

Religion and Spirituality in Early Childhood Education: A Phenomenological Interpretative Analysis

Cassandra Chaney* and Jennifer A. Baumgartner

Child and Family Studies Louisiana State University, USA

Abstract: Religiosity and spirituality are distinct constructs that can inform the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of humans; however, few studies have examined the role of these constructs as a frame for early education pedagogy. Given the current void in the literature, this exploratory study will examine the extent these constructs inform early education. By using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as our foundation, this qualitative, pilot study involves examining the responses of six African American females related to eight questions regarding the role of religiosity and/or spirituality in their educational pedagogy. The authors will provide recommendations regarding how early child educators can use religiosity and/or spirituality to heighten the learning experience for themselves and the children in their care.

Keywords: Early childhood education, Interpretive phenomenological analysis, Qualitative, Religion, Spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is an important socialization agent for young children. Maria Montessori, the Italian physician and educator best known for the education philosophy that bears her name, knew the society's advancement largely depends on the existence of quality early child education. For many, ECE is not only a local, state, and federal concern, but also a global one, and individuals across party lines agree on its importance. The Convention on the Rights of Children began a conversation about the role of early childhood education for increasing equity and eradicating poverty [1]. Since that time, global and national discussions regarding early childhood education focus on equity through quality and access [2].

There are three reasons why early childhood education is important. For one, children are in a developmental stage of life when their minds and bodies are experiencing remarkable growth and change. Second, through continued interactions with individuals that provide them care, children develop secure attachments to others and enter the world with confidence. Finally, by teaching children to be active and informed citizens, early childhood education builds resilience in children by teaching them to grow to be capable, healthy, and stable adults [3, 4].

While the socialization of young children is important, many early childhood educators are using

holistic or all-inclusive methods to guide the young. Therefore, many of these educators may wonder about the best way to support spiritual development in an early education setting. As Lascarides and Hinitz [5] note,

“The desire to orient their offspring to the needs of a society seems to be an innate mammalian characteristic, as anthropologists and biologists have shown through the years. However, there have been many ideas about how this can best be done so that young humans will grow up to fill the patterns designed by their elders.” (p. xv).

As a result, scholars have seen increased emphasis on religion and spirituality in education settings [6-9]. The purpose of this manuscript is to validate the experience of six early child educators regarding what, if any extent they use religion and/or spirituality to help young children reach their potential.

In the section that follows, we present relevant literature on this topic. We begin by discussing how scholars have defined religiosity. After this, we examine what the literature reveals regarding spirituality. Next, we examine distinctions between these constructs. Finally, we discuss how religiosity and spirituality inform early education.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Extant scholarship on religion and spirituality is extensive and influences several social spheres in education. For example, tomes have examined the spirituality of young children [10, 11], the salience of integrating a Christian perspective in childhood [12-14], as well as the relationship between education,

*Address correspondence to this author at the Child and Family Studies Louisiana State University, 331 Huey P. Long Fieldhouse, Baton Rouge, LA 70803; Tel: 225-578-1159; Fax: 225-578-2697; E-mail: cchaney@lsu.edu

spirituality, and wellbeing [15-18]. Other scholarly works reveal religiosity and spirituality facilitates the families of children with disabilities [19], how runaway and homeless youth use these constructs to cope with hardship [20], as well as how early childhood teachers use spirituality abroad [21]. There are, however, differences between religiosity and spirituality.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOSITY AND SPIRITUALITY

Religiosity and spirituality are not the same. Several decades ago, Berger [22] generally defined religiosity as the relationship that exists between humans and the universe.

Rupert, Moon, and Sandage [23] associate religiosity with "shared and/or communal elements and traditions" and spirituality with how people relate to the sacred, or "what a person reveres or considers of ultimate importance. Examples of religiosity include gatherings of worship or mediation while examples of spirituality include God or the divine, spiritual principles or symbols, and practices perceived to be of utmost importance (p. 165). Best [24] associated religiosity with "church teachings," while spirituality has been perceived as an "awareness in which fact and value merge," and involves a connection between the physical world and the psychological values that one adopts as well as becoming a person in the fullest sense [25]. In other words, religiosity encompasses a set of rules, assumptions and or practices that guide individuals' interactions within a community. In contrast, spirituality involves the contemplation of an individual's place in the universe with a focus on questions of identity, connection and purpose. In fact, many people view themselves as more spiritual than religious [26-28].

