Educators' perspectives on nurturing spirituality in faith-based early childhood education: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood educators, especially in faith-based institutions, need to have a deep understanding of children's spirituality in order to design and respond to spiritual experiences that arise spontaneously. This study aimed to explore the personal insights and experiences of educators regarding spirituality, as well as their understanding and approaches in fostering spirituality among young children. A qualitative research design was employed, guided by three key questions. The sample included nine educators from a faith-based early childhood program in Kudus, Central Java, specifically involved with 3 and 4-year-olds in class A, which consisted of three classes. Data collection techniques using observation, interviews, and documentation. Findings indicated that the personal insights and experiences of educators play a pivotal role in boosting children's spirituality. Consequently, there are significant opportunities to support educators in their own development and to provide relevant information regarding children's spirituality. Based on the findings, it is suggested that to effectively nurture children's spirituality, educators should cultivate their own sense of personal spirituality, which entails having experienced spiritual events in their own lives essentially spiritual formation.

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Additionally, educators must possess the knowledge and skills to reflect on their spirituality and effectively integrate these experiences with their early childhood teaching methodologies in order to create meaningful spiritual opportunities for children. The study recommends enhancing the competencies of educators in promoting the spirituality of young children. This research contributes valuable insights into the understanding of spirituality within religious-affiliated early childhood education settings.

Keywords: Early Childhood; Educators; Early Childhood Education; Religion-Based Education; Spirituality.

ABSTRAK

Pendidik anak usia dini, terutama di lembaga berbasis agama, perlu memiliki pemahaman mendalam tentang spiritualitas anak agar bisa merancang dan merespons pengalaman spiritual yang muncul secara spontan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi wawasan dan pengalaman pribadi para pendidik mengenai spiritualitas, serta pemahaman dan pendekatan mereka dalam menumbuhkan spiritualitas di kalangan anak kecil. Metode - Desain penelitian kualitatif digunakan, dipandu oleh tiga pertanyaan kunci. Sampel tersebut mencakup sembilan pendidik dari program anak usia dini berbasis agama di Kudus, Jawa Tengah, khususnya yang terlibat dengan anak usia 3 dan 4 tahun di kelas A, yang terdiri dari tiga kelas. Teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa wawasan dan pengalaman pribadi para pendidik memainkan peran penting dalam meningkatkan spiritualitas anak-anak. Akibatnya, ada peluang signifikan untuk mendukung para pendidik dalam pengembangan mereka sendiri dan untuk memberikan informasi yang relevan mengenai spiritualitas anak-anak. Berdasarkan temuan tersebut, disarankan bahwa untuk memelihara spiritualitas anak secara efektif, para pendidik harus menumbuhkan rasa spiritualitas pribadi mereka sendiri, yang mencakup pengalaman peristiwa spiritual dalam kehidupan mereka sendiri—pada dasarnya pembentukan spiritual. Selain itu, para pendidik harus memiliki pengetahuan dan keterampilan untuk merefleksikan spiritualitas mereka dan secara efektif mengintegrasikan pengalaman ini dengan metodologi pengajaran anak usia dini mereka untuk menciptakan kesempatan spiritual yang bermakna bagi anak-anak. Studi ini merekomendasikan peningkatan kompetensi para pendidik dalam mempromosikan spiritualitas anak-anak usia dini. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan berharga tentang pemahaman spiritualitas dalam lingkungan pendidikan anak usia dini yang berafiliasi dengan agama.

Kata Kunci: Anak Usia Dini; Pendidik; Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini; Pendidikan Berbasis Agama; Spiritualitas.

1. INTRODUCTION

The framework for preschool education in Indonesia encompasses the period from birth to the age of six. Across the country, an increasing number of children within this age range are participating in early childhood education through various settings such as daycare centers, learning groups, and kindergartens. There has also been a notable rise in early childhood

educational institutions that emphasize religious teachings in recent years. This study specifically focused on educators working within these faith-based early childhood education environments.

