



The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Educators in Ireland and Their Perceptions of Spirituality in Schools: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

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Research on spirituality has become increasingly common within academic literature. National and international policy document attest to its value as a complex existential phenomenon. As the body of scholarly research on the spirituality of the child expands, it reveals a gap in the existing literature. This research thesis offers insight into the largely absent voice of the educator on the topic of their own spiritual identity and their perceptions of spirituality in Irish primary school classrooms. The current study is contextualised within an increasingly diverse Irish society and is influenced by its rich spiritual history. It addresses the need for insight and clarity surrounding conceptualisations of spirituality and is undertaken with a sample group of ten primary school educators. These educators have diverse experiences and career trajectories and are employed in schools of diverse patronage throughout the Republic of Ireland (RoI). Grounded within the interpretivist paradigm, this research employs semi-structured interviews to facilitate the gathering of rich, complex experiential data. Following rigorous engagement with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith *et al.* 2022), the findings of this research highlight that spirituality is a multi-faceted, encompassing and contested concept.

While there are many commonalities in the conceptualisations presented in this original research, findings indicate that educators experience considerable uncertainty relating to the concept of spirituality as well as in their personal spiritual identities and the spiritual development of children in RoI primary schools. The findings illuminate new insights into the dynamic, nuanced, diverse spiritual identities of educators which are shaped by personal beliefs, values, priorities and other socio-cultural influences. This research reveals that 90% of participants have spiritual beliefs which manifest in pluriform ways. The study contributes to contemporary conceptualisations of the complex, contested relationship between spirituality and religion. It highlights that the navigation of personal spiritual beliefs in RoI primary schools can be a sensitive issue as educators attempt to reconcile their identity with the characteristic spirit of their school. While 70% of participants believe that spirituality should be addressed in schools as part of the child's holistic development, not all research participants agree. Further, the research reveals participants' uncertainty as to how to address spirituality within high-pressure classrooms and the issue requires careful consideration from a human rights perspective. The study offers several recommendations for key stakeholders including policymakers, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers and educational researchers.

Declaration

Title of Thesis: The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Educators in Ireland and Their Perceptions of Spirituality in Schools: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education, is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not, to the best of my knowledge, breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed: 

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Declaration	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Tables	xiii
List of Figures	xiii
List of Appendices	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xv
Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale	17
1.0 Introduction	17
1.1 Research Rationale and Scope of Inquiry	17
1.1.2 Researcher Positionality: Rationale and Reflexivity	20
1.2 Conceptual Foundations: Defining Core Terms.....	22
1.2.1 Spirituality.....	23
1.2.2 Religion.....	23
1.2.3 Characteristic Spirit.....	24
1.2.4. Educator	24
1.3. Structure of the Thesis.....	24
1.4 Conclusion	25
Chapter 2: A Contextual Overview - History, Society and Policy	27
2.0 Introduction	27
2.1 The Historical Context: Religion and Education in Ireland.....	27
2.2 The Current Societal Reality	30
2.3 Religion in Ireland: Constitution and Curriculum	33

2.3.1 Constitutional Entitlements	33
2.3.2 The Primary School Curriculum	34
2.5 The Patron’s Programme	35
2.5.1 Roman Catholic Schools	36
2.5.2 Church of Ireland Schools.....	36
2.5.3 Educate Together Schools	37
2.5.4 Community National Schools.....	39
2.5.5 Steiner Schools	41
2.5.6 Forest Schools	42
2.6 Spirituality as a Global Issue: Influential International Documents	42
2.7 Conclusion	44
Chapter 3: Definitions of Spirituality	44
3.0 Introduction.....	44
3.1 Defining Spirituality.....	44
3.1.1 The Difficulty.....	44
3.1.2. Spiritus – Breath, Spirit, Soul.....	45
3.1.3 Spirituality in Ireland.....	47
3.1.4 The Spirit in Education.....	48
3.2 Spirituality and Religion.....	49
3.2.1 Religion.....	49
3.2.2 Spirituality in the Christian Tradition	51
3.2.3 Spiritual, but not religious.	54
3.2.4 New Age Spirituality	56
3.2.5 Spirituality: A Distinctive Discipline Emerges	58
3.2.5.1 A Contested Relationship.....	59
3.2.5.2 Inequitable Terms.....	60
3.2.5 3 A Conceptual Overlap.....	61

3.3 Common Conceptualisations of Spirituality	61
3.3.1 Spirituality is Innate	61
3.3.2 A Quest for Meaning and Purpose.....	62
3.3.3 Spirituality, Relationships and Connections.....	63
3.4 Conclusion	70
Chapter 4: Spirituality and Education – Educator, Child and Curriculum	71
4.0 Introduction	71
4.1 The Characteristic Spirit.....	71
4.1.1 Human Rights, Spirituality and Education.....	72
4.2 The Spirituality of the Educators.....	74
4.2.1 Educator Identity.....	75
4.2.2 The Spiritual Identity of the Educator.....	76
4.2.2.1 The Critical Importance of Educator Spirituality	77
4.2.2.2 Strength in Spirituality.....	78
4.2.2.3 Wellbeing and Educator Spirituality.....	79
4.2.2.4 Confusion Surrounding Educator Spirituality	80
4.2.3 Continued Professional Development.....	82
4.2.3.1 Reflection	84
4.3 The Spirituality of the Child	86
4.4 Spirituality and the Curriculum.....	88
4.4.1 A Holistic Approach.....	89
4.4.2 Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Curriculum.....	91
4.4.3 A Cross-Cultural Approach	93
4.4.4 Spirituality for Criticality.....	95
4.4.5 Concerns with the Use of ‘Spirituality’ in Education	97
4.5 Performativity.....	98
4.5.1 Diminished Integrity – Diminished Soul?	99

4.5.2 Diminished Childhood.....	100
4.5.3 An Alternative Approach.....	101
4.6 Conclusion.....	102
Chapter 5: Methodology.....	104
5.0 Introduction.....	104
5.1 Epistemological Assumptions.....	104
5.2 Research Design.....	105
5.2.1 Qualitative Research.....	105
5.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	106
5.3 Theoretical Foundations.....	107
5.3.1 Phenomenology.....	108
5.3.2 Hermeneutics.....	109
5.3.3 Idiography.....	110
5.4 Sampling.....	111
5.5 Data Collection.....	114
5.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	114
5.5.2 Pilot Interviews.....	116
5.6 Data Analysis.....	118
5.6.1 Analytical Procedures in IPA.....	118
5.6.2 From the individual to the shared.....	119
5.6.3 Steps of Analysis.....	120
5.7 Validity.....	121
5.7.1 The Independent Audit.....	122
5.7.2 Member -Checking.....	122
5.8 Reflexivity.....	123
5.8.1 Bracketing.....	124
5.9 Ethical Considerations.....	125

5.9.1 Procedural Ethics	126
5.9.2 Ethics in Practice	127
5.10 Methodological Limitations.....	127
5.10.1 Criticisms of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	127
5.11 Conclusion.....	128
Chapter 6 – Understandings of Spirituality.....	129
6.0 Introduction.....	129
6.1 Understandings of Spirituality.....	130
6.1.1 Spirituality is a multifaceted, encompassing concept.....	130
6.1.1.1 Spirituality and the Self: A Sense of Meaning and Purpose	131
6.1.1.2 Spirituality and Connection (Others, Something Bigger sometimes called God)	135
6.1.1.3 Spirituality, the Land and Irishness	137
6.1.1.4 New Age Spirituality	141
6.2 Spirituality and Religion are complexly inter-connected.....	142
6.2.1 Spirituality and Religion are Synonymous.....	143
6.2.2 Blurred Lines between Spirituality and Religion	144
6.2.3 Spirituality and Religion – A Difference Exists.....	146
6.3 Uncertainty Permeates Spiritual Understandings	147
6.4 Discussion of Theme 1: Understandings of Spirituality.....	149
6.5 Conclusion	156
Chapter 7 – The Spiritual Identity of Educators	156
7.0 Introduction.....	156
7.1 Spiritual identity is shaped by a range of influences.....	157
7.1.1 Education	157
7.1.2 Family and Community	160
7.1.3 Travel.....	162

7.1.4 A Vocational Career.....	163
7.2 Spiritual Beliefs and Experiences highlight the desire to believe in ‘Something’	164
7.2.1 Spiritual Experiences	164
7.2.2 The Desire to Believe in Something.....	166
7.3 Complex Catholicism and its Measurement against Mass Attendance	170
7.4 Navigating Personal Beliefs and the Characteristic Spirit of the School ranges from natural to challenging.....	176
7.4.1 Where Beliefs Align.....	176
7.4.2 Misaligned Beliefs and Consequential Imposter Syndrome.....	179
7.4.3 Bracketing Personal Beliefs	180
7.5 Discussion on The Spiritual Identity of Educators.....	181
7.6 Conclusion	188
Chapter 8: The Spiritual Development of Children in Schools	189
8.0 Introduction	189
8.1 Spiritual Development and Children’s Wellbeing.....	189
8.1.1 Challenges Confronting Children’s Wellbeing	192
8.2 Approaches to Spiritual Development.....	196
8.2.1 Meditation and Yoga for Spiritual Development.....	197
8.2.2 Cultivating a Natural Connection.....	199
8.2.3 Spiritual Development and the SPHE Curriculum	201
8.2.4 The Rhythm and Routine of the Day	202
8.2.5 Developing Spirituality through Story and Play	204
8.3 The Navigation of Characteristic Spirit and Spiritual Development	206
8.3.1 Religious Education and its role in spiritual development.....	210
8.3.2 Spiritual Development and Religious Education: The Challenges.....	212
8.4 The Need for Curriculum Clarity.....	214
8.4.1 The Need for Commitment.....	215

8.4.2 The Need for Consideration and Certainty	216
8.4.3 The Need for Guidance	217
8.4.4 The Need for Clarity on Assessment	218
8.4.5 The Need for Authentic Approaches	219
8.4.6 The Need for Training and CPD	220
8.5 The Spiritual Development of the Child: Educator Uncertainty	222
8.6 Discussion on the Spiritual Development of the Child	225
8.7 Conclusion	230
Chapter 9: The Challenges and Changes to Spirituality in Schools.....	231
9.1 Introduction	231
9.2 Societal Changes and Fear of Causing Offense.....	232
9.3. The Performative Pressures on Teachers	236
9.4. A Holistic Approach to Education is Required.....	243
9.5 Discussion on the Changes and Challenges to Spirituality in Primary School Education in Ireland.....	245
9.6 Conclusion	249
Chapter 10	251
10.0 Introduction.....	251
10.1 Relevance of this Research.....	251
10.2 Limitations of this Research.....	258
10.3 Recommendations	259
10.3.1. Educational Policy and Practice	259
10.3.2 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continued Professional Development (CPD)	263
10.3.3 Future Research.....	264
10.4 Conclusion.....	265
References	268

Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework	305
Appendix 2: Positionality Reflection (On Leaning Towards IPA)	306
Appendix 3: Steiner School Website Exploration	307
Appendix 4: Recruitment Notice	313
Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet	315
Appendix 6: Interview Schedule Based on Extant Literature	318
Appendix 7: Transcript Extract	320
Appendix 8: Exploratory Noting (NVivo 12)	322
Appendix 9: Experiential Statements	323
Appendix 10: Examples of Personal Experiential Statements (PETs)	324
Appendix 11: Group Experiential Themes (GETs)	325
Appendix 12: Research Journal Notes	326
Appendix 13: Reflexive Writing Extract	327
Appendix 14: MIREC Approval	328
Appendix 15: Participant Consent Sheet	330

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Patronage of Mainstream Primary Schools in Ireland (Gov.ie 2024)	31
Table 2.2 Influential International Documentation	43
Table 5.1 Pseudonyms and Settings	113
Table 6.0 Participants and their school contexts	129
Table 10.1 Recommendations for Key Stakeholders	259

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Research and Embedded Questions	20
Figure 2.1 Irish Education Policy Timeline	27
Figure 2.2 Strands from Follow Me (Wilkinson 2001-2010)	37
Figure 2.3 Learn Together Strands (ET 2011b)	39
Figure 2.4 GMGY Strands (NCCA 2018).....	40
Figure 5.1 Characteristic Spirit	112
Figure 5.2 Key Sampling Elements	113
Figure 5.3 Sampling Criteria	114
Figure 5.4 IRP Protocol	117
Figure 5.5 7 Steps of Data Analysis (Smith et al. 2022)	120
Figure 5.6 Bracketing (Chan et al. 2022)	125
Figure 6.1 The Grandmother Tree (Prairie Woods 2020)	138
Figure 6.2 Relationships Between Spirituality and Religion	143
Figure 6.3 Confusion Surrounding Spirituality	147
Figure 6.4 Controverted opinions on SBNR	155
Figure 6.5 Understandings of Spirituality: Key Findings	156
Figure 7.1 Influences on Educator Spiritual Identity	157
Figure 7.2 Roman Catholic Identity Terminology	171
Figure 7.3 Spiritual Identity of the Educator: Key Findings	188
Figure 8.1 Approaches to Spiritual Development in Schools	196
Figure 8.2 The Need for Curriculum Clarity	214
Figure 8.3 The Spiritual Development of Children in Schools: Key Findings	231
Figure 9.1 The Changes and Challenges to Spirituality in Primary School Education in Ireland: Key Findings	249

Figure 10.1 A Tetradic Model of Spirituality	260
Figure 10.2 Teacher Identity Policies Requiring Spirituality	262

List of Appendices

Appendix 1.....	305
Appendix 2.....	306
Appendix 3.....	307
Appendix 4.....	313
Appendix 5.....	315
Appendix 6.....	318
Appendix 7.....	320
Appendix 8.....	322
Appendix 9.....	323
Appendix 10	324
Appendix 11	325
Appendix 12	326
Appendix 13	327
Appendix 14	328
Appendix 15	330

List of Abbreviations

BERA	British Education Research Association
BOM	Board(s) of Management
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CNS	Community National School
CPD	Continued Professional Development
CPPREC	Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum
CSP	Catholic School Partnership
DE	Department of Education
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DPCF	Draft Primary Curriculum Framework
DSP	Dalkey School Project
EPV	Extra Personal Vacation
ERB	Education about Religions and Beliefs
ESRI	Economic and Social Research Institute
ET	Educate Together
ETB	Education and Training Board
GERM	Global Education Reform Movement
GETs	Group Experiential Themes
GiL	Grow in Love
GMGY	Goodness Me! Goodness You!
GSBE	General Synod Board of Education
IEC	Irish Episcopal Conference
IFSA	Irish Forest School Association
IGP	Irish Government Publications
INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IRP	Interview Refinement Protocol
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Ethical Committee
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NICA	National Interfaith Coalition for Aging

ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PCF	Primary Curriculum Framework
PE	Physical Education
PETs	Personal Experiential Themes
RC	Roman Catholic
RE	Religious Education
RI	Religious Instruction
SBNR	Spiritual But Not Religious
SESE	Social, Environmental and Scientific Education
SPHE	Social, Personal Health Education
SPICE	Spiritual, Physical, Intellectual, Creative and Emotional.
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
UK	United Kingdom
UNCERD	United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

1.0 Introduction

This thesis sets out to investigate the spirituality of educators in ten primary schools of diverse patronage in Ireland. It investigates educators' understandings of spirituality in the primary school classroom, as well as their perceptions of children's spirituality. Spirituality is a complex social phenomenon, and its definition is widely disputed in societal, educational, and academic discourse (Hay 2007; Sheldrake 2007; Elfriech 2019; Hyde 2021; Hyde and Rouse 2022). While research pertaining to the spirituality and spiritual development of the child is widely available, the spirituality of the educator and their spiritual development remains a relatively underexamined dimension of the academic field (Häusler *et al.* 2019; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Stylianou and Zembylas 2019; Penthin *et al.* 2023). Therefore, this exploration of the spiritual identity of the educator is necessitated by the current gap in the literature and the paucity of research in this area to date. Scholarly evidence suggests that if educators are not aware of the spiritual dimension of their own lives, their understanding and awareness of children's spiritual development will be impacted (Miller 2009; Greenfield 2018; Wartenweiler 2021).

This chapter introduces the research question and overviews central elements that provide a clear context and rationale for the current study. It outlines the parameters in which the research has been undertaken and provides definitions of key terms. The research aims are situated within the sphere of primary school education in Ireland and the reader is introduced to the researcher and her positionality within the research.

1.1 Research Rationale and Scope of Inquiry

This research explores the spirituality of the educator, in ten diverse types of primary schools in the Republic of Ireland and investigates whether educators' understandings of spirituality impact on their understandings of and approaches to the spirituality of the child. Article 14 of the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)(1989) affords the child the right to freely articulate their perspectives on matters of conscience and religion. Spirituality is referred to on four occasions within this declaration (UNCRC 1989). In Ireland, the spiritual development of the child is referred to within the Drama curriculum (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (1999) and has recently been located within the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF)

within the key competency 'Being Well' (NCCA 2023, p.11). However, spiritual development has been predominantly considered alongside the child's access to Religious Education (RE) (O' Higgins-Norman and Renehan 2014; Darmody and Smyth 2017). RE is a curricular area under the jurisdiction of the various patron bodies responsible for the provision of primary school education in Ireland (Section 2.2). In an increasingly diverse Irish society influenced by globalisation and secularisation (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019; Kieran *et al.* 2022; Foley *et al.* 2024) Census statistics (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2011; 2016; 2022) reveal a considerable increase in the non-religious demographic. However, levels of religious self-identification in Ireland remain high from a European perspective. Roman Catholicism accounts for 69% of the population, with the second largest category, Church of Ireland, representing a further 2% (CSO 2022). As a result of such societal change and continued religious self-identification, the way in which the spiritual development of the child is being addressed in the Irish primary school system warrants critical examination.

The rationale for this research is reinforced when the focus is shifted to the role of the educator in the spiritual development of the child (Greenfield 2018; Wartenweiler 2021). There is a need to investigate whether an educator's spirituality influences their own professional identity and their educational practice in the classroom (White 2009; Hartwick 2015). However, according to existing research (Miller 2009; Gibson 2014; Wartenweiler 2021), educators who are unaware of their personal spiritual identity cannot be expected to attend to the spiritual development of the child. Without such awareness, it may be that spirituality 'slumbers in the unconscious awaiting expression' (Harmon 2022, p.238). The possible influence of this role presents a need for inquiry into educators' perceptions regarding this multifaceted domain of the human person.

The rich spiritual history of Ireland contributes to the rationale for this study (Duncan 2015; Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2015; Hensey 2015; O'Donohue 2022; Ní Riain 2023). The resilient, durable legacy of Celtic spirituality operates as a contextual hinterland to this academic study. When evaluated alongside the influence of Christian beliefs on Irish society, it is unsurprising that Ní Riain (2023) describes the resulting spiritual landscape as 'eternally shimmering – ag biorradh' (Ní Riain 2023, p.209). Academic scholarship provides early evidence of spirituality in pre-Christian Ireland (Darcus 2005; Hensey 2015; O'Donohue 2022). However, the scope of this study and its predominant

contextualisation within the parameters of primary school education in the 21st century does not allow for an in-depth exploration of spirituality and spiritual traditions in Ireland which span over 5,200 years.

This research thesis is concerned with the spiritual identities and perceptions of spirituality held by educators in schools of diverse patronage in Ireland. The current system of education in Ireland, the most westerly country in Europe, differs from many other European countries in that it does not have a state school system in operation, but a privately managed, state funded system of schooling at primary level. In fact, it has a distinct denominational primary educational system (Mullally and Kieran 2024). Children are required to attend school from age six to sixteen or until three years of secondary school have been completed (Department of Education and Science (DES) 2004). Of the 3,089 primary schools in Ireland in 2022, the overwhelming majority operate under denominational patronage (Department of Education (DE) 2024). As Irish society becomes increasingly diverse and pluralistic, it is notable that self-governed approaches to spiritual and religious beliefs increase. Despite this denominational education remains the prevailing approach to primary schooling, amidst the context of considerable calls for divestment (McGraw and Tiernan 2022). For the past 25 years, the NCCA (1999) has identified pluralism and inclusivity as significant elements in primary education in Ireland.

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan *et al.* 2012), henceforth called the *Forum*, unequivocally highlighted the necessity for greater diversity in school patronage to reflect the pluralistic nature of Irish society. This is a pertinent issue concerning this study as the child's spiritual development is often considered alongside their access to RE and their moral and spiritual development occurs primarily within the context of the patron's programme (O' Higgins-Norman and Renehan 2014; Darmody and Smyth 2017). At the outset of this research, it must be acknowledged that in Ireland, questions surrounding the spiritual identity of educators, and the spiritual development of the child are intrinsically linked to religion. It is a key element in the conceptual framework (Appendix 1) of this study along with spirituality, spiritual development, identity and education. This framework presents the key concepts underpinning this research and the intricate connections between them. The core terms are defined within this chapter (Section 1.2). The following section clarifies the aim of this study and dissects the

overarching research question. 1.1.1 Defining the Inquiry: The Research Question and its Aims

This research aims to offer an original insight into the lived experience of primary school educators in Ireland concerning their own spiritual identity and their perceptions of spirituality in schools. A review of seminal and contemporary scholarly work presented in Chapters 3 and 4 reveals that educators' understandings of spirituality, their experiences of becoming aware of and navigating their own spiritual identity, and their experiences of addressing spirituality in schools are all too frequently ignored by the research literature and are topics that merit further scholarly investigation. In order to respond to this lacuna in the research literature, the primary research question guiding the study, and the related embedded questions are presented in Figure 1.1



Figure 1.1 Research and Embedded Questions

The present study aims to answer the research and embedded questions by gathering research data from ten primary school educators who each were given the opportunity to share their own experiences and understanding of their own spiritual identity and their perceptions of spiritual development in schools. The educators were employed in schools with various denominational and multi-denominational patronage (Section 5.4).

1.1.2 Researcher Positionality: Rationale and Reflexivity

The theoretical underpinnings of this study, its qualitative nature and its location within the interpretivist paradigm, signpost the researcher to her positional responsibilities. Such responsibilities require the researcher to illuminate her own perspective both on

the theory of knowledge and the complex social phenomena under investigation (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). The research design, discussed in detail in Chapter 5, is influenced by the researcher's philosophical position and is aligned closely with the orientation revealed through thorough introspective questioning and related reflective writing (Appendix 2). Within the interpretivist paradigm, the role of the researcher is not simply to show interest in experiences, but to uncover the perspectives and understandings held by the participants to reveal how they make sense of their lived reality (Weber 2019). The various intersecting identities of the researcher as a human person are informed by her numerous personal, cultural and academic influences (Bayeck 2022). While the influences and experiences held by researchers had previously been considered bias which should be eliminated entirely from the research process, this is no longer the case (Denzin and Lincoln 2017). Identity, experiences and insights can be used as 'a major source of insights, hypotheses and validity checks' (Maxwell 2009, p.225).

The researcher currently works as a primary school teacher in a denominational school in Ireland and has previous experience of working as a teacher in a denominational school in the United Kingdom (UK). Her educational background has immersed her exclusively in Catholic education as a student (primary, post-primary and third level), as a student teacher, and at present, as a teacher with nine years of classroom experience. RE and theology were areas of particular interest to the researcher at undergraduate level in alignment with her upbringing and educational history. Growing up in a practicing Roman Catholic family, she observed her parents and grandparents in prayer, shaping her early understanding of faith and spirituality within the Roman Catholic tradition. However, her exposure to spirituality was not confined to formal religious structures. As she progressed through third-level education, she became increasingly interested in diverse spiritual expressions beyond what she had experienced within her home and church.

The researcher was introduced to integrative spiritual practices that extend beyond institutionalised religion by other close family members, practices which incorporate elements of mindfulness, energy work, and reflective rituals. These included exposure to meditative and breathwork techniques, sound-based healing, and community-based spiritual gatherings, which collectively deepened her engagement with spirituality both within and beyond formal religious settings. These experiences provided a broader, more experiential understanding of spirituality that complemented, yet challenged the

researcher's Catholic foundations. Directly influenced by this dual immersion in Catholicism and alternative spiritual traditions, the researcher was motivated to explore the relationship between spirituality and religion in education. This is a complex phenomenon that she navigates both personally and professionally, prompting an ongoing reflection on the interplay between religiously tethered and untethered spiritual expressions of spirituality (Section 1.3.1).

This curiosity and interest were instrumental in motivating the researcher to undertake the current research project. Following the completion of a research Master's thesis which presented the researcher with more questions than answers surrounding the spirituality of educators, the researcher designed a qualitative study to explore the identity and perceptions of fellow educators in relation to spirituality. Boadu (2021) argues that when engaged in research with educators, their life worlds are not accessible by adopting a removed, distant position. Instead, it is engagement with an insider perspective, along with an acknowledgement of how personal insights might shape data interpretation that facilitates the rich interpretation of the lived experience of the educator (Saldaña and Omasta 2018; Boadu 2021). The researcher's unique perspective, shaped by both traditional Catholic education and broader spiritual experiences, enable her to approach the study with a reflexive awareness of the potential for multiple dimensions of spirituality to exist in education. The reflexive measures undertaken (Section 5.8) support the researcher in attending to her experiences surrounding the concepts underpinning the framework of this study, definitions of which are provided in the following section.

1.2 Conceptual Foundations: Defining Core Terms

Several terms central to the conceptual framework (Appendix 1) grounding this study describe complex, ambiguous phenomena and Biesta (2013) highlights the need to consider the use of language in education carefully as 'our words matter' (Biesta 2013, p.540). In particular, spirituality and religion are widely contested terms within educational discourse. To provide clear orientation from the outset, it is vital for the researcher to identify how terms are being employed and understood within this thesis and the four key concepts of spirituality, religion, characteristic spirit and educator will be defined in this section. Definitions are based on the literature reviewed on the foundational concepts for this study.

1.2.1 Spirituality

While spirituality can be perceived as inherently connected to religion, scholarly literature suggests that spirituality can be religiously tethered or untethered (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003). The myriad understandings of spirituality encountered and reviewed in the literature are discussed in detail in Section 3.1. Following a synthesis of these definitions, this research understands spirituality to be a universal domain of the human person, the awareness of which differs on an individual basis. Spirituality is an innate drive which powers a search for connection, meaning and purpose. It is a quest for relationships with the self, others, the environment and for many, something more, something or someone transcendent. For some, this desire is at least influenced by organised religion, if not entirely contextualised and grounded within it. For others, it is completely separate and may or may not have a transcendent element. It is a desire to engage completely in the human experience and for some, to transcend the self. Connection to a transcendent entity is understood in a Kantian sense for the purpose of this research, referring to a being or force that exists beyond the realm of human experience and may not be accessible to human perception (Kant 1998; Pihlström 2023). It is important to note that the terms spirituality and religion are not used interchangeably within this study.

1.2.2 Religion

The academic scholarship of Timothy Fitzgerald (2000;2017) critically examines the categories of religion and secular and advocates for an awareness of the historical and ideological origins of the terms. When studying religion, Fitzgerald highlights the importance of recognising the power dynamics involved in defining religion that may be self-serving for certain institutions. For clarity within the present study, organised religion will be understood to mean a communal or institutional expression of belief guided by doctrine which may include belief in a divine power or power that is believed to control human destiny. The term religion, derived from the Latin *Religare*, meaning to bind together, will also represent personal beliefs and faith in religious teachings that are practised in a private, non-organisational or individual manner. Although there is a commonality between the terms, religion differs from spirituality, which is considered innate and universal, whereas religion is guided by an established set of principles, which are usually codified, and transferred through generations. This definition synthesises seminal conceptualisations of religion, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHR) understanding of religion and other scholarly work (James 1902; Cox 2020; Vliengenthart 2020; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2024)

1.2.3 Characteristic Spirit

Within this study, educators are asked to discuss the characteristic spirit of their respective schools which relates to their ethos, patron body, and religious identity where applicable (Faas *et al.* 2019). Ethos is used in place of characteristic spirit within semi-structured interviews as it is used widely in education. According to Section 2(1)(b) of the Education Act (1998), it is the responsibility of the board of management, accountable to the patron, to ensure that the characteristic spirit of a school is upheld. It is highly relevant to this study as the spiritual development of the child should have regard for the characteristic spirit of the school, in accordance with Section 9(d) of the Education Act (1998). The characteristic spirit of the school is determined by the 'cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school' (Section 15(2)(b) Education Act 1998).

1.2.4. Educator

Within this research, the term educator is used throughout when referring to the participants of this study. It encompasses both administrative and teaching principals, classroom teachers and primary school teachers who are also forest school leaders. This term is used to support the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Its employment was decided upon instead of 'teacher' to attend to the diversity of the rich lived experiences of the participants and their varied roles and responsibilities within the educational landscape.

1.3. Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 contextualises the research problem within historical, political and current educational and societal narratives. The study is briefly situated within the context of national and international policy documents which influence the research.

Chapter 3 is the first in a series of two chapters containing a narrative literature review. It provides an insight into the multifaceted understandings of spirituality as a social phenomenon and the most commonly presented conceptualisations are explored, as is the complex and contested relationship between spirituality and religion.

Chapter 4 focuses on a review literature relating to spirituality in education with a focus on the educator, the child and the curriculum. The chapter concludes with a review of the literature on performativity and the significant challenge that prevailing neoliberal ideologies place on spirituality and its role in education.

Chapter 5 outlines the research paradigm and methodological approach employed for the purpose of this study. An overview of data collection and analysis procedures is provided, along with an examination of the ethical considerations relevant to the study.

Chapter 6 is the first in a series of four chapters which present the findings of this research gleaned from data analysis. It discusses the understandings of spirituality found within the data gathered. In each of these chapters, findings are discussed in relation to relevant research and extant literature and the reporting is cognisant of the centrality of the educator's lived experience, in accordance with the theoretical underpinnings of this study

Chapter 7 presents the findings relating to the spirituality of the educator and the range of influences on this complex dimension of the human person are discussed.

Chapter 8 presents the findings relating to the spiritual development of children in schools. It provides an insight into the multi-dimensional nature of this concept.

Chapter 9, the final chapter in the findings series, presents the societal challenges and changes to spirituality in schools found in this study.

Chapter 10 concludes the thesis. It considers the relevance of the findings of this research which include the spiritual identity of teachers revealed by this study, as well as their perceptions of spirituality in schools. The chapter shares the significance, limitations and recommendations of the current study.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the research rationale and the scope of the inquiry. The positionality of the researcher is illuminated and the location of the researcher within the rationale for the study is shared. The conceptual framework highlights the key concepts and the relationships between them and the definitions of four key concepts within the framework which underpins the study are expounded. The following chapter briefly

contextualises the study through the lenses of history, policy and present-day society in Ireland.

Chapter 2: A Contextual Overview - History, Society and Policy

2.0 Introduction

The following chapter provides a brief overview of the historical context of this research. It moves on to place the research within the context of the current societal reality and briefly highlights both national and international policy documents which are relevant to the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017), the historical and societal contexts are highly influential on a multitude of research elements including methodology, ethics and positionality. Figure 2.1 presents a timeline overview of the key policy documents that significantly influence this research.

Irish Education Policy Timeline

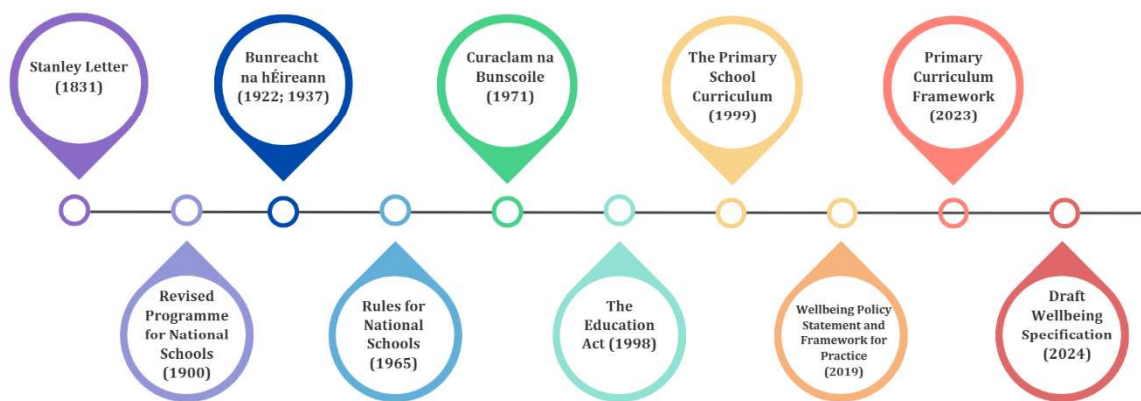


Figure 2.1 Irish Education Policy Timeline

2.1 The Historical Context: Religion and Education in Ireland

The Irish landscape, with its rugged terrain, ancient monuments, and natural beauty, is often perceived as suffused with spiritual energy and symbolism, prompting a reverence for nature and a spiritual connection to the land (O'Donohue 1997; Duncan 2015; Ní Riain 2023). The ancient sites of Brúgh na Bóinne (Boyne Valley) in Co. Meath include Newgrange, Knowth and Dowth, sacred places, which according to Darcus (2005) contain the most extensive of Stone Age monuments and the largest known collection of megalithic art in Europe. Appearing in early Irish literature as home to the 'earliest known native Irish Gods' (Darcus 2005, p.1), an ambience of ancient ceremony and ritual permeates these sites which provided a place for the 'veneration of ancestors' (Whitley 2002, p.121). The Celtic legacy of the mythological underground world of the Tuatha Dé

Dannan tribe has had a continued influence on the tangible spirituality of Ireland as ‘this myth has imbued the whole landscape with numinous depth and presence’ (O’ Donohue 1997, p.46).

The coming of Christianity to Ireland in the 5th century resulted in a growing monastic tradition from the sixth century onward, forming inextricable links between education and religion so that ‘love of God and love of learning’ (O’Higgins-Norman and Renehan 2014, p.34) were closely intertwined. The subsequent position of religion in Irish society has profoundly influenced the primary school system in Ireland and it is a position which has resulted in considerable restructuring and reorganisation of the system over time (Ganiel and Holmes 2019; McGraw and Tiernan 2022). The legacy of this is a long-established relationship between academic learning and religion on the island of Ireland which frames the historical context of the present study.

The Act of Union (1800) placed Ireland under the jurisdiction of the British government, facilitating opportunities for Westminster to utilise Ireland as a ‘social laboratory’ (Coolahan 1981, p.3) in which experimental policy initiatives could be implemented and evaluated. One such directive was a state-supported primary school system. Against a backdrop of considerable poverty, the national school system responded to the desire for a structured approach to education, which was discernible in Ireland at the time. As a result, in October 1831, Lord Edward Stanley outlined the framework for the national school system in his letter to the Duke of Leinster, Augustus Fitzgerald (Walsh 2016). It served as the foundational document upon which the ‘experimental and interdenominational’ (Kieran 2024, p.248) system of education was built. This failed attempt at a state-supported, multi-denominational school system (Stanley 1831) led to an implicit system of denominational education which focused significantly on Religious Instruction (RI) (Coolahan 1981; Walsh 2016; Kieran 2024). Denominational management of parochial schools by the dominant church bodies in Ireland was widespread (Parks 2011). According to O’ Higgins-Norman and Renehan (2014), this has consequently hindered the cultivation of spiritual development in schools. The historical position of religion in Irish education significantly influenced the identity of the teacher, a person employed to be the ‘willing assistant of the clergyman in parochial life’ (Parks 2011, p.40). The identity and practices of the teacher were stringently managed, and teachers were required to adhere to the rules laid out by the Commissioners which called

for them to be 'of Christian sentiment, of calm temper and discretion and... imbued with a spirit of peace' (Coolahan 1981, p.31),

By 1900, multi-denominational education scarcely featured in the national school system, much to the satisfaction of the Catholic General Synod (Walsh 2016). As a result, the twentieth century saw the pervasive and dominant influence of religion strengthen continually in Ireland. High levels of dissatisfaction within education resulted in the formulation of the Revised Programme for National Schools (1900). This was revolutionary in nature and formalised the role of denominational religious authorities in educational governance. The political events leading to the formation of the Irish Free State also provided a catalyst for considerable change to educational policy and subsequently, the identity of the educator. The desire to cultivate and strengthen Gaelic identity, alongside the Irish language and culture, served to consolidate the position of Catholicism as the 'religion of nationalism' (Kieran 2024, p.253). The incorporation of a nationalistic identity into the requirements for teachers further reinforced the Catholic Church's influence on the identity of teachers and the establishment of an educational workforce who were predominantly 'Catholic, White and Gaelic' (Torvey and Share 2003, p.343).

The central role of religion in Ireland following the establishment of the Free State had a substantial impact on the structure of education in Ireland (Inglis 2024). The relationship between Church and State intensified and Catholicism firmly anchored its privileged position within Ireland, becoming an 'omnipresent and triumphant force in Irish society' (Walsh 2016, p.12). Church control of family, health and welfare systems was established, alongside its widespread domination of education which offered structure and cohesion during a tempestuous period in a new Ireland (Kieran 2024). The prioritisation of religion in education within the Constitution (1922; 1937) and the Rules for National Schools (Irish Government Publications 1965) saw the spiritual education of the child subsumed into RI due to its identification as the 'most important' subject and the expectation that a 'religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school' (Irish Government Publications (IGP) 1965, Rule 68). The policy discourse consolidating the role of religion in schools served to ignore the possibility of spiritual development outside of RI (O'Higgins-Norman and Renehan 2014). However, contemporary policy shifts highlight the potential for spiritual development beyond the parameters of RI. Within the Draft

Wellbeing Specification, spiritual development is identified as a curricular responsibility and spiritual wellbeing is defined to include organised religion. At the end of the twentieth century, the possibility for the divergence of spirituality and religion was first visible in the enactment of the Education Act (1998) which states that schools should:

‘promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school’ (The Education Act 1998, Section 9(d)).

2.2 The Current Societal Reality

Ireland’s reputation as a land of saints and scholars is centuries old and religion has been recognised as a fundamental aspect of social identity in Ireland for generations (Ganiel and Holmes 2019). However, research conducted by Inglis (2014; 2017) highlights that this reality has evolved considerably. The Catholic Church, which accounts for the considerable majority of school patronage (88.48%), is no longer ‘important in the creation of webs of meaning... God and religion are not woven into [people’s] everyday lives (Inglis 2017 p.25). While high-quality education provided by the Catholic Church was the lived reality for some (Kieran 2024), the continued dominance of Catholic patronage in primary schools in Ireland is an issue facing exacerbating public and political discourse and the need for increased diversity at the primary school level is apparent (Mawhinney 2007; 2012; 2015; Coolahan *et al.* 2012; Kitching 2020). Table 1.1 illustrates the current patronage of mainstream primary schools in Ireland, highlighting the ongoing prevalence of denominational education (94.6%), with Roman Catholic schools alone accounting for 88.48% of mainstream primary schools. The current system of patron body management is, according to Kitching (2020), a longstanding heritage of ‘British colonial and Irish sectarian bargaining’ (Kitching 2020, p.133).

Table 2.1 Patronage of Mainstream Primary Schools in Ireland (Gov.ie 2024)

Patronage	Number of Schools	Percentage
Roman Catholic	2,772	88.48
Church of Ireland	170	5.43
Multi-Denominational	153	4.88
Presbyterian	17	0.54
Inter-Denominational	16	0.51
Muslim	2	0.06
Jewish	1	0.03
Methodist	1	0.03
Quaker	1	0.03

Despite the significant prevalence of denominational education in Ireland, there are numerous societal indicators of the move away from church teachings and a withdrawal from adherence which includes those who experienced immersion in denominational education (McGraw and Tiernan 2022). In Census 2022, 69% of the population of Ireland reported that their religion was Roman Catholic (CSO 2022). This has declined substantially since CSO (2011) when Roman Catholics accounted for 84% of the total population. In considerable contrast to this, the number of people reporting that they have ‘no religion’ has risen by 187% since CSO 2011. However, there is little research that profiles the beliefs of the individuals within the composition of this broad category (Kieran and Mullally 2020). Expressions of Roman Catholic identity are varied within Irish society and Ganiel (2019) postulates that in post-Catholic Ireland, ‘extra-institutional religion’ is the lived reality for some. This term was coined to describe the practices of those who are ‘relatively committed’ (Ganiel 2019, p.473) to religion and may engage in practices outside of or alongside traditional religious practices. According to Inglis (2017), cultural Catholicism has replaced strict adherence to the teachings of the church, alongside the abandonment of ‘austere self-denial and rigorous Roman practice’ (Turpin 2024, p.566). Despite the homogeneity suggested by one’s identification as Roman Catholic, the diverging beliefs and practices present in the literature reviewed (Section 3.2) provide evidence of the varying interpretations that inform the lived

experience of self-identified Roman Catholics. The myriad ways in which contemporary identification with religion is realised are discussed further in Section 3.2.1.

Expressions of religious and spiritual identity are increasingly pluralistic in Irish society, as evidenced by census statistics (CSO 2011;2016;2022). A scholarly argument exists that some spiritual and religious practices are increasingly concerned with the individual, prioritising self-discovery, personal growth and inner transformation over traditional communal practices and the authority of organised religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2006; Sheldrake 2007; Beck 2010; Hyland 2017; Forbes 2019). Such changes in identity have occurred in alignment changing attitudes to religious belief such as a declining fear in eternal damnation and in the Irish context, a reduction in the church's ability to shame those who do not conform to church teachings (Inglis 2024). However, while the permitted activities of the educator outside of the school day are no longer stringently controlled by the Commissioners' 'rules and regulations for the ordering of the teacher's work and behaviour' (Coolahan 1989, p.31), the current system of denominational patronage remains influential on the identity of the teacher, as evidenced by findings of this study, discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

Recently, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) Congress 2024 highlighted the dissatisfaction of some educators with the current system of patronage and are calling for the removal of the requirement for teachers in Catholic schools to hold a *Certificate in Religious Education*. While some delegates expressed discomfort regarding the longstanding position of religion in primary schools in Ireland and the lack of school choice in a continually changing Irish Society, others felt strongly that faith formation belonged in schools (O'Kelly 2024). As a result of the debate, the INTO membership instructed the INTO Central Executive Committee (CEC) to survey all members on the inclusion of faith formation in primary schools and their preference for primary schools to have secular or religious patrons. The CEC has also been directed to formulate a task force on the future of school patronage that will report the results at Congress 2025 (INTO 2024). The contrasting opinions illuminated by Congress 2024 highlight the contention and contestation surrounding the positions of RE and denominational patronage in schools for practising teachers in Ireland at present. As can be seen, the debate surrounding RE and patronage is nuanced and must be read in conjunction with current policy and legislation that govern the Irish education system,

2.3 Religion in Ireland: Constitution and Curriculum

The contextualisation of the present study within educational policy discourse continues to examine the complex relationship between religion and education due to the extensive influence of church bodies on the provision of education in Ireland (Kieran 2024).

2.3.1 Constitutional Entitlements

As evidenced by the historical context discussed, religious bodies have a significant influence on education in Ireland. Bunreacht na hÉireann (The Constitution of Ireland)(1937) bestows recognition upon the family as the ‘natural and primary educator of the children’ (Article 42.1) and offers parents with freedom to decide the providers of their child’s education. Constitutionally, the role of the state is to ‘provide for free primary education’ (Article 42.4), a statement which served to strengthen the position of denominational education in Ireland. This phrasing facilitates state support for education through funding and regulation while allowing denominational education to exist and thrive within the framework of the national education system.

Guided by Articles 42 and 44 of Bunreacht na hÉireann(1937), the Education Act (1998) is the primary legislation governing the operations of schools, as well as the roles and responsibilities of boards of management, principals, teachers, and the Minister for Education. It states the schools are responsible for the spiritual development of students and that this should be done in alignment with the characteristic spirit of the school. The characteristic spirit is ‘determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school’ (Education Act 1998, Section 15(2)(b)). The importance of the characteristic spirit of a school is perceptible within the Education Act (1998). The Minister for Education is legally required to act in a manner that is cognisant of the characteristic spirit of the school and the legislation also indicates that schools can teach subjects that reflect their unique identity, such as the patrons’ programmes, while still covering the national curriculum (Education Act 1998, Section 30(2)(b)). It is also this legislation which requires Boards of Management and subsequently, educators, to undertake their duties in a manner that is reflective of the characteristic spirit of the school.

2.3.2 The Primary School Curriculum

As the present study is being undertaken, the national primary school curriculum in Ireland is experiencing considerable transformation. Following the enactment of the Education Act (1998) and guided by the philosophical underpinnings of *Curaclam na Bunscoile* (Primary School Curriculum) (DE 1971), the NCCA published the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA 1999) in which RE remained the responsibility of the respective church bodies. Intentional recognition of the spiritual domain of the human person is discernible within the document with the spiritual dimension identified as a fundamental issue in Irish education at the time of publication. The need to develop 'spiritual, moral and religious values' (NCCA 1999, p.34) is identified as a specific aim of the curriculum, as is acquiring 'sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life' (NCCA 1999, p.34). Interestingly, Drama is the only curricular area identified as having the potential to address the spiritual development of the child outside of RE.

An increasingly diverse Irish society, evolving societal and educational challenges and advancing educational research led to the launch of a review and redevelopment of the curriculum by the NCCA in May 2019. In line with recommendations from the Forum (Coolahan *et al.* 2012), a curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics, was proposed, which included the need for spiritual awareness. However, the proposed curriculum is tasked with unattainable objectives, according to Sullivan (2018), who notes the impossibility of attending to the recommendations of the Forum, while responding to the needs of all stakeholders and patrons. This is particularly contentious when the right to a patron's programme in alignment with the characteristic spirit of a school is firmly and legislatively embedded in the Education Act (1998).

The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework for Consultation (DPCF)(NCCA 2020) was published in February 2020. The document considered the need for an extended statement on patrons' programmes in order to respect all members of Ireland's increasingly diverse society. The spiritual dimension of life is recognised within the DPCF and it included an aim that children would be 'as spiritually healthy as they can be' (NCCA 2020, p.8) through having a sense of meaning and purpose. Following a period of consultation on the DPCF, the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) (NCCA 2023) was launched in March 2023. Within the renamed competency *Being Well*, a rephrased statement pertaining to the wellbeing of the child reads, 'This competency develops

children's understanding and appreciation of wellbeing and their ability to be as healthy as they can be – physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually' (NCCA 2023, p.11). However, little insight is shared on how the curriculum intends to address this aim.

The Patron's Programme, a subject area entitled 'Religious/Ethical/Multi-belief, and Values Education' is allocated a weekly time of 1 hour and 40 minutes at Stage 1 and 2 hours, a change from its previous daily allocation. While spiritual development is mentioned within the curricular areas of wellbeing and the Patron's programme, the capacity for the Arts to develop spirituality is no longer acknowledged by the NCCA (2023). Church authorities are no longer mentioned in the PCF, a divergence from its previous publication which bolstered the jurisdiction of church authorities by referring to them four times (NCCA 1999). This mirrors the societal changes evidenced by Census statistics (CSO 2011;2016;2022) and the shifting influence of the influence of church authorities within societal contexts. Correlatively, a significant contrast is evident when comparing the prominence of RI as outlined in the Rules for National Schools (1965) to the role of the Patron's Programme in the PCF where it is categorised as being 'in addition' (NCCA 2023, p.14) to the five core curricular areas. These programmes are discussed further in the following section.

2.5 The Patron's Programme

In accordance with the Education Act (1998), it is the responsibility of the patrons of primary schools in Ireland to promote the characteristic spirit of the school. Within this responsibility, a patron's programme is required in order to facilitate the holistic development of the child, particularly from the religious and/or ethical perspective. These programmes are required to 'underpin and support the characteristic spirit of the school' (NCCA 2023, p.19). The patron's programme holds a unique position in primary education in Ireland and the interrelated nature of RE and the patron's programme is the inheritance of the largely denominational composition of Irish primary education (Sullivan 2018). While denominational patron bodies represent 94.6% of primary schools in Ireland, multi-denominational patronage is the fastest-growing sector in primary school education in Ireland DES 2018. The evolution of school patronage is a response to the increasingly diverse society and significant societal changes influencing education in Ireland over the last thirty years (Malone *et al.* 2021). The following section provides a

brief insight into the six research sights of this study and the position of spirituality within their respective patrons' programmes.

2.5.1 Roman Catholic Schools

Roman Catholic patrons continue to oversee 88.48% of primary schools in Ireland, highlighting its embedded historical and cultural position in Irish primary education. The Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum (CPPREC) for Ireland was published in 2015 by the Irish Episcopal Conference (IEC). The document frequently references spirituality and highlights its aim to foster a 'distinctly Christian Spirituality... rooted in the experience of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ' (IEC 2015, p.19). The curriculum also directs schools to enable children to 'learn skills of spiritual, moral and religious literacy (IEC 2015, p.14). The development of spiritual literacy is one of the central skills of religious literacy included in the curriculum which aims to develop an awareness of the spiritual and the identification of practices that can enhance the spiritual domain of one's life (IEC 2015). The curriculum is grounded in the national catechetical document Share the Good News (IEC 2010), which conforms with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. In alignment with Share the Good News (IEC 2010), the RE curriculum presents two distinctive yet synergistic dimensions: the educational dimension and the faith formation dimension.

The patron's programme utilised in Roman Catholic primary schools in Ireland is Grow in Love (GiL)(IEC 2015). It is the first programme written for the CPPREC (IEC 2015) and the publication has translated the two fundamental curricular dimensions into learning objectives and faith formation goals. GiL employs a spiral approach to RE and utilises various themes in each year of the programme to attend to the spiritual development of the child. The programme aims to facilitate the development of Christian spirituality referred to in the CPPREC (IEC 2015) by enabling children to 'notice, accept and celebrate the love of God in their own lives (and) to come to know that they are loved, that they need to share love with others, and that they need to care for creation' (O' Connell 2017, p.83).

2.5.2 Church of Ireland Schools

Church of Ireland (CoI) schools joined the national school system alongside Catholic and Presbyterian schools in the final decades of the nineteenth century. At present, CoI schools account for 5.43% of primary schools in Ireland. The General Synod Board of

Education (GSBE) is responsible for RE in CoI schools (Parkes 2019). The GBSE (2000) recommends that the spiritual development of the child should permeate all aspects of education, as well as explicit development in RE lessons. The patron’s programme is *Follow Me* (Wilkinson 2001-2010) and was developed by the CoI alongside the Methodist and Presbyterian boards of It was influenced by *Alive O* (Veritas YEAR), as well guidelines for RE and moral education in Scotland and Northern Ireland. *Follow Me* (Wilkinson 2001-2010) acknowledges the need for the spiritual dimension of the child to be nurtured and developed (GBSE 2024) and aims to facilitate the cultivation of ‘spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God (NCCA 1999, p.8). The programme employs a spiral

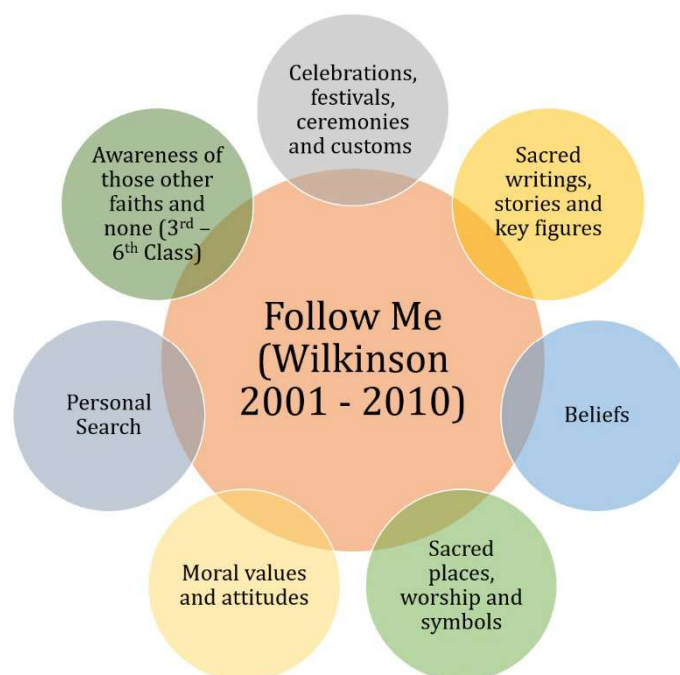


Figure 32.2 Strands from *Follow Me* (Wilkinson 2001-2010)

approach to enable teachers to guide children on a journey that begins with their own life experiences, facilitating the growth of their understanding. The programme is comprised of six strands with the addition of a seventh for programmes published for third to sixth class.

2.5.3 Educate Together Schools

Multi-denominational patronage is now the fastest-growing patronage sector of primary schools in Ireland (DES 2018a). The origins of Educate Together (ET) schools can be traced back to the Dalkey School Project (DSP), a school established following the decision of a small group of parents to seek state support for a multi-denominational school. This

quest was motivated by the results of surveys which questioned the separation of Catholic and Protestant children for the purposes of education and voiced a desire for the children to be educated together (Lalor 2013). St. Patrick's NS in Dalkey provided the inspiration for the DSP as a result of its reputation as an excellent school and its 'de facto multi-denominational nature' (Hyland 2021, p.26). The Educate Together Charter was launched in 1990, delineating the guiding vision for ET schools and the abolishment of the requirement for ET schools to provide sites, as well as 15% of the building cost further supporting the expansion of the sector (Lalor 2013).

In the place of RE, ET schools offer an alternative, a primary school ethical education curriculum. The *Learn Together* curriculum (ET 2004; 2011; 2022) was formally developed in 2004 and was designed to support the characteristic spirit of an ET school. The curriculum is guided by the Educate Together Charter (ET 2015), a document which focuses on human rights and affirms that

'children of all social, cultural and religious backgrounds have a right to an education that respects their individual identity whilst exploring the different values and traditions of the world in which they live' (ET 2011a, p.1).

The initial publication had four strands which were identified as 'critical to the delivery of the Educate Together ethos at a curricular level' (ET 2011b, p.10).

- Moral and Spiritual
- Equality and Justice
- Belief Systems
- Ethics and the Environment

The programme aimed to recognise the spiritual dimension of the child by addressing the issue of spirituality. The philosophical rationale of the curriculum highlights the importance of encouraging children to 'explore their own spiritual identities' (ET 2011b, p.9). Within the strand 'Moral and Spiritual', the strand unit 'Cultivating Spiritual Growth' theoretically provided an opportunity for children to engage in self-reflection, and meditation, to engage in existential questioning and develop a sense of wonder in his/her

world. This occurs alongside the central tenant of respect for children of all ‘religious and non-religious backgrounds (ET 2011b, p.9). Religion and spirituality are not explicitly linked within the document. In 2022, a revised edition of the Learn Together curriculum was published. There are four revised strands which guide the reimagined curriculum which are presented in Figure 2.2.

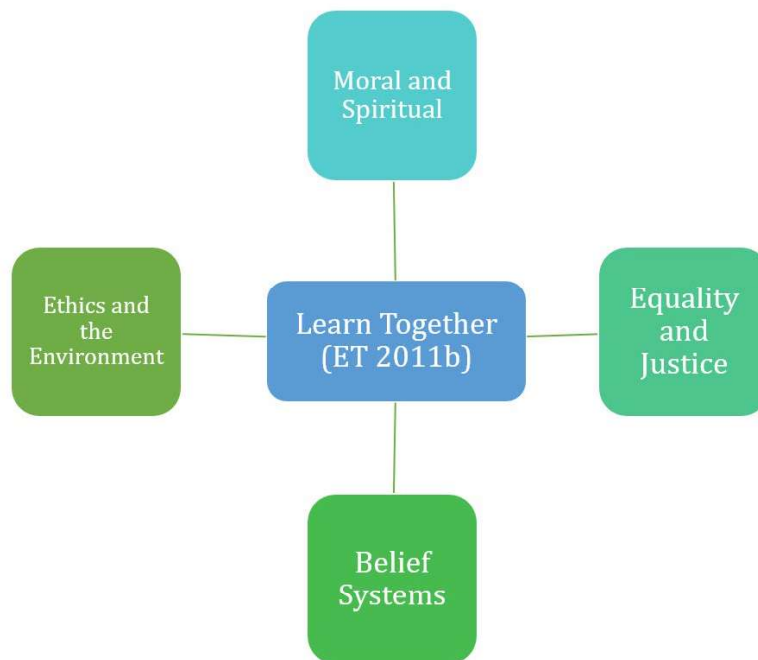


Figure 2.3 Learn Together Strands (ET 2011b)

The ET Charter (ET 2011) expresses that the religious background of the child must be respected. Within the revised curriculum (ET 2022), it is said that children should become familiar with major world religions and should encounter a range of both secular and religious beliefs. The curriculum no longer refers to the spiritual dimension of the child, a notable contrast from Learn Together (ET 2004; 2011b).

2.5.4 Community National Schools

In response to the increasing diversification and pluralism present in Irish society, the demand for publicly managed primary schools and the challenge of securing school places for children, the Irish state established the first Community National School in 2007 (Malone *et al.* 2021). CNSs are co-educational, multi-denominational schools operating under the patronage of the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and the first of its kind, Scoil Choilm CNS, was founded in Clonsilla, Co. Dublin in 2007 (CNS 2018). A central aim of CNSs is to engage in the holistic development of the child in a manner that

is cognisant and respectful of diversity and celebrates the value of difference which ‘gives strength and vibrancy to the school community and the wider community’ (NCCA 2018, p.5). The patron’s programme in CNSs is entitled *Goodness Me! Goodness you!* (GMGY) (NCCA 2018), a programme which has a multi-belief curriculum focusing on identity, values, philosophy and multi-denominational RE. The programme has undergone considerable change since its initial development in 2008 and it aspires to value and respect all religious traditions and secular worldviews, ensuring equity for all students irrespective of their belief backgrounds (Mullally 2018; Malone *et al.* 2021).

Analysis of *GMGY* highlights its central role in upholding the characteristic spirit of a CNS, a phrase mentioned ten times within the document. The spiritual domain of the child is acknowledged once in the curriculum within the section entitled ‘The Community National School Model’ (NCCA 2018, p.5). The curriculum has four strands, presented in Figure 2.3 below.



Figure 2.4 GMGY Strands (NCCA 2018)

The strand ‘Beliefs and Religions’ employs a multid denominational approach to RE and is centred on learning ‘about’ and ‘from’ different religions and beliefs. Similarly to the Learn Together curriculum, the programme encourages the exploration of both religious and non-religious beliefs and practices. While the programme aims to approach education holistically in a manner that recognises that children develop ‘spiritually’ (NCCA 2018, p.5), spirituality is not explicitly mentioned within the strands and or elements of *GMGY* (NCCA 2018).

2.5.5 Steiner Schools

Within the sphere of Irish education and education in the wider context, the terms ‘Steiner’, ‘Waldorf’ and ‘Steiner Waldorf’ are used interchangeably to refer to schools of this kind and their associated approaches (O’ Shiel and O’Flynn 1998; Pearce 2019). At present, there are seven Steiner primary schools in Ireland inspired by the educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner (1919). Lifeways Ireland is the recognised patron body of four independent Steiner primary schools in Ireland. The other three Steiner schools in Ireland are currently operational under ETB patronage, an arrangement which requires the delivery of *GMGY*, as discussed in the previous section. Such schools are granted a governmental license, part of which involves the school being assigned a specific task and the jurisdiction to facilitate a curricular emphasis on the assigned task (Coolahan *et al.* 2012).

No single document outlines the primary curriculum for Steiner schools in Ireland comprehensively. Instead, Steiner schools typically follow guidelines based on Rudolf Steiner's educational philosophy, which are adapted to local contexts. The educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner is highly influenced by the anthroposophical lens through which he attempted to see the world (Pearce 2019). As a result of the incorporation of wisdom from major world religions, an acknowledgement of the spiritual domain of the human person is a central tenant of Steiner’s (1927) educational philosophy. Subsequently, Waldorf education seeks to address the spiritual development of students alongside their intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. The spirit of the human person is related to being and consciousness, and to the sense of meaning and purpose one has in life. According to Steiner’s (1927) lectures on education, that which is not perceptible by the physical sense is considered spiritual. As a result of Steiner’s acknowledgement of the spiritual domain, Waldorf education is cognisant of the human person in a holistic sense, recognising the body, soul and spirit of the person (Rawson 2020). Religion is referred to repeatedly throughout Steiner’s scholarly work, and he states that ‘religious impulses’ (Steiner 1927, p.12) play a pivotal role in the evolution of humanity.

Education in Steiner schools seeks to address the spiritual development of students alongside their intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. An exploration of the websites of the seven Steiner primary schools in Ireland (Appendix 3) illuminates the

acknowledgement of the spiritual domain of the human person by all seven schools and the importance of spiritual development.

2.5.6 Forest Schools

In 1859, Norwegian poet Henrik Ibsen is thought to have coined the term 'Friluftsliv' to describe the value and beauty of time spent in nature, a concept which is deeply embedded in Scandinavian culture (Hofmann *et al.* 2018; Murphy 2020). The concept encourages a holistic connection to nature and emphasises the promotion of physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing through outdoor activities and experiences (Hofmann *et al.* 2018). Inspired by the philosophical underpinnings of Friluftsliv, Forest Schools were established in Denmark and Sweden, school settings which prioritised outdoor play and nature-based learning. Following a visit to a Danish Forest School, early years practitioners from Bridgewater and Taunton College set up a Forest School for children attending their on-site childcare centre in Somerset, England. As a result, the pedagogical approach became increasingly popular in the United Kingdom (UK) (Murphy 2020).

In Ireland, Ciara Hinksman is credited with the adoption of the Scandinavian Forest School approach as the owner and founder of Forest School Ireland (Murphy 2018). It differs from the other research sites of this study in that it does not have a patron. At the time of this study, four primary schools were members of the Irish Forest School Association (IFSA) (2024). Forest Schools adhere to six fundamental principles which emphasise the importance of regular sessions, woodland settings, community, holistic development, opportunity to take risks and qualified practitioners (Knight 2017; Murphy 2020; IFSA 2023). The ethos of Forest Schools Ireland (2004) focuses on holistic development which explicitly includes the spiritual domain of the child.

2.6 Spirituality as a Global Issue: Influential International Documents

This section briefly examines educational policy discourse in the wider context which is considered influential in the contextualisation of this study (Table 2.1). While these documents have an evident influence on curricular and organisational policies, they also collectively shape the professional environment for educators, influencing how they can express their spiritual identities, with freedom, intermediacy or restriction. Educators in some school contexts in Ireland and across Europe are often expected to maintain a neutral stance on spiritual and religious matters in the classroom, especially in public schools, to foster an inclusive and respectful learning environment (Wartenweiler 2021).

However, as discussed, in denominational or faith-based schools, teachers may be more involved in promoting specific religious values, provided they do so in a manner that respects the rights and beliefs of all students. The publishers of policies relating to these central issues include United Nations (UN) (1989), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2006), Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)/ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) (2007) and United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (UNCERD) (2011).

Table 2.2 Influential International Documentation

Document	Relevance
UN (1989)	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified in Ireland on 28 th September 1992 and highlights the country’s commitment to ensuring the protection and promotion of children’s rights and welfare. The spiritual domain of the child is acknowledged in Articles 17, 23, 27 and 32 with Article 14 emphasising the rights of the child to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
UNESCO (2006)	The Guidelines on Intercultural Education (2006) refer to spirituality when delineating key issues and interrelationships in education. Spirituality is identified as a foundational component of culture and is notably separated from religion as a central component of the diverse human experience.
ODIHR/ OSCE (2007)	The Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools provide guidance on how to approach RE and discussions about beliefs in a way that respects diversity and avoids proselytism.
UNCERD (2011; 2019)	Ireland has been criticised on two occasions for its continually substandard upholding of UN charters and UNCERD (2011) notes its repeated calls for increased school choice to attend to the needs of a diverse Irish society. Concerns and criticisms were reiterated in 2019 and a lack of clarity on how divestment could be achieved was highlighted as problematic, as was the continued integration of ‘religious teaching’ (UNCERD 2019, p.65) into the school day.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has contextualised this study within the history of education in Ireland, the current societal discourse applicable to the research and relevant national and international policy documents were examined. This examination highlights the awareness of the spiritual domain of the human person in curricula, the global consideration of spirituality as a universal trait and the influence of educational policy on the spiritual identity of the teacher. The following two chapters explore spirituality and related themes revealed through a narrative review of relevant literature.

Chapter 3: Definitions of Spirituality

3.0 Introduction

The following chapter is the first in a series of two chapters containing a review of literature pertaining to the topic of spirituality. This literature review focuses on contemporary research and seminal works relating to spirituality in education, as an academic discipline and its conceptualisations in the 21st century. Reflective writing was conducted throughout the process of the review in order to attend to selection bias which can occur during the process (Green *et al.* 2006; Ferrari 2015). This chapter focuses on the myriad definitions of spirituality present in the literature reviewed as well as an exploration of the complex relationship between spirituality and religion.

3.1 Defining Spirituality

The following section illuminates the diverse definitions and conceptualisations of spirituality available in contemporary literature. It begins by expounding the difficulty in defining and understanding the concept of spirituality before exploring the etymology of the term itself, its Christian origins and the emergence of spirituality as a distinctive academic discipline.