Other studies support differences between these constructs. In her examination, Chaney [29] finds religiosity to be "associated with external behaviours and internalized beliefs" and spirituality to be associated with "acknowledging a spiritual reality" and "feeling connected to God." (p. 210). In her dual qualitative examinations of how 149 African American women conceptualized religion and spirituality, Mattis [30] reveals three key differences between these terms. For one, religiosity was associated with organized worship and spirituality with "the internalization of positive values." In addition, religion was seen as "a path" and spirituality as "an outcome." Finally, was the idea that religion is tied to worship, whereas spirituality is associated with relationships.

Educational researchers have uncovered three elements of spirituality to appear across cultures, experiences, age and time [31]: a sense of belonging [32, 33], respect for self and others [34, 35], and awareness and wonder for the unknown [36, 37]. Spirituality is a central part of being a human being [38, 39] and central components of early childhood curriculum, such as awareness of self and respect for others are related to aspects of spirituality [40]. As such, teachers seeking to attend to the needs and development of the "whole child" must also attend to the dimension of spirituality. Essentially, this means that although religiosity may inform spirituality, spirituality may also include non-religious individuals, or those not associated with a particular religious organization.

One key work highlights the salience of religion in early childhood. To explore the influence of religion on several different dimensions of psychological development and social adjustment in early childhood, Bartkowski, Xu, and Levin [41] examine nationally representative data. By analysing data from the Spring 2000 wave of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) these scholars focus on how child development is shaped by individual parents' religiosity, the religious homogamy of couples, and the family's religious environment. The results of the study were significant and reveal parental, couple, and familial religion are closely associated with children's pro-social behaviour. Thus, the findings of this nationally representative work suggest religion can influence the attitudes and behaviours of children and the adults who provide care for them.

However, the public perception that supporting spirituality is endorsing religion leads most public schools to exclude the support of children's spirituality from early childhood curriculum. In fact, the consideration of one's place and purpose in the world are key components of education as well as spirituality. By neglecting children's spiritual development, the work to support children's learning and development in these critical questions becomes the primary responsibility of families and communities. One recent study aligns with the methodology of the current work. Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein [42] had early childhood educators (n = 33) complete a survey describing their perceptions towards various aspects of spirituality. The researchers defined spirituality, or the spirit, as 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" (p. 4). In particular, these educators were asked to draw on

personal spirituality to support their role in the classroom, determine the curricular activities, interactions or experiences educators believe relate to nourishing children's spirituality, how the classroom environment or schedule may support children's spirituality, as well as how school culture may support children's spirituality.

The findings of this study reveal these educators believe opportunities for creative expression and free play, engagement with nature, contemplative practices (e.g. mindfulness), relationship building and moral/character development relate to nourishing children's spirituality. Furthermore, the personal spirituality of these educators motivate them to treat colleagues and children well, intentionally provide a good example for children, use of contemplative practices and connecting children with nature. Overall, the findings of this study suggest discussing the spiritual nature of child development may help educators protect and enhance high-quality early learning environments in secular settings [43].

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were six African American females who reside in a large Metropolitan city in the southern region of the United States. The only criteria for participation was that individuals be at least 18 years of age and currently work in an early education setting. The age of the participants range from 23-55 years and the average age was 37.66 years. The length of time participant's work in childcare range from three years to 19 years and the average amount of time in childcare was 9.33 years. Three participants were divorced; two participants were single, never married; and one participant was married. Three participants did not have children (50%) while the other three participants had children (50%). The 38-year old participant had a 16-year old daughter, a 13-year old son, and a 6-year old daughter. The 52-year old participant had a 23-year old daughter, a 20-year old daughter, and an 18-year old son. The 55-year old participant had three daughters, ages 31, 35, and 37, respectively.

The highest level of education was three college graduates (50%), two advanced degrees (33%), and a high (17%) school graduate. In regards to income, three participants (50%) had a total income less than \$10,000; two participants (33%) had a total income \$20,000 - \$29,999, and one participant (17%) had a total income \$70,000 - \$79,999. The average income

\$25,833. Two participants were Baptist; one participant was Christian; one participant was Methodist; one participant was Full Gospel; and one participant did not have a religious affiliation. Pseudonyms protect the identity of the participants.

