*Jan Grajczonek**

BELONGING, BEING & BECOMING: THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR AUSTRALIA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR EARLY YEARS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

This paper examines Australia's first statement on the education of young children between birth and five years of age, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) and considers its particular implications for religious education in religiously-affiliated early childhood centres and settings. The recent publication of this landmark document has elevated and emphasised the position and place of early childhood education in contemporary Australia. This document seeks to guide and shape curriculum across the entire early childhood sector including religiously-affiliated centres and settings. In addition to its significance in being the first national statement regarding early childhood education, this document is also significant in terms of its several explicit references to children's spirituality and educators' called responses to that. What is the nature of such references and what do they imply for early childhood religious education within religiously-affiliated early childhood centres and settings in the Christian tradition, including those attached to schools and/or parishes?

Introduction

Early childhood education currently occupies significant attention in Australia particularly since the landmark publication of Australia's first national document, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009). This framework's influence and impact extend to all early years settings, including those provided by religiously-affiliated institutions such as Catholic diocesan education offices and agencies, for whom early childhood care and education also currently occupies significant interest and attention. There has been an increased growth in some dioceses of Catholic Child Care Centres (for example in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, the Centacare Child Care Services), and several Australian Catholic Diocesan Education Offices and Commissions have published early years religious education curriculum guidelines and/or positional statements (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Catholic Education Office Diocese of Ballarat, 2007; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, In press; Crotty, 2006; Rush & Truasheim, 2007) and more recently the Queensland Catholic Education Commission has commissioned a literature review of young children's spiritual and religious development (Grajczonek, 2010b) and subsequently released the *Framework for Early Years Spiritual Development in the Catholic Tradition* (Grajczonek, 2010a). For those religious bodies involved in care and education of young children, the nature and purpose of their distinct position and place within the early childhood sector takes on a noteworthy dimension, as they seek to implement a national government framework within a distinctly religiously-affiliated setting. How does such a framework with its several references to the spiritual aspects of young children's being, enable and/or inhibit the religiously-affiliated early childhood setting?

This paper seeks to analyse the document *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) in which several references are made to the spiritual aspects of young children's lives as well as to educators' responses and responsibilities to those aspects. In other words, how does the language in the text of this document function to construct its reality (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). In order to gain clearer insights into the particular construction of the spiritual in the *Early Years Learning Framework*,

it is first important and helpful to briefly review the extensive literature regarding spirituality, particularly relevant to this paper: (i) the nature of the relationship between spirituality and religiosity, (ii) young children's spirituality, and (iii) nurturing young children's spiritual development.

Literature Review

The nature of spirituality and its relationship with religiosity

The notions of spirituality and spiritual development have received considerable attention in research and scholarly writing. Such scholarship suggests that rather than being finitely defined, spirituality tends to be described in terms of it attributes and characteristics (Eaude, 2003, 2005; Harris, 2007; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006; Tacey, 2004). However, despite the many and varied attributes and characteristics attached to spirituality, the literature generally agrees that spirituality is innate to all humans and is said to arise from our deepest humanity (Hay with Nye, 2006; O'Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2004). Key attributes or characteristics of spirituality include: a person's relationship or connectedness to themselves, others, the environment and for some to God or an Ultimate; a sense of wholeness or becoming whole; a quest for meaning and purpose; a sense of value; an appreciation of the wonder and beauty of nature as well as of the nature of human accomplishment; a sense of mystery and transcendence; and moral sensitivity (Eaude, 2003; Hay with Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2007; Robinson, 1977; Rossiter, 2010a, 2010b; Tacey, 2000).

Whilst it is accepted that spirituality is universal to all humans and related to religiosity, it is important to acknowledge that spirituality is not synonymous with religiosity and that a person can be spiritual without being religious (de Souza, 2009; Rossiter, 2010b; Tacey, 2000). Rossiter's (2010b) two descriptions of spirituality and religiosity offer some insight into this confusion as they clearly differentiate between the two. Of spirituality he writes:

> The spiritual is the natural dimension to life that includes: thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose in life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic. Spirituality is the way in which a spiritual/moral dimension enters into, or is implied in, the thinking and behaviour of individuals. (p. 7)