As with all early childhood education settings, religiously affiliated institutions require that educators possess appropriate qualifications and adhere to the nationally prescribed curriculum (Sajedi & Sajedi, 2019). Pedagogical guidelines and teaching practices, along with specified learning objectives, are designed to support the holistic development of children. This includes fostering their spiritual growth during the formative years. To move beyond merely acknowledging children's spiritual needs, educators must possess a sound understanding of spirituality and develop the necessary skills to nurture spiritual development. Previous scholars Adams et al., (2016) have emphasized that religious training is essential for educators to effectively respond to the diversity among children; the present study reinforced that assertion.

In addition to religious training, educators must also comprehend the religious and spiritual dimensions of children's lives to design meaningful spiritual experiences. Given that many spiritual moments arise spontaneously, often initiated by the children themselves, educators must be equipped to recognize and respond to such moments in order to deepen children's spiritual experiences.

Previous studies have tended to explore the characteristics of spirituality rather than attempting to define it (Adams et al., 2016). These characteristics often include the development of self-identity, the search for meaning and purpose, connection to others and the environment (Jirásek et al., 2017), and a sense of belonging to a larger whole (Ghane et al., 2021). The need for educators to receive religious and spiritual training is repeatedly emphasized in the literature, and the results of this study further support this requirement.

Educators should prioritize the holistic development of children, including their spiritual dimensions. To implement spiritual education more effectively, educators must gain knowledge about spirituality and the skills required to nurture spiritual growth in early childhood. This encompasses feelings of wonder and joy (Lee, 2020), as well as connections to morality and personal beliefs (Rodriguez, 2025). Recent findings broadly concur that spiritual identity does not necessarily equate to religious affiliation. Nonetheless, there are instances where an individual's religious convictions may align with their spiritual expressions. The notion of being connected to oneself is articulated in the research by Rouse (2024), which describes the link between the 'I' and the Self, aligning with established understandings of identity development in earlier studies (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020).

Spirituality can serve as a medium through which identity is expressed and expanded; it is an intrinsic capability that engages various aspects of the self (Eaude, 2025). When an individual experiences a positive connection with their inner self, Hay (1998) and Wills (2024) suggest that it can enhance identity formation, self-awareness, and self-esteem, ultimately contributing to a stronger sense of well-being. Existing studies often highlight the sense of connection derived from spiritual experiences (Coles, 1990). Foundational research by Coles (1990). revealed that feeling connected to others and the environment, referred to as relationality, represents "a fundamental motivation of spirituality" (Viftrup et al., 2024).

A notable contribution from Pranoto et al., (2024) is the introduction of relational consciousness, defined as an awareness that integrates being, knowing, and feeling. This concept emphasizes interpersonal relationships and self-awareness within those dynamics. The

sense of relationality, denoting a connection to others, is closely associated with the concept of belonging. Children utilize their spiritual capacities when connecting with peers, thereby deepening their sense of belonging (Hyde & Rouse, 2022).

Relationality also manifests in one's relationship with the surrounding world and is understood as an awareness of one's existence in relation to the encompassing environment (Robinson, 1983). Research by Greenfield (2018), drawing from educators' perceptions of children's spirituality, suggests that experiences with nature are often linked to spiritual understanding. The connection between spirituality and curiosity is well-documented in the studies of (Nafisah et al., 2025). Research on very young children highlights the essential role of curiosity and imagination in facilitating spiritual expression during early childhood. Holmes (2024) assert that curiosity and wonder are fundamental to experiencing and articulating spirituality, particularly within educational settings.

Previous studies have also established a relationship between personal morality and belief systems as elements of spirituality. Mata-McMahon et al., (2020) outlined two key ethical frameworks within morality: "duty ethics," which addresses distinctions between right and wrong actions, and "virtue ethics," which explores an individual's understanding of what constitutes 'good,' both for themselves and their community (Souza, 2016). To be considered a good person implies adherence to a value framework that is inherently tied to one's moral sensibilities. When viewed through this lens, spirituality pertains to the enactment of personal beliefs and values, reflecting an individual's behavior toward others.