Measures

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the chosen methodology [40, 44-46]. The design of the semi-structured survey was to understand how religiosity and spirituality informs the work of early child educators. The questions were open-ended, which allows individuals to elaborate on their responses for enhanced understanding [44]. Participants were recruited through a university Extension specialist who works in childcare settings and established rapport with the individuals within these settings. To solicit participation, the first author created a university-approved IRB consent form and flyer. While the childcare workers did not receive monetary compensation for their participation, they were advised the study sought to understand how religiosity, spirituality and/or a sense of wonder informs their work with children. The university Extension specialist emailed the survey to all workers within a particular childcare setting. Upon completion, the participants emailed the surveys to the first author.

The researchers developed an eight question questionnaire, which address distinctions early child educators make between religiosity and spirituality; how early child educators encourage respect, facilitate wonder and a sense of belonging, the extent that religiosity and spirituality informs teaching, as well as beliefs regarding how children demonstrate spirituality. Participants responded to the following eight questions: (1) How do you define religiosity? (2) How do you define spirituality? (3) How do you encourage children's learning about respect? (4) How do you facilitate a child's sense of wonder about the unknown? (5) How do you help children feel/experience a sense of connection or belonging? (6) In what ways, if any, does religiosity inform your teaching? Please share a story regarding this. (7) In what ways, if any, does spirituality inform your teaching? Please share a story regarding this. (8) Do you believe that children demonstrate spirituality, and how do they do this? Please share a story regarding this.

Procedure

The IPA approach facilitates analysing questionnaires, understanding participant experiences,

and interpreting these experiences within a broader context [47, 48]. This study uses the purposive sampling method. The authors examine questionnaires, which include comments to summarize participant comments, interpretations, initial associations and the language used. Evolving themes and inferences about the experience made by participants, their meanings and context were determined. The emerging themes were separate, according to their meanings and relationship to each other. The first author identified the primary themes and provided specific definitions of each theme. The second author analysed the themes provided by the first author. Is this true?

Presentation of the Findings

Qualitative analysis of the data reveal several themes: (a) Religiosity as Belief in God or a Higher Power (Question 1); (b) Religiosity as Negative (Question 1); (c) Spirituality as Acknowledging what one cannot observe (Question 2); (d) Spirituality as a Connection to God (Question 2); (e) Respect as teaching children to have regard for the person and/or possessions of others (Question 3); (f) Respect as encouraging through example (Question 3); (g) Wonder through Hands-On Activities (Question 4); (h) Wonder through Tangible Learning (Question 4); (i) Connection through Hands-On Activities (Question 5); (j) Religiosity to Judeo-Christian Teachings (Question 6); (k) Spirituality to Judeo-Christian teachings and practices (Question 7); (l) Children's spirituality relates to God or Jesus Christ (Question 8); (m) Children's spirituality as higher than adults (Question 8); (n) Not related (Question 8).

Question 1: How do you define "religiosity?"

Four early child educators (80% of participants) use words and/or phrases that relate religiosity to a **belief system that encompasses God or a Higher Power**. Tiffany, 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years, says, "Numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief." Carol, a 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years says, "That God is the most important part of our lives and he should be #1 all the time." Camille, the 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years expresses, "I did not know that was a word! Religions as I understand it, refers to a belief system supported by a doctrine, a congregation, and parameters that the followers abide by." Eleanor, a 55-

year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years says, "It is a belief in a higher power [and] each person one has a view about how to believe and interpret the scriptures. This influences my view in childcare as not to interfere with the family's belief and respect it."

Religiosity as Negative. While Jessica [28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years) one person responded that the question was "non-applicable" to her daily responsibilities. Brittany, a 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years, uses the word "brainwashing" to describe religiosity.

Question 2: How do you define spirituality?

Four early child educators (80% of participants) use words and/or phrases that **relate spirituality to acknowledging what one cannot observe**. Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years]. "Personal need for comfort." Upon more closely reviewing Brittany's entire transcript, it appears that she believes spirituality is more about a subjective coping process and less about acknowledging the unknown. Brittany's use of the word "comfort" links to the view of another childcare educator. Camille, the 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years says, "Spirituality is having a belief (or philosophy) that you have a soul. The soul functions in a non-concrete, non-physical way." Tiffany, 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years provides this view, "The deepest values and meaning by which people live." Eleanor, the 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years remarks, "Is how a person feels inside of the strength of using prayers, [and] right from wrong. In childcare, we teach children respect, the right way to socialize and self-esteem."

Spirituality as a Connection to God. Two early child educators (33% of participants) use words and/or phrases that relate spirituality to acknowledging the existence of God and/or a Higher Power and having a relationship with this entity. Carol, the 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years shares, "That God is everywhere. God lives in us. He is everything to me. He is my Lord and Saviour." In addition, Jessica 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years states, "I would define it as a personal relationship with the Most High and having your own take on religion."