Rossiter sees religiosity as, "a measure of one's religious behaviour such as attendance at church/mosque, frequency of prayer, engagement in a local community of faith" (p. 7), whilst for Ryan (2007) religiosity can most simply be described as religious spirituality, or spirituality which finds expression through religion. Rather than using the terms spirituality and religiosity, some make the distinction between 'secular spirituality' and 'religious spirituality' in terms of their overall aims or goals. Meehan (2002) for example argues that " 'Secular spirituality' seeks to find meaning and purpose in *universal human* experience rather than religious experience *per se*" (p. 292). These are important distinctions to note particularly in contemporary Christian child care and/or education settings whose families continue to reflect Australia's increasingly pluralist population. Whilst all children are innately spiritual, this does not equate to their being religious and this distinction must be reflected in the religion programs offered to young children in that they must not presume to impose or catechise, as stated in the Church document, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988)

> Not all students in Catholic schools are members of the Catholic Church; not all are Catholic.... The religious freedom of the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and its duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose, however; the latter suggests a moral violence

which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and by Church law. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 6)

Young children's spirituality

The earliest research exploring people's spiritual and/or religious experiences came out of Alister Hardy's (1965) research which was continued by Edward Robinson (1977) who found that people's spiritual or religious experiences most often occurred in childhood and that rather than being something rare and extraordinary, such experiences were ordinary and commonplace (pp. 144-148). Research which focused more intentionally on young children's spirituality was initiated by Robert Coles (1990) whose study, conducted with children themselves, led him to conclude that children are interested in the meaning of life, understand life as a journey and are able to ask questions of ultimate meaning. Further significant insights into young children's spirituality and spiritual development came out of David Hay and Rebecca Nye's (1998) research which led them to claim that all children have an innate spirituality suggesting that each child possesses his/her own 'personal spiritual signature'. Essential to this personal spiritual signature is children's 'relational consciousness' (Nye, 1998). Linked to this 'relational consciousness' is children's identity and sense of belonging as they both come to know themselves in relationship with others and find their place in the world and with others (Adams, 2009; Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Coles, 1990; Eaude, 2003, 2005; Fowler, 1981). Myers (1997) emphasises children's relationships with significant adults claiming that their development as whole human beings is dependent upon their relationships with people who love, listen, respond to and guide them.

Important aspects of young children's spiritual lives include their meaning and searching as they seek to find significance in the many experiences they encounter both joyful and painful (Eaude, 2009; Fowler, 1981; Hay with Nye, 1998, 2006; Hyde, 2005, 2008). Other aspects of children's spirituality are their sense of mystery, transcendence, awe and wonder (Hart, 2003, 2006; Hay with Nye, 2006), imagination (Fowler, 1981; Nye & Hay, 1996; Priestley, 1981), wisdom and knowing (Hart, 2003, 2006). Some argue that it is essential to give children the chance to explore, to search, and to reflect on, all aspects of their spirituality so as to reinforce their resilience and sense of agency, and further when such opportunities are provided children will flourish (Eaude, 2009). In other words, it is essential to nurture children's spirituality.

Nurturing young children's spirituality

The intentional nurturing of young children's spirituality is argued to be of the highest importance with some claiming that if it is not nurtured, children's spirituality and capacity for the spiritual will fade and be lost (Crompton, 1998; Eaude, 2003). Scholarly literature is replete with teaching and learning activities and strategies that intentionally and explicitly nurture the spiritual aspects of children's lives and their learning. An important factor in the intentional nurturing young children's spirituality is the classroom environment itself which must be open and sensitive to the spiritual (Adams, 2009). From the research conducted by Hay and Nye (1998, 2006), Hay (1998) claims that spiritual education is the reverse of indoctrination and suggests that educators in nurturing children's spirituality have four major responsibilities: (i) helping children to keep an open mind; (ii) exploring ways of seeing; (iii) encouraging personal awareness; and (iv) becoming personally aware of social and political dimensions of spirituality.

