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אפרתה

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על החינוך

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מיסודה של מכללת אפרתה  
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# Defining Spiritual Development in Young Children: A Research Challenge

Deborah Schein

## Abstract

This article shares a research study on spiritual development where data was collected during interviews with early childhood educators to determine a definition and a framework for nurturing children's spiritual development. The research was based on assumptions, one being that all humans are born with a spiritual embryo, a metaphor used by Montessori to describe the internal driving force that propels each child toward growth and development. Data analysis resulted in a preliminary definition of spiritual development as a system of children's deep connections leading first to self-awareness, and later to the nurturing of basic and complex dispositions ignited by moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace that develop into the prosocial personality traits of caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence. This system requires love and attachment, spiritual modeling, and time spent by children within spiritual moments. Participants described specific attributes for spiritual moments in time, space, nature, within relationships, and with big questions capable of taking children beyond themselves.

# **An Overview of the Grounded Theory Study**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the study was to construct a theory of spiritual development of young children, beginning at birth, for parents and early childhood educators as they reflect upon ways to nurture the spiritual growth and development of young children living in the 21st-century. Although individual scholars such as Jerome Berryman, creator of Godly Play materials and curriculum for Christian children, Rabbi Michael Shire, creator of Godly Play materials and curriculum for Jewish children, and Rabbi Sandy Sasso, renowned author of spiritual and religious books for young children, have produced works that precede this study, research in this area remains sparse and religiously focused (Schein, 2014). Others have written about older children and spirituality (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006), and healing and spirituality (Jenkins, Wikoff, Amankwaa, & Trent, 2009), as have individuals from a variety of countries (Blain & Eady, 2002; Bone, 2008; Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007). Yet, many researchers still believe that spiritual development has been overlooked, especially in regard to young children (Bone, 2008; Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007; de Souza, 2009; Harris, 2007; Hay & Nye, 2006; Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Surr, 2011). To be more specific, no references have been made to a child's spiritual development in leading American ECE curricula such as Creative Curriculum® (Dodge et al., 2002), or by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2005).

Though research was sparse, a number of theorists have valued and reflected on spiritual development in their writings. Fowler (1995), Gardner (1999), Montessori (1963), and Senge (1990), write about the power of human spirituality, its presence at birth, and the positive role it can play in developing a whole, well-balanced individual. Fowler speaks about spiritual development using the language of faith and Erikson's stages of development. Gardner speaks about spiritual development in relation to his theory of multiple Defining

Spiritual Development in Young Children 3 intelligences. Montessori speaks of a spiritual embryo. Senge introduces the concept of spiritual systems. Using terms such as empathy, caring, kindness, and wonderment, Etzioni as well as Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, and Damon (2002) indirectly imply that nurturing a child's spirituality can lead to the creation of a good society. At the same time, increasing numbers of young children act out aggressively and exhibit a deficiency in both moral and character development (Fowler, 1995; Palmer, 1998; Surr, 2011; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Wilson, 2008a). Attention to spiritual development could help solve these escalating problems. Therefore a grounded theory research study was initiated, due to the lack of information on spiritual development of young children, and it is this study that will be discussed in this article. At the same time, other studies have begun to show that spirituality can be examined separately from religion (Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude 2003) et al. This perception accommodates universal qualities of spiritual development apart from religion, and permits the study of the relationships between spiritual development and nature education to occur without referencing God or religion (Schein, 2014).

It is from this perspective that this article is written. The methodology was a quantitative social constructivist grounded theory.

## **Nature of the Research Study**

The purpose of the study was to develop a theory of spiritual development for young children, based on the perspectives of highly respected early childhood educators.

I began with the following assumptions. A more in-depth explanation of these assumptions will follow.

1. Spirituality is an innate human trait.

2. The innate sense of spirituality may exist at birth but must be nurtured in order to flourish, thus the term spiritual development.
3. Spiritual development plays an important role in creating quality early childhood education and may be the premise for supportive parenting.
4. Human qualities that have been overlooked and undervalued should be developed. (Schein, 2012).

The first assumption is that spirituality is an innate human trait. The notion that children are innately spiritual has been documented throughout history (Scarlett, 2006). Montessori, who introduced the language of the spiritual embryo, noted that a child's spiritual embryo is present at birth as a “miracle of creation from nothing . . . [It] is not merely a material body” (Montessori, 1963, p. 15) but also houses a vital force, or the “horme”, a concept borrowed from Sir Percy Nunn (Montessori, 1963, p. 15) and used by Montessori to describe an internal driving force that guides, directs, and propels each child toward growth, independence, and knowledge, learning, and knowing (Montessori, 1967).

The second assumption is that the innate sense of spirituality must be nurtured in order to flourish (Fowler, 1995). Without nurturing it may not be awakened or developed.

