15
Master's degree	148	40
Doctoral degree	14	4
Job Title (n=348)		
Lead teacher	150	43
Assistant or co-teacher	13	4
Specialist (reading, math, music, P.E., science) or special education teacher	15	4
Homecare provider or caregiver	66	19
Administrator (center director, owner, family childcare provider)	99	28
Other	5	1
Years of Teaching Experience (n=351)		
0–3	34	10
4–10	91	26
11–20	125	36
21 or more	101	28
Work Setting (n=363 valid)		
Public secular	165	46
Private secular	157	43
Religiously affiliated	41	11
Region of Work Setting (n=360)		
Urban	127	35
Suburban	136	38
Rural	97	27

Examples of responses coded under the group of *Essence*, category *Mystical*, and codes *God* and *Higher Power* are provided below. The participant code is identified by the letter 'R' and the number assigned to them, and then the group, category, and code assigned are identified. As can be seen in these quotes, respondents holding an

Essence/Mystical/God perspective of children's spirituality also discussed how this essence manifests in the type of person they become and the quality of their interactions, such as being loving and respectful toward others.

Table 2 Codebook organized by response framework group and category (N = 318)

Response Framework Group/Category	F
Essence	201
Mystical	106
Self	61
Values	23
Purpose, Meaning & Role	11
Origin	122
External	72
Internal	50
Action	86
Toward Others	50
Toward their Surroundings	13
Religious Mindset & Practices	12
Meditation & Mindfulness	6
Playing & Discussing	5
No Answer	31
Children do not Understand Spirituality	4

Spirituality is a sense of relationship to a high power that guides them in a loving way to be a good person to themselves and others. They may not understand GOD, but they understand there is something beyond themselves. (R035; Essence/Mystical/God and Higher Power)

Every child should build their life on [a] Spiritual Foundation. The present generation build[s] their life without any foundation, and therefore we are failing. [The] Bible says the fear of God is the beginning of all wisdom. Once children have the fear of God, they respect parents, respect teachers, they take their study seriously, and they begin to love one another, and Human Society will stand on [a] firm foundation. (R076; Essence/Mystical/God/Fear of God)

Their belief in God and how this impacts their actions and the actions around them. (R110; Essence/Mystical/God/Belief-Faith in God)

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. (R120; Essence/Mystical/God/ Understand-Know God)

Origin

The response group of *Origin* was the second most frequently found group in the participant's responses (f 122) and included categories that defined spirituality as External (f 72) and Internal (f 50) in its source of origin. See Table 4.

Table 3 Codebook response framework: essence (N = 318)

Category/Code	F
Mystical	106
God	50
Higher Power	15
Something	9
Greater Power	9
Mystery Wonder & Awe	8
Jesus	6
World-Universe	6
Awareness of Creator	1
Guiding light	1
Heaven & Angels	1
Self	61
Self-awareness	8
Understanding feelings	7
Understanding self	6
Belief in self & Self-esteem	6
Connection to self	6
Character & Temperament	3
Freedom	3
Self-exploration	3
Being Creative	2
Calm & Peace	2
Perspective of self & 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	11

Table 4 Codebook response framework: origin (N = 318)

Category/Code	F
External	72
Taught by Others	6
Learning about Right & Wrong	2
From Culture	6
From Experiences	3
Internal	50
Innate-Inherent-Natural	30
Within Self	12
Individual-Own	8

Examples of responses coded under the group of *Origin*, categories *External* and *Internal*, and codes *Taught by Others* and *Innate/Inherent-Natural* are:

I believe they are products of their environment and can be molded into whatever kind of human beings our society determines they should be based on various factors including race, gender, socio-economic status, and religion. This begins to determine their spirituality at an early age. (R162; Origin/External/Taught by Others)

I believe children's spirituality is how they are brought up and what the parent believes. (R073; Origin/External/Taught by Others)

I think the majority of it for a young child comes from their family culture and beliefs. (R152; Origin/External/Taught by Others)

They come to us with an innate spirituality. (R332; Origin/Internal/Innate-Inherent-Natural)

Action

The third and last group was *Action*, with a frequency of appearance of 86. This group of responses included categories of action *Toward Others* (f 48), *Toward their Surroundings* (f 13), *Religious Mindset & Practices* (f 12), *Meditation & Mindfulness* (f 6), and *Playing & Discussing* (f 5) as actions that were considered spiritual and were offered as the respondents understanding of children's spirituality. See Table 5.