Educators' roles are key at the planning stage of a curriculum that seeks to nurture children's spirituality and educators are urged to not only attend to the cognitive domain in their planning, but also to both the affective (the felt sense) and spiritual domains (de Souza, 2004; Hyde, 2006) by providing time and silence for inner reflection, for creative, imaginative and intuitive responses and for transformed action (de Souza & Hyde, 2007, p. 100). Others have suggested frameworks/approaches which consist of steps that intentionally nurture young children's spirituality. Hart's (2003) research into children's spiritual development led him to design a series of steps or what he calls the "Ten Sources *of* Power *and* Perspective" (pp. 171-209). Five ideas for "putting the spirit into practice" have been articulated clearly by

Thomas and Lockwood (2009) who suggest: practise the value of being; connecting and relating; routines and ritual; connecting with the natural world; and cultivating compassion (pp.17-25). Baumgartner and Buchanan's (2010) understanding of, and approach to, spirituality includes three elements to be intentionally nurtured within children: their sense of belonging; their respect for self and others; and their awareness and appreciation of the unknown (pp. 91-93).

In the context of early childhood Christian settings, many advocate that the starting point for religious education for young children should begin with, and seek to develop, their spirituality ahead of a more formal religious education (Hyde, 2007; Liddy, 2007; Nye & Hay, 1996). This argument is premised on two contemporary realities: first, young children entering early childhood settings reflect our increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious society; and second, that an increasing number who are not practising members of their own faith communities, lack or have limited knowledge and language to engage with specific, complex religious concepts.

Of particular note and import for religiously-affiliated early childhood settings is Bradford's (1999) proposal that by nurturing and satisfying children's fundamental needs - that is nurturing the "human spirituality" - can lead to the development of a more "religious (devotional) spirituality". The fundamental human-spiritual aspects of the essential needs of children are love, peace, wonder, joy and relatedness, and Bradford argues that these five essential needs or categories are fundamental to religious identity of all kinds. A critical implication that arises from Bradford's insights is that in the nurturing of these essential needs a pluralist approach that would acknowledge and respect all children's religious backgrounds or their diverse religiosities, would be enabled. Whilst a religiously-affiliated child care or early childhood centre could not be considered a faith community as such (given the pluralist nature of the children and their families in such settings), Bradford's guidelines nevertheless provide some practical and effective actions that would nurture young children's spiritual development that in turn could lead to their religious development.

The study being reported on in this paper builds upon and extends research conducted thus far into young children's spirituality paying particular attention to the construction of children's spirituality in the document *Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework of Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Present Study

Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework of Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) is not only a landmark document as Australia's first such statement regarding the education of young children, but also because it explicitly refers to the spiritual aspect of children's lives and considers its (the spiritual's) role in children's learning and wellbeing. Educators also have been assigned particular roles in the consideration of children's spiritual aspects of their lives in terms of children's learning. Educators and carers are very familiar with the usual aspects of children's lives, including their cognitive, physical, cultural, social, emotional, personal, linguistic and creative aspects, but not so familiar with the 'spiritual' being included in this list. This marks a significant shift in perception of the nature of the human person from the normally secular government perspective. Educators traditionally have been directed to be concerned with children's physical, cognitive, social, personal and emotional development. Now, for the first time educators are called to also consider children's spirituality. Spirituality is related to religiosity although not synonymous with it, but no connection is made between the two in the document. It does however, refer to children and their families'

diversity of culture, belief systems, world views and spiritual aspects.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how both children and educators are associated with the 'spiritual' in Australia's first national early years framework so as to ascertain the implications such associations might have for early years religious education. The specific questions guiding this research

project are:

- How are children and educators constructed in terms of the notion of 'spiritual'? That is, what specific 'spiritual' attributes/characteristics are assigned to children and educators in the *Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework* document?
- How does the document construct the notion of the 'spiritual'?
- In what other ways are children and their families' diverse backgrounds constructed in the document?
- What opportunities and challenges do such constructions offer and/or imply for early childhood religious education?

Methodology

In the main body of the document several references are made to children's spirituality and diversity as well as to educators' roles in relation to these areas. Extracts that explicitly refer to these were selected and analysed using Membership Categorisation Analysis an Ethnomethodological method. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 1984) is an interpretive methodology, which seeks to interpret members' everyday activities *in situ* and *in vivo*, that is, in the place of the event as it is happening. Membership Categorisation Analysis affords insights into how knowledge is organised and constructed in interaction and/or texts (ten Have, 2004) in terms of Categories and the Category Bound Activities which include characteristics, attributes, rights, obligations and so on (Baker, 2004; Freebody, 2003), assigned to those Categories by speakers and/or writers (Sacks, 1992). By analysing relevant sections of text from the document in terms of the specific Categories 'children' and 'educators' and their assigned Category Bound Activities associated with spirituality and diversity, a closer examination of how spirituality and related notions are constructed in the document is made available (Freebody, 2003).

