“BECAUSE THEY ARE SPIRITUALLY DISCERNED”:
SPIRITUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of my qualitative research was to explore with early childhood education teachers, their understanding of children’s spirituality and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. I wanted to search further with them how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice. This study was grounded in the critical Black feminist and interpretive theoretical frames with a situated methodology. It incorporated grounded theory. The research included five participants from two different early childhood education settings, who were selected purposefully through community nomination. The instruments to gather data included: individual interviews, observations, written field notes and narratives.

The findings pointed to a theoretical framework that integrates the four major themes across the data: identity and connectedness with the self, identity and connectedness with self and others in relation to social justice, spirituality embedded in loving education, and multiple spiritualities negotiated within early childhood education. The theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education that emerges from the findings
situates spirituality as foundational for early childhood educators and for young children. It contextualizes spirituality in education within the parameters of identity, connectedness with the self and others and with love, fairness and equity. It also recognizes its subversive and significant place in early childhood education. It positions spirituality as a source of strength and resistance, as well as a tool for change. The framework considers spirituality in early childhood education as providing the individuals with a foundation for social justice.
Dedicated to Sonia Burgos,
My aunt and my friend,
From whom I learned early in my life
About community and about loving and caring education.
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Integrated Teaching and Learning

Early childhood education

Multicultural education

Qualitative research
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reduce teaching to intellect,
and it becomes a cold abstraction;
reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissist;
reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world.
(Palmer, 1998, p. 4)

The field of early childhood education has been influenced by
diverse philosophers and educators like Comenious (1970), Pestalozzi
(1969), Rousseau (1931), Froebel (1887) and Montessori (1967), who
have defended that the educational processes should approach the whole
child (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2000). According to the perspective of the
whole child philosophy, children develop holistically (Kostelnik, Soderman
& Whiren, 1999). All developmental domains, such as the social,
aesthetic, language, cognitive, affective and physical, are interconnected,
and each one influences the others. An infant, for example, who learns to
walk, may develop other domains like the cognitive, language and the
social, influenced by his or her mobility. Thus, educators must consider
and attend all of the children’s developmental domains (Lawson, 1996). However, the spiritual dimension has been left out, as part of the whole child’s education. Spiritual development has been excluded systematically from the schools and has been considered not pertinent to be integrated into the curriculum (Palmer, 1983). Nevertheless spirituality is part of the life of every person (Scott, 2001).

Human beings search for purpose and for meaning in their lives (Wright, 2000). This search is part of the inner journey linked to spirituality (Alexander, 2004). Children seem to have a natural spirituality revealed in their sense of wonder, their fantasies and imagination, their play and their spirit of curiosity (Halstead & Waite, 2001). Tacey (2002) points out that even university students want to develop their spirituality. He observes that they long to be transformed, more than informed by the educational institutions.

According to Andrew Wright (2000) it is imperative that parents and educators nourish the spiritual dimension of themselves, that of their children and of the young people. He is concerned with what he identifies as the spiritual crisis of modernity. As part of this crisis, influenced by Enlightenment’s rationalism, Wright (2000) asserts that human beings have given disproportional emphasis to the human reason, and have been using their intellectual power to destroy and to dominate other peoples
and nations. This has been reflected in the worldwide reality of materialism, consumerism, violence and oppression as evidenced in the twentieth century (Wright, 2000; Gearon, 2001; Miller, 2000). People seem to have lost the meaning, purpose and value of life and, at the same time, they seem to be searching more than ever for these spiritual aspects in response to the chaotic reality (Alexander, 2004; hooks, 2000).

Kessler (2000) stresses the need to integrate the spiritual dimension in the classroom as a means of preventing socio-emotional problems in adolescents. She, like Glazer (1999), identifies a relationship between teaching, learning and the education of the heart. If teachers are engaged in the education of the whole child, the inner life of their students, characterized by feelings, emotions, imagination, intuition, creativity and the spiritual dimension as such, should be of equal importance (Lawson, 1996).

Literature on the topic of spirituality and education indicates that in the United States the spiritual dimension is not included systematically in education for diverse reasons. One of the major reasons is related to the ambiguity of the terms spirituality and spiritual development (Haynes, 1999). Another reason rests in the conflict and confusion that arises over the separation of church and state (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson
A further reason is linked to the fact that teachers in the United States do not know how to approach the spiritual dimension without violating the First Amendment of the Constitution (Kessler, 2000). Given that the children develop holistically, their education should not be alienated from their spiritual dimension, including their feelings and emotions, their imagination, intuition and their relationship with others (Lawson, 1996). Neither should the lives of the teachers in the classroom be disconnected from these dimensions (hooks, 1994). After all, education should be about the mind and the heart as well (Palmer, 1983). Lawson (1996) asserts that the development of the spiritual dimension nurtures a sense of connectedness with self and with others, and a sense of interdependence and social responsibility needed in our fragmented and unjust society.

That sense of connectedness with self and with others, and a sense of interdependence and social responsibility are challenged in the twenty-first century. Western society’s growing interest in spirituality is influenced by capitalistic, neoliberal interests that foster a capitalistic spirituality (Carrette & King, 2005). As part of the capitalistic spirituality, religion has been subordinated to economics and has been privatized, systematically contributing to the oppressions. There are, however, other notions of spirituality, such as the one appropriated in this work, away
from that individualistic approach, that is inclusive of a sense of community with a commitment to social justice.

Statement of the Problem

The professional literature depicts a limited amount of research documented in the United States regarding the topic of spirituality in education and particularly in the field of early childhood education. The need to study this topic on deeper levels is evident. Educators, administrators and policy makers have focused on education reforms that emphasize the academic aspect of the development of the child, neglecting to view the child as a whole person (Delpit & White-Bradley, 2003). These reforms have not proven their effectiveness across the years. Studies related to holistic ways in education that include the spiritual dimension might provide other alternatives toward more effective educational processes (Kirk III, 2000). In this process it is critical to hear what the teachers have to say. These important voices have been usually excluded from the education discourse and from literature (Jagielo, 2004). Studying early childhood education teachers’ perceptions of children’s spirituality, the ways they think they can support this type of development in the classroom, and how they think spirituality in early childhood
An education for the whole child, as fostered historically by educators and philosophers, requires that teachers attend to all developmental domains such as the: social, aesthetic, language, affective, physical, and cognitive, including the spiritual dimension (Clark, 1991). Nevertheless, in the United States the spiritual dimension has been excluded systematically from the educational processes. Schools have imposed a silence regarding sharing about the inner life (Bosacki, 2002) that is both problematic and contradictory in the context of this democratic society. That silence becomes problematic because people in society, as Wright (2000) describes, seem to feel an urgency to search for the meaning and purpose of their lives, and the educational processes are completely alienated from this urgency. The fact that the institution of the school does not foster this type of development is a contradiction, given its responsibility for the integral or holistic development of the students (Lawson, 1996). How can early childhood education be holistic? How can it attend to the whole child if it does not attend this inner journey also called spirituality?

Early childhood educators with a holistic approach have the potential to break the silence about their inner life, and that of their
children, imposed by the schools. They can opt to do this as a way to share the depth and meaning of their unique spiritual journey. They can opt to do this in order to construct new meaning and as a way to nurture their spirituality and that of their children, without interfering with the state-church agreement and without violating the First Amendment of the Constitution (Montgomery-Halford, 1999).

Although Western culture tends to make a separation between the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual, they intertwine “in the human self and in education” (Palmer, 1998, p. 4). These dimensions are interrelated and interdependent with one another. Good teaching, according to Palmer (1998), fosters connection among all of these dimensions, and it fosters connection among the educators as subjects, who relate to themselves and to others, including their colleagues and their students. In Palmer’s (1999) words:

Teaching and learning, done well, are done not by disembodied intellects but by whole persons whose minds cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul. To teach as a whole person to the whole person is not to lose one’s professionalism as a teacher but to take it to a deeper level. (p. 10) As teaching is taken at deeper levels, educators open possibilities to reclaim the power of inwardness in order to transform who they are, to
transform their lives and what they do in their classrooms and beyond (Palmer, 1998). This also brings forward the real possibility of transforming education into a context that fosters wholeness and relations (Kirk, 2000). Students and teachers can learn to be a caring community that contributes to the society at large (Miller, 2005). Within this holistic approach to education, students can better achieve academically, and thus, the diverse ways of knowing, such as imagination and intuition, can be acknowledged and fostered without leaving reasoning behind (Kirk, 2000).

However, the academic culture does not encourage this type of holistic approach based on a sense of connectedness with the self, other human beings and nature. On the contrary, it promotes disconnection and distance from the inner self, and from the others (Kirk, 2000). The school’s goal is to prepare the children to compete in a global economy; thus its emphasis is on the academics and on tests without taking into consideration the whole person (Miller, 2000). Hence, education turns out to be a process where students and teachers become alienated, isolated, and disconnected from who they are and from others. This reality of fragmentation is what Palmer (1998) denominates the pain of “dismemberment” or disconnection. In order to change this reality in education and in the academic culture he recommends emphatically: “we
must talk to each other about our inner lives” (Palmer, 1998, p. 12).

Dialogue could serve as a very powerful transformative tool (Freire, 1999).

Freire (1999) defines dialogue as the true act of love, as the profound commitment to the liberation of all oppressions. He elucidates that dialogue is about being in relationship with other persons and with the reality of the world (Freire, 1999). Teachers are human beings who are in relationship with other persons and with the world and who have the responsibility to contribute toward the transformation of injustice (hooks, 2000). This investigation was done with the intention of providing a space for the voices of the teachers regarding their spiritual journey and its influence in their teaching. I borrow from Ayers (in Jagielo, 2004) the following assumptions: “teachers are interactive”; “teacher self-awareness is valuable” and “indispensable” and “teachers are a rich and worthy source of knowledge about teaching” (p. 13).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of my qualitative research was to explore with preschool and elementary school teachers, their understanding of their own spirituality and that of their children and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. I wanted to search further with them about how spirituality in early childhood education paves
the way toward social justice. The inspiration for this study came from my experience working with children and teachers in early childhood education. Many conversations with my colleagues had been around questions that children have shared about life, relationships, their immediate physical world and reality. We marveled on the depth of their insights, their sense of wonder and their longing for deeper meanings. These elements precisely are part of the definition of children’s spirituality (Waite & Halstead, 2001). Yet, as those colleagues and I recognized, spirituality is not valued as part of the children’s development in the school setting.

Western spirituality comprises various traditions and practices. But spirituality is more than beliefs, practices, and institutional affiliations (Noddings, in Montgomery-Halford, 1999). The emphasis on the separation between church and state, reinforced by an inflexible interpretation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, many times serves as a barrier that paralyzes some teachers in their efforts to nurture the spiritual dimension of children (Noddings, in Montgomery-Halford, 1999). As a consequence, these teachers are not able to support children’s holistic development in the school setting (Miller, 1990). This study focused on how teachers define children’s spirituality
and on the ways they think educators can foster the spiritual development in the classroom.

The methodologies incorporated in the investigation are qualitative. The study was framed within the critical Black feminist and interpretive theoretical approaches. It also drew from the grounded theory approach for the analysis. Writing was incorporated as a method as well. These elements will be elaborated on in Chapter 3.

Research questions

This study explored teachers’ notions on children’s spirituality and the alternatives that they identify to support children in this developmental domain. The questions that will guide this inquiry are the following:

1. How do preschool and elementary school teachers perceive or define their own spirituality and that of their children?
2. How do preschool and elementary teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom?
3. In what ways do these educators think they can foster and support the children’s spiritual development in the classroom?
4. What do the teachers think about how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way for the promotion of social justice?

*Significance of the study*

This research is important for teachers, education administrators, policy makers and teacher educators. It challenges the silence imposed on teachers and children in school regarding their inner lives. By exploring teachers' understandings of spirituality, the ways in which it influences their teaching and the means to nurture it in the classroom, we create other possibilities to imagine education in the context of the United States democratic society. Hopefully, this will serve as an inspiration for teachers, education administrators, policy makers, and teacher educators toward curriculum and program review and reformulation, as well as for the creation of policies that guarantee more holistic and effective approaches in early childhood education.

The dialogical opportunities within this research fostered space for the construction of new meanings and for identification of ways to nurture the inner life of the whole child and that of the teacher in the classrooms. The study also connected education with the experiences of the people and the urgency of searching for the meaning and purpose in their lives.
This effort breaks with the tendency of marginalization of the voices and experiences of working women, particularly of early childhood education teachers. Preschool teachers and their experiences traditionally have been excluded and neglected in the discourse and literature about teaching (Jagielo, 2004). Early childhood education teachers, their voices and their experiences, were at the core of this work. This investigation also contributes to expanding the limited amount of research documented in the United States regarding the topic of spirituality in early childhood education.

**Limitations of the study**

This research was done with early childhood education teachers recognizing that they experienced an imposed silenced regarding their spiritual life within the school context. However, this study did not consider the children's voices. Children have also been silenced regarding their spiritual dimension. Their voices need to be heard as well, in this regard; and their perspectives need to be included in the dialogues concerning education if it is intended to be responsive to who they are.
Future research about this topic can be oriented to explore with children in schools in the United States about how they perceive and experience their spiritual dimension, and the place and role of spirituality in their lives.

**Definition of terms**

There is not a consensus about the definition of spirituality or spiritual development among the authors that write concerning this topic (Wenman, 2001). For this reason it is necessary to define these concepts in terms of their implications for this research.

The feminist theologian Sandra Schneiders (1999) defines spirituality as the person’s response to all that calls him or her to integrity and transcendence. Spirituality is understood also as the search for meaning and for purpose in life, as the profound experience of interconnectedness with others, with nature and with oneself (Bosacki, 2002). Spirituality in relationship with education has been defined as the cultivation of the inner life, as the cultivation of the heart and the mind (Palmer, 1983). That includes the experience of the person as a whole, which includes not merely the intellect but also the body, the emotions, the perceptions and all that the person is (Glazer, 1999).
Waite and Halstead (2001) make note that children seem to have a natural spirituality. These researchers define natural spirituality as the following:

children’s sense of wonder and fascination with things, their extraordinary capacity to play, to enter into fantasy, to exercise their imagination, their intense awareness of immediate experiences and emotions, and their innocent raising of profound questions about the meaning of life (Waite and Halstead, 2001, p.185).

Three inherent elements of spirituality that Wenman (2001) recognizes include that spirituality integrates relationships; it seeks transcendence; and it is unique in each person. Children’s spirituality refers to that particular notion in this study.

The term spiritual development will refer to what Tony Wenman (2001) describes as offering the students “opportunities to be increasingly imaginative, expressive, creative and analytical, to develop a scale of values for themselves...” (p. 315),"helping children to keep an open mind, enabling them to explore different ways of seeing and understanding, encouraging their personal awareness of the social and political dimensions of spirituality” (p. 315).
Chapter summary

Across time diverse philosophers and teachers in the field of early childhood education have recognized that the child develops holistically. An education for the whole child fosters all developmental areas such as the cognitive, physical, social and emotional, including the spiritual. However, the spiritual dimension is not taken into consideration as part of the educational processes. This dimension has been marginalized from the school, especially because of different interpretations of the First Amendment among other reasons. Many teachers feel that they violate the Constitution of the United States if they take into consideration children’s spirituality and that of their own within the educational context. However, spirituality is a quotidian experience.

The purpose of this study was to explore with early childhood education teachers their understanding of their spirituality and that of their students; how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom; and how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice. In the context of this research, spirituality has been defined as the search for purpose and meaning in life, as the inner life manifested through feelings, emotions, imagination, and a sense of wonder (Astin, 2004). This was a qualitative research grounded in the critical Black feminist and interpretive theoretical frames. It also
incorporated the grounded theory approach and writing as methods of analysis.

This first chapter has offered an overview of the study. It stated the problem and explained the purpose. It also defined relevant terms and presented the research questions. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the professional literature.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spirit is at the heart of a meaningful education. Spirit is the spark of life that resides within every human being; it is the connection to the fabric of all life and the source of all creation, and is the essence of what it means to be a human being. (Oládélé, 1999, p. 62)

The context of spirituality in education in the United States

There is not a universally accepted definition for spirituality (Wenman, 2001). The historical older definition for this term is linked with religion (Haynes, 1999). It has been understood as the particular way that a person accepts and practices, or lives specific religious beliefs and doctrines (Wenman, 2001, Kessler, 2000).

That notion still predominates in the United States. The First Amendment protects the citizens from indoctrination in the schools and from the imposition of any religion or particular worldview practice. It guarantees the right of all persons to believe in the doctrine or creed of their choice. The imposition of any devotion in the classroom is
considered a violation of the First Amendment. The text of this important
document reads as follows:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of
religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the
freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people
peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a
redress of grievances” (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson Jr., Hudson Jr.,
&Thomas, 2003, p. 15).

educators define spirituality and in what context they present it to students
may determine its acceptance among parents and religious leaders. It
may also determine its constitutionality” (p. 24). This author recalls an
experience when a teacher from the Bronx, Mildred Rosario, was fired for
leading a prayer in her classroom. For Haynes (1999), leading a prayer in
the classroom exemplifies a violation of the neutrality that educators need
to profess according to the First Amendment. He argues that any
practice, including meditation and visualization, associated with religions
and integrated into the classroom in order to foster spiritual development
in public education, might be considered unconstitutional in a court. Thus,
educators, according to Haynes (1999), need to establish clear goals for
these practices and they also need to connect these practices with the
secular mission of the public schools. “If presented purely as a relaxation
technique (meditation) or as an aid to active imagination (visualization) or
to health (yoga), some practices associated with religion might pass
constitutional muster” (Haynes, 1999, p. 26).

The First Amendment is a safeguard against indoctrination and
against the imposition of any religion or particular worldview practice in the
public schools (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson Jr., Hudson Jr., & Thomas,
2003). Being knowledgeable and aware of possible interpretations and
implications of the First Amendment does not preclude teaching about
religions as part of the cultural legacy (Noddings, in Montgomery-Halford,
1999) or for being responsive to the whole child. Haynes, Chaltain,
Ferguson Jr., Hudson Jr., & Thomas (2003) explain this issue in the
following way:

When applying the Establishment Clause to public schools,
the Court often emphasizes the importance of ‘neutrality’ by
schools officials toward religion. This means that public
schools may neither inculcate nor inhibit religion. They also
may not prefer one religion over another – or religion over
non-religion”. (p. 36)

Kessler (2000) identifies that educators, administrators and policy
makers have excluded spirituality from the realm of education. Eaude
(2001) affirms that teachers do not talk about spirituality for multiple reasons that include “uncertainty, the pressure of other activities, and embarrassment” (p. 231). Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) indicate that teachers might be reluctant to talk about it because: they are afraid to impose their own values; they may hold negative attitudes toward spirituality and organized religions; and they may not feel they have the knowledge to address spiritual concerns. These authors suggest that, as a strategy to help teachers assume the tension and challenge with the topic of spirituality in school, it would be beneficial for the educators “to become familiar and comfortable with their own spirituality and to become able to articulate what spirituality means in their lives” (p. 87).

