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# Navigating in Seclusion: The Complicated Terrain of Children's Spirituality in Trauma, Grief and Loss

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Navigating in Seclusion: The Complicated Terrain of Children's Spirituality  
in Trauma, Grief, and Loss

by

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

The topic of spirituality has become an important area of focus in social work; however, there is great disparity in the attention extended to preadolescent children's spirituality. Research with older individuals has demonstrated that spirituality is an important and significant factor in trauma, grief, and loss (TGL). It can be a source of strength, nurturance, comfort, and support, and it is a resource for resiliency, coping, and posttraumatic growth. However, not much is known about children's spirituality in the area of TGL. Therefore, this research study sought to investigate the processes, experiences, and understandings of children's spirituality in TGL in outpatient counselling.

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory methodology, which is helpful in understanding the interpretations, attributable meanings, and experiences of participants in areas that are complex and underexplored. Semi-structured interviews were employed with eighteen participants including six children, five parents, and seven clinicians at a counselling centre in Northwestern Ontario. Theoretical sampling and a constant comparative method of data analysis were conducted in regards to the interpretations of participant's descriptions.

The theoretical model that emerged was *navigating in seclusion*. Children in this study were found to have robust and complex spiritual lives with abundant spiritual experiences, relationships, activities, and practices. Spirituality was sparked and catapulted by TGL events, and children experienced spiritual struggles, engaged in spiritual questioning, increased their spiritual activities and practices, and entrusted spiritual relationships. However, spirituality was understood to be a weird phenomenon that was not socially validated or supported, and it was

deemed to be taboo by the participants. Many challenges and processes were exposed, and the overall experience was found to be isolating.

Previous research with preadolescent children has contributed to the nascent development of theoretical knowledge; however, many gaps in the literature remain. This study addresses the gap in the area of TGL, and advances our understanding of children's spirituality in social work. The findings of this study are related to the literature, and contribute to, and extend the literature on TGL and children's spirituality. The theoretical contributions, implications for practice and future research are discussed, and the limitations of the study are considered.

*Keywords:* children, spirituality, trauma, grief, loss, social work

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to three people. First, I would like to dedicate it to my parents. My father Dr. Arthur Boynton died part way through my PhD studies but has remained in my heart, and his spirit continues to be felt. He was a great mentor who believed in me and let me know how proud he was of me that I was doing this work. My mother Marilyn Boynton believed that my topic was so very important and she spent time discussing spiritual aspects and insights with me. Both my parents spent many hours listening to and reading my work along the way and offering advice. They were very spiritually progressive allowing and wanting me to develop my own spiritual path and belief system as I grew up.

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## Navigating in Seclusion: The Complicated Terrain of Children's Spirituality in Trauma Grief and Loss

Spirituality is an important aspect of life and healing, and according to Hill et al. (2000), it is one of the few phenomena that are integral across the lifespan. There is a growing body of empirical research demonstrating that during adversity spirituality can be important and instrumental in coping, resiliency, and posttraumatic growth (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005; Lancaster & Palframan, 2009; Wortman & Park, 2008). In addition, evidence has suggested that trauma, grief and loss (TGL) can produce both positive and negative effects on the spiritual experiences and perceptions of individuals (Bray, 2010; Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006; Park & Ai, 2006, Shaw, Joseph, Linley, 2005). Human beings have longings and aspirations that can be honored only when the person's spiritual capacity is taken seriously (Gratton, 1995), yet the spiritual capacity of children has been ignored and under acknowledged by adults (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008). Canda and Furman (2010) conceived spirituality to be the heart of social work practice and helping. They stated that "spirituality is the heart of empathy and care, the pulse of compassion, the vital flow of practice wisdom, and the driving energy of service" (Canda & Furman, 2010, p.3). However, not much is known about children's spirituality in TGL, as there is very little literature and empirical research addressing this area, especially in social work.

Even though children's spirituality is a rising area of importance in research within the other helping disciplines such as, nursing, psychology, and education, the exploration and understanding of the spiritual dimension in children has considerably lagged behind our understanding of spirituality in adults and adolescents (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003;

Cheon & Canda, 2010; Mabe & Josephson, 2004). Hay (in Hay & Nye, 2006) explicitly stated that there has been a significant shortage of competent research in the area of children's spirituality. Furthermore, Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, and Benson (2006) surmised that the area of children's spirituality is just at the beginning of a major theme in child development, and that it is as important as cognitive, social, and emotional aspects in human development. In the social work literature there is a great sparsity of research in the area of children's spirituality in general, and more specifically in TGL.

### **1.1 Overview of the Problem**

There is an increasing understanding within social work practice of the significance and complexity of the interplay between mental health, spirituality, and managing TGL, and that these are important practice concerns (Boynton & Vis, 2011, 2014; Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), 2012; Pack, 2014; Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2006; Starnino & Canda, 2014; Vis & Boynton, 2008). Spirituality has been found to be linked with positive physical and mental health; it is a domain of strength for individuals; and it offers social, relational and psychological supports and resources (Bray, 2010, 2011; Brownlee, Rawana, MacArthur, & Probizanski, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2003; Koenig, 2010; Rosmarin, Wachholtz, & Ai, 2011). Researchers have posited that there are reciprocal relationships between spirituality and children's well-being (Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2008; Mabe & Josephson, 2004). Spirituality is instrumental in the achievement of developmental tasks, an important factor in socialization and relationship processes, and in responses to and evaluation of life events (Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2008; Mabe & Josephson, 2004; Schwartz, Bukowski, & Aoki, 2006).

According to the Children's Health Policy Centre (2011), in Canada approximately two thirds of children are exposed either directly or indirectly to TGL. Children who experience multiple TGL events have more mental health problems often requiring supports from child welfare or counselling organizations. Furthermore, Larkin Felitti and Anda (2014) conveyed that adverse childhood events (ACE) have been found to be linked to increased prevalence of health and mental health difficulties in later years. ACE events can also lead to increases in at risk behaviours such as substance use, sexual promiscuity, and suicide attempts. Struggles with parenting due to lack of skills and competence have been found with ACE events. Resilience and protective factors including spirituality can be promoted and enhanced to moderate these negative effects of TGL events. This speaks to the need for better trauma-informed practices, which should include spirituality. In fact, the CSWE (2012) disseminated a competency framework for advanced social work practice for trauma, which specifically outlines the need for skills and knowledge pertaining to trauma. These guidelines inform how spirituality is interrelated with trauma, that spirituality influences the therapeutic relationship, and practitioners need to attend to spiritual development in trauma practice. And yet, in reviewing the social work literature it becomes very apparent that there is a significant lack of theoretical frameworks, practice guidelines, and evidence based practices pertaining to children's spirituality and spiritual development, particularly in the area of TGL.

### **1.1.1 Spirituality and Social Work**

Spirituality has emerged as a significant area of interest in the helping professions, and in social work there is a mounting body of literature addressing its importance in academia, practice, and research. According to Robbins, Chatterjee, and Canda (2012) the definition of



spirituality in the social work literature “most often refers to a search for meaning, purpose, and moral standards for relationships between oneself, other people, the universe, and the ground of reality, understood in theistic, atheistic, animistic, or other terms” (p. 17). Canda and Furman (2010) have presented the most comprehensive theoretical understanding of spiritual diversity and spiritually sensitive social work practice. Their definition is discussed further in Chapter Two. They described spiritually sensitive social work practice as “a way of being and relating throughout the entire helping process” (p.214). Canda (2008) explained it as being:

attuned to the highest goals, deepest meanings, and most practical requirements of clients. It seeks to nurture persons’ full potential through relationships based on respectful, empathic, knowledgeable, and skillful regard for their spiritual perspectives, whether religious or non religious, it promotes peace and justice for all people and all beings (pp. x-xi).

Boynton (2011) asserted that within the social work literature spirituality has been “focused in the areas of social justice (Coates, 2007; Lee & Barret 2007; Nash & Stewart 2005), ethics (Canda, Nakashima, & Furman 2004; Hodge, 2005a), education and training (Ai, 2002; Baskin, 2002; Coholic 2003, 2006), how to incorporate it into practice (Bullis, 1996; Cascio, 1998; McKernan, 2005; Wagler-Martin, 2005), as well as conducting spiritual assessments (Hodge, 2001, 2005b)” (pp.109-110). Other recent texts on spirituality and social work have further embraced spirituality as an important aspect of social work practice. For example, Coates, Graham, Swartzentruber, and Ouellette (2007) offered a history of spirituality in social work, discussions of spirituality in social work and clinical practice, and diversity and faith traditions in Canada. Groen, Coholic, and Graham (2012) presented a historical background of

spirituality in education and social work along with pedagogical implications, and issues related to practice and teaching. The text by Crisp (2010) discussed spirituality across the lifespan, and the 'lived experience' of spirituality, which includes rituals, creativity, place, believing, and belonging. She very briefly reviewed children's spirituality and the need for holistic practices that include rituals. However, there are very few that impart thorough information and practice concerns on children's spirituality in social work related to TGL.

There have been a number of studies with social work practitioners that have addressed their feelings, beliefs, and understandings of spirituality, their incorporation of spirituality into clinical practice, their educational training in the area of spirituality, and how their own spirituality is an influence on, or is influenced by, their work (Bell, Busch, & Fowler, 2005; Canda & Furman, 2010; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). Social work practitioners, educators, and students have articulated the importance of including spirituality in social work education and practice as it is significant in the lives and needs of clients (Coholic, 2003, 2006; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). It has been found that clients often bring up spiritual issues and want spirituality, spiritual beliefs, or spiritual symbols to be included in the counselling process (Canda & Furman, 1998; Coholic, 2003; Sheridan, 2004). Coholic (2003) identified spiritually influenced practices social workers engaged in, such as assisting clients in meaning making, fostering connections, adopting a holistic approach, and recognizing resilience and an individual's spiritual essence. Clark (2006) noted, "the need to attend to the spiritual and religious dimensions of a person's worldview and frame of reference is an axiom of spiritually-sensitive practice, but practice models and processes for facilitating this kind of integrative understanding are few" (p.1).

It is evident that social work research, education, and training have not kept up to date on the importance of spirituality in practice, as Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) found that two thirds of social workers believed they lacked skills and knowledge to effectively address spirituality in practice. Canda and Furman (2010) demonstrated that sixty-five percent of social workers did not have any content regarding spirituality in their training, and yet over eighty percent felt it was appropriate to address in issues of bereavement. Kimball (2008) conveyed that “there is a crisis of confidence among social workers when it comes to engaging the spiritual experience of young people” (p. i). Nonetheless, it is apparent practitioners are addressing and integrating spiritual interventions while lacking critical knowledge and expertise in the area (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014). Research has demonstrated that social work practitioners in the field are encountering spirituality in their work with children. Social workers find that children bring spirituality up in counselling sessions, thus they are incorporating spiritually based interventions and activities in counselling with children (Canda & Furman, 1999, 2010; Coholic, 2010, 2011; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007). More importantly, Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) wondered how social workers were gaining knowledge and effectively making sound practice decisions. These factors could bring up issues with self-efficacy and competence for social workers, as well as ethical concerns.

Social workers practicing with children and their families will inevitably encounter those who are dealing with TGL events. Pargament, Desai, and McConnell (2006) contended that spirituality plays a critical role in major life traumas, as it is involved in how they are understood, managed and resolved. The literature indicates that TGL can shatter children’s spiritual confidence, create spiritual struggles or challenges to one’s spiritual worldview, and it

can create spiritual disconnection for children with associated feelings of alienation (Angell, 1998; Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Poyser, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Multiple traumatic events and complex TGL can create even deeper spiritual struggles for children (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005). These events can generate enormous existential and metaphysical challenges that may be incredibly difficult for children (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996). These are significant practice concerns with children and families, and yet there remains a considerable lack of research in social work pertaining to spirituality in children who have encountered TGL. Furthermore, conceptual and theoretical development in this area is greatly lacking.

### **1.1.2 Spirituality and Child Development.**

Child development theories are embedded in the research and literature on children's spirituality. Spirituality is associated with relationships and attachments, cultural and environmental contexts, and morals and values, which are all components of child development. Attachment theory research, pioneered by Bowlby (1969), provides a framework based upon the behavioural and functional responses of individuals upon their environment and in their relationships. Attachment theory has formed the basis of research pertaining to relationships with God, and the concepts children have of God (De Roos, 2006; Kim, 2008). Some research has demonstrated that individuals engage in an attachment relationship with God or a higher power for security, and to ask for support when they experience distress through TGL (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006).

The most prominent theories that children's spirituality research is based upon are the constructivist, cognitive, ecological, and contextual perspectives. The constructivist ideology of

development proclaims that children actively engage in their environments from which they learn, and learning occurs in a process of cognitive and development stages (Papalia, Olds, Feldman, & Kruk, 2004). Society and culture are deemed to mediate the child's development (Docherty & Hughes, 2009). The ecological and contextual approaches adopt a bio-psycho-social model that includes systemic factors. In this philosophical perspective individuals are viewed to be inseparable from and interconnected with the world in which they live.

Moral reasoning frameworks of child development have also been discussed in the literature on children's spirituality. It has been found that children engage in decision making processes, and they develop empathy and sympathy for others, as well as, a sense of ethical aspects such as right and wrong, and good and evil (Levine & Munsch, 2011; Parke, Gauvain, & Schmuckler, 2010). James Fowler (1981) developed a theory of faith development, which was based on cognitive, constructivist, and moral development theories. His theory embraced a bio-psycho-social approach that also incorporated religious and cultural symbols, meanings and practices, and existential concerns. His theoretical framework has been employed in the emerging theory on spiritual development.

Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, and Wagener (2006) compiled the most recent scientific theories and research in the area of spiritual development for youth and offer a fairly comprehensive overview. Spiritual development research has begun to illuminate some of the experiences, processes, and dimensions of children's spirituality. However, there continues to be a lack of research on, and application of TGL within these theoretical frameworks. TGL has been found to cause disruptions in attachment processes, functioning, and developmental (Briere, 2006; Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006, Decker, 1993; Johnson, 1989; Nader 2008).

Therefore, it is important to gain a better understanding of the impact of TGL on spirituality and spiritual development for children.

### **1.1.3 Spirituality and Children Research**

Most of the studies on children's spirituality have been in the area of religious or conventional education, and very few studies have been conducted in Canada (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Ratcliffe, 2008). The majority of the recent studies have been qualitative in nature. However, very few studies have specifically explored children's perceptions, understandings, and meanings of spirituality.

Within this body of literature, Coles (1990) unveiled that children had incredible spiritual lives associated with values, morals, and meaning making. He concluded that spirituality was innate and universal. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) echoed many of his findings when they explored children's spirituality. They uncovered the construct of relational consciousness, which was "an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness" (p. 109) demonstrated by the children. They also described spiritual awareness, the physical experience of spirituality within the body and mind, and values and meaning making as key concepts for children's spirituality. Hart (2003) described spirituality as a developmental process, and also stated it was part of an individual's worldview. He elaborated on the wisdom and emotional aspects involved in spirituality, as well as the sacred relational experience, the knowledge of the heart, and the invisible spiritual world of children. Hyde (2008) discovered four characteristics of children's spirituality that overlapped with some of those described by Hay and Nye, and Hart, such as spirituality involving awareness, and a sensory and bodily experience. He also found children had personal

agency in the development of their spirituality and worldview, and that they engaged in deep spiritual cognitions in metaphysical and existential matters.

No similar qualitative exploratory studies were found in the social work literature. Furthermore, none of these researchers specifically explored the area of TGL for children. It is evident that the area of children`s spirituality in TGL is an imperative area in need of further research, especially for social work practice. Therefore, I have chosen to conduct my research on the topic of children`s spirituality in TGL in outpatient counselling.

## **1.2 Background of the Problem**

The impetus for this study arose from a variety of factors including my own personal life experiences, my academic career, and my work with children as a mental health clinician for over 28 years. As a young child I experienced all kinds of spiritual phenomena which were difficult to explain, and I had many existential thoughts and questions regarding life, the world, and the universe, which still occur today. Throughout my life I have been fascinated and perplexed by the spiritual realm, and have continued to evolve on my own spiritual life journey. My interest in the well-being of others, their beliefs, experiences, and stories involving our whole world led me to the field of social work and the exploration, passion, curiosity, and interest in children`s spirituality

Post-secondary education has been a contributing factor in my ontology. In my physical and health education program I was introduced to the interrelatedness and importance of the mind, body, and spirit connection, as well as their integration and importance in wellbeing. Through psychology courses I was introduced to Maslow`s theory of needs and self-transcendence which included the physical, mental, and spiritual areas of life. I also was

exposed to the works and spiritual contentions of Carl Jung who believed that there was a spiritual purpose to life. Within child development courses there seemed to be a lack of attention to the spiritual aspect of our lives in development, aside from teachings on moral development and religion. While engaged in my social work program there also seemed to be a real lack of focus in the area of spirituality both theoretically and practically. There was a void in highlighting what spirituality was, its importance in the well-being and health of individuals, and how to attend to it, or address it in counselling.

While working with children and families as a child and youth worker and social worker over many years, it was evident that spiritual concerns were prevalent both explicitly and implicitly. Many of the children I encountered sparked conversations and dialogue in relation to spiritual concerns. They often engaged in spiritual contemplation, and asked deep spiritual questions that they seemed to be wrestling with, which at times were linked to their difficult life situations. They talked to me about seeing ghosts and spiritual entities, about their ponderings on heaven and an afterlife, and about abstract thoughts regarding life. They especially struggled with spiritual aspects involving TGL. I was often unsure as to how to respond. In my training and exposure to the workplace and practice ideology I had been led to understand that I was to avoid the religious and spiritual aspect of people's lives, so as not to impose my own beliefs onto others.

I also found that families brought up both spiritual strengths and struggles that at times were dismissed in an interdisciplinary treatment approach, which confused and troubled me, especially as we touted a holistic approach to care. I found that when I did bring these topics up in clinical meetings the conversations seemed difficult and awkward. Most of my colleagues



also shied away from this topic. However, I did find a couple of colleagues who were more open and felt the same way I did, and they said that they often addressed these things in their work but did not openly discuss it. I felt that this was almost becoming an ethical dilemma for me. I began to gain the courage to speak more openly about the need for spirituality and its importance in social work practice.

These experiences led me to search for literature and research in the area, and what I found was a scarcity of literature on children`s spirituality in general and especially in social work. This concerned me as it seemed to be such an important area especially for children and families who had experienced great adversity in their lives. The first book I found that did address spirituality was *Spirituality in Social Work Practice* (Bullis, 1996), although it lacked content and focus on children. However, this book became almost a “bible” to me as it addressed my thoughts on the importance of spirituality and offered a starting point for its inclusion into social work. I was then introduced to the works of Ed Canda who has greatly contributed to the beginning theoretical frameworks for spirituality in social work.

Through my continuous need and drive to learn about spirituality and social work I became aware of the Canadian Society for Spirituality in Social Work (CSSSW) and attended a conference in Waterloo, Ontario in 2005. I found that this group of people were speaking my language and were engaged in some phenomenal dialogue and research in the area of spirituality. Dr. John Graham introduced himself to me at this conference, and we had a very engaging dialogue about spirituality, his interests and mine. I also attended many workshops and listened to authors and researchers, whose work I had previously read, and I found this exhilarating and motivating. This experience increased my courage to journey forth as an advocate and champion

for spirituality in social work. Attending this conference transformed my life in many ways. Most importantly, it allowed me to become more vocal regarding spirituality and the need for it to be honoured, validated, and addressed in social work practice.

These processes and experiences ultimately led me to embark upon exploring children's spirituality through my Masters of Social Work (MSW) and PhD programs. I attended the CSSSW conference in Calgary in 2010, and presented on the literature review on children's spirituality that I had completed for my MSW. I also was elected onto the CSSSW Board of Directors during the annual meeting at this conference. I volunteered to be the organizing chairperson for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual North American Conference on Spirituality in Social Work. This two-year project culminated in a wonderful event at Lakehead University in 2012. These foundational life and learning experiences contributed to an understanding of the pertinence of spirituality and transcendence in human life. I ultimately chose to conduct this important research in a much needed area that would honour the experiences and voices of children, families, and clinicians, as I recognized the gap and the critical need for theory development in this area.

### **1.3 Overview and Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to garner an understanding of children's spirituality in the context of TGL and social work practice. This area is important for several reasons: 1) many children and their families accessing counselling services have encountered TGL; 2) children's understandings and experiences of spirituality in conjunction with TGL have not been specifically explored in social work to date; 3) TGL has been found to create spiritual crises, spiritual questioning, spiritual struggles, lead to posttraumatic growth, or stimulate spiritual

development (Decker, 1993; Mabe & Josephson, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 2006; Vis & Boynton, 2008); 4) spirituality is an emerging area of dialogue, practice, and research in social work.

Houskamp, Fisher, and Stuber (2004) provided methodological guidelines for research exploring spirituality in children, and asserted that qualitative research should be the method of choice. Hay (in Hay & Nye, 2006) contended that qualitative interviews are sagacious, and “when you listen directly to what children have to say instead of setting them Piagetian tests, you hear a different kind of story, one concerned with living personal experience” (p. 54). In heeding these contentions this research project involved a constructivist grounded theory approach to interviewing children who have encountered a TGL event in order to comprehend their perspectives, experiences, understandings and meanings of spirituality. Interviews with parents and clinicians were also included to gain a broader understanding of the topic area.

A constructivist grounded theory approach systematically develops a substantive theory based upon the analysis of data from participant interviews (Charmaz, 2005, 2008; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). This approach is beneficial for topics such as spirituality, which include transpersonal experiences, meaning and purpose, and where there is a lack of understanding (Coholic, 2003; Forte, 2004a; McSherry & Watson, 2002; McSherry, 2006; Walsh, 1992). It is an approach that provided an opportunity to appreciate and grasp the deeply rich and personal stories, interpretations, meanings, intentions, and actions of the participants. Therefore, this approach was employed.

#### **1.4 Research Question**

In grounded theory the research question states and identifies the phenomenon, and tends to be concerned with actions and processes, and it provides focus and clarity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). It is open, broad, and offers flexibility, as well as freedom to explore the depth of a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). The main question drives the research and also leads to identifying the concerns, issues, and dilemmas of participants, how they experience, understand, resolve, or act in the situation, why they act in certain ways, and what occurs in the situation regarding the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2000, 2003, 2006/2009, 2008; Glaser, 1992).

Therefore, the main research question that drove this study was:

*“What are the processes, experiences, and understandings, of children’s spirituality in response to trauma, grief, and loss, as manifested in outpatient counselling?”*

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

This study aimed to develop a substantive theory describing the core process, and associated processes involved in children’s spirituality through listening and validating participant accounts. A substantive theory can provide knowledge for social work education, practice, and training, and can contribute to best practices. A substantive theory also allows for the creation and development of further research. Through this approach, this study sought to develop an awareness of the subject and to uncover common themes, experiences, challenges, or barriers involved in children’s spirituality in TGL. It further aimed to contribute to the literature and advance the subject area in social work.

## 1.6 Organization of the Study

This first chapter provided an introduction and brief overview of the understandings and gaps associated with children's spirituality in the area of TGL in social work. It offered an overview of the area and the existing research, and began to establish a context for this study. Chapter Two will present a more thorough review of the literature related to this topic, and will situate my study within the context of previous relevant research. It also includes a focus on the theoretical frameworks and conceptualizations of spirituality and social work practice, the major historical contributions and current literature in children's spirituality, child development, and faith and spiritual development. Furthermore, it describes the theoretical developments and conceptual models of TGL, and discusses literature on the association of spiritual wellbeing. Chapter Three comprises an overview and rationale for the constructivist grounded theory methodology employed in this study and the methods undertaken. It outlines the research design including recruitment of participants and sampling; the processes involved in interviewing; data collection, coding, and data analysis methods; as well as, aspects of rigour and ethical considerations. Chapter Four illustrates the detailed emergent grounded theory model of *Navigating in Seclusion*. It uncovers the substantial positive and negative experiences of participants, the socially oppressive forces, the dialectical meaning constructions, and the active and intertwined processes contributing to an isolating experience for participants. It illuminates the multifaceted nature of children's spirituality including experiences, relationships, abilities, activities, and practices. Finally, Chapter Five imparts a discussion of the results along with implications of the findings for practice and future research, as well as the limitations. This includes the contributions to the TGL literature, and how the findings extend and enhance

current models of TGL, as well as developmental aspects of children, faith, and spirituality. It stresses the importance for education and training for social work clinicians, and the need to attend to children's spirituality in counselling practice.

