Investigating Spirituality Within Teaching in Two Early Childhood Classrooms: Enacting Spiritually Connective Teaching

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation study uses a multiple case study approach to examine the ways two early childhood educators who work in a school district in the Midwestern region of the United States enact elements of spirituality in teaching and learning. Relying on the intersection of sociocultural theory, the African concept of Ubuntu, and a definition of spirituality, I posit the concept, spiritually connective teaching, by focusing on interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections that emerge from the data from the two early childhood educators.

The findings of this dissertation study demonstrate how connections to learning are made visible in the two classrooms in the following ways: 1) Based on how the two educators plan their respective classroom spaces to facilitate the students’ relationships with each other; 2) Through the ways connections to self and others are present within the teaching philosophies of the two educators; and 3) Based on how these connections drive the ways the two educators teach from the heart and provide a compassionate presence for (and with) their students. Examples demonstrate how connections among students shape a sense of community that enables the spiritual presence to be embodied through a sense of belonging and a spiritual being. Connections among students create an environment that fosters empathy, which is a precursor for young children to enact a sense of social justice.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my children, Ashley and Michael, and also to my son by marriage, Todd, and my beautiful grandson, Avery. Goethe said, “treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.” You have treated me as though I were capable of reaching the stars. Because of you, I have. Your love and support fill my heart to overflowing and help my spirit soar.
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Table of Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................ii
Dedication....................................................................................................................iii
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................iv
Vita ............................................................................................................................v
List of Tables .............................................................................................................viii
Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Framework ..............................................1
    Considering My Personal and Professional Journey ..................3
    Research Questions .........................................................................................6
    Theoretical Framework .................................................................................8
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature .................................................................33
    Divisiveness in Education in the United States .........................38
    Spirituality in Education .............................................................................50
    The Development and the Role of Empathy .............................61
    Conclusion ...................................................................................................63
Chapter 3: Methodology .....................................................................................65
    Methodological Stance ...............................................................................67
    Case Study Research .................................................................................70
    Methods ......................................................................................................72
List of Tables

Table 1. Frequency of Terms Used Related to Community ....................... 139
Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

“The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty – it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.” ~ Mother Teresa

This dissertation employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the pedagogical practices of two female early childhood educators in their elementary classrooms in a midsize Midwestern city in the United States. In particular, the study focuses on the ways in which these two educators make explicit and meaningful the roles of spirituality in teaching and learning for themselves and in the relationships, or connections, they foster with and among their students.

Throughout this dissertation study, I pay close attention to how the two educators foster connections—that are spiritually driven—with their students, and how those connections impact the educators’ teaching and learning processes. Personally and professionally, I am invested in how connections within elementary classrooms are spiritually formed and sustained, especially because I value the ways people are connected one to another. In fact, connections have formed the most significant part of who I am and of how I value the relationships I have had and continue to have with people. I have been blessed with loving, nurturing, and supportive family and friends who have laid a solid foundation for my sense of self. This solid foundation, however, was created within a heteronormative environment (e.g., white, patriarchal, gender-determined contexts) in which I was both sheltered and unaware of the privileges
afforded to me because of my race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. As I pursued higher education, I immersed myself in the lessons from the courses I took—lessons about whiteness, privilege, power, racism, and marginalization. My interactions with people (e.g., university professors, peers, administrators, community and school representatives, etc.) who have a range of lived experiences encouraged me to further critique my view of self and the world.

As I continually deconstruct my view of self and world, I am made even more aware of how I am both implicated in, and impacted by, a sense of belonging and the pain of disconnection, particularly as experienced by people who have been historically marginalized in the United States and throughout the Diaspora. Because I am implicated in this tension that so many people feel—that of seeking a sense of belonging at the same time of feeling the pain of disconnection—I rely on my spiritual identity to question the larger meanings of belonging, connection, and disconnection in ways that rely on my personal (e.g., home/familial) and professional (e.g., school/academic) experiences.

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “belonging” to mean the human emotional need to be accepted as a member of a group. I use the phrase “pain of disconnection” to refer to a sense of isolation experienced psychologically and emotionally when there are short- or long-term obstacles that prevent acceptance. Additionally, I use the term “spirituality” to refer to the innate human need to seek meaning in life based on connections with self, others, nature, and with the transcendent.

These terms, as will be discussed throughout this study, require me to consider who I am and my own positionality in conducting research on spirituality from a sociocultural
perspective that relies on Africanist understandings of self. Admittedly, I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian female from the Midwestern region of the United States where this dissertation study was conducted. I was born, raised, and attended K-12 schools in a small rural (and primarily white) community, and I remained in this Midwestern region for all of my undergraduate and graduate education. And, I am invested in learning about how spirituality gets enacted—implicitly and/or explicitly—in the pedagogical practices of early elementary teachers. Engaging in this type of research requires me to consider my own personal and professional journeys. Thus, I begin here.

**Considering My Personal and Professional Journey**

My ongoing journey toward a spiritual self is two-fold in that it contains both the personal and the professional; my recognition of this is pivotal to my dissertation study. For such a long time, I kept my personal self, which includes my spiritual self, my faith, and my familial relationships separate from my professional self, which includes my role as a student and an educator. The plethora of experiences I have had—experiences that have come to shape who I am racially, spiritually, and educationally—encouraged me to reconcile the division that I created between my personal and professional identities.

Personally, I have experienced hate, racism, ignorance, humiliation, confusion, and anger as I supported my daughter through a bi-racial relationship, marriage, and parenting of a biracial child. For nearly two decades, my (white) daughter and her (Black) husband have encountered the ugliness of hateful comments from complete strangers and from family members. From the beginning of their relationship, they were purposefully excluded from events and gatherings, often being told that one of them was not welcome.
in the homes of family members. Many family members refused to acknowledge the existence of my now son-in-law, perhaps in the hopes that not recognizing him would suddenly result in his absence from my daughter’s life. These experiences continue to impact familial relationships. Additionally, I believe that racism is partially responsible for my divorce and becoming a single mother for the majority of my children’s lives. The division, separation, and acts of hate that racism causes is painful, and the manner in which these things have personally impacted me have made me aware of many of the larger issues of oppression and marginalization encountered by others. This awareness has made me both name and speak out against racism. Yet I did not always understand the connections between speaking out personally (e.g., experiencing racism with family and friends) and speaking out professionally (e.g., encountering racist behavior with colleagues).

Professionally, I get angry when a child is excluded from activities or is emotionally attacked within a classroom context because of differences that get associated with race, class, and/or gender. I experience tightness in my chest, welling up in my throat, and a racing mind of the things I should say or do in response. However, as an educator, I did not always know how to respond, for I had been acculturated to the “professional standard” of maintaining separation of church and state, and throughout my early teaching career, my understanding of this edict was to keep the faith that was foundational to my personal self out of my professional interactions.

It was not until I experienced an unbelievable encounter with an early childhood educator that I reached a level of frustration that haunts me to this day. In 2004, I was
leading a professional development training with a group of 15 in-service early educators who ranged in age, years of teaching experience, and the geographic location of their places of employment. However, they were all white, lower- to middle-class SES females—homogeneity was very evident. As we discussed issues of guidance in the classroom and providing options for children to practice socially acceptable behaviors, an older educator enthusiastically raised her hand to share an incident she had experienced in her classroom of 4-year-olds. Proudly, she stated that she had not forced a child to follow the directions of another adult who had asked the young white girl to sit in a certain spot during the morning group meeting. She shared that the young girl screamed in protest after being directed to sit next to an African American male classmate. According to the educator, the young girl pointed to her male peer and stated, “My Momma says they are filthy and to not go near them!!” The silence in the room as this educator shared the story was palatable. I was taken aback as I searched, frantically, for a response. Before I could respond, the educator continued, “I wasn’t about to make that precious little thing sit next to him. I know how her parents feel and I know it was not right to force her to sit there. She was so upset. I was so worried about her. I took her aside and calmed her down, then I let her sit in my lap on the other side of the group.”

Again there was silence, and this time, my lack of response shamed me deeply.

In reflection, I realize I was speechless in this awful instance as a result of my self-imposed separation of personal and professional identities. Without engaging in critical, reflexive questions, I kept silent my spiritual identity, voice, and sense of being in light of acts of marginalization and racism being reported by an educator. Since this painful
encounter, I have come to understand the need for me to be holistic in connecting my personal and professional identities, for they both create my spiritual being. It is within this holistic realm that I am empowered to address racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of injustice that marginalize and oppress people.

As I do this work of calling out and naming injustices, of examining practices in teaching and learning within early childhood classrooms, I rely, ever so strongly, on my spiritual self. It is Dillard (2006) who argues for the inclusion of the spiritual in all of our identities, both the professional and the personal. Additionally, in Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson’s (2000) discussion of a spiritual pedagogy, they highlight elements that address the re-connection of all parts of self that are “embedded” in a view of teaching as “a direct connection between purpose of pedagogy and the sense of self” and “an affirmation and an embrace of a pedagogical model that remains true to the individual and their soul” (p. 460-461). Dillard (2006) and Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson (2000) help me to understand the importance of nurturing a connection and re-connection to spirituality, particularly within one’s pedagogical practices.

**Research Questions**

While Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson (2000) focused on the presence of the spiritual in pedagogical practices within higher education, I am interested in examining the presence of the spiritual within early childhood education. As I reflect on the aforementioned example from a professional development training in 2004 and as I consider relevant research on spirituality in education, I believe it is important to turn the
gaze on the role of spirituality in the pedagogical practices of early childhood educators. Thus, this dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two participants’ early childhood classrooms?
2. How do the two early childhood educators/participants enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?
3. In what ways can a spiritual response within the pedagogical practices of the two early childhood educators/participants speak back to the marginalization of young children?

The aim of this dissertation is to explore the teaching practices of two in-service early childhood educators in search of ways they embody a commitment (named or unnamed) to their spiritual presence within their pedagogical practices and in their classroom communities. To do this work, I consider how teaching fosters interdependence in ways that include spiritual connections fostered within community contexts (Rogoff, Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). I believe in searching for the goodness of a pedagogy that is framed within the spiritual and that is related to the inclusion and definition of community. I chose to study two in-service early childhood educators in order to highlight the goodness in their pedagogy and their thinking about the role spirituality plays in their teaching. I am interested in the spiritual aspects of their teaching practices because I contend that an educator’s teaching practices (to include how they engage with students) can impact children’s spiritual development and their ideas regarding acceptance of difference, diversity, and social justice. The creation of spaces that fosters connections to self, others,
and the transcendent begins, I believe, with the spiritual aspects of teaching and with teachers setting the stage for children to engage in this work. This is the focus in which I am interested.

**Theoretical Framework**

For the theoretical framework used in this dissertation, intentional decisions were made to bring together two different perspectives: sociocultural theory and Ubuntu. In making connections between sociocultural theory—a canonic Western framing—and Ubuntu—an African concept—I am suggesting that the hybridization of the two mirrors the coming together of perspectives and ways of thinking that are echoed throughout this dissertation study on spirituality and early childhood educators. If the tenets of sociocultural theory, which are grounded in Eurocentric, paternalistic, Christian perspectives, can marry concepts from Ubuntu, which are grounded in the human experience for many who live by African traditions, the resulting theory would mimic the convergence of two ways of thinking and being. Similar to my own experience of the bringing together of my personal and the professional selves in ways that contribute to my spiritual self, the canonic traditions of sociocultural theory could potentially benefit from relying on concepts from the African tradition of Ubuntu. Specifically, two different voices (e.g., Western and primarily white; African and primarily Black) would be in dialogue with each other and could create a third space for rich dialogic exchange.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will examine the elements that shape the theoretical framework for this dissertation study. My theoretical framework, as described by Maxwell (2013), is both a coat closet (a framework to help me understand what I see) and
a spotlight (to help me shed light on relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed). As a coat closet and spotlight, the framework of sociocultural theory helps me to understand classroom practices and existing connections among teachers, students, and environments. I will discuss what sociocultural theory is and provide a brief overview of its historical roots and main tenets that guide this dissertation study. Relationally, the theory that undergirds the African concept of Ubuntu serves as a coat closet and spotlight, but in ways that allow me to explore the spiritual concepts of interdependence and connections within community contexts. I will define and offer a brief history of the concept of Ubuntu and its main tenets.

Then, I will discuss spirituality by defining the term, distinguishing it from religiosity, and highlighting the ways I employ the term spirituality in this dissertation. This focus allows me to then present the spotlight—that is, the merging of two theoretical perspectives (e.g., sociocultural theory and Ubuntu)—in relation to a definition of spirituality that helps me understand the relationship of spirituality to teaching and learning in early childhood classrooms. In this discussion, I will introduce my idea of spiritually connective teaching (SCT) and how I use this lens as a way to think about the research questions that guide this dissertation study.

**Sociocultural Theory**

Edwards (2005) defines sociocultural theory as “the culturally situated and socially communicated nature of knowledge and knowledge acquisition” (p. 38). The two major elements contributing to knowledge acquisition, according to sociocultural theorists, are social interactions and cultural contexts. In other words, a focus on sociocultural
perspectives considers the interactions of people and the cultural contexts in which people interact instead of the processes of maturation and biological factors that purportedly drive human development. According to Lim and Renshaw (2001), “descriptions of learning and development within a sociocultural framework, therefore, are accounts of changing patterns of engagement in collective activities and social practices, rather than descriptions of progressive developmental changes that occur within the individual” (p. 14). The emergence of sociocultural theory challenged the either/or binaries that have longed claimed that human development was either led by internal processes or conditioned responses.

Historically, sociocultural theory was first attributed to Lev Vygotsky (1978), a Russian theorist who believed that human development stems from relationships and social activities. Prior to the prominence of sociocultural theory, the sequence of theoretical stances regarding development and learning was theorized within dominant behaviorist (learning is external) and psychodynamic perspectives (internal thought, subconscious, relationships and emotions impact learning). In fact, Vygotsky’s contemporary, Jean Piaget, proposed a theory of cognition that stressed the importance of the interaction between maturation and experience in the formation of developmental skills (see Berk, 2013; Follari, 2007; Lascarides, & Hinitz, 2000; Morrison, 1998). The focus of Piaget’s work was on individuals’ developmental progression through encounters with materials, and not on people’s social interactions and cultural contexts.

The works of Bruner (1966, 1975, 1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) align with Vygotsky’s focus on the social context of learning and development, for they believe that
various social and cultural elements impact children’s learning. Whereas Bruner (1966, 1996) addresses the social context of the classroom and the role of reciprocal dialogue as modes for learning, Bronfenbrenner (1979) incorporates a broader view of how culture and interactions between different societal dynamics directly or indirectly impact learning and development.

Additionally, the scholarship of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Rogoff (1990, 2003) have deepened the application of sociocultural theory to more closely examine the relationships of the child within a community of practice and how the uniqueness of a child’s cultural experiences and engagements lead development and learning. Rogoff (2003) states the following:

In the emerging sociocultural perspective, culture is not an entity that influences individuals. Instead, people contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people. Thus, individual and cultural processes are mutually constituting rather than defined separately from each other. (p. 51)

Historically, sociocultural theory has focused on the environment and social interactions within the cultural context of the child as pivotal for development and knowledge acquisition. This portion of the theoretical framework for my dissertation study notes the important role of the classroom culture and social interactions, two foundational elements in creating connections for, with, and among students. In addition to culture and interactions, it is important to recognize the main tenets of sociocultural theory, for they help to deepen my understanding of the theoretical significance of this dissertation study and its research questions.
Vygotsky’s (1978, 1986) utility of sociocultural theory focuses on the social nature of learning within a historical, or sociohistorical, context. He frames the learning process as the interaction of children’s social experiences when they gradually acquire knowledge and various psychological tools from their community, with an emphasis on language as a tool that leads learning. Vygotsky (1978) believes communities operate by certain knowledge, practices, and beliefs about the way the world works that is unique to their historical perspectives. According to Vygotsky, a community’s practices and beliefs are built from the past—upon the foundation of previous generations that have transferred knowledge in the context of life within their community.

While Vygotsky (1986) argues that part of the process of learning and development included the internalization of knowledge, he also believes the process is transformational more so than internal. Practices and beliefs are transformed, demonstrated through evolving practice within sociohistorical contexts. In a modern example, practices and beliefs about western society’s communication via the telephone have evolved from using a stationary, or land line, version to the mobile options currently available. Merely internalizing the practice of communicating by phone is not sufficient in the historical context post-20 years of the emergence of the mobile phone. People have had to transform their knowledge to accommodate a myriad of technological changes, such as moving from a rotary dial, to a push-button style, to touch screen, to voice-activated, and to blue tooth technology.

The way this transformation of practices and beliefs occurs, according to Vygotsky (1986) is a two-part process that begins with interacting with others. He states:
Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. (p. 163)

Torres-Velasquez (2000) asserts that the sociocultural theory of learning and development is “based on the concept that human activities are situated in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbolic systems of representation, and are best understood in their historical context” (p. 69). Additionally, Palincsar and Scott (2009) summarize Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in the following way: “From this perspective, as learners participate in a broad range of joint activities and internalize the effects of working together, they acquire new strategies and knowledge of the world and culture” (p. 852). Sociocultural theory supports the idea that the environment matters and the cultural context of classrooms serve as conduits for meaningful interactions among children and adults. Such interactions can potentially transform one’s knowledge and understanding of the world.

Bruner (1975, 1996) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) build upon Vygotsky’s basic premise by focusing on the role of social and cultural contexts in the process of human development and knowledge acquisition. Bruner (1975) considers the impact of cultural elements such as poverty and the role of interactions with the caregiver in language use and motivational factors. Bruner and Bronfenbrenner contributed to the creation of the federally funded Head Start program, with Bruner serving as a consultant and advisor to the program development team, and Bronfenbrenner serving on the Head Start planning committee (Zigler & Styfco, 2010). Their research and involvement in Head Start contributed to how children learn, develop, and interact with others in cultural contexts.
and under a variety of conditions (e.g., poverty; etc.). It is Bruner (1996), too, who emphasizes the importance of classroom culture, dialogue, and language as essential in children’s learning processes. He notes the value of two-way communication, ongoing dialogues, and related assessment strategies from such encounters to guide instruction.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) presents his ecological systems theory regarding the many contexts or systems that interact and influence the development of a child over time. Aligned with Vygotsky’s concept of the impact of the passage of time, Bronfenbrenner argues that time is an important concept that promotes change and development. He notes the direct influence of entities and experiences closest to the child, such as the immediate family, in addition to the indirect influence of entities such as parental level of education, employment, economic conditions and societal norms that impact the life of the child.

The work of Bruner and Bronfenbrenner highlight the significant impact of the cultural context of the child within and beyond the classroom community and served to shape how sociocultural theorists later came to focus on children’s participation within school and out-of-school communities.

Insofar as participation is concerned, sociocultural theorists Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, and Goldsmith (1995) have made an important contribution. They contend that knowledge acquisition and development occur through participation within social contexts in ways that create shared, common understandings and that situate historical moments (e.g., prior and lived experiences) as impactful to human development and participation. Rogoff et al. (1995) note, “Instead of studying a person’s possession or
acquisition of a capacity or a bit of knowledge, the focus is on the active change involved in an unfolding event or activity in which people participate” (p. 55).

Furthermore, Rogoff (1990) suggests the importance of social interactions in the language of relationships, noting the innate actions of infants to position themselves near caregivers, which creates opportunities for learning to occur (p. 17). Rogoff (1990) asserts:

In this more inclusive approach, I think it is possible to encompass more of the daily activities in which children participate that are not explicitly designed to instruct, and to speak reasonably of the cultural differences in arrangements for children’s learning. (p. 16)

Rogoff (1990) supports the apprenticeship model as illustrative of the relationships and social interactions between the child and other people. She notes, “Hence the model provided by apprenticeship is one of active learners in a community of people who support, challenge, and guide novices as they increasingly participate in skilled, valued sociocultural activity” (p. 39). The process of becoming a participant in a social or communal activity is addressed in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) discussion of peripheral participation. Aligned with an apprenticeship model, legitimate peripheral participation, also referred to as situated learning, indicates the range and variation of engagement located within the fields of participation defined by a community. Lave and Wenger (1991) note that peripheral participation is about being located in the social world and describe it as, “the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, fully cultural–historical participants in the world” (p. 32). Lave (1996) argues:

Learning as noted from informal origins, as opposed to formal notions of education is about the process of becoming, movement toward change of learning in ways of
participating, ways in which participants and practices change. Mainly people are becoming kinds of persons. (p. 157)

In summary, some of the main ideas shared by the aforementioned sociocultural theorists include the identification of learning that occurs between planes or systems involving the social world and cultural context (as opposed to the child learning in isolation). Sociocultural theorists (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1986) note the impact of history and prior experience, and they value dialogue and encounters with people, materials, and experiences within community contexts. Given this emphasis on interactions, social and cultural contexts, and knowledge, I believe a focus on the African concept of Ubuntu will expand what is known about learning and being. In the following sub-section, I define Ubuntu, provide a brief historical overview of the concept, and discuss its main tenets. From there, I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of spirituality, spiritually connective teaching, and with insight into how I arrived at, and will use, these concepts in this dissertation.

Ubuntu

For the purposes of this dissertation, I am suggesting that the concept of Ubuntu adds a spiritual element to understandings and applications of sociocultural theory. I note many similarities between sociocultural theory and portions of Ubuntu, and I use Ubuntu to extend sociocultural theory in ways that address the whole child and that are inclusive of the spiritual.

Ubuntu is an African concept that addresses personhood and being. It is important to note that there are many cultures in Africa and predication of a tradition or concept as African does not connote homogeneity of cultures. As reflective of the African
cosmology indigenous practices and beliefs were relegated as inferior in the process of colonization which, as Viriri (2010) notes as “resulting in the invention of a European-made Africa”. (p. 29) This version of Africa involved a view of the continent and its indigenous population from a European world view. Ubuntu is a concept believed to be native to South Africa, but this is translated through the Westernized view of history. For the purpose of this dissertation, the use of African as reference of the origin of Ubuntu is meaning within the geographic sense to mark out Africa as different from Europe, Asia, North and South America.

Ubuntu is attributed to the South African way of living in the world as part of the collective. The word Ubuntu has been traced to the Sub-Saharan African language, Bantu (Battle, 2009). Variations of the word Ubuntu can be found in many languages native to South Africa and other countries whose common language is in the Bantu family (Battle, 2009; Mkhize, 2008; Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Swanson, 2009).

Defining Ubuntu is complex as its etymological cornerstone is denoted as –ntu, translated as being, and the prefix ba- as the plural for humanity, which is another way of stating that Ubuntu addresses personhood (Battle, 2009, p 2). According to Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005), “Ubuntu is a term which derives from muntu, meaning a person, a human being. It defines a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person. Ubuntu is not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself” (p. 217).

Concepts attributed to various discussions of Ubuntu include interdependence, relationships, respect, value, belonging, empathy, and care (Battle, 2009; Mkhize, 2008;
Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005; Swanson, 2009). In their discussion of Ubuntu, Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) state:

All the definitions cited imply that *Ubuntu* is more than just a manifestation of individual acts. Rather, it is a spiritual foundation; an inner state, an orientation, and a good disposition that motivates, challenges and makes one perceive, feel and act in a humane way towards others. It is a way of life that seeks to promote and manifest itself and is best-realized or evident in harmonious relations in society. (p. 218)

Mnyaka and Motlhabi’s (2005) discussion points to the human element of spirituality and how spirituality serves as a connection between us all, particularly in relation to harmony, respect, belonging, and personhood. Their discussion asserts that these commonalities are what make us human and connects us across differences.

Ubuntu relates to a process of being and becoming human, and emphasizes the role of interdependence over independence. It involves finding one’s humanity in relation to other people and their humanity. As I think about the concept of Ubuntu, I consider how it relates to who I am (my own identity), given that I believe it is through my relationship with others that I come to know and understand myself (Battle, 2009). Knowing one’s self apart from the collective is not possible for me and for many other people, and in this way, Ubuntu emphasizes the human need to belong and be a part of a larger community.

According to Bishop Desmond Tutu,

We say a person is a person through other persons. We don’t come fully formed into the world. We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. (qtd. in Battle, 2009, p. 54)

Battle understands Tutu’s perspective as one that speaks to how humans seek unity because of their sense of connectedness—to other people, to the world, and/or to the image of God. The image of a higher being, according to Tutu, situates human beings as
part of a creator that is in us all and that seeks wholeness through unification. Tutu notes how acts of hatred, disrespect, and non-loving actions create division among humans and in communities in ways that separate us from a creator (p. 54).

While the understanding of being as connected to personhood and as connected to relationships between people and a higher being is a part of Ubuntu, it should be noted that this understanding is not exclusive to a particular faith, religious rite, or practice. The expectation is that the concept and uptake of Ubuntu signifies a way of life, an intricate part of one’s being, and a spiritual element that is not tied to specific practices or religions.

Additional examination of the concept of Ubuntu reveals that acknowledgement is given to the depth and breadth of how the concept is applied to various aspects of life (e.g., interpersonal communication, health, ethics, human rights, education and spirituality). For the purposes of this dissertation, I focus on the definition and application of Ubuntu in relation to how it carries educational meaning and serves as a vehicle of spirituality in teaching and learning. Therefore, the ways Ubuntu is discussed and taken up in this dissertation do not represent Ubuntu’s magnitude in all aspects of human interactions and in life. Instead, I focus on how Ubuntu promotes the following factors within a spiritual dimension of teaching and learning: an ethic of care, justice, and community building.