Question 3: How do you encourage children's learning about respect?

Four early child educators (67% of participants) use words and/or phrases that associate encouraging respect in children by **teaching children to have regard for the person and/or possessions of others**. Brittany, a 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years shares, "I teach them that all people and things deserve the respect they expect for themselves." Eleanor, a 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years states, "As incidents occur, we talk them through the right way to treat others, define what is yours, and mine." Carol, a 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years mentions, "That they respect other people's things, like toys." Tiffany, 30-year old, who has been an early child educator for 8 years, says, "Talk with them about being kind to each other. I tell them to treat everybody how you want to be treated. I read stories about respect."

Encouraging Respect through Example. Two individuals (33% of participants) use words and/or phrases **that associate encouraging respect in children by being a model or example of respect for children to emulate**. Jessica, a 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years provides this response: "By displaying respect towards those who work around the children and me." To reiterate the value of modelling respect, Camille, a 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years states: "Actions speak louder than words. Young children emulate and imitate the caregivers in their presence. If caregivers use words, i.e., "Yes, Ma'am," "No, Ma'am," "Thank You," and "Please," children will too!"

Question 4: How do you facilitate a child's sense of wonder about the unknown?

Three early child educators (50% of participants) use words and/or phrases that associate fostering a child's sense of wonder through **hands-on activities**. Tiffany, the 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years does this "Through puppet shows, and stories." Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years, says, "I allow them to do experiments and question me." Carol, the 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years reveals, "I tell them that God is everywhere in creation. He made the birds and the fish in the sea and everywhere."

Tangible learning. Two individuals (of participants) use words and/or phrases that relate to fostering a

child's sense of wonder via tangible or concrete learning. Eleanor, the 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years, shares, "I use books on concrete items." Camille, the 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years shares, "Under the age of five, answers should be concrete in nature. They do not understand the unknown due to being abstract." In contrast to the above, Jessica, the 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years provides a response of "Non-Applicable" to this question.

Question 5: How do you help children feel/experience a sense of connection or belonging?

Five women (of participants) use words and/or phrases that associate fostering a child's sense of wonder through **hands-on activities**. Jessica, the 28-year old, who has been an early child educator for 3 years, shares, "By including them in all age-appropriate activities." In addition to tangible activities, one educator allows children to pose questions. Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years, remarks, "I allow them to do experiments and question me." Eleanor, the 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years shares this view, "I let them choose between activities; talk to them and about feelings and physical touch."

Activities in which the child enjoys and excels guides the activities of Brittany (23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years), "I find something they like or are good at and connect it to me or another child." Tiffany, the 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years shares, "I promise group time. I post pictures of them as well as post their artwork on the wall." Camille, the 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years states, "Decorate room with their artwork, their pictures, and their family pictures; and make sure they have their own coat hook and cubby. Do a home visit before [a] child begins." In contrast to the above comments, one childcare educator helps children experience a sense of belonging by recognizing the value of children. Carol, the 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years, states, "That everything belongs to somebody. Children are a blessing and they belong to us. They are a gift from God."

Question 6: In what ways, if any, does religiosity inform your teaching? Please share a story regarding this.

Three early child educators (50% of participants) use words and/or phrases **that relate religiosity to**

Judeo-Christian teachings. Carol, the 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years says, "The Christmas Story. I share about Jesus being born and Easter- how Jesus rose us from the grave. I share both the stories of Easter and Christmas and I expound on it with the kids in my room at story time." In support of Carol's perspective, Camille, the 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years, discuss Jesus. She states, "Our teachers do talk about Jesus during Easter week and Christmas week. Their Christian principles become evident when celebrating Christmas, Easter, and the death of a pet or family member." Jessica, 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years, states, "The only way it influences my teaching is by allowing each child a chance to learn and giving him a push that will encourage them to do their best. Showing that I have faith they can do anything."

Three individuals (50% of participants) use words and/or phrases that relate religiosity-informing teaching does not apply to them nor has a place in the education setting. Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years says, "None. I do not teach religiosity. It has no place in schools." Two females (33% of participants), namely Tiffany and Eleanor provide the response "Non-Applicable" and "Non-Applicable. I have toddlers," respectively.

Question 7: In what ways, if any, does spirituality inform your teaching? Please share a story regarding this.