## Chapter Two: **Review of Literature**

*"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience." (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, n.d.)*

The above quote most often attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (n.d.) relates to an ontological perspective, or theory of being, which suggests that spirituality is an innate feature of human life. There is a growing body of literature in the helping professions over the past several decades providing evidence of the spiritual world of children including indications of innate spiritual capacities, and a range of diverse spiritual practices and experiences (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008; Nye, 2009). However, only a handful of empirical studies have been conducted with preadolescent children to explore and understand how spirituality is conceptualized and experienced by them (Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008), and to provide information on children's spiritual development (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006).

The sparse number of studies on preadolescent children's spirituality have been conducted mainly in the United Kingdom and Australia. The context of these studies has been within religious and academic educational settings with the intent of understanding children's spirituality in order to assist in developing programs to nurture spiritual education and development in children. There are very few Canadian studies on spirituality in preadolescent children, and the complexity of children's spirituality is frequently overlooked (Moore, Talwar, & Bosacki, 2012). Furthermore, there is extremely little research in the area of children's spirituality and TGL, and particularly in the social work field (Coholic, 2010). Graham, Coholic, and Coates (2006) assert that the area of spirituality and children is an area of need in social

work. They further state that preliminary studies on coping and resilience, which have found spirituality to be significant, provide an impetus for commencing research in this area.

In this chapter, the literature is reviewed in an attempt to ground and contextualize this research project within the existing bodies of knowledge in children's spirituality, TGL, and counselling. This chapter is divided into six sections with the first outlining the literature review methods. The second briefly overviews the social work practice realm, and clinician experiences with spirituality, as well as the challenges, such as lack of experience, and training required for including spirituality into clinical practice. The third provides an overview of the history and evolution of children's spirituality, and the philosophical perspectives that have contributed to, and influenced, the dialogue and research over time. The fourth imparts current understandings, meanings, definitions, and the conceptualization of spirituality. The fifth discusses child development and its influence on children's spirituality plus the controversial dialogue surrounding spiritual development. The sixth section highlights research in the areas of both children's spirituality and TGL. It examines the potential benefits of spirituality for children, as well as the issues and shortfalls within both of these areas of study. These concerns are related to directions for future research, and are important for my field of study.

## **2.1 The Literature Review Methods**

For constructivist grounded theory studies an initial review of the literature allows the researcher to provide a rationale for the study and approach. The literature review allows the researcher to understand what has been previously done in order to identify gaps, contextualize and orient the study, develop sensitizing concepts and theoretical sensitivity, and develop clarity in thinking about related theories and concepts (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006/2009,



2009; Dunne, 2011; Urquhart, 2007). Charmaz (2006/2009) purports that in constructivist grounded theory “the literature review and theoretical frameworks are ideological sites in which you claim, locate, evaluate and defend your position” (p. 163). However, reflexivity and delaying a more in depth review of the literature allows the researcher to not impose concepts on the emergent data (Glaser, 1998; Charmaz, 2006/2009, 2009; Dunne, 2011). Accordingly, the substantive area of literature is initially reviewed here, and is also focused on later in the research process during the theoretical analysis in the discussion chapter, which considers points of divergence and convergence with findings from this study. This method of reviewing the literature strengthens the emerging argument from this work, which in turn demonstrates its credibility (Charmaz, 2006/2009).

Through the constant comparison process the literature is interwoven into the theory building process, along with the discussion of results, in order to provide compelling connections between earlier studies and findings from this research (Glaser, 1998; Charmaz, 2006/2009, 2009; Dunne, 2011). Based on grounded theory methods this process facilitates claims to be made from the data, and gaps can be revealed in the existing extant knowledge relative to how the new emerging findings address that extant knowledge (Charmaz, 2006/2009, 2009; Dunne, 2011). These literature review processes were adopted within this research project and therefore literature is interwoven throughout several of the dissertation chapters. Notwithstanding the interjection of the literature review throughout the thesis, the main focus of this chapter is related to research and theory development in the areas of children’s spirituality pertaining to spiritual development, spiritual coping, attachment, and TGL for children.

The literature review processes involved various strategies including internet searches on Bing, Yahoo, Google, Google Scholar (and utilizing Google alerts); institutional library catalogue searches for texts, books, policies, and reports, and numerous databases including dissertation and theses databases, and research and articles databases including (but not limited to) CINAHL, ERIC, ProQuest, PsychArticles, PsychInfo, PubMed, Scholars Portal, Social Sciences Citation Indexes, Social Services Abstracts, SocINDEX, Social Work Abstracts, Web of Science etc. The search focused on key word combinations including (but not limited to) child\*, spirit\*, children + spirituality, trauma, grief, loss, spiritual development, and child development.

It was necessary to utilize pertinent resources outside of the social work literature. A key journal accessed was the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* and a key text was *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* edited by Roehlkepartain et al. (2006). Several books on children's spirituality written by researchers were also significant resources including *Stages of Faith* (Fowler, 1981), *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Coles, 1990), *The Spirit of the Child: Revised Edition* (Hay & Nye, 1998/2006), *Children's Spirituality: What it is and Why It Matters* (Nye, 2009), *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (Hyde, 2008), and *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (Hart, 2003). Books pertaining to TGL included *Living Through Loss: Interventions Across the Life Span* (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006), *Treating Trauma and Traumatic Grief in Children and Adolescents* (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006), *Understanding and Assessing Trauma in Children and Adolescents: Measures, Methods, and Youth in Context* (Nader, 2008), and *The Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth: Research and Practice* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). These works

provided significant theoretical information, and assisted in contextualizing children's spirituality and TGL. Many references cited in articles and texts were also accessed and examined. Conferences and workshops pertaining to children, spirituality and TGL also were attended.

## **2.2 Spirituality and Social Work Practice**

Spirituality has emerged as a significant area of interest in social work, although its relevance to children is noticeably scant. Interestingly, Kvarfordt, and Sheridan (2007) interviewed social workers in the United States and discovered that many incorporated a variety of spiritually-based interventions with youth. The social workers believed that spirituality was relevant and significant for the children they encountered. Social workers agreed that addressing spirituality could be of benefit to children and youth. They felt that the most relevant topics for spirituality included death and dying, and suicide and depression. They further identified that children and youth also experienced religious and spiritual abuse and neglect. Social workers assisted children and youth by gathering information on their spiritual and religious backgrounds, they supported them in reflecting on beliefs about loss or other difficult life situations, and recommended spiritual activities and engaged spiritual resources in their care. Sometimes they would pray with clients, or recommend the practice, and also taught or recommended meditation. However, the majority of social workers had not received education or training in navigating spirituality in practice. They also identified barriers to incorporating spirituality, for example concern for imposing or presenting their own spiritual biases on clients, and the caregiver disapproving of incorporating spirituality. Sixty-two percent (of the 60 percent

who responded) stated they had obtained caregiver consent to address or include spirituality in counselling, which could pose as an ethical concern depending on the age of the child.

Metheany and Coholic (2009) used grounded theory to understand the viewpoints of social workers and psychiatrists on spirituality and mental health in Canada. The researchers found that the participants believed that incorporating spirituality led to more effective processes for individuals, and they advocated for a diverse conceptualization of spirituality. The participants felt that understanding clients' spiritual beliefs and practices were useful in understanding their mental illness, and that clients often found that spirituality added meaning to their life. It was felt strongly that spirituality should be performed competently and practitioners should reflect on their own spirituality. Being trained, as well as having opportunities for consultation and support, were seen as necessary components for including spirituality in counselling. The researchers concluded that spirituality is highly relevant and linked to trauma treatment.

Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) provided a literature review on social work practitioners' integration of clients' religion and spirituality in practice. They noted that a recent meta-analysis of 31 research studies that incorporated spiritually oriented psychotherapy found a moderately high effect size across varying mental health concerns. The authors commented on the work by Canda and Furman (1999; 2010), who found that social workers felt that spirituality was important for clients and certain practices were appropriate for inclusion in practice. Canda and Furman (1999; 2010) also discovered that social workers engaged clients in spirituality and spiritual practice, and they concluded that the incorporation of spirituality was of benefit for clients with clinical concerns. Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) noted that religion and

spirituality has not always been part of the social work curriculum, however there is a growing acknowledgement regarding its importance. Many programs do not offer a specific course but do weave some spirituality content into other coursework and discussions. Oxhandler and Pargament (2014) wondered if social workers' self-efficacy could be affected by not having training in spirituality, and argued that a lack of training would affect treatment planning and client outcomes. They contended that social workers should seek continuing education, supervision, and peer consultation to address ethical and effective integration of spirituality in practice. No research was found that specifically explored clinician's viewpoints on children's spirituality in TGL.

### **2.3 Historical Progression of Research on Children's Spirituality**

It is important to understand the history of research in children's spirituality and its influence on current epistemological stances and research approaches. Therefore, this section highlights some of the literature's historical key progressions and influences on the area of children's spirituality. A thorough overview of the history of theory development and research in relation to children's spirituality is offered by Ratcliffe (2008), who indicated that the first documented study on children's spirituality was a study by Barnes in 1892 entitled "*The Theological Life of the California Child.*" It is not clear when the first study occurred in social work.

According to Ratcliffe (2008) the approach before 1910 was holistic and integrated, and spirituality was not really differentiated from other important life aspects. He noted a change in the literature between 1910 and 1920 where a more religious focus occurred from one that was previously more secular. Religious journals began to surface, and Ratcliffe surmised that this

could be due to the emergence of behaviourism and the fact that science and faith had polarized, and that these influences remain in current literature.

The next few decades were characterized by more opinions or clinical reflections on religion and spirituality, as opposed to research (Ratcliffe, 2008). Ratcliffe (2008) illuminated that the area of children's spirituality became much more complex, and quantitative statistical research on children and religion marked the decades between 1930 and 1960. The religious needs of children in terms of education and development became a driving force in the area of study. This perspective has continued to evolve and be developed in the current literature.

### **2.3.1 The Cognitive Era: 1960-1990**

Ratcliffe (2008) named the next period the cognitive era which encapsulated the 1960s to the 1990s. Children's spiritual experiences and understandings were rarely an intentional focus in research and discussion during these three decades. David Elkind was influential in children's spirituality research and dialogue during this period. Elkind (1978) explored children's understandings of faith and their affiliations, which he connected to other aspects of development which were understood to occur in stages. He concluded that children younger than twelve think about religious concepts concretely and are not capable of thinking abstractly. Ratcliffe (2008) wondered if this assertion was related more to language acquisition and limits, as opposed to cognitive function and an actual ability to experience and express spirituality in other forms. This is an important query which researchers since the 1990s have posed as well. Further in this literature review, research is presented which contradicts the stance that children are unable to think abstractly regarding spiritual and existential matters. This is an important contention for the conduction of my research.

Within this cognitive era the stages of faith work completed by James Fowler (1981) emerged as one of the most significant theories, and it continues to be discussed in the area of children's spirituality. Ratcliffe (2008) stated that Fowler's work continues to be an influence due to its research base, along with the fact that it is broad and encompasses multiple faiths. Fowler's (1981) theory is not confined to religion, and incorporates whatever an individual believes to belong to their structure of faith, such as family, work, recreation, and other life aspects. His approach to faith was more holistic and inclusive of spirituality than previous studies focusing mainly on religious aspects. However, Fowler's theory was based on developmental stages of spirituality which is now controversial and contested in the literature. His theory is elaborated upon later in this chapter.

After 1990 it is evident that various authors and researchers started to critique previous stage theories pertaining to child development, faith, spirituality, and spiritual development by drawing attention to the weaknesses, challenges, and difficulties in the body of previous research (Erricker & Erricker, 1994; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Hart (2003) contended that educators, psychologists, and other adults previously assumed that children were not capable of being spiritual. Pearce (in Hart, 2003) indicated that psychiatrists, parents, and other adults previously thought children's spiritual experiences and sensory perceptions were psychotic episodes, as opposed to natural or innate spiritual phenomena. Several researchers have claimed that the spiritual aspects of children's lives were largely unacknowledged, dismissed, pathologized, and misunderstood, which ultimately has led to the repression of children's natural spirituality (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006). Early research

ignored children's views and their capabilities to describe and discuss their experiences and conceptualizations of spirituality.

### **2.3.2 The Constructivist and Postmodern Era: 1990-Today**

The next era began to more fully embrace constructivist thinking where knowledge of the world was viewed to be individually and socially constructed (Creswell, 2007). The constructivist perspective underlies many postmodern approaches which include structural, systemic, power dynamics and interplays, and acknowledges the concerns of race, class, gender and other group affiliations (Creswell, 2007). These current philosophical stances accept that there are multiple realities and a complexity of views and meanings, and research focuses on the contexts of individuals (Creswell, 2007). As a result of these epistemological perspectives, researchers have begun to employ qualitative interviewing research methods to explore and listen more attentively to children in regard to their spirituality (Coles, 1990; Erricker & Erricker, 1994; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hart, 2003; Hyde, 2008).

These perspectives are congruent with social work perspectives as well as my own beliefs and rationale for a constructivist approach. The constructivist approach to previous research in children's spirituality has enabled children to express their experiences and interpretations, and it has proven to be extremely worthwhile to listen to children's thoughts and reflections regarding their spirituality (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). However, the area of TGL has not been an area of focus and exploration. Most of the literature since the 1990s has been qualitative in nature and has identified some core constructs of children's spirituality and spiritual experiences which are pertinent to my study.



For example, the work of Robert Coles (1990) was a ground breaking and significantly influential body of research that contributed to the development of understanding children's spirituality. He interviewed over 500 children in North and South America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East between the ages of 6 and 13, who were Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and agnostic. He listened to children's values, morals, and meanings of life, which led to him discovering and uncovering the vast spiritual life of these young people. Although Coles was not clear about his methodology, it was presented within a phenomenological framework and had a narrative approach (Ratcliffe, 2008). Coles (1990) found that children often expressed concepts outside of their religious traditions, and he surmised that children's experiences and awareness of the spiritual realm was a natural and universal predisposition. Recent studies have also found similar results (Hyde, 2008). Although Coles did not specifically research the area of TGL, it was embedded in some of the children's narratives of spirituality.

Coles felt that attending to intellectual functioning and cognitive development limited the understanding of the breadth of children's descriptions, and he vied for an active listening approach to research over using one's own interpretations. Hyde (2008) imparted that previous research had been embedded in religious language used by researchers, whereas Coles engaged in dialogue that was more open, and existential and spiritual, than religious. This approach has continued to be employed in recent literature and has led to research looking into children's awareness, perceptions, and responses to spiritual phenomena in everyday life (Hyde, 2008).

Clive and Jane Erricker conducted qualitative grounded theory research on preadolescent children's worldviews and spirituality in the 1990's. Erricker and Erricker (1994) argued that spiritual education and research with children needed to utilize methods, metaphors and models

that were more child friendly, as previous research limited the exploration of intimate spiritual experiences. Erricker, Erricker, Sullivan, Fletcher, and Ota (1997) further emphasized the need to engage in active listening in order to understand children's spirituality and views. They spent time with small groups of children using unstructured interviews. This research appears to be the first research in the area of children's spirituality that focused on themes of loss and conflict, and the existential and spiritual dialogue of the children, which is pertinent to my study.

Erricker, Erricker, Sullivan, Fletcher, and Ota (1997) identified narrative constructions or 'genres' that children employed in an approach to life through which their spirituality was expressed (Erricker et al., 1997; Erricker, 1998). These genres are not utilized in exclusivity by children. The four identified genres included:

- 1) My little pony- a Disney approach with a deep interest and understanding in the welfare of animals
- 2) The all American kid- an approach where life revolves around consumerism, theme parks and McDonald's restaurants
- 3) Family centred- an approach where family relationships are key to life
- 4) The hard man- an approach that includes hardships and conflicts in life

Erricker (1994) argued how child-targeted social media was filled with sentimentality and influenced these spiritual genres. He reasoned that the scripts on television were about the battle between good and evil with a resultant happy ending, and this reality was unlike the real life conflict and loss that the children he studied had encountered. He contended that adults tended to shelter children during traumatic experiences and did not recognize that children needed to discuss things, were thinking about existential concerns, or were experiencing sadness and

confusion. He did not elaborate further on any processes that might be occurring in relation to sheltering children in TGL, and it is also not clear what the children were experiencing in regard to spirituality and TGL. His identified genres seem to have contextual and cultural influences. Therefore, it is plausible that studies in other countries or locales could identify differing genres based upon contextual cultural, social and environmental influences in those regions.

The research projects Erricker was involved with found that children seemed to have a spiritual awareness and a personal meaning narrative (Erricker et al., 1997; Erricker, 1997a; 1997b; 1998). The children reported using prayer and rituals independently, and they communicated with the deceased in an attempt to remain connected (Erricker et al., 1997; Erricker, 1998). There have been further research studies, which are discussed later, that have congruent findings, which provide an initial theoretical understanding of children's spirituality in relation to grief and loss and are relevant to this study.

Since the late 1990's the research highlights findings related to the psychological and transcendent aspects of spirituality, such as wonder, awe, creativity and imagination, as well as the conscious ability of children to discuss and relate existentially and spiritually (Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008; Rossiter, 2012). The most significant research and dialogue in this era is that of David Hay and Rebecca Nye (1998/2006). They elaborated on the incredible spiritual awareness and sensitivity of children found during their qualitative interviews. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) noticed that children could reflect and communicate profound philosophical and existential insights and meanings related to their connections within their reality including self, others, nature, and a higher power. They coined this construct *relational consciousness*, which is described as an advanced level of perceptiveness or consciousness where children expressed

things within “a context of how the child related to things, other people, him/herself, and God” (p. 109).

Nye (2004) explained that her interview-based grounded theory study with 40 preadolescents resulted in the core category of relational consciousness that integrated the multiple ways children expressed spirituality in their lives. She conveyed that relational consciousness was not an isolated aspect of children’s lives but was interwoven through all aspects of life. She found three central themes. First, that each child had their own authentic style or ‘individual signature’ of spirituality (p.94). Secondly, that children demonstrated mental strategies that were predictable in terms of developmental levels, as well as spiritual maturity, and deeper levels of spiritual perception than is normally recognized. Lastly, that children recognized the profoundness and significance of their spiritual feelings, thoughts, and experiences, and children felt they were alone spiritually and had to inhibit their spirituality as they aged. She felt the children spoke honestly and from their heart, and that they had a biological spiritual awareness.

Hay and Nye (1998/2006) suggested that spiritual processes are innate in children, and they outlined three categories of children’s spiritual sensitivity as awareness-sensing, mystery sensing, and value-sensing. Awareness-sensing is described as an awareness in the moment, in the here and now, and being aware of our awareness. It also encompasses ‘tuning,’ described as such things as feeling at one with nature, deep felt emotions of empathy and belonging, or the experience of listening attentively to music. Flow is another dimension of awareness-sensing, which was initially described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), where an individual feels that time stops and she/he is so highly involved or deeply concentrating on something that it seems

that she/he is transcending in action and thought. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described ‘focusing’ as the fourth dimension of awareness-sensing which they defined as being in touch with the ‘felt sense’ of an experience or bodily awareness.

Mystery-sensing involves wonder and awe, and imagination. It includes the awareness of aspects of human life that are incomprehensible or are a mystery, or without explanation, such as the mystery of our existence, or the vastness of our universe, which invoke awe within. It also includes the awe experienced when looking into a fire or flame. As children develop they gather knowledge and insights which can explain some things in life but there remains much that is unknowable in life. Imagination involves the fantasy part of life, dreams, and creativity.

Value-sensing is defined as the experience of emotions, and ideas of worth and value. The aspect of ultimate goodness is part of value-sensing where one places trust in others and in ‘being.’ The last component of value-sensing is meaning, which involves the process of meaning making including searching for and discovering meaning. This not only involves cognitive processes but a deeper meaning that is ‘sensed,’ or characteristic of a spiritual experience. These constructs of children’s spirituality provide a theoretical framework that can be compared to the findings in my study.

Further research has built upon these core constructs and extends this foundational theoretical framework. For instance, through a grounded theory study Reimer and Furrow (2001) expanded the understanding of Hay and Nye’s (1998/2006) relational consciousness and offered a socio-contextual framework for it. They interviewed children aged 7 and 8 who attended religious congregations and were from middle class families. They identified that children employed ideological clusters of language, which contained associated words and

themes that were repeated by the children which were spiritually significant. These ideological clusters appeared to be socially constructed narratives or shared experiences or perceptions, similar to the findings of Erricker et al. (1997). However, Reimer and Furrow also identified an existential map which described the unique spiritual experiences that were not shared with others. They proposed that these first two categories may be clues to the mental representations of spiritual knowledge for children. Reimer and Furrow surmised that some of the children's spiritual expressions represented parts of an inner spiritual dialogue that was beyond that of social learning. They also noted that parents were shocked by their child's spiritual dialogue when reading their child's transcripts.

Reimer and Furrow (2001) further found that children described transcendent things in visual or generative similarities, which they categorized as symbolic attachments. Another category was bonding where the child described God as being close and proximal. Children felt bonded with God during times of calm and times of distress. The children also employed more formal spiritual language in describing God's existence and this category was framed as mystery, meaning and theology. The authors contended that prayer was an example of spiritual agency of the child. The last category involved positive justice where children talked about ideas of fairness, service, and giving as spiritual activities. The work of Hay and Nye, and Reimer and Furrow provide an emerging foundation for a promising theoretical formulation. Relational consciousness and the existence of a unique spiritual identity do seem to be recurring aspects in many of the subsequent studies on children's spirituality. Although, it is not clear how this construct is correlated specifically with children experiencing TGL.

The next significant research apposite to my study, is that of Hart (2003) who spent five years interviewing children and adults on the topic of spirituality. He described spirituality as twofold, as a process of development and a worldview. He conveyed that a spiritual worldview integrates the physical reality with the spiritual world and locates us in a multidimensional and sacred universe. His findings are similar to those of Hay and Nye (1998/2006) and he contended that children will get to the heart of the matter if allowed, and that adults need to listen for their wisdom. In his book he described five spiritual capacities of wisdom, wonder, wondering, the meeting between 'you and me,' and seeing the invisible.

Hart (2003) depicted wonder as a constellation of experiences which invoke feelings such as love, awe, joy and connection. Similar to Hay and Nye (1998/2006), he also mentioned the concept of flow and timelessness that can occur in spiritual experiences. He also conveyed that meaning occurs for individuals through spiritual experiences and it is often ineffable or beyond the boundaries of language. He described wondering as the process of pondering the larger questions in life, and also the perplexing and paradoxical aspects of life. He stated that children are capable of considering metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and logic and can comprehend some things at a very deep level, although they may not explain things with the same breadth and analysis as adults. However, what is not clear in his writing is whether children experiencing significant TGL have similar spiritual feelings, experiences and existential thoughts, or if some of these aspects are changed through TGL events.

Hart (2003) discussed the relational aspect of spirituality comparable to the assertions of Hay and Nye (1998/2006), where spirit exists between 'you and me.' Martin Buber (1958) first presented this relational dynamic of how we engage with one another, the world, and a higher

power. Buber described an 'I-thou' relationship as a perception of another as a whole being, where mutuality, connectedness, and reciprocity are involved. Hart discussed that there is 'knowingness' in the heart that opens the individual to deeper relationships, compassion, and empathy. He further stated that children often relate this way naturally.

The fifth capacity Hart described was 'seeing the invisible,' which is a capacity to see visions, hear angels or voices, an ability to know things before events occur, or know what is occurring at a distance, and an ability to feel energies. He found that some children were able to tune into subtler levels of reality and had intuitive abilities. Often these events remain unexplainable in regard to scientific knowledge. He surmised that children may be more open to these realities, and that discussing these experiences becomes prohibited in the social world of adults. Hart's work expands the theoretical model presented by Hay and Nye (1998/2006), however it still does not specifically address spirituality in relation to TGL for children.