An ethic of care is evident in Ubuntu in its moral aspects. Mungai (2009) discusses her experience growing up in Kenya and the ways she “experienced” Ubuntu through the concern, care, and hospitality she saw demonstrated on a daily basis by her family and
community members. She states, “A person who acts with Ubuntu utilizes moral virtues to act humanely to others, thereby improving the quality of life within the community” (p. 41). Mkhize (2008) discusses how demonstrating care for self and others is a vital element of Ubuntu in relation to maintaining harmony in the life of the community and individual. Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005), noting how care is an important component of Ubuntu, state:

Ubuntu also deals with many feelings of compassion, related to making life more humane for others; especially to care for the disadvantaged, namely the sick, the bereaved, the poor and strangers. There is a concerted effort and commitment to advance their interests. These acts help to ‘bring sense not only to one’s own life but also to the lives of others. (p. 37)

Also, Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) argue that hospitality, especially toward strangers, is a significant element of Ubuntu that serves as both “a public duty” and “a sacred duty” in interacting with “strangers where the honor of the community was at stake” (p. 230).

Battle (2009), again quoting Bishop Desmond Tutu regarding the role of care as part of Ubuntu, indicates that “This is how you have Ubuntu—you care, you are hospitable, you’re gentle, you’re compassionate and concerned.” Tutu continues, “go forth to demonstrate your Ubuntu, to care for them, to heal them especially those who are despised, marginalized” (p. 54).

Additionally, a variety of scholars (Battle, 2009; Mkhize, 2008; Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2005) discuss the role of justice in Ubuntu and how actions that degrade, humiliate, exclude, threaten, harm, or destroy others are not aligned with the concept of Ubuntu. Battle (1997; 2009) discusses how Ubuntu was pivotal in the response to Apartheid utilized by Bishop Desmond Tutu, noting how the oppression and harm done
to others were both felt and experienced by those connected through the spirit of Ubuntu. According to Tutu, “We are made for togetherness, we are made for family for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence” (qtd. in Battle, 1997). Battle (1997), himself, also notes that Tutu claims that the idea of “togetherness” is, for the most part, “why apartheid and all racism are so fundamentally evil for they declare that we are made for separation, for enmity, for alienation, and for apartness” (p. 65).

One way that Ubuntu addresses justice relates to how a person embodies dignity and value, and is deserving of respect within a community. Additionally, Ubuntu addresses forgiveness as a necessary part of being human. Harmful actions are not embraced within Ubuntu and those guilty of such are to be granted forgiveness in a process of reconciliation (Battle, 1997; Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2005). Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) describe this as the “kind of justice [that] seeks to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence” (p. 226).

The concepts of community and community building are foundational to Ubuntu. The individual is recognized for his/her own personhood, but only within the community. Their identity is tied to the role the community has assigned to the individual (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). Outside the community, one is incomplete because one cannot be a human being alone, but in community with others (Battle, 2009; Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2005; Mungai, 2009; Shutte, 2008). Mnyaka and Motlhabi (2005) describe this as follows:

Everyone belongs and there is no one who does not belong. The sense of belonging is necessary, important and central in Ubuntu. One belongs or finds community through
being a neighbor, a friend, a relative, a clansman, a member of a tribe or of a nation, and so on. (p. 221)

The role of the individual as related to community in the concept of Ubuntu could be summarized as the isolated self versus the self in relation to others. Interconnectedness fostered through community in Ubuntu fosters the knowing of self. In this way, specific elements of Ubuntu that facilitate this dissertation study include an ethic of care, a sense of justice, and community building. Intersections of ideas between sociocultural theory and Ubuntu include the advocacy for inclusion, connections and relationships, and stressing the importance of community as a vehicle for connections and for development.

In considering the theoretical framework for this dissertation, these elements can be utilized within the union of sociocultural theory and Ubuntu to examine pedagogical practices of early childhood educators in ways that seek to name how elements of spirituality can be made visible. In order to clarify this latter point, I will now provide the definition of spirituality used in this dissertation. This allows me to explain how the triangulation of similar elements housed within sociocultural theory, Ubuntu, and the definition of spirituality provide a nuanced theoretical way to consider how the two early childhood educators in this study enact spirituality in their pedagogical choices.

**Spirituality**

Much of the academic literature regarding spirituality includes an attempt to define it (Astin, 2004; Cozart, 2010; Mabud, 1992; Nye and Hay, 1996; Paris, 1995; Shahjahan, 2004; Vogel, 2000; Wallace, 2000; Watson, 2000; Wright, 1997). Defining spirituality often becomes complicated because many believe that it is intrinsically bound to religiosity. Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) offer a humanistic
definition and perspective of spirituality that emphasizes that religion does not hold the monopoly on spirituality, but that spirituality is grounded in human and universal elements (p. 8). Their objective was to identify a definition that neither denies a connection to religion nor embraces an anti-religious stance. The humanistic definition formulated by Elkins et al. (1988) states that spirituality is “a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate” (p. 10).

This dissertation operates under a larger understanding of spirituality that is taken from my review of related literature on this topic. Elkins’ et al. (1988) describe four major assumptions that are foundational to defining spirituality:

1. There is a dimension of human experience which includes certain values, attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, emotions, and so on – which can best be described as a “spiritual dimension” or “spirituality”.

2. Spirituality is a human phenomenon and exists, at least potentially, in all persons.

3. Spirituality is not the same as religiosity, if religiosity is defined to mean participation in the particular beliefs, rituals, and activities of traditional religion. Therefore, it is possible for persons to be “spiritual” even though not affiliated with traditional religion.

4. By means of theoretical and phenomenological approaches, it is possible to define and describe spirituality and to develop an approach to its assessment.
While this dissertation does not address the assessment or measurement of spirituality, it does explore ways to describe and define it. In the following discussion, I will briefly address the universality of spirituality, the distinctions between spirituality and religiosity, and how spirituality addresses connections and relationships. I will end this section with the definition of spirituality that will be used in this dissertation.

Berdyaev (1939), Chaffers (1994), and MacQuarrie (1972) note the universal traits of spirituality as they each trace the origin of the word to its Latin root, *spiritus*, meaning “the breath of life” (as cited in Mattis, 2000, p 103). The implication is that spirituality is life giving and translates to all humans. By offering a broad definition and understanding of spirituality, recognition of its human and universal nature removes the boundaries of specific religions, boundaries that are often experienced as exclusive. Both Abraham Maslow (1970) and John Dewey (1934) view spirituality as more basic than, existing prior to, and different from traditional expressions of religiosity.

Understanding the universality of spirituality is imperative to the inclusive element foundational to defining spirituality in the context of teaching and learning. Privileging a specific religious perspective as part of the definition of spirituality creates a hierarchy and a division in opposition to the goal of inclusivity. In an interview with Scherer (1999), Rabbi Harold Kushner offered the following:

Respect for the divine image in every single human being…that is a spiritual value. To believe that every person is fashioned in the image of God is not the dogma of any one religious faith, but a universal spiritual value. (p. 19)
The naming of this dimension of our shared humanity need not be aligned with any one religious practice to recognize the existence of spirituality. In addressing spirituality in the context of religion, hooks (2000) notes:

An individual does not need to be a believer in a religion to embrace the idea that there is an animating principle in the self – a life force (some of us call it soul) that when nurtured enhances our capacity to be more fully self-actualized and able to engage in communion with the world around us. (p. 13)

Continuing her discussion of the spiritual as universal, hooks (2000) describes how those who choose to recognize the existence of “a place of mystery in our lives where forces that are beyond human desire…guide and direct us” name it in diverse ways. According to hooks, “some people call this presence soul, God, the Beloved, higher consciousness, or higher power” (p. 77).

Similarly, the spiritual, for hooks (2000), is something that is within all individuals (“an animating principle”), even for those who choose not to name it or whose actions may demonstrate characteristics in juxtaposition to the spiritual. In his discussion of his work establishing the South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the height of apartheid, Desmond Tutu (1999) describes his belief about individuals enacting the horrors of oppression and violence against the people he sought to free. He asserts, “God does not give up on anyone, for God loved us from all eternity, God loves us now and God will always love us, all of us good and bad, forever and ever” (p 85). Speaking of forgiveness of our enemies in the framework of love, an element of the spirit, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2010) states there is an element of goodness in all mankind, even our worst enemies. King (2010) proclaims:
When we look beneath the surface, beneath the impulsive evil deed, we see within our enemy-neighbor a measure of goodness and know that the viciousness and evilness of his acts are not quite representative of all that he is. We see him in a new light...we know God’s image is ineffably etched in his being. (p. 45-46)

One of the common themes in the varied definitions of spirituality is the concept of consciousness: being aware of one’s self, others, and the world in which one lives (Astin, 2004; Dillard, 2006; Sarath, 2003; Shahjahan, 2005; Wallace, 2000). These values and awareness of one’s self and others address the importance of relationships and connections believed to be a vital part of spirituality. The notion that we are part of something larger than ourselves, intrinsic to the idea that we are connected to others as a part of our humanity, illustrates the focus on connections through relationships within the definition of spirituality (Ambrose, 2005; Astin, 2004; Battle, 2009; Bellous & Csinos, 2009; Dillard, 2006; Harris, 2007; Kumar, 2000; Niyozov & Punja, 2010; Palmer, 1999; Hanh, 2011; & Wane, Manyimo, & Ritskes, 2011). This aspect of spirituality entails the realization that in our connections to each other, we impact and are impacted by each other.

Building upon this foundation, Dillard’s (2006) notion that spirituality is a “conscious choice” toward relationships with a higher being and with others signifies the importance of our interactions (p. 41). Specifically, her focus on the value of relationships is echoed in many definitions of spirituality regarding connections to self and others. These qualities of connection and relationship are found in the following definition offered by Brene Brown (2010):

Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and
to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. (p. 77)

In keeping with the literature that privileges unification over divisiveness, the operating definition of spirituality for this dissertation is grounded in a humanistic perspective. Though with respect for culturally situated expressions of spirituality, for the purposes of this dissertation, spirituality is understood as a dimension universal to the human experience. The definition offered is from Palmer (1999) and was chosen based on its inclusivity and focus on connections. For this study spirituality will be defined as:

The ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos – with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive. (Palmer, 1999, p. 6)

The aforementioned definition of spirituality leads me to propose the concept of spiritually connective teaching, which is created as a tool for thinking about the data collected for this dissertation on spirituality in two early childhood classrooms.

**Spiritually Connective Teaching**

I propose the idea of spiritually connective teaching (SCT) because of the ways the following factors intersect: 1) the definition of spirituality used in this dissertation, 2) the elements discussed earlier in this chapter related to sociocultural theory, and 3) the concept and tenets of Ubuntu. The definition of spiritually connective teaching, therefore, emerged from the theoretical framework for this dissertation and where the common elements of connection emerge. I will now discuss how the element of connection was identified from the definition of spirituality, and the theoretical framework, specifically
the sociocultural theory and theory of Ubuntu to form the idea of spiritually connective
teaching.

The concept of connections is prevalent across definitions of spirituality examined for
this dissertation. Many definitions described spirituality as a form of connectedness,
characterized by qualities of relatedness and as being in relationship with one another and
all of life (Bone, 2008; Dillard, 2006; Kumar, 2000; Lindholm & Astin, 2008; Mattis,
2000; Mayhew, 2004; Rigby, 2005; Wane, 2011). Spirituality has been a topic of interest
not only in education, but also in business, social services, and the medical field,
especially nursing. In comprehensive reviews of the literature on spirituality and its
definition among the recurring conceptual components of spirituality, relatedness and
connections were encountered most frequently (Chiu, Emblen, Hofwegen, Sawatzky, &
Meyerhoff, 2004; Cook, 2004; Meezenbroek, Garssen, van den Berg, Visser, &
Schaufeli, 2012). Additionally, the connections discussed are in association with entities
such as self, others, nature and the environment, and that which is greater than self, or a
higher being. The categories of connections identified by Meezenbroek et al. (2012) of
interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal are used to organize the various examples
of connections in the following manner:

Interpersonal – connections in context of others and the natural environment

Intrapersonal – connections within oneself

Transpersonal – referring to a sense of relatedness to the unseen, God, or power
greater than the self and ordinary source (Meezenbroek et al., 2012, p 338).
Connections to self, or intrapersonal connections, are described by Astin (2004) as “our sense of who we are and where we come from” (p. 34), our understanding of our purpose and connection “with our own souls” (Palmer, 1999, p. 6). Connections to others, or interpersonal connections, are described as how we relate to other people and build relationships with one another (Astin, 2004; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Hay, 2000; Palmer, 1999). Transpersonal connections to a higher being, or the transcendent, are noted by Palmer (1999) as “the ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our own egos…with the invisible winds of the spirit” (p. 6).

Both sociocultural theory and the concept of Ubuntu share a focus on the relationship of individuals to themselves and others within the context of community. Theories within the sociocultural tradition stress the importance of relationships, or connections, that are made between individuals and others within their community, which are pivotal to human learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bruner, 1996; Lave, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1986). For sociocultural theory, the learner is viewed in the context of social interactions within “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Lave (1996) states, “Wherever people engage for substantial periods of time, day by day, in doing things in which their ongoing activities are interdependent, learning is part of their changing participation in changing practices” (p. 150). This statement is juxtaposed with the idea of formal education that prevails in many school settings in the United States, which could be described as “out-of-context” and detached. Formal education is based on instruction with learning built through abstraction and
generalization, which results in a general understanding. Therefore, informal education—as discussed by Lave (1996) as participatory within community, and as described by Rogoff et al., (1995) as participation in culturally organized activity—aligns strongly with the concept of community as discussed in this dissertation.

The concept of Ubuntu stresses interdependence within community as vital to being human. As Mnyandu (1997) notes, “Ubuntu is not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself” (p. 81). The connection with others within community according to Ubuntu is how individuals come to know themselves. Battle (2009) explains how identity is expressed in relationship to others as “a person depends on other persons to be a person” (p. 3). Other elements of interdependence as understood as part of Ubuntu include a need to be a part of something larger than ourselves as well as being able to be known by others. “We learn how to think, walk, speak, behave, how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human” (Battle, 2009, p. 54). The context of connections within the concept of Ubuntu go beyond facilitating a relationship with others with the goal of learning “how to get along”. The focus of the connections between individuals as noted in Ubuntu is to establish interpersonal connections and group harmony. The objective therefore, of connections within the context of Ubuntu is how to conduct a genuine, mutually rewarding interpersonal relationship (Hanks, 2008).

In consideration of the intersection of the definition of spirituality, sociocultural theory, and the concept of Ubuntu that form the theoretical framework of this dissertation study, the idea of spiritually connective teaching (SCT) emerged. This concept can be
visible in teaching practices that foster interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections. SCT produces an image of teaching that is focused on the forming and nurturing of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections. SCT recognizes the role of the educator as purposeful, demonstrating compassionate presence with students. SCT fosters connections between students in the notion of interdependence, demonstrating mutual respect for other and the greatness that lies within all human kind, in the form of the spiritual. In this dissertation the tool of spiritually connective teaching guides the data analysis, seeking how these two early childhood educators make meaningful the connections fostered in their pedagogy in the everyday interactions within their classroom communities.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss the basis for my argument for spiritually connective teaching as a response to the issues of divisiveness in education that originate from racial and class divisions that have existed in the United States for decades, and the more recent divisions caused by the focus on accountability and assessment in education. I will discuss the literature on spirituality in teaching and learning, specifically the contexts in which spirituality has been explored in education and how spirituality in teaching and learning is distinct from teaching that might be labeled “best practice.” I will conclude Chapter 2 with a discussion of the literature that supports the importance of the early years for the development of empathy as a response to marginalization of young children.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology employed in this dissertation, discussing the context of the study, and the methods used in data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, I present the findings of the study by highlighting lessons learned from observing and
interviewing the two educators. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of this study that emerge from the presented findings in ways that lead to possibilities for praxis.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

There are historical roots in the field of early childhood education tied to spirituality. During the Reformation and Enlightenment periods, philosophers Comenius, Pestalozzi, and Froebel wrote of their beliefs about young children and learning as strongly tied to the spiritual nature of the child (Feeney, Christensen, & Moravcik, 1996; Follari, 2007; Graves, Gargiulo, & Sluder, 1996; Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000; Morrison, 1998).

In his philosophy of education, *The Great Didactic*, Comenius (1638/1910) states that the purpose of educating the child is threefold: 1) faith and piety, 2) uprightness in respect to morals, and 3) knowledge of language and of arts. According to Lascarides and Hinitz (2000), Comenius believes, “Greater care must be taken for the soul, which is the highest part of the child’s nature” (p. 41). Additionally, Lascarides and Hinitz (2000) argue that Pestalozzi’s philosophy of early childhood, as articulated in a series of published letters in 1819, held in high regard the importance of faith, and his belief in the mother as the child’s first teacher, as “qualified by the Creator” (p. 60). Pestalozzi believes that the child’s “moral nature” is a priority that must be developed as early as possible, and he encourages mothers to “develop in the child the innate principle of love and faith” (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000, p. 61).

Froebel (1826/1887) refers to his philosophy of education in terms of connectedness, connections of all things in life including learning, and connections with God. Lascarides
and Hinitz (2000) state, “The spiritual development of man was Froebel’s highest priority in education. The emphasis on interconnection and unity of life stemmed from his view of Divine unity” (p. 94). It must be noted that historically, there has been attention brought to the need for a humanistic perspective on spirituality in early education through the notion of unity, attention to connections, and stressing the importance of a holistic view of the child. In this dissertation, I call for the need to assert this humanistic perspective on spirituality through a more inclusive lens of spiritually connective teaching (SCT), which is a blend of the Western Sociocultural theory, the African worldview of Ubuntu, and the humanistic definition of spirituality offered in this dissertation. The SCT perspective emphasizes the role of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transpersonal connections within spirituality, connection to self, connection with others, and connection to nature and a Higher Entity. The notion of connection appears in much of the literature regarding the definition of spirituality.

In two separate studies regarding the creation and the review of surveys to measure spirituality, Elkins et al., (1988) and Meezenbroek et al., (2012) report the role of connection and the elements of spirituality that distinguish it from religion. Elkins et al. (1988) report the various stages in the development of their inventory instrument to measure spirituality and the emergence of nine themes or components of spirituality that frame their work. These components are: 1) a transcendent dimension, 2) meaning and purpose in life, 3) mission in life, 4) sacredness of life, 5) material values, 6) altruism, 7) idealism, 8) awareness of the tragic, and 9) fruits of spirituality. In their description of these components, Elkin et al. (1988) identify altruism as what connects humans to each
other, noting, “The spiritual person knows that ‘no man is an island’ and that we are all ‘part of the continent’ of common humanity” (p. 11). They describe the fruits of spirituality as having a “discernible effect upon one’s relationship to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate” (Elkin et al., 1988, p. 12).

Meezenbroek et al. (2012) review ten questionnaires that address spirituality as a universal human experience, evaluating them for criteria that address psychometric properties useful in the field of health research. In their review of the literature regarding definitions of spirituality, Meezenbroek et al. (2012) found the experience of connection and connectedness as important, recurring themes. They identify the types of connections as being experienced intrapersonally (with oneself), interpersonally (in context of others and the environment), and transpersonally (referring to the unseen, God, or a power identified as greater than self), noting these connections encompass various experiences common to humanity (p. 338). Universal experiences aligned with each type of connection and include:

- **Intrapersonal** - expressed through inner peace, consciousness, self-knowledge, and seeking meaning in life;
- **Interpersonal** – expressed through compassion, caring, gratitude and wonder;
- **Transpersonal** – experienced through awe, hope, sacredness, and adoration of the transcendent (p. 339).

Meezenbroek et al. (2012) state the questionnaires chosen for their review met the criteria of measuring spirituality as an experience, or attitude, that transcends any particular religion. They note, as does Elkin et al. (1988), a humanistic definition of
spirituality does not privilege any religion and that religion may serve as a way for expression of spirituality, but that they are not necessarily interconnected (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation study).

Mayhew (2004) explores the commonalities between college students representing eight different worldviews and their experiences of spirituality. In this phenomenological study, the eight worldviews represented were Agnosticism, Atheism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Muslim, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. From the data, ten themes emerged that were common to the eight participants’ understandings and experiences of spirituality. The ten themes include: continuity, local moment, pervasiveness, local environment, relationship with humanity, relationship with community, relationship with personal other, internal process of making meaning, external process of making meaning, and meaning-making as a product. From these ten themes, two categories were identified, connectedness and explication. In his implications for the study, Mayhew (2004) states:

As they strive to create contexts that promote tolerance, dialogue, and values, student affairs professionals can use this idea of spirituality as a means of connecting different students with different worldviews to each other, as opposed to shying away from more traditional views of spirituality that invoke a sense of divisiveness and polarity. (p. 668)

I am basing the need for SCT in early childhood on the fact that there is a need to re-connect due to significant divisions currently in the field, the cause of which I examine in this chapter as two-fold: the racial and class divisions that have existed in the United States for decades, and the more recent climate demanding accountability and assessment as a focus for education. This dissertation addresses these obstacles, and as noted in
Chapter 1, I have a personal investment in promoting acceptance and inclusion. This dissertation is neither comprehensive of any of the concepts of exclusion, racism and classism nor is this dissertation claiming the existence of no other elements in the complex nature of exclusion and marginalization of groups of people. In this dissertation and in this chapter, I will present what the literature states as important considerations around racism and classism in the field of education in the United States, focusing on the division between groups of people that therefore serve as obstacles to building relationships.

In response to these issues of divisiveness in education, I argue for the importance of spiritually connective teaching. Spirituality in education has been examined under difference auspices in the context of higher education, counseling, nursing education, and classroom teaching at the middle childhood and young adult level. In this chapter, I have discussed how spirituality in education has been addressed in the literature as offering an inclusive, humanistic versus a religious perspective that privileges one set of faith practices over others. In the remainder of this chapter, I will also discuss how spirituality in education serves as a response to marginalization and oppression through characteristics such as inclusivity, being transformative, and relational. I will note how spirituality values the community as sacred.

Overall, I argue from a developmental perspective for the presence of spirituality in teaching and learning from the early years, as the literature supports the early years as pivotal for the development of certain skills (e.g., learning how to relate to others, learning how to build relationships, and gaining the capacity for empathy).
conclusion of this chapter, I will discuss the literature regarding connections among attachment, relationships, and the development of empathy. I believe that spiritual connections with others are the foundation upon which empathy is built, and it is this foundation that fosters inclusion of differences and diversities. In this way, then, I am able to situate spirituality in the context of education as a response to marginalization, the climate of accountability, and the development of empathy in young children. I begin with the literature on the obstacles within education in the United States, specifically around racism, classism, and the climate of accountability.

**Divisiveness in Education in the United States**

**Racism and Classism**

The body of literature addressing racism and classism is voluminous and it is outside the scope of this dissertation to fully address all of the literature. The purpose of addressing racism and classism in this chapter is not to offer solutions for overcoming the multiple facets of how these two concepts impact groups of people. Alternatively, I will offer evidence from the literature of the existence of racism and classism in education in the United States and their impact on individuals, especially around acceptance and building a sense of belonging. This focus aligns with my argument for the importance of building connections and relationships with other people as pivotal for spiritually connective teaching.

**The achievement gap.** Ladson-Billings (2006) identifies the achievement gap as “the disparities in standardized test score between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrant and White students” (p. 3). Several scholars (Darling-Hammond, 2007;
Garcia, 2004; Howard, 2010; Kornhaber, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonardo, 2013; Nieto, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) examine the impact of the achievement gap and discuss the disparities in services offered to students in the United States that are believed to contribute to the distance between groups. Some of these services range from having access to highly qualified teachers, to having educational resources as basic as updated textbooks and facilities, and secure, safe learning environments.

Howard (2010) notes the manner in which discussions of the achievement gap are framed within a Black-white dichotomy, suggesting this framework creates further division between groups of people. The implications of a Black-white dichotomy present white as the standard to reach, or the norm used to gauge success, while ignoring the values and intellectual traditions of historically underserved groups such as African American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous populations. Howard (2010) also suggests the framework promotes the assumption that all whites are performing well academically, which is not true due to the impact of poverty that cuts across racial lines.

In consideration of the intersectionality of race and class, Kozol (1991, 2005) examines the pattern of per-student expenditures and inequalities in the structure of school funding in the United States, uncovering the extreme racial/cultural/economic chasms existing between middle- to upper-class white neighborhoods and poverty ridden neighborhoods consisting of mostly Black families.

Ladson-Billings (2006) extends the discussion revolving around the inequities that create the achievement gap and proposes the gap is the result of “the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society” (p. 5). She
terms this larger issue the education debt, noting the importance of addressing its four components—the historical debt, the economic debt, the sociopolitical debt, and the moral debt—in order to effect change and narrow the achievement gap. Each of these four components of the education debt contributes to divisions between groups of people, as highlighted in my discussion (below) of each of these components and the obstacles they create.

**Historical debt.** Ladson-Billings (2006) shares examples from US history that illustrate the legacy of educational inequities currently in place. She notes the forbiddance of schooling for African Americans during the period of enslavement, and the imposition of assimilation upon Native Americans in boarding schools with the objective “to kill the Indian in order to save the man” (p. 5). Howard (2010) describes the history of intelligence testing, dating back to the instruments developed by Terman and Yerkes with questions that were biased to favor those most familiar with American culture of that time. The results of these intelligence tests were widely accepted as accurate measurements and as scientific evidence of inferior cognitive abilities of those who performed poorly, mostly consisting of the immigrant population in America (p. 97-98).