Findings and discussion

Before this interrogation is revealed, it is first helpful to note how the word 'spiritual' is understood and interpreted throughout the document and this can be located in the document's glossary as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: *The definition provided for 'spiritual' in the Glossary*

Spiritual: refers to a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, and an exploration of *being* and knowing. (p. 48).

In this definition/description precise attributes and/or characteristics for the word spiritual are not made available. Initially spiritual is referred to as a "range of human experiences" and this description is then followed by one example of those experiences, "a sense of wonder and awe". This one example is then expanded to include "an exploration of *being* and knowing". The extensive research into the area of spirituality, some of which is outlined in the literature review of this paper, provides descriptions of many human experiences and aspects of the spiritual. In contrast to the experiences and aspects of the spiritual as described in the review of the literature, the definition for 'spiritual' provided in the document is limited.

In the main body of the document those sections that refer explicitly to children's spirituality and diversity as well as to educators are interrogated in order of their placement within the document. The first insight to note is that children are constructed in terms of spirituality a total of five times and educators are linked to the notion of 'spiritual' a total of three times. The first references focus on how children are constructed in terms of the diverse backgrounds as they appear in the vision statement of the document (p. 7) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: *Vision for Children's Learning*

Fundamental to the Framework is a view of children's lives as characterised by *belonging*, *being* and *becoming*. From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place. Their earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children's first and most influential educators...
BELONGING
Experiencing *belonging* – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. (p. 7)

This section introduces aspects of children's diverse contexts in terms of their connections to family, community, culture and place and the significance of family as children's first educators is acknowledged. Other aspects of children's diversity are not made available.

The next reference refers to children's spiritual aspects of their learning (p. 9), as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: *Children's Learning*

CHILDREN'S LEARNING
The diversity in family life means that children experience *belonging, being* and *becoming* in many different ways. They bring their diverse experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills to their learning.
Children's learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, **spiritual,** creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated. (p. 9)

In this section children's diversity is acknowledged in terms of their family backgrounds wherein they experience belonging, being and becoming in different ways. Children's diversity is also defined in terms of their experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills. Children's learning is described as "dynamic, complex and holistic", and in addition to physical, social, emotional, personal, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of their learning, a spiritual aspect is also attributed. The inclusion of the spiritual attribute to children's learning explicitly acknowledges that for learning to be holistic, a spiritual aspect must be included, and further, it also acknowledges that this spiritual aspect is "intricately interwoven and interrelated" with other aspects of their learning.

In the section, 'Early Childhood Pedagogy' (p. 12), attributes assigned to educators have particular significance for educators in religiously-affiliated centres as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: *Early Childhood Pedagogy*

Educators' professional judgements are central to their active role in facilitating children's learning. In making professional judgements, they weave together their:
• awareness of how their beliefs and values impact on children's learning personal styles ... (p. 12)

The attribute referring to educators' own beliefs and values is helpful to note in terms of how such beliefs and values have been shaped; for some educators in religiously-affiliated centres their values and beliefs may have been shaped by their own religious traditions. It is important to bear in mind that such religiously-affiliated centres are open to all and children enrolled in them represent a diverse range of religious beliefs and values. In this regard, educators occupy a delicate space/position that includes three aspects: (i) being respectful of, and at the same time reflecting the religious affiliation of the centre; (ii) being authentic to their own values and beliefs (which might be that they do not be reflective of any particular religious affiliation); and (iii) being respectful of young children's own beliefs.

More is articulated about diversity in section 4 of the document, 'Respect for diversity' (p. 14), as outlined in Table 5.

4. Respect for diversity
There are many ways of living, *being* and of knowing. Children are born *belonging* to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, but also by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families. Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families. They value children's different capacities and abilities and respect differences in families' home lives.
Educators recognise that diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides a valid evidence base about ways of knowing. For Australia it also includes promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and *being*.
When early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for children, they are able to foster children's motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners. They make curriculum decisions that uphold all children's rights to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged and valued, and respond to the complexity of children's and families' lives.
Educators think critically about opportunities and dilemmas that can arise from diversity and take action to redress unfairness. They provide opportunities to learn about similarities and difference and about interdependence and how we can learn to live together. (p. 14)

Several key insights into how children are constructed in terms of their diversity are made available in this section. First, it acknowledges that children are born into a culture. Culture here is assigned specific attributes including traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, as well as experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Again, the specific aspects of values and beliefs are not aligned with religion. This section continues and articulates specific attributes of children's contexts including their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths.

