

# Spirituality at the Convergence of Social Justice in Early Childhood Education

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo resume un estudio cualitativo realizado en Estados Unidos con cinco maestros de educación temprana para explorar cómo definen su espiritualidad y la de los niños, así como su percepción sobre las formas en que pueden apoyarla en el contexto educativo. El estudio se realizó, además, para identificar las percepciones de los participantes respecto a cómo la espiritualidad en la educación temprana contribuye a la construcción de la justicia social. El marco conceptual que emerge de los resultados contextualiza la espiritualidad en relación con las nociones de: identidad, conexión consigo mismo y con otras personas, justicia, equidad, solidaridad y amor. Se reconoció que la espiritualidad es fundamental para los educadores y para los niños y que tiene un lugar subversivo y significativo en el campo profesional. Es una fuente de fortaleza, resistencia y transformación, así como parte de los cimientos para la justicia social desde la infancia.

**Descriptor:** Espiritualidad, Justicia social, Educación temprana

## ABSTRACT

This article reports the results of a qualitative study with five early childhood educators which explored their understanding of spirituality, their own and that of the children they taught, as well as their perceptions of how they may nurture this type of development in their classroom. The study also aimed to identify teachers' perceptions regarding how spirituality in early childhood education contributes toward social justice. The findings point to an emergent theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education that con-

textualizes it within the boundaries of identity, connectedness with oneself and others, and with fairness, equity, caring, and love. Spirituality is recognized as fundamental for early childhood educators and young children. Its place within this field is subversive and significant. It is a source of strength, resistance, and transformation, as well as part of the groundwork for social justice early in life.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Social justice, Early childhood education

## Spirituality within a holistic approach to early childhood education

The field of early childhood education has shown a tendency to envision the child as an integral human being, who develops holistically. Recognized educators and philosophers in this field such as Comenius, Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel and Montessori, among others, emphasized through their work the importance of an education for young children that fosters their development in all domains (Gordon & Browne, 2004). These domains include the social, aesthetic, language, cognitive, affective and physical aspects, as well as the spiritual. They are interconnected and influence one another. Therefore, it is imperative that early childhood educators propitiate experiences to provide an education for the whole child (Lawson, 1996).

Providing a holistic education that attends the whole child becomes a challenge in Western societies, particularly with regard to spirituality. Although early childhood education needs to attend to the child as a total person, the spiritual dimension has been excluded systematically from formal public educational institutions in the United States. Spirituality is considered irrelevant to school curriculum (Palmer, 1983).

There is not an accepted universal definition of spirituality. Western spirituality integrates various traditions and practices. However, spirituality is more than beliefs, practices, and institutional affiliations (Noddings, in Montgomery-Halford, 1999). Spirituality is not exclusively about religion. In order to avoid the tendency to exclude the topic from education because of its elusiveness, this article will proceed, providing definitions for these concepts in terms of their implications for this study.

Spirituality is recognized as an integral part of the life of everyone (Scott, 2001). Schneiders (1999) defines it as the person's response to all that calls him or her to integrity and transcendence. Spirituality is defined also as the search for meaning and for purpose in life, and

as the profound experience of interconnectedness with others, with nature and with oneself (Bosacki, 2002). For Palmer (1983) spirituality in relationship to education is about the cultivation of the inner life; it refers to the cultivation of the heart and the mind.

Waite and Halstead (2001) affirm that children seem to have a natural spirituality characterized by a profound sense of wonder, curiosity, and inquiry regarding the significance of life in addition to an awareness of their experiences and emotions, and an immense capability for imagination and play. In this study children's spirituality refers to that particular notion, and includes three other elements of spirituality that Wenman (2001) recognizes: relationships, search for transcendence, and its uniqueness in each person.

Although Western culture tends to separate the intellectual, the emotional, and the spiritual spheres, they interweave in the individual person and in education as well (Palmer, 1998; de Souza, 2006). The link between them is so fundamental in education that, according to Palmer (1998), good teaching fosters connection among all of these dimensions. For Palmer (1999) good teaching also cultivates the connection among the educators as subjects who relate to themselves and to others, which includes the relationships with colleagues and students without losing professionalism.

Within this relational dynamic that takes the educational processes to deeper levels, educators can be in touch with their inner power and potentiate themselves to transform who they are, their lives and what they do in their classrooms (Palmer, 1998). This allows education to be transformed into a context that promotes wholeness and relationships, and influences the students to better achieve academically (Lawson, 1996; Kirk, 2000). It allows valuing diverse ways of knowing such as imagination and intuition as well as reasoning (Kirk, 2000). It supports the construction of a community of students and teachers that see their role as contributors to the larger society (Miller, 2005).