**Sociopolitical debt.** The sociopolitical component of the education debt is described by Ladson-Billings (2006) as “the degree to which communities of color are excluded from the civic process” (p. 7). She discusses examples such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which ended decades of disenfranchise of African Americans in the democratic process. The three-fifths compromise in Article 1, Section 2 of the US
Constitution is another example of devaluing African Americans as it declares them as counting as three-fifths a person in addressing the apportionment of taxes (Leonardo, 2004; Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1993). Bell (1993) and Crenshaw (1988) discuss the social and institutional benefits for whites as a result of racism against African Americans. Examples discussed by Bell (1993) include the role of the Brown vs. Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in closing down African American schools in order to bus African American students to predominately all-white schools. As a result of the movement of countless African American students to all-white schools, the African American teaching force and administrative population were decimated, as their workplace, by and large, vanished.

The resulting demographic divide continues today and is increasing, as the teaching population and teacher education students are out of proportion in comparison to the diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic identities of students in today’s classrooms in the United States (Gay & Howard, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Howard, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2011). As noted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013) the percentage distribution of teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools by race in 2011-2012 was 82% white, 7% Black, 8% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and .5% Indigenous in public schools. In private schools, the data on the distribution of teachers indicate 88% white, 4% Black, 5% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 0 Indigenous. The data on public school student membership and percentage distribution by race/ethnicity in the 2007-2008 school year found 56% white, 17% Black, 21% Hispanic, 5% Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 1.2% Indigenous. This mismatch results
in what Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to as a lack of cultural synchronization (p. 160), and therefore, the potential for ineffective teaching exists in these classrooms.

The overall training of students in teacher education programs does not adequately prepare future teachers for the diverse population in which they will teach (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay & Howard, 2000). Gay and Howard (2000) found troubling attitudes and fears of teacher education students regarding the teaching of children from different ethnic and racial groups. Gay and Howard (2000) concluded that the reluctance of teacher education students resulted from their racial prejudices and anxiety about a lack of knowledge of ethnic and cultural diversities (p. 3). A call for globalization in teacher education addresses the gap in the preparation of future educators. Ball and Tyson (2011) call for the need to embrace researchers from the global community, noting the valuable contributions of the diverse perspectives individuals from communities representative of regions of the world beyond that which is currently privileged. Apple (2011) states the need for research from the global community, which can potentially contribute to addressing the narrow understandings of teachers and teacher education students from Western perspectives. He notes, “One of the main problems is that teachers and teacher educators are left with all-too-general stereotypes about ‘what diasporic children and their parents are like’ and what the conditions are in the places from which they come” (p. 223).

Economic debt. This component of the education debt addresses the funding disparities between schools serving white students and those serving students of color. With the majority of states in American funding their schools from the local level, often
tied to property value, or income tax rates of residents, the monies for schools remain within the borders of where it already exists (Kozol, 1991). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013), the percentage of children under the age of 18, living in poverty demonstrate the stark contrast between white children and children of color. According to NCES (2013) data from 2010, 13% of white children live in poverty, versus 38% of Black children, 32% of Hispanic children, and 34% of children of Indigenous populations. As research has shown, schools located within poverty-stricken areas tend to perform at a lower level on standardized accountability measurements. According to NCES (2013) data from the 2008-2009 academic year, the percentages of students attending public elementary and secondary schools by status of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and race/ethnicity, disparaging numbers tell a similar story. The percentage of white students in schools that met AYP is 66% and white students in schools that did not meet AYP is 33%. For Black students, 52% are in schools meeting AYP and 46% are in schools not meeting AYP.

Oakes (2004) examines the lawsuit filed against the state of California, *Williams v. State of California*, claiming the rights of all public school children in the state to the basic educational opportunities that are available to more privileged children. The children being horribly underserved, primarily immigrant children, children of color, and low-income children, were enduring conditions such as inadequate heating and cooling systems in the buildings, infestations of rats, mice, and cockroaches, no text books, and for some, no teachers or even classroom seating (p. 1890).
Kozol (2005) recounts a conversation with an elementary student, Pineapple, who inquires about what it is like “over there”, referring to life outside of her school and community contexts in the Bronx. He recalls how Pineapple has very little contact with white people and how in her conversation she relates how she is painfully aware of the distance between her life and that of Kozol and so many “other people” she can only imagine. As Kozol (1991) notes that children living and attending school in impoverished neighborhoods are very aware of the world’s perception of them as likened to their surroundings; they are aware that others might see them as disposable. These circumstances point to a moral debt owed to all who have experienced separation, oppression, and racism.

**Moral debt.** Ladson-Billings (2006) describes the moral debt as the disparity between what we know is right and what we actually do. Examples Ladson-Billings (2006) provides includes the government medical study of the disease syphilis involving African American participants who were not provided treatment from doctors even after a cure was found. Additionally, she notes the moral debt the United States government owes to Japanese Americans who were forced into internment camps within US borders during World War II.

Relating Ladson-Billings’ (2006) concept of the moral debt owed to groups of people who have endured centuries of racism from a national, institutional, or political level to more of an individual or societal level might involve the messages relayed through actions considered socially acceptable in much of Western society. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) define internalized oppression as, “Internalizing and acting out (often
unintentionally) the constant messages that you and your group are inferior to the
dominant group and thus deserving of your lower position” (p. 49). Messages of certain
groups of people being less than fully human, of holding little to no value, and of being
inferior have permeated Western society for decades, even centuries, and have created a
moral debt of such magnitude that it is not likely to ever be repaid. Several scholars
(Kozol, 1991; hooks, 2000; Howard, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Leonardo, 2013) have noted the
impact this has had on children, in particular.

Research dating back to the late 1930s by Horowitz (1939), Clark and Clark (1939,
1950), and Morland (1966) demonstrates internalized oppression in African American
children as young as four-years-old, as they demonstrate strong preference for images
and toys depicting whiteness over those representative of Blackness. In the Clark and
Clark (1950) doll experiment, preschool children were presented two dolls, one with
white skin color and one with brown skin color. Then, they were asked to select the doll
with which they wanted to play. The majority of African American children chose the
doll with white skin color and 35% of those children offered the explanation of the
colored doll as ugly and the white doll as pretty. Related to this experiment is Katz’s
(1973) study of preschool children’s perception of racial cues, in which she found:

What emerges clearly from the present findings is that preschool children have
already undergone considerable socialization with regard to dealing with racial
stimuli, to intergroup attitudes, and their expression. Differential perceptions of same-
and other-race stimuli appear to be fairly well established by age 4 and may form the
basis for subsequent attitude development. (p. 299)

Studies have found children as young as 4-years-old notice racial differences based
on characteristics of phenotype. Equally important to note is that many of them have
already been socialized to form racial ideology. In Van Ausdale and Feagin’s (2001) study of the development of racial awareness in children, they make the following suggestion:

The very real images of racial and ethnic groups are available to the children through direct observation of the world around them, and these images are grounded in the dynamic social structure of the society – as seen around them and in the mass media – and in their past and ongoing interactions with other adults and children. Many choices of action accumulate over a period of time and constantly reinforce race and ethnicity as developing, working concepts for children. (p. 17)

An unfortunate contribution of the education debt is deep divisions based on race and class between children in the United States, which creates obstacles to building connections with self, with others, and with the world. The impairment to spiritual connections includes a view of self that has been influenced by internalized oppression, thus, not fully aligned with the holistic and sacred image in which one was created.

Additionally, if connections are fostered exclusively within a homogenous community, then a spiritual connection with others might be absent. Interpersonal connections based on the concept of spirituality foster connections across difference, or as Wane and Ritskes (2011) state, “Spirituality has always been about inclusiveness” (p. xviii).

**Accountability and Assessment**

The past two decades held many efforts to improve education in American schools, leading to an increasingly focused use of learning standards, accountability measures, and student learning assessments. Two national initiatives related to accountability and standardization include No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002 and Race to the Top in 2009 (Klinger, Maggi, & D’Angiulli, 2011). Crawford (2007) notes how NCLB created a focus for reform at the level of the classroom, making teachers, kids and school bear the
“burden of reform” (p. 3). This caused a change in classroom practice and the climate of the classroom.

Darling-Hammond (1991) discusses the impact of increased standardization, testing, and assessment on classroom practice. She refers to national data regarding teaching methods during the years between 1972 and 1980 in public schools, emphasizing a decline in the use of student-centered discussions, writing assignments such as essays, and hands-on types of experiences such as projects or laboratory work (p. 222). Darling-Hammond (1991) states, “As evidence from many studies indicates, when high stakes are attached to scores, tests exert a strong influence on what is taught, how it is taught, what pupils study, how they study, and what they learn” (p. 222). She cites a study of classroom effects of education policies in which teachers reported how all the tasks associated with additional testing and assessments take time away from “real teaching”. Descriptors of what is meant by “real teaching” include teaching of content that is not covered by the testing and teaching strategies such as discussing ideas, writing and engaging in creative activities and project based learning (Darling-Hammond, 1991, p. 222).

Dantley (2003) cites a study by McNeil conducted in 2000 on how teaching practices were modified in response to the climate of accountability and the increased testing. McNeil is quoted as saying:

And the role of students as contributors to classroom discourse, as thinkers, as people who brought their personal stories and life experiences into the classroom, was silenced or severely circumscribed by the need for the class to ‘cover’ a generic curriculum at a pace established by the district and the state for all the schools. (Dantley, 2003, p 284)
Relatedly, Crawford (2007) calls these effects on teaching perverse and notes the characteristics of the learning experience for minority students whose native language is not English. Crawford (2007) describes the experience as follows:

The perverse effects are...excessive class time devoted to test preparation, a curriculum narrowed to the two tested subjects, neglect of critical thinking in favor of basic skills, pressure to reduce or eliminate native-language instruction, demoralization of teachers whose students fall short of unrealistic cut scores, demoralization of children who are forced to take tests they can’t understand, and perhaps worst of all, practices that encourage low-scoring students to drop out before test day. (p. 2)

An argument could be made claiming most of the effects identified by Crawford (2007) are experienced by all students in classrooms focused on testing and assessment. Nieto (2010) recognizes the shift in curriculum as having a heavy emphasis on drill and practice in reading and math, with little attention or time given to the arts and physical education. She describes the impact accountability measures such as NCLB has on the academic schedule, citing a 2008 report by Berliner that many schools use 20 to 60 days out of the year for test-preparation activities. Nieto (2010) also discusses the impact high-stakes tests have on the classroom climate:

As teachers and administrators feel the pressure to increase test scores, less time is devoted to developing and sustaining relationships among students and their teachers. When this happens, schools become joyless places, and real learning and thinking take a back seat to drill and rote memorization. As a result, more students are making the choice to identify as ‘street kids’ rather than as ‘school kids’, a choice that almost always leads to even less engagement with school. (p. 20)

Less engaged students are disconnected from their quest for knowledge and for seeking their life’s purpose, which relates to a spiritual aspect of learning. In a conversation with Nel Noddings, Halford (1999) asks how spirituality connects to the trends toward a standards movement in education. Noddings replies:
Only in the last 20 or 30 years have people begun to talk as if the only end of education is a batch of academic information that appears on tests and that the only reason students do academic work is so that they will go to college and get a good job and make money and buy lots of stuff. Such thinking is enormously harmful. To buy into that economic, consumerist argument, explicitly or implicitly, is enormously damaging. Such thinking is connected to this longing for the sacred that hasn’t been satisfied where it could be – namely, in education. (p. 31)

How can the sacred, or the spiritual, remain a part of classroom pedagogies in the face of potential sanctions of accountability measures? Delpit and White-Bradley (2003) discuss learning experiences with two different classrooms and grade levels in Atlanta Public Schools. They contrast the learning approach in a fifth-grade lesson dictated by a packaged reading program, focusing on raising test scores, with an approach in a seventh-grade social studies lesson framed by the Egyptian concept of Ma’at. Mkhinze (2008) describes Ma’at as very similar to the South African concept of Ubuntu, placing an emphasis on the need to belong, but requiring one to conduct oneself in a respectful, honest, empathetic manner toward others (p. 42).

Delpit and White-Bradley (2003) report stark contrasts between the two teaching and learning experiences. The scripted reading lesson resulted in off-task behavior and demanded significant time spent on menial tasks dictated by the lesson, such as timing the activities and awarding student teams points for nonacademic tasks such as being first to stack their materials in the center of their table. The authors report there was no time for deep discussion or exploration of any topics of interest.

The social studies lesson involved the topic of the indigenous people of a region in ancient Egypt known as Kemet. The teacher incorporated a framework of the seven principles of Ma’at, truth, justice, harmony, balance, order, reciprocity, and righteousness
as part of the study. The outcomes of this lesson include students’ expansion of the discussion of the ancient civilization and principles of Ma’at to application in their home and school life.

Delpit and White-Bradley (2003) conclude that choosing to engage the hearts and minds of students through the social studies lesson as beneficial to students’ development as human beings, and to do so requires relationship building and fostering a sense of family within the classroom. Delpit and White-Bradley (2003) state,

The fundamental question becomes whether we want students to speak their truth, to become thinking and ethical human beings, as was the goal of the ancient Kemetians. Or do we want to train them to blindly follow authoritarian dictates whether they are sensible or not. In other words, do we want to educate our students’ spirits or incarcerate them? (p. 288)

**Summary**

Palmer (1993) views the current status in the field of education as problematic because many students are underserved, and many teachers feel frustrated, given the mandates that locate their focus away from the reason they entered the field – to teach students, to bring students into relationships with each other and with learning, and to work in community with colleagues who share their passion. Palmer (1993) believes spirituality offers “hope that is hard to find elsewhere” (p. x). The reason for the call for spiritual wisdom, according to Palmer (1993), is because it is ultimately about reconnections. This equates to a return to wholeness, inclusive of our spiritual nature. I identify the vehicle for the return to wholeness as spiritually connective teaching.

**Spirituality in Education**

**Addressing Marginalization**
Characteristics of spirituality in education that address marginalization include inclusivity, transformative thinking, sacredness of community, and relationally focused. A specific spiritual pedagogy has not been identified in the current literature on spirituality. However, the aforementioned four characteristics, as discussed by various scholars, provide insights for the role and purpose of the spiritual inside classrooms and pedagogical practices.

Inclusivity in spirituality connects us to each other on the basis of our shared humanity. Spirituality promotes a level of connectedness that is understood as a set of shared human experiences. Mayhew (2004) notes spirituality as a “sense of connectedness that human beings experience with each other simply because they are human beings” (p. 662), which comes to mean that we should recognize and affirm difference based on each person’s uniqueness (Ritskes, 2011; Wane & Ritskes, 2011). As noted by Scherer (1999), “…respect for the divine image in every single human being…that is a spiritual value. To believe that every person is fashioned in the image of God is not the dogma of any one religious faith, but a universal spiritual value” (p. 19). Spirituality that recognizes each being as connected to the divine impacts the practice of marginalization as Cole (2011) notes, “Abandoning the practice of diminishing the other has opened up the possibility of experiencing all as valid – thus experiencing spirituality as intrinsic to being human” (p. 13).

Spirituality is transformative through the elements of hope, love, and purpose. The concept of finding meaning or purpose in life is strongly aligned with the definition and description of spirituality in the literature with numerous scholars addressing the idea of
purpose in their study of spirituality (Canada, 1988; Helminiak, 1996; Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997; Love & Talbot, 1999; Mahoney & Graci, 1999; Palmer, 1999; Chiu et al., 2004; Cook, 2004; Mayhew, 2004; Pigza, & Welch, 2010; Meezenbroek et al., 2012).

Spirituality offers the opportunity to ask questions worthy of our time and attention. Palmer (1999) states, “When we bring forth spirituality of teaching and learning we help students honor life’s most meaningful questions” (p. 6). These questions include: How can I rise above my fears? How do I deal with suffering, my own and that of my family and friends? How does one maintain hope? (Palmer, 1999, p 6). Fraser (2007) extends the focus on asking such important questions by stating, “the deepest parts of children’s lives remain untouched by school and our educational institutions fail to tap our most cherished values and extend our potential” (p. 297). In her study of educator’s perception of spirituality in their practice, Fraser shares a participant’s story regarding his frequent use of a beloved book with his students: “The story strikes a chord with children as to what is important, how to build resilience in the face of hardship and how to thrive” (p. 297). The practice of fostering children’s reflection on the meaning of their lives, their purpose, and their questions about their connections to the world-when framed by hope, love, unity, trust, and respect-present opportunities for transformative thinking.

Connections to others are an important aspect of spirituality, and these connections are most effective within community. Fraser (2007) examines how the classroom can become a sacred place, stating:

The teachers stressed that a sense of connection and belonging at school came from fostering children’s sense of self and sense of community. The teachers did not mention self-esteem at all and nor did they focus only on valuing the self- rather, they discussed the importance of self as personal and self in relationship to others. (p. 299)
The creation of the community as a sacred space is initially part of the educator’s role and according to Kessler (2000) includes respectful discipline, an open heart, and a willingness to care (p. 119). In order to view others and self as valued, and to be encouraged to ask meaningful questions, students must feel safe within the community. As noted by Ritskes (2011) creating a space of openness and belonging involves “spiritual characteristics such as compassion, respect, and contemplation” that are encouraged through opportunities within spaces where students feel safe to explore “in the context of connection” (p. 31).

Several scholars have discussed spirituality as relationally focused through the connections built with those we encounter in life (Canada, 1988; Dyson, Cobb, Forman, 1997; Mattis, 2000; DeSouza, 2003; Mayhew, 2004; Bellous, 2006; Harris, 2007; Schoonmaker, 2009). Kirmani and Kirmani (2009) state, “Spirituality is manifested in relationships” (p. 375). DeSouza (2003) recommends schools offer activities that promote relational aspects, noting relationships as a vital aspect of students’ spirituality (p. 278). According to the African concept of Ubuntu, we form our understanding of ourselves through our relationship with others and within community (Battle, 2009). We come to a deeper understanding of our purpose, our identity, and our connection to other people in the context of a relationship with our ancestry (Paris, 1995; Ritskes, 2011; Dillard, 2012). The relationally focused characteristic of spirituality fosters our understanding not only of ourselves, but also of others.

Spirituality in teaching and learning supports inclusion of all individuals, recognizing the divine nature of humanity, with the possibility to transform our thinking through the
deep questions regarding life’s purpose and meaning. It is within the sacredness of community that spirituality offers us understanding across difference which can be explored through our relationship with others. If these elements are a part of teaching and learning, then the spiritual responses to marginalization are acceptance, inclusion, respect, and love for humanity.

**Addressing the Disconnection from Learning**

Scholars note that historically, the connection between spirituality and religion has been used to impose a template of ideas, beliefs, traditions, and behaviors against which others, the uneducated, the tribal, the lost souls, were to be measured (Palmer, 1993; Paris, 1995; Manyimo, 2011; Kaburu & Landauer, 2013). For the field of education, Palmer (1993) contrasts this expectation to the implementation of authentic spirituality and its ability to “open us to truth” (p. xi). Authentic spirituality, according to Palmer (1993) does not dictate, it seeks the truth, and when walking in spirituality with integrity, the search for truth will be fruitful. Authentic spirituality with integrity offers opportunities for acceptance across differences as it exposes, recognizes, embraces and challenges fear, for it is fear that drives ignorance (p. xi).

From Palmer’s (1993) discussion of the connection between spirituality and learning/knowledge, it becomes apparent that certain elements would be present in a classroom where spiritually connective teaching occurs. Spirituality in teaching and learning is holistic in the truest application of the term. Miller (2005) notes how historically the holistic approach to education known as progressive education and humanistic education omitted the spiritual dimension. According to Miller (2005),
“Perhaps the defining aspect of holistic education is the spiritual” (p. 2). The spiritual re-
connects us to ourselves, to others, to that which we cannot see or fully understand, and
to knowledge and learning.

As Palmer (1993) notes, a distinction between a conventional classroom and the
spiritual classroom revolves around the role of the learner as connected to the learning, or
as Palmer terms them, the knower to the known (p. 35). Palmer argues that the
objectivism inherent to a mode of thinking or knowledge that holds ideas, thoughts, or
topics apart from the learner as something to be obtained, as if the knower is “here” and
the knowledge is “out-there” waiting to be discovered has connotations of a hierarchy.
Palmer asserts the implication of this approach is that knowledge is owned, which is
inherently opposed to humanity’s predisposition for seeking knowledge. He states that in
a spiritual context, emotion, intuition, and faith all have a place in the modes of knowing,
claiming:

These modes of knowing do not manufacture a world to be held at arm’s length,
manipulated and owned. Instead, they receive the world as a given, an organic whole,
and they make the knower an integral part of it. Such knowledge does not reduce the
world to lifeless ‘things’ but fills all things with vital, pulsing life. In such a world the
very rocks have souls; flowers and trees have spirit-selves; the events of daily life are
filled with symbols and signs. The whole of experience is pregnant with portent
meaning, and the knower is interwoven with it all. (Palmer 1993, p. 25)

While embracing the role of human emotion, intuition, and faith in the process of
knowing, Palmer (1993) stresses the importance of education as conveying the message
of truth. He uses the term based on its historical, Germanic root related to the English
word “troth”. He describes the use of the word troth as having meaning within
relationships, mutually agreed upon, transformative relationships “forged of trust and
faith in the face of unknowable risks” (Palmer, 1993, p. 31). He does not suggest that a type of education that moves toward truth equates to an abandonment of facts, theories, and objective realities, as these will remain, unchanged, and the change that will occur in such a context of seeking truth is the relationship between the knower and the world,

In truthful knowing we neither infuse the world with our subjectivity…nor hold it at arm’s length, manipulating to suit our needs. In truthful knowing the knower becomes co-participant in a community of faithful relationships with other persons and creatures and things, with whatever our knowledge makes known. (Palmer, 1993, p. 32)

Based on this description of spirituality as related to knowledge, or learning, the classroom environment provides opportunities for children to engage with each other, with materials, and with their thoughts and ideas. In these classrooms, the planning of the learning space is purposeful and intentional, and the classroom environment addresses the emotional aspects of learning by creating a safe space where children feel comfortable relating to each other and sharing their ideas. Additionally, the curriculum offers opportunities for children to connect with the concepts, or as Palmer (1999) refers to them, the “big story”, which is the subject area content.

**The big story as part of the little stories.** Palmer (1999) relates how the big story of the discipline, or academic content area, must connect with the little stories of the child’s life in order for learning to move beyond recall of objective facts. In order for a more spiritual connection with the content, children, according to Palmer, need the subjective self to be included as part of the exploration of topics and content.
Relating to his own experience of studying the Holocaust as a youth, Palmer (1999) shares how the fact-driven focus of the topic, or big story, impacted his connection to the historical event and as he notes, his ethical understanding of difference:

I failed to learn that I have within myself a “little Hitler”, a force of darkness that will try to kill you off when the difference between you and me becomes so great that it challenges my conception of reality. I will not kill you with a gun or gas chamber, but with a word, a category, a dismissal that renders you irrelevant to my life: ‘Oh, you’re just a [fill in the blank…]. (p.9)

Palmer’s (1999) discussion demonstrates the importance of helping students make connections to the world through the manner in which academic content is delivered. His experience implies the danger of disconnections for children between their own story and the content, which they study. Perhaps more effectively, Palmer’s experience speaks to the value of ensuring students’ small stories are included as part of the approach to teaching the big stories in the curriculum areas.

This pedagogy fosters connections to concepts and ideas in ways similar to other curricular approaches; however, the spiritual approach includes opportunities to connect to what Palmer (1999) describes as helping “students honor life’s most meaningful questions” (p. 6). Questions that get asked with this approach include: Does my life have meaning and purpose? Do I have gifts that the world wants and needs? Whom and what can I trust? How does one maintain hope? (p. 6). He adds that it is not necessarily that educators are responsible for answering these questions for their students. The importance does not lie in the solutions and the formulas, rather the value is in allowing the questions to be heard, or, as Palmer explains, “Spiritual mentoring is about helping
young people find questions that are worth asking…questions that are worth wrapping one’s life around” (p. 8).

Many pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning align with the description of spirituality offered thus far. As some scholars have asked, it is important to address questions such as, “Isn’t this just good teaching?” and “Is there a spiritual dimension to good teaching?” (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Palmer, 2003). The scope of this dissertation limits the ability to address the multiple pedagogical approaches in the field. In order to address these questions regarding uniqueness of spirituality in teaching and learning, I have chosen to discuss culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching approaches because I believe they align with a focus on race and cultures, topics I address in this dissertation. While this discussion is not an attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on culturally relevant or responsive teaching, I will present the main ideas of culturally relevant teaching as described by Ladson-Billings (1995). Then, I will discuss Gay’s (2000) ideas as a way to show connections between culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching. This discussion paves the way for me to examine how spirituality in teaching and learning add to the concept of culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching. This discussion is not an argument in favor of, or against, culturally relevant or responsive approaches. Instead the objective is to offer a description of how spirituality connects to these two approaches and contributes to how I approach this dissertation study.