3.1.1 The Difficulty

It is widely agreed in the literature reviewed that spirituality is a complex social phenomenon that is contentious and difficult to define (Sheldrake 2007; Hyde 2021; Hyde and Rouse 2022). Dillard (2006) as cited in Elfreich (2019) believes that spirituality defies all definitions as it 'is all that is' (Elfreich 2019, p.35). For this reason, scholars often depend on a description or series of descriptions to construe the meaning of spirituality (Hyde 2021). At the beginning of the 21st century, David Hay, an expert on

spiritual experience, organised the convergence of a wide range of specialists at a seminar to negotiate and decide upon a definition of spirituality. However, 'the experts were hopelessly at odds with each other and so we gave up' (Hay 2007, p.8). While the difficulty in defining spirituality is evident in the literature, alongside attempts to simply describe the concept, the need for clarity is evident, particularly within the realm of education.

When the above difficulty is located within educational discourse, abandoning efforts to define or describe spirituality is damaging, serving only to add to the confusion and contestation which surrounds the concept. To attend to the spirituality of the human person, attempts must be made to increase understanding. An argument exists that there is a need to distinguish between what is spiritual and what is not. Perceiving every action as spiritual, particularly within education, means that there is 'no delineation between different areas of development which at best renders spirituality indistinctive and at worst, meaningless' (Adams *et al.* 2016, p.770). An uncritical inclusivist approach to spirituality which equates it with all aspects of life is hopelessly inadequate and relinquishes the possibility of distinguishing between spirituality and other aspects of existence or the opportunity to speak meaningfully about it. Others suggest that defining spirituality is fruitless, particularly if the intention is to be inclusive and not to alienate (Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Gibson 2014). Hand (2003) rejects the notion of an open and inclusive definition and conceptualises it in a narrower sense, relating it entirely to a search for connection or relationship with God. Hyde (2021) agrees that distinctions must be made between what is spiritual and what is not, as well as what is spiritual and what is religious. The following section explores the term spirituality and its widely agreed ontological nature.

3.1.2. Spiritus – Breath, Spirit, Soul

Spirit comes from the Latin word *spiritus* which means breath or breathing. The link between the spirit and the breath is also implied by the Greek word *pneuma* which means both breath and spirit or soul (McGregor 2013; Elfreich 2019). It is argued that the original source of the term spirituality stems from Christianity. Sheldrake (2007) and Kourie (2009) refer to the use of *pneuma* (spirit) and *pneumatikos* (spiritual) in the letters of St. Paul. Ní Riain (2023) separates spiritual into 'spi-ritual, ritual is spirit, a secret force circling our lives' (Ní Riain 2023, p.21). The word spirituality and its derivatives are problematic for many as it is 'reminiscent of a dualistic and obsolescent Christian

Platonism' (Davies 1999, p.xv) which may be perceived as jarring for many in this current age of materialism (Johnson and Ord 2012; Forbes 2019; Naudé and Flick 2022). This problem contributes significantly to the disagreements surrounding attempts at defining spirituality, particularly when a Deweyan lens is applied to the concept. Rockefeller calls Dewey a 'prophet' (Rockefeller 1994, p.4) of a new definition of spirituality in which the dualism of the natural and spiritual worlds are broken down to reconcile spirituality and everyday being, in order to bring wholeness and openness to the life of the human person. Dewey's (1934) definition of spirituality has made an enduring impact on many conceptualisations and consensus exists within the literature that spirituality is innate (Coles 1990; Noddings 1992; O'Murchu 1997; Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008; Eade 2009; Fisher 2010; 2011; 2014; Adams *et al.* 2016; de Souza 2016; Ubani and Murtonen 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Bryant *et al.* 2020; Hyde 2020; Robinson 2023). Indeed, Chapman and Miller (2022) refer to this as 'natural spirituality' (Chapman and Miller 2022, p.2) and this notion of innate spirituality may act as a potentially universal, foundational framework for understanding this disputed concept.

Such a belief offers a common ground, a starting place, a universal opportunity for respect, connection and unity, while embracing differences (Elfreich 2019). Spirituality, therefore, is not bestowed upon the human person as a result of birthplace, religion or culture (O'Murchu 2012; Shi 2020). While there is widespread agreement in the literature that spirituality is innate in the human person, Shi (2020) notes that levels of spirituality vary from person to person, adding to the capacity of the concept to elude concrete, widely agreed definitions. Drawing on previous work from Benson *et al.* (2003), Wong *et al.* (2006) describe spirituality as 'the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred' and which motivates 'the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution' (Wong *et al.* 2006, p.205). In the literature, spirituality is conceived as a representation of the ways people realise their potential in a positively transformational way (Elfreich 2019; Lee 2022). To speak of the spirit and spirituality is not to speak of something other than humankind, simply 'more than the humankind as it is lived and known' (Huebner 1999, p.343 in Elfreich 2019). This presentation implies that while it is innate in the human person, spirituality has the potential to exist at varying levels. For Hyde (2021) spirituality is also something that can be lost yet has the potential to be found or realised again.

3.1.3 Spirituality in Ireland

Miller (2009) and Hyde (2021) suggest that conscious awareness of spirituality is fundamental to its existence and that spirituality requires a presence and witnessing of this awareness in order to bring what is innate in the human person to fruition. Monaghan (2001) suggests, in what could be perceived as a somewhat inflated manner, that there has been a global awareness of spirituality in Ireland and claims that at a time when traditional religious institutional structures are changing considerably, 'the world looks to Ireland to save, if not civilisation, at least civilisation's spiritual component' (Monaghan 2001, p.8). Spirituality in Ireland is a complex, evolving phenomenon, and historical testimony to its longstanding presence is discernible in ancient Neolithic sites such as Newgrange (Monaghan 2001; Hensey 2015). At times, this site has been classified in a reductionist manner simply as a passage tomb. However, this ancient monument was dedicated to the spiritual needs of the Neolithic community who constructed it 5,200 years ago (Hensey 2015). It is of substantial spiritual significance and, along with Knowth and Dowth and other sites in Brú na Boinne (the Boyne Valley), it highlights the presence of spiritual practices which were concerned with 'much more than a straightforward engineering ability or astronomical expertise' (Hensey 2015, p.75).

The Irish landscape, with its rugged terrain, ancient monuments, and natural beauty, is often perceived as suffused with spiritual energy and symbolism, prompting a reverence for nature and a spiritual connection to the land (Duncan 2015; O' Donohue 2022; Ní Riain 2023). At the time of the Iron Age, spirituality in Ireland took on a Celtic form, characterised by a reverence for nature, sacred sites, and various Deities. Seasonal festivals and Druidism were also significant features of Celtic spirituality (Monaghan 2001; Duncan 2015; Hensey 2015). Christianity arrived in Ireland in the 5th Century and its influence became evident in the spirit of the Irish people and spiritual traditions such as Monasticism which started to flourish and 'undoubtedly left their mark on the early Irish Church' (Davies 1999, p.17). Although from the 7th century onward, Christianity fused with and replaced many spiritual beliefs in both Britain and Ireland, the spirituality of the Celts endured and experienced a resurgence in the late 20th century, demonstrating its 'resilience and durability' (Duncan 2015, p.1). Celtic spirituality and its re-emergence may be described as 'a new constellation in our times' (Duncan 2015, p.3). A renewed interest in the cyclical nature of the Celtic calendar and its four fire festivals (Samhain, Imbolc, Bealtaine and Lughnasadh) according to Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016), is a key

aspect of the return to indigenous Irish spirituality. The nexus of influences on spirituality in Ireland, which now includes elements of globalisation, secularisation and marketisation, has resulted in deeply intricate, multidimensional conceptualisations described comprehensively by Maignant (2011).

The result is a kaleidoscope of interpretations and representations as the rich spiritual heritage of Ireland finds itself woven into the fabric of narratives inspired by individual experience and imagination' (Maignant 2011, p.31).

Within the literature reviewed, spirituality is understood as an ongoing process of exploration, growth and transformation and as such, spirituality can be conceptualised as a seeking, quest or journey (Roof 1999; Coleman 2005; Koenig 2008; Maignant 2011; Vliegenthart 2020; Wartenweiler 2021; Ní Riain 2023; Panko 2024). These scholars understand it as a dynamic journey rather than a fixed state where meaning and purpose are sought, connection is desired and for some, transcendence is pursued (Crawford *et al.* 2006; Victor and Treschuk 2019). This longing and yearning to interact with these elements result in an undertaking along a 'pilgrim path' (Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016, p.59) on a quest for human flourishing accessed through spirituality. The concept of quest, journey or seeker is evident in both mythological and Christian literature and provides evidence of the myriad blends of Indigenous Celtic and more traditional Christian conceptualisations of spirituality which shape and continually shape understandings of spirituality in Ireland (Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016). In the literature reviewed spirituality is considered as an existential reality which highlights its ontological nature and reaffirms its presentation as innate in the human person. Such ontological conceptualisations of spirituality, which suggest that spirituality is a fundamental aspect of the human experience, are intriguing to explore within the context of education.

3.1.4 The Spirit in Education

Much of the research literature presents spirituality as an ontological reality (Robinson 2019), as an essentially human quality intrinsically woven with one's being (Hyde and Rouse 2022; Eade 2019; Mata 2014; Groome 1998). In fact, Groome (1998) states we are 'spiritual beings who have human life (rather) than human beings who have a spiritual life' (Groome 1998, p.332). This belief in the primacy of the spiritual life of human beings can be observed in many ancient traditions, or found as a thread in world religions, and

noted in philosophical understandings and mystical teachings. Yet the origin of this notion is also widely disputed. This modern phrasing of the belief is credited to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Furey 1998; Schafer 2021). Others argue that this conceptualisation is one of many variations of Hegel's dictum which places the spiritual aspect of the person at the beginning of their human experience (DeVries 1988; Mills 2017). Defining spirituality in terms of the lived experience of the human person relates it to a longing, search, or drive for the human experience in the fullness of its potential (Schneiders 1986; 2005; Sheldrake 2007). Within the context of education, this relates closely to Maria Montessori's (1949) conceptualisation of the spirit of the person as an innate force which propels learning. Others suggest that this spirit is an innately and exclusively human characteristic which is dynamic and entails perpetual transformation (Vliegenthart 2020). Montessori identifies it as a desire to absorb from the environment during a formative period and she considers the newborn child as a 'spiritual embryo' (Montessori 1949, p.261) eager to learn and explore. Since the person's spirituality results in a drive for meaning and purpose, an ontological understanding of spirituality is central to Jungian theory (Corbett 2013). Others describe it as a life force (James 1902; Belousa 2008; Miller 2015; Plater 2017). When considered in this sense, as something innate in the human person before their introduction to culture, nationality or religion, it is possible to understand how spirituality is increasingly understood as a prerequisite for religion. However, an exploration of spirituality within the realm of education cannot continue without first attending to the complex and contested nature of the relationship between religion and spirituality which is widely disputed in seminal and contemporary literature.

3.2 Spirituality and Religion

3.2.1 Religion

The literature reviewed for the purpose of this study presented a number of challenges regarding the conceptualisation of spirituality. The most controversial, contentious issue explored was the relationship between religion and spirituality. In order to gain insight into the depth of the issue, it is important to clarify the conceptualisation of religion underpinning this study, synthesised from existing literature. Religion derives from the Latin *Ligare*, meaning to bind fast. James (1902) approached religion from a psychological perspective. In this foundational work, a distinction was made when he described it as

'the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine' (James 1902, p.27). Heelas (2002), more particular in his conceptualisation, defines religion as 'obedience to a transcendent God and a tradition that mediates his authority' (Heelas 2002,p.365). The centrality of the sacred is evident in these understandings.

As with the concept of spirituality, there is a contentious debate regarding the inclusion or separation of that which is sacred and religion (Boyce-Tillman 2016; Halík 2024). Cox (2020) understands the sacred to be any element that refers to supernatural entities or the concept of the divine. Heavily influenced by Fitzgerald (2000), Cox (2020) was compelled to present a non-theological, sociocultural understanding of religion. This view of religion consists of 'identifiable communities that adhere to traditions that are transmitted from generation to generation with an overwhelming authority' (Cox 2020, p. 331). These communities are guided by a particular system of codified principles which are traditionally dogmatic and adhered to in practice by the followers of the principles (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2023). A synthesis of both understandings suggests that religion can be understood as a complex, multifaceted, life-orientating system based on doctrines and teachings that may or may not include adherence to sacred elements. Such teachings and beliefs have the potential to be highly influential on cultural and societal norms.

Within the context of Ireland, as well as the wider world, conceptualisations and realisations of religion are changing dramatically (Section 2.2). In some instances, religious beliefs are blended with other spiritual beliefs and practices such as those indigenous practices referred to by Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016). For others, the influence of religion on their lives is diminished or even abandoned, leading Ganiel (2016) to name the existence of 'Post-Catholic Ireland' (Ganiel 2016, p.1). While adherence to organised religion has declined, it is still a significant facet of culture and society. Ganiel (2016;2019) encapsulates this by expounding extra-institutional religion, a concept contextualised in Ireland. It describes how some religiously committed individuals practice outside or in addition to institutional organised religion. This phenomenon is built upon the concepts of 'believing withoutbelonging' (Davie 1994) which describes individuals who adhere to a belief in God and other Christian tenets yet engage minimally or not at all in church-related endeavours. Ganiel (2019) is also inspired by Day (2011) and her adjustment of this concept to 'believing *in* belonging' (Day 2011, p.44). This

author argues that within religious institutions, people find meaning and belonging in their relationships with others, challenging the previously prevailing notion of individualisation within the sociology of religion. Day (2010) also refers to performative religion which Ganiel (2019) builds upon. This involves assuming a particular role in a given social situation where individuals will 'actively claim and shape beliefs to produce socially specific identities' (Day 2010, p.18). The Christian influence on conceptualisations of spirituality is so profound that it is revealed in the etymological examination of the word, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Considering the weighted position of Christian religions in Ireland, the following section explores spirituality through the lens of Christianity.

3.2.2 Spirituality in the Christian Tradition

As with the concept of spirituality in general, the literature presents multiple, diverse and occasionally conflicting understandings of Christian spirituality, many of which contribute to the debate surrounding the definitions of spirituality in relation to religion. Ongoing contestation regarding the need to distinguish between what is spiritual and what is not is mirrored within the realms of Christian scholarship. Scholarly research explores what can be identified within Christianity as explicitly spiritual, 'as distinct from ethics or doctrine or institutional structures' (Holder 2005, p.3). A seismic shift in cultural priority, moving away from organised religion, means that spirituality now finds itself as an academic discipline in its own right. However, this is a contested notion and a scholarly argument exists suggesting that spirituality outside of religion is futile (Hand 2003; Wright 2004; Gearon 2006; Marples 2006; Sheldrake 2007). This aligns with Elmer Thiessen's thesis that spirituality should be contextualised solely within religion aligning closely with the Augustinian view that 'the heart is restless until it rests in God' (Neiman 1999, p.217). While the parameters of this study do not allow for an exclusive focus on the literature surrounding Christian spirituality, Sheldrake's (2007) identification of key scriptural markers is helpful in constructing an understanding of Christian spirituality. An abridged summary of this author's work highlights the centrality of discipleship in Christian spirituality, which involves holistically leading a Christian life, guided by the ministry of Jesus. For Sheldrake, Christian spirituality involves more than individual practices and is focused on attending to community, tradition and social justice in order to live a truly Christian life. Understood in this way, it is possible to see the links between

broad understandings of spirituality as a journey presented earlier in this chapter (Section 3.1.3) and the conceptualisation of Christian spirituality articulated in this work. According to Sheldrake (2007), scholars of Christian Spirituality sometimes focus on it as their primary discipline, while others move back and forth between it and other 'home base' (Sheldrake 2007, p.3) disciplines such as biblical studies, theology or sociology. For Holder (2005) Christian spirituality is 'the lived experience of Christian faith and discipleship' (Holder 2005, p.5). Although this author is confident that his conceptualisation of Christian spirituality is sufficient, he qualifies his understanding by referring to it as a 'working definition' (Holder 2005, p.5). This suggests a lack of certainty surrounding the conceptualisation despite his insistence that the delineation had 'done its job' (Holder 2005, p.5). Kourie (2009) also cites the lived experience of Christian faith as the basis of Christian spirituality and argues against former self-denial, anti-materialistic understandings of spirituality which previously dominated understandings of spirituality from a Christian perspective. Kourie (2009) welcomes contemporary understandings of Christian spirituality which acknowledge the human person in their totality, 'without bifurcation between sacred and secular' (Kourie 2009, p.154). Spirituality as a custodian of dogma and doctrine is therefore dramatically reduced in this more holistic understanding of spirituality, 'freed from deterministic categories' (Kourie 2009, p.158).

There is a sense in the literature that it 'is difficult to predict how the Christian spiritual tradition will flourish in the new climate of spiritual pluralism' (Sheldrake 2007, p.204). Parsons (2018) concludes that there is no past linear progression upon which the future of spirituality could be predicted. Within the context of education in Ireland, as discussed in Section 2.3.2, the child's access to spiritual development is often considered alongside their access to RE. Groome (2021) notes that the spirituality of the Christian tradition is often secondary to knowledge and dogmatic teaching. This is perceived as problematic by Sheldrake (2007) who concludes that in order for Christian churches to survive the turn away from organised religion, they must learn how to 'unlock its treasures and to focus more on teaching spiritual wisdom' (Sheldrake 2007, p.206). Decades earlier in 1942, Simone Weil published an essay entitled 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God'. The depth and intensity of Weil's spirituality have resulted in her being referred to as a mystic (Sheldrake 2007). For Weil (1942), education is a

spiritual exercise. Her conceptualisation of studying is prayerful, it is a communing of the human and the divine and goes entirely against a utilitarian view of education as described by Haslam *et al.* (2012). Using the spiritual quality of attention is key to Weil's (1942) educational philosophy as 'attention is the key to both prayer to and to our ability to be present to and available to our suffering neighbour'.

When considering Christian spiritual development in Ireland, Keating (2017) found that using meditation in classrooms can nurture the child's ability to access spiritual wisdom, fostering presence, attention, self-awareness and innate spirituality. Meditation is a core concept in Keating's research which dates back to the 2nd century in the Christian tradition (Gracie and Wilkinson 2022). The spiritual grounding of the Catholic Church, 'bequeathed by its Jewish roots, from Jesus of Nazareth, and then from across its two thousand years of engaged faith tradition' (Groome 2021, p.xii) provides a foundation for education which is 'life-giving' (Groome 2021, p.xii). It acknowledges the dignity, integrity and rights of the human person and is committed to the common good. While uncertainty and even fear permeate the outlook of both student and practising teachers regarding religion, faith and spirituality, this foundation, upheld by universal values, is accessible to any student, parent, educator or stakeholder concerned with the common good (Groome 2021; Lydon and Glackin 2024).

The concept of spiritual capital (Grace 2002) offers a valuable framework for understanding the intersection of Christian spirituality, education, and social formation. Resembling Inglis' (2014) application of Bourdieusian concepts, Grace (2002) applies Bourdieu's (1997) notion of cultural capital to spirituality, defining spiritual capital as the 'resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition' (Grace 2002, p.236). Within Catholic education, this capital has historically shaped the spiritual, moral, and social formation of students, cultivating an ethic of the 'Good Samaritan' through acts of mercy and charity. This aligns with Grace's (2002) assertion that the love of God and love of neighbour are inextricably linked within Christian spirituality. However, as neoliberal ideology increasingly influences educational policy and practice, there is growing concern about the commodification of education and the erosion of its spiritual and moral foundations (Grace, 2002). O'Sullivan (2012) extends this argument, highlighting spiritual capital as a societal resource for 'authentic social change deriving from its spiritual and religious resources' (O' Sullivan 2012, p.45), while Lydon and

Glackin (2024) emphasise the need to consider the spiritual capital not just of school leaders, but also of teachers, parents, and students. This broader perspective underscores the collective role of faith communities in sustaining Christian spirituality within education, particularly in contexts where formal religious structures are in decline.

At the heart of Christian spirituality is the belief in a Trinitarian God and a desire to follow and embody the teachings of Jesus (Sheldrake 2007; Villegas 2018). This spiritual awareness provides meaning and purpose, shaping both personal identity and one's response to suffering and mortality. Prayer, as a central wellspring of Christian spirituality, has long been emphasised as essential to Christian spirituality and subsequently, spiritual education (Cardinal Hume 1997). However, in a rapidly evolving religious landscape, Villegas (2018) argues that new narratives are needed to engage contemporary Christian seekers, advocating for theological reflection as a means of deepening academic engagement with Christian spirituality. Drawing on Karl Rahner and Pope Francis, Villegas (2018) suggests that questions such as 'how do persons formulate their quests for growth and greater wholeness?' should be central to this discourse. Moreover, the study of Christian spirituality need not be insular; Villegas (2018) proposes an openness to wisdom from the global marketplace, which resonates with the broader trend of self-developed spiritual beliefs (Mercadante 2014). In this sense, Christian spirituality remains dynamic, responding to both historical theological traditions and contemporary spiritual pluralism.

3.2.3 Spiritual, but not religious.

An example of such pluralism present in the literature is the concept of 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR) (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p.1), a category that continues to rise in the Western world. Despite its ancient Greek and early Christian origins, SBNR's current location is largely Western (Parsons 2018). Fraser-Pearce (2022) believes that a lack of certainty or a clear definition of spirituality means that this self-defining movement proves useful for those identifying with the dual declaration that 'I am this, but I am not that' (James 1902, p.113). Indeed, the psychologist William James' research (1902) is often credited with the separation of spirituality from religion, where spirituality is perceived as experience and religion is interpretation (Parsons 2018). However, other scholars assert that such an irrefutable distinction between religion and spirituality is a vast oversimplification of the diverse belief systems of the 21st century (Johnson and Ord

2012; Berger 2014; Mercadante 2014) and the fluidity of beliefs present within the Irish education system (Harmon 2018; Faas *et al.* 2019; Kieran 2019; Kieran and Mullally 2020; 2021).

The number of people identifying as SBNR in Western cultures continues to rise alongside those who are resolutely opposed to religion (Mercadante 2014; Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016; Parsons 2018; 2022; Villegas 2018; Fraser-Pearce 2022). Parsons (2018) questions the justification of the term SBNR and Ní Riain (2023) asserts that identifying as SBNR is now for many, a trite popular unexamined expression and stereotypical concept. It could be considered conventional wisdom, a term popularised by Galbraith (1958), to highlight the potentially detrimental impact of widely accepted concepts that lack critical examination. According to Parsons (2018), one's identification as SBNR is 'befitting [of] spiritual shoppers in a consumer age' (Parsons 2018, p.80). Indeed, a desire for meaning, purpose and connection outside of traditional sources has opened a commodifiable void in the market. This resulted in a 'glut of spiritual books and enterprises in the marketplace (and)... the success of a good deal of possible bogus spirituality' (Neiman 1999, p.217). As a consequence, the result of such commodification has the potential to undermine critical thinking and academic rigour in the field of spiritual studies.

Although spirituality has experienced separation from religion in academic and societal discourse, a significant body of research exists which argues that a distinct separation of these complex social phenomena is neither appropriate nor possible (Hand 2003; Wright 2004; Sheldrake 2007; Gearon 2014; Ubani and Murtonen 2018). These writers argue that a conceptualisation of spirituality is firmly grounded in religion. According to Hand (2003), to say that something is spiritual also means that it is religious, as it is indicative of derivation from religious teaching. However, Parson (2018) believes that even those who identify as SBNR do not indicate a clear distinction between the two phenomena. The lines are often blurred, enabling those in search of 'the more' (James 1902) to self-select what feels comfortable and appropriate for them, whether it is grounded secularly, religiously or somewhere between. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, for example, Inglis (2014) identifies four types of contemporary Catholics including a creative type who 'mix and match their Catholic beliefs with a variety of spiritual sources' (Ganiel 2019, p. 478). For Inglis the four types of Catholics consist of 'Orthodox, Cultural, Creative, and Disenchanted' (Inglis 2014, p.126). While this adds to more expansive and nuanced

understandings of Catholicism, as well as the elasticity and inclusivity of spirituality, it also adds to its complex and contested nature and highlights the changes in the ways in which spirituality is understood.

3.2.4 New Age Spirituality

In the literature, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) and Mercandante (2014) examine the cultural movement away from the predominately Christian religion, towards what is often termed 'New Age' spirituality. Where organised religion previously dominated opinions on what constituted a meaningful, purposeful life, alternative viewpoints on what constitutes 'a good life' are provided by Heelas and Woodhead (2005) who explore the 'massive subjective turn of modern culture' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p.2). They suggest that prior to this seismic shift, Western life was dominated by external duties, obligations and roles influenced extensively by religion. Mercandante (2014) highlights a concern that the sense of duty held by many as a result of religious affiliation could have a markedly negative impact on many religiously orientated social services ranging from the provision of university education to soup kitchens and shelters. Holder (2005) notes that the initial shift between theology and spirituality occurred in the twelfth century and interestingly describes it as a split between 'the reasoned expression of faith and its lived experience' (Holder 2005, p.4). Again, the links between spirituality and the lived experience of the human person discussed in the previous section are notable.

The twentieth century saw radical changes in culture, politics, society and religion which had a marked impact on conceptualisations of spirituality (Johnson and Ord 2012; Berger 2014; Mercandante 2014; Faas *et al.* 2019; Hyde 2020; Panko 2024). Writing from a Christian perspective, Sheldrake (2007) highlights the most notable elements of these changes which shaped the transformation in understandings of spirituality. While the vast majority of the changes pertain to the decline of institutional religion, which Sheldrake (2007) interestingly refers to as the 'victim' (Sheldrake 2007, p.174) of the fall of traditional hierarchical establishment, the global reach of Christianity is also cited as being transformational. As a result of colonial expansion, missionary endeavours and demographic changes the 'centre of gravity shifted slowly but surely to the Southern hemisphere' (Sheldrake 2007, p.174). Alongside this movement, postmodernism had a revolutionary influence on contemporary New Age spirituality, due to the societal fragmentation that occurred and the human person's subsequent search for meaning and

purpose separated from a religious or political agenda (Kourie 2009). Interestingly, this quest and spiritual searching is articulated succinctly by a Vatican report which describes New Age spirituality as ‘a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts and for making sense of a confusing and alienating world’ (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 2003, Section 1.5). This is an aspect of spirituality which is widely debated in the literature and discussed throughout this chapter.

New age spirituality is often critiqued as being selfish, individualistic, and even narcissistic when it is excessively concerned with the self rather than the collective (Thatcher 1999; Hay 2000; Eaude 2009; Judy 2011; Hyland 2015;2017). Forbes (2019) outlines his concerns regarding mindfulness practices in particular which he believes have been completely disconnected from their Buddhist foundations. He attributes this clinical severing from its Buddhist foundations (Forbes 2019) to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn is widely considered to have simplified and secularised Buddhist mindfulness meditation for the purposes of stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Landau and Jones 2021; Carroll 2023; Kelly 2023). Ruth (2023) concurs with Forbes’ (2019) argument that some Eastern spiritual practices have been separated from the wisdom, ethics and social justice which traditionally form their foundation. A concern is also presented in the literature that such approaches ‘can trivialize and that emphasis on an individual’s inner being can lead to ignoring outer conditions’ (Ruth 2023, p.171). The medicalisation and privatisation of such spiritual practices is termed ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser and Loy 2013). The process involved taking Buddhist wisdom of the dharma, secularising it and then ‘Kabat-Zinn threw most of it out’ (Forbes 2019, p.15). The production of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn 2011) has resulted in a reduction of mindfulness to an overly simplistic self-help tool, utilised without adequate respect in order to further the market needs of ‘corporate objectives, employee pacification and commercial profit’ (Peiris *et al.* p.49). Some spiritual practices have been reduced to consumer products, detached from their original ethical context in a process termed the ‘McDonaldization’ (Hyland 2017, p.1) of spirituality. Scholars argue that such commercialisation of spirituality undermines the transformative potential of mindfulness-based practices in order to support the stress levels of individuals so that they can improve their ‘personal brand and become a more marketable economy’ (Forbes 2019, p.16). Scholars contend that such marketisation allows for the reinforcement of

harmful neoliberal values (Purser and Loy 2013; Hyland 2015; 2017; Forbes 2019; Ruth 2023; Peiris *et al.* 2024).

Purser and Loy (2013) criticise the popularisation of mindfulness, referring to it as 'McMindfulness'—a simplistic solution to complex societal problems. Similarly, Hyland argues that spiritual practices are becoming 'McDonaldized; (Hyland 2017, p.10), losing depth and meaning. In contrast, Kabat-Zinn (2013) defends mindfulness as a genuine 'way of being' that can enhance health and wellbeing while also cultivating compassion and altruism. Others state that it is possible to argue that it is simply subjective, rather than individualistic (Schneiders 2003). The subjective life is lived in accordance with one's own inner experience, states of being and consciousness and is often guided by one's own thoughts, feelings, emotions and desires (Frisk and Nynäs 2022). The significant, governing source for such a life stems from the subjectivities of each individual. This contrasts greatly with Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) suggestion that conformity to external sources may be valued in a mode of life which they refer to as 'life-as' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005, p.4). These scholars have bracketed religion and spirituality into two distinctive categories; life-as and the subjective life, the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary, the religious and the spiritual. Peiris *et al.* (2024) also present a conceptual approach to spirituality which involves adopting self-inquiry and a high level of presence in order to be spiritually well, which the authors argue should be of the highest priority for the contemporary human person. As a result of the conflicted and conflated conceptualisations of spirituality and religion in societal discourse, the role of spirituality within the sphere of academia has been altered. Naturally, this is of importance due to the transferred influence these alterations have on education at both policy and possibly practice levels.

3.2.5 Spirituality: A Distinctive Discipline Emerges

The scholarly literature in this field indicates that conceptualisations of spirituality have been altered significantly resulting in the academic study of spirituality becoming increasingly common. This is evidenced by an increase in scientific studies pertaining to spirituality, multiple dedicated journals such as the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* and the *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, as well as university courses (Sheldrake 2007; Kourie 2009; Rossiter 2014). No longer confined by the parameters of organised religion, as an academic discipline, spirituality can be described

as an 'existential phenomenon' (Schneiders 2003, p.15). It is distinguishable from both theology and the study of religion, as the language of spirituality replaces that of religion in some instances (Lartey 2002). While the study of spirituality continues to find itself within the contexts of theology and religion, its interdisciplinary nature is continually expanding. According to Waaijman (2007), spirituality within the academy is now observable through a variety of paradigmatic lenses including philosophy, feminist studies, ecology, anthropology, peace and liberation theory among others. This is linked to growing interest in lived spirituality through a contemporary lens, mirrored by scholarly interest in this 'new (yet ancient) discipline' (Kourie 2009, p.149).

It is agreed in the literature that while spirituality has become a distinctive discipline, it has an undoubtedly interdisciplinary nature (Holder 2005; Waaijman 2007; Kourie 2009). Literature pertaining to spirituality has increased dramatically in the last number of decades (Johnson 2005). However, the location of spirituality within the academy is not without contestation (Waaijman 2006;2007; Kourie 2009). While examples of research pertaining to primordial and indigenous spirituality are now in existence, a comprehensive search yielded little regarding the study of spirituality outside of Christian parameters prior to the 20th century. The study of spirituality as an academic discipline appears to stem from a separation from religious and philosophical concepts. from the thirteenth century onward as the beginning of the separation of theology, philosophy and spirituality. However, Waaijman (2007) holds that even until the early twentieth century, spirituality as an academic discipline was studied almost solely in the world of French Catholic academia. Kourie (2009) credits the scepticism of postmodernity with the increased interest in spirituality from an academic perspective and the separation of spirituality from previously more 'esteemed' (Kourie 2009, p.149) disciplines. Despite the passage of centuries, the location of spirituality in academia is still contested. The following sections conclude the review of literature pertaining to the relationship between spirituality and religion by summarising it as a contested relationship, with a conceptual overlap and indefinite terms.

3.2.5.1 A Contested Relationship

A component of the widely debated attempts to define and describe spirituality is the contested relationship between spirituality and religion which is widely debated in the literature and is described as nebulous and elusive (Groome 1998; Larty 2002; Hyde

2008; Koenig 2008; Michaelson *et al.* 2021). The relationship between or separation of religion and spirituality is part of an intricate debate which requires a considerably cautious approach due to the complexity of both phenomena and the blurred lines of their conceptualisations. Elfreich (2019) offers interesting insights into the differences between spirituality and religion stating that both concepts have their own ‘nuanced historical etymology’ (Elfreich 2019 p.34). Conceptualisations of spirituality in the literature range from entirely secular to absolutely religious; a deeply debated spectrum with a multitude of complex understandings between each endpoint. Greenfield (2018) finds that while spirituality is not about religion, it does relate to belief in a higher power or God. Ng and Fisher (2022) argue that this element of spirituality i.e. a relationship with God, is vital for holistic development. Indeed, an argument exists that a relationship with God is the most vital element of this tetradic conceptualisation of spirituality (consisting of the self, others, the environment and a higher power) discussed in the previous section. Increasingly resolute positions state clearly that contemporary understandings of spirituality outside of religion are fruitless and futile (Wright 2004; Sheldrake 2007; Gibson 2014). This appears internally contradictory as Sheldrake’s (2007) own delineation of spirituality pertaining to the human spirit which many scholars believe to be innate as it precedes the human person’s introduction to organised religion (Section 3.3.1). Such perplexing literature contributes to the confusion and contestation which surrounds spirituality in the 21st century, particularly when considering its impugned relationship with religion and its location within the sphere of education.

3.2.5.2 Inequitable Terms

Indeed, a body of literature stresses that spirituality and religion are not interchangeable terms (Adams *et al.* 2016; Sagburg 2017; Jirásek 2023) and ‘the divergence is less than flattering to the religious institutions’ (Hay and Nye 2006, p.19). This is due to spirituality’s association with universal human experiences such as love, meaning-making, purpose, contemplation and wonder. Contemporary understandings of religion, particularly within Western societal discourse have been harmed by clerical scandals, authoritative church teachings and uncertainty regarding church doctrine (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019; Kieran and Mullally 2021). Elfreich (2019) argues against an understanding of spirituality that presupposes ‘ontological religious assumptions’ (Elfreich 2019, p.35). Instead, spirituality is presented as a universal constitutive element of the human person, concerned with recognising one’s self history and does not require grounding in a

particular religion. Elfreich (2019) stresses that traditional understandings of faith that assume alignment to an institution is not what he understands a spiritual life to be. Instead, in alignment with the work of hooks (2000), Elfreich (2019) advocates for ‘an understanding that a spiritual life is a conscious practice and unites the way we think and act’ (Elfreich 2019, p.32).

3.2.5 3 A Conceptual Overlap

While the conflation of spirituality and religion is problematic from a human rights perspective since many humans are non-religious, a conceptual overlap is evident in the literature (Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Bryant *et al.* 2020) and many scholarly works point to the possibility that spirituality can be religiously tethered or untethered (Section 1.2.1). Schneiders (2005) supports this belief that spirituality can be religious or not since the boundaries between these phenomena have been dissolved resulting in the ‘spirituality revolution’ (Tacey 2003, p.14). While spirituality is universal and ‘refers to the deepest dimension of the human person’ (Kourie 2009, p.152), de Souza (2016) identifies what she calls ‘obvious’ (de Souza 2006, p.126) links to spirituality but notes also that it is identifiable as separate from religion as it is an essential element of the human person. Jirásek (2023) concurs with this as does the Dalai Lama who sees that spirituality is ‘concerned with those qualities of the human spirit’ that can be developed ‘without recourse to any religious or metaphysical belief system’ (Xiv Dalai Lama 2000, p.23). According to Noddings (1992), spirituality is an awareness of the spirit in life but religion is the way in which spirituality is recognised in alignment with institutional beliefs. While this section has revealed the considerable contestation surrounding spirituality, its definition and its relationship to religion, a number of common conceptualisations are discernible from the literature reviewed and are presented in the following section.

3.3 Common Conceptualisations of Spirituality

3.3.1 Spirituality is Innate

It is widely agreed in the literature that spirituality is innate in the human person. Spirituality is widely presented as ontological in that it refers to the lived experience of the human person, which is often characterised and inspired by an incomprehensible drive or life force (James 1902; Belousa 2008; Miller 2015; Plater 2017; Chapman and Miller 2022). It has been described as a deep, vital energetic power that gives meaning

and direction to one's life (Holder 2005; Miller 2007). Montessori (1949) believes that this exists at birth or before it. Inspired by Indian philosophy and the conceptualisation that the child has a spiritual embryo she suggests that 'the whole [person] develops within a kind of spiritual halo' (Montessori 1939, p.61). Indeed, the rest of human development depends on this embryo coming to fruition (Belousa 2008; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). Even though young children may not be able to articulate the spiritual moments that they experience, Hart (2006) argues that their presence alone is spiritual. This supports the belief of seminal and contemporary scholars who argue that spirituality exists prior to immersion in culture, religion or birthplace (James 1902; Dewey 1934; Montessori 1936). These phenomena may serve to mould and influence that which is already inherent in the human person, but they do not give rise to it. This suggests that spirituality has the potential to develop without organised religion, a perception strongly opposed by varying scholars, as discussed in Section 3.2.5.1. Defining spirituality as that which is innate in the human person for the purpose of education will be explored and addressed in a more substantial manner in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

3.3.2 A Quest for Meaning and Purpose

Spirituality is widely perceived in the literature as a driving force or innate desire for meaning and purpose; a search for substance that enables the human person to engage with the totality of the human experience and enter into the fullness of their potential (Tacey 2003; Crawford *et al.* 2006; Johnson 2005; O'Murchu 2012; Hartwick and Kang 2013; Rossiter 2013; Mata 2014; Sagburg 2017; Haugen 2018; Groome 2021; Wartenweiler 2021; Lee 2022). While religiously tethered approaches to spirituality relate to this understanding of spirituality, the search for meaning and purpose is a universal experience and does not require grounding in religious tradition (Grajczonek 2010). Spiritual activities such as reflecting on existential questions have the potential to enhance a sense of self and the ability to form meaningful relationships (Section 3.3.3.1). Related to this is the conceptualisation of spirituality which equates it, in part, to the contribution of the human person to the greater good, and to the wellbeing of the self and others, as outlined by Benson *et al.* (2012) and Wartenweiler (2021). This has considerable relevance for the value of attending to the spiritual domain in primary education. Spiritual development and fostering a sense of meaning and purpose in the human person has the potential to contribute to the alleviation of social justice issues and to encourage care for the environment. de Souza (2016) attributes modern societal issues

which impact the wellbeing of the human person to a lack of connection and the dismissal of innate spirituality. In literature pertaining to the spirituality of the child (Keltner and Haidt 2003; May and Ratcliff 2004; Schneider 2009; Bryant *et al.* 2020; Hyde 2020), spirituality is also characterised by experiences of awe and wonder. Hay and Nye (2006) refer to this dimension of spirituality as mystery sensing. Other understandings of spirituality perceive it as something sacred (Tomlinson *et al.* 2016), which has the capacity to take the human person beyond the self (Rogers and Hill 2002; Hart 2003; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Mata 2015; Schein 2017; Ungvarsky 2020; Wartenweiler 2021).

3.3.3 Spirituality, Relationships and Connections

A vast body of literature exists which understands spirituality in terms of relationships, connections and a sense of belonging (Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Fraser 2007; Gibson 2014; Michealson *et al.* 2016; Pandaya 2016; Gillespie 2019; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). A desire for connectedness is inherent in the human person (Eaude 2009), however literature suggests that it is the denial of what is innate, what Hay and Nye (2006) refer to as relational consciousness, that has contributed to contemporary issues such as the destruction of the planet, the collapse of human communities, diverse societal problems and endless commodification (Hay 2007; de Souza 2016; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Ní Riain 2023). Relational consciousness is described as nuanced sensitivity for connections and relationships, rather than an intellectual awareness. This is highly relevant in the sphere of primary education as it supports the development of authentic connections and trust which underpins the work of the teacher, their personal and professional sense of purpose and the holistic development of the child (Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Nye 2013; Pandaya 2016; Greenfield 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019).

With regard to the relationships between the educator and the child, Johnson (2010) states that the role of the educator should be grounded in love while Gillespie (2019) finds that meaningful connections within school communities are entered into a point where spirituality is interwoven with professionalism. Here, spirituality is part of a process which should facilitate the development of societal members who wish to engage in social action and change. It is the application of a spiritual lens to this process, according to Gillespie (2019), that enables educators and students to enter into positive relationships, establish meaningful connections and make meaning from moments of profundity.

Since 2003, de Souza (2006; 2008; 2009; 2012; 2014; 2016a; 2016b, 2021) has investigated and advocated for embracing spirituality in education in order to nurture the relational domain of the lives of children and young people while promoting their encounters of connectedness. When researching the spirituality of teachers, Kennedy and Duncan (2006) found that the majority of participants understood spirituality in terms of relationships first and foremost. Fisher (2010;2011;2013) has based much of his research on the seminal definition of spiritual wellbeing which was provided at the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA) in 1975. NICA outlines that spiritual wellbeing comes from a sense of connectedness to the self, to others, to the environment and to a Divine other, called God (Hay and Nye 2006) or a transcendent other (Fisher 2011). Ng and Fisher (2022) note that this foundational understanding has held a firm position in the literature across the decades. The following sections of this chapter will explore this life affirming relationship with God, the self, others and the environment as it is referred to repeatedly in the literature and forms the basis of many attempts to define or describe spirituality. Zhang (2014) specifically focuses on a religiously untethered conceptualisation of spirituality. Instead, a triadic understanding is adopted which focuses on a relationship to the self, others and the wider world. However, Zhang's (2014) failure to acknowledge that for many people, spirituality is expressed in a religious manner and does involve or even depend on a relationship with God or a higher power called by other names may be problematic. Exclusively religiously tethered and untethered understandings of spirituality are problematic as they do not take adequately into consideration the lived experiences of diverse people who may or may not be religious. Perhaps an inclusive approach which includes both would be more beneficial than an either/or approach.

3.3.3.1 A Relationship with the Self

The ontological nature of spirituality discussed at the beginning of this chapter refers to its manifestation in the lived experience of the human person. A relationship with the self is an important facet of spirituality and contributes to a positive sense of wellbeing required for reaching the fullness of human potential (Hay and Nye 2006; Fisher 2011). As discussed in Section 2.3.2, the prominence of wellbeing in education policy documents continues to develop within Irish educational discourse and spiritual development is repeatedly identified in the literature as a vehicle for supporting self-awareness, self-

identity, self-worth and self-confidence. The nourishment of a relationship with the self has the potential to give rise to profound moments of transformation which result in humility, integrity, inner peace, present moment awareness and the capacity for interpersonal and transcendental relationships (Peiris *et al.* 2024). However, the relationship with the self is also a contested aspect of spirituality, particularly when it is considered in its New Age sense. As discussed previously in this chapter, the scholarly literature offers a critique of an individualistic, overt fixation with the self, at the expense of the collective (Roof 1999; Hay 2000; Heelas and Woodhead 2006; Eaude 2009; Frisk and Nynäs 2012; Hyland 2017; Forbes 2019).

3.3.3.2 A Relationship with Others

The need for connection and relationships is universal to the human condition (Ní Riain 2023). Within the various tetradic models of spirituality present in the literature reviewed (NICA 1975; Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Fisher 2011; Worthington 2012; de Souza 2016; Michaelson *et al.* 2019; Lee 2022; Jirásek 2023), a relationship with others is central to these conceptualisations of spirituality. When considering the spirituality of the educator within the context of a relationship with others, it is the relationship between educator and child that is addressed most succinctly in the literature. According to Murphy *et al.* (2020), the most important task of the educator is to develop a relationship with their students and to attempt to teach them, only after a relationship has been established. It is argued that ‘the spiritual life of the child emerges in relationship with caring adult’ (Greenfield 2018, p.279). Connecting with students in terms of their life world and their experiences is deemed essential by Liu (2015), who states that this positively influences both student engagement and motivation. In order to attend to spiritual development, Greenfield (2018) argues the need for compassionate educators, who care and have empathy for children. Others suggest that such traits enable quality relationships to flourish, which may safeguard the child against a suppression of relational sensitivity (Hay and Nye 2006). Findings from Mata-McMahon *et al.* (2019) suggest that teachers draw from their spirituality as a resource for entering into these relationships as an element of their professional practice. The application of Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006) enabled Mata-McMahon *et al.* (2019) to call for teachers to respond to children and enter into relationships with them that are based on love, care, safety, respect and compassion. However, concepts such as

Liquid Professionalism (Revell and Bryan 2018) present the teacher as a performer in a competitive market (Ball 2003; d'Agnese 2024). This is discussed further in Section 4.5. In the contemporary literature, the understanding of a teacher as a vehicle for curriculum delivery also exists alongside other increasingly narrow conceptualisations of the role of the teacher (Gibson 2014; Shower 2017). It is interesting to consider the impact that this has on the value of the relationship between the teacher and the child. The relationship between teacher and child has inherent value and it is formalised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) who identify the teacher as the professional who is best placed to attend to the wellbeing of the child. This is a concept which literature suggests can be attended to through spiritual awareness and development, as discussed in the following section.

A caring relationship between students and teachers is promoted by Nell Noddings who describes caring as a state in which 'the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the other' (Noddings 1992, p.16). Noddings' ethic of care compares this to the relationship between a good mother and her child which is reminiscent of Buber's (1958) 'I-Thou' relationships. Such a relationship involves an authentic exchange between two reciprocal parties based on empathy, presence and attention. It is the extension of the human person into the space between the self and others enables the individual biological system to become a person. Nieman (2000) and Hederman (2012), in realising the significance of this theory, believe that reconceptualising education in a way that is cognisant of the significance of these relationships has profound spiritual ramifications. Examinations of these relationships immediately brings the relationship between the teacher and child to mind. In fact, this is the manner in which Bone (2005;2008) understands relationships between educators and children. The treatment of children with care, love and respect is how spirituality is demonstrated within educational settings and is a significant element of the spirituality of the child (O' Higgins-Norman and Renahan 2014; Harris 2019). Along with many other scholars cited in this section, Noddings' (1992) concern for care in relationships does not refer solely to relationships with others; an actively caring relationship with the self, the Earth, the environment, as well as artefacts and ideas that are also central to her understanding.

3.3.3.3 A Relationship with Nature and the Environment

A relationship to the environment is also perceived to be an essential part of spirituality for many scholars. Kourie (2009) describes spirituality as 'telluric' (Kourie 2009, p.170), signifying by this term that it is of the Earth. While Kourie (2009) appears to describe spirituality in this way in order to highlight its long-established nature and importance, it also refers to the physical Earth. Stanely (2020) suggests that through synonymising rituals and worships with churches and temples and 'enclosing our spiritual practices' (Stanley 2020, p.18), a separation from nature has occurred. Part of the holistic nature of contemporary spirituality means that it encompasses a concern for the environment; for nature; for preservation of the planet (Fraser 2007; Kourie 2009; Bell *et al.* 2021; Lee 2022). Many scholars agree that there is a compelling need for spirituality which is radically concerned with the finite nature of the planet and its resources (Sheldrake 2007; Worthington 2012; Lee 2022). The urgency of the situation is tangible in the literature and Sheldrake (2007) believes that approaches such as ecofeminist spirituality will feature strongly in spiritual discourse, particularly when the mutual dependency of the human person on the planet is considered. Ecofeminist spirituality is one approach which embodies this, combining ecological and feminist concerns with a spiritually driven care for the earth (Bell *et al.* 2021).

From an Irish perspective, Flanagan and O Sullivan (2016) highlight the unique spiritual identity of the island as intrinsically linked with the current ecological concern. The authors postulate that this has occurred due to the fusion of multiple spiritual and cultural traditions. The influence of Celtic spirituality on early Christianity is noted by Davies (1999) who highlights the orientation towards nature and role of the landscape of the spiritual belief of Celtic Christians. This differed from other expressions of Christianity in the Latin world which were influenced ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. According to Davies (1999) a desire to experience a connection to the land, respect for nature and a yearning for a sense of place are a result of this fusion. Ní Riain (2023) concurs with the Duncan's (2015) thesis that in the modern world, there is a problematic disconnect with the natural world and this fracture has a detrimental impact on the environment. 'We no longer have any direct contact with the environment that sustains us... The nexus of interdependence has disappeared from our lives' (Ní Riain 2023, p.2).

Within the context of education, de Souza (2016) believes that preparing children and young people for living in world that they are growing into, through the development of a sustainable education systems, requires addressing the spiritual dimension of their lives. Ignoring this domain is highly problematic. Harmon (2022) highlights the capacity for the environment to be employed as an 'avenue for people to explore their spirituality either from a secular or religious position' (Harmon 2022, p.244) and in alignment with this, Parsons (2018) believes that any future of spirituality outside of religion is likely to be grounded in a concern for the environment and the battle against global warming. Halík (2024) postulates that Pope Francis invoked Franciscan spirituality which is concerned with creation. Through the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) addressed to the whole world, Francis attempted 'to baptise this contemporary sensitivity vis-à-vis nature' (Pope Francis 2015, p.42). This encyclical contributed to a reorientation into the inner life of the human person which is essential to the survival of the planet as it is only this which can truly counter the annihilating behaviours and activities of the human species that have led to the present destruction being witnessed (Johnson 2011). In order to address such destruction, Harmon (2022) believes that education must become a location to enhance the relationship between the environment and the human person in a manner that honours the natural world and the person. A research participant in Bell *et al.* (2021) succinctly captures the potential for a relationship to nature and the environment to support spiritual development.

'I seek spirituality in nature, in the world around me, so I think that very lens helps to create a reverence to think that you are part of something and not necessarily dominant over it' (Bell *et al.* 2021, p.53).

The literature also presents a cogent claim that having a sense of place and belonging are essential for spiritual development as they facilitate the cultivation of a sense of meaning and purpose (Sobel 2004; Smith and Sobel 2014; de Souza 2016; Lee 2022). Without a connection to the environment, Duncan (2015) fears that the current spiritual malaise present in society will continue to the detriment of the environment. The educator's role in fostering the child's sense of place and belonging is essential as the opposite experience can lead to the individual becoming displaced, alienated and even harmful to the self and the world around them. Such lack of connection influences the sense of self and place in the person and has

contributed to the destruction of the planet (Hay 2007; de Souza 2016). While the connectivity of the world has dramatically increased in an infrastructural sense, the global polarisation of the 21st century has served only to contribute to disconnect and destruction (Duncan 2015). Researchers have suggested that returning to the spiritual self, or in the case of education, fostering the spiritual self, has the potential to advance concerns for the environment and social justice issues. Engagement with contemplative practices can also cultivate such attitudes (Sheldrake 2007; de Souza 2016; Razza *et al.* 2020). Within education, providing opportunities to experience connectedness with nature and the wider world can develop a sense of connectedness and stewardship that calls both the student and teacher to action (Fisher 2011; Duncan 2015; Haugen 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Bell *et al.* 2021; Lee 2022). de Souza (2016) acknowledges that while the experiences of connectedness for some may refer solely to the earthly human experience, for others, it moves beyond that into that which is transcendent, as discussed in the following section.

3.3.3.4 A Relationship with something More

The human person's capacity to engage in a relationship with a transcendent entity is the most contentious aspect of spirituality, particularly within the context of education. It is this distinction that differentiates between triadic (Zhang 2014) and tetradic models of spirituality (NICA 1975; Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Fisher 2011; de Souza 2016). The contention is particularly notable when a human rights lens is applied to spiritual development. For some people, spirituality is grounded solely in the human world. For others, it stretches far beyond this into the realm of 'the More' (James 1902), an ultimate reality, a source, higher being, or power called many names, including God or the Universe (Bone 2008). The need for a relationship to a higher power is declared to be 'the deepest form of connection of them all' (Ní Riain 2023, p.17). As a result of this need, Ng and Fisher (2022) declare connection to a higher power to be the most important facet of spirituality. According to O' Farrell (2016), children are 'quite capable of relating to a transcendent God' (O' Farrell 2016, p.132) and they are believed to have an innate 'child-God consciousness' (Hay and Nye 2006, p.115), an idea which is echoed in the work of Harmon (2018). Chapman *et al.* (2021) suggests that Buber's I-Thou theoretical

understanding is also relevant when considering this relationship to 'the More' (James 1902).

Simon Weil's understanding of the meaning and purpose of the human person is that the abandonment of the self is necessary in order to hand the self over to God and come into one's fullness. Sheldrake (2007) notes how this also involves a giving to others as well as to God and 'a corollary of this view of the self is a positive spirituality of sacrifice' (Sheldrake 2007 p.182). This was evidenced in Weil's lifelong expressions of solidarity with those less fortunate than herself. This spirituality of sacrifice links to the spiritual understandings of those who emphasise the necessity of contribution as expressed by Benson *et al.* (2012) and Wartenweiler (2021). While this relates closely to the relationship to others discussed in the previous section, Sheldrake (2007) attributes the underpinnings of Weil's spirituality to 'attentiveness to God and waiting in patience on God' (Sheldrake 2007, p.182). However, an in-depth look at Weil's dedication to social justice issues reveals that it was in others that she saw God. In contemporary Ireland, guided by their respective characteristic spirits, some schools engage with contemplative, religiously orientated practices such as those supported by Christian Meditation Ireland, to attend to the spiritual development of the child where religiously tethered as well as religiously untethered spiritual beliefs are welcomed and celebrated (Keating 2017). For other schools, this may not be the case.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed literature which defines spirituality in a variety of multifaceted, intricate and sometimes disputed ways. The literature reveals the relationship between spirituality and religion as a source of contention. Although definitions of spirituality are widely debated, there are numerous common elements present in the literature reviewed. The following chapter explores seminal and contemporary literature on spirituality in education with a focus on the school, the educator, the child and the curriculum.

Chapter 4: Spirituality and Education – Educator, Child and Curriculum

4.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature reviewed on spirituality in education. It begins with an exploration of the characteristic spirit due to its importance within the conceptual framework. Following this, the chapter reviews literature pertaining to the educator and the child, as well as the debated space for spirituality within the curriculum

4.1 The Characteristic Spirit

The characteristic spirit of a school, often referred to in literature as ethos, is an essential guiding principle for spiritual development in schools (Pearse 2019). For educators, schools are their places of work, and the ethos of a workplace is described as a ‘subtle group presence’ (O’Donohue 2022, p.120) indicating that it is the people there who create the ethos, not simply the declared characteristic spirit of the school. The Education Act (1998) delegates responsibility to the school for the promotion of the ‘moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents’ (The Education Act 1998, Section 9(d)). The Board of Management (BOM) is accountable to the patron, and all school functions should be carried out in a manner which upholds the characteristic spirit of the school, stemming from its ‘cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions’ (The Education Act 1998, Section 15(2)(b))the school. As discussed in the previous chapter, primary education in Ireland is overwhelmingly denominational as a result of the historically embedded position of religion in education (Kieran and Hession 2005; Lane 2013; Inglis 2014; Darmody and Smith 2018; Faas *et al.* 2019; Ring 2024). Despite the vast diversification of Irish society in recent decades and the western decline of religiosity, private faith schools account for the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Faas *et al.* 2019; Kieran and Mullally 2021).

The increasingly pluralistic population of classrooms is mirrored in ITE settings where student teachers, alongside their future students, can no longer be described as ‘Catholic, White and Gaelic’ (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013, p.477). Navigating the ethos of a school, the diverse belief systems of students and their personal and professional identities are sources of confusion, uncertainty and fear for educators, and will be discussed further in Section 4.2.2.4. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) highlight the fears of student teachers regarding school ethos such as concerns regarding parents’ beliefs,

inexperience with spiritual activities and lack of familiarity with the school. In this piece of research, student teachers were unfamiliar with the origins and role of Christian meditation and accredited this and other spiritual activities to Buddhist and other traditions. Participants of this study were not comfortable or confident with spiritual activities as they 'did not want to indoctrinate young children into something they themselves did not believe in' (Gracie and Wilkinson 2022, p.13). The literature illustrates that both teachers and student teachers are grappling with the complexity of the rapidly changing situation in post-Catholic Ireland (Ganiel 2019) and it is unsurprising that uncertainty and ambivalence taint their efforts to attend to the diverse needs of their students (Kieran and Mullally 2021; GRACE 2024). However, there is an obvious gap in the corpus of existing research relating to the position of practising teachers and their personal spirituality as well as their perceptions of spiritual development in schools of varying characteristic spirit in Ireland.

Groome (2021) believes that it is not just RE teachers who have the potential to impact the spiritual development of the student and contribute to the ethos of the school. Translating this into the Irish Primary context, the potential to engage with spirituality and the characteristic spirit of the school is not just during RE lessons. It has the potential to permeate school life in its entirety and integrate with all curricular areas. While Groome's study (2021) focuses on RC teachers, it is possible that all educators have the capacity to 'ask the kinds of questions and offer the kinds of resources that will nurture the spiritual life of students, engage their souls as well as minds, and foster their character development' (Groome 2021, p.215). It must be recognised that in the research literature, criticism permeates understandings of spirituality that synonymise it with religion and as a result, Ireland has experienced international criticism regarding its overwhelmingly denominational schools (UNCERD 2011). Lau (2010) heavily criticised faith-based preschools for completely conceptualising spiritual education in this way by arguing that it led to educational inequalities.

4.1.1 Human Rights, Spirituality and Education

The conflation of RE with spiritual development poses a range of complicated questions and some suggest that this conflation has resulted in the neglect of the spiritual domain in Western education (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003; O'Higgins-Norman and Renehan 2014; de Souza 2016). It is only recently within Irish educational discourse, and

educational discourse in general, that spirituality is being considered outside of religion. Due to the culturally and historically embedded nature of religion within Irish education (Darmody and Smyth 2018), this has become problematic, and Wright (2004) suggests that without religion, spirituality is rendered meaningless. In Kennedy and Duncan's (2006) qualitative examination of teachers' perspectives of spirituality in Catholic schools, the participants express an understanding of spirituality which has religious grounding. However, this does not limit their expressions of spirituality or their recognition of the children's spiritual expressions. The authors suggest it is integrated across the curriculum and should not be confined to 'tidy definitions' (Kennedy and Duncan 2006, p.286) or addressed solely by the RE curriculum. If spirituality is innate, as argued repeatedly by scholars, perhaps this natural orientation of the child towards that which is transcendental exists before the child's introduction to formal religion. If this is spirituality, it does not align with the understanding of spirituality as a subset of religion presented in Wright's (2004) research. Conversely, O'Higgins-Norman and Renehan (2014) condemn the reductionist approach to religiously tethered spiritual development, Such a claim may unfairly ignore the capacity for denominational schools to foster deep spiritual engagement (Grace 2002) through a range of opportunities for spiritual formation (Keating 2017). Wright (2004) sees spiritual development as a subset of RE, yet this could be considered problematic, particularly from a rights-based perspective as many identify as non-religious and indeed, some are anti-religious.

Perhaps a religiously untethered understanding of spirituality is warranted in order to attend to spirituality in a manner cognisant of the human rights of the individual. Kourie (2009) discusses the decline in engagement with organised religion in the Western world and the variety of reasons for the 'allergy' (Kourie 2009, p.153) to religion. The author refers to intolerance of fanaticism, opposition to religious governance and the treatment of women in some religious groups. Some theorists argue that in an age of increased secularisation, perhaps it is spirituality without religion of any kind that is the way forward for those who have become both disenchanted and disillusioned with organised religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Kourie 2009). According to McShane and Fanning (2016), an Irish media exit poll (Meehan 2019) revealed that while 14% of people interviewed identified as having no religion, 9% considered themselves to be 'spiritual'. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) note that the relationship between spirituality and religion can be understood in diverse ways. Their approach to their research with student

teachers in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland attempts to take cognisance of the multivariate ways in which spirituality is conceptualised, within formal religious understandings and outside of them. While priorities have shifted away from organised religion, it has not disappeared from society and concepts 'to explain how religion continues to function, even as people's religious practices change and adapt are needed' (Ganiel 2019, p.484). Though increased secularisation may suggest the need to step back from religion in education, Gearon (2022) resolutely argues that its role is more evident than ever. While Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) refer to the 'gradually changing religious profiles of our classrooms' (Gracie and Wilkinson p.4) this is a long-standing issue, as evidenced by the issues presented in the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan *et al.* 2012).

In an examination of the child's right to spirituality, Bryant *et al.* (2020) separate spirituality and religion in a manner common for contemporary social science (Oman 2013). While religion is a systematic concept based on organised standards, practices and beliefs, spirituality is based on personal practices and beliefs and can be experienced 'within or without formal religion' (Phillips 2003, p.249 in Bryant *et al.* 2020, p.306). Haugen (2018) states that religion is in fact a response to the needs of the human person to express their spirituality, spirituality understood in this instance as 'a fundamental human dimension that exists in modern human beings' (Haugen 2018, p.320). Albeit in a small sample, the participants of Hyde and Rouse's (2022) research agree that spirituality is different from religion due to the innateness of spirituality. This assertion is common in contemporary literature. It is understandable that with such wide contestation associated with spirituality in education, educators experience uncertainty when addressing the spiritual domain as it relates to their own lives and that of the child (Belousa 2008; Flanagan *et al.* 2012; Hyde and Rouse 2022), as discussed in the following section.

4.2 The Spirituality of the Educators

Literature pertaining to the spirituality of the educator begins with an explanation of identity derived from a review of seminal and contemporary literature. It is widely agreed in the social and philosophical literature reviewed that identity is not a fixed facet of the human person evident from birth. The literature suggests that it is a fluid, vacillating concept that shifts and develops as part of an ongoing process. According to Beijard *et al.*

(2004), identity is the answer to the enduring question, 'Who am I at this moment?' (Beijaard *et al.* 2004, p.108). This conceptualisation is influenced heavily by American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and his theory of psychosocial development. Erikson (1968) describes identity as a fundamental organising principle which develops constantly throughout the lifespan. It is not something which the human person has, but something which develops influenced by myriad sources. Mead (1934) seminal highlights the influence of the environment on identity and the sense of self. It arises out of environmental transactions and social communication which influences the roles a person adopts and the theories and stories a person believes about themselves. 'The world of the self may appear to the outsider to be subjective and hypothetical, but to the individual experiencing it, it has the feeling of absolute reality' (Purkey 1970 in Beijaard *et al.* 2004, p.108).

4.2.1 Educator Identity

Teaching differs from other professions in that it occurs at the 'dangerous intersection of public and private life' (Palmer 1998, p.17). For this reason, the identity of the educator, which has a nexus of influences, has a marked effect on professional practice (Fraser 2007; White 2010; Wartenweiler 2021). The teacher is not only influenced by personal and professional experiences but by the interaction between them. An evident alignment to this is found in the work of Beijaard and Meijer (2017) who highlight the interrelated nature of the personal and professional identities of the educator. These identities involve a complex process of growth, reflection, and reconciliation of various aspects of the educator's identity in an attempt to address existential questions such as 'Who am I as a teacher?' and 'What kind of teacher do I want to become?' (Beijaard and Meijer 2017, p.117). A consensus exists that whether or not they are aware of it, educators engage in a projection of the self onto their work and students based on their beliefs, culture and experiences, aligning with the seminal belief that 'we teach who we are' (Palmer 1998, p.1).

Much of the educational research conducted in the area of identity and beliefs in Ireland pertains to pre-service teachers (Kieran and Mullally 2021; Gracie and Wilkinson 2022; O'Connell *et al.* 2023), once again highlighting the gap in the literature focusing on the beliefs of in-service teachers. Operating within the tradition of narrative inquiry, Huber *et al.* (2004) discuss beliefs in the context of stories that Canadian educators live by. These

stories uncover how educators experience moments of tension in their profession, tension with the stories of other teachers, students, schools and classrooms. These moments of tension lead the teacher to possible shifts in identity as educators are continually 'on a search for narrative coherence' (Huber *et al.* 2004, p.194). The stories referred to are based on both personal and professional experiences and reflections on the life history of the teacher. For Beijaard and Meijer (2017), beliefs are fundamental to the identity of the educator and likely form the basis of personal and professional identities, as well as the interaction between them. Educators' beliefs, not just about their work, are in direct correlation with the development of their teacher identity (Sternberg *et al.* 2014). Becoming aware of one's beliefs is necessary due to their influence on identity. Beliefs have the capacity to be both helpful and harmful to the identity of the teacher and their subsequent work. 'Beliefs are the building blocks of a teacher's professional identity... all subsequent instruction and experience will pass through these beliefs, as water passes through a filter' (Beijaard and Meijer 2017, p.179).

4.2.2 The Spiritual Identity of the Educator

The literature reviewed on the spiritual identity of the educator appears to be heavily influenced by the work of Parker Palmer (Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Belousa 2008; Gibson 2014; Gillespie 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019), hence its inclusion in this literature review. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) highlight the importance of the identity of the teacher to their capacity, comfort and confidence in addressing matters of spirituality in the classroom. If teachers experience uncertainty and fear with regard to the spiritual domain, their attendance to spirituality in their classroom practice is likely to be impacted.

Ng and Fisher (2022) believe that the care and concern which teachers personally have for their students is directly related to their connection to their own identity, their spirituality and their subsequent wellbeing. Their research finds that educators cannot share with their students that which they do not possess with regard to identity and spirituality. However, when the innateness of spirituality is considered, alongside its ontological nature (Section 3.3.1), suggests that teachers experiencing a disconnect with the spiritual domain may simply require reorientation through reflection and engagement with spiritual practices. With the identity and spiritual experiences of the educator impacting how spirituality is perceived in education (Meehan and O'Connell

2012; Greenfield 2018), perhaps the teacher should be afforded the opportunity to reflect on and develop this domain in their own lives (Pandaya 2016; Ng and Fisher 2022). The meaning-making processes required to illuminate the spiritual domain of one's life could be understood as a phenomenological issue, as teachers are required to become aware of how they make sense and meaning from their life experiences (Smith *et al.* 2004).