On the other hand Purpel (2002), like Kessler (2000), explains that the exclusion of spirituality in education is done as a way to protect children’s rights and as a way to avoid legal problems. Purpel (2002) recognizes the need to be aware of the potential problem in connecting spirituality with education. Some of the problems that he recognizes are: “dogmatism, zealotry, authoritarianism, and irrelevance” (p. 92). These risks make people reject the possibility of considering spirituality as part of education and, as a consequence, educational processes are not totally responsive to the whole child (Kessler, 2000).
Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) also state that although research “suggest(s) that spirituality might improve the schooling experience for the youth” (p. 68) educators and stakeholders are reluctant to consider it in education. The reasons they offer are because of “the pervasiveness of ‘individualism’ in Western belief systems and the mainstream’s refusal to interrogate educational paradigms that glorify logical thought” (Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery, 2000, p. 68). These authors explain that these Western paradigms foster false dichotomies between spiritual knowledges and positivistic science knowledges. Educators need to break with these dominant paradigms in early childhood education in order to be able to include an image of the child as spiritual.

Some authors like Lambourn and Mackenzie (in Wringe, 2002) do not consider spirituality as a developmental domain. They describe it as an empty category, the contents of which relate more with the personal and moral dimension of the human being (Wringe, 2002). Nevertheless, other recognized educators and philosophers like Comenious, Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel, and Montessori envisioned education as a holistic process, where children’s spirituality was assumed as part of it (Miller, 1990).
Riley-Taylor (2002) proposes this connection between spirituality and education, also, when she reminds us that the role of education goes beyond the academics, beyond the cognitive development to foster a deeper awareness of the self, of others, and of the ecological world and to challenge children’s capacities for wisdom and imagination.

Broadening the term to demystify spirituality in education

Kessler (2000) recognizes the need to broaden the notion of spirituality in order to integrate it into the educational processes. Oldenski and Carlson (2002) talk about the need to demystify spirituality. Teachers do not need to talk about God, Buddha or any other deity to support children’s spirituality (Pridmore, 2002). It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple perspectives of spirituality. The professional literature offers other diverse Post Modernist definitions of spirituality, beyond the religious prism (Taggart, 2001; Wenman, 2001; Earl 2001). Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) recommend the deconstruction of the language used when describing spirituality as a way to make sense of the dichotomy spirituality-religion. They propose for the description of spirituality the incorporation of “general or non-religious characteristics” (p. 72). They offer, as an example, a definition of spirituality articulated by Dickman (in Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery, 2000) that
include attributes such as hope, resiliency, happiness, and flexibility. According to them, these attributes, like the ones offered in this study, frame the term away from religion and focus on the profound human experience that touches issues related to the inner lives of peoples and their deeper questions about life. Thus, issues related to the spiritual life are not exclusive matters of religions (Tacey, 2004). David Tacey (2004) expresses it clearly: “No membership is required to relate to spirit” (p. 1). But it is crucial to understand what Taggart (2001) denominates the elusive nature of spirituality, to understand why the integration of the spiritual dimension has been a challenge in education.

The struggle to define spirituality makes sense for some educators and researchers, as they feel that they need to know what it is in order to consider it as an integral component of the educational processes. Haynes (1999), for example, recommends defining the term carefully and establishing clear goals before its consideration in education. Some others prefer not to define it, as an effort to avoid the limitation that comes with each definition (Taggart, 2001). The definitions presented in this work offer a broad notion of spirituality in the classroom in a way more congruent with the schools in the United States. Somehow, as I work with this concept, I need to hold the ambiguity and elusiveness of the term,
recognizing that working definitions are “both necessary and necessarily inadequate” (Eaude, 2001, p. 231).

Schneiders (1999) refers to spirituality as the person’s response to all that calls him or her to integrity and transcendence. She defines transcendence as the capacity of all persons to rise above themselves through love and knowledge. Integrity is related to the reality of the self being authentic and honest. This concept has to do with the recognition of who one really is. Palmer (1998) defines integrity in the following way:

By integrity I mean whatever wholeness I am able to find within that nexus as its vectors form and re-form the pattern of my life. Integrity requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not. (p. 13)

Spirituality has been defined also as the search for meaning and for purpose in life and as the deep experience of interconnectedness with oneself and other persons as well as with nature (Bosacki, 2002). Palmer (1983) brings forward another definition of spirituality in relationship with education. He refers to it as the cultivation of the inner life, as the cultivation of the heart and the mind. Within this process the person is viewed as a being that is whole, as an embodied subject with intellect, emotions, and perceptions; the person is viewed in all that she or he is (Glazer, 1999).
Wenman (2001) identifies three basic elements of spirituality. This author ascertains that spirituality integrates relationships, seeks transcendence; and is unique in each person. He defines the term spiritual development as supporting students’ imagination, creativity, their capacity to express themselves and to analyze, as well as the building up of their scale of values. It includes the aspects of supporting children in the exploration of diverse ways of seeing and understanding, and maintaining themselves receptive to different ideas. Wenman's (2001) articulation of spiritual development integrates another fundamental notion that helps to expand the concept of an “awareness of the social and political dimensions of spirituality” (p. 315).

This notion of the social and political dimensions of spirituality is particularly significant in the effort to broaden the concept of spirituality. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (2005) in their book *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion*, make notice that many people, influenced by the Enlightenment ideas, continue to be obsessed with trying to define “the precise characteristics of religion” (p. 3). Within this tendency there is also the thought that religion and spirituality are separated from other dimensions of the human life (Carrette & King, 2005). Thus, there is a separation of religion and spirituality from economics and politics.
Carrette & King (2005) establish that Western society’s growing interest in spirituality is influenced by capitalistic, neoliberal interests. According to these authors there is an emergence of a capitalistic spirituality. This notion of spirituality subordinates “the religious and ethical to the realm of economics” (Carrette & King, 2005, p.5). Within this dynamic, religion has been excluded from the public political, scientific, and economical domains and has been made a private and individual matter; it has been privatized and marketed. Carrette & King (2005) describe this process as “a wholesale commodification of religion, that is the selling-off of religious buildings, ideas, and claims to authenticity in service to individual/corporate profit and the promotion of a particular worldview and mode of life, namely corporate capitalism” (p. 15). They explain that religion has been turned into a psychological reality, into what is better recognized as “private spirituality” (p. 27), fostered by a capitalistic psychology.

This capitalistic psychology emphasizes the individual freedom and sells the idea of healing the fragmentation caused by the individualism and materialism of the capitalistic system. It does it by using the language, artifacts, and ideas that resemble the goodness and sacredness of religion. It uses, for example, terms like belonging, community, and connection to foster consumerism. People sell and buy everything,
including prescriptions for successful lives, to solve all types of problems and to be relaxed and happy. Like Carrette and King (2005), in the book *Breaking bread* (hooks and West, 1991) Cornel West criticizes the “one-dimensional forms of spirituality” (p. 15) that encourage “consumerism and privatism” (p. 15). At the end, this concept of private spirituality promotes social conformism (Carrette & King, 2005). In this sense, private spirituality fostered by a capitalistic psychology, disregards any idea or action related to social justice by sustaining and perpetuating the neoliberal system (Carrette & King, 2005).

The term spirituality in this study, however, integrates the social and political dimensions. My argument is that to view the human being in a holistic way, is to view the human being in relationships with others and nature (Caine, 2003). Contrary to the view of private spirituality, the view of relationships in this research is contextualized within the frame of an idea of community and interconnectedness that obliges the appropriation of the notion of social justice. Lerner (2005) elaborates the concept of an *emancipatory spirituality* that accentuates mindfulness and a sense of wonder within the broader scope of working for environmental sustainability and for a more just society. hooks (2000) also establishes a relationship between spirituality and social justice. She asserts: “Identifying liberation from any domination and oppression as essentially a
spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practice with our struggles for justice and liberation” (p. 109). One of the aims of this study is precisely to make the connection about how spirituality serves the purpose of social justice in early childhood education. Peace and social justice, like spirituality, are not exclusive matters of religions (hooks, 2000). It would be too limiting to think that only religions have the responsibility for the work of peace and social justice. In fact, historically, religions have not always been engaged in this type of work, but on the contrary, they have been in function of the political and economical systems (Carrette & King, 2005).

Children’s spirituality, in relation to education, has also been defined in ways similar to Wenman’s notion (2001). Waite and Halstead (2001) talk about a natural spirituality in children that is characterized by a sense of wonder and fascination, an amazing ability for playing and for engaging in activities using the imagination, and an extraordinary awareness of present experiences and emotions. Waite and Halstead (2001) also include in the definition, children’s tendency to make questions about profound issues of life.

David Hay (2001) describes spirituality as a natural, biological human predisposition. From his point of view this predisposition is expressed in all children through diverse ways, including the religious.
His research with Rebecca Nye (in Hay, 2000) included children from ages six to ten. The children were asked, without bringing in religious language unless the children themselves brought it up, to talk about spirituality. This study revealed that the natural spirituality that children have in their early years decline by age ten. This tendency is congruent with Tamminen results (in Halstead and Waite, 2001) where the findings evidenced that the decline happened in the children by the ages of twelve or thirteen. According to Hay (2000) this decline relates to the influence of adults on children. This researcher points out that spirituality “has become an extremely private matter”. He considers that society suffers from a socially constructed amnesia. Through this type of experience children learn that spirituality is a taboo and laugh at their peers when they dare to share any spiritual matter (Hay, 2000).

**Influence of spirituality**

It appears though, that spirituality plays a critical role in grieving children. Catherine Andrews (2004) explored the role that spirituality plays in children that were grieving the loss of a family member. She found that getting in touch with the spiritual dimension of self through drawings and other art activities, metaphorical play or a linking object, help to provide comfort as children manage their grief and feeling of loss.
Kessler (2000) establishes a relationship between the adolescents’ spiritual development and their behaviors. She relates depression problems, suicide attempts, eating disorders, the persistent violence and self-destructive behaviors of students with the lack of opportunities for spiritual development. Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) also identify that “a religious and spiritual orientation” (p. 68) has helped adolescents withstand negative social influences and has helped them in the recovery from drug abuse. It also seemed to influence African American adolescents in their achievement of higher academic performance and in their search for family and social support networks. These researchers also indicate that spirituality has the potential to influence a greater sense of interrelatedness amongst people, contributing to a sense of community and connection to the broader reality of the world.

Lealman (1991) indicates that apparently science education and religion are not helping young people to face the continuous transformations of life, and that young people seem to be moving away from religious dogmatisms. On the other hand Tacey (2002), like De Souza (2003), observes that young people’s spirituality is rooted in a sense of responsibility and social justice as well as in a sense of sacredness of nature. It is important to acknowledge that while this might
be true for many young people, for others the spiritual experiences are connected to religion. In the book *Learning while black* Janice E. Hale (2001) points to this type of connection for many African Americans. This author dedicates a chapter to explain how the African American churches have been instrumental in providing for this population “a vehicle for stability and change”, (p. 154). As the churches have participated in community service, they have contributed to the preservation of the African American culture, and have become reform agents that have fostered not only personal salvation but also social salvation (Hale, 2001). For the African American youth who participate in this dynamic the spiritual experience is, therefore, potentially connected to church.

**A holistic spiritual approach in education**

John Miller (2000), like Tacey (2002), identifies a growing sense of spirituality based on a sense of sacredness of nature. He perceives what he denominates a spiritual “global awakening” (p. 5) influenced by an ecological movement that shares a deep concern for environmental issues. According to him this ecological movement has contributed to an awareness of the interconnection among peoples, and between people and nature. Miller (2000) states that the environmental crisis is a manifestation of the spiritual or inner crisis that the people in the World are
experiencing. He explains that this crisis is evident in the way that people often look in public places such as the shopping centers. He sees the persons “exhausted, disgruntled, or angry” and escaping or seeking fulfillment in their lives through drugs, alcohol and other addictions, including a “rush to acquire and consume” what they do not need (Miller, 2000, p. 3).

Miller (2000) finds that the children also feel that pressure. He elucidates that the school’s emphasis is primarily economic, as the society has established that the aim of education is to prepare children to compete in a global economy. He criticizes that because of this the education experience has become focused on tests rather than learning, thus provoking multiple social and academic pressures. Lisa Delpit and Paula White-Bradley (2003) describe this issue as follows:

We believe that the reductionism spawned by the testing mania has created settings in which teachers and students are treated as objects to be manipulated and “managed”. As a result of the all-consuming testing enterprise, classrooms – particularly those in low-income, urban areas – are inundated with scripted instructional programs, packaged classroom management schemes, and consultants whose job is to police teachers to ensure that all of the scripts are followed and all of the management policies
implemented. The result is reflected in the words of the young man above: school is equated with prison (p. 284).

Miller (2000) establishes that with this approach the school ignores the inner life of the child (congruent with the tendency in the culture) and it denies the spirit. Hence, he concludes, it does not educate the whole person.

In order to address the whole child in the school, educators need to think in holistic ways in the educational processes (Miller, 2000, 2005). Holistic education is an approach that presumes that the children develop as a whole: socially, aesthetically, linguistically, cognitively, affectively, physically and spiritually (Taggart, 2001). Holistic education “is the art of cultivating human relationships; it is a dialectic between teachers and learners within a caring community” (Bosacki, 2002, p. 163). Clark (1991) describes holistic education as a new paradigm that reflects “an attitude, a philosophy, a worldview, that challenges the fragmented, reductionist, mechanistic, nationalistic, assumptions of mainstream culture and education” (p. 56). He affirms that the purpose of holistic education is to transform the fragmented and reductionist ways in which we view the world and ourselves and the ways in which we relate with others, with nature, and with ourselves.
In this sense, the holistic education approach challenges what Palmer (1993) calls the hidden curriculum of traditional education. This hidden curriculum isolates the self and fosters anti-communal practices, focuses on other people’s vision of reality disregarding the vision of the teachers and the students, and teaches students to use and manipulate others instead of collaborating and assuming responsibility with them (Palmer, 1993).

From the holistic education perspective the whole child is valued and considered in the context of an interrelated system of people and the cosmos. This approach includes the principle of ecological interdependence that allows for growth into the awareness that everything and everyone is interconnected, and that we all share, in one way or another, the consequences of our decisions regarding the environment (Taggart, 2001). According to Taggart (2001), holistic education promotes a spirituality of connectedness in the learning process that emphasizes relationships, creativity, imagination, exploration, intuition, silence in the presence of mystery and reflection. This type of spirituality that promotes equity and social justice and a deep ecological awareness coincides with that of the young people identified by Tacey (2002) and De Souza (2003). Somehow it could be a contribution toward a deep societal transformation,
as it is concerned with more humane approaches to social structures (Miller, 2005).

In his study with four high school teachers who integrated a holistic approach into their educational processes, Scott Conti (2002) examined and described the connection that teachers perceived between their spirituality and their pedagogy as a way to seek a deeper understanding of holistic education. He collected data integrating classroom observations, interviews, curriculum documents, and descriptive storytelling around artifacts. The methodology incorporated was portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). The findings of this study indicate that holistic education highlights the notion of connectedness. They also point out that the participants view teaching as a call and as sacred, and that they use their spiritual wisdom to inform and to enhance their pedagogy. To my knowledge, no other similar study has been identified related to teachers in early childhood education, even when multiple philosophies that influence early childhood education point to the spiritual dimension as part of the holistic education approach that many professionals in this field profess.

Some other studies have been done in higher education. Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson (2000), through the use of narratives tales, explored the meaning of a spiritual pedagogy for three African American
women, teachers and scholars, and the impact in the classroom, for the students and the teacher, of living out of this spirituality-centered paradigm. The elements of the spiritual pedagogy that they identified in this work are: a strong sense of self identity, a notion of purpose in life, a reciprocal relationship of trust between the student and the teacher with space for vulnerability, reflection, openness to multiple perspectives, and the acceptance of a pedagogical model congruent with whom one is. Postletwaite (2003), a university professor, in his dissertation, reflected on how a spiritual worldview affects his teaching. Some of his findings point to spiritual teaching as characterized by love and selflessness and about the teacher being authentic and sincere.

Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) made another important contribution. She studied how educators from different cultural backgrounds, within the context of adult, community, and higher education, perceive that spirituality influences their work for social change. The findings of this research revealed that spiritual development was a “spiral process of moving away and re-membering or reframing spiritual attitudes and symbols originating in their cultures of origin” (Tisdell, 2002, p. 133). As part of the participants’ spiritual journey, when they identified in their childhood religious traditions such oppressions as racism and heterosexism, they moved away from these religious traditions and
reshaped their spirituality. On some occasions, they also "spiraled" back and reclaimed some values and symbols that were part of that childhood religious tradition. This points to the changing dynamic of the spiritual development in each person, which is influenced by socio-cultural-historical experiences. Spiritual development changes over time and is influenced by the socialization process and cultural backgrounds from childhood (Tisdell, 2002; Carrette & King, 2005).

Another result in Tisdell’s (2002) study was that her participants’ description of their spirituality was linked to a “Lifeforce that periodically put them in touch with an appreciation for the realm of mystery and pointed to the interconnection of all things” (p. 134). Their description of spirituality was also connected to the development of “authentic identity” (Tisdell, 2002, p. 134). An important finding of this study was that the participants, all of them adult educators, felt that spirituality informed and supported their work for social justice. They perceived that their spiritual development was deeply connected to their global consciousness and that spirituality assisted them during difficult times (Tisdell, 2002). This is relevant for the present investigation since one of the aims is to explore how early childhood educators perceive the influence of spirituality in education regarding social justice.
In the study *Female Head Start teachers’ perceptions of the influence of life experience upon their professional pedagogy*, Linda Marie Jagielo (2004) explored the perception of four Head Start teachers about how their life experiences influenced their professional pedagogy. As part of the methodology the researcher integrated three portraits and a cross-case analysis. One of the findings of her study indicated that the participants perceived that their spiritual beliefs and religious practices influenced their teaching. Although the researcher did not elaborate much on this finding in the dissertation, her assertions showed that the participants, for example, recited a poem or a prayer before sharing the snacks or meals. The present study will provide the opportunity to explore in depth teacher’s perceptions about their own spirituality and that of their children.

Bosacki (2002) emphasizes the relational aspect of integrating spirituality in the classroom. She alludes to the importance of caring and of loving teaching. According to her to be caring refers to the ability to see from other people’s perspective, and to be loving refers to the integration of care, connection and concern for other persons (Bosacki, 2002). Noddings (1992) calls the attention to the relational aspects of caring when she indicates that “the need for care in our present culture is acute” (p. xi). She describes *to care* and *to be cared for* as basic human needs.
She also makes notice that children feel uncared for in schools, since it is a context that emphasizes achievement and competence.

Bosacki (2002) suggests different ways in which a teacher could foster more holistic educational processes. She recommends the use of language art programs that incorporate journals or other means of self-narration, story telling, mythology and non-verbal activities like visualization, relaxation techniques, and play to promote caring and loving relationships. Teachers from the holistic education approach integrate drama, body movements, dance, visual arts (Taggart, 2001), music, poetry, conversation, and biography (Noddings, in Montgomery-Halford, 1999) as a way to integrate the spiritual dimension and to value different ways of knowing beyond that of reason.

Hostetter (2004), like Freire (1999), hooks (1994), Bosacki (2002) and Palmer (1983), also highlights the significance of love as a foundation for learning. He, like Freire (1999) stresses the importance of the creation of communities of reflection and action in the classroom. Within the context of these communities the schools can provide the children a space to sustain them and to respond to the injustices lived in the world (Hostetter, 2004). His notion of love is congruent with that of hooks (2001) who stated that “love is as love does…”, (p. 30) and who declared that “Without justice there can be no love” (p. 30). Thus, the classroom
atmosphere should provide for ways to connect with one another as a means of creating a community committed to the other and to social justice (Miller, 2005). In this sense the practice in education becomes “spiritual rather than educational” (Purpel, 2002, p. 102).