In her 3-year study of successful educators of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) developed culturally relevant pedagogy. This pedagogy addresses
teaching strategies that consists of strong content knowledge, strong pedagogical knowledge, and additionally incorporates “the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice” (p. 160). The three criteria Ladson-Billings (1995) identifies as foundational to culturally relevant pedagogy are, 1) students’ academic success, 2) students’ development of cultural competence, and 3) students’ development of a critical consciousness to be used to challenge the status quo (p. 160).

Ladson-Billings (1995) describes the criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy, noting the focus must go beyond addressing the students’ self esteem to place greater emphasis on the students’ academic achievement as more than a means to make the student “feel good” (p. 160). Culturally relevant pedagogy uses the students’ culture as a means for learning, including the reinforcement and inclusion of family knowledge and skills as part of the curriculum. A critical sociopolitical consciousness is an important criterion of culturally relevant pedagogy for students to “critique cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162).

Gay (2000) discusses similarities in purpose between culturally relevant and her choice of terms, culturally responsive teaching. She states: “Although called by many different names, including culturally relevant, sensitive, centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive, the ideas about why it is important to make classroom instruction more consistent with the cultural orientations of ethnically diverse students, and how this can be done, are virtually identical” (p. 29). She defines culturally responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior
experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to
make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29).

Additionally, Gay (2000) discusses specific characteristics of culturally responsive
teaching: validating/affirming, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering,
transformative, and emancipatory. “Validating/affirming” addresses the unique culture of
students, legitimizing students’ cultural experiences and connecting their home
experiences to their school experiences. Students are encouraged to know and praise their
own culture and each other’s cultures as they use multicultural materials in their learning
processes (p. 29). The characteristic of “comprehensive” addresses how culturally
responsive teaching addresses the whole child, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and
including political learning through cultural referents (p.30). Culturally responsive
teaching is characterized as “multidimensional” because it encompasses the curricular
content, the learning context, the classroom climate, student-teacher relationships,
instructional techniques and performance assessments (p. 31). Empowering refers to how
culturally responsive teaching enables the student to be a better human being and more
successful learner (p. 32). The characteristic of being transformative has a double focus;
it critically addresses the cultural hegemony of the curriculum and combats prejudices
such as racism and oppression through a critical social consciousness (p. 33). Lastly,
culturally responsive teaching is characterized as “emancipatory” because it liberates
students of color from the constraints of mainstream canons of knowledge (p. 35).

How, then, does spirituality in teaching and learning contribute to the culturally
focused pedagogies discussed by Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2000)? As discussed
previously, I believe that spirituality can offer a way to resist forms of marginalization, and that the characteristics of spirituality (e.g., inclusivity, transformative thinking, sacredness of community, and being relationally focused) can contribute to how we teach and learn. These characteristics of spirituality might offer a contribution to the utility of culturally focused pedagogies.

Culturally focused pedagogies provide students the quality of relevance, integrating elements into the curriculum, the teaching strategies, the classroom environment, the learning context, and student-teacher relationships that are familiar, meaningful and validating to students from various cultures. Spirituality in teaching and learning adds a dimension of depth to include purpose and value intrinsic to being human. As stated by Schoonmaker (2009), “Spirituality refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond themselves, to become more than they are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence” (p. 2713).

In consideration of marginalization of individuals based on difference, a spiritual response can enhance a culturally focused pedagogy to raise social consciousness that combats racism, prejudice, and oppression. A sense of social justice is inherent in fostering the social consciousness that refutes all forms of oppression. In consideration of the need for social justice, I now discuss how spirituality in teaching and learning fosters the development of empathy in young children, a trait that promotes social consciousness and therefore social justice.

The Development and Role of Empathy

61
According to Szalavit and Perry (2010), the definition of empathy is separated from the definition of pity through the manner of the preposition. To pity someone is to feel sorry for him or her; to empathize is to feel sorry with them (p. 14). The essence of empathy involves feeling another person’s experience and emotions, caring about the other person’s well being and wanting to make things better when they go wrong, or when one is hurt (Szalavit & Perry, 2010, p. 12). Therefore, empathy plays an important role in fostering a sense of social justice in children. Without empathy, according to Szalavit and Perry (2010), “Failure to empathize is a key part of social problems such as violence, war, racism, and inequity” (p. 4).

Tracing the development of empathy begins in infancy with the emergence of the bond with the primary caregiver known as attachment. Berger (2001) defines attachment as an enduring emotional connection between people that produces a desire for continual contact as well as feelings of distress during separation. The progression toward the development of empathy occurs during the toddler, and early childhood years (ages 2 to 5), beginning with the relationship with the primary caregiver. According to Szalavit and Perry (2010), babies need significant time and repetition of interactions with others, especially one-on-one attention to fully develop their brains relational capacity (p. 311). Szalavit and Perry (2010) argue that the development of empathy requires a lifelong process of relational interaction (p. 14) and discuss the adverse effects of relational poverty, which is the decline in circumstances and situations that enhance empathy (p. 297).
Ways to promote empathy in early childhood years include reading to the child and talking about the character’s experiences and feelings to elicit perspective taking. Also, having discussions with young children regarding how people’s actions affect other people, and exposing them to different types of people creates familiarity, which is a great way to increase empathy (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010).

Relationships have been established as an important element of spirituality in teaching and learning, and as pivotal to the promotion of empathy. Empathy emerges from the attachment bond with the primary caregiver, and through relationships, empathy develops. Empathy nurtured in a spiritual context can foster a sense of social justice in children. As Lindholm and Astin (2008) note:

People’s abilities to access, nurture, and give expression to the spiritual dimensions of their lives have also been found to impact how they engage with the world and to foster within them a heightened sense of connectedness that promotes empathy, ethical behavior, civic responsibility, passion, and action for social justice. (p. 186)

**Conclusion**

From this argument for a spiritual response to the divisiveness in education caused by marginalization of others based on racial and class difference and the climate of accountability, I suggest the importance of a humanistic perspective of spirituality in teaching and learning. I create a more inclusive lens, spiritually connective teaching, through which to identify spirituality in teaching and learning that can foster the development of connections on various levels. I argue that these connections support the development of empathy, which is foundational to the development of acting on behalf of others in an inclusive manner; therefore, the need to oppose marginalization of others based on differences. I conclude that the environment created through spiritually
connective teaching should be present early in a child’s development and should align with the research on human development. As examined in this chapter, spirituality in education has been addressed in contexts outside early childhood education, and this dissertation study focuses on spirituality within early childhood classrooms, which serves a contribution to the field. In the remainder of this dissertation, I present the research methodology, findings, and implications related to how spiritually connective teaching is enacted in two early childhood settings.
Chapter 3: Methodology

While Palmer (2003) asks the question, “Is there a spiritual dimension to good teaching?” (p. 376), Schoonmaker (2009) notes that there is growing interest in how spirituality is linked to teaching, on the one hand, and that there is little evidence that spirituality is “intentionally included in most public school classrooms” (emphasis added, p. 2713), on the other hand. Taking up Schoonmaker’s belief about the un-intentionality of the presence of spirituality in many classroom contexts, this dissertation examines the concept of spirituality in relation to the pedagogical practices and teaching decisions of two early childhood educators. It relies on a qualitative case study design to inquire into the specific ways in which two educators intentionally include spiritual dimensions in their teaching. This inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two participants’ early childhood classrooms?

2. How do the two early childhood educators/participants enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?

3. In what ways can a spiritual response within the pedagogical practices of the two early childhood educators/participants speak back to the marginalization of young children?
For the purposes of this dissertation study, spirituality is defined as the innate human need to seek meaning in life based on connections with self, with others and nature, and with the transcendent. This definition is grounded in the humanistic view of spirituality as part of the human experience and distinguished from the confines of any specific religion. Spirituality in teaching and learning has to do with human connections and relationships in that it emphasizes how learning occurs within the context of a community that relies on interdependent and not independent perspectives. As discussed in the review of literature (see Chapter 2), spirituality in teaching and learning can offer a critical response to the various forms of divisiveness among people (e.g., racism, classism, linguistic oppression, etc.) and within educational choices (e.g., standardizations and test-driven forms of assessments). The professional literature related to spirituality in teaching and learning highlights the need to have learning environments that foster connections to self, to others, and to the transcendent. As previously indicated, such connections can serve as a spiritual response to educational forms of marginalization and division.

As highlighted in the included literature on spirituality and education, spirituality has been studied in middle and high school contexts and in higher education. While the increasing focus on middle school, high school, and college settings is important, what is largely absent in the literature is a focus on early childhood settings. Thus, this dissertation study uses a modified multiple case study methodology to examine how the pedagogical decisions of two early childhood educators are informed by spirituality in ways that have implications for the formative years of elementary-aged children and for the pedagogies of educators who seek to foster interpersonal, intrapersonal, and
transpersonal connections in their classrooms. The modification of case study methodology for this study occurs in the selection of participants and identification of cases. The participants were selected using a community nomination process (further discussed later in this chapter). The identification of cases relied on the researcher’s prior knowledge of the field of early childhood pedagogy and established professional relationships with the participants. In the findings chapter (Chapter 4), I will show how insights gained from the two educators help to name the practices that support interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections for children and for the pedagogical decisions of early childhood educators whose teaching is inclusive of a spiritual dimension.

In this chapter, I turn attention to the methodological stance I used to conduct this dissertation study. I begin by explaining the methodology that was used—qualitative case study. Then, I discuss my epistemological and cultural points of view in ways that connect to the theoretical and methodological perspectives that support this research. Doing so allows me to focus on the overall design of this study, which includes descriptions of research procedures, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, contexts, and participants.

**Methodological Stance**

My epistemological and cultural standpoint acknowledges that research is an interpretive and naturalistic endeavor (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). I recognize the process of knowledge production as constructed through the actions and interactions among people (Dewey, 1910/1991; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).
Additionally, I also believe that research is hermeneutical (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), multifaceted, and is reflected in (and reflexive of) multiple, constructed realities (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

I draw on these standpoints throughout this dissertation study in order to explore the pedagogies of two early childhood educators and their perspectives on spirituality. Dillard’s (2006) concept of spirituality informs my work. She argues that the spiritual theoretical frame assumes humanistic characteristics within research methodology. Such characteristics include the following things: the embodiment of the researcher, the political nature of research, the professional risks assumed by the researcher, the manner in which the research addresses culture in a sacred manner, the ways in which research is grounded in truth, the dialogic elements of research, and the potential for the research to be liberating and redemptive (pp. 18-27). These characteristics were important for how I conducted this dissertation study; they allowed me to deeply grapple with, and seek to understand, the design of qualitative research studies that take seriously the concepts of embodiment, positionality, and spirituality. I discuss these concepts below because they are central to the design of my dissertation study, generally, and for how I address my research questions, specifically.

Dillard (2006) discusses embodiment as one’s positionality, as being present and making that presence known within spaces of sharing in dialogue and of learning. I bring myself fully to this work, but I do not singularly privilege my own perceptions. In other words, I acknowledge my presence in this work at the same time that I remain open to the experiences, stories, and perspectives offered to me by the participants. In this way, my
researcher positionality includes my own lived experiences and perspectives and those experiences and perspectives that are afforded to me through my participation with participants in the research process (see Kinloch & San Pedro, 2013). This positionality, or critical subjectivity, allows me to share my experiences with participants as they share their experiences with me. Collectively, our experiences form new stories that are collaborative in nature and that does not privilege a single perspective.

This dissertation study, then, is inherently a pedagogical, personal, and social endeavor. It is intimately connected to the pedagogical and personal experiences of the participants, to my experiences, and to our levels of vulnerability, making the dissertation characteristic of a spiritual methodology (Dillard, 2006). Characteristics of a spiritual methodology present in this dissertation include how I approached the research as non-hierarchal, in a respectful manner, stressing the dialogic elements of the research. I viewed the participants and their spaces as sacred, and the process of the research had transformational elements, addressing the participants’ view of their pedagogy and the relationship to spiritually connective teaching. The work arises from how we (participants and me) engaged our pedagogical, personal, and social experiences through the use of dialogue: we talked about teaching practices and decisions, we talked about various ways of knowing and being, and we talked about how pedagogies can be spiritual. Our talking and my observations of their practices and of their reflections of their practices led me to rely on a case study design. I sought to frame their practices (and the spiritual dimensions of their practices) as cases by using an honest, open approach to observing their pedagogies and to listening to their stories. The case studies present the classroom culture
as unique to the setting and, to use Dillard’s word, as a *sacred* space for the educators and their students.

More specifically, this dissertation, utilizing elements of a multiple, instrumental case study design, seeks to provide insight into how spirituality is enacted in the pedagogical practices of two early childhood educators. The hope here is that by using an instrumental case study design, the findings will: 1) demonstrate transformational, liberating, and redemptive moments (this relates to research question #1), and 2) provide clear, focused descriptions of the two teachers and their classrooms and the presence of spirituality in their practices (this relates to research questions #2 and 3). In the section below, I elaborate on the multiple, instrumental case study approach by noting its definition and history, and by describing how I used it to design this dissertation study.

**Case Study Research**

Stake (1994) describes a case study as, “a choice of object to be studied” (p. 236) rather than a methodological choice. Other scholars identify case studies as part of research methodology; however, they stress identification of a single, bounded, social, naturalistic unit of study as the main descriptor (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Merriam, 2009). So clearly, the identification of the case is a significant element in case study research.

The purpose of case study research is not to identify a cause for behavior or conditions. Instead, case study research, according to Stake (1994), offers ways to better understand specific characteristics about a single case that makes that case unique (intrinsic case study), or ways to explore the details of a particular case to provide insight into phenomena (instrumental case study). Additionally, case study research can offer
details into a range of related cases that are chosen in the hopes of producing greater understanding of a phenomenon, a group, a condition, or an event across multiple studies (collective case study).

There are many examples of case studies in educational research. For instance, Heath’s (1983) 10-year study of communicative practices across three distinct communities in *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms* explores how community members used language to make meaning of their social contexts. Kozol’s (1991) research, *Savage inequalities: Children in America’s schools*, examines the disparities between impoverished urban schools and affluent suburban schools in various parts of the U.S. (e.g., East St. Louis, New York’s South Bronx, and Chicago’s South Side). He shares the educational and personal stories of several students living in some of the poorest of neighborhoods across America. Relatedly, Fisherkeller’s (2002) case study, *Growing up with television: Everyday learning among young adolescents*, demonstrates how middle school students’ economic circumstances and social situations at home, school, and with their peers shaped what they learned from television.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, I rely on Dyson and Genishi’s (2005) argument that case studies, particularly instrumental case study designs, are important for educational research because they reveal “interest in the local particulars of some abstract social phenomenon” (p. 3). In the case of this dissertation study, whose phenomenon is spirituality in teaching and learning, the local particulars include the context of each classroom, regarding the way learning was made meaningful and the
view of the student as capable and valued as a learner and an individual. In this dissertation study, an instrumental case study design allows me to “gain insight into some of the factors that shape and the processes through which people interpret, or make meaningful” some phenomenon (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3).

Because the production of meaning is contextual, Stake’s (1994) argument is important to consider. He asserts, “Qualitative case study is characterized by the main researcher spending substantial time, on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, revising meanings of what is going on” (p. 242). Adopting Stake’s assertion, I utilize an instrumental case study for this dissertation study because of my desire to observe within the naturalistic setting of the classroom those things that Dyson and Genishi (2005) describe as cultural, recurring, shared practices that “emphasize the ways in which everyday events come packed with values about what is natural, mature, morally right, or aesthetically pleasing” (p. 7). Those things that are not observable were obtained by interviews I conducted with the two teachers.

As previously mentioned, the selection of the case is pivotal to an instrumental case study and the most significant criteria for selection of the case is that it offers an opportunity to learn about the phenomena of interest (Stake, 1994, p. 243). I will now discuss the methods used in this dissertation, beginning with the selection of the cases and recruitment of the participants.

**Methods**

The identification and recruitment of participants for this research was based upon a theoretical sampling, as it was important that the participants represent the phenomena of...
spirituality in their teaching in order for me to describe how their pedagogical practices
aligned with spiritually connective teaching. Dyson and Genishi (2005) discuss the
process of case selection as “casing the joint”, which involves the deliberate gathering of
information about the setting and individuals within the setting in order to identify the
specific case to be the focus of the study. The case study, as discussed by Dyson and
Genishi (2005), often emerges from a larger study, honing in on the unit that becomes a
case of something, of some phenomenon. A modified version of “casing the joint,” which
is used in this dissertation, is predicated on two aspects: 1) the cumulative knowledge and
experience of the researcher regarding early childhood education and the pedagogical
practices of the two participants, and 2) the confirmation of participant identification
using the community nomination process. I will now describe the first element in this
process—the role of my prior knowledge and experience.

I have been actively involved in early childhood education as a classroom teacher,
supervisor, and educator in teacher education programs for fifteen years. I have most
recently, for the last four years, been a university supervisor for graduate students in early
childhood during their yearlong classroom placement and student teaching experience. I
am familiar with best practice as a result of my teaching and professional experience. I
recognize exemplary teaching, and as a result of my study of spirituality in teaching and
learning, I have come to recognize elements of spirituality in teaching and learning.
Additionally, within my experience as a university supervisor, I have spent two years in
the classroom of one of my participants. I am aware of the other participant’s pedagogy
through my relationship with her as a fellow graduate student, hearing of her teaching in
class discussions and working together on course projects over a span of two years. I
initially identified both participants as likely cases for this dissertation as a result of my
familiarity with their pedagogical practices, and based on my knowledge of early
childhood education and spirituality in teaching and learning. In an effort to confirm
these two participants as viable for a multiple, instrumental case study, I used the process
of community nomination (in this case, teacher selection) by turning to suggestions from
professional colleagues.

I used the model for teacher selection created by Foster (1993), which she named
“community nomination,” to identify potential participants for my dissertation research
(see also Ladson-Billings, 2009). Foster (1993) used “community nomination” to identify
exemplary African American teachers for participation in her research; she turned to an
African American community of students in the region and asked them to identify their
best teacher. Similarly, I solicited nominations from faculty and staff within the
department of teacher education at a large midwestern university. My selection process
was based on conversations with peers who supervise graduate students in the early
childhood education program with whom I had worked for the past two years. The
criteria that emerged included teachers: 1) having strong relationships with children, 2)
incorporating a variety of learning opportunities beyond the textbook, and 3)
demonstrating skill at creating a sense of community with their students. Using these
criteria as a basis, faculty and staff who had regular contact with classrooms in the
metropolitan area were asked for names of teachers in prekindergarten to 3rd grade
settings who they felt best met the criteria. From this process, a list of ten names
emerged, including the names of the two participants I had previously identified. I therefore had confirmation that these two participants would be excellent candidates for this dissertation study.

I note the importance of having a previous relationship with the two participants to emphasize the focus on relationships with participants as a significant criterion in conducting research from the spiritual paradigm as well as engaging in instrumental case study research. The existence of a prior relationship helps the research to go into deeper detail regarding the pedagogy of the participants, as the need to build trust is not a part of this work, since it had already been established. I believed I would be and was able to have a deeper dialogue with the two participants because of our existing relationship.

Therefore my sampling rationale is grounded in a theoretical sampling and the existence of established relationships. It is important that the participants were likely to demonstrate characteristics that potentially align with the phenomena of spirituality in teaching and learning as this is a major criteria for an instrumental case study. Regarding the process of selection of the case to be studied, it is Stark (1994) who notes, “the primary criterion is opportunity to learn” (p. 244). Additionally, I use interviews as a significant method of data collection, for as Laverty (2003) argues, it is important to establish trust and an environment of safety from the onset of the research. Laverty (2003) states, “The interaction in the interview takes place within the context of a relationship, that is central to what is ultimately created” (p. 19). The established relationship with the two participants, who both exhibited characteristics I would identify as spiritual in their teaching, led me to select them for participation.
**Participants**

Ava is a white female in her mid-20s who teaches first grade in a rural school building. She is native to Midwestern United States. She has a younger brother and she is also close to her mother. Her father passed away of a sudden heart attack when Ava was a young girl. She has never been married and lives in the suburbs of a large midwestern city, approximately 20 miles from the school where she teaches. She has taught for 10 years and is a doctoral candidate in education.

Beth is a white female in her late 30s who teaches second grade in a suburban school building. She is native to Midwestern United States and is the youngest of 5 children. Both her parents are living and her family is currently located across several states in the United States. She is married and has 2 young sons. She lives in a suburb of a large midwestern city, approximately 10 miles from the school where she teaches. She has taught for 15 years, all of those years in the same building.

Both Ava and Beth describe themselves as believing in God and having a Christian upbringing from their youth. Neither of them currently attends a church and they both note they do not regularly engage in specific faith-based practices.

**Setting**

The two participants in this dissertation research work in the same school district (Core City School District), but in different elementary buildings. Their buildings draw from adjacent regions of the district, with Ava’s building, Central School, drawing from a rural portion of the district, while Beth’s building, Main School, draws from a suburban portion of the district.
The Core City School District covers approximately 119 square miles of the county in the central region of a midwestern state. The Core City School District is the second largest in the county in which it is located, which, according to the 2013 US Census, has a population of approximately 1,212,263. The district, the sixth largest in the state, was formed in 1956 through consolidation of six local school systems. The district’s history has included tremendous growth in the first four years after consolidation, gaining 1,000 new students per year during those four years. After decades of growth, decline, and financial stress, voters in the 1998 district-wide elections passed one of the largest school construction bond issues in the state’s history. This bond approved the construction of 4 intermediate buildings, a middle school, a high school, a technical career center, and renovations to 7 existing schools.

Currently, the district serves approximately 21,000 students and has 4 high schools (grades 9-12), 1 technical high school (grades 11-12), 5 middle schools (grades 7-8), 5 intermediate schools (grades 5-6), 16 elementary schools (grades K-4), 4 Head Start centers, and 5 special education preschool programs as part of its facilities. The district continues to grow with a 3-phase building plan currently underway. This plan includes the construction of 4 new elementary buildings to replace existing buildings, and renovations to 2 existing buildings in phase one; 5 new elementary buildings to replace existing buildings in phase two; and the construction of 3 new elementary buildings to replace existing buildings in phase three.

According to the district website, enrollment for the 2012-2013 academic year was as follows: grades 9-12 had 6,314 students; grades 7-8 had 3,194 students; grades 5-6 had
3,150 students; grades K-4 had 7,479 students; and pre-kindergarten and Head Start combined for a total of 689 students. The district has a free and reduced lunch percentage of 57.03. The district’s expenditure per pupil for the previous academic year, 2011-2012, was estimated at $10,273, with the state average as $10,508.

The English as a Second Language (ESL) and Limited English Proficient (LEP) populations are estimated at 2,700 students. The number of spoken languages across the district is 64, with Spanish being the most prominent. The district has the second largest ESL percentage in the state.

The ethnic composition of the district is as follows: Asian 1.2%, Multi-racial 3.6%, Hispanic 2.4%, African American 39.8%, and Caucasian 53.0%. However, it is important to note that the district’s Mission Statement, published on their website, touts their diverse student population. It reads, “Our mission, directed by our commitment to excellence, and in partnership with the community, is to meet the educational needs of our diverse population of learners”. Along with the Mission Statement, there is a 12-item list of the district’s Belief Statements. These address concepts such as all children have the ability to learn and all individuals deserve respect. The statements address the need for the learning environment to be safe, caring and supportive and for the quality of teaching to be exemplary in supporting all students, meeting them at their current level of need. The statements include references to the inclusion of family and community as important support systems for student learning, and a belief that student success extends beyond graduation and includes a commitment to life long learning for students, staff, and community members throughout the district.
Along with the above description of the district, it is also necessary to provide insight into the school buildings, Central and Main Elementary Schools, and how I situate them in this dissertation study. I will begin with Central Elementary and then turn attention to Main Elementary. The descriptions are from entries in my researcher journal.

**Central Elementary School.** I am traveling to the site of Ava’s classroom, noting the location and what I am seeing along the drive. The location reminds me of my native part of the state, in the fact that the school is surrounded by corn and soybean fields with farmers in the midst of harvest, kicking up the dust as the combine cuts the beans from their vine. The cloud of dust moves slowly across the road as I near the work being done. I note how some settles on my car windshield, and presume on other exterior surfaces of my car as I drive through the cloud. On the other side I catch my first glimpse of a construction site with a large block framework well in place and underway.

The site bustles with front-end loaders, dump trucks, and construction workers lifting, dragging, digging, loading, and emptying various materials. The site is near the intersection of two country roads, and as I arrive at the stop sign to turn left, I first note the existing school building. The new construction will be their new campus, projected to be occupied and fully functioning by Fall 2014, a year from now, as proclaimed by the signs posted on the outskirts of the construction site.

The journey to this school ended with familiar sites for me, but began just a few moments prior in the business and traffic of a typical suburban area of a city in Midwestern United States. As I drive I am swallowed by the traffic that is slowed by the orange barrels marking the seemingly endless road construction being done to the
As I merge from the interstate to the busy, large street that runs from the easternmost, to the westernmost boundaries of the city, there is more construction. The businesses appear to be suffering from the slow economy, as portions of strip malls sit empty, with parking lots that are filled with potentially tire deflating potholes and bumps. This scene is juxtaposed by the presence of a newly constructed fast food chain, as well as another popular food chain restaurant located just east of the abandoned storefronts. Driving west, the businesses appear less frequently alongside the street, and soon homes dot the landscape on either side. The journey goes from densely populated sections, to residential, to the rural scene I am so familiar with.