4.2.2.1 The Critical Importance of Educator Spirituality

While empirical research on the spirituality and spiritual development of the child is vast, a preliminary review of literature on spirituality in education highlights a notable gap in the research (Pandaya 2016; Gillespie 2019; Wartenweiler 2019). The spirituality of the educator is largely under-researched in comparison to that of the child. Much of the literature that currently exists focuses on early years educators and is situated in Australia and New Zealand (Grajczonek 2010; 2012; de Souza 2016; Greenfield 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Hyde and Rouse 2022; Robinson 2023). Scholarly research suggests that it is often the educator's presence, 'not the pedagogy or environment (Miller 2018), that makes a lasting impression' (Harris, 2019, p.152). While the spirit may guide the child to learn, it is the role of the teacher to create experiences with which the spirit may engage (Fraser 2007; Hederman 2012; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Wartenweiler 2021). However, as discussed in the previous section, the educator cannot address authentically what they do not know.

Therefore, teachers who acknowledge their spiritual domain, attend to it or even possess an awareness of its complexities, identify spirituality as important in their work as educators. The participants of Kennedy and Duncan's study (2006) consider their spirituality to be fundamental to their roles as teachers, particularly with regard to their relationships with children, colleagues and other members of the school community. While the participants do acknowledge the likelihood that spirituality exists outside of religion, as Catholic teachers in Catholic schools, they suggest that it is their relationship with God which they understand to be the 'fountain from which all their other relationships flow' (Kennedy and Duncan 2006, p.291). This is important because the research suggests that in an increasingly diverse Ireland; in order to support educators' responsibility for the spiritual development of the children entrusted to them, teachers should be provided with opportunities to understand their own values and perceptions (O'Connell and Meehan 2012).

While the richness of spirituality means that it is often misinterpreted and avoided by some educators, those who have an awareness and understanding of their spirituality find richness in its complexity. The teacher participants in Belousa's (2008) study believe that spirituality is an essential concern of the teaching profession and perceive it as an inner way toward journeying to the truth. The consequence of engaging with spiritual education and attending to the spiritual development of the teacher and the child involves 'reaching the fullness of the human condition' (Belousa 2008 p.45). However, Belousa (2008) fails to present an analysis of research participants with alternative viewpoints, and it must be emphasised that the research was conducted with Masters ITE students which may not be representative of the general teaching population. This leads the present researcher to consider further contemporary research-based insights into the spirituality of teachers in Ireland.

4.2.2.2 Strength in Spirituality

Many educators view their spirituality as a valuable strength, support and resource which can be drawn upon, at times heavily, to support their professional practice (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). The participants of this study present spirituality as a lens which provides the teacher with a sense of meaning and purpose, increasing their joy. Research conducted by Belousa (2008) which employs Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006), aligns with much of the key literature reviewed for the purpose of this study. This methodology has been utilised seminaly by Hay and Nye (2006), as well as Fraser (2007), Greenfield (2018) and Mata-McMahon *et al.* (2019), to research teachers' perceptions of spirituality. It is applied by Belousa (2008) to establish a framework representing a person's spiritual development in terms of three interrelated traits, namely 'human reality, an inborn drive to learn, and inclination to rise above that represents the existential, transformative and transcendental aspects of spirituality' (Belousa 2008, p.46). This relates closely to the foundational works of Montessori (1939), who considers spirituality to be a life force which drives learning forward and Steiner (1926), who views spirituality as central to educational philosophy. It is also evident that Belousa (2008) is concerned with the *heart* of teaching, where 'intellect, emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self' (Palmer 1998, p.11). While even the use of the term spirituality is contested in educational discourse (Marples 2006), the denial of the spiritual domain is problematic for educators who draw from this facet of their identity to give meaning and purpose to their work.

As educators continue to navigate the value of their personal beliefs and values alongside their absence in policy, disillusionment permeates the profession, which Murphy *et al.* (2020) accredits to the increasingly performative school culture in Ireland. This is harmful both to the identity of the teacher and their relationship with the self, as well as their relationships with students and colleagues. It is also possible to consider the parallel difficulties this has on the teacher's personal life and wellbeing in general (Peiris *et al.* 2024; Pong 2024). The wellbeing of the educator is influenced by their navigation of private and professional identity and research suggests that a contemporary reduction in the value of the personal involvement of the teacher impacts wellbeing negatively (Acton and Glasgow 2015). This is discussed further in Section 4.5. Indeed, it is suggested that educators are experiencing the silencing of their inner wisdom, and the voice of the teacher requires support from policy discourse to emerge from performative culture, a culture which continues to diminish the soul of the teacher (Ball 2003; Belousa 2008; Hyde 2021; Ball and Grimaldi 2022). Stylianou and Zembylas (2018) are also concerned with the voice of the educator, which requires a re-awakening and re-imagining of policy which allows for the acknowledgement of personal vulnerabilities and self-awareness. However, unless educators are supported in their exploration of the spiritual domain and its value is explicated and attended to in policy documents, confusion and contestation may taint views on the spirituality of the teacher.

4.2.2.3 Wellbeing and Educator Spirituality

The links between the spirituality of the educator and their subsequent wellbeing are pronounced in contemporary literature (Poll and Smith 2006; King and Boyatzis 2015; Peiris *et al.* 2024; Pong 2024). In their comprehensive study of 165 Kindergarten teachers, Ng and Fisher (2022) find that the spiritual wellbeing of the educator has a profound impact on their professional practice. Further, it is not surprising that the research suggests that the wellbeing of the teacher has an influence on their classroom practice (Murphy *et al.* 2020). While research pertaining to the pedagogical wellbeing of the teacher is in its infancy in Ireland, international research highlights the value of its exploration in education (Pietarinen *et al.* 2013). The wellbeing of the teacher is essential for the negotiation of the current educational climate and for enabling teachers not only to sustain themselves in their profession but to flourish in it (Acton and Glasgow 2015). An increase in a competitive atmosphere has also served to diminish the wellbeing of the teacher. As a result of performativity, teachers are experiencing competitiveness among

staff in school environments. Within the Irish context, this impinges on relationships, and inhibits a culture of collaboration and the wellbeing of the teachers in general. Recent perspectives on the wellbeing of the teacher stress the importance of enabling teachers to thrive in their work and develop a more positive approach to wellbeing rather than focusing on alleviating stress and its root causes. 'Positive functioning is not simply surviving stress; it also entails thriving physically, mentally, socially, and professionally' (Kern *et al.* 2014, p. 501). While this literature does not mention the spiritual domain of the teacher explicitly, the present literature review suggests the spirituality of the teacher is closely correlated with their wellbeing.

Indeed, Murphy *et al.* (2020) identify the wellbeing of the teacher as a mitigating resource against current approaches to education that foster the resilience of the teacher in challenging circumstances. In the literature, engagement with spiritual practices and a considered understanding of spirituality is increasingly associated with health and wellbeing, a factor which was instrumental in Flanagan *et al.'s* (2012) research on the relationship between engagement with spiritual practices and wellbeing. The wellbeing of the educator is essential as it fosters their ability to feel passionate and purposeful about their work as educators (Gillespie 2019). For teacher wellbeing to be established, Murphy *et al.* (2020) assume that four key elements must be present. They include interactions with students, interactions with colleagues, making evaluations and choosing and developing instructional tools. The latter elements relate closely to the value of teacher spirituality and its potential to access the inner wisdom and the voice of the teacher (Ball 2003; Belousa 2008; Stylianou and Zembylas 2018; Ball and Grimaldi 2022). The former elements presented by Murphy *et al.* (2020) highlight the importance of fostering positive relationships for spirituality and wellbeing.

4.2.2.4 Confusion Surrounding Educator Spirituality

According to Meehan and O'Connell (2012), a review of Irish education policy reveals that teachers are 'directed to provide for the spiritual development of children in schools' (Meehan and O'Connell 2012, p.210). Interestingly research on spirituality also indicates that student teachers experience confusion, uncertainty and even fear when it comes to spirituality. Within the context of primary education in Ireland, Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) voice a concern about student teachers' readiness to engage with spirituality as part of their RE studies. This fear is related in part to the lack of quantifiable, measurable

outcomes or success criteria in this area. This directly correlates with concerns regarding the current culture of performativity (Section 4.5). As the number of people identifying as SBNR (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Parsons 2018) continues to rise in Ireland (Gracie and Wilkinson 2022), it is unsurprising that other research on student teachers exhibits their experiences of uncertainty and in some cases fear, around spirituality, particularly within the context of RE (Kieran and Mullally 2021). The number of people identifying as non-religious is increasing rapidly in Ireland (Central Statistics Office 2017; Kieran and Mullally 2019). Even though student teachers can easily self-identify as spiritual, confusion permeates their ability to connect this with their professional identity and their classroom practice (O'Connell 2012). Flanagan *et al.* (2012) also identify the hesitancy and sometimes, the unwillingness of practising teachers to engage with spiritual matters. Of the teachers participating in their study, only 50% returned the data collection journal to the researchers. Similarly, Hyde and Rouse (2022) experienced significant difficulty when recruiting participants for their study on teacher spirituality, with only three out of 1,680 members of the social media group contacted expressing an interest in participating in their exploratory study. While no definitive causes are given for this, one might conjecture that negative conceptualisations of spirituality might be responsible for some of this hesitancy.

The employment of the voice-centred relational method by Hyde and Rouse (2022) afforded the teacher participants of this study the opportunity to reveal the multiple voices influencing their conceptualisations of spirituality and the complexity of their understandings. Adams (2009) stresses that identifying teacher conceptualisations of spirituality and understanding how they influence the work of the teacher is necessary, especially if teachers require spiritual development and spiritual formation. A nexus of influences moulds educators' perceptions of spirituality and a perceived lack of clarity in policy documentation serves only to heighten uncertainty and confusion. In their research with early childhood educators, Mata (2012) and Violante *et al.* (2023) found that while teachers expressed an understanding of the importance of the spiritual development of the child, a great deal of uncertainty permeated their ability to incorporate spirituality into their curricula. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) suggest using ITE as a vehicle to address this reluctance and uncertainty. Continued Professional Development (CPD) and ongoing reflection are also highlighted as critical for addressing the spiritual domain, as discussed in the following section,

Gillespie (2019) identifies contexts in primary education, such as faith schools, where the spirituality of the educator is valued and welcomed. However, there are other settings in which spirituality although acknowledged is excluded. Indeed, it is not welcomed as an aspect of the educator, nor should it be used to inform professional practice. For example, Gibson (2014) found that some teachers in non-religious schools found it uncomfortable when spiritual values were portrayed by school leaders. As a result, caution is required to avoid inappropriate interactions with spirituality, particularly from a human rights perspective (Flanagan *et al.* 2012). The importance of recognising the diversity of spiritual expression is acknowledged by Pandaya (2016), whose mixed-methods study calls for in-depth, qualitative research into teachers' perspectives of spirituality. However, unless the teacher is aware of their spiritual expressions, one may ask if it is possible to truly attend to such diversity. As society continues to diversify, spirituality interconnects with many different worldviews, and due to these differences, Gibson (2014) notes instances where expressions of a teacher or school leader's spirituality are deemed inappropriate. Pandaya (2016) suggests that spiritual assessments should be utilised in order to mitigate the tension and ambiguity surrounding spirituality in education. Again, it appears that the awareness of the teacher is fundamental in effectively attending to spirituality, both personally and professionally. Perhaps, as Greenfield (2018) suggests, the development of such awareness, as well as assistance with the uncertainty which permeates the concept of spirituality, should be facilitated by ITE and CPD.

4.2.3 Continued Professional Development

The literature presents an overwhelming need for CPD for educators with regard to coming to know their own spirituality in order to support the spiritual development of the child, as well as to enhance a sense of meaning and purpose in the sphere of education. Belousa (2008) argues that teachers require surplus support to develop the spirituality of the child and believes it should be first addressed in educational policy and transferred into the realms of ITE and CPD to support its attendance in the classroom. The need for CPD for educators is evidenced by Razza *et al.* (2020) who investigated the influence of spiritual practices on children who experienced high levels of trauma. While the study argues in favour of spiritual interventions such as meditation and yoga for students, it also stresses the need for suitable programmes for teachers who 'serve and guide them' (Razza *et al.* 2020, p.89). Unsurprisingly, research indicates the uncertainty and discomfort experienced by teachers when attending to the spiritual domain, particularly

when they have no personal experience of spiritual practices or are uncertain of their own beliefs (Razza *et al.* 2020; Kieran and Mullally 2021). Similarly, 89% of student teachers who participated in Gracie and Wilkinson's (2022) cross-border study expressed a need for further support and development when attending to the spiritual development of children. Their research highlights the need for addressing the spiritual domain to be a significant part of both ITE and CPD in order to impact positively the holistic development and wellbeing of the child. As previously stated, the research literature emphasises that it 'is only possible for educators to deal with spirituality, in the sense of promoting spiritual development, if they know what it is' (Fraser-Pearse 2022, p.114).

It is understandable that with such wide contestation surrounding spirituality in education, educators experience uncertainty when addressing their own spirituality and that of the child, as well as spirituality in general (Belousa 2008; Flanagan *et al.* 2012). According to Ng and Fisher (2022), the teacher's awareness of their own spirituality and a focus on their spiritual wellbeing is essential in order to develop the spiritual domain of the child because 'people cannot confess or encourage what they do not possess' (Ng and Fisher 2022, p.14). While this piece of research identifies a relationship with God as the fundamental purpose of spiritual development, the need for awareness of the spiritual domain is relevant regardless of the ethos in which a teacher finds themselves. Greenfield (2018), in a qualitative study with 24 participants, concludes that teachers need to be aware of the exercise of their personal beliefs and experiences as a resource which they draw on when attending to the spiritual domain of the child. Palmer (1998) highlights the need for nourishment of educator spirituality if the teacher is to be able to effectively attend to the spiritual development of the child. Considering the impact of spirituality on educational leadership, Gibson (2014) suggests that programmes for school leaders, as well as ITE and CPD courses, address the spiritual domain of the teacher. With the profound impact of teacher spirituality emerging clearly from the literature, alongside the importance of the teacher's relationship with the child (Section 3.3.3.), calls for the development, and consequent actualisation, of the spiritual domain of the teacher is warranted. In effect, the literature stresses that greater intentionality is required in attending to spirituality, as the development of this domain does not occur by 'osmosis' (Batchelar 2011 in Greenfield 2018, p.287). However, the persistent uncertainty around terms and key concepts and lack of clarity permeating contemporary literature on the

spirituality of the teacher tends to translate into a lack of clear guidance on how to nourish teacher spirituality in the fields of ITE and CPD.

Moreover, in order to support the spiritual development of the child, educators should be afforded the opportunity to engage in reflection both in ITE and CPD contexts (Gibson 2014; Pandaya 2016; Greenfield 2018). Mata-McMahon et al (2019) argue that this is a level of self-observation and contemplation with which many teachers may be unfamiliar, and their research supports further the examination of the spirituality of the teacher in order to attend to the spiritual domain of the child. Here teacher education is presented as the central agent for change which enables educators to apply a spiritual lens (Mata-McMahon et al. 2019) and transform educational activities into the 'art of teaching' (Belousa 2008, p.47). In order to achieve this transformation, teachers must be primed to do so. 'The real preparation is the study of oneself... It includes the training of character; it is a preparation of the spirit' (Montessori 1995, p.132). The literature reviewed in this section suggests that while the depth of introspection required may be unfamiliar or even uncomfortable for educators, it is only through authentic engagement with reflective processes that the necessary revelations about the character and spirit Montessori (1995) refers to will come to light.

4.2.3.1 Reflection

It is crucial for the educator to understand their spirituality and the spiritual development of the child due to the critical impact these conceptualisations have on children's spiritual development (Pandaya 2016; Greenfield 2018; Groome 2021; Wartenweiler 2021; Ng and Fisher 2022). However, in order to achieve this, it is vital to take note of a vast body of literature suggests that teachers should be afforded the opportunity to reflect on their own spirituality in tandem with the professional practice required to nourish and develop the spiritual domain of the child (Johnson 2005; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; White 2009; 2010; 2014; Greenfield 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Razza *et al.* 2020; Groome 2021; Gracie and Wilkinson 2022). Reflection is an important part of this 'introspective journey with ourselves, first and foremost, that ultimately gives us the insight and courage to engage with others' (Elfreich 2019, p.32) While the need for such reflection is apparent, it seems that educators are not equipped with the necessary time or tools for such reflection. Palmer (1998) considers the spiritual as a longing for connectedness that animates the work of the teacher and expresses concern that 'seldom, if ever, do we ask

the “who” question – who is the self that teaches?’ (Palmer 1998, p.4). Unless the teacher is afforded the opportunity to reflect on this self, comprised of the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual, who ‘depend on one another for wholeness...interwoven in the human self and in education at its best’ (Palmer 1998, p.5), uncertainty may continue to dominate.

Although the need for reflection is unmistakable in the literature, engaging with the process in an authentic manner requires commitment and conviction. Mooney Simmie and Moles (2020) highlight the importance of critical reflexivity in their acceptance of the Socratic aphorism that ‘the unexamined life is not worth living.’ This is not a menial task, and insights may give rise to a variety of emotions and revelations. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) identify religious background and family values as potential barriers to spirituality for teachers, which highlights the need for considerable help to be available to support teachers in accessing and processing these reflections. This work is necessary as spirituality is not an area which can be attended to from a distance in education. It cannot be authentically addressed at ‘arm’s length, so that the subjectivity of the teacher is safely concealed from the children’ (Hay and Nye 2006, p.148). Again, the influence of Palmer (1998) is evident here. Contemporary research supports the fundamental belief that ‘we teach who we are’ (Palmer 1998, p.1). As this is so strongly argued in the literature, its exploration is warranted.

Within the current climate of performativity, Ball (2016) recommends the technique of self-writing to create ‘a space, and thus a confrontation with power, within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable in a different way’ (Ball 2016, p.1141). Murphy *et al.* (2020) suggest that reflection and writing of the self in this way are essential in the current educational climate due to the governance of the neoliberal agenda and performativity on teachers and their work. However, the contemporary climate, discussed further in this chapter, prioritises the development of teachers and student teachers according to its agenda. As previously cited, in 2012, only 50% of teacher participants in Flanagan’s *et al.* (2012) cross-border Irish study returned reflective journals pertaining to spirituality. While more current research is clearly lacking in Ireland, it is interesting to consider the value teachers place on spirituality and the practice of reflection over a decade later. In this study, four of the teachers reported a change in their level of presence, patience, and self-acceptance, as a result of engagement with the assigned contemplative

practices. As such activities continue to gain interest and engagement in literature and in society, it would be interesting to gather data and reflect on differences and similarities a decade on. Perhaps, the current governmentality approach to education means that teachers are required to embrace a Foucauldian approach to reflection and ‘discover a new way of governing oneself’ (Foucault 2000, p.233) in order to attend to their own spirituality and that of the child, as discussed in the following section.

4.3 The Spirituality of the Child

As cited previously, it is widely regarded in the literature that children are innately spiritual (Bryant *et al.* 2020) and have a capacity for discerning deeply spiritual experiences and expressing these using language (Adams 2008; 2010; O’Farrell 2016; Harmon 2018; Hyde 2021). Despite this consensus in both seminal and contemporary literature, and the increasing body of research pertaining to the spirituality of the child, it is arguable that spirituality remains the least well-understood dimension of childhood (King and Boyatzis 2015; Adams *et al.* 2016; Hausler 2019). The spiritual domain of the child must be attended to and considered explicitly as it is a crucial element of human development, critical for developing relationships, a sense of wellbeing and reaching the fullness of human potential (Zhang 2014; Adams *et al.* 2016; de Souza 2016; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). The body of research concerned with the spirituality of the child has expanded in recent decades, and while the spiritual development of the child is mentioned in various educational policy documents discussed in Chapter One, the depth of understanding arising in the literature is not mirrored in policy discourse.

The spirituality of the child is ‘inherently mysterious... manifested and enhanced within everyday experience’ (Eaude 2009, p.191). Indeed, ordinary, everyday occurrences have the capacity to attend to the spiritual development of the child. The literature repeatedly refers to experiences of awe and wonder that children require to develop that which a Deweyan perspective considers innate in them. Bryant *et al.* (2020) argue that it is the right of the child to encounter settings that foster awe and wonder which is crucial to spiritual development. While everyday experiences have the potential to nourish the spirit of the child, Keltner and Haidt (2003) also state that truly awe-inspiring events and experiences may lead to dramatic personal growth and change. When considering the impact of childhood trauma on the outlook of the person and their search for meaning

and purpose in life, the need for such awe-inspiring events is evident, due to their capacity to restore hope (Bryant *et al.* 2020; Eakman 2024).

While little contemporary literature is referred to by Bryant *et al.* (2020), the research provided highlights the importance of spirituality in childhood significantly and therefore, should be considered a 'basic human right' (Bryant *et al.* 2020, p.307). The child has a right to spiritual development afforded to them as explained in Section 2.6. Hyde (2021) highlights that the child's right to a spiritual life is sometimes perceived as a moral or ethical issue. He suggests that this is incorrect and that it is a legal mandate. There is a great deal of correlation between Hyde (2021) and Bryant *et al.* (2020) regarding the child's right to spirituality and the voice of the child within that. Harmon (2018) refers to this in his research. While the younger child may require the assistance of an adult to use their voice and exercise their right, it is important according to Hyde (2021) that they are supported to do this, as 'children are full human beings' (Wall 2010, p.35).

The role of significant adults in developing the spirituality of the child appears strongly in the literature reviewed. Pearse (2019) finds that those with the responsibility for spiritual development are fundamental in the spiritual development of the child. While this may appear obvious, Hyde (2021) refers to the power relations between teachers and children and their capacity to restrict the convictions of the child, and therefore, their spiritual development. However, this means that the potential for the relationship between the educator and the child to have the opposite effect also exists. Having an awareness of the ways in which to support the spiritual development of the child may facilitate reconfiguring the power imbalance referred to. The role of classroom teachers in all schools, not just faith-based schools is highlighted by Hyde (2021) in relation to the development of the child's spiritual voice. These voices are often silent or hidden, particularly by the alignment of educational policy with the neoliberal agenda discussed at the end of this chapter.

The individuality of the child requires substantial consideration when attending to the spiritual domain. Hay and Nye (2006) discuss the personal signature of each child. Adopting a case study approach enabled these researchers to become sensitised to the complexities of the concept being studied. While this could be considered a limitation if a general statement on the spirituality of the child was required, Hay and Nye (2006) argue that focusing on the particular sensitised them to spirituality as a nebulous phenomenon.

Attending to the spirituality of the child through careful, authentic listening is vital and assists the teacher in determining and comprehending their individual spirituality (Champagne 2001; Ha and Nye 2006; Hyde 2021). This aligns with the findings of Harris (2019) in her examination of Fred Rogers' work. Engaging in present, intentional listening has the power to make a 'genuine difference' (Harris 2019, p.152). However, Hyde (2021) provides a cautionary note with regard to encouraging the spiritual voice of the child. Teachers need to be aware of how to safely and respectfully undertake this without placing a psychological expectation on the child which could compromise their integrity. The participants of Greenfield (2018) agree that fostering the spirituality of the child is a central responsibility of the teacher. However, current educational policy discourse lacks certainty and guidance with regard to the spiritual development of the child. As policy documents continue to deepen control while diminishing educator autonomy and creativity (Ball 2003; Hederman 2012; Gibson 2014; Shower 2017; Revell and Bryan 2018; d'Agnese 2024), the position of spirituality within policy documents such as curricula warrants exploration.

4.4 Spirituality and the Curriculum

When considering spirituality in education, a natural question arises; can spirituality be taught? (Morris 2009; Wane *et al* 2011; Shi 2020) If so, how can it be taught? As mentioned in Section 2.6, global policy discourse highlights the importance of the spirituality of the child. Indeed, Ireland names the spiritual domain of the child as a priority for the curriculum (NCCA 2023). While other educational policy documentation may not explicitly mention spirituality, the findings of Hyde and Rouse (2022) show that educators can appreciate the importance of spiritual development without connecting it to curriculum documents or other policy frameworks. However, a lack of clarity results in a sense of uncertainty for many educators (Section 4.2.2.4). Fraser-Pearce (2022) highlights the contradictory understandings of spirituality as challenging for educationalists, suggesting that the term should be used solely to describe a relationship with the transcendent. If there is uncertainty about what spirituality is or is not, how can there be certainty regarding how it should be taught, or if it should be taught at all? This is problematic when considering the necessity of an appropriate understanding of children's spirituality and how to develop it (Adams 2009).

de Souza (2016a) argues resolutely that the spiritual domain has been severely overlooked and undervalued in this Western world. This is largely attributed to a focus on the marketisation of education for the development of a capable workforce. When the spiritual domain is identifiable in policy documents and educational discourse both nationally and internationally, perhaps more attention needs to be given to conscious, deliberate attempts to define it, understand it and teach it. Further, the notion that spirituality and consequently spiritual education are beyond definition should be rejected entirely. Instead, Fraser-Pearce (2022) believes that spiritual education should be considered a subspecies of relational education with a key distinctive feature so that the term spiritual education would refer only to that which is concerned with a relationship with the transcendent. Fraser-Pearce (2022) insists that this would provide a practical, helpful means of distinguishing between what is not for children, parents, teachers and all other relevant stakeholders. However, this definition is contentious when a triadic conceptualisation of spirituality is considered (Zhang 2014), particularly from a human rights perspective. For this reason, scholars argue for a holistic approach to spirituality.

4.4.1 A Holistic Approach

A holistic approach to education that clearly attends to and values the spiritual domain of the child is recommended in contemporary literature (Lau 2010; Grajczonek 2012; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Robinson 2019; 2023; Chapman *et al.* 2021; Lee 2022). It is helpful to understand the holistic development of the child as presented by the United Nations (Section. 1.1), which is concerned with the 'enhancement of children's physical, social, emotional, spiritual and cognitive development' (UN 2015, p.9). Holistic education, which actively promotes the development of the whole child-child using a multi-disciplinary approach has transformative potential. In order to access such potential, the approach must be grounded in 'the totality of the human experience, that is, one which integrates rationality, emotionality, physicality and spirituality' (de Souza 2016, p.128). Taiwanese education values the importance of a holistic approach and attends to the spiritual domain through 'life education' which is actively promoted in schools. Life education also includes spirituality as spiritual maturity is found to be linked to the development of the whole person (Shi 2020). This spiritual maturity has considerable potential for holistic development and wellbeing when the spiritual domain is addressed from early childhood. Children's play is identified as a vehicle for spiritual development (Berryman 2013; Engel 2015; Mata-McMahon 2019; Bryant *et al.* 2020), particularly in relation to the spiritual

voice and understanding of the child. Hyde (2021) moves the understanding of voice forward to include their experiences, interests and needs, regardless of the child's ability to express this orally.

The child's access to spiritual development is often considered alongside their access to RE, stemming from the delegation of responsibility within the Education Act (1998). Considering the radical transformation of spirituality discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is interesting to consider other subject areas such as the Arts, Languages, Physical Education and Science as appropriate opportunities for spiritual development. Teachers in Catholic schools in New Zealand also highlight the multidisciplinary nature of spirituality across various curricular areas, as well as the hidden curriculum. The participants favoured curricular integration and opposed restrictive understandings confining spirituality to certain curricular areas (Kennedy and Duncan 2006). For instance, Arts Education has the capacity to be a vehicle for transformation for the child, especially for their spiritual education (Kennedy and Duncan 2006; de Souza 2016). The Arts have the capacity to enhance the child's ability to create and imagine, to inspire in students a sense of mystery, magic and wonder, and possibly a glimpse of something beyond the mundane reality of their everyday' (de Souza 2016, p.133). However, due to the implicit nature of the Arts in comparison to other subject areas, and the intangibility of its benefits, it is often undervalued and underutilised in education. This appears wasteful when consideration is given to de Souza's (2016) appraisal of the Arts as 'the unconscious language of the soul of humanity which transcends racial, cultural and religious boundaries', (de Souza 2016, p.134). Providing the child with opportunities to engage in creative expression accesses the innate capacity for innovation in order to bring something new to fruition. It is this capability which Johnson (2011) believes separates humans from other animals as it is 'godlike' (Johnson 2011, p.10).

The potential to develop the spirituality of the child across the curriculum is evident when the purpose of spirituality is identified as developing the innate spiritual qualities of the human person (Shi 2020). The ability to construe meaning and purpose is a considerable benefit of spirituality in education and Bryant *et al.* (2020) determine meaning-making to be the fundamental existential issue surrounding childhood spirituality. This research is influenced by Noddings (1992) who advocates that meaning-making 'should form the organising backbone of the curriculum and should be appropriate everywhere' (Noddings

1992, p.8). To further this, Shi (2020) suggests posing existential questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is the purpose of life?’ (Shi 2020, p.92). Engaging with this at an appropriate level has profound potential for spiritual development while its avoidance can have the opposite effect (Noddings 1992; Hyde 2008). Integrating spiritual development throughout the curriculum and developing it through the hidden curriculum supports the meaning-making processes of all children but has a considerably positive impact on those who have experienced childhood trauma (Van de Kolk 1994 in Bryant *et al.* 2020). Zhang (2010; 2014) highlights the transformative potential of spiritual development for children with additional needs. The application of a spiritual lens to special education can provide children with deep, sustainable learning experiences that contribute to their wellbeing and influence their sense of meaning and purpose in life. This concurs with the findings of Mata-McMahon *et al.* (2019) who suggest that educators who engage with spiritual development and are conscious of children’s spirits may ‘find more meaning and joy in their work’ (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019 p.2237).

4.4.2 Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Curriculum

An argument exists that ultimate goal of education is to positively develop human wellbeing (Groome 2021). Elfreich (2019) argues in favour of addressing spirituality in public schools in America in order to advance wellbeing. This is justifiably identified as a complicated conversation, and its complexity is not lessened by considering it within the context of Irish educational discourse. This of particular relevance when contestation permeates discussions surrounding the definition of spirituality and a thread of uncertainty weaves through the confidence of the educator in attending to this domain (Section 4.2.2.4). The numbers of children and young people experiencing anxiety, depression and a variety of other mental health problems is increasing with mental health problems rising by 25% since the Covid-19 pandemic (WHO 2022). According to de Souza (2016), children’s health is influenced by their awareness of their contemporaries around the world experiencing displacement and destruction as a result of war, natural disasters and a range of societal and political occurrences. Experiencing the realities of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine has impacted the culture and climates of Irish classrooms and tangibly affected the lives of children. Schafer (2021) highlights the need for fundamental changes and the cultivation of spirituality in order to attend to the rapidly expanding mental health issues which children are experiencing following the pandemic. Developing

the spiritual domain of the student has the potential to support their wellbeing as the spiritual dimension of health is 'the foundation and glue that holds health together' (Ng and Fisher 2022, p.14). Providing a space for spiritual activities that promote contemplation, and presence is highly beneficial for the wellbeing of the child. Contemporary scholarly works highlight the capacity for such spiritual development to influence the wellbeing of the child by decreasing anxiety and stress and increasing feelings of happiness (Flanagan *et al.* 2012; Razza *et al.* 2020; Gracie and Wilkinson 2022; Carroll 2023; Peiris *et al.* 2024). While religious contemplative activities often form the basis of such activities, such experiences are also possible without a religious association, focusing on fostering inner peace, a sense of gratitude and opening hearts and minds (Quintiliani 2011). However, in a systematic review of 1,826 articles, Taylor *et al.* (2022) highlight the adverse effects of meditation interventions, therefore caution may need to be exercised when engaging children in contemplative practices.

Engagement with spiritual practices in both religiously tethered or untethered manners enables the mind to respond, rather than to react, in a more collected manner (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003). Emotional self-regulation is also improved with regular practice, and 'with improved emotional self-regulation comes ... greater possibility for calmness, compassionate kindness, and more effective learning and teaching' (Quintiliani 2011, p.26). Researchers find that contemplative practices positively influence the atmosphere in the classroom, the focus and attention of the students, emotional regulation and stress reduction. However, concerns surround spiritual activities related to mindfulness, meditation and yoga, with an Irish Bishop warning schools against these practices that are 'not of Christian origin' (Skelton 2019). For some within the Christian tradition, an argument exists regarding the Buddhist origins of such practices, the potential for misappropriation of the practices and the dangers of a clear mind being open to demonic forces (Gracie and Wilkinson 2022; Carroll 2023). In contrast, Hederman's (2003) broad conceptualisation of spirituality is inclusive of various practices including tarot cards and meditation which can be utilised to access that which is usually unconscious. Hederman (2003) proposes that openness to various creative approaches to spirituality is required in order to allow God to enter one's life.

Slattery (2013) proposes a vision of a curriculum which integrates theological text using proleptic eschatology, particularly for the development of wellbeing. According to Elfreich

(2019), the proleptic task of the wellbeing curriculum would use spirituality in order to address the 'urgent ethical mandate of contemporary living' (Slattery 2013, p.87) through the creation of 'meaningful moments instead of delaying or projecting meaning and purpose' (Elfreich 2019, p.33). Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) state that current *in situ* practices regarding RE do not support the holistic wellbeing of the child. Spiritual development and the wellbeing of the child are increasingly delegated to other curricular areas such as Social Personal Health Education (SPHE). Again, this emphasises the importance of the educator regardless of the pedagogy or the environment. Unless confidence and competence exist, holistic education and spiritual development cannot come to fruition. Pearse (2019) argues strongly in favour of spiritual education, even in non-denominational schools. Citing Hand's (2004) 'possibility-of-truth case for religious education' (Hand 2004, p.303), the argument is made that children should be exposed to spiritual education with the purpose of affording them the space and opportunities to consider religion and religious beliefs so as to connect with the Transcendent which Hand (2003) says can 'give rise to spontaneous worship' (Hand 2003, p.399). This has the potential to be controversial if this is not the parents' wish for their child and substantial consideration must be given to the definition of spiritual education and its aims as a result. This is also problematic when a religiously orientated education is desired, solely 'rooted in holy life' (Gearon 2014, p.8). Within the literature reviewed, a more inclusive, cross-cultural approach to spiritual development is suggested, as discussed in the following section.

4.4.3 A Cross-Cultural Approach

The value of a cross-cultural approach to spirituality within the sphere of education is worthy of deliberation, particularly within the context of spirituality's paradigmatic shift in recent decades. When considering the location of spirituality in education and whether it should be located more explicitly within the curriculum, culture and society require adequate consideration, alongside the continual decline of alignment with 'traditional religious denominations' (Sheldrake 2007, p.204). As the interconnectedness of the global community continues to strengthen and expand, the coalescence of cultures, faiths and spiritual traditions is now a reality (Sheldrake 2007; Johnson and Ord 2012; Berger 2014; Mercandante 2014). The need for a cross-cultural approach is necessary in order to address what de Souza (2016) refers to as 'the fear of the Other who is different' (de Souza 2016, p.126). Experiencing the diversity of culture, faith and societal norms is the

reality for children in many countries and it is argued that education is the means through which tolerance and inclusion can be fostered and the aforementioned fear attenuated (de Souza *et al.* 2016; Faas *et al.* 2019). It is not simply about learning to exist in parallel with the other but learning to sustain positive interactions amongst differences. Education has the potential to produce the 'formulas of peace' (Berger 2014, p.79) required to navigate the increased plurality of beliefs in society.

For those who are not aligned with a particular religious organisation, spirituality has the capacity to guide the search for meaning and purpose in life. It can provide a 'framework of meaning through which youth can make sense of their adversity or trauma' (Crawford *et al.* 2006, p.366). It can also provide direction for relationships, by delineating values and influencing relationships and social conscience. Gracie and Wilkinson's (2022) contemporary study finds that student teachers were deeply concerned with the diversity of beliefs and an increase in atheism and secularism in society and as a result in classrooms. The participants believe that significant familiarity with children and their families is necessary before engaging in spiritual activities. Inclusive, non-specific approaches to spiritual development were preferred by the students over explicitly religious approaches. However, when a person's spirituality is orientated entirely towards religion, spiritual development in an inclusive sense becomes a complex task.

The need for distinction between what is spiritual and what is not was argued in Section 3.1.1 and the contested definitions of spirituality are problematic when considering its location in the curriculum. Following an examination of the work of Noddings (1992;1993), Neiman (1999) suggests an 'intermingling' of various approaches to education in order to give students 'a chance at tapping rich sources of spiritual sustenance' (Neiman 1999, p.227). Noddings (1992) also stresses the need for adequate consideration of the context when considering both the curriculum and pedagogical approaches. The relationships, subsequent power dynamics and cultural background of the students require necessary deliberation, and the integration of spiritual development should be examined carefully from a cross-cultural context. A curriculum centred on caring relationships is vital according to Noddings (1992), who stresses the importance of educating the emotional, intellectual and spiritual parts of the human person. Noddings (1993) encourages teachers in public schools to employ their own spirituality to develop that of their students, through holistic, reflective thinking across the curriculum and

conversations about controversial and existential topics. The current climate of educational discourse from both a global and Irish perspective mirrors that described by Noddings (1992;1993). Teachers simply do not have the space, time or resources within the current system to address these topics (Mooney Simmie and Moles 2020; Hyde 2021; Ball and Grimaldi 2022). As a result of this, teachers 'are placed within a system that makes thinking about spirituality almost impossible' (Neiman 1999, p.220). This school of thought reveals misconceptions regarding the purpose and value of integrating spiritual development throughout the curriculum. While spiritual development has inherent value in and of itself, it also has considerable potential to develop the problem-solving, higher-order thinking and metacognitive skills of the child, evidently valued within current policy documents.

4.4.4 Spirituality for Criticality

Spiritual development has the capacity to advance the critical thinking skills of the human person (Routhier-Martin *et al.* 2017; Elfreich 2019; Shi 2020). Elfreich (2019) advocates for an eclectic approach to education which includes spirituality in order to draw from various schools of thought in a flexible, adaptable manner. Elfreich (2019) states that eclecticism encourages and develops higher-order skills, as it is not solely concerned with a central truth. Instead, this approach to curriculum development would draw from multiple theories and insights as opposed to promoting a single set of beliefs or assumptions. Eclecticism enables students to approach education holistically and bring all domains of the human person to their learning, rather than excluding elements at the door of the classroom (Dillard 2006 in Elfreich 2019). In an examination of the work of Fred Rogers, Harris (2019) highlights the capacity for spirituality to develop the critical thinking skills of the child. By posing open-ended questions, Rogers promoted mystery, wonder, awe and presence in the child (Harris 2019). Rogers facilitated higher-order thinking through his explicit modelling of curiosity, an important element of enabling the child to experience awe and wonder. A consideration of existential questions supports both the spiritual and cognitive development of the child, alongside engagement with mindfulness or contemplative practices. Engaging in mindfulness activities and participating in meditation is linked to an increase in cognitive functions such as critical thinking, concentration, problem-solving and making decisions, as well as the experience of inner harmony (Routhier-Martin *et al.* 2017; Peiris *et al.* 2024). Providing opportunities for reflection and explicit modelling of how to meaningfully reflect is

important for obtaining the cognitive, as well, as spiritual and emotional benefits of these practices.

Reflection (Section 4.2.3.1) is a fundamental element of spiritual development in education for both the child and their educator (Johnson 2011; de Souza 2016; Hudson 2018; Elfreich 2019). The child's ability to reflect is important as it provides opportunities not only for the development of metacognitive skills but also for a sense of mystery, awe and wonder to develop, as well as the development of agency and resilience (de Souza 2016; Grajczonek 2012; Hudson 2018; Chapman and Miller 2022). This ability to reflect is fundamental for active learning and critical thinking as it parallels the skills required to undertake an 'internal enquiry into the unique working of one's being' (Shi 2020, p.92). An introspective journey is also essential for spiritual development to support children in establishing and maintaining meaningful, nourishing relationships with the self and others, while developing an ability to grasp otherwise intangible concepts (Noddings 1992; Sobel 2004; Chapman and Miller 2022). It is a reflection which enables both educators and students to engage in the meta-cognitive task of creating connections while supporting their spiritual development in the process.

Elfreich (2019) advocates for a Currere approach (Pinar 2012) which builds reflection into the curriculum as an essential element. This approach stresses the need for both teachers and students to engage in reflection in an autobiographical manner allowing the relationship between education and one's life to be illuminated. Perhaps the Currere approach to curriculum centred on students' personal experiences and self-reflection, would enable spirituality to be woven into subject areas through entering into conversation with oneself in order to actively and passionately participate in the world. It has the potential to be an autobiographical reflection on educational experiences that promotes spiritual development through a continual search for meaning, purpose, and wholeness, as well as learning. Pinar (2012) understands curriculum as a 'complicated conversation' (Pinar 2012, p.232) and suggests a dialogic approach, a reciprocal exchange between the student and their experiences, that promotes connection, and a truer, more authentic sense of understanding through reflection. By facilitating reflective opportunities for students, be it through journaling, written activities or other contemplative experiences, a variety of metacognitive skills can be developed and nurtured such as an increased sense of self-worth, an appreciation of gifts, talents and

areas for improvement, the ability to discern life's meaning and purpose and the ability to understand and resolve inner conflict (Crawford *et al.* 2006; Johnson 2011). Though not an exhaustive list, this provides a clear insight into the value of reflective practice for students, as well as their educators.

4.4.5 Concerns with the Use of 'Spirituality' in Education

In stark contrast to the value of spirituality in education discussed in this chapter, Marples (2006) argues entirely against the use of the term 'spiritual education' in within educational discourse. Further, the inclusion of spirituality in contemporary education policy and practice is sometimes considered 'academically backward' (Hetzberg 2000 in Gibson 2014, p.521) due to the conflation of religion and spirituality. This perspective may be driven by a fear of indoctrination and even fundamentalism (Best 2008; Berger 2014). Other concerns relate to the conceptualisation of spirituality often referred to as New Age and its potential to foster self-indulgences and individualism in a harmful way (Thatcher 1999; Hay 2000; 2007; Eaude 2009; Judy 2011; Fisher 2017; Hyland 2017; Forbes 2019; Naudé and Flick 2022). Sheldrake (2007) also highlights concerns with the concept of consumerist 'lifestyle spirituality that promotes fitness, healthy living and holistic wellbeing' (Sheldrake 2007, p.2), particularly when it occurs outside the sphere of organised religion. However, many scholars argue against this understanding due to the centrality of relationships and connectedness in spiritual development. When defining spirituality, Schneiders (2003) argues against individualistic conceptualisation, stating that spirituality is the capacity of the person to 'transcend themselves through knowledge and love.... and become more than self-enclosed nomads' (Schneiders 2003, p.165). Both Parsons (2018) and Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) concur with this and argue that spirituality can serve as a mitigating force against a contemporary society focused on materialism and the success of the individual over the collective.

While there is much debate against the conceptualisation of spirituality outside of religion as narcissistic, it must also be acknowledged that a search for God can occur outside religion (Parsons 2018). Others point to the neoliberal agenda, discussed in the following section, as a damaging source of 'competition, individualism, utility and pragmatism' (Hyde 2021, p.18) which reduces the value of the spiritual domain of children and their teachers. Slattery (2013) and Elfreich (2019) concur with Hyde (2021) outlining a

concern with the current reductionist approach to curriculum and the space for spirituality within it. Slattery (2013) asserts that current approaches to curriculum development focus students on content and skills which do not encourage personal relationships. The consequent result, according to Slattery (2013), is individualism and cultural isolation. Further, a concern exists that 'totalitarianism is the logical endpoint for a society that has lost touch with relational consciousness' (Hay 2007, p.72). The result of such a disconnect may be found in the current culture of performativity discussed in the following section.

4.5 Performativity

A contemporary concern regarding the impact of performative education exists in the literature pertaining to spirituality in education (Pinar 2012; Keddie 2016; Revell and Bryan 2018; Hyde 2021; Biesta 2022; Forbes 2019; Lynch and Kalaitzake 2020; Ruth 2023; Van Eycken *et al.* 2024). This is an influential agenda which Mooney Simmie and Moles (2020) say permeates educational discourse in over 30 countries. The ongoing dictation of educational policy towards 'learnification' (Biesta 2016, p.5) by the neoliberal agenda has continued well into the 21st century (Hyde 2021). The prioritised curricular areas continue to be related to numeracy, literacy and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education. While 'such a way of knowing is needed, of course, it is highly limited' (Groome 2021, p.xii). After two decades of arguing against movement in this direction, Biesta (2016; 2022) continues to argue that this is a mistake. The COVID-19 crisis was cited as an opportunity to draw closer attention to the incessant pressure from global policy to be 'excellent' (Biesta 2022, p. 223). Pinar (2012) believes that the neoliberal agenda and its promotion of accountability systems is not about learning at all, it is about control. Educational policy documents serve the role of aligning the priorities of schooling with the private sector, creating the space for the privatisation and commodification of what Ball (2003) refers to as 'core public services' (Ball 2003, p.216). With performance and production extracted as primary aims from policy documents both nationally and internationally, the spirit of the human participant is not recognised (Mooney Simmie and Moles 2020) and continues to recede as the focus on an 'empty discourse of learning' (Biesta 2012, p.35) strengthens. The result is increasing teacher exhaustion and burnout (Pong 2024; Van Eycken *et al.* 2024). According to Hyde (2021), this should be of immediate concern for educationalists due to its negative impact on the

wellbeing of students and teachers, and its capacity to stifle and ultimately silence their spirituality.

Ruth (2023) identifies consumerism and marketisation as fundamental issues impacting contemporary approaches to spiritual development. This involves the commodification of education which turns students into consumers and education into a product. The impact is detrimental to educational values due to the prioritisation of performance metrics rather than true learning or critical thinking (Ruth 2023). de Souza (2016) finds the Western drive for calculable achievement and its influence on education in both Western and Eastern countries highly problematic. It is driven by 'a scientific worldview that is objective, positivistic and reductionist, focusing as they do on compartmentalisation, competitiveness and the promotion of the individual over the group' (de Souza 2016, p.128). When certain subjects continue to be valued over others, there is a consequent approach to education which focuses predominantly on educating for membership of the workforce. If this remains the primary concern of 21st century education, then focusing on particular subjects is somewhat illogical as it is not known what will be required of workforces in the future. It is also problematic when the value of a holistic approach to education, which attends to the spiritual domain, is considered.

4.5.1 Diminished Integrity – Diminished Soul?

Highlighted in the literature is the viewpoint that educators are increasingly influenced by the continual disintegration of their professional autonomy as a result of the increased control the state has on education in Ireland (Farrell *et al.* 2017). The neoliberal agenda and the culture of performativity which permeate schools at present diminishes the autonomy and integrity of teachers and their capacity to formulate meaningful, authentic relationships with their students and colleagues. This is the struggle over what is referred to as the teacher's soul (Ball 2003; Hyde 2021). As discussed in previous sections, identity, wellbeing and relationships are linked to the spirituality of the educator. Ball and Grimaldi (2022) describe neoliberalism as a justifying set of beliefs and practices, a manner of interpreting the world which configures all aspects of existence in terms of the economy. It equates human progress with sustained economic growth (Biesta 2005; 2013; Bockman 2013). Performativity is a product of this. This is a precarious shift as it sees teachers striving to be 'calculable rather than memorable' (Ball 2012, p.145) and results in a reduction in teacher agency and autonomy (Huber *et al.* 2004; Murphy *et al.* 2020;

Razza *et al.* 2020. A person's worth and value in a particular field are based on their performance in their field and their output. The worth of the child is based on how well they perform, and that of the teacher is subsequently based on the success of the child. This means that teachers and students, like many others, are 'living in an age of calculation' (Ball 2003, p.215).

This current culture of performativity has changed what it means to be a teacher (Murphy *et al.* 2020) as it alters the teacher's role and autonomy by imposing restrictive educational policies which are aligned with a performance agenda. Murphy *et al.* (2020) and Razza *et al.* (2020) highlight a reduction in autonomy as a stressor for educators. There is no room for spirituality in their work, particularly if it is not religiously orientated and in direct alignment with the ethos of denominational schools (Gibson 2014). As a result, the wellbeing of educators and students is impacted by contemporary approaches to curriculum and the loss of spirituality in education. Ruth (2023) links this to a widespread disillusionment experienced by educators and students. While the research of Razza *et al.* (2020) is contextualised within an American early childhood education setting, similar findings of educator exhaustion and burnout are reported in other relevant literature (Murphy *et al.* 2020; Charzyńska *et al.* 2021; Pong 2024; Van Eycken *et al.* 2024). Anxiety, mental ill health and career satisfaction are significantly impacted by living in 'an existence of calculation' (Ball 2003, p.215). As a consequence of such stressors, both at home and at school, the holistic wellbeing of the educator is negatively impacted (Murphy *et al.* 2020; Charzyńska *et al.* 2021; Peiris *et al.* 2024).

4.5.2 Diminished Childhood

The continued influence of neoliberalism results in an advancing relationship between education and the economy. For Hyde (2021), this is of great concern due to its potential to damage children as a result of conditioning them to believe that their worth is correlated with their 'output, utility or productivity' (Hyde 2021, p.16), guided largely by high-stakes testing. This climate enforces a culture of silence and suppression of children and the abandonment of the spiritual domain in educational discourse. Entire aspects of their being are rendered meaningless as they come to believe that only certain dimensions of their identity are valued. 'Children come to think that their teachers are not interested, and so remain silent about their experiences and ideas, and the cycle of secrecy perpetuates' (Hyde 2021, p.16). The silencing of the child's innate spirituality

drastically impacts their identity as they are required to manipulate who they are in response to the requirements of neoliberalism. As such, children are compelled to adapt to who they are, their thoughts on meaning and value, and experience isolation. As the focus continues to be on state examinations in Ireland (Hederman 2012), the research of Murphy *et al.* (2020) reveals that the culture of performativity and high-stakes testing have a severely destructive influence on students. While Murphy *et al.* (2020) acknowledge that contemporary reform seems positive, the stronghold of the state examinations continues to influence educators and students, yet consideration of an alternative approach, as a response to the relentless drive for calculable performance seems necessary.

4.5.3 An Alternative Approach

For Santotero (2017), the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) focus on the preparation and alignment of a tractable labour force damages the integrity of education and educators in the Western world. Educators who derive meaning and purpose from their work through the application of a spiritual lens are forced to endure an incessant pressure, devoid of soul or spirit, and reach burnout faster as a result (Mata-McMahon 2016; Hyde 2021; Van Eycken *et al.* 2024; Pong 2024). In the current policy climate, it is teachers who are amenable, obedient or even detached that policy writers influenced by performativity require. However, an alternative is required as ‘teachers who persist in exercising their moral agency under these conditions may experience moral madness’ (Santoro 2017, p.50). Mooney Simmie and Moles (2020) wish to see what Biesta (2013) refers to as ‘the beautiful risk of education’ (Biesta 2013, p.1) endorsed within educational discourse. Ethics and risk-taking are central to this understanding of education. These authors aim to promote the desirability of risk in education in stark contrast with the current ethos which idealises teachers who are ‘unproblematic implementers of policies and curricula provided from external sources’ (Mooney Simmie and Moles 2020, p.388). This requires an acknowledgement of the spirit.

While Section 3.2.4 explores contemporary concerns with spirituality which is overtly individualistic and self-indulgent, Paolantonio (2019) presents the role of education in the emergence of the person as unique, distinct and irreplaceable within the context of relationships. This author believes such individualisation should occur through the facilitation of ‘responsive relationships to the other and the world’ (Paolantonio 2019,

p.9). de Souza (2016) argues that it is the current scientific worldview that is responsible for the prioritisation of the individual over the collective. Gracie and Wilkinson (2022) argue for the inclusion of spirituality in education as part of much-needed reform, a necessary requirement from a human rights perspective. They suggest that when spirituality is considered through the lens of human rights, then perhaps a rights-respecting curriculum is the way forward (Lundy and Cook-Sather 2016). Consequently, the voice of the child is heard and celebrated as they enter into dialogic pedagogy with their teachers. Evidently, this approach faces myriad difficulties posed by current educational discourse as explained in this section and Section 2.2 which explores the current reality.

When voicing the need for attending to the spiritual domain, de Souza (2016) argues that the goal of education should be to develop the child's capacity for relationships in order to engage fully in the human experience. de Souza (2016) seems to identify the capacity to enter into meaningful, fruitful relationships with the self and with others as the ultimate goal of education. This will naturally foster a sense of respect, acceptance and inclusion and the realisation that the wellbeing of the human person also directly correlates to the wellbeing of the wider community. Addressing the spiritual dimension of the child in education will enable connectedness to flourish and children to develop into compassionate, concerned, considerate adults who become active members of inclusive communities. Perhaps it is this that should be the ultimate goal for a sustainable education system that aims to prepare children for the global world of the 21st century.

4.6 Conclusion

This series of chapters has presented a review of the large body of literature pertaining to this study. This narrative view was undertaken to contextualise the research problem within current academic, societal, and educational discourse (Rowley and Slack 2004). The literature reviewed in this chapter focused on the spirituality of the educator and the spiritual development of the child, as well as spirituality in the curriculum. From the literature presented, it is evident that spirituality is a highly complex social phenomenon. It is understood in myriad ways and its relationship to religion is a contentious issue. This chapter highlights the complexity surrounding the position of spiritual development in education, which is both valued and contested in various contexts. The literature reviewed also indicates that this contentious issue is highly influenced by the current

culture of performativity which impinges on education at policy and practice levels. As evidenced by the literature investigated, the spirituality of the educator is of critical importance, yet its acceptance in various settings is contested. This is also the reality of the spirituality of the child. From the literature reviewed it is evident that a gap exists in contemporary literature in relation to the spiritual identity of primary school educators in Ireland and their perceptions of spiritual development. The present study addresses the gap identified on the spirituality of educators in Ireland. Chapter 5 presents the methodology utilised in the study in order to attend to the voices currently absent within extant research.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the chosen methodological approach and to delineate how data collection and analysis were undertaken in alignment with the study's epistemological assumptions and theoretical foundations. The validity and reflexivity of the study, as well as its ethical considerations and methodological limitations are also discussed in this chapter.

5.1 Epistemological Assumptions

The epistemological assumptions of this study have emanated from the way in which the research question presupposes the nature of reality i.e., its ontology (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995). According to Smith *et al.* (2022), the prime reason for choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) should be its alignment with the epistemological position of the research project. There are implicit assumptions and beliefs within the research question (Section 1.1.1), that suggest what information and insights the data collected can provide. Epistemology is 'the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology' (Crotty 1998, p.3) It refers to what knowledge is and how it is acquired. It is concerned with the relationships between the knower and the known and asks the question, 'How do we know what we know?' (Maynard 1994; Dew and Foreman 2020). The application of an overtly scientific model and positivist approach to the study of social sciences is heavily criticised due to the distinctive reality of the individual human experience (Bryman 2016). The purpose of the present study calls for an alternative understanding to a positivistic approach.

Interpretivism is the epistemological understanding which contrasts with positivism (Bryman 2016). It requires an approach to research which acknowledges the meaning of social reality for human beings and therefore, perceives that human actions are meaningful in a way that is not reflected in the natural sciences (Schutz 1962). This research project is influenced by the epistemological belief that the experience of each individual in the creation, modification, and interpretation of the social world is particular to them, it is relativistic and idiographic and is not an 'absolutist, external reality' (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p.8). The research design of this study operates on the epistemological

assumption that educators are social actors who contribute to the construction of reality in schools and bring to this their own experiences, assumptions and subjective understandings of spirituality, which influence their professional practice (Hennink *et al.* 2011). According to Neuman (2000), the worldview of the researcher and research question is manifest in the chosen research design.

5.2 Research Design

Informed by the epistemological assumptions guiding this study, the research design is situated within the interpretivist paradigm and employs IPA (Smith *et al.* 2022). The understanding of a worldview as a set of philosophical underpinnings which orientate the researcher stems from Guba's (1990) description of the concept as 'a basic set of beliefs that guide action' (Guba 1990, p.17). This is also called a paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1990), a term first used by Kuhn (1962) who defined it as an 'entire constellation of beliefs, values... shared by members of a given community' (Kuhn 1962, p.162). The present study's location within the interpretivist paradigm assumes that the individual has an active role in constructing their social reality and related meanings which are 'multiple and relative' (Crotty 1998, p.45). Unlike those identified within the positivist tradition, interpretivist research is concerned with understanding the subjective work of the human experience (Cohen *et al.* 2007, p.22). It is based on the assumption that knowledge about a social phenomenon is derived from social actors, who are continually arriving at intermediate knowledge and meanings. This interpretivist research is underpinned by Weber's (2019) seminal concept of *verstehen*, meaning 'understanding' or 'interpretive understanding.' In his posthumous work first published in 1922, Weber states the researcher is required to move past objectivity into a realm of empathy and deep insight to understand the subjective experiences and actions of the research participants.

5.2.1 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research explores and understands the meanings people assign to their experiences. When conducting a qualitative research project, the aim is to illuminate meanings that are 'less perceptible' (Tuffour 2017, p.1). A qualitative approach to research prioritises the exploration, understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon and how it is experienced, where the phenomenon is the 'abiding concern' (Anderson and Olsen 2006, p.31) of the research. Qualitative research is deliberate in its avoidance of a

'preoccupation with measuring, counting and prediction' (Tuffour 2017, p.2) and its rejection of the norms of the natural scientific model. Instead, it emphasises a relationship between theory and research which is inductive, as well as the generation of theories. Such a research approach aligns with the underpinnings of this study due to its understanding of social reality as 'a constantly shifting emergent property' (Bryman 2016, p.33) created by individuals.

Qualitative research is both idiographic and emic as it aims to comprehend the experiences and understandings of the participants from the participants themselves (Tuffour 2017). The literature review revealed a significant gap regarding teachers' experiences of spirituality and undertaking experiential qualitative research has the potential to illuminate the lived experience of the teacher and heighten awareness regarding that experience (Larkin *et al.* 2019). A qualitative approach to this study was deemed appropriate due to its capacity to provide a detailed view of a complex phenomenon and reveal the multifarious nature of the human experience, as well as its potential for exploring lesser-known or understood phenomena (Creswell 2013; Tuffour 2017). The researcher's conceptualisation of her role in the research process was also influential in the adoption of a qualitative approach. The role was understood to be that of data collector and also interpreter, who is required to gain insights through analysis and interpretation, while acknowledging her experiences and value systems in the process (Saldaña 2011). 'Researchers must decide on the best approach based on the nature and context of their research and their overarching epistemological posture' (Boadu 2021, p.409). Using qualitative methodology aligns with the epistemological assumptions previously discussed and avoids a research scenario described by Maxwell (2009) as attempting to 'do a physically demanding job in clothes that don't fit' (Maxwell 2009, p.214).

5.2.2 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA is a qualitative approach to research centred on the examination of how participants make sense of their life experiences. While its best-known applications are in the field of psychology, it is increasingly being applied within the realms of human, social and health sciences (Smith *et al.* 2022). Smith (2004) advocates for the use of IPA outside of health psychology and states that it is more important to ensure that the epistemological underpinnings of the approach are in alignment with the research problem rather than

an overt concern with boundaries. IPA was identified as a suitable research approach for this project as the researcher was concerned with the exploration of ‘participants’ personal and lived experiences, in looking at how they make sense and meaning from those experiences’ (Smith 2004, p.48). Experience itself is acknowledged as a complex concept and IPA relies on Dlithey’s (1976) understanding of experience. It is a comprehensive unit that is made up of parts of life. These parts are often separated and interrupted in time but are linked together as a result of their common meaning. An IPA interview aims to ‘recall their parts and their connections and discover common meaning’ (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.2).

The decision to employ IPA was influenced by the complex phenomenon being studied. Within the present study, the participants’ differences as individuals and professionals encouraged the assumption that varying perspectives on spirituality exist among them. As a result, IPA was chosen in order to access, analyse and interpret the rich detailed, lived experience of the participants (Boadu 2021). The primary aims of IPA are to carefully examine the manner in which a person makes sense of their life experience and to provide, in detail, an account of the experience in order to understand it (Tuffour 2017). IPA aims to ‘stand in the shoes’ (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014, p.8) of the participant, though never entirely possible, through an in-depth exploration of their lived experience, giving full appreciation to each individual account. The approach is concerned with rigorously understanding the participant’s lived experiences and the personal meaning and perspective the participant maintains. This perspective is then reported as a perspective from an emic, insider position (Saldaña and Omasta 2018; Tallman 2019). The role of the researcher is acknowledged by the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, which align with the epistemological assumptions previously discussed. The researcher’s role in the process is significant as an interpretative relationship with the data is required (Smith *et al.* 2022).

5.3 Theoretical Foundations

This section explains three key theories which provide a foundation for the methodological decisions underpinning this study namely, Phenomenology, Idiography and Hermeneutics.

5.3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology attempts to examine and understand the lived experience of the human person (Bolderston 2012). IPA is phenomenological due to its concern with the participant's perception of an object, event or experience. The theses of four key phenomenological philosophers are integrated by Smith *et al* (2022), namely: Husserl (1927); Heidegger (1962); Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1956). Their philosophical understandings are employed to assist IPA researchers with understanding the lived experience of the participant in a manner that illustrates phenomenology as 'a singular but also pluralist endeavour' (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.7). Since the end of the 20th Century, the application of phenomenological thinking and the use of textual analysis of stories has been noted in the field of education, as well as the areas of health and psychology where it traditionally lay. It is employed by scholars to 'inform, inspire and transform current thinking and practice in the health care and education disciplines' (Vandermause and Fleming, 2011, p.368). Recent scholarly work by international educational researchers highlights its value as a methodological approach for illuminating the experience of teachers in relation to a particular phenomenon (Crawford 2019; Gillespie 2019; Tallman 2019).

Phenomenologists utilise participants' 'perception of the world... as [a] starting point in understanding social phenomena' (Ernest 1994, p.25). While it is concerned with the perception of the individual it recognises the role of the researcher in analysing the experience of the participant (Smith 2004). Edmund Husserl's phenomenological concern lay with identifying how a person might come to know their own experience. It considers consciousness deeply and calls for a significant level of reflexivity which requires stepping outside of one's 'natural attitude and adopting a phenomenological attitude' (Husserl 1927, p.2). This influence encourages IPA researchers to focus on engaging with the process of reflection. The adoption of a purely Husserlian approach to phenomenological research calls for rigorous attention to be placed on the data and for the influence of any external theory, knowledge or preconceptions to be set aside to 'bracket' that which is often taken for granted (Husserl 1927). However, significant arguments exist against the ability to separate all pre-existing knowledge and experience in order to examine another's human experience. Tuffour (2017) describes Husserl's concept of pure experience as 'elusive and inaccessible' (Tuffour 207, p.3), as the examination of an experience usually occurs after the event has already taken place. It is

for this reason that IPA aligns with phenomenology and the hermeneutic tradition which is based on the works of Heidegger (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1956). Their theses form an argument which denies the human person's ability to separate experience from prior knowledge and experiences due to the person's embedded position in the world of language and encounters (Finlay 2011).

5.3.2 Hermeneutics

IPA is strongly underpinned by Hermeneutics, which is concerned with interpretation, meaning-making, and 'capturing the uniqueness of an event' (Yin 2011, p.20). According to Rutt (2006), 'Hermeneutics without phenomenology is interpretation without context, without situating in it in the world. Phenomenology without hermeneutics is arguably nothing but a façade' (Rutt 2006, p.2). IPA utilises the theories of Heidegger (1962), Schleiermacher (1998), Ricoeur (1970) and Gadamer (1960) to intertwine hermeneutics and phenomenology, which supports this study's concern with acknowledging the role of the researcher and enhancing the validity of the study through reflexivity. Smith *et al.* (2022) state that IPA is a double hermeneutic as the researcher is making meaning from the participant's meaning-making. This entrusts the researcher with a central role in the analysis of the data and requires the complex relationship between interpretation and prior knowledge to be accessed. This must be done by maintaining an authentically reflexive position (Section 5.8).

One of the primary goals of applying a phenomenological lens to this study was to create 'a picture of the issue of phenomenon for people other than the participants' (Bolderston 2012, p.67). While the sample of ten educators is relatively small, the insights and experiences shared by the participants provide a potential insight into the lived experience of primary school teachers in Ireland through the themes generated when the data was analysed. The application of a hermeneutical lens to this study poses questions about the uniqueness of the teachers' experiences and how, through interpretation, they come to know their experiences (Yin 2011; Smith *et al.* 2022). When engaging in analysis of the data, Schleiermacher (1998) suggests that when it is rigorous, comprehensive and holistic, the researcher can come to 'an understanding of the utterer better than he understands himself (Schleiermacher 1998, p.226). However, Gadamer (1985) disagrees that this is the goal of hermeneutics. An attempt should be made to 'capture the perspective with which [the author] has formed his views' (Gadamer 1985, p.259). While

this view is not entirely different from Schleiermacher's (1998), it purports that the researcher should reach a deeper level of understanding by fusing the participant's original meaning with the researcher's reality.

5.3.3 Idiography

IPA is idiographic, a term first used by neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Windelband in 1894. The application of an idiographic lens to research facilitates the production of images of the human person 'in the total wealth and profusion of their uniquely peculiar forms and with their full and vital individuality preserved intact' (Windelband 1980, p.179). The idiographic nature of IPA is a foundational element of the philosophical underpinnings of this research project as it is concerned with the specific experiences of the human person, the details and the understanding of individual experience. Whilst this can be considered a limitation, it provides the study with tremendous potential for illuminating the lived experience of the 10 participants in relation to the abstruse phenomenon of spirituality being explored.