A more recent phenomenological study was conducted by Brendan Hyde (2008) who spent time with groups of children ages 8-10 (36 participants). He builds upon the theoretical foundations already discussed and his findings are pertinent to my research. Hyde identified four characteristics of children's spirituality categorized as the felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning, and spiritual questing. The felt sense involves awareness in the here and now of the present moment and the experience of the body in the lived moment. Children appeared to have an ontological awareness and were absorbed in engagement with their whole being. He characterized this as being in ultimate unity in a deep level of connectedness, or being one with the 'Other.' Hyde utilized Hay and Nye's (1998/2006) framework as a sketch



map and this category is similar to their awareness-sensing. It is also similar to the findings of Hart (2003) regarding wonder.

Hyde (2008) described integrating awareness as an ability to engage in two levels of awareness at the same time. Children were engaged in a beading activity while at the same time engaged in a dynamic dialogue at another level of awareness. He suggested that there were varying levels of consciousness co-existing, and these are not separate but integrated.

This finding is congruent with later research conducted in social work by Coholic (2011) who found that beading and arts activities allowed children to engage in mindfulness based arts activities and spiritual dialogue as co-existing consciousness. She conducted an arts based group with children in foster care with a goal of teaching mindfulness, improving self-esteem, self-awareness, and resilience. Spiritually sensitive conversations were facilitated by group leaders, but she found that spiritual conversations also spontaneously emerged among the child participants.

Hyde (2008) discovered that children engaged in a process of weaving threads of their spiritual meaning from various aspects. He revealed that children used their sense of wonder in meaning making, and although the children were immersed in a Catholic worldview, they exercised personal freedom to integrate other frameworks of meaning. He cautioned that children may have differing or even opposing internal spiritual meaning frameworks from those of their family, church, or school milieus. This is congruent with the findings by Coles (1990) who identified that children's spiritual meanings come from other life teachings and experiences outside of religion and the beliefs of their family. And it also confirms the work of Hay and Nye (1998/2006) who found that children have their own unique spiritual signature.

Hyde's last category of spiritual questing involved the act of pursuing newer authentic ways of connecting, as well as desires to help and engage in altruistic behaviour. It encompassed a search of self, of existence, and transcendent ways of being in the world. The children described a fascination with the supernatural, such as desires to understand astrology and cosmology and its part in life, desires to have supernatural abilities such as telepathy, and desires to have powers that could ensure the safety of others and the universe. He believed these larger themes and values of life included interconnectedness and love, peace, freedom, and happiness. Although children experiencing TGL could have been part of many of these studies, their spirituality has not been researched specifically in terms of having TGL as a criterion for the research population.

Since the turn of the century the studies exploring children's spirituality have adopted a more holistic approach and recognized a non-linear as opposed to a stage approach to spirituality. In Ratcliff's (2008) review he concludes that "the wide variety of theories, methods, and specific issues involved presents a virtual kaleidoscope of possible lenses on children's spirituality" (p. 36). These major historical works have opened the dialogue on children's spirituality and laid a foundation for the development of a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Nevertheless, there is much more to learn and understand regarding spirituality in children's lives.

A great deal of the research pertaining to children's spirituality has been conducted in scholastic or religious educational settings, or in hospital settings, but very little has been conducted in counselling settings. As noted, there is very little research explicitly and solely addressing the spirituality of children experiencing TGL. In this review it is apparent that

research within social work pertaining to children's spirituality remains an area of need. The following sections highlight other pertinent areas of research that assist in situating my research within the emerging field of study.

## **2.4 Conceptualizing Spirituality**

It is important to provide the definitions and conceptualizations of spirituality from the literature for the purpose of this study. This process assists with defining parameters and situating the findings of my study within the literature, as well as interpreting and analyzing the data. However, it is not intended to impose these definitions and conceptualizations on the participants, as my study explores the participants own understandings and meanings of spirituality.

After an initial review of the literature it was evident that conceptualizing and defining spirituality was a core area of interest for theorists and researchers over several decades. There seemed to be differences of opinion concerning the abstract nature of spirituality. Most of this research was conducted with the intent of determining a more encapsulating definition along with the key concepts of spirituality. For the most part research on conceptualizing and understanding spirituality has been conducted with adults and adolescents, and very few studies in this area have included preadolescent views.

Spirituality is highly complex and this has contributed to the difficulty of determining a single definition. The tensions and ongoing processes in developing a common definition and delineating the various constructs of spirituality are apparent across many of the helping professions (see: Canda & Furman, 2010; Chui, Emblen, Van Hofwegen, Sawatzky, & Meyerhoff, 2004; Helminiak, 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2003; MacDonald, 2009; Meraviglia,

1999; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). This is due to the fact that spirituality is a multidimensional construct, as it is experienced by individuals in different ways, and it overlaps with religion and religiosity (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crisp, 2010; MacDonald, 2009). Often spirituality and religion are used interchangeably within the literature which makes it confounding.

There has been debate over distinguishing the constructs of spirituality and religion, and caution over whether or not there should be clear distinctions due to their overlapping and entangled aspects and common characteristics (Estanek, 2006; Hill, Pargament, Hood, McCullough, Swyers, Larson, & Zinnbauer, 2000). Pargament (2007) felt that religiousness and spirituality were substantively intertwined and related to one another, and both were attributed to a sense of the sacred. Other researchers have contended that failing to integrate both constructs may inaccurately reflect the full intertwined religious and spiritual experiences of individuals (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012). Additionally, Schafer (1997) postulated that a sense of the sacred, along with recognition of a divine being, a power, or a life force that transcends the physical world, existence and personal experiences, are part of both religion and spirituality. Conversely, Helminiak (2008) posited a 'dis-identification' of spirituality from the divine in order to address characteristics of the human spiritual dimension, and attend to difficulties with validity of the divine. It is important to understand these differences and the delineation of the two constructs, as distinctions between the constructs are often noted in the research and literature and are sometimes confounded.

Wilkinson (2012) recognized that religion can be difficult to define as there are many religions which are as diverse as the numerous cultures that exist. Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus in the literature that religion involves institutionalized beliefs shared by a

community; it involves rituals, practices, and traditions; it also includes dogma related to a denominational identity; and it is a means of spiritual expression (Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 1999; Carroll, 1998; Sheridan, 2004; Tanyi, 2006; Turner, 2002). Canda and Furman (2010) conveyed that religion included the transmission of traditions over time, as well as providing community support functions. Wilkinson (2012) explicated there are seven elements of religion which include doctrine, mythology, religious experience, religious institution, ethical content, ritual, and sacred objects. Canda and Furman (1999) deemed that religiosity is characterized as ascribing to religion and religious practices, and it can also be a vehicle of spirituality. This is something to be cognizant of in my study.

The conceptualization and definition of spirituality appear to include significant aspects of the development of identity, self-discovery, or understanding of *Self* (the spiritual or divine aspect of oneself) (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Crisp, 2010; Delaney, 2005). Other associated attributes include hope, beliefs, transformation, and transcendence or moving beyond oneself (Chiu et al., 2004; Crisp, 2010; Weaver, Pargament, Flannely, & Oppenheimer, 2006). Drouin (2002) defined spirituality as becoming more human, through a deeper connection to others, and to a higher power of our understanding. Meraviglia (2002) emphasized that the spiritual dimension integrates all human dimensions such as the mind, body and spirit, and provides a sense of well-being. She asserted that spiritual beliefs provide a basis for positive meaning and hope in life, which constitutes faith. Many of the wisdom traditions across our planet convey that the important aspects of spirituality involve cognitions and emotions of love, hope, faith, comfort, and peace, which are associated with our inner and our outer social connections, and with transcendent experiences (Smith, 1991).

Chiu et al. (2004) conducted an integrative review of spirituality studies in the health sciences over ten years (1990-2000) in order to increase the understanding of spirituality ontologically and theoretically. They found that there was a lack of consistency in definition and conceptual clarity in the 73 quantitative and qualitative research studies they analyzed. From their review they developed a thematic analysis and condensed the numerous themes into four categories: existential reality, transcendence, connectedness, and power/force/energy. Existential reality included aspects of hope, meaning and purpose in life, and spiritual experiences. Transcendence was characterized as moving beyond the reality of here and now, and physical boundaries, and also involved an existential awareness. The attributes of connectedness involved relationships with 'Self,' nature, others, and a higher power, being or the universe. The category of power/force/energy included aspects of a dynamic life-giving energy, a force of motivation, striving and guidance, and a source of creative energy and inspiration. Like other authors they asserted that spirituality is affected by cultural and humanistic influences and it is multidimensional. Chui and colleagues (2004) identified that there was a strong focus on the personal aspects of spirituality. Of particular note, only two of the studies included a sample with children under the age of 19. However, their synthesis may hold merit for my study.

Swinton (2001) described spirituality as an "outward expression of the inner workings of the human spirit" (p. 20). He viewed spirituality as a personal, as well as a social process where one interprets the experiences of the spirit. This also comprises our inner processes involving ideas, concepts, values, attitudes, and behaviours. He included the process of *becoming* as part of spirituality, a process which involves reflecting on who one is, and how one comes to know.

He saw these experiences and processes as core features of spirituality, and explains that spirituality is:

“an intra, inter and transpersonal experience that is shaped and directed by the experiences of individuals and the communities within which they live out their lives. It is *intrapersonal* in that it refers to the quest for inner connectivity... It is *interpersonal* in that it relates to the relationships between people and within communities. It is *transpersonal* in so far as it reaches beyond self and others into the transcendent realms of experience that move beyond that which is available at a mundane level” (p. 20).

His conceptualization signifies the multidimensional relationships involved which one should be mindful of in research.

Within the social work literature Edward Canda has written prolifically for several decades on the topic of spirituality, and his definition has evolved over time. Canda's (1998) first definition of spirituality was described as "the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the nonhuman environment, and for some, God" (p. 243). Through his work with Furman (Canda & Furman, 1999), spirituality was conceptualized to be an aspect of human experience and functioning, along with the biological, psychological, and sociological aspects, and the definition further evolved. Canda and Furman (1999) defined spirituality as:

"The human striving for a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment through morally satisfying relationships with oneself and between individuals, communities, the surrounding universe, ultimate reality, and the ontological ground of our existence

(whether conceived in theistic, animistic, nontheistic, atheistic or other terms), however a person or group understands it” (p. 44).

This definition appears to be quite encompassing and complex. In a later text Canda and Furman (2010) outlined twelve attributes of the concept of spirituality from the helping professions and religious studies, which included the essential qualities of humans; the innate drives for meaning and for a sense of wholeness and connectedness; the beliefs, values and moral frameworks; transpersonal levels of consciousness and connection with spiritual entities; participation in spiritually supportive groups; virtues of compassion, love, justice, forgiveness and humility; qualities of resilience, joy, peace and contentment; and a sense of wholeness or holism. This is a robust framework which may be applicable in data analysis processes.

Crisp (2010) offered her definition of spirituality as “an awareness of the other, which may be God or other human or divine beings or something else, which provides the basis for us to establish our needs and desires for, understand our experiences of, and ask questions about, meaning, identity, connectedness, transformation and transcendence” (p. 7). She also explained that spiritual expression is socially and culturally constructed and part of our lived experience. Sheridan (2004) provided a more succinct definition of spirituality than Canda and Furman, or Crisp. Her definition is “the search for meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe and ultimate reality, however one understands it, which may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions” (p. 10).

Although these definitions provide a better understanding of what spirituality may encompass, they have been conceptualized and defined through an adult lens. A number of studies discussed next have demonstrated that children are quite capable of articulating their own



perceptions and ideas on spirituality. Recent research has found that although children feel spirituality is somewhat similar to these adult conceptualizations and definitions, they have a somewhat unique perspective and way of describing their understandings and experiences of spirituality. It is evident that children have surprised adults in regard to the level of their spiritual capacities, experiences, understandings and dialogue of spiritual and existential matters. In grounding my research further, it is important to review previous research on the conceptualization of spirituality from a preadolescent perspective. This will allow for any connections or divergences to be identified and discussed.

#### **2.4.1 The Conceptualization of Spirituality by Youth**

Since my study focuses on children studies pertaining to the conceptualization of spirituality by youth are important. Within the literature pertaining to children, spirituality is commonly considered to be universal among ethnicities and cultures (Benson 2006; Ratcliffe & Nye, 2006). It is apparent that children experience, think about, express, and are highly open to discussing spirituality (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Vialle, Walton, & Woodcock, 2008). Nye (2009) professed that a key finding in recent research is that spirituality is a natural component of children's lives, and that they have active spiritual capabilities. Vialle et al. (2008) found that although older preadolescent children were able to provide more details and facts about their views on the world and existence, there were not major differences in the content of the conversations they held with children as young as five years of age. They noted that there was complexity and abstraction in children's dialogue which was beyond the accepted constructions of child development stage theorists.

### **2.4.2 Research with Children 12 and Older**

In the United States the Search Institute created the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence. The goal of this institute was to conduct research in order to provide more thorough understandings, experiences, and meanings, of spirituality and spiritual development for youth across contexts and cultures (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, & Roehlkepartain, 2012; Kimball, Mannes, & Hackel, 2009). The researchers conducted focus groups and surveys with over 6725 youth in 13 countries (Benson et al., 2012; Kimball et al., 2009), and it is the largest international cross cultural endeavour on youth spirituality to date.

Kimball et al. (2009) presented information from one of the studies conducted by this group. The specific portion of the study highlighted by these researchers involved a constructivist grounded theory approach to analyzing data from 27 focus groups with 171 youth ages 12-19 in 13 countries. Many were educated and middle or upper middle class, and the majority were Christian. A generic protocol of questions was developed and employed in an attempt to establish methodological consistency and reliability of the data across researchers and groups. There were several limitations to their study. For example, their sampling strategy limited youth participants to those connected to an advisor network. Some of the youth knew the focus group facilitators, and this may have skewed their disclosures. Some of the focus groups were conducted in English, and for some youth this was their second language, which could further constrict meanings, and limit the understanding of salient aspects among differing ethnicities and cultures.

Even with these limitations the findings presented by Kimball et al. (2009) constitute a considerable contribution to the literature. They found that most youth welcomed the

opportunity to discuss and explore spirituality without feeling judged. From their analysis they identified eight categories of spirituality described by youth across cultures which include: 1) *Capacity for spirituality is natural* 2) *Being actively spiritual is a choice* 3) *Active spirituality shapes a purposeful orientation to life* 4) *Spiritual development is not dependent upon age but is affected by other dimensions of human development* 5) *Spiritual development is mediated by the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and social contexts* 6) *Spirituality is seen as different from, and more expansive than, religion and religious observance* 7) *Spirituality is commonly experienced as a source of protection and/or comfort especially during troubling times* and 8) *Spirituality is rooted in a special connection.* The authors conveyed that their findings support the literature which distinguishes spirituality as an innate and relational dimension of human life. They contended that this information supported the infusion of spiritual consciousness into regular practice in youth work and education. This framework may be of benefit in my own analysis and discussion.

Sveidqvist, Joubert, Greene, and Manion (2003) reported findings from The Healthy Spirit Project, which was a Canadian qualitative focus group study of 51 English speaking adolescents 14-18 years of age attending high school. The study explored the meanings and importance of spirituality, and the relationship to resilience, emotional well-being and mental health of youth. The analysis process was not very clear aside from developing categories from key concepts. They identified a seven-category conceptual framework of themes, and asserted that it is more respectful of the perspectives of youth than a definition. Of central importance to their discussion of spirituality were the themes of religion, philosophy, and an internal element. Some of their findings are similar to those of Kimball et al. (2009).

Similar to studies with adults, the participants in the study by Sveidqvist et al. (2003) also clarified the relationship and difference between religion and spirituality. Although several youths felt the concepts were tied, the majority of the youth felt that they were not synonymous and that spirituality seemed to be more universal and fluid. The concept of faith was central and was featured in a few categories. Their category of *philosophy* described spirituality as an approach to life, much like the category of *purposeful orientation to life* explained by Kimball et al. (2009). The youth discussed an active search for meaning, and existential questioning of the positive and negative events in life. The third category outlined an internal element which was related to the development of identity or a personal belief system. The children described a process of self-discovery and awareness, and they also felt that there was an internal existence of a soul, spirit, or conscience.

In relation to its role in mental health the youth felt their spirituality provided them with a sense of support and comfort, and it was a source of strength, energy, and inspiration. Some participants shared that their spirituality assisted them in getting through personal traumas and led to recovery and growth. Spirituality was seen by the youth as a positive aspect of mental health, and that having faith provided a means of coping, understanding, and dealing with difficult life experiences such as trauma and grief (although TGL was not a specific factor in participant recruitment). The researchers conjectured that questioning and the search for answers could cause strife especially if answers were not found, however this was not explored with the youth participants. The fact that this study was conducted in Canada there may be congruencies with my findings.

Wintersgill (2008) summarized the views of spirituality obtained from 385 adolescents ages 12-18 in the United Kingdom. The study utilized piloted qualitative questionnaires involving interviews. Word analysis was employed, as was a process of identifying semantic relationships, although these processes were not clearly described. The findings of youth perceptions included spirituality being termed as a dynamic force, and related to identity, while the inner spirit was viewed as 'the real me.' Both spirit and spirituality were seen to have guiding facilitative qualities or functions; however, spirit was viewed as an entity and spirituality as an attribute. Participant responses categorized spirituality as primarily about holding beliefs; relationships with others, and the self; personal identity; and religion and religious identity. As can be seen there are commonalities across various studies.

Ubani and Tirri (2006) conducted a group activity study with 101 children aged 12 and 13 in Finland on their meanings of religion and spirituality. Small groups of approximately 5 children were first provided with a sheet of paper with the word religion and were asked to write down words they associated with it, then the same activity was done with the word spirituality. Two individuals rated the content independently. The children provided less expressions for spirituality (N=305) than religion (N=475). The ten most common expressions for spirituality were spirit, spiral, spirit-movie, devotional life, yoga, Latin word, rituals, spiritual world, spiritism, and a strange word. The religious words were connected to Christianity, whereas the spiritual words were not and this was the most common difference. There was overlap between the constructs developed, which fell into three dimensions: the institutional, the supernatural, and the humanistic. The participants associated religion with established or institutional forms mainly in the institutional dimension; whereas, the meanings of spirituality were mostly related

to human aspects of life and culture, and the supernatural. The supernatural dimension included interpretations such as entities (angels or the devil), and to things outside or beyond daily life, and transcendental phenomena. This study also adds to the multidimensional aspects involved.

These studies shed light on the beliefs of youth, however very little research includes the views of preadolescent children. It could be argued that adolescent views begin to develop in childhood. However, just as it has been noted that there are some subtle differences in how adolescents conceptualize spirituality in comparison to adults, it could also be argued that there may be differences in how preadolescent children view and experience spirituality.

### **2.4.3 Spirituality as Viewed by Preadolescents**

This section is most pertinent to the focus of my study. Moore, et al. (2012) conducted open ended semi-structured interviews with 64 preadolescents ages 6-11 from a variety of religious affiliations in Canada. The sample came from a data base of parents wishing to participate in research, as well as through advertisements placed throughout the city near religious and spiritual centres. Demographic information was gathered from parents, which demonstrated that they were from varying income brackets, and 81% reported that they spoke more than one language in their home. Almost one quarter of the participants were Catholic. Another quarter were associated with no religion, while the remainder were from various other religions, which speaks to the diversity in the Canadian context. The researchers wanted to explore children's diverse perceptions of spirituality and therefore they interviewed the children alone.

Similar to my methodology they employed grounded theory. Their approach uncovered common themes from children about spirituality regardless of the child's religious affiliation.

Although twenty-eight percent of parents described their children as not religious at all, there were only five percent of children who stated they were skeptical or did not believe, and these children still shared conceptions and aspects of spirituality. Eighty-eight percent of the children offered information on where they deemed the God of their belief was located. They articulated locations including inside their heart, mind or body, the sky, or everywhere suggesting god is omnipresent. Only eight percent of the children spoke about a soul or essence that lives on after death alluding to a belief in an afterlife. Children articulated that prayer was a common spiritual activity, and they felt that praying to a higher power helped them through adversity and loss, as well as assisting in achieving goals. Praying to a higher power made them feel good or happy. The researchers proposed that regardless of an individual's religion or culture, prayer is a vital component of spirituality. Based on their findings they argued that further research into spirituality and its relationship to children's coping through adversity, including grief and loss, was warranted. They also asserted that understanding the role of spirituality in coping and wellbeing was important for educational and clinical settings. These contentions support the rationale for my research.

What these studies illuminate is that there are similarities pertaining to a belief in a higher power, and the use of prayer, in preadolescent conceptualizations of spirituality, and those of older youth. It is evident that prayer is a salient activity of spirituality for individuals of all ages, and it provides comfort and support in times of adversity. Prayer also has positive benefits in regard to emotions, and goal achievement. Spirituality is considered multidimensional in that it is intrapersonal, interpersonal and transpersonal. It is complex and involves identity and developmental concerns, it has multiple facets including values and beliefs, and it comprises

cognitive, physical, emotional, social and supernatural dimensions. As my research analysis progresses and theory is formulated these definitions and conceptualizations will be further examined and scrutinized.

No further studies on the conceptualization of spirituality with preadolescents were found. The depth and complexity of preadolescent conceptualizations and understandings of spirituality are not as well understood as they are for adults and older youth. The theoretical understanding and the experiences of spirituality that preadolescents have are still very nascent. For example, what is not understood in this area of the literature is whether all children have similar understandings and conceptualizations of spirituality. Although children who had experienced TGL were likely included in some of the research, given that they were able to allude to the benefits of prayer through distressing times, this population has not been identified specifically in any research found. Children who have experienced TGL may have similar or different understandings, meanings, and experiences of spirituality. The spirituality of this segment of the population is quite under researched and theory development is tentative and should not be generalized to this population without further research.

## **2.5 Child Development Theoretical Foundations**

In situating and analyzing my research it is important to consider child development theory as it is significant in spiritual development theory and it offers further theoretical knowledge on children's capacities. There are five major theoretical perspectives that inform the conceptual models and research, and that are important and employed in the children's spirituality literature. These influential approaches pertaining to development include the psychoanalytic, biological/ethological, learning, cognitive, and ecological or contextual theories



(Docherty & Hughes, 2009; Kail & Barnfield, 2009; Papalia, Olds, Feldman, & Kruk, 2004; Vasta, 1993). Each of these perspectives provides valuable information on child development and some build upon one another. Although the scope of these theories is beyond the focus of this chapter, they are influential in the literature on children's spirituality and therefore they are briefly outlined.

The psychoanalytic and ethological theoretical approaches provide a foundation in the areas of trust and attachment which contribute to hope, and these constructs are pertinent in both spirituality and TGL. The learning and constructivist cognitive approaches inform how preadolescents are actively engaged in their environments, and offer developmental stages that children typically go through. The ecological and contextual perspectives adopt a systemic and interconnected approach, which is important to understanding the whole child within the world. These approaches include aspects of culture and moral development, which are associated with spirituality and TGL.

### **2.5.1 The Psychoanalytic and Ethological Approaches**

The psychoanalytic and ethological approaches are often applied in spiritual development theory and research, and can offer knowledge and constructs which could be applicable to my study. The psychoanalytic approach to understanding child development is focused on social and cultural factors and contributed to psychosocial theory. Erik Erickson's efforts in psychosocial development focused on emotions and personality traits, and emerging identity, and he believed that children were actively engaged in their environments (Docherty & Hughes, 2009). His contention was that people progress through eight stages of development with

internal personal conflicts involved. He argued that trust and mistrust was one area of conflict in early childhood that individuals must resolve.

Papalia et al. (2004) explain that if trust in relationships and the world predominate, children will develop hope as a virtue and will believe in their ability to fulfill their needs and desires. If mistrust is more prevalent children will view their environments as unpredictable and unfriendly and relationships will suffer. The further stages and conflicts include autonomy versus shame and doubt (independence, and the associated virtue is will); initiative versus guilt (trying out new things, and the virtue is purpose), industry versus inferiority (the virtue is skill and competence); identity versus confusion (answering the question Who am I? The virtue is fidelity); intimacy versus isolation (where the virtue is love), generativity versus stagnation (concern for the next generation, the virtue is care); and integrity versus despair (acceptance of life and death, the virtue is wisdom). Hope, relationships, purpose, love, care, wisdom, and questions surrounding identity, life, and death are encompassed in the definitions and conceptualizations of spirituality.