The school building’s parking lot is impacted by the construction of the new campus, so entry into the building is gained by walking around the perimeter to the front entrance. Posted on the building, just outside the front entrance are two poster boards touting the school’s commitment to character building for their students. The Seven Core Virtues – respect, honesty, giving, compassion, perseverance, self-discipline, and responsibility – are the cornerstone of the Basic School Concept according to the information made public before entering the school. I remember this commitment being a part of the mission of the Core City School District for their elementary schools, it appears to be a focus. This same information is prominently displayed in similar form in the foyer of the building, visible upon entrance through the front door.

The staff was welcoming, helpful and friendly as I entered the office space to sign in and introduce myself to the principal. I was able to catch the principal as he was leaving the office on an errand in the school. He quickly shook my hand upon introductions and
mentioned that my participant had spoke to him of my work and my impending presence in her classroom. He was grateful for the copies of my letters granting permission to do the research in his school and asked if I would please sign in every time I visited. Our brief meeting ended with him retreating back toward his original errand, and my attention turning to the sign in process.

**Main Elementary School.** I am traveling to Beth’s classroom for our initial meeting. The location of Beth’s school is very near Ava’s, as they are within the same school district. I am very familiar with the route to Beth’s school, as I supervised three groups of student teachers in this building and worked with Beth for two of those three groups. The route is the same as for Ava’s school, however, this school is not as far west and is located within an area surrounded by housing, typical for middle class suburbia – two story homes, with attached garages, a patch of grass as their front lawn, manicured landscaping defining their patch of lawn from their neighbors’.

This building, a sprawling, one story campus, flanked by two small playgrounds, with a paved drive flowing from the street curving the length of the building where buses and cars are regularly delivering or picking up their passengers at the beginning and conclusion of each school day. The building sits across the street on two sides by neighborhood housing, and on the other two sides it is adjacent to the campus of a nearby high school. The entrance to the building is nestled in a cove in the center of the campus, not highly visible from the street, but indicated by the sidewalks that all converge at the front doors. There is a buzzer by the door with signage requesting all visitor be buzzed into the premises, requiring first an announcement of your name and reason for being
there. Upon admission through the first set of doors, on the other side of the foyer is another set of tall glass doors, with a sign posted in both English and Spanish indicating that all must sign in at the school office prior to visiting any of the classrooms.

This building also has the previously mentioned Seven Core Virtues, in print, posted on the walls visible after entering the building through the second set of doors. The office staff remembers and greets me warmly, asking me to sign in as I have so many times. The principal is out of her office, observing a teacher in her classroom, so I tell the staff I will try to catch her upon my departure. I sign in, using the same process as used in Ava’s school, and make my way to Beth’s classroom.

This building is designed with clusters of classrooms in four or five wings along the perimeter of the building. The center core includes the administrative offices, the computer lab, and the library. The clusters, two groups in each wing, are labeled as pods. With each pod, the space is shared by four classrooms, with no classroom doors, and no permanent walls between the classrooms, only floor to ceiling partitions. The pod areas are typically filled with voices of teachers and children at various levels of volume. At times the noise level is raised to the point that students in their classroom may struggle to hear their own teacher due to noise emanating from neighboring classrooms. The teacher and students usually ignore this, unless the disruption is outrageously high in volume. I arrive at Beth’s classroom space that is within the first pod in her wing of the building.

**The elementary buildings.** I will now share some general information about the two elementary buildings. Ava’s school, Central Elementary, was built in 1960, with additions made in 1964 and 1996. Central is one of the elementary buildings that will be
abandoned in Fall 2014 to inhabit the newly constructed campus, located on the same site. The average daily enrollment is 460 students and the ethnic composition in the building is as follows; Asian 2.7%, Multi-racial 5.1%, Hispanic 14.5%, African American 5.7%, and Caucasian 72.0%. The percentage of students in Central Elementary who have limited English is 21.6%, the percentage with an identified disability is 11.3%, and the percentage of students who are considered economically disadvantaged is 66.5%.

The principal at Central Elementary is a white male. His message to the community, located on the school’s web page, includes the following Vision Statement: “Central School envisions the teamwork of parents, students, and staff working together to provide a safe, positive environment where children can learn to their fullest potential”. He adds in a personal message that states: “Our school…is characterized by a diverse student population ranging from high achieving students to students who are from a variety of cultural backgrounds”. Additionally, he adds:

The students and staff pride themselves on maintaining an outstanding environment for learning by practicing the seven core virtues that are cornerstones of the Basic School Concept. These virtues provide students with a blueprint of how to treat each other as well as how to maximize student, staff and family efforts in regards to academic and social growth.

Beth’s school, Main Elementary, was built in 1995 and will be one of the 2 buildings receiving a total renovation during the summer of 2014. The average daily enrollment is 684 students, with the ethnic composition as follows; Asian 1.8%, Multi-racial 4.5%, Hispanic 30.3%, African American 11.1%, and Caucasian 52.3%. The percentage of students with limited English is 38.4%, the percentage of students with an identified
disability is 11.5%, and the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged is 70.9%.

The principal at Main Elementary is a white female. The school’s website includes a welcome from the Principal that states:

The teachers and staff at Main Elementary are committed to providing a safe and caring learning environment for all students. We believe that a family’s involvement in their child’s education is important and wish to keep the lines of communication between the school and our students’ families open.

There is a separate section of the website that addresses what is called the “Virtues Celebration”. This is not directly identified as linked to the Seven Core Virtues. It notes the seven characteristics and has an opening line explaining the quarterly practice of teachers recognizing students who display the positive characteristics during a school-wide assembly.

The classrooms. I will now describe each of the participants’ classrooms, beginning with Ava’s and then Beth’s. Ava’s classroom is down the hall, a short distance from the office. The hallway has children’s work posted on both sides of the walls, covering them in various degrees of arrangement. Some displays were organized by a theme, noting the purpose of the work, such as a graph that listed children’s predictions as to whether their expectant teacher would give birth to a boy or a girl. Other work was in a linear arrangement with just a title such as who is in a specific classroom, along with students’ descriptions of themselves using a pre-printed sheet with prompts and space for student responses.

I note the layout of the room as having tables clustered in 4 groups throughout the room, chairs surrounding each cluster with common supplies in the center of each cluster,
such as glue, crayons, pencils, etc. Each chair has a canvas caddy hanging from the back, containing the folders and workbooks belonging to the occupant of each chair. In one corner of the room there is an empty space, approximately eight feet in diameter, and near this space there is an easel and adult-size chair sitting next to the easel. This is the whole group, or class meeting area. In the adjacent corner there are tables with four larger, older computers in a row and a chair in front of each. To the left of this computer station is a larger, half-moon shaped table with an adult, swivel chair in the curved center portion of one side and student-sized chairs on the opposite side of the table. This is where Ava holds her reading groups and other small group work. This is also where she does her morning work of checking students’ folders, recording attendance and lunch count, and other administrative tasks.

The walls and dry erase boards of the classroom are covered with print. The work is mainly of the children, or products from group discussions. There are many sheets of large chart paper attached to the dry erase board with webs on various topics, handwritten in both the teacher and children’s handwriting. There is a word wall on a large section of one wall, the height of which allows students to reach all words posted there. The words are on small index cards, or stock paper, and are handwritten, arranged in alphabetical order on the wall.

In the center of the room there is a table with several plastic bins, or containers (approximately 12” x 8” x 5” high) filled with books. There are also shelves around the parameter of the classroom with children’s books filling many of these. The room has ample space and is arranged to facilitate interactions as the chairs surround tables, rather
than all facing forward toward a central location where a teacher might stand to deliver lectures. Children move through the space with ease and seem very comfortable and knowledgeable about the use of the space.

Beth’s classroom at Main Elementary does not have a door as a point of entry; instead, exterior walls and floor to ceiling partitions define the space. Standing at the entryway to Beth’s classroom, you are facing the exterior wall with windows overlooking the playground. Immediately to your left is a small desk, placed against a permanent partition that forms an approximately seven-foot expanse of wall. In this space, which is adjacent to the area where students’ have individual cubbies for their belongings, Beth has her desk and a filing cabinet. Taking two steps further into the classroom, the students’ tables are grouped in four clusters in the center of the space. To the left of these tables is an open floor area, approximately nine feet in diameter just in front of the other permanent wall where the large dry erase board is located across most of the wall. Additionally surrounding this open floor space is a computer monitor, with a television mounted on the wall above, also an adult sized chair and an easel occupy this space. This is the group meeting area that Beth uses frequently throughout each day. Directly behind and to the right of the group meeting area is a shelf unit, and book display rack that is filled to capacity with children’s books. The wall space directly below the bank of windows overlooks the playground house shelves and baskets and bins of materials and supplies.

If standing at the entry to the classroom, looking to the right is a partition that separates Beth’s classroom from a first grade classroom. She has a half-circle table
located there with resources for her reading group meetings she holds in this space. Directly behind this area, further into the classroom are the math and science areas that sit along the rest of the partitioned wall with supplies for each of these content areas such as manipulatives, magnifying glasses, items from nature, and other supplies.

The classroom walls include signage created by Beth that indicates types of behavior or expectations for the group. For example, above the space where students have individual cubby, storage space is a sign posted that has children’s photos as the border and reads, “In room XYZ, we agree to listen, be kind, and always use perseverance”. The science and math areas of the room are labeled with a handmade sign that reads, Serious Scientists, and Math Masters. In the poetry corner, Beth has a poster board hanging on the wall that has a photo of one of her students in the center. The title of the board says, “What a good listener does”. Radiating from the center photo are speech bubbles with descriptions of how the photographed student is demonstrating being a good listener (hands quietly in lap, mouth closed, bottom on carpet, eyes forward).

The room is not large, but it does not feel cramped. There is ample room for students to move around the area and they are very conscious of how they are to move about in the space to be respectful of each other and the materials within the classroom.

**Data Collection**

Data sources that support an inquiry into the phenomena of spirituality in teaching and learning should replicate an invitation for participants to share their story of how they perceive their journey to becoming a teacher, and their pedagogical beliefs about teaching and learning within the context of their daily, lived experiences with children. As I
considered what data to collect for this study, I turned to Dillard’s (2006) understanding of inquiry framed within the spiritual paradigm. She notes:

What if, as researchers, we spiritually approached our research projects – and our relationships with others in these projects – knowing and confident that our words instead of our credentials were divine invitations to be in relationship with another, invitations that were able to both heal and serve? (p. 92)

I rely on these sentiments to think about the interactions of the two participants and my own interactions, as Dillard’s sentiments focus on the value of a dialogic approach to data collection. In fact, her sentiments resist the imposition of a hierarchical relationship between my participants and myself. This stresses the importance of the participants’ words, shared within a relationship of trust and collaboration.

I rely on data from transcripts of interviews and post observation conferences, field notes, reflective journals kept by participants as well as me, and representative documentation elicited from participants. The data sources I have chosen align with the spiritual paradigm, as they are representative of the dialogic element of the participants’ stories in the form of interview transcripts, their reflective journals, and the discussions from post observation conferences. These serve as tools for the creation of a shared dialogue, one that emerges from the collaborative work that pushes us beyond our own cultural boundaries to form new ideas and to stretch us beyond our own knowing.

Data collection methods consist of three one-on-one interviews and two group interviews. The first interview was a one-on-one; it focused on deepening the relationship between each participant and me. In other words, I sought to get to know, better, the participants and encouraging them to get to know, better, me. In this way, the first
interview included discussions regarding the participants’ journey to becoming teachers— I invited them to recall their earliest memory of wanting to become a teacher. As noted by Palmer (2007), the heart of the teacher is determined by her/his identity and integrity, not by the methodology she/he uses or the content she/he teaches. Palmer suggests identity and integrity are implicated in a holistic manner in this application: “Identity lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and integrity lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death” (p. 14). The intentionality of this interview, with its focus on participants’ sharing childhood memories and their decision to become teachers, addresses the value of self-reflection as a strategy for learning about a person’s identity and choices in becoming a teacher (Palmer, 2007).

The second interview was a group interview focusing on participants’ representation of their identity as a teacher and their teaching philosophy. Each participant was asked prior to the interview to create a symbol they believe represents who they are as a teacher. This request directly connects to the concluding discussion of the first interview, extending the participants’ reflection on their beliefs about teaching and the connection to their identity.

The third interview was a one-on-one interview focusing on how the participants plan their classroom environments. The discussion in this interview addressed the process and goals used by each participant as they plan their classroom environment prior to students’ arrival and also how they use the classrooms, themselves, and how they facilitate students’ use of the environment as well.
The fourth interview was the final one-on-one interview. During this interview, I shared with the participants my definition of spirituality as it is used in my dissertation. This led us to discuss each participant’s responses to the definition and how they perceived their own teaching as aligned with any portion of the definition. The definition, which was shared with both participants prior to the interview, states:

…the ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos – with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive. (Palmer, 1999, p. 6)

The fifth and final interview was a group interview, and in that interview, the concept of Ubuntu was introduced to the participants. I provided participants with the following brief summary prior to the interview for them to review:

From the belief that development occurs within relationships with others, Battle (2009) discusses the concept of Ubuntu, the African concept of personhood in which identity is stressed as interdependent through community, which adds the dimension of spirituality to identity. Battle (2009) states, “In the African tradition spiritual and natural dimensions of life, the sacred and the secular have no formal distinctions” (p. 86). According to Battle (2009) the spiritual permeates every aspect of life and encompasses all that is human which creates the holistic view of spiritual as vital to our identity. It is in our interdependence on others and the world that we find ourselves, which provides the element of relationships as spiritual. In addressing our identity, Battle (2009) demonstrates how identity is shaped in communion with others, “a person does not know she is beautiful unless there is another person who can make beauty intelligible to her” (p. 33). Additionally, Battle (2009) notes the manner in which we learn to function, stating, “We learn how to think, walk, speak, behave, how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human” (p. 54).

Each interview began with a period of reflection of the previous interview by participants and me (the researcher). Each interview took place either in the participants’
classrooms or their homes, with the first group interview being held in Ava’s classroom and the second group interview in Beth’s classroom.

Additional data were collected through observation notes taken during eight observations of each participant during their teaching. The focus of the observations was on the teaching practices and the manner in which each participant addressed building connections and relationships. Each observation lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and occurred in increments of two in the first month of the study, three observations in the second month, and three in the third month, for a total of eight. Field notes were taken and a brief conversation with the participant was held immediately following each observation; these served as checking points for me to collect any additional thoughts from the participants regarding what was observed. Within the week after each observation, notes were revisited and reorganized by highlighting significant events related to the phenomenon of spirituality.

I maintained a researcher journal from all the interview and observation sessions as a way to note points that were raised during these events. Additionally, participants were asked to keep a reflective journal regarding their experiences in the study and their feelings about spirituality. One participant completed three audio journals that I transcribed and returned to her for review and suggestions for edits or revisions. The other participant completed three written journals, which I returned to her after I photocopied them.

Member check sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred at three times throughout the study, with the participants receiving transcripts of interviews, observation notes,
transcriptions of any participant journal entries, and access to my researcher journal during each of the three sessions. Materials were sent to participants electronically and a follow-up conversation occurred during the session immediately following the receipt of the materials, this meant before an observation session in some cases, and in other cases before an interview. The feedback given from participants was incorporated into the raw data before analysis. Additionally, a form of member checks occurred during interviews as a summary of early findings was interjected into the discussion with the opportunity for participants to affirm, extend, or revise the information.

The elements of trustworthiness and member checking align with the concept of being grounded in truth within the spiritual paradigm (Palmer, 1993). This is illustrated in Palmer’s (1993) notion of communal truth in which he challenges the notion of a single truth by asking researchers take up the distinctions between private perceptions of reality: “One truth for you, another for me, and never mind the difference” (p. 55). It is in the differences that we find a communal truth formed in the collaborative process in which each individual’s personal truth can be challenged and enlarged. This communal truth is foundational to trustworthiness in my dissertation research.

The triangulation of methods for data collection was important as part of the research process in this study. The data collection methods used helped me to gain different information through different sources. I was able to gain data from my observations of the participants that could not be gained from interviews and vice versa. I gained the participants’ perceptions through the interviews and conversations during debriefings,
and I gained a view from outside the perspective of the participant during my observations.

The use of multiple sources of data also allows the voices of my participants to be heard in multiple ways. The voices are found orally in the interviews, in the written word through journal entries, symbolically through the artifacts explored, reflectively through the member checks and journal entries, and relationally through the observations of them in their classroom. In these ways, the multiple data sources speak to my decision to utilize an instrumental case study design, for it is Stake (1994) who asserts that case studies be grounded in a variety of data. Additionally, the data collection sources align with a spiritual paradigm in the way they honor the voice of the participant and are dialogic in nature.

**Data Analysis**

I relied on modifications of Colaizzi’s strategy for phenomenological data analysis, as identified by Shosha (2010) and Wojnar and Swanson (2007). The original strategy used by Colaizzi was applied in nursing research and includes seven steps: 1) reading and rereading descriptions, 2) extracting significant statements, 3) formulating meanings, 4) categorizing into clusters of themes, 5) describing, 6) returning to participants, and 7) incorporating any changes based on the informants feedback (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

In my analysis, I am not trying to analyze patterns, but rather I attempt to identify, name, and group them in a way that highlights aspects of spirituality in the participants’ teaching and learning processes. The questions guiding the identification of patterns include: 1) What are these educators saying about their practices? 2) Where do these
educators perceive spirituality in their practice as defined for this study? and 3) How is this practice made visible?

Analysis and Spiritually Connective Teaching

Through the data analysis, codes created for the significant statements revealed an overall theme of connections. This theme strongly aligned with the idea of spiritually connective teaching, which is created from the definition of spirituality used in this dissertation (see Chapter 2), as well as from the common elements contained within the theoretical framing of sociocultural theory and the concept of Ubuntu used in this dissertation (see Chapter 1).

Considering the intersection of the definition of spirituality, sociocultural theory, and the concept of Ubuntu, the idea of spiritually connective teaching emerged. This concept can be visible in teaching practices that foster interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections (see Chapter 2).

Data Analysis Procedure

The process of data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process in the following ways. I listened to each interview in their entirety the day after they were recorded. I transcribed the interviews within the week in which they occurred. I read the entire sequence of interview transcripts after all had been completed. Then, I used a modified version of Colaizzi’s analysis process as identified by Shosha (2010) and Wojnar and Swanson (2007). These actions led to my data analysis, which involved the following steps:
1. I first of all read and re-read all transcripts of interview, journals, and observations to gain a general sense of the overall content of the data.

2. I then identified significant statements from all transcripts upon a third reading of each transcript. I recorded the significant statements in a separate document, noting the participant, the date, the origin (observation, or interview, or journal), and the line number from the document for each.
   a. Significant statements were defined as any portion that pertained to the phenomena of spirituality in teaching and learning.

3. I then created codes for the significant statements based on their alignment with the theoretical framework and concept of spiritually connective teaching to identify common experiences. Identified codes were: Connection to self, Connection with students, Connection to others, Connection to learning, Connection to knowledge, Connection between students, and Connection to a higher being.

4. I then formulated meaning for each significant statement and created memos for each, noting the theme.

5. I sorted formulated meanings identified by theme into clusters of categories that aligned with each case, or participant.

6. I then integrated the findings into a description of the phenomena of spirituality in teaching and learning around the major cluster of categories, 1) the use and planning of classroom spaces, 2) presence of and connections with the educator, and 3) the creation of classroom community. I renamed each of
these categories to align more directly with spiritually connective teaching as follows: 1) reverence of the environment, 2) compassionate presence of the educator, and 3) sacredness of community.

**Positionality**

As noted by Lincoln (1995), positionality addresses the research in an authentic manner regarding completeness, generalizability, and truth; positionality also recognizes how research is “socially, culturally, historically, racially, and sexually located” (p. 280). This study examines, in-depth, the experiences of two early childhood educators whose stories are unique to them and their classroom settings. Their stories may illuminate new ways of thinking about pedagogy and spirituality, but they do not represent the whole story or the only perspective on this topic. This dissertation study has the strong potential to contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding spirituality in teaching and learning in ways that build upon what is already represented in the literature, but in ways that extend the focus to early childhood settings. However, I do recognize that this study is limited in that it only presents practices and perspectives from two educators in the Midwestern region of the U.S.

As the researcher, I bring my holistic self to the work, which is shaped by my sociocultural, racial, and sexual identities and my own personal history. I am transparent with my participants, acknowledging my position as a white, middle-class female from the Midwest who has encountered little struggle or strife insofar as the privilege that is associated with my cultural, racial, and sexual identities. I openly embody and acknowledge who I am just as I acknowledge who the two participants are in this study.
It is with these understandings of self and others that I acknowledge how this work is both spiritual (in the connections that it seeks to highlight) and political (in the ways this work on spirituality within teaching and learning is already highly politicized and often contested). Thus, I join the participants in exploring personal stories in an effort to create spaces for what is possible regarding spirituality in teaching and learning.

**Ethical Issues and Reciprocity**

In recognition of what Lincoln (1995) notes as the communitarian nature of research, my goal is to frame this study in a manner that serves the purposes of the various communities within which it occurred. I recognize my responsibility to my participants and I worked to ensure that all the following criteria was met:

- Were all participants given full information of what is involved in partaking in this study? Was informed consent complete and comprehensive?
- Was potential risk of harm addressed and eliminated for participants?
- Was I truthful in presenting all data in a trustworthy manner?
- Were privacy, confidentiality and anonymity fully addressed and protected for participants?

**Limitations**

This study represents the experiences of two individuals and two classroom settings, and I realize he findings are not generalizable or complete in scope. The findings represent the voice of the researcher and the perspectives and practices of the two participants, but not those of the children and their families. The children’s perspective of spirituality in teaching and learning, as well as in their relationships with their peers are
not explored in this dissertation study. Additionally, the perspective of the families and their understanding of their child’s spirituality and the impact of spiritually connective teaching is not addressed. The focus on the perspective and experience of the educators, sans the view of children and their families, limits the scope of this work and gaining a full understanding of the complexity of the dynamics involved. In the next chapter, I present some of the findings of this dissertation study as they relate to spirituality in teaching and learning and to spiritually connective teaching.
Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I examine how two early childhood educators teaching in the United States Midwest enact a spiritual presence in their teaching. As will be discussed, the findings align with the idea of spiritually connective teaching, which derives from the framing of sociocultural theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003), the African concept of Ubuntu (Battle, 2009), and the definition of spirituality (Palmer, 1999) used in this dissertation. These findings address the three guiding questions of this dissertation study:

1. How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two participants’ early childhood classrooms?

2. How do the two early childhood educators who participated in this study enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?

3. In what ways can a spiritual response within the pedagogical practices of the two early childhood educators participating in this study speak back to the marginalization of young children?

The presentation of findings is organized sequentially. First, I present a general discussion of the analysis process and initial findings. Then, I discuss how the findings emerged from an examination of the data through the lens of spiritually connective teaching. Finally, I discuss the findings as framed within each of the three categories—
reverence of the environment, compassionate presence of the educator, and sacredness of the community—that emerged during data coding. These three categories align with, and respond to, each of the three research questions. More specifically, I present an overview of the findings, and discuss each question by incorporating examples from the data set. In this way, I am intentional with my decision to honor the voices of the participants and maintain the integrity of the data.

Important to note here is that while participants in this study are not claiming expertise in the area of teaching and learning, they are authorities of their own experiences and they exhibited strong desires to share their stories and perspectives with me. I believe their insights offer opportunities to reflect on the role of spiritual connections in teaching and learning; therefore, I approached this study and the two participants with love and compassion. I engaged in reciprocal learning and attempted to maintain, or enact, the tenets of ritual throughout. In other words, my approach was intentional and reflected my decision to highlight a pedagogy of goodness, grounded in a spiritual presence, in teaching and learning. Thus, I present the findings of this study in order to highlight the transformative, reciprocal learning opportunities provided by the two teachers as I center a spiritual presence and notions of collective humanity in early childhood education.

**Spiritually Connective Teaching**

Analysis of collected data revealed an overall theme of connections. Significant statements, defined as any portion that pertained to the phenomena of spirituality in teaching and learning, were identified from the transcripts of all materials, observations,
interviews, and journals. The codes created for the significant statements, which aligned with spiritually connective teaching, were: connection to self, connection with students, connection to others, connection to learning, connection to knowledge, connection between students, and connection to a higher being.

The themes noted from the memos for the coded data aligned with one of the three types of connections within spiritually connective teaching—reverence of the environment, compassionate presence of the educator, and sacredness of community. I identified clusters of categories in the data in ways that aligned each research question with a connection to spiritually connective teaching. Then, I used a variation of Creswell’s (2013) model for presenting case study data as a way to discuss the findings of this dissertation. For clarity, I used an integrated approach to report on the findings for each of the two cases since the findings across the cases were more similar than different. The differences that are notable are identified within the discussion of each representative case. It should also be noted that there are similarities, which I will discuss, across the participants’ contexts and the aspects of spirituality that relate to the three categories. Both the similarities and differences are important to highlight, as they speak to the significance of the findings on spiritually connective teaching in early childhood settings. Below, I present the findings as organized by the three cross-case themes: reverence of the environment, compassionate presence of the educator, and sacredness of community.