While the philosophy of IPA significantly values the individual and the particular, the framework provides a clear opportunity for identifying the common and the general within the lived experience of the participants. When the research commits fastidiously to the process of data analysis, the convergence and divergence between the participants' experiences can be illuminated. According to Smith *et al.* (2022), this should be undertaken cautiously in order to produce 'fine-grained accounts of patterns of meaning for the participants' reflection upon a shared experience' (Smith *et al.* p.31). The findings of the analytical process are then connected to existing literature and contribute to extant nomothetic research. In short, the 'specifics are unique, but they are hung on what is shared and communal' (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.32).

IPA researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal. This aligns with the epistemological understanding that underpins this study, due to the emphasis placed on the subjective, individual experience of the participant (Cohen *et al.* 2007). This requires a focus on the detailed analysis of an individual participant until some degree of closure has been reached before moving on to the next case. Only when this had been achieved with each case was an attempt made to cross-analyse, compare and contrast, looking for 'convergence and divergence' (Smith 2004, p.42). Where appropriate, an IPA study can be undertaken with a single case, as a single case can be said to bring us closer to the

universal when it is analysed deeply enough. However, in this current research, a small sample was recruited to facilitate movement between important themes generated in the analysis of the group, while providing examples from the stories of the individual participants.

The theoretical framework of the study, which enables the researcher to align with a particular research design, is influenced by the researcher's prior experiences, theoretical understandings and also existing research, which provide an argument for the rigour and appropriateness of the chosen means of study (Agee 2008; Ravitch and Riggan 2017). It can be argued that the centrality of identity and its emergence as a key organising principle of IPA, alongside the employment of IPA by Gillespie (2019) in a study on teacher spirituality increases the rationale and also the relevance of its theoretical underpinnings in this study. It is necessary to reflect upon and clearly illuminate the understanding out of which the framework for the current research has arisen, since without a solid theoretical framework, the research is undermined. This means that when confronted with 'ambiguity, complexity or change... [researchers] are unable to fall back on a coherent rationale for their choices' (Ravitch and Riggan 2017, p.4).

5.4 Sampling

According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), the sampling of an IPA study depends on four key elements: the depth of analysis of a single case; the richness of the individual cases; how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases and the pragmatic restrictions one is working under. The last category includes time constraints or access to participants. Within traditional phenomenological research, a sample size of five to 25 participants is recommended (Creswell 2014). The sample size of 10 participants within the present study falls within the recommended parameters of IPA samples which are 'small, purposively selected and carefully situated' (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.24), so IPA projects are most commonly concerned with 'collecting qualitative data from a reasonably homogeneous group who share a certain contextual perspective' (Larkin *et al.* 2019, p.184). The context of this study means that a sampling strategy which sought out primary school teachers in Ireland was required. This was the central element of homogeneity connecting the participants as all ten were teachers in primary schools. However, in order to capture the complexity of the teachers' lived experience concerning spirituality, it was important to explore the phenomenon from more than one perspective

(Larkin *et al.* 2019). For this reason, the researcher made a deliberate effort to recruit educators from a range of geographical locations, in schools of diverse characteristic spirit.

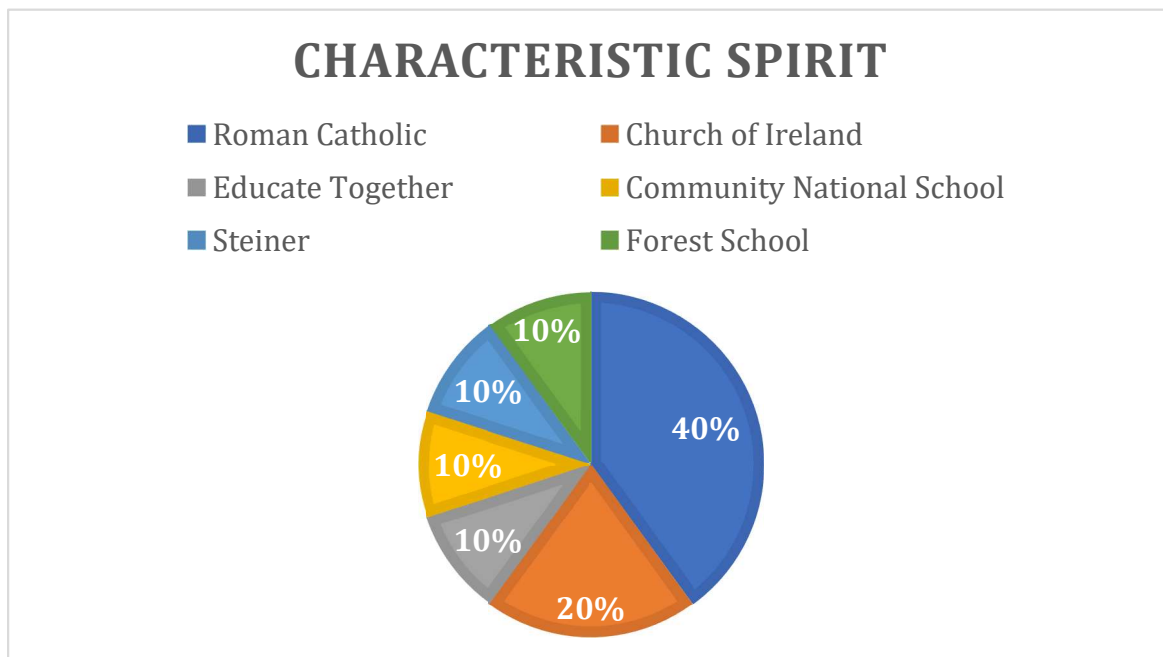


Figure 5.1 Characteristic Spirit

A sample of 10 primary school teachers (adults over 18) were recruited from varying school patron bodies namely: Roman Catholic (RC) schools, Church of Ireland (CoI) schools; Educate Together (ET) schools, Community National Schools (CNS), Steiner Schools and Forest Schools as represented in Figure 5.1. Larkin *et al.* (2019) effectively use metaphorical language to describe directly related groups that have subsamples immersed in the same experience. They are likely to have different views, and while there are differences, they are ‘all surfing the same wave’ (Larkin *et al.* 2017, p.186). This aligns with the sampling of the current study who share the experience of being a primary school educator in Ireland yet differ in the context of their school’s characteristic spirit. The participants' years of experience ranged from one year to 36 years as an educator. Research sites included both DEIS and non-DEIS schools, as well as urban and rural schools. The gender representation within the sample group closely relates to that of Eurostat (2022) statistics which places female teachers at 85% and male teachers at 15%. These key elements are represented in figure 5.2.



Figure 5.2 Key Sampling Elements

Table 5.1 situates the participants in their respective settings using pseudonyms, as discussed further in this chapter.

Table 5.1 Pseudonyms and Settings

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Characteristic Spirit of their School</i>
Aisling	Roman Catholic School
Catherine	Roman Catholic School
Grace	Forest School
Marie	Community National School
Megan	Roman Catholic School
Michael	Educate Together School
Rachel	Steiner School
Sally	Roman Catholic School
Sophie	Church of Ireland School
Stephen	Church of Ireland school

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) in order to align with the underpinnings of IPA. Figure 5.3 highlights the criteria which were identified in order to attend to the varying voices of educators and the contexts in which they are found. The small sample size was easily maintained as it was often the case that participants met more than one criterion.

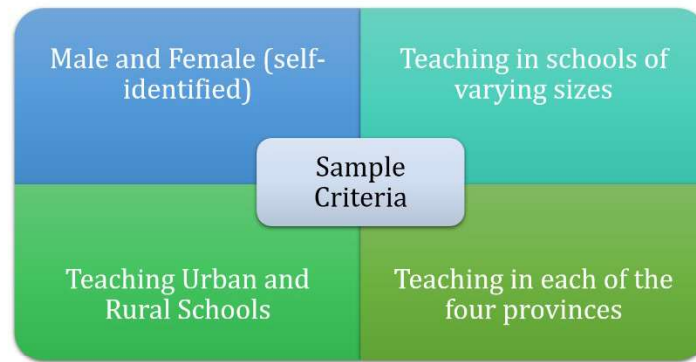


Figure 5.3 Sampling Criteria

At the beginning of the recruitment process, emails were sent to the respective education officers of each patron body. Initial contact yielded zero responses; therefore, the process was repeated. At this point, eight willing primary educator volunteers responded and were recruited as research participants. Eight participants enabled the idiographic nature of IPA and its commitment to the particular to be upheld, yet also focused on shared elements (Smith *et al.* 2022). However, following reflection with critical friends and engagement with literature, two further participants were recruited using the recruitment notice (Appendix 4) shared on social media in order to access educators in both Steiner and Forest School settings. In accordance with the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of IPA, the researcher briefly discussed the phenomenon at the centre of the research in order to provide the participants with time to think about their lived experience deeply and to support their ability to provide informed consent to participate in the research (Vandermause and Fleming 2011). A Participant information sheet was shared (Appendix 5) and the researcher ensured that consent was informed and voluntary. While the small sampling may suggest that IPA is somehow ‘easy’ this is a mere illusion of a ‘demanding enterprise’ which requires a ‘wide repertoire of skills’ (Smith *et al.* 2009, p.13). The following section delineates how data was collected from the recruited participants.

5.5 Data Collection

5.5.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

The research question, which focuses on the spiritual identity of educators and their perceptions of spirituality in primary schools, determined the data collection strategy (Tuffour 2017). The researcher deemed it essential to choose a method of data collection which answered the research question primarily and also contributed to a rigorous,

coherent research design. A key aim of this research was to provide access to the individual story, perceptions, insights and lived experience of the spirituality of each of the ten participants while attending to the complexities of qualitative research (Rubin and Rubin 2012; Flick 2018). As a result, interviews, more specifically, semi-structured interviews, were chosen as the primary data collection instrument in this study. Interviews are a common method of eliciting qualitative data due to the provision of insight they give into the person's behaviour and the meaning that they ascribe to that behaviour. Individual, semi-structured interviews are in alignment with the theoretical framework underpinning the study as they reduce the risk of individual voices being lost in a focus group scenario (Bradbury Jones *et al.* 2009). They are a way of not simply listening to but 'hearing and gaining an understanding of people's stories' (Bolderston 2012, p.67).

The researcher was guided by the literature suggesting that semi-structured interviews of substantial length are recommended when approaching research phenomenologically with no more than ten participants (Bolderston 2012). This guideline was followed closely, following Smith's *et al.* (2022) approach to conducting data collection when engaged in IPA. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the interview agenda to be loosely set while offering the researcher the option to explore tangential issues as they arose (Bell 2009). Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, a secure online platform. Covid-19 saw a dramatic increase in the use of platforms such as Teams and Zoom to engage in the process of data gathering using remote interviews. The researcher was cognisant of perceived drawbacks to remote interviewing such as decreased depth of interaction and diminished rapport between researcher and participant (Irvine *et al.* 2013). However, the researcher was also conscious of the potential for remote interviewing to expand the study's geographical reach, increase the feasibility of pre- and post-interview interactions. It also had the capacity to enhance the participants' options regarding the data collection location, to positively impact the rigour of the study (Keen *et al.* 2022). An interview brief was conducted with each participant in order to guide and socialise the participant on what to expect (Wahyuni 2012; Smith *et al.* 2022). Online interactions with participants, where the researcher's gratitude and openness, along with appropriate 'on-camera researcher body language' (Keen *et al.* 2022, p.4) facilitated the development of a rapport with willing participants and supported the collection of rich, detailed data using a virtual method. Interviews began with more informal conversations

about school life in general, eagerness for summer holidays and other topics such as online platform familiarity since the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed the researcher and the participant to ease into the situation. The time for the interview to begin seemed to arrive naturally at which point the researcher would remind the participant about the audio recording, provide the required ethical assurance and seek consent to begin the recording.

Intentional, necessary interview questions were chosen based on the research question (Appendix 6) and were supported by the extant literature pertaining to the phenomenon being studied (Castillo-Montoya 2016). The interview questions formed the basis for data collection; however, they were not considered entirely resolute. The researcher aimed to avoid a situation where the questions were overly prescriptive and limiting in a manner which may override what the participants expressed in relation to their experiences (Biggerstaff and Thompson 2008). The nature of the study enabled the researcher to glean insights from the participants by being open-minded, curious, and flexible when listening to them narrating their own stories in their own words to illuminate how their experiences have been influenced by culture, society, history and economy (Finlay 2011). The researcher operated on the understanding that at the heart of interview research is 'an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth' (Seidman 2013, p.9). During this process, guided by broad, general questions, participants were free to share constructed meaning through discussion and interaction with another, in this instance, the researcher (Hays and Singh 2012; Creswell 2014). Due to the study's location within the interpretivist paradigm, and the philosophical lenses applied through the use of IPA, the researcher was open to 'unexpected or unfamiliar responses, making space for an interactive exchange to manifest' (Vandermause and Fleming p. 369). In order to attend to IPA correctly, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) highlight the importance of sensitivity to other forms of communication such as non-verbal and non-behaviours. For this reason, a research journal was employed to hold notes gathered *in situ*, as well as pre-and post-interview reflections. This journal was engaged alongside a live document used for reflexivity and validity, as discussed further in Section 5.8.

5.5.2 Pilot Interviews

Pilot interviews provide the opportunity for questions to be modified and also improve the validity of the process (Seidmann 2006; Bolderston 2012). Initially, a decision was

made to undertake 2 pilot interviews in order to trial engagement with the process and craft of semi-structured interviews, as well as to examine the success of the interview schedule in attending to the research question. Here the researcher engaged with the four phases of ‘Interview Refinement Protocol’ displayed in Figure 5.4. This was suitable for use with semi-structured interviews and supports the collection of rich, detailed data which captures the experience of the participant with as much truth as possible (Castillo-Montoya 2016). Phase 3 focuses on the acquisition of feedback from the pilot participant with a view to enhancing the trustworthiness and reliability of the interview protocol.

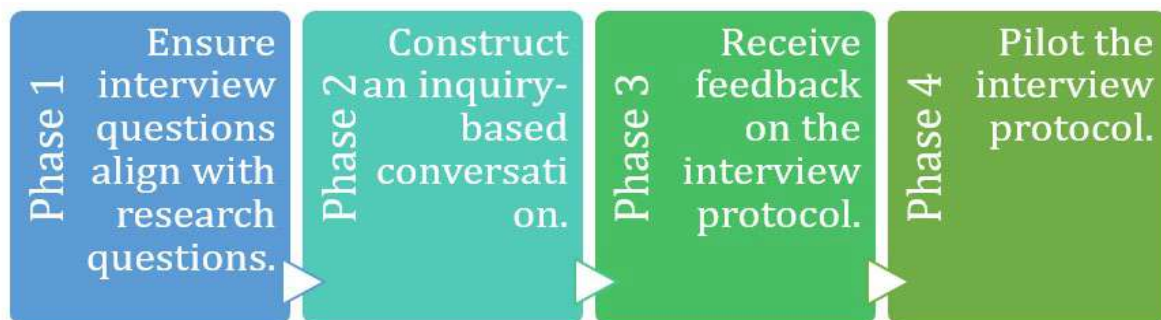


Figure 5.4 IRP Protocol

Following dialogic reflection with the pilot participants, engagement with the interview transcripts, periods of reflexive writing, and the process of IPR, a third pilot interview was undertaken in order to refine the research instrument further and Phase 4 was completed. This supported the researcher in her quest to develop a research instrument that was appropriate for the participants to engage with and also to achieve congruency with the aims of the research. (Jones *et al.* 2014). Further insights gleaned included the importance of centring interview questions most closely related to the purpose of the research in the middle of the interview, in order to strengthen the rapport and encourage the greatest depth of answering (Rubin and Rubin 2012). During the pilot interviews, participants were asked initially to discuss their identity as educators. This proved to be an ineffective way to begin the interview. The interview schedule was amended to allow the participant to enter more naturally into the conversation and were simply asked, ‘Can you tell me about your school? Interview questions were also adjusted to include less theoretical language and the importance of asking one question at a time was heightened for the researcher (Rubin and Rubin 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale 2018). The manner in which the data was analysed is discussed in the following section.

5.6 Data Analysis

This section discusses the analytical procedures applied to data collection. As is generally the case within qualitative research, there is no exact prescription for undertaking data analysis with IPA. The following section describes the steps taken to analyse the data, as influenced by a number of IPA scholars (Crawford 2019; Gillespie 2019; Tallman 2019; Smith *et al.* 2022) while attending to the theoretical framework in which the study is grounded. Qualitative data analysis is an initially inductive process, which involves moving back and forth between the data collected and the themes emerging until a comprehensive set of themes has been established. Deductive thinking may then be introduced in order to determine whether or not further information is required to support each theme (Creswell 2014). It is important to note that data analysis is engaged throughout every stage of a study as collection and analysis are not two separate stages. The ‘inseparability of methods and findings’ (Emerson *et al.* 1995 in Ravitch and Riggan 2017, p.67) was considered throughout this study.

5.6.1 Analytical Procedures in IPA

Data analysis in IPA requires execution in a highly detailed manner (Smith *et al.* 2022). This has the capacity to generate novel insights into the lifeworld of the participant when engagement with the data is at an interpretative and theoretical level. Therefore, patience and openness are required when analysing the data in order to allow the authentic voice of each educator to emerge, (Chan *et al.* 2013). The researcher’s immersion in the data, through multiple readings and re-listening to audio recordings is necessary, as each new reading and audio session can reveal something new or produce a contemporary understanding. Each interview was transcribed by the researcher. While Bolderston (2012) describes transcription as an ‘arduous and time-consuming process’ (Bolderston 2012, p.74), it is a considerably worthwhile way of becoming familiar with the data gathered and an extract is provided in Appendix 7. Smith (2004) notes the discipline required in order to be able to truly attend to the individual experiences of the participants. IPA researchers are required to ‘listen’ for the existence of something operating at a deeper level such as the intentions and motives of the participants in order to ascertain what is going on ‘between the lines that may reveal... deeper meaning’ (Yin 2011, p.28). In accordance with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, the data collected was analysed using a hermeneutical approach which occurs at an interpretative level

(Smith *et al.* 2022). This was undertaken in order to reveal the experience of a human person, making sense of a particular phenomenon, in a given situation.

Data analysis within IPA is considered double hermeneutic due to the interplay between two layers of analysis; that of the participants make meaning and then the research attempts to decode it (Smith 2004). The data collected is analysed inductively in order to gain an insight into the participants' experiences and the meaning that they assign to them (Tuffour 2017). As a result of the exchange between the participants' experiences and the researcher's analysis, it is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge the potential for distortion and filtration to occur. This is due to the interpretative nature of IPA. This was attended to by enhancing the trustworthiness of the analysis process (Lincoln and Guba 1985), further discussed in Section 5.8. In order to do this, Colaizzi's (1978) framework for data analysis calls for results to be validated by returning them to the participants, an appropriate measure of trustworthiness where a phenomenological lens has been applied. This step ensured that the data which has been collected and analysed had not been misinterpreted. It is necessary, according to Creswell (2014), for the focus to remain on the meaning the participants bring to the phenomenon being researched and not that of the researcher.

5.6.2 From the individual to the shared

The analysis of qualitative data using the IPA framework requires immersion within the data in order to 'try to step into the participants' shoes as far as possible' (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.) Within IPA, data analysis begins ideographically and eventually moves from the particular to the shared. Each participant's experience is analysed individually, in a manner that allows a case study for each participant to be presented. Then, from the personal level, the analysis moves 'outwards' (Larkin *et al.* 2019, p.190). It is also beneficial to operate with one group at a time. In this instance, educators within schools of similar characteristic spirit were analysed together, after individual analysis, in order to reveal patterns and variations in their experiences. Next, the process moved to analysis between and across the participants' experiences, focusing on thematic development and the illumination of resonances and disparities in the lived experience of the participants, as recommended by Smith *et al.* (2022)

5.6.3 Steps of Analysis

While IPA does not provide an exact 'recipe' (Pietkiewicz and Smith 2014, p.11) for the analysis of data, the flexible guidelines provided encourage focusing on four key elements during analysis, namely, content, language use, context and initial interpretivist comment. When engaging in the process of data analysis, the researcher is required to be sensitive to the risks of developing themes. This is to avoid 'the loss of Idiography, the artificial construction of consensus, or the denial of difference' (Larking *et al.* 2019, p.192). IPA themes are experiential in nature, a defining factor in the difference between Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to Thematic Analysis. While this was employed at the pilot interview stage, it was soon deemed by the researcher, in accordance with Smith's *et al.* (2022) guidelines for data analysis, to be theoretically discordant. Therefore, Figure 5.5 displays the seven guiding steps outlined by Smith *et al.* (2022), which were used to ensure the preservation of Idiography within the data analysis process, alongside the illumination of congruence and divergence.

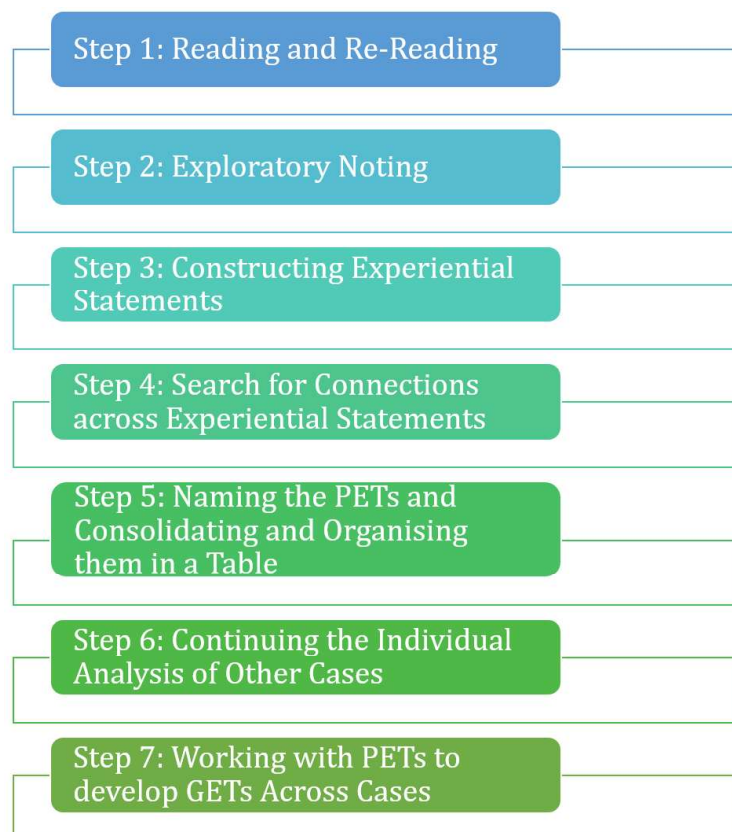


Figure 5.5 7 Steps of Data Analysis (Smith *et al.* 2022)

Transcripts were read and re-read to support immersion within the data, with audio recordings revisited to support a more complete analysis of the data. An open-minded

approach to exploratory notetaking was undertaken, with anything of interest being noted by the researcher [Appendix 8]. Engaging with a close analysis was the priority of this step, not the outcome, to 'avoid the sort of superficial reading which we engage in so often' (Smith *et al.* 2022 p.). This is not conducive to valid findings as it can lead to comments being made only on what the analyst expects to find in the text. Comments and notes were consolidated by constructing experiential statements which moved the researcher forward in a way that reflected the depth of her analytic work (Appendix 9). At this point, the search for connections across the statements begins. It is important to note that the study's idiographic lens remained a focus at this point and each step was undertaken with each participant's transcript as a whole. Personal Experiential themes (PETs) were then established to clearly explain what was being discussed for the researcher and subsequently, the reader (Appendix 10). It also supported the researcher's desire to methodically attend to the production of a paper trail to support the trustworthiness of the research. Once the initial five steps were completed, the researcher moved to the next transcript and repeated the process, treating each account as 'a complete universe of inquiry' (Smith *et al.* 2022). Finally, the researcher engaged in cross-case analysis by generating Group Experiential Themes (GETs) based on PETs (Appendix 11). Throughout the process, the researcher was cognisant of illuminating a holistic understanding of the central phenomenon and the detailed description of the participant's lived experience (Crawford 2019). This required a fervent commitment to the validity of the study, as discussed in the following section.

5.7 Validity

Validity is described as 'how accurately the account represents participants realities of a social phenomenon and is credible to them' (Creswell and Miller 2000, p.124). Seminal attempts to attend to the validity of a qualitative study were influential in this research such as a strive for trustworthiness and rigour, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). According to Seale (1999), it is essential to attend to the credibility, transferability and dependability of the research within the interpretivist paradigm. Smith *et al.* (2022) acknowledge the basis provided by such classical approaches to validity and build on them in order to achieve high-quality research when using IPA. Core elements are listed for consideration by IPA researchers which provided helpful guidelines for the enhancement of this study, including criteria established by Levitt *et al.* (2018).

Suggestions were tailored for use by the researcher, as recommended by Smith *et al.* (2022) who refrain from endorsing a prescriptive approach to validity and reliability.

5.7.1 The Independent Audit

A formal audit trail provides 'clear documentation of all research decisions and activities' (Creswell and Miller 2000, p.128). The researcher chose to document all decisions using various paper trail activities, a variety of which are included as appendices to this project. This adds to the researcher's confidence in the honesty and transparency of the research process and subsequent findings, as well as its confirmability (Seale 1999; Carcary 2006). The researcher attended to the independent audit trail by recording all data, data analysis, research journal notes (Appendix 12), reflexive writing (Appendix 13) and other relevant documents in a way that is accessible and easy to follow for an independent reader (Yin 2015; Trainer and Bundon 2021). Using dated entries to a live document supported the researcher with this process. Other evidence filed to support the validity of the research included a research proposal, ethical documents, annotated statements and documents pertaining to each layer of data analysis conducted (Smith *et al.* 2022). The independent audit trail does not aim to produce a single report claiming to be representative of a single truth. Instead, it allows for 'the possibility of a number of legitimate accounts [concerned] with how systematically and transparently this particular account has been produced' (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.153). The researcher was also supported by insights gleaned from a critical friend (Brinkmann and Kvale 2018), as well as the conversation with participants surrounding completed interview transcriptions (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As the researcher was the primary instrument for the collection and analysis of data, and in accordance with the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of the study, reflexivity was central to the validity of this project. Its importance is discussed in the following section.

5.7.2 Member -Checking

The desired objective of IPA is to understand the lived experience of the participants. In order to do this with trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln and Guba 1985) the need to develop tools exists (Alase 2017). Member checking (Creswell 2008) was used with the participants in order to amplify the authenticity of the findings and the participants were informed of this element of the process prior to engaging in the interview. Following the semi-structured interview, participants were provided with a copy of their transcript

which had any identifying information redacted. All participants responded via email to confirm that transcripts were free to be analysed and quoted verbatim. Following this, participants were invited to engage in a member check as previously discussed with them. 80% of the educators participated in member check conversations which ranged from 15 to 20 minutes. Questions were asked to confirm that the researcher had begun to interpret the experience of the educator correctly and to seek clarification in order to deepen the researcher's ability to authentically attend to the experiential reality of the educator. An example includes Aisling's mentioning that she asks her 'holiest people' to pray for her in times of need. During the member check, the researcher invited Aisling to share who the people were. Conversations were not recorded, and notes were taken with the permission of the participants. This aligns with Colaizzi's (1978) framework for increasing the validity of data gathered and analysed.

5.8 Reflexivity

Within the complex and constant processes of qualitative research, the analysis and collection of the data, as well as the modification of questions, theory development and validity considerations do not occur in a linear fashion. Engaging in a qualitative inquiry process should encourage the researcher to question personal theories, continually visit and re-visit questions and attend to conceptual frameworks to expand or modify them (Agee 2008). There is a continual exchange between these elements which requires reflexivity in order to correctly 'connect (and reconnect) the dots between the intersecting parts' (Ravitch and Riggan 2017, p.67). Constructivists acknowledge that their 'interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction' (Charmaz 2006, p.187). Therefore, the recognition of the researcher's own personal, historical and cultural background is an important part of interpretivist research. This highlights the importance of reflexivity within IPA, not just for mitigating bias or prejudice, but considering how the role of the researcher, and her culture, history, beliefs, values and experience may influence the direction of the study (Creswell and Miller 2000; Chan *et al.* 2013).

Accessing the subjective world of the participants and their complex lived experiences was not facilitated by the adoption of a deductive 'outsider' position, but by the development of 'an insider point of view, open to all possible realities' (Lodico *et al.* 2006, p.265; Saldaña and Omasta 2018). Validity can only be established when the researcher

acknowledges her role in double hermeneutic research, particularly as it is necessary for researchers engaged in a qualitative approach to research to apply a degree of subjectivity to the interpretation of the participants' experience. As a result, it was crucial for the researcher to illuminate how 'their preconceptions shape the knowledge produced through personal reflexivity in a form of self-analysis and self-evaluation' (Tuffour 2017, p.2). It was important to engage with the research process in a manner that was constantly aware of the role of the researcher, the prior knowledge and experiences on which the researcher's personal and professional identity is built and the potential such elements have to influence the data analysis and interpretation procedures (Chan *et al.* 2013; Boadu 2021). An awareness of the complexity of meaning-making and the layers in creating knowledge was central to the researcher's concern with reflexivity. It assisted with the critical acknowledgement of the researcher's 'emotional attachments and characteristics' which must be considered 'when immersed in the collection and analysis of data' (Crawford 2019, p.459). In accordance with the conceptual and philosophical underpinnings of the research, bracketing was employed to assist with this process.

5.8.1 Bracketing

Bracketing is a central Husserlian approach to validity that should be employed once a phenomenological study has been initiated (Smith *et al.* 2022). It requires thorough preparation and should begin at the initial stages of the research, prior to collecting or analysing data (Chan *et al.* 2013). This is fundamental in order to let meanings emerge which are unexpected. Bracketing assists the researcher to avoid influencing the participant's individual understanding of the phenomenon being studied. It also supports the researcher by delineating findings which are as close to the truth of the participants' experiences as possible, and Chan *et al.* (2013) claim that a realistic and practical approach to bracketing can support this research goal.

Bracketing (Chan et al. 2013)	
B	B egin with a mentality assessment of the researchers' personality.
R	R eflexivity helps the researchers to identify areas of potential bias.
A	A nalyse data in IPA using Colaizzi's (1978) method.
C	C omply with the prevailing gate-keeping policy when deciding the scope of the literature review.
K	K eep a reflexive diary, helping to awaken the researchers' own preconceptions.
E	E ngage participants in bracketing during the data collection process when indicated.
T	T horough research planning before data collection.
I	I nterview the participants using open-ended questions
N	N ot-adopt a Not-knowing stand to maintain the curiosity in the participants
G	G enerate knowledge from participants via semi-structured interviews

Figure 5.6 Bracketing (Chan et al. 2022)

There does not appear to be an agreed set of methods for undertaking bracketing and Giorgi (2011) notes that IPA does not provide an insight into how this step should be executed. To address this, Chan *et al.* (2013) provide an acronymic strategy (Figure 5.6). beginning with a mental assessment of the researcher's personality and ending with the generation of knowledge from semi-structured interviews with participants. This supported the researcher in her quest for valid, trustworthy, reflexive research. While the Husserlian principle of *epoché* suggests that preconceived beliefs and assumptions can be temporarily bracketed, other key phenomenological thinkers dispute the researcher's potential for total bracketing (Boadu 2021). One central argument states that within hermeneutical phenomenology, the researcher's experiences, understandings and knowledge cannot be bracketed entirely as it is the human person that is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Therefore, it is not possible to achieve total objectivity (Crotty 1998). For this reason, a commitment to integrity should underpin the research process, further outlined in the ethical considerations discussed in the following section.

5.9 Ethical Considerations

Qualitative research involves collecting data about people, from people (Punch 2005 in Creswell 2014). Due to the centrality of the human person and their story within a

hermeneutical phenomenological approach such as IPA, ethical considerations were attended to throughout the research process (Von Unger 2016; Creswell and Creswell 2018). In order to acknowledge this, non-maleficence remained a primary concern for the researcher from the outset. It is evident in the researcher's acceptance of a responsibility to the openness and transparency of the research process as well as the dignity, integrity and protection of the participants throughout the process (Biros *et al.* 2010; BERA 2018). This commitment to ethics is composed of two crucial elements, inspired by Guillemin and Gillam (2004) and the notion of 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004, p.262).

5.9.1 Procedural Ethics

Firstly, procedural ethics were attended to through a formal application for ethical approval from Mary Immaculate College Ethical Committee (MIREC), which was granted in May 2022 (Appendix 14). This also tasked the researcher with attending to the responsibilities associated with representing the institution. In order to guide and socialise the participants into what to expect, an interview briefing was conducted with each participant (Wahyuni 2012; Smith *et al.* 2022). Establishing an appropriate rapport with participants is essential to the success of IPA (Smith *et al.* 2022). Once informed consent was provided (Appendix 15), a two-week cooling-off period took place to safeguard the autonomy of the participants. Following this, participants were asked if they wished to proceed and reminded of their right to withdraw from the research process at any stage without consequence. Participants were also assured of their confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report and all identifying markers have been redacted.

The practice of assigning pseudonyms was considered in-depth in order to name participants respectfully. According to Brear (2018), it is an expected important art of qualitative research, but its ethics are sometimes questionable. The researcher asked participants if they wished to choose a first name pseudonym for themselves. In the instances where participants did not wish to choose, a pseudonym was suggested to them by the researcher. While Creswell (2013) assigns the responsibility of anonymity solely to the researcher, however, the findings of Allen and Wiles (2015) evidenced the importance of including participants in the naming process. This research found that this

'apparently minor part of the research process [is] of great importance to those involved' (Allen and Wiles 2015, p.155)

5.9.2 Ethics in Practice

Researchers can never fully know how questions will be interpreted or how participants will respond. While Adams (2008) shares worry about the paralysis of the research due to excessive worrying about ethics, it is necessary to consider the impact of the research throughout the process in order to ensure best practice (Agee 2008). With regard to situational ethics or 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004), a significant quantity of reflexive activity was required. Due to the complex nature of spirituality as a social phenomenon, it is possible that sensitive, existential issues may arise and all possible risks require consideration, according to Chan *et al.* (2013), who also argue that silence is an acceptable part of the data collection process. Participants, when navigating their thoughts on a nebulous concept, were afforded time to contemplate and if an incongruous ethical moment arose, it was the researcher's responsibility to respond appropriately, ending an interview for example, as 'in the end, ethical research depends on the integrity of the investigator' (Biros *et al.* 2010, p.990). A member check was also be conducted and participants were provided with appropriate resources should further support be required. Upon completion, transcripts were returned to participants for correction. IPA posits that the lived human experience can be understood through an examination of 'the meanings which people press upon it' (Smith *et al* 2022, p.28). Therefore, the researcher remained resolute in her commitment to the careful and conscientious representation of the participants and their lived reality. A number of methodological limitations are discussed in the following section.

5.10 Methodological Limitations

5.10.1 Criticisms of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA has been criticised for a variety of reasons including a claim that it does not satisfactorily acknowledge the role of language and lacks sufficient standardisation (Willig 2008; Giorgi 2011;). Such claims exist alongside the argument that it cannot accurately capture the true experience of the participants, only an opinion of it, potentially caused by an overt concern with description rather than interpretation (Brocki and Wearden 2006; Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez 2011). Critics also state that like many other phenomenological approaches to research, IPA is restrictive in the

understanding it provides as it is focused on the perception of the lived experience and not the reasons it occurs (Willig 2008). Lastly, Willig (2008) also admonishes IPA for its claim to be concerned with cognition, stating that it is not compatible with phenomenology. It is necessary for the researcher to acknowledge the criticisms and concerns of scholars and to attend carefully to the data collection and analysis processes in order to 'successfully communicate the nuances of experiences' (Tuffour *et al.* 2017, p.4). Additionally, attending authentically to the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of IPA supports the researcher in collecting rich, detailed data and presenting the lived experience of participants in a manner that acknowledges that meaning-making processes take place within the context of narratives influenced by myriad internal and external sources.

5.11 Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the methodological approach employed for the purpose of this study. Informed by epistemological assumptions, the theoretical foundations of IPA and previous research in the area of spirituality in education. While so doing it also described the data collection and analysis procedures and delineated attempts to ensure the validity of the study, the reflexivity of the researcher and the non-maleficence of the research through its ethical considerations. The following chapter presents the findings generated from data analysis and locates them within the relevant literature.

Chapter 6 – Understandings of Spirituality

6.0 Introduction

This chapter is the first in a series of four which present the findings of the research project from data gathered using semi-structured interviews. The findings identified are discussed and located within existing literature and contemporary research. The presentation of findings is not concerned with description alone as the purpose of the research is twofold: to provide an account of the data gathered and to offer an interpretation of its meaning through ‘detailed analytic interpretation of the text’ (Smith *et al.* 2022, p.110). The report is supported by substantial transcript extracts in order to give voice to the phenomenological experiences of the participants (Corden and Sainsbury 2006). To scaffold the credibility and rigour of this qualitative study, verbatim quotes, in the form of indented block quotations, are included throughout, supported by the principle of authenticity (Corden and Sainsbury 2006; Lingard 2019). The findings presented and discussed in this chapter provide an account of the lived experiences of each of the 10 participants (Table 6.0). An insight into the contextual reality of each participant is also presented in the previous chapter (Section 5.4).

Table 6.0 Participants and their school contexts

Pseudonym	Context
Aisling	Educator in a Roman Catholic school
Catherine	Educator in a Roman Catholic school
Grace	Educator in Forest Schools
Marie	Educator in a Community National School
Megan	Educator in a Roman Catholic school
Michael	Educator in an Educate Together school
Rachel	Educator in a Steiner school
Sally	Educator in a Roman Catholic school
Sophie	Educator in a Church of Ireland school
Stephen	Educator in a Church of Ireland school

Following rigorous engagement with the seven steps of IPA (Smith *et al.* 2022), four main themes emerged from the rich experiential data gleaned from 10 semi-structured

interviews and subsequent member checks. Each theme provides the foundation of each of the four sequential findings and themes are discussed in detail following their presentation. The series of findings adhere to the philosophical underpinnings of the study through ‘the interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts’ (Smith *et al.* 2022). The themes in each of the four chapters are as follows:

Chapter 6: Understandings of Spirituality

Chapter 7: The Spiritual Identity of Teachers

Chapter 8: The Spiritual Development of Children in Primary Schools

Chapter 9: Changes and Challenges to Spirituality

6.1 Understandings of Spirituality

The participants of this study understand the concept of spirituality in a variety of ways. These understandings are influenced by numerous sources and uncertainty characterises the conceptualisations of spirituality shared by 60% of the participants. The understandings of spirituality shared throughout the interviews are linked to religion in a multiplicity of ways. For some, the concepts are synonymous (Sheldrake 2007). Others perceive significant links between spirituality and religion but note differences between them (Hyde and Rouse 2022; Ng and Fisher 2022). The remainder of the participants highlight the existence of spirituality outside of religion (Elfreich 2019). These complex, nuanced and varied understandings of spirituality shared by the participants are explored in the following section.

6.1.1 Spirituality is a multifaceted, encompassing concept

In alignment with contemporary research, this study finds that spirituality is understood in a multitude of ways (MacDonald 2011). While the literature presents a variety of descriptions of the concept, there are many common conceptualisations evident in how spirituality is understood. At appropriate points during each semi-structured interview, participants were asked to share what immediate thoughts or associations came to mind upon hearing the term ‘spirituality’. The findings of this study concur with research which conceptualises spirituality in terms of connection to the self, others, nature and the environment (Hay and Nye 2006; Fisher 2011; Worthington 2012; Chapman and Miller

2022; Lee 2022; Jirásek 2023). For some participants, spirituality is linked with a connection to something more, as discussed in the following section.

6.1.1.1 Spirituality and the Self: A Sense of Meaning and Purpose

Within the literature reviewed on spirituality in Chapter 3, a connection with oneself is considered significant for the development of self-awareness, self-identity, self-worth and self-confidence. It also related closely to the establishment of a sense of meaning and purpose (Section 3.3.2), a widely agreed element of spirituality discussed further in this chapter. This research supports the extant literature as half of the participants relate spirituality to the self and have a sense of existential significance and teleological direction. Four of the ten participants, namely Aisling, Rachel, Sally, Sophie and Catherine, explicitly discuss spirituality in relation to one's connection with the self and the meaning and purpose one can draw from an awareness of spirituality in their lives, with Rachel stating it is about looking 'your own wellbeing, look after yourself first, not in a selfish way but grounding, feeling grounded in yourself.' Aisling believes that spirituality is deeply connected to a sense of being and a sense of self-worth.'

The findings of this research highlight the role of spirituality in supporting the development of a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life. This construct is foundational to the conceptualisations of spirituality shared by four participants within this study. Aisling discusses spirituality with a disposition of openness and provides insight into the plasticity of the concept in her life. Her beliefs about the phenomenon and its myriad meanings alter and change as she encounters new challenges and experiences. Aisling feels that spirituality relates to one's 'sense of purpose and your sense of being and you know, so many elements like your self-belief and your sense of self-worth.' Spirituality is a significantly influential element of the human person which permeates daily life in a variety of ways. Rachel concurs with Aisling's understanding of the malleability of one's spirituality. 'The higher power element of life' gives Rachel 'a sense of how we're here, why we're here' highlighting the capacity for spirituality to provide a sense of meaning and purpose in one's life. According to Ng and Fisher (2022), connecting to a higher power is the most important facet of spirituality.

Aisling: [Spirituality] is something that I think every conversation or deep conversation comes back to, and I think your spirituality and your sense of self basically guide everything that you do and how you conduct yourself and how you

are in your daily life and your daily meetings with people that that's what actually shines through as the person that you are.

Rachel: I think with spirituality, you have to be ready to evolve and not get too stuck in any way that you're not too black and white and that every day you're rewriting who you are, your identity as a person, knowing what's unmovable within you, your beliefs, and yet what layer you're ready to add on.

Spirituality is undoubtedly an encompassing term according to Aisling. For her, it relates strongly to the meaning and purpose she experiences in her life and the sense that 'I am where I meant to be now, and sure we'll go from there and see where we are in a while.' A connection to her spirituality has alleviated stress and strain for Aisling during challenging times in her life such as a period of job insecurity and uncertainty. She states that part of her understanding of spirituality involves 'how you are able to face challenges and overcome them.' This aligns closely with the influence of one's spiritual identity presented by Naudé and Fick (2023). Grace also relates spirituality to meaning, purpose and a sense of directionality.

Aisling: [Spirituality is] what you believe in that comforts you, or what you believe in... where we've come from, why we're here, what your purpose is, you know, your moral code. I think that's spirituality, and I certainly believe that spirituality is a much more encompassing term focusing on who you are and what you think you are and where you think you're coming from and why you're here. So many elements like your self-belief and your sense of self-worth, I think a lot of that is encompassed in spirituality now. It wasn't something that I necessarily would have thought of before.

Grace: [Being spiritual] would mean somebody who is, who was mentally well, and who was kind of either content or striving in the right direction. I think it's got to do with your sense of maybe not... I was going to say peace, around the bigger questions in life, but I don't think it has to.

The innateness of spirituality and the importance of acknowledging the spiritual domain of the human person is stressed within the research but it requires contemplation and reflection in order to acknowledge it. Catherine highlights the potential that each person has to attend to this dimension in a manner suitable for them based on their choices and

circumstances. Grace also considers spirituality to be an influential system which provides direction to the human person, accessible 'at any point that you need it. And it guides your... kind of personal rituals in a sense.' The findings of this research also highlight the evolving nature of spirituality in the trajectory of human life. Rachel shares in Grace and Catherine's understanding that there is a deeply personal element to spirituality and what it means to one person, is different to what it may mean for another. Rachel shares that throughout life, 'we're finding out as we go what fits right with us... I'm learning where that fits with me.' For Rachel, engaging with introspective work and 'questioning' allows her personal spiritual needs to come to the fore. Such questioning facilitated a powerful revelation regarding the importance of a connection to the self and its influence on health and wellbeing. This is influential on her teaching philosophy, evidenced by her belief in holistic learning approaches that foster a connection to the self in the Waldorf-influenced manner of engaging the 'head, heart and hands' (O' Shiel and O' Flynn 1998; Drašutė and Umbrasaitė 2015; Rawson 2021). Aisling's sense of certainty and security is evident and it is clear that leaning on her spiritual beliefs allows her to experience a strong sense of self which she links to spirituality. However, this is not the case for everyone and Aisling shares that those close often 'struggle' with their sense of self. While Aisling now considers spirituality to be related to having a deep connection to the self, this belief has evolved over the course of her life.

Catherine: Acknowledging that human beings have a spiritual dimension, however they may choose to express that, but to be fully human is to also develop one's spiritual dimension, to the same extent as one's physical or emotional and to look after one's spiritual health in the same way as one's physical or emotional. So how does one do that? That's an individual choice or an accident of birth.

Grace: I would consider the fact that I get up in the morning, and I make my coffee, and I go, and I sit outside and drink it... Even if it's lashing rain, I'll open the door, and I'll sit back, and I'll drink my coffee... I would consider that one of my spiritual rituals because it's one of the things that gives me a sense of peace and a sense of wellbeing, a sense of connection and meaning. So that's spiritual for me.

The findings of this research suggest that having a spiritual sense of self can provide a sense of solace, assurance and equanimity. Rachel states that spirituality has an element of 'solitude' to it. It is about fostering a sense of 'peace... quiet peace' that is accessible to

the human person. Grace concurs with this and explains that 'there's probably an element of contentment there... and an element of peace.' In accordance with Naudé and Flick (2022), Rachel states that 'spirituality is something 'that we each understand in our own way and it's a very individual journey.' Like Rachel, Sophie also offers an initial understanding of spirituality which involves one's relationship with the self which requires 'going deep into the mind' in order to understand 'how you believe the world around you works.' Sophie also concurs with Rachel's conceptualisation of spirituality as being part of a person's journey. A person can use their sense of spirituality as something to 'lean on almost. It helps you in your journey in life, you know that there is always going to be a way through.' Sally stresses the importance of having a connection to oneself, particularly when consideration is given to the multiple stresses experienced in modern life. Having a sense of spirituality provides an 'escape' for the human person in the midst of the challenges as it is 'reassuring, kind of grounding, and it's kind of like an escape.' Sally concurs with Rachel and Sophie's expressions of the importance of questioning and introspection for a spiritual connection to the self, as does Grace who states that spirituality is about 'your relationship to yourself and your introspection.' It is engagement with introspective questioning that has the potential to be transformative for the behaviour of the human person.

Sally: It's kind of like asking yourself, what is the purpose of your life? Like, I feel like... it allows for all these deep realisations that then change your character and then change your behaviour as a child and an adult.

For 60% of the participants of this study, their understanding of spirituality relates, in part, to a connection with oneself and the awareness of a sense of meaning and purpose in life. This awareness, which may require inner questioning in order to be revealed, provides guidance on what Sophie and Rachel consider the 'journey' of life. The importance of questioning and introspection for spirituality concurs with a vast body of literature which highlights the need for reflection on spirituality, particularly for educators as educators require access to and nourishment of their own spirituality in order to attend to that of that child, a concept reviewed in detail in Section 4.2.3.1.

6.1.1.2 Spirituality and Connection (Others, Something Bigger sometimes called God)

The search for connectedness is innate in the human person (Eaude 2009). The participants of this study prioritise relationships and connections in their work and in their personal lives. 80% of the participants explicitly discuss the need for relationships and connection to others, to the wider world and for some, to something larger than oneself. According to Greenfield (2018), a relationship with a higher power is important for spirituality, although this is not necessarily religiously contextualised with other scholarly works arguing that for some people, a relationship with God is the most crucial element of connectedness required for spirituality and spiritual wellbeing (Wright 2004; Sheldrake 2007; Gibson 2014; Ng and Fisher 2022). The importance of relationships for spiritual development is evident throughout the interviews with the educators. The desire for educators to belong and to experience a sense of belongingness (Greenfield 2018; Charzyńska *et al.* 2021) is visible in this research.

The centrality of connection to others is evident in Grace's conceptualisation of spirituality. She understands spirituality to be 'very positive. It's very colourful. It's a sense of peace and of safety, of belonging and of hope.' Marie and Megan also refer to the need for hope when discussing spirituality. Grace feels that spirituality is 'what you experience with a group' and this could potentially be at 'a church service.' However, it is more likely for Grace that music be utilised as the vehicle through which a spiritual connection is established than explicitly religious experiences.

Grace: I probably more often experience this with music. And playing or singing with a group of people, I find an incredibly spiritual experience. And this kind of sense of connection that is not with words that you have with us when an orchestra is playing together. And that, for me is something that's very spiritual.

Interestingly, while Grace uses the term 'connection' throughout her description of spirituality, a person's moral code and how they treat others is not something which she perceives to be spiritual or religious. Despite this assertion, Grace feels that someone 'who is spiritually conscious would probably end up being what we would say is some kind of a morally good person.' Connecting with others in a fair and just way is likely to lead to feelings of 'contentment' and 'peace' according to Grace. This is more closely related to Rachel's perceived centrality of connection within the phenomenon of spirituality. Her

exploration of spiritual and religious beliefs has allowed her to conclude that the treatment of others is central to spirituality. It is linked to the meaning and purpose of life and the belief that 'we're here for a higher good or a better good. That's a church in itself.' This learning is evidently influential on her teaching philosophy.

Grace: I don't feel it has much to do with morals. Some reason I don't, I can't.... I feel like the fair treatment of other people is just a given it's a baseline. I don't know how that ever got tied up in kind of religious practice.

Rachel: Be a good person and do good for others. When you simplify it all, that's what it comes down to, to look after each other... So that's the kind of message that I want to be able to pass on to the children that I work with, that we are part of a community and that we help each other.

Connection to a transcendent entity is understood, for the purpose of this research, to be a being or force that exists beyond the realm of human experience. This connection is significant to conceptualisations of spirituality for 80% of the participants. Sophie believes that this aspect of spirituality involves 'going deep into your mind and getting this awareness that it's not just you, it's just connecting the whole Earth.' Rachel shares that her beliefs are built upon a foundation which comes from a 'higher power element of life... giving us a sense of how we're here, why we're here.' Along with a connection to the self discussed in the previous section, Rachel's conceptualisation of spirituality has a clear sense of connection and belonging to others and to a higher power embedded within it, evidenced by the imagery shared when discussing the meaning of spirituality. While there are notable differences in the ways in which Rachel and Catherine express their spirituality, there is a link in the centrality of a higher power that they share. Catherine's conceptualisation of spirituality is centred on a personal relationship with God established and sustained through prayer. Sally's understanding is similar, and she states, 'When I hear the word spirituality, I think of something bigger than ourselves.' This is also the case for Marie, Michael, Grace and Aisling who express their beliefs in 'a higher power' sometimes called 'God.'

Rachel: I can picture a circle of people like holding hands and believing that there is some sense of higher power there, looking down on us and wanting good for each and every one of us. And that it's accessible to all... in the sense that we each

have this channel or this way of communicating with something higher than ourselves. And that we each understand that in our own way and it's a very individual journey. But then the collective for me, it's beautiful too.

Catherine: When it comes to me, it boils down essentially to a personal relationship with God, whoever or whatever you decide to call he or she. I think that that is developed through prayer... That's how I would explain that conversation we're having to a child... You need to spend time with people in order to know them and I don't think that we can be spiritual beings if we don't spend time in the presence of the Spirit.

6.1.1.3 Spirituality, the Land and Irishness

Worthington (2012) and Lee (2022) present nature as one of four key sources of spirituality. Connecting with nature, caring for the environment and relating to the world are widely agreed elements of spirituality in the literature reviewed (Louv 2005; Stanley 2013; Murphy *et al* 2018). Sobel (2004) and Nye (2018) also highlight the importance of having a sense of place in order to support meaning-making and spiritual development. The participants of this study concur with the findings in the literature and three of the participants, namely Grace, Rachel and Sophie explicitly include nature in their conceptualisations of spirituality. Grace and Rachel also connect their spiritual beliefs to the land, language and traditions of Ireland which provide them with a sense of identity.

Grace states from the outset that for her, spirituality 'definitely guides how I relate to the natural world and other kind of living things in it.' This aspect of Grace's conceptualisation of the spiritual can be traced to her Waldorf education which holds nature and the environment in a place of respect (Steiner 1995). Sophie's awareness of spirituality deepens when she spends time in nature, stating that 'I feel more spiritual when I am outside in nature.' This is the time when she feels peace and has a sense of calm, although it is difficult for Sophie to articulate exactly how nature becomes the vehicle for this type of awareness. It allows her to access an awareness that 'it's not just you, it's connecting to the whole Earth' which is central to her conceptualisation of spirituality.

Grace: You know, there's a belief that everything in nature is part of God and whatever, you know in whatever way you want to, to take it. And, and so

celebrating the seasons, and the changing of the seasons is a really important part of that spirituality.

Sophie: I don't know what it is about nature... I feel most calm when I'm in nature, and you feel grounded when you're in nature. Whereas if you feel if you're in a building... it's not that you're limited, but your mind doesn't relax as much as it is, when you're in an open space, in a big open space.

Grace's spiritual connection to nature is evidenced in her description of the Grandmother Tree, a central element of Forest School sessions which encourages children to be aware of their role in caring for the environment. The Grandmother Tree is depicted in Figure 6.1 and sourced by the researcher. This 'wise, wise woman' is referred to using a variety of names 'Máthair chríonna (Grandmother), or Seanmháthair (Grandmother) or Mamó (Granny) even.' This entity acknowledges a strong matriarchal tradition in Ireland of women who were considered 'the ingress and egress... the gatekeepers.' The role of the grandmother tree is Grace's work and her evident connection to her highlights the centrality of nature in her conceptualisation of spirituality.

Grace: [The Grandmother Tree] is a matriarchal figure in the space... I feel a very strong sense of connection to it. But explaining it to others, it's like, okay, this is just a way to kind of physically realise the understanding that we do not own nature. We're not in charge of what happens. We're here by... we're here by permission..., it's a reciprocal relationship and we need to respect it. And so, the children ask permission from Grandmother Tree.'



Figure 6.1 The Grandmother Tree (Prairie Woods 2020)

The seasons are also influential on how Rachel and Grace conceptualise spirituality. Grace's spiritual traditions are guided by the 'festivals that are kind of part of the Christian calendar.' However, she stresses that there is 'a little bit more emphasis on the nature side of things.' The celebration of Advent in Grace's multi-denominational setting illustrates the seamless blending of traditions which occurs in her teaching practice. A connection to the seasons is also important to Rachel, who feels drawn to follow the 'rhythm and routine of the year.' For her, this rhythmic cycle is a 'ritual' which is part of her work. Utilising these Celtic and Christian opportunities for celebration facilitates the growth of the community by providing moments for connection, serving as a 'community event.' Marie is highly aware of mentioning religious or cultural celebrations in her multi-denominational school following in-service which told her to be 'conscious' of what is said regarding religious and cultural celebrations.

Grace: Advent is the time for quiet and reflection. So, we would have the candles, and we would have like a nice table setting of some greenery and crystals, but you wouldn't have flowers, you wouldn't have decorations up until the actual Christmas Day. So, in some way, a lot of the traditions are quite similar to what would have happened in Ireland and in kind of older times.

Rachel: So, for instance, we have first one we do we celebrate things like St. Michael's day, something around the end of September, and then later on, we have the Advent spiral, and I need to brush up on what we've got... like St. Brigid's Day. And yeah, like St. John's Bonfire, and things like that... We also have a Bealtine festival.

Recent years have seen a notable increase in the number of Irish speakers and attempts at language revitalisation in Ireland, reflecting a broader trend of cultural preservation (O'Rourke and Walsh 2020). Irish is an important feature of Grace's identity which encouraged her to 're-learn' in recent years. Grace states that 'Irish has an important role to play in Forest Schools' and she receives invitations to engage in Forest School work in order to foster children's connection to both the land and to the language. Like Grace, Rachel also shares a spiritual connection with Gaeilge and notes that the richness present is not comparable in the English language. Following a lost connection with the Irish language for a time, Rachel experienced 'a massive sense of peace' at the return of this 'missing element' in her life. The strongly established connection to Ireland, with its

'lovely' native language and rich culture and history influenced Rachel at a pivotal stage in her career. Being part of a national community which shares in this heritage is a 'blessing.' The establishment of more 'bilingual schools' would be beneficial, according to Rachel, who states that having 'more Gaeilge' would be 'a good thing for the spiritual being.'

Grace: I think that is a crucial piece in our sense of identity, not from a nationalistic point of view, but from a sense of place because the language that comes out of the landscape is inextricably tied to it. And the way Irish was used was, was so tied to place, we would have a very strong sense of place and of our relationship with nature, through Irish, a much stronger one through Irish than I think we have through English.'

Rachel: I think when you go to the Gaeltacht (regions in Ireland where Irish is the primary spoken language of the majority of the community) and you see how strong those communities are, that you see again that connection with the land or the connection with community and owning our heritage and our history and that the culture isn't lost... Beautiful phrases and things that can never be replicated in English either. And, yeah, that's important to me and that really brought a lot of joy to me when I decided to return... I have the blessing to be part of the Irish community and that we have this lovely second language and to be part of that again.

While the centrality of nature is evident in some existing conceptualisations of spirituality found in this study, for Michael, it was an entirely new idea. Throughout the interview, his thoughts on spirituality seem to evolve. Following a brief discussion on the potential for spirituality to involve a connection with nature, as evidenced in the literature, Michael's perspective began to change. While he did not connect spirituality and nature initially, Michael viewed nature as an element of spirituality which could potentially facilitate its conceptualisation in a more universally accessible manner. Michael considers the implicit learning and understanding which could occur as a result of connecting spirituality and nature. Similarly, much of Grace's spiritual connection to nature occurred as a result of implicit learning. She does not recall explicit lessons designed to foster this appreciation stating, 'it was a subconscious, unconscious thing that was grown' throughout her

upbringing. This influence has evidently permeated Grace's identity and her subsequent teaching philosophy.

Michael: I think [connecting nature and spirituality] is interesting. I think if you can conceptualise being spiritual as a connection to nature, I think... that's really relevant. I never really thought of being spiritual as being connected to nature, but I can see in that context how it would be important for a child to be spiritually healthy, to have that awareness of the environment. I just haven't thought about that before.

Grace: I don't remember ever having been educated about having to look after nature, or not rubbishing or like looking after animals or this kind of thing, because there was no, you know, this is something that's really tying into my, my work at the moment, there was just an understanding that the world was special, and you didn't own it.

30% of the participants explicitly discuss the importance of nature, the environment and a sense of place in their conceptualisations of spirituality. There is an obvious seasonal element to this for Grace and Rachel. One-fifth of the participants link the Irish language to spirituality and to their personal spiritual identities. While the connections discussed in this section can be contextualised within Ireland and are viewed as having Celtic and Christian origins, there is a societal and cultural shift in understandings of spirituality present in this research project. The alternative approaches are deemed 'New Age' by Heelas and Woodhead (2006), as discussed in the following section.

6.1.1.4 New Age Spirituality

According to Heelas and Woodhead (2006), a spiritual revolution is occurring against the background of the fall of organised religion (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019). This cultural movement is giving way to a new, more personal, individual form of spirituality which is described as 'New Age' (Vliegthart 2020; Burello 2023). This understanding of spirituality, which centralises a life lived in accordance with one's own subjective experiences, is evident in the understanding of spirituality presented within this study. It rejects the solely religious connotations of spirituality in existence prior to the mid-20th century (Vliegthart 2020). Aisling understands spirituality as a concept which is more personal than religious and notes the 'real changing attitude of the Irish public' towards

spirituality. In line with this, Marie feels that in comparison to religion, spirituality is 'more open' and relates to practices such as 'mindfulness, meditation, kind of just quiet time in reflection and stuff.' This understanding of spirituality, also discussed by Megan, Grace, Aisling and Sally recognises and empowers the spiritual potential all of individuals and acknowledges that the development of one's spirituality is related to their 'psychological development and maturation' (Frisk and Nynäs 2012, p.9).

Sally: Nowadays, a lot of people are getting more interested in kind of like, Eastern beliefs, that's like yoga, meditation... like the yoga and up to let's say, like, East and Western beliefs and stuff and kind of practices and rituals. And even if you compare it to say like a prayer and a meditation, like you could pray daily, you could meditate daily on what you pray for.

Megan: [Spirituality is] about kind of stress and anxiety, like there's loads of different definitions, like wellbeing and stuff like that. And I suppose like, mindfulness is a big one in college... It was nice to kind of have that few minutes to just be your own, in your own mind. focused on something else.

While the New Age understandings of spirituality discussed by the participants of this study are often interwoven with beliefs relating to organised religion, the expansion of a purely individual approach to spirituality, which is increasingly more anthropological than theological (Barker 2004), is evident. From the extant research reviewed, the individualisation of spirituality, promoted by approaches deemed to be New Age, is highly problematic (Roof 1998; Hay 2000; Eaude 2009; Frisk and Nynäs 2012; Hyland 2017). According to Forbes (2019), New Age approaches to spirituality are profanely separated from their wise and ethical origins and have been reduced to unethical, 'white-washed' (Forbes 2019, p.18) practices which 'keep the link with the exotic East and its spiritual caché without the mystifying baggage of religion' (Forbes 2019, p.19). This contentious issue is primarily concerned with the separation of religion from spirituality, discussed in the following section.

6.2 Spirituality and Religion are complexly inter-connected

The participants of this study relate spirituality to religion in a variety of ways. As evidenced by Figure 6.2, 30% of participants consider spirituality and religion to be synonymous concepts. The concepts are equivalent in their understanding. 30% of

participants understand spirituality and religion to be different concepts and 40% express the belief that while there are differences between spirituality and religion, there are connections and similarities between these complex social phenomena. Perhaps these results are not surprising given that although historically, religion played a key role in ROI, that role is changing and more non-religious and secular worldviews are evident in society, among teachers and in increasingly diverse classrooms.

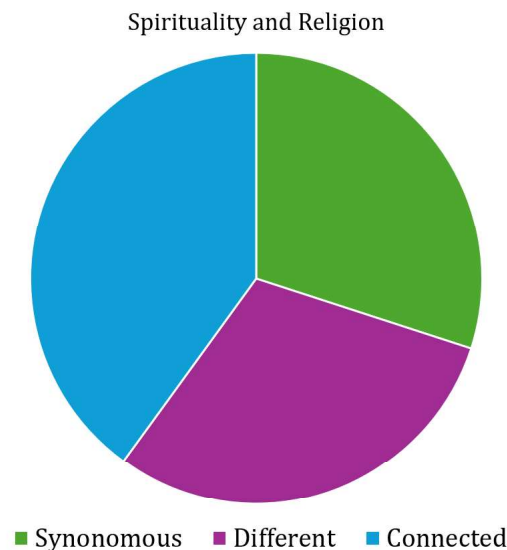


Figure 6.2 Relationships Between Spirituality and Religion

6.2.1 Spirituality and Religion are Synonymous

30% of educators contextualise spirituality within the parameters of religion. For them, the concepts are perceived as synonymous, comprising elements which suggest adherence to a unified system of beliefs and practices. This aligns with research literature which considers spirituality to be a futile, fruitless concept when devoid of religious grounding (Hand 2003; Wright 2004; Gearon 2006; Marples 2006; Sheldrake 2007). When first asked about spirituality, Marie immediately contextualises it within religion. When asked what the term spirituality brings to mind, she states, 'prayers... That's just my upbringing, like Catholic upbringing, prayers, mass, candles, priests.' Similarly, Stephen considers spirituality and religion to be interlinked. When asked his initial thoughts on spirituality he states, 'I'm thinking ethos, I'm thinking of the Church and I'm thinking of... they're the two things that come to mind, really, the church and ethos.' Stephen confirmed that he considers spirituality and religion to be synonymous. Further

discussion on conceptualisations of spirituality did not move beyond this understanding that spirituality and religion inhabited common ground.

Catherine also considers spirituality and religion to be equivalent, and for her, 'faith' encompasses religious and spiritual beliefs. She firmly believes that humans need a relationship with God and a religious orientation is at the centre of her conceptualisation of spirituality. For Catherine, those who are searching for spirituality outside of a relationship with God are engaged in self-deception due to spiritual disorientation. This, Catherine expresses, is particularly true for people who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR). Such a self-description feels inauthentic to Catherine in comparison to her identification with organised religion.

Catherine: That is such a phrase! That is such... it's like hashtag spiritual not religious. So, it's like... it's like I'm one of the cool people. Now, of course, there are wonderfully spiritual people, but I think that they, if they are wonderfully spiritual people, I think they are religious. I think when somebody on Brendan O'Connor or Miriam O'Callaghan's show on the weekend says I'm spiritual, not religious, they mean, I'm not a practising signed-up member of an organised faith group.

6.2.2 Blurred Lines between Spirituality and Religion

The literature review conducted for the purpose of this research highlighted that the delineation between the concepts of spirituality and religion is indistinct. Within this study, 40% of the participants perceive links between spirituality and religion, as long as there is also an acknowledgement of some elements of difference. This is the most common conceptualisation of the relationship between spirituality and religion found in this study, conforming with the body of literature which denotes that spirituality can be either religiously contextualised or not (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003). Michael seems cautious in the language choice he makes when describing his beliefs and considers himself to be 'religious enough.' Although there is an air of apprehension to this initial self-description, Michael perceives a strong link between spirituality and religion. However, Michael also acknowledges that others' conceptualisations of spirituality may be different to his. The blurred lines between religion and spirituality are also evident in Sally's conceptualisation. When engaged in discussions with Sally, it is clear that spirituality and religion blend in some ways, such as when she speaks of her engagement with prayer. However, there is also an openness to spirituality which she does not feel

subsists entirely in the concept of religion in general. When asked about her own beliefs, Sally sought clarification on whether she should discuss 'the religion and spirituality or separately.' While Sally attempts to separate religion and spirituality, this appears difficult when her belief system is evidently influenced by a variety of sources (Section 7.1). Sally states that while 'religion can give you a lot... there's obviously a reason why I've kept going back and back to yoga and meditation.'

