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To cite this article: S. E. Holmes (26 Sep 2024): Is spirituality in ECEC a valued component or pushed aside? A discourse analysis, International Journal of Early Years Education, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2024.2406373](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2024.2406373)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2024.2406373>



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Published online: 26 Sep 2024.



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Is spirituality in ECEC a valued component or pushed aside? A discourse analysis

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary discourses regarding children's spirituality in ECEC professional publication streams (academic and practitioner readership) were analysed, with consideration of impacts of these discourses on practice in the early years sector. Many established theoretical concepts regarding children's spirituality were not evident in the early years texts analysed, suggesting that those theories are either not relevant, not accepted or simply not on the radar of early years specialists. Tacit acceptance of a young child's spirituality was evident, alongside a focus on ensuring spiritual rights and wellbeing, rather than efforts to nurture or enhance a child's spirituality. Whilst discourse analysis revealed that spirituality is viewed positively and as a valued component of a young child's development and wellbeing, inclusion of spirituality in ECEC internet sources and academic literature is minimal, suggesting that in practice, spirituality is pushed aside in contemporary early years practice. More research is needed to understand how these discourses may impact upon early years practice, and to investigate the perspectives of practitioners and parents about spirituality in contemporary early childhood education and care.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 June 2023
Accepted 15 September 2024

KEYWORDS

Spirituality; early childhood; discourse analysis; practitioner; ECEC

Introduction

Spirituality in children has been described as an innate potential to connect and relate to self, others, and the Other (Mata 2012); or a sense of listening to the heartbeat of the living universe, of being one with that seen and unseen world, open and at ease in that connection (Miller 2016).

The study investigates some of the influential discourses within the contemporary early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector regarding spirituality of young children. We ask: what discourses regarding spirituality in professional publications streams have been evident during the past seven years? And what may be the impact of these discourses on practice in the early years sector? The premise was that consideration and implementation of spirituality within ECEC settings is an emerging aspect

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which is not yet as widespread in awareness and practice as other components of a child's development.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child promotes the child's right to spiritual wellbeing and spiritual development (UNICEF 1989) and the English-derived EYFS emphasises that supporting a young child's spiritual development encourages their deeper understanding of themselves and others and helps them to gain an appreciation of their place in the wider world (Tang 2023). However, prevalence of attention to this within the ECEC sector is limited (Adams et al. 2015; Hudson 2018; Larson and Keeley 2020). This is in striking contrast to copious empirical evidence that spiritual children have a sense of inner worth, a sense of the lasting, higher sacred self, are well-grounded, and can feel fulfilled by their life choices (Barton and Miller 2015.). Indeed, Hay (2000) demonstrated that overlooking or marginalising spirituality results in damaging effects to the texture of human community, and research has explicitly shown that happiness and a sense of persistence and resiliency are connected with a deeper spiritual connection and awareness of a sacred world (Barton and Miller 2015). Whilst children's spirituality has been of growing interest over the past 20 years (Hay and Nye 1998; Hyde 2008; Lawson 2012; Ratcliff and May 2004), its inclusion within early years practice has transpired more recently (Adams, Bull, and Maynes 2016; Mata-McMahon 2016; Mata-McMahon, Haslip, and Schein 2019). Existing literature indicates ambiguity regarding the construct of spirituality (Adams, Hyde, and Woolley 2008; Berryman 2004; Mata-McMahon 2016; Campagnola and Ratcliff 2004), and it is proposed that this lack of clarity may be impeding the approaches adopted in ECEC contexts (Adams, Bull, and Maynes 2016). In light of these ambiguities and contrasts with evidence-based policies and recommendations, this paper seeks to investigate some of the discourses conveyed in English-speaking literature aimed at early years practitioners, and subsequently consider how these underlying discourses may inform practice.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Chi-Kin Lee (2022) described a spectrum of spirituality, from secular spirituality constituting a search for meaning and identity in universal human experiences (Grajczonek 2010; Meehan 2002), to spirituality linked with faith and religious contexts. Within this, modes of considering spirituality include spiritual intelligence (Gardner 1983; Zohar and Marshall 2000), spiritual sensitivity (Tirri, Nokelainen, and Ubani 2006) and spiritual styles (Csinos 2010). For Berryman (2004), a child's curiosity marks spiritual maturity, echoing the notion that children's spirituality cannot be compartmentalised neatly into stages (Coles 1990). This may be expressed as a secret spiritual life containing profound experiences and spiritual capacities (Hart 2006), an inward response to external stimuli (Hay and Nye 1998), connectedness and relatedness (Hyde 2008) or a craving deep within for transcendence and meaning (Ratcliff and May 2004). These depictions emphasise the complexity of children's spirituality and diversity in terms of how the concept is understood.

Many have asserted that children are naturally spiritual beings, regardless of their religious involvement or influences (Berryman 2004; Hart 2006; Hyde 2008; Nye 2017). Hay and Nye (1998) described this innate spirituality in children as a natural process of relating to the world, including a Divine Other, and the self. Whilst expression of spirituality varies

between and within cultures (Toso 2011), children find themselves in a wide range of different spiritual spaces globally (Adams 2019). Fisher (2011) revealed the importance of attending to children's spiritual wellbeing. Providing appropriate activities enable cultivation of spiritual development in the early years (Hudson 2018), so attention to curriculum content and materials for promotion of spirituality within the early years sector are key (Bagherpur et al. 2022; Corr 2004; Lee 2020; Saadatzaheh et al. 2022; Trousdale 2005). Play and creativity are critical aspects within this (Adams, Bull, and Maynes 2016), alongside the role of educators (Eaude 2005; Robinson 2019; Thomas et al. 2016). All of these sources indicate that spirituality is a valid and viable entity in the early years and consequently a facet which must be attended to in young children rather than being pushed aside. Furthermore, these depictions all view spirituality as broad, and wider than the narrower remit of religious belief or tradition. This secular understanding of spirituality in young children seems appropriate to align with for the purposes of this paper since the investigation is taking place within the secular sector of ECEC. Research surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic confirmed that a child's environment impacts their spiritual wellbeing considerably (Chi-Kin Lee 2022; Heland-Kurzak and Holmes 2021; Kelley et al. 2022). Hence, it is key to explore the underlying discourses being conveyed to practitioners which will form and shape the environment provided for children, and the extent to which this accommodates and facilitates the flourishing of a child's spirituality.