**Reverence of the Environment**

In articulating a response to the first of the three research questions guiding this dissertation study—*How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two*
participants’ early childhood classrooms?—one must first imagine a description of a spiritually centered classroom. What might be included as a part of the environment? What might govern the learning opportunities? How might children and educators use the space? To facilitate this imagining, I briefly turn to Schoonmaker (2009), who explores spirituality in classroom contexts and offers the following definition of spirituality:

Spirituality refers to a way of being that includes the capacity of humans to see beyond themselves, to become more than they are, to see mystery and wonder in the world around them, and to experience private and collective moments of awe, wonder, and transcendence. (p. 2713)

Schoonmaker’s (2009) definition of spirituality speaks to the way in which Ava and Beth make spirituality meaningful in their classrooms, which can best be described as their reverence of the environment. Both educators view the classroom space as a place for children as opposed to a place that is owned by the teacher and that simply includes children for a few hours each day. As aligned with sociocultural theory, the importance of the learning space is a focus for both educators, considering the context within which interactions can occur in a purposeful manner. The reverence of the environment aligns with the concept of Ubuntu in the manner in which both participants used the classroom space as a tool for building relationships. The importance of interpersonal connections, as demonstrated through the use of the environment, supports Ubuntu in the focus on interdependence and relating to others. Ava and Beth’s reverence for the environment focuses on the child, placing ownership of the space in the collective, rather than the possessive. These classrooms are considered places where children should feel
comfortable, as if they belong, and that are designed for their use and discovery. In other words, classrooms are places to come and wonder, to think, to question, and to share.

Ava and Beth’s classrooms, then are places that privilege context over content, concepts over facts, questions over answers, imagination over knowledge, intuition over rational logic, process over product, and quality over quantity (Iannone & Obenauf, 1999, p. 741). Within their classrooms, forms of spirituality were visible, which materialized in the planning of the classroom environment, the physical arrangement and emotional elements that comprised the classrooms, the ways the classrooms were used as resources for learning, and in the variety of teaching strategies that were used to facilitate students’ connections to the learning.

**Planning of the Classroom Environment**

While both Ava and Beth state that their view of their pedagogical practice as spiritual emerged during our work together, they did state they were very intentional in the planning of their classroom environment. This point speaks to Schoonmaker’s (2009) claim that while there is, in fact, “growing interest in spirituality and education, there is little evidence that it is intentionally included in most public school classrooms” (p. 2713). According to Ava, “I just feel like there is a lot of consideration that goes into even when I’m selecting where different centers are going to be.” Ava is conscious of the consequences of her decisions—from deciding where to place the various learning centers to how to ensure, as best she can, that her classroom is a comfortable space. Ava was not alone in her articulation of having a comfortable classroom space. Beth also discussed the value of having such a space, which could be devoted to whole group
meetings in which students would sit on the floor near each other. However, Beth and Ava both mentioned the importance of also having adequate personal space. They each created a balance between the need to have both a large space and a more personal space in their classrooms, for both types of spaces provided opportunities for students to collaborate and to work individually. Ava describes the need to have both types of spaces as having *natural boundaries* in the classroom:

And then I also always have a generally BIG meeting area at least one big space where we can all be together, and kids can see, and we can work together. But then I also, within creating those natural boundaries like to have little nooks and crannies for kids to be able to get into those spaces and work in groups and have just a little separation… I know that they love finding little places to curl up at the end of a bookshelf and read a book, or to find a little nook and play a game…

Recognizing how their students utilized the classroom spaces became a priority in how Ava and Beth planned classroom-based learning experiences, an important finding to highlight, given that the structure of the classroom environment (and not the students’ use of it) often facilitates and limits teachers’ decisions.

**Classrooms’ emotional aesthetic.** In their discussion of elements of a spiritual pedagogy in a classroom (Dillard, Daa’iyah, & Tyson, 2000), Daa’iyah and Tyson discuss the attention to aesthetics that Dillard brought into her teaching, allowing student expressions through creative arts in assignments, and the aesthetic of voices in relation to whose voices are heard in a spiritual classroom. As Palmer (2003) states, aesthetics serve as crucial components by which to create spaces that welcome the soul.

There is an emotional element in planning a classroom space that allows for students to think creatively and express themselves with shared voices. During my data analysis, I discovered the importance, for both Ava and Beth, of children feeling part of classroom
spaces; they also need to feel safe enough to take risks in their learning. Both Ava and Beth demonstrated ways (e.g., their planning of group work, individual work, and of shared discussions) that they value students’ voices. When I asked Beth to talk about why the group meeting area was most important in her planning, she commented:

Well, we spend a lot of time there, I think. It also has to be comfortable for people but more than just the literal sense, in an emotional sense. I always tell them my first job, as a teacher is to make you feel safe. I think that’s the first step towards it is having that meeting space. They know if we have a problem, that’s where we’re gonna go to solve it and kind of hash it out. That’s where we begin every single day. Most days, it’s where we end the day, although the ends of days are a little bit rushed. But, if we set a goal, that’s where we meet to talk about it, and we evaluate it. After lessons, that is where we come back to share our work. It’s the ‘kitchen’ of our classroom, you know? It’s the meeting place and where people bear their souls.

Both Ava and Beth spoke of how they wanted their students to feel about the classroom. Beth notes that it is important that “everyone feels like an equal part of the classroom”, and to accomplish this, she posts photographs and words from her students throughout the classroom. Ava comments that it is important to her that students want to return to the classroom each day:

And their parents are saying, ‘I’m just happy they love to come to school and they love what’s going on and they’re happy to go to school every day’. That means the space they are coming to, they are excited about. Yeah, it’s hard, but they’re still excited to come and be there. When I walk in I feel like my classroom feels like home.

Additionally, both Ava and Beth planned the space by considering the children’s daily lives within the classroom community, a point that aligns with the belief that part of a child’s spiritual connection with the world derives from moments of “standing in wonder and awe of life as it unfolds before us” (Miller, 2006, p.6). Ava speaks about the planning of her classroom by admitting: “But there are always just places for them to go,
and to be, and to just find room to work in groups, work in pairs, whether it’s on the table, on the floor”. This is indicative of Ava’s belief in providing space for children just “to be” in the daily life of the classroom.

**Classroom as a resource.** “Every single thing in the room is like a tool for their learning,” declares Ava in describing her classroom environment and the way students use it as a resource for their learning. Because she includes a variety of tools for learning in her classroom, she is able to work with students in ways that foster greater connections to the materials, to each other, and to the classroom environment. Students are encouraged to participate in groups and to collaborate with the teacher. Beth shares that the classroom books that the students collaboratively created are always available and that “they are always the first grabbed”.

Both Ava and Beth mention how the student-created resources are used as tools for student writing and problem solving for classroom issues. Ava talked about how the students create books and charts together, which are used as “artifacts in the room.” She continues by explaining how “all the stories we read together, those are kind of collected in a certain kind of space where it’s like those are books they know how to read and know how to use.” Thus, Ava views the classroom as “a tool for their learning.”

During my observations of Ava in her classroom, I witnessed how she consistently referred to and used the artifacts posted throughout the room. She would scribe words dictated by the students during their group meetings on a dry erase board and she would also post things on the classroom word wall. All were used as supports for student writing. During one observation, Ava utilized four large sheets of chart paper posted on
the walls in the classroom, one for each of the four seasons—winter, spring, summer, and fall. On each sheet, she listed the season in the center of the web and she connected the arms of the web with particular labels related to sight, smell, hear, touch, and taste, which then connected to columns containing words and phrases that describe things that children would see, smell, hear, taste, or touch during each season. These ideas, generated by the group and connected to the students’ own experiences, demonstrated how their words and thoughts are valued in this classroom. When they were ready to write, students were given the freedom to sit near the appropriate chart and use the information as prompts and support for writing their stories. Through this strategy, Ava provides validation for the value of students’ thoughts and words, rather than providing other resources such as dictionaries, textbooks, or the words of the teacher as prompts for students’ writing.

A strategy Beth uses that promotes the value of students’ words and ideas involves problem solving. She talks about how she utilizes the classroom and the students’ words as tools for their problem solving:

I try to involve them in problem solving and then creating resources to solve those problems. So, like we were being noisy at the cubbies, so I just posed that problem, “Look, this is the problem we are having. What can we do to fix the problem? Oh, we could make a sign! Ok. Great! What do you want it to say?” and then posting that. I think they can see themselves up, around the room and know that they had a part in creating those things.

Not only does Beth use the students’ own words for the signage that is created, but she also looks to the students for the actual resolution. Within the context of Beth’s classroom, students are viewed as capable of solving their own problems, and she acknowledges this by using their verbiage in the solution. Beth reaffirms the importance
of the student-led process by using the students’ own words to post the solution in the classroom, which serves as a tool for how they could navigate the space in their daily lives.

Ava shared that she sees the classroom environment as playing an important role in her students’ learning, and she referred to an incident that occurred during our work together. Within her classroom, she uses the space and materials in ways that facilitate learning. For example, when the class had to evacuate their classroom for two days “because of heater issues,” the idea and value of the classroom as a resource became evident. According to Ava, evacuating the classroom was a major “struggle because they [students] use so many things that are on the walls that are on the shelves as tools.” Significant to note here is that Ava recognizes that the students “refer to them. They look for them. They are a part of centers. They are a part of everything. They are a part of our culture. They are a part of everything we do.” She continues: “So then to…just transplant to another room, yeah, you can do that. But, they are missing that engagement with the classroom itself.”

Ava’s comment that the classroom is part of the culture of the group who inhabits the space illustrates the importance of the physical classroom (and its artifacts) as part of the spiritual nature of her teaching. As noted by Scherer (1999), “When we downplay competition and play up mutual help, we make the classroom a more spiritual place” (p. 20). Scherer’s sentiments regarding mutuality ring true for Ava because she constructs her classroom—and her students both see and use their classroom—as a space that is a
resource for learning that frames learning as co-constructed by the lives, the actions, the ideas, and the words of students.

**Teaching strategies to enhance students’ connection to the learning.** Ava and Beth use two strategies to help their students connect to knowledge—elements of culturally focused pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000) and what Palmer (1999) refers to as the intersection of the big story with the little story of a child’s life.

**Culturally focused pedagogy.** According to Ladson-Billings (1995), “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). Similarly, Gay (2000) refers to this idea as culturally responsive teaching, and she offers characteristics of her concept that include the following:

- It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
- It teaches students to know and praise their own and each other’s cultural heritages (p. 29).

Both Ava and Beth utilize teaching strategies that align with Ladson-Billings’ (1995) idea of using students’ culture as a vehicle for learning, as well as strategies that align with the aforementioned characteristics from Gay’s (2000) culturally responsive teaching. For Ava, the importance of culturally relevant and responsive teaching is evident in how she discusses her relationships with her students and the regularity in which she includes students’ home cultures and non-school social experiences in her pedagogical practices. She values connecting students’ classroom learning to aspects of their cultural identities, and she encourages students to learn from the cultural identities of their classmates.
In discussing her relationship with students, Ava shares:

They begin by connecting with each other and connecting with me, but then for me, I try to pull them into the curriculum. So I try to make the curriculum responsive to them. So, if I’m going to the library and checking out read alouds, or even if I’m using the same read aloud I’ve used for five years, I might approach it a different way with a different group of kids because I know certain things about them. So, I can make a connection to a student because I know that about them. So, I am very intentional in that.

Ava adds that she expects students to “bring their world into the classroom every day” saying that it is “encouraged” and “almost expected”. She asks students to make and share connections with each other in ways that motivate them “to make those connections and to share them.” She hopes “that they see themselves in the curriculum. That’s kind of a goal.”

Additionally, Ava notes how her relationships with her students shape her instruction: “I have opportunities to build relationships with kids, to use what I’m getting to know about them to guide my instruction is important.” She also makes available learning opportunities for students to share who they are with their peers in ways that might foster meaningful connections and relationships. She uses opportunities, in the form of formal and informal dialogue and content related experiences, for students to discuss what they do outside school and for students to learn about experiences from her own childhood (e.g., roller skating, students’ favorite hot dog toppings, etc.). In response to my inquiry about how she fosters students’ connection to the world, Ava states, “I would say, in general, relating to each other as humans. We talk about how we act in school and how we act outside of school and things that we do outside of school.” She adds, “I ask lots of open-ended questions. Even when they are sharing, me, continuing to ask questions and
more open-ended questions we can learn more about each other through that sharing process. Brings us closer together.”

Another strategy both Ava and Beth use is the hand signal that symbolizes “me too” during classroom discussion. Students are encouraged to use the “me too” hand signal when they notice a commonality with a classmate, or if they arrive at a similar response to a posed question. Ava notes, “With comprehension I might ask, what was your favorite part and why? And they have to be listening to each other because they do that ‘me too’ if that was their favorite part. So they are acknowledging each other’s connections.”

In addition to the hand signal, Beth and Ava also use the ‘turning and talking’ strategy, which provides students opportunities to discuss their ideas and their work with a partner who is near them during group time. There is significant time allotted for talking and sharing with each other in both classrooms. Ava explains that she “started using last year… the ‘turning and talking’. Intentionally stopping at certain points in the story, or if it’s just before we’re about to go back and write, I’m having them visualize.” On this same point, she continued:

I have them close their eyes, I’m having them think about it. And then before they go and write they have to turn and tell someone about it. Along with that comes back to the sharing time when they bring their work to the floor and we’re sharing to the group, but they also turn and share with a buddy. A lot of my class spends a lot of time talking, but it’s all well worth it because the types of things I see them writing, and the way I see them writing. And the ways I see them thinking about things are very sophisticated.

Another example of students learning about each other through sharing was the sharing party that Ava planned. Throughout the school year, students’ families would join
the class to learn about the work the children produced. Reflecting on an upcoming sharing party, Ava explains:

We just finished family stories that they wrote and on Wednesday we are having a sharing party so they are going to be able to share their stories. I invited their families to come in if they want to hear the stories be read. They brought in photographs, they drew pictures, they told stories about things that they wanted to do with their family. It’s not just about being respectful but it’s about learning about each other.

The examples shared here lay a foundation for culturally focused pedagogy that enables students to connect to each other and to the related learning by exploring group commonalities and by embracing children’s individualities in relation to cultural identities and lived experiences. The message that is conveyed through these examples is one that insists that students belong to, and are a significant part of, the classroom environment, on the one hand, and students’ cultural identities should be incorporated into pedagogical practices, on the other hand. Both Ava and Beth demonstrate they value students’ experience; they encourage students to share their stories and perspectives with each other. These strategies facilitate characteristics of culturally responsive teaching noted by Gay (2000) in ways that build meaningful connections between home and school and that recognize students’ cultural heritages.

**The big story as part of the little stories.** During my time with Ava and Beth, I witnessed how they both structured their lessons in a manner that relates to Palmer’s (1999) idea of creating an intersection between the big stories of the content with the little stories of the students. These examples were from the Social Studies content area relating to Veteran’s Day and Thanksgiving, and I will share a discussion Beth and I had
about a social experiment she has replicated in previous years regarding oppression and racism.

Beth discussed the creation of a class poem, composed for Veterans’ Day, and she shared some insight into the process. She began by explaining that they played a video that was linked to the questions, “how many of you know a veteran? Whether it’s someone in your family, or someone that you see or have seen in the school before. And what are your experiences?” Then, she explained that students are “pretty forthcoming… So we do a lot of sharing and then kids realize if they think they have nothing to share they hear other people share and that spawns something in them and they are willing then to speak up and say that too.”

In addressing Thanksgiving, Beth framed the study of the Pilgrim’s experience in a manner that allowed students to make connections to their own lives. During my observation of a lesson that was part of the unit of study on Thanksgiving, Beth identified the learning goal for the unit as, “In Social Studies, I can explain ways in which pilgrim life is different from my life”. As part of Beth’s classroom, this goal is posted along with learning goals in all content areas. She changes the posting as the goals change with the content being addressed. Beth introduced this specific body of content to students by using poetry workshop as the medium for students’ work. The preparation for the students’ writing was a lesson in which Beth focused the pilgrims being forced to leave England and travel to America. Through class discussion, she identified the concept of religious freedom as the impetus for the pilgrims to leave their homes and their lives in England. She offered students the opportunity to discuss what was really important to
them that would cause them to make such a bold stance before asking them to deeply consider what is really important to them and that makes them special.

During a conversation with Beth, she explained to me that she does not only ask students to explore the event (Thanksgiving) from the perspective of the pilgrims, but she also invites them to consider the larger historical experiences. It was during our final one-on-one interview where she talked about how she seeks to foster students’ connection to the world by providing them with a “more realistic view on history”. She stated:

> When the Native Americans were here and the pilgrims came over, I think in the past it’s always been taught and children perceive it as this great, huge party, and everyone got along famously. And just trying to give it a more realistic spin, you know that was nice, but then we turned around and we weren’t so nice to them. So what lesson can we learn from that, moving forward because history is about learning. So, beyond interdependence, there’s a more literal spin to it in the way I try to teach history.

> During an observation of a lesson about immigration to the United States, Beth used a visual of the outline of a pot and world maps to support her discussion of the United States as “the melting pot” (she also added that label to her visual aid). She wrote “Native American” in the center of the pot and explained that the Native Americans were the first people to inhabit the U.S., and others were not native, but immigrated to the U.S. for various reasons. She used the world map to point out each country she discussed with students, adding the name of the country to the visual aid of the melting pot as she identified them.

> In our final one-on-one interview, Beth shared with me her powerful experience of providing students a sense of being oppressed. She replicated a well-known social experiment originally conducted in an elementary classroom in rural Iowa in 1968, occurring in the days immediately following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King,
Jr. The experiment, a report for the news program, *Frontline*, was entitled, “A Class Divided,” and is often referred to as the “Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed Experiment”. In this experiment, the classroom teacher created a premise for students to feel superior to their classmates based on their eye color. The teacher reinforced this notion of superiority with collars student wore to identify them as part of the ‘lesser’ group, making it easier to know who is in which group from a distance. The teacher also articulated a series of justifications for the superior group’s status and within one school day, the students responded according to their identified roles as a part of the superior, or better group, or as part of the oppressed, or inferior group.

Using hair color to recreate this experiment, Beth discusses the impact on her students as, “always a huge eye-opening unit for them because they just can’t even get their little heads around it”. She continues, “They become really engaged when they figure out people were really treated like this.” Her description of the actual experiment with her students includes the following:

We try that and it is AMAZING the connection that they have and it’s almost instantaneous. Both sides get it. I usually try to do brown eyed-brown hair people just to make it different. It’s amazing how FAST and how quickly they jump on that bandwagon of superiority and looking down upon the other ones, just because I’ve said that. It’s eye opening to them, because then later when we talk about it they say, ‘I would never do that. I would never treat somebody like that’ and I say, ‘But, you DID!’ That’s hard for them to realize, I think.

In their attempts to bring the students’ small stories into focus with the big story of the academic content, Ava and Beth sought to foster connections to knowledge and the world in their students by creating a spiritual connection. I argue that they did so by
providing learning opportunities for students to consider the experience of others in relationship with their own experiences and understandings of the world.

**Summary**

In summary, the response to the research question—*How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two participants’ classrooms?*—involves the manner in which the educators plan and use their classroom spaces and pedagogical strategies to help students connect to the learning. Specifically, the creation of spaces within the larger classroom contexts for students to work in small collaborative groups and as a whole class, paired with the intentional design of spaces for individual, self-reflective work, speaks to spiritually connective teaching that recognizes connections with self, others, and learning. Ava and Beth used teaching strategies to support students’ connections to their own cultures and those of the teacher and their classmates. They also foster connections to learning by inviting students’ experiences inside the classrooms in ways that speak to the element of spiritually connective teaching regarding connections to the world and to learning.

Palmer (1993) describes the spiritual learning space as one that promotes invitation to a relationship with truth, explaining “to know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one’s whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will” (p. 31). A space that promotes this is open and includes sub-spaces for students to connect and relate with others. It is also a space that is open to, and accepting of, ongoing participation. This emotional element of the learning space is as vital as the
physical arrangement because both the emotional and physical aspects welcome the soul and encourage people to make connections to self and others.

To borrow Palmer’s (1993) idea, both Ava and Beth bring the known into the proximity and experience of the knower, their students, as opposed to treating the known as an entity that is “out there” to be discovered, but without any affect or subjectivity involved.

**Compassionate Presence of the Educator**

Insofar as the second research question is concerned—*How do early childhood educators enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?*—I highlight data that align with spiritually connective teaching that promotes intrapersonal and interpersonal connections. The focus of this data is the participants’ connections to self, with students, and to how they embody what I refer to as a compassionate presence (see Miller, 2006, “compassionate awareness”). Miller (2006) states, “the primary task of an educator is to become fully conscious and present to the miraculously unfolding lives of the young people before them” (p.8). He notes the characteristics of teaching related to “compassionate awareness” by asserting that “the teaching moment involves each child’s personality and aspirations, and his or her mood at a given time, as well as the social climate of the classroom, school and community, as well as the current realities of the world at large” (p. 8).

For an educator to have, or embody, a compassionate presence, she/he should focus on students and should be fully responsive to students as human beings by recognizing them in a holistic manner. This is juxtaposed to an educator’s focus on learning.
objectives at the exclusion of students’ emotions, hopes, and dreams. As Kessler (2000) notes, this way of being in the classroom, “will ultimately determine how safe and open students will feel when we invite them to explore deep matters” (p. 118). The findings in this area align with sociocultural theory in the manner in which Ava and Beth relate to their students in an apprenticeship model. Both educator’s relate to students in a manner indicative of a strong personal relationship, aligning with sociocultural theory’s focus on authentic cultural activity. The relationships built between the educators and their students demonstrate the impact of the specific cultural context, as the children develop habits of mind and ways of being that are unique to the cultural context of the classrooms. The educators model, implement shared and then guided activity around socialization in the classroom, and move relationships with students toward gradual release as students develop skills as collaborators and cooperative learners. The findings support the concept of Ubuntu in the aspect of how the educators build students compassion, and trust toward each other. As noted by Waghid (2013), Ubuntu encourages a level of caring beyond just a feeling toward one another to include practical ways to sustain and improve one’s living conditions (p. 61). The relationships between these educators and their students model this element of caring as noted in Ubuntu. While an educator’s compassionate presence points to her/his connection with students (the interpersonal connection), as Palmer (2007) notes, this presence begins with the educator’s connection to self (the intrapersonal connection).

The discussion of the intrapersonal, or connection to self, will explore how the data align with Palmer’s (2007) discussion of how teachers “teach who we are” (p. 1).
Components of this discussion will include how Ava and Beth’s identities are integral to their teaching, especially as they address the inward sign of vocation, the “voice of the teacher within” (Palmer, 2007, p. 33), and the role of positionality with regards to how they describe themselves as educators and understand their teaching philosophies.

At the beginning of our work together, both Ava and Beth articulated that they did not view their teaching as spiritual. They both equated this to the common misconception that spirituality meant religion and they had not yet considered a variation of the definition of spirituality. As Ava noted, “I would probably venture to say that most teachers don’t think that they’re spiritual. Or if they’re spiritual they relate it to being religious and then that is something that is very separate.” They both also shared that as they journeyed through the process of considering spirituality in a different context, as I had framed it, that they realized elements of spirituality present in their own practices. In our final one-on-one interview, I shared my definition of spirituality—which I take from Palmer (1999)—as, “The ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive” (p. 6). Then, later and during the final group interview, Beth shared the following:

I think the last time we had the interview you asked if I had ever thought about my teaching as spiritual and I said, no. I mean honestly I haven’t because to me that’s always been defined as being related to religion. So taking it out of that context and putting it into this one, I think very much so. I mean that idea of creating community is very important to me. Sort of everything goes back to that center of community, and the idea of interdependence, those two things really stand out to me as being tied into the way I teach and try to run my classroom.
When I inquired about what they felt was the most significant discovery made during our few weeks together, Beth replied, “Also, just decontextualizing the idea of spirituality. That’s been new for me. And seeing that it does have a really real-world connection to what we do here. Again, those ideas of interdependence and community.” Beth’s response reflects a realization of one of the hopes I carried into this work, that I would be able to serve as a mirror for these two educators to enable them to see their own practice for the spiritual elements it contains. Additionally, the reciprocity that is part of the methodology of surrender, as discussed by Dillard (2006), is evident in Beth’s articulation of what our dialogue had brought to her heart. Undoubtedly, I was deeply transformed after hearing her describe her practice and after being afforded the privilege of observing her pedagogical practices and engagements.

Throughout this dissertation study, I anticipated seeing good teaching. However, I was motivated to get to know these teachers more fully because of the spiritual essence they brought to their teaching and to their students. Their spiritual essence pointed to elements of their spirituality of interdependence and compassionate presence, and their deep connections to students and their families became more visible in my observations of their pedagogies and in our shared dialogue. Framing my observations of Ava and Beth in their classrooms through a spiritual lens magnified the significance of the work they do on a daily basis. As I reviewed the data immediately after each point of collection, I noted that the focus of their practice and philosophy was not on specific content or methodology. This is not to say that content was not addressed, it was, and effectively. The practice of these two teachers related to the following idea asserted by
Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes (2011): “Bringing spirituality back into the academy is not a rejection of logic or reason, but a rejection of the privileged position that it is given; it is a call for the inclusion of hope, love, respect, diversity, peace, community, and humour – the things that make us whole” (p. xvi). While Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes’ work is situated within higher education, Ava and Beth are doing the things that they call for, but within an early childhood context: they are teaching the content within a spiritual context that focuses on hope, love, respect, diversity, peace, community, and humor. These elements serve as the foundation of their practice and their beliefs about teaching and learning. Ava and Beth rely on their spiritual focus as they work with the children in their care and in this way, they engage in what I call spiritually connective teaching.