Nevertheless, education reforms have emphasized the academic aspect of the development of the child, disregarding a vision of the child as a whole person (Delpit & White-Bradley, 2003). The academic culture, rather than encouraging a holistic approach that honors cognition as well as all the other dimensions of the person, leads to a disconnection and distance from the inner self and from others (Kirk, 2000). The academic culture dismisses spirituality as a realm that should be excluded from education, (de Souza, 2006), instead of identifying practices, congruent with the United States Constitution,

to nurture the spirit in the classroom. As a result educational processes are alienated from what is meaningful and significant for all of the education subjects: students and teachers.

The marginalization of the topic of spirituality is evident also in the professional literature. This body depicts a limited amount of research documented in the United States regarding the topic of spirituality in education and, particularly, in the field of early childhood education. The present investigation responds to the need to study this topic on deeper levels.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore what preschool and elementary teachers understood as spirituality in terms of their own and that of the children they teach, as well as how they perceive how they may nurture this type of development in their classroom. The study also aimed to identify teachers' perceptions regarding how spirituality in early childhood education contributes toward social justice.

### Relevant literature

Kessler (2000) points out that teachers, administrators and policy makers have excluded spirituality from the field of education. Some reasons for this exclusion include: academic pressure, discomfiture, ambiguity (Eaude, 2001), fear of imposing personal values, attitudes against organized religion, lack of knowledge about how to address spiritual matters (Dei, James, James-Wilson, & Karumanchery, 2000) and the desire to protect children's rights and avoid legal problems (Purpel, 2002; Kessler, 2000). Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) also identify the current individualistic tendency of Western belief systems and paradigms that foster false dichotomies between spiritual knowledges and positivistic science knowledges. Early childhood educators need to break with these dominant paradigms in order to be able to include an image of the child as spiritual in early childhood education.

Historically, the definition of spirituality has been associated mainly with religion and this causes conflict with the guarantees of the First Amendment in the United States (Haynes, 1999). Kessler (2000) advises that we broaden the notion of spirituality in order to integrate it into educational processes. Oldenski and Carlson (2002) recommend demystifying the term. Dei, James, James-Wilson, and Karumanchery (2000) recommend the deconstruction of the language which implies using non-religious attributes or language when defining spirituality or talking about it. Educators need to establish clear,

non religious goals related to the secular mission of the public school in order to avoid constitutional conflicts when integrating the spiritual dimension in education (Haynes, 1999).

The concept of spirituality in this study integrates the social and political dimensions. Relationships are contextualized within the framework of community and interconnectedness that compels the appropriation of the notion of social justice. Thus, akin to Lerner (2005) and hooks (2000), spirituality in this work is linked to social justice.

Professional literature points out that spirituality is a very important dimension in the lives of people. Spirituality plays a critical role in the healing process of grieving children (Andrews, 2004), and in adolescents with emotional problems such as depression, suicide attempts, eating disorders, persistent violence and self-destructive behaviors (Kessler, 2000). According to Mallick and Watts (2001) it has been a helpful element for adolescents as they face and withstand negative influences, and as they recover from drug abuse problems. It has also been a positive influence in the achievement of higher academic performance, as well as in the search for family and social support networks of African American adolescents (Dei, James, James-Wilson, & Karumanchery, 2000).

The limited research on children's spirituality from a secular or non religious perspective has been done mostly in fields other than early childhood education (Conti, 2002; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). Within the field of early childhood education, Linda Marie Jagielo (2004) explored the perception of four Head Start teachers regarding how their life experiences influenced their professional pedagogy. One finding of this study indicated that the participants perceived that their spiritual beliefs and religious practices influenced their teaching. Yet, there is a gap in the professional literature related to how spirituality influences the work of early childhood educators and how it relates to social justice. This study seeks to fill the gap in the existing literature.

## Methodology

### *Epistemological and theoretical framework*

This research followed a qualitative approach designed to allow for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2002). It was informed by the critical Black feminist and interpretive theoretical framework. Considering the nature of the research topic, which was spirituality in early childhood education, the Black feminist epistemology offered four fundamental components. These elements,

as identified by Hill-Collins (2000) were: lived experience as a criterion for meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability and the ethic of caring. Given the interpretive paradigm, it was presumed that there are multiple realities constructed through human interaction (Schwandt, 2000). The study assumed Bohman, Hiley, and Shusterman's (1991) notion that interpreting is both a social and a political practice, which implies that meanings are constructed within the power politics of a community. All of these methodological pieces were crucial in the realization of a study that needed to be developed in ways congruent with the topic. In this sense it integrated a notion of research as "both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit" (Dillard, 2000, p. 674).