Michael: I suppose it's linked with faith...I think, I think spirituality is linked is linked to your faith. It's your belief, I guess, that there is a God... For me, if I can be direct about it, spirituality is linked to God and my faith and my belief in God. Now that's for me, you know, I guess I appreciate that. Like while that's really important for me, and my faith is important for me and my family. I recognise that you know, others may disagree and may differ.

Sally: I feel like spirituality is like a belief system but not as strict as a religion. And not as like closed in as a religion, even though I feel like my religion is a bit open. But like, if you look at religion as a whole, it's very kind of like closed in, I think spirituality is openness, open-mindedness.

However, like Michael, Sally identifies that spirituality and religion have differences, depending on one's personal beliefs (Roehlkepartain *et al.* 2011). This relates to Sophie's expression that 'they can be two different things, you can be spiritual, but if you're religious, it kind of links in that way. But you can be spiritual, without being religious.' Megan concurs with this in her expression, 'I suppose they are very interlinked, but they're also very separate.' Megan experiences the tangible links between spirituality and religion when teaching RE in a denominational context due to 'mindfulness kind of things going on' such as giving children 'a chance to kind of close their eyes and pray.' Sally shares in this experience of overlap in a similar setting. This is interesting because religion is very evident in the educational system in most schools. As a religious person, Sophie feels that experiencing the Holy Spirit links the concepts of religion and spirituality in her life. She considers the Holy Spirit to be 'a strange concept that is everywhere.' It creates tangible links between spirituality and religion for Sophie, especially when she is 'on holy ground.' Aisling once considered the concepts to be confluent entities, however, this is no longer the case. Aisling shares the evolving nature of her understanding of spirituality and religion. This appears to be influenced by the

significant reflection and subsequent conclusions drawn during her Initial Teacher Education (ITE) formation discussed in Section 7.1.1. Aisling now feels that while spirituality may be religiously contextualised for some people, the concepts are different. This is a change from her previous manner of thinking where she considered religion and spirituality to be ‘almost synonymous with one another.’

Megan: In the [RE] curriculum... there are things that overlap. There’s a lot of me talking and maybe they repeat after me, but like mindfulness kind of things going on. And like you like give them a chance to kind of close their eyes and pray or do whatever you’d like to do.

Sally: Interestingly enough, actually, for one of the visits from the priest, he did a meditation with the class with my class group. I do think there's some crossover... I feel like Catholic and other religions have a lot of similarities. So, let's say like prayer is almost like a type of meditation. So, there's a lot of intertwining.

6.2.3 Spirituality and Religion – A Difference Exists

A body of research exists which argues against the conflation of spirituality and religion, particularly from a human rights perspective (Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Adams *et al.* 2016; Sagburg 2017; Elfreich 2019; Bryant *et al.* 2020; Chapman and Miller 2022; Burello 2023). The most significant difference outlined between these complex social phenomena is that spirituality tends to be perceived as innate whereas religion is perceived as a more socialised, organised reality (Grajczonek 2010; de Souza 2016). In alignment with the argument against their conflation, 20% of participants in this study consider spirituality and religion to be different concepts. Grace articulates this separateness by stating that she often tells people ‘I’m not religious, but I am spiritual.’ Grace appears to distinguish spirituality from religion by highlighting the importance of connection to the self for one’s spirituality. This aligns with Sophie’s conceptualisation of spirituality. She also considers religion and spirituality to be different phenomena stating, ‘You don’t have to be religious to be spiritual.’ Rachel’s identification as a spiritual person and explicitly not a religious person reveals that the concepts are not synonymous in her understanding. For Rachel, is ‘quite confined’ in comparison to the openness she gleans from spirituality. There is an understanding in her experiential sharing that spirituality is innate within the human person, aligning with Sophie. These conceptualisations align with a vast body of extant literature (Section 3.3.1).

Grace: There is a different spirituality, yourself, in your relationship to yourself and your kind of introspection and your relationship with nature, to what you experience with a group... And so, I think a lot of people who come to spirituality as opposed to religion, I think a lot of the time, it's because they're looking, they're looking for that they're looking for a sense of connection, that sense of meaning, but they're also looking for the space that say meditation or something like that gives you.

Although the participants understanding' of spirituality and its relationship with religion can be broadly categorised, the findings of this study reveal that fear, uncertainty and confusion are infused with the previously discussed conceptualisation.

6.3 Uncertainty Permeates Spiritual Understandings

The findings of this research align with Elfreich (2019) and Hyde and Rouse (2022) to reveal undeniable uncertainty, confusion and a lack of confidence in relation to the research participants' understandings of spirituality. Uncertainty regarding the concept of spirituality was evident in 100% of the semi-structured interviews undertaken. Figure 6.3 conveys a sample of ways in which uncertainty was articulated. Further, the research participants were often apologetic for their self-perceived lack of understanding. In conversations relating to conceptualisations of spirituality, the relationship between spirituality and religion, and children's spiritual development, the phrase 'I don't know' was used by each of the ten educators between two and thirteen times.



Figure 6.3 Confusion Surrounding Spirituality

Sally expresses that she has her 'own understanding' of spirituality but questions whether or not it is 'right' or not. She states 'I don't even really know what the full meaning of

spirituality is. Sorry Like, I couldn't give you like the dictionary definition of it.' While Sally feels that her personal interest in spirituality would increase her confidence in addressing children's spiritual development, she does not feel that this would be true for her colleagues who would likely be unsure about spirituality. Megan shares in this uncertainty. In order to increase her capacity to discuss the phenomenon, Megan told the researcher that she conducted a Google search of the term 'spirituality' prior to engaging with the interview as she was concerned that she would not be able to discuss the topic. Many varying definitions were returned highlighting the plasticity and vagueness of the term. Megan shares that spirituality is not something that she is consciously aware of and there is uncertainty around what is spiritual and what is not.

Megan: I wouldn't be aware... If I Googled right now, like, what does spirituality mean? I might be like, 'Oh, I do that sometimes' or like, but I wouldn't actually be aware that that is spiritual... I have it here! (Laughs) Earlier on I was panicking so... It talks about like, kind of stress and anxiety, like, there's loads of different definitions. Yeah. Like wellbeing and stuff like that.'

Sally: I would feel confident [addressing spirituality in the classroom] because I feel like I am interested in spirituality. But if I was to look at my staff as a whole, I would say, not all of them, I would even question if even half of us would... feel confident teaching it because if they're not interested in themselves, and even I know as an adult that like when I'm talking to them, or my friends, or if I send them a text or WhatsApp, or if I share something that I've seen that I think is fascinating relating to spirituality, they'll kind of be like looking at me as if I have ten heads.

Michael's uncertainty around the term spirituality permeated the initial part of the interview. When sharing his thoughts on the concept of spirituality, Michael concluded by admitting, 'I don't know if I'm giving you the right or wrong answer.' When asked about children's spirituality, it was clear that unless the uncertainty was responded to in some way by the researcher, further discussion on the topic would be precluded. In this interview, Michael inverted the relationship by posing questions to the researcher. Michael asked, 'Can I just ask just for myself, like, what, do you mean by spirituality in that context?' He also sought clarification by asking, 'What does spiritually healthy mean?' The researcher did not want such a discussion to shape Michael's perceptions yet felt obliged to respond to his questions. She shared, in plain language, a brief overview of a range of

key conceptualisations of spirituality in the literature such as the innateness of spirituality and spirituality as connection.

Michael: I think that term is really, I think that's really relevant. Yeah, I never really thought of being spiritual as being connected to nature, but like I can see in that context how it would be important for a child to be spiritually healthy, to have that awareness of the environment. I just haven't thought about that before.

At the end of the conversation, Michael articulated the change in outlook and understanding that occurred as a result of the interview. This highlights the need for clarity and also suggests the need for educators to reflect on spirituality.

Michael: It's taught me actually to reflect a little bit of myself, and what I think of spirituality. And when I look back now, maybe I probably had a very narrow view of it. And, you know, when we were discussing it, and as I think about it now, like, you know, what I see, I see the point that you made about like, it being something a lot broader, and a lot more you know, encapsulating. And I think that's, really positive, actually. I think having that emphasis on the environment, and the ethics, all of those kinds of things, I previously wouldn't have put those under spirituality. But I think our conversation has kind of like sparked, brought a spark from me in terms of how I look at that.

The findings of this study highlight the uncertainty, confusion and discomfort experienced by educators when discussing conceptualisations of spirituality, their personal beliefs regarding the concept and the spiritual development of children in schools.

6.4 Discussion of Theme 1: Understandings of Spirituality

The educators in this study highlight the existing complexities when attempting to define spirituality. While some participants provided articulate conceptualisations that were encompassing and multi-faceted (Adams *et al* 2016; Mata-McMahon *et. al*, 2024), uncertainty was present in all conversations. This mirrors the findings of previous scholarly works that suggest spirituality is ontologically and epistemologically difficult to define (Robinson 2019). This study finds that the majority of participants understand spirituality to be a quest for deep, meaningful connections, aligning with the relational understandings of spirituality in extant literature (Bone 2008; Adams *et al*. 2016; de Souza 2016; Tomlinson *et al*. 2016; Chapman and Miller 2018; Chapman *et al*. 2021).

Understanding of spirituality uncovered by this study highlights that it can provide the human person with a sense of unity and wholeness in order to glean meaning and purpose from one's life (Kourie 2009; Eakman 2024). The relationships and connections referred to throughout this research align with Hay and Nye's (2006) relational consciousness, Fisher's (2011) Four Domains of spiritual health and Chapman's *et al.* (2021) relational spirituality. Connections to the self, others, nature and the environment, and the transcendent are present in the understandings of spirituality held by the teachers in this research.

An understanding of spirituality which considers it to be a personal phenomenon, relating to a sense of self was discussed by numerous participants in their interpretations of spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006; Fisher 2011; Mercandante 2014; Zhang 2014; Burello 2023; Jirásek 2023; Eakman 2024). A sense of self, developed by emphasising the individual's cognisance of the presence of and encounter with internal sentiments and convictions is possible through spiritual development (Fisher 2011). The capacity for spirituality and spiritual practices to foster a sense of self is thought to impact one's sense of meaning and purpose according to the educators participating in this study. This influenced the participants by providing them with a sense of security and hopefulness, as well as a sense of drive and direction in their lives. Such lived experiences align closely with the conceptualisation of spirituality found in the literature reviewed which relates spirituality to attempts at meaning and a quest for purpose (Grajczonek 2012; Rossiter 2013; Bryant *et al.* 2020; Eakman 2024). Other recent research suggests that the application of a spiritual lens has the capacity to foster a sense of motivation and direction in the work of the educator (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). However, awareness of one's spirituality is a prerequisite for this and requires reflection in order to develop such consciousness (Palmer 1998; Pandaya 2016; Elfreich 2019).

The triadic and tetradic conceptualisations of spirituality presented by the literature reviewed in Section 3.2.1 have one fundamental difference. That is the acknowledgement of the capacity for the human person to engage in a relationship with that which James (1902) described as 'the More.' James (1902) utilised research on the subconscious to highlight a person's ability to engage with impressions which feel as though they have arisen from beyond the self (Taves 2009). The participants' understanding of spirituality suggests that divergence exists in the necessity for a relationship with a transcendent

power. In this study, this is referred to as 'God' for some, as a 'higher power' for others and for two participants, their quest to engage in a relationship with something transcendent is expressed in their desire to believe in 'something more.' Insights from the literature reviewed suggest that some conceptualisations of spirituality, interestingly contextualised both within and outside of religion, prioritise a relationship with God (Greenfield 2018; Ng and Fisher 2022; Ní Riain 2023). This theological understanding of spirituality (Tomlinson *et al.* 2016) is articulated by Catherine in her assertion that a relationship with God is at the heart of the spirituality of the human person. This research also highlights the divergence of primary school teachers' understandings of spirituality. While another participant considers spirituality and religion to be inextricably linked, it is the moral values and religious traditions that are mentioned, not a transcendental relationship.

This research data presents evidence of participants' perceptions of a spiritual element to these primary educators' connection to nature and the environment. This connects with an existing body of research that indicates the presence of a connection to nature and the environment in understandings of spirituality (Harmon 2022; Jirásek 2023; Ní Riain 2023). Such research, supported further by the significant findings of this study, inspires the conclusion that ecological consciousness and a propensity for connecting with the natural environment are central to spiritual development. This study finds that time spent in nature and a connection to the environment promotes an awareness of the spiritual in some 30% of educators. A spiritual connection to nature results in an intrinsic desire to become a steward and warden, a facet of New Age spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2006) and Celtic Spirituality (Flanagan and O' Sullivan 2016; O' Donohue 2022) which Vliegenthart (2020) links to the continually increasing prominence of environmentalist and feminist theories in academic, educational and societal discourses. Research suggests that a connection to nature, which fosters a sense of wonder and awe for the environment, has a positive impact on the spiritual development of the human person (Kourie 2009; Worthington 2012; Robinson 2019; Lee 2022). The findings of this study highlight the value of connecting to nature by consciously spending time in its presence. Nourishing such a relationship has the capacity, according to the participants of this study, not simply to promote care and concern for the environment, but to experience a kinship and oneness with nature as a result of spiritual environmental sensitivity.

This research uncovers novel insights into the capacity for educators to experience a spiritual sense of connectedness to place, nationality and language. For educators who spent time separated, either physically or otherwise from the land of Ireland, and its native language, a sense of absence dissipated once the connection was reestablished. This revitalised connection is reminiscent of the rejuvenation of the self (Maignant 2011, p.47) felt by those returning home and stepping foot on Irish land. In conversation with Breslin (2024), Ní Riain discusses how Irish spirituality has never been more important than it is now. Due to the rich historical spirituality present in Ireland, Ní Riain states that 'we have the answer' to that which is lacking in the modern world. This aligns with the value placed on Irish spirituality by Monaghan (2001). The Irish language and landscape serve as potent symbols of cultural identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and connection amongst individuals to their heritage and community. This study finds that such a connection can be deeply spiritual, and it is a central component to the spiritual understandings, beliefs and practices of two educators participating in this research. Their connections to nature, Celtic spirituality, and the cyclical nature of the seasons highlight the 'earthy', innately spiritual ecological concern of inhabitants of Ireland and Celtic spiritual beliefs and practices that are 'attractive to many contemporary Irish spiritual seekers' (Flanagan and O' Sullivan 2016, p.A55). Although Christianity replaced many beliefs as the norm in Britain and Ireland from the 7th century, the spirituality of the Celts endured and experienced a resurgence in the late 20th century, demonstrating its 'resilience and durability' (Duncan 2015, p.1). O'Donohue (2023) described Celtic spirituality and its re-emergence as 'a new constellation in our times' (O'Donohue 2022, p.3). A renewed interest in the cyclical nature of the Celtic calendar and its four fire festivals is a key aspect of the return to indigenous Irish spirituality, according to Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016). 'The Celtic soul put great store on the ever-turning cycle of the seasons' (Ní Riain 2023, p.189), beliefs and practices which inform the spiritual understanding of educators in this study.

With regard to Gaeilge, the Irish language, Ní Riain (2023) believes that 'God is part of simple everyday moments, right down to the way we say hello to each other' (Ní Riain 2023, p.22). This links directly to Flanagan and O'Sullivan's (2016) characterisation of Irish as a 'soul language' (Ní Riain 2023, p.68) due to the ways in which greetings occur in the language. Examples include *Dia dhuit* which means 'hello' and translates literally to 'God be with you' and *'Beannacht Dé leat'* meaning 'farewell' which translates to 'God's

blessing with you' (Foras na Gaeilge (Irish Institution) 2024). President Michael D. Higgins refers to the cultural trauma that continually occurs as a result of imperialism and highlights its influence on attitudes towards the Irish language (Áras and Uachtaráin 2021). This resonates inextricably with the findings of this research. One participant, Aisling, postulates that in Ireland, attempts have been made to eradicate the language and culture of the country. She states, 'We've always sort of been pushed down... we've gone through a lot of that in our history and our culture.' This study highlights that despite centuries of adversity, including colonisation and cultural marginalisation, the Irish language and landscape have endured as symbols of collective identity and belonging and are interwoven into the spiritual understandings of a number of this study's participants. The deep-seated spiritual connection to both the language and the land experienced by the participants is discernible in the following statement by Seamus Heaney.

'Not to learn Irish is to miss the opportunity of understanding what life in this country has meant and could mean in a better future: it is to cut oneself off from ways of being at home' (Heaney 1993 in *An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta, et al.* 2015).

The contested relationship between spirituality and religion is evident in scholarly debates (Wright 2000; Fisher 2011; MacDonald 2011; Rossiter 2013; Harmon 2022; Eakan 2024). This contestation is unquestionable in the findings of this study. The participants' understandings of spirituality in relation to religion appear to exist upon a continuum ranging from entirely synonymous to entirely divergent. One academic argument suggests that without grounding in the realm of religion, spirituality in education is limited; it lacks a primary interpretive framework and ethical standing. This opinion present in the literature is evident in the findings of this research (Blake 1996; Huebner 1999; Wright 2000; 2004; Hertzberg 2000 in Gibson 2014). The number of people identifying as spiritual but not religious is increasing (Mercadante 2014; Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016; Fraser-Pearce 2022; Parsons 2022). This represents a seismic shift in societal identity when, according to Kieran and Mullally (2020), the physical position of 'no religion' on the Census form has changed from being listed as the last to the first option. Indeed, the no religion category represents the fastest-growing category in the latest Census results (CSO 2022). Such a change is visible throughout the Western world with identification as SBNR rising steadily in America (Pew Research Centre 2023). For

many, this comes as a result of disillusionment with institutional religion. This may occur despite a person believing in the foundational wisdom and ethical teaching upholding a religious institution. This study highlights the striking divergence in how the relationship between spirituality and religion is understood. While some participants self-identify as SBNR or at least acknowledge the capacity for the spiritual to exist outside of the religious, others align with scholars in their argument against the use of this terminology believed to be completely futile (Hand 2003; Parsons 2018; 2022; Ní Riain 2023). It is possible that SBNR is suggestive of a person who integrates the spiritual tenets of a religion without fully adhering to its doctrinal and institutional frameworks (Parsons 2022). Is this then truly spiritual, but not religious?

New Age spirituality and what might be termed secular spirituality are evident within the conceptualisation of spirituality presented in this research (Heelas and Woodhead 2006; Bigger 2008; Chastain 2016; Vliegthart 2020) with two participants explicitly identifying as SBNR. The literature reviewed suggests that secular spirituality can foster inclusivity and personal autonomy, allowing individuals to explore meaningful spiritual experiences outside the parameters of traditional organised religion. This is interesting to consider within the context of educational discourse due to the traditional conflation of spiritual development and RE. However, the issue of personal spirituality and an understanding of spirituality which promotes a strong connection to the self is a controverted topic (Heelas and Woodhead 2006; Eaude 2009; Hyland 2017; Forbes 2019). While some participants in this study understand the significance of spirituality for fostering a connection with the self, the literature reviewed presents concerns regarding the individualisation which scholars claim is promoted by New Age and secular spirituality. This study highlights the opposition between understandings of spirituality amongst educators. have diametrically opposed interpretations of spirituality (Figure. 6.4). The findings of this research highlight the vibrancy of the concept of spirituality, its elasticity and its controversial nature.

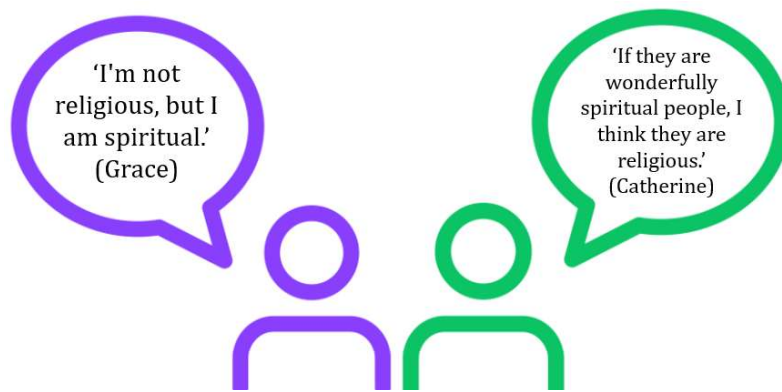


Figure 6.4 Controverted opinions on SBNR

Nevertheless, understandings of spirituality which are contextualised solely with organised religion are problematic from a humanistic perspective. Jirásek (2023) is resolutely opposed to the idea that spirituality must be grounded in religion and also argues against suggestions that secular spirituality promotes overt individualism fact, a belief exists that the opposite is true; where the spiritual domain is ignored, narcissism has the capacity to exert its influence. Judy (2011) highlights the scholarly work of Jung (1968) and Needleman (1980) who argue that some religious orientations of spirituality have lost the capacity to guide people in an inner pathway of spiritual development. Perhaps an inclusive, relational conceptualisation of spirituality, which is welcoming and centred on the development of deep, meaningful connections, as suggested by Chapman *et al.* (2021) is more appropriate for the educational sphere.

Although this research provides insight into the variety of ways primary school educators understand spirituality, the uncertainty present in the findings is striking. This concurs with the widely agreed consensus that spirituality is a highly complex social phenomenon that is notoriously difficult to define (Section 3.1.1). Such variance and ambiguity contribute to the contested nature of spirituality in the research and strengthen the need for clarity and certainty in educational policy discourse, particularly within curriculum documentation. The findings also suggest that the human person needs time and space to develop an awareness of their spirituality and consequently presents questions about the availability of this space within current societal and educational discourse.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings pertaining to understandings of spirituality gleaned from the participants following data analysis. Such understandings are rich, complex, nuanced and multi-faceted. The educators' understandings include a consistent element of uncertainty pertaining to the intricate social phenomenon that is spirituality. The key findings are presented in Figure 6.5. The following chapter moves on to discuss the rich, complex spiritual identities of the educators participating in this study.

1. Spirituality is a multi-faceted, encompassing concept. Its definitions are varied, contested, personal and questioned.
2. Spirituality is commonly conceptualised as a source of connection to the self, to others, to nature and the environment and in some cases, to a transcendent entity.
3. There is a rich, yet often complex, contested relationship between spirituality and religion. Conceptualisations exist on a continuum from entirely synonymous to entirely separate.
4. Educators experience varying degrees of uncertainty when discussing definitions of spirituality, personal spiritual beliefs and the spiritual development of children in schools.

Figure 6.5 Understandings of Spirituality: Key Findings

Chapter 7 - The Spiritual Identity of Educators

7.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the manner in which educators understand and self-describe their spiritual identities. The findings of this research demonstrate how the spiritual identity of the educator is formed through a confluence of personal experiences, cultural influences and reflective practices. This identity is dynamic, malleable and evolving as a result of educational, theological and philosophical perspectives, as well as interactions within personal and professional communities (Beijard *et al.* 2003). Following discussions regarding conceptualisations of spirituality, participants were asked, if they so wished, to discuss their personal beliefs. Where explicit terminology deriving from the

word 'spiritual' was not used by the participants, extant literature and seminal works were utilised in order to inform the researcher's presentation of the findings in the following section.

7.1 Spiritual identity is shaped by a range of influences

Erikson (1968) characterizes identity as a fundamental organizing principle that continuously evolves throughout the entirety of one's life. As with identity overall, spiritual identity is dynamic and evolving in nature (Naudé and Flick 2022). The participants of this study exhibited a variety of influences on their spiritual identities including education, family members, travel, other people and careers, as evidenced by Figure 7.1. Each of these factors contributes to the spiritual identity of the participants in a variety of complex ways and reflects the interplay between personal experiences and broader social influences.

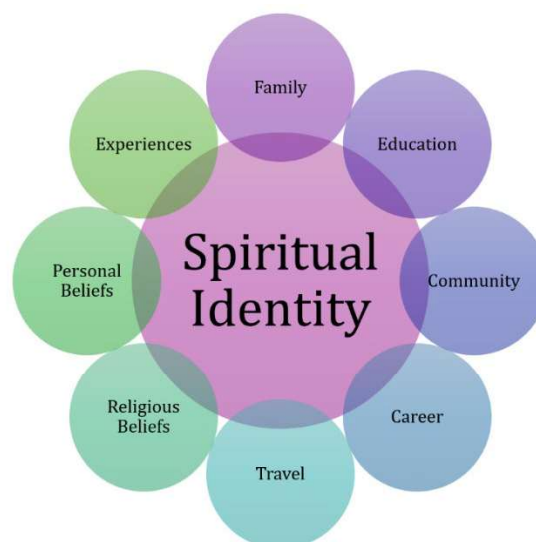


Figure 7.1 Influences on Educator Spiritual Identity

7.1.1 Education

Education can bestow multiple opportunities for spiritual development by providing exposure to diverse beliefs and practices, through social and moral development and through engagement with curriculum content and pedagogical approaches. Grace's spiritual identity has been influenced by all stages of her education and she credits her interest in alternative approaches to education to her experiences in primary and secondary school. Three central elements of Waldorf education have influenced Grace's spiritual identity. Sally also identifies education, with a particular emphasis on its denominational nature, as influential on her spiritual identity.

Grace: There's sort of three... kind of trends from Waldorf education of the child that made me feel like things were different. One was the connection to nature. The second was this sense of big history that leads to a sense of your own place, and identity and it also leads to a sense of connectedness and connection and empathy with everyone else... And then the third one was the practical... Because Waldorf education is head, heart and hand. But it's generally hands that you know, the doing of stuff. And, and then with the heart, the appreciation of other cultures.

Sally: I feel like the religion... it's like the norm for me... I went to a Catholic school as well. So that was like reinforced in my primary school education. And then same with my secondary school, it was a Catholic school, and my college... it was a Catholic college. Yeah. So, I fully believe that.

In education, learning about various religious histories, stories, and practices can foster a sense of curiosity and appreciation for the spiritual dimensions of different cultures. This was the reality for Grace. However, her experience in a 'convent secondary school' contrasts significantly with her primary school career. This considerable change caused her to be 'confused' as the focus of this experience rested entirely on 'what it meant to be a good Catholic.' Challenging encounters arose as a result of the tension and cognitive dissonance Grace experienced in secondary school. Grace shared an insight into such experiences that led her to discern, 'This is not for me... it doesn't include me.'

Grace: I got on the wrong side of my religious teacher because I was given a kind of cartoon strip, where I had to draw the 12 Stations of the Cross and draw Jesus in every picture and put a thought bubble, about what Jesus felt. And I just couldn't do it. I was like, 'This is not for me...' The lady who was teaching us was very, very angry with me and she excluded me from the rest of the class. And I couldn't explain to her why I didn't want to do it.

When it comes to education, higher education institutions often provide a space for dialogue and debate, allowing for the exploration and re-evaluation of one's identity in light of new knowledge and perspectives. Within this research, 60% of participants, namely Megan, Sally, Sophie, Grace, Aisling and Rachel, refer to the influence of college on their spiritual identities. Much of Megan's definition of spirituality stems from her encounters with a lecturer during her ITE formation. The lecturer provided respite and

moments of reflection during both in-person and online lectures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Megan shared that 'he was the one that kept us all going.' She states that because 'he always showed up' for them and 'covered such broad topics... you wanted to listen to what he was saying.' Although it took Megan and her contemporaries a brief period to realise the value of this content, it now resides with her fond college memories and has impacted her approach to spiritual development in her classroom. Grace too shared the impact of ITE on her beliefs and subsequent teaching practice and also fondly recalls her religion lecturer. Aisling too discusses the impact of ITE on her spiritual beliefs yet in a different manner. Engagement with Christian RE and theology modules caused her to question the Catholic beliefs that were 'a grey area' for her at the time and caused her to feel 'betrayed'. Aisling now 'no longer believes in the faith side of the Catholic Church.' Subject areas outside of RE were not mentioned by the participants during semi-structured interviews when discussing ITE. This leads to the suggestion that despite some participants saying that religion and spirituality are not synonymous within the formal educational context, there is a notable tendency to conflate RE and spirituality in the formal higher educational system. The importance academic inquiry and opportunities for self-reflection and critical thinking during educational experiences, were deemed essential for the development of spiritual identity by participants of this study.

Megan: [The lecturer] would turn off the lights and put on this song. I can't remember the name of it... If someone brings it up, we all start nearly singing it... I've used it in the class myself. I can't remember the name, but it's, there's no like lyrics. And it's just, like, we'd be humming away... I have used it in school... it was really, really relaxed and like you'd start getting into it. We thought this was mental but then we got into it as it went on... And they're the kind of things you remember things like that.

Grace: My religion teacher in university... She started each [lesson] with a meal. She brought in food from one of the kinds of cultures or religions that we were learning about. She talks about food, then about festivals, about geography and land and community and how that leads into religion and spiritual practice. It was just inspiring... I find this to be a really beautiful way of teaching.

7.1.2 Family and Community

The findings of this study reveal the influence of family and community on the spiritual identity of some educators. When discussing spiritual beliefs, the influence of Michael's family is considerable, and he states, 'The people who influenced me most, I guess, are those who indicated to me that they cared about me.' Michael shares that, like other family members, his identity has been influenced by a 'crisis' of faith at different points in his life. Sally and Rachel have also been influenced by their families. Interestingly, Rachel highlights the 'ancestral' nature of one's spirituality, an understanding which is related to the centrality of a connection to the land in her conceptualisation of spirituality and the sense of identity which forms as a result of this connection. The ancestral nature of belief systems seems to be considered restrictive by Rachel when discussing her own spiritual identity. Rachel says that identifying as 'a spiritual person is a lovely way of looking at it' because for her the term 'religious can be quite confined.' Megan also refers to the influence of her mother on her spiritual beliefs and how she is moving away from them as they are 'fairly traditional.' Due to the strength of her grandmother's faith, Grace shares her memories of being exposed to Catholicism. Her grandmother feared that Grace's lack of Mass attendance with her parents was problematic and brought her to Mass whenever she could with the hope of exposing Grace to the Catholic faith 'just in case' she would benefit from the experience. This influenced Grace's spiritual identity and her identification, or lack of identification, with the church into which she was baptised (Section 7.3). The findings of this research suggests that the influence of familial religious practices and spiritual narratives provide the initial framework within which spiritual identity is developed, often offering a foundation for later spiritual exploration and integration.

Sally: So, when I was younger, we went to Mass every single Sunday. And I just, like soaked it up, not all of my siblings did now, I fully soaked it up... So, I think as a child, I just lapped that up... My father is extremely religious. And I really admire that in him, that he continues to go to Mass.

Rachel: I find I go back to my childhood, and you have less choice. You're just following your parents. It's that ancestral thing of what have we inherited. What belief systems have we inherited from our parents or grandparents? So, I definitely would say a spiritual person, for sure.

Michael: My faith has come from my family but then...I guess it's like everyone you know, every family and every person, if you are faithful, if you if you have that faith, you do have a crisis of faith, at different times of your life. My family have had at different times a struggle, where you might struggle to reconcile the beliefs that you have with your faith. How you... I guess how you will be faithful, but also be open to the world, you know?'

A community can also provide a collective framework for beliefs, practices and values that shape the spiritual experiences and understandings of the human person (MacDonald 2011). Within this study, three participants, Grace, Catherine and Sophie, explicitly discuss the influence of their communities on their spiritual identities. The findings presented in this chapter highlight the broad nature of the conceptualisations of spirituality revealed by the educators in this research. Grace recalls the fond memories of the 'sombre, very quiet, very calm and very present' services she encountered within her community as a child, as well as Quaker meetings which also required 'presence.' Seasonal celebrations and some Christian calendar celebrations were also celebrated. The influence of this community, which placed 'a little bit more emphasis on the nature side of things' and 'celebrating the seasons and the changing of the seasons on Grace's conceptualisation of spirituality and her approach to spirituality, are evident. Catherine shares that the development of faith, particularly in childhood, 'takes a village' to nurture and expresses gratitude for the 'small group who share my faith and community.' She is concerned about 'teachers in their twenties and thirties' who 'simply don't' experience the sense of faith community which is life-giving and sustaining for Catherine.

Grace: the only thing that was asked of us as children was a question, which was... It wasn't even a question, the priests would say to you, the Lord will be with you when you seek Him. And you would say, I will seek Him. Basically, that you're looking for God, you look for spirituality and things around you. That was the only kind of commitment we were asked to make

Sophie: Where we are is great for that community building. A lot of maybe Catholic children and our children who aren't Church of Ireland go to the Church of Ireland youth clubs and stuff. So yeah, [spirituality is] built on outside the school as well as in school... I was a youth leader in the local youth club... The [interest] in children's spirituality came to me through that.

The development of online communities, particularly during Covid-19 is increasingly influential on spiritual beliefs and practices (Papadopoulos *et al.* 2021). The popularity of mindfulness and meditation apps has introduced many to spiritual practices in a secular context, emphasising wellbeing and mental health rather than religious observance. Sally shares the value of joining both online and in-person communities for her personal spiritual development. Aisling expounds the value of online communities which were established during the pandemic and the accessibility they provide supports her spiritual development.

Sally: The spiritual side of things, so the yoga, the meditating, and all kinds of other aspects that say, like women's circles, and all of that, and chanting and breathwork. I think that's an interest that has come from COVID. Probably a lot to do with online... having the time and seeing stuff online... One influencer had [put] up [online] that she was doing Down Dog, the yoga app. And I said 'I'll do the same. And after a couple of practices, I got hooked.

Aisling: Since Covid, I suppose, the church has been even more accessible to us, because...we can watch masses on Zoom. So that's been really helpful... And often the priest will just do a mass for the parents and the school community, as well as us tuned in online. So that's really nice as well.

7.1.3 Travel

In addition to the local identity, which is formative for the human person, this research highlights the capacity for travel to impact the spiritual identity of participants by exposing them to diverse cultures, religious practices and spiritual philosophies (Jensen *et al.* 2011). The findings of this research postulate that immersive experiences and encounters with new people and unfamiliar places can challenge, change or possibly integrate with one's existing spiritual identity. While Sally feels that her family are religious, she expresses that 'none of her family are interested' in what she perceives to be her spiritual practices. During an Erasmus trip, Sally encountered a peer who shared her meditation practice story with her. An online app was recommended as the starting point for meditation. Sally's interest in meditation and other spiritual practices developed from this point. She believes that she had an innate interest in spirituality which was hidden for many years. Prior to her explicit interest in spirituality developing, Sally states that she was 'manifesting' becoming a 'spiritual person' following a purchase of a poster

of a Hindu 'Om' sacred symbol and a Buddha which she was initially drawn to simply because it was orange. Sally is certain that this influenced her identity at a subconscious level. Rachel also shares the influences of her travels on her spiritual identity and the orientation of her spiritual beliefs towards Buddhism.

Sally: What you soak up is what's so interesting as well is like, I would believe in, let's say, like manifesting, which is definitely a spiritual side of things. And when I was in college and first year, and I would have had no interest or no established interest in let's say like yoga, meditation, and all that I've mentioned... and one poster that I bought... I think even just by me, like, unconsciously looking at that in my room for four plus years, that I think I soaked in some of that.

Rachel: The more people you meet, it encourages you to look further and further and the more you travel as well. Like I worked in Thailand for two years and... Buddhism, it's just the core of their being you know, like it was fascinating for me... I found myself now going back to that because it was, it was simpler, you know.

Alongside the elements discussed, the careers of 30% of the educators were also explicitly identified as influencing their spiritual identity. These participants state that teaching is a vocation, a concept that Buechner (1993) describes as a place where your 'deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet' (Buechner 1993, p.119). The influence of such congruence is discussed in the following section.

7.1.4 A Vocational Career

A vocational profession can influence spiritual identity by aligning the educator's professional values and ethical beliefs (Buechner 1993; Palmer 2017; Gillespie 2019). Engaging in work that resonates with one's sense of purpose and calling can reinforce and deepen spiritual identity (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). Considering teaching as vocational is mentioned by Catherine, Grace and Aisling. Indeed, conversations which presented teaching to be a vocational activity occurred as these participants discussed the various influences on their personal spiritual identities. In intentionally promoting her school as a Catholic school, Catherine says that she is guided by her 'own moral compass, my own professional ethics and my own teaching vocation.' Grace also views teaching as 'vocational.' For Aisling, this conceptualisation of her career is considerably influential on her teaching philosophy, her willingness to uphold the denominational characteristic

spirit of her school, and her care and concern for the children she encounters. The current researcher thought it worthwhile to examine this research finding from an inverse perspective. What if the spiritual beliefs of the participants influenced their decision to choose a teaching career? During a subsequent member check, Aisling confirmed that this was most likely in her case.

Aisling: I think you would find it very hard as a teacher not to view it as a vocation and to view it purely as a profession. Because I feel that you really put your heart and soul into teaching and for me, that's where the vocation part of it comes in... You're spending the most amount of time with these children other than their parents in their life, and that you are so it's so foundational, what you do in their entire being, that whatever you do, will either help them to grow or impact in their growth. And that, to me, is where the vocation side comes in. Because for the majority of teachers are [sic], in my opinion, they care.

The following section explores the spiritual beliefs, experiences and practices of the participants which inform their spiritual identity.

7.2 Spiritual Beliefs and Experiences highlight the desire to believe in 'Something'

The spiritual identity of the human person is evident in their expressed spiritual beliefs and in the spiritual practices in which they engage (MacDonald 2011). When asked about their spiritual identity, 90% of the participants of this study discuss a range of beliefs and experiences and connect being spiritual or explicitly religious together in some way. It should be noted that one participant, Stephen, did not identify as spiritual or religious in any way.

7.2.1 Spiritual Experiences

During the interviews, participants were asked if they had ever had a spiritual experience. Catherine believes that spiritual experiences are accessible to her as she has already experienced them. She believes that 'prayer' is the way in which such an experience can be encountered again, through regular practice. Catherine states, 'I mean, it's like anything... How can you get the next grade in piano? Go away and practice every day. It's like anything.' When discussing the possibility of spiritual experiences, Sally became visibly emotional and her wonder and gratitude for the life that she lives was overwhelmingly evident.

Catherine: Yeah, (pauses). Yes. Terribly profound? No. Have I heard voices from the heavens? Sadly not. But yeah, I believe that I have been in the presence of God. I've felt a real peace, Jayne. Yeah, and it's not there all the time. But I think once you have that kind of experience, at whatever level it's, you want to experience that again and again, I know it's there. And you know, it's real because it's within the realm of your experience.

Sally: I feel like life every day is a spiritual experience if you ask me... If you actually just sit down and think about it, I feel like a child at most times. And I actually think about it, that me and you are sitting here, we're breathing... It's madness... If you take a second to really realise how like, miraculous we are, I think that's like every day. I'm actually getting emotional.

Sally moved on to discuss what she considers her first 'official' spiritual experience, an experience of 'substance.' This stemmed from a conversation about spiritual practices with a colleague, highlighting the centrality of spiritual practices in Sally's life. She shares her experience during her participation in a cacao ceremony. She explained that a cacao ceremony is a spiritual ritual involving the consumption of cacao, a natural plant medicine derived from the seeds of the *Theobroma cacao* tree, which is revered for its heart-opening and meditative properties, often used to foster emotional healing and connection (Steinberg 2002; Heinonen 2023). Sally's engagement with this ritual illuminates the diversity of spiritual practices in which educators participate. Indeed, for Sally, these include 'the yoga, the meditating, and all kinds of other aspects like women's circles... chanting and breathwork.' Sophie shares experiences she characterises as spiritual from her time spent in natural settings. This supports the conceptualisation of spirituality based on connection to nature.

Sally: I went to a cacao ceremony... I drank cacao. And then we did breathwork. And I honestly felt like I had a movie clip going through my vision or my mind... I was reminded of a memory that I had with a relative who had passed away, which I didn't remember... I feel like that's my official spiritual experience. Well, for me, it was... It was wild. I actually didn't even think I was going to be able to drive home after, but it was really... Yeah, it was legal and everything (laughs).

Sophie: Yeah. I'd say I have had a couple [of spiritual experiences]... Most of them have been out in nature that like, I'd been sitting there and just relaxing, and then something would hit me... Yeah, different moments like that.

Reference to individual spiritual experiences was not articulated by all participants, highlighting the diversity of spiritual identities present within this study. Megan doesn't feel that she has ever had a spiritual experience, but her uncertainty is evident. She expresses that because she does not understand the concept of spirituality, because she is not 'overly familiar with it', she cannot say for sure. Although experiences in school and college came to mind, she does not feel that they 'would be classified as spirituality.' Her ambivalence is tangible. While Aisling shares details of the betrayal felt by the faith in which she grew up, she considers herself a 'spiritual' person and credits this identification with her sense of meaning and purpose in her life. 'Growing up as an Irish Catholic child' is influential on Aisling's spiritual identity and has 'ingrained' the belief within her that there are 'signs' if one is willing to notice them. Aisling shares, 'You see a Robin and you think, oh, that's Grandma now, or you see a feather or a butterfly... I do believe in all of those things.' While Aisling expresses that she has never had what she would label 'a massive spiritual experience', there are other aspects of her life that she considers spiritual. Again, the personal nature of spiritual experiences and the subjective, inconclusive, complex nature of spirituality articulated by the participants is evident in the findings of this research.

Aisling: I would consider, like, if I heard a particular song I had and it evokes a memory, like, I'd very much get goosebumps out of things, or, you know, if you, if you see something that finally pans out, and you think, 'Oh, well, that was the reason that all of the other stuff didn't work out.'

7.2.2 The Desire to Believe in Something

This study reveals that for 90% of the participant educators, there is a desire to integrate spiritual beliefs and practices into their lives in order to connect to something greater than the self and to experience hope. In the current geo-political climate of wars and growing fear and hatred of minority groups including immigrants, allied to the environmental crisis, an interesting and unexpected finding of the research was the participants' emphasis on the need for hope. While Marie experiences irresoluteness regarding her spiritual beliefs, particularly when contextualised within religion, she does

share her belief in something greater than herself stating, 'I believe there's something, something higher, higher than us. But I don't know. I don't know.' When asked about where this belief came from, Marie shared that there was a 'need' to believe in something to have 'hope'. Similarly, Sophie also expresses the need and desire to have a sense of spirituality, whether it is religiously tethered or untethered (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003.) Megan also shares Sophie's desire to believe in something more than the self and the here and now. Like Marie, this is essential to have hope.

Marie: It's more hope. I think more than anything. I just think it's good to believe in something like, be very hopeless otherwise, I think... I suppose it's just believing that there is like a God is such that there is a higher power [sic], I think is just the right sense of hope and sort of I just think it's sad not to believe in anything.

Sophie: I find it's really important to have that spirituality there. It's something that can always be with you whether it is God or whatever or religion or even no religion. It's just important to believe that there's something else out there.

Megan: I suppose like it is more to do with... It's like death, I suppose. Like, just you want to believe that there's something there. I don't know. I think it's when you experience something... Like, even tragedies and stuff, like you would wonder like, is there actually any, like..., How can this happen and stuff, but at the same time, you want to believe that there's something there for them if that makes sense. That's not the end of the road. I don't know. But I do find it hard. Like it's, it's those I don't know, it's hard to wrap your head around.'

The participants of this study engage with a variety of practices which support their spiritual identities including prayer, meditation, attendance at religious services, yoga, journalling and immersion in nature. Prayer is mentioned by 40% of participants as a practice which is employed for spiritual purposes. Sally discusses her blended beliefs throughout the interview and states 'I would consider myself a spiritual person, but also a religious person.' This emphasises the different compatible, coexisting elements of her multi-layered identity. While Sally states that she craves the space her meditation practice gifts her, she also states, 'I do crave a good prayer as well.' Aisling states, 'I don't pray necessarily, I think the only time I would pray is if I was in awful difficulty.' Aisling also shares that she would ask the 'holiest people' to pray for her in times of need in her life.

During a member check, Aisling shared that these people are close friends and family who are known to be prayerful. One person in particular was her friend's late mother who would light a candle for Aisling when she was in need of luck. This links with Grace Davie's (2000) notion of 'vicarious religion' (Davie 2000, p.62) where people who are not practicing themselves ask religious people they know who practice acting as religious plenipotentiaries for them. Catherine also highlights the importance of payers. For her, through prayer, the human person develops a relationship with and comes to know God. She explains this using a simple, but effective analogy.

Catherine: For instance, have I heard of David Beckham? Yes. Do I know David Beckham? No. Like how would I get to know David Beckham? I'd have to read about him. I'd have to watch documentaries, but how would I really know him? I'd have to talk to him.

Sally: A prayer can be more powerful because like I said, I believe in God... I was reminded always to pray during good times. And then, because often people can just pray and ask for help during difficult times. So, I always try to pray during good times as well.

Aisling: Last year I got a bag of things from Knock from my aunty, and you think 'Oh, well, that's lovely.' And say I put the rosary beads on the side of the door. And I put the little Miraculous Medal in my car. Because, you know, I suppose it's ingrained in you deep down that those things are there to keep you safe. You know, I suppose it's comforting as well.

Sally uncovers the multilayered and blended nature of her diverse spiritual practices stating that alongside prayer, she practices yoga and meditates regularly, which Sally considers to be 'the spiritual side of things' whilst she identifies prayer as more religious. Although Sally compartmentalises her practices under the umbrella terms of 'spirituality' and 'religion' during the semi-structured interview, it is perceptible that blurred overlaps occur between what she classifies as her spiritual and religious practices. However, ambiguity is evident in her discernible attempt to classify and separate her religious and spiritual practices despite the natural links between them as she speaks of her experience. A cognitive dissonance is also experienced by other participants. Rachel talks of her 'own meditation practice.' Marie creates links between prayer and meditation, suggesting that

prayer can be meditative and vice versa. She gleans 'comfort in that everyone is saying the same thing' although, for Marie, the reality is that there is a possibility that 'you don't believe a word of what's being said, and you're only saying it and you don't know what you're saying.' Just as the current research uncovered significant levels of ambiguity and confusion surrounding the meaning of the term spirituality, the research interview findings also uncovered multilayered, complex and synchronous descriptions of research participants' personal spiritual practices. In the interviews, participants refer to a range of diverse religious and belief traditions as they spontaneously describe practices from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Druidism, New Age Spiritualities, Indigenous traditions and non-religious traditions.

Sally: 'I feel like a lot of my beliefs and what I do for my day-to-day would be let's say like a combination of religious side of things and spiritual side of things. And then so let's say like I pray most days by myself like outside of school, like I pray most of the time I don't do like I don't just pray if something's gone wrong in my family, like I pray more nights and most mornings, most nights especially... And just thank God and then that even aligns up with the gratitude diary. That would be more like spiritual kind of. [questioning tone]? I don't know.'

Both Grace and Sophie utilise reflection in nature to attend to their spiritual needs. Grace believes that the time and space provided for contemplation and reflection is a success of some religious traditions. Sophie concurs with this and feels that the absence of contemplative time and space is the reason for the disconnect from the spiritual domain in contemporary society. Sophie also attends church services regularly which brings her spirituality to the fore when she is 'on holy ground.' While Sophie is clear on the place of organised religion within her spiritual identity, such clarity is not the reality for the majority of the participants of this study, as evidenced by the findings presented in the following section.

Grace: I think one of the things that religion had very, right is this sense of having to set time aside for not doing. So, like in Judaism, having Shabbat, where I mean, I don't think it's a coincidence that you have a culture where you are not allowed to go on any to do any work to do any, anything productive for a day. And this is a religion that is one of a kind... it produce[s] a disproportionate amount of philosophers and thinkers.

Sophie: I think a lot of people say, no, I'm not religious' but they have that feeling that there is something out there, but they don't really get a chance to explore it if they need to.

7.3 Complex Catholicism and its Measurement against Mass Attendance

Using various terminology (Fig. 7.2), 90% of the participants of this study shared that they were baptised within the Roman Catholic Church. Within this group, identification as Catholic and levels of religiosity and engagement with Catholicism vary greatly. For Stephen, the overarching Christian values which permeated the ethos of his school facilitate respect, care and inclusivity. These values are modelled to the children. However personal religious or spiritual beliefs are not something which Stephen considers important in his life stating, 'I'm Roman Catholic myself... It's very much baptised, very much nonpracticing, very much not a part of my life.' Stephen conforms to what Inglis describes as a cultural Catholic (Inglis 2014). On the other hand, Catherine represents what Inglis (2014) terms orthodox Catholicism as her Catholic faith and the faith formation of the children in her school are of primary concern to her. She expresses a belief that 'there is a God-shaped hole in all of us.' This is reminiscent of the Augustinian notion of a restless heart which is restless until 'it rests in God' (Neiman 1999, p.127). When asked to put words on the beliefs she was describing, Catherine, as quoted below, placed the central emphasis on her Catholic Faith.

Stephen: You know, we would always talk about being kind, being respectful, all that... [The ethos] is underpinned by Christian values of respect, care, all that kind of stuff. And because of that, we live that out in our day-to-day interactions.

Catherine: 'What I believe? I believe in God. I believe in the Real Presence in the Eucharist. And as such, I am a member of the Catholic Church and a struggling Christian that falls every day, several times.

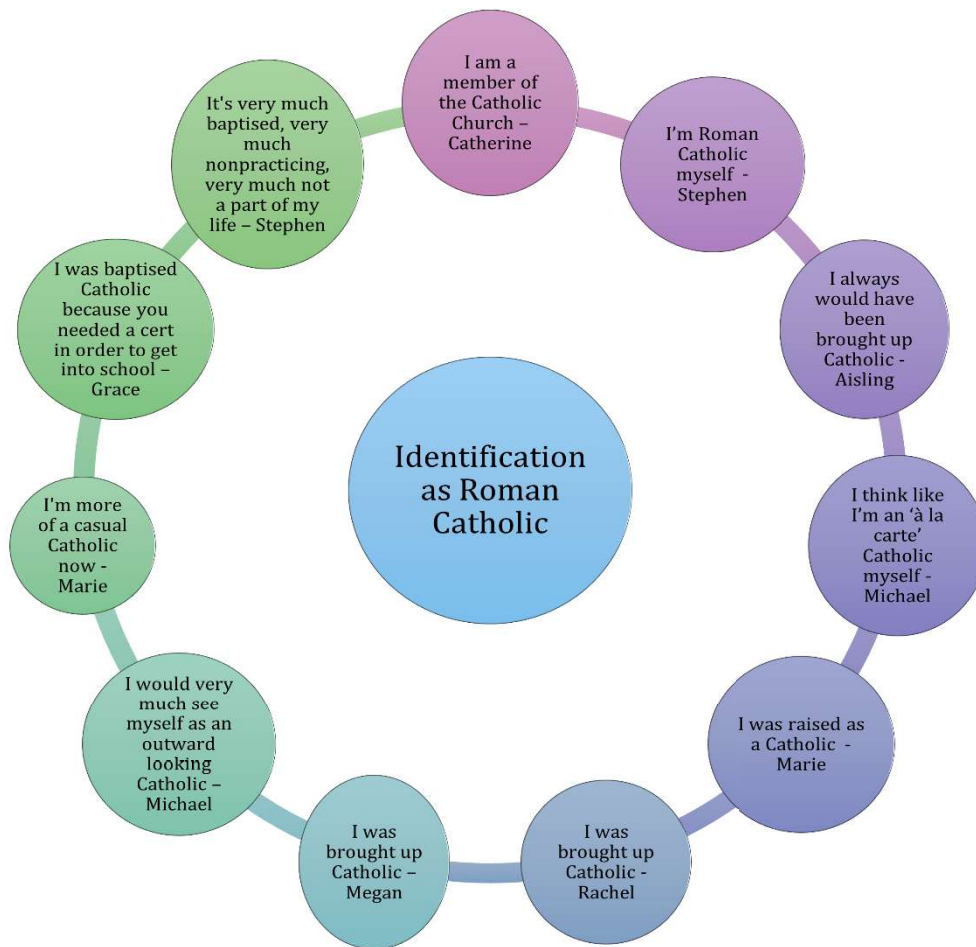


Figure 7.2 Roman Catholic Identity Terminology

A discussion about her experience as a struggling Christian unfolded during the member check where Catherine discussed the hope she experienced through ascribing to a redemptive faith. The expectations for Christians are high, according to Catherine, who considers the Ten Commandments a guide for living her life. As a result of this, some days are more successful than others. This hope of redemption is a defining feature of Catherine's spiritual identity. For the remaining 60% of participants who identify in some way as Roman Catholic, the expressions of the way this impacted their lives varied greatly. While discussing her experiences of education, Grace shared the functional nature of her Baptism stating, 'I was baptised Catholic because you needed a Cert in order to get into school. (Laughs) You needed a Baptismal Cert.' Grace's parents were raised in homes with varying degrees of Catholicism stating that her paternal family were not 'very heavily practising.' This was not the case for her mother's family and the fear perpetuated by her

maternal grandmother influenced her disassociation with the Catholic Church. There is an inter-generational sense of ambiguity and conflict around Catholicism as Grace's mother struggles with the societal position of the Church today although she herself had a positive experience of Catholic education. While Grace's mother's lived experience is filled with fond memories, this is not Grace's own reality, and her perception of Catholicism is that it is insular and exclusionary.

Grace: My Granny, has, I can't remember what the name of the order is, but she's, she's basically one of the highest orders that the Catholic Church could confer upon the layperson. She did everything. And, and she was very devout. And she instilled that, I want to say fear in her children, okay, more than a love of it. You know, that you do this or else... And so that was, that was what my mom grew up with on one hand. But she also had a convent education from some wonderfully talented and open-minded nuns. And, you know, she always, she says, she finds a little bit difficult the attitude to the church today, because that order of nuns gave her so much at a time when you really couldn't have expected that quality of education from elsewhere.'

Grace had many other experiences of service that highlight a disconnect with Catholicism in her life which influenced her belief system and spiritual identity. Within her community, during childhood, Grace explained that her early experiences of religion and spirituality included attendance at services. These were often contextualised in various Christian settings. Although she was baptised, she experienced little connection with Catholicism and found it to be exclusive and elitist. This contradicted her experiences of the world and of faith up to that point. Grace's lived experience of Catholicism contrasts starkly with Michael's. For Michael, being Catholic is important to him, 'really important in the actual purest, traditional Catholic view, you can be including of everybody [sic]... that does define me, that's very important to me actually.' He describes himself as both an '*a la carte* Catholic' and 'an outward-looking Catholic.' This represents the shift which Inglis (2017) refers to towards 'more individual, liberal forms' (Inglis 2017, p.22) of Catholicism evident in his conceptualisations of cultural Catholics and creative Catholics (Inglis 2014). Michael intersects these categories (Section 3.2.1.), a blend which Inglis (2014) states is most likely to occur. Michael believes that Catholicism is inclusive and welcoming and states, 'in the actual purest, traditional Catholic view, you can be including

of everybody, I guess, like, in a certain way that does define me, that's very important to me.' The disparities in these lived experiences highlight the complexity of the role of Catholicism within the spiritual identity of the educators.

Grace: I used to notice when I went to a Catholic Church, that other churches, it said underneath 'all welcome'. And it doesn't say that in the Catholic church. You have to be Catholic in order to take part because it's the one true Catholic faith... part of the Catholic thing was this is the one true Church and that would cut off so much of what I felt I knew already about the world. I just couldn't bring myself to say it.'

Aisling, Megan and Rachel all refer to being 'brought up Catholic' at various points during their interviews, with others referring to being 'raised as a Catholic' or 'baptised Catholic'. These seemingly 'cultural Catholic' (Inglis 2014, p.124) identifications contrast with Catherine who states that she is 'a member of the Catholic church' and Sally who states, 'I identify as a Catholic.' Aisling shares that she is no longer a practising Catholic following her request to her mother for permission to stop attending Mass as a teenager to which she responded 'grand. That's fine.' As is the case for half of the participants of this study, Mass attendance features strongly in discussions about Catholic identity. For Aisling, music is a defining feature of her association with Catholicism. Marie also links her association with Catholicism to Mass attendance, sharing 'I was raised as a Catholic... one of my friends described it as I'm more of a casual Catholic now. like I wouldn't go to Mass every week.' Upon further discussion, Marie shared again that she 'wouldn't be a regular Mass goer.' She explained that a casual Catholic means 'kind of picking and choosing what path you kind of believe in and want to follow.' While continuing to discuss her beliefs, Marie shared the details of her struggle with the institution of the Church and how this has significantly impacted her belief system and as a result, her spiritual identity. Megan also shares her struggles with the institution of the church and discusses the entanglement of Mass attendance with her identity as a Catholic, stating that she too was 'brought up Catholic.'

Aisling: I would have gone to mass when I was younger. I never would have listened to much in mass really.... At some stage, my mom said, 'Look, you don't have to go into mass anymore.' And we thought 'Grand, that's fine...' I'm not a practising Catholic, but then I'll do the choir for Christmas Mass or Easter Mass, or

when I'm in school, I'll do the Communion and the Confirmation choirs, and I love all that. But then I don't go to Mass... So, I'm a bit of a mismatch. I suppose I'm not a practising Catholic, but I pick and choose the parts that I want to adhere to.

Megan: I wouldn't like always that like I don't go to Mass every weekend, but I definitely believe in something like I don't... I don't know. Like you do you really question it though. Sometimes but that's just with like everything going on kind of behind the scenes where there's like a little kind of scandals and stuff like you're just like, what's going on? What's really going on?

Marie: I actually don't know what I believe in anymore. Like, I suppose I would have a Catholic upbringing, and I'd like to think there's something out there... And you know, it's more the kind of institution, like it's more the institution of the Church that would put you off, put me off, following the Catholic faith, you know, and I remember going to Mass a couple of years ago and hearing your priests talk about abortion and thinking, 'Oh, my God, like, how can he talk about when he has absolutely no... You know, he's not connected in any way.'

A number of participants highlight the cultural connection between being Irish and being Catholic (Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013), For Megan, being a Catholic 'is a very Irish thing.'

Megan: As a child definitely, I would have been at Mass every week, like, I wouldn't have missed it, but kind of since Covid like, I haven't really been back... It's just like, not like, a priority kind of. But it is interesting. I suppose, like, none of my friends would be there like, it's just like, I don't really know anyone my age, like, very few... There is a bit of guilt there. But like you don't belong, you're kind of forgetting about it.'

Megan shares this experience with her mother, highlighting the influence of family and upbringing on her identity.

Megan: Like she would have been going to mass her whole life and since COVID, like she hasn't really been going and like she has would have serious kind of guilt about it. Okay, I think that generation, like she just thinks it's crazy, that like, she herself isn't seeing it as a priority when it was like her whole life when she was younger.'

Sally and Rachel share the experience of being raised Catholic and connecting with it in some ways. As well as this, the participants consider themselves open-minded about religious beliefs and have an interest in other religious traditions, as discussed further in this chapter (Section 6.2.2). Both Sally and Rachel reflect on the fact that their beliefs and their spiritual identities are influenced by Eastern traditions. 'I would be a Catholic, but I would also be open to the other side, let's say like the yoga, meditation... But I would still identify as a Catholic.' Sally shares that, 'I still do fully believe in everything. I believe in Mary the Virgin, I believe in Jesus, God, like I have no questions, I fully believe in it.' She questions this in relation to her spiritual identity immediately stating, 'I don't know if they're supposed to be separate or?' Sally shares her eclectic combination of elements of other religious traditions into her own belief system. This is an example of the 'smorgasbord' approach to religious and spiritual beliefs presented in the literature reviewed (Frisk and Nynäs 2012; Inglis 2014; Boyce-Tillman 2016).

While Rachel discusses being 'brought up Catholic', there is considerable introspection occurring in relation to her religious and spiritual beliefs at this stage of her life. The complexity and liminality of educators' spiritual identities are evident in this research. Their sharing reveals experiences of being inside, yet also on the periphery of the institutional Church. Perhaps these educators seek to identify that which potentially unifies various religious traditions, an endeavour which Mercandante (2014) states can be difficult when religious teachings differ greatly. This highlights the potential for interspirituality described by Johnson and Ord (2012) who believe that world religions have a thread weaving them together which is based on the innateness of spirituality.

Sally: I think Will Smith and his wife read like all the top, let's say like equivalents of the Bible and the Koran and, and they did one per year. And then they took all the good bits from each of them and created, let's say, their own belief system. I'm a bit like that.

Rachel: I question. It's the questioning, you know? Do I want to relate to any one organised religion like Buddhism... It's quite broad for me at the minute and I'm in my own stage of questioning and learning but I don't want ... I'm not closed on any you know, I don't... I don't feel that I'm closed on any and it allows me to be open to different opinions.

7.4 Navigating Personal Beliefs and the Characteristic Spirit of the School ranges from natural to challenging

There is an obvious tension existing between the personal identity of the educator and the expectations they believe exist regarding their professional identity (Waterweiler 2021; Zimmerman 2021). The negotiation of personal and professional identities is a challenging task as the domains are often profoundly interwoven, with constant interaction and adjustment of both occurring. The findings concur with existing literature relating to the challenges of teacher-identity navigation (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard and Meijer 2017; Palmer 2017). This challenge is of particular relevance to the dynamic between the educator and the characteristic spirit of the school where they are employed, as they are duty-bound to uphold this spirit by the Education Act (1998). This research findings highlight the complexity of navigating personal and professional identities within the context of the school's characteristic spirit and the tension that arises for educators in various roles, at various stages of their careers.

7.4.1 Where Beliefs Align

For 50% of the participants in this study, their personal beliefs and values are largely in alignment with those of their school's characteristic spirit. For these educators, engaging with the respective Patron's programmes (Section 2.5) and promoting the values of the school, a notable ease and sense of proficiency is evident in their attitudes towards their schools' characteristic spirits. In her experience, teaching in an 'intentionally Catholic school' is a priority for Catherine. This is in alignment with her beliefs as a Catholic. She resolutely states, 'I am a member of the Catholic Church.' For this reason, upholding the characteristic spirit of the school and emphasising the faith formation of the children is of primary significance to her.

Catherine: That would be a priority for me... Is that true of every teacher on the staff now, in spite of, you know, judicious, interview questions? I'd say our staff is representative of society as a whole, of the modern Irish society.

Catherine has professional experience of interviewing candidates for positions in Catholic schools. Rather than asking more general questions about the characteristic spirit of the school, Catherine chooses to discuss what 'sense of the Divine' the interviewee has to avoid the regurgitation of the schedule of a Catholic school. She

suggests that the schedule is simply a description of what a Catholic school is about (Catholic School Partnership (CSP) 2019). In Catherine's experience, any question pertaining to upholding the Catholic characteristic spirit of the school is usually a standardised answer, which many interview candidates respond to almost identically. She reveals that she felt the need to move away from generic questions to more specific questions in order to gain a more personal insight into the interviewee's personal understanding of faith and their knowledge of a school's characteristic spirit. Catherine's experience and her desire to dig deep into the interviewees' personal sense of the divine highlights her need desire to move away from what she sees as rehearsed and inauthentic expressions of teacher beliefs to dialogue about their authentic lived experience. In speaking thus, it indicates her consciousness of the range of beliefs of teachers employed in Catholic schools, whom she feels are likely representative of modern Irish society.

For Sally, who identifies as Catholic and teaches in a denominational school, there is an alignment between her belief system and that of her school. She states that 'for me anyways then as well as a teacher, my own like outside beliefs are that I would be, I would be a Catholic.' This interestingly suggests that for Sally, there is a possibility that not all 'teacher' inside beliefs are in alignment with their 'outside beliefs'. While Sally also describes the blended nature of her belief system between Eastern traditions and Catholicism, she proclaims, 'I would still identify as a Catholic, and I am happy to work in a Catholic school.' This is also the reality for Sophie who is confident in attending to the Patron's programme and contributing to the characteristic spirit of the school. She identifies as religious and when asked about what the ethos of her school means to her, Sophie shared, 'I grew up Church of Ireland, and it's something that I'm very comfortable with.' Even if faced with difficult questions at the Senior end of the school, Sophie is confident that she would be adequately supported within the school and wider community to uphold the characteristic spirit and to competently deliver the Patron's programme.

Sophie: As you get up along, I know it does get trickier. Sometimes you might have more difficult questions and things, but that's when you get support from your Rector or your Reverend to come in and not answer those questions, but talk to children about maybe those difficult questions. But yeah, it's I've never felt uncomfortable. But as I said, I haven't been in one of those tricky situations yet.

The values underpinning the characteristic spirit of the multi-denominational setting in which Michael is an educator, quoted below, are in alignment with his personal values which are centred on Noddings' (1984) 'ethic of care.' Aisling's beliefs also align with the values promoted by the characteristic spirit of the denominational school in which she teaches. It promotes respectful relationships and fosters an atmosphere of inclusivity, both of which are important elements of Aisling's beliefs and her subsequent teaching philosophy. Interestingly, Greenfield (2018) resolutely states that it is through relationships with caring adults that the spirituality of the child develops. Both Aisling, Stephen and Michael concur that modelling the values which their respective characteristic spirits are built upon is essential in the relationships between all stakeholders.