Spirituality in the ECEC sector

Mata (2012) suggested that many teachers steer away from spiritual matters in their classrooms to maintain distance between church and state. This often results in religion and spirituality being excluded from education in the USA. However, in the UK there remains a link between spiritual development and the broader curriculum (Eaude 2008), such as explicit mention in the early years curricula of Wales,¹ England² and Northern Ireland.³ The Scottish early years framework (Scottish Government 2009) also mentions spiritual development. Further afield, in Australian early learning centres educators seek to attend to children's holistic development, including their spirituality (Robinson 2020), in Hong Kong there is also a focus on holistic early childhood education (Ng and Fisher 2022) and within Indonesian contexts, spiritually-based education is viewed as important to develop character and morals (Rohmah, Rahayu, and Latif 2021). In Iran there is a focus on fostering spiritual self-awareness through the Heavenly Gifts curriculum within the elementary education system (Saadatzaheh et al. 2022). The expression and inclusion of the importance of some sense of spirituality in the early years in all of these curricula, policies and frameworks demonstrates the widespread acceptance of the literature corpus evidencing the value of supporting a child's spiritual development. However, these different approaches support Wood's (2019) assertion that super-diversity has become the norm, hence the metaphor of a kaleidoscope conceptualises the complex processes and intersecting elements of ECE theory, policy and practice. It is therefore key to explore the extent to which the importance of spiritual development is conveyed in the literature produced for early childhood professionals and also whether the expression incorporates this sense of super-diversity.

Whilst some writers perceive spirituality as a solitary endeavour, Toso (2011) argued that it is developed and shaped through relationships. Indeed, the extent to which a

practitioner is personally religious or spiritual impacts upon the spiritual actions and initiatives incorporated into their practice (Ng and Fisher 2022; Rohmah, Rahayu, and Latif 2021). Robinson (2020) found that there is a need for educators to experience personal spiritual formation themselves, not only to transfer information regarding spirituality to children. This raises questions about whether this correlates to traditional religious beliefs or broader expressions of spirituality. Nevertheless, Mata (2012) observed that although American early years teachers consider spirituality to be an important aspect of development, minimal professional development in this area leads to uncertainty about incorporating it into their curricula. It is therefore critical to explore some of the discourses being conveyed in literature being distributed to early childhood professionals to understand the extent to which established evidence-based policies and understandings of spirituality are being conveyed at the grassroots level.

Methodology

This was an exploratory study using critical discourse analysis (CDA) on online literature in the domain of UK-based ECEC professionals, similar to Rogers et al. (2005). Using CDA facilitated analysis of how language (discourses) impact societal and local contexts. This facilitated capturing discourses which were semiotic in nature, and enabled meaning-making insights within the broader social context of the ECEC sector (Fairclough 2013). Online texts designed for readership in the international, English-speaking Early Years sector over the past seven years (2015 to present) were analysed, aiding inclusion of pre- and post-pandemic sources. Since this project sought to uncover the discourses being conveyed as part of general and widely available literature to a broad cross-section of early childhood professionals, the sources selected were generic early childhood journals or web sources, rather than those focussed specifically on children's spirituality. The assumption was that literature explicitly labelled as being about children's spirituality may only be accessed by those practitioners who already have an interest in spirituality. Therefore, by only examining literature which would appeal to a broader base of practitioners, and hence with more widespread readership, it would be possible to find out within these widely disseminated sources the extent to which spirituality was included. In addition, where it was included, it was of interest the nature of expression and language used to uncover some of the underlying discourses being transmitted to practitioners as read these sources during their day-to-day activity.

Printed books were excluded since they may not be universally available to all early years practitioners, if they have limited funds for book purchases or are not located geographically close to an academic library. Therefore, all of the literature included would have been potentially available to practitioners if they had accessed them online. Firstly, the university library database was used to search for relevant literature, using search terms 'early years' and 'early childhood', with the list of outputs then being refined to list only those sources available online, in order to align with the online availability of sources for practitioners. Academic journals were included if they were titled 'early childhood' or 'early years'. This was followed by a Google search, again using the term 'early childhood', and the top 22 sites selected (excluding university course sites which also appeared in the search results). The texts analysed comprised academic journals related to Early Childhood ($n = 12$) and early years websites ($n = 22$). Religious

organisations and personal blogs were excluded, since they were beyond the scope of this investigation since the project viewed spirituality with a broader understanding than religion. Equally, it was not likely that significant portions of the early years workforce would actively seek to read religious material for their work. It was also decided to exclude early years guidance documents since they could be considered to be core reading and fundamentally accepted and followed universally. Hence, this paper sought to explore some of the discourses conveyed in wider literature beyond the mandated reading, hence internet-based and academic professional discourses, rather than frameworks and parameters imposed externally by governing bodies. These searches led to a data corpus being created to enable exploration of some of the discourses regarding spirituality conveyed amongst ECEC professionals in recent years.

Once data sources were selected, a search was carried out within each source for the term 'spiritual', since this term would capture both 'spirituality' and 'spiritual development'. This process first illuminated the frequency of use of this term and then enabled the analysis of individual texts using critical discourse analysis to ascertain the discourses they conveyed about spirituality in the early years. 'Discourse' was used to refer to specific meaning systems that were identified both by their characteristic structural features and by their characteristic effects (Fairclough 2013). Specific discourses have been defined as sets of ideological belief frameworks which directly inform practice and policies (Jones 2011). The reason for investigating these discourses is that curricula tend to contain values imbued by social and cultural discourses selected by someone else to privilege a (usually dominant) particular ideological position produced in a unique historical context (Apple

	Academic Early childhood Journals	Internet-based ECEC Sources
Active development/ learning	An aspect of holistic development/ curriculum	
	Spiritual intelligence/ significance/ learning/ growth	Spiritual wealth. Fostering spiritual welfare Spiritual guidance. Spiritual counselling
	Spiritual activities & practices, religion	
	Understanding/ experiencing death/ grief from spiritual context	
A state of being	Spiritual wellbeing	Rights of child. Spiritual wellbeing
	Spiritual foundation/ dimension/ belonging/ connection/ participation	Spiritual capital/ connection
	Spiritual values/ beliefs/ identity	Needs/ identity/ heritage/ values
	Compassion/ empathy/ love. Spiritual support. Spiritual love	

Figure 1. Detail of data analysis.

