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Identity, connection, choice: Exploring dimensions of spirituality in the occupations of young children

This dissertation uses a phenomenological approach to explore the relationship between occupation and spirituality, in four pre-school aged children. Three dimensions of spirituality were chosen as the foci for this study: (1) experiences of self-identity; (2) meaningful connection with others; and (3) choice and motivation for occupation. These aspects of spirituality were distilled from definitions of spirituality described within two influential models that guide the practice of occupational therapists.

Data were gathered through asking the participants to complete an art activity and then engaging each child in a discussion about the artwork they had created, and the researcher documented her observations and reflections immediately after the session. The discussions were audio-tape recorded and transcribed. The artwork, transcripts and observations were analysed to develop themes. Four themes were constructed about the spiritual experiences of children, which were interpreted as incidences of being special through what they chose to do: (1) What I do makes me special; (2) My pet makes me special; (3) Doing with family and friends makes me special; (4) When I play outside I feel special. These themes illustrated that spirituality was an important experience in the participants’ everyday lives. In addition, the research also highlighted that there are many challenges faced by researchers when exploring abstract phenomena with very young children. It is recommended that future research exploring spirituality and occupation in young children might best utilize longitudinal and mixed methods for exploring intangible phenomena, such as spirituality.