Michael: Teachers have to model [care]... Like, this is the first way we teach about ethics and model, kind of the decision-making, ethical and ethical decision-making process... we're not making decisions, on a dogmatic basis because of what we really believe, but because we're making decisions because we're putting the child or the person or the family at the centre of this, and making sure that we can demonstrate kind of care towards children and families of citizens.

Aisling: The ethos is the Catholic ethos. And it's very much seen in the school. When I first joined, the staff could not have been friendlier, and the kids could not have been more welcoming as well. The staff really have a lovely bond, even though there is a massive amount of staff in the school. But I do think that that's led by the principal because he does take the time to really get to know us... I think more than anything, that main encompassing part of the ethos is the inclusivity.

Stephen: I feel that it's the Church of Ireland ethos is underpinned by Christian values of respect, care, all that kind of stuff. And because of that, we live that out in our day-to-day interactions. And it kind of permeates through... When we're approaching policy work... we're looking at those kinds of things, from a real day to day side of things, the teachers would model sorts of care, integrity, respect all of that throughout their..., those Christian values that model them in their day-to-day interactions with children, the children that model them with themselves.

7.4.2 Misaligned Beliefs and Consequential Imposter Syndrome

The synchronicity and ease experienced by 50% of the participants in relation to their personal beliefs and the characteristic spirits of their schools is not mirrored by all participants in the sample group. Below, both Sally and Rachel highlight the disparities between the personal beliefs of the educator and the characteristic spirit of the school that they are required to uphold. There is an acknowledgement from Rachel, who has experience in schools of varying characteristic spirits, that not all educators experience the alignment discussed in the previous section. This is particularly true when faith formation is a priority of the school, and it does not align with a person's beliefs. For Rachel, the over-arching Christian element of her school is not an issue due to her upbringing within the Catholic faith. She claims that alignment of personal beliefs with those of the school is not the reality experienced by all teachers. While Sally is personally comfortable with faith formation in her school, she acknowledges that her contemporaries share in other's experiences as evidenced by Rachel's experience presented below. Megan is also concerned about the misalignment of her beliefs and her requirement to uphold the characteristic spirit in a denominational school. The characteristic spirit of Megan's school and her role as a teacher of RE has stirred feelings of 'Imposter Syndrome', particularly when the children pose questions that she cannot answer. She shares, 'There's a Catholic ethos in the school. Yeah, am, I don't know too much about it.' This feels particularly uncomfortable for Megan, evidenced in her uncertain quotation below, as she feels she should know more than she does as a result of her Catholic upbringing. The cognitive dissonance that she experiences is evident.

Rachel: It fits well with me because I think a lot of teachers can go into that job and a very heavy religious element to school and it doesn't fit very well and the teacher can carry out that role, but it doesn't fit in with their own ideas, whereas for me I can have my own ideas outside of school and enact them in school.'

Sally: I can imagine then if a teacher is asked to teach children this, and if they don't fully believe it, but then... you could point out that, like, there's definitely teachers who are working in Catholic schools, who aren't believers as such of the Catholic ethos, so if we're able to do that, shouldn't we be able to do this?

Megan: There's obviously a million questions that come with [RE] that I don't have the answers to I suppose... Like, they take everything you say, literally, so literally

like. So, I suppose that's kind of important when it comes to religion... And I obviously like I would have made all my sacraments and everything, but I'm not like, I wouldn't go to Mass myself. I really tried to kinda be in the loop with everything that's going on... So, it's kind of an awkward one when they do ask, especially in front of the priests. And you're kinda like, Oh, God!

7.4.3 Bracketing Personal Beliefs

The research reveals participants' varied experiences in the navigation of identity and beliefs while engaging with the characteristic spirit of their respective schools. The experiences described by Rachel and Sally of teacher misalignment with school ethos are the reality for 30% of the participants of this study. It encapsulates Marie's experience and she expresses the discomfort and awkwardness she feels due to the disjuncture between the characteristic spirit of the school and her identity. In her career, the vast majority of Marie's work has taken place in denominational education. While working in a multi-denominational school, Marie shares that her identification as a Catholic and her cultural experiences of Catholicism had to be disregarded due to her fear of causing offence. In the quotation below, in order to uphold the characteristic spirit of her school, Marie bracketed her connection to her identity at a time when a child, who she knew to be Catholic, was experiencing discomfort. Michael, also an educator in a multi-denominational setting, is resolute in his belief that his personal 'faith' must not directly impact his approach to educating a diverse student population. However, as quoted below, there is an acknowledgement that an indirect influence is unavoidable, such as the empathy he associates with his faith. This highlights the complexity of the layers of the spiritual identities shared by some of the participants within this research. While Stephen self-reports that he is not religious in any way and does not agree with the inclusion of terminology relating to spirituality in national curriculum documentation, he ensures that the Christian values promoted by his school's characteristic spirit are upheld, modelled in interactions across the school and permeates decisions made at policy level. The challenges of bracketing personal spiritual and religious beliefs are evidently complex.

Marie: I do find it hard sometimes in [this school] when, say, for example, last year, a boy in the class, his grandfather died... he's obviously very upset. But if you're in a Catholic school, you could say a prayer. You know, I suppose it's more familiar to

me to go down that route, the Catholic route... But, you know, I kind of felt a bit awkward... I feel like I should be very careful in what I do and say sometimes, because I suppose there's such a diverse set of beliefs in front of me in the classroom that, you know, you don't want to focus too much in on the Catholic kind of side of things.

Michael: I try to keep my faith separate, I do in my job, I would never let it impact on a professional decision that I have to make. But I guess where it may impact in an indirect way is, I feel ... I have very good empathy. And I think that comes from it, even though I would often feel that leaders in my faith don't always show that empathy to others.

Stephen: I feel that the Church of Ireland ethos is underpinned by Christian values of respect, care, all that kind of stuff. And because of that, we live that out in our day-to-day interactions. And it kind of permeates through... When we're approaching policy work, we look at that. From a real day-to-day side of things, the teachers would model sorts of care, integrity, respect all of that throughout their [interactions]... those Christian values are modelled in their day-to-day interactions with children, the children that model them with themselves.

7.5 Discussion on The Spiritual Identity of Educators

The spiritual identity of the educator has a notable influence on their professional practice and serves as a key factor in teachers' professional identities (White 2009; Palmer 2017; Wartenweiler 2021; Zimmerman 2021). It is a fluid, dynamic concept (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009) and Hartwick (2015) highlights the influence of the spiritual beliefs of the educator on their practice as it serves as a lens through which meaning-making occurs. The findings of this study suggest that such beliefs are influenced by a variety of sources including family, community, religion, travel and career. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) also highlight the capacity for internal factors such as emotions to impact the spiritual identity of the educator. While influenced by education and community, family serves as the primary socialising agent and significantly influences the formation of an individual's spiritual identity. Through familial interactions, rituals, and traditions, individuals internalise spiritual values and beliefs that shape their conceptualisations of spirituality and other metaphysical beliefs (Malone *et al.* 2021). This current research finds that education, religion, travel and other factors such as

spiritual experiences and practices have also shaped participants' spiritual identity. 21st-century globalisation has had a profound influence on spiritual identity by facilitating increased cultural exchange and hybridisation. This is evident in participants' references to an Om poster, Buddha statue, cacao ceremonies, yoga, manifesting, crystals and women's spiritual circles highlighting that Ireland is undoubtedly a globalised society (Inglis 2014). This leads to more fluid and multifaceted self-conceptions, as evidenced by this research. Such interconnectedness facilitates access to diverse cultural narratives which can influence the spiritual identity of the human person through exposure to global perspectives (Poll and Smith 2006; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Jensen *et al.* 2011; Frisk and Nynäs 2012; Malone *et al.* 2021).

The present study illuminates the varying levels of spirituality present among the educators in this research, their complex, nuanced relationships with religion and the diverse practices with which they engage that influence their spiritual identity. The fluidity present in this study aligns with the religious and belief fluidity articulated by children in Ireland in the research conducted by Harmon (2018). The findings of the current study highlight the complexity of spirituality as a social phenomenon. The influence of religion on the spiritual identity of the educator varies in each participant's lived experience and while Christianity and Catholicism may represent the tradition they were born into, as adults and as educators they have adapted and inflected it with, or exchanged it for, a host of other religious and spiritual practices. Indeed, the literature shows that affiliation with institutional religion is in decline in the Western world and Ireland is no longer a predominately religious, homogeneous Catholic nation. It represents a multi-belief, diverse society highly influenced by globalisation and secularisation (Coleman 2005; Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013; Inglis 2017; Malone *et al.* 2021; Panko 2024). As a result, the findings presented in this current research are consistent with and contextualised within post-Catholic Ireland and extra-institutional Catholicism as outlined in the literature review (Ganiel 2019). Due to the societal 'shift in consciousness' (Ganiel 2019, p.479) which has occurred, the previously esteemed position of the Catholic Church has declined, even amongst those who continue to identify as Catholic. This reality presented by Ganiel's research (2019) is mirrored in the findings of this research.

Despite the decline in absolute adherence to the teachings of the Catholic Church, it is important to acknowledge that in this current research, it still remains an important aspect of teacher identity so that it is interwoven into the cultural patrimony of Ireland, which Macmillan (2013) defines as the 'heritage of humankind' (Macmillan 2013, p.1). This present study highlights the complexity of participants' confounded identification with Catholicism and its impact on their spiritual identities. For this reason, the place of cultural Catholicism (Inglis 2017) warrants consideration as it is influential on participant identity, encapsulated accurately in Aisling's summation of herself 'a bit of a mismatch' who picks and chooses what aspects of Catholicism are relevant to her personal spiritual identity. This research reveals educators' transitions from traditional and doctrinal expressions of Catholicism to more individualised and liberal manifestations (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019). For some, their identity is influenced by selected religious beliefs and teachings without substantial participation in church services or the feeling of needing to adhere to traditional religious teachings. This is what Davie (1994) refers to as 'believing without belonging.' For others, Day's (2011) alteration of the phrase to 'believing *in* belonging' is a more fitting explanation of their beliefs. This phrase suggests that a sense of belonging, and identity can be discerned from a person's religious beliefs and affiliations. Finally, some belong but don't believe (Hayes and McKinnon 2018), a reality that is true for two participants in this study. Collectively, these categories appear to represent what McBrien (2013) referred to as 'both/and rather than an either/or approach to Christian faith and practice' (McBrien 2013 p.16). His seminal work argues against binaries by suggesting 'not unity or diversity, but unity in diversity' (McBrien 2013, p.16). Data analysis reveals that the participant educators' lived experiences of and identification with Catholicism are widely disparate. While Grace and Marie argue that the exclusion they feel is inextricably linked to the institution of the Catholic Church, Michael, Sally and Aisling affirm the welcoming, inclusive nature of Catholicism, aligning with Kieran and Mullally's (2020) statement that 'affirming diversity is at the heart of what it means to be Catholic' (Kieran and Mullally 2020, p.389) and McBrien's (2013) reminder that 'in a word, Catholicism is *catholic*' (McBrien 2013, p.79), meaning inclusive and universal. Perhaps the diverging opinions in this small sample group occur when one positions the institution of the Church and its perceived failings (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019) against the participants' religiously tethered and untethered beliefs. There is a sense of the oscillating nature of the composite and complex

spiritual identities of the educators in this study. The participants experience shifts in their beliefs and perceive varying levels of connection and ambiguity in relation to religiously tethered spirituality (Alexander and McLaughlin 2003) at different points in time.

Alongside those who integrate Catholicism into their beliefs and practices in varying degrees, a voice must be given to the spiritual identity of those who wish to sever ties with organised religion entirely. Some choose to express this as 'spiritual but not religious' (Heelas and Woodhead 2006). This is articulated by Rachel and Grace within the findings of this research. Although Sophie contextualises her personal spirituality within the realm of organised religion, she also acknowledges the potential for a person to identify as spiritual but not religious. In accordance with the aforementioned globalisation (Coleman 2005; Inglis 2017), this research substantiates 'spiritual cross fertilisation' (Ní Riain 2023, p.13) which results in beliefs and practices interweaving and amalgamating. For Ní Riain, this creates 'an authentic expression of love and personal growth' (Ní Riain 2023, p.13).

The findings of this current research exemplify how spiritual and religious practices and experiences can be fused and integrated and taken from various religious and cultural traditions, to form rich, diverse, blended identities (Johnson and Ord 2012; Mercadante 2014; Halík 2024). For Sally, meditation is a form of prayer, while Marie conversely explains that prayer can be perceived as a form of meditation. The spiritual practices and experiences discussed in this study (Section 6.2.2.) represent the blended beliefs and practices present in Ireland's pluralistic contemporary society. A significant body of extant literature argues for the acknowledgement of spirituality outside the parameters of organised religion, particularly when the spiritual domain of the human person is widely regarded as innate within them and not necessarily confined to religious doctrine (Xiv Dalai Lama 2000; Schneiders 2005; Kourie 2009; Jirásek 2023). Sally epitomises the potential for a fluid interweaving of beliefs from various spiritual and religious traditions. Her meditation practice is linked to the 'crave' she experiences for prayer. Sally links her thanksgiving prayers to her daily practice of gratitude journaling and in the midst of these rich practices, she feels called not only to practice yoga but to teach it too. Ní Riain (2023) validates Sally's efforts to engage with her spiritual practices in a manner which is appropriate for her stating that 'we must liberate ourselves from old, redundant

paradigms of prayer' (Ní Riain 2023, p.24). The participants' blending of New Age spiritual practices (Heelas and Woodhead 2006) with more traditional religious practices aligns closely with Mercandante's (2014) findings which reveal the potential for the human person to have spiritual beliefs 'without borders' (Mercandante 2014, p.130). Heelas (2008) also affirms the experiences of participants like Sally, Rachel and Grace who draw their spiritual beliefs and practices from a range of various traditions, where the individual selects that which aligns with their experiences and values. The fused and blended result is described in the literature reviewed in various ways: a patchwork quilt (Roof 1999); a collage (Larty 2002; Coleman 2005); a smorgasbord (a Swedish word depicting a buffet-style approach to spirituality)(Frisk and Nynäs 2012; Inglis 2014; Boyce-Tillman 2016) and a pastiche of traditions and beliefs (Roof 1999; McAvan 2010; Panko 2024).

According to Berger (2014), increased pluralism in society means that a market situation is a reality, which Roof (1999) calls the spiritual marketplace. In this marketplace, the consumer participant realises that organised religion which previously monopolised spiritual beliefs and identities, is one among many possible options so that the adherence of the faithful to religious communities is no longer guaranteed. The reduced authority of religious institutions, evidenced by the self-descriptions and experiential realities of the participants of this study, now means that traditions must be 'marketed. It must be "sold to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy"' (Berger 2011, p.138). The market is competitive due to the desire to believe in something, as expressed by the participants of this study (Section 7.2.2). Roof (1999) postulates that like any marketplace, the spiritual marketplace is operational through the lens of supply and demand. Individuals assume the role of consumer often guided by their quest for meaning and journey of spiritual seeking (Roof 1999; Coleman 2005; Maignant 2011; Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016; Vliegthart 2021; Ní Riain 2023; Panko 2024). According to Steiner (1927), we 'seek spiritual development since the answers to today's needs must come from the spiritual world' (Steiner 1927, p.48). Koenig (2008) states that understandings of spirituality have expanded to include seekers of wellbeing and happiness as well as religious seekers. According to Parsons (2018; 2022), the problematic nature of spiritual shopping in an age of consumerism culminates in the identification of SBNR, the description assigned to the spiritual identity of two participants within this study. This enables the individual to ascribe to elements of religious, spiritual and cultural traditions and integrate them into

their personal, subjective spiritual identity ‘without committing to what are perceived to be the false trappings and mendacity of religious accoutrements of all kinds (i.e., dogma, ideologies, rituals, hierarchies, etc.)’ (Parsons 2022, p.80).

Concerns exist regarding those who selectively integrate and blend their spiritual beliefs and practices (Parsons 2022). Within this study, Catherine’s opinion aligns with literature that does not validate SBNR declarations and corresponds with Ní Riain’s (2023) conveyance that ‘so many people label their identity with a higher force as ‘spiritual’ rather than religious that it is now a cliché’ (Ní Riain 2023, p.21). A scholarly argument exists against the supermarket approach to religion due to a critique that it simply perpetuates regarding self-centred individualism (Robertson 1978; Coleman 2005; Berger 2014; Forbes 2019 Fraser-Pearce 2022; Parsons 2022). These scholars disagree with the individual adopting the role of spiritual consumer, surveying what is available from the expansive and varied religious, spiritual and cultural traditions of the world, and selecting the beliefs and practices which align with their personal interests. Despite this, Berger’s (1980) theological agenda is clear that the possibility of encounters between world religions, such as those discussed by Sally, must be taken seriously. Within the context of such pluralism and diversity, it is understandable that educators experience both challenges and opportunities when navigating their personal spiritual identity while attempting to uphold the characteristic spirit of the school in which they are employed. While Catherine is strongly theistic as she postulates that ‘a God-shaped hole’ exists universally in the human person, sufficient consideration must be given to the inverse non-religious experience of those who believe that they are ‘good without God’ (Epstein 2009). The experiential reality for Stephen is that the spiritual domain is not present in his personal life and was not an aspect of his identity which is named, labelled or explored within the interview conducted.

When the fusion, diversity, and uncertainty of the spiritual identities of the educators in this study are considered, it is apparent that the blurred lines between the personal and professional identities of teachers pose significant challenges, particularly concerning their spiritual beliefs (Ball 2003; Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard and Meijer 2017; Peiris *et al.* 2024). As evidenced by this research, educators experience significant difficulties when their lived reality involves experiences of misaligned personal beliefs and professional expectations. These difficulties may lead to conflicts of interest and

ethical dilemmas, as educators struggle to maintain professional neutrality while navigating their personal convictions and the characteristic spirits of their respective schools (Palmer 2017; Wartenweiler 2021). This is the lived experience of 50% of the participants of the current study and involves educators attempting to bracket their personal beliefs in order to uphold their school's characteristic spirit. This finding resonates closely with Wartenweiler's (2021) research which highlights the 'inner conflict' (Wartenweiler 2021, p.13) experienced by participants who feel the need to conceal central components of their spiritual identity in order to outwardly display an acceptable professional identity. The study also illuminates the 'role conflict' (Peiris *et al.* 2024, p.54) experienced by educators when there is an experience of misalignment between their perceived role as educators and their role as spiritual beings with beliefs, values and traditions. This dissonance and inner conflict, which Ball (2003) refers to as 'values schizophrenia' (Ball 2003, p.221), can undermine the delivery of education in accordance with the stipulation pertaining to the upholding of the characteristic spirit in the Education Act (1998). This has the potential to negatively influence the holistic wellbeing of the human person and to influence the development of the child, factors which support the need for the substantial consideration of spirituality from a human rights perspective (Sagberg 2017). The following section explores educators' understanding of the spiritual development of the child in their lived experience.

7.6 Conclusion

Chapter 7 presents the findings revealed by data analysis which are thematically related to the spiritual identity of the educators. The participants' diverse religiously tethered and untethered spiritual identities highlight a desire to acknowledge the spiritual domain of the human person and their personal spiritual identities. For one participant, personal spirituality was not a valued component of his lived experience and neither was it presented as something that was experienced as missing or longed for in his life. Overall, the research results present evidence of both convergence and divergence within the spiritual identities of the participants and the key findings of this chapter are presented in Figure 7.3. The following chapter explores a further theme which emerged from data analysis, namely the spiritual development of children in schools.

1. The spiritual identity of educators is complex and multi-dimensional. Levels of spirituality amongst the participants vary from not at all spiritual to highly spiritual.
2. 90% of participants demonstrate evidence of holding spiritual beliefs. 10% express no association with spirituality.
3. Spiritual identity is a fluid, complex concept and is influenced by a variety of sources including family, education, community, travel, religion and spiritual experiences.
4. Educators' identification with and relationship to Catholicism is complex and influences spiritual identity.
5. The navigation of educators' spiritual identity and the characteristic spirit of their respective schools is a sensitive issue and 50% of participants experience misalignment of their personal spiritual beliefs and those of their school.

Figure 7.3 Spiritual Identity of the Educator: Key Findings

Chapter 8: The Spiritual Development of Children in Schools

8.0 Introduction

The complexity of children's spirituality encompasses a multitude of dimensions, including cognitive, emotional, cultural, and relational aspects, which evolve uniquely within each child's developmental context, as explored in this section. This research examined educators' thoughts, beliefs and experiences about the spiritual development of children in schools and its complex, multi-dimensional nature. The findings of this study reveal the potential for spiritual development to contribute to the holistic development and wellbeing of the child and present the rich approaches employed by educators to attend to children's spirituality in various settings. However, an overwhelming sense of uncertainty and confusion dominated the majority of participants' experiences of children's spiritual development, as explored within this section. A vast body of literature reviewed argues resolutely in favour of the innateness of spirituality. As a result, the spirituality of children and spiritual development in schools was discussed with each of the educators in this study. Participants were asked to discuss their thoughts and the inclusion of the word 'spiritually' by the NCCA (2020; 2023). This section explores the perceptions and experiences of educators in relation to spiritual development in schools with varying characteristic spirits. The findings highlight the links between spirituality and wellbeing (Naudé and Flick 2022), the diverse approaches to spiritual development adopted by educators, the contrasting opinions on the location of spirituality in the curriculum and the ambiguity perceived by educators regarding the spiritual dimension of the child.

8.1 Spiritual Development and Children's Wellbeing

The participants of this study highlight concerns about children's development in modern society and the impact this has on their wellbeing. Marie highlights the rise in concern regarding children's wellbeing and states that within the spheres of national media and educational discourse, 'Mental Health has become more of a buzzword. I don't remember, in my early days of my career it wasn't a big thing, like it wasn't at all.' However, this is no longer the case, as evidenced by the findings of this research. The experiences of Aisling, Grace, Michael, Megan and Rachel highlight that half of the participants in this study connect children's wellbeing to their spiritual development and consider it an

opportunity for strengthened relationships and connections, as well as the cultivation of enhanced emotional resilience.

Michael shares that spirituality is important for him personally. This results in Michael stating that the links between children's spiritual development and their wellbeing are apparent. He refers to the 'five wells' which Mosley (2017) refers to as SPICE: spiritual, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional. The spiritual well, according to Mosley (2017) involves revitalising a sense of wonder and reverence through spiritual convictions, meditative practices, engagement with nature, or any method aimed at quieting the mind to perceive energy, beauty, and grace. Concomitantly, Aisling feels that sustained engagement with spiritual development would support children in their perception of belonging to a community and being 'part of a bigger scheme' as they go through potentially 'lonely' and isolating times in their lives. The governmental mandate for schools to engage with wellbeing through the SSE process (DES 2019) is now giving schools who may have been 'reluctant' to engage with this 'the push to start engaging in it.' This is important to Aisling who stresses that 'the countless research on how beneficial' spiritual development is cannot be ignored 'when it does work.' Aisling's explanation links spirituality to wellbeing, mindfulness and meditation, a conceptualisation which she confirmed during a member check conversation. Sally also believes that, in her words, engaging with spiritual development has the potential to be 'really reassuring, kind of grounding. And it's kind of like an escape, isn't it?'

Michael: I think Mosley mentioned about that, mentions being spiritual as being one of the five wells of wellbeing and that's just coming back at me now... I think for me, spirituality is important for my wellbeing. And for our children? Yeah, I guess like with a broad conceptualization of what spirituality is, I can see how that's really relevant to wellbeing. You know, you're kind of conceptualising it in kind of broad terms, I think, yeah, you know, why not? I think it could be, it is relevant

Aisling: [Spiritual development] will probably give our future students the ability to have that fallback that you know, you're actually not alone and you are a part of the community... but also... strategies that help them to regulate... It might be something in terms of mindfulness or meditation that we're teaching them that from a really young age, like, there's teachers teaching that, from junior infants...

But you might have one teacher in a school who's doing it, and it's hell for leather on teaching them to be mindful beings. And then you move on to the next year, and they haven't an ounce of mindfulness done the whole year and they forget it all.

While Stephen does not agree with the use of terminology derived from the word spirituality, his concern for children's wellbeing and the need to attend to it in schools is apparent. It is an issue which Stephen prioritises in his work as an educator and feels children need adequate engagement with material pertaining to mental health and wellbeing in order to support them in childhood and subsequent adulthood. As quoted below, Stephen discusses the *amygdala hijack* with students. This term, coined by Goleman (1995), describes an overwhelming emotional response in the brain that occurs when the amygdala causes a fight or flight reaction (Cannon 1929), bypassing rational thinking. Megan also highlights the growing concern for children's wellbeing in school which is 'definitely promoted but wouldn't be classified as spirituality.' However, Megan personally feels that linking spirituality and wellbeing would have a positive impact, suggesting a 'wellbeing walk' for children in order to attend to their spiritual development.

Stephen: I think that's the biggest message I will be constantly trying to hammer home, particularly towards the senior end of the school... We will be talking about amygdala hijack all the time and I bring it down to their level and I talk to them about the fight or flight mode and the importance of you know, you know, you want to say but you have to catch yourself, we have to understand that it's better in this these circumstances to respond rather than to react.

Aisling believes that addressing the spiritual domain of the child in schools would have a hugely positive impact on their wellbeing due to an increased sense of self-developing as a result. Miller (2013) argues resolutely that spirituality is the most profound source of protection against mental health issues. This scholarly work states that no other protective factor with the pervasive protectiveness of personal spirituality is known to research. When the onerous task of attending to children's wellbeing is considered within the context of the formidable issues presented in the following section, a holistic approach to children's wellbeing, which acknowledges and addresses the complex needs of the child is warranted. For Aisling, attending to children as 'spiritual beings' is the initial juncture of this challenge. Aisling's certainty regarding the benefits of spiritual

development for wellbeing contrasts directly with Stephen's. While his school relies heavily on Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES 2019), there is obvious uncertainty regarding how to address children's wellbeing in practice and what strategies should be employed to meet their holistic needs. When trying to navigate issues pertaining to children's wellbeing, Stephen says 'I haven't come up with anything concrete yet. And I think it'd be a while before I do.'

Aisling: You know that all starts with the children who are in the schools, and if we can get them to be spiritual beings, and understand their sense of self-worth, and just their sense of who they are. That will help for future generations to be far more open than we even are.

Stephen: [Wellbeing] is almost like a Pandora's box that I'm kind of semi-opening to look into it. As a staff, all of our discussions on wellbeing have been very much framed around the wellbeing policy statement and framework for practice, which is a great sort of support document but for the children... If a child says, 'I'm anxious', I'm just exploring myself, what are the best ways to support that child?

The contrasting perceptions of educators in this study highlight the complexity of children's spiritual development and its perceived role in the sustainment of children's wellbeing. Stephen's lived experience highlights the tangible gap between policy and practice. While the policy documents are in existence, the reality when faced with a child experiencing an issue requires more than a publication. The potential for spiritual development to enhance children's wellbeing warrants substantial consideration when the complex obstacles facing children in primary schools in Ireland are considered. The salient issues encountered by educators are explored in the following section.

8.1.1 Challenges Confronting Children's Wellbeing

The educators participating in this research share their experiences with the children they encounter and the challenging, trying issues that they are currently facing. Such experiences highlight the importance of attending to wellbeing in schools. A number of participants identify spiritual development as a potential support for addressing children's wellbeing. This research finds that children's mental health-related issues are increasing in occurrence and complexity and educators are increasingly confronted with the escalating complexity of the range of issues children encounter in contemporary

society. According to this study, such issues stem primarily from social media, family and societal stresses as well as a deficit in support and services available to children and their families and schools. Increased levels of anxiety in children are present in many primary school classrooms (Razza *et al.* 2020). Sophie shares Stephen's concerns about the negative impact of social media and discusses the school's reaction to children who encountered distressing video footage online. Catherine is also concerned about the pressures that 'are unique to every child' and questions the varying levels of resilience among children. This research concurs with the findings of McDool *et al.* (2020) that social media is having an increasingly negative influence on the wellbeing of the child as well as the myriad societal issues that children in primary schools in Ireland are facing

Sophie: One particular older teacher in a school, she was like, 'Oh, sure, what have kids got to be anxious about these days?' They don't actually understand what the kids are going through... They were like on social media and seeing things that I didn't see till I was, like, 17/18 kind of thing. And I don't know if those teachers actually understand how much they can see. Again, when I was teaching 4th class, there was a whole thing on TikTok, where it was like a random video. And at the end, it showed someone committing suicide. And those kids had seen it that evening and they came in the next day talking about it, but they didn't actually understand it... I don't know if there's a lack of understanding of how, like social media can be amazing, but it can also be very, very negative at times.

Stephen: I think there's an awful lot going on for the children at the moment. And they have huge pressures, they're on social media, particularly in the senior end of the school, where they're expected to be doing... they're expected to be on Tik Tok. They're expected to be on Snapchat. And if they're not, there's something like... they're almost getting teased for not being on it. There's pressures there coming from, like, in, say, for me, when I was in primary school, it was smoking, now it's vaping. There's sort of... there's a lot of external pressures there on the children, and I think that's just causing stress, understandably, so.

Catherine: How come some people can sail through a situation that's deeply traumatic to another person? And but I mean, look, all the obvious ones - the online gaming, the societal breakdown, the diet, nutrition, chaotic family lives... Tired, they can be very tired. And something that somebody pointed out to me recently

that I wouldn't have been aware of was children waking up early to go on social media. Setting an alarm and waking up early to go on social media. So, but so if they're waking up at 6am, they're on Tik Tok for two hours, by the time they come to school they're tired again. So, texting and it's that kind of cyberbullying then just the norm.

This study highlights how closely educators are intertwined with the lives of the children they encounter and shares their numerous concerns regarding the societal stresses facing children. Social issues can profoundly hinder children's spiritual development by creating environments of stress and instability. As a result, these educators are required to respond accordingly in order to attend to the wellbeing of the children. Megan shares that regardless of the scale of the issues facing the children she encounters, 'if there's something bothering them that day... you have to jump over that bridge first' before any teaching and learning can take place. This aligns closely with the desire for a holistic approach to education discussed by the participants in Section 7.4. According to the WHO (2022), the prevalence of anxiety and depression has increased globally by 25% following the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that the mental health and wellbeing of young people have been disproportionately and detrimentally affected. Children's learning has been impacted and there is pressure to increase progress in core subjects to the detriment of their wellbeing. Sophie explains that the global pandemic has adversely impacted children behaviourally and this is a 'a big issue' for her. She feels that children feel the need to 'find their boundaries' in a different way. Megan also articulates the stress and strain caused by COVID-19 and the adverse impact that it is continuing to have on children. Zhao (2021) highlights the dangers of falling into the 'learning loss trap' (Zhao 2021, p.557). It is not simply losses to reading and maths but to social and emotional learning, wellbeing, relationships and psychological development also. The holistic understandings of spirituality presented in this study suggest potential losses to spiritual development too

Catherine: Stresses, like family breakdown is huge, you know, and then Mommy has a new boyfriend. And then if there's a new baby, and like, if small kids trying to process all of this it's really tough on them.

Rachel: There are a lot of children from single-parent or low-income families, children who have economically difficult backgrounds, really. So, all of that comes

into the school and how we manage that. And yeah, we have, you know, as a faculty, we have to manage those different kinds of energies and different kind of sensitivities that we need to put into place there.

Grace: I would know to say, 'do you need to go and sit with the book for a little bit?' because I know that child is going to go sit with a book, I'm going to go over in 10 minutes, and he's going to be asleep with the book over his face, because he lives upstairs from a raging alcoholic, who probably kicked the door in again last night... And then you also know that these kids, because I was in 5th and 6th class, these kids if they don't, academically, if they don't succeed now, they're not going to be engaged in secondary.

Stephen, Sophie and Grace share the need for adequate services to be present in schools to support children, parents and school staff in addressing the issues children are currently facing. Stephen is also concerned about children's inability to regulate their emotions and the challenges that they encounter. When faced with issues pertaining to an absence of wellbeing, Stephen feels that he needs to remind himself 'I'm not a counsellor or a psychologist'. Sophie shares in Stephen's concern stating, 'You're almost becoming a therapist for children, but... I don't have the qualifications to be a therapist for children.' This caused Sophie a great deal of stress when she supported a child through a traumatic situation and 'had no idea how to deal with it.' Sharing in Sophie's desire for increased support, Grace believes that there should be 'a child psychologist in every school.'

Sophie: It'd be great if the school had something there for the children who are anxious, afraid, children who needed it so that the therapist is in the school for a day every two weeks or something... Someone for like the teachers to go to if they're having difficulty like they could ring a certain person say, Listen, I'm having difficulty with this child, and they're coming out saying this what might, what ways might I help them would be really helpful.

Stephen: [Children are] not able to regulate emotions as well as potentially we would have. I say that in a very generic sweep but, potentially children in previous years were able to, and I think that notion of sort of thinking or reacting and responding, and they're not taking in that moment anymore, because they're ...

anxieties there, and they're on the edge already. So, if something happens, that pushes them over the edge, they're, they're reacting rather than responding.

Sophie: [Schools] definitely need a few more ideas on how to face [mental health issues]. So, whether it be CPD or whatever... I don't really know because they change so often, it'll be very tricky. Like, if you do a course on to self-harm, like, it could change within two or three years, like how it's being done, or how to notice the signs and things like that. So, I'm not sure how you could deal with it... I definitely think having a stronger connection to like therapy resources or even a therapist would help the school in general.

The desire to positively contribute to the wellbeing of the child is evident among the educators engaged with this study. However, the challenges are significant, and the support and services are evidently lacking. As a result, educators experience significant pressure, discussed further in this chapter (Section 8.3).

8.2 Approaches to Spiritual Development

The educators participating in this study shared their experiences of developing children's spirituality in their respective settings, observable in Figure 8.1. The influence of the characteristic spirit of their respective schools is evident and approaches discussed include meditation, mindfulness, yoga, time in nature, story, rhythm and routine, play, integration with SPHE and their schools' patrons' programmes.

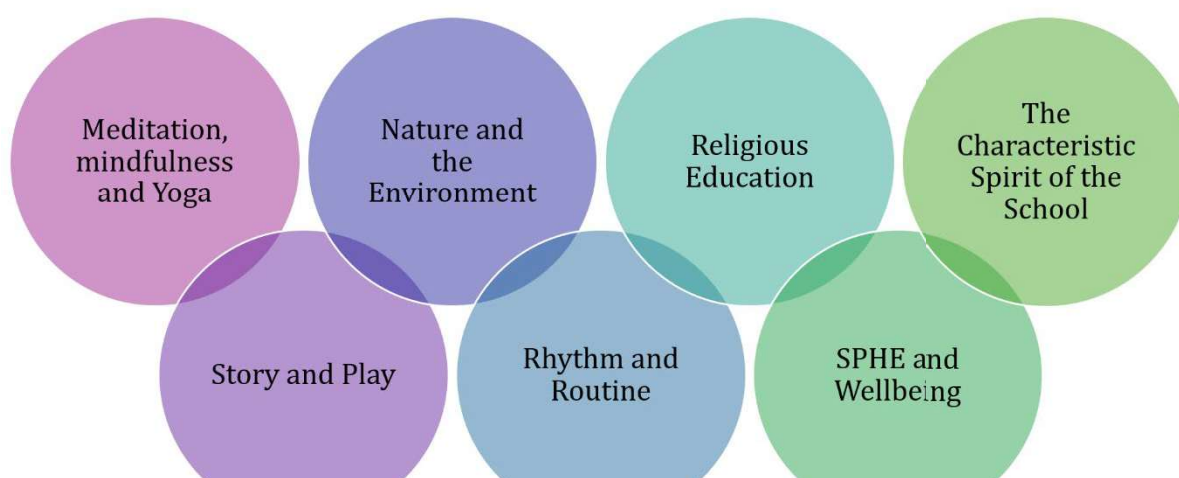


Figure 8.1 Approaches to Spiritual Development in Schools

8.2.1 Meditation and Yoga for Spiritual Development

Rachel, Aisling, Catherine and Sally advocate for the employment of meditation to support children's spiritual development. Meditation has the capacity to enhance children's spiritual development by fostering mindfulness, emotional regulation, and a deeper sense of inner peace and self-awareness (Peiris *et al.* 2024). Within a denominational setting, Catherine introduced Christian Meditation to foster the innate desire for a relationship with God which she firmly believes to be present in the child. It was also an attempt to support the students with the 'socially different kinds of stresses and pressures on the children' such as those discussed in the previous section. Keating (2017) finds that Christian meditation can attend to the innate spirituality of the child and to increase the child's capacity for self-awareness and presence. This aligns with Aisling's assumption that 'mindfulness and meditation' should be utilised as 'strategies to help [children] regulate.' Rachel suggests that 'meditations' which use 'mantras' can provide 'comfort' in a manner similar to prayer. This resonates with links between prayer and meditation created by Sally. Like Rachel, Sally shares her personal interest in meditation which she practices regularly. Both educators utilise meditation in their respective approaches to children's spiritual development in accordance with the characteristic spirit of their schools. Interestingly, as suggested by Aisling, Marie and Megan also, Sally feels that many educators are engaged in developing the spirituality of children but simply do not label it as such.

Catherine: Children have an innate curiosity, to learn about God, and to pray and to be in the presence of God, and to be on some level, they recognise that they need that quiet, they need that connection. And that's why meditation has been really successful with us.

Rachel: I would say more meditation. And I also, you know, ask the children themselves. We have a great student council. And I spent a lot of time this year working on the Amber Flag for mental health... We do an awful lot of mindfulness work, ensuring that there's plenty of that happening in school. And so, like daily meditation sessions like, even on a Monday morning, we meet as a whole school. And we do breathe work, and you know, we tune into each other, we tune into our own self... So, more mindfulness and meditation practices for the school is ultimately what we can do as teachers anyway.

Sally: So, a lot of it we're kind of doing already, but... the label spirituality isn't used, and then maybe like meditation, and then in a Catholic school, you could link back to prayer.

Catherine went on to share her positive experience with Christian Meditation Ireland which offers free training to teachers based on the doctoral research of Keating (2016). In Catherine's school, the meditation involved listening to a guided track. It was hugely beneficial at times in the day when 'everybody just needed to calm down' such as after breaks when children had issues they needed to deal with. The children were invited to use the phrase 'Maranatha', to sit quietly without using the phrase and engage in 'secular meditation' or to read if they did not wish to participate. According to Keating (2016), Maranatha is an Aramaic word meaning *Come Lord*. It was entirely invitational with one clear instruction 'Don't disturb the [others].' Catherine believes it was beneficial to the children for spiritual development because 'children have very little quiet time... they're constantly stimulated.' Time in silence and reflection, which allows for the establishment of relationships and deeper connections is a valued approach to spiritual development advocated for by Catherine and her colleagues.

Catherine: My own class... they said things like, 'It makes me feel good'. And 'it makes me happy' and 'I feel it peaceful' and you know... there were no negative comments... The teachers when we spoke about it at staff meetings, they were very positive about it.

Sally and Rachel suggest using yoga to foster the spirituality of the child. This aligns with findings from extant research about the benefits of yoga for children (Rashedi and Schonert-Reich 2019; Razza *et al.* 2020). Rachel has trained as a 'children's yoga teacher' and suggests that as well as developing children's spirituality, yoga could be utilised to develop the children's Irish. Rachel advocates for the inclusion of yoga, which she states she 'could teach through Irish.' This suggestion aligns closely with Rachel's conceptualisation of spirituality and her belief that the Irish language is deeply spiritual. Sally also suggested using yoga to develop the spirituality of the child and shared her school's experience of having an external yoga teacher. Interestingly, when discussing the denominational characteristic spirit, Sally described yoga as a 'standalone practice' that 'definitely wouldn't be under a Catholic umbrella as such.' Despite this, Sally's experience was positive. Again, Sally's perceptions on the spiritual development of children align

closely with her personal beliefs and practices which she states involve, 'a lot of intertwining... of East and Western Beliefs.'

Sally: For me anyways, I think that's perfectly okay. Because I think when I think of a Catholic school, like number one, think of being welcomed and being open. So, we invited that external teacher, and she was treated with respect. And it was just nearly a matter of like mindfulness and like a break on a different aspect of PE (Physical Education).

8.2.2 Cultivating a Natural Connection

Extant literature on spirituality connects it to nature and to the environment with many scholars expounding the telluric nature of the concept (Fraser 2007; Kourie 2009; Bell *et al.* 2021; Lee 2022). Three participants, namely Grace, Rachel and Sophie, share their belief that time in nature is a vital component of spiritual development for children. Not only should children be afforded the opportunity to develop a relationship with the Earth for the purposes of stewardship and custodianship, it also facilitates the development of a sense of place and belonging in the child which positively impacts their sense of meaning and purpose. The establishment and fostering of a connection to nature is 'really important' to Grace's approach to developing children's spirituality. 'Ritual and routine is really, really important' for Grace and while the 'activities change, the routine stays the same.' One of the rituals she invites children to participate in is 'saying grace' in a 'nondenominational' manner that is focused on gratitude for nature. 'We say a blessing on the blossom, a blessing on the leaf, a blessing on the root.' Being outside and connecting to nature in a way that fosters a connection to something larger than the self is a central objective of Grace's approach to spiritual development. This highlights the capacity for transcendence through ordinary occurrences in the school day. Ryan (2002) collected a variety of spiritual and secular mealtime blessings, the value of which resides in acknowledging the many blessings life offers in order to satisfy the hunger for connection to the self, to others and to nature. Rachel also highlights the importance of developing children's connection to nature. For that reason, in her setting, they devote a significant amount of time to outdoor activities, encouraging children to interact with their natural surroundings.

Grace: what we're really hoping to get through [is] a sense of reverence, so this thing that people get in churches, where they feel like there is something bigger

than them, you should be able to get that outside of church anytime you're, you know, away from a ceiling really.

Rachel: In our school, it's really going for a whole, what we call 'head, hands and heart approach to learning. So, it's a very holistic kind of approach to learning where we really engage the whole body as such. So, we spend an awful lot of time outdoors, getting the children to engage with the environment.

Grace and Sophie share explicit examples of the ways in which they have experienced children engaged in spiritual development within the natural environment. Grace fosters a sense of reverence and respect for the natural world within the children she encounters. In the quote below, the capacity for nature to cultivate a sense of wonder and awe while in nature is evident in her approach. Sophie shares an explicit approach to fostering children's connection to nature within a Christian context in the form of Muddy Church, an approach founded by Lucie Hutson (Coleman 2023). The practice involves an accessible, inclusive, natural way of deepening a connection with God, by 'holding intentional time and space with God and each other outside the confines of a building' (Coleman 2023, p.3). According to Stanley (2020) engaging with nature in this way and becoming aware of the spiritual within it comes naturally to children. However, Stanley (2020) postulates that authentic engagement from the facilitatory adults is essential to ensure a meaningful connection. Berryman agrees with the need for spiritual guidance from adults but also argues that adults too need children for spiritual guidance in order to 'refresh and re-centre' (Berryman 2013, p.1) spiritual growth in adults. The conceptualisations of spirituality shared by Sophie and Grace (Section 6.1.1.3) prioritise a connection to nature, highlighting the alignment of their personal beliefs with their professional practices.

Grace: The children are introduced to the Grandmother Tree, and... we collectively ask permission, we sing, we sing the tree of songs, sometimes we bring it a little present, and we ask permission... this is just a way to kind of physically realise the understanding that we do not own nature. We're not in charge of what happens. We're here by... we're here by permission. And we need to, it's a reciprocal relationship and we need to respect it. And so, the children ask permission from Grandmother Tree. You know that she says yes because the leaves wave a little bit.

Sophie: There's amazing children's work, there's Muddy play and Muddy church, and all these kinds of church things. It's all play-based, they kind of do trails... There might be a reflection trail, or they might have a theme for the month, and it's all based outside. So, the kids get up like rain, hail or shine these muddy churches on and it's all outside these activities, mainly based on the kind of the Steiner ideals as well. It's really, really interesting.

The findings of this study suggest that ample consideration should be given to the profound capacity of the natural environment to develop the spirituality of the child. Grace shares a powerful experience of a young girl when a tree had been damaged. This child's experience highlights the value of a spiritual connection with nature and the land and its capacity to foster a sense of custodianship in children. The power of the child's voice powerfully embodies a deep spiritual connection to the landscape.

Grace: Somebody had chopped down one of the trees in our forest. And one of the 11-year-old girls said to me, on the next session, she said, and because it was a tree that had kind of fallen over and we'd helped to prop it back up. So, we worked on it and we came back the next day, and it was chopped down. And she said to me, 'You know, in those olden stories, they used to punish people by cutting off their legs.' And I said, 'Okay, I didn't, I didn't know that. But yes, tell me more' and she said, 'that's the way I feel when I look at that tree.' ... That's the strength of the connection that they start to feel. And so, when you have that sense of connection with place, you don't need to be told, 'Don't throw plastic on the ground.' You just know it.

8.2.3 Spiritual Development and the SPHE Curriculum

When asked about the spiritual development of children in schools, 40% of participants referred to SPHE lessons as an opportunity to address children's spirituality. The SPHE curriculum is understood by educators to be an opportunity for the promotion of a deeper sense of self-awareness. The curriculum can also foster spiritual growth through their exploration of relationships with others and developing a connection to the wider world (NCCA 1999). This opinion was shared by educators in both denominational and multi-denominational settings. Sophie suggests that in order to engage children in spiritual development, educators should 'dive into SPHE, and their sense of self... their confidence and that kind of thing and link it with being spiritual.' The role of the characteristic spirit

of the school is important to Sophie's conceptualisation of spiritual development and she states that even when the national curriculum is employed, attending to the spiritual domain of the child is 'going to look different in every school.' Aisling feels that there needs to be a 'succinct plan across the school' and that it should be approached in a spiral manner so that 'When they go off into the big bad worlds, and they've challenges to face, that they have those practices that they can fall back on.'

Sally: I definitely see links there because in SPHE, you have a topic on even decision-making. So, I feel like if you were in touch with your spirituality, you're more self-aware, you know off the top of your head what are your values... what you believe in, and then that will make a lesson on decision making a lot easier. And then also in SPHE, there's topics on feelings. So going back to the self-awareness of spirituality, connecting with yourself, connecting with those around you, and the greater "whatever" (gestures inverted commas) you believe in. So, I think there will be a lot of links between SPHE and spirituality.

Sophie: Try and link it to SPHE... and build on a spiral curriculum... Building that whole sense of self really because I find it's really important to have that spirituality there. It's something that can always be with you whether it is God or whatever it is, religion or even no religion. It's just important to believe that there's something else out there... that you can lean on almost, it helps you kind of in your journey of life, like, you know that there is always going to be a way through.

Marie: Like a lot of [spiritual development] is SPHE as well. This month is all about your gifts and talents, kind of what you're good at, and what you find difficult. Setting a goal for the year. Like, it's a lot of stuff you would do anyway.

8.2.4 The Rhythm and Routine of the Day

Waldorf education seeks to educate the whole child naturally and holistically: 'spirit, soul and body' (Drasutė and Umbrasaitė 2015, p.27). The rhythmic nature of Waldorf pedagogy is stimulated by creating flow and order to the day using "in-breathing" and "out-breathing" activities. Two participants in this study suggest that incorporating the structure and rhythm of a Waldorf approach can benefit children's spiritual development by fostering a balanced and harmonious inner life, enhancing their capacity for mindfulness and self-awareness (O'Shiel and O'Flynn 1998; Woods *et al.* 2005; Angus

2011; Drašutė and Umbrasaitė 2015). The breath and its rhythmic nature, in and out, are central to the Steiner Waldorf approach to education. Steiner (1919) advocates that the breath is the human person's most important relationship to the physical world. It is for this reason that this approach to education prioritises rhythm where activities demanding increased focus and attention (in-breath) are balanced with free activities such as time in nature (out-breath) (Drašutė and Umbrasaitė 2015).

For Grace and Rachel, these central tenets of Waldorf education support spiritual development and according to Rachel, 'promote aesthetic and holistic methods for children to reach their full potential as creative individuals.' As quoted by Rachel below, the day begins with a verse which, interestingly, can refer to a higher power or not, depending on the preference of the teacher. Both Grace and Rachel discuss the importance of beginning the day together with movement and rituals and structuring the day in a manner proposed by Steiner (O'Shiel and O'Flynn 1998; Woods *et al.* 2005; Angus 2011; Drašutė and Umbrasaitė 2015). The importance of preparing food together, giving gratitude for it and having, as Rachel states, 'lunchtime where they sit and eat around the table altogether' is also important for fostering connection throughout the day.'

Grace: Like one of the things that they do in Waldorf education... It's called 'rhythm time' in the morning and it is physical movement. It's to wake your body up... You start to kind of link up as a team, as a class. You're starting to work together... You're kind of saying, 'Okay, I'm here, I'm present now...' You can sit [the children] down and you can work for two hours. And they will work beautifully with beautiful focus because they've had that time.

Rachel: There's a lot of rhythm and routines, and the in and the out-breath of the days, what we'd call it, that, they come in and do their bit of meditation in the morning, and then that's in-breath and then the out-breath is the movement, and we do circle time and rhythmic work... They say a verse... We'd speak of a higher power, or the choice there, the teacher has kind of autonomy to this, a lot of the verse in the morning are essentially like a prayer like that we do but it's very connected with the elements and the Earth, and you could leave out the God element though.

The application of a rhythmic approach to the day provides security and familiarity for children. The predictability of the routine provides a safe environment for exploration and encourages curiosity and creativity. It also has the capacity to support the spiritual development of the child by fostering deep connections and an introspective disposition. This allows for the child's focus and attention to naturally develop, positively impacting their holistic development

8.2.5 Developing Spirituality through Story and Play

The findings of this study show that 50% of the participants use story to engage the children in spiritual development. This research suggests that stories can support children's spiritual development by providing them with meaningful narratives that explore moral values, cultural traditions, and existential questions, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. This finding highlights the crossovers between religiously tethered and untethered conceptualisations of spirituality such as story, song, ritual and movement. Grace feels it is possible when children are aware of the origin stories of various peoples. Sophie and Stephen highlight the potential for parables to support spiritual development. Sophie provides the example of the Good Samaritan as a story which is appropriate for spiritual development. Sophie, who has engaged in specific training for children's spiritual development, suggests asking children reflective questions, calling them to action and then encouraging introspection. 'What actually is being a kind person and maybe putting that into practice over a few weeks, and then getting them to reflect on like, was I kind this week?' She credits her ability to engage with stories in this way to Godly Play training, a Montessori-inspired approach to Christian RE developed by Dr. Jerome Berryman (O'Farrell 2016). Stephen and Marie, as quoted below, also suggest extracting what Rachel calls 'the main message' from a story as a muse for contemplation. This is also a feature of Rachel's teaching practice but with a difference. Rachel does not engage in the discussion immediately. She returns to the children in the time after the story has been heard to reflect and discuss it with them after they have had time to digest it. Rachel employs story as a methodology regularly as it is an effective facilitator of holistic education and 'maximum integration' which Rachel describes as 'the big goal.'

Grace: Knowing the origin story of a culture, you understand a bit more about, like, when you when you meet somebody like that, they're not totally foreign to

you, they're not scary. Because somewhere in your, in your mind, you have the link to them.

Sophie: I think it is just storytelling like when they're that age, they just love the storytelling elements to it. And I did a course on children's spirituality. So, it's - it and the Godly play helps me kind of are trying to get more playful kind of theme around it... But the Godly play, I got it through college with a lecturer. She recommended that to me. And it was a two-day course. And I loved it. It was very much based upon the Steiner story style. And it's really good for telling Bible stories.

Rachel: Let's get grounded and then they do a story as well. We don't overanalyse like, we read the story to the whole school and it's not like 'And what was the moral of that story?' Because it can be something very different for each child. So we just like, you know, put it out there and see how the children respond to it and as I say, we just leave it there with them, and then we'll return to it at a later date when they have had time to digest that.

In this study, 20% of the educators suggest using play to engage children in spiritual development. Play can nourish the spiritual domain of the child by allowing them to explore their inner thoughts and feelings, fostering creativity, autonomy, and a sense of connection to their inner selves, as well as the wider world (Montessori 1912; Schein 2014; Mata-McMahon 2019; Hyde 2020;2021; Adams 2020). Grace uses 'free play' and 'physical play' in her teaching to support the children's spiritual development. This period enables children to deepen their connections to the self, to others and to the world around them.

Engel (2015) highlights the value of play for developing higher-order thinking, in particular counterfactual thinking which supports the child's spiritual development by supporting their understanding of 'what if' scenarios and a deeper understanding of concepts like empathy and consequences. For Grace, such opportunities are lacking in mainstream school resulting in children's inability to be 'body-literate' and to truly connect with themselves and their needs. This aligns with a concern in the literature that current approaches to education attempt to govern 'bodies, emotions and thinking' (Buchanan and McPherson 2019, p.9). Free play is also an opportunity for learning about

consent while following the three key rules: 'Look after yourself... you look after each other and you look after nature.' Play is also important to Rachel's approach to children's development and the lack of 'formal learning, reading and writing' in the early years of her setting facilitates a focus on play. It allows for meaningful 'one-to-one discussion with the children' which was lacking in her experience in other settings and allows for a more authentic 'love of learning' to be developed. The importance of playful approaches and outdoor learning for holistic development is important to Rachel, Grace and Sophie.

Grace: They're taught to listen to those feelings, in terms of feeling unsafe. And there's the kind of physical development big emphasis on your proprioception, your vestibular, so your balance and your interoception in terms of so for example, they go to the toilet when they want, they eat when they want, we do have mealtimes together. But you learn to listen to your body. And because it is so important... It's enough not to feel okay. This thing, especially as a woman, that you can listen, you can listen to your body, you can listen to when you're feeling anxious, you can listen to when your stomach is telling you something doesn't feel right. That's enough.

Rachel: Especially in the younger years, we call the kindergarten that we don't over influence, you know, we allow them to enter into their play world and we don't over influence how they do it... kindergarteners those 4,5,6 that age group it's about giving them a really fundamental basis for outdoor learning.

8.3 The Navigation of Characteristic Spirit and Spiritual Development

The semi-structured interviews undertaken for the purpose of this research began with educators being asked to share about the characteristic spirit of their respective schools. Participants discussed a variety of elements inspired by this question including the school's atmosphere, environment, relationships, size, location, pupils, activities and implementation of the Patron's programme. For some participants, their school's characteristic spirit facilitated that which could be considered spiritual development against the backdrop of the literature reviewed (Section 4.1). Aisling, Sally and Sophie discuss the capacity of their schools' characteristic spirits to support the spiritual development of the child by promoting environments that value inclusion, relationships and a sense of community. This aligns with many approaches to spiritual development expounded in the literature. For Aisling, she believes it is important that the children

'understand that they're all a part of this sort of wider school community.' She is glad that the characteristic spirit of her school emphasises belonging. She shares that a sense of community 'can be easily lost in my opinion, and from previous schools I've worked in, you can just very much be one class working on your own.' Sophie also values the culture of belonging promoted by the characteristic spirit of her school, particularly evident in weekly assemblies. Aisling, Sally and Sophie all acknowledge the role of clergy members in supporting the school with the children's spiritual development in accordance with the respective characteristic spirits.

Sophie: [The children] know when they get together, it's a really good connection with that whole community...There usually is religious elements in it and we were saying that like, God is always there. God is always our friend... Then if there is anything you know like sports achievements and things are all shown in this assembly. So, I what I really like about it is the children are so excited, so proud to be showing what they love doing and it brings the outside kind of into your school as well.

Aisling: We follow the Catholic religion in the school. We have *Grow in Love*, we do that daily. And of course, then you have your Confirmation and your Communion classes... The priest has a big role to play in our school, he's always in and out to us... He's obviously just so friendly and makes everything really understandable. Like with the sort of analogies he uses, like he might use the bird's nest to describe one of the stories in the Bible. He just makes it very understandable for the kids.

Sally: We have a Catholic ethos within our school. So that for me that would mean that we are welcoming... We celebrate things like Catholic Schools Week, we would follow *Grow in Love* programmes within the school, we practice the Sacrament of Confirmation and Communion within the school... We would be following on from those values that are instilled in Catholic teaching... So, for me, that would be like kindness, treating one another as you would like to be treated, and just kind of values of respect.

This research shows that when discussing the characteristic spirit of their respective schools, 60% of the participants share uncertainty regarding the role of RE in schools and children's spirituality. Rachel states that in her school, which is multi-denominational, it

is preferred to 'leave the heavy, organised religion to the parents.' She states that with regards to the Patron's programme, they 'haven't even got onto beliefs' due to a significant degree of uncertainty pertaining to this topic. Rachel feels that, despite this, the children's spiritual development is not negatively impacted because the children encounter 'stories, thinking time and philosophy' which supports this. The quotations presented below highlight the dissonance between the expectations of the patrons and their respective programmes, the beliefs of the educators and the life of the child. The emotive, forceful, negative language utilised by the participants in their descriptions of denominational education displays this further.

Sophie: *Grow in Love*, there were some things that I didn't quite agree with, like I found it was almost very harsh at times. And in junior infants, I was shocked to see that it was like when you go to church, what do you see, or when you see this in the church or attend church on Sunday, and then find these differences, I felt like it was almost forced, in a way onto the kids.

Stephen: [Roman Catholic Schools] pretty much promotes an ethos and kind of, I guess, to paraphrase some words that have been said to me previously by parents almost 'rams it down their throat'.

Sally: My only problem with working in a Catholic school is that all you think of it as this lovely welcoming and treat others as you'd like to be treated. But I'm sure not every family or parent or child feels like that when they hear when they hear of Catholic school because they have their own experiences with the Catholic Church and their own perceptions.

Aisling: But I don't necessarily believe in the faith side of the Catholic Church and with the whole sort of I suppose indoctrination that happened when we were small. I don't agree with that in schools. I don't believe in that side of things either.

Stephen: I would have met particularly parents who were moving from a more strict sort of Roman Catholic ethos and they were saying, 'Okay, we didn't appreciate that. We didn't appreciate the fact that particularly preparation for sacraments was a big issue.'

Although Stephen prioritises the transfer of Christian values to the children attending the school, Stephen feels strongly that schools are not best placed to support children with

religious and spiritual development, particularly when considered in light of the language 'spiritually healthy' used by the NCCA (2020). He expresses that pressure from patrons to attend to the spiritual domain is the reason it is addressed in the curriculum document. He believes that there is 'pressure from all of the patrons saying this needs, this must be included.' Marie also feels that within the context of her multi-denominational school, spiritual development is not appropriate. This appears to be linked to her understanding of spirituality and religion as synonymous terms. Within a multi-denominational setting, Michael concurs with Stephen regarding the role of parents and the place of spiritual development in schools.

Stephen: Well, I think it's very difficult for a school. I guess we can support a child to be spiritually healthy. But I would see a lot of that as the responsibility of the parents. And whatever the parents choose, that's their business. And yes, I understand the school has an ethos, and we have our Church of Ireland ethos, and I've spoken to you already about the Christian values. And I think that's important. But I think for... in order to support a child to be spiritually healthy, I don't... I don't think it school is best placed to support a child to be spiritually healthy. That's just my thoughts.

Marie: Yeah, like, I can't really [address spirituality]. Because there's such a wide variety in front of me. I can't encourage a belief in one thing over another, I can just expose them to the variety out there. Again, it's religion, I think of it as religion.

Michael: Like for us, I guess, things like that is, is the job of the parents or the guardians... ethics and the environment is a crucial part of our curriculum. And ethics is important. But as I consider it, and based on what we were saying, like, you know, [ethics] could probably come under the umbrella of spirituality... whereas, we will probably have ethics as the broad term and spirituality being part of that for individual people if they want it.'

Michael succinctly discusses the challenges of navigating the diverse beliefs of his school community at length. The challenge of navigating the 'spectrum of belief and non-belief' families is of paramount importance to him, particularly when 'the majority have very strong views about faith in their own different faiths.'

Michael: Everybody is really entitled to their own religious beliefs. And they're really entitled to their own personal convictions. And, and it's important that children and families have those beliefs. But those beliefs are not allowed to impact on other children who have different beliefs. And getting that balance is something that can be challenging.'

8.3.1 Religious Education and its role in spiritual development

The educators in this study discuss the role of RE in relation to the upholding of the characteristic spirit of their respective schools. While the spiritual development of children in Ireland may be historically associated with their access to RE, it appears that the participants of this study encounter more challenges than opportunities when considering spiritual development within the parameters of RE. This aligns with Kieran and Mullally's (2020) cognisance of the challenges educators face when attempting to attend to the diverse needs of students from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds. The findings of this study reveal the concerns of practising educators regarding the potential exclusion of students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. This, in turn, may hinder the development of an inclusive educational environment where pluralistic beliefs exist. This may have adverse repercussions on the spiritual development of the child, particularly when a human rights lens is applied to the issue (Sagberg 2017; Bryant *et al.* 2020).

Despite these concerns, educators share their experiences of employing RE to engage children in spiritual development. When discussing spirituality and religion initially, Megan felt that they were separate, However, as the discussion unfolded, she felt that children were engaging in spiritual development while participating in RE. Aisling values the space for reflection and questioning created by RE and the opportunities this affords for spiritual development. Sophie concurs with this and states that she counts on the 'Rector or Reverend' for support with children's spirituality and to 'talk to the children about those difficult questions.' For Sophie, her primary concern when teaching RE is the 'morals... Not that you need to go to church, and you need to do this, and you need to believe in Jesus. It's more, you need to be kind.' This aligns with Stephen's belief that the denominational programme means 'making those parables real for the children. We're talking about messages about like being kind and being... caring for each other.'

Megan: Like, I suppose, in the *Grow in Love* curriculum, [religion and spirituality] are very separate, but like there are things that overlap. Like I find in the *Grow in Love*, there's a lot of like me talking, and maybe they repeat after me, but like mindfulness kind of things going on. And like you like give them a chance to kind of close their eyes and pray or do whatever you'd like to do.

Aisling: it's just very child centred... because it's completely centred around how they learn and how they understand and all the questions that they ask that, you know, sometimes you might be asked questions, you think, 'Oh, God, I don't know how to answer that at all.' But it encourages them to ask questions, and they can be open ended, and you don't have to have answers to them. But that children are allowed that space and are respected in that space that they can ask questions.

Aisling also highlights the positive opportunities during RE lessons for the sharing of diverse perspectives in her denominational school. As an educator in a multi-denominational setting, Michael endeavours to celebrate the various beliefs present and a range of religious celebrations are highlighted, guest speakers are invited to share their experiences, and the children learn about the spirituality of all major world religions. However, the discussions on religion and spirituality must be purely informative in order to uphold the characteristic spirit of the multi-denominational school. This invitational approach contrasts with the forceful perceptions of RE described by the participants in the previous section.

Aisling: It's really nice as well for like the other faiths part of the *Grow in Love* curriculum that, you know, they can share their side of things as well... I had a lot of girls in my class this year who were Catholic, but they're Indian, and even just sharing the different traditions that they have from Irish Catholics was lovely as well. But it's not seen as a big issue at all.

Michael: We will have children, and you know, different families, different faith groups, you know, come in, so we try to mark it as best we can. We get guest speakers from the different faiths coming to a talking about their faiths in the school, all of us and we do that from what you might call a non-proselytising perspective. Like, if I ever if I ever got a sense that a guest speaker was going into a class and extolling the benefits ... or maybe trying to convince the children of

their faith, it wouldn't happen. I would not allow that, you know, it's from an information point of view.

8.3.2 Spiritual Development and Religious Education: The Challenges

The educators encounter a number of challenges in relation to the role of RE and the spiritual development of the child. Such challenges include a lack of commitment within school staff, an overwhelming curriculum and awkwardness and restriction when children are not participating in RE lessons. Catherine feels that engagement with the patron's programme in a denominational school varies greatly. While Catherine states that, 'we celebrate the liturgical year, we celebrate the sacraments, we have introduced Christian meditation', an evident concern exists that lack of consistent engagement with RE impinges on faith formation. As quoted below, Catherine feels educators adopt a 'we better do something' approach i.e. adopting a minimalistic approach to engaging with key themes, based on the belief that limited engagement is preferable to none. Megan notices that the children engage positively with RE, yet she has concerns about the awkwardness that stems from children who are not engaging in faith formation.

Catherine: I feel that teachers in the sacrament classes, prepare the children for the sacraments. And apart from that, I feel it's hit and miss. It's, you know, oh, gosh, we better do something on Christmas, we better do something for All Souls, we better do something for St. Patrick's Day, we better do something for Easter, I think those lessons, it's largely based on the liturgical calendar... I don't know, the extent to which it really forms children in their faith.

Megan: I think it is a good curriculum. It's kind of restrictive, though, because there obviously is children in the school who aren't Catholic. Like this year there was a child in my class who hadn't been baptised and her parents just decided not to bring her up as Catholic, but they were sending her to the school. Anyways, so they said it's not really like an issue this year, but whenever she's making her communion next year, like it might be a bit of an awkward one just because the whole class will be except for her. So, it's, it kind of is restricting.

While the expressions above suggest that employing RE to address the spiritual domain of the child is challenging, 80% of the educators situated in denomination schools are all

pleased that parents allow children who may be from a different faith background to engage RE in their schools. Aisling feels that simply exposing children to the teachings within RE lessons is not an issue, once the parents agree with this too. Most parents in Aisling's experience place the decision with the child saying, 'If they want to take part, they can take part.' Sophie too feels that listening to a story in an RE lesson can have a religious or moral focus, depending on the background of the child, making it an open and inclusive approach to spiritual development. As quoted below, Stephen highlights the lived reality of characteristic spirit in a school, it is more than a legal option; it is experiential.