Overall, this research confirms that spirituality is an intrinsic aspect of child development that should be prioritized, and that specialized training for educators is essential to foster this dimension effectively. This study explored the personal insights and experiences of educators regarding spirituality, as well as their understanding and approaches in fostering spirituality among young children.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definitions of Spirituality

Research on ethics and individual convictions related to spirituality underscores the importance of considering cultural and religious perspectives. Contemporary understandings of spirituality emphasize that it is not limited to particular religious doctrines or cultural beliefs Veraksa et al, (2022) but represents an intrinsic dimension of human experience. Spirituality manifests through shared aspects of humanity and transcends cultural and religious boundaries. Individuals express and experience spirituality in diverse ways. For instance, some may feel spiritually connected while listening to music, others during engagement with sacred texts, through silent meditation, or in advocating for justice (Sajedi & Sajedi, 2019).

2.2. Spirituality in Early Childhood

Young children are often described as possessing multiple "spiritual voices" (Gholamnejad et al., 2024), with imagination, creativity, awe, and wonder recognized as vital modes of spiritual expression in early childhood. A study on nurturing children's spirituality in educational contexts found that practices enhancing spiritual expression include opportunities for stillness, meaning-making, inquiry, bodily or kinesthetic awareness, concentration, contemplation, and imaginative engagement. The sense of wonder experienced during

childhood plays a pivotal role in shaping children's worldview and spiritual identity (Bagherpur et al., 2021). This connection between spirituality and wonder is further supported by previous research.

Additional investigations Eaude (2016) have affirmed that very young children engage with and express spirituality through creative thought and a sense of wonder. Spirituality is viewed as a multidimensional construct involving contemplation (Eskandari et al., 2019), empathy, transcendence, and the pursuit of meaning. While not all introspective or creative experiences equate to spirituality, research suggests that such moments can foster or facilitate spiritual expression.

2.3. Educators' Role

In the context of children's spirituality, empirical studies Francis et al., (2021) highlight the importance of creating environments where children can experience and express their spirituality. Educators are encouraged to recognize the depth and richness of children's spiritual lives. Early childhood is widely acknowledged as a critical period for the holistic development of all capacities, including spiritual ones (Jingyi & Jiangli, 2024), a notion echoed in prior scholarships Assis (2021) suggesting that spiritual capabilities reside within all individuals but must be activated and nurtured.

The emergence and development of these abilities in early childhood are essential. Exploring educators' perspectives on spirituality, particularly their understanding and engagement with young children's spiritual growth, represents a growing area of academic interest. For instance, a previous study Adams et al., (2016) examined how early childhood educators in non-religious settings perceived the role of their spirituality in shaping classroom practices.

2.4. Gaps in Literature

Findings from prior research support the argument that teachers must engage in personal growth to effectively support the spiritual development of children. According to (Hyde, 2021), educators must recognize and affirm children's spirituality as a key component of a holistic educational approach. This study aligns with research conducted in the New Zealand context (Rahmatullah et al., 2023), referencing the national early childhood curriculum, Te Whāriki, which emphasizes holistic learning and development.

Past studies have identified a notable gap in professional development related to spirituality within early childhood education, despite teachers' awareness of their role in fostering children's spiritual well-being. Similarly, research conducted in faith-based settings (Jafarian, 2019) has proposed strategies for educators to deepen their understanding of children's spirituality. These findings suggest that when educators participate in professional training focused on documenting children's spiritual experiences alongside other learning outcomes, they develop a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between spirituality and religion.

3. METHOD

This study was grounded in a social constructivist framework. The interpretive framework is based on the premise that reality is shaped through social interactions, and

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research seeks to understand how individuals perceive their environments (Viftrup et al., 2024). Data were gathered through comprehensive methods involving a limited number of respondents, specifically educators from faith-oriented early childhood learning institutions.

Based on the earlier discussions in the introduction, the following three research questions were formulated:

a. How do educators define the concept of spirituality?
b. What is educators' understanding of nurturing spirituality in children?
c. What practices do educators implement—both intentionally and unintentionally to enhance children's spirituality?

The investigation was conducted at a faith-aligned early childhood learning center located in Kudus, Central Java. This study specifically examined the educators responsible for 3- and 4-year-old children, referred to as Class A, within the center, which consisted of three classes. The educators' qualifications varied significantly, ranging from those with an S1 PG PAUD degree to those with other academic backgrounds. To standardize the experiences, the educator with the highest qualifications in each class was designated as the 'lead educator.' Nine educators were approached for participation, all of whom consented, thereby forming the participant group. Three distinct data collection methods were employed to address each of the three research questions guiding this study.