My study will investigate experiences of spiritual aspects in relationships with others and the child's environment in regard to spirituality. Environment and relationship development and factors are part of child development frameworks. For example, John Bowlby (1969) felt that psychoanalytic theory could not explain the processes of attachment between child and parent. Therefore, he researched and developed attachment theory, which explained the behavioural system response, functioning, and an internal working model of an individual in relation to his/her environment (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). In his ethological approach Bowlby argued that attachment was biologically rooted in needs for survival (Levine & Munsch, 2011), and

attachment behaviours are activated during traumatic and threatening life experiences (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006). Mary Ainsworth joined Bowlby in researching attachment, and she developed four categories of attachment which include: 1) secure attachment: where babies are able to explore novel environments feeling secure and minimally distressed from a short separation of their parent and seek out the parent upon return; 2) anxious avoidant attachment: where babies do not appear distressed by a separation with a parent and avoid them upon return; 3) anxious ambivalent/resistant attachment: where babies are very distressed in a separation from their parent and are inconsistent in seeking out the parent upon return; and 4) disorganized/disoriented attachment: where babies seem to respond in a disorganized or disoriented manner upon the return of a parent (Levine & Munsch, 2011; Parke, Gauvain, & Schmuckler, 2010).

Further work has been done across cultures which somewhat conflicts with these categories of attachment. It appears various factors such as the environmental context, cultural factors, time spent with the parent throughout the day, and whether parents and children share a bed can create differences in attachment processes (Parke et al., 2010). The role of fathers also is not fully understood within this theory. John Bowlby's (1982) work on secure versus insecure attachment bonds and disruption due to loss in relationships remains a significant area of focus in childhood and is discussed in the literature on TGL, and spirituality. Yet, most of the research on attachment and spirituality has been conducted with adults.

Attachment theory research has demonstrated that individuals rely on God or a higher power as an attachment figure when experiencing distress or TGL in order to feel a sense of security, and to ask for assistance (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006). Granqvist and Dickie (2006)

outline the compensation theory, which hypothesizes that individuals who have not developed secure attachments to caregivers need to develop compensatory relationships and attachments in order to regulate emotions. God or a higher power functions as their surrogate figure of attachment. Granqvist and Dickie (2006) also outline the correspondence hypothesis, which proposes that individuals who are more securely attached have spiritual foundations that foster a positive relationship with God, and that they also are socialized successfully in adopting caregiver spiritual beliefs and standards. This is important to consider for my study, as belief in a higher power has often been noted by children as part of their spirituality in previous research. Although, there has not been a lot of research in the area of spirituality with children using attachment theory as a central framework, Granqvist and Dickie feel that the theory can be applied in understanding the results of research.

While limited, some research on attachment theory and God concepts has been conducted with children. For example, De Roos (2006) reported on two studies on children's concepts of God in relation to attachment and the theoretical correspondence hypothesis with 72 kindergarten children. The first study described was conducted by De Roos, Iedema, and Miedema (2004). They used questionnaires, Likert scales, and an attachment story completion task to assess caregiver/child attachment relationships. They also assessed child and teacher relations. Contrary to their hypothesis, children's concepts of a punishing God were not related to the child's relationships with parent or teacher, or their self-concept. Parental attachments did not correlate to children's perceptions of God, but the teacher relationship did. Children with close relationships with their teachers had a more positive *God concept*, which was mediated by their

concept of self. Mothers in this study identified primarily as agnostic, whereas the majority of teachers were religious (liberal Christian).

The second study was conducted by De Roos (2006), and involved 198 kindergarten children, their parents and teachers. This sample was more religiously diverse. Children were interviewed by a female researcher at school in a separate room. Similar questionnaires were implemented to assess concepts of self and others, *God concepts*, and mother/child attachments. A shortened version of the Student/Teacher scale was used. In this study they also employed a scale for caregivers *God concepts*, and a questionnaire on caregiver's goals for religious education. The results demonstrated that children's concepts of God as punishing, or similar to the concepts of parents, could not be predicted; however positive concepts of God could be predicted via the antecedents. Interestingly, most of the children expressed a loving *God concept*.

A previous study by De Roos et al., (2004) found that children with parents who were stricter, or used power-assertive styles, had more negative concepts of God. De Roos (2006) surmised that attachment does not appear to contribute to the concept of God, and only partly explained individual differences for young children. These findings differ from the research with adolescents and adults and may be pertinent to my research.

Kim (2008) researched parenting styles and religiosity in children. Kim conveyed that a child who had a close relationship with his or her parent(s) had a concept that God was close, loving, and forgiving. In contrast, children with punitive and controlling parents did not feel that God was loving, but was punishing. Kim professed that parents' own *God concept*, religiosity, and the relationship with their child, influenced the child's own religiosity, spirituality, and *God-*

*concept.* Authoritative parenting styles with love, nurturance, and acceptance seemed to be critical factors in healthy spirituality in children.

Kim's (2008) research is congruent with the research by De Roos et al. (2004) and De Roos (2006) but contrasts with previous research with children who experienced abuse, trauma, and loss who had positive God perceptions and developed close relationships with God (Granqvist & Dickie, 2006). This suggests that there is more complexity to children's connectedness and relationships with a higher power, and their overall sense of self, security, and attachment. These studies demonstrate that there is much more to learn about the relationship between children, caregivers, and their conceptualization of a higher power especially in the areas of TGL and spirituality. This literature can be employed in the later data analysis stages of my research.

### **2.5.2 Learning, Constructivist Cognitive, and Ecological/Contextual Approaches**

The constructivist and ecological approaches to child development are the most significant for the context of my research as they are epistemologically congruent. Within the current literature on children's spirituality the main theoretical approach applied is a constructivist cognitive approach. The constructivist cognitive approach has evolved from the works of Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, and Vygotsky. This philosophical ideology proclaims that children learn through active engagement in their environment, and learning occurs in developmental stages (Papalia et al., 2004). The paradigm of social constructivism posits that society and culture mediate development (Docherty & Hughes, 2009). Social and cultural factors will likely emerge through my research.

According to Parke et al. (2010), the approach developed by Jean Piaget proposed that a child's worldly knowledge increases developmentally into more complex cognitive structures over time. Preadolescence is linked to what Piaget termed as the concrete operational stage. In this stage children are deemed to begin to anticipate, consider, and understand the thoughts of others; understand attributes; think deductively, and develop logical reasoning. Piaget characterized children at this stage as thinking in terms of a concrete reality or the observable, and not capable of abstract thought. This theory distinguishes children's cognitive abilities from that of adolescents and adults, which is an important factor that is debated in the current literature on children's spirituality.

Ecological and contextual theories of child development have built upon the constructivist approach. According to Papalia et al. (2004), the two main proponents of contextual theory are Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky. They emphasized that cultural context is significant to children's cognitions, and that children's thoughts, views, and beliefs differ according to the cultural importance of concepts by adults and society. Individual development is considered to occur through biological, psychological, and systemic factors. These theorists viewed individuals as inseparable and interconnected to the environment. Hyde's (2008) research identified how various ecological systems do in fact influence children's spirituality.

Another theoretical approach that is pertinent to the literature on spirituality is Kohlberg's (cited in Papalia et al., 2004) moral reasoning theory. Kohlberg's theory roughly corresponds to Piaget's moral development assertions. He developed seven stages that relate to the moral reasoning or processes upon which individuals base moral decisions (Papalia et al., 2004). The first four are applicable to preadolescents. The first two stages involve pre-conventional and self

focused morality where morals are shaped by the standards of adults (up to age nine). The second two stages involve conventional and other focused morality stages where moral standards are internalized from valued role models (up to adolescence). The fifth and sixth stages include moral reasoning based on individual rights and justice. He later added the stage of transcendental morality which links religion and moral reasoning. He felt individuals moved from one stage to another. Moral concerns are encompassed within children's spirituality. However, it is unclear where children who experience grievous events in their life would fit within this framework. For example, if TGL events occur which are viewed as unjust and morally wrong, how might the morality or development of a child exposed to these events be affected or influenced?

According to Levine and Munsch (2011), Kohlberg mainly studied boys and he asserted that the moral development of girls fell behind boys. Gilligan (1982) contested his gendered claims and argued that the moral development of girls differed from boys. Yet, it appears that research has not favoured either stance (Parke et al., 2010; Levine & Munsch, 2011). Findings demonstrate that there are cultural differences as opposed to gender differences in moral development, especially in the movement from stages four to five (Levine & Munsch, 2011; Parke et al., 2010). In this developmental shift individuals begin to recognize individual rights and ethical principles (Levine & Munsch, 2011). Emotional development, such as empathy and sympathy, are intertwined with moral development and may also differ in relation to context, culture, and gender (Parke et al., 2010). Eisenberg (as cited in Kail & Barnfield, 2009) developed a similar model to Kohlberg but looked at the development of prosocial reasoning and caring that shifts from self-interest to a concern or empathy for others.



Kohlberg's moral approach is a consideration in relation to spirituality as moral cognitions can be influenced by an individual's spiritual belief system. As individual's mature moral decisions appear to be more comprehensive and integrated as opposed to decisions in younger years that are considered to be based more on rewards and punishments, and beneficial outcomes (Cunningham, 2012). Walker and Reimer (2006) believed that Kohlberg's approach did not encompass spirituality. They argued that spirituality is highly connected to moral reasoning and in handling real-life moral concerns. They found that faith, morality, and spirituality were intertwined and individuals based decisions on their values and virtues related to these aspects. Kohlberg's model is informative, but could prove problematic when applying it to preadolescents, as children can move through various developmental stages between the ages of 8 and 12. Again, one is led to wonder how TGL would affect a child's moral aspects and how this may impact their spiritual worldview.

One should remain objective in relation to whether or not child development stages appear to be sequential and age dependent or whether they are more fluid and dynamic. It is apparent that not one of the child development perspectives provides enough explanatory information on the complexity of development. The understanding of spiritual development in children and youth relies on many of these child development concepts, although it is proving to be extremely multifaceted. Since individuals develop spiritually through their interactions with their environmental and cultural contexts it is important to have a basic understanding of all of these associated developmental frameworks.

### **2.5.3 Faith and Spiritual Development**

The body of literature on faith and spiritual development theory is perhaps one of the largest areas of focus in the literature on children's spirituality. These areas inform how individuals develop and mature within a bio-psycho-social-emotional-spiritual framework. Examining this body of literature further contributes to grounding and situating my research.

**2.5.3.1 Faith development theory.** James Fowler's (1981) work has informed much of the current research on children's spirituality. He conducted and analyzed 359 interviews and formulated seven stages of faith, however his methodology is unclear. The stages are: 1) Primal faith, 2) Intuitive-projective faith, 3) Mythic-literal faith, 4) Synthetic-conventional faith, 5) Individuative-reflective faith, 6) Conjunctive faith, and 7) Universalizing faith. His contentions are similar to those of Coles (1990) whose phenomenological work suggests that spiritual faith is a universal human characteristic that provides coherence and meaning in life. Fowler's constructivist development model described faith as a cognitive process that underlies values, beliefs, and meaning and it begins with trust between child and parent (Fowler & Dell, 2004). However, as seen above trust and attachment are inconsistent factors in relationships with a higher power, and therefore these processes may occur outside of the parent/child relationship.

The factors Fowler attributed to faith development include maturation, cognitive and emotional development, psychosocial experiences, and religious and cultural symbols, meanings, and practices (Fowler & Dell, 2004). He outlined biological phases in the first four stages (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Primal faith as described by Fowler and Dell (2006) involves the development of a disposition of trust prior to language acquisition and is based on Erickson's framework of basic trust. In Fowler's intuitive-projective faith stage, from toddlerhood to early

childhood, fantasy and fact are indistinguishable within the child, and symbols and images with power are representative of good and evil (Fowler & Dell, 2004). In this stage children begin to demonstrate meaning making processes based on emotions and perceptions. Death begins to be a focus with danger and mystery involved. Existential concerns pertaining to security and safety arise.

The next stage articulated by Fowler is the most relevant for my research as it pertains to preadolescents. Fowler and Dell (2004) related that in the mythic-literal stage of middle childhood and beyond intuitive processes are suppressed by logical thinking and a differentiation in experiences and perspectives is noted. More conscious interpretations shape meanings and experiences, and cause and effect relations and perspective taking emerge. The previous intuitive ways of knowing are suppressed by logical modes of thinking. This is viewed as a social construction process where power within social conventions appears to diminish public attention of the spiritual domain. Similar to Fowler (1981), Hay and Nye (1998/2006) also conjectured that a socially constructed modern Western pattern obscures preadolescent children's spirituality. Hay (2000) asserted that a Western individualistic pattern has moved spirituality out of the communal and into a personal domain. Hay contended that the suppression of spirituality beginning in childhood is a profound loss (Hay & Nye, 1998/2006).

Children in the mythic-literal stage are perceived to not reliably have personal feelings but are seen as managing emotions and impulses (Fowler & Dell, 2006). Fowler argued that children in this stage do not personally construct God, and they view God's ruling as based in fairness and morality where good behaviour is rewarded and bad behaviour is punished (Fowler & Dell, 2006). According to Fowler and Dell (2006), in this stage children's concepts and

meaning are concrete and literal. This stage wanes when children recognize that bad things can also happen to good people, and evil deeds can go unpunished. This is likely an important area of consideration for children experiencing TGL, and there does not seem to be any research corroborating or disputing these contentions.

The synthetic-conventional stage, reached around age 12 or 13, brings expansion in cognitive abilities and perspective taking in Fowler's framework (Fowler & Dell, 2006). God perceptions take on personal qualities including understanding, acceptance, love, loyalty, and support during adversity. Identity, values, and beliefs become strong and the ability to articulate and reflect one's lived and asserted worldview emerges. However, the self is not able to see or evaluate itself and lacks a transcendental perspective. Fowler described the later stages as not pertinent to children and adolescents. These stages are more self-reflective in nature.

Individuals in these stages see multiple perspectives, truths, and roles, and have an ability to make sense out of paradoxes. In the last stage individuals see all of humanity as children of God who deserve unconditional love, and a stance of non-violence and yearning for peace is adopted.

Fowler's theory offers many important considerations; however, there seems to be a lack of empirical support for his theory in further research. Fowler's approach involved a progression towards greater complexity in each of the stages, yet this model does not seem to include aspects of contextually unique life circumstances such as TGL experiences. It is not clear what impacts TGL may have on children in the stage trajectory offered by Fowler. In fact, progression may be more fluid or dynamic than linear and progressive, or children may regress.

**2.5.3.2 Spiritual development theory.** There is quite a range of literature produced outside of social work on spiritual development in childhood which is relevant to my area of

study and these works are highlighted next. Preadolescence is a pivotal time for spiritual development, as well as the development of healthy interpersonal relationships, attachment, and stability, identity formation and self-concept (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Fowler, 1981). Mabe and Josephson (2004) posited that spirituality has an instrumental influence on how children respond to and evaluate life events, how they achieve developmental tasks, and it is relative to socialization processes, parenting, family function, and relationships. Over the past decade there has been contention and challenges to conceptualizing and understanding spiritual development.

Accordingly, the approach of applying stage theories is contested in the spirituality literature, and there are arguments for the inclusion of sensory and experiential knowing and a more fluid and dynamic conceptualization of spiritual development (Boyatzis, 2009; Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003). Ratcliffe (2008) questioned whether child stages are relevant to children's spirituality. He surmised that while development influences some aspects of spirituality, some aspects may be distinct and not connected to development. Boyatzis (2009) suggested that our understanding of children's spirituality has been impeded by assumptions related to stage theories and that some children appear more advanced in their spirituality. Cupit (2009) elucidated how the complexity and diversity in the pathways of development are not validated in structural theories. He vied for adopting a dynamic systems approach, which he believed could incorporate the complex spiritual phenomenon of development.

Spiritual development is seen as part of everyday life and it is not a separate aspect of life. Many authors and researchers have hypothesized it is a dimension that is as important as social, emotional, and cognitive development, which may not be mutually exclusive but interrelated (Canda & Furman, 1999; Eaude, 2003; Fowler, 1981; Ratcliff, 2008; Roehlkepartain

et al., 2006; MacDonald, 2009). Roehlkepartain et al. (2006) compiled literature from leading scholars across various disciplines in order to provide a comprehensive review of the current scientific knowledge in spiritual development in childhood and adolescence. The definition of spiritual development often cited is one offered by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003) who defined spiritual development as:

"The process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental "engine" that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices" (pp. 205-206).

Ratcliffe (2008) asserted that this definition is fruitful as it "recognizes spirituality as (a) a natural propensity, (b) characterized by connection and relationality to what is beyond the self, and (c) socialized through multiple experiences (i.e., both within and outside organized religion)" (p. 47).

Roehlkepartain (2004) surmised that spiritual development is an important dimension that emphasizes processes, spiritual change, transformation, and maturation. However, he pointed out that the word 'development' implies growth and this is incongruent with an understanding that spirituality is fully formed at birth in individuals, and that spirituality is often suppressed socially over time. He also argued that spiritual processes involve the interaction and dynamics between ecological influences, and spiritual development involves a trajectory across time as opposed to disconnected stages of development.

Roehlkepartain (2012) presented a theoretical framework of spiritual development created from an extensive research project involving 6,725 teens in eight countries. It is important to note that the participants he included as teens actually ranged from 12 years up to 25 years. He stated that spiritual development is a “dynamic interplay between one’s inward journey and one’s outward journey” (p. 163). Three core developmental processes were constructed within this large research project, which included awareness or awakening, interconnecting and belonging, and living an integrated life, which all interacted with ecological influences. Awareness or awakening involves the self-awareness or world-awareness of the ways that self, others, or the universe, can cultivate meaning and purpose and contribute to identity. Interconnecting and belonging includes the interdependency and search for significant relationships, as well as the linking of various narratives and ideologies that offer meaning to life experience across time. Living an integrated life is the authentic expression of an individual’s personal characteristics such as creativity, values, and inherent strengths. This expression bonds the individual to self, others, the world, the sacred, and the transcendent. These findings may or may not be germane to my research.

An area that remains under-explored is the role of gender in spirituality, and it is hypothesized that spiritual development may differ according to gender in youth (Desrosier & Miller, 2007; Eade, 2004; Engebretson, 2004). A quantitative study conducted by Milevsky and Levitt (2004) with 694 preadolescents and adolescents found a significant difference on intrinsic religiosity between genders, with females scoring higher. This study also found that youth scoring higher on intrinsic religiosity had lower scores on scales for depression and psychological adjustment, although there were no significant differences between males and

females in this area. However, there was a significant difference in the area of loneliness with males scoring higher in the domain of loneliness. There were no differences in self-esteem between genders, although there was a difference between cultural groups with European Americans scoring higher than African and Hispanic Americans. Milevsky and Levitt proposed that gender differences could be due to socialization factors. They do not discuss potential contextual or cultural factors, or issues of race and oppression, or TGL in relation to spirituality and gender.

Eaude (2004) also proposed that spiritual development in boys and girls likely differs due to societal, cultural, and family systems and structures; however, there is a lack of research in this area to make any generalizations or depictions. One study by Desrosier and Miller (2007) found relational spirituality to be more prevalent in adolescent girls than boys. Relational spirituality included such things as daily spiritual practice, religious devotion, and attendance and interaction in spiritual and religious activities with others. Spirituality was also positively associated with decreased levels of depression for girls but not for boys. Analysis demonstrated that daily spiritual experiences, forgiveness, positive religious coping, and benefits of belonging to a congregation predicted a better outcome of psychopathology for girls. Of interest was that positive congregation benefits did correlate with decreased depression for boys, and congregation problems were associated with increased depression. This differs from the study above where intrinsic spirituality was found to be more prevalent in girls, as opposed to positive benefits from relational spirituality. The results of both studies indicate that certain aspects of positive spirituality do decrease depression in both genders. Social congregation was most important for males in regard to loneliness and social relations.



In a grounded theory study of adolescent males and spirituality Engebretson (2004) found that the boys had a strong need for identity development, connectedness and belonging with friends and family, and that moral codes were linked to belonging. The boys had a strong drive to seek purpose in life, they used prayer through challenging times, and they held concerns for world issues. This is congruent with the literature above that social concerns are a spiritual factor for males. It appears that there has not been enough research in the area of gender differences to make generalizations, and to determine the specific spiritual needs of children. This area is beyond the scope of this study, although it is of interest as there may be emergent factors which could be important.

#### **2.5.4 TGL Responses**

Although trauma responses are not the focus of my research they may factor into the findings. Janoff-Bulman (2006) professed that not only are there tangible losses; there is an internal shock with aspects of disorganization and disintegration resulting from the psychological unpreparedness for the extremes of a new, disrupted and altered reality. A psychological trauma is described as a stress-related event invoking intense feelings of distress, anxiety, helplessness, fear, or disorientation that challenge our cognitive structures and perceptions regarding our worldview, meanings, and purpose in life (Ai & Park, 2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006; Park & Ai, 2006; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 2006). Bonanno and Kaltman (2001) outlined typical TGL responses including confusion and preoccupation, dysphoria, pining, yearning, and loneliness.

Gabarino and Bedard (1996) stated that for children two primary components of trauma are overwhelming cognitive, emotional and physical arousal, and negative cognitions which can

be difficult for children to manage alone. Brown, Pearlman, and Goodman (2004) conveyed that young children experience a range of TGL symptoms including phobias and fears, enuresis, separation anxiety, and irritability. According to Nader (2008), children experience a wider range of symptoms and reactions to TGL than adults. Difficulties can include struggles with cognitions, attention, and concentration. Physical manifestations can include reactivity, various sleep disturbances, and some children may exhibit somatic aches and pains. Abnormal or exaggerated behaviours, hypervigilance, or hyperarousal, and an exaggerated startle response can also occur for children. Emotional disturbances such as numbing, avoidance, and restricted or blunted affect may be exhibited, and detachment and disassociation are more serious symptoms.

Very young children and preadolescents may experience more emotional and behavioural difficulties due to fewer personal capacities for coping with TGL (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Paris, et al., 2009). Incidents of previous TGL, relationship factors and other sociocultural factors can have an impact on children's responses (Green & Connolly, 2009). The age of a child, the social developmental level, temperament, cognitive and emotional expressive abilities, and language and communication style are all factors in a child's response to TGL (Green & Connolly, 2009; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Paris et al., 2009).

Children may have disrupted or clingy relationships or may demonstrate a lack of engagement and withdrawal from others (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Brown et al. (2004) elucidated that boys seem to exhibit more oppositional and aggressive behaviours, whereas girls display and report more depression and anxiety. They stated that symptom severity in children is also positively associated with adult mental health problems, and negatively associated with the coping skills of adult caregivers. Care-giving adults have been found to underestimate the

impact of trauma on children, and children's responses can go unnoticed or may be neglected (Brown et al., 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). When children's grief is unrecognized it is known as disenfranchised grief (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006).

Affective and behavioural responses are impacted by the perception of the event and how traumatic the individual child perceives it to be (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Taylor & Weems, 2009). When death is part of a TGL event, the type of death, whether it is expected, violent or sudden, does not appear to matter in relation to the response of children (McClatchy, Vonk, & Palardy, 2009; Paris et al., 2009). Paris et al. (2009) asserted that children may not be able to psychologically prepare for an anticipated loss, and all types of death are perceived as sudden or traumatic. Taylor and Weems (2009) found that preadolescent children identified traumatic events as less severe than adolescents and adults. Conversely, some children identified events as traumatic when adults did not. Trauma appears to be within the eye of the beholding child. This leads one to wonder how spirituality may be associated with perception or expectations.

In a recent study of 701 children, those that experienced one adverse event were ten times more likely to have mental health concerns, and children experiencing four or more adverse events were thirty percent more likely to experience both mental and physical health concerns (Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Cameron, 2011). Similar statistics were cited by Goodman, Brown, and Courtney (2002) who contended that TGL in preadolescence increases the likelihood of serious emotional and behavioural problems by three times. In the counselling realm children presenting with these types of concerns are highly evident. One wonders if prevention interventions could be helpful.

Complicated grief, also termed traumatic grief in the literature, can create psychopathology symptoms and struggles for children that confound adaptation. This occurs when the child experiences trauma related symptoms as a result of a loss, which disrupt or affect the grieving process (Cohen & Mannarino, 2004; Edgar-Bailey & Kress, 2010). TGL symptoms take precedence over the grief process, and the child's ability to resolve and integrate the loss is further compromised. Increased struggles with psychosocial adjustment and increased symptoms of psychopathology in children are often related to events that are incomprehensible to them (Simon, Feiring, & Kobielski McElroy, 2010; Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). Traumatic, intrusive and disturbing thoughts, images and memories contribute to the child's pain and can be triggered by situations, people, places, smells, and sounds that remind the child of the event (Cohen & Mannarino, 2004).