**Connection to Self**

The findings indicate that both Ava and Beth demonstrate a connection to self that align with Palmer’s (2007) discussion that the identity and integrity of a teacher are integral to their view of self. Teaching grounded in identity and integrity is not based on methodology or teaching techniques, but rather, it emanates from the heart and soul of the individual. As noted by Palmer (2007), this definition of teaching is grounded in connecting with self and students in ways that help students connect with content. These connections, from the heart, are described “as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (Palmer, 2007, p. 11). Palmer goes on to define identity and integrity by writing that “identity lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and integrity lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death” (p. 14).
Both Ava and Beth were asked to suggest, or create, a symbol they felt representative of their identity as an educator. Through the discussion of the symbols each presented, the way in which they positioned themselves as an educator was revealed. This discussion demonstrates how they each see themselves professionally. In later discussions, connections between their professional and personal identities were revealed as integrated and aligned.

**Positionality of self.** Both participants offered a symbolic representation for their view of themselves as a teacher. The images they offered were distinctive to themselves and the discussion around the chosen symbols revealed more about their view of positionality of self. Ava, for instance, confessed to “always being drawn to a tree” because of its strength and roots. She admitted that as a teacher, she has learned more about who she is and the type of work she engages (her “craft”). She continues:

> You kind of start out trying to make it and get through it and over time you really begin to learn and find that this is your classroom, this is your space and that it’s your expertise that guides what you do. There are things I am even doing this year that maybe last year, or years before I didn’t think I could stop for a second and take time to do. It’s getting more comfortable and even thinking of better ways to do things that are better for the kids. In thinking about that, growing professionally, but also that in all the different roles you play, you have all these branches that reach out everywhere.

Ava then talked about the feeling of being asked to do many different things and how those different things eventually “become your little tiny twigs. But over time the things that are the most important kind of stay the strongest.” She elaborated on this latter point:

> One of the things, I would say along with the tree metaphor, that I kind of reflected on that I sent you was I feel like teachers, or for me, have to come back to just staying calm in the light of all the things that are thrown at you all the time; and not letting it get you down, or be negative, or overwhelmed. Everything is always just sort of thrown on you and you kind of have to, in terms of thinking about that metaphor of the tree, dig into those roots and continue. And it really is going back to those
relationships and making time for those kids and not letting those thoughts infiltrate my mind while I’m working with them, because that can easily make someone negative. It can make them feel stressed, overwhelmed and it takes away from your time in here with them. And that’s not what I want to happen.

Beth used the image of the ocean as the symbol for her teaching. She describes her choice of this symbol by talking about her return to water, which she believes is a great metaphor for thinking about her pedagogies. She mentioned a prior conversation we had about teaching, recalling that she, herself, used the word “hard” to describe teaching. As she reflects on that prior conversation, she admits, “I would still say that. But it is a lesson in contradiction because it is hard, yet it’s rewarding.” She states:

So it’s related to water, or ocean. You have to be several of those things at once. You have to be tenacious and determined, yet tentative and uncertain as you sort of finding your way and the best choices for individual kids. You have to be supportive of them, yet relentless and keep on them. Rigid in terms of what you have to teach, or with behavior issues maybe, yet flexible and willing to work with different schedules and different types of children, and switch gears when something’s not working. At times, it’s chaotic. Many times you must be the calming force, the one in charge. It’s hard yet you have to be gentle and steadfast, pervasive. You have to get to everybody, and everlasting and eternal. So hopefully you stick with them. I just thought the ocean represented all of those things. It can be calm and peaceful yet, really turbulent, determined.

Ava and Beth’s choices and descriptions appear to be in opposition. Ava’s choice of a tree appears to relay her positionality as grounded, solid, and centered, whereas Beth’s choice of the ocean implies fluidity. Ava uses the analogy of storms to note the steadfast nature of her metaphor, using descriptive terms such as grounding, very strong, your expertise, most important, strongest, dig into those roots. She implies that no matter what comes her way, remaining calm and focused are important.

In contrast, Beth’s description of the symbolic nature of the ocean uses many dichotomous terms such as tenacious/tentative, determined/uncertain, hard/rewarding,
supportive/relentless, and rigid/flexible. Additionally, she uses an image that she believes represents difficulties, definitiveness, or being hard, “period”. The addition of the word period appears to be for emphasis, yet she follows that with the contradictory notion that it is rewarding, which led me to wonder if Beth views herself as being tossed about, back and forth, as with the waves of the ocean. Or, I wonder if she envisions herself as multifaceted, able to address the ever-changing needs of her students. Is there a vastness in her ability to reach all children, a vastness like that of the ocean?

Both Ava and Beth indicate their recognition of the purpose of their teaching, a description of which aligns with their different positionalities. Akin to her steadfast and grounded view of herself as a teacher, Ava makes a very straightforward statement about teaching saying, “I think it is one of the most important jobs that anyone can do.” This implies a solid purpose to her view of teaching. Beth mentions the ebb and flow of her relationships with her students in response to our discussion of the purpose of teaching. She says, “Finding those relationships again, and realizing you still have that bond, that’s really why we’re in it, to see them move forward. I think once you feel that again, it’s a feeling, the feeling keeps you grounded”.

Both Ava and Beth note how their professional role is a large part of who they are as a person, as Ava noted, “I definitely live and breathe it now” in reference to her teaching identity. This holistic element of expressing themselves as part of their teaching can be painful or, as Beth stated, “I feel things deeply. So sometimes this is a hard job”. They both indicate a deep level of investment and commitment to their role as educators and they both recognize the importance of integrity and authenticity. According to Ava,
“Because I really do feel like the person I am as a teacher in here is the same person I am when I leave the classroom. I don’t turn on the ‘person’ that’s like a fake person. And that’s probably why my kids do love me, it’s because I’m a real person with them.” And for Beth, “I think they can perceive whether or not you are being genuine. And that plays into that connectedness as well. I think it also lets you into your own soul a little bit.”

**Inward sign of vocation.** In discussing their reasons for being an educator, both Ava and Beth articulate how they believe this profession is their calling. Ava states the importance of “having that passion for what you are teaching” as vital to her ability to help students make a connection to learning. She also states, “there is something that is very immediately exciting and stimulating as an educator to be around kids everyday”. Beth describes teaching as, “it gives you a sense of pride, accomplishment” and as she recalls her process in deciding her career path, she states that “it is all I really ever wanted to…well, that’s not true.” She explains:

> When I was little I wanted to be one of three things, which were a teacher, a veterinarian, or a nurse. I just narrowed it down, because I thought nursing would be too sad. And it would make me upset. And a veterinarian, I didn’t want to have to put animals down, be too sad. But, you know this has its sad parts too! I don’t remember a moment, but I remember always working towards it.

Beth’s remembrance of her call to teaching addresses her heart, which she is aware of when she notes why the other two professions would not be a fit for her. She indicates how she places importance on relationships, as ending them would be too painful.

These examples speak to what Palmer (2008) calls the “inward sign of vocation” (p. 31), noting how if work is ours to do there will be a deep sense of gladness felt, even during the challenging and difficult aspects. It is through those challenges that we are
able to grow in the work that we are meant to do. As Ava stated, “I’ve found ways to
rejoice in just those little interactions during those hard times”.

In a discussion in our final group interview, Beth summarizes the frustration felt by
both she and Ava in dealing with elements that are incongruent with their inward sign of
vocation. For Ava, she says that “by the very nature of teaching, most teachers are
emotional people and seeking those relationships.” This led her to admit the following:

I said it in a meeting the other day, when we hear reports about bad test scores, or
we’re just looking at data, it sucks all the fun out of it. We got into this to have
relationships with them and to just be authentic in our teaching and our caring of
them and delivery of content. Not paper/pencil, sit in meetings all day that take me
out of the classroom. That’s not what I signed up for.

As Palmer (2007) notes, there will be times when we must do our work for reasons
other than for meaning, yet he adds, “that does not release us from continually checking
the violence we do to others and ourselves by working in ways that violate our souls”
(pp. 31-32). As noted by both Ava and Beth, the issues that take them away from having
authentic relationships with students slowly violate their souls.

**Value of reflection.** For Ava, “teachers who embody spirituality in their teaching
have time to be very reflective and want to be very reflective, not just about their
teaching but about life in general.” She talks about the role of reflection in her teaching,
believing that fostering connections with self through reflection embodies spiritual
elements in teaching.

Beth adds that reflective practice is foundational to her teaching, as she has
established ownership of her pedagogy in the realization that growth occurs from looking
within herself, especially during difficult or challenging times. As part of our discussion
of how she moves through challenges she has faced, Beth refer to self-determination and contends that she is “a real reflective person…I was always taught and brought up to believe that if something was going wrong in a classroom, you need to look within, because it’s something that you are doing.” She goes on to state, “I tried and tried and I tried. I dug deep. And that was hard. I tried to start fresh. I tried to approach it from new angles. So, I guess that determination and trying different tactics is what kept me going.”

Beth takes responsibility for when things are not going well, which is a testament to her integrity. She takes ownership and persists during times that are not really positive, and she perseveres because this is the work to which she feels called.

**Forgiveness and redemption.** Ava speaks frequently of the impact her father’s sudden death had on her and is reflective in thinking about how that experience shaped her as a person. She draws power and strength from this loss and feels as if it has allowed her to connect more with herself. She is aware of her strength and how it impacts her connections with her students. In this way, I argue that she is aware of the power of forgiveness and redemption, which are key elements of spiritually connective teaching.

For instance, Ava makes comments such as “you have to let it go”, and “I’m also a teacher who doesn’t hold a grudge”. She comments on her guidance and interaction with students saying, “I can be very firm, but it’s not in a way that I’m going to keep making them feel bad for something”. She specifically recounts her belief about the classroom behavior management system that her entire district uses in the elementary classrooms, and how her belief of forgiveness and redemption are a part of her strategies for using the required system. She shares her thoughts about the system in which students have a
wooden clothespin (clip) with their name written on it. Their clip is moved to various sections of a behavior chart indicating if they are making good choices, or moving down the chart toward inappropriate choices. Ava states, “one of the things that’s nice too with our clip system, and our behavior system, is that if you move your clip down you can always move your clip back up.” However, she notes that there are some teachers [who] don’t allow them to move their clip back up and they’re supposed to, and I don’t agree with that at all.” On this latter point, she elaborates:

Because, then when a child moves their clip down they feel like they’ve lost everything, there’s not a chance or no hope for them to move their clip back up. So what I try to praise them for is that everyone makes mistakes. Yeah, you might move your clip, but that’s ok. But just turn your behavior around, try your best, and you’ll get to move it back up. End of story.

Later, Ava adds in another discussion of her relationship with her students, one that indicates that she is a giver who wants to ensure that all children are given chances “to try to make a better choice, or to fix their behavior.” She says that she is “never unrelenting or feeling like they are a bad kid. I don’t think any kid in my class thinks they are a bad kid, even if they’ve made some bad choices. I think that the spirituality part goes into the building of relationships.” Ava believes in forgiveness and second chances, and when asked to reflect on the reasons why, she discusses the loss of her father to an unexpected heart attack when she was very young. Recalling some of the details of this experience, she recalls how her parents kissed her before they went to sleep and how when she awoke the next morning, “he was gone.” She continues:

So, how that affected me as a person throughout the rest of my life is I don’t ever want to go through having argued with someone and not gotten over it, or not apologized, or not worked it out. But also, I want to start each day over. So, for these kids I feel like they always deserve, no matter what to have a fresh start. No matter
what’s happened the day before. Yes, I know, maybe certain situations happen, but I
don’t want to be that teacher who gives them a bad rap, or comes in harping on them
the next day. I want every kid to always have another chance, and to always know
they can do better, and work harder, and that I’m never going to be mad at them, or
that their teacher doesn’t like them. I don’t want them to ever feel like that. They’re
too young to feel like that.

Ava expresses her belief in redemption and forgiveness, knowing the origin of this
trait in her traces back to the sudden loss of her father. She demonstrates an awareness of
how this loss impacted her and shaped who she is today. Her comment, “these kids, I feel
like they always deserve, no matter what, to have a fresh start,” signifies her declaration
of the dignity and respect every one deserves as a human being. This way of being is very
spiritual in that it aligns with the concept of Ubuntu (Mnyaka & Motlhabi, 2005). Ava
equates acts of forgiveness with acts of connection to self and to others (e.g., her
students), noting that when there is a “teacher who gives them [students] a bad rap,”
separation occurs. She values connections because she recognizes how quickly separation
and loss can occur.

**Connection with Students**

A significant finding of this dissertation study relates to the connections that Beth
and Ava develop with their students. As the study unfolded, it became clear that much of
the pedagogical focus for Ava and Beth relates to their students and the connections they
form with them. In getting to know both Ava and Beth through classroom observations,
interviews, and dialogue, I noted early on how they spoke often of their relationships with
their students when they spoke of their beliefs about teaching and about their perception
of themselves as educators. The discussion rarely turned to content, or lesson plans, the
majority of the dialogue revolved around the students. My observations of Ava and Beth
serve as confirmation to the fact that they place students at the center, and heart, of their
teaching. From early entries in my researcher journal I note:

Beth is so in-tuned and connected to her students. The way she interacts with and
leads these children is quite admirable. I notice her manner with a student who I am
guessing needs some type of an intervention due to the mention of “your timer” and
“what is your plan” within their conversation. Beth showed great patience, active
listening, and gentleness in helping this student be successful during the lesson I
witnessed. I also notice a student seeking out her attention, moving during group time
to be close to her and approaching her during transition with a few questions. Their
interactions were familiar, warm, kind, and authentic, as the dialogue was informative
yet included some humorous banter as well. It appeared to be just what the child
needed.

As she notes in the discussion of the first of her “7 Gateways to the Soul”, Kessler
(2000) describes characteristics of the deep connections young people seek as being
profoundly caring, deeply meaningful, grounded in a strong sense of being seen and
known as an individual, and involving a feeling of belonging (pp. 114-115). Ava and
Beth’s descriptions of the relationships they have with their students included the terms
authentic, trust, sharing, and care.

Beth states, “I try to speak to them as much as I can with genuine compassion, or
genuine anger or genuine whatever it may be”. She also notes that her relationship with
her students, while authentic, is not without boundaries:

I don’t want to show them that love and compassion is just letting them get away with
murder. So, I think it’s important to be stern with them sometimes, and make them
follow rules that everybody else has to follow. Or, participate in the community like I
expect everybody else to participate. Because that is what I would expect for my own
kids, so I think trying to be cognizant of treating them like I would treat my own.

Ava describes her approach to gaining her students’ attention to hear her, which is
similar to Beth’s idea of the need for trust in order to hear what is said. Ava states:
I’ll say things like, ‘When you are talking, I look at you and I listen to you. I don’t talk. I’m trying to understand and pay attention to what you are saying. So when I’m teaching you, I expect you to look at me and listen and not talk.’ So they understand in that sort of way rather than just ‘be quiet’. I’m not telling you to be quiet just because I want you to be quiet. It’s because we are trying to learn and you have to listen to learn.

The approach Ava describes to quietness for listening is about attentiveness that must be gained in order to make a connection. This is as opposed to the approach to quietness Ava refers to as quietness to enable the adult assurance that they might need. There is a difference, a subtle one, but a difference never the less. The former is linked to relationships, “I want you to hear me just as I want to hear what you have to say”. The latter is linked to issues of power and control, “What I have to say is important, so you must be quiet to hear what I am saying”.

In addition to describing their relationships with their students as authentic, trustworthy, and inclusive of how they share aspects of themselves, the concept of care is a significant part of their relationships. The method in which care is demonstrated may be slightly different, but both Ava and Beth speak of and demonstrate their care for the children in their classroom. Ava speaks of the way she cares for student by providing the reassurance of a hug, but also by being present and acknowledging them as individuals on a daily basis. She describes her morning routine as follows:

I make sure every morning that when the bell rings, I stand outside my door in the morning and I say good morning. I’m not in my room. I’m not doing stuff. So not only am I greeting my kids, I’m greeting all the other kids that walk past my door. I’m doing it because I want to, not because I have to. It’s because I want to connect with them.

Another way Ava demonstrates care for her students is through efforts to make them feel as if they do belong and to make them feel wonderful as individuals. She wants them
“to feel special, and to feel that there are special things about them and great things about them, and to know what their good qualities are, and the things that are their strengths.”

She explains:

Because those are the things that they should be proud of and they should feel good about. I want all of them to have more than one, like multiple things that they feel good about. I think it’s great for kids to feel as though they stand out and feel good about themselves.

Beth speaks frequently of letting her students know that she cares about them. She says, “I always tell them, my first job is to keep you safe and to do that they sort of have to feel they have a connection with you and that you care.” When asked what she hopes her students will take away from their year with her she says, “I would hope a sense of this is a person that cares about me and will forever.”

Beth discusses how she has provided a sense of touch for students who were struggling with issues surrounding the stability of their home life. When asked how she addressed the issues presented by students facing challenges at home she explains that she seeks “to give them a sense of touch more often because I feel they are lacking that. Those are kids that you look at and you think, ‘I can fix them by loving them’. Even though it’s hard, really hard sometimes. But I think that’s important, too.”

I asked Beth what she thought that sense of touch might provide for children. She talked about having connections with other, helping them to feel as if they are cared for, and motivating them to think outside the box. She then offers the following:

And if that should happen to manifest in making academic gains, well that would be a great thing. But if all it fulfills is something that they are missing from another part of their life, then I’m good with that too. Because, until that part is in place, none of the other part is really gonna happen.
Beth got very emotional when she discussed students who were dealing with very difficult life circumstances. One such discussion involved a child who became homeless during the school year and who eventually stopped attending school. She shares:

One of my little boys this year came in late one day and said, ‘Oh, I’m sorry I’m late. We had to move into a homeless shelter over the weekend.’ So that was upsetting. You know, you go home and look at everything with such a different perspective. You tuck you kids into their nice warm beds and you think of them (gets emotional) and their future. Another little boy, he has no shoes, his shoe flap came totally off, so he is wearing sandals with socks (gets emotional) and his pants are five inches too short. And then I think of another little boy last year, I still love him so much. His parents were separated. He just was unable to focus, he was the most pleasant little boy ever and he would really, really try hard, but he just couldn’t. He talked about missing his mom all the time. So that was hard to know, cause you think about them moving forward in the future.

During one of my observations of Beth, I had noticed a stack of individually wrapped graham crackers on her desk. I was intrigued as to why those were on her desk, and when I asked about them, Beth responded that they “were for one of my little guys who was homeless.” She explained that “he has since moved away and I worry a lot about him because he is still on my list so I don’t know that he’s enrolled anywhere since Thanksgiving. But he would eat at the homeless shelter then he’d come and still be hungry. So we were keeping a stash of crackers there for when he was hungry.”

Beth’s focus is on the child, and she sees him as a human being with needs that must be met. While it may appear to be too theoretical to address the basic needs of a child before addressing a child’s academic aspirations, Beth’s focus on the child emphasizes aspects of dignity, of life, and of humanity that, I believe, far outweigh a singular focus on academic success. This is an example of compassionate presence in action.

Summary
In summary, the response to the second research question—*How do early childhood educators enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?*—involves intrapersonal and interpersonal connections identified through the lens of spiritually connective teaching. Such teaching addresses connections to self and to others (e.g., students).

Examples of connection to self illustrate the ways in which both Ava and Beth align with Palmer’s (2007) discussion of how ‘we teach who we are’ and how they teach from the heart in the way their identity and integrity are foundational to their teaching. I presented illustrations of how Ava and Beth are true to the inward sign of vocation (Palmer, 2007) in how they feel their teaching is what they are called to do and how they are able to see the positive in the midst of challenges as a result of their strong connection to their vocation as having purpose and meaning. Both Ava and Beth demonstrate their use of reflective practice as a tool to keep them connected to their purpose and objectives in their teaching. Also, the way in which Ava and Beth position themselves as educators illustrates their perspective of the nature of their teaching: Ava’s as grounded and solid with the ability to withstand storms of challenges to her desire to remain connected to her students; Beth’s as fluid and multifaceted with the ability to ride the ebb and flow created by the storms of challenges to meeting the needs of her students. Ava also shares how reflecting on the impact of a personal loss shapes her philosophy to include forgiveness and especially redemption.

I have discussed how both Ava and Beth practice a compassionate presence in the relationships they have with their students, characterized by elements of authenticity,
trust-worthiness, sharing, and how they demonstrate care toward their students through these relationships.

The way in which spirituality is enacted in the pedagogical practice of these two early childhood educators is visible through relationships. Viewing the data through the lens of spiritually connective teaching, these relationships emerge as foundational to the pedagogical practice and personal identity for both Ava and Beth.

Sacredness of Community

In articulating a response to the third research question—*In what ways can a spiritual response within the pedagogical practices of early childhood educators speak back to the marginalization of young children?*—the type of spiritually connective teaching found in the data aligns with interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections. These connections are made meaningful in the context of Ava and Beth’s classrooms and include a value for interdependence (interpersonal), or the sacredness of community, prioritizing students’ sense of belonging (intrapersonal), and as Scherer (1999) describes is, “respect for the divine image in every single human being” (transpersonal), which she notes as a “spiritual value” (p. 19). These findings align with the concept of Ubuntu as they encourage respect as a dignified ethic of humanness. Also, the findings relating to the sacredness of community align with how Ubuntu views community as an individual’s social status being measured in terms of, “a person’s sense of responsibility, expressed, in turn through his/her responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the group”. (Waghid, 2013, p. 61) The educators both stressed the notion of student
responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs of others within the context of the classroom community – this was a priority.

I will first offer the definition of marginalization I use in this dissertation. Then, I will discuss how the connections between students, within a strong sense of classroom community, are a key element in this response. I will frame this discussion of community as it relates to the literature on the development of empathy in young children, which I argue serves as a precursor to establishing a sense of social justice as a manner of speaking back against marginalization of others.

**Marginalization**

The term marginalization and the discussion of the implications for spiritually connective teaching as a way to speak back to it are both premised in this dissertation upon a developmental spectrum. My perception of marginalization and the manner in which I use it in this dissertation is from a developmental perspective, emphasizing the foundational elements that lead to practices of marginalization. In this way, considering the elements that lead to practices of marginalization, one can alternatively consider how to prevent a tendency toward such practices and can consider ways in which to foster elements of acceptance instead.

While the term marginalization is often housed within political elements, specifically how institutional practices and societal beliefs fuel the marginalization of groups of individuals who are devalued in society, I use marginalization as synonymous with oppression. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) define oppression as:

*The discrimination of one social group against another, backed by institutional power. Oppression occurs when one group is able to enforce its prejudice throughout society*
because it controls the institutions. Oppression occurs at the group or macro level, and goes well beyond individuals. Sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism are forms of oppression (p. 186).

The development, or acceptance, of acts of oppression, or marginalization, can be traced back to the socialization process related to learned prejudice, or prejudice about members of groups to which we do not belong. This socialization process can occur outside the classroom setting, and is most frequently introduced prior to children beginning their formal education. As noted by Corsaro (1997) and Paley (1992), within the social development of children and their peer interactions the exclusion of children from established peer groups is part of the developmental process. I argue that within a classroom community characterized by a focus on the spiritual connections between children a foundation of acceptance for all life is present, and that this climate would serve as a response against exclusion. Additionally, a classroom community grounded in spiritual connections among children would challenge notions of prejudice and foster a sense of empathy toward others. As noted in the review of the literature (see Chapter 2), the development of empathy supports the role of social justice in education. Therefore, the building of classroom communities that includes elements of spiritually connective teaching—specifically a focus on connections among students—is foundational to the development of empathy and the role of social justice later in children’s development. This type of classroom community is housed within connections characterized by the first of Kessler’s (2000) “Seven Gateways to the Soul”, which include developing a sense of belonging within a climate of safety, care, and respect.

Classroom Community
I will now present examples from Ava and Beth’s classrooms and pedagogies that demonstrate elements of spiritually connective teaching related to their focus on interpersonal connections between students (e.g., creating a sense of community in their classrooms). The ways this concept of community aligns with spirituality include fostering interdependence, creating a sense of belonging, and helping children find their identities within classrooms through the eyes of their peers and teacher. In the below examples, I discuss how Ava and Beth both conveyed the importance of community in relation to their classrooms and how they sought to establish welcoming classrooms from their first encounters with their students. This will lead into a discussion of the intrapersonal connections that Ava and Beth fostered with (and for) their students. I will conclude with examples of how they both relied on transpersonal connections to establish climates of respect and trust for students.