The third assumption is based on the notion that spiritual development plays an important role in creating quality early childhood education, which is known to (a) meet learners where they are, taking into account their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development and characteristics; (b) identify goals for children that are both challenging and achievable—a stretch but not an impossible leap (implying development or growth); and (c) recognize that what makes something challenging and achievable will vary, depending on the individual learner's development in all areas; store of experiences, knowledge, and skills; and the context within which the learning opportunity takes place (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006). These qualities may be considered spiritual in



the sense that each child is seen by the educator for who they are, is highly respected, and viewed as capable of meeting challenges or provocations.

The fourth assumption accommodates a vision of the development of human qualities that have been overlooked and undervalued. Lerner et al. (2006) held that a theory of spiritual development can support children in becoming more competent, connected, confident, caring, and compassionate, especially as early childhood educators, parents, and caregivers gain the language, definition, ability, and comfort needed to discuss the spiritual development of young children.

### **Research Questions**

These are the questions that guided the study:

1. What is the nature of spiritual development of young children? How is spiritual development viewed and defined in regard to young children, beginning at birth?
2. What kinds of learning activities and experiences foster a child's spiritual development?
3. Has spiritual development been outwardly addressed? If so, how and why?
4. What factors inhibit a child's spiritual development?

These research questions simultaneously imply a qualitative framework and a grounded theory design. Furthermore, the participants provided a subjective interrelationship with the researcher in order that meaning be co-constructed from the data (Mills, Bonner & Francis, 2006).

## **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

Constructivist grounded theory studies require a purposeful sampling, meaning that the researcher seeks out “people, events, or information to illuminate and define the boundaries and relevance” of a study (Charmaz 2006, 189). All participants in this study had advanced knowledge of early childhood education, because the study required shared perceptions of practice that could inform theory. But the study also necessitated representation from various early childhood programs and movements, including Montessori, Waldorf, play-based, and Reggio Emilia philosophy as they exist in the contemporary United States. To provide a broad picture of early childhood educators' perspectives on spiritual development, this study also included educators from various religious and academic backgrounds working in the field. The twelve individuals were chosen to represent this spectrum as well as gender and racial inclusion. Furthermore, participants were accessible and willing to participate. Participants were sought out who displayed an affinity for or were comfortable with discussing the topic of spirituality (Schein 2012). This diverse population enabled the investigation commonalities (and differences).

### **Data Collection**

Data collection included hour-long initial and follow-up telephone interviews that were audio recorded, transcribed, and member checked. The interview questions related to the nature of the spiritual development of young children from birth, and the kinds of learning activities and experiences that foster or inhibit a child's spiritual development. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning the above set of questions was sent to each participant prior to the interview, with the understanding that dialogue would follow. A constructivist grounded theory study must remain fluid and open, allowing for new questions to emerge (Hatch, 2002). This study followed these guidelines. Furthermore, follow-up interviews were scheduled as needed, either to clarify what had already been shared or to ask new questions that would lead to saturation of the topic. In addition to the interviews, the three participants still teaching in an early childhood classroom participated in journal writing. They recorded

their observations and understandings of spiritual development two times per week over four weeks. This data was used for data triangulation.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis included open, axial, and selective coding as well as bracketing. Triangulation was achieved by comparing interviews, teacher journal entries, and memo writing. Data were analyzed and organized into patterns displayed in diagrams, charts, and tables that were shared, reflected on, and revisited in follow-up interviews until saturation occurred. At the end of this process, a theory emerged, offering parents and early childhood educators a deeper understanding of spiritual development.<sup>1</sup>

## **Defining Spiritual Development as a System**

In an attempt to make sense of all the collected data, multiple sources of information were used to guide the formation of a theoretical framework for the spiritual development of young children. The findings were built upon Montessori's (1963) spiritual embryo, Buber's (1923/1996) I and Thou, Gardner's (1999) multiple intelligences, findings from brain research, and conceptual understandings of what constitutes quality early childhood education. Systems theory as described by Senge (1990) offered a means to integrate past ways of looking at children's development, in order to conceptualize the creation of a new theoretical understanding for this grounded theory study. A more detailed account of how these theories impact the findings can be found in the discussion section that follows the findings. The purpose for mentioning them here is that it is not one belief or understanding that guides the findings, but rather a system of ideas that support the language and thoughts shared by participants in this study.

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1. Sections from Data Analysis and Findings were originally published in *Children, Youth and Environments*, vol. 24, issue 2, pp. XXX–XXX, available through JSTOR on <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=chilyoutenvi>. Reproduced with permission.