Four early child educators (67% of participants) use words and/or phrases that **relate spirituality to Judeo-Christian teachings and practices.** Jessica, the 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years mentions, "Just having a positive outlook on the outcome of the children and having faith in them." Tiffany, the 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years says, "I pray on my way to work that the children and I will have a peaceful day and that the parents will trust me with their children. I also pray that God will give me favour with my co-workers." Eleanor, the 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years shares, "Their spirituality becomes evident when dealing with the death of a pet or family member. Our three-year-olds have vivid imaginations as to where deceased pets go."

Three individuals (f participants) use words and/or phrases that relate religiosity-informing teaching does

not apply to them nor has a place in the education setting. Eleanor, the 55-year old who has been an early child educator for 16 years states, "Non-Applicable. I have toddlers." Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years has a stronger view. She shares, "I will never use spirituality to inspire teaching. It is too personal."

Question 8: Do you believe that children demonstrate spirituality, and how do they do this? Please share a story regarding this.

Two early child educators (33% of participants) use words and/or phrases that relate children's spirituality to **God or Jesus Christ.** Carol, the 38-year old who has been an early child educator for 10 years says, "Sometimes they might sing "Jesus Loves Me" I did [this] one day." Tiffany, 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years reveals, "Yes. Sometimes the children will talk about God or Jesus. One little boy told me that his mom is in heaven. I have seen the children during playtime pray before pretending to eat."

Two people (33% of participants) use words and/or phrases that **regard children's spirituality as individual as well as the ability of children to have a higher spirituality than adults do.** Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years says, "It [children's ability to be spiritual] is personal and individual." Camille, 52-year old who has been an early child educator for 19 years provides this view, "I believe children are more spiritual than adults are. They are easily comforted during a loss. They seem to understand that there is another place (or realm) where their loves ones go. But their explanations are more concrete than abstract. ["My doggie is on that cloud up there."]

Two women (5 of participants) use words and/or phrases that **relate this question does not apply to them because they "have toddlers"** (Eleanor) or they question whether children realize what this concept means. For example, Jessica, the 28-year old who has been an early child educator for 3 years says, "I am not sure if they do because they have yet to understand what it means to be spiritual."

DISCUSSION

Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its foundation, this qualitative, pilot study examined the extent that six African American females integrate

religiosity and/or spirituality in their educational pedagogy. This study suggests early child educators could be salient forms of social support for children. Tiffany, Carol, and Eleanor specifically associate religiosity to a Higher Power and a belief system that stems from that Higher Power. Tiffany associates religiosity with “numerous aspects of religious activity, dedication, and belief” while Carol believes God should be “the most important part of our lives and he should be #1 all the time.” However, knowledge regarding religiosity and how it informs how early child educators interact with children are not mutually exclusive. Camille makes this point when she acknowledges she “did not know” the word religiosity exists, yet clearly connects this term to “a belief system supported by a doctrine, a congregation, and parameters that the followers abide by.” Camille’s view suggests that even though early child educators may not be aware of it, religiosity may indeed inform their practice. Eleanor reiterates this point when like Tiffany, Carol and Camille she links religiosity to “a higher power” yet differs from the other women by recognizing scriptural interpretation is personal. Thus, for Eleanor, religiosity allows her to simultaneously acknowledge a Higher Power and not “interfere” with and respect a family’s belief system.

Half of the participants suggest that religion and spirituality have no impact on their teaching (Tiffany, Eleanor, Brittany). While Carol and Camille do identify ways that they overtly teach the fundamentals of Judeo Christian faith in their classrooms, and Jessica suggests that her faith informs her teaching philosophy, half of the participants report that religion and spirituality have no impact on their teaching. The reluctance to recognize the impact of one’s spirituality or religious beliefs may relate to current workplace climates that seek to separate personal ideology from professional practice. Indeed every teacher in this study report efforts to encourage children’s spirituality through a sense of wonder and belonging and nearly everyone (all but Brittany) mention some ways that they foster a sense of respect in the classroom. These aspects of spirituality appear salient to the teachers as they spoke comfortably about the desire to foster wonder- through art, science explorations, language and children’s literature as well as increasing a sense of belonging as they create spaces where everyone felt a part of the community. For example, when Brittany shares that she encourages questioning and experimenting, this is a way of increasing wonder.

The teachers that describe spirituality as an influence in their work were more likely to view children as spiritual beings. Of course, a causal relationship is outside the scope of the present study. However, when looking closely at the data we can see that those teachers that describe their own spirituality as influencing their work in the classroom are more likely to report believing that young children are spiritual beings. For example, Camille shares multiple times how she supports children’s belonging, respect and wonder and describes children as very spiritual beings that have a honed appreciation for the world and beyond. She states, “I believe children are more spiritual than adults are...They (children) seem to understand that there is another place (or realm) where their loved ones go.”