Megan: She was just integrated into it, she had that... her parents weren't too fussy or anything. And they didn't mind her partaking in the activities, but they just personally aren't gonna [sic] bring her up as Catholic, but they're happy enough for her to just be part of it... Not to be left out I suppose.

Sophie: So, what I like about the *Follow Me* programme is that it's quite broad. So, most of the time, you're just speaking about maybe Bible stories and some children, and like I was teaching first class, some children are quite clear that they don't believe in God. So maybe an emphasis on the morals [for those children] and but whereas other children, if they're Christian, they'd follow along story, and most of them know the story.

Stephen: We very rarely have people opt out the patron's programme...I can only remember one family that have ever opted out of it... They just didn't participate in the lesson... But in general...parents... we show them the Patron's programme, we talk them through it, and they're quite happy with it... We're talking about messages about like being kind and being... caring for each other. And they see that and then they see it lived out with us, and they see lived out with the children and everybody, everybody takes part in it.

While Megan notices that the children she teaches clearly enjoy RE, it is the subject area which is usually forsaken if curriculum and timetable pressures impact the school day. This highlights another challenge surrounding the spiritual development of the child and its association with RE. The educators also discuss the challenges surrounding the

location of spiritual development within the curriculum, as discussed in the following section.

Megan: There's like a half an hour slot before lunch every day that we're like kind of advised to do religion within that time. So, I suppose if like nothing went astray... like you always did about half an hour for religion. If you didn't do it, then they'd be like, 'Why are we not doing religion?'... It does suffer.

8.4 The Need for Curriculum Clarity

During each semi-structured interview, the participants were asked their thoughts on the inclusion of the term, 'spiritually' (NCCA 2022, p.8) in the DPCF in relation to the development of the child. The findings of this research clearly highlight educators' need for clarity, consistency and coherence in curriculum documentation in order to provide appropriate guidance for the spiritual development of children where educators and school contexts differ. This is evidenced by Figure 8.2. The complex contested nature of spirituality means that a degree of uniformity is essential in order to create learning opportunities where children can explore and develop their spiritual identity.



Figure 8.2 The Need for Curriculum Clarity

8.4.1 The Need for Commitment

This research finds varying degrees of acceptance expressed by the participants in relation to the use of terminology derived from the word spirituality. Grace shared her positivity regarding the inclusion of this terminology stating 'Wow. I think that's wonderful' and feels that it would positively impact the perception of religion in society and how it is conceptualised. Catherine also states that she is 'pleased to see it there' aligning with Sophie she says that while 'it's a bit of a tricky one, it's great that they have it in there.' Aisling's positivity resonates with this, and she expresses her belief that it is the right time for the promotion of spiritual development in schools. Positive changes to society, according to Aisling, need to begin with developing children as 'spiritual beings.' She feels that it is 'about time that [spirituality] was actually recognised and labelled in the curriculum and the society that we have now in Ireland.' Throughout the conversation on spiritual development with Michael, an awareness of the relevance of spiritual development for children unfolded. This research suggests that a degree of commitment from educators is needed in order for children to be supported in their spiritual development. However, in order for this to occur, clarity in the form of definitions is required.

Grace: Religion has been kind of politicised and divisive in so many contexts. And I think it's wonderful that this kind of unilateral acknowledgement of the spirituality that underpins all religions is being acknowledged. And so, I'm delighted that it's on there.

Michael: So, I suppose if it was kind of embedded in the children like 'this is spirituality' and define it from a young age then I suppose then it would be beneficial because that's not like you're not like pushing anything on them. Like it's all kind of there up to them, kind of personal.

Sophie: Having that spiritual element is important. And as I said, even when you're not religious, you can be spiritual. So, teaching that spirituality may help people in the future to realise that religion isn't the be all and end all. You can be spiritual without being religious, if they feel that way.

Contrastingly for Stephen, who asserts that spirituality and religion are synonymous, spiritual development is a problematic concept within the context of denominational

education. There is an evident reluctance to consider spiritual development outside the parameters of the patron's programme. The need for clarity and the defining of key terminology is apparent, as explored in the following section.

Stephen: I think once there's clear guidance on what we can and can't do and say and if the curriculum comes down, and of course, we have no choice but to accept it and move forward with it. It's linked to the Patron's programme, I guess. I guess this will be built into whatever new versions of the Patron's programme come out... and if it comes to doing that, we'll do that too.

8.4.2 The Need for Consideration and Certainty

The uncertainty regarding spirituality and spiritual development is evident in the data gathered for the purpose of this study (Section 6.3) The participants highlight the need for terminology utilised to be clearly defined and those who agree with the inclusion of the term 'spiritually' in the curriculum believe that supporting documentation to aid educators to develop the spiritual domain of the child should be available. Obviously shocked that there is no definition of spirituality in the curriculum at present, Michael states, 'I can really see how [a definition] is an important thing if spirituality encapsulates all of those things. That's really important that it will be there.' In stark contrast, Stephen feels strongly that the term 'spiritually' has been included solely as a result of pressure from the patron bodies of schools stating, 'I probably see pressures from all of the patrons saying this needs, no, this must be included.' Marie concurs with this and feels that the terminology pertaining to spirituality in the curriculum has been included to appease denominational patron bodies, for the purposes of 'ticking a box.' Michael, initially, was also concerned about the inclusion of this terminology and didn't realise it was present in the DPCF (NCCA 2022). There is evident uncertainty regarding both current and future locations of spirituality in curriculum documentation and opposing opinions are present in the findings of this research. The need for careful consideration and clear definitions is evident.

Stephen: It would be very dangerous for the NCCA to locate 'spiritually healthy' within the national programme, because ultimately, the NCCA has no remit over spirituality. So, I don't see them ever doing it, within the curriculum. I would see it ultimately, as I reflect on it, finding a home within the Patron's programme.'

Marie: [Spirituality has] always been in it, has it? You know, when the majority of schools were Catholic schools, and maybe just maybe it was an oversight. Or maybe they acknowledge that it is part of a child's development but didn't think about the fact that there are other schools than Catholic schools, and there are other things... It's probably narrow-minded, really.

Michael: I think to be spiritually healthy; you have to be spiritual in the first place. So that's not going to suit a lot of learners because some people aren't spiritual. I think for children or families who are spiritual, I think it's important, but I think maybe children or families who aren't spiritual or have different views or who are, you know, secular... I'm not sure how appropriate that is... Like for us... that is the job of the parents or the guardians.

8.4.3 The Need for Guidance

Educators express the need for age-appropriate guidance on the development of children's spirituality that moves in a spiral manner. Aisling highlights the need for guidance within the curriculum and supporting documentation. She feels that this needs to be 'something meaningful so that you can see the development.' Sally strongly concurs with this and feels that as children progress through school, their engagement with spiritual development could increase in depth and criticality. Catherine states that educators require 'clear direction' which she believes at present 'is very much absent.' The quotations below highlight the direction which educators require to engage with spiritual development.

Aisling: You need to have sort of a succinct, step-by-step building blocks, that you can't just go straight into a completely metaphorical mindfulness technique for junior infants because they're not going to have a notion whereas a 6th class will be far more close to that.

Rachel: I think we need some sort of a framework there to help us achieve the goals that we set out for spiritual health and spiritual wellbeing in children. Otherwise, it gets a bit wishy-washy, you're touching on it but you're not doing much.

Sally: Let's say if you're in junior infants, so you ask the children their question, whatever it could be, I have no examples out of the top of my head. And then they

just draw a picture, or they pick a colour. And they do that and their little spiritual journal, and then in Rang 6 and they may be able to form a sentence about their thoughts.

8.4.4 The Need for Clarity on Assessment

Within the guidelines that educators are calling for, the role of assessment is questioned by 30% of the participants. There is a concern that the spirituality of the person is not something which can be assessed. This research highlights the influence of performative culture and increasing expectations experienced by educators at present (Section 7.3). As a result, Rachel is concerned about how educators could 'check or evaluate whether children are, feel they are' spiritually healthy. This research clearly establishes that 50% of educators are concerned about the role of assessment in spiritual development. Sophie also worries that it would be 'tricky to hold down how you could help a child be spiritually healthy' and feel that clarity is needed in terms of 'what's appropriate' and suggests the use of 'learning objectives' to support this. While educators call for clarity, rigorous testing and performative accountability systems are not the desired response from educational policy documents. This aligns with Hay and Nye's (2006) thesis that the spiritual health of a school community is not a readily assessable component of school life.

Rachel: So, when it comes to like, NCCA, though, they love to assess like, it's a very difficult one to assess... It's a tricky one to say whether that can be assessed and how you could assess that, whether or not that's been achieved... Who can help us get to that point? That would be our biggest... not failing, I don't want to say failing, but that that will be your biggest challenge.

Stephen: I think there's an opportunity here for the NCCA to deliver or the Patron's programme to deliver a clear, sort of deliver clear guidance, like I said, for teachers, so that we can do that... I mean how would you even assess that? It's quite, it's an interesting way to approach it... I don't think I would be able to assess whether or not a child is spiritually healthy. So, there's an opportunity there for the NCCA to make this clear for everyone. We need clarity.

Grace: I would be hard pressed to say what a spiritually healthy person looks like... You know, I don't have like a black and white answer... That's a hard one to explain.

So, I don't think that ... I think maybe spiritually healthy doesn't mean that you're certain.

8.4.5 The Need for Authentic Approaches

If educators are required to develop children's spirituality, whether it is measured or not, authentic approaches are called for by educators. Despite the expressed need for structure, tokenistic approaches to spiritual development will not be sufficient according to Aisling who believes that spiritual development should be embedded in all aspects of school life. Grace also shares a concern that formalising spiritual development will lead to tokenistic practices, as quoted below. There is also apprehension that the inclusion of wellbeing is a performative government response to current societal problems. This concurs with Hyde (2021) who highlights the negative impact of performativity on children as 'their worth and values as individuals become tied to how well they perform and achieve on an external set of standards' (Hyde 2021, p.10). Catherine states that while 'it's easy to put it in the Draft Framework (DPCF), it is far more challenging to realise.' Rachel feels that truly understanding the spiritual needs of the children is needed to support authentic spiritual development.

Rachel: I would say that we're tuning into the needs of the children as well that come to us, that was one of my big concerns... You're going to have to come in and meet the kids and see where they're at, you know, and see what they need to learn. Because you might meet these children, you know the children that you meet on day one, maybe very spiritually aware, and have a wonderful community element and a collective sense, you know, that sense of peace and harmony within. And then you might, in your opinion, say, okay, these are very, these are children who are in touch with their spiritual wellbeing.

Grace: There's a problem, just stick it on the curriculum. Then, we're just doing worksheets about, you know, colour your feelings... It's just not how it works... The latest Tusla publication... it's called 'from the ceiling is the sky', [sic]. It's about outdoor classrooms. We know this stuff; we know what is good. And yet, somehow, it just gets diluted and diluted and lost and watered down, and then it ends up in on an A4 Twinkl sheet... I think it's amazing that it's on the curriculum, my fear is that it will be a worksheet, or that it will be let's do a spirituality week where they'll

sit and meditate or do something token for a week that we forget about it for the rest of the year.

Aisling: If we're going forward and having a category of spiritual development for the children and making sure that they're spiritual beings, that you know, a wellbeing journal every few weeks isn't going to cut it. You know, you'd want to be doing this daily. And in groups... like it can be ingrained into everything you do.'

In contrast to Grace, Sally believes that the inclusion of spiritual terminology in the curriculum as a result of societal problems has the potential to have a largely positive influence on children as they grow and change into adults. However, while Sally feels positive about a curricular approach to societal issues, as discussed in the following section, there is a significant climate of uncertainty and an obvious need for further CPD expressed by the participants in order to engage appropriately with spiritual development in schools.

Sally: Why have they included? Do you know what? It's because of our whole, our society as a whole. I think grown adults who've been through this education system layout, this traditional way of teaching that hasn't changed, probably in x amount of years, are collapsing, or they're burning out when they come to work... So, then I feel like the NCCA are like that step ahead thinking, why should we wait until they're a developed adult? Why not develop this within them when they are like sponges and willing to soak it up, so then when they do get to leaving certificate that they're filled with this spirituality?

8.4.6 The Need for Training and CPD

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that educators need sufficient education regarding the spirituality of the child and attending to their spiritual development. This concurs with extant literature suggesting that educators can effectively engage in fostering spiritual development only when equipped with a comprehensive understanding of spirituality itself (Razza *et al.* 2020; Fraser-Pearse 2022; Ng and Fisher 2022). In her current setting, with her ITE and induction process complete, Megan feels that she is not confident enough or equipped to support children with spiritual development. However, like other participants in this study, Megan believes that with further CPD, this would be both possible and beneficial. Megan's New Age

conceptualisation of spirituality is evident here. This research also supports the conclusion that it is the explicit naming of spirituality and spiritual development that is required. In Aisling's experience, as quoted below, educators are already engaged in this work, they simply do not recognise it as spiritual development. Grace also shares in this uncertainty. Michael and Stephen agree that clear definitions are also essential, alongside adequate training for educators in attending to the spiritual development and wellbeing of children and the complex issues associated with these social phenomena. Michael expresses concern regarding 'the huge training deficit for teachers' in this area. The current approach adopted by Stephen is a result of 'a bit of experimenting' following the consumption of 'theory' and attempts to 'make it relatable for children.' The uncertainty and discomfort experienced as a result of increased complex mental health issues in the lives of children worries Stephen as he feels at present, 'it's not our remit.'

Megan: I do think like if I was asked to do a course or like do something to help me promote it in the class like I have no issue with and it's something I would be interested in kind of promoting it in the classroom... I suppose like it does give the children a bit of a break from the academics, and it lets them focus on themselves and maybe things that are going on in their lives.

Aisling: [Teachers] might not necessarily have been experts on it, but it's something that they're far more familiar with, in terms of their practice, than they probably are in terms of reading a definition of how children are spiritual and getting confused with this, you know, I'm sure that the majority of teachers have actually been working towards having spiritual beings in front of them for far longer than we know. And probably, without even understanding themselves, that that's what it is that they were doing.

Stephen: I think what's happening with wellbeing is, it's a term that's just being thrown out there. And particularly sort of 'I'm anxious' or 'I'm this' or the other. And I don't know if there's a full understanding there on the children's behalf of what anxiety actually is. And that's something that I kind of have in my mind, and I'm mulling over it, what's the best thing to do? It's more difficult with wellbeing because if a child tells you, 'I'm anxious', I'm not going to turn around to them and say you're not anxious. We're just trying to think of the best type of coaching

questions ask agened children who present with anxiety to work... to enable them to work through it.

Within this research, the participants spoke of how they were influenced by their ITE tutors when engaged in third-level education (Section 7.1.1). However, the lived experience of the majority of participants is centred on uncertainty and confusion regarding the task of spiritual development in the primary school classroom. The substantial ambiguity and confusion surrounding the spiritual domain of the child and the manner in which it should be addressed is expounded in the following section.

8.5 The Spiritual Development of the Child: Educator Uncertainty

Sally considers herself a spiritual person and feels she would be confident in supporting children's spiritual development. She does not feel that this would be the case for most teachers. When asked if teachers would be in a position to support children's spiritual development, Catherine responded, 'No, one hundred per cent, that is a hard no.' Catherine, who locates children's spiritual development within their faith formation as part of the patron's programme, feels that sustained support modelled on that of Oide would be helpful in encouraging educators to engage with the spiritual development of the child which Catherine feels brings about 'actual change'. She feels that singular 'once-off visits' are not sufficient because 'they are easily forgotten.' As a result, Catherine argues, 'in terms of faith-based education... there needs to be boots on the ground and support for teachers delivering the curriculum in school.' Aisling agrees that spiritual development requires a great deal of personal and professional development of teachers in order to come to fruition. Interestingly, as quoted below, Aisling links this development to mindfulness practices. However, Sally feels that regardless of professional development undertaken by teachers, personal beliefs and values will primarily influence their thoughts and feelings about spiritual development. The contention caused by teachers' capacity to engage children in spiritual development is evident. It is clear Sally feels that it is a topic which is highly influenced by the personal beliefs of the educator and those who are 'interested' in spirituality are likely to be those who would engage with 'spirituality courses.' The varied levels of engagement and perceived capacity to engage with the spiritual development of the child are pronounced within the lived experience of the participants.

Catherine: The patrons are putting a lot of money, and a lot of support into supporting Catholic schools. But I think they need boots on the ground. I think teachers in schools need support... I would love to see a model like that, where somebody like you, who has the knowledge and the experience, and the interest would be in my school and saying, 'Right, tell me where your challenges are...and let's have a workshop on this, and I'll pop back. So, our model was up to five sessions in a school with staff or with the school leader. And, and it worked very successfully. Now, it was quite labour-intensive, but it worked.

Aisling: Well, first and foremost, they need training and not just to the whole 'oh do a Summer course to get a few EPV [Extra Personal Vacation] days.' They need proper in-depth training, on how to equip children with these skills, because for the most part, adults don't engage in mindfulness because it wasn't something we were ever taught to do. And any adults that do engage in mindfulness have generally had to teach themselves or seek support themselves.

Sally: I don't think [spirituality] can be forced... What I'm saying now about spirituality it should nearly be for religion as well, I don't think you can force somebody to be passionate about a subject if they're not. So, I think all the training in the world will not change somebody's core values and core beliefs, what they bring, because I think that's the beauty of teaching is that every teacher is different because of their own experiences. So, I think all of the training in the world, unless they have a light bulb moment, won't change that for the teacher.

Alongside this, Aisling and Sally suggest that teachers need adequate resources to support them with children's spiritual development. Aisling's desire for a 'foolproof' programme highlights the lack of confidence surrounding the spiritual development of the child. Sally is concerned that the personal beliefs of the educators regarding spirituality will not align with expectations surrounding the spiritual development of the child. A misalignment of personal beliefs, such as those discussed in Section 7.4.2 poses significant challenges for educators due to their descriptions of cognitive dissonance. Educators who feel the need to keep their spiritual self entirely disconnected from their professional identity describe experiences of stress and strain in order to be deemed copacetic for their school setting. This has the capacity to prevent an educator from being able to 'teach to their fullest' (Wartenweiler 2021, p.13).

Aisling: [What] teachers need aside is training and a programme they can follow. And you know, us Irish teachers, we love good programme that we can just open the book and go to the next page. But something that's actually meaningful so that you can see the development and even the teachers might take things on board themselves. And it's laid out in a sort of programme where it's step by step, but something that, you know, is very foolproof, that it's laid out very clearly.

Sally: If teachers are uncomfortable, and then being forced nearly to kind of like, believe in it, then I think there's the two obstacles... Like material, content, like, where am I supposed to go for all of this? Am I supposed to get up a YouTube video? So, like in SPHE, I do think there's good work put into the SPHE topics. You have concrete materials, we have like books in the school, there's videos online. So, there would have to be a lot of resources and materials for the teachers.

Perhaps, as Grace suggests, promoting wonder and awe, alongside a culture of curiosity is a more appropriate approach than explicit time for spiritual development. This aligns closely with Sally's beliefs that children should come to know their spirituality organically rather than through a timetabled programme that employs worksheets and journals. Sally states that 'there is value' in explicitly attempting to develop the spiritual domain of the child as they would then be 'more developed teenagers and then more developed adults.' However, despite Sally's personal interest in spirituality, she wonders if this is something which should occur explicitly or if interest in spirituality should be afforded the chance to develop organically as a person grows and changes.

Grace: How do you teach spirituality? ... I think the answer is, don't. You keep the space. Children are spiritual, like, talk to any three-year-old about what they think about stars or what they think about God. They are spiritual. And you just have to kind of leave that space there for them to grow with themselves. And, and be there to, to talk to them and to allow them.

Sally: Now there is a tiny portion of my brain that's asking, is it absolutely necessary for children?... I didn't have it as a child. And I didn't have it in secondary school. But I stumbled upon it. So, I think that there's a real beauty in that... So, I don't know about that, but then just introducing it to them, I do think there is more benefits than disadvantages... [but] I wouldn't say I'm one hundred percent.

This study finds that 30% of participants feel external providers could support the spiritual development of children in schools. This provides clear evidence that primary school educators do not feel confident in addressing the spiritual development of the child. Sally voices concerns about expecting teachers to engage with spiritual development in their classrooms and asks, 'Are we not under enough pressure?' However, she feels that if time allocation were correctly adjusted, it could 'allow for this spiritual teaching.' Sally is also troubled by the idea that teachers would be bound by the curriculum to engage with spirituality, which would make teachers 'uncomfortable' as a result of 'being forced to nearly kind of like believe in it.' Sally identifies as a highly spiritual person but clarifies that her interest manifested naturally. It is not something that should be coerced. Sally offers the suggestion that external providers or teacher experts should be identified in order to support children with spiritual development. Stephen and Grace also suggest recruiting external teachers or leaders to support the school with children's spiritual development. Teachers, according to Stephen, do not currently have the expertise for this.

Sally: I think schools and policymakers should allow for the hiring of external staff members to come in. And then maybe like a principal who sends out a little sheet, or even just makes the decision on behalf of their staff members that they would know well enough, do I need to get an external teacher for spirituality?'

Stephen: I think there's an opportunity here for potentially, if the patron's programme allows for it and if there's a budget there, for the Patron's programme to outsource elements of this... They can have someone who they [sic] who has gone through the necessary and requisite training to deliver this to enable a child to be spiritually healthy.

Grace: If you have the resources of not having the need for your class teacher, your primary school teacher to be an expert at everything... you have teachers who don't feel fully confident with it. And so, they'll stick to textbook stuff.'

8.6 Discussion on the Spiritual Development of the Child

The seminal work of Robert Cole (1990) inspired an increase in literature on the spirituality of children (Sagberg 2017) such as that of Hay and Nye (2006). Such literature provides an insight into the innateness of children's spirituality, children's natural

capacity for spirituality, both within and outside of religious frameworks, and the multitude of benefits of spiritual development in childhood (Adams 2008; 2010; Bryant *et al.* 2020; Hyde 2021). Children are also afforded the right to spiritual development by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) which, through various articles, protects and promotes the exploration of beliefs and spirituality, the development of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as respect for cultural and religious identities. Despite the expansion of the availability of literature pertaining to the spirituality of the child, a significant degree of uncertainty is evident within contemporary literature and mirrored within the findings of this research. Due to the scholarly turn towards objectivity and positivism, the spiritual domain, a unique dimension of the human person, remains the least understood developmental domain of the child (King and Boyatzis 2015; Adams *et al.* 2016; Hausler 2019).

While this research shows that uncertainty and confusion are impermissible, consensus exists in relation to some approaches to developing the spirituality of the child such as the perceived relationship between the spirituality of the child and their wellbeing. Since the publication of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES 2019), the wellbeing of the child has been an increasingly topical issue. The children in contemporary classrooms experience significant risks to their wellbeing from a variety of sources which include social media, family breakdown, performative expectations and a lack of access to adequate children's services. This is a divisive, politicised issue within the context of Irish education. Contemporary research validates the concerns of the educators of this study pertaining to the wellbeing needs in contemporary classrooms and the potential for spiritual development to positively influence wellbeing (Fisher 2017; Elfreich 2019; Razza *et al.* 2020; Peiris *et al.* 2024). The aforementioned studies highlight the issues present in current classroom environments which can prompt interactions that draw educators into a counselling-like sphere. Therapeutic interventions, according to Stephen, are not the responsibility of educators in primary schools in Ireland. However, this research strongly indicates that the issues facing children require educators to engage with challenging circumstances without adequate training or support. This, as evidenced by Megan, is deeply concerning. While systemic flaws form the basis for these issues, consensus exists that spiritual development has the potential to support the mental health and wellbeing of the child (de Souza 2016; Fisher 2017; Schafer 2021; Ng and Fisher 2022).

Providing opportunities to experience wonder and awe and opportunities for contemplation are necessary for the spiritual development of the child and can be cultivated in the midst of ordinary daily occurrences (Eaude 2009; Flanagan *et al.* 2012). The participants of this study assume that such opportunities accessible through meditation, yoga and other mindful activities have the potential to support the child's emotional regulation alongside the development of the spiritual domain (Quintiliani 2011; Razza *et al.* 2020; Gracie and Wilkinson 2022; Carroll 2023; Peiris *et al.* 2024). However, contemporary Irish research warns against the total dependence on such practices for wellbeing. As noted by Farrell *et al.* (2024) responsibility for wellbeing has experienced a relocation and is influenced by a political agenda placing it solely with the individual, a movement called 'self-responsibilization' (Lynch 2022, p.13). In alignment with the consumerism and marketisation discussed in Section 4.5, spiritual development is also influenced by 'assumptions of a neoliberal capitalist conceptualisation of wellbeing' (Farrell *et al.* 2024).

The findings of this research clearly highlight the centrality of nature in conceptualisations of spirituality. When consideration is given to the definition of spiritual wellbeing which calls for the development of 'a sense of connection with oneself, others, nature, the world and, for some, a larger purpose or higher power' (NCCA 2024, p.50), nature and outdoor learning become obvious vehicles for the spiritual development of the child. One of the main findings of this research is that time in nature and outdoor learning has a profound capacity to support the spiritual development of the child. Utilising nature, which is 'often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child's life' (Louv 2005, p.49) can provide authentic opportunities for spiritual development and have subsequently positive impact on the wellbeing of the child. Nature provides opportunities for the cultivation of a sense of responsibility and awareness for one's environment, resilience and applied happiness in achievement, according to scholars who argue resolutely for the undeniable healing space that is provided by nature and the outdoors (Louv 2005; Davis *et al.* 2006; Murphy *et al.* 2018).

This study substantiates the claim that engagement with outdoor environments has powerful opportunities for spiritual development, especially in the development of a sense of awe and wonder. Paffard (1973) in Davis *et al.* (2006) suggest that transcendental opportunities are more common in the outdoors, a postulation mirrored

in the findings of this research. Nature and outdoor education support the establishment of roots and a sense of place. This can foster a feeling of belongingness and the cultivation of meaning and purpose (Kellert 2002; Sobel 2004; Nye 2018). These works align with the findings of the present study. During Grace's interview, she refers to 'When the Roof is the Sky' (Tusla 2023) which discusses guidance for educational services operation outdoors. This document validates engagement with outdoor learning for the wellbeing of the child and their holistic development in a manner that simply cannot be provided by an indoor environment. Sophie's experience of 'Muddy Church' (Coleman 2023) also highlights the capacity for outdoor learning and engagement with the natural environment to facilitate transcendental connections. This aligns with Sophie's personal spiritual identity, just one of the myriad examples of the links between spiritual identity and professional practices revealed by the findings of the present study.

The identity of the educator is an essential element which warrants consideration due to the impact of one's identity on their professional practice. The role of the educator as a facilitator for spiritual development, particularly in nature warrants substantial examination, as it is through encouragement to observe, pause, wonder and appreciate that spiritual development in the outdoors can occur (Davis *et al.* 2006; Williams 2012; Stanley 2020). The potential for spiritual development provided by Steiner Waldorf (Section 2.5.5) and Forest School (Section 2.5.6) approaches to education are indisputable in this research. As a result, the potential inclusion of such approaches merits thorough consideration due to their capacity to foster awe and wonder, a sense of connectedness, powerful intellectual development, and problem-solving skills which can be cultivated through engagement with the non-human environment (Kellert 2002; Drąsutė and Umbrasaitė 2015; Murphy *et al.* 2018; Egan 2020; Stanley 2020; Harmon 2022; Coleman 2023). It is possible to comprehend how nature and outdoor learning could be utilised in order to holistically and inclusively attend to the spiritual domain of the child in pluralistic classrooms within a diverse Irish society.

The increasing cultural and religious diversity within Irish society necessitates a curriculum that can address and respect various spiritual perspectives. This gives rise to discussions on how to inclusively incorporate spiritual development unfolding with the educators participating in this study. NCCA (2020; 2023) utilises the term 'spiritually' within the context of healthy development and its inclusion was a catalyst for rich, varied

findings revealed by this research. The links between the spirituality of the child and their wellbeing are pronounced in the literature and the majority of participants discerned a link between spiritual development and wellbeing. Within this research, 40% of participants suggested employing SPHE as a vehicle for spiritual development and suggested using methods such as mediation, yoga and mindfulness to support the spiritual development of the child. However, the long-standing association between spirituality and religion within the sphere of education posed challenges for some educators as three out of ten participants consider spirituality and religion to be synonymous concepts. Uncertainty surrounding conceptualisations of spirituality and understandings of children's spiritual development result in ambiguity. The novel findings of the current research project align with contemporary research conducted with student teachers calling for clarity, certainty and training with regard to the spiritual development of the child from ITE and CPD providers (Gracie and Wilkinson 2022).

A striking finding of this study relates to the language participants use when discussing the role of RE in denominational education and its relationship to spiritual development. There is a forcefulness to the verbs employed by some participants and a sense of negativity surrounding the place of RE in schools. In a multi-denominational setting, Michael has concerns regarding guest speakers who may try to 'convince the children of their faith' and asserts that discussions must be had from a 'non-proselytising perspective.' Both Sophie and Sally use the word 'force' when discussing RE in RC schools and Aisling describes it as 'indoctrination'. Stephen identifies the RC characteristic spirit as something 'strict' which 'rams it down [children's] throat[s]'. This contrasts with Carroll's (2023) depiction of spiritual practices and RE in Catholic schools where the invitational nature of RE is conveyed. This is in alignment with the key pedagogical approach of *the Grow in Love* programme which prioritises three central qualities: respect, invitation and conversation. Aisling, Megan, Sophie and Catherine positively discuss RE in their respective denominational schools, yet their opinions employing RE for spiritual development differ in alignment with their diverging conceptualisation of spirituality. Such differing understandings and experiential realities regarding the spiritual development of children in schools further support the need for clarity and support for educators. This viewpoint proposed by this study is strengthened further when Sally's statement that 'we're kind of doing it already but the label spirituality isn't

used' and Aisling's belief that it is time that spirituality is 'recognised and labelled as such' within educational discourse.

A Deweyan understanding of the spirituality of the child would suggest that it that an innate facet of being and it requires support in a manner similar to any other domain of human development (Chapman *et al.* 2021). Hay *et al.* (2006) support this by stating that spirituality is 'biologically structured into the human species' (Hay *et al.* 2006, p.50) and the innateness of spirituality is widely agreed in the literature reviewed (Section 3.3.1). A major finding of this research is that despite 90% of participants affirming the value of addressing the spiritual domain of the child, 90% of the participants clearly and emphatically indicate that there is a very definite need for supporting educators with the complex challenges and changes in supporting the spiritual development of children. Despite the evidence presented in favour of spiritual development in schools, the uncertainty and confusion apparent in this research reveals that most participants in this study (Megan, Stephen, Michael, Marie, Catherine, Sally, Aisling and Grace) are not confident in educators' ability to attend to the spiritual development of the child. The complexity of the situation is obvious within the current study as evidenced by the debated and contested position of spirituality within educational policy and curriculum documentation by half of the participants (Sally, Grace, Stephen, Michael and Marie).

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings pertaining to the spiritual development of children in schools gleaned from data analysis. The key findings are presented in Figure 8.3. If, as seminally suggested by Montessori (1949), the spirit of the child motivates learning, it seems conspicuous that it is the role of the educator to provide opportunities for the development of that spirit (Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019). This research finds that seven out of ten participants express a need for the spiritual development of children to occur in schools holistically. However, this is a considerable challenge when there is tangible uncertainty, confusion and even fear experienced by educators when faced with the task of spiritual development (Hartwick 2015; Wartenweiler 2021), evidenced unequivocally by the findings presented in the following chapter.

1. The spiritual development of the child is important for their wellbeing and should be attended to as part the child's holistic development.
2. Children experience a range of obstacles and stressors in contemporary society and spiritual development may support them in navigating the challenges that they encounter.
3. Educators employ a range of approaches to developing the spirituality of the child including story, play, meditation and time in nature. However, such approaches may not be explicitly labelled as spiritual development.
4. RE is linked to the spiritual development of the child, yet there are a number of challenges associated with this.
5. There is an evident need for clarity within curriculum documentation surrounding the spiritual development of the child.
6. Educators experience varying degrees of uncertainty surrounding the spiritual development of the child.

Figure 8.3 The Spiritual Development of Children in Schools: Key Findings

Chapter 9: The Challenges and Changes to Spirituality in Schools

9.1 Introduction

Ireland is a diverse, multi-cultural, pluralistic country that is no longer solely 'Catholic, White and Gaelic' (Torvey and Share 2003, p. 343 in Parker-Jenkins and Masterson 2013). Instead, contemporary society in Ireland is increasingly heterogeneous and as a result, conceptualisations of spirituality are ever-evolving. Perhaps the most considerable change in recent times is how spirituality is understood in relation to religion and the possibility of 'religionless spirituality' (Boyce-Tillman 2016, p.17) alongside religiously orientated conceptualisations of spirituality. Such diversity and pluralism call for the coexistence and interaction of distinct approaches where various perspectives, beliefs and lifestyles are recognised and respected. This study highlights the myriad complexities experienced by educators in attempting to attend to this. Although the child is afforded a right to spiritual

development by the UNCRC (1989), ratified in Ireland in 1992, an awareness of this is not discernible from the research conducted. The following section discusses the societal challenges and changes that impact conceptualisations of spirituality and its subsequent role and location in primary schools in Ireland.

9.2 Societal Changes and Fear of Causing Offense

There are changes to understandings of spirituality in Ireland and the conflation with religion is also being altered. This research highlights a growing interest in New Age spirituality discussed in Section 6.1.1.4. A key finding of this study is that primary school educators are exploring spirituality outside the parameters of religion. Megan feels that spirituality outside of religion is being included by the NCAA (2020;2023) due to the increased secularisation of Irish society stating, 'There's a lot of societal factors that are influencing the push for this because a lot of people are kind of moving away from religion.' Sophie also feels that explorations of spirituality outside of religion are being interrogated and integrated as a result of the decline in religious affiliation. As the number of people identifying as religious is decreasing, Sophie highlights the need for alternative approaches to spirituality that are not solely contextualised within the parameters of religion. Sally too believes that people are turning to spirituality due to the challenges experienced in modern society.

Megan: I suppose [spirituality] is like a belief in something else... Like my friends at Dublin would work in like [multi-denominational schools]. They're in all different sorts of environments. Like I'm just so used to like the Catholic, *Grow in Love*, this is what do you do. Whereas like their schools are so like open to different things like they have Pride. They have everything. We need that.

Sophie: I think it is, it's very important that we have [spirituality]. And I think people are scared at the moment or not scared, but nervous at the moment because they feel a lot of people aren't religious anymore. And having that spiritual element is important. And as I said, even when you're not religious, you can be spiritual. So, teaching that spirituality may help people in the future to realise that religion isn't the be all and end-all. You can be spiritual without being religious if they feel that way.

Sally: [People] come to work. They are, maybe their rates of suicide have gone up. Maybe the rates of like obesity have gone up. I don't know. I feel like there's definitely a reason being and I feel like society as a whole is craving it.

Within the Western world, the historical place of religion in society is being continually altered (Davie 1998; Day 2011; Johnson and Ord 2012; Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019). In Ireland, a decline in formal religious affiliation and church attendance is representative of this change (Ganiel 2019; Inglis 2014; 2017; 2024;). Catherine feels that teachers do not have the peer support to develop their own spirituality due to the increased secularisation of society as she states, 'I might have a small peer group who share my faith and community, but teachers in their 20s and 30s, simply don't.' Catherine clearly highlights the communal dimension of faith and spiritual development, as quoted below. While church attendance is important to Sophie, she notices the absence of her contemporaries and signals the ever-reducing levels of religious affiliation as the reason. However, Sophie feels that church attendance should not be the sole measure of religious engagement. For Catherine, changes to societal discourse regarding the place of religion highlight the need for denominational education and faith formation as opposed to its removal from school settings, particularly when 'currently, to be a person of faith is countercultural.' This directly contrasts with Marie's experience. Despite the dissonance she experiences regarding her own spiritual beliefs, Marie is certain that the rate of societal change in Ireland and the decline of religious beliefs would be sufficient justification for the removal of religion from schools.

Sophie: Catholic Ireland was such a big thing... A lot of people are turning away like I know, even in my church... like I'm the youngest person that goes to church. So, a lot of people are kind of turned away from religion because religion... They kind of count religion as the amount of people sitting on pews, the parishioners. Whereas like, there's a lot of people go into youth club and everything near me and they're still doing religious things where they're learning their morals and everything, but it's not sitting on a pew on a Sunday morning. So, I think the fact that we are losing the parishioners in parishes is scary for people. Because they don't know what's going to happen next.

Catherine: I feel that that transmitting faith is a really important part of Catholic education of faith-based education, whatever the case may be, but in our case, it's a Catholic school. Because I fundamentally believe... it does take a village to raise a child and my husband and I having raised kids ourselves, that has never been more true than in the area of faith formation. And I suppose the current narrative would have us believe that faith is a private matter and while it is also that, it is also expressed in community. And it needs, I need, my children need the support of that community... Children need education and support in their faith in the same way as they needed in everything else.

Within Ireland, it is evident that increased instances of interfaith dialogue and pluralism have resulted in broadened, more diverse understandings of spirituality (Ryan 1996; Kieran 2019). Marie feels that the experience of children in multi-denominational schools is representative of society. According to Marie, this results in the children being 'more open to difference in a real way' and they're 'more open to knowing that God is different for everyone.' This warrants an exploration of the embedded place of religion in denominational schools according to Marie. This study finds that the pluralistic expressions of religion and spirituality in primary school have resulted in a culture of caution among the educators participating in this research. Conversely, the openness called for by Marie, Megan, Rachel and Grace contrasts strongly with Catherine's concern for spiritual development in what she describes as a 'multi-faith context.' According to Catherine, in alignment with Ganiel (2019), Ireland may be perceived as a 'post-Catholic country.' Despite this, she resolutely believes that spiritual development should be religiously contextualised within denominational schools because 'for whatever reason, whether it's rites of passage, or tradition, or insurance policy, a lot of young parents still want their children to celebrate the Sacraments' and for their children to attend 'faith-based schools.' Again, this contrasts starkly with Marie who strongly believes that there is a need for more multi-denominational schools. The findings of this research reveal the polarised opinions of the educators and highlight their varied perceptions surrounding the place of religion in primary schools, which both perceive as intrinsically linked to spirituality.

Marie: Even like in the Catholic school, it's just very, even with prayers in the morning and the prayers at lunchtime, and like, it probably is right that religion is taught outside of school.

Michael is evidently passionate about giving voice to the diverse expressions of belief present in schools. However, criticism of others for their convictions is entirely against the characteristic spirit of the school, a feature which aligns with Michael's personal spirituality. Michael shares the example of religious beliefs around the structure of the family. The challenge lies in 'trying to bring the diverse perspectives together.' Catherine also perceives this challenge and struggles to comprehend how spirituality can be approached inclusively and effectively in modern schools.

Michael: You're allowed to believe in your own personal perspective, that, you know, a traditional family structure is, you know, is the best, but you're not allowed to criticise those who have a family structure, that doesn't accord with that tradition...

And while I appreciate it, that is your personal conviction, regardless of how deeply it's felt, is not allowed to diminish the views of another person who holds, who has a different view or maybe disagrees with it.

Marie: I remember when we had to do this kind of in-service before we started the job. And you know, they were kind of pointing out like, just be careful of what you kind of say without thinking about it... you shouldn't say things like all children celebrate this, or all people do it this way. You should be very conscious to say some people believe in this and some people do it this way... Just be mindful of the language.

Catherine: How do we facilitate that without it being perceived that the other children are somehow being othered? And I don't know if there are examples of where that has happened successfully elsewhere. And it's, it is a challenge here, because of the huge Catholic slash Christian majority, whether that's culturally or otherwise, it is an immutable fact and it can't be changed.

This research provides evidence of the changes to how schools are operating in response to the societal diversification in occurrence. According to Aisling the roles of schools and teachers have changed dramatically. Schools are no longer places of 'conformity, where you sit down and you do what you're told, you know, schools have changed so much in the last decade, not to mind in the last century.' She feels that 'it's just nice to see we're kind of moving away from that whole 'stiff upper lip', and you can't ask questions.' Aisling considers the story of Irish society and her belief in leaning into the links between spirituality and wellbeing. She feels positive about the move towards a more open society and the fact 'that we do allow time for wellbeing.' This is necessary when consideration is given to the increasing wellbeing needs.

Aisling: For a society where we've been, you know, pushed down even, taken away our language trying to take away our heritage, we've always sort of been pushed down or no, you can't ask those questions or, you know, that even for single moms having a baby, you can't let them know that you don't have a father, it has to be hush-hush and quiet... We've gone through a lot of that in our history and in our culture. So, it's nice to think that we'd be trying to throw the lid off that where we can ask questions, and we are resilient... Or just even to talk about things in a much more of an open way [sic] than we would have done as a society for decades, hundreds of years even.'

There are a variety of societal issues impacting the lives of families involved in Michael's school. Despite the fear of causing offence articulated previously, Michael is resolute in his belief that issues presented to him must be dealt with 'ethically' even when motivated by his greatest strength, which he identifies as being 'very empathetic', Michael employs the values underpinning the characteristic spirit to support him in addressing challenges which come to the fore. Michael states that often, 'the ethical thing to do is not always the most popular thing to do. However, by embracing his own beliefs and using 'the basis of the ethos of your school', to scaffold his decision-making process, Michael aims to create a cohesive environment. The influence of Michael's personal spirituality, which he believes comes from his Catholic faith, as well as the influence of the characteristic spirit of his school is evident in his articulation below.

Michael: What keeps me going or what kind of kind of motivates me from that point of view is kind of knowing that if I don't make the right decision, a family or a child will suffer. That is the bottom line, because very often, it's the loudest voices that will kind of be very good at articulating their view and, you know, wanting their view to be taken on board. But the child and children who are poor, families who are poor, don't always have that ability, or they don't have... they feel they don't have the social capital, the cultural capital to do this. So, what keeps me going in those times it's kind of the feeling that there was a right thing to do. And I want to do the right thing.

9.3. The Performative Pressures on Teachers

An unexpected and noteworthy finding of this study reveals the influence of neoliberalism (Section 4.5) on the lived experience of primary school educators with 'pressure' being referred to 47 times by participants during semi-structured interviews. The reality of escalating performative pressures and increasing expectations, driven by a focus on measurable outcomes and standardised testing is suffocating the agency of educators (Mooney Simmie and Moles 2020; Hyde 2021; Biesta 2022; Ruth 2023), as quoted by Catherine below. This emphasis on performance metrics not only strains the educators but also undermines the holistic development of children, which consequently impedes their spiritual growth. The resultant educational environment, which prioritises quantifiable achievements over personal and spiritual development, neglects the nurturing of well-rounded, introspective children. (Hederman 2012; Hyde 2021). When discussing the potential challenges and obstacles pertaining to spiritual development in schools, educators shared their concerns about adding spiritual development to the list of responsibilities and expectations currently in place. The expectations emanate from a variety of sources including

educational policy directives, school leaders, increasing workload, parents and social media. The diverse needs present in the classroom also provide challenges, particularly when a lack of support and resources is the reality for both Megan and Marie indicating that 20% of the participants identify this deficit as a considerable source of stress and strain.

Aisling: Well, there's so many different expectations from all the different governmental bodies. I mean, you have your curriculum expectations, you have your standardised test expectations, you have just your general day-to-day expectations... I think honestly, if you thought about it hard enough, you would probably self-combust.

Sally: Another area where the pressure comes from is... the workload, the workload, the never-ending list... I have like an EPV day off, or if I have, like the weekend off or something like that, and I might want to catch up on work, or recently we had a school day off for the day after, the Monday after the Communion and myself and some other teachers came into school to do some work during that day. And some of my friends and family members who weren't teachers were fascinated... I was like, 'we all have like never-ending lists that will never ever be finished as a teacher.' So, I think just that huge amount of workload that's expected of you is pressurising.

Stephen: For teachers, the stresses and pressures are numerous, multiple. There's consistent pressures coming from parents at the moment, there is consistent pressure coming from the Department of Education in terms of curricular change, in terms of initiatives... getting pressures from higher above in the Department of Education.

Grace's lived experience unquestionably illuminates the mental strain caused by the incessant pressure exerted upon educators. Current expectations placed on educators and children exist in complete disharmony with Grace's identity as an educator. During the brief moments of peace in her mainstream classroom, Grace's appreciation for the present moment would be quickly interrupted by the unremitting pressure she faced within the performative climate she experienced at that time. The sense of expectation and subsequent guilt she felt damaged her ability to appreciate the children working creatively and independently. Eventually, despite her attempts, Grace decided that the classroom was no longer the correct setting for her stating, 'I can't. It just kills me.' Megan shares in Grace's dismay. For Megan, a lack of understanding exists regarding the range of pressures experienced by teachers exists and is a source of frustration. This is a challenge that encouraged her staff to take up 'wellbeing walks' after school in order to get fresh air, exercise and to readjust after the day because as

Sally states, 'we're all under a lot of pressure as teachers.' Sally concurs that there is a lack of understanding regarding the work of the educator who has 'an awful lot to do.'

Grace: I had rare moments like that in the classroom. Some when they were doing art, or something a little bit creative, they wouldn't be silent working, but still be a little murmurings going on, but they were thoroughly engrossed with whatever it was that they were doing. And I was not needed. And I've had that for a moment. And then I would think, 'Oh, gosh, do like actually go and mark those books, or just pull that child out for extra support', or I should... Because the pressure, to push, and push and push and push was just immense, all pervasive, And the feeling, I remember being told this, that, 'with finite resources, we're attempting to fulfil an infinite need'... So those really precious moments of looking at how wonderful those kids were, we're just rapidly followed with guilt and not I'm not doing enough, I need to do more, I need to do more.

Megan: Once the bell goes.... I find in the evenings like my own family, they don't care what goes on school like, or even like your friends, like if they're not in it themselves, like they don't really understand. Like, I used to come home from placement be like, 'Oh, my God, like this happened today' or whatever. And they're like, 'oh right.' Unless you're in it yourself, you don't understand like, or unless you can sort it yourself, they don't really care.

Sally shares that there is also an increase in expectations within the teaching profession, fuelled in part by a rise in the number of teaching-focused social media accounts which grew exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pokhrel & Chhetri 2021). In Sally's experience, comparison occurs among school staff, as well as online. As much as the profession can be considered 'really social', there is a sense that the pressure can also result in isolation. This was confirmed during a member check conversation with Sally. The increasing expectations experienced by educators also stem from curriculum overload and the perceived focus on literacy and numeracy with Megan stating that other subject areas suffer because 'you have to get your English, Irish and Maths done.' A concerned colleague who was returning from a period of leave frantically questioned Megan about the increasing expectations asking, 'How do you fit in all these aspects into the week?' For Megan, the only approach was 'just finding a way to get it in without all this stress... It's so hard.' It is evident from the experiences shared by some participants in this research quoted below that the expectations are becoming increasingly difficult, to the detriment of other subject areas. It also results in inauthentic,

regimented approaches to planning for teaching and learning, as discussed further in this section.

Sally: So, you're working with children or working with other people. But then you went to another classroom, and your friend is there. And they're talking about doing this lesson. And like, kind of like jealousy and comparison... I think because we're working so separately, and then you get kind of like spoon-fed kind of like the best bits of what happened. That might put pressure on you... and Instagram and seeing what others are doing... You're working by yourself, like away from other teachers.

Megan: Once you do like SESE (Social, Environmental and Scientific Education), there's absolutely no time for your drama and music and everything like it does suffer. And they're the ones that [the children] enjoy the most probably. But they're kind of always in the back of your mind, even like, SPHE obviously has to be done, but it's so hard to just find the time to fill in. Like I find myself kind of integrating like drama, SPHE and oral language and English into like the one lesson a lot of time to just get tick a box nearly, instead of giving them all equal attention.

This research reveals that educators are concerned about 'the expectations that parents hold on you' (Aisling). Megan, Marie and Sally are also apprehensive about parents' perspectives on the inclusion of spiritual development, particularly when the perception is that other subject time allocations may be impacted as a result. A focus on core subjects is primary 'what the parents want', according to Sally. Catherine feels that a challenge presents itself in the 'real awareness of standardised testing.' The focus on standardised test and resulting Sten scores is problematic, and Marie feels that this emphasis is 'the worst thing that could have happened' with regard to parents' expectations. She shares her experience of witnessing parents engage in comparison of their children's test results and highlights the increasing pressure parents are under because of social media. The results are now used 'as a reflection of the class teacher' and are not an 'accurate reflection' of children's learning. It strengthens the primary focus on numeracy and literacy and performative metrics which the participants of this study disagree with.

Marie: [Reporting results] is all online now. But back in the day, you'd hand the child, an envelope with the reports in it... Johnny's mother would stand behind beside Mary's mother, and the two of them would open their children's envelopes beside each other, pull them up and compare them. I think there's an awful lot of comparison and pressure, like pressures of the perfect child and pressure to be perfect parents and I

think it's just yeah, pressure on parents like they're to know [sic] from social media and from each other. And it's probably social media really, because there's, there's awful pressure [on] parents, I think, to just do the right thing and have the perfect child.

Amongst the participants, there is a prevailing concern that parents prioritise performative aspects of school life, such as progress in core subject areas. Aisling explains that core subjects are 'maths' and 'languages.' The participants believe that if developing children's spirituality could potentially impact their academic success, it would likely be a contentious issue. Sally and Rachel also view children's home lives and parental opinions and expectations as a potential challenge to children's spiritual development in schools. The diverse backgrounds of children in modern classrooms could influence 'how the kids receive' spiritual development. Their engagement with spirituality is likely dependent on their family background. A New Age understanding of spirituality is evident in Sally's description of this particular challenge. Rachel feels that it is an educator's responsibility to engage the children in spiritual development as it is unlikely it occurs at home states, 'at least for four or five hours a day, we can give them that.'

Aisling: I can imagine some parents coming in being very cross that like English and maths, or maybe downtime, or SESE subjects may be downtime because of spirituality. So, I think that's a huge obstacle, people are receiving it.

Sally: So if I was a parent, and I was like, to my child, let's say my child was attending this school, and I was going to a cacao ceremony, and I told my child, or let's say, if you have a child at home, and their dad pops off to a yoga class, so how the child receives it will be based on how their parents receive it.

Rachel: One of the things that challenges I suppose getting parents on board with it or getting support from home is huge... Children aren't just in school five hours a day, and then nothing else... I do feel when it comes to children in the evening at 3pm that there's just a total zone out. They're back on devices right now. There's no follow-up on what we're doing during the day.

A stark finding of this research is that 90% of the participants describe experiencing pressure from a range of sources including parents, colleagues and stakeholders' expectations. Alongside this, a major finding is that 50% of the educators in this study describe experiencing a current culture of control, constraint and confinement stemming from the

aforementioned sources as well as an acute fear of the Inspectorate which causes education to be 'stifled', as quoted by Catherine. Such fear prevents educators from authentic engagement with planning and preparation for teaching and learning, as evidenced by Aisling's lived experience below. Despite the DE's (2023) claim that teachers are recognised as 'agentic professionals' (DE 2023, p.7), this research shows that a sense of agency is not actively present among educators. This culture, according to the participants, negatively impacts the wonder, awe and curiosity of children who are viewed within policy discourse as 'learners' in the restrictive manner described by Biesta (2013). The subsequent impact on spiritual development is perceptible. Viewing children in this commodifiable manner means that educators are considered providers and children are consumers involved in an economic exchange (Biesta 2005). The participants' experiential reality is that there is insufficient time available to foster a love of learning or explore concepts of interest; core subjects must be prioritised. Catherine feels that the solution to this is to 'slim down the Inspectorate hugely.' Stephen concurs that the pressure currently emanating from the Inspectorate is entirely problematic and current approaches which focus on achieving inspectoral validation damage educators' ability to plan for 'the best possible experience for the children in front of me.'

Aisling: It's very much okay, this is what I did, but I can't say that I did it that way. Because that technically doesn't meet the curriculum objective or the learning outcomes... But that's not what we did. You're covering your own back that if an inspector did come in that you're not saying, 'Oh, we spent a whole hour talking about Rio, because that was our geography lesson when we were actually meant to be doing something else', because it might not be on the fifth-class curriculum. So, I do think that people just record things for the sake of it and covering their own back but definitely do something different when it comes to in the class.

Stephen: Too many times now, when teachers are sitting down to plan for their class, if you have to have a picture frame beside the laptop, in the picture frame would be the inspector. Whereas I would have always said that picture of the inspector needs to come out and what needs to go in there is the picture of the children... Those messages need to start getting out.

While new policy documents advocate for agentic teachers (DE 2023), the culture of fear surrounding inspections prevents teachers from embracing this autonomy. The fear of inspectoral reports hinder authentic enactment of agency because, as Stephen says, 'Nobody wants to have a WSE report published says that the standard of preparation for the teachers

is unsatisfactory.' Both Stephen and Sally feel teachers are a relatively homogeneous group who have a desire to conform, to perform and to maintain the status quo.

Stephen: It's a very homogenous type of group... For like the vast majority of people would be middle class, they would be highly educated, go-getters sort of, we're a very homogenous group and we want to do well. We don't want to let anyone down. And there's a fear that if you sidestep from what's been approved, and you find yourself in the unknown, you'll be the person that that's the whole group down and everybody wants to do well.

Sally: I think teachers are under a lot of pressure because of the types of people that we are. So, I think that we're under pressure. Because we... Now, this is a sweeping statement. Most teachers are high achievers... So, we're under pressure from ourselves to be the best that we can be... I think the majority of the pressure comes from the teachers themselves, trying to be the best version of themselves.

This desire to achieve, conform and progress is problematic for Catherine and Stephen as it does not provide space for educators to express autonomy and creativity in their classrooms when they are 'undermined at every turn.' The current approach requires reconfiguration with Catherine firmly believing that 'we can look at that. We can reimagine that.' Stephen agrees with Catherine's desire for change stating that 'agency can't be present in a system that is stifled by the Inspectorate.' He firmly believes that a problematic culture of 'accountability' is the 'only reason' that teachers are caught in a damaging system which promotes planning for inspections rather than for quality teaching and learning. Grace also has concerns about the performative culture of measurement permeating education discourse at present. Grace feels that this has the potential to reduce spirituality to assessable outcomes or to focus on other measurable outcomes which are far less important.

Catherine: It's very compliance-focused, and it's almost 'catch them out.' And that old sense of, you know, an authoritarian Inspectorate hasn't gone away at all. And teachers [are] just being compliant in case the inspector comes rather than being enthused about policy and pedagogy and methodology... I am fascinated by the inclusion of agency and agentic teachers and all of that, but... it doesn't at all dovetail with an inspectorate then, who are totally focused on compliance. I mean it is very difficult to say to you to be an agentic teacher in the classroom, Jayne, and then an inspector comes in with the template on the laptop with boxes to tick.

Stephen: Performativity comes into this a lot in terms of teachers, because we do like to be the good boys and the good girls.. And we need to move away from that. Ultimately, we have to move away from that and the inspectorate's role, while absolutely they need to advise and guide on the school's approach to preparation, I think the notion of telling you that your plans are wonderful, because you've adopted this particular format, and then all of a sudden, everyone in the school is doing the same one, because sure, she told you that they were good, therefore, will every one do, it will all be great. We do need to move away from that.

Grace: I mean, I think the danger with these things always is that if it is not something that's easily quantified, you end up with like, you know, not everything of work can be measured. You know that. But not everything that can be measured is of worth. So, in the absence of being able to measure something that is so worthy, we end up concentrating our energies on trying to measure something that's not important

Sally believes people believe that pressure might come from a principal. This is not the reality in her setting but may be the case for others. There is, however, a degree of 'additional pressure' experienced when thinking about inspections. Catherine feels that now is the time for schools to take ownership of new policy directives and enact them in the manner envisaged by the department. This, for many of the educators participating in this study, is centred on the adoption of a holistic approach to education which is cognisant of all developmental domains.

Sally: Teachers being under a lot of pressure, I think, from my own experience, because a lot of people would probably think it's from principals, because let's say like they're essentially our employer... Then in the middle of all of that, when you hear when let's say other schools getting inspected and stuff like that, that can create pressure.

Catherine: Now and to be fair to the department... they have listened, and they have heard, and I think on the new guidance on preparation for teaching and learning, and with less emphasis on the recorded preparation, I think that now it's up to us to, you know, take that and make it work.

9.4. A Holistic Approach to Education is Required

The participants refer to the 'core' subjects as the primary focus of the curriculum, an understanding that Megan believes has been historically 'drilled' into educational discourse

and prevails as a result of a 'backwards mentality.' Aisling and Grace are hopeful that the freedom that the new curriculum is to afford teachers will facilitate more holistic approaches to education that recognise and support the spiritual domain of the human person. Aisling reveals, when discussing her personal approach to planning that current policy documents, in particular 'Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for All Primary and Special Schools' (NCCA 2023) are permitting educators to do that which they are already engaged in. However, due to the performative pressures discussed in the previous section, they do not feel confident in articulating that this is how they prepare and plan. Michael postulates that a holistic focus on the wellbeing of the child should be emphasised. While educational policy documentation illuminates the importance of this, educators perceive a deficiency in training and resources required to bring the policy discourse to fruition in a lived sense.

Aisling: That's something that the new curriculum is really trying to focus on from what I've gathered... That you're developing a child in a sense that it's not just school isn't just a place for academia...I mean that, for me, is what holistic development is that, you know, you're allowing the child to develop spiritually and morally, and that's something that the new curriculum seems to be focusing on as well, which is a great change for us... I think it's something that has been done by many teachers for a long time now, which is very promising... I feel it's slightly late, you know, we really should have been doing this for a long time. And to be fair, I think teachers are doing it, but we're actually given the official go-ahead to be able to do it now.

Grace: That's all of the things we're talking about in terms of creative, independent problem solving, in terms of resilience in terms of, you know, a sense of connection, the strong sense of self, a sense of community, all of that stuff, amazing.

Michael: [There needs to be] more of an emphasis on wellbeing in a holistic sense. Okay. I think the wellbeing policy statement and framework of practice, you know, is, you know, it's very good, it's very helpful. But unfortunately, it's not resourced to the extent that it could be. So, I think that's something that could really be... really be helpful in terms of bringing schools forward and ensuring that back when this is put at the centre of, you know, experience for children and families.

While Catherine believes in the power of curriculum change, she discusses that for spirituality and spiritual development to be correctly comprehended and positioned, it is system change rather than curriculum change that is required. Due to the systemic elements influencing the current conceptualisations of spirituality within educational discourse, this would be a

momentous challenge for stakeholders. However, Catherine feels that is necessary due to the void in modern society caused by lack of spirituality which 'we all know from our Instagram and whatever, that people try to fill us with all sorts of different things, and they all fall short.' For Aisling, a holistic approach to education, which includes the development of the spiritual domain, is essential. She relates this to 'Maslow's Hierarchy of needs.' Grace believes that the need for a holistic approach to education which includes spiritual development is critical at present.

Catherine: I think it's system change we need, not policy change. And there's a lot of moving parts in the education system, and there's a lot of moving parts in the civil service. And there's a lot... it's just it's very, it's very difficult to change one part.

Aisling: More than anything, a happy child will learn. And if you don't take the time to actually meet the children, you know, the emotional needs come over the behavioural needs and the academic needs.

Grace: I think it's something that is more urgent, there's more urgent need of it now in today's life, and the way we're living our lives than there was in the past, and yet, it's kind of disappeared.

9.5 Discussion on the Changes and Challenges to Spirituality in Primary School Education in Ireland

The literature reviewed argues that neoliberalism, which 'a privatised, individualistic, market-based worldview and structure' (Forbes 2019, p.27) remains the prevailing ideology and policy at present (Section 4.5). As a result, educators are tasked with engaging in competitive approaches to education which prioritise knowledge, skills and attitudes valued within the market, often at the detriment of creativity, critical thinking and holistic learning experiences, as evidenced by this research. Within this research, 40% of the educators discuss the problematic culture surrounding school inspections in primary schools in Ireland. The current system is believed to praise educators for conformity and maintaining the established institutional norms. The homogeneity of the teaching profession at present has resulted in educators who, according to the findings, conform to inauthentic approaches to teaching and learning, due to fear of being deemed 'unsatisfactory' as described by Stephen. As a result, inauthentic approaches to planning for teaching and learning are undertaken and educators are required to formalise evidence of learning inauthentically in order to appease inspectors.

Organic teaching moments, which have the capacity to attend to the child's curiosity, wonder, awe and love of learning, are not valued. The result of this culture is a language of 'secret places, sacred stories, cover stories' (Soltic 1995, p.vii in Huber *et al.* 2004, p.182) and educators who perpetually experience dilemmas while navigating the divergence between perceived expectations and reality. This is also the reality for some educators in the navigation of their personal and professional identities. Sadly, those who feel compelled to conceal their true spiritual identity are unable to teach to their fullest potential (Wartenweiler 2021). Concerningly, Hyde (2021) suggests that this culture of secrecy also influences children who eventually come to realise that only certain aspects of their knowledge, skills and attitudes are valued.

The participants of this research name multiple stressors indicated on the wellbeing of the educators. As a result, coping mechanisms fail, burnout levels are reached, and educators teach with diminished levels of personal engagement (Acton and Glasgow 2015; Murphy *et al.* 2020; Razza *et al.* 2020; Charzyńska *et al.* 2021; Wartenweiler 2021). The educators in this study are politically, societally and personally required to attend their individual wellbeing, the wellbeing of others such as they children they teach and their employment requirements. Attempting to balance these elements is challenging and overwhelming. Naturally, this influences the holistic wellbeing of the person and educators experience 'a spillover effect' (Peiris *et al.* 2024) into other facets of their lives. This research reveals that educators experience pressure from a range of sources and strive to attend to the related expectations. This balancing act becomes increasingly complex when spiritual identity is considered. As discussed in Section 5.4.2, half of the participants in this study experience misalignment between their personal beliefs and professional expectations. As a result, experiences of inner conflict (Crawford *et al.* 2006; Johnson 2011 Wartenweiler 2021), 'role conflict' (Peiris *et al.* 2024, p.54), 'moral madness' (Santoro 2017, p.50) and 'values schizophrenia' (Ball 2003, p.221) can occur. While extant literature highlights the need for children's spirituality to be nourished and developed, this research finds that educators' spirituality warrants considerable attention. Catherine describes openly having spiritual or religious beliefs and being a 'person of faith' as 'countercultural.' Despite this, Sally believes that people are 'craving' spirituality, aligning with many scholarly works highlight the spiritual quests and journeys of the human person (Roof 1999; Coleman 2005; Maignant 2011; Flanagan and O'Sullivan 2016; Vliegenthart 2021; Ní Riain 2023; Panko 2024). This is understandable given the insight into 'pressure-cooker' (Hartigan 2009) schools shared by the participants. The issues described by participants reveal the vast disconnect between the

emphasis on quantifiable and measurable assessments and their felt need to attend to the holistic development of children. As a result, educators are left with feelings of 'guilt' (Grace, Megan and Michael) and the sense that 'I need to do more' (Grace). When this pressure is paired with an experience of needing to conceal one's true spiritual identity, it is not simply about having enough time; it is an existential issue. It is a concern which warrants substantial consideration due to the correlation between spiritual wellbeing and teacher burnout uncovered by Pong (2024).

According to CSO (2022), the number of people with no religion has increased by 187% compared to CSO (2011). While affiliation to organised religion and identification as belonging to a particular religion may be in decline (Inglis 2017; Ganiel 2019), the findings of this study suggest that spiritual beliefs and practices are significant among the participants, with only one participant stating that spirituality does not assume any role in their life. While CSO (2016; 2022) statistics highlight decreasing levels of religiosity and the rise of the 'nones' (Kieran and Mullally 2020), this should not automatically imply decreasing levels of spirituality. Within the context of the Czech Republic, a country perceived to be significantly more secular than its neighbouring regions, Jirásek (2023) believes that it would be wholly incorrect to assume that low levels of religiosity is suggestive of low levels of spirituality. Perhaps the same could be said regarding declining levels of religiosity in Ireland. Once a relatively religiously and culturally homogenous society, the increasing diversity and pluralism cause educators to experience fear and uncertainty when considering spiritual development and RE (Gillespie 2019; Kieran *et al.* 2022). Paired with the ambiguity surrounding the location of spirituality with educational policy discourse and approaches to spiritual development in curriculum documentation, it is unsurprising that educators experience fear of causing offence. The uncertainty caused by educators' navigation of their own spiritual identity adds to the complexity of these multifarious issues (Wartenweiler 2021).

Gibson (2014) suggests that enhancing understandings of spirituality and cultivating appropriate modes of its expression within educational settings, while refraining from endorsing any specific spiritual perspective, would be advantageous. It could support the lessening of the aforementioned fears and concerns. Further support for this theory is discernible when consideration is given to Ganiel's (2019) hypothesis regarding the potential disappearance of religion's sociocultural relevance in Europe. Assigning sole responsibility for the spiritual development of the child to RE is problematic. This is also contentious when

viewed through the lens of human rights and the child's right to spiritual development (UNCRC 1989). This research reveals the potential for a holistic approach to spiritual development to attend to this unique domain more inclusively. In order for education to be holistic, the spiritual domain of the human person must not be neglected, as 'the whole human way of being is not complete without spirituality' (Jirásek 2023, p.2). Despite the educators of this study illuminating an obvious desire to attend to children's development holistically, pressure from numerous internal and external sources negatively impacts the educators' sense of agency. Despite the NCCA's (2023) expressed desire to foster agentic teachers, the educators of this study engage in inauthentic approaches to planning for teaching and learning so as to uphold the perceived status quo. This is highly problematic for the identity and wellbeing of the educator. This 'fabricated teaching causes teachers to act out an inauthentic version of their teaching self in order to be viewed... as a good teacher' (Reeves 2018, p.9).