Miller (2000) points to how spirituality would shape our practice in early childhood education in non-dogmatic ways when he states that “by bringing soul to education” (p. 9) we foster an education for the whole child rather than for a fragmented self. He also brings up that soul in education revitalizes and energizes our classroom, as well as giving the teachers and the students an opportunity to experience a balance between the inner and the outer, between rationality and intuition. Miller (2000) sees, in addition, that soulful education provides a space to address essential human questions related to self-identity, relationships with others and nature, and the purpose in life. When early childhood education considers these elements it brings up what is relevant and meaningful to the children.

Chapter summary

In conclusion, the professional literature offers broad notions of spirituality and of children’s spirituality beyond the scope of religion (Tacey, 2001). Spirituality in education is about getting in touch with the
teachers’ and the children’s inner life, with their deepest concerns, with their creativity and with their vital energy (Bosacki, 2002; Glazer, 1999). Spirituality in education means searching for the meaning and purpose of life. It means inner and social transformation (Miller, 2005). There are different ways to nurture it meaningfully for our children without violating the First Amendment (Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson Jr., Hudson Jr., & Thomas, 2003). People seem to express an urgency to search for the meaning and purpose of their lives. But even when this has been a tendency in the contemporary society, the school institution has imposed a silence regarding the inner life of peoples (Miller, 2000). This silence is related to the risks of indoctrination, the rupture with the First Amendment, and individualism, among others (Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery, 2000).

This silence has been evidenced even in the limited body of research available regarding spirituality and education in the context of the United States. There is a gap in the literature related to how spirituality influences the work of early childhood educators and how it relates to social justice. The limited number of studies done in this country related to the topic of spirituality in education has been focused particularly in higher education. Surprisingly, I have not found a study done in the United States within the context of early childhood education that focuses
on teacher’s understandings of children’s spirituality and how they think it can pave the way to social justice.

The possible contribution of this study may reach beyond the addition to the research work in the area of spirituality and early childhood education. It may help teachers, administrators, and policy makers to grow into the awareness about the need to create spaces in the schools for dialogue regarding the teacher’s own spirituality and that of their students, as a way to enhance the educational processes. A major finding in Astin’s (2004) study with higher education teachers was that the participants were “eager to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, and spirituality” (p. 38). These dialogical spaces are necessary to construct new meanings and to find creative ways to nurture the inner life of the whole child in their classrooms.

Spirituality in education is about a holistic approach that recognizes an image of the whole child which includes the perception of the child as spiritual. It has the potential to influence a revitalization of the classroom and the personal and social commitments toward social justice and equity. Spirituality in education assumes democratic critical processes to unmask injustices and contributes toward transformation (Oldenski & Carlson, 2002). Spirituality in early childhood education represents the possibility of viewing the whole child and the possibility of offering her or him better
educational opportunities. Thus, we educators in the early childhood education field are challenged to recognize the whole child in all her or his dimensions, including the spiritual child.

The next section, Chapter III, will present the methodology that will be incorporated in this study. It will provide details related to my epistemological and cultural standpoint, and to the theoretical frames that ground my work.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose is the controlling force in research. Decisions about design, measurement, analysis, and reporting, all flow from purpose.
(Patton, 2000, p. 213)

Introduction

The definitions of spirituality incorporated for the purpose of this study in the previous two chapters broaden the term and frame it as a human dimension that does not necessarily have to do with religion, particularly within the public school context. Spirituality in education has to do with the inner life of the students and teachers, with their deepest questions and concerns, with their search for meaning and purpose in life (Astin, 2004). It has to do with their creativity, feelings, emotions, and with all that the person is (Kirk III, 2000). It means connectedness with the self and others, and commitment to transformation and to social justice (Oldenski & Carlson, 2002; hooks, 2000). It means opportunities to respond to the whole child and opportunities for academic achievement
(Miller, 1990). Spirituality in education does not violate the First Amendment if it does not pursue any type of indoctrination or imposition of a particular religion or worldview (Haynes, 1999). Nevertheless, the school institution has imposed a silence regarding the inner life of peoples (Bosacki, 2002). As explained in the review of the literature, the professional literature related to spirituality in education also reveals a gap that points to this imposed silence.

This qualitative research was done to explore with preschool and elementary school teachers their understanding of children’s spirituality and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. This work also aimed to investigate how teachers think spirituality in early childhood education could pave the way toward social justice. The questions that guided this inquiry are the following:

1. How do preschool and elementary school teachers perceive or define their own spirituality and that of their children?

2. How do preschool and elementary teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom?
3. In what ways do these educators think they can foster and support the children’s spiritual development in the classroom?

4. What do the teachers think about how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way for the promotion of social justice?

This chapter will explain the methodology that was incorporated in this study. It will provide details related to my epistemological and cultural standpoint, the theoretical frames that ground my work, the design, the participants, the procedures and the instrumentation. It will also offer details regarding the analysis and trustworthiness in this work.

Epistemological and theoretical framework

Gloria Ladson Billings (2000) emphasizes that the concept epistemology refers not simply to a “way of knowing” but to a “system of knowing” that is directly connected to a worldview. To affirm my epistemological and cultural standpoint implies a recognition that research is a socio-cultural venture (Dillard, 2000) and that the process of knowledge production is historical and contextual (Harding, 1993). It also implies that it is political since it implies power relationships as reflected in
a system of hierarchies of oppressions where race, class, gender, sexuality, age, abilities, intersect (Alcoff & Potter, 1993; Hill-Collins, 2000). To affirm my epistemological and cultural standpoint is to resist and to challenge the hegemonic Euro-American systems of knowing that maintain inequities and injustices (Hill-Collins, 2000, Hurtado, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Congruent with my intention to explore with teachers the deep meanings regarding spirituality and its influence on educators’ teaching, I drew from the critical Black feminist and interpretivist perspectives to inform my research work. The critical feminist theoretical frame assumes that the positionality (class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, among others) of the researcher and of the participants, students, and school staff, influences how every step of the research is done (Olesen, 2000). In this sense, I recognize that my own positionality as a Black Puerto Rican woman and educator who has been influenced initially by Liberation Theology and later by the Eco-feminist approach (as foundations for my commitment to peace and justice), somehow permeated my work. My participation in the Catholic Church with this background and my experience working as an educator of children and adults has a common denominator: my desire to collaborate
with others toward the construction of a better world for all peoples.

Across twenty years I have worked in Puerto Rico with children from birth to age twelve and with adults. These experiences included working with teachers, other staff members, and parents in early childhood education programs as well as teaching students in bachelor programs in early childhood education.

Being Puerto Rican, I am frequently perceived in the United States as an “other”, as a “Latina” holding American citizenship because of the particular political relationship between United States and Puerto Rico. My first language is Spanish. As a woman and educator who is part of an ethnically and linguistically “diverse group” I could relate as an insider with the educators who were the research participants. By being women and/or teachers we, the participants and I, shared some common experiences in terms of the power dynamics within the system of the hierarchy of oppressions in which power circulates (Foucault in Olssen, 1999). I acknowledge too that doing research in a cultural context different than mine called me to be particularly sensitive and welcoming of the participants’ multiple perspectives, as I faced the challenges brought by my position as an outsider in this sense.
Black feminist epistemology

Because of who I am as a Black Puerto Rican woman and because of the nature of my research topic, which is spirituality in early childhood education, one of the frameworks for the inquiry process was the Black feminist epistemology. Hill-Collins (2000) identifies the following as integral components or criteria of this framework: lived experience as a criterion for meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability and the ethic of caring. When Black women make knowledge claims invoking the lived experience as a criterion for meaning they are validating the personal knowledge and wisdom constructed from concrete experiences (Browning-Cole, 1993). Their lived experience gives them credibility (Ladson-Billings, 1997). In my experience as a teacher I shared with the participants some common challenges to nurture my own spirituality and that of the children within the school context.

A second component of the Black feminist epistemology, the use of dialogue, is critical in order to establish equal status relationships between me as a researcher and the participants. The use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims implies a connection between all subjects of knowledge where no one subject dominates the others (Hill-Collins, 2000). During the research processes the participants had the same opportunity as I, as
researcher, to formulate questions and to share experiences, insights, and perspectives. We created multiple opportunities for dialogue within the busy schedules of each person. This space for dialogue was the context for the negotiation of meanings (Christians, 2000) amongst the participants and myself. These dialogical interactions became a way for the inclusion and validation of the teachers' voices. They also provoked a transformation in the power relationships as experienced by all the persons involved in the research. The teachers shared their experiences and their ideas. These were critical in the research process and in the written report.

Regarding the ethic of personal accountability, Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) asserts that within the Black feminist epistemology framework “Not only must individuals develop their knowledge claims through dialogue and present them in a style providing concern for their ideas, but people are expected to be accountable for their knowledge claims” (p. 265). Hill-Collins (2000) emphasizes, with this element of accountability, the importance of taking positions on issues and on assuming the responsibility for articulating their validity. The methodology of this work will explicate how this was taken into consideration. The critical Black feminist approach moved me to make methodological decisions that
created specificity for the context and the interactions between me and the participants (Tyson, 2002).

The fourth component of the Black feminist epistemology as a foundation for my study was the ethic of caring. The core imperative of this dimension was that I always needed to seek the well-being of those with whom I related as part of the research process, including myself (Browning Cole, 1993). Christians (2000) explains that the foundation of this ethic of caring rests upon egalitarian researcher-participant relationships, compassion, empathy, personal expressiveness, and collaboration. These characteristics also become an integral part of the process of knowledge validation (Ladson-Billings, 1994). “Neither emotions nor ethics is subordinated to reason. Instead, emotions, ethics and reason are used as interconnected, essential components in assessing knowledge claims.” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 266). This position impelled my decision to value feelings, emotions and human relationships within the context of the study. It also involved my disposition to share with the participants the power to make decisions regarding the research, and to confirm with them the data collected and the analysis of it.
Critical Theory

Having identified a social dynamic in the schools of the United States where the voices of the teachers and the children have been silenced regarding spirituality, I drew also from the critical theoretical frame. Critical work in research usually focuses on identifying and challenging relationships of power and justice issues “and the ways that economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion, and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 281). This social system perpetuates inequities and injustices using dominant ideologies to make people think that these oppressions are “normal” (Brookfield, 2005). Hill-Collins (2000) explains that “What makes critical social theory ‘critical’ is its commitment to justice, for one’s own group and for other groups” (p. 31). She criticizes that to know for the sake of knowing is not sufficient. According to her, and I agree, Black feminist thought must be directly connected to the transformation of oppressions.

Taking action with the participants during the study toward the transformation of those relationships became part of an emancipatory stance of the critical perspective (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) and of this
work. The research process, and within it particularly our dialogues, provided a space for critical analysis and for transformation regarding the imposed silence about spirituality in education. I believe in the potential of dialogue as a tool not only to relate with one another and to construct meanings together, but also as a tool for the liberation of oppressions (Freire, 1999). This critical stance is shared also within the Black feminist approach (Hill-Collins, 2000). The feminist approach upholds not only taking action but also creating spaces for the voices of those who have been silenced or marginalized (Olesen, 2000). A significant addition to this critical stance from the feminist perspective is that it also challenges the ways in which that could be done. Coming from the feminist perspective, the researcher holds the tension of “making women’s voices heard without exploiting those voices” (Olesen, 2000, p. 231). Tyson (2003) asserts: “If liberation achieved by individuals at the expense of others is an act of oppressions, then, educational research achieved by individuals at the expense of others is also an act of oppression (p. 23). The ethic of caring of the Black feminist epistemological approach was an alternative that helped me deal with this tension.
*Interpretive paradigm*

I identified the interpretivist paradigm also as a framework for my research. From this perspective it is understood that there are multiple realities constructed through human interaction (Schwandt, 2000). Within this framework there is recognition of multiple truths that are identified and better understood through dialogic discourse (Sipe & Constable, 1996). Language is a tool to understand people’s experiences, meanings and perspectives (Gadamer, in Morse, 1994). Language is basic for the process of hermeneutic reflection. This hermeneutic reflection “consists of the dialectic of interpreting the meaning of the research data as a dynamic movement toward further understanding” (Morse, 1994, p. 125). This process of interpreting is both a social and a political practice (Bohman, Hiley, & Shusterman, 1991) given that the meanings are constructed socially within the power politics of a community.

In this study I explored with early childhood education teachers how they perceive their spirituality and that of the children, listening to the educator’s voices as well as constructing and interpreting the meanings with them. The interpretivist paradigm allowed for a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched supporting the dynamic of genuine participation toward the continuous understanding of deeper
meanings (Schwandt, 2000). During the research the participants assisted in structuring the inquiry through collaborative experiences, such as interviews, and observations. They also had the opportunity to participate by sharing their input and reviewing the interpretations and analysis of the data as well as the final report.

Design

Given that my qualitative research was grounded in the critical Black feminist and interpretivist theoretical frames the incorporation of a situated methodology seemed appropriate and relevant for my work. The term methodology refers to a theory of how research should proceed. Schwant (2001) explains that the different methodologies define and justify, for example, what is worth studying, how the researcher works with the researched, how to select and use the data collection and data analysis tools, and how to talk about the researched. Situated methodology is culturally contextualized (Olesen, 2000). Therefore, it is not generalizable or transferable. It takes into consideration who the researcher is in his or her project, welcoming in this fashion, spaces for subjectivity. Angronsino & Mays de Pérez (2000) point to the intersubjectivity element when they indicate that a situated methodology takes into consideration the
relationship researcher-participant, as well, allowing for a dynamic process in which the positions of both the researcher and the participant may change as one influences the other and the inquiry process. This explains why a situated methodology is emergent rather than a priori (Lather, personal communication, November 8, 2004).

The methodologies that I incorporated for my research differ from the more traditional methodologies in multiple ways. The first element in which they are different rests precisely in that they are situated. The more traditional research is framed usually within the positivist paradigm. Within this paradigm there is a claim for one objective reality out there that could be discovered (Sipe & Constable, 1996). Knowledge is viewed as innocent, impartial and objective, with the possibility of being discovered by a rational subject if he or she integrates the right (scientific) method (Usher, 1997). One presumption is that what is objective is independent from the subject (Bernstein, 1983). For this reason “philosophers and other scholars have traditionally separated their research from the person in the research role, attempting to excise personal bias, emotion, and subjective knowing” (Neumann, A. & Peterson, P., 1997, p. 3). The situated methodology breaks with these positivist notions. In this sense the assumptions within this framework include that all knowledge is
produced within the context of human social interactions and that it is influenced by historical and cultural elements (Olesen, 2000). Therefore, it cannot be generalizable or transferable. It breaks with the dichotomy of objective and subjective knowledge that characterizes positivism and it recognizes the active presence and role of all subjects of knowledge within the research project and the interactions among them. Contrary to the positivist approach that requires an a priori approach to research, the situated methodology is emergent, as it evolves according to the interactions and findings that are identified during the process of the study.

Participants

The participants for this study were five preschool and elementary school teachers from two different early childhood education programs in the Midwest. Three of these educators were African American women working in a school setting related to a Christian church. The other two were a White woman and a male, working in a non-religious context. These teachers were selected purposefully. Usually in qualitative research participants are chosen according to the characteristics that make them suitable for the study (Patton, 2002). Patton (1990) points out that purposeful sampling in qualitative research provide the opportunity to
select “information-rich cases” (p. 169) that allow the researcher to learn and to study in depth the important issues of the inquiry. Since the focus of the study was to understand in-depth teachers’ perceptions of spirituality and the ways in which spirituality influences their teaching and paves the way toward social justice, the number of participants was not a significant element. Qualitative studies typically focus on small samples to allow for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). In fact, this study was not designed with the intention of making any type of generalization but rather my purpose was to understand deeper meanings.

Given that the purpose of this study was to explore with early childhood educators the topic of spirituality in education in relationship to social justice, the selection of the participants was based on this particular interest. Thus, this selection incorporated theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a defining element of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000), which will be explained further in the chapter. Corbin and Strauss (1990) describe the process of theoretical sampling as follows:

Sampling in grounded theory proceeds not in terms of drawing samples of specific groups of individuals, units of time, and so on, but in terms of concepts, their properties, dimensions, and
variations. When a project begins, the researcher brings to it some idea of the phenomenon he or she wants to study. Based on this knowledge, groups of individuals, an organization, or community representative of that phenomenon can be selected for the study. For example, if a researcher wants to study nurses’ work, he or she would go where nurses are working – a hospital, a clinic, or home (or all of three) – to watch what they do. (p. 8)

Sampling in this manner may include events, incidents and documents, in addition to people, depending on what happens, depending on the findings that emerge during the research process (Charmaz, 2000; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This theoretical sampling process is related to the constant analysis method, which will be explained within the analysis section of the chapter.

As part of the participants’ selection process I engaged in a community nomination process. I asked my professors at the university, my peers, and local teachers with whom I worked, for suggestions regarding possible participants for the study. As I received the suggestions I contacted these recommended teachers in their schools. They received my invitation to collaborate in this study. To protect their confidentiality and anonymity I will not provide any information that may
lead to the identity of the subjects, including their real names. I requested authorization from the school administration to have access to the school. (See Appendix A: Access Request.)

Procedures

The procedures to gather the data included contacting the teachers in the schools and extending the invitation to collaborate on the study. I incorporated a written lay summary to convey to the participants who I am, the type of research I was doing and its purpose, as well as the possible benefits and risks for the participants. In this document I addressed how I was going to handle the confidentiality and anonymity issues, and I provided general details regarding the data gathering and analysis processes that involved their participation (Glesne, 1999) (see Appendix B: Lay Summary). I asked each participant to sign a consent form. (See Appendix C: Consent Form.)

To answer the first two research questions, which are: How do preschool and elementary school teachers perceive or define their own spirituality and that of their children? How do preschool and elementary teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom? I interviewed the participants individually. To
answer the next two research questions: In what ways do these educators think they can foster and support the children’s spiritual development in the classroom? How does spirituality in early childhood education pave the way toward social justice? I used classroom observations, written field notes and narratives, as well as individual interviews. The semi-structured interview was audio-recorded.

Instrumentation

Qualitative research relies on the incorporation of a variety of instruments or methods in order to get the rich data needed and in an effort to address trustworthiness or authenticity (Glesne, 1999; Schwant, 2001). The instruments that I incorporated to gather data included: individual interviews, observations, written field notes and narratives. These instruments were means for crystallization along with the texts that will be presented in chapters four and five.

The individual interviews were mostly unstructured with the addition also of some semi-structured ones. Unstructured interviews have the potential to “provide a greater breadth of data than other types given its qualitative nature” (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Ellis and Berger (2003) recognize the tendency of many postmodernist researchers to consider
the interview as “an active relationship occurring in a context permeated by issues of power, emotionality, and interpersonal processes” (pp. 159).

The rationale behind the use of unstructured and semi-structured interviews in this work, in addition to obtaining fat data, was to have a better opportunity to attend to the human beings that join in research, recognizing the issues that Ellis and Berger (2003) depict. These types of interviews also avoid the rigid separation of researcher and participant that leads to objectify the participant. From the critical Black feminist and interpretivist approach in which I framed my work, the methods needed to be in function also of the development of researcher-participants relationships based on trust and rapport. In this regard the interview process needed to draw attention to relational aspects between all the persons involved, recognizing the personal and social identities of each individual, and how these identities influence each person and the research process (Kvale, 1996). As a way to foster a dialogic interaction and a sense of mutuality, the participants had the opportunity to ask questions as desired, and I did not avoid self-disclosure during the interview process when the participants elicited it. I wrote field notes during the interviews.
Seeking for evidence of content validity, I submitted the questions of the semi-structured interview to experts on the topic of spirituality to see if the questions respond to the research questions. As part of this scrutiny process I submitted the questions to a pilot study. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed as a way to document the conversations.