A mixed methods study by Urman, Funk and Elliot (2001) examined the experience of childhood trauma and trauma narratives. They incorporated a grounded theory approach with six preadolescent children ages 9-13 and discovered the stages and processes that children go through in experiencing TGL. Their core finding involved a process where children engaged in negotiating and maintaining balance between aspects of life which were normal and those that were different post trauma. Children attempted to integrate aspects of normalcy, such as a sense of security, familiarity, and 'everydayness' from their pre trauma worldview, with the different aspects, such as a sense of change, newness, threat, and danger resulting from the TGL event, as their post trauma worldview was transformed. The researchers theorized that this negotiation process was adaptive, with an attempt by the children to hold on to normal aspects of themselves and their lives.

Children reported witnessing strong adult expressions and responses to TGL, which were normally not common behaviours of their caregivers in the children's experience. Adults also attempted to control their own emotions at times and console the child. These two differing adult responses were modeled and therefore witnessed by the child through the TGL event. The negotiating process included attention to the trauma, and emotional and instrumental responses. Children directly involved in the TGL event were found to negotiate acceptance and denial of the TGL, which included beliefs that everything would be okay. The researchers administered the Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children, and the results demonstrated that children who were direct victims had more symptoms of distress than those who indirectly experienced TGL. Accordingly, post traumatic distress symptoms such as nightmares, fears, intrusive thoughts pertaining to the trauma, and cognitive avoidance were more endorsed for direct victims. There was no mention of impacts to spirituality in this study.

Family connection and emotional openness, in terms of expression of feelings of parents or caregivers, is considered to be a critical factor in recovery and processing of traumatic events (Lutz, Hock, & Kang, 2007; Nader, 2008; Urman et al., 2001). These factors may be relevant to spirituality and my research. Lutz, Hock, and Kang (2007) interviewed 48 eleven year olds and their parents who were participating in a longitudinal study of maternal openness since birth. This part of the study was conducted within a couple of months after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Maternal openness was found to remain considerably stable over the 11 years prior to the catastrophic terrorist event. Through correlational analysis the researchers found that maternal openness was correlated with child openness with no gender differences. Surprisingly, maternal openness also correlated with decreased depression

symptoms in fathers. Parental depression accounted for 24% of the variance of child outcomes, and maternal openness accounted for 11% of the variance, for a total of 35% variance in the child outcome scores. Therefore, parental psychopathology and emotional availability after TGL has an influence on children. They did not address spirituality in relation to the TGL and family openness, and connection, and whether this was a factor in psychopathology.

Lutz et al. (2007) related their findings to other studies that have found that depressed individuals tend to suppress open expression of emotions. They contended that children are able to emulate positive parental coping strategies of emotional expression and find ways to cope and manage distress. Urman et al. (2001) surmise that openness and discussion of TGL events may allow children to make sense of confusing and conflicting emotions, and provide relief from distress.

In relation to my study the following concerns may emerge as relevant factors. An open family communication dynamic may promote healing and adaptation in TGL. Whereas parents who are struggling with their own negative impacts to TGL may not be emotionally available or able to model positive adaption and coping strategies. When considering the nature of attachment and trust between the parent and child, along with the effects of TGL on both parent and child that can occur, one can be led to wonder how spirituality might also be influenced, or how it might play a role in coping.

What is missing in this area of research is the impact of TGL on children's spirituality, including spiritual development, spiritual health and wellbeing, spiritual worldview, spiritual relationships, and spiritual coping and resilience. It is understood that TGL can have profound effects on children, and this ultimately could contribute to processes associated with spirituality.

Furthermore, TGL likely shapes or contributes to an individual's spiritual meaning making and spiritual worldview. Nevertheless, this area remains greatly under-researched in preadolescents.

## **2.6 Defining and Conceptualizing TGL**

In framing my research, it was important to review the TGL literature in order to understand how TGL has been defined and conceptualized, and its effects on individuals. Research has demonstrated that TGL experiences are significant mental health issues. TGL can contribute to feelings of alienation and spiritual disconnection, it is linked to distress and psychopathology including anxiety and depression, can contribute to high risk behaviours and have negative impacts on overall health and wellbeing (Bellingham, Cohen, Jones, & Spaniol, 1989; Cotton et al., 2009; Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Longo & Peterson, 2002; Prince & Howard, 2002; Thompson & Cui, 2000; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005; Verma & Sta. Maria, 2006). TGL events can cause adverse effects on development, lead to psychiatric symptoms, and contribute to future problems and difficulties (Briere, 2006; Ford, 2002; Thompson & Cui, 2000). Trauma has been found to disrupt attachment processes and functioning, and disrupt the developmental trajectory (Briere, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006, Decker, 1993; Johnson, 1989; Nader 2008). Multiple traumas experienced in childhood can create greater struggles for some individuals, or more resilience in others (Reuther & Osofsky, 2013).

Grief, bereavement, mourning, and trauma are often used interchangeably in the literature. Hooyman and Kramer (2006) explicated that grief is a universal human response to the "loss of something or someone important to us" (p. 16), and it "is a complex; highly individualized phenomenon with a wide range of what is considered "normal" in different social and cultural environments" (p. 15). Hooyman and Kramer (2006) clarified that bereavement is

the loss of someone significant either through death or separation, and that mourning is the social act or expression of grief. Children recognize death as permanent by the age of five, and by the age of eight they begin to make meaning of death (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). This seemed to be pertinent and important for my research with preadolescents in regard to spirituality and meaning making processes in TGL.

Defining trauma was a necessary component for sampling in my study, and thus the trauma literature was examined. McCann and Pearlman (1990) defined trauma as an event that is sudden or out of the norm which goes beyond an individual's perceived ability to meet the demands of the event and its effects. They further conveyed that the trauma disrupts a person's frame of reference and related schemas. The trauma may be physically or psychologically threatening and effect one's sense of safety, security, survival, or sense of self. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2014) reported that traumatic events include serious injuries that are experienced by the child, witnessing serious injury or death of another, threats of injury or death, or the violation an individual's physical integrity.

Childhood traumas can include various types of abuse and victimization, separation and loss, family pathology, catastrophes and natural disasters, violence, terrorism and wars, animal attacks, accidents, illness, death, infectious disease outbreaks, and other life threatening or dangerous events (Cohen et al., 2006; Johnson, 1989; Monahan, 1993; Nader, 2008; Yeager & Roberts, 2003). Childhood traumas were classified by Terr (1991) into Type I (single events) and Type II (multiple, ongoing or recurring events, or an extreme or horrific single trauma). She proposed that children suffering from Type II events differed from those experiencing Type I events. Research that corroborates this theory outlined below.



Trauma and grief can overlap with interrelated processes that are difficult to distinguish, creating complex responses to bereavement (Paris, Carter, Day, & Armsworth, 2009). Trauma symptoms experienced by the individual or observed by others are very similar to those in grief and loss. The responses to trauma can be varied and complex, and can differ in relation to development.

### **2.6.1 Meaning Making, TGL, and Worldview**

One's worldview is a conception, theory, or mental model regarding how one interprets, perceives, and makes sense of the world, life, and the universe (Vidal, 2012). Meaning making and worldview are connected with spirituality, and therefore are applicable to my research. Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) explicated how typically our worldview is stable, meaningful, benevolent, predictable, trustworthy, and comprehensible. When traumatic events occur which are sudden, unexpected or beyond normalcy, that violate societal and cultural norms, and that lack contextual fit, individuals struggle with making sense of a disrupted worldview, which taxes coping capacities (Janoff-Bulman, 2006; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Rechelt, & Tjersland, 2005). Individuals are challenged and experience a cognitive and emotional need for rebuilding shattered basic assumptions regarding the world and their self-identity (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Mossige et al., 2005; Neimeyer, 2006; Park & Ai, 2006). In making sense of the event, a new worldview must include the negative realities of the trauma that may be threatening and painful (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992, 2006). O'Connor (2002-2003) described meaning making as an individual creating or discovering significance in events with cognitive and emotional components, which can affect responses in the cognitive,

behavioural, emotional, and physiological domains. The spiritual domain seems to be an area that has been overlooked.

Thompson (2007) argued that since spirituality provides an avenue for meaning making when major loss occurs it can create a loss of ontological security (our sense of rootedness) and a crisis of meaning. He professed that anyone involved with helping people cope with bereavement is charged with assisting people to respond to significant challenges to their spirituality. Meaning reconstruction involves engaging people in identifying the meanings they have lost and creating new individual and unique frameworks of meaning. Thompson declared that reactions to TGL also do not occur in a social vacuum. Individuals create meaning through wider cultural spheres which include factors that are structural and also involve power, discrimination, and oppression. Therefore, the social context of grief is important especially in terms of recognizing when grief is disenfranchised.

Kilmer (2006) pointed out that not enough is known about how children cognitively process and make meaning of TGL. Children may ruminate, which is a process of recurrent thinking related to the TGL event within a short time frame (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). While rumination is seen as a natural response to TGL stimuli, it can lead to deep struggles and detrimental outcomes if it is not resolved (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2005). Critical to meaning making, the cognitive accounts, appraisals, or narratives children develop post TGL may lack resolution or causal connection, and may be maladaptive (Mossige et al., 2005). Meiser-Stedman, Dalgleish, Glucksman, Yule, and Smith (2009) found that maladaptive appraisals after a trauma event were associated with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children. They concluded that maladaptive appraisals were involved in the development and maintenance of

PTSD. Nader (2008) expounded that TGL can create challenges to a child's self-concept, confidence, mastery and life skill development. Children who are able to engage in healthy constructive processing are able to fare better in terms of adaptation (Simon et al., 2010).

A few authors have conveyed that TGL can destroy spiritual confidence creating challenges to spiritual worldview and salient spiritual dimensions (Angell, 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). When death is involved in the trauma it can bring forth questions or ponderings related to the existence of an afterlife, or the purpose of death and/or suffering in life. Gabarino and Bedard (1996) elucidated that spiritual aspects, including meaning making and finding purpose, are important factors in TGL. Several researchers speculated that these metaphysical and spiritual crises are likely difficult for children to process independently in healthy ways (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Simon et al., 2010). According to Gabarino and Bedard (1996), processing thoughts and the re-integration of conceptual worldviews are spiritual tasks surrounding a TGL event. If these tasks are not successful then psychological and physiological symptoms can ensue. Adult guidance in the facilitation of expressing narratives, as well as with organizing and constructing meaning of traumatic experiences is viewed as important for children in managing TGL (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Mossige et al., 2005).

### **2.6.2 Meaning Making and Spirituality**

Some research has identified that children have an existential awareness and they exercise personal agency or individual choice in forming and integrating a comprehensible spiritual worldview (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Houskamp, Fisher, & Stuber, 2004; Hyde, 2008). Children draw upon cognitions, prior learning, family beliefs, social and cultural stories and narratives, including media and popular cultural, and spiritual frameworks, in

meaning making (Hyde, 2008; Pahl, 2002). When a child encounters new experiences or information they consider and integrate chosen aspects into their understanding and spiritual worldview (Bosacki & Ota, 2000; Houskamp et al., 2004). Hyde (2008) explains how children appear “to enter the space between each of these different frameworks in order to select eclectically those elements from each which created meaning for themselves” (p. 241). However, not much has been researched in regard to TGL and its effect on the spiritual worldviews of children.

Very little research has explored spiritual processes and experiences for children in TGL. However, spiritual concerns, distress, and struggles with worldview are beginning to be recognized as trauma symptoms in children (Thompson & Walsh, 2010; Walker, Reese, Hughes, & Troskie, 2010). Furthermore, Scott (2004) discovered that children can have spiritual experiences during TGL events. Yet, these findings have not been fully embraced within the models of TGL. The spiritual domain is an area that is greatly lacking in the area of children and TGL.

## **2.7 Models of TGL**

There are several models and theoretical frameworks that inform the area of TGL and are important for my area of study as they provide insight into how TGL is often processed, experienced and managed by individuals. A few include spiritual aspects including coping, adjustment and practices which may be applicable to my study. Early theories of TGL are psychoanalytic in nature, an orientation which was pioneered by Sigmund Freud. The initial models developed by Freud and Bowlby associate child development, early attachments, and relationship bonds with grief and loss (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Freud viewed grief as *work*

needing to be done. Therefore, he developed a task framework where the primary task was relinquishing the relationship in a process of ‘decathexis,’ or detachment and separation from the deceased (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). This led to other researchers approaching TGL models from tasks, stages, phases, or processes, with associated psycho-social-spiritual and physiological changes (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007).

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) was instrumental in the area of grief and loss as she identified five stages of dying. Her stages included 1) shock and denial, 2) anger, resentment and guilt, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, and 5) adjustment and acceptance. Her stage approach has been utilized and modified in many current models of TGL, including grief task models and phases of grief models (Cohen et al., 2007; Osofsky, 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1993). However, her model was developed through studying adults who were dying, and not with individuals who lost a loved one. It also did not include children experiencing TGL. Yet her model remains dominant in grief and loss in the field of social work.

Worden (1996), and Hooyman and Kramer (2006) overviewed some of the tasks involved in children’s grief. In the grief task model it is proposed that children have an understanding of death from an early age, and they may have continual questions about death and what happens after death. The child must face and manage the emotional pain and cope with not having the person present. An investment into existing or new relationships is important for the child, as is developing a new sense of identity. Structure and routine are important for the child in maintaining or returning to developmental tasks. As the child matures there may be triggers for re-experiencing grief especially at times of developmental milestones, ceremonies, or achievements. According to this model, a child will think about and question aspects of life and

death. What is missing from this model is the spiritual domain and my research could uncover further information in this regard.

Another area of theory includes social functioning related to TGL. This approach is more integrative in nature, and it seeks to understand emotions involved in grief, and how grief recovery can be impeded if the focus is only on negative emotions (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Cognitive processing and meaning making of the event are also seen as important aspects for recovery and reorganization of one's worldview (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, 2006; Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006; Neimeyer, 2006). Bonnano and Kaltman (1999) suggested an integrative model of grief incorporating features of various other models for understanding individual differences in grief. They assert there are four primary components to consider: 1) the context of the loss 2) the continuum of subjective meanings associated with the loss 3) the changing representations of the lost relationship over time, and 4) the role of coping and emotion-regulation processes. However, the spiritual component for the individual is also missing from this integrative model.

Currently, comprehensive and integrated approaches are emerging which include understanding the nature of relationships and attachment, continuing bonds, and resilience and adaptation in recovery from loss (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010; Cohen & Mannarino, 2004; Field, Gao, & Paterno, 2005; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010). For example, the dual process model conceptualizes grief as a dynamic process where individuals vacillate between focusing on the event (orienting towards loss), and avoiding grief (an orientation of restoration) while adjusting to primary and secondary losses (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Massat, Moses, & Ornstein, 2008). The primary loss is the initial loss that occurs, and the

secondary losses arise as a result of the primary loss and are specific or unique changes to which one must adapt (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Newer research also includes aspects of resilience, coping strengths, competency beliefs (self evaluations of achievement, efficacy, value, and worth), and posttraumatic growth as significant factors in TGL (Kilmer, 2006; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

The postmodern perspective has led to researchers qualitatively exploring subjective TGL experiences, including differences in relationship bonds, responses to TGL, and the trajectory of loss. For example, Rando (1985, 1986), and Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) challenged the belief in the need to detach from the deceased as they found benefits in the maintenance of continuing bonds that occurred with the deceased. In the continuing bond process, the relationship with the deceased becomes transformed from a physical relationship to an emotional and spiritual relationship (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). However, an individual may remain physically attached to tangible objects or belongings, that belonged to, or represent the loved one, and these objects have been coined as linking objects (Andrews & Marotta, 2005; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). This could be a significant factor associated with spirituality for children in TGL.

Although there are some common experiences, responses, and outcomes that individuals experience, and processes that they go through in TGL, research also suggests that the experience is unique to every person (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). According to Rothaupt and Becker (2007), many of the models of grief are pathology oriented and outdated, and previous beliefs are being challenged such as the idea of grief work and tasks. They state that cultural and contextual factors are significant as are emotional and spiritual aspects of TGL. Marrone (1999)

discussed spirituality as an important aspect for people in TGL. He identified four phases which include cognitive restructuring, emotional expression, psychological reintegration, and psychospiritual transformation. The final stage of psychospiritual transformation is relevant to spirituality. This involves a growth oriented existential and spiritual process of transformation which profoundly changes one's spiritual worldview. This often includes processing and transformation of central assumptions, attitudes and beliefs about death, life, compassion, love, and a higher power. He did not discuss how psychospiritual transformation pertains to children or to their development.

Wortmann and Park (2008) conducted a systematic review of the quantitative research pertaining to religion, spirituality, and bereavement, finding 73 relevant articles (but unfortunately did not list the date range employed). They categorized the research into the following constructs or dimensions of religion and spirituality: 1) affiliation and membership to a faith or spiritual community, 2) attending religious and spiritual events, 3) general religiousness including depth, commitment, and daily practices, 4) religious beliefs in a higher power and an afterlife, 5) composite beliefs and activities including beliefs and behaviours, 6) intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness and motivation, 7) religious and spiritual coping, and 8) religious and spiritual social supports, as well as spirituality including spiritual and transcendent experiences. In the studies that fit the spirituality dimension, all but one found that participants benefitted from spirituality in adjustment to the TGL event. Other studies in this group had positive correlations with wellbeing and self-esteem, and reduced psychopathology; however, there also were findings that were not correlated and the researchers deduced that multiple factors were likely involved. It was construed that multidimensional aspects are involved in spirituality and



TGL. The researchers proposed that further research was needed to look at elements such as meaning making, posttraumatic growth, and diversity. Of particular note, this study did not include any research conducted with children.

Theorists acknowledge that varying theories offer both strengths and limitations, and no one theory captures the complexity and multiple dimensions of TGL. There appears to be a lack of comprehensive multidimensional theoretical frameworks for TGL in regard to children. Some theorists have focused on the symptomatology of TGL for children identifying a range of physical and emotional behaviours, and some have created checklists or measures (Briere, 1996; Stroebe & Stroebe 1993; Terr, 1991). A multiplicity of factors can exist when an individual experiences adversity, and there are varying degrees of symptomatology, developmental, and psychobiological factors identified as important in TGL. Gabarino and Bedard (1996) theorized that in childhood TGL there are numerous developmental context concerns. Tishelman and Geffner (2011) asserted that research and models of TGL should adopt cultural, contextual, and ecological perspectives which could identify significant factors with this age group. However, the experience of spirituality, and the significance of spirituality and its role in TGL processes for preadolescent populations was not mentioned, and it is not yet really understood.

## **2.8 Spirituality, Health and Wellbeing, Coping, and Resilience**

According to Houskamp et al. (2004), there is an increasing recognition of a positive relationship between spirituality and overall health and wellbeing in the literature. They also conveyed that children and families struggling with TGL events report that their spirituality is important to them. Other research demonstrates that individuals rely on their spirituality and spiritual coping practices when managing crises and TGL events and find these resources helpful

in adjusting, providing hope, and contributing to wellbeing (Morse & O'Rourke, 2009; Wortmann & Park, 2008). Some of the TGL literature discusses aspects of resilience, thriving, coping strengths, competency beliefs, and that posttraumatic growth is linked to spirituality (Kilmer, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Spirituality has been found to be a salient aspect in coping for children who have debilitating, chronic or fatal illnesses, and for those who have experienced domestic violence, sexual abuse, or other traumatic events (Collis, 2009; Houskamp et al., 2004; Morse & O'Rourke, 2009; Pendleton, Cavelli, Pargament, & Nasr, 2002; Sveidqvist et al., 2003).

### **2.8.1 Spiritual Wellbeing and Posttraumatic Growth**

Within the literature there is a body of research on the development of scales to measure spirituality. One area of focus has been on obtaining valid and reliable psychometrics on spiritual well-being scales (Ellison, 1983; Fisher, 2009). However, these measures can be confusing as they incorporate both spirituality and religion (Cotton et al., 2009; Ellison, 1983; Fisher, 2009), which can lead to inaccurate measurement (Reamer, 1993). Most of the measures have been developed within the adult population and have been adapted for use with children (Cotton et al., 2006; Fisher 2009). They often conflate religiosity and spirituality into a single question. There is a lack of development of valid and reliable questionnaires and tools for children, as well as informative qualitative data (Houskamp et al., 2004).

Fisher (2009) assessed various scales employed in studies from 1983-2008 determining that multi-item scales are more reliable. However, he contended that most measures provide narrow views on the construct of spirituality. Fisher developed a 20 item measure which provided a four-domain model of spiritual well-being that included the personal (relationship

with self), communal (relationships with others), environmental (relationships with environment), and transcendental (relationship with a transcendent other or God). Fisher explained that since individuals embrace spirituality in multiple ways all of these areas need to be assessed. A limitation of this scale which he did not articulate is that its development is based upon interviews with educators, and not individuals from multiple disciplines. Moreover, children's perceptions of spirituality were not included. Fisher believed this tool can offer a balanced assessment, however the validity of the tool was conducted with adolescents. Although it does offer a starting point, further research is needed in this area especially for preadolescents.

Interestingly, Holder, Coleman, and Wallace (2008) used the Spiritual Well-being Questionnaire developed by Gomez and Fisher (2003). The authors adapted this measure, and also employed two measures of happiness, which were administered to 320 preadolescents in Canada. The children sampled were described as being from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds; however, the participant faiths were not articulated. The personal and communal domains of Fisher's scale were strongly associated with children's happiness. This is noteworthy given Hay's (2000) assertion that spirituality moves from the communal to the personal as one ages. Holder et al. (2008) found that spirituality predictors varied across happiness measures. The authors found that spirituality could be empirically separated from religion, and that spirituality and happiness are more strongly associated for children than for adults. They argued that personal meaning and relationships with others should be fostered and enhanced for children, as they appeared to be key factors for increased happiness and wellbeing. They concluded that further research is required in this area. Given that previous research on children's perceptions of God, the transcendental relationships are a curious domain. What was

not identified is whether any of these children also had experienced TGL in their lives.

However, given the large sample size it is likely that some children had been exposed to TGL events. This aspect has not been delineated in most of the research.

Staples, Abdel Atti, and Gordon (2011) found that a psychoeducation group for children incorporating meditation, guided imagery, breathing techniques, autogenic training, biofeedback, use of genograms, and self-expression through words, drawings, and movement reduced symptoms of posttraumatic stress, and improved hope. Positive and spiritual methods of coping are reported to contribute to a sense of control, mastery and hope, which are deemed to be necessary in recovery from TGL (Nader, 2008; Thompson & Walsh, 2010). Some of these activities such as meditation, breathing, focusing on positive images, or self expressive pursuits, may be employed by children independently or through prompts in times of adversity.

Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2006) found that children could experience transformative posttraumatic growth (PTG). PTG was correlated with competency beliefs within the child, and competency beliefs were also correlated to a supportive social environment. They concluded that adults can assist children in understanding meanings, managing reactions, expressing feelings, and validating event related thoughts and emotions. This can provide support which can lead to constructive rumination processes, and enhance competency beliefs. Kilmer et al. (2009) explored PTG in children and notably remarked that spirituality was the area in which children reported the most absolute growth. They hypothesized that these results may have been attributed to children's contexts and religiosity, or by adults encouraging faith-based coping or framing of the experience through their faith. They concluded that these results

pointed to a need to explore the importance of culture and context and the role of caregivers in the PTG processes.

PTG and the transcendence from childhood TGL has been found to occur through processes which include awareness, resilience, acceptance, forgiveness, care and compassion, and spirituality (Skogrand, Singh, Allgood, DeFrain, DeFrain, & Jones, 2007). Skogrand et al. (2007) described that resilience has been viewed as a combination of various behaviours including insight, initiative, creativity, morality, independence, humour, and relationships. Emotions such as anger and forgiveness have helped to move people forward from TGL events, and spirituality and spiritual beliefs are accessed in healing. In their research with adults transcending childhood trauma they found that the participants had a deeper spiritual awareness, and spirituality had assisted them through adversity.