In this way, a system of spiritual development emerged from the findings of this study. The system consists of spiritual development (Phase 1) and spiritual moments (Phase 2) and resembles a system as described by Senge (1990). In his book titled, *Fifth Dimentions*, Senge discusses how spiritual aspects of personal development and relationships create a system from within. For young children this means that it is necessary to acknowledge that much occurs within children's inner being and that children's reality is reflected outwardly in relation to the environments made available to them. In order to glean such an understanding of young children, the findings from research, thoughts, and reflections from known theorists are shared in such a way as to describe the emerging process of this system of spiritual development. The description of this system is a starting point for discussing spiritual development of young children, as well as a starting point for understanding the relationship between nature and spiritual development.

## Phase 1: Deep Connections and Dispositions

Phase 1 describes how deep connections and the support of a child's disposition provide spiritual nurturing.

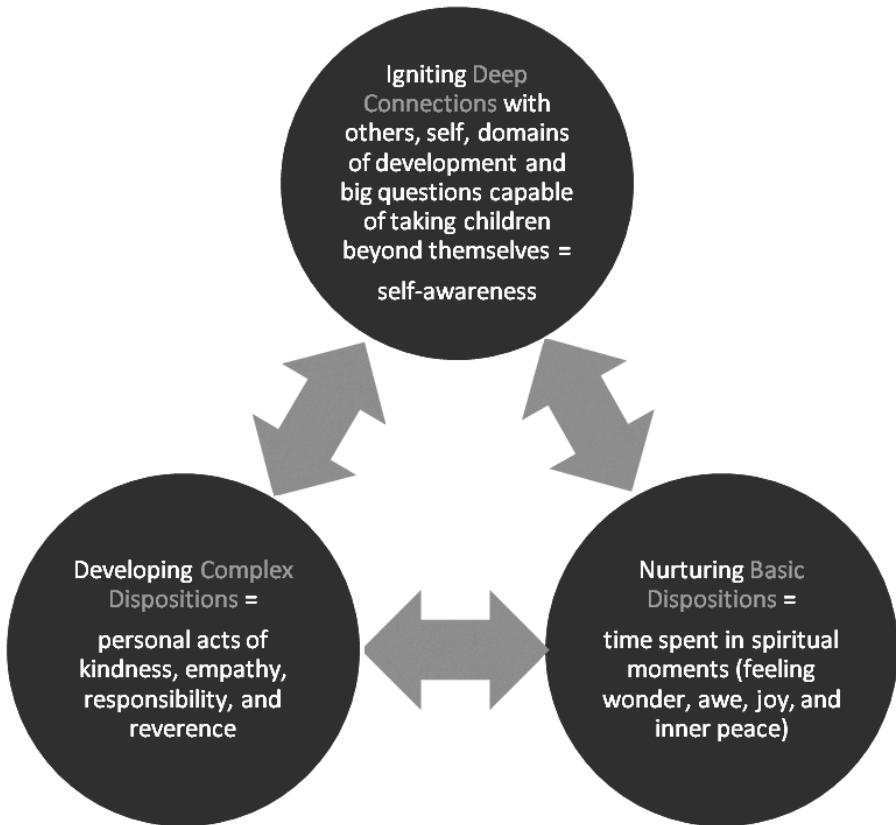


Figure 1: Describes the three aspects of Phase 1-spiritual development. These three aspects include igniting deep connections, nurturing basic dispositions, and the emergence of complex dispositions.

### Deep Connections

According to participants, innate traits of spiritual development are nurtured, beginning with love and attachment. They include modeling, and eventually involve supporting each individual child's unique disposition.

Participants spoke of infants' need for deep connections between others, with self, and with nature, with other domains of development, and with big questions capable of taking children beyond themselves, as first steps toward developing a system of spiritual development.

One participant currently working as a professor at a four year college of education said, "Love and acceptance, care and concern, tenderness and contentment, all support the developing personhood of the infant." Another participant, an educator from a parochial day school said:

*For me spiritual is about heart-to-heart and heart-to-mind connection, human beings to other human beings on a very primitive level. I really think it is important for teachers and adults to be able to sit down with a child when they are playing... and really get to know them. Let that child be known!*

Another participant, a professor emeritus who is currently writing and consulting about young children and nature shared:

*[Spirituality is about] deep connections. I think it is about connections between adult to child, child to child. It's connections with self where the child is supported in developing a very unique self. So it's the connection to self. It is also a connection to nature. These are elements that make development very spiritual.*

Theorists support these findings. Pestalozzi (1898) and Montessori (1967) provide a starting point for the modeling of spiritual development with the expression of parental love towards infants beginning at birth. Acts of love are the first window through which children catch a glimpse of themselves: they do so by absorbing the facial expressions and body language of others (Bardige 2005; Raikes & Edwards, 2009; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). This process successfully occurs because infants possess an absorbent mind, a metaphor that reflects a young child's exceptional ability to learn culture, language, and nuances from the environment (Montessori, 1967).