These observations took place over two days to gather information on their interactions and practices with children, addressing research questions 2 and 3. Alongside the semi-structured interviews, the observational method was used. The third data collection method involved reviewing documentation, where planning documents spanning two weeks were analyzed to examine initiatives related to children's spirituality, corresponding to research question 3.
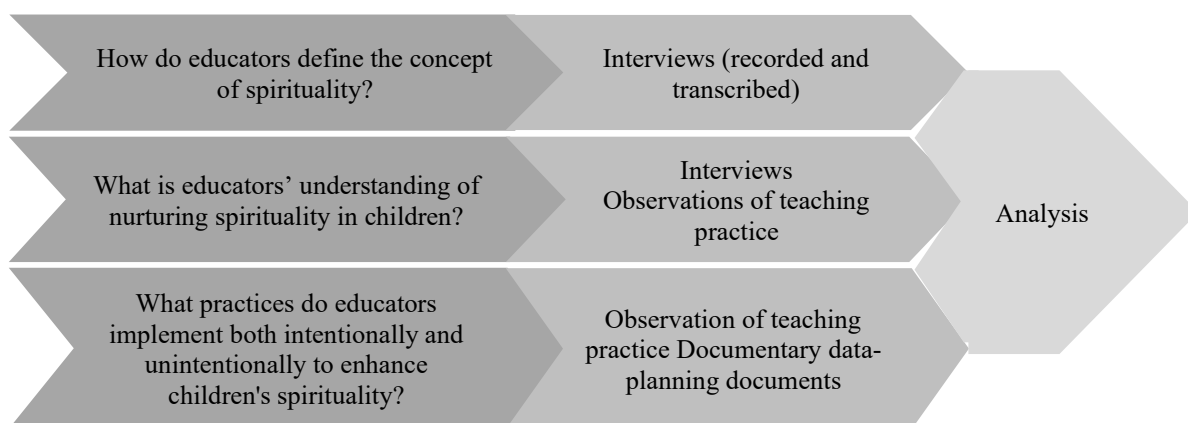

Figure 1. Approaches to research and their evaluation concerning each inquiry.

Ethical considerations were incorporated throughout the research in compliance with the ethics approval granted by the higher education institution. Confidentiality for both the center and individual participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms. The study adhered to high ethical standards by ensuring that the researcher's personal beliefs and biases were kept distinct from those held by the participants.

The data analysis process involved collecting and analyzing all three types of data separately: interview transcripts, observational notes, and documentary evidence. Interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed. The analysis of these transcripts aimed to uncover the educators' understanding and interpretations of spirituality in relation to children's spirituality. Themes were subsequently identified across the transcripts to establish overarching themes.

At this stage, the information within brackets was examined to ensure that the researcher's opinions and biases remained separate from the emerging themes. Ultimately, subordinate themes were identified within each overarching theme. Observational notes were analyzed using initial coding, which led to the identification of both overarching and subordinate themes. In contrast, documentary data was analyzed differently, focusing on educator planning records, which were scrutinized for insights.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings derived from assessing each of the three research questions shed light on educators' understanding of spirituality in relation to themselves and to children, as well as their approaches to fostering spirituality in early childhood settings. This study presents three central inquiries for consideration: spirituality as a personal concept, the influence of educators' spiritual beliefs in nurturing early childhood spirituality, and the incidental promotion of spirituality within early learning environments.

4.1. How Do Educators Define the Concept of Spirituality?

The interview responses revealed valuable perspectives on educators' interpretations and experiences with spirituality. In response to the interview question, "How do educators define the concept of spirituality?" the educators provided descriptions encapsulating the range of their answers.

> *"I believe that spirituality is fundamentally an individual experience. It goes beyond mere religion and centers around having faith. This aspect renders spirituality more abstract since it lacks physical form. Spirituality revolves around personal convictions that are uniquely understood by each individual."* (SS)

> *"Understanding an individual and their values, along with the kind of person they aspire to become, can certainly establish a link to a greater existence. For instance, I may refer to it as God, while others might use a different term. Spirituality embodies a tranquility similar to a confidence that makes all fears, anxieties, or doubts disappear, leading to a fleeting yet profound sense of serenity."* (AT)

In alignment with studies indicating that teachers frequently lack familiarity with spirituality and how to nurture their students' spiritual development, the interviews yielded vital perspectives on educators' interpretations and experiences that shaped their interactions with children. The analysis revealed that the evolving perceptions of spirituality predominantly stemmed from the teachers' lived experiences rather than any structured professional development.