### *Participants*

Five preschool and elementary school teachers from two different early childhood education programs in the United States participated in this research. They included three African American women working in a Christian church school context, and a White woman and a White male, working in a non-religious setting. Pseudonyms were chosen by the participants. The selection process integrated theoretical sampling, a defining element of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000).

### *Instrumentation and analysis*

The instruments used to gather data included individual interviews (semi-structured and unstructured), observations, written field notes, and narratives. The incorporation of these instruments emerged from the interaction with the participants. The emergent process of the research, as well as the constant comparative method integrated into the analysis, was rooted in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Charmaz, 2000). The constant comparative method involves coding systematically and comparing and contrasting themes and concepts within the context in which they occur in the text (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The analysis also integrated writing as a method of inquiry and crystallization, which propitiates seeing and analyzing from multiple perspectives (Richardson, 2000). All recorded interviews were transcribed.

### *Trustworthiness*

Lincoln (1995) defines trustworthiness as the set of criteria that we can utilize to evaluate the quality of research work in the human sciences. Besides the use of a variety of instruments for crystallization,

in an effort to address trustworthiness, the researcher engaged in continuous dialogue and observations with the participants every week, during the course of a year, generally in their classrooms, school patio or gym. Three knowledgeable friends contributed in peer debriefing, revising the data and analysis, and offering recommendations.

The participants reviewed the interview transcriptions as well as the analysis, as part of the member check processes. They took part with the researcher in decisions regarding the representation of the data and the final report. Within the audit trail, incorporated to attain dependability, they also, along with two third-party examiners, who were experienced researchers, helped to verify whether the procedures seemed trustworthy and if the findings seemed confirmable. The findings integrated disconfirming evidence for negative case analysis.

## Findings

The findings of this study are organized through the incorporation of categories and common themes that emerged from the different methods and frameworks integrated into the study. These categories and themes, which are presented in the next paragraph, convey the major patterns identified across the analysis. They are then exemplified and further developed by quoting the teachers words and thoughts as conveyed through their participation in this study.

The data within the categories *teacher's own spirituality*, *other teachers' spirituality* and *children's spirituality* answer the first question regarding how early childhood education teachers define spirituality. The responses of the second question concerning early childhood education teachers' perceptions on the influence of spirituality in their practice and pedagogy is conveyed within the categories *the place of spirituality in early childhood education*, and *perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy*. The category *tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom* offers data to answer the query about the ways teachers think they can foster and support children's spiritual dimension in their classrooms. The data within the category *perceptions about the connection between spirituality and social justice* answer the question related to teachers' perceptions about how spirituality in early childhood education contributes to social justice.

### *Teacher's own spirituality*

When defining spirituality the participants initially integrated responses such as: "Something... I don't know.", "Spirituality is a way"

“It is what moves you.” Then they shifted to define it based on their personal experiences. They indicated that spirituality was crucial in their existence, it was connected with their self identity and it was an experience deeply rooted in their Christian religions. Some recalled that it has been an integral part of their lives connected with their families since they were “growing up...”. “It is my life” was Michelle’s first account when expressing its meaning for her. In the same fashion Marie established: “It makes me who I am... It’s a very important part of my life”.

Relationships with oneself and others were a recurrent theme. “It is about your relationship with yourself”, asserted Kellogg, for instance. He associated spirituality with community and positive interaction with people. Spirituality inspires him to “pay attention to people and respect them.” Lisa and Michelle indicated that it is entwined into their lives. It makes Lisa, for example, “stronger” and “patient” during difficult times. It moves her “to be a better nurturer with the kids, to be more attentive”, and to be wiser, avoiding “jumping to conclusions” about others. Michelle tries to “incorporate it in everything” she does. It helps Taylor in “looking at things differently”, focused in the positive point of view of the situations and it keeps her “connected” and “balanced”.