Other theories such as Buber's (1923/1996) theory of I and Thou, Gardner's (1999) theory of Multiple Intelligences, and Wilber's (2006) theory of spirituality, share a belief that children instinctively seek relationships and connections with all they encounter. These encounters include relationships with others, time to play, and time in nature (Schein, 2012). Deep connections can lead children toward secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969), happiness (Noddings, 2007), trust (Erikson, 1950; Fowler, 1995; Wilber, 2006), and resiliency and thriving (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001)—all necessary for healthy growth and development.

Ultimately, deep connections appear to have a positive effect on the development of self-awareness; different from self-esteem in that it is not about the individual, but about the individual in relationship to all that exists beyond one's self (Schein, 2012).

### **Basic Dispositions**

A disposition is a child's nature, character, and temperament (Katz, 2009).

Participants shared these comments:

*To me, whenever you can engage children and whenever I see children engaging each other or something in the world engaging children in a way that lights up a sense of awe and wonder in them—that is a moment for spiritual development.*

Another participant who works at a nature preschool said:

*I think awe [is]... something that just strikes you. It captures something within you. It can be awe, a feeling in seeing something, or feeling... what is this, what can it mean without it being a cognitive question as well as moments that provoke wonder and curiosity in a more conventional way? Like seeing dancing sun spots on the window when there is no prism. A sense of awe may have no need for words but also could lead to asking, 'Where did it come from?' I want to know. Or it can just provoke dancing around the room or making music. All of these can be spiritual moments.*

Theorists share that secure attachment eventually moves young children to look beyond parents and caregivers as new relationships develop, including a deepening connection and relationship with nature. Words such as awe, wonder, joy, and inner peace are used frequently by participants and theorists alike as they speak of young children's relationship with nature. Researchers suggest that there exists a significant need and drive for a relationship between nature and children and that it is inherently predetermined (Bailie, 2012; Kellert, 2005). Kellert (2005) contended that both physical and mental well-being depend upon the quality and quantity of one's experience with the natural world. Bailie (2012) shares a quote from Kellert, "Predominantly emotional and affective values of nature emerge earlier than more abstract, logical, and rationally deduced perspectives" (Kellert, 2002, p.132). Neurological studies of young children confirm such findings (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003; Vandell, 2004).

Study participants agree that young children require real time to explore natural environments (Mustard, 2006). They need to see it, touch it, ask their own questions, and be given language to reinforce their own experiences (Gardner, 1999). From the perspective of early childhood educators, the concept of *prepared environment*, another metaphor from Montessori (1963), comes to mind. A prepared environment is based on a belief that young children (a) learn best by exploring real things with their hands and movement, (b) learn from whole to specific (Montessori, 1967), and (c) strive to become independent and require beautiful things, meaningful activity, order, and time for repetition and self-selection of activity (Montessori, 1963).

Reggio Emilia philosophers support ideas of children's deep needs for beautiful aesthetic environments often infused with natural materials. Reggio Emilia educators invite children to explore the world using 100 languages for expressing and making visible children's understandings of themselves and of the world (Gandini et al., 2005). Language is believed to communicate thought (Vygotsky, 1962), so children's exposure to 100 languages provides children with a variety of ways to communicate, to reflect, and to know the world and themselves.



In this way, words of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace also become connected to emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual development and are often associated with nature or natural materials.

### **Complex Dispositions**

Participants also described another set of personality traits that seem to emerge after children's basic dispositions are nurtured in the ways described above. Within this system of spiritual development, the traits, defined as complex dispositions, are reflected by children's pro-social behaviors displayed through self-initiated acts of kindness, caring, empathy, and reverence (Schein, 2012). These pro-social acts are possible outcomes created by a process of spiritual development.

One nature educator and past early childhood director shared thoughts about caring and respect evolving into acts of reverence, reflected through on-going responsibilities:

*I feel strongly about [children] having close contact with nature . . . Their involvement in nature should also include their being active in the caring of these things and the caring of the natural world around them. This is one of the strongest ways to support spiritual development because there is that sense of beauty and mystery and that oneness in the natural world.*

One might add, a sense of responsibility can also emerge from this type of relationship.

Another participant, a well known early childhood educator and author shared:

*The spiritual child—or the child whose spiritual development has been nurtured—is more likely to contribute to the establishment of a more spiritual society—a society where empathy, caring, compassion, and peace are valued.*

Basically, these participants are speaking about respect for the environment and respect for others. Respect can become reverence when young children

are expected to carry out simple jobs and responsibilities such as caring for plants, pets, and environmental aspects of the early childhood classroom, or simply helping to keep the classroom environment orderly. Being able to understand and follow rules are indicators of reverence. Both jobs and rules support children in their ability to become reverent and more intentional, as they learn to become part of a community; a society. Morals and values also come into play.