The observations were realized in the classroom and other contexts related to school activities, such as in the gym. In many occasions I was able to write the observations immediately. Other times, however, it was necessary to write them after school that same day, since I offered volunteer services to the teachers in the classroom, when possible and as needed, as a way to reciprocate.

The integration of narratives provided a space for voicing lived experiences and for interpreting and sharing the meaning of these experiences. Doyle and Carter (2003) explain that since the early years, human beings share the tendency to use narratives as a way to interpret what they have learned or what they have experienced. For Daniel Scott (2001), “Personal narrative is one means of expressing spiritual experiences in a form that allows meaning to be constructed” (p. 120). He
asserts that the act of sharing spiritual stories is an act against the strong cultural message of keeping silence regarding spirituality.

Although this work includes the first semi-structured interview that I used during one of our conversations (see Appendix D: Interview Protocol), the incorporation of methods in this study emerged from the interaction with the participants. This emergent process was rooted in grounded theory. The grounded theory method “consist(s) of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 509). Kathy Charmaz (2000) explains that within this framework the researcher engages in a continuous process of gathering data and interpreting it analytically to decide the next steps of the data gathering process. She elucidates that in this process of collecting and analyzing data the researcher informs and refines his or her theoretical analysis. Thus, the instruments that I have mentioned were integrated into the study as required within the emergent process. I gathered data until I reached data saturation, recognizing the ambiguity of this term in postmodernist research. When one recognizes that the participants, the interactions amongst them, as well as the different contexts (like events, situations and specific cultural and personal circumstances) influence the research
process, we may acknowledge that each phenomenon is unique too. Thus, we may accept that data saturation might be an illusion also (Lather, personal communication, March 9, 2005).

**Analysis**

I followed a systematic process for the organization and analysis of the data. In this study writing became another method of inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Laurel Richardson (2000) establishes that writing as a method of inquiry is “a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 923). She explicates that “By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable” (p.923).

I incorporated mixed literary genres, not only for the data collection process but also for the (re)presentation of the findings-analysis. Across the study I recurred to the process of crystallization. Laurel Richardson (2000) explains that “in postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate; we crystallize. We recognize that there are far more than ‘three sides’ from which to approach the world” (p.934). Richardson (2000) integrates the image of crystals to convey the dynamism of
research in which “what we see depends upon the angle of repose” (p. 934). She conveys:

- Crystallization without losing structure, deconstruct the traditional idea of “validity” (we feel that there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves), and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic.
- Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know.
- Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (p. 934)

Congruent with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I started the analysis with the initiation of the data collection. In grounded theory data collection and analysis are interrelated processes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Beginning both simultaneously and systematically enables one to document “potentially relevant aspects of the topic as soon as they are perceived” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 6). I started the analysis for the interviews during the process of interviewing. According to Kvale (1996) the analysis of this type of method begins when the participants tell their stories, when they share their experiences, opinions, knowledge and feelings in relationship with a topic. In this process they and the researcher begin to interpret and to offer explanations (Kvale, 1996). During the interview I asked questions and made commentaries when I
felt that I needed to better understand the participant’s perspectives and meanings. This provided the opportunity to confirm or reject my understandings and my immediate interpretations with the participants.

I listened and transcribed the recorded interviews the same day, or as soon as possible, in order to remember the dialogical interaction more accurately and to be able to inform the next stage. The next steps included asking the participants to check for any type of errors about the information, or any misleading information, and modifying the transcriptions by incorporating the content edited by the participants. Subsequently, I identified possible emergent themes and categories. I highlighted the words, phrases or sentences in the transcription that might be pointing to the emergent themes or categories. These themes or categories were identified in a column added to the transcription sheet. I prepared a codebook to keep this information organized (Charmaz, 2000). This process was part of the constant comparative method that I incorporated for coding the data, not only of the interviews, but also of the observations, field notes and narratives.

As a component of the process of grounded theory the constant comparative method is a major strategy for generating theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). When utilizing the constant comparative method the
researcher engages in comparing and contrasting themes and concepts within the context in which they occur in the text (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). This context considers the circumstances, places, and reasons in which the themes occur. Charmaz and Glaser (in Ryan & Bernard, 2000) elaborate specifying that constant comparative analysis implies:

(a) comparing different people (such as their views, situations, actions, accounts, and experiences), (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves at different points in time, (c) comparing incident with incident, (d) comparing data with category, and (e) comparing a category with other categories. (p. 515)

Although I recognized that there exists computer software designed to assist in the process of analyzing qualitative data, I preferred to do it manually, incorporating some tools of the computer to organize and categorize the information. Though I had seen that for some researchers the software has been a very helpful tool for analyzing their data, I felt that in my case I wanted to maintain a sense of closeness to my data to better understand it and to analyze it (Weitzman, 2000).
Trustworthiness

Research paradigms reflect our worldviews, our values, beliefs and assumptions (Lather, 1986a). The criteria traditionally used to evaluate research in the human sciences are embedded in the positivist framework. Within this framework the reality is objective and can be discovered, quantified, measured and categorized (Peile, 1994). It assumes that there is one absolute truth (Peile, 1994). Thus, if the researcher uses the right methods he or she will obtain true facts and true results. From this positivist perspective it is also assumed that the ways to do research in the natural sciences are applicable to social sciences (Lather, 1986a). Hence, the conventional standards of rigor within this paradigm are internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). According to Leedy & Ormond (2001) validity refers to “the accuracy, meaningfulness, and credibility of the research project as a whole” (p. 103). Internal validity points to how a study’s design and the data gathered allow us to draw accurate conclusions. External validity refers to the extent to which the conclusions of a study can be generalized to other contexts. Reliability rests in the capacity of an account to be replicated by another researcher (Schwant, 2001). Objectivity refers to
how the study is supported with evidence or data, presuming a distance or separation between the known and the knower (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

The problem with these traditional criteria resides precisely in its questionable assumptions. Post positivism has challenged the positivist notions giving way to other views for inquiry based on the idea that knowledge is socially shaped, historically contextualized and value-based (Lather, 1986b). From this paradigm, it is presumed that there is not one absolute truth and that incorporating the correct methods does not assure true results (Lather, 1986a). It is presumed also that the complexity of reality and of the human being does not necessarily allow for generalizations or replications nor for free value, free bias claims. It points out that the researcher is not neutral.

Within these post positivist premises Lincoln (1995) and Lincoln and Guba (in Schwandt, 2001) define trustworthiness as the set of criteria that we can use to evaluate the quality of research in the human sciences. In an effort to deal with the trustworthiness issues in this study I approached multiple alternatives. These included credibility (understood as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and crystallization), peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, member checks, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln, 1995).
As part of my prolonged engagement I went to the teacher’s classroom every week, until I reached data saturation. These experiences in the classroom offered me the opportunity to do observations, to tape interviews with an audio recorder and to write field notes, as well as to listen to narratives from the teachers. I asked three peers to revise my data and analysis and to share with me their points of view, their insights, their suggestions and their recommendations.

For crystallization I incorporated multiple methods such as teacher interviews, audio-recording of these, classroom observations, field notes, narratives and I included the teachers in the processes of interpretation and analysis of these methods. The different genres incorporated in the representation of the findings, which included a synoptic chart, a poem, a vignette, and an acrostic were part of the crystallization process as well. This study also integrated the teachers in the revision of the interview transcriptions and in the analysis and interpretation of the data as part of the member checks processes. I evidenced referential adequacy through the use of rich and frequent quotes of the teacher’s experiences and concrete narratives from my field notes and transcriptions.

Negative case analysis was another option to approach trustworthiness issues in this research. As part of this process I focused
also in identifying disconforming evidence. The integration of this criterion was thought to help me avoid as researcher, the exclusive support of my favorite interpretations. To achieve confirmability I grounded my data and interpretations in what had happened, or what had been said (the events) rather than in my personal constructions. Audit trial was incorporated to attain dependability. This included a systematic documentation process in which all the materials and procedures incorporated in the study were made explicit. As part of this audit trial process I also asked the participants and other persons outside the research to verify whether the procedures seemed trustworthy and if the findings seemed confirmable.

**Timeline**

In October 2005, after the Institutional Review Board approval (Protocol Number 2005E0549), I requested and obtained authorization to work in the two early childhood education settings of this study. During this month I also identified and met with the participants, obtaining their consent to participate in this research. From November 2005 to April 2006 I collected data and worked on the data analysis simultaneously. The participants had the opportunity to share their feedback about the research process and about the collected data and analysis as well.
During these months also the participants and I had many opportunities for other conversations. One of these conversations was guided by the interview protocol included in this work. This interview was realized with all of the participants during January 2006. I transcribed each interview during the same week and then the following week I offered it to the participants for member check. The phase of more in-depth analysis and report writing took place during March 2006 and April 2006.

Chapter summary

My experience as a Black Puerto Rican woman, who has worked directly with children and with adults in the field of early childhood education, and my experience as a student at the Ohio State University has influenced in my awareness of the role of the spiritual dimension in early childhood education and research. Like hooks (1994), I view education and research as a relational process in which all persons involved are wholly and embodied. I acknowledge that what constitutes knowledge is shaped socially and “depends profoundly on the consensus and ethos of the community in which it is grounded” (Dillard, 2000, p. 2). I recognize how Western thought, with its hegemonic feature, perpetuates inequities and injustices by creating dichotomies between mind and body,
mind and emotion, fact and value, self and the other (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996). By emphasizing rational ways of knowing over non-rational ones and by imposing a quantitative rationality and “the” scientific method, Western thought invalidates all other ways of knowing. “Western thought began to liquidate all other ways of knowing: not intuition, not imagination, not feelings, not spiritual knowing, not knowing through connecting, participation, and identification; not qualitative subtleties; and surely not knowledge that the body holds” (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996, pp. 4-5).

Given that the children develop holistically, their education should not be alienated from their spiritual dimension, including their feelings and emotions, their imagination, intuition and their relationship with others (Lawson, 1996). Neither should the lives of the teachers in the classroom be disconnected from these dimensions (hooks, 1994). After all, education should be about the mind and the heart as well (Palmer, 1983). Lawson (1996) asserts that the development of the spiritual dimension nurtures a sense of connectedness with self and with others, and a sense of interdependence and social responsibility needed in our fragmented and unjust society.

The ways in which I realized this research needed to be congruent with those general dimensions: connectedness with self and others,
interdependence, and social responsibility. My epistemological and cultural standpoint and the methodologies considered for my research reflect a rupture with Western hegemonic thought. They represent alternative epistemologies and processes for producing and legitimate knowledge. They recognize the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the participants and the researcher and their influence in the research process. They embrace a commitment to reciprocity and caring. In this manner they also reflect a sense of research as “both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit” (Dillard, 2000, p. 674).
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

I think that as the children
Bring their sense of self to the classroom
Teachers do too.
I think more under the political realm,
Teachers are not allowed
To impose any religion in the classroom but,
No matter what,
Their sense of who they are
And the way they interact with people,
And the way they were brought up will come up.
(Kellogg)

Introduction

This study was designed to explore with preschool and elementary
school teachers their understanding of children’s spirituality and how they
think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. I
wanted to search further with them about how spirituality in early
childhood education paves the way toward social justice. This chapter
presents the findings of the study as identified from individual interviews,
observations, written field notes and narratives. They focus on the guiding questions of this study:

1. How do early childhood education teachers perceive or define their own spirituality and that of their children?
2. How do early childhood education teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom?
3. In what ways do these educators think they can foster and support the children’s spiritual development in the classroom?
4. What do the teachers think about how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way for the promotion of social justice?

The findings are organized in categories and themes that emerged from the different methods integrated into the study. These included individual interviews, observations, field notes and narratives. The purpose of this organization is merely to provide some direction for the analysis. I recognize that much of the data is interrelated. The data presented as part of the categories of the teacher’s own spirituality, other teachers’ and children’s spirituality answer the first question of this study regarding how early childhood education teachers perceive or define their spirituality and that of their children. The findings included in the categories of the place of spirituality in early childhood education, and of
perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy, answer the second question of this research regarding how early childhood education teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom. The category of tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom responds to the third question, which refers to the ways in which early childhood educators think they can foster and support the children's spiritual development in the classroom. The findings presented in the category of perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice answer the last question which refers to what the teachers think about how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward the promotion of social justice.

The general organization includes the presentation of the categories and themes as part of an initial analysis. Then I present a further analysis integrating the professional literature. The purpose of this organization reflects my intention to honor the voices of the participants and the integrity of the data.

As I move into the direction of reporting the research, I hold the tension and responsibility within the issues of (re)presentation (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). All five participants are completely able to tell their stories, including those related to their experience of spirituality in their life and in education. However, recognizing their limited time and their intention to
support the flow of the research process, they allowed me to write the report, with a great deal of trust. They had the opportunity to share their perspectives about the collected data and the data analysis, as well as about possible ways to write this report. In this process, nevertheless, Talburt’s statement regarding member check became alive: “to honor participants’ narrations while reading beyond them is no easy ethical task, but the points of consensus and dissensus that a dialogic rendering of member checks can offer, creates a more polyphonic text than one that verifies the accuracy of data and interpretations” (p. 394).

My epistemological understandings of spirituality had bearing on my analysis of the data, in that I did not use gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and abilities as units of analysis. Spirituality transcends these fixed categorical descriptions. For this reason I did not write a direct introduction or description of the participants. The (re)presentation of the findings makes explicit, through the use of a pseudonym, who the participant was that made the contribution to the study in most cases. I asked the participants to choose their pseudonym as way to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. The information provided will, hopefully, allow the reader to know about them, although indirectly and in a very limited way, in a manner more congruent with the multiple notions of spirituality incorporated for the purpose of this the research.
As the participants and I dialogued regarding possible ways to write the report we talked about challenges that come up when we intend to talk about spirituality. First of all we recognized that given that the topic is rooted in experience, a kind of experience that touches the depths of the self, the communication of this, as well as the very experience itself, does not necessarily follow a lineal or hierarchical mode. Second, we wanted to affirm the uniqueness of this experience for each person. Third, we also wanted to communicate it in ways that convey ideas and feelings beyond (the immediate) words. For these reasons it seemed necessary for us to present the findings integrating different genres at different moments. Thus, this section will include emergent categories and themes with fragments of conversations, observations and reflections integrated into direct quotes, a poem, a synoptic chart, a vignette, a list and an acrostic.

Teacher’s own spirituality

The findings of this study are organized through the incorporation of categories. These categories convey the major patterns identified across the analysis. The categories include: teacher’s own spirituality, perceptions of other teachers’ spirituality, children’s spirituality, the place of spirituality in early childhood education and perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy. Other categories include tending to the spiritual
dimension in the classroom and perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice. The next sections of this chapter reinterpret the findings offering an analysis that integrates the professional literature. These sections incorporate the following categories: reinterpreting perceptions of children’s and teachers’ spirituality, reinterpreting perceptions of the influence of spirituality and pedagogy, reinterpreting ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom, and reinterpreting spirituality in relation to social justice.

As part of the category of teachers’ spirituality contained in this section, a pattern became evident. The five participants indicated that spirituality is fundamental in their lives. Michelle, for example, referred to it in the following way: “It is my life.” Kellogg expressed: “That’s a given in my life.” In both cases the assertion seemed to be significant since it was the first sentence that the participants used to describe their experience of spirituality in their own existences.

Another common pattern that became evident in all the participants was that spirituality was deeply rooted in religion. They shared different religious creeds grounded in the Christian tradition. Two teachers were Methodists, one was Baptist, one was Lutheran, and another was Catholic. During the formal interview Taylor stated: “I definitely have a connection, a belief in God. I trust God; and that belief and trust goes
beyond things that happen to me in my life." Michelle mentioned that she thinks of spirituality as “going to church and having a relationship with God”. Kellogg mentioned that he finds spirituality as first being related to religion. When Marie described her personal experience of spirituality she elaborated:

When I first think of the word spirituality I definitively think of religions and, you know, a higher being, a god. And for me it’s one of the most important things in my life. I’m involved in my own church, but... again, it is the whole person. It makes me who I am... my faith, my faith in God, being a Catholic Christian. It’s a very important part of my life.

In this manner she also established a relationship between spirituality and religion as well as between spirituality and identity.

Some of the participants talked about their spirituality as an experience that has been part of their lives since they were “young”, since they were “growing up”. One linked his experience of spirituality with family and with how he was brought up. He also associated it with community and with relationships with people.

I grew up in the Lutheran Church and this is always our deed. And I think personality extends through her life in the community...That’s how myself and all my siblings grew up.” But from there we try to keep one thing no matter what... a kind of golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

The theme of relationships with people included positive ways in which people need to be treated. “That’s always one of the things that I always
try to do: pay attention to people and respect them no matter what”, emphasized Kellogg.

Michelle also refers to the theme of relationships with people and she points to spirituality as an experience woven into her life. “I try to incorporate it in everything I do, like the way I talk, how I treat others, how I treat the children… That doesn’t always work but I try to incorporate it into everything that I do.” Lisa related to this experience of spirituality as woven into her life, focused on herself, on her personal growth, as well as on her role as a mother and as a teacher.

My spirituality makes me stronger in dealing with a number of issues that have come to light in my life. It makes me a better parent because I look beyond the surface. It allows me to be a better nurturer with the kids, to be more attentive, to discern what is going on and to recognize things. …With spirituality you don’t jump to conclusions.

When Lisa referred to the issues that have emerged in her life she was really talking about issues related to her divorce process. This was a process that she described as “unexpected” and as “very difficult”. Lisa was trying to talk about it without approaching the topic directly, precisely because it was painful. As Lisa conversed about this experience she incorporated a reflective tone and her facial gestures indicated sadness. Her eyes became wet, although she was not crying. It was as if she was
holding back the tears. When she explained how spirituality helps her to not “jump to conclusions” she added:

Well, it’s a sense that it’s not necessarily the obvious. When something happens or when there’s a reaction, there is something deeper and as a spiritual person you know that you have to read in further (with emphasis in this last phrase) and not assume or jump to conclusions. That’s what I mean. And there is a patience that comes with that.

Lisa’s account of her experience of spirituality also included the dimension of “looking at things differently”, as Taylor articulated it. In Taylor’s words, looking at things differently means the following:

It is a way to perceive things in our life and to take that perception and not so much focus on the negative, or the things that go wrong but to internalize your feelings and your thoughts and to try to pick out the positives about the situations.

Taylor elaborated on the idea about what spirituality is for her and how it helps her, even when it might be challenging for her.

And I’m not saying that’s something that’s easy to do because it’s not. Your spirituality is the thing that helps you to grow and helps you to see that things happen for a reason and your spirituality keeps you connected, keeps you balanced.