Educators' roles are also assigned particular responsibilities within this section. They are called upon to ensure the curriculum both values and reflects families' diversities, explicitly noting those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The next explicit reference to children's spirituality is in the section, 'Holistic Approaches' (p. 16) as outlined in Table 6.

Table 6: *Holistic Approaches*

Holistic approaches
Holistic approaches to teaching and learning recognise the connectedness of mind, body and **spirit**[4]. When early childhood educators take a holistic approach they pay attention to children's physical, personal, social, emotional and **spiritual** wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning.
An integrated, holistic approach to teaching and learning also focuses on connections to the natural world. Educators foster children's capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land. (p. 16)

Two insights into spirituality are afforded in this section: first it recognises that a child's spirit is connected to his/her body and mind and therefore must be considered along with the body and mind in holistic approaches to teaching and learning; and second, a child's spiritual wellbeing is also an important aspect to which attention needs to be paid. This section leaves no ambiguity as to the significance of the spiritual aspects of children's learning which educators must consider, but is silent about the nature of this spiritual aspect and how educators might be able to achieve this aspect.

This section also includes an explicit reference to the natural environment in which educators are called upon to foster children's understanding and respect of the natural environment and "the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land" (p. 16). Relationship is a key aspect of spirituality (Hay with Nye, 2006; Rossiter, 2010b) and a key element of that relationship is between the person and the natural environment. In this section, although not explicitly stated, in attending to this directive, educators are indeed nurturing children's spiritual aspects of their learning. (Specific examples of how educators can nurture children's connections with the environment are provided in 'Outcome 2: Children are connected

with and contribute to their world' (p. 31). However, this outcome is not part of the research outlined in this paper.)

Further insights into how the document constructs children's diverse lives are made available in the section 'Cultural Competence' (p. 18) as outlined in Table 7.

Table 7: *Cultural Competence*

Cultural competence
Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences. This is evident in everyday practice when educators demonstrate an ongoing commitment to developing their own cultural competence in a two way process with families and communities.
Educators view culture and the context of family as central to children's sense of *being* and *belonging*, and to success in lifelong learning. Educators also seek to promote children's cultural competence.
Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses: • being aware of one's own world view • developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences • gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views • developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures. (p. 18)

In this section educators are explicitly required to be culturally competent which in turn requires a respect for diversity and an understanding and honouring of differences. The specific attributes of cultural competence are articulated and include an understanding of world views and cultural practices. What is not acknowledged in this section, is that world views and cultural practices can also emerge from, and be shaped by, families' religious traditions.

Another attribute that is assigned to children throughout this document is their sense of identity and it is explicitly acknowledged that their *belonging, being* and *becoming* are integral parts of that identity, as described in "Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity" (p. 22), shown in Table 8.

Table 8: *Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity*

OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY
Belonging, *being* and *becoming* are integral parts of identity.
In early childhood settings children develop a sense of *belonging* when they feel accepted, develop attachments and trust those that care for them. As children are developing their sense of identity, they explore different aspects of it (physical, social, emotional, **spiritual**, cognitive), through their play and their relationships.
The concept of *being* reminds educators to focus on children in the here and now, and of the importance of children's right to be a child and experience the joy of childhood. *Being* involves children developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world. (p. 22)

In this construction it is noted that children in the early years are developing their sense of identity which includes a number of different aspects. Along with physical, social, emotional and cognitive aspects, the spiritual aspect is also explicitly assigned to children's identity. Implicit in this construction is that spirituality is therefore an attribute of children's *belonging, being* and *becoming*. The final sentence in this section also deserves interrogation, "*Being* involves children developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world" (p. 22), particularly the words "social and cultural heritage". Diversity is at the heart of this statement as it acknowledges children's diverse backgrounds and contexts but only in two areas of this background: social and cultural. The explicit inclusion of other forms of diversity, such as religious heritage is not articulated.

Various aspects of the outcome are elaborated and include a description of evidence which might indicate children's development of confident self identities (p. 25) as shown in Table 9.