1993; Shannon 2016). Investigating these will therefore reveal what is informing contemporary early years practice. Figure 1 shows the detail of this analysis. This was then sorted and categorised, resulting in the overview shown in Figure 2.

Findings

Scope of spirituality

Within the academic journals, ‘spiritual’ appeared on average 13 times. One journal did not use the term at all during this period. The highest occurrence was 47 (the Early Child

Literature title	Frequency of use and discourse conveyed
<i>Academic Journals</i>	
Child development	1x Spiritual support Resistance to spiritual thinking Spiritual function of objects Child perspectives on death Spiritual strength (in times of illness) Spiritual coping 3x descriptive information of their religious or spiritual programs/involvement or spiritually connected
Child Development Perspectives	nil
Childhood Education	Spiritual intelligence Area of development Aspect of human child Awareness through body Peace building Piety Perspective of childhood 2 x Citizenship and peace education Mindfulness Education for sustainability Whole child approach to learning Culturally responsive Character development
Journal of Early Childhood Literacy	Zero
Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood	21 occasions Often linked with culture, eg many regarding New Zealand or Māori perspectives (particularly about the spiritual realm). spiritual connectedness and respect for what each person brings. Ancestry. ‘For Māori families, at least, when their cultural and spiritual values are reflected in the ECCE settings, this elicits a sense of well-being and fosters further engagement within that setting, highlighting the value of including hybrid familial funds of knowledge’ Also ‘Africans tend to express their personhood through connections to spiritual agency, social agency and self-agency.’ and ‘spiritual connection with land’, connecting with colonial mindset. Discourses of love, care and maternalism in early childhood education, seen as foundation for spl dev Emotions and identity: Emotions can also be associated with individuals’ ability (or inability) to make choices on matters of personal value (such as spirituality or quality of life) Understanding death from cultural, religious or spiritual context Deep compassion and empathy are central to a wide range of spiritual traditions. Consider the child’s religious or spiritual beliefs Teacher’s role to negotiate linguistic, spiritual and pedagogical tensions, complicating what she previously believed of her new milieu.

Figure 2. Overview of the discourses identified in this data corpus.

	<p>The emotional work carried out by compassionate ECEC professionals constitutes care which is sensitive to the physical, psychological, cultural and spiritual needs of both the child and their family</p> <p>Occasionally listed fleetingly as an aspect of curriculum, again often alongside emotional aspects.</p> <p>Analysing theories such as Montessori & Waldorf</p>
International Journal of Early Years Education	<p>47 occasions (out of 1361 = 3.45%) Spiritual support</p> <p>Spiritual/moral/cultural aspects</p> <p>Analysing ideas, such as Steiner</p> <p>Spiritual lifestyle (akin to beliefs)</p> <p>Happy person in terms of mental and spiritual aspects</p> <p>Pedagogical love: It's about spirituality too, being loved is a spiritually connecting experience. relationship between spirituality and pedagogical love</p> <p>Spiritual connection with nature</p> <p>Laying a spiritual foundation</p> <p>The role of spiritual identity in resilience interventions for children</p> <p>Spiritual delight</p> <p>Children considered themselves as spiritual, social, cultural, and gender beings</p> <p>Connection to the land as a physical and spiritual space created a sense of belonging and identity, a popular concept in EE</p> <p>One paper where spiritual experiences were the main focus: Jennifer Mata-McMahon, Michael J. Haslip & Deborah L. Schein (2019) Early childhood educators' perceptions of nurturing spirituality in secular settings, <i>Early Child Development and Care</i>, 189:14, 2233-2251, DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2018.1445734</p>
Early Childhood Education Journal	<p>7 occasions</p> <p>All aspects of child development, including physical development (fine and gross motor coordination), intellectual (academic intelligence, creativity, emotional intelligence, spiritual intelligence), socio-emotional (attitude and behavior and religion), cognitive, language-communication, self-reliance and personal health in accordance with their uniqueness and stages of development.</p> <p>Religious and spiritual leads</p> <p>Voice of indigenous people: "location is about relationships to land, language, spiritual, political, economic, environmental, and social elements in one's life"</p> <p>Development of the whole child — physical, social, emotional, mental and spiritual</p> <p>Development has several inter-related dimensions. These include physical, cognitive, social, spiritual and emotional development, each of which influence the other and all of which are developing simultaneously?</p>

Figure 2 *Continued*

Development and Care Journal), with another (Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood) using the term 21 times. Five journals used it between 11 and 19 times, and four used it on less than 10 occasions. The term was generally used fleetingly rather than being fundamental to the argument. Across the journals analysed, there were only three papers which had spiritual aspects as a focus.