An authentically holistic approach, which is cognisant of spirituality in an ethical, meaningful manner is a significant challenge for a variety of reasons, such as those revealed by the findings of this research. Spirituality is evidently entangled with religion for some participants in this study which understandably sees the child's spiritual development equated with RE. While Gibson's (2014) theory of a neutral approach to spirituality warrants exploration, it is far from an infallible solution. The challenge of adequately and equitably addressing spirituality remains unresolved through the adoption of a secular approach. This is because, for some individuals, their spiritual convictions are intrinsically tied to their association with organised religion. Alongside concerns regarding both secular and religious approaches to spirituality, educators reveal a concern that inauthentic, tokenistic approaches to the spiritual development of children will be adopted in order to comply with curriculum objectives. This study illuminates the unease experienced by educators who fear that curriculum documentation will be utilised as a perfunctory response to societal issues, such as an attempt to address wellbeing in a performative manner. While attending to spirituality for the purposes of wellbeing may be intentionally benevolent, there is a risk that 'advancing neoliberal policies [would be]... the unintended consequence (Forbes 2019, p.33).

9.6 Conclusion

This chapter is the final in a series of four which present the findings of this study. It has provided an insight into the myriad challenges and changes facing primary school educators in Ireland in relation to spirituality. The key findings are presented in Figure 9.1. Guided by Smith's *et al.* (2022) seven steps of data analysis, four primary themes emerged from the data gathered using ten semi-structured interviews and subsequent member checks. The process was iterative and inductive (Smith 2007), aligning with the epistemological assumptions guiding this study and its situation within the interpretivist paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1990). The lived experience of the educators is central to the conceptual framework underpinning this study (Bolderston 2012) and the central theories of Phenomenology (Husserl 1927), Hermeneutics (Gadamer 1985) and Idiography (Windelband 1980) guided the presentation and reporting of the findings in this chapter (Smith *et al.* 2022).

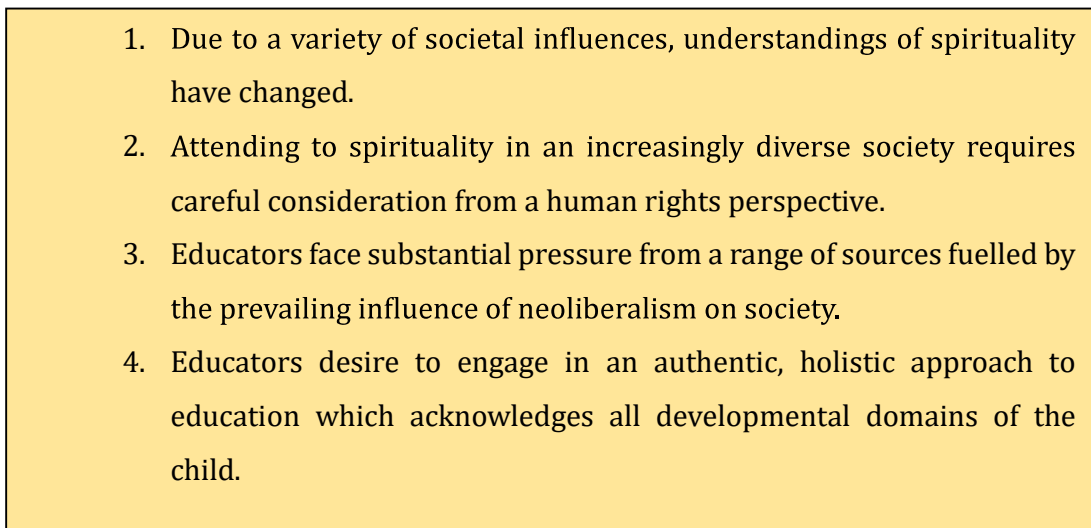
- 
1. Due to a variety of societal influences, understandings of spirituality have changed.
 2. Attending to spirituality in an increasingly diverse society requires careful consideration from a human rights perspective.
 3. Educators face substantial pressure from a range of sources fuelled by the prevailing influence of neoliberalism on society.
 4. Educators desire to engage in an authentic, holistic approach to education which acknowledges all developmental domains of the child.

Figure 9.1 The Changes and Challenges to Spirituality in Primary School Education in Ireland: Key Findings

This study reveals the complexity surrounding spirituality as a social phenomenon. The spiritual identity of the educators are rich, varied and multi-faceted. 90% of educators identified spiritual beliefs, practices and experiences as relevant to their personal identity. However, the space for their personal spirituality within their professional practice is a contentious issue. The findings of this study provide an insight into the lived experience of educators in a variety of educational settings and their respective realities are rich, complex and nuanced. When tasked with upholding the characteristic spirit of their schools and attending to the development of the child, these educators experience confusion and

uncertainty. Participants' opinions on the location of spirituality within educational policy documents and approaches to spiritual development illuminate the need for clarity and adequate training. Expectations from stakeholders apply substantial pressures to educators and the need to attend to the diverse needs and holistic development of children within the context of a multicultural milieu is a considerable challenge. The final chapter of this research presents the conclusions and recommendations arising from the findings reported and discussed in this penultimate chapter.

Chapter 10

10.0 Introduction

This study provided an insight into the spiritual identity of ten primary school teachers and their lived experiences and perceptions of children's spiritual development. Within this concluding chapter, the relevance of this qualitative research on a sample group of ten adult teachers in primary schools in Ireland, in response to the research question outlined at the beginning of the research, is discussed. Further, the limitations of this current research are expounded. The chapter outlines recommendations for key stakeholders as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a final word on the significance of this research.

10.1 Relevance of this Research

The introductory chapter to this thesis explored the research question and its embedded questions within the context of education through historical, societal and philosophical lenses. The research question contains two fundamental elements. Firstly, it set out to provide an insight into the spiritual identity of 10 full-time primary school educators drawn from a sample group representing a range of school Patrons in Ireland. Semi-structured interview results indicated that 90% of the participants in this study expressed that they had spiritual beliefs. 10% expressed having no association with spirituality. The spiritual identities described by the participants are complex and influenced by a nexus of sources. How the educators in this study expressed their spirituality in a complex, multi-layered, nuanced manner revealed it to be ambiguous, fluid and religiously tethered and/or untethered. Their articulations and the research findings presented in chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 align with much of the current research on this complex social phenomenon. Further, their conceptualisations of spirituality exhibit diversity, uncovering a breadth and depth of understanding and showing both similarities and differences among participants on key themes. There are multiple elements of spirituality which the participants agree on including the centrality of relationships to the self, others, the environment and for some, a higher power (NICA 1975; Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Fisher 2011; Worthington 2012; de Souza 2016; Michaelson *et al.* 2019; Lee 2022; Jirásek 2023; Michaelson *et al.* 2023).

This current research is original, and it addresses a gap in the literature on teacher spirituality in Ireland's diverse primary school sector. Among its original findings is that

spirituality matters for these teachers, both in their own lives and in the children's lives where they link it to wellbeing. The research participants' emphasis on the inextricable links between the 'talamh', (earth) or land of Ireland and the participants' own spiritual identity is emphasised by one-fifth of the sample group, representing two participants in this research. As a result, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on Irish spirituality arising from the connection between spirituality and the development of a sense of place (Kellert 2002; Sobel 2004; Nye 2018). The spirituality associated with Ireland is historic and unique and is embodied in the ancient neo-lithic landscape of Newgrage, Knowth and Dowth (Davies 1999, Monaghan 2001; Maignant 2011; Duncan 2015, Hensey 2015; O'Donohue 2022; Ní Riain 2023). In alignment with the present study and existing literature, Ní Riain (2023) posits that the 'genius loci of the land continues to enable the spirit of people, place and the Divine to thrive and flourish' (Ní Riain 2023, p. 240). An understanding of spirituality which relates it to a sense of identity, place and belonging is helpful for conceptualising this layered phenomenon within educational discourse. Flanagan and O'Sullivan (2016) suggest a return to indigenous heritage can be helpful in developing this sense of place. Participants of this study felt a need to be rooted in and connected to the Irish landscape around them. For Simone Weil 'to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul' (Weil 1955, p.43). The Irish language also represented a key aspect of the participants' need for a rooted spirituality. Indeed, the research findings present 90% of participants expressing the thirst for seeking something 'More' (James 1902) which aligns with Judy's (2011) postulation that the Western world is awakening and rediscovering its spirituality, spirituality which was lost for many due to a disconnection from organised religion.

This study contributes to the current body of literature on the contested relationship between spirituality and religion, and their problematic conflation. The overwhelming majority of educators in this study speak about spirituality in articulate, sensitive, open, and insightful ways with 90% of the participants showing a real aptitude for discussing their spiritual beliefs and practices at length. For instance, Catherine concludes that people need to 'spend time in the spirit to be spiritual beings.' Overall, participants esteemed spirituality as something innate to human life and as an important part of their educational and professional lives. This is just one example of the profound ways in which the participants showed their understanding of spirituality. Despite such articulations on the importance of spirituality, confusion and uncertainty surrounding the concepts of

spiritual and spiritual development are discernible from participant interviews. This unequivocally highlights a need for clarity surrounding these complex, contested terms within educational policy documents and the literature.

While the sample size of this study is small, the range of diverse opinions within the findings are incredibly rich. A spectrum of opinions is present within this group of ten educators with participants' personally identifying as completely non-spiritual to highly spiritual. While Marie believes that RE and spiritual development do not belong in schools, faith formation is at the core of Catherine's role as an educator. This research highlights the complexity of this area within educational and societal discourse. The data gathered highlights the emotive nature of concepts such as religion and spirituality, concepts which tend to evoke strong reactions and polar positions amongst practising educators. The current research indicates that it is important that these themes be approached with real sensitivity and understanding by researchers as they connect with the core professional and personal identity of educators.

This research illuminates opposing opinions regarding spirituality and the secularisation of Irish society. One educator within this study stated that spirituality was not part of his life, and it is vital to take into consideration those who are unconvinced or bewildered by an emphasis on spirituality in education. This research also highlights the blurred intersection of religion and spirituality for 40% of the participants. However, while this may be the case, 90% of the participants expressed a desire to believe in something 'more.' The findings of this research reveal that there are many possible ways of being spiritual and religious present among educators. For instance, Sophie leads but no longer attends church services. There are numerous examples of blended spiritual and religious practices as well as suggestions for cross-curricular approaches to spirituality within the data gathered. These include combining Gaeilge and Yoga (Rachel), celebrating Advent using crystals (Grace) and a gratitude journal and thanksgiving prayers to God (Sally). In the research literature, Ganiel (2019) refers to Ireland as 'Post-Catholic' (Ganiel 2019, p.1). It is claimed that 'Ireland became a secular state at unmatched speed' (Monaghan 2001, p.7). However, this research raises questions about such claims which suggest that Ireland is post-Catholic. Within this piece of original research, 90% of the participants shared that they were baptised with the Roman Catholic Church. Of this group, seven of the nine educators discuss the ways in which Catholicism directly influences their

spiritual identity. Although the participants appear to measure their adherence to Catholicism against their levels of Mass attendance, this research shows that the influence of Catholicism is diffused and has permeated areas of their personal and professional life so it may be premature to speak of them as post-Catholic. Further, Catholicism's impact on the current system of education and on culture in Ireland is an immutable fact. Interestingly, Sophie, the only research participant who does not identify as Catholic, actively identifies as a member of the Church of Ireland and discusses her reduced attendance at church services. However, the influence of her religious beliefs on her spiritual identity is evident in her lived experience.

The second element included in the overarching research question involved uncovering the educators' perceptions surrounding the spiritual development of children in primary schools in Ireland. This study contributes original insight into the experienced reality of primary school teachers and the spiritual development of children in primary schools in Ireland. The educators in this study are deeply aware of the complexity of the issue and question whether children should be explicitly engaged in spiritual development through targeted specific input or if it should occur organically. Within the research findings participants exhibit a range of diverse opinions. These range from the majority of participants agreeing that spiritual development is needed in schools for holistic development and wellbeing to those 20% stating that spiritual development is inappropriate for the primary school context. This research also highlights the varying levels of confidence amongst educators in developing the spirituality of children. It ranges from 40% having complete confidence in the task to 40% having no confidence whatsoever. Within this original research, 30% of the educators suggested outsourcing spiritual development to external expert providers. This is an obvious indicator of the complexity of the spiritual domain and a lack of teacher confidence in this area. It also raises the question of whether the participants perception of the ambiguity and complexity of spirituality might lead them to require an expert to visit schools and attend to children's spirituality. This in turn opens up the question of whether the spiritual domain of the child in primary education is an area which needs to be professionalised and compartmentalised in primary schools. Such a reality is highly problematic when the holistic development of the child is considered.

Children require opportunities which have the explicit potential to address their spirituality (Bone 2008). As such, educators must be aware of the innumerable ways in which children can express their innate spirituality (Adams 2009). This current research also suggests enlarging more traditional religiously tethered understandings of spirituality in primary education so that spiritual development outside the parameters of religion in response to diverse, pluralistic classrooms as 'secular spirituality is equally valuable to those who do not profess a faith background' (Harmon 2022, p.239). Indeed, the child's right to spiritual development (UNCRC 1989) cannot be attended to unless there is a clear, distinct definition of spiritual development provided (Lau 2010). Educators require answers to questions such as the one posed by Sally when she asked, 'Where do I go for all of this?' It appears that there is a need for a move beyond an either/or approach to spirituality with both religious and non-religious spiritual development being needed (Quintiliani 2011). This requires specific insight from ITE and CPD providers. This study argues that clarity and confidence, greater sensitivity to different understandings and types of spirituality and not abandonment of the complexity and messiness of spirituality are required.

Another significant insight from this study stems from the value placed on children's spiritual development by the educators in this study. The teachers noted that spirituality was important for children's wellbeing and necessary for their holistic development. Its inclusion in educational policy and practice is highly relevant when considering the range of stressors and obstacles children experience in contemporary society as described by the participants of this study. This research highlights that some educators are actively engaged in developing the spirituality of the children that they encounter but because the area is so complex and ambiguous, they may not label it as 'spirituality' as such. The data gathered from this current research suggests that a lack of clarity and guidance from educational policy documents may be one reason for this. Educators may not have the language to discuss that which they may be engaged with already. Understanding curricula from Pinar's (2012) perspective illuminates the lived reality of educators in this study. There is a dichotomy between the formal curriculum as it is documented and the enacted curriculum as an experiential reality. It is for this reason that the current research findings highlight the priority and importance of addressing not only teachers' need for clarity around definitions and terms relating to spirituality but also guidance on the location of spirituality within the curriculum, opportunities for cross-curricular

integration, as well as supporting educational documentation to enable them to support children's spiritual development.

This research shows that the characteristic spirit of a school is considerably influential on how spiritual development is understood. This study contributes to the debate surrounding the place for spiritual development in school and highlights the complexity of the issue. This aligns with Hueber's (1999) concern that the use of the word spiritual in education warrants substantial consideration, especially in instances of denominational education where it may be suggestive of institutional affiliation. This original study contributes to the extant body of research which argues for and against this use of the term spiritual and related words within educational discourse. This current research claims that the terminology is not only appropriate for use but essential if the holistic development of the child is to occur. Hueber (1999) also moves on to argue that it is necessary to attend to the spiritual domain as it is integral to their humanity.

The longstanding conflation of religion and spirituality has contributed to the interlinking of spiritual development and RE in Ireland (O'Higgins Norman and Renehan 2014). In alignment with O'Higgins-Norman and Renehan (2014), this study highlights the problematic nature of this conflation from a human rights perspective. The educators in this study have experiences of children being withdrawn from RE lessons or allowed to 'listen in' to lessons. Fraser-Pearce (2022) suggests that the term spiritual should be reserved for a relationship with the transcendent. Where spiritual development is associated solely with RE and children are opted out from RE lessons, this study questions what space is made available for these children's spiritual development in schools, a facet of development to which children have a right (UNCRC 1989). This study also questions the correctness of a longstanding association between spirituality taking place exclusively within RE as the research findings reveal that a saturated curriculum results in RE being, according to Megan 'the first thing to go' when time constraints impinge on educators. The current research also highlights that despite participants stating that children enjoy RE, denominational RE which is understood as transmissive or catechetical, can also have a negative legacy as is evidenced by the emotive, forceful language used by the participants in this study.

Within the context of an increasingly diverse, pluralistic society, voice must be given to Stephen's experiential non-spiritual reality and those outside of this research who may

share this lived experience. Stephen does not identify in any way as a spiritual or religious person and resolutely states that his baptism as a Roman Catholic is not a part of his life. Despite this, Stephen's role as an educator in a denominational school, where he is required to uphold the characteristic spirit and engage the children in faith formation, does not align with his personal beliefs. Stephen, along with Marie, Megan and Grace have experienced the misalignment between personal beliefs and professional practice. This study highlights this as a contemporary issue, something of a white elephant that merits honest discussion, in Irish educational discourse. It raises ethical questions about teacher rights, pupil entitlement and Patron responsibility.

The role of the educator as a facilitator of spiritual development emerges clearly from this research. While the literature reviewed highlights children's innate inclination towards spirituality, this study highlights the benefit of educators adopting facilitatory roles in the spiritual development of children. It aligns with the findings of O'Farrell (2016) who noted that children never asked her what she thought when discussing spiritual matters or existential issues. As a result, O'Farrell (2016) states that while children do need a facilitator, their agency as spiritual beings will serve them well in their spiritual development. The current study concurs with O'Farrell (2016) and others who highlight the importance of the educator as a facilitator of children's spiritual development (Davis *et al.* 2006; Williams 2012; Stanley 2020). However, such work cannot be undertaken without adequate preparation. A major finding of this research is the need for educators to engage in reflection on their personal spirituality and professional practices before attending to the spiritual development of the child (Johnson 2005; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; White 2009; 2010; 2014; Greenfield 2018; Mata-McMahon *et al.* 2019; Razza *et al.* 2020; Groome 2021; Gracie and Wilkinson 2022).

This current study highlights the multi-faceted nature of spirituality and concurs resolutely with O'Connell's (2012) argument in favour of affording educators the space and time to reflect on this complex social phenomenon. A brief summer course or a short online session cannot address the questions posed or resolve the uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity experienced by the participants of this study. ITE and CPD must provide space for the personal searching and growth of ITE students and teachers, for their big questions and their ambivalent responses. Peer to peer dialogue among ITE students and teachers in the field may well scaffold them as they explore some of these key issues. This

research provides insight into the need for educators to engage in introspective journeys prior to facilitating the spiritual development of the child. Such reflection is necessary for the wellbeing of the educator as Peiris *et al.* (2024) state that reflection can support teachers in their navigation of the various domains of the human person in order to prevent role conflict. This is particularly relevant when the misalignment of beliefs and expectations experienced by a significant number (50%) of the participants of this study is considered. The need for space and time for reflection evidenced by this study aligns with Ng and Fisher's (2023) emphasis on the spirituality of the educator because 'people cannot confess (or encourage) what they do not possess' (Ng and Fisher 2023, p.14).

10.2 Limitations of this Research

All research has limitations, and the scope of this research is limited in a number of ways. Firstly, this research takes place in Ireland in primary schools and does not include a comparative element involving international voices from schools in other countries, or participants from post-primary schools, or indeed the direct voice of the child. Further, within the Irish educational primary school context, the sample group is missing significant teacher voices from interdenominational, Presbyterian, Muslim, Jewish, Methodist and Quaker schools are absent from this research. These schools account for 1.2% of schools in Ireland (Table 1.1). The researcher was aware that due to the idiographic nature of this study, it would have been important to include these voices in the research. However, doing so was not ethically feasible, as participants may have been easily identifiable given the small number of some of these schools in Ireland and the voluntary nature of participation.

Another limitation arises from the small sample size. The data gathered does not yield results that are generalisable, and the study provides an insight, at a particular moment in time, into the lived experience of ten specific participants in schools of diverse patronage. Therefore, it cannot be used to extract information relevant to the entire teaching profession in Ireland or to primary schools and children's spiritual development in general. However, in selecting this sample group of ten, the researcher was guided by the research literature and this is in alignment with the philosophical underpinnings of this study (Gadamer 1960; Heidegger 1962; Husserl 1972; Windleband 1980) and the current small sample research findings provide a foundation for wider future investigation.

From the beginning, the researcher was concerned about her own positionality. The researcher was cognisant of bias throughout the research project as she is currently teaching in Ireland, in a primary school with a Catholic ethos, engaged in both the spiritual and religious formation of children. Therefore, it was necessary for her to adopt a reflexive position for the duration of the study (Creswell and Miller 2000). This was addressed primarily using reflexive writing (Tuffour 2017) as evident in her regularly updated research journal and guided by the Husserlian recommendations for bracketing when engaged in phenomenological research (Chan *et al.* 2013).

10.3 Recommendations

The data gathered from ten primary school educators in schools with varying characteristic spirits was analysed in accordance with IPA (Smith *et al.* 2022) and presented in the previous chapters. Based on the findings revealed from the data analysis, this study presents several recommendations for consideration by key stakeholders shown in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 Recommendations for Key Stakeholders

Recommendation 1	Define Spirituality
Recommendation 2	Identify Spiritual Development Practices
Recommendation 3	Locate Spirituality in Policy Documents
Recommendation 4	Empower Agentic Educators
Recommendation 5	Develop an Awareness of Spirituality in Educators
Recommendation 6	Engage in Future Study

10.3.1. Educational Policy and Practice

10.3.1.1 Recommendation 1: Define Spirituality

This research unequivocally highlights the need for clarity surrounding spirituality and its definition within the realm of education. Following the period of data collection and analysis required for this study, NCCA (2024) published a Draft Wellbeing Specification document for consultation. This follows the launch of the Primary Curriculum Framework (PCF) which names Wellbeing as one of five key curriculum areas. Within this document,

‘spiritual development’ (NCCA 2024, p.1) is mentioned as a dimension of wellbeing. The following definition of ‘spiritual wellbeing’ is provided:

‘Spiritual wellbeing is concerned with love for life, others, and a sense of connection with oneself, others, nature, the world and, for some, a larger purpose or higher power. It involves personal beliefs and practices that may or may not be linked to organised religion’ (NCCA 2024, p.50).

This study recommends utilising the above definition to guide policymakers when defining spirituality. The central elements of the definition are evidenced in Figure 10.1 and the current research recommends that the ‘higher power’ dimension be attended to as per the characteristic spirit of each school. The above definition aligns with a substantial body of research which understands spirituality as a desire for connections and relationships in this tetradic manner (NICA 1975; Hay and Nye 2006; Kennedy and Duncan 2006; Fisher 2011; Worthington 2012; de Souza 2016; Michaelson *et al.* 2019; 2021; Lee 2022; Jirásek 2023). The common conceptualisations of spirituality found in the current study add to this existing literature.

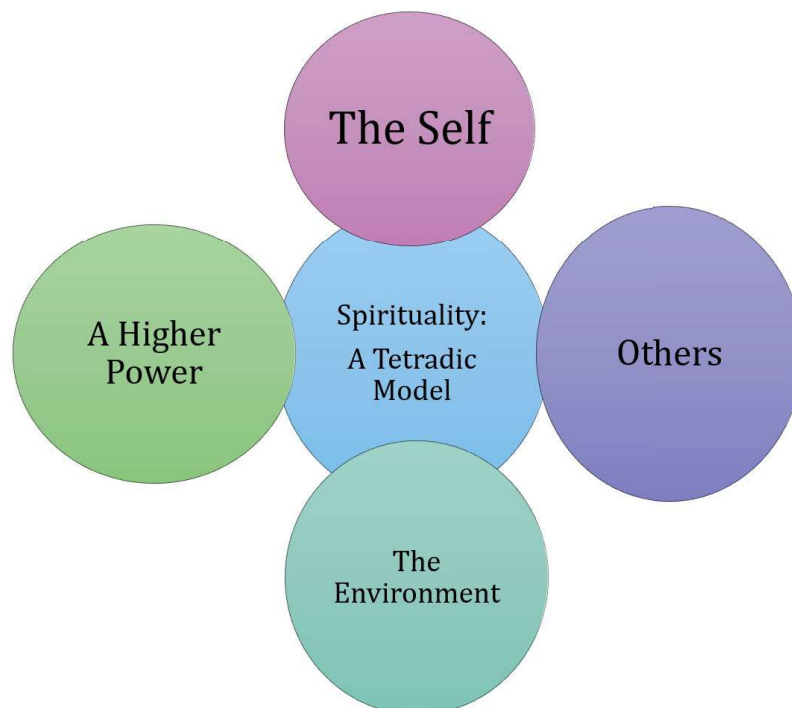


Figure 10.1 A Tetradic Model of Spirituality

10.3.1.2 Recommendation 2: Identify Spiritual Development Practices

It is most interesting that many of the conceptualisations of spirituality shared by the educators in this study align with the elements identified by NCCA (2024) including the tetradic model of connection to the self, others, nature and the wider world and a higher power, spirituality as a source of meaning and purpose and the potential for spirituality to be contextualised, or not, within the parameters of organised religion. Despite the strength of this inclusive description, no insight into how spiritual development can occur is provided by the NCCA (2024). Beliefs, spiritual practices or organised religion are not mentioned in the specification. This study strongly recommends that educational policy documents, in particular curriculum documents published by the NCCA, should include insight and specific guidance drawing on the curriculum, into how educators can respond to the innate spirituality of the children, and their right to spiritual development while attending to the characteristic spirit of their respective schools.

10.3.1.3 Recommendation 3: Locate Spirituality in Policy Documents

As a consequence of the findings of this research, it is recommended that once spirituality has been clearly defined by policymakers, it should be located within the national curriculum in a manner that recognises the child's right to spiritual development (UNCRC 1989). The conceptualisations presented in the findings of this study by 70% of the participants are inclusive and holistic. As a result, confining spiritual development within the parameters of a Patrons' programme in Ireland is both limiting and reductive. This idiographic nature of this study also values the insight shared by 30% of the participants who contextualise spirituality within religion. However, when the child's right to spiritual development is considered within the context of a diverse, globalised, pluralistic Irish society, equating spiritual development solely with the child's access to RE is highly problematic. The links between spirituality and wellbeing are pronounced in extant literature and this original study contributes to this conceptualisation. Consequentially, this research recommends including spiritual development within the key competency of 'Being Well' (NCCA 2023) so that it may permeate all aspects of the curriculum, and that time is allocated to spiritual development within the curriculum area of 'Wellbeing' (NCCA 2024). To attend to the rights of parents as primary educators of children, as well as the rights of the child, it would be helpful if the fourth dimension of the tetradic

understanding, the higher power dimension, was attended to in accordance with the characteristic spirit of the school.

This study also recommends that the spirituality of the educator be afforded a place in relevant policy documents in order to guide ITE and CPD providers in attending to this domain of the human person. The innateness of spirituality features strongly in seminal works and contemporary research reviewed for the purpose of this research. This contributes to this body of work by highlighting the need to acknowledge, if not value, the spiritual identity of primary school educators. Figure 10.2 suggests a number of national policy documents which could include such value and acknowledgement.



Figure 10.2 Teacher Identity Policies Requiring Spirituality

Recommendation 4: Empower Agentic Educators

This research concludes that the participants experience considerable pressure from multiple sources in their work as educators. The substantial pressure and fear

experienced as a result of inspections is an unexpected finding of this research which highlights that the experiential reality of educators does not align with the vision proposed in 'Preparation for Teaching and Learning - Guidance for All Primary and Special Schools' (DE 2023). Educators do not experience the sense of agency described in this document. In stark contrast to the discourse expelled by the DE and the NCCA, the reality is, according to Catherine a 'system stifled by the Inspectorate.' This research recommends that as a matter of priority, policy enactors and curriculum developers should ensure that the vision proposed in guiding documents becomes a practised reality. This recommendation refers in particular to the Inspectorate, named as a source of considerable stress and a barrier to authentic, holistic education by Aisling, Catherine, Sally and Stephen. Only when system-wide agreement on how to increase and value the agency of the educator is reached can Stephen's desire be realised.

Stephen: If you have to have a picture frame beside the laptop... that picture of the inspector needs to come out and what needs to go in there is the picture of the children.

10.3.2 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continued Professional Development (CPD)

10.3.2.1 Recommendation 5: Develop an Awareness of Spirituality in Educators

This study recommends that CPD providers attend to the spiritual domain of the educator and the spiritual development of the child in their course content. If the clarity described in the previous recommendations existed, and spirituality was properly located within policy documents, perhaps DE assistance could be provided to schools. One suggestion is to adopt the 'sustained support model' provided by Oide (Oide Technology in Education 2024) that has been utilised to support schools in other curricular areas. Within this original study, Aisling emphasises that there is no short fix. It is not about offering teachers a summer course required to gain EPV days. Spirituality is a life-long endeavour and educators need what Catherine describes as a 'boots on the ground approach' to supporting the spiritual development of children. This research also recommends that private course providers develop course content that includes a definition of spirituality, opportunities for reflection on spiritual identity, as well as pedagogical and methodological insights into the spiritual development of the child in primary schools in Ireland.

This research recognises the significant impact of ITE on primary school teachers in relation to their understandings of spirituality and spiritual development. Within this research, 60% of the participants refer to the influence of ITE on their personal and professional identities. Each of these participants notes the impact of ITE on their conceptualisations of spirituality and spiritual development. For this reason, the present study recommends that ITE settings provide pre-service teachers with more sustained, specific, cross-curricular opportunities to reflect on their identity in ways that are cognisant of the spiritual. This research finds that naming spirituality as a support for holistic wellbeing would be beneficial due to the various pressures experienced by all participants in this study. This aligns with contemporary research which highlights high levels of teacher exhaustion and burnout and identifies spiritual wellbeing as a support for these problematic issues (Poll and Smith 2006; Acton and Glasgow 2015; King and Boyatzis 2015; Murphy *et al.* 2020; Charzyńska *et al.* 2021; Wartenweiler 2021; Peiris *et al.* 2024; Pong 2024).

10.3.3 Future Research

10.3.3.1 Recommendation 6: Engage in Future Research

Kourie (2009) presents a resolute argument for the validity of studies on spirituality within the academy. This study recommends several avenues for engaging in further research based on the original findings of this study.

- Larkin *et al.* (2019) advise exploring complex phenomena with more than one group. Due to the complexity of spirituality, the researcher recommends that a comparable study be conducted with other stakeholders including parents and children in schools of differing characteristic spirits in the primary sector. This is warranted within an increasingly diverse, pluralistic Irish society.
- The findings of this research are limited due to the time spent in the field and the small sample size, as well as the exclusive focus on the primary school context. The research findings support the notion of the fluid, dynamic nature of spirituality and highlight the need for further insight into this phenomenon. It is recommended that a longitudinal study on the spiritual identity of educators be carried out, which follows educators through a dynamic trajectory including their experiences of ITE, induction and CPD (Teaching Council 2016; 2017; 2020) to

ascertain the influence of spirituality on their professional identity and practices over a significant period of time. Further, there is opportunity for future cross-sectoral research exploring teachers' spirituality in both primary and post-primary settings in Ireland.

- Finally, the present study identifies a concerning level of pressure within educators' experiential realities. The role of the educator appears harmed and reduced by the performative neoliberal cultures tainting education at present. Sally insists 'the system isn't working and that teachers are 'collapsing, or they're burning out.' As such, it is recommended that future research investigate the lived experiences of educators in Ireland on their wellbeing in contemporary Irish primary schools. It would be helpful to employ a mixed methods approach to such a project to phenomenologically investigate the lived reality of educators in this culture. Charzyńska *et al.* (2021) found that spiritual practices supported the wellbeing of teachers in Poland and contributed to their protection from burnout. It is also recommended, based on the findings of this research, that a similar study is conducted in Ireland to increase insight into this increasingly pronounced reality.

10.4 Conclusion

This original research offers an insight into the previously under-researched experiential reality of the spiritual identities of primary school educators in Ireland. This study highlights that whether educators identify as spiritual, religious or neither, this aspect of their identity is of significant importance in their lives and cannot be disconnected from their roles as educators without evoking stress or strain. This research contributes significantly to the existing body of literature which highlights the increasing levels of pressure, teacher exhaustion and burnout, especially as a result of issues of spiritual wellbeing. By focusing in-depth on a small number of teachers, this study concludes that, within this sample group, the spirituality of the educator must be afforded a core place in the educational sphere that is underpinned by tolerance at a minimum, respect as a standard and celebration as the ultimate affirmation.

The challenges, uncertainty and pressure experienced by the participants in this study pose important existential questions: what is the purpose of education? Perhaps it is life education (Shi 2020) which prepares children in classrooms to inhabit and inherit a world about which little is known, a world that current educators will not be part of (Miller 2009; Hederman 2012; Pandaya 2016). According to de Souza (2016), relationships and connections are the purpose of education. Perhaps the purpose of education is to contribute to the wellbeing of the human person and foster a desire to contribute to the greater good (Forbes 2019; Groome 2021). A scholarly belief exists that the purpose of education is to develop creativity, curiosity and imagination (Hederman 2012; Engel 2013; 2015; Harmon 2022), elements which Maignant (2011) believe to be at the core of the human experience. For others, human flourishing is the true purpose of education (Eaude 2009; Chapman *et al.* 2021; Ruth 2023). This study proposes that a tetradic understanding of spirituality presented in this research has the potential to attend to these profound, multifaceted phenomena within the sphere of primary education in Ireland.

However, within the current age of measurement (Biesta 2010), in Irish primary school classrooms, the focus remains firmly on learning outcomes which can be 'defined, prescribed and quantified' (Rawson 2021, p.25). It is difficult to imagine how the previously mentioned elements could be quantified or measured. The language used to speak about education is often reduced to an 'empty language of learning' (Biesta 2013, p.38). Global competitiveness means that the primary function of education is to contribute to the global knowledge economy (Auld and Morris 2016). Berliner (2020) claims that young children are now being taught not to ask their teachers questions. This aligns with concerns about the restraints of 'commercial education' (Hederman 2012, p.53) evidenced in Engel's (2013) observation of a child being reminded 'No questions now, please; it's time for learning' (Engel 2013, p.38). In this climate, spirituality must 'not be reduced to yet another measurable outcome' (Rawson 2021, p.25). This is the lived reality for the educators in this study tasked with a technicist approach to education while simultaneously expected to attend to the holistic development of the child (Buchanan and McPherson 2019; NCCA 2023). This research concludes that the ten educators in the sample group are navigating the messy, contested, complex intersection between culture, tradition, school ethos, personal life and professional role in learning. It suggests that defining, locating and valuing spirituality and spiritual development in primary school

education is necessary to attend to the multi-faceted identity of the educator as well as the holistic development of the child. As Grace states, 'not everything that can be measured is of worth.'

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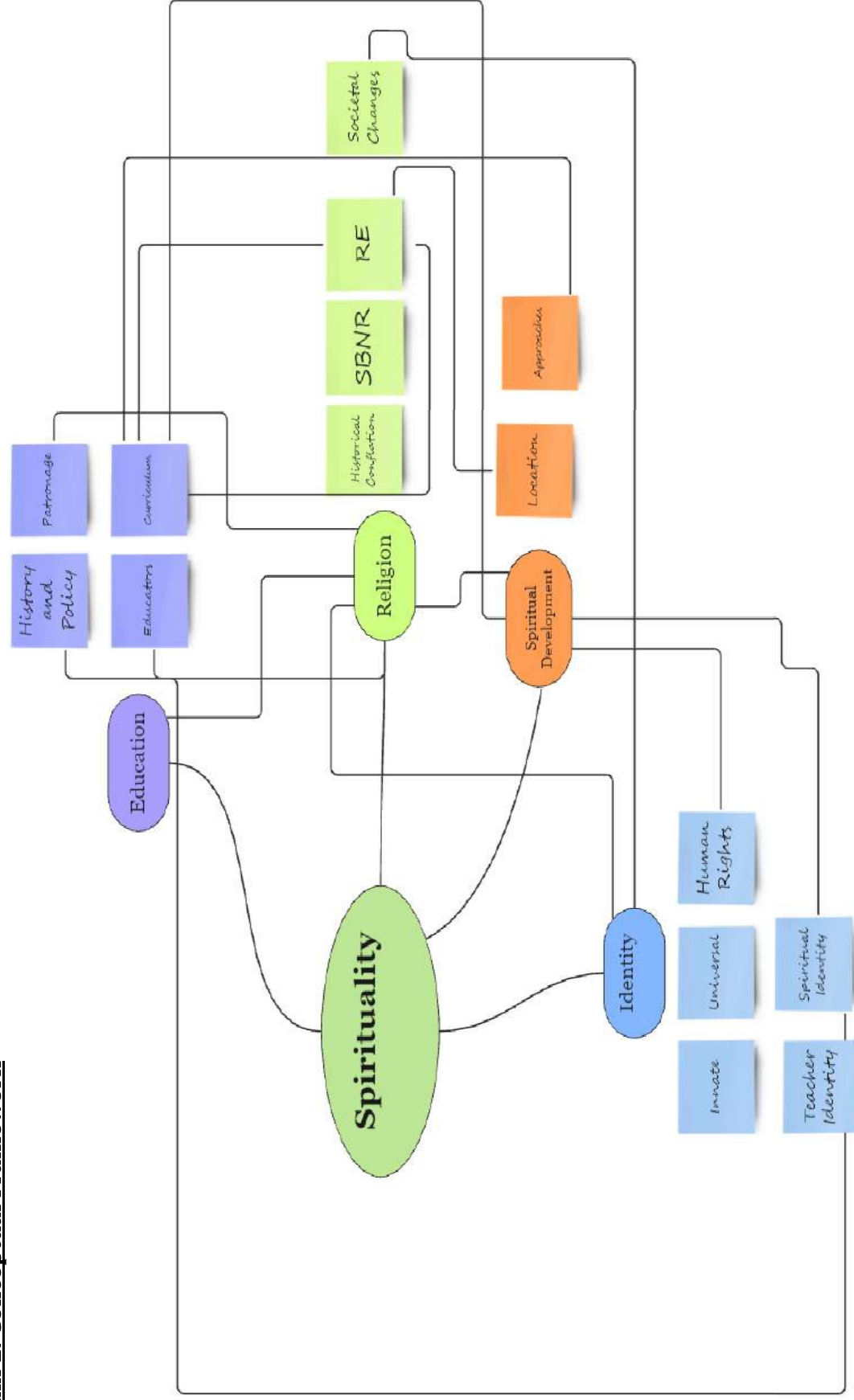
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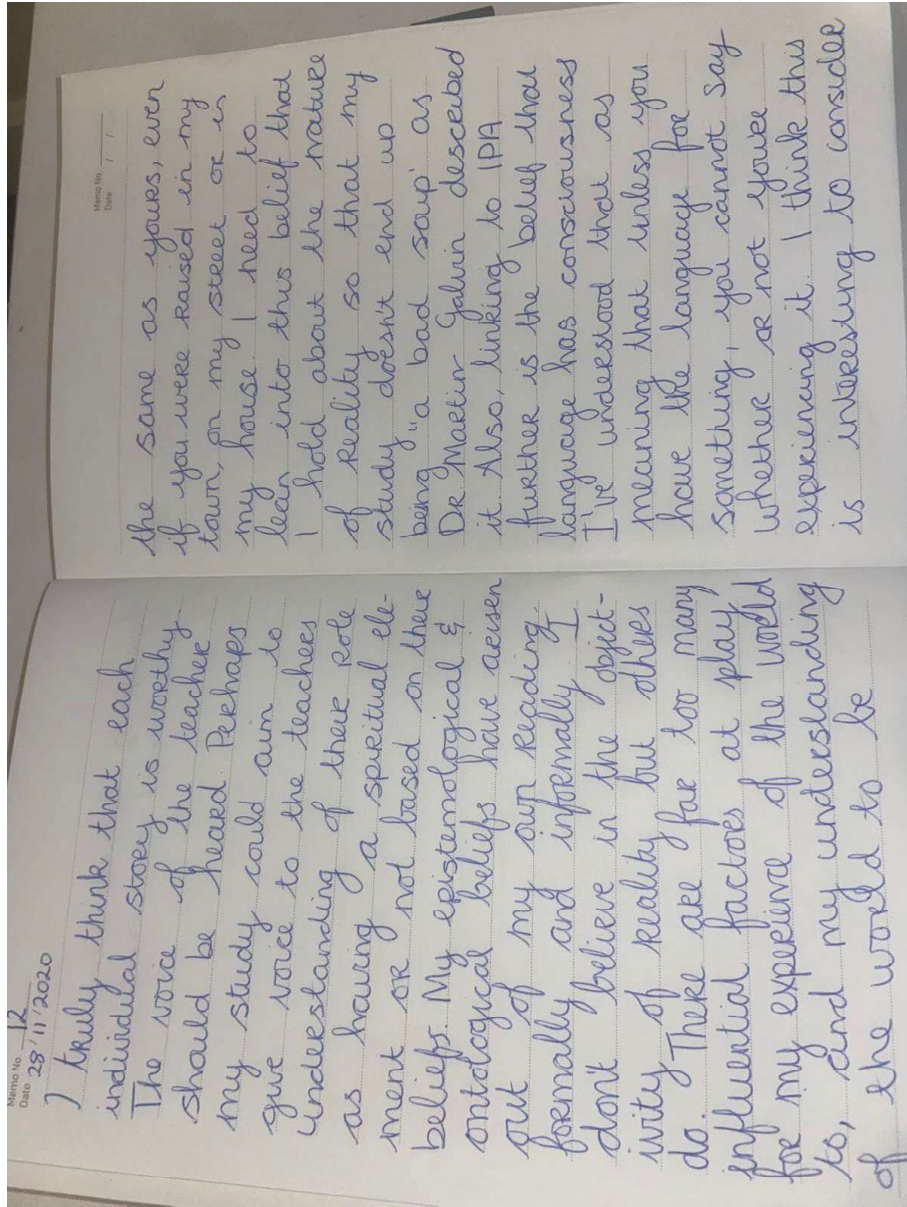
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Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework



Appendix 2: Positionality Reflection (On Learning Towards IPA)



Appendix 3: Steiner School Website Exploration

Search Terms: “Spirituality” and “Religion” as well as derivatives

Emboldened text indicates the section of the website from which the statements have been extracted.

b>

School	Patronage	Spirituality (and derivatives)	Religion (and derivatives)	Website
<i>Cuan na Gaillimhe CNS</i>	Galway and Roscommon ETB	<p>Intro to Steiner Education - Takes account of the needs of the whole child – academic, physical, emotional and spiritual.</p> <p>Story Time - In the fairy-tale internal development paths and spiritual truths are become spiritual experiences.</p>	<p>Intro to Steiner Education - A Steiner School incorporates this into the daily activities and is multi-denominational, so that many religions and cultures are experienced fully, leading to a healthy understanding and respect for others.</p> <p>Steiner Schools in Ireland - The principles fundamental to Steiner/Waldorf Education are accessible and adaptable to the needs of different ethnicities, cultures, and religions.</p>	https://www.cngcns.com/

<p><i>Croí na Coille</i></p>	<p>Lifeways Ireland</p>	<p>Guiding Principles - To develop the needs of the whole child including physical, social, emotional, intellectual, cultural and spiritual.</p> <p>About our School - We concentrate on developing the whole child and we emphasise the importance of physical, emotional, social and spiritual development as much as intellectual development.</p> <p>A Day at Croí na Coille - Our school recognises the importance of the spiritual world.</p>	<p>A Day at Croí na Coille - Our children are introduced, through story, to many different religions and cultures from around the world.</p>	<p>https://www.croinacoille.ie/</p>
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<p><i>Dublin Steiner School</i></p>	<p>Lifeways Ireland</p> <p>What happens in a Waldorf school? Take account of the needs of the whole child – academic, physical, emotional and spiritual.</p> <p>Festivals - The meaning behind this celebration is about finding the confidence and courage to look to the spiritual world for strength, and renew the impulse to live our lives to the best of our abilities.</p>	<p>Festivals - However, these festivals are celebrated through story and fables and the religious side of the festival is never the focus. We are a multi-denominational setting and families from all religious or non-religious backgrounds are welcome.</p> <p>Advent is a four week festival, the four weeks leading up to Christmas and Winter Solstice. It has a religious meaning but it can equally be celebrated as a special occasion to bring warmth and light to Winter days.</p>	<p>https://www.dublinsteiner.com/</p>
<p><i>Kildare Steiner School</i></p>	<p>Lifeways Ireland</p> <p>Why choose our school - Steiner education seeks to educate the physical, emotional,</p>	<p>F.A.Q. - Is there any religious instruction in the school? As a non-denominational school, the school welcomes children of</p>	<p>https://www.kildaresteinerschool.ie/</p>

	<p>intellectual, cultural and spiritual aspects of each child.</p> <p>Testimonials - There is no task of greater importance than to give our children the very best preparation for the demands of an ominous future, a preparation that aims at the methodical cultivation of their spiritual and their moral gifts.</p>	<p>all faiths and none. While Steiner Waldorf education has a broadly Christian ethos, the curriculum focuses on developing a child's sense of ethics and morality, rather than any particular religious tradition.</p>	
<p><i>Kilkenny Steiner School</i></p>	<p>Vision - Our ethos understands the human being to be grounded not only in human culture but also in the natural world, as well as the spiritual world, and that it is essential for this connection with the earth and nature to be fostered while at school.</p>		<p>https://kilkennysteinerschool.ie/</p>

<p><i>Mol an Óige CNS</i></p> <p>Limerick and Clare ETB</p>	<p>Information for parents - The method takes into account all the needs of your child, including their academic and physical development as well as their emotional and spiritual worlds.</p> <p>What to expect at Mol an Óige CNS - Our school recognises the importance of the spiritual world of your child and acts with reverence toward all the worlds spiritual traditions.</p>	<p>Mission Statement - Equality: In all aspects of school life, all members of our school community are treated equitably regardless of their race, gender, religion/belief, age, family status, civil status, membership of the Traveller community, sexual orientation, ability or socio-economic status.</p> <p>What to expect at Mol an Óige CNS - Our children are introduced, through story, to many different religions and cultures from around the world. However, the responsibility for any formal religious instruction lies with the parents and family.</p>	<p>https://molanoige.ie/</p>
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*Raheen
Wood
CNS*

Limerick and Clare ETB	Landing Page - Our school is founded on the conviction that a true education must engage and nourish the whole child: body, mind and spirit. A Unique School - Our school is founded on the conviction that a true education must engage and nourish the whole child: body, mind and spirit.	A Unique School - Works for all children irrespective of academic ability, class, ethnicity or religion.	https://raheenwood.org/
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Appendix 4: Recruitment Notice

The image is a recruitment notice for a research project. It features a background of an open book on a grassy surface with a blurred green background. The text is arranged in a vertical layout. At the top left, there is a title and subtitle. Below that, a question is posed. The next line is an invitation to join the study. This is followed by the research area. Then, a question about the researcher's experience is asked. Next, a question about the time and convenience of the interview is asked. Finally, there is a call to action for more information and an email address. At the bottom left, there is a logo for MIC (Mary Immaculate College) with its name in Irish and English.

The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Teachers in Ireland and their Perceptions of Spirituality in the Classroom
Online Recruitment Notice

Are you a primary school teacher?
Join our study!

Research area: Teacher spirituality and spiritual development in the classroom

Why? Your experience matters and can contribute to research in this area.

What is required? A one-to-one interview lasting approx. 40 minutes at a time and place of your convenience which aims to gain insight into your thoughts, experiences and understandings.

For more information email jayne.guiney@mic.ul.ie



MIC
MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE
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Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet



Information Sheet for Participants

The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Teachers in Ireland and their Perceptions of Spirituality in the Classroom

What is the project about? This research sets out to explore the primary school teacher's understanding of spirituality and their perceptions of spirituality in the classroom.

Who is undertaking it?

Jayne Guiney is a primary school teacher and PhD student at Mary Immaculate College. This research is being undertaken as part of her doctoral studies.

Why is it being undertaken?

The study aims to research primary school teachers' understandings and experiences of spirituality. It aims to highlight how primary school teachers understand spirituality and spiritual development in their classrooms and whether the school ethos influences this.

What are the benefits of this research?

In an increasingly diverse Ireland, this research aims to address a gap in current research surrounding spirituality and primary school teachers in Ireland. Exploring the lived experience of primary school teachers across Ireland who teach in a variety of schools will provide an insight into how ethos and patronage influence the participants. At a time of curriculum change, this research will shed light on the place of spirituality in the curriculum. The study also aims to generate timely knowledge on the primary school teacher's beliefs about spirituality and religion and whether their perceptions impact their role as teachers.

What is involved for the participant?

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in a one-to-one interview at time and location that is convenient. An option to complete the interview using a secure on-line platform (Microsoft Teams) is also available. The interview will last approximately 40 minutes and will involve a discussion about spirituality, the spiritual development of the child and the role of the teacher. If a question arises that you do not feel comfortable with, you will not be required to answer it. Each recorded interview will be transcribed, and this transcript will be shared with you to ensure that you are happy with it.

Right to withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the research without giving a reason and without consequence. If such an event occurs, your data will no longer be used.

Anonymity:

Your anonymity is assured. The researcher will use pseudonyms and any real names or places will be anonymised.

How will the information be used / disseminated?

The researcher intends to utilise the findings of this study as the basis for her doctoral thesis. The researcher also aims to present the findings at conferences and to publish the results in a peer reviewed journal.

How will confidentiality be kept?

All data gathered will be anonymised and stored under password protection on an encrypted device. It will not be possible to identify any individual or school from the data collected. All information gathered will remain confidential and will not be released to any third party. A pseudonym will be generated for each participant and this rather than the participant's name will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

What will happen to the data after the research has been completed?

In accordance with the MIC Record Retention Schedule all research data will be stored safely for the duration of the project, anonymised research data may be held indefinitely or as required by the researcher.

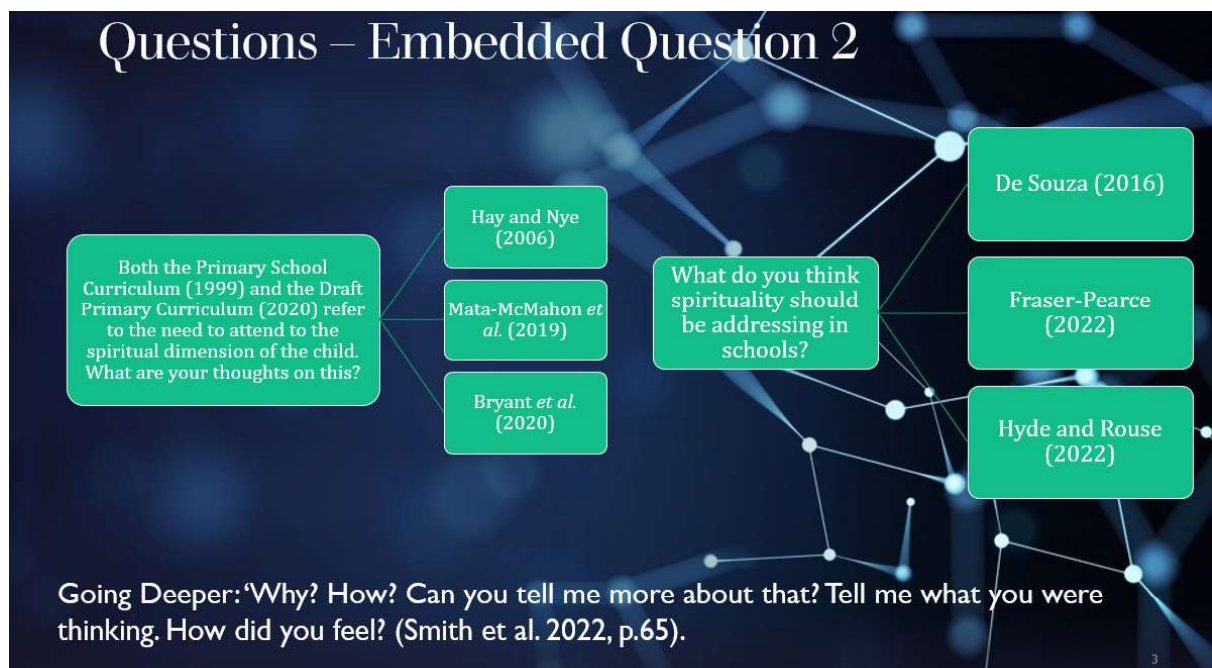
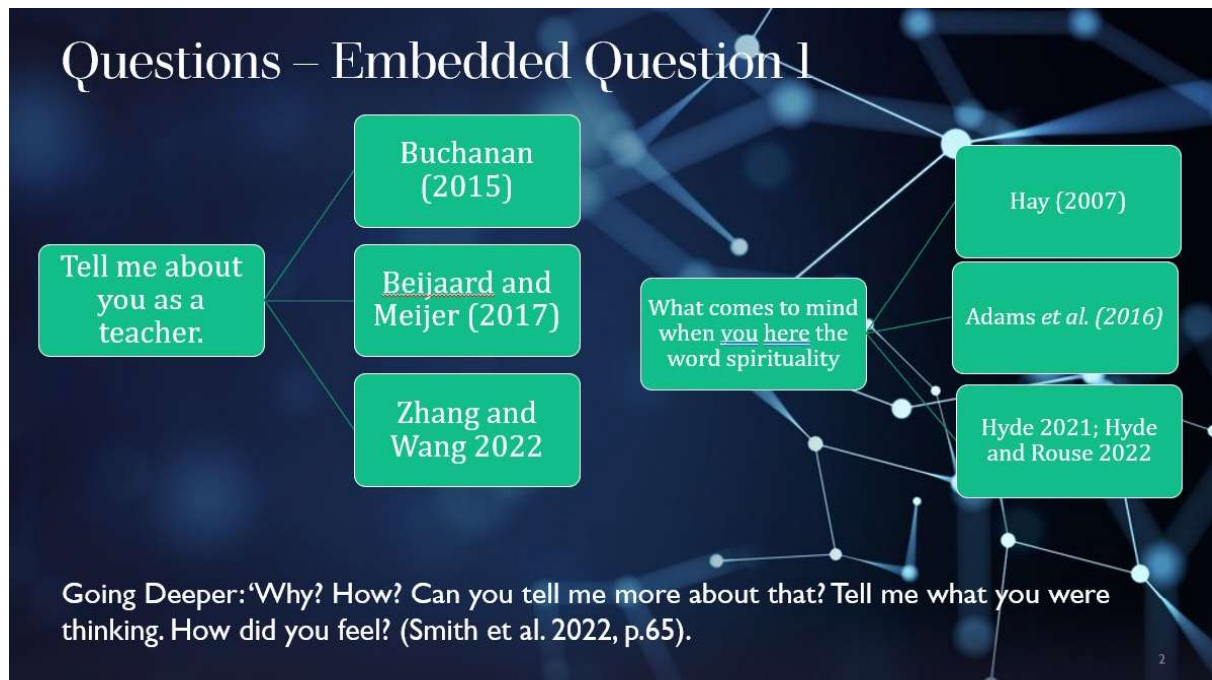
Contact details:

If at any time you have any queries / issues with regard to this study, the researcher's contact details are as follows:

Jayne Guiney, jayne.guiney@mic.ul.ie

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Research and Graduate School, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 / E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie

Appendix 6: Interview Schedule Based on Extant Literature



Questions – Embedded Question 3

Can you tell me about the ethos of your school? What does this mean for you in your role as a teacher?

Pearse (2019)

Groome (2021)

Gracie and Wilkinson (2022)

Going Deeper: 'Why? How? Can you tell me more about that? Tell me what you were thinking. How did you feel?' (Smith et al. 2022, p.65).

4

Appendix 7: Transcript Extract

Participant: Then, my first like, official one that like you could actually talk about with a bit of substance is, I went to a cacao ceremony. That was around 15 20 minutes away, a colleague of mine had suggested that she had went herself. So I said, why not? I'd go and I went, and I drank cacao. And then we did breath work. And I honestly felt like I had like, a movie clip going through my vision, or my mind screen that say, I was reminded of a memory that I had with a relative who had passed away who, which I didn't remember, like, if you asked me if I have any memories before, then I said, No, and just lots of other stuff like that. I feel like that's my official spiritual experience. Well, for me, it was, yeah, it was wild. I actually didn't even think I was gonna be able to drive home after but it was really... Yeah, it was legal and everything. (Laughs)

Researcher: It's plant based isn't it (Laughs). Thank you so much for sharing that. We might move on to talk about children and spirituality. So the new NCCA framework has come out. And one of the things that says in that is the children should be spiritually healthy. What are your thoughts on that?

Participant: Children should be spiritually... spiritually healthy. Yes, I do agree with it. Now, I do find it very difficult. And I'm sure if anybody that who's working with kids, let's say if we asked that yoga teacher now, it's very difficult to bring it to their level without simplifying too much. Okay.

Researcher: Okay yeah, could you say more about that?

Participant: So I think, let's say like, I do think there's a huge need for it, or the children would receive it, but I think because of their age, like, let's say, if you take a five year old child in junior infants should be spiritually healthy. Like, for me, I only came in touch with my own spirituality, you would say, in third year of college, okay. Like I would have said before, then I would have been extremely... it would have been mainly religious. So I don't

know, maybe just from my own experience, and even after, like a lot of my family members, if you says, Are you spiritually healthy to them? And like, I'm talking about my siblings who are all in their 20s? Like, they'd be like, no, what even is that? So I feel like then there's just a lack of overall understanding. And I feel like it's really big, that I don't even fully comprehend that. So then it would be trying to make it accessible for a child.

Appendix 8: Exploratory Noting (NVivo 12)

The screenshot displays the NVivo 12 software interface. At the top, the title bar reads 'PhD Research Project.nvp - NVivo 12 Plus'. The main menu includes 'File', 'Home', 'Import', 'Create', 'Explore', 'Share', and 'Document Tools'. Below the menu, there are sections for 'Links' (Memo Link, See Also Link), 'View' (Zoom, Annotations, Quick Coding, See Also Links, Relationships, Highlight), 'Coding' (Coding Stripes), and 'Annotations' (New Annotation, Visualize Document, Word Cloud, Compare With, Explore Diagram). A central pane shows a list of 'Interviews' with columns for Name, Codes, and References.

Interview Name	Codes	References
Aisling Transcript	772	1597
Catherine Transcript	570	1166
Grace Transcript	1081	2022
Marie Transcript	801	1593
Megan Transcript	862	1840
Michael Transcript	740	1515
Rachel Transcript	841	1927
Sally Transcript	879	1820
Sophie Transcript	945	1905
Stephen Transcript	518	990

Below the list, a document titled 'Aisling Transcript' is open, showing a text passage with several lines highlighted in blue. The highlighted text reads: 'And that actually was the moment that I said to myself I could do this as my job. You know, I view my job as vocation I don't see it as a profession or, well, it's certainly not a means of making a lot of money. I view it as a vocation, and something that I do think I was born to do.' Below this, the initials 'JG' are visible, followed by a paragraph: 'Okay, talk to me a bit about the difference between a vocation and a profession. I think teaching is a bit of grey area really, because I think you would find it very hard as a teacher not to view it as a vocation and to view it purely as a profession. Because I feel that you really put your heart and soul into teaching and for me, that's where the vocation part of it comes. And, you know, we were lucky we have our long holidays, but if you actually talk to teachers, the amount of those holidays that are spent thinking, Oh, I must organise that, or, Oh, that's a really good idea, you know, your brain is constantly switched into 'I could do that in my teaching'. Whereas somebody who views teaching as a profession, would very much say, you know, your nine to three is me being there doing my job, and

At the bottom of the interface, a sidebar shows a project structure with 'Quick Access' (Files, Memos, Nodes) and a list of steps: 'Step 1 - Reading and Re-reading', 'Step 2 - Exploratory Noting', 'Step 3 - Constructing Experiences', 'Step 4 - Search for Connections', 'Step 5 - Naming the Personal', 'Step 6 - Continuing the Individual', and 'Step 7 - Working with PEs to...'. The main document area also features an 'Annotations' table with columns for 'Item' and 'Content'. The first entry is '71' with the content: 'Viewing the work of a teacher as solely professional is different and doesn't value the connections as much as the vocational lens. While the children would not be physically harmed, their holistic development would not be correctly prioritised. Most teachers view teaching as a vocation.'

Appendix 10: Examples of Personal Experiential Statements (PETs)

+	○	A Culture of Fear of the Inspectorate	1	5	JG
+	○	Administrative Time Wasting Occurs	1	2	JG
+	○	Challenges to Holistic Education come from	1	3	JG
+	○	Comparison is problematic in teaching	1	5	JG
+	○	Current planning approaches are not helpful	1	4	JG
+	○	Inauthentic Planning occurs and Inspectorat	1	4	JG
+	○	Managing pressure and expectations of staf	1	9	JG
+	○	Patience is a Strength	1	2	JG
+	○	Pressure to achieve in Literacy and Numerac	1	7	JG
+	○	Significant policy and mindset changes are r	1	23	JG
+	○	Systemic Change is Needed	1	3	JG
+	○	Teachers are not equipped to tackle wellnes	1	8	JG
+	○	Teachers are under pressure	1	11	JG
+	○	Teachers experience Pressure	1	14	JG

Appendix 11: Group Experiential Themes (GETs)

PHD Research Project.nvp - NVivo 12 Plus

The screenshot shows the NVivo 12 Plus interface with the following menu items: Home, Import, Create, Explore, Share, Add To Set, Create As Code, Create As Cases, Properties, Open, Memo, Link, Item, Clipboard, Merge, Copy, Cut, Visualize, Query, Explore, Code, Auto Code, Range Code, Undo, Classification, File, Classification, List View, Find, Detail View, Sort By, Navigation View, Undock, and Workspace.

The Spiritual Identity of Teachers

Name	Files	References	Created By
A desire to believe in something	4	42	JG
Complex Catholicism	8	89	JG
Navigating personal beliefs and characteristic spirit	9	225	JG
Spirituality is shaped by a range of influences	9	92	JG

Appendix 12: Research Journal Notes

Following Interview 1 - May 2023

I think that overthinking is both a blessing and a curse. Of course, it means that I pay attention to detail and the ethics of my study are extremely important to me. It is at the forefront of the work that I am doing. However, I don't want it to cripple me and force me into a pedantic over-and-back with the participant. Perhaps if I had felt more at ease, the conversation might have flowed. By not giving the participant a straight answer initially, perhaps I stifled the conversation a little. I was just afraid of skewing what the participant was saying. Eventually, I did share quickly on what was common in the literature, not my own thoughts on spirituality. This eased the atmosphere, and it was more free-flowing for the participants. It became less like a job interview scenario which I absolutely do not want it to be. I also felt like I should have asked the participant a bit more where their faith came from.

Appendix 13: Reflexive Writing Extract

On being an insider:

I feel that maybe I am questioning approaches that I am less familiar with more. Am I subconsciously assuming I know what educators in RC schools are talking about? In a way, I feel connected to the CoI experience because so much of it is in alignment with what I have experienced in England, despite this also being an RC experience. I need to remember that while I know my own experiences, I do not know that of the participants and I need to question the remaining participants and interrogate the data from RC educators with the same level of curiosity and inquisition as the data from Forest and Steiner schools. CNS and ET data also feels a tiny bit little more familiar – so perhaps it is curriculum difference that piques my interest that bit further, as well as ethos difference.

Appendix 14: MIREC Approval

MIREC-5, Created November 2021



MIREC-5

Research Ethics Committee

MIREC Final Decision Form

APPLICATION NUMBER:

A22-024

1. PROJECT TITLE

The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Teachers in Ireland and their Perceptions of Spirituality in the Classroom.

2. APPLICANT

Name:	Jayne Guiney
Department / Centre / Other:	Learning, Society & Religious Education
Position:	Postgraduate Researcher


3. DECISION OF MIREC CHAIR (✓)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance through MIREC is not required and therefore the applicant need take no further action in this regard.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is required and is hereby granted by the Chair without need for referral to the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance for a funding application or a similar purpose is granted by the Chair <i>pro tem</i> without need for referral to the MIREC committee. However, the applicant must subsequently seek ethical clearance from MIREC prior to embarking on any related project work involving human participants or their data.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ethical clearance is not granted following review of the application by the MIREC committee.

4. REASON(S) FOR DECISION

I have reviewed this application and I am satisfied that it meets MIREC requirements. It is, therefore, approved.

5. SIGNATURE OF MIREC CHAIR

Name (Print):	Dr Marie Griffin
Signature:	
Date:	29 th April 2022

Appendix 15: Participant Consent Sheet



The Spiritual Identity of Primary School Teachers in Ireland and their Perceptions of Spirituality in the Classroom

Consent Form for One-to-One Interviews:

I _____ have read and had the opportunity to ask questions about this study. I understand what the study is about.

I _____ consent to participate in this interview as part of the research outlined above.

I _____ do not consent to participate in this interview as part of the research outlined above.

Consent for Recording of One-to-One Interviews:

I _____ consent to have this interview recorded.

I _____ do not consent to have this interview recorded.

Contact details: If at any time you have any queries / issues with regard to this study, researcher's contact details are as follows:

Jayne Guiney, jayne.guiney@mic.ul.ie

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Research and Graduate School, Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick. Telephone: 061-204980 / E-mail: mirec@mic.ul.ie