Marie also elaborated on how helpful spirituality is for her: “It helps me guide my morals, my beliefs. It helps me when I approach situations in the classroom, maybe with children that don’t have the same upbringing that I have.”
The participants’ definitions of spirituality seemed to be deeply connected with their experiences of spirituality. I chose to re(present) these insights, integrating poetry, because when I was transcribing the data it “sounded” like a poem that expressed deep experiential-emotional knowledge. Hence, this was my main purpose as I wrote the poem: to communicate not only what the participants said, but the energy, the feelings, and the understandings that they shared. I chose to re(present) it with this literary tool, also, to honor the participants’ knowledge beyond the standards of professional or academic structures that establish standard definitions. Although the text is mediated by me, given that I chose and arranged the phrases or sentences in the poem, the voices of the participants also come through since all the verses are literal words, phrases and sentences that they offered. This alternative tale reflects the element of polyvocality present in these findings.

**Spirituality means…**

Spirituality is a way...

Something... I don't know...

The way you deal with things...

It is how you carry yourself.

It is what moves you,
What guides you
To make choices and decisions.
Oh… very wordy…

When I first think of spirituality
I think of a higher being,
A deep connection with a higher power
A faith in God,
A relationship with God.
That's what my heart feels and what I believe in…
For anyone it is something that is bigger than yourself.
I guess that's spirituality for me…

But now I think about spirituality beyond religion.
It's what's inside me.
It is about your relationship with yourself.
It is the understanding you have
Of what is right or wrong.
It's about how we relate to people in positive ways,
About mutual respect.
It is just about my life.
Perceptions of other teachers’ spirituality

The five participants indicated that it is difficult to articulate how other teachers define spirituality. Each of them offered diverse reasons for this. Marie, for example, explained:

I think, for each educator, it’s going to be different, depending on their own experiences throughout their entire life and how they were raised, how they were taught. I think that how you were taught comes into your classroom.

Lisa pointed out that defining spirituality was “an individual question”. “It could be about individuality for them…”, she speculated. She, like Taylor, established that it is not the same to teach “within a Christian environment” or school than to teach in a public school. They indicated that in a Christian school teachers are more likely to share a common, Christian vision, than in another educational context. The following text presents Taylor’s articulation of her ideas regarding this differentiation.

The non-Christian early childhood educators may view spirituality negatively. They might not have an opinion on spirituality. Maybe they don’t have any experience with it or never gave it any thought, but I think a Christian early childhood educator would define spirituality as a growth that they need to foster in a child that will help them to love God more, to understand who God is and why He is… and I think definitely a Christian early childhood educator will have some sense of spirituality.
While Kellogg’s account relates also to the different definitions of the other teachers, he provides another explanation for it. He described that even though he and his classmates “were all immersed in the same anti-bias curriculum”, which emphasized “the curriculum of the children”, he has observed that not everybody follows these “ideas”. According to Kellogg, his classmates “felt that they need to be teaching these kids specific things and not so much letting them find their own ways.” He added with enthusiasm:

That’s one of the neat things that I like about the way that I’ve been educated and the way that we do it in this Reggio Emilia philosophy within our school. It is about allowing kids to take ownership of their learning and go forward that way.

Reggio Emilia is an Italian early childhood education approach “grounded in constructivist theories of development” (Kantor & Whaley, 1998). It fosters a holistic vision of the child which includes a view of the child as a social and cultural being who constructs knowledge by interacting with other persons (Rinaldi, 2001). The child is viewed also as powerful, and as a protagonist of his or her own learning (Edwards, 1998).

The perception of other teachers’ spirituality, for the participants, was also related to the opportunities for social interaction and for communication with one another. Michelle responded that she did not know how other teachers perceive their spirituality. “I don’t know because
I haven’t had a lot of interaction with other childhood educators, other than the ones that are here (in my school)."

**Perceptions of children’s spirituality**

Some of the participants pointed to the notion that children’s spirituality is about relationships, about connecting with the self, with other people and with a higher being. When talking about how she perceives spirituality in children’s lives, Taylor responded:

> Spirituality means a deeper understanding of yourself, of the people around you, a deeper connection with yourself and a higher being, whatever being that person believes in: God, Mohammed... It’s a deeper connection, a connection that goes beyond doing things...

Marie described it as follows: “Spirituality, especially in the classroom situation that we have, is very much about community. The kids all work together; you see them doing their own problem solving”.

For Kellogg, children’s spirituality is “related to their families and how they (the children) are brought up”. He explicated that “some kids are introduced, for example, to some specifics, like religion, and they get used to it and are involved in it”. According to Kellogg that is how spirituality “comes up” or develops in children. In this way, this participant established a relationship between children’s spirituality and their
childrearing. Kellogg also linked children’s spirituality with play. He articulated this relationship in the following way:

Their sense of self (that of the children) comes out through their play; their sense of right or wrong comes out through their play. The way that they have been brought up comes out through their play. In a lot of ways I think whether you try to or not it comes up. With the children, spirituality comes out through their play.

Other relationships that the participants established were between children’s spirituality and self-identity, and spirituality as a critical dimension to begin to be developed from childhood. Referring to the children, Lisa stated: “I think that spirituality makes them who they are.”

Michelle on her part elucidated:

Being a child is the most important time to develop your spirituality, I think. It’s embedded in you… and it stays with you for the rest of your life. Not that it won’t evolve in adulthood, but I think that spirituality is critical at the children’s age...

The following synoptic chart (re)presents the perceptions of the participants discussed previously. The teachers think about spirituality in multiple ways. This is reflected by how the participants view children’s spirituality, other educators’ spirituality and that of their own, as represented in the particular categories that emerged from the data (see figure 1). Notice that, although for the participants, children’s spirituality shares some common elements with that of their own, it also integrates
other particular ones, as evidenced in the subcategories of relationships, parent’s spirituality, critical development and problem solving.
Figure 4.1 Teacher’s understandings of spirituality

- Teacher's own spirituality
  - Fundamental
    - God
  - Self-Identity
  - Feelings, thoughts
  - Roles: parent teacher
  - Inner life
  - Childrearing

- Other teacher's spirituality
  - Difficult to articulate
  - May have negative view
  - Higher being, God
  - Social interaction
  - Beyond religion
  - Not everyone

- Children's spirituality
  - Play
  - Parent’s spirituality
  - Critical development
  - Higher being
  - Connection with higher being
  - Relationships: self others
  - Self-identity aware
  - Different for everyone
  - Point of reference in life
The place of spirituality in early childhood education

The participants avowed that spirituality is important enough to be integrated into early childhood education. They shared diverse reasons to justify their conviction. For Lisa, the main reason rests in that children “can be who they are and feel comfortable with it” when spirituality is integrated into education. She explicated that spirituality “allows the child early on to see the power that they have”. Marie grounded her assertion within the notion of holistic education: “If you are educating the whole child, then you educate all parts of the child.” Kellogg talked about children’s spirituality in terms of “coming up quite often through the social and emotional development” and through “play”, which are “big factors” in the “kids’ education.” Michelle stated: “I think spirituality defines your morals. I think it is very important because it defines the persons’ morals. It defines their actions”. For Taylor, spirituality in early childhood education “is a must”, “particularly in a Christian classroom”. She explained that within the public school it is important also, because it relates to the ways in which children interact with others positively, in non-violent ways.

The participants pointed to an apparent complex reality regarding the space of spirituality in early childhood education. Somehow spirituality permeates education, and at the same time, its integration in education
may represent a challenge. Marie mentioned that “there is a lot of space for spirituality if you are educating the whole child”. The way that she expressed this thought, laughing while articulating the sentence, as a tool to emphasize that the opposite almost seems a contradiction, denoted that for her this was a given. For Marie educating the whole child implies considering the spiritual dimension. Kellogg expressed that “spirituality is from within the children. They are the ones who bring up their ideas, their path findings …the really great questions”.

The opportunity to dialogue about the topic of spirituality seemed to provide an “awakening” experience for Taylor who ascertained this, indicating a sense of surprise. She added: “I didn’t realize how much it’s already integrated into the educational process.” She expressed this reflection after she described how spirituality was integrated through her deep connection with her students and through the development of different social skills.

Michelle also mentioned that “the space for spirituality is open”, depending on the school context. She also pointed to the notion of the separation between Church and State, established by the Constitution, and the political dimension that is embedded in it. She explained: “In Christian schools I think that the space is wide open. But, from what I’ve heard about public schools… there is not as much room for spirituality...
because of the government”. Marie referred to this idea, as well, when she shared: “I think that there is a lot of space for spirituality. But again it’s just a matter of how you approach it, and how you say it… you know… being politically correct in the society…”

Perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy

Multiple themes emerged as to how the participants perceive that spirituality contributes to their sense of teaching. Some of these themes were: spirituality as embedded in the quotidian activities and in the teachers’ approaches regarding the potential of the children, as well as in the relationships with the parents, as crucial, in bringing spirituality to the classroom. When describing the contribution of spirituality to her sense of teaching, Marie stated “spirituality is a good part of what I do in the classroom”. She mentioned that she finds that it makes her day “so much smoother, so much easier” because for her it is connected with honoring children’s potential. It helps her to “acknowledge the children and what they can do at this age”. To honor and to believe in children’s potential also implied that the children could learn, that the children could achieve academically. This attitude toward the children’s potential brings her to “give them a little more freedom” and to ”provide opportunities so that they can go wherever they want” with their “thoughtful ideas”. Marie also
articulated that “with children from different religious or cultural backgrounds the parents kind of dictate how much of their spirituality they are going to bring to the classroom”. She acknowledged that the educational and respectful interactions with the parents regarding how they pursue their religious beliefs, for example, helps in this matter and “automatically opens up and broadens” the world of the children. Marie also clarified:

It’s nothing that I necessarily believe in, but when the parents will tell me something like that (related to their religion) then I would more than welcome it and… You know, it’s developing the relationship with the parents, as well as with the students.

Michelle pointed to the theme of spirituality as a foundation for her decision to teach. She declared: “It’s to me really, the reason why I am teaching, because I can’t teach without the spirituality aspect.” The fact that she repeated this idea later may indicate how significant this was for her. She offered other details related to this notion. “I don’t think that I would want to go into the public school. Not that you can’t be spiritual, but it’s a lot harder, I think. It’s not accepted as much.” (She was referring to the spiritual dimension within the context of religion when she said this.)

The emergent themes of the self, trust relationships with others and their role in learning also came up when Lisa shared how she perceives spirituality as it influences her teaching. For her, this is about students
and teachers relating to other peoples with a sense of their “own identity”.

She perceives it as getting “to know one another well” in the classroom and developing “relationships of trust” as well as using this knowledge to inform the teaching process. She asserted:

We establish relationships of trust that help them learn. This informs how you need to be with each kid, what you need to do to help him develop. I try not to assume anything about the children. Statistics can help, but to know what is going on in your classroom is what really helps; it’s the better tool.

Another theme that emerged was: teachers bring their spirituality by bringing who they are to the classroom, which includes bringing their family and cultural background. Kellogg established that his “sense of self” and “the way” that he was “brought up”, respecting people and caring for them, contribute to his teaching. As he shared these ideas and the ones that follow, his facial gestures revealed seriousness. He also spoke, integrating a grave tone that reflected depth, as if he was talking from the most profound self.

And later I found out that the actual work with children, too, is another way to continue that, to continue to give more respect to others, especially to children, who need to be cared for and who need to learn and to grow. (Pause of 10 seconds.) You know, my self is always in the classroom, so it is always going to contribute to my teaching. It’s just who I am… there… (in the classroom).

Taylor also referred to the influence of spirituality in the teaching process, bringing to it who the teachers are and their cultural background.
She also pointed to other emergent themes, which will be identified in the following vignette. I chose to integrate a vignette here in an effort to describe and reconstruct some of the context in which the participant and I shared a powerful “aha moment” or awe-inspiring account.

**Spirituality, culture, connection, love and high expectations:**

**A narrative vignette**

Taylor and I went to her classroom to have an interview after we said goodbye to the children. Although both of us were a bit tired after the long day in school, we were relaxed and enjoyed the conversation. Neither one of us seemed to be rushed; though I was very aware not to abuse the privilege of the time she had given me.

On this occasion, I used the interview protocol as a guide to facilitate the conversation, and I participated when necessary. At some point I made the following commentary and asked a question: “I see you reading stories and sharing perspectives that allow these children to see themselves. Do you think that the spiritual aspect is embedded here, not only because of the religion, but also because of the shared culture?” Taylor looked at me with a smile. I think that she was surprised with the question, yet she offered her response.
Our culture plays a part, definitely, with the spirituality... I'm an African American teacher. I'm teaching African American students. All my students are African American; so, culturally we have some type of spiritual connection because of our ancestry. You know, we have a connection that way... and I never thought about that, but that is a deep connection.

She said these affirmations with a smile and with an “enthusiastic-discovery” type tone in her voice that might indicate that she was amazed somehow about what she had reflected on. Taylor elaborated this idea when she added that she connects with her children by using her “language”. She also connects with them by “reading stories” in her “way”. She repeated this assertion: “That is a connection I never really thought about... but it is there ...”

When Taylor was speaking I kept thinking: “Wow, this is deep”. I felt that what she shared was powerful. I felt that I knew somehow what she was talking about. After all I have been in her classroom and I have seen her teaching. And I have seen that she projects a presence to the children that they can identify with. Her being an African American teacher gives her authority. The way that she reads the stories, the way that she talks with the children and interacts with them is influenced by who she is, indeed. One day, for example, she presented the movie Ruby Bridges, about the first African American to go to an integrated school with White persons. A boy asked her: “Why the White people didn’t want us in
the classroom (with them)?”  (Italics are used for emphasis.) She
answered:

Because of *our* skin color. Sometimes people have different ideas
about other people based on their skin color or on the amount of
money they have… And they think that some people are better
than others because they have more money or because they have
a lighter skin color. Do you think that it is true?  (The children
shouted together:  No!!! and she continued talking.) You must
know:  God created us equal.  All of us are equal in God’s eyes.
And we all are brothers and sisters.  Don’t you ever let anybody tell
you something different!

As we continued the conversation Taylor offered other insights.

She expressed the following, showing a great deal of conviction and
passion:

I think whether or not the early childhood educators know it, they
are connecting spiritually with their children. If the teacher has a
type of spirit that is a positive spirit, all children can learn; maybe
not in the same way or on the same day but all can learn. To
people that go into teaching I will say:  ‘Do you have that spirit of
love?  Teachers have a love for learning.  They have a love for
children and I think it’s always there’.

In this manner she stated that independently of whether they are aware of
it or not, teachers connect with their students spiritually.  According to
Taylor “all children can learn” if they have teachers with a “positive spirit”.

For her, educators need to love in order to teach.  They need to love the
children and to love learning.

Taylor also shared about the contradictions or limitations in
“bringing” spirituality to the children and she expressed a desire to
continue growing in order to become a better teacher. Utilizing a reflective tone she revealed:

‘Cause, I mean, I’m not perfect… and even though I try… I cannot guarantee that my spirit will be happy all the time or that I will be always in a good mood. But as much as possible, I need to make sure and to be aware of how my spirituality is… or how my spirit is connecting to that of the children. Or I need to make sure that I am aware of how much I need to focus on their spirit and making sure that their spiritual needs are taken care of. …Spirituality makes you think that you have a greater responsibility than you initially thought of in the first place. When I decided to go into teaching I never thought that it was an easy job. But now, wow! It’s kind of scary to think… (of the enormous responsibility). And I’m thinking back now, and I wish I could have done some things differently… really, Lisandra.

When Taylor shared the last thought she had tears in her eyes. I sensed a feeling of regret in these last words. I felt that I was touching a sacred place that I did not want to intrude. I kept silent for a moment, holding her with her emotions and her feelings and holding my own vulnerability as a teacher… We both took some tissue, and laughed as we did it. Then we continued with our conversation…

Tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom

Some emergent themes related to the category of tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom include: equipping oneself before teaching, relationships and connection with the children, respect, learning
community, challenging, being able to change and bringing in the Bible. Other topics that emerged were: “time, space and opportunity”.

Taylor mentioned that before she teaches, she needs to “firstly equip” herself. She needs “to meditate, especially if the morning didn’t go so well”. She shared: “Once I get to school I need to meditate and focus myself back on God, focus on the reason he chose me to have this career, this gift”. For her this implies listening to music. Taylor described how she tends to the spiritual dimension of her children in the classroom: “I bring the spirituality through love, through my guidance, my care for them, making sure that they are okay, through my nurturing attitude and behavior.” She expressed a concern: “In public school, a lot of times, maybe teachers can’t do that because they may be afraid of lawsuit for something, because you are not supposed to touch the children or to hug them…” She defended emphatically: “That physical touch is a spiritual connection as well. Everyone needs human touch! And without it, especially children, it’s very detrimental to them. Imagine, no physical touch, not getting close to your teacher?” Some concrete ways in which she fosters her connections and relationships with the children are: sitting “next to each other on the carpet” for some activities, providing “everybody a chance to sit” by her or to “hold” her hand and holding hands as everyone stands when praying. In an effort to be “fair” with all the
children, she tries to “get the chance to touch everyone at least once during the day.”

Lisa pointed to the topics of relationships and connection with the children and learning community, as well, when she referred to the metaphor of “parenting”. She elaborated this image as follows:

When I work with a kid, my spiritual being, my parenting comes along a lot. My motherhood comes up. You approach a child with a lot of care. They [the children] see me as their mother. It doesn’t have anything to do with age or with being a woman. It’s about how you are with them; it’s about how you are going to be different when you are using your spiritual gifts. You don’t assume things. You relate to them with kindness and affection. You know each child. I feel that they know me. They know me as I am. We have nothing to hide because of the relationship we have. You share a deeper connection with the kids. We can get one to one with them. You see them when they are playing and when they are in more structured activities... We are learning. We are learning together. (She said with passion.) I don’t want them to think that I already know and that they don’t. We are a community. That is something that you welcome and nurture.

Lisa indicated also that the notion of the community of learners developed as she was trying “to create a setting” that worked for her. She shared that “it was different three years ago”, when she started teaching, implying in this manner that she has been able to change. She reiterated how important this development has been for her: “What works best for me is that we are in this journey together.” Marie, like Lisa, brought up the topic of community when she established that “it’s just a matter of working together as a small community with the children, and with the other
teachers too… Everyone in… with their own experiences… and creating a
together”. To achieve this, she specified, “the teacher has to be flexible…”

For the participants, community is also about relationships with parents. The participants nurture these relationships through constant communication with the parents. They greet them and talk to them briefly when parents bring their children in the morning, and when they come back to pick them up in the afternoon or evening. The dialogue is mostly focused on what the children achieved during the day. In one of the schools there is an Internet communication where parents can daily hear their children’s voices sharing what they remember about their day. In this same school the parents have access to their child’s portfolio as soon as they enter the classroom. In the other school, each teacher sends a weekly newsletter to the parents. This is complemented by a folder that they send to all of the families every Friday with the assignments, concepts and skills that will be part of the lessons for the upcoming week. The school staff and the families from this same school have the opportunity to celebrate diverse cultural festivities together after school. They also have a “Friday movie night” with the community once a month.

Other ways in which Marie indicated that she tends toward the spiritual dimension in her classroom, take into consideration “that overall understanding of what is good, what is right with respect to the children in
the classroom”. For her it is about “respecting them for their thoughts and their ideas”, and “bringing in their different situations and ideas”. She indicated that it is about respecting their preferences and their potential as well. The portfolio assessment tool that has been incorporated in her classroom reflects different ideas, preferences, and focuses on the potential of each child. It contains a “curriculum journal”, selected children’s works, pictures, projects and ideas that the students have shared and have been documented.