Within the early childhood websites analysed, 14 did not use the term at all, one mentioned it once and two utilised it three times. The maximum use was on the UNICEF

	Framework recognizes the diversity of cultural, spiritual and theoretical approaches to early childhood education across Australia.
Early Childhood Research Quarterly	2 occasions One paper where spiritual experiences were the main focus One connected with stress: spiritual exhaustion
Early Years: An International Research Journal	13 occasions A trait of a teacher to be investigated: spirituality, alongside other factors (aspects of the profession that are at first glance absent from the research, such as spirituality, love, atmosphere, colour, airiness and horizon.) Investigating child's concept of death: parents' spiritual and religious beliefs, spiritual thinking, religious or spiritual explanations, Exploring the attitudes and behaviours of a professional teacher in Indonesia...spiritual essence that animates the physical body, notions of spirituality might be implicated in teachers' perspectives of ECEC professionalism Cultural values: pedagogy is 'grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships' with physical, spiritual and cultural actions and knowledge actions that have spiritual and cultural dimensions The needs that the care is supposed to fulfil, shifting from physical needs (dressing and eating) to spiritual needs (how to be in the world) or psychological needs (communication). children's spiritual or psychological needs Intellectual and spiritual growth of students' Spiritual significance of creative education, Imported educational theories and models are incompatible with Chinese traditions, which highly value collective spiritual and self-discipline Care is not nowadays considered as fulfilling merely physical needs but also spiritual or psychological needs
European Early Childhood Education Research Journal	15 occasions The cartography consists of 10 dimensions, or ways, of belonging: (i) emotional; (ii) social; (iii) cultural; (iv) temporal; (v) physical; (vi) spiritual; (vii) moral/ethical; (ix) political; and (x) legal. Spiritual dimensions of belonging are associated with connectedness with spiritual traditions and beliefs and sacred artefacts, including those of indigenous people (Sumsion and Wong, 2011). None of the eight ECEC educators made reference to the spiritual dimension of belonging. Spiritual places where children should experience social relationships and cultural values Ethically and spiritually complete citizen According to the teachers, one big problem is the lack of spiritual and concrete support and help from management authorities. Hong Kong & Singapore: Soka educators as focused on inner human qualities such as spiritual strength, character and humanity.

Figure 2 *Continued*

website,⁴ with 81 uses of 'spiritual' over the seven-year period of investigation. Most of these are related to rights of the child, and at times religion. The OECD website⁵ included 'spiritual' on 46 occasions whilst UNESCO⁶ had 24 uses. These two websites associated this more with a developmental aspect, a child's identity formation, or spiritual well-being. They barely mentioned religion as a related topic.

Figure 2 shows the discourses identified through analysis in the data corpus. Eight broad themes of discourse emerged (denoted by the eight rows). This reveals that the academic journals included more range of discourses, with websites focussing more on an

	<p>The arts challenge our perceptions, uplift and entertain us, and enrich our emotional and spiritual lives.</p> <p>Spiritual connections to land</p> <p>Spiritual participation</p> <p>One paper where spiritual experiences were the main focus: Adams, K., Bull, R., & Maynes, M. (2015). Early childhood spirituality in education: Towards an understanding of the distinctive features of young children's spirituality. <i>European Early Childhood Education Research Journal</i>. doi: 10.1080/1350293X.2014.996425</p>
International Journal of Early Childhood	<p>13 occasions</p> <p>New Zealand: Spiritual Experts, future guardians of the tribe's spiritual knowledge, Integral to Indigenous perspectives are spiritual rituals that resonate this respect and concern for the land, rivers, mountains and oceans. paradigms of spiritually embedded relational reciprocity with the land, rivers, etc</p> <p>Their cultural and spiritual significance of rituals</p> <p>Alaskan place-based education is aimed at connecting children with their place, as well as rooting them in a spirituality of knowing who they are, where they come from, and their purpose in life</p> <p>This support of not only the rational part of the child, but also his spiritual side</p> <p>Directed toward the moral and spiritual goal of fulfilling human potential</p> <p>Regarding dead animal: to make sense of the spiritual dimension of interpretation</p> <p>Religious/spiritual identity was welcome.</p> <p>Recognising that some educators had their own spiritual and religious wellbeing was really important too</p>
International Journal of Early Years Education	<p>19 occasions</p> <p>Spiritual love, describes love as a spiritual connection and ethical bond between living beings, love as a spiritual concept</p> <p>Spiritual activities (congregational prayers, Koran recitation, and verse memorisation)</p> <p>Material and spiritual values,</p> <p>Promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'</p> <p>Study participants believe that religious parenting can contribute positively to the acquisition of spiritual capital.</p> <p>Children living in poverty experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive,</p> <p>Emotional/spiritual</p> <p>Spiritual environment</p> <p>Spiritual component to their grief</p>
Journal of Early Childhood Research	11 articles

Figure 2 *Continued*

aspect of wellbeing or development, and less often in terms of religious values and identity. The first discourse; spirituality as an aspect of development or a curriculum topic was present in both data genres, indicating the relevance and acceptance of spiritual matters as a developmental or curricula aspect. This reflects to some degree the SMSC (Spiritual, Moral Social and Cultural Development) UK framework (Eaude 2008).

Other discourses were present across both data sets but often framed differently, for example where academic sources denoted spiritual intelligence or learning, internet

	<p>Spiritual foundation, spiritual aspect held, a spiritual outlook, spiritual soul qualities, dimensions of spiritual philosophy</p> <p>Spiritual and cultural well-being</p> <p>Combining family and spiritual value in specific socio-cultural contexts</p> <p>Spiritual significance of the children</p>
Early Education and Development	<p>7 occasions</p> <p>One of parental roles: cultivate spirituality and a sense of faith in their children</p> <p>Religious/Spiritual Practices and Values</p> <p>Cultivate religious and spiritual sensibilities in young children</p> <p>Religious and spiritual socialization</p> <p>Spiritual beings</p> <p><u>Spiritual</u> entities</p> <p>Provide effective material and <u>spiritual</u> support</p> <p>Religion or spirituality</p>
Journal of Early Intervention	<p>5 occasions</p> <p>Spirituality and religion have also emerged in recent literature as factors that may influence the choices of families of children with ASD.</p> <p>Spiritual support for parents of SEN child</p> <p>Spiritual and cultural beliefs</p>
<i>Internet based ECEC sources</i>	
https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/what-is-early-childhood-development-a-guide-to-the-science/	zero
https://royalfoundation.com/early-childhood/	zero
https://www.unicef.org/early-childhood-development	<p>81 occasions</p> <p>A lot of religion</p> <p>Convention of rights - in four places mentions spiritual</p>
https://centreforearlychildhood.org/	zero
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_childhood_education	zero
https://early-education.org.uk/	zero
https://www.impact.upenn.edu/early-childhood-toolkit/what-is-early-childhood/	zero
https://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education	<p>24 occasions</p> <p>Spiritual needs</p> <p>Spiritual & cultural identity</p>

Figure 2 *Continued*

sources conveyed a similar discourse as spiritual wealth or guidance. This terminology difference is perhaps due to the perceived readership needs, seeking to use less intimidating, more grounded and practically applicable language for practitioners (Ortlipp, Arthur, and Woodrow 2011). Spiritual wellbeing was referred to in both data sets, although internet sources included a children's rights nuance. This was unsurprising given the prevalence of attentiveness to children's rights and general wellbeing in early years practice (Correia et al. 2019).