### *Perceptions of other teachers’ spirituality*

For different reasons, the five participants expressed that it was difficult for them to state for sure how other early childhood education teachers define spirituality. According to the participants the definition of the educators would depend “on their own experiences throughout their entire life” (Marie), their “individuality” (Lisa), the religious or non religious school context (Taylor and Lisa), and the teacher’s vision of the child (Kellogg). The insight of other teachers’ spirituality was also related to the opportunities for social interaction with colleagues. Michelle explained that she did not know how other teachers define spirituality, since she does not have “a lot of interaction with other childhood educators” from other schools.

### *Perceptions of children’s spirituality*

Some major themes within the category children’s spirituality included: relationships, connection with the self, other people and a higher being. In Taylor’s words children’s spirituality is about “...a deeper understanding of yourself, of the people around you, a deeper connection with yourself and a higher being...”. Other strong themes included self



identity, parent's spirituality, critical development and play. Lisa, for example, elucidated: "spirituality makes them [the children] who they are." Kellogg recognized the influence of the spirituality of the parents and of some childrearing practices. He established that when the family goes to church together and gets involved within this context the chances are that children will develop their spirituality. For the participants spirituality is "critical" in life and it needs to be developed early in life. Childhood was referred to by Michelle as "the most important time to develop your spirituality". Play becomes a way in which children's spirituality "comes out" and a means to express who they are.

### *The place of spirituality in early childhood education*

The participants asserted that spirituality is fundamental in early childhood education. It "allows the child... to see the power that they have" and it is part of a holistic approach in education for the "whole child" (Marie). Taylor recognized that it is integrated in education as she connects deeply with her students. Kellogg referred to it as "from within the child", as "inevitable in the classroom". Thus, it permeates education, although its incorporation in education may represent a challenge. Michelle described that even though "the space for spirituality is open" depending on the school context, teachers need to be cautious of how they approach it, because they need to be "politically correct" in an effort to avoid violations to the Constitution.

### *Perceptions regarding spirituality and pedagogy*

Two significant themes linked with the participants' perceptions on how spirituality contributes to their sense of teaching were spirituality ingrained within quotidian activities and in the teachers' vision concerning the potential of children. Marie, for example, describes that "spirituality is a good part" of her duty in the classroom, which includes believing in their potential, recognizing and honoring all that they can accomplish. In this sense it leads her to provide the preschoolers with an environment of freedom and opportunities for self empowerment and optimal learning.

The participants brought up consistently the themes of identity, trust, relationships with others, and bringing spirituality to the classroom by bringing who one is. Lisa for instance, established that spirituality impels students and teachers to develop "relationships of trust" to relate to other people with a sense of their "own identity" and to "to know one another well" in order to inform the educational processes

and propitiate a positive atmosphere for learning. These relationships included those with parents, who, in Marie's words, "dictate" the types and ways of spirituality in the classroom according to their religious or cultural background. She recognized the importance of welcoming their different perspectives in the classroom through a dynamic of continuous dialogue.

Kellogg affirmed repeatedly that "as the children bring their sense of self to the classroom, teachers do too." He acknowledged: "...my self is always in the classroom, so it is always going to contribute to my teaching." For him the teacher's family and cultural backgrounds are an ever-present influence within the educational processes. He identified that this influence was the primary source for developing his spirituality with a deep sense of respect and caring for others.

Cultural connection and love were other main themes identified with spirituality and its contribution in the classroom. "I'm an African American teacher... All my students are African American; so, culturally we have some type of spiritual connection because of our ancestry", avowed Taylor. This participant claimed that teachers connect with their students spiritually whether they are aware of it or not. She also stated that teachers "need to love the children and to love learning". As part of this learning she recognized her need to assess her behaviors since in her process of caring for the students sometimes there are limitations and contradictions.

Another focal theme was spirituality as a foundation for the decision to teach. Michelle averred: "It's to me, really, the reason why I am teaching, because I can't teach without the spirituality aspect." In this sense spirituality was not only a significant influence in the pedagogy of the participants but also in their choice for their professional career.

### *Tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom*

Emergent themes within the category of tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom include: prior preparation for teaching, relationships and connection with the children, respect, learning community, and transformation. Taylor feels that she needs to "equip" herself before starting to teach. The following sentence describes some ways in which she tends to the spiritual dimension in the classroom: "I bring the spirituality through love, through my guidance, my care for them..." (referring to the children). For her, as for all the participants, the caring or "nurturing attitude and behavior", and "respect for one another"

are crucial in tending to the spirit in the classroom. She identified that “physical touch is a spiritual connection” within the classroom context. It is a challenge as well in the public school since teachers “are not supposed to touch the children or to hug them...” because the consequence might be a lawsuit. She added that this becomes “very detrimental to them” since young children need to be close to their teachers.