When educators articulated their interpretations of spirituality, many connected it with their faith, which aligns with previous research indicating that spirituality is often tied to personal convictions and ethics. The researchers acknowledge that the religious environment of the centers might have influenced educators in framing their concept of spirituality through a religious lens or that their interest in working at these centers might be due to a congruence with their personal faith. Regardless of the underlying factors, eight out of the nine educators referenced their religious convictions when discussing spirituality.

> *"The relationship with a higher power is often referred to as God, though others may choose to use different terminology."* (RAT)

The connection between spirituality and religious belief has been established in existing studies. Typically, this connection is characterized as overlapping. "Although the two are not incompatible, not everything spiritual is necessarily religious, and not everything religious is necessarily spiritual". The educators participating in this research affirmed the notion of the intersection between spirituality and religious belief. Given that previous studies indicated many educators were frequently unaware of the concept of spirituality or how to nurture the spirituality of their students " (Lee, 2021), the interviews revealed important perspectives on the personal insights and experiences of educators that shaped their teaching methods with children. It was ultimately discovered that the interpretations of spirituality that emerged were predominantly rooted in the personal experiences of the educators rather than through any formal professional training.

An examination of the interview responses provided clarity regarding the educators' perceptions and experiences with spirituality. The interview's final question directly inquired whether the educators had pursued or received any professional development related to their spirituality or children's spirituality. Only two educators responded positively, noting that spirituality was discussed in the final module of their undergraduate studies. The educators relied solely on their personal life experiences, as there were no provisions for spiritual engagement available to them as professionals working with children. This finding reinforces the conclusions from a previous relevant study, highlighting the shortcomings of initial teacher education programs in addressing children's spirituality.

4.2. What is Educators' Understanding of Nurturing Spirituality in Children?

The primary discovery was that the personal spiritual journeys of the teachers played a crucial role in enabling them to offer spiritual experiences and opportunities. Insights regarding children's spirituality were shaped by the educators' spiritual encounters and their understanding of effective teaching methods suitable for early childhood education.

> *"I believe that both the self-representation of teachers and the influence from peers play a significant role. Following this, engaging with instructors and fellow students is essential. Absorbing tales about the Prophet and the Messenger, diving into the Qur'an starting from Yanbu'a, reciting daily prayers, reading brief letters accompanied by concise hadiths, and participating in routine group prayers are important. I think that, perhaps, incorporating these daily practices with kids might involve gathering their experiences and sharing these personal insights with them."* (DR)

Similarities and differences were revealed through the research regarding what educators expressed about nurturing children's spirituality and what truly occurred in practice. For instance, educators emphasized children's identity as an essential element of their spirituality. Likewise, the importance of relational dynamics in spirituality was notable throughout the interviews and observational findings. However, despite educators mentioning a connection to nature as part of spirituality, practical instances of providing children with nature experiences were infrequent.

The findings imply that early childhood educators must expand their understanding of spirituality beyond their individual views to offer diverse spiritual experiences and opportunities for every child's spirituality. The researchers also pointed out a link between the childcare environment's religious background and educators' experiences. One significant discovery was that the personal spiritual backgrounds of educators played a crucial role in helping them to offer these experiences and opportunities. What educators understood about children's spirituality stemmed from their spiritual journeys and their awareness of suitable teaching methods for early childhood education.

> *"Considering that the subject of spirituality is infrequently addressed in college programs."* (YT)

Educators relied solely on their personal experiences since they were not given opportunities for spiritual encounters as professionals interacting with children. This aligns with previous research (Hyde, 2016), highlighting deficiencies in early childhood education programs regarding children's spirituality. However, the preschool educators focused on a specific religion-oriented interpretation of spirituality that overlooked the importance of religious and cultural inclusivity.