	A rich spirituality and mythology receive spiritual rewards Spiritual capital Spiritual and emotional level Rich spiritual cultural heritage
https://theirworld.org/resources/early-childhood-development/	zero
https://www.oecd.org/education/school/earlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm	46 occasions 'Spiritual' as aspect of development/culture/identity Spiritual wellbeing, spiritual wealth, spiritual guidance, spiritual counselling cultural/spiritual values
https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/early-childhood-education/	zero
https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/early-childhood-education-and-care	zero
https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/improving-practice/focusing-early-years/early-childhood-unit	zero
https://www.asparis.org/blog/details/~board/academics/post/what-is-early-childhood-education-1596020598964	zero
https://www.globalpartnership.org/what-we-do/early-learning	Fostering spiritual welfare Emphasising spiritual as well as material education in tandem for children Emotional and spiritual well-being
https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/	Experience a spiritual connection Cultural and spiritual teachings of Elders and Knowledge keepers Support physical, social, emotion and spiritual growth ... the ability of Indigenous men to transmit language, spiritual beliefs,
https://earlychildhoodeducation.co.uk/	Steiner
https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/series/changing-face-of-early-childhood-in-britain	zero
https://my.chartered.college/early-childhood-hub/	11 occasions An aspect of development Spiritual world
	Other dimensions Spiritual wellbeing
https://www.crec.co.uk/	zero
Unicef https://www.unicef.org/education/early-childhood-education	Emotional spiritual care to refugee families Spiritual and emotional care Protect children's moral and spiritual capacities Spiritual mandate to promote children's rights and challenge harmful social norms Promote social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health

Figure 2 Continued

The spiritual values or identity discourse was present in both data streams, with academic sources broadening this to encompass belief, and internet sources describing it as spiritual heritage. This may reflect an assumption that non-academic readership may appreciate more tangible and practical wording, although does not reflect practitioner desire to be aware of individual needs, circumstances and convictions of children (Toso 2011). None of the discourses identified addressed concerns that despite many considering spirituality to be an important area, there is often uncertainty regarding incorporating it into curricula (Mata 2012). Notably, the discourse of spirituality being connected with religion or specific spiritual activities and practices was only in academic literature, as was connection with death and bereavement; the intimation being that only academic thinkers connect spirituality with religion or death. However, early-years settings are acutely aware of the need to support children through grief (Taplin 2020), indicating that early years practitioners may not view spirituality as relevant to a young child's experiences of grief and loss.

Internet sources included reference to spiritual capital or connection, although academic sources used additional expressions, such as spiritual foundations, and included terminology of participation and belonging. It is surprising that the notion of spirituality being connected with love, compassion and care was only evidenced in academic literature rather than the early years websites since nurture and care is fundamental to early childhood practice (Grimmer 2021). These eight distinct discourses broadly revealed two categories of discourse (denoted by the first column in Figure 2): active development and learning, and a state of being. The active discourses intimated something of a child's requirement to act to develop these aspects of spirituality. The remaining four discourses described a state of being or position of the child which exists naturally.

Discourses identified in literature

Active development or learning

– An aspect of development

Those who denoted spirituality as a developmental aspect portrayed a holistic view, such as 'children's spiritual or psychological needs', 'intellectual and spiritual growth', 'an ethically and spiritually complete citizen' and 'development of the whole child'. The intimation being that without attention to the child's spiritual dimension, they would be deficient, reflecting the assertion that children's spiritual development has been neglected. Yet some scholars honour spiritual development as a core developmental process (Boyatzis 2008). Some expressions of spiritual dimension seemed tokenistic or fleeting, aligning with Ingersoll's critique of genuinely child-centred efforts of shared participation versus manipulation (Ingersoll 2014). This reinforces the notion of spirituality as a marginalised topic.

Numerous connections are made between pioneers of early childhood theory and spirituality. These connections were usually complementary, with highly positive and affirming language but in one case it was stated that 'imported educational theories and models are incompatible with Chinese traditions'. A tacit acceptance of the work of these pioneers was evident, with this being a convenient platform for mentioning

spirituality, and a justification of its inclusion. Ultimately, this reflects the fact that early years policies and frameworks do indeed mention and include spirituality to some extent (Eaude 2008), so academic and internet-based writers tend to include it to some degree. Yet the distinct lack of commitment to it as a concept to be developed further or grappled with is clear. This will undoubtedly inform early years practice, resulting in spirituality being viewed in practice in a similar way; something to be mentioned briefly and perhaps in connection with well-known theorists or pioneers, but not included or developed any further beyond that.

– Intelligence and learning

This discourse conveyed a sense of spiritual growth or learning through an intellectual or cognitive lens and was more prevalent in education-focused journals rather than more holistic early childhood periodicals. Within the internet data sources, UNESCO and OECD were the only sites to include this discourse in relation to a child's spirituality, and it was often mentioned in writing about children's culture and spiritual identity. Inclusion of this by well-respected organisations indicates that the spiritual dimension of a child is being taken seriously, but perhaps as an educational or cognitive attribute rather than inherently. Even so, this was a very marginal topic on websites, shown by the minimal instances of the term. The implication of viewing a child's spirituality as something intellectual, requiring teaching rather than a pre-existing aspect requiring nurturing reflects a reliance on stage models derived from developmental psychology (Boyatzis 2008). This was expressed in internet data sources as 'spiritual wealth', 'spiritual welfare' or 'spiritual guidance'. Whilst these terms convey something which is achievable or to be attained, they encompass less intellectual or cognitive overtones, reflecting the approach of awareness sensing from Hay and Nye (1998).