### **2.8.2 Thriving and Coping**

The literature on thriving and coping includes some important aspects which could pertain to my research and are highlighted next. Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, Almerigi, and Lerner (2004) found that children with stronger spirituality have better outcomes of thriving, with spirituality being a mediator of religiosity. Thriving included the presence of healthy behaviours such as personal values, engagement in school, presence of a 'moral compass,' a search for a positive identity, future orientation, and prosocial views of gender equity and diversity. This suggests that spirituality should be assessed as a strength and a resource for children in TGL. Accordingly, Rawana, and Brownlee (2009) included cultural and spiritual factors in their strength-based assessment inventory for children and youth. Their strength inventory has been employed with children involved in child welfare and who have experienced

TGL events, in order to focus on strengths and assist children in improving their lives, and building the capacity for maximizing their potential (Brownlee, Rawana, MacArthur, & Probizanski, 2009).

Spirituality and spiritual coping strategies are often utilized by children as a resource when encountering a TGL event; however, children's spiritual coping differs from adults and adolescents. Using a grounded theory approach Pendleton et al. (2002) found several differences, as well as depth, and diversity, in the spiritual coping utilized by preadolescent children. They formulated eleven categories of religious and spiritual (r/s) coping that children engaged in during experiences of adversity, which differed from adult coping. Pendleton et al. found that children demonstrated substantially less negative spiritual coping than adults, and their spiritual coping strategies were less sophisticated than those of adults, however they did not fully elaborate on how these strategies were less sophisticated.

The categories in their model are as follows: 1) declarative r/s coping where the child announces to and expects a higher power to implement a positive and desired outcome; 2) petitionary r/s coping strategy where children believed God would respond but they felt there may be limits to God's ability and there also may be other influences to account for the request being met; 3) collaborative r/s coping where both God and the child have a responsibility in the outcome; 4) a belief in God's support where children believed that God assisted, benefitted, protected, and comforted them; 5) a belief in God's intervention; this was seen by the child as God being autonomous and supernaturally confronting the stressor independent of the child; 6) a belief that God was irrelevant where the child did not believe in God or felt God was not important in life events; 7) spiritual social support, which involved interactive processes with

God, the child, and others; 8) ritual response where the child engaged in r/s activities to cope; 9) benevolent r/s reappraisal where the child made meaning of a result by spiritual reframing of the event. When God failed to help them with a stressor, the child preferred to employ an explanatory model which limited God's power instead of endangering their view of a loving and supportive higher power; 10) a punishing r/s reappraisal, which included thoughts of the child that God's punishment was possible, however the children in their study continued to maintain a loving supportive view of God; 11) discontent with God or their congregation.

Pendleton et al. (2002) also included a child's anger as potential for the final category. However, they found that children held more disappointment, and disillusionment with God, or feelings of abandonment by God. In a similar study Moore, Talwar, Bosacki, and Park-Saltzman (2011) found that children prayed and believed that a higher power or God would help either directly or indirectly through providing necessary tools for coping and managing.

Benore, Pargament, and Pendleton (2008) quantitatively explored religious coping, spiritual growth, wellbeing, and adjustment in 87 youth aged 8-17 who were hospitalized with severe asthma. Children in this study reported more positive, relative to negative, religious and secular coping strategies, and felt that their spirituality was important to them. Negative coping was associated with poor adjustment. Positive coping from both religious and secular perspectives accounted for a significant variance related to adjustment, quality of life, depression, anxiety, and spiritual growth one month after discharge. Of interest was that worry about one's illness was counter intuitively higher in children with positive religious coping. This study further demonstrates that children engage in spiritual coping during stressful times in their lives and that spirituality is an important factor.

In a phenomenological study on coping with grief, Andrews and Marotta (2005) found that children used linking objects, such as toys, belongings of the deceased including clothing and jewellery, or photos, to maintain their relationship with the deceased. Some children also found objects in the natural world such as flowers, butterflies, and turtles to be comforting. The spiritual connections evolving from children's grief were the most relevant for them, and were part of spiritual family connections. They described the relational aspect as representative of an I-thou dynamic (as discussed above in 2.32). Some children felt comfort with a higher power and others were distressed or angry with God. The authors surmised that the meaning making process in TGL may differ for children as compared to older individuals. This study is congruent with previously mentioned studies demonstrating that children wish and attempt to stay emotionally and spiritually connected with those who were important to them who have died.

Jackson et al. (2010) conducted interviews with 188 adolescents between 14 and 18 years of age from various cultural backgrounds in the United States who had been placed in foster care. They analyzed the frequency of the data descriptions and compared belief in God with race or ethnicity. The view that spirituality included a belief in God was held by 87 percent of the participants, and 95 percent reported they believed in God and found trusting God gave them spiritual strength. There were no differences relating to race or ethnicity in adolescent's belief in a God. In relation to spiritual aspects during adversity 93 percent held a sense of hope, and over 80 percent felt that love and forgiveness were part of their healing process.

Many of the youth spent time alone, and prayed, as modes of coping when going through difficult times. It is not clear whether the youth isolated themselves, or whether they felt isolated



or disconnected from others during these traumatic situations. Approximately one third of the youth found it difficult to believe in God, and 45% had been angry with God due to pain and suffering in life. The authors felt these were spiritual problems for the youth. Even though these youths reported these spiritual concerns, over 80% reported that they felt joy and were able to find meaning in hard times, which could be evidence of spiritual coping or PTG. Whether the youth received support or resolved the spiritual issues independently was not articulated.

Over eighty percent of the youth believed that spiritual activities were helpful in coping during difficult life events. Spiritual activities described by the youth included prayer, spending time in nature, poetry and journaling, creative activities, attending spiritual events, meditation, music, yoga, exercise, and finding spiritual content and resources on the internet. Some youth also reported that they shared problems with others. A large number of the youth reported having spiritual goals, such as becoming a better person or seeking self-discovery, following a life plan (set out by a higher power), getting to know one's life purpose, and contributing in making the world better. The researchers concluded that youth experiencing traumatic events find strength and support in their spirituality and use it for coping and healing. It appears that youth engage in varying methods of spiritual coping and activities.

A recent constructivist grounded theory study was conducted by Karlsen, Coyle, and Williams (2013) with 9 preadolescent children ages 6-7 who were attending school. These children had not been identified as having experienced a difficult traumatic situation. Three of the 9 children were affiliated with a religion. The core finding was a reciprocal relationship between the unavailability of trusted adults, and a withholding process by the children regarding communication over spiritual matters. Children in this study reported being isolated and making

sense of spiritual matters alone. They found that these children had received implicit spiritual guidance and messages from trusted adults. Some of the adult views and stances were modeled and had influenced the children, and were integrated into the children's spirituality.

This study further illuminated that children withheld spirituality from trusted adults, and one hypothesis was that this could be a personal preference and part of natural development. One child reported sharing spirituality with friends as opposed to parents. However, most of the children reported withholding spiritual dialogue due to parental unavailability. The children identified adults as being too busy, hence unavailable when children had a desire to talk about spiritual questions, experiences, and insights. Other reasons included adults not making discussions about spirituality a priority, a lack of space and privacy, and adults being emotionally unavailable. The children in the study also withheld spiritual matters as topics related to death were seen as taboo, and they did not want to create negative emotions for their parents.

The child participants isolated themselves from others and did not share spiritual thoughts and experiences with others out of fear of suspicion and disbelief by others. Some of the children had spiritual experiences such as hearing angels, communicating with the deceased, conversations with God, and 'out of body' experiences but felt that these topics were avoided and banned in communication with others. Some felt that others were sometimes dishonest about having spiritual experiences. These experiences led them to mistrust the responses of others. The children disclosed hiding their spirituality, and having sought safer avenues of managing spiritual events, such as confiding in pets. This is the only study found that uncovered spiritual processes occurring between children and parents.

All of the studies suggest that children are actively, yet often independently engaged in their own spirituality. In relation to the last two studies cited above, one study included children experiencing TGL and the other did not. Of note, both studies found that children appear to withdraw and isolate their spiritual lives from others, especially adults, although the children had spiritual questions and experiences, and they acknowledged engaging in spiritual activities. A lack of communication between adults and children has been noted in other articles specifically focused on TGL. These studies contribute to the foundational knowledge within the literature, however it is evident that there is still much to be learned and explored in the area of children's spirituality and TGL.

## Chapter Three: **Methodology**

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methodology and philosophical underpinnings of the research, and how these guided the methods employed in this research project. This study utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach with an objective of generating a substantive theory of spirituality for children who had experienced trauma, grief, and loss. It sought to answer the question:

*“What are the processes, experiences, and understandings of children’s spirituality in response to trauma, grief, and loss, as manifested in outpatient counselling?”*

The initial section of this chapter presents a rationale for choosing a qualitative grounded theory (GT) approach for the research study. The second section provides an overview of the different GT approaches and a rationale for choosing constructivist GT. The third section elaborates on methods and details of the research design with a description of ethical considerations, the sample, recruitment of participants, the aspects of sampling, data collection processes, data coding and analysis, and theory development. The final section discusses issues of rigour including credibility, trustworthiness, transferability, dependability, conformability, authenticity, originality, resonance, and usefulness.

### **3.1 Rationale for a Qualitative Approach**

There are different approaches that could have been employed to study children’s spirituality, and each approach has its own elemental strengths and challenges. However, for various reasons I believed the most sagacious approach to this research project was an interpretive qualitative method. Primarily, qualitative research is suited to social work practice as it “connects with social work values” (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002, p. 46). Additionally, Merriam

(2009) clarified that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5). Moreover, Gibbs (2001) contended that qualitative research should be held alongside quantitative research, which tests ideas and breaks down problems into measurable concrete variables. She stated that social work research should be reflective, and embrace a value for qualitative research that identifies processes and meanings in the complexity of contexts. She also believed that service users should be included as participants and consultants in the research process. Gibbs asserted that a quantitative scientific method either ignores the tender qualities of spiritual subjective experiences, or tends to distort them into variables to be quantified. She further proclaimed that “concepts like culture, spirituality, warmth and empathy are difficult to measure as evidence yet they are clearly linked to effective social work” (p. 700). These were all salient aspects that related to my own philosophical paradigm.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explicated “the net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a *paradigm* or an interpretive framework” (p. 22) and this guides the research actions. In determining a methodology for research there should be congruence with the philosophical underpinnings of the approach and the ontology (theory of being) and epistemology (theory of knowing) of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2003) professed “the researcher brings to the choice of a research design assumptions about knowledge claims” (p. 13).

Paradigms within qualitative research often embrace a relativist ontology (a belief in multiple constructed realities), an interpretive epistemology (a belief that the participant and the researcher interact and shape one another), and employ naturalistic methods of inquiry, such as

ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative projects the researcher interprets the findings and acknowledges that their own experiences and background play a role in making sense of the meanings of the participants. The interpretive process involves complex reasoning and an iterative thinking process, which is engaged while cycling back and forth between data collection, analysis, problem reformulation, and writing (Creswell, 2003). A relativist and interpretive stance were congruent with my ontology and epistemology.

An interpretive qualitative method was suitable for this study for the following reasons. Interpretive qualitative research is useful for exploring human or social issues or problems. More specifically, when topics are emergent, and constructs and definitions are in flux, qualitative approaches are deemed appropriate (Ratcliffe & Nye, 2006). Nelson and Poulin (1997) conveyed that qualitative approaches are helpful in counselling and social work as they can uncover emerging processes, and examine and identify what things frame and influence personal events and contexts. They also stressed that as culture evolves more complex structures emerge. Children's spirituality is an emerging area of conceptualization and complexity with extremely limited examination in the field of social work.

Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005) purported the strength of qualitative research is that it enables a complex understanding of a specific social phenomenon, or context, and that it provides "complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue" (p. 1). It sheds light on the "often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals" (p. 1). Creswell (2007) claimed that qualitative research assists in understanding an issue and capturing its complexity as it is conducted in the

context of the “field” where individuals live or work. He explained that it is used when one wants to empower individuals and to hear their stories, and especially when one wants to hear silenced voices. These were important factors for me in conducting my research.

An advantage of qualitative methods is the use of open ended questioning. Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005) articulated that qualitative open ended questioning provides the researcher with the ability to probe further and ask how, why, or when questions of the individual. This type of questioning allows participants to provide rich interpretive and/or explanatory responses that are meaningful and culturally salient to the individual, and may be unanticipated by the researcher. For these reasons open ended questioning was employed.

### **3.1.1 A Rationale for the Use of Grounded Theory**

The goal of qualitative research is developing a descriptive or textured understanding of situations, or developing a theoretical model, which rely as much as possible on the participant’s viewpoints (Creswell, 2007). The qualitative method of GT is widely used, and is an effective and appropriate method for understanding psychosocial processes and occurrences within social interactions. This method seeks to discover emergent ideas and to increase the understanding of a context, the meanings, patterns, and processes involved for individuals, and how various things take place (Charmaz, 2005, 2008; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). Charmaz (2008) stated “emergent methods are particularly well suited for studying uncharted, contingent, or dynamic phenomenon” (p. 155). In GT it is assumed that individuals develop meanings of events and experiences through interactions, and these meanings affect their behaviour. The social processes within a context are sought to be illuminated. The method is helpful in examining

clinical practice issues and developing a related substantive theory (Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). GT can capture the essence of the participants' experiences and can elucidate the interconnected complexities of experiences.

Since its inception GT has been utilized as a method of research in numerous disciplines such as sociology, nursing, anthropology, health sciences, business, and social work (Cutcliffe, 2005; Forte, 2004). Tweed and Charmaz (2012) contended that it is a solid method employed in mental health and psychotherapy research used to analyze situations for marginalized individuals and groups. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) imparted that GT “comprises a systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry for the purpose of constructing theory” (p.1). The method can investigate the influences of situations, social structures, and relationships on patterns of interactions, behaviours, and interpretations (Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). A scan of the literature demonstrated that GT has previously been used with preadolescent children in exploring TGL, and it had been used in studying spirituality (Andrews, 2004; Coholic, 2011; Coholic, Loughheed, & Cadell, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006; Karlsen, Coyle, & Williams, 2013; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Urman, Funk & Elliot, 2001). However, the combination of TGL and spirituality did not appear to be an explicit focus of study for preadolescents in general.

According to Schreiber (2001), “grounded theory is useful when we want to learn how people manage their lives in the context of existing potential health challenges and is suited to social work” (p. 57). The method is useful in understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to their lives or in certain contexts, or in experiencing certain challenges; where relationships between concepts are underdeveloped or not understood; when there are gaps in understanding a



phenomenon; and where there is a lack of cohesive guidelines or frameworks for social work practice (Coholic, 2003; Forte, 2004b; Heath & Cowley, 2004; Schreiber, 2001; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). It can uncover patterns of meaning within contexts, and social constructions including hidden aspects, silenced voices, and power arrangements (Charmaz, 2005; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). The meaning making process for clients is an important aspect of social work, and it is a key component of spirituality.

There did not appear to be any studies specifically exploring spirituality in preadolescent children experiencing TGL in social work. Since the area of children's spirituality is nascent, qualitative methods of understanding are important before any type of potential common reality or transferable theory can be quantified, or for generalizations to be possible (Fook, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative GT methodology was deemed as apposite for better understanding children's spirituality particularly since there was very little understanding in this area.

The GT method (GTM) has many approaches and stances, which range on a methodological spiral reflecting the varying epistemological underpinnings from positivism to pragmatism and postmodernism (Charmaz & Bryant, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Mills, Bonner, Chapman, & Francis, 2007; Tweed and Charmaz, 2012). As new knowledge develops and new insights are applied to past theoretical perspectives we then see evolution of thought and application thus affecting approaches and methods. Charmaz (2006/2009) conveyed that how a researcher uses GT guidelines and processes is not neutral, and that GT can be used with postmodern methodological assumptions and approaches. Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) articulated that "the form of grounded theory followed depends on a

clarification of the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant, and on an explication of the field of what can be known” (p. 26).

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) affirmed that researchers contemplating the use of GT must “grasp the inherent complexity of what might be termed the ‘family of methods claiming the GTM mantle’” (p. 11). They stated that an understanding of the differing methods and lenses allows one to make informed choices and to provide rationales that support their choices. Therefore, in conducting a GT project it is important to have knowledge of the historical background and evolution, and to understand the various epistemologies and methods in order to choose a congruent approach to the proposed research.

### **3.2 Overview of Grounded Theory and a Rationale for a Constructivist Approach**

#### **3.2.1 Historical Roots of Grounded Theory**

GT was articulated by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in their landmark book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* first published in 1967 (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). This method is typically coined classic or Glaserian GT. Strauss went on to articulate his interpretation of the method with Juliet Corbin, and this is often referred to as the Straussian method. Over the past several decades GT has expanded and evolved to incorporate varying methods and differing paradigms.

The roots of GT stem from pragmatist views and symbolic interactionism (Glaser, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In pragmatism the truth or meaning of an idea rests in observable and practical consequences, and reality is changeable. Pragmatists accept that truths are not certainties; they are estimates and are perspective bound (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; McCready, 2010). Symbolic interactionism is premised on the belief that individuals, who are

engaged in social transactions, understand and act based upon meanings created in the mind.

There is an interaction of body and mind occurring within a social transaction. The term symbolic interactionism was coined by Blumer (1969) who elaborated on the conceptualizations presented by Herbert Mead.

The thrust of symbolic interactionism is based upon Mead's triadic nature of meaning (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Mead proposed the following: 1) Human beings act toward objects, people, and situations on the basis of the meanings they attribute to them 2) The meanings are a product of social interactions with others; 3) The meanings are restructured, modified, and transformed through a process of interpretation engaged in by an individual (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There is an interpretive reciprocal relationship among humans and the society in which these processes occur (Annells, 1996).

To understand this more thoroughly Mead (1934) portrayed how this process occurs through the development of the human mind and self, and through exposure and learning of language, as well as common understandings in social interactions. He articulated that gestures, which are social acts including communication, conversations, and actions, are interpreted by the individual, and reflected upon within the mind, which results in meaning making and subsequent behaviour, action or dialogue. Humans engage in interactions where meanings and symbols (such as language or actions) are essential to the expression of thought (Charmaz, 2005; Crooks, 2001). People understand a situation and make choices through interactions with the self and with others (Crooks, 2001). Self is defined via perspectives, expectations, and social roles in social contexts, and collective social definitions are learned through socialization (Annells, 1996).

Based upon these viewpoints of symbolic interactionism, it is the aim of GT to understand how reality is described and defined by individuals within societal milieus (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal of GT is to produce an explanatory theory related to experiences and social processes. Glaser (2004) maintained “the generated theory explains the preponderance of behavior in a substantive area with the prime mover of this behavior surfacing as the main concern for primary participants” (p. 10). Relationships of the key elements and the basic social processes of a phenomenon are identified and connected. The theory is explanatory or it enables prediction.

Glaser and Strauss (1967/2009) articulated that substantive or formal theories can be generated from using the GTM. Substantive theory is developed from a limited specific or empirical area of study such as emergency room care or counselling. It is formulated from the real world life of individuals. Abstracted theory is developed around a general domain, which in turn can be conceptually compared across substantive contexts.

The GTM is distinguishable from other qualitative methods as it combines an explicit procedure of constant comparison and conceptualization of data gathered from interviews, observations and other means, with the generation of theoretical notions, ideas, categories, and simultaneous and continuous development of theory (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Over time and across disciplines and perspectives the GTM has diversified along with the adoption of varying epistemological lenses. Holton (2009) declared, “Classic grounded theory transcends the specific boundaries of established paradigms to accommodate any type of data sourced and expressed through any epistemological lens” (p. 268).

Glaser and Strauss initially acknowledged that the GTM was a beginning venture and it would continue to evolve and develop (Annells, 1996; Cutcliffe, 2005). Not only did they individually expand upon the methods (strategies of inquiry) after their initial joint project, they applied different approaches to the implementation of practices in subsequent publications. It appears that they held differing epistemologies and there were differences in their methodologies (the theory explaining the methods). In reading text from both authors it appears that Glaser held a more postpositivistic stance (with some positivistic threads). In postpositivism there is a search to find a common reality that is independent of our thinking. Postpositivist researchers make knowledge claims using a cause and effect approach, reflecting select variables that have been focused upon and narrowed, and which are observed and measured through empirical study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Glaser originally maintained that this reality emerged from the data as a basic social process through constant comparison of the data.

Charmaz (2005) professed that Glaser's positivism provided an objective stance, logic and rigor, analytical procedures, comparative methods, and conceptual development. She pointed out that Strauss brought pragmatic and symbolic interactionist emphases to the meanings, actions and processes, but also focused on verification and objectivist assumptions grounded in positivism. However, Strauss appeared to take more of an interpretive symbolic interactionist approach that leaned towards constructivism. Annells (1996) identified that relativism was detectable in Strauss and Corbin's assertions of interpretation of a reality. For example, she noted that Strauss located the researcher as being actively involved with the method.

A relativistic paradigm posits that: a) truths are not absolute but are relative to the individual, and are local and specific, b) there are multiple realities, and all truths are equal and important, and c) realities can be subject to redefinition (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Charmaz, 2004; Houston, 2001; Phillips, 2000; Shadish, 1995; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Guba and Lincoln (2005) professed that realities are socially co-constructed and the findings of a study are co-created by the participants and the researcher. Knowledge is created based upon multiple perspectives including the data gathered and the analysis of the researcher. Annells (1996) contended that with this relativistic, subjectivist, and interactionist stance the GTM can be located within constructivism.

Symbolic interactionism and constructivism have common features (Charmaz, 2009; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Norton, 1999). Constructivist philosophy acknowledges that human beings subjectively interpret the world through their perceptions. Individuals construct meanings and knowledge through interactive internal and external learning experiences and social transactions, and these interpretations and meanings provide explanation and guidance (Creswell, 2007; Kraus, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Norton, 1999; Piaget, 1976). Knowledge is also constructed through symbols and language (Fisher, 1991). The participant's subjective meanings are often negotiated in interaction with others and via operant historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2003; 2007). People have common meanings and individual meanings, so in order to understand unique meanings one needs to look at the process of meaning construction and the different influencing factors. Kraus (2005) professed that meanings are embedded with culture, ideologies, stereotypes, beliefs and worldviews within the social world.

### **3.2.2 Grounded Theory Tensions and Problematics**

Heath and Cowley (2004) pointed out a paradox in symbolic interactionism that is pertinent to postmodern GT: “if meaning is conferred on the social world by interaction of actors, can there be a reality of basic social processes to be investigated?” (p. 142). This question invites one to ponder on the constructivist approaches employed by Charmaz (2006/2009) and Clarke (2005). These authors identified that there are often multiple processes occurring in the research and argued that searching for a single process can immobilize the researcher. A repositioned GT with postmodern perspectives applies approaches and procedures for identifying systemic and structural processes and effects (Annells, 1996; Clarke, 2005; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Postmodern researchers view reality as diverse, complex, situational, and context specific, and they locate knowledge as co-created through interaction and language (Campbell & Ungar, 2003; Charmaz, 2012; Clarke, 2005; Gibbs, 2001).

Glaser (2002) contested the constructivist GTM calling it a misnomer. He argued that the approach taken by Charmaz was qualitative data analysis and descriptive capture. He made several assertions in this regard, and contended that GT focuses on latent patterns; the concepts come from the constant comparative methods and sensitive theoretical sampling, which are continuously fitted to the data. In this article he maintained that there is one core variable or core category, which is a main concern for participants with properties of various related categories developed from the data. The core variable reoccurs in the data, and it is a central and stable pattern that has explanatory power (Holton, 2010).

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) conversely articulated that a repositioned GT “seeks to recognize partial knowledge, multiple perspectives, diverse positions, uncertainties, and

variation, in both empirical experience and its theoretical rendering” (p. 51). Postmodern thinkers have acknowledged that GT assumptions and processes are far from neutral. They believed that new analytic techniques can be amalgamated with the basic framework of GT in producing knowledge that allows for complexity and layers of deconstruction and reconstruction (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Clarke, 2005; Wasserman, Clair, & Wilson, 2010). The postmodern paradigm embraces complexity and asserts that social structures and roles, power relations, politics, economics, capitalism, individualism, language, social roles, gender, other identities, culture, race and ethnicity, religion, and spirituality all contribute to diverse experiences, contexts, and meanings (Annells, 1996; Campbell & Ungar, 2003; Clarke, 2005; Gibbs, 2001; Sands & Nuccio, 2002).