In this research, the educators showed no disrespect towards religious diversity; however, they struggled to express an understanding or recognition of promoting spirituality from various religious viewpoints. They did not offer insights connecting spirituality to other global religions or demonstrate their cultural awareness. By omitting a sense of cultural sensitivity, including the nuances of religious diversity, the question arises of whether educators perceived all pedagogical methods through a singular religious framework (Setiawan et al., 2022). Singh and Bahadur (2021) recommend expanding the perspective to encompass the various forms that children's spirituality can manifest. The outcomes of this study indicate that this issue requires attention, especially regarding the accessibility of spiritual opportunities related to diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, a notion also echoed by (Jafarian, 2019).

4.3. What Practices Do Educators Implement—Both Intentionally and Unintentionally—To Enhance Children's Spirituality?

Key insights from examining observational and documentary data highlight overlooked opportunities for nurturing children's spirituality. While there were instances where educators could have fostered children's spiritual growth, these moments predominantly arose spontaneously from the children's initiatives rather than being part of deliberate or planned activities. Additionally, it was revealed that when educators engaged with children's spirituality (Safara et al., 2023), they approached it from an educational angle rather than consciously striving to promote spiritual development (Greenfield, 2018; Saadatzadeh et al., 2022). For

instance, educators concentrated on children's curiosity, play activities, or moral lessons based on their understanding of early childhood education rather than focusing specifically on spirituality.

The activities or intentions supporting children's spirituality noted in educators' planning documents were often not explicitly defined. Early childhood educators play a vital role in integrating spirituality when designing learning experiences and opportunities. Moreover, the Early Years Learning Framework emphasizes the essential duty of educators to create intentional learning experiences that nurture all aspects of children's development, including their spiritual dimensions (Dillen, 2020). Analyzing the documentary materials shows a lack of clearly defined learning outcomes or objectives, indicating that systematic planning for children's spirituality was also missing.

The present research supports the connection between the formulation of learning goals and teacher effectiveness. Skilled teachers not only grasp their subjects and their students' needs but are also equipped through the implementation of effective planning techniques. In essence, the caliber of planning directly influences the quality of a lesson or activity, underscoring the necessity for carefully developed educational objectives if there is any hope of achieving them. When educators consciously define and plan for children's cognitive, emotional, and spiritual development, it enhances the possibility of transformative learning experiences that connect children to their previous knowledge, inner selves, and others. Conversely, neglecting to plan for children's spiritual experiences risks significant missed opportunities.

5. CONCLUSION

This research revealed that teachers' personal insights and experiences play a crucial role in fostering children's spiritual development. Consequently, there is a pressing need for educators to have access to opportunities for personal enrichment and to acquire knowledge related to children's spiritual lives. In response to the first research inquiry regarding educators' interpretations of "spirituality," it became apparent that many educators struggled to grasp the essence of spirituality or how to effectively address their students' spiritual needs. The connection between religious beliefs and spirituality was described as intertwined; while they are not mutually exclusive, it is important to note that not all spiritual experiences are rooted in religion, and not everything religious is inherently spiritual. The educators who participated in this research affirmed this notion of spirituality intersecting with religious beliefs.

In addressing the second research question about how educators perceived the enhancement of children's spirituality, it was found that teachers' individual spiritual journeys significantly influenced their ability to create spiritual experiences and opportunities for their students. The educators' personal spiritual encounters and knowledge of suitable teaching practices for young learners shaped the understanding of children's spirituality. Unfortunately, educators often relied solely on their life experiences, as there were insufficient avenues for professional spiritual growth specific to those working with children.

In response to the final research inquiry, educators' action, intentional and unintentional, in support of children's spirituality emerged as spontaneous initiatives by the children themselves rather than deliberate or conscious efforts by the teachers. Moreover, it was discovered that when educators did engage with the spiritual dimensions of their students, their focus was predominantly pedagogical rather than explicitly centered on nurturing spirituality.

For instance, educators were more concerned with fostering children's curiosity, play, and moral understanding through their grasp of early childhood education principles rather than spiritual insights.

Based on the findings, it is suggested that to effectively nurture children's spirituality, educators should cultivate their sense of personal spirituality, which involves having experienced spiritual events in their lives, essentially spiritual formation. Additionally, educators must possess the knowledge and skills to reflect on their spirituality and integrate these experiences with their early childhood teaching methodologies to create meaningful spiritual opportunities for children.

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