This discourse was often partnered with another facet of the child, such as 'emotional and spiritual intelligence', 'intellectual and spiritual growth' or 'spiritual or psychological needs', implying that the spiritual aspects alone are not sufficient intellect but must be aligned to other aspects to be recognised or acceptable. It is interesting to note that in some cases, this dyad is made up of aspects which may be invisible, intangible and immeasurable, such as 'emotional intelligence' and 'spiritual intelligence'. In the case of combining 'intellectual' and 'spiritual' growth, these two notions could be perceived to be counterparts in terms of rational thinking and curriculum planning which is usually in place to reach tangible and evidence-based targets (Britto et al. 2017). The implied message of always presenting spiritual intelligence or learning alongside other aspects of learning or development is that it is not a sufficiently stand-alone component and needs support from other aspects to be credible. However, to some extent, this may reflect modern-day holistic perspectives on the young child (Haslip and Gullo 2018).

– Religious or spiritual activity or practices

This discourse is distinct from religious beliefs or values, which are aligned more with a state of existence. It is defined by its active nature, although mentioned rarely and only in academic sources. It was used to describe facts or observations, namely to detail the activity or practices which a child took part in that were specifically spiritual or religious

in nature, concurring with Mata-McMahon (2016) and King and Boyatzis (2015) that religious and spiritual practices are often associated even though they have obvious differences. These activities and practices cited by the writers tended to be discrete, compartmentalised, and established practices, such as ‘prayer’, ‘church attendance’ or ‘meditation’, rather than all-encompassing ethos or ways of life, such as the broader vision of religious education for Berryman (2004), or the broader notions of spiritual sensing, wondering and questioning (Adams, Hyde, and Woolley 2008). Nevertheless, this discourse was minimal, suggesting that it was not of key consideration within the sector. Conversely, there was more inclusion of stand-alone religious practice, perhaps because religious practices seem to be more easily identified and defined (King and Boyatzis 2015).

– Connected with death and grief

This was minimal in academic sources, and not at all in the internet sources analysed. The main thrust was on the child’s understanding or conception of death, and how spirituality could contribute to or support a child in formulating this, indicated by: ‘understanding death from a cultural, religious or spiritual context’. This reflects the ideas of Panagiotaki et al. (2018) that biological and religious ideas often co-exist in a child’s thinking about death. One suggestion was that in the eventuality of an animal dying, a child could interpret this through a ‘spiritual dimension’, implying an acceptance of the universal capacity of children as spiritual beings. This discourse was therefore categorised as active, although it was presented as a tool to facilitate or enable children.

A state of being

– An aspect of wellbeing and children’s rights

The discourse of spiritual wellbeing or welfare was more prevalent in internet sources than academic, although present in both. Within academic sources, it was only minimal, and tended to be used in relation to cultural wellbeing, so that the two aspects of wellbeing were often presented together in narrative. Often it related to ECEC practice from New Zealand or Māori perspectives (Adams, Bull, and Maynes 2016), with the implication that attention to a child’s spiritual and cultural values was thought to foster their sense of wellbeing, reflecting the holistic understanding of wellbeing promoted by Logan, Cumming, and Wong (2020) and Ritchie (2016). There was no consideration in any of the texts (internet-based or academic) of what constituted spiritual wellbeing, only hints towards what may enable it. The discourse was presented largely uncritically, with an air of statement of fact as to what spiritual wellbeing was. This sense of authority about what constitutes spiritual wellbeing concurs with observations of Amerijckx and Humblet (2014), that child wellbeing is often poorly defined but is multidimensional. Neither was there any discussion around how spiritual ‘ill health’ or spiritual wellbeing deficiencies would be evidenced. Yet Bellous (2000) emphasised the importance of awareness of this to ensure ethical and wholesome practice.

This was evident more in the internet sources, where its use was slightly broadened, to include reference to children’s rights regarding their spiritual dimension. This was

particularly evident on the UNICEF website, where copious content regarding safeguarding, preventing abuse and measurement of wellbeing was present. The OECD website also included this discourse abundantly, using terminology of ‘spiritual wellbeing’, ‘spiritual wealth’, ‘spiritual guidance’, and spiritual counselling. These references were always presented positively, with the insinuation that to ensure a child’s holistic wellbeing, awareness of their spiritual dimension is fundamental. This was presented without criticality or counterarguments. In the internet sources, spiritual wellbeing was also connected at times with emotional wellbeing, concurring with Eade (2009), who observed that a child’s spirituality can contribute to their happiness, emotional wellbeing and mental health.

– Lifestyle and foundation

This discourse was in academic and internet sources. More variety of terms conveyed this discourse in the academic literature rather than in internet-based. Academic sources spoke of ‘spiritual foundations’, ‘spiritual belonging’, ‘spiritual connection’, and ‘spiritual participation’, whilst internet sources spoke only of ‘spiritual capital’ and ‘spiritual connection’. Nevertheless, all communicated a sense of underlying and foundational features of a child’s life. They expressed spirituality as integral and fundamental to a child’s foundation, reflecting holistic development and wellbeing (Eade 2009). Another aspect of this was the sense of togetherness or linkage with others, conveying that it is not individual or isolated but rather a collaborative venture, concurring with the socio-cultural context of a child’s spiritual essence (Sewell 2009). The discourse conveyed a sense of spirituality as resourceful and equipping to the child, aligning with the notion of spirituality having the capacity to serve as a help or hindrance (Holmes 2017). Interestingly, ‘spiritual foundations’ were incorporated into the texts uncritically, with a presumption that these aspects are positive for the child, relating to King and Boyatzis’s (2015) assertion that spirituality is integral to human experience but often undefined and uncritiqued.