Michelle brought up the theme “bringing in” the Holy Bible (accepted sacred writing of Judeo Christianity), as part of her spiritual experience in the classroom. For her, integrating the Bible is a way “to integrate the spirituality”. She said: “If the children are playing and they have a problem… I can bring in the Bible, I can bring in how that makes another person feel”. She explained that the Bible can be integrated “into the math subject, or social studies, or science, anything the children are doing”. She articulated that she tries “to explain things spiritually, as well as intellectually”. She illustrated the meaning of this in the following way:

For example, I can say: this may happen because of A, B and C but let’s look at it this way. Someone may feel bad because you do something wrong to them but let’s look at a deeper level. I talk about what it may do the spirit, how it may hurt their spirit, their soul… things like that.
Thus, explaining things “spiritually as well as intellectually” implies talking about the consequences of one’s actions toward other people.

Kellogg stated that tending to the spiritual was for him about “time, space, and opportunity”. He stated:

If you create an environment where the kids are comfortable about who they are, they are comfortable about their interaction with others, you’ll really get to see how they open up and really find out who this child is, what kind of things they know and what they can do.

The classroom environment of each participant pointed to those themes. The social interactions among students and teachers reflected negotiations, collaboration, co-responsibility and sharing of food toys and other materials. The atmosphere was characterized by jokes, laughs, and humor during the structured and unstructured activities. Each classroom followed a schedule, yet the teachers were able to modify it when needed. There was time for rest and for recess. Each group of pupils had nine to ten students. The teachers worked daily with the students on an individual basis, in small groups, and with the entire group. They provided opportunities for exploration, experimentation, dialogical interactions, music, dance, drama, story telling, and projects. In terms of the physical environment, every classroom was cleaned, with a variety of quality materials that were organized and accessible to the children. The halls and classrooms walls displayed children’s pictures and projects.
In her journal, Marie presented a list that, although it had no title or date, it pointed to the themes of time, space and opportunity as well as that of community. Thus, it seems very pertinent to present these findings, incorporating the same format that the participant used.

• Take the time to say: “good morning” each day.

• Engage in conversation with open-ended questions.

• Let them explore each activity however they want to. Allow them trial and error opportunities.

• Smile – even when it’s a tough day.

• Trust the children’s instincts. They know when they are tired, hungry, or not feeling well.

• They can do a lot more than what I sometimes give them credit for.

• Hug them and let them hug you.

• Talk with your fellow teachers: flexibility, share ideas. They understand your frustrations.

• Sing, dance, laugh with the kids. It’s more than just play.

• Challenge myself and kids to try new things.

• Get messy with them.

• Let them help. They usually want to.

• Guide on the side.
All the participants felt that it is not difficult for them to tend to the spiritual dimension because the school structure supports their efforts in one way or another. For Marie and Kellogg their philosophy is rooted in Reggio Emilia, which fosters a sense of community and respect for the children and their families, with all that they bring. For Lisa, Michelle and Taylor, because they are in a school related to a Christian religion, tending to the spiritual is expected and fostered. Kellogg finds it natural and easy, to tend to the spirit “because it is who you are”. He explained: “No matter who you are, you are always trying to create that nice comfortable, welcoming environment for the children. …I think that’s an area that nobody really tries to plan for. It just really happens.”

Conversely, three of the participants conveyed that tending to the spiritual dimension could be challenging. For Lisa it is difficult to tend to the spirit in some settings “because you have a lot of kids per teacher”. She elaborated this notion as follows:

You have a lot of kids with a lot of different needs. It’s so much! And without that training to make it possible…, I see it truly difficult. In the public schools, because the teachers are not trained to bring in the spiritual, they can get in trouble. They don’t know what to do and it is difficult with the law that goes beyond the teachers. It’s difficult also because everybody is expected to do the same. There is no room for individuality… That stops the growth of the children. It can create a classroom environment that will not provide for it. I’m thinking of the public structure with so many more kids per teacher, with different backgrounds, if there are some things, if
there are beliefs that are not parallel or go together with that of each family, then that can create a whole new problem.

Marie expressed that she has been “in other classrooms situations where, yes, it was a little more difficult” and she “had to be more stern”. Sharing ideas similar to Lisa’s, she implied that it had to do with how the teachers worked together and how they related to the children’s families. On the other hand Taylor expressed that it was difficult for her if she “didn’t feel well”, if she “didn’t get to meditate or pray that morning or if something unexpected happened”. She also pointed to the element of stress and the multiple demands of teaching.

If you are so focused on having two grade levels, it’s kind of stressful. I don’t show it that much but it is kind of stressful for me, because I feel like, oh, this grade is missing out on this, or I didn’t spend enough time with them today. Or when I’m so focused on: ‘oh, I got to get this one done’. And I may not.

At the same time she recognized that in her case, this may happen momentarily, since she feels that children help her “forget” about her “worries” and “chaos”. She added: “I just keep focusing on them, and I keep laughing at the jokes they are telling, or enjoying reading a story to them and using funny character voices”.

This section elaborated on the category of tending to the spiritual in the classroom. The next section will focus on the category of the perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice.
Perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice

As I was exploring with the participants their perceptions regarding the connection between spirituality and social justice, I asked them what social justice meant to each of them. Each participant brought up different pieces to a definition that needs to be constructed collaboratively with our lives... Some of them opened their mouths and eyes as soon as they heard the question and then smiled. I interpreted these gestures as: “Hey, this is a challenging question…” The participants all engaged in the process of defining, demonstrating a very positive disposition. Four of them repeated the term slowly as a way to begin their definition: “Social justice…” One of them provided a definition for each of the two words and then put both definitions together. Their answers were short, (compared to others they had provided) and they seemed to focus on what I call “core words, phrases or sentences” that the participants seemed to perceive as intrinsic to the term. For this reason, choosing an acrostic seemed very appropriate to re(present) the multiple insights from the participants. As with the poem, although it is important to recognize that I incorporated the literal words and phrases from the transcriptions, I assume full responsibility for the choice and arrangement of them. It is important to recognize also that the participants agreed and were very pleased about presenting these particular findings in this manner.
**Personal Meanings Across Social Justice**

Share. Some days it is ambiguous: everybody having their ideas.

Overall is about basic rights and privileges.

Communities of people, the classroom, the world.

It means to honor and respect all persons, their ideas and beliefs.

Acknowledging differences: race, religion, gender, abilities.

Looking for, searching for what is right for all peoples.

Just about being human beings.

Understanding, not ever condemning or labeling people.

Social justice is for those who are rich; for those who are powerful.

There is no social justice…

Interaction with people with a sense of morality; how do we do it.

Children express it in their sense of being fair and equal.

Equity more than anything else, and fairness; everyone is treated equally.

Some themes that emerged as the participants dialogued about spirituality and social justice were: intrinsic connection between both
spirituality and social justice as aims, ways of relating to and being with others, as love, as valuing all peoples, rights, fairness and morality.

According to the participants, there is an intrinsic connection between spirituality and social justice. Marie expressed this notion in the following way: “I don’t think you can really have one without the other. …That’s what you aim for, that’s what you strive for”. Taylor articulated how both concepts were related, not only among themselves but also with ways of relating to and being with others, as well as with love, with the value of all peoples and with rights.

We are teaching spirituality as a connection with people. And with social justice you have to have a connection as well… with people. You have to treat people in a kindly way. So, spirituality is in connection with social justice. …And it’s about believing that people are important and that we have certain rights. (She said this with emphasis in the last word.) It’s about making sure that we have a right to love each other as humans, and to grow and to have a certain connection and attitude, for we believe that all peoples are important in some way, whether they are different from us or not…

Michelle also pointed to the theme of ways of being and relating to others when she said that this connection is manifested through “treating others right and by giving time to others.” Lisa “looked at it from the perspective of fairness” in the classroom. For her, fairness in this context is about “seeing and treating each child as an individual”; and is also about “accepting and recognizing our individuality and our potential” beyond “what everybody expects”, “avoiding clumping each child with
others”. When Michelle referred to the notion of fairness in the classroom, she also alluded to the need to teach “how it affects you if you are being fair to others”.

Kellogg and Marie brought up explicitly the theme of morality. Kellogg said with conviction: “Your morality comes out a lot in your interaction with others”. He explained that spirituality relates to morality “because morality is your sense of right or wrong and that comes through your perception of who other people are.” Marie established a similar relationship. She uttered that “it goes back to that basic guide, or some set of morals that you believe in”. She also added with emphasis: “And if you don’t have social justice as part of that, I’m not quite sure about spirituality then.” She like, Kellogg, recognized the influence of their childrearing and of what they have learned throughout their lives in the development of this notion. Kellogg articulated it as follows. “The way you interact in a social setting and the way that you approach other people have a lot to do with the way you’ve been raised and the things you’ve learned throughout your life.”

Michelle indicated that there is a connection between spirituality and social justice, yet she also pointed to a disconnection between both. This finding can be interpreted as disconfirming data as well as a deeper description of a complex reality. She offered this complex view of the
relationship between spirituality and social justice when she articulated the following thoughts:

There should be a relationship (between spirituality and social justice). I think there is (a relationship between both) at the young age and that is true also for most spiritual people. But there are also those people for whom there is no connection. To me, if you are spiritual, social justice should come right along with that. And that's the case for a lot of people.

The participants indicated that spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice as it relates to providing the children a foundation in their early years regarding ways of being with self and other people. Kellogg described this process as follows:

I think that kids bring their sense of self into the classroom and they bring just who they are… But then, when they get into the social setting they are interacting with other kids, getting other kids’ ideas, and finding out how to work cooperatively with other peers, as well as adults. And then, on top of that, they are learning about strangers, about friendships, and the self …and I think of the kind of things that’ll help them be the persons they will ultimately become.

Taylor expressed that we “can’t wait until someone is fifteen years old to teach them to share” and “to treat the neighbor nicely”. For her “it would be too late because those preset notions and thoughts [regarding the others and how to relate with them] are already set in those persons’ minds”. She recommended: “As an early childhood educator, I think is important starting young, teaching those foundations, those social behaviors like sharing, caring about one another, and taking turns”. Marie
pointed to a similar notion and at the same time indicated a possible contradictory and co-existing view in society regarding the importance of this foundation.

In watching my current children now, it hit me the other day how important these early years are. They really do set the building blocks and lay the foundation for the rest of their education. I think too often that early education, especially at three, four and five, is dismissed as not really school and learning. I think it’s more often seen as a baby-sitting service than an educational experience.

Lisa mentioned that spirituality paves the way toward social justice as it moves the teachers “to treat children as individuals” and “to allow them to know what it is expected” of them. Marie also alluded to the idea of individuality when she articulated: “Because if you take each child where they are and respect all his differences and acknowledge him (or her) you’ll see them developing.” For Marie this development includes the value that the child would be able to welcome and respect persons from different races, with different abilities, social and familial situations as well as status and religions. For Michelle “getting them in touch with their feelings” was important.

Because if they can understand, really understand how it makes them feel to do something, or if someone does something to them, they’ll hopefully, later in life, understand how important social justice is, ‘cause they know how it feels if they are not treated fairly, if they are not treated equally.
Michelle suggested that it was important “to educate the parents regarding taking time with their children, and to talk about their feelings” and about the consequences of their actions.

This section focused on the category of the perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice. The next sections present an analysis, incorporating the professional literature. The following one will elaborate on the category of reinterpreting perceptions of children’s and teachers’ spirituality.

Reinterpreting perceptions of children’s and teachers’ spirituality

Some researchers who have worked in higher education refer to spirituality as an elusive term, and yet, as essential in the life of the people (Palmer, 1998; Tisdell, 2002; Purpel, 2002). The data of this research indicate that it was hard for the participants to define spirituality, not because of lack of knowledge, but because of what it evokes in them in terms of depth. Their open answers in the poem: “Is a way…,” “Something…”, “Oh… very wordy…”, “It is about my life.” point to that elusiveness identified in the professional literature.

At the same time, the participants perceive that spirituality is fundamental in their existence; they find it as “one of the most important things” in their lives, as Marie expressed it. Spirituality for them is at the
center of their identity. It is a source of strength and wisdom during difficult times. It guides their “choices and decisions” (from the poem: Spirituality means) and their ways of thinking and doing. These findings are congruent with Tisdell’s (2002) notion of spirituality for adults. According to Tisdell many adults perceive spirituality as “a major organizing principle that guides their life choices”, which is at “the center of their being” (p. 127). In Tisdell’s (2002) study, as well as in Ngunjiri’s (2006), the adult educators who participated in the study also experienced that their spirituality strengthens them during difficult times.

In her work with adult educators Tisdell (2002) also found that their spiritual development was influenced by the socialization process of these individuals including their childhood experiences. Similarly, the findings of this research indicate that the participants’ spirituality was greatly influenced by their upbringing. The early childhood educators indicated that they were socialized within the Christian denomination to which they still belong. This explains how their spirituality is deeply rooted in their Christian religion. For them, as for some other educators, their spiritual experience was shaped initially by the religious experience of their childhood and extends, somehow, to the present, as reflected in their ways of being and doing (Tisdell, 2003). This points toward the reality that for some persons spirituality is connected with religion. In fact, the
professional literature shows, in this regard, that although African American spirituality goes beyond the boundaries of organized religion, many African Americans opt to nurture their spirituality through their experience in organized religious groups (hooks & West, 1991; Dantley, 2005).

Palmer (1983) defined spirituality as the cultivation of the inner life, as the cultivation of the heart and the mind. The early childhood educators in this study also related spirituality with their inner life, with their feelings and thoughts. In this sense, the definition of the participants seems to reflect a holistic vision of the human being as an embodied subject with intellect and feelings (Glazer, 1999). Thus, the participants’ definition, in this regard, points to a break with the dichotomies of heart and mind that characterize disembodied spiritualities.

The participants also seemed to recognize that there is a multiplicity of spiritualities, given that the definition of each educator is going to be different, depending on their unique experiences. Wenman (2001) recognizes this attribute of the individual’s spirituality when he says that spirituality is unique in each person. The findings also suggest that the teachers can learn about each other, about their unique spirituality if they interact, if they talk to one another. As Palmer (1998) emphasizes, teachers need to talk with one another about their inner lives, about their
spirituality, in order to break with a sense of disconnection with the self and others. Not having opportunities for this type of interaction is an obstacle for this type of mutual learning and for personal growth (Palmer, 1998). If spirituality is a fundamental element for the individuals, it seems contradictory that they do not have opportunities to share about what is significant in their lives (Palmer, 1998).

Some researchers talk about spirituality in relationship to a sense of interconnectedness with the self and with others (Bosacki, 2002; Caine, 2003; Lerner, 2005). The findings of this study point toward a similar notion. For the early childhood educators of this study, spirituality is linked to a sense of connection with the self and others, with a sense of respect, love and caring for others (hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005).

Waite and Halstead (2001) refer to children’s spirituality as characterized by a sense of wonder and fascination, a great ability for play and for engaging in imagining activities. The participants pointed to a similar notion of spirituality when they indicated that children’s spirituality is expressed through play. They however, pointed to some other ideas. Like Hay (2001), they related children’s spirituality to a connection with a higher being. Like Tisdell (2002) they indicated that the ways in which the children are brought up influence their spirituality. In this sense, the spirituality of the parents seems to be a strong influence in their
conception of children’s spirituality. The findings, too, point to a perception of children’s spirituality that includes some notions that are in common with the spirituality of the adults. The participants indicated that children’s spirituality is linked to a sense of self-identity and with relationships with the self and others. For them, spirituality makes children who they are. These notions are similar to those identified by the higher educators in Tisdell’s (2002) study when they described their own spirituality as adults.

The findings of this study suggest one new element related to children’s spirituality. The participants’ perception of children’s spirituality includes, also, the notion of spirituality as a very important development during the early years. Michelle, for example, indicated that “spirituality is critical”. She also emphasized that childhood is the most important time for the development of the individual’s spirituality. They linked this development particularly with the learning of basic pro-social behaviors, which included treating the other with respect and kindness.

This focus of this section was on the category of reinterpreting perceptions of children’s and teachers’ spirituality. The next section will present the category of reinterpreting perceptions of the influence of spirituality in pedagogy.
Reinterpreting perceptions of the influence of spirituality in pedagogy

Purpel (1989), Palmer (1998), Dei (2002), Miller (2002), Moffet (1994), Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson, (2000), Astin (2004), amongst other scholars, recognize the significant place of spirituality in education. Like these scholars, the teachers of this study indicated that spirituality is important in early childhood education. They justified this conviction in different ways. One of their main arguments was that both teachers and children bring their spirituality to the classroom by bringing who they are and by connecting with one another as well as with other people. This is communicated somehow in the narrative vignette: *Spirituality, culture, connection, love and high expectations*. This vignette points to how the individual, historical, cultural and psychological identity of teachers and children are present in the act of teaching, and it illustrates how powerful this is. It describes the deep spiritual connection that an African American early childhood educator feels with her children coming from a shared African American ancestry and culture. For her, this connection is expressed in the way that she talks and reads to her children, referring in this way, to how she teaches her students. The participants were convinced that teachers and students bring their identities to the classroom. They referred to this as unavoidable and necessary for an effective and holistic education. In this manner, the early childhood
educators also pointed to how spirituality contributes to their sense of teaching. Congruent with Dei’s (2005) notions, the participants viewed spirituality as intrinsically related to who they are and what they do in the classroom. Like Dei (2003) they perceived spirituality as part of who they are as historical and cultural beings.

For some of the participants, spirituality is important because the children can fully be who they are and they can discover their power. This notion about spirituality and identity is similar to that of Dantley (2005) who asserts that “our spirituality is the core of who we are” (p. 654). Other participants indicated that spirituality is critical in the education of the young children since it defines the individual’s morals and actions, and since it is linked to how the children relate to others. Akin to Tisdell’s (2002) findings with adult educators, the early childhood education teachers associated spirituality with ways not only of being, but also with ways of doing. They indicated, as well, that a holistic view of the child and of education cannot dismiss spirituality. This is congruent with the perspectives of scholars such as Miller (2002), Kirk (2000) and Lerner (2005).

Kessler (2000) and Purpel (2002) talk about the exclusion of spirituality in education. They both attribute this exclusion to the desire to protect children from indoctrination, and as a way for teachers to avoid
legal problems. The early childhood education teachers in this study identified this exclusion as well. Their explanation for its exclusion relates to the reasons offered by Kessler (2000) and by Purpel (2002) when they elucidate that spirituality is excluded from education to protect children’s rights and a to avoid legal problems. The teachers explained that spirituality is excluded to avoid “problems with the government”.

Interestingly, although the teachers recognized the exclusion of spirituality in education, they also indicated that there is a lot of space for spirituality in this field. In this manner, they pointed to a complex reality regarding the space of spirituality in early childhood education: spirituality is excluded and it permeates education. It is excluded and there is space for it in the educational processes. The participants asserted that educating the whole child implies considering the spiritual dimension. They also stated that spirituality permeates education since both teachers and children bring it to the classroom with who they are. It is important to observe that even when they affirmed this notion, the early childhood teachers, like Haynes (1999), recognized the importance of “being politically correct” with regard to spirituality in education. They recognize that the public schools are not places to indoctrinate or proselytize any religion.
Tisdell, (2002) establishes that spirituality informs the choices and actions of many individuals. In a similar fashion Dantley (2003) established that spirituality informs “personal and professional behaviors” (p. 274). In this study, the choices, actions and professional behaviors were focused on teaching. One of the participants referred to spirituality as a foundation for her decision to teach. She identified that spirituality was “her reason to teach.”