Table 9: *Evidence of children's development of confident self identities*

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Becoming includes children building and shaping their identity through their evolving experiences and relationships which include change and transitions. Children are always learning about the impact of their personal beliefs and values...

Children develop knowledgeable and confident self identities.

This is evident, for example, when children:
• feel recognised and respected for who they are
• share aspects of their culture with the other children and educators
• use their home language to construct meaning
• develop strong foundations in both the culture and language/s of their family and of the broader community without compromising their cultural identities
• develop their social and cultural heritage through engagement with Elders and community members
• reach out and communicate for comfort, assistance and companionship
• celebrate and share their contributions and achievements with others. (p. 25)
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Several references are made to children's cultures, social and cultural heritage, as well as to their cultural identities. Whilst these have the greatest significance for children's identities, a number of children's world views, personal beliefs and values also come out of their religious traditions. Again, there is no reference to either religious or spiritual diversity in this section, or to how both these aspects of children's lives also shape their personal beliefs and values. If educators are to *fully* understand children's identities and the place diversity occupies within that, it is important that they are aware of all aspects of diversity, including religious diversity.

Outcome 3 focuses on children's sense of wellbeing which is acknowledged as including a spiritual aspect, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10: *Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing*.

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OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING

Children's wellbeing can be affected by all their experiences within and outside of their early childhood settings. To support children's learning, it is essential that educators attend to children's wellbeing by providing warm, trusting relationships, predictable and safe environments, affirmation and respect for all aspects of their physical, emotional, social, cognitive, linguistic, creative and **spiritual** *being*. By acknowledging each child's cultural and social identity, and responding sensitively to their emotional states, educators build children's confidence, sense of wellbeing and willingness to engage in learning. (p. 32)

Educators promote this learning, for example, when they:

● welcome children and families sharing aspects of their culture and **spiritual** lives (p. 33).
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In this section, educators are required to support children's learning by attending to their wellbeing in affirming and respecting all aspects of their being including the spiritual aspect. In the list outlining how educators can promote children's learning the following example is given "when they welcome children and families sharing aspects of their culture and spiritual lives" (p. 33). Now in this particular construction, a spiritual life has been assigned as an aspect of children and their families' lives and cultures. However, what is not described or articulated is the nature of that spiritual life or what it encompasses. Does it refer to families' religious beliefs or affiliations? Is it somehow linked to their culture? Such clarifications are not available and begs the question how educators might share aspects of children's spiritual lives.

However, there are some salient points to highlight regarding the document's particular construction of children's spirituality and diversity as well as with what it has omitted. The document provides a description/definition for spiritual, but this definition is limited with spiritual explained as referring to "a range of human experiences such as awe and wonder, and an exploration of *being* and knowing" (p. 48). In the main body of the document there are six references made to the spiritual which are linked to aspects of children's *being* in terms of their identity, and to their learning constructed in the following ways:

● the spiritual is identified as an aspect of children's learning;
● it is intricately interwoven and interrelated with other aspects of children's learning including the physical, social, emotional, personal, creative, cognitive, and linguistic aspects;

- educators are called to recognise the connectedness of children's mind, body and spirit;
- educators' implementation of holistic approaches to teaching and learning must pay attention to children's spiritual aspects of their wellbeing as well as to their physical, social, personal and emotional aspects of wellbeing;
- the spiritual is acknowledged as an attribute of both children's identity as well as their being; and finally;
- alongside children's cultures, their spiritual lives are also explicitly named as part of their home lives.

The document also refers to children's diverse lives in several ways including their cultural and social contexts. It is acknowledged that children's lives are shaped by family, community, culture and place. Several attributes are assigned to culture including: traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, experiences, values and beliefs. Educators are required to be culturally competent and to understand and honour difference in terms of families' histories, cultures, languages traditions, and the like, and are called to ensure the curriculum both values and reflects diversity. Educators are also called upon to be aware of their own values and beliefs and how these might impact on children's learning. Whilst diversity is acknowledged in a variety of ways there is no reference made to families and children's religious diversities. This omission is surprising given Australia's increasing religiously diverse society. More than ever, it is important for all to understand and honour the Other not only in terms of their cultural diversity, but also in terms of their religious diversity.