So what is the connection between these teachers’ personal definitions of spirituality and religiosity and their belief in children as spiritual beings? Tiffany’s report is especially interesting. Tiffany reports that her own spirituality, which she defines as personal values that guide behaviour (“The deepest values and meaning [sic] by which people live”) has no impact on her teaching, but does recognize children as spiritual beings (“Sometimes the children will talk about God or Jesus”). This may have more to do with Tiffany’s definition of spirituality which is value focused. Given the concerns about “indoctrinating” young children, perhaps Tiffany sees her own values and her children’s values as distinct and separate.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

This study had several limitations. First, the small sample size prevents us from generalizing the findings to other early child educators. In other words, this exploratory study may have yielded different results if the sample size were larger. Second, because of the small sample size, the findings cannot be representative of all African American early child educators. Finally, as the study allowed these women to respond to a questionnaire, this study cannot speak to how the views of these early educators form nor how they may (or may not) change over time. In spite of these limitations, however, this work highlights the qualitative perspectives of a racially homogenous group of early child educators who have a range of experience working with children. As this study was qualitative, the women in this study had the opportunity to define religiosity and spirituality, share how these constructors inform their teaching, share how they

teach children respect, as well as how they create classrooms where connection and belonging are constant. This reveals an inherent strength of the current study.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future scholars can build on this work in five ways. For one, recall that Brittany, the 23-year old, who has been an early child educator for five years, uses the word “brainwashing” to describe religiosity. This merits further exploration, especially since African Americans generally have a high regard for religion. Future work in this area may reveal the reason or reasons why early child educators have this belief as well as the circumstances that solidify this belief.

Second, and related to the first point, scholars should explore the perspectives of early child educators who firmly believe religiosity and spirituality have no place in these settings.

A place on the survey allowed participants to provide any additional comments. Brittany, the 23-year old who has been an early child educator for 5 years makes it clear, “Religion and spirituality do NOT belong in schools.” Future work in this area may reveal whether early child educators like Brittany have always had this view or the circumstances that led Brittany and educators like her to change their view.

Third, Carol’s belief that children “are a gift from God” deserves further study. Future work in regards to this belief system may reveal the strength of the parent-early child educator relationship may largely hinge on how they approach the collective care of their “child-gift.” In other words, parents who trust early child educators will consistently care for their “gift” may be more likely to trust the early child educator to make decisions for their child. Tiffany, the 30-year old who has been an early child educator for 8 years hints at this when she says, “I pray on my way to work that the children and I will have a peaceful day and that the parents will trust me with their children. I also pray that God will give me favour with my co-workers.”

Fourth, recall that Eleanor says that “as incidents come up” it is important for early child educators to teach children respect and “the right way to socialize and self-esteem.” Follow-up work may reveal “the right way” as the systematic processes by which early child educators consciously socialize the young. Thus, future work in this area may reveal what early child educators

believe to be optimal times and/or pathways to helping young children grow to become valuable members of society. In addition, work in this area may highlight how differences in childrearing may influence the type and frequency of socialization that children receive.

Finally, as it relates to “favour,” future work can delve into the specific ways that early child educators facilitate “favour,” or a good relationship between themselves and the children in their care. Understanding this process can help scholars recognize the greatest forms of conflict in this setting as well as how early child educators simultaneously deescalate conflict and promote harmony.

The experiences and thoughts of these six teachers suggest some interesting questions for future research and practice. The sense of respect, wonder and belonging are key objectives for supporting the development of young children’s spirituality. In this study, every teacher reported methods, philosophies and activities that support children’s growth in these areas. However, many of the teachers in this study did not see supporting children’s spirituality as part of their work or something that should inform their teaching. Several teachers also shared that they are unsure that very young children are spiritual beings. Future research should consider the connections between teachers’ spirituality and definitions of spirituality and their views of children as spiritual beings. In addition, future research might consider the impact of child’s age on teachers’ beliefs about the impact of spirituality on teaching and learning.

Teacher training programs, both pre-professional and professional, should make sure to include information about the spiritual development of young children. Intentional work with children demands an understanding of the philosophies and mental models that guide our teaching. Early childhood professionals should offer space in their training for self-exploration of their spirituality and the role it will play in their work.

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