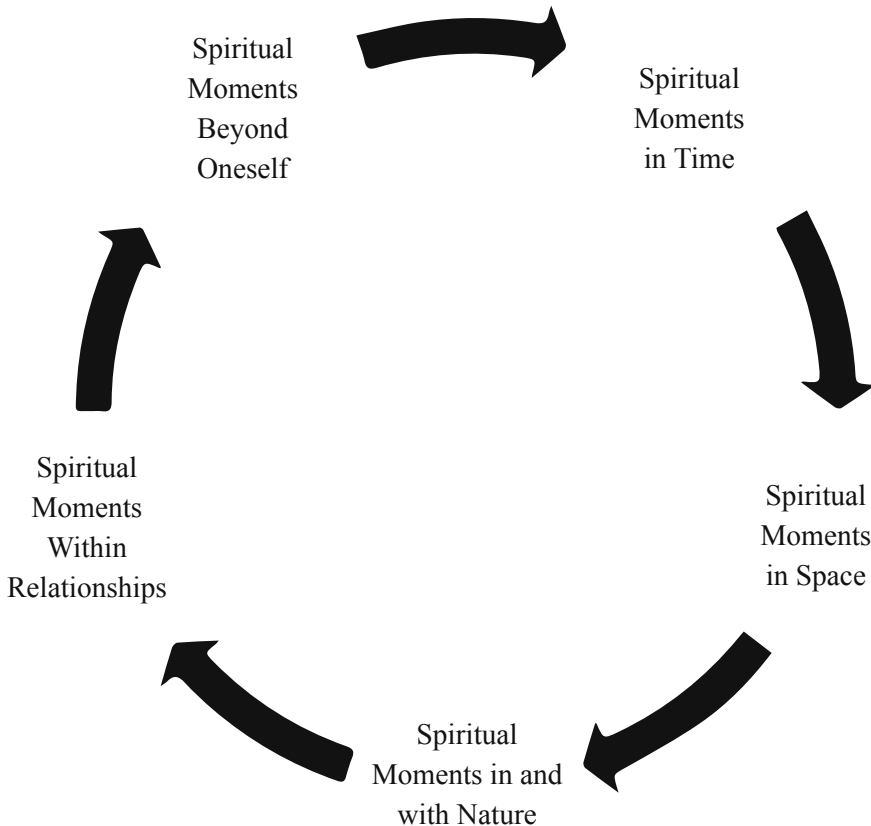
Two longitudinal studies (Wellman et al., 2008; Zayas et al., 2012) show that infants and very young children are capable of imitating and understanding intentional actions, that become the bases for theories of mind that are believed to be the predecessor to moral judgment. Participants believed that it is possible that values and moral development may emerge from proper nurturing of spiritual development.

### **Review and Reflections of Phase 1**

Innate traits of spiritual development must be nurtured to flourish (Schein, 2012). Love and attachment first awaken the spiritual embryo so that the system of spiritual development can be propelled forward, strengthened, and deepened. The system begins with stage development but evolves into a system known as development systems theory. When this system is healthy it has the potential to perpetuate itself. The definition of spiritual development becomes a system that eventually follows development systems theory and therefore is capable of being self-sustaining throughout one's lifetime, and is believed to require close human connection to nature in order to do so. Furthermore, it is believed by some of the participants that such a system can begin its existence within very young children.

## Phase 2: Spiritual Moments

During the interviews it became clear that participants had different ways of talking about spirituality. They concurred that these moments could be described as spiritual moments. As depicted in Figure 2, a range of spiritual moments contributes to a child's spiritual development. It is believed by some researchers that more of the whole child is developed when spiritual development is reinforced by spiritual moments (Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009; Schein, 2012).



Study participants were asked, “What kinds of learning activities and experiences foster a child's spiritual development?” Because of the lack of language available to them on this topic, this question was often met with

silence or such comments as, “I have never been asked this question. I don't really have the words to answer.”

An educator at a nature preschool said,

*When you see it [a spiritual moment], you know it. But if we are not paying attention, we can even miss it, not even recognize it. Emotions...feeling from the core, reflection, pondering deep peace, inner contentment all seem to be a part of a spiritual moment.*

Another participant said, “I have those moments every day. I have taught for over 20 years. Those moments happen very fast. The eye contact. The physical contact.”

Eventually participants had much to say about creating moments for spiritual development to occur in their early childhood classroom environments. They did not speak specifically about activities and experiences; rather they spoke explicitly about the environment and what was needed to create spiritual moments. A description of their thoughts has been collected into Phase 2 of the system of spiritual development, in which spiritual moments are defined.