Within relationships characterized by “kindness and affection” that Lisa refers to, she, like Marie, indicated that the classroom community can grow and nurtures itself becoming a learning community, where people are transformed. According to all the participants this dynamic extends to the parents and needs to be cultivated through continuous communication.

Other topics that emerged were: “time, space and opportunity” (which Kellogg literally expressed in his responses). The participants’ classrooms physical and emotional ambiance reflected these themes. The schedule provided a general, flexible structure without inhibiting teacher’s initiatives and decisions. The sites were neatly clean, organized, decorated with children’s pictures and projects, and offered a variety of quality materials. Each classroom had nine to ten pupils. The interactions between everyone, adult or child, reflected a sense of co-responsibility, collaboration, and negotiation. Dialogue, jokes, exploration, experimentation, storytelling, songs, dance, projects as well as large and small group activities, were common during the educational experiences.

### *Connection between spirituality and social justice*

Each participant defined social justice differently and offered short, direct responses. Some of these included that it is about “fairness” and “equity”, “basic rights and privileges”, the search “for what is right for all peoples”, “honor and respect” to everyone including “their ideas and beliefs”, “acknowledging differences”, “understanding...” without “condemning or labeling people”, “communities of peoples” that include “the classroom, the world” and “just about being human beings”. The “children express it in their sense of being fair and equal”. Conversely, when defining social justice a participant mentioned that, “some days it is ambiguous”. Another expressed that “there is no social justice...” since it is “just for those who are rich... and powerful”.

Regarding spirituality and social justice other themes that emerged were: an intrinsic connection between both as well as a disconnection; and social justice as an aim, as a way of being and relating to others, as love, as valuing all peoples, as rights, fairness, morality and a

foundation in the early years. Marie, for example described the connection between both as follows: “I don’t think you can really have one without the other...That’s what you aim for...”. Taylor indicated that spirituality is linked with social justice since both imply “a connection with people” as well as “believing that people are important and that we have certain rights” which include the right and responsibility “to love each other as humans...”. This is congruent with Lisa’s view that encompasses being fair as “seeing and treating each child as an individual” and “recognizing our individuality and our potential”. Furthermore, for Marie and Kellogg it is congruent with a sense of morality that according to Kellogg, implies knowing “what is right or wrong”, is learned during childhood, and becomes manifested through the “interaction with others”.

Although Michelle shared with the other participants the notion of connection between spirituality and social justice through “being fair” and “treating others right”, she also indicated that there is a disconnection between both, pointing to what appears to be disconfirming data. She established that even though there is a connection for most spiritual people at the young age, “there are also those people for whom there is no connection”. She argued however, that “if you are spiritual, social justice should come right along with that”, offering in this manner a deeper view of a complex reality.

For the participants, spirituality paves the way to social justice in early childhood education as it provides young children a foundation about ways to be with the self and others. Taylor, for instance, stated that it “is important starting young, teaching those foundations, those social behaviors like sharing, caring about one another, and taking turns.” Kellogg described that children “...bring just who they are to the classroom” and learn “about strangers, about friendship, about the self”, about “how to work cooperatively...”. Marie, like Lisa, recognized that spirituality moves the educator to respect the child’s particularities, and indicated that it also should lead the child to welcome and respect the diversity of all peoples. Michelle envisioned it as getting in touch with their feelings so that “they know how it feels if they are not treated fairly...” and they “understand how important social justice is”.

## Discussion and conclusions

The findings indicate that although the concept of spirituality was difficult to define for the participants, given the depth it evokes in them, it is fundamental in their lives. It is an elusive term; nonetheless it is sig-

nificant in people's lives (Palmer, 1998; Purpel, 2002). Like in Tisdell's (2002) work with adult educators, spirituality for the participants was at the center of their identity, and it was a source of strength and wisdom, a guide for their ways of thinking and doing, for their personal choices and decisions, including the professional ones and those related to social justice. It was influenced, originally, by their upbringing and religious socialization during childhood, which explains why these teachers perceived their spirituality associated with religion or "a deep connection with a higher power."

Similar to Wenman (2001), the participants acknowledged that spirituality is unique in each person, depending on the individual's experiences. They expressed multiple views of spirituality; some connected with religion, others not. The participants expected to tend to the spirit within their educational settings, and they did so according to their particular religious or non-religious context. Their ways of learning about how to tend to these multiple spiritualities integrated continuous communication with the children's parents and colleagues.