Examples of responses coded under the group of *Action*, categories *Toward Others* and *Toward their Surroundings*, in codes *Connections to Surroundings*, *Respect*, *Love & Loving*, and *Connection to Nature* are:

How they connect with the people and environments around them. (R320; Action/Toward their Surroundings/Connection to Surroundings)

Treating others with respect, following rules [so] as not to infringe on anyone else. Doing their best. (R361; Action/Toward Others/Respect)

I understand children to be accepting, loving, and caring. Teaching children various techniques to preserve and build on those qualities would be a form of spirituality that children can relate to and assimilate. (R054; Action/Toward Others/Love & Loving)

To me, children's spirituality is demonstrated as a connectedness or attachment to me, to the world around them, as in nature and to each other. (R348; Action/Toward their Surroundings/Connection to Nature)

Table 5 Codebook response framework: action (N=318)

Category/Code	F
Toward Others	50
Respect	10
Love & Loving	9
Connection to others	5
Care	5
Good	4
Relationships	2
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	5
Play and engage with others	3
Questions of Life & Death	1

The researchers noted that 32 respondents did not answer the question or posed no significant response when answering. Four respondents also offered that children were too young to understand spirituality and included this as their response to Q7.

In looking at the demographic information of the study participants, it was noted that 41 were from religiously affiliated settings (11%). Of these 41 respondents, 36 responded to Q7. Since the target participants were early childhood educators from secular education settings, researchers removed these 36 responses from the coding analysis to the Q7 data to determine if any statistical change could be noted.

After removing 36 religiously affiliated respondents from the codebook of 318 responses, a one-tail *t*-test was performed to establish the level of change, if any, on a codebook now reflecting 282 responses to Q7. The analysis revealed no statistical significance across the response framework as a whole or across the majority of categories, codes, and subcodes, indicating the robustness of the original 318 codebook. Nevertheless, statistical significance at a 5% level was found within the response framework group of *Essence*, specifically in the category *Mystical*, within the codes of *God* and *Jesus*. This indicated that

the 36 responses from religiously affiliated settings had a substantial impact on these categories and codes. Moreover, a few subcodes within the code *God*, such as *Belief-Faith in God*, *Connection-Relationship to God*, *Fear of God*, and *Understand-Know God*, also showed statistically significant change at the 5% level (see Table 6). Despite these isolated instances, the overall pattern of responses was largely unaffected by the exclusion of respondents from religiously affiliated settings, and the proportional frequencies presented in categories, codes, and subcodes, as related to each other, remained the same. This demonstrates that while religiously affiliated settings had a statistically significant impact on an isolated category, such as *Mystical*, and a few of its codes and subcodes, it had minimal impact on the overall codebook; thus, the original codebook, including 318 responses, was maintained.

Discussion of Findings

These findings confirm the multidimensional nature of spirituality (Benson, 2006; Lerner et al., 2006) while significantly expanding knowledge about how in-service early childhood educators understand children's spirituality, particularly by illuminating prominent new perspectives. An earlier study involving 33 early childhood educators described children's spirituality as forming connections and relationships, practicing virtues, often related to supporting relationships, and making meaning through curiosity and questioning (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020). Participants also discussed, though less frequently, children's spirituality as related to their beliefs in God and religion, their self-awareness, mindfulness, and connection to inner feelings. In the present and expanded study of 318 participants, these concepts remain present; however, new overarching perspectives characterizing how participants describe children's spirituality were identified. Participants responded to the question, *what do you understand children's spirituality to be?* from three main perspectives: spirituality as an essence or state of being, as deriving from a specific place of origin, or as related to a form of action. Taken together, these perspectives form a

new framework for how early childhood educators understand children's spirituality.