The teachers also perceived spirituality as embedded in the quotidian activities, being part of everything they do in the classroom. Spirituality helps the teachers to acknowledge and to respect who the children are, as well as to recognize and foster their potential. As part of this, educators feel impelled to build a learning community in the classroom. In this learning community students and teachers bring their authentic, cultural selves, know one another and develop trust relationships. The knowledge of each child informs educator’s decisions in regard to teaching. Teachers seek what works best for them and their children in the classroom. The experience of community extends to the parents who, according to the participants, influence and help make decisions regarding what spirituality to bring to the classroom and in what constitutional ways to bring it. Early childhood education teachers
acknowledged that respectful interactions with parents offer learning possibilities for them and for their students.

Some researchers point out that education is about love (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006). Education is about caring for one another (Noddings, 2005). Loving education focuses on a notion of the self as individual and as part of a community (hooks, 1993). As part of loving education, the individual learns to live in community and to act, having in mind the common good (hooks, 1993). The early childhood educators in this inquiry stated that teachers need to love the children and to care for them. They suggested that early childhood educators need to believe that they all can learn. They also asserted that teachers need to respect the students and to welcome their diverse ideas. They indicated that teachers need to connect with their children and to share with them a positive spirit.

Caring for the children implies having high expectations, not only of what children can do, but also of what teachers can do in the classroom (Ladson- Billings, 1994). One of the participants pointed to these notions when she engaged in a self-assessment process and identified that she experiences limitations and contradictions in this process of caring for the children. She indicated that there are occasions when she is not as caring as the children need because of personal situations or because of the multiple teaching demands. Yet, she expressed her desire to continue
growing to become a better teacher. Thus, the findings suggest that early childhood educators perceive that spirituality influences their pedagogy through the appropriation of hooks’ (1993) notion of loving education, rooted in an ethics of caring (Noddings, 2005).

This segment of the chapter focused on the category of reinterpreting perceptions of the influence of spirituality in pedagogy. The next section will elaborate on the category of reinterpreting ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom.

Reinterpreting ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom

The early childhood educators referred again to the notion of loving education with an ethic of caring, as proposed by hooks (1994) and Noddings (2005) when they dialogued about how they tend to the spirit in the classroom. They perceived that they tend to the spirit in the classroom context through sharing their “love”, “guidance” “and “care” and through their “nurturing attitude and behavior”. They perceived that nurturing their relationships in the classroom, and building community is a way to tend to the spirit. Concrete ways to foster connections and relationships in the classroom that the participants use include: making sure that they provide each child the opportunity to sit close to them during assemblies, holding hands when praying together (in the Christian school) and touching every
child at least once every day. One participant integrated the metaphor of parenting and motherhood to describe her being and doing in her relationships with her students. This notion of caring education (Noddings, 2005) which also includes the other educational practices that will be mentioned below, has the main purpose of offering all students the opportunities that they need, to learn and better achieve academically. When talking about how teachers demonstrate caring for their children Geneva Gay (2000) offered the following description:

This is expressed in concern for their psycho emotional well-being and academic success; personal morality and social actions; obligations and celebrations; communality and individuality; and unique cultural connections and universal human bonds. (p. 45 - 46)

The educators also brought up that showing affection is another way in which they tend to the spirit. For them, physical touch is another means for spiritual connection with the children. The participants of this study, like hooks (2001), established that children need to receive love thru guidance and care. They also established that children need to receive love through affection or physical touch and that teachers can offer this type of nourishment.
Showing affection, however, brings its challenges to teachers at a time when people are anxious and worry about “children’s (sexual) safety” (Jones, 2004, p. 367). Similar to Jones’ (2004) findings, early childhood educators in this study recognized that if they physically touch a child, they might be subjected to a lawsuit. Recognizing the importance that receiving love has for the children, the participants offered the following suggestion for early childhood educators: let the children and their parents know who you really are; let them know what you do with the children; and let them know how you relate with their offspring. This finding is similar to that of Jones (2004) that suggests that teachers look for visibility in their interactions with children to show and confirm their innocence.

Building community, which the participants identified as a way to tend to the spirit in the classroom (1994), implied for them nurturing the relationships with the parents as well. The participants communicated constantly with the parents. They greeted them and initiated short conversations about their children every time that the parents came to the school. The communication was extended in different ways in the two different schools. These included the opportunity to hear the preschoolers’ voices in internet, newsletters, and assignment folders, informing the concepts and skills to be considered in the lessons. These means included, also, celebrations of cultural festivities.
The findings suggest that another alternative to tend to the spiritual dimension in the classroom is through recognizing, validating and fostering the potential of the children. The early childhood educators also indicated that they tend to the spirit of their students when they welcome, respect and validate their different ideas. They indicated that other ways to do this were related to “time, space and opportunity”. This implied a classroom environment characterized by collaboration, negotiations, co-responsibility, laughter and humor. In addition, it implied the provision of opportunities for dialogue, exploration, experimentation, music, drama, story telling and projects. It entails the provision of a variety of quality materials in a classroom that is organized and clean and that is inviting for the children and their teachers. Placing too many students in the same classroom should be avoided, as a way to allow the teachers to be attentive to each child. These findings offer concrete constitutional ways that early childhood educators identified as being in harmony with tending to the spirit in the classroom.

Haynes (1999) affirms that to foster spirituality through the ways of an institutionalized religion is expected within the context, for example, of a Christian school. He also talks about the neutrality that teachers in the public schools need to profess regarding religion. In this study the early childhood educators said that within religious educational settings,
fostering spirituality is expected and fostered. They also indicated through their responses that in non-religious settings teachers need to tend to the spirit in ways congruent with the First Amendment. The educators working, for example, in the Christian school integrate the Bible across all subject areas. They integrate elements of a definition of spirituality beyond religion, as well. The educators working in a non-religious school focused on a broad notion of spirituality beyond religion, even when their spirituality was grounded in their religious experience. They seemed to be aware that the public school is not the place to proselytize about any religion. The findings point to a multiplicity of views of spirituality in early childhood educators. They also suggest that early childhood education teachers can negotiate the spaces where they could tend to the different spiritualities according to the particularities of the different educational contexts.

Palmer (1998) avers that as intellectual, emotional and spiritual beings, teachers need to nurture their inner life in order to educate. The findings of this study confirm this notion. One of the participants, for instance, shared that she, first, needs to equip herself before teaching. For this participant, meditating, listening to music and praying offers her alternatives to “equip” her. These alternatives are included as part of the
repertoire recommended in the professional literature to nurture her inner life (Miller, 2002; Palmer, 1998).

The category of reinterpreting ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom was the focus of this section. In the next segment of this chapter, I will offer an elaboration of the category of reinterpreting spirituality in relation to social justice.

Reinterpreting spirituality in relation to social justice

The findings offer a personal and collaborative definition of social justice that is interrupted and complex (Acrostic Personal meanings across social justice). The core words, phrases and sentences are charged with the wisdom that comes from the experience of each teacher. Early childhood educators referred to social justice as an ambiguous concept that every person defines differently. The definition integrated concepts associated with the relationships amongst the individuals and the group as a whole. Some of these are: fairness, equity, honor, respect and acknowledging differences. It incorporated a perception about how children express it. It also denounces the reality of injustices in the world by proclaiming there is no social justice, and that there is social justice for the rich and the powerful.
The professional literature points to an intrinsic relationship between spirituality and social justice (hooks & West, 1991; Dantley, 2005). hooks and West (1991) and Dantley (2005) established that spirituality is an instrument of identity and connection for the African American community. These researchers stated that spirituality is a source of resistance and energy amongst the African Americans in their struggle for the transformation of oppressions. Spirituality brings a sense of being as individuals and as a community that energizes and drives African Americans to resist and transform injustices (hooks & West, 1991; Dantley, 2005).

The participants of this study, attune with the notions of hooks and West (1991) and Dantley (2005), perceived an intrinsic relationship between spirituality and social justice. They pointed to an inherent relationship between spirituality and identity, and between spirituality and the connection with self and others. The early childhood educators indicated that spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice in that it provides the children a foundation in their early years regarding ways of being with self and other people. For the participants, spirituality paves the way toward social justice as the individuals learn in the early years that every person and group is important, and as they learn loving and caring ways of being and doing
with self and others. It paves the way toward social justice as the individuals learn that they are connected to others in the world and as they express this sense of connection by treating everyone with kindness, righteousness and fairness. Spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice as the individuals learn to welcome, respect and honor all peoples and the diverse perspectives that they bring to life.

These elements are connected to the cognitive and social-emotional development of young children. Thus, the results indicate that learning in the early years to better understand oneself, other people and their humanity, that learning to relate with others with kindness, righteousness and fairness is foundational, as this leads to social justice. Spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice as the individuals learn to welcome, respect and honor all people and their diverse perspectives (Tyson, 2003).

For the early childhood educators of this study, spirituality is linked to a sense of connection with the self and others, with a sense of respect, love and caring for others (hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005). The findings indicate that these teachers identify the previous attributes as essential and fundamental in education, in order to educate for social justice. The findings point also to the reality that for some people the contribution of
early childhood education, in this regard, is not as important, since for them, preschool education is “seen as a baby-sitting service (rather) than (as) an educational experience.” The next section will summarize the findings of this study.

Chapter summary

The findings of this study were organized through the following categories: teacher’s own spirituality, perceptions of other teachers’ spirituality, children’s spirituality, the place of spirituality in early childhood education and perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy. Other categories included: tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom, perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice, reinterpreting perceptions of children’s and teachers’ spirituality, and reinterpreting perceptions of the influence of spirituality and pedagogy. The last two categories of this chapter were: reinterpreting ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom and reinterpreting spirituality in relation to social justice.

The first question of this study was: How do early childhood education teachers perceive or define their own spirituality and that of their children? The answer to this question is summarized as follows. Congruent with the knowledge offered in the professional literature, the
findings point to spirituality as an elusive term, yet as essential in the life of
the individuals (Palmer, 1998; Tisdell, 2002; Purpel, 2002). They also
indicate that, like the results in Tisdell’s (2002) research with adult
educators, for early childhood educators, spirituality was greatly influenced
by their childrearing and their childhood religious experience. They
suggest that early childhood educators define spirituality reflecting a
holistic vision of the human being akin with that of Glazer (1999) who
describes the individual as an embodied subject with intellect and feelings
(Glazer, 1999).

In this study the participants linked spirituality to a sense of self-
identity as individuals and as part of a group. Like Dei (2003) they
perceived spirituality as part of who they are as historical and cultural
beings. Congruent with Dei’s (2005) notions, they viewed spirituality as
intrinsically related to who they are and what they do in the classroom.
For them, spirituality is related to connections with the self, God and
others, and to a sense of respect, love and caring for others as well
(hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005). Their perceptions of children’s spirituality
are similar to their perceptions regarding adult’s spirituality. The
perception of children spirituality adds the element of play (Waite and
Halstead, 2001), critical development and relationship with the spirituality
of the parents.
The findings confirm the notion that spirituality is unique in each person (Wenman, 2001), and brings up the idea that there are multiple spiritualities. Akin to Palmer’s perspective the findings suggest that the teachers can learn about each other and about their unique spirituality if they interact, if they talk to one another.

The second question of this study was: How do early childhood education teachers perceive that their spirituality influences their practice and their pedagogy in the classroom? The answer to this question is summarized as follows. Similar to the position of higher educators (Purpel, 1989; Palmer, 1998; Dei, 2002; Miller, 2002; Moffet, 1994, Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson, 2000; Astin, 2004) the teachers of this study indicated that spirituality is important in early childhood education. They also recognize that spirituality permeates education, since both teachers and children bring who they are. They, nevertheless, like, Kessler (2000) and Purpel (2002), talk about the exclusion of spirituality in education as a way to protect children’s rights and to prevent teachers from legal problems.

As in Tisdell’s research (2002), the findings of this research confirm that spirituality informs the choices and actions of many individuals. The participants of this study indicated that it informs what they do with the children in the classroom. Spirituality also influenced the decision to teach
for one of them. The findings point to the perception in early childhood educators related to the influence of spirituality in their pedagogy through the appropriation of hooks’ (1993) notion of loving education, rooted in an ethics of caring (Noddings, 2005).

The third question of this study was: In what ways do early childhood educators think they can foster and support the children’s spiritual development in the classroom? The findings offered alternatives that illustrate how early childhood educators tend to the spirit in their classroom. The early childhood educators referred to the notion of loving education with an ethic of caring, as proposed by hooks (1984) and Noddings (2005) when talking about how to tend to the spirit in the classroom. For them this includes loving and guiding the children, caring for them, building community with the children and their families, knowing one another, showing affection, recognizing and fostering the potential of each child and welcoming, respecting and validating different people and their ideas. For the early childhood educators, tending to the spirit is about providing time, space and opportunity so that the children develop their potential. They understand that when the teachers tend to the spirit through loving and caring education, the children demonstrate a better academic achievement. The findings suggest that even when early childhood educators’ spirituality was grounded in their religious
experience, they focused on a broad notion of spirituality negotiating the spaces for the different spiritualities, in order to tend to the spirit in constitutional ways within non-religious settings.

Regarding the last question: What do the teachers think about how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward the promotion of social justice?, the findings indicate that the teachers identify loving education, rooted in an ethics of caring (hooks, 1993; Noddings, 2005) as essential and fundamental in education in order to educate for social justice. The early childhood education teachers also find it imperative to provide opportunities to establish the foundation of the ways of being with self and other people in the early years. The participants of this study, attune with hooks and West (1991) and Dantley (2005), perceived an intrinsic relationship between spirituality and social justice.
CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

Fundamentally, if we see research and teaching
As both intellectual and spiritual endeavors,
Then the purpose of our research will be
To more fully love and serve human beings
And to serve life.
(Dillard, 2006, p. 69)

Introduction

In embracing research as an intellectual and spiritual deed which
aims to love and serve (Dillard, 2006) I ask myself: What did I learn from
this endeavor? What might the findings be telling me - us? What
contribution might these findings make to the community? What might
their implications and complications be for teachers, education
administrators, policy makers and teacher educators? The purpose of this
chapter is to synthesize these learnings.

This chapter presents the learnings, offering a reinterpretation of
the findings through the articulation of a theoretical framework that
emerges from the data. The theoretical framework integrates the four major themes across the data:

1. *Identity and connectedness with the self*
2. *Identity and connectedness with self and others in relation to social justice*
3. *Spirituality embedded in loving education*
4. *Multiple spiritualities negotiated within early childhood education*

The theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education that emerges from the findings situates spirituality as foundational for early childhood educators and for young children. It contextualizes spirituality in education within the parameters of identity, connectedness with the self and others and with love, fairness and equity. It also recognizes its subversive and significant place in early childhood education. It positions spirituality as a source of strength and resistance, as well as a tool for change. This framework considers spirituality in early childhood education as providing the individuals with a foundation for social justice. This foundation, rooted in the understanding of everyone’s humanity and the need for justice to permeate our decisions and actions holds many implications for teaching, researching and developing curriculum for early childhood education.
Identity and connectedness with the self

The findings evidenced an intrinsic relationship between identity, spirituality and teaching. Spirituality was linked with a sense of self as individuals and as part of a group. It was related to the childrearing of persons, to their inner life, feelings and thoughts. Dei (2002), like the participants of this study, asserts that when teaching and learning, teachers and students bring who they are. He explains that who the teacher is and who the student is are as important as what they do. The integrated, complex self is situated in a classroom with other complex selves, each one bringing their multiple layers of being, including the spiritual, along with their cultural and psychological beings among other layers (Dei, 2002). “The self (as identity and subjectivity) is itself linked to schooling and knowledge production” (Dei, 2002).

Education, however, usually focuses on the intellectual and ignores the multiple dimensions of a human being (Miller, 2002). An education that is disengaged from who the persons are fosters disconnection. It fosters disconnection with the self, with others in the world and with nature (Seymour, 2004). An education that promotes a sense of connection with the self, others and nature is an alternative “to a more human, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environment” (Seymour, 2004, p. 11). This is a serious implication that needs to be taken into account when
educators, education administrators, policy makers, and teacher
educators make decisions for classrooms, schools and early childhood
education programs.

The current focus in education on the intellectual, on testing the
children as part of a standardization process, as Linda M. McNeil (2000)
describes it, leaves behind a vision of the students as integral human
beings. It leaves behind possibilities for the students to know who they
are as individuals and as part of a community (Dantley, 2003).
Assessment has an important role in education. One of its roles is to
inform decisions regarding the teaching and learning process. Thus,
teachers need to continuously assess children, but education is more than
assessments and teaching for the tests (McNeil, 2000).

Teachers need to be able to use their knowledge and judgment to
make decisions about what would work best to facilitate effective teaching
and learning processes. Sonia Nieto (2000) argues that the emphasis on
testing inhibits teachers’ creativity and decision-making regarding what
would be best for the children in the classroom. McNeil (2000) found that
teachers changed their ways of doing in the classroom in an effort to focus
on the content and skills of the required standardized tests. If the self is
intrinsically connected with the educational processes and knowledge
production, the classroom interaction, the multiple curriculums, programs
and administrative structures in early childhood education need to acknowledge and foster this type of connection. Hence, an implication is that early childhood education experiences should consider and foster classroom pedagogies (congruent with the First Amendment) that tend to the spirit.

Identity and connectedness with self and others in relation to social justice

In this study teachers’ and children’s spirituality, as experienced in the classroom, was linked also with that sense of connectedness with other people and with ways of being with them. This connection and the ways of being, implied multiple elements that relate to social justice. Some of them are: trust, kindness, affection, community, the sharing of a positive spirit, an expectation that all children can learn, respect for all peoples and for the diversity they bring as well as fairness and equity.

The individual is accountable and responsible to the community. This sense of connection, not only with the self as individual, but also with the self that is part of the community, and the ways of being with others, seem to be the underpinning when the teachers experience spirituality as foundational in their lives and in the lives of the children. This may explain why the teachers perceive that spirituality, as it relates to the self, as an individual and as a social being, is foundational not only for them but also
for young children. This perception appears to be coupled with the conviction that, if early childhood education promotes that sense of connection, it has the possibility of contributing to the transformation of oppressions in society. In this manner, spirituality is not just a private, individual experience with the function of cultivating and reproducing alienation and a lack of social commitment.

Although the idea of connection with the self and others within the context of community may sound simple and innocent, it is not. It subverts the basis of a social, economic, political and educational system that is grounded in a Eurocentric vision that fosters individualism for the purposes of the marketplace. Lerner (2005) refers to this idea in the following way:

The alleged neutrality of contemporary education is a sham that covers up the systematic indoctrination of students into the dominant religion of the contemporary world: the slavish subordination of everyone to the idols of the marketplace and its “common sense” that all people should seek to maximize their own advantage without regard to the consequences for others, that all that is real is what can be validated through sense observation, that it’s only human nature for people to compete with each other and seek “individual excellence,” and that schooling should aim to promote economic success, which is available to anyone who has accumulated the requisite skills and who has the requisite intelligence. (P. 327)

Thus, spirituality turns out to be “a powerful tool in resisting miseducation” (Dei, 2002, p.131) and therefore becomes an ally for social
justice. As the results of this study indicate in the acrostic of social justice, this dynamic is experienced as incomplete, as interrupted and with contradictions. We might be working toward fairness and equity for all, but we are not there yet. This might explain two of the incidences of disconfirming data or negative case analysis. After a participant established that there was social justice for the rich and powerful, she denounced that there was no social justice. This participant also established that spirituality and social justice are connected, but then she established, as well, that they are not connected for some people. This sense of incompleteness and contradiction, however, could also be a source of energy to continuously challenge our commitment toward social justice in education and in all social institutions. It could even help us to be more aware of our need to work with others for the sake of the common good. Hence, we must think critically, and hold and confront the contradictions, including our own, as part of our struggle for the liberation of all oppressions (Freire, 1999).