Reason and Bradbury (2006) purported that postmodern approaches draw on pragmatic philosophy, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, systems thinking, complexity theory, and constructionist theory. GT allows for an openness of these postmodern theoretical concerns (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012). A postmodern commitment to representing the multiple voices and experiences of the participants is very apparent. Clarke (2005) asserted that the interactionist GTM already has the capacity for postmodern perspectives “in ways fully compatible with what are now understood as situated knowledges” (p. xxvii).

According to Bryant and Charmaz (2007), repositioning GT with postmodern perspectives solves epistemological problems and moves it into interpretive conceptual frames. They also related that it builds on emerging fluidity and interactive processes while recognizing diversity and variation. Within a postmodern constructivist paradigm, knowledge is created



based upon multiple perspectives including the data gathered, and the researcher draws upon personal and theoretical experiential knowledge in the analysis and is actively involved (Annells, 1996; Charmaz, 2006/2009). Charmaz (2000) described the use of analytic tools which are open ended and flexible, and heuristic strategies that are constructivist in nature. She also eloquently drew attention to the apparent interaction of subject and interviewer, the tension of objectiveness, and the constructivist nature of theory development.

Bryant and Charmaz (2007) identified the researcher's position, the context of the situation, priorities, and various perspectives and interactions as important factors for consideration by the researcher. The researcher recognizes that she and the participants construct knowledge, and the researcher's interpretation in theory generation is a construction in itself produced by emergent processes (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2005) took an approach that builds upon the constructivist elements in GT which "does not subscribe to the objectivist, positivist assumptions" (p. 509). The emphasis is not on the methods but instead is on the studied phenomenon. She articulated a reflexive stance based on knowing and paying close attention to empirical realities while locating oneself within these realities. The researcher shares in the construction of data through decisions about the questions which are asked, by choosing the conceptual categories and their definitions, and the theoretical renderings are posited. Accordingly, the researcher interacts throughout the entire research process bringing past and current knowledge and experiences, and therefore the data and its analysis are not neutral.

Charmaz (2005) stated that "grounded theory entails developing increasingly abstract ideas about research participants' meanings, actions, and worlds, and seeking specific data to fill

out, refine, and check the emerging conceptual categories” (p. 508). She asserted that this analytic interpretation of the processes illuminates how participants’ worlds are constructed. The subjective and collective experiences are located within the larger structures which allow us to understand how they develop, work, and change or continue. She further elaborated that these relationships and processes between social structures and human agency have theoretical and practical implications in social research studies.

As GT approaches have evolved there have been considerable discussions and controversies regarding the emergence of new stances. Glaser maintained that categories emerge from the data and are not forced. He wrote Strauss a fairly contentious letter, which he also published in his 1992 book *Basics of GT analysis: Emergence vs. Forcing.* In the book he asked Strauss to remove his book from the market, and critiqued Strauss’ methods believing they were modified to the extent that it should be termed ‘Full Conceptual Description,’ and not associated with GT. Strauss did not formally respond to Glaser through the literature. However, in the second edition of Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) book there was more clarity and elaboration on emergence from the data, although the coding processes and analysis methods still differed from Glaser’s.

Charmaz (2008) pointed out that researchers need to bracket knowledge to address emergence and limit preconceptions while still possessing sufficient theoretical sensitivity to follow theoretical leads from the data. Attempts to resolve these tensions have furthered the development of the GTM with differing strategies. Charmaz (2008) conveyed that Glaser had abandoned some of his assertions, such as the single basic process, and in turn recognized

multiple processes and how participants resolve their main concern. He continued to exclaim that emergence should be the researcher's focus.

According to Charmaz (2008), constructivist GT “retains the original focus on emergence but does so in relation to the conditions of the research and the standpoints and interactions of the researchers” (p. 160). Constructivist GT includes co-constructed shared meanings in the data, and the researcher constructs abductive reasonings from the data in a search for theoretical explanations. Researchers are directed by their perspectives, but this will not determine their research or its findings, however reflexive researchers aim to make this explicit. In a constructivist paradigm the researcher is deemed to be embedded in the process.

In developing a GT, the researcher creates codes from the data by using a word or short phrase that describes or captures the essence of what is stated or occurring in the data (Charmaz, 2006/2009). There are various coding stages and processes involved. Charmaz (2008) discussed how both Glaser's theoretical codes or coding families (groups of concepts) and Strauss and Corbin's axial coding were approaches that encouraged a researcher to force the data into extant categories, which is application and not emergence. She contended that coding families are not mutually exclusive and distinct, rather substantive codes in a study often cut across different coding families and these should be used more as directions to pursue. She felt that researchers should pose theoretical questions which arise from interpreted issues, as opposed to applying theoretical concepts. The emergent inquiry process involves actively and systematically examining the data, successively developing and sensitizing categories, and constantly asking action and analytic questions. This impels the researcher to examine the studied world in detail, explore theoretical possibilities, and follow emergent leads. She highlighted that “The iterative

process of going back and forth between collecting and analyzing data raises the emergent level of analysis” (p. 161). Charmaz believed that researchers need to gain intimate familiarity within the area of study for emergence to occur. Intimate familiarity along with the checking processes built into the method, and the overall transparent process contribute to the credibility of the research (Charmaz, 2005).

### **3.2.3 Rationale for Choosing Constructivist Grounded Theory**

After considerable reading, reflection, and analysis of the assertions and contentions of the varying grounded theorists, learning through course work and assignments, and numerous discussions with mentors and peers I chose to incorporate a social constructivist GT approach. A constructivist GT approach with its philosophical underpinnings and methodological applications were an appropriate fit for the chosen area and purpose of my study based upon the nature of the questions, my values and beliefs, and my social work practice and research skills. The constructivist paradigm articulated by Charmaz (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz 2005, 2006/2009, 2008, 2009; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012) had many salient characteristics which aligned with my ontology and relativist epistemology, which I have discussed in Chapter One.

Many of the contentions in Charmaz’s approach to constructivism were congruent with my own worldview and social work practice. For example, I agreed with the assertion that knowledge is socially constructed, and there are tacit, silent, or unrecognized aspects within social constructions. She recognized and took into account the social locations, cultural traditions, and situational, and interactional contingencies, which I felt were important in the social work realm. Like Charmaz, I also felt that my own experiences and worldview would have some influence in the questions that I would ask, the choices that I would make in the

research, and the conceptual formulations in the theory building process. Considering diversity in theoretical starting points opened the inquiry process to theories beyond symbolic interactionism. There were various theoretical approaches in the areas of spirituality, TGL, and social work, which were relevant to my study. Charmaz further acknowledged organizational and societal discourses, and structures identified by Clarke (2005), and I believed these were important considerations within a client's situation and within the practice setting.

A social constructivist method is person-centred, and it views the child “as part of an integrated whole within her environment” and “the child is accorded no less understanding than any other person” (Fisher, 1999, p. 94). Fisher (1999) elucidated that in a social constructivist approach researchers begin with the frame of reference of the child and validate that position in their work. Children are viewed as experts on their own lives and can offer insights and descriptions of their thoughts, feelings, and subjective experiences. This stance has been a focus within my work with children in mental health.

A social constructivist framework professes that we must take our own constructions into account as we are not separate within a research study (Charmaz, 2006; Fisher, 1999; Northcutt, 2000). An understanding of the meanings and concepts is articulated by the researcher and discussed with the participant producing a third definition that is co-constructed (Charmaz, 2006; Fisher, 1999; Northcutt, 2000). Personal characteristics, thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and events are elicited and understood as subjective processes. These perspectives on knowledge constructions fit with my own ontology and epistemology. They also fit well with the understanding of spirituality in social work, in which individuals find meaning and purpose through their relationships with self, others, or a higher power (Canda & Furman, 1999).

GT's roots in symbolic interactionism appeared to be congruent or complementary to understanding the elements of spirituality which other authors have defined, such as connectedness, meaning making, self-identity, and purpose in life (Canda & Furman, 1999; Sheridan, 2004). Symbolic interactionism describes the process of the development of self-identity through reflexive meaning making in interactions, relationships, and dialogue with others (Goulding, 1999; Heath & Cowley, 2004; Norton, 1999). GT is an acceptable exploratory method for spirituality where a lack of cohesive guidelines or frameworks exists (Coholic, 2003; Forte, 2004b). GT is useful for topics that include meaning and purpose, consciousness, and transpersonal experiences, and it is helpful in understanding spiritual aspects in social work and other areas of practice (Coholic, 2003; Forte, 2004a; McSherry & Watson, 2002; McSherry, 2006; Walsh, 1992).

The fact that some child development and spiritual development theories were rooted in constructivism (Fowler, 1981; Fowler & Dell, 2004; Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2006) further supported the use of a constructivist GT approach. GT methods can capture children's meanings, understandings, and experiences, providing rich descriptions of spiritual and TGL processes and contextual factors (Charmaz, 2006). Creswell (2007) illuminated that within a social constructivist paradigm the researcher looks for the complexity of views rather than narrowing the meanings into a few categories or ideas.

Several authors have contended that GT is suited to social work inquiry for the following reasons: the natural fit of symbolic interactionism to social work, the process of interviewing is similar to counselling, there is a focus on the participant's perspective, and the findings can emerge directly from clients, practitioners, or associated persons (Coholic, 2003; Forte, 2004a,

2004b; Gilgun, 1994). Since there did not appear to be any theoretical frameworks pertaining to spirituality in preadolescent children experiencing TGL, the GTM seemed to be suitable for beginning to understand what was occurring for children. It was believed that there were possible interactions, processes, or actions occurring for children and parents, as well as for clinicians. The development of an explanatory theory through the GTM would serve to provide a theoretical framework for further research.

My clinical skills as a social worker and knowledge of some aspects of the area of study complemented the theoretical sensitivity required in GT. Glaser (1978) contended the researcher needs to remain open to what is actually happening, and in social work one must meet clients where they are at. He also stated that sensitivity involves having a theoretical grasp of the area and being steeped in the literature of the variables in order to generate familiar categories. The researcher must be able to go beyond the data to new problems and ideas. My work in children's mental health has provided me with this exposure, along with the ability to reflect and analyze, and this assisted with the process of how to explain and interpret the data. I felt it was important to understand how children interacted with their spiritual world, the meaning it had for them, and how their experience was also understood by their parents and counsellors. Creswell asserted the researcher uncovers "processes of interaction among individuals" (p. 21) and I was curious about the processes of children's spirituality within the TGL counselling realm.

### **3.3 Understanding the Methods in Grounded Theory**

The methods utilized to analyze the data and uncover processes need to be understood in order to conduct a GT study. The methods of GT involve data collection, coding, and theory development. In collecting data for the development of theory, interviews and observations are

conducted within a particular substantive area under review (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Substantive theory development is a process which emerges from the constant comparative method where data, codes, categories and memos are compared to one another (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). The theory is applied only to the area examined, however it may be a stepping stone and a strategic link in developing formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Formal theory can be derived directly from the data or through comparisons across substantive contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). Formal theory encompasses and integrates all the diverse contingencies and qualifications of the substantive categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). The process of analysis and theory development can differ depending on which specific methods are utilized.

GT involves two data analysis processes in the constant comparative method (Walker & Myrick, 2006). First the coding and systematic analysis of data generates a hypothesis. Secondly, scrutinizing the data for categories and properties contribute to conceptualizing and theorizing. Heath and Cowley (2004) related the methodological divergences between Glaser and Strauss, explicating how Glaser extended GT through more detailed concepts of theoretical sampling, coding, and memos, and Strauss and Corbin elaborated on theory process and analytic techniques.

It can be confusing for a novice researcher to navigate the literature and to understand the differences, although it is crucial to delineate the processes of coding and analysis. Walker and Myrick (2006) critiqued the differences in the Glaserian and Straussian methods, which center on the researcher's "role, activity and level of intervention in relation to the procedures used within



the data analysis process” (p. 547). Coding, memo writing, constant comparison, and theoretical sampling are critical processes in GT development.

### **3.3.1 Delineating the Coding Processes in GT**

Coding is the first process used to analyze the data, and there are various methods. The process of coding entails identifying themes contained in each specific text segment. Coding allows one to fracture the data, label, and categorize the component parts into similar and different elements (Glaser, 1978; Schreiber, 2001; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Glaser (1978) elucidated that codes conceptualize underlying patterns of empirical indicators and processes in the data. A conceptual code is “the essential relationship between data and theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 55). According to Glaser (1978), coding holds central importance in generating theory.

The open coding stage is the beginning of comparative analysis. This process is reviewing phrases, sentences, or paragraphs line-by-line. It is in this analysis of text where units of meaning and key words or phrases are identified, along with the writing of memos, which leads to initial properties and emergent categories (Bowen, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Goulding, 1999; Schreiber, 2001; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Open coding is a process of opening up the text to individual thoughts, ideas, and meanings, and implicit and explicit concerns that are embedded within it (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). In this process the “data are broken down into discrete incidents, ideas, events, and acts and are then given a name that represents or stands for these” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 105).

In naming the code, meaning and imagery associated to the data are used, which may entail an ‘in vivo’ code (words used by participants). The researcher’s goal in open coding is to generate as many emergent categories along with their properties that are relevant, relate to, and

fit the empirical substance of the data (Glaser, 1978; Kelle, 2009). Open coding involves an analytic process where concepts, properties, and dimensions are identified from the data, and are examined for similarities and differences allowing for discrimination and differentiation among categories (Charmaz, 2006; 2009, Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Walker and Myrick (2006) highlighted that identifying dimensions is a core task. Glaser (1978) purported that “open coding carries with it verification, correction, and saturation phenomenon” (p. 60).

Selective or focused coding is more conceptual in nature, and it assists with synthesizing and explaining the expansive amount of data (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser, 1992; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Focused codes that are brief, active descriptors of the data allow for visibility of substantive processes (Charmaz, 2009). In selective coding, a core variable or category is determined (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser, 1992; Walker & Myrick, 2006). The core category has several functions for generating theory including integration, density, saturation, completeness, and delimiting focus (Glaser, 1992). Glaser (1978) asserted that in selective coding one delimits the codes and selects a core variable, which is often a basic social process with which other codes are related. In such delimiting processes, variables that relate to the core code in significant ways are focused upon. The core code thus guides further data collection and theoretical sampling.

Theoretical coding in the classic method is the process of conceptually integrating and merging substantive codes into hypotheses and generating a representative depiction or theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 2009; Walker & Myrick, 2006). A conceptual process occurs by determining how the substantive codes relate to one another, and theoretical codes are developed. These relationships of the substantive codes as hypotheses are integrated into theory

and the story is woven back together (Glaser, 1978). Glaser (1978) indicated “theoretical codes give integrative scope, broad pictures and a new perspective” (p. 72). Hernandez (2009) described the theoretical code as a relational model of an empirical pattern. Glaser initially presented 18 theoretical coding families, and later added another nine, of which the analyst can use in rendering an empirical pattern for their theory (Glaser, 1978; 1998). Although, Glaser (1998) remarked that other patterns are continually being discovered. The codes have considerable overlap and are not mutually exclusive. They are intended to keep the analyst sensitive, conceptual, and theoretical to the interrelations implicit in the data.

Theoretical sensitivity is another important aspect related to coding. It is an inductive process of the researcher who moves from the particular to the abstract in building theory from the specifics (Glaser, 1978; Schreiber, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Glaser (1978) insisted that the researcher remains sensitive to the data by entering with few predetermined views and ideas. He also asserted that having a theoretical grasp of the literature and the variables assists in explanation and interpretation of the processes within the data. Glaser believed that constant comparison and attending to the data are critical for theoretical sensitivity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) included theoretical notes as part of open coding and they impart the importance of emergence from the data. They asserted theoretical sensitivity is achieved through various analytic tools (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 553).

Glaser (1987) argued that the theorist must attend to the data and only use literature and theory after the core concept and basic social process are identified. However, it is impossible to fully ignore prior knowledge and theoretical understandings which are present even tacitly (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Heath and Cowley (2004) described researchers as social beings who

bring with them experiences, assumptions, and understandings of social processes. This philosophy is recognized in symbolic interactionism.

**3.3.1.1 Articulating the difference in Strauss and Corbin's coding process.** The later stages of coding articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) differ from the later stages of coding described by Glaser (1978). After open coding, Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) described the process of axial coding. They described axial coding as the relation of categories to subcategories via properties and dimensions. It is a conceptual linking process that answers questions about the phenomenon, relates structure with process, and provides explanatory power (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). An axis for the GT is developed in yielding a central category through relating phenomena, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action and interactional strategies, and consequences (Kelle, 2007). This is similar to the coding families presented by Glaser in theoretical coding, however it is engaged in at a different stage in the analysis process (Kelle, 2007; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Both authors contended that their methods conceptually reconstruct the fractured data (Charmaz, 2008).

In the third phase of selective coding Strauss and Corbin's (1998) method focuses on theory refinement and integration. The authors imparted that integration is an ongoing process from beginning to end and is an interactive relationship between the analyst and the data. The salient dimensions and findings are in the codes, the memos written by the researcher, and the diagrams utilized in framing and conceptualizing. The core category has a range of variability and is abstract and powerful, as it amalgamates all the categories into an explanatory whole. A path of logic or analysis is elucidated throughout the theoretical explanation. Theoretical

saturation is achieved when no new properties or dimensions emerge from the data. Core concepts and relational statements are used to explain what is occurring in the social process.

Charmaz (2008) recommended that the researcher look for and pursue the issues, theoretical directions, and concepts, that the data suggest. Charmaz (2006/2009) further contended that researchers can analytically hone their conceptualizing process making it more coherent and comprehensible through the skillful use of theoretical codes, if they fit the data, and assist in the interpretation. She cautioned around ensuring that the researcher is not forcing a framework on the data. Charmaz (2008) also recommended diagramming the relationships amongst categories for analytic complexity development. She believed these approaches can facilitate original ideas, which can move the researcher further, and beyond axial coding or theoretical codes outlined by Strauss and Corbin, and by Glaser.

**3.3.1.2 Differences in the approaches with the use of literature and analysis.** The significant divergence related to the use of theoretical understandings and literature between the methods of Glaser, and Strauss and Corbin, is the role they play, and when they are utilized (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Glaser (1978) asserted that one must learn to ‘not know’ in maintaining sensitivity to the data. In his approach, literature should only be used as further data in theoretical sampling once the emergent theory is satisfactorily developed (Heath & Cowley, 2004). However, Strauss and Corbin (1990) asserted that literature can be used to stimulate theoretical sensitivity and in generating hypotheses. Literature is used early on in Strauss and

Corbin's method, and can be used in identifying what is known in regard to a subject of study (Heath & Cowley, 2004).

Induction is a key process in Glaser's assertions; however, in Strauss and Corbin's descriptions deductive reasoning and questioning, and validation and elaboration through data comparison are prominent in the analysis (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Strauss and Corbin contended that validation and constant comparison ensure emergence and prevent distortion from the researcher (Heath & Cowley, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). There appears to be merit in both arguments. Walker and Myrick believed that gaining an understanding of the thinking and assumptions underlying the coding process is time well spent. It can help in explicating methods of analysis, and in making informed choices in the research method. It is up to the researcher to determine the style and method of analysis that is deemed appropriate for their study.

Charmaz (2006/2009) professed that the comparative methods are neutral, and researchers can adopt and adapt the data analyzes guidelines for coding, theoretical sampling, and memo-writing for diverse studies. She viewed grounded theory methods as a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages. They are flexible and are not methodological rules. Charmaz (2008) elucidated that researchers have utilized and loosened the GT strategies without endorsing the positivist assumptions. She felt that a procedural approach hinders emergent processes and strengths, as well as theoretical innovation. She provided guidelines for open and focused coding; comparative methods for data, codes, categories and concepts; memo-writing and conceptualizing; theoretical sampling, saturation, sorting, and theorizing (Charmaz, 2003; 2005; 2006/2009; 2008).

Charmaz (2006/2009; 2008) illuminated that for the most part both Glaser, and Strauss and Corbin conveyed that the emergent theory is discovered as an external reality independent of the observer. Charmaz (2008) posited that the steps and processes of grounded theory are interactive and researchers are involved cognitively and bring their own perspectives and positions to the process. The data and theories are not discovered, they are constructed through our past and present experiences (Charmaz, 2006; 2009). Through a constructivist lens the researcher looks for complexity and multiple meanings, aims for abstract understandings, and searches and checks for all possible theoretical interpretations (Charmaz, 2008). The interpretations offered in the theory portray constructions of reality within the area of study.

### **3.4 Research Design**

This section outlines the specific methods that were employed in my study. As noted earlier a constructivist GTM was chosen and the principles and processes outlined by Charmaz (2006/2009) mainly guided the process. Charmaz stated there is “an emphasis on examining processes, making the study of action central, and creating abstract interpretive understandings of the data” (p. 10). She explained “certain codes crystallize meanings and actions in the data” (p. 11). I used numerous texts, articles and dissertations as guides in the research process. The process followed is explained below and outlines the research initiative, recruitment of participants, sampling, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness/rigor, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.4.1 Initiative and Recruitment**

The initiative for this study occurred through my work at a children’s mental health centre in Northwestern Ontario, and it was the selected site for recruitment. The centre provides

services to children 0-18 years of age who are experiencing social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, and who reside within approximately 60 km of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The recruited participants were preadolescent children ages 8-12 who were referred to the centre for counselling services, and had experienced TGL; parents of the children; and clinicians who worked either directly with the participants, or were otherwise interested in participating. Recruitment of children and parents was done through an information letter provided to all clients by clinicians (appendix A), and through posters put up at the agency (appendix B). The process for recruitment of the clinician participants involved providing information regarding the study to managers at a meeting, and then to staff at team meetings. A follow up email was also sent to clinicians. Clinicians could contact the researcher independently, and this was done by all of them.

Tweed and Charmaz (2012) stated that sensitizing concepts, where the researcher generates initial ideas of interest and attends to theoretical frameworks as guides comprise the starting focus of GT. I was sensitized to the areas of spirituality and TGL through my social work practice and my previous education. This allowed me to develop the interview guide and to delimit the scope of my intended project.

**3.4.1.1 Preadolescents as participants.** According to Parke, Gauvain, and Schmuckler (2010), the constructivist cognitive approach to child development theorized by Jean Piaget maintains that children's knowledge of the world increases developmentally into more complex cognitive structures over time. The stage associated with preadolescence is the concrete operational stage, where children begin to anticipate, consider and understand the thoughts of others, can understand attributes, can think deductively, and they develop logical reasoning.



Piaget characterized children at this stage as thinking in terms of a concrete reality or the observable. Developmental considerations of language and cognition are important for the interviewing process and questions with children.

Studies on children's spirituality that have been conducted with preadolescents demonstrate that they have the cognitive ability to contemplate spiritual questions, reflect on and communicate profound philosophical and existential insights and meaning related to their connections within their reality including self, others, nature, and a higher power, and that they demonstrate metaphysical and spiritual comprehension, and have unique spiritual worldviews (Gersch, Dowling, Panagiotaki, & Potton, 2008; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008; Reimer & Furrow, 2001). They also engage in processes of reflecting perceptually on their experiences and can converse about deep ontological, existential, and spiritual philosophy (Bosacki & Ota, 2000). Therefore, it was argued that a sample of preadolescents could offer valuable information in regard to their understandings and experiences of spirituality. Consequently, it was decided that children were to be interviewed in this study, although other ways of communicating such as drawing or acting would be options provided.

**3.4.1.2 Parents and clinicians as participants.** Charmaz (2006/2009) contended that a constructivist GTM "places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (p. 130). The analysis can lead the researcher to establishing reasons for meaning constructions and subsequent actions and processes. Charmaz (2006/2009) also argued that the constructivist approach allows the researcher to learn "how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often, hidden positions, networks, situations, and relationships" (p. 130).

She continued by stating “differences and distinctions between people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate differences and distinctions” (pp. 130-131).

The researcher needs to be alert and aware of the conditions where these differences and distinctions arise and continue to be maintained. Therefore, in order to understand the broader context of children’s spirituality and garner a greater understanding of the areas outlined above, it was decided that parents would be interviewed. To further this angle, as well as to gain a practice related perspective it was decided that clinicians would also be interviewed.