– Values and identity

Academic literature referred to ‘religious or spiritual identity’, whilst the internet-based literature spoke of ‘spiritual and cultural identity’. This relates to the distinguishing characteristics that define a person’s experience of spirituality, according to Kirmani and Kirmani (2009). Connection with culture was also conveyed in the internet sources: ‘cultural or spiritual values’ and ‘a rich spiritual and cultural heritage’. Within academic literature, culture was only mentioned in connection with beliefs: ‘spiritual and cultural beliefs’. The importance of connection with culture was demonstrated by Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales (2011), who drew attention to awareness of contextual perspectives on spiritual identity. The word ‘value’ was used in both categories, although primarily in the academic sources, which viewed spirituality as ‘personal values’, ‘material or spiritual and material values’, intimating value as well as aspects of a private realm. Only academic sources referred to religious aspects or beliefs: ‘the child’s religious or spiritual beliefs’, ‘spiritual and cultural beliefs’, and ‘religious or spiritual identity’, conveying a sense that occasionally spiritual matters relate to religious aspects but are not synonymous. Another expression of this discourse in academic

papers was children as ‘spiritual entities’ and ‘ethically and spiritually complete citizen’, implying that spiritual identity is a natural human predisposition (Hay 2000), and an integral aspect of their being (Adams, Hyde, and Woolley 2008). The internet sources referenced to a child’s ‘spiritual needs’, ‘spiritual and emotional level’, and a ‘rich spiritual cultural heritage’, implying that it is something to be measured or scoped out in terms of a level or entity to be grasped. In some cases, these are aspects which have been planted into the child, such as cultural heritage or spiritual beliefs. In other cases, underlying principles and ideals were described as at the child’s core, namely their personal or spiritual values and identity. One described the child as an ‘ethically and spiritually complete citizen’, indicating a notion of eutopia and perfection, but also that spiritual aspects contribute to a human being to be considered ‘complete’, with the implication that a deficit description would be spiritually incomplete. However, the academic paper did not describe how a spiritually incomplete child would be evidenced.

– Compassion and love

These discourses were only conveyed in the academic sources, and not ECEC websites. Expressions of this were bold, including wording such as ‘deep compassion and empathy’, ‘pedagogical love’, ‘spiritual love’ and ‘spiritual support’, all communicating a sense of an underlying pedagogy of love, as promoted by Grimmer (2021). One wrote that ‘love, care and maternalism in early years settings is seen as a foundation for spiritual development’, indicating that nurturing is a key aspect of the profession (Champagne 2003; Flemig and McNair 2022). Depictions of early childhood professionals as highly nurturing are synonymous with compassion and love, with a nurturing environment viewed as a foundation for spiritual development (Bellous and Csinos 2009). The omission of this discourse from the internet-based sources indicates that it may not be high on the agenda within early years practice.

Discussion

Theoretical and conceptual implications

Reflecting on the theoretical and conceptual framework of this paper, this discourse analysis confirms an understanding within the Early Years sector of a kaleidoscope-like spectrum of spirituality as observed by Chi-Kin Lee (2022) and Wood (2019). However, whilst identity, values and belonging were evident in relation to spirituality, the notion of a search for meaning in universal human experiences (Grajczonek 2010; Meehan 2002) was not apparent in the literature analysed. Equally, spirituality linked with religious understanding and religious contexts was only minimally evident. Some of the established fundamental concepts and theories of spirituality were not discussed in the academic or internet-based ECEC literature analysed, implying that concepts such as spiritual intelligence (Gardner 1983; Zohar and Marshall 2000), spiritual sensitivity (Tirri, Nokelainen, and Ubani 2006) and spiritual styles (Csinos 2010) are not considered as relevant to the contemporary early years sector. Since these information sources are being accessed by early years practitioners, this will be forming and shaping both their perception and understanding of young children’s spirituality, but

also impacting their inclusion of spirituality in their practical work with the children in their care. Limiting the scope of spirituality to identity, values and belonging limits the benefits and value of spirituality to enhance a child's spiritual intelligence, awareness and expression (Barton and Miller 2015).

References to spiritual maturity (Berryman 2004) or stages of spiritual development (Coles 1990) were minimal in the literature analysed, and the sense that young children have spiritual capacities and experiences (Hart 2006) was not really discussed. Rather, it seemed to be unequivocally accepted by the writers that young children have the capacity to be spiritual beings (Berryman 2004; Hart 2006; Hyde 2008; Nye 2017) and no limitations in this regard were raised. However, conveying a tacit acceptance of the presence of spirituality in young children without encouragement and facilitating their spiritual maturity and development could serve to stunt and even prevent ongoing growth and flourishing of spirituality in the child. Hence, minimal communication through this practitioner-informing literature related to the maturing or development of spirituality in children is likely to result in practitioners translating this mindset into their practical work amongst children, and not fostering development of a child's innate spirituality. Further to this, in the literature analysed, evidence of spirituality in children was not documented, neither was the relation between inward responses to external stimuli (Hay and Nye 1998), reinforcing the notion that the role of practitioners in a young child's spirituality is more akin to being aware and supporting their tacit and existing spirituality rather than intentionally facilitating its development. The lack of encouragement in this early years literature for practitioners to support the enhancement and flourishing of young children's spirituality will undoubtedly result in a narrow view of the role and responsibilities for practitioners to provide an environment to enable spiritual growth.

Within the literature, there was a strong discourse of spirituality enabling children to feel connected (Hyde 2008; Ratcliff and May 2004), although the sense of observing a child's deep craving for transcendence and meaning was not incorporated into the discourses analysed, again intimating a shallow understanding and expression of spirituality to early years practitioners. Nevertheless, the notion of spiritual wellbeing was fundamental in the texts analysed, although this was broadened to include children's rights. This conveys to practitioners the value of affirming and protecting the presence of children's spirituality but suggests a passive role, rather than an active and intentional bolstering and enhancing role. Similarly, the concept of monitoring or measuring a child's spiritual wellbeing (Fisher 2011) was not apparent, once again communicating to early years practitioners the lack of importance or value in strengthening or equipping young children's spirituality.