**Importance of classroom community.** Many scholars discuss the significance of community as part of the spirituality of mankind, noting the role of community as contextual for spirituality and how spirituality is profoundly a communal act (Cole, 2011; Harris, 2007; Harris Garad, 2013; hooks, 2003; Hay, 2000; Helminiak, 1996; Kessler, 2000; Love & Talbot, 1999; Scherer, 1999). I had a sense that community was an important aspect of both Ava and Beth’s teaching philosophy from an early point in our discussions. They made references to community and relationships on a regular basis in our dialogues. In doing a frequency analysis, I created a word cloud from all the transcripts of our interviews, omitting my part of the dialogue, in order to see what words they used frequently that related to the concept of community. The findings are listed in
Table 1 and demonstrate how both Ava and Beth made reference to concepts of community and connectedness throughout our five discussions via interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1. Frequency of terms used related to community

For Ava and Beth, community is very important, which materialized in our conversations and in my observations of how they worked to establish a sense of community with their students. Ava shares that “one of the biggest things in setting up a classroom community at the beginning of the year is talking about how we treat each other.” She goes on to talk about having conversations with students about “why our school is a nice place to come to, and why our classroom is a nice place to come to, is because we treat each other nicely. They’ve already learned that language and thought about it many different ways. They learn to become very compassionate towards each other.”
As noted in Chapter 3, the district where both Ava and Beth teach adopted a list of virtues that are to be promoted in all classrooms and throughout each grade level. Ava notes that she would utilize these concepts even if they were not a part of the district’s programming. She states:

In terms of interdependence…I would have done this without having the Central School virtues, the school has adopted these certain virtues that we talk about. They are just ways that we treat each other. So we talk about those a lot at the beginning of the school year, we try to teach the kids what they even mean. What the words mean, honesty, respect, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline, perseverance, and giving. And they can get little ‘bucket filler strips’. We read this book, “How to fill a bucket”, and then when you are showing these virtues you are filling someone else’s bucket and making them feel better. And when you are not doing that, you are actually emptying their bucket or being a bucket dipper.

While Ava would address the virtues even without the school’s mandate, she is aware that the environment is supportive of these elements in the classroom and contributes to her own commitment to community.

Ava and Beth use literacy and dialogue to promote acceptance and community in their classrooms. Ava shares that students “write about someone that’s a good friend, or a way to be a good friend, or why someone’s a good friend. So we talk about friendship a lot”. Beth notes that dialogue is important in her practice by stating to students, “If someone is brave enough to ask you, please be polite enough to accept.” Ava shares, “We’ve done a lot of read alouds about, and talks about how we want to treat each other”. She adds, “I taught them a way to kind of help each other, they just started naturally being helpers for each other, no matter what we were doing”.

In reference to the ways children include others during classroom interactions and group work, Ava notes that she does not experience issues in her classroom stating: “I
think it really stems from setting up that expectation from the beginning.” In terms of exclusion, she explains, “that just never becomes tolerated from day one”. There is an expectation that the classroom environment will be one of respect and acceptance for (and by) all and that problems that might arise are immediately addressed with care, respect, and acceptance.

Creating a sense of belonging. As Kessler (2000) describes the deep connections that are pivotal to the first of seven “Gateways to the Soul”, the need to be seen and to be known—truly and fully—is a significant part of these connections. Ava and Beth position the seating arrangements of students based on the needs of each student. When we discussed how they make decisions about which students will share table space within the classroom, Beth talked about her effort to recognize the needs of individual students in ways that allow her to provide them with support:

Who could be there to support them, and would be patient and kind? Who could be a leader? Are they going to butt heads, or are they going to work well together? Do you want someone there to challenge another thinker? So all of those things are kind of taken into consideration. And I try to buddy them up with maybe another girl or boy who I think they would have some commonalities and might not reach out to them otherwise. That kind of forms some, helps form some friendships that wouldn’t otherwise be formed, which is kind of neat to see.

Ava shared similar ideas related to the seating arrangements of students at the learning tables:

My second move is to look at kids verbal abilities and who might, in a turning and talking kind of situation, who is going to be able to support each other. So, I want kids who can be supportive of each other, not necessarily I want a high kid with a low kid because that’s not always the best thing either. I look more at relationships. I look for kind students. And students with patience, who when we’re trying something that’s hard they might be kind to the person next to them, because we do have to work together.
Beth summarizes this process of grouping students by saying that she places students “in spots that lend themselves to opportunities to talk and to share, helps them connect to one another. The problem solving that we do together helps them connect to one another. And just validating everyone’s thinking I think when we’re in those types of settings.”

Beth shares the process she uses when a student joins her class after the beginning of the year. The focus is on helping the new student to feel as if they are a part of the group, to foster their sense of belonging. She relates how the bulk of the morning of the student’s first day is spent in introductions, the current students introduce themselves and tell the new student what they want them to know about the classroom, and something they will like about the school and something that will excite them about being there. She notes, “We add them to our list, to our agreements so that they see themselves as part of the group as well. Put their name on everything before they get here”.

Beth provides her students a “welcome to the school year” baggie with small treats that she includes along with a poem explaining the significance of each. Some of the items include: erasers because everyone makes mistakes, stickers because we’ll stick together as a class, taffy for all the fun and laughs we will share, bouncy balls for all the little ups and downs, and chocolate candy Hugs™ because everyone needs a hug now and then. Beth shares how she provides one of these baggies for a student who joins her class later in the year, “So when we get a new student, the rest of the group can kind of reminisce and tell them all about it”.

When discussing the concept of classroom community, Beth shares, “I think that fosters that sense of belonging, especially if they are a person who for some reason
doesn’t’ feel like they fit in elsewhere. There’s a spot for them in this community.

There’s a spot for everyone”. The visibility of spirituality in teaching and how it impacts students’ sense of belonging is noted in her comment. I note that Beth repeatedly states throughout our discussion the need to fit in and have a place, a spot in the community, and beyond perhaps as she shares in her dialogue a few times regarding students she has had in her classroom and her concern about how students are doing beyond her time with them. It is as if she is concerned for the child’s well being beyond the four walls of her classroom, both geographically and chronologically. She wonders what will become of them, where they will find their place and if she has prepared them to find their own way. These seem to be underlying factors in her comments.

**Respect and trust.** Both Ava and Beth share how they use language and dialogue to set the tone for how to treat each other with respect and how to handle conflict and problem solving. Beth states,

I think that what we do is show them by thinking aloud. This is how good readers do this. Or, this is what a good friend might think about. Or, oh, you don’t have a pencil, what could he do? Let’s problem solve this together. Well, you could ask to borrow a pencil. John, ask someone if you could borrow a pencil, and then everyone is raising their hand. Just taking them through those steps in hopes that you are scaffolding them, to lead them to independence. So, next time a pencil breaks, hey, maybe John is going to ask somebody, or ask a friend to borrow theirs.

Beth uses problem solving as a tool for fostering both independence and interdependence. She notes how she has students go to each other to seek assistance as well as helping them think about a solution. This establishes the climate in which students can trust that their words will be heard and honored. Beth demonstrates how this
addresses the trust-building process noting, “I think being confident enough to say what’s on your mind, it is a risk for a lot of them”.

Ava shares how she models respectful language in situations regarding making choices. She states: “So there’s just lots of modeling, lots of thinking about it. I have to, when there is conflict, I have to translate that for them and help them make that connection between how they treat each other and the types of words that I’m using.” She then addresses another element of respect that is aligned with her diverse cultural classroom context:

Because my classroom is so culturally diverse, it really is just teaching them different ways of knowing and that even though people have different practices and different ways of knowing that’s not a bad thing. It’s more about being respectful; it’s about wanting to learn. So, I’m teaching them it’s a way they should always be learning and learning about each other.

Both Ava and Beth note the need to address a breach of respect within the classroom that inevitably happens. Ava discusses how she addresses a conflict in personalities, noting that she wants her students to like each other and “to be friends.” However, she is “a proponent of you don’t have to like everyone. If you don’t like someone, or you don’t get along with them, that’s ok. But how are we going to treat each other in a respectful way and move on from that? I am never one to force a kid. That’s not ok. I would never do that.”

Beth speaks of her perspective on respecting the community, especially when “you’ve used all your strategies as a good friend, there comes a time if you’re not being a respectful part of our community then you can’t be part of our community right now.” She continues, “if we’ve tried everything we know and you’re not willing to be kind and
you’re disrupting our community, then you need to leave the community until you can respect it.”

Beth’s comment regarding the importance of maintaining the integrity of the community aligns with spiritual elements in Ubuntu. Mkhize (2008) states, “Belonging is not synonymous with group membership; it requires one to conduct oneself in a manner befitting of a fully moral being, maintaining social justice, respectfulness and truthfulness, and being empathetic towards others, among other attributes” (p. 42). There is therefore a distinction between marginalization based on difference and requiring a member of the community to conduct themselves in a manner respectful of the sacredness of the community. Marginalization is exclusion on the basis of disrespect for the divine within each human being. In marginalization there is no attempt to forgive, no support for redemption, and no attention to maintaining the dignity of the individual. Within the sacredness of community, as noted by Mkhize (2008) mere membership is not an assumption of belonging; however the function of the community, via interdependence involves redemption, forgiveness, respect, and recognition of all members, even when behavior is not becoming of the values held within the community. The dignity, the humanity, and the divine element of all members are always recognized within the sacredness of community.

Chapter Summary

The findings of this dissertation study illustrate examples of spiritually connective teaching within the two early childhood classrooms that were examined. The examples demonstrate how connections to learning are made visible in the classroom through the
planning of the classroom space and the learning opportunities that help connect the student’s personal story to the larger story of the content areas. The examples demonstrate how connections to self and others, including students are present within the teaching philosophy of both participants and how these connections drive the teaching from the heart and providing a compassionate presence with their students. And the examples demonstrate how connections between students shape a sense of community within the classroom which enables the spiritual presence to be embodied through a sense of belonging and feeling respected and known as a spiritual being. The connections between students, I argue create an environment rich for fostering a sense of empathy, which I note is a precursor for the likeliness of young children enacting a sense of social justice once empathy is established.

The implications of these findings include giving a name to the way spirituality in teaching and learning can be enacted with young children, through spiritually connective teaching. This involves the creation of multiple and multifaceted connections within the classroom community. These interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections include those to self for both the educator and the child, connections to others, connections to learning and knowledge that can be promoted through the planning of the environment and the learning opportunities, and connections between children and educators. The findings indicate that these connections can be fostered within the creation of classroom community and can be accomplished without compromising academic content. As described by Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes (2011), “by weaving spirituality into learning and knowledge creation discourses, educators as well as learners can foster
spiritual growth while strengthening the connections between the learner, knowledge, and
the process of schooling” (p. xv). I find this a worthy goal for early educators to strive
toward.
Chapter 5: Implications of the Study

This dissertation examined the pedagogy of two early childhood educators, seeking to understand how they embodied spirituality in their pedagogical approaches and practices. Using a theoretical framework based on the union of Sociocultural theory and the African concept of Ubuntu, the study stressed advocacy for inclusion, connection and relationships, and the importance of community as a vehicle for advancing children’s spiritual development and learning.

By focusing on the aforementioned themes (e.g., inclusion, connections, community) to examine the pedagogy of the two participants, I was able to name how elements of spirituality can be made visible. Specifically, I argue that the following elements of spirituality materialized in the two participants’ practices: an overall focus on connections, those made through a reverence of the environment, through relationships with students within the compassionate presence of the educator, and through the manner of sacredness of community. These elements demonstrate teaching that places the students at the heart of participants’ pedagogy, with an authenticity that is not solely focused on methodology, but always considering the student as the teaching evolves. These elements also demonstrate a level of inclusivity with the community as the central focus. It is important to learn from these elements how teaching can be accomplished within a spiritual context that focuses on hope, love, respect, diversity, peace,
community, and humor first and foremost. As noted by Wane, Manyimo, and Ritskes (2011) “the things that make us whole” (p. xvi).

Collectively, my findings from this study on the spiritual dimensions and practices of two early childhood educators, paired with my reliance on sociocultural theory and Ubuntu, allowed me to address the following research questions:

1. How does spirituality in teaching and learning look in the two participants’ early childhood classrooms?

2. How do the two early childhood educators/participants enact a spiritual presence in their pedagogical practices?

3. In what ways can a spiritual response within the pedagogical practices of the two early childhood educators/participants speak back to the marginalization of young children?

Using a lens of spiritually connective teaching, the data were analyzed for instances where teaching practices fostered interpersonal, intrapersonal, and/or transpersonal connections. Spiritually connective teaching suggests the image of the educator as a caring, concerned, empathic person who co-constructs learning opportunities and spaces with students. This implies that the educator is purposeful and demonstrates a compassionate presence, fostering connections within interdependence, and demonstrating mutual respect for others and the recognition of the greatness that lies within all human kind in the form of the spiritual.

The findings of this study reveal the presence of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections in three cross-case themes – reverence of the environment,
compassionate presence of the educator, and sacredness of the community. Larger themes that emerged from the findings include attention to how the environment plays a major role in supporting spiritual connections to knowledge, how the integrity and identity of the educator support spiritual connections to self and to others, and how creating a sense of community fosters spiritual connections to self, to others, and to the transcendent.

The participants in this dissertation demonstrated a focus on interpersonal connections through their reverence of the environment and in their intentionality of planning for maximal use of the classroom space. Their practices demonstrated a focus on their students’ need to connect to each other and to the knowledge as they ensure their classrooms include space for students to gather as a whole group in order to share ideas and get better acquainted with each other. The participants balanced this planning with consideration of space for the students to work individually and to seek understanding using the classroom as a resource through the inclusion of children’s thoughts, words, and ideas. Both participants addressed the emotional elements of the classroom space, creating a sense of safety for students to ask questions, to wonder, and to reflect on their own understanding, knowing their ideas and concerns would be respected, honored, and valued. Beth, for example, intentionally addresses her goal of students feeling comfortable in a physical as well as an emotional sense when designing the group meeting space in her classroom, wanting the students to feel that it is a safe space for them to “bear their souls”. Within spiritually connective teaching, addressing the emotional elements of the space facilitates students’ abilities to trust that their contributions and ideas will be welcomed. As Kessler (2000) states this “will ultimately
determine how safe and open students will feel when we invite them to explore deep matters” (p. 118). The environment in both Ava and Beth’s classrooms intentionally reflected the voice of the students, and the teacher-student and student-student relationships created a space of safety for sharing their ideas and experiences.

Participants demonstrated intrapersonal and interpersonal connections in the compassionate presence of their teaching choices and teaching philosophies. Both Ava and Beth embodied their identity and integrity in ways that recognized that they “teach who they are” (Palmer, 2007). Their teaching practices demonstrate a commitment to the profession in their acknowledgement of teaching as their life’s purpose, and a commitment to their students in the manner in which they both approach relationships with their students as paramount. Both Ava and Beth enact a teaching philosophy that is authentic, trustworthy, generous, and demonstrative of an ethic of care toward their students. Ava and Beth describe their respective teaching philosophy in diverse ways, illustrative of their belief in their ongoing commitment to teaching. This was apparent when Ava described her position as a classroom teacher as steadfast, grounded, solid, and nurturing of students and their self-images. Beth notes her position as more fluid, always shifting to support the needs of her students as their needs change. Beth also acknowledges the vastness of her commitment to all students in making them feel safe and cared for beyond their time in her classroom.

Ava and Beth demonstrate interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transpersonal connections insofar as the topic of sacredness of community is concerned. Both participants prioritize building a sense of classroom community from the beginning of the school year. Ava and
Beth approach community as fostering interdependence, creating a sense of belonging for their students, and helping their students respect that which is divine within all, as part of their community. For instance, it was paramount for Ava to approach community with her students from the first day, using literature as a foundation for discussions about how they should treat each other, and even defining for her students the meaning of the words honesty, respect, compassion and giving. She utilized this approach because, according to Ava, she wanted to establish these expectations for inclusivity from the beginning. She commented on the notion of exclusion by saying, “that just never becomes tolerated from day one”. Establishing this understanding of the importance of including others and the meaning of being respectful, compassionate, and giving are significant parts of spiritually connective teaching. These elements are foundational to students making connections to each other in a way that declares the dignity and respect every one deserves as a human being and acknowledges the divine within each of us as we were created.

The findings of this dissertation imply that when spirituality is embodied in the practices of early childhood educators, then a strong sense of belonging can be fostered in students. This sense of belonging can serve as a foundation for how students come to think about inclusivity, how they come to accept other people, and how they come to understand the value of differences and diversities. If early childhood educators re-connect with and recognize the spiritual elements of their practices, then the results may include a classroom environment that promotes connections to self and to others. Within such classroom environments, these connections (to self and to others) can serve as responses to the harmful, pervasive ways many children are marginalized in schools
because of how differences and/or diversities get read upon them. Spirituality in teaching and learning can, therefore, speak back to the divisiveness that exists in many classrooms and schools in the United States, given the widespread and ongoing impact that racism and classism have had (and continue to have) in education. Relatedly, the divisions caused by what seems to be a never-ending focus on accountability and assessment, as noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, can be interrogated.

Spiritually connective teaching (SCT) can help to combat the divisiveness that has been caused by racism and classism in how the connections promoted by SCT address the phenomenon of internalized racism. As noted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, the literature shows evidence of children internalizing a view of self as inferior to others based on larger societal perspectives. As demonstrated in their authentic, caring pedagogies, both Beth and Ava provided their students with a sense of belonging and a strong sense of self as unique and valued. Beth referred often to the importance of building community in her classroom and how it provides a sense of belonging for her students. Beth stated, “There’s a spot for them in this community. There is a spot for everyone.” Ava noted her goal that all her students are aware of their “good qualities” and their “strengths” stating, “I want all of them to have more than one, like multiple things that they feel good about”. The message being sent to their students is, “I belong” and “I have value”.

In addressing classroom community, both Ava and Beth were intentional in the way they situated students, in seating arrangements and during group work assignments, focusing on pairing students to ensure the presence of kindness, and an element of
supportiveness. In discussing this, Ava mentioned, “I look more at relationships. I look for kind students. And students with patience, who when we’re trying something that’s hard they might be kind to the person next to them, because we do have to work together”. Ava also notes how she stresses different ways of knowing around the diversity of experiences in her students’ cultural context as a positive during the process of students building relationships with each other.

Addressing the divisiveness caused by a focus on accountability and assessment in the classroom, both Ava and Beth do not lose focus on the student in addressing the pressures affiliated with these measures. Beth mentions this topic during her discussion of the demands currently placed on early educators and how she maintains her focus on the child, stating, “And it really is going back to those relationships and making time for those kids and not letting those thoughts infiltrate my mind while I’m working with them, because that can easily make someone negative. It can make them feel stressed, overwhelmed and it takes away from your time in here with them. And that’s not what I want to happen”.

Within these instances of spiritually connective teaching, the divisiveness is addressed through a foundation of acceptance and value for diverse experiences and ideas in a climate that would serve as a response against exclusion.

Additionally, the findings of this dissertation provide descriptions of how spirituality in teaching and learning appear in the physical classroom environments, as well as practices that set the emotional tone of classrooms. The findings provide illustrations of the role of the educator as having a compassionate presence with their students that
supersedes a focus exclusive to content. The findings do not negate attention to content, but rather they highlight a focus on the student first and foremost, utilizing the relationships with and knowledge of the student as teaching tools. As demonstrated by Beth in her belief that her priority to her students was to make them feel safe, it is important to interact with students in a caring and loving way. Beth also uses her students’ ideas and words throughout the classroom, sending a message that their contributions are important. In such a space, indicative of spiritually connective teaching, there is an openness to participate in the safety of acceptance, where the ideas expressed are acknowledged as having value. This emotional element of the learning space is as vital as the physical arrangement, given that both arrangements welcome the soul, favor making connections to one’s own ideas and acknowledges the importance of also making connections with others in the community.

The findings of this dissertation illustrate how community building, with an intentional emphasis on the spiritual elements of interdependence, respect, and awe for that which is good in all of humanity, supports children’s development of strong relationships. Specifically, framing students’ relationships within a structure of support for each other, connecting the worlds between students’ home and school experiences, and establishing an environment of respect from the beginning illustrate these elements. Both Ava and Beth promote interdependence between their students, as noted by how they structure the daily life/activities of their classrooms. Students are taught to see each other as a source of solutions in problem solving, and are intentionally positioned to foster supportive relationships that lead to positive interactions within classrooms. Both
educators bring students’ experiences into the classroom as part of the teaching strategies to foster deeper relationships between the students and a sense of value for their diversity of experiences and cultures. Also, both educators establish how students are to treat each other within the context of the community from their first day together, which has implications for how they should treat others in the larger social world.

These relationships can serve to foster the development of empathy in children. In building and supporting the development of empathy, children are able to progress toward relationships with others that can lead to acts of social justice.

Questions that Remain

While this study focused on the experiences of two early childhood educators, questions remain regarding the experiences of the children and the administrators within early childhood settings. It is important to understand the experience of spirituality in teaching and learning within the entire context, addressing the needs and perceptions of spirituality on multiple educational levels – the children’s and the administrators’. Additionally, the perspective of families regarding their child’s spirituality would be important to address and investigate because it would provide contextual information regarding how best to strengthen children’s spirituality and the relationships within the broader scope of the child’s world.

Specific questions that could be investigated in relation to children and spirituality in educational contexts include the following: What does the child’s experience of spirituality in teaching and learning tell us about pedagogical choices? How can the child’s perception of spirituality be incorporated into the assessment practices of the early
childhood educator? How might the educator use the child’s perception of spirituality as a guide in the framework of assess, plan, teach that is suggested in early childhood classrooms?

In terms of school administrators, specific questions that can be explored are: Why is it necessary to support administrators’ understandings of the role of spirituality in the professional development of their teaching staff? In what ways can administrators, themselves, receive professional support as they work with, mentor, and support teaching that is spirituality connective? How is spirituality made visible in the role of the administrator? What leadership qualities does spirituality foster?

Finally, insofar as educators and administrators are concerned, I believe pertinent questions that can be posed include: How can educators and administrators address families’ understandings and perceptions of spirituality in teaching and learning? How can educators help families embrace their own faith practices while recognizing the value of spirituality for young children? What might be some tensions and challenges that could arise from this work with educators, administrators, and parents, and how might a spiritually connective approach to teaching and learning mediate these?

Recommendations for Future Research

As noted in this dissertation, the development of empathy during the early childhood years within a spiritual context is important for fostering a sense of social justice in young children. Spirituality in teaching and learning supports inclusion of all individuals, recognizing the divine nature of humanity, with the possibility to transform our thinking through the deep questions regarding our purpose and life’s meaning. It is within the
sacredness of community that spirituality offers us understanding across our differences which can be explored through our relationship with others. If these elements are a part of teaching and learning, then the spiritual response to marginalization is acceptance, inclusion, respect, and love for all humanity. Therefore, the manner in which social justice is addressed in this dissertation relates to relationships with others. Within spiritually connective teaching, children are encouraged to build relationships with others on the basis of acceptance, respect, and love for humanity – the humanity within all of us. If this is established, then children are more likely to not only model respectful, accepting relationships with all people, but to covet these relationships as part of their own humanity. As a result, they would be more inclined to take action to protect others from racism, harm, disrespect, and shame. These actions would evolve out of empathy and take shape as the child develops and matures. In the early childhood years, acts of social justice take on the appearance of modeling respectful relationships with others, speaking up on behalf of someone who is experiencing pain, and rejecting the peer pressure to exclude someone on the basis of difference.

For future research, I would suggest that we consider what is needed to support this development of social justice beyond the early childhood years based on teaching and research on the spiritual. There is a need to better understand the spiritual practices in teaching, such as creating an inclusive community based on love, hope, respect, diversity, and peace that should be in place later in a child’s life if we are to build upon the foundation of empathy established during early childhood. The development of empathy is the basis for a child’s understanding of the experiences of others, thus fostering their
ability to care about and care for those outside themselves. As Ava stated, “One of the biggest things in setting up a classroom community at the beginning of the year is talking about how we treat each other”. And as she noted, as a result, “They learn to become very compassionate towards each other.” This is vital for young children’s development to foster acceptance of others.

Additionally, I suggest the importance of exploring how teacher education programs in early childhood education can better think about the foundational elements of teaching pedagogy from a spiritual perspective, such as creating an inclusive classroom community and creating a compassionate presence as an educator. What is the role of spirituality in the way programs structure the training of early childhood educators? While literature regarding spirituality in higher education is available, the characteristics unique to early childhood pedagogy call for continued study regarding the manner in which spirituality is addressed in teacher education programs. As demonstrated by both Ava and Beth, having students at the heart of their teaching with an authentic, compassionate, caring teacher presence sets the tone for the rest of their pedagogy. This focus on the child and the spiritual nature of teachers’ pedagogies points to the importance of addressing the spiritual dimension as a potential framework for teacher education programs.

**Conclusion**

Palmer (2007) notes a basic truth, “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). I embrace this truth as a reminder of the importance of remaining re-connected to my holistic self—
inclusive of my spiritual self. It is through this re-connection with my spiritual self in my professional realm that I recognize the importance of connections – connections to myself, to others, to knowledge and learning, and to that which is greater than me. These connections, or relationships, are at the heart of who I am, holistically.

In light of the many challenges in the field of education, challenges that create division between professionals and their integrity and identity, divisions between educators and their students, and divisions between students and their peers and knowledge, I feel called to remain connected to the spiritual as my source and inspiration. For it is in the spiritual that I will find healing, wholeness, love, beauty, and purity of heart. The spiritual lens provides me with the strength and ability to respond to all attempts to divide or to isolate people. I am reminded of my purpose and inspired by the concept of Ubuntu, as described by Desmond Tutu:

Go forth as a new doctor, conscious that everybody is to be revered, reverenced as created in God’s image whether inner-city and rural areas – go forth to demonstrate your Ubuntu, to care for them, to heal them especially those who are despised, marginalized. Go forth to make the world a better place for you can make a difference. The task is daunting – of course, but it is our necessary struggle. (Battle, 2009, p. 54)

My hope is for all to experience Ubuntu, a sense of belonging, especially within early childhood classrooms.
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164


168