The child and parent participants were informed that they could contact the researcher independently without their counsellor knowing to maintain confidentiality. However, they all chose to inform their counsellor, and asked the counsellor to provide the researcher with their contact details, and the counsellors contacted the researcher directly. Children and parents were not informed by the researcher if their counsellor had participated in the research, and it is not known if counsellors shared that they did participate in the research with any of the other participants, including other counsellors.

### **3.4.2 Sampling**

In the GTM there are several sampling processes that occur. The sampling process is sequential with convenience and purposive sampling (also known as selective sampling) occurring first, which identifies the setting and the population involved (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007). This sampling process involves selecting participants based on their experience with the general concern, problem, issue, or phenomena under investigation (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter; 2007). Breckenridge

and Jones (2009) conveyed that sampling is then theoretically oriented. Theoretical sampling progressively and systematically tailors data collection to serve the emergent theory. Charmaz (2006/2009) described theoretical sampling as a process with an aim of selecting people, events, and information to develop properties, and to delineate the boundaries and the relevance of the emerging categories.

Theoretical sampling (sampling to compare incidents and concepts) occurs during the study along with maximum variation sampling, which aims to sample for diversity and heterogeneity (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007). It involves the construction of tentative ideas regarding the data and then exploring and examining them through further inquiry that is strategic, specific, and systematic (Charmaz, 2006/2009). Charmaz (2006/2009) argued that this leads to robust category development with variation and relationships to other categories.

Sampling of new participants, and theoretical sampling, continues until no new codes emerge in the generated data and a saturation point is felt to be achieved in the conceptual information attained (Hood, 2007; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter; 2007). As a study progresses there is a point where there is a declining return from collecting data, and more data doesn't necessarily produce more information, spark new theoretical insights, or add to the overall theoretical story or framework (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Mason, 2010). Charmaz (2008) maintained that saturation is a theoretical concern and not just a methodological measure of redundancy in the data.

Closure is gained through constant comparison, re-examination and questioning of the data, and theoretical saturation is sought. Strauss and Corbin (1990) elucidated that saturation occurs when “(1) no new data seem to emerge regarding a category; (2) the category

development is dense, insofar as all of the paradigm elements are accounted for, along with variation and process; [and] (3) the relationships between categories are well established and validated” (p.188). In determining saturation, a researcher assesses that the theoretical framework, its categories, and their properties, are found to be sufficiently dense and explain variations in the data (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009; Charmaz, 2006/2009; Dey, 1999; Hawker & Kerr, 2007). However, Charmaz (2008) asserted that the focus on filling the properties and saturating each category is fundamental, but whether or not saturation is accomplished is debatable. She pointed out that it is not really possible for a researcher to absolutely know if all of the salient aspects and variations have been given sufficient coverage or been defined.

The number of participants interviewed and required to reach saturation varies in the literature. Creswell (2007) suggested conducting up to twenty interviews when using the GTM. However, according to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) saturation can be achieved in as little as six interviews. They stated saturation occurs when sufficient data is gathered to enable the development of meaningful and useful themes and interpretations. Mason (2010) found great variation in qualitative dissertation sample sizes. He asserted that sample size can be irrelevant, as the results from the interaction of an interviewer and the participant produces quality data which constitutes the measurement of its value. Charmaz (2006/2009) professed that smaller studies with modest claims can attain saturation early. The process and steps one takes to ensure data or theoretical saturation is achieved should be explicit to increase the rigor and transparency (Bowen, 2008). Bowen (2008) suggested increasing the size of the sample is not always necessary and that sample adequacy is more important. He contended that depth and breadth of

information in each complete theoretical category are indicators of sample adequacy. He further indicated that when a category has been adequately explained that theme saturation has occurred.

**3.4.2.1 Participant sampling.** In this study 18 initial interviews were conducted with 6 children, 5 parents, and 7 clinicians, to reach adequate theoretical saturation within the scope of the study. The children were accompanied by a parent, caregiver, or trusted adult for the interviews. One child resided with a family caregiver who chose not to participate, and the child chose to have her counsellor present. After the first interview, the researcher asked adults attending with the child to hold on to their own thoughts as much as possible and to wait for their own interview. This was done strategically to allow children to be able to offer information independently. The parents were then interviewed on their own to allow them to speak openly or share insights separate from the child. The counsellors were interviewed separately. Four of the clinicians were providing counselling services to the children and parent participants.

The interview data collected was coded and subjected to constant comparison throughout the data collection and analysis process. The data from child/parent dyads were analyzed, as well as the triad of child, parent, and respective clinician. The child interview data were analyzed as a group, as was the interview data for the parent group, and the clinician group. Subsequent interviews were held with 3 clinicians, 2 parents and 1 child. Two other parents were contacted for follow up interviews with them and their child but they did not follow through with appointments made. These additional interviews aided with theoretical sampling as well as the member checking process described later. Moreover, data collection procedures and theoretical sampling occurred in order to more fully saturate the categories. All participants were offered and received a reasonable monetary compensation in the form of a twenty-dollar gift card.

**3.4.2.2 Interviews.** In collecting data for the development of theory, interviews are conducted within a particular substantive area under review (Dey, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). The questions asked in GT interviews are typically exploratory in nature and move from general to specific, and the interviews are generally semi-structured or unstructured (Creswell, 2007; Norton, 1999; Schreiber, 2001). The key goal was to understand the problem through the eyes, words and experience of the participants. An interview guide (appendix C) using a variety of open ended and direct questions was piloted with two children, a female age 8, and a male age 11, who were not involved with the centre. The aim of piloting was to ensure the questions were developmentally appropriate and that they would elicit rich and thick descriptions. The use of drawings, pictures, stories, or toys can also assist children in recalling and relating events, and can provide powerful non-verbal communication (Instone, 2002; Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). These strategies were familiar to me as a social worker, and were offered to the children. However, only one child chose to utilize drawing and writing a poem, the others preferred just to talk and share their experiences and views.

There are other important engagement considerations when interviewing children such as: choosing a good time of the day; creating a neutral, non-threatening, pleasant and therapeutic environment; and attempting to be transparent in the purpose and expectations of the interview with the child (Instone, 2002; Docherty & Sandelowski, 1999). Child and parent participants were offered a choice of being interviewed in their home, a neutral location, or at the centre. All chose to be interviewed at the centre and they chose the time of day for the interview. The child interviews lasted between approximately 25 and 45 minutes. The research procedures were

discussed during the process of obtaining informed consent (prior to each interview) as well as at the end of the interview to ensure transparency.

### **3.4.3 Use of Audiotape and Transcription**

The use of an audio-recorder allows the researcher to more fully attend to, and focus on the participant, whereas note taking can be more cumbersome and distracting, and important details can be missed (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Schreiber, 2001). A digital audio-recorder was utilized to assist with recording and transcribing the content for the purpose of coding and analysis. The participants were informed that the audio-recording was to be destroyed once it was transcribed verbatim by a transcriber who signed an oath of confidentiality and was provided with participant pseudonyms (described below). Any information that was provided outside of the audio-recording was noted on paper, then summarized and reviewed with the participant, and permission was sought to include it in the data analysis. Transcripts were authenticated by the researcher prior to destroying the taped conversations to ensure accuracy. Participants were provided with their transcript and offered two weeks to review it for changes, deletions, or the ability to withdraw from the study prior to its use in data analysis. After this two-week period if withdrawal was not indicated by the participant, or no changes were identified in the transcript content, the analysis of the transcribed data and field notes began.

### **3.4.4 Use of Computer Software for Data Collection and Analysis**

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is often used in data analysis for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). Creswell (2007) argued that CAQDAS stores and organizes data, and can help the researcher to conceptualize different levels of abstraction in data analysis. NVivo 10 was utilized to store data

including interview transcripts, as well as field, coding, and theoretical memos. It assisted with the data analysis processes of coding, categorizing, diagramming, and the creation of conceptual models. Word search queries were conducted, categories were delimited, and then properties were expanded within the program. Memos were written, sorted, and compared with codes and categories, and other memos.

All the notes and memos were entered into the NVivo program. However, there were limitations to the analysis process with the computer program. Therefore, traditional methods of writing key codes and phrases onto sticky notes were employed so that these could be visually sorted and moved around on a large table. Notes and memos were printed in order to sort and compare these items manually. As new ideas, concepts, and category descriptions were developed they were entered into NVivo. Diagrams and charts were developed through the analysis process and also used in the constant comparison method, as well as in peer and mentorship discussions, and member checking.

### **3.4.5 Coding, Substantive Theory Development, and Memoing**

The data analysis and theory development begins with coding the first interview and writing memos. Coding offers the researcher analytic scaffolding which is the foundation of theory development building (Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2003; 2005). Tweed and Charmaz (2012) described the development of a GT and liken it to the building of a pyramid. The coding of the data identifies meanings, actions and processes in the data which form the building blocks. The second stage of focused coding and category development creates smaller amounts of blocks that are richer and conceptualize the blocks below. Each level is more sophisticated in its level of



abstraction and interpretation. The peak of the pyramid is the core category which encompasses all of the concepts and processes interpreted from the data below.

**3.4.5.1 Open coding.** The open coding stage is the beginning of comparative analysis. Data is broken down in a process of line-by-line analysis of text. In naming the code, meaning and imagery associated with the data is used (Schreiber, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The units of meaning, discrete incidents, ideas, events, acts, and key words or phrases are identified, along with the writing of memos, which leads to initial properties and emergent categories (Creswell, 2007; Goulding, 1999; Schreiber, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Each set of data is coded and checked with previous codes to see whether the codes are relevant to refine the central concepts and theoretical categories (Bowen, 2008). This coding process provides an analytic frame as codes are compared and contrasted (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Schreiber, 2001). The researcher's goal in open coding is to generate as many emergent categories along with properties that are relevant, relate to, and fit the empirical substance of the data (Glaser, 1978; Kelle, 2009). Glaser (1978) purports that "open coding carries with it verification, correction, and saturation phenomenon" (p. 60).

In the first phase of initial coding the codes I chose were short, simple, active gerunds that were analytic, and identified characteristics of the text segments (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Schreiber, 2001; Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2007; Walker & Myrick, 2006). The use of in vivo codes allowed me to remain close to the data. While I continued to ask participants the same initial questions, more targeted theoretical questions were posed to inquire further about the initial codes in subsequent interviews. For example, the words "heart" and "soul" were being

used by the first participants. These initial codes and subsequent categories were the first to emerge and develop.

I also attempted to look for any processes occurring during the interviews and within the content of the interview data, such as the process of testing the terrain where participants were cautious in dialoguing with others about spirituality. I noted in the first child interview that the parent was at times interrupting the child, correcting the child, or providing words and/or finishing the child's sentences. This seemed to cause the child to stop sharing certain aspects and withhold some information, or be cautious and look to the parent for direction as to what to say. In subsequent child interviews I asked children outright about who they talked to about their spirituality and spiritual thoughts and experiences. All of the children looked at the parent sheepishly or cautiously prior to answering some of these questions openly, and at times appeared guarded, or qualified what they had said.

**3.4.5.2 Focused coding.** According to Charmaz (2006/2009), the second major phase of coding is focused coding where compelling and frequent codes are synthesized from the large batch of data. She stated that through focused coding properties of the categories are identified, defined, and the characteristics are delineated. A core variable, which is often a basic social process that the other codes relate to, is often sought in GT through delimiting the codes in the selective coding process (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2008). In delimiting only those variables that relate to the core category in significant ways are attended to (Glaser, 1978). However, this can force data into one framework and limit the development of other emergent categories; therefore, the researcher needs to keep this in mind (Charmaz, 2008). Researchers often find multiple processes in their studied settings (Charmaz, 2006/2009; 2008; Clarke, 2005). It is up to the

researcher to determine whether a core category has emerged or if there are other processes occurring alongside that complement or conflict with one another. The delimiting and development of a few core categories can guide further data collection and theoretical sampling.

In the focused coding process, I used more conceptual and selective codes that analytically categorized the data to capture and synthesize themes (Charmaz, 2006/2009). I sought to compare and determine similarities, differences, and gaps in the emergent sets of categories and their properties (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006/2009). Different questions were framed and asked in order to gain a better understanding of the meanings and experiences of the participants. This allowed me to further develop the emerging categories and themes, and to uncover the processes for children's spirituality during the interviewing process.

**3.4.5.3 Theoretical coding.** Theoretical coding is a third phase or process I engaged in, which included conceptualizing how the substantive codes relate to one another and to the core category (Charmaz, 2006/2009; Glaser, 1978). Substantive theory development is a process which emerges from the constant comparative method where all data, codes, categories, and memos are compared to one another (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 2009). Glaser (1978) indicated that "theoretical codes give integrative scope, broad pictures and a new perspective" (p. 72). The four stages of the comparative method outlined by Bowen (2008) included "(1) comparing incidents applicable to each theme that emerges from the data; (2) integrating themes and their properties; (3) delimiting the theory; and (4) writing the theory" (p. 139).

I continued to check elemental codes and concepts, and to identify patterns and theoretical properties of the themes that emerged from the data (Bowen, 2008). In a desire to maintain reflexivity I continued to focus on the words of the participants and I was cognizant not

to force the data into categories. I did reflect upon Glaser's (1978; 1998) 27 different theoretical coding families which the analyst can use in rendering an empirical pattern for their theory. These coding families have considerable overlap and keep the analyst sensitive, conceptual and theoretical regarding the interrelations implicit in the data. I also reviewed the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (1998). They describe a conceptual linking process that answers questions about the phenomenon, relates structure with process, and provides explanatory power to the theory development. I noted that I had intuitively engaged in some of the processes each of these authors highlight.

Through comparing and contrasting data pertaining to each participant group I was able to develop conceptual properties of each of the substantive categories. I compared participant groups to other participant groups to understand processes and interrelations. I then compared around individual triadic groups of child, parent, and clinician to examine processes and look at linkages, comparisons and contrasts. Later in the process, literature was examined and theoretically linked in relation to the developed categories and conceptual ideas.

A central category was developed through relating phenomena, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action and interactional strategies, and consequences throughout the coding paradigm processes (Kelle, 2007). In this phase I used various procedures including sorting, diagramming, mapping, and integrating data, as part of the inter-related analysis and theory development process (Charmaz, 2006/2009). Bowen (2008) described an analytic diagram as a "loom for weaving a story line of the many patterns discovered" (p. 145). The variety of sorting and diagramming procedures assisted me in creating visual representations of the related concepts and are part of my audit trail.

I continued to collect data and write memos until adequate categorical and theoretical saturation occurred when no further data, new theoretical insights, or new properties emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006/2009). Theoretical sampling occurs until redundancy happens. I was able to fit any new data, ideas and concepts into the previously developed categories. This replication process ensures completeness and comprehensiveness in categories (Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2003). According to Bowen (2008), through the rigorous processes of saturation the data categories are condensed, well established, explanatory, and validated.

**3.4.5.4 Memos.** Memos are short notes that a researcher writes as they move through the analysis of data in order to capture thoughts that may lead to new insights and ideas (Charmaz, 2006/2009). The three main types are field notes, code notes, and theoretical notes. These memos include different types of information that capture the researcher's cognitive process and connections, crystallize questions, record hunches and ideas, and provide direction and conceptualization (Borgatti, 2010; Bowen, 2008; Charmaz, 2009; Glaser, 1978). All of these types of memos were utilized for this study. The sorting, and comparing of my memos and the data led to the development of further memos. This assisted with raising the coded data into conceptual categories, delineating properties, and developing the analytic framework (Charmaz, 2006/2009).

Theoretical memos are the core stage of theory development where ideas about substantive codes and related theoretical relationships are written (Glaser, 1998). The sorting of theoretical memos allows the researcher to put the fractured data back together again into a theoretical framework (Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 2006/2009). I employed the strategies of sorting,

charting, and diagramming, and then integrating theoretical memos to determine how they best fit together (Charmaz, 2006/2009). This led to the theory model development.

**3.4.5.5 Substantive theory development.** Substantive theory development is a process which emerges from the constant comparative method where all data, codes, categories, and memos are compared to one another (Charmaz, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). A storyline is developed that connects all the categories and a hypothesis is developed stating the predicted relationships (Creswell, 2007). The description is rich, complex, and dense, and builds from the substantive categories and properties to a robust GT with its predictions and explanations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009). All of the above analysis and theory development processes contributed to the data analysis phase in this study.

### **3.4.6 Rigor**

The quality and rigor of a research project can increase the trustworthiness, and determine the applicability of the findings (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative approaches seek rigor and validity through trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, and authenticity as aspects of rigor (Creswell, 2003, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Charmaz also discussed originality, resonance, and usefulness as criteria for GT studies (Charmaz, 2005; Tweed & Charmaz, 2012).

Creswell (2003; 2007) outlined eight strategies of attaining accuracy to be considered in qualitative research. The strategies included triangulating multiple data sources, methods and theoretical schemes; clarifying researcher bias; spending time with participants, and in the data analysis process; providing rich and thick descriptions for transferability; member checking to determine accuracy of the findings; presenting negative or discrepant information; the use of

peer review or debriefing; and the use of an external auditor. Carlson (2012) offered advice on member checking, and establishing trustworthiness, in order to maintain rapport, and to avoid potential traps and associated problems. Memos also assist in creating an audit trail (Charmaz, 2006/2009). I attempted to incorporate all of the above strategies for rigor, with the exception of spending more than one or two interview sessions with participants, as this was not feasible given the time parameters for this research project. The findings and implications were associated with the existing research and literature in an attempt to enhance theoretical relevance of the model that was developed.

I have clarified my stance and potential bias as a researcher. I spent considerable time moving through all of the data collection and analysis processes, and attempted to provide rich and thick descriptions of the data collected from participants. I triangulated data from children, parents and clinicians, and also used literature later in the process. After I had developed a draft of the theoretical framework I used a member checking approach. One child, two parents, and three clinicians were provided with the framework, and questions were asked to ensure it was relevant and accurate to their experience. Below I have indicated some of the member checking comments, based on participants' comments after they had reviewed an initial summary of the findings. Note that the study participants will be described further in Chapter Four.

In discussion with one participant on some of the findings, and after asking further questions of her experiences and understandings, the child Bobby Bobblehead commented that "it pretty much hits the mark." Her parent Beatrice felt "it accurately describes the process I feel is occurring." Another parent Natacha stated "this is wonderful and it really needs to be brought forward." Martha, a clinician, also expressed that the framework seemed to encapsulate her experience and understandings of the situated context. She said "it's all very true" and "children

seem more open and advanced, and less judgmental of spirituality.” Another clinician named Sandy stated “I really feel validated, and it is reassuring to know that other clinicians have experienced the same processes that I have...I feel this is a critical area and we need to be trained in order to attend to it.”

Throughout the process I conversed with committee members and engaged in peer reviews and debriefing. The final draft of this thesis is being read by external reviewers. Memos are chronologically compiled in NVivo, as well as in a physical file folder, which has thus created an audit trail. I emailed memos and diagrams to my supervisor and committee members, as well as to peers, as I was working through data analysis and seeking consultation and peer review. I sought peer review with my cohort of students, and with professors from other institutions which has led to further insights for my analysis. I also had conversations with colleagues and family members who inquired about my work and progress.

I was continually cognizant of the need to bracket, a process of setting aside any prejudgments and personal experiences about the area of phenomena being studied. This more fully allowed me to be attentive to participant stories and meanings, and to remain non-judgmental of the experiences shared and to engage in a mutual co-construction of the data. Differences among participants were explored, clarified, and understood. I engaged in critical self-reflection throughout the entire process of the study. My own values and beliefs were explored, questioned and examined. I was aware of my role as the researcher and attempted to remain cognizant of the influence of self in the research process so as to not unduly influence data collection or the analysis.

Credibility, as outlined by Charmaz (2005), entails achieving intimate familiarity with the setting and topic. Data should be sufficient and there should be depth and links in the observations within the data, and comparisons between observations and categories. Enough evidence should



allow the reader to form an independent assessment of agreement. In terms of originality Charmaz conveyed that categories should offer new insights and the analysis should provide a new conceptual rendering and theoretical significance. The work should refine, extend or challenge existing concepts, ideas, and practices. Both originality and credibility increase the resonance and usefulness of the research contribution.

Resonance is defined as the researcher drawing links between individuals' experiences and collectivities, and the analysis making sense to participants in offering deeper insights into their world (Charmaz, 2005). The categories are sought to be full and liminal, and taken for granted meanings are revealed. Lastly, Charmaz (2005) stated that if the theory offers interpretations people can use, it speaks to generic processes, and reveals hidden implications, it is useful. It also is likely to spark further research and contribute to the betterment of society. In this study I kept these aspects in mind, especially through my data analysis and final theory development stages.

### **3.4.7 Ethical Considerations**

Prior to conducting this study ethics approval was obtained from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary, as well as the Research Ethics Board at Children's Centre Thunder Bay. The research ethics and standards in section 6.0 of the Canadian Association of Social Workers Guide to Ethical Practice were upheld (CASW, 2005). This section outlines the responsibility of social workers who engage in research. Social workers are to ensure responsible research practices; minimize risks for the protection of participants; the provision of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality; the avoidance of deception, and accuracy in the report of research findings.

Since the children in this study were deemed to be a vulnerable population there were several safeguards put in place such as parental consent and child assent, and the parent sitting in

the room with the child while the child was interviewed. In order to ensure informed consent a letter explaining the research project, participant consent (appendix D), and child assent forms (appendix E), were created and reviewed through the ethics process. These documents outlined the various processes of the research including the purpose of the study, what would be asked of the participants, data collection and storage processes, privacy and confidentiality commitments, rights to participate and withdraw, and risks and benefits. Participants were also informed of the plans for the dissemination of knowledge. Children signed their own assent forms, while parents signed their own consent forms and consented to their child's participation. Clinicians were also provided with informed consent forms (appendix F). All participants were able to choose their own unique pseudonym which was utilized instead of their real name. They were allowed to ask questions and address any concerns prior to commencing the interviews.

Procedures were put in place to ensure a safe and secure environment that enabled as much anonymity as possible. Interviews were held in a private office within the organization where the research took place. As noted above, the researcher further attempted to ensure confidentiality through the use of participant pseudonyms (which were stored separately from the consent forms in a locked file cabinet). Participants were also informed of local resources for counselling should they become upset during or after the interview.

Audio-recordings were destroyed after authentication of the transcription by the researcher. A password protected jump drive was used to store the transcriptions which also were kept in a locked file cabinet. All paperwork data with identifying information was stored in a locked file cabinet that is only accessible to the researcher. De-identified data was stored on the researcher's personal home computer.

## Chapter Four: Navigating in Seclusion

The results from this study attempt to answer the main research question:

*“What are the processes, experiences, and understandings of children’s spirituality in response to trauma, grief, and loss, as manifested in outpatient counselling?”*

Charmaz (2000) conveys that the analysis of the results tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. She also contends that the composed story reflects the interpretations of the participants, and the researcher. Therefore, this chapter reveals the story of children’s spirituality in trauma, grief and loss (TGL) based on the interpretations, meanings, and understandings of the participants and this researcher.

The first section of this chapter offers a description of the participants. The second section provides an overview of the results and presents the model. The third section describes some of the contextual and environmental factors that contributed to and influenced the data and experiences of the participants. The fourth section discusses the core category of *navigating in seclusion* and briefly presents the two major dialectical subcategories *it’s normal and important* and *it’s weird and taboo*. The fifth section provides the associated subcategories and properties of *it’s normal and important*, which describes the foundational components of children’s spirituality. The sixth section overviews participants’ descriptions of how TGL is experienced by children. The last section provides the details and the associated subcategories and properties of *it’s weird and taboo*.

Overall the accounts offered by the children in this study were very deep and represented advanced understandings of spirituality, and they had an awareness of the complex nature of

spirituality and existential matters in life. They also were aware of their own cogitations, struggles, and search for understanding and making sense of their existence, and their world and beyond. They seemed eager and open to discussing and sharing aspects of their spirituality; however, I wondered whether they would have opened up further over a longer period of time as trust developed in the relationship. Furthermore, I questioned whether more candid discussions may have occurred without having a parent in the room during the interviews, or even through the use of a peer investigator. Charlie mentioned how her daughter Mookie might have been uncomfortable in sharing fully, “*Being on the spot and having her mom here maybe is...you know?*” These queries are also posed due to findings that children engage in a process of withholding their spirituality, and are