The EYLF document is a significant for many reasons, but in terms of this study, its acknowledgement of children's spirituality and call for educators to consider both the spiritual and diverse aspects of their learning are noteworthy and imply a number of opportunities as well as challenges for religious education.

Opportunities and challenges for religious education

A number of critical elements have been left unsaid in the EYLF document and such silence potentially creates ambiguity, which can in turn, result in omission. It is from within this sphere of silence that a significant opportunity for religious education arises, beginning with a clear and explicit articulation of the role religion can play in children's spiritual and diverse lives. Linked to this is the need for a clear articulation of the nature of religious diversity and how to acknowledge and pay attention to that in early years settings both informally in the lived daily routine, and formally in the early years religion curriculum. Further, a clear and succinct statement regarding the nature of children's spiritual development in relation to their religious development is essential. Many have written about the nature of children's spirituality suggesting that it be the starting point for a more formal religious education (Hyde, 2007; Liddy, 2007; Nye & Hay, 1996) but the nature of the actual shift from a child's spiritual development to his/her religious development along the lines that Bradford (1999) suggests remains unclear. Religious education is well placed for deeper investigation into this area. The document makes references to the formation of children's beliefs and values, world views and cultural practices but does not acknowledge the role religion *can* and *does* play in these vital aspects of their identities and being. This silence in contemporary Australian society is one that must not remain and again an opportunity begs for expression of religion's role in these key aspects of children's belonging, being, and becoming.

Another opportunity for religious education is to design, plan and implement appropriate professional development in a number of areas arising from the EYLF document including educators' understanding and appreciation of the nature of the spiritual aspects of young children's learning, and how they can intentionally pay attention to, and develop those aspects. Further, it is essential that professional development regarding the nature of children's religious diversities and the impact that such diversity has not only on their learning but also on their sense of belonging in early years settings, is designed and implemented. In many religiously-affiliated centres children's religious diversity is not acknowledged, thus it too, is silenced (Grajczonek, In press).

Whilst such opportunities exist, it has to be recognised that each opportunity also presents a challenge for religious education. In seeking to implement an authentic religious education that pays attention to children's spiritual aspects of their learning, the challenge would be that such a program does not become 'so' spiritual (as articulated in the EYLF document), that it becomes secular in all respects. Linked to the acknowledgement and articulation of diversity at all levels (staff and families) within a religiously-affiliated early years centre is the challenge at the same time, to maintain the religious identity and mission of that centre. For many who seek to articulate and cater for such diversity comes the struggle to also articulate and live the centre's religious identity.

Further, the document's call for educators to be aware of their own beliefs and values presents a challenge and deserves closer attention on several levels in religiously-affiliated centres. A number of these educators might belong to the religion affiliated with the centre and it would be important that they understood how their own values and beliefs have been shaped by that religion. It is also imperative that they understand that other staff in the centre as well as a number of families and children might not share these same religious values and beliefs. Further, for those staff that do not belong to the centre's affiliated religion, they too need to understand their own values and beliefs and their possible impact on children. This area is much more intricate and complex than it appears in the document and professional development is vital to ensure all educators understand not only their own values and beliefs, but also those espoused by the centre, their colleagues, and the centre's families and children. All need to understand how the origins and diversity of such values and beliefs impact on everyone's place in the centre, especially on children. The document's references to values and beliefs in terms of people's culture do not go far enough; religion's role in such matters must be acknowledged and respected, a point that is explicitly stated in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) as noted in Articles 1, 14 and 29.

Conclusion

Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) makes a substantial contribution to the early childhood sector not only because it is the first national statement outlining policy and practice for the education of all young children, but also for its significant acknowledgement that in addition to children's physical, cognitive, emotional, social, personal, creative aspects of their beings is a *spiritual* aspect. The significance of this acknowledgement in such a document as this is profound and its impact cannot be either diminished or dismissed. At the same time however, much regarding the spiritual, the relationship between spirituality and religion, as well as educators' responses to those areas, remain silent. Religious education has an opportunity to illuminate and contribute to this void. Whilst those opportunities are at the same time challenging, they are necessary if the document's fullest potential within the religiously-affiliated early childhood setting, is to be realised.

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*Dr Jan Grajczonek is Senior Lecturer in the School of Religious Education, McAuley Campus, Queensland. Her main research interests are religious education in early childhood and how young children learn.