The most common perspective was to explain the *Essence* of children's spirituality as mystical or transcendent, encompassing *God*, the child's relationship to God, relationship to a greater or higher power, or a transcendent figure, such as Jesus. Participants also related children's spirituality to a state of mystery, wonder, and awe. Children's spirituality from the perspective of its *Essence* was also described as a construct found within the *Self*, as part of the child's self-awareness, which included understanding and connecting to one's feelings and self-esteem. Finally, the *Essence* perspective included the presence of *Values* such as kindness, joy, and happiness and the search for who they are regarding their *Purpose, Meaning & Role* in life.

From a second perspective, educators discussed their views on the *Origin* of children's spirituality rather than trying to define the construct in its essence. The origin of children's spirituality was frequently reported to be *External*, being taught to children by others, particularly by parents and other family members. Yet, children's spirituality was also seen as originating *Internally*, as an innate characteristic or as developed within the self, and exemplified through curiosity or the presence of a soul or spirit. From an external *Origin* perspective, adults are responsible and accountable for nurturing the internal spiritual characteristics of children in order for them to flourish.

The third perspective describes children's spirituality as *Actions* and behaviors directed *Toward Others*, *Toward their Surroundings*, and *Toward Themselves*. As an action toward others, children's spirituality was understood as virtuous behavior such as showing respect, love, and care. As an action toward one's surroundings, spirituality was described as the connection to and appreciation for nature and the world. Children's spirituality expressed toward themselves included having a religious mindset, religious practices, meditation, and mindfulness, and finally, through play and by engaging in play with others.

These findings contribute to focusing the discussion about children's spirituality around these prominent themes also mentioned by scholars in the field, such as spirituality understood by its nature or essence (Crowell, 2023; Hay & Nye, 2006; Mata, 2015; Topa & Jacobs, 2023), its source or origin (de Souza, 2016; Eaude, 2023; Hyde, 2023; Keating, 2023; Kirmani, 2023; Miller, 2021), and the actions that are perceived by adults as a demonstration of being spiritual (Gillespie, 2019; Hill & Woolley, 2022; London, 2023; Mogra, 2010). While past scholarship has considered the perspectives of spirituality as facilitating certain actions, as having a source or origin, and as an essence, existing scholarship has largely focused on adult and youth spirituality and has often been conceptual rather than empirical in nature. This becomes the first empirical

Table 6 Changes of frequency of response with and without religiously affiliated responses

Category/Code/Sub-code	With	Without
Mystical	106	88
God	50	39
Belief-Faith in God	18	15
Connection-Relationship to God	12	8
Understand-Know God	19	16
Jesus	6	4

study to identify and integrate these three perspectives into an organizing framework to describe how early childhood educators understand young children's spirituality.

Interestingly, the perspective of spirituality as *Essence* received the highest number of responses, most frequently characterizing children's spirituality as *Mystical*, exemplified by the child's understanding of and a connection to *God*. Although most participants worked in secular early childhood settings where spirituality was not emphasized, educators' views about children's spirituality primarily reflected a majority belief that spirituality centers on belief in or connection to God. Given this study was conducted in the U.S., researchers expected the findings to align with the trends found in the national population, where 81% report they believe in God (Gallup, 2023) and 90% report they believe in a higher power (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Implications

Given that spirituality and spiritual practices in adulthood are associated with living a significantly longer life, improved relationships, enhanced mental health, greater resilience to adversity, a stronger sense of purpose and meaning, and improved well-being (Kim & Esquivel, 2011; Kim & Seidnitz, 2002; Koenig, 2012; Manning et al., 2019), understanding and nurturing spirituality in children might equip them to experience these benefits throughout their lives. As a first step, current and future educators need space to converse about the meaning and value of children's spirituality and how it is nurtured. This study demonstrates that early childhood educators have clear perspectives on this topic, value it, and are willing to discuss it. Therefore, opening new spaces to discuss children's spirituality in educational settings appears timely.