There was little suggestion in the literature about what constituted appropriate activities for cultivating spiritual development in the early years (Hudson 2018), or how practitioners may endeavour to nurture a child's spiritual development (Trousedale 2005). This again reinforces the notion that supporting children's spiritual development is not within the remit of early years practitioners. Curriculum content and materials to promote spirituality amongst the early years sector were not discussed, which may feed into the uncertainty of teachers or practitioners to incorporate spirituality into the curricula identified by Mata (2012). It may also convey a sense that spirituality is not a valid, viable or even necessary part of the curriculum, despite policies and early years frameworks stating that it is. Furthermore, the use of play to aid a child's expression of spirituality

(Adams, Bull, and Maynes 2016) was not included in this literature either, indicating a lack of connection between theory and practice. This all reveals that there are few resources to support early years practitioners in fostering a child's spirituality, and any resources which do exist are not presented in contemporary core early years literature. However, there was some inclusion of the role of practitioners in fostering some character traits connected with a child's spirituality (Eaude 2005; Robinson 2019), with a focus on early years professionals being compassionate and caring; this often being synonymous with spiritual wellbeing and expression. Equally, there was significant focus on the role of spirituality in aiding a child through grief and loss, which suggests that at times of deepest need there is awareness that spiritual connection is beneficial for practitioners to foster in children. However, the literature analysed did not communicate to practitioners the value of this to children outside of these experiences of grief and loss. Overall, the discourse analysis of the literature suggested significant contrast and disconnection with the established theoretical and conceptual understandings of spirituality.

Implications on practice

Returning to the metaphor of a kaleidoscope, demonstrating the complexities involved in this sector (Wood 2019), the discourses identified above will undoubtedly be impacting contemporary ECEC practice. The discourses included in both academic and internet-based sources are all positive, affirming assertions of Adams, Hyde, and Woolley (2008) and Hart (2000) that awareness and attentiveness to a child's spirituality are beneficial. This largely related to fostering and enabling a child's holistic wellbeing, although some also connected it with an aspect of child development or early years curriculum. Discourses in the web-based literature mainly related to the child's experiences and attainment prior to arriving at the early years setting, such as their spiritual identity, heritage or values, with the implication that early years settings are merely required to be aware and affirming of a child's existing spiritual experiences or intrinsic values. However, there were some discourses in the internet literature about spiritual guidance or counselling, implying that perhaps early years settings *do* have a role in guiding a child or enabling them to feel spiritually connected. As an underlying theme, the internet-based sources expressed inclusion of spiritual aspects and awareness as part of children's rights and wellbeing. This begs the question of whether this is being carried out in practice.

This paper shows that spirituality is only minimally mentioned in both academic and internet-based ECEC sectors. Where it is included, it is generally a fleeting mention rather than fundamental to the focus of discussion, concurring with observations of King and Boyatzis (2015) that spirituality has been nowhere close to a mainstream concern of scholars. The implication on the practitioner and early years setting are likely to be that spirituality is barely incorporated into the early years environment and curriculum, and where it is, it may be very fleeting or tokenistic. This requires future investigation, although Eaude (2022) indicates that this is the case. As Hay (2000), omitting spirituality from children's awareness and experience can be detrimental to their development and wellbeing.

This marginalisation of spirituality in the early years does not seem to be for negative reasons, or due to it being considered a taboo or unethical since all discourses included related to spirituality being positive; often related to children's rights and wellbeing.

Inclusion of spirituality in early years environments would therefore be beneficial to children's development and wellbeing, aligning with Lawson (2012). It is therefore unclear of the reason why spirituality is not a greater part of academic and internet-based ECEC literature. This requires further investigation amongst early years practitioners.

Limitations

This project has only investigated written discourses within academic and internet arenas, and it would be beneficial in future to expand on this to incorporate voices of other agents. Future research could explore the experiences and perceptions of parents and practitioners regarding inclusion of spirituality in early years settings, the impacts of these discourses regarding spirituality in ECEC settings, and how this ultimately affects the provision, opportunities and lived experiences of young children. It would also be beneficial to include the voice of the child, although this may be more challenging due to the challenges of a young child verbally expressing spiritual experiences.

Conclusion

This paper asked whether spirituality was a valued component or pushed aside. It is clear from the discourse analysis of these data sources that in principal, it is viewed and documented positively and as a valued component for a child's development and wellbeing. Yet whilst policies and guidance frameworks espouse its importance, literature produced for early childhood practitioners includes it minimally. The fact that its inclusion in internet-based and academic literature is minimal indicates that in practice, the notion of spirituality is pushed aside in contemporary early years practice. When it is included, the mentions appear to be tokenistic or fleeting, and often the concept of spirituality is linked with the values of pioneers since this seems to be a convenient platform to view it from. Likewise, religious practices are sometimes mentioned within discussions of spirituality but these are highly compartmentalised. On one hand, some express spirituality as integral and fundamental to a child's foundation, and talk about its necessity for a child to be 'complete', but on the other hand, there is minimal discussion about how it may be fostered. Indeed, the concepts seem to be expressed with minimal criticality, counter arguments or discussion. Some express the notion of spirituality as a cognitive function, with something to be achieved or aspired to indicate a mismatch with established theories of spirituality being the opposite. Ultimately, the reasons for this marginalisation, uncertainty and confusion of spirituality in the early years sector are unclear and will be investigated in future research.

Recommendations from this research are therefore multi-layered. Within the academic domain, it is proposed that researchers and writers should produce more 'practitioner-focused' literature to disseminate their findings more widely. In addition, these researchers and writers alongside collectives such as the International Association of Children's Spirituality should seek to report their literature and research findings more into the practitioner and policy-making spheres in order to increase the impact and integration of their work. It is clear that calls should be made at the policy-making layer for spirituality to be integrated more fully into ECEC settings.

At the practitioner level, it is recommended that greater awareness of resources to support practitioners in an increased focus on children's spirituality should be more widely publicised and disseminated. There is also a need for more practical resources and tools to be created. These endeavours would hopefully bring about some progress at societal and local levels.

Notes

1. <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-in-wales>
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
3. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/topics/support-and-development/early-years-education-and-learning>
4. <https://www.UNICEF.org/early-childhood-development>
5. <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/earlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>
6. <https://en.unesco.org/themes/early-childhood-care-and-education>

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by culham st gabriels.

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