Spirituality embedded in loving education

The teachers who participated in this study are conscious of the complications and challenges of tending to the spirit in the classroom (e.g., large numbers of students in a classroom, multiple and continuous
demands for educators, and risk of indoctrination). Yet they recognize its importance and they identified ways in which teachers tend to the spirit within educational contexts. They recognize that a holistic and relevant education cannot dismiss the spiritual dimension. Within the theoretical framework that emerged in this research, education is more than an intellectual enterprise. Education is about love (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006; Lerner, 2005). Loving education focuses on a holistic and relational learning approach where the individual learns how to live in community and “to act politically and intellectually” for the common good (hooks, 1993, p. 4). The individuals develop a sense of responsibility and accountability to the community. Their notion of community extends from the immediate to that of the world. Within this context the individual learns to challenge the self and others, as well as those structures that threaten the life and the wellbeing of each and every person. This is one way in which spirituality can serve social justice.

The results of this study also point out that loving education requires that teachers demonstrate their love and caring for the children, by their way of being and doing with the children and their families. People learn to love by being loved and by loving. To learn to love takes a person beyond reading about it. Lerner (2005), like the participants, indicates this notion: “A loving education requires teachers who are
capable of demonstrating love and caring in their own being in the way they interact with each other and with students." (p. 338). It is about treating one another with cariño. The concept cariño in Spanish implies tenderness, kindness, affection, special rapport and nurturance. It implies actions and behaviors oriented from the mind and the heart. The framework that emerged in this study includes this vision, where knowing one another, trust, caring, kindness, honesty, collaboration, respect, affection and working together with the tensions of diversity, are essential elements of early childhood education that contribute to the learning processes. The participants established, like Nel Noddings (2005) that the nurturing attitude and behavior of teachers influence the development of an ethic of caring in children. Again, this ethic of caring not only adds to the learning process, but also establishes the foundation for social justice. How can a society be just if the people don’t learn about social responsibility, if the people are not caring with one another? For that reason, the ethics of caring is an alternative to inform and help shape other ways of being and doing in early childhood education beyond the traditional Eurocentric view, which negates the self and the community. Within this ethic of caring, the community in the classroom recognizes the boundaries of the relationships when it comes to showing affection. This seems to be a critical issue that needs to be taken into
consideration without being naïve. The possible complications that physical interactions may bring to teachers “in an era of anxiety about children’s (sexual) safety” cannot be denied (Jones, 2004, p. 367). The teachers in this study recognized that if they physically touch the children, they might be subjected to a lawsuit. At the same time, they recognized the importance of loving the children by respecting, caring and sharing affection with them. As teachers assume the complexity of this type of interaction, it seems to be of great importance to keep in mind what the participants suggested: let the children and their parents know who you really are, and what and how you relate with the children. These are offered as words of wisdom coming from their experience, and not as prescriptions. Neither are they the only alternatives for dealing with the complexity of the situations that may arise, as the community in the classroom engages in affective interactions. The previous finding is similar to another in Jones’ (2004) work: that teachers search for visibility in their interactions with children as a way to demonstrate and validate their innocence.

Multiple spiritualities negotiated within early childhood education

The research findings implicate that there are multiple definitions of spirituality that coexist in early childhood education. They indicate that
teachers have multiple coexisting constructions of spirituality and that they can negotiate the spaces for these constructions. Teachers working in a non-religious setting, for example, do not necessarily impose their religions in the classrooms, and seem to be aware of the importance of negotiating with the children and their families about what would be relevant and pertinent as part of the educational processes. That educators bring their spirituality to the classroom by bringing their selves is inevitable and necessary if we aim for authentic educational processes. This does not necessarily imply the imposition of a particular religion. The participants’ notions of spirituality were rooted in their experiences. Although spirituality for them was grounded in their Christian faith, it was also related with their childrearing and other broader elements such as identity, inner life, feelings, thoughts and connection with other human beings. The participants’ ways to tend to the spirit in the classroom were not necessarily exclusive of a particular religion, except for those referring to the Bible within the Christian school. The participants seemed to be aware of the challenges that come when having multiple perspectives that co-exist and that are valid. They were also aware of and valued the opportunity for the growth that this represents.

The preceding findings lead us to reflect that a core issue for spirituality in early childhood education, then, seems to relate more with
diversity than with spirituality itself. If schooling fosters sameness and uniformity (McNeil, 2000) for the purposes of standardization of knowledge, ways of being, thinking and doing, as a participant pointed out, then spirituality in this context will be considered a problem or a threat if we do not have an encompassing, standard definition. Nevertheless, each person who participates in the schooling processes has different experiences and notions of spirituality and they bring these with them to the classroom. If the classroom is viewed as a community, homogeneity cannot be the rule. Homogeneity destroys the possibility of community through dogmatic imposition, through establishing exclusively valid ways of life (hooks & West, 1991). This includes the imposition of one exclusive vision of spirituality, being that religious, or not religious.

When I began the research process, I was worried that while I wanted to focus on non-religious conceptions of spirituality, the basis for the participants’ spirituality was religious. This was true for the participants working in the Christian setting, as well as for those in the non-religious setting. Then, as I listened to them and observed them working with the children and the parents, the following became evident: the educators were able to negotiate the space for their multiple constructions of spirituality without imposing their own particular religion. They were aware of and focused on elements of spirituality that are not
particular to religions and they welcomed and respected the different spiritualities of the children and their families. An important point here is that they did this while acknowledging where they, themselves, come from. They did not need to pretend that they come to school and teach within a spiritual vacuum.

Instead of acting out of fear and just dismissing spirituality as a shortcut to prevent the challenges that come with it, school administrators, policymakers and teacher educators can focus on offering opportunities to prepare and support teachers with regard to spirituality and diversity. One of the participants offered this recommendation as she identified that sometimes teachers come into conflict with the law for lack of knowledge concerning spirituality in the classroom. What the individuals bring, together with their uniqueness, goes beyond personal or established religions. Learning how to make the most of the multiple opportunities with diverse persons, cultures, ideas, ways of being, thinking and doing in the classroom helps to foster the potential of the individuals and of the communities (Dei, 2002). It also allows for the production of counter-knowledge and of ways that defy and can help to transform the dominant values in society, (and which are fostered in the school), that maintain injustices because they are at the service of the economy and not of the wellbeing of all peoples (Lerner, 2005).
The results of the study invite us to welcome and acknowledge spirituality in early childhood education as part of a holistic approach to education. The teachers seem to recognize that independently of the intentions and of the awareness of educators, administrators, and policy makers, as well as the structures that may limit tending to the spirit in the classroom, spirituality permeates education. Again, it happens within a complex reality of its rejection within the context of public education. This could be interpreted as a voice of resistance in an educational system that focuses, exclusively, on the intellectual development, while disengaged from the whole person. Early childhood educators recognize that teachers and students bring themselves to the classroom, and, consequently, they also bring their spirituality. They recognize that spirituality is woven into their lives, and acts as an energy that strengthens them, and moves and guides them. They view spirituality as embedded in the daily activities realized in the classroom. The findings suggest that even when spirituality is not openly recognized and fostered in the setting of non-religious education, it doesn’t preclude its influence in the educational processes.

During the research process, the dialogue about spirituality provided opportunities to share and to deepen reflections about the topic. The dialogical dynamic about spirituality seemed to provide space for self assessment about the ways of being and doing with the children, parents
and colleagues. It did not turn out to be an activity of religious proselytism, as some may fear when talking about spirituality. It served as a tool to challenge personal and collective ideas as well as behaviors. This result of the study implicates that dialogue (including dialogue about spirituality) may be an effective tool to help teachers (and researchers) in their assessments and in the transformation of their way of being, thinking and doing in their classroom. The teachers also seem to integrate it as part of their negotiations with the parents regarding what spiritualities to bring in, and in those ways which are congruent with the First Amendment. A question that comes to mind as I reflect on this implication is: What is needed personally and structurally to foster and support these types of dialogical interactions between the teachers, and between the educators and the families of the children?

Implications:

1. Recognizing that for many individuals, their spirituality is grounded in religious experiences, all the members of the school community need to confront possible biases with organized religions, as well as to validate these types of experiences in order to reach out to those who share other ways of thinking and doing.
2. In view of the fact that the individuals are embodied subjects with an inner life, the early childhood education experiences should consider and foster classroom pedagogies that tend to the spirit and that are in compliance with the First Amendment.

3. Early childhood educators, administrators and policy makers should recognize that there are multiple spiritualities that coexist in the classroom. They need to openly and creatively negotiate the space of these spiritualities with the students and the families of each particular classroom, keeping in mind the stipulations of the First Amendment.

4. Since a holistic early childhood education require teachers who welcome and honor diversity and that nurture their spirit as well as that of their children, teachers’ hiring policies should integrate criteria related to the spirit.

5. Given that spirituality is fundamental in the development of young children, and that many teachers within the public school system are afraid to consider spirituality as part of the teaching and learning processes, early education programs should provide experiences to prepare teachers as to how to tend to the spirit in the classroom in ways congruent with the First Amendment.
6. In an effort to foster a holistic education for the whole child and in an effort to educate for social justice, teacher educators, early childhood educators, administrators and policy makers should consider the notion of loving education, rooted in an ethic of caring, when developing curriculums and policies and when designing educational reforms.

7. Given that spirituality is fundamental in the lives of people and that the opportunities to dialogue about it provide spaces for self-assessment and growth, the school community should engage in this dynamic in an effort to improve the ways of being, thinking and doing in the classroom.

Recommendations for future research

The topics of spirituality and spirituality in relationship with social justice have not been explored much within the early childhood education field in the United States, as yet. This study was done with the hope of raising more interest about these topics within our field. I recommend that we, as early childhood educators, continue to engage in the exploration of these topics. For future research, I suggest that we consider integrating more diverse educators in terms of religious and non–religious backgrounds, as well as of race, ethnicity, social class, abilities, sexuality
and gender. I suggest the consideration of more diverse educational settings as well. It would be of great interest to study early childhood education programs that openly welcome spirituality outside the realm of religions and to document how this happens. Other studies can be designed and implemented around the idea of how we approach spirituality in an interview process in a way that is protected by the First Amendment. This type of research has the potential to contribute to the creation of hiring policies for teachers.

This study focused on the perceptions of the teachers. It would be very important to study the children, as well, with their particular constructions of spirituality. It seems that the foundations for social justice are fostered as part of early childhood education. It would be a tremendous contribution also to study whether the young children really develop, as part of their education, that sense of connectedness with self, with others and with nature, which characterizes spirituality. If they do, another inquiry could be made around what happens with that sense of connectedness later in life. Other topics of inquiry may include the knowledge and skills related to social justice as it manifests itself in the development of young children, which includes children from birth to third grade.
Other studies can be done to investigate how teachers and parents negotiate the spaces for the multiple constructions of spirituality within the educational contexts. Related to the topic of dialogue about spirituality as a tool for self-assessment, transformation, and negotiation, I recommend also exploring what teachers and parents need (personally and structurally) to facilitate this type of dialogical interaction.

A finding in this study, suggests that teachers search for visibility in their interactions with children as a way to demonstrate and validate their innocence with regard to any accusation of sexual abuse. Alison Jones’ (2004) research in New Zealand also suggests that innocent or not innocent, “even in public view, no teacher can be immune to accusation” (p. 372) paradoxically. This is a topic that can be studied in the United States.

Epilogue

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out. (Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 38)
As I extend my reflection regarding the constructions about spirituality in early childhood education Lorde’s (1984) words of wisdom echo in my heart. The theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education that emerged in this work reconstructs what seems to me as “old and forgotten” ideas from our interior that we need to recapture and “try out” (Lorde, 1984). Nothing about it seems new to me, yet it seems to offer possibilities for contributing to the continuous renovation of early childhood education.

Talking about a theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education may sound incongruent when one intends to break with dogmatic impositions of all kinds. This framework is offered, recognizing its particular contexts and circumstances that help shape and reshape dynamically multiple interpretations. It is offered within a notion of “theory as a story or narrative operating as an open system of ideas that can be retold and reformulated” (Hill-Collins, 1998, p. 200). The process of writing the research itself has been a process of retelling and reformulating, moving continuously into new interpretations, and constructing with the participants new meanings. From what I know, this process has only begun… The readers and re-tellers are welcome to
participate in this dynamic. “For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (Lorde, 1984, p. 39).
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APPENDIX A

ACCESS REQUEST
Dear ____________________:

I am Lisandra Pedraza, a student at the Ohio State University. As part of my requirements to complete my doctoral program in early childhood education I am working on a research about spirituality in education. The aim of this letter is to request your authorization to realize this research with teachers from your school. The purpose of this study is to explore with preschool and elementary school teachers, their understanding of children’s spirituality and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. Another aim of the study is to search further how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice. These are important topics when we consider the education of the whole child above and beyond the intellectual development as well as when we consider the need to contribute toward a more just society. I have found that there is not much work done in the United States regarding these topics in the early childhood education field.

This will be a qualitative research. The teachers will be asked to collaborate in different types of interaction that include informal conversations and interviews. The qualitative nature of study requires also frequent observations in the classroom. I plan to begin the research by November 01, 2005 and to complete the data analysis by April 15, 2006.

I am sure that that the findings of this research will benefit your school. By exploring teachers’ understandings of spirituality, the ways in which it influences their teaching and the means to nurture it in the classroom, we create other possibilities to work toward an education that attends to the whole child. Thus, the participants from your school may evidence this in their teaching. By exploring how spirituality relates to social justice in early childhood education we focus on educational practices that contribute toward just educational experiences with the possibility to transform not only the individuals but society.

You may contact me at (xxx) xxx–xxxx or my advisor, Dr. Cynthia Tyson, at (xxx) xxx – xxxx, if you need any clarification regarding this study. Thank you in advance for the opportunity to learn from your teachers.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Tyson, Principal Investigator
Ohio State University Associate Professor

Lisandra Pedraza, Co-Investigator
Ohio State University Ph. D. Candidate
APPENDIX B

LAY SUMMARY
Lay Summary

I am Lisandra Pedraza, a student at the Ohio State University. As part of my requirements to complete my doctoral program in early childhood education I am working on a research about spirituality in education. The purpose of this study is to explore with preschool and elementary school teachers, their understanding of children’s spirituality and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. Another aim of the study is to search further how spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice. I have found that there is not much work done in the United States regarding these topics in the early childhood education field.

I am sure that that the findings of this research will be beneficial to you, to your school and to the society. By exploring teachers' understandings of spirituality, the ways in which it influences their teaching and the means to nurture it in the classroom, we create other possibilities to work toward an education that attends to the whole child. By exploring how spirituality relates to social justice in early childhood education we focus on educational practices that contribute toward just educational experiences with the possibility to transform not only the individuals but society.
I am asking you to participate in this research because I believe that your ideas about children’s spirituality and about how your own spirituality influences your teaching will help me better understand how this dimension could be nurtured within the educational processes. This study will benefit you offering a space where you will be listened to regarding a topic that is often a taboo in education. It will provide you and the rest of us involved in the research, the opportunity to learn from one another. These interactions may lead us to the construction of new understandings and meanings and to enjoy the sharing of deep issues that are so pertinent and critical in our lives. There is, however a risk, that sometimes talking about the inner life might not be comfortable for oneself, particularly when one does it in the work context. To minimize this risk during the interviews and informal conversations, you are encouraged to share only the content that you feel comfortable with and to disengage from the conversation when you feel that you need to protect your personal space. Your decision will be honored and I will not persuade you to continue talking when you choose not to do it.

As means to assure confidentiality and anonymity you will be asked to choose your pseudonym. I will not use your real name nor will I provide any information that may lead to identify you in any of my reports. Since I would like to have the interviews audio-recorded I would like your
authorization for them. I will always ask your permission before audio-taping. During these interviews I will take notes to remind me of our conversations. I will be the only one with access to these instruments. After finalizing this research all the data and tapes will be destroyed.

Throughout this study we will be interacting with one another for a considerable period of time. I plan to begin the research by November 01, 2005 and to complete the data analysis by April 15, 2006. I will go to your classroom every week, which will provide the opportunity for the interviews, to converse and exchange ideas, and to make observations. Your experiences and opinions will be most valuable. I will be eager to listen to your stories.

The process of this study will be an emergent one. Our interactions will inform the next step of the research. After each interview you will be asked to correct and edit the transcriptions. I will share the data with you and will ask you to give your insights about it. The same will be true concerning the analysis.

You are entitled to know that you can decide to discontinue your participation in this study at any time. This will not affect in any way your relationship with the Ohio State University.

If you have any question regarding this study or if you would like to know more about it, please feel free to contact me. My phone number is
(xxx) xxx – xxxx. My email address is: xxxxxxx You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Cynthia Tyson, for any clarification. Her office phone number is (xxx) xxx – xxxx and her email is xxxxxxx.

Thank you for your disposition to collaborate in this research.

Sincerely,

Cynthia Tyson, Principal Investigator
Ohio State University Associate Professor

Lisandra Pedraza, Co-Investigator
Ohio State University Ph. D. Candidate
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH
Consent for Participation in Research

I, __________________________, consent to participating in the study entitled: Spirituality in Early Childhood Education. Dr. Cynthia Tyson, Principal Investigator or her Co-Investigator, Lisandra Pedraza, has explained the purpose of the investigation, the procedures to be followed, and the expected duration of my participation. Possible benefits of the study have been described, as have alternative procedures, if such procedures are applicable and available.

I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to obtain additional information regarding the study and that any questions I have raised have been answered to my full satisfaction. Furthermore, I understand that I am free to withdraw consent at any time and to discontinue participation in the study without prejudice to me.

I understand that my confidentiality and my anonymity will be protected. My real name will not be used in any report of the study.

I have received the home phone number and the email address of the researchers, in case that I need to communicate with them.

Finally, I acknowledge that I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

Date: _________________________________

Signed: ____________________________________________

(Participant)

Signed: ____________________________________________

(Principal Investigator)

Signed: ____________________________________________

(Co-Investigator)

Witness: ____________________________________________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

1. What does spirituality mean to you?
2. What is your experience of spirituality in your own life?
3. How do you perceive spirituality in children’s lives?
4. How do you perceive that other early childhood educators define spirituality?
5. What is the space for spirituality in early childhood education?
6. Do you think that spirituality is important enough to be integrated into the educational processes? Why?
7. Is there any connection between spirituality and a holistic approach to education in the early years? If yes, explain how.
8. How do teachers bring the spiritual into the teaching processes?
9. How do you bring the spiritual dimension into the educational processes?
10. Is it difficult to bring the spiritual dimension to the educational processes? How? Why?
11. How does spirituality contribute to your sense of teaching?
12. What does social justice mean to you?
13. Is there any connection between spirituality and social justice? If yes, explain how.
14. How does spirituality in early childhood education pave the way toward social justice?