Theorists also support this concept of spiritual moments as reflected in the Reggio Emilia understanding of “the environment as a third teacher” (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012, p. 149) and Schwab's concept of milieu. One participant defined such an environment as “environments that produce questions, wonderment, and curiosity about the world rather than answers to things.” *Milieu* refers to the environment, situations, and surroundings as well as the tonal qualities of a moment (Schwab, 1969). Participants in the study described how children are capable of building deep connections, if their learning environment supports spiritual moments in time, space, nature, relationships, and with big questions that take children beyond themselves.

Spiritual moments also encompass nature. Participants stated that when schools offer beautiful classrooms where adults demonstrate respect for children's

perceptions of the environment, children achieve spiritual moments in space as well as spiritual moments in nature. Both Waldorf schools and nature schools provide such classrooms, where purpose and intentionality determine the arrangement of the environment and guide what children do. Furthermore, E. O. Wilson (1984) introduced the term *biophilia* to mean “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes” (p. 1). Bailie (2012), influenced by Orr (1994), suggested that “for biophilia to take root and grow in a young person's life, natural places that are accessible and safe are required, along with the help of caring adults to guide and model behavior in a community based on intense love of the natural world” (p. 52). Orr (1994) also suggests that it is important that biophilia take hold early in a person's life, because “If by some fairly young age, however, nature has not been experienced as a friendly place of adventure and excitement, biophilia will not take hold as it might have” (143). He adds that “education that supports and nourishes a reverence for life would occur more often [when children spent time with nature, specifically] out-of-doors”(pp. 147–148). In other words, the concept of biophilia represented by a child's developing relationship with nature provides another deep connection, as discussed by participants, and is required for stimulating and maintaining a child's spiritual development.

The idea of spiritual moments captures the environmental qualities that are necessary for nurturing children's spiritual development. One participant, a director of an early childhood center, shared that spiritual moments:

*Provide an environment that help children to keep exploring: You know when their whole sense of inquiry is pulled in. As they ask something and they keep going further and further. They don't give up because even without answers there is something that moves them on. I think it is their spirituality that moves them on.*

Another participant who heads an early childhood department at a four year college said that she sees more of the whole child when she provides:

*...a classroom that invites children to ask difficult questions. Because children are of course asking those difficult questions anyway... [so we must] give voice to*

*these questions... to [help children] perceive... [the world]... [and] to be concerned out loud about what's happening in their immediate world, or the larger world around them.*

These stories come from college lab schools:

*Some children were in the throes of dealing with the death of their goldfish in the preschool. And they created this ceremony around how to deal with that loss, and how to think about it, and to respond to it as a little community. I was thinking that this was one of those places where I felt that the children were trying to think of themselves in relationship to some unknown entity of life, and constructing a sort of ritual together.*

Here is the second story:

*The children were very busy with blocks and many various activities, and I noticed it started snowing. So I turned the lights off and I simply said, 'Look.' All the children stopped and looked out the window, and of course it was get up, and go over to the window, and just a sense of awe. It was really the first real snowfall of the season, and it was just hush... that was a time of reflection. The children said nothing about the beauty or wonder of that experience. There was not a lot of talk just being there with the falling snow. It was an incredible moment for me, a spiritual moment, and I could see that it was so for the children as well.*

Theorists offer additional insight for the type of moments children need to nurture their inner selves. One says that children must develop a will to do what is right (Taylor, 2002). This implies deep connections and strong relationships between child and educator. Children delight in and require “ritual” in order to understand deeper meanings of life (Taylor, 2002, p. 297). Order is one of qualities defined under spiritual moments in time by participants. Children need time, love, and respect in order to develop a positive sense of self-awareness (Honig, 2002; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003; Taylor, 2002). These theorists support the concept of deep connections leading to a stronger sense of self. Children must have lots of “fantasy” in their lives in order to understand the nuances of

living, including symbolic representation and a sense of “other” (Fowler, 1995; Gardner, 1999; Montessori, 1963; Taylor, 2002). These theorists agree in the value of wonderment, awe, and joy as important for scaffolding all learning and knowing. Most of all, children need “trust,” which is a basic human desire (Taylor, 2002, p. 313). Most participants spoke of trust as a quality needed to build relationships. One participant summarized this line of thought by saying that “The most basic component of a relationship is trust.” In other words, in order for children to develop deep connections they first need to be in a trusting relationship. Again, this line of thought is not new. What is new is that it is being tied to the concept of spiritual development as well as brain development and all the other areas of human development.

The above attributes could easily become language for spiritualness, as described by both Senge (1990) and Buber (1923/1996). These attributes are actually quite similar to those used by Siegel & Hartzell, (2003), as they describe what a healthy brain needs to mature. They are also comfortable concepts for well-educated early childhood educators and parents who realize the importance of putting the child first and introducing the child at an early age to the natural world.

## **Review and Reflections of Phase 2**

The system of spiritual development may be triggered and awakened by love and attachment, but it is the daily environment that is responsible for providing moments for continued spiritual development and growth. Spiritual moments in time, space, relationships, nature, and big questions nurture the parents and educators who create the environments as well as the children. Spiritually aware adults can consciously and carefully create beautiful milieus (Schwab, 1969) that support spiritual moments (Schein, 2012).

## **Discussion of Spiritual Development in Early Childhood Education**

### **Nature Education and Spiritual Development**

These findings suggest that spiritual development is a required component for high-quality early childhood education. Early childhood education around the world is often driven by standards. Research findings from nature education, study participants, and theorists suggest that nature and spiritual development may in fact lay a foundation, or possibly a different kind of foundation, for quality early childhood education. In fact, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) has published *Early Childhood Environmental Education Programs: Guidelines for Excellence* (2010) and an Early Childhood Environmental Education Rating Scale (Bhagwanji, 2011) that help formulate a language of standards, goals, and benchmarks that integrate children and learning with nature as part of a holistic education. The link between these studies, standards, and spiritual development is important because they speak about and support children's need for time, space, and beauty to stimulate moments of wonder as well as big questions (Rivkin & Schein, 2014). Nature research suggests that time in natural spaces provides such moments.

Here is what some of nature focused research studies are finding that support the important link between nature and spiritual development. Blain and Eady (2002) found that “presence, joy, and awareness” are often experienced when children connect to plants, animals, and people (p. 127); as well as increased ability to ask questions and develop perceptions capable of taking children beyond themselves (Blain & Eady, 2002; Hart, 2006; Montessori, 1963 Seidlitz et al., 2002; Wilson, 2008a). More specifically Louv (2008) writes “that all spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder, and that one of the first windows to wonder is the natural world” (p. 356).



## **A Longitudinal Study**

Vandell's (2004) longitudinal study demonstrated that the higher the number of recommended standards met by an early childhood program, the stronger the program. Strong programs were defined as having students with fewer behavior problems and higher school readiness and language comprehension scores. Children enrolled in quality early childhood programs exhibited lower cortisone levels and test scores 14 points higher than the mean of the norming sample for the Bracken Basic Concept Scale (Vandell, 2004, p. 5). Research on nature education provides findings that support such outcomes when children are engaged in moments that offer wonder, awe, joy, and inner peace and as they develop prosocial behavior (Schein, 2012).

## **Brain Development**

Neurological research has produced a new wealth of knowledge about human development that is reflected within the system of spiritual development. This new knowledge has led to an understanding that “all children are wired to learn” (Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl, 2001). In order for the wiring to occur, however, certain environmental conditions must be in place. Simply stated, children require love and secure attachments in order to know themselves and in order to feel secure enough to meet the world (Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl, 2001; Lally, Mangione & Greenwald, 2006; Liston, 2008; Mickel & Hall, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). When children explore and experience their environment, “brain and biological pathways” are also set to influence “intelligence, literacy, behavior, and physical and mental health” (Mustard, 2006, p. 15; see also NAEYC, 2005; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Vandell, 2004). In this way, when children are offered spiritual moments, they are also more able to expand upon their knowledge of the world.

## **The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)**

NAEYC (2009) defines quality early childhood education using three core considerations for developmentally appropriate practice, and 12 principles of child development that inform practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Some of these core ideas and principles are reinterpreted here and tied to the findings of this study on spiritual development. NAEYC tried to meet children where they are. NAEYC believes that children should be viewed and respected as unique individuals who live within an existing culture (similar to Bronfenbrenner's (2004) bioecological system theory of development). NAEYC believes that children should be viewed and respected within a developmental system of norms and as individuals with unique learning styles and needs (similar to Gardner's (1999) theory of Multiple Intelligences). Finally, NAEYC believes in the importance of children's environments being rich in content for learning, supported by loving adults, who provide children with lots of time to play. Such environments can be described as spaces that support spiritual development.

## **Reggio Emilia Philosophy**

Another vision of quality early childhood education comes from the Reggio Emilia philosophy, in which Malaguzzi (as cited in Rinaldi, 2006, p. 7) describes a picture of a system and a child within that system connected to all that was, is, and will be. This image parallels how Buber's (1923/1996) theory of I and Thou is reflected in the deep connections young children are capable of having with inanimate and organic objects. Buber suggests that the "it" becomes a "thou" the minute something becomes important (1923/1996), and for very young children this implies anything that is within the child's hand. This parallels Rinaldi's (2006) description of quality education using the 100 languages of children and a vision of children as being capable and competent. She writes that children are deserving of beautiful spaces:

*The space cannot be too static... we design the space as warm, welcoming, stimulating and safe. The space encourages investigation. It is able to renew itself, to recognize the need and the request but also the life of the children and the adults who live in that image. Therefore, the space has the possibility to transform itself. The space has to communicate. It can speak many different languages. The space is a powerful and fundamental language. It can welcome and exalt differences. In this way, the space can make some sort of relationship between others and us. That means that when we organize the space, we are also thinking about a way of living, the quantity and quality of relationships and collaborations and possibilities. In that space we try to organize and to guarantee encounters with others and with ourselves. We try to promote relationships and collaborations in the group, but also highlight individual identities and personal space. We try to stimulate investigations and exchange, cooperation and conflict.*

## **Summary**

When quality early childhood education comes together with nature and beautiful spaces, then exploration and experiences also influence the spiritual side of human development (Bailie, 2012; Harris, 2007; Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009; Surr, 2011; Schein, 2012; Wilson, 2008a). This is where all learning domains converge, making learning more about connections, wonderment, imagination, creativity, and big questions capable of taking one beyond oneself.

## **Scope, Delimitations, and Limitations**

### **Scope**

This study focused specifically on views of 12 early childhood professionals on the spiritual development of children from birth to age 5 years. Although religious development and a belief in transcendence were not a primary focus of the current study, spiritual development may play an important part in both; and the influence may be mutual.

## **Delimitations**

The parameters that bound this study and limited its ability to generalize are many. First, the study took place from 2009 to 2012. Second, a purposeful sampling was used, and only experts in the field of early childhood education with insight and expertise relating to spiritual development in young children were interviewed. Participants were chosen based on their work in the community, their publications, their training, or their leadership activities associated with early childhood spiritual development, from a list of individuals generated by the researcher and the researcher's colleagues. Third, given that this was a grounded theory study, a theoretical sampling was used to guide the process, resulting in giving voice to the researcher who was responsible for sorting and analyzing the data (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, the data depended upon those interviewed and the questions asked, as well as the researcher's understanding and perspective on the data. Throughout this process, new questions arose. In this fashion, neither data nor theories were actually discovered but were instead “constructed through past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). A final delimitation focused on examining spiritual development so that universal characteristics might be uncovered. In order to accomplish this goal, the language used to discuss spiritual development was carefully chosen in order to be inclusive of all children; therefore, delimitations included a perspective from which spiritual development was innate and shaped through interactions with environmental influences.

## **Limitations**

The potential weaknesses in this study include first, the researcher's interest and experience with spiritual development in infants and young children. To ensure that the findings were trustworthy, several strategies were used: triangulation of data, member checks, and memo writing. Second, the purposeful sampling used to recruit participants for this study can also lead to bias. To ensure that the selected participants were available and willing, a letter of consent was sent to each, explaining in detail the scope of the study and the responsibilities of each participant. Finally, this study focused only on the spiritual development of young children from birth to age five living in the United States.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study focused on the spiritual development of young children, beginning at birth. It is a grounded theory and therefore a starting point for further study. This study included only 12 participants, early childhood educators from across the United States. It would be valuable to replicate this study with a larger sample that includes educators from a larger pool of early childhood educators from a variety of countries. Moreover, a longitudinal study on the effects of providing spiritual nurturing at the beginning of life would provide more information about the long-term effects of early spiritual development. Further analyses, reporting, and interpreting of findings from this study are also needed with regard to the following questions: (1) what is the connection between spiritual development and the other domains of development? (2) What might early childhood practices look like if new insights into spiritual development were applied to early childhood education programs? (3) What is the connection and relationship between nature education, spiritual development, moral development, character building, faith development, and the cultivation of values? (4) What are dispositions? How do they come into existence? What role do they play in supporting children's spiritual development?

### **Concluding Statement**

This grounded theory study of early childhood educators' views about young children's spiritual development is based on participants' perspectives that spiritual development begins at birth, and must be nurtured beginning at birth in order to foster the development of the whole child. The resulting theory describes spiritual development as basic dispositions (wonderment, awe, joy, inner peace) and complex dispositions (caring, kindness, empathy, reverence), that are nurtured through spiritual modeling and spiritual moments. Beginning with love and connection, spiritual modeling and spiritual moments support children as they grow into individuals who possess a positive sense of self and deep connections with the world, that is, they are citizens of character, who are able to make ethical and moral decisions, and capable of asking big questions.

capable of taking one beyond oneself. This study provides a starting point for further discussion and research on the spiritual development of young children.

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# **DERECH EFRATA**

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