The nationally representative nature of this study's findings could be of interest to pre-service educators in teacher preparation programs studying child development and learning how to facilitate holistic development. These findings could promote deep discussion and reflections among educators in preparation stemming from comparing their understanding of children's spirituality with the definitions provided by the newly found framework.

In-service educators would also benefit from deep reflection on their understanding of children's spirituality, particularly around the framework component of *Action*, guiding how they include supports to nurture spirituality within their classroom and select the behaviors they model and encourage for their students. The ECE-SPC instrument could be used as a self-assessment tool to encourage educators to further reflect on this topic and gain insights into how to better nourish spirituality with their students. For practitioners ready to begin nurturing spirituality

in the classroom yet still concerned with the possibility of infringing upon students' families' religious views, it is recommended to start with facilitating mindfulness activities. Incorporating mindfulness strategies that encourage children to calm, focus, and move their bodies with intentionality, as well as promote kindness and compassion towards themselves and others (Jennings, 2019), will encourage children to focus and slow down their breathing, contributing to stabilizing their nervous system and becoming more present in their bodies, which in turn facilitates focus and attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). These mindfulness strategies should be incorporated in short periods of time, yet daily, since consistency in practice has been shown to produce the best results (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

Regarding implications for research, the next steps may include determining the correlations between educators' understanding of children's spirituality and the extent to which they report nurturing it in their classroom, as measured by the ECE-SPC instrument. This will allow us to identify how educators' views on spirituality impact the spiritually nurturing practices they engage in. A study with this aim could compare educators across groups by looking at variables such as geographic regions, grade levels, years of experience, gender, race/ethnicity, or level of education.

Limitations

This study primarily reflects the views of experienced female early childhood educators in the U.S. regarding children's spirituality, which cannot be generalized to the rest of the world, given the differences in culture and spiritual and religious beliefs elsewhere. Another consideration is that not all 50 states were represented in this national survey, although participants represented 36 states inclusive of all major regions in the country with a fairly even distribution between urban (35%), suburban (38%), and rural (27%) settings. Most perspectives were from White educators (77%), but this is relatively close to the national U.S. racial distribution, estimated to be 71% White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Furthermore, ninety percent of this study's sample had four or more years of work experience, and 64% had 11 or more years of experience, so it is possible that junior educators may view children's spirituality differently compared to experienced peers. Despite these noted limitations, the present study communicates the most representative and comprehensive understanding of early childhood educators' views of children's spirituality in the U.S. to date.

Conclusions

Previously, the largest survey of early childhood educators' views on children's spirituality represented 33 participants. The present study significantly expands this inquiry by reporting a nationally representative sample of 318 respondents from 36 U.S. states, revealing for the first time that children's spirituality is conceptualized from three major perspectives by early childhood educators: (1) as an essence, containing a mystical and transcendent nature such as a relationship to the divine; (2) as an origin, primarily as something taught to children by others or originating inherently from the self; and (3) as an action, including the practice of virtuous behavior toward others and toward one's surroundings. These findings enrich the existing literature, expanding upon how U.S. early childhood educators understand children's spirituality and how this understanding informs the ways they support and nurture spirituality for the children under their care. The importance of this line of inquiry stems from findings pointing to spiritually nurturing environments appearing to safeguard developmentally appropriate practices, which are associated with high-quality early childhood education (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018). Finally, this study makes a major contribution towards coming to a consensus definition of children's spirituality within the field of early childhood education in the United States.

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