These findings indicate that early childhood educators can learn about diverse spiritualities, as well as to respect and negotiate them according to their particular context. Dialogue about their inner lives, seems to be a necessary tool, as Palmer (1998) recommends. Given that spirituality is fundamental for individuals it seems incongruous to inhibit sharing concerning this significant dimension. The teachers in this study understood that this type of interaction did not mean indoctrination with regard to any particular perspective. Thus, this type of sharing can be done within the parameters of the United States Constitution.

Like Palmer (1983), the educators in this study linked spirituality with their inner life, with their feelings and thoughts, assuming a holistic vision of the human being that breaks with the dichotomies of heart and mind distinctive of disembodied spiritualities and education. For them, as for Noddings (2005) and hooks (1994), spirituality entails relationships with oneself and others characterized by respect, caring, and love.

The participants' definition of children's spirituality pointed to these ideas as well as to Waite and Halstead's (2001) notion of wonder, imagination, and play, as ability and as means for expressing spirituality. The teachers related it with a connection with a higher being. They furthermore recognized the significance of childrearing practices. These findings point out the role that parents play in spiritual development. Moreover, the notion of children's spirituality encompasses a

particular factor: it is important that it be developed throughout the early years of life, given that children learn basic pro-social behaviors, like respect and kindness and discover their potential and power.

Scholars like Miller (2002) and Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson (2000), acknowledge the significant place of spirituality in education. In this study early childhood educators recognized the same within their professional field as well. Challenging the assumption of teaching within a spiritual vacuum, they were convinced that teachers, children, and parents bring their spirituality to the classroom by bringing themselves, their identities, and their family background. In this fashion, coinciding with Dei (2002) they perceived spirituality as part of their historical and cultural beings. Spirituality for them is not only inevitable, but necessary for an effective and holistic education. Attuned to Dei (2002) the participants pointed out that spirituality permeates education since it is integrated not only with their identity but to what they do in the classroom. This became a major contribution of spirituality to their pedagogy.

Conversely, the educators identified the exclusion of spirituality in some classrooms, explaining that teachers avoid legal problems and try to protect children by excluding it sometimes. In this manner the participants pointed that although, spirituality has its fundamental place in early childhood education it is sometimes disregarded by teachers.

The participants indicated that their spirituality leads them to respect and love everyone, to recognize and foster their students' potential, to engage in self assessment about their behaviors, and to build a learning community with parents, where everyone knows and trusts one another. These results suggest that their perception regarding how spirituality influences their pedagogy as well as how they tend to the spirit, integrates hook's (1993) notion of loving education and Nodding's (2005) ethics of caring.

Furthermore the findings point to the teachers' awareness of the need to show affection with the challenge that this represents. Although as in Jones' (2004) study, the participants recognized that they might be subjected to lawsuit if they physically touch a child, they also emphasized the importance of receiving love in the early years. For this reason they choose to act on behalf of their students and recommended that teachers communicate to the parents who they are, what they do with the children, and how they relate to them. Analogous to Jones' findings (2004), this can be interpreted as an effort toward visibility

in order to show and confirm innocence concerning their interaction with children at times when people are concerned about sexual abuse.

The results of this study also point to an intrinsic relationship between spirituality and social justice as well as between these and their connection with oneself and others. Scholars like hooks and West (1991) had also referred to this relationship when describing that spirituality has been instrumental in bringing a sense of identity and connection among African Americans, being also a source of resistance in their struggle against oppressions. The findings furthermore indicate that spirituality paves the way toward social justice since it becomes a foundation in the early years regarding basic human ways to be with oneself and others. The importance of starting this education early in life was emphasized. The participants recognized that the foundation for social justice is established as early childhood educators help young children learn to be fair, and kind, to welcome, respect, and care for themselves, and for all peoples and the diversity they bring. This suggests a perspective of spirituality that has a social transformational dimension to it. This challenges the notion of private spirituality, which perpetuates the neoliberal system by reproducing alienation, by disregarding any idea or action related to social justice, and by using religious language to foster consumerism and impose a worldview (Carrette & King, 2005).

The findings of this study lead to the following emergent theoretical framework for spirituality in early childhood education. Spirituality is fundamental for early childhood educators and young children. Its place within this field is subversive and significant. It is a source of strength resistance, and transformation. It is contextualized within the boundaries of identity, connectedness with oneself and others and with fairness, equity, caring, and love. In this fashion it is a part of the groundwork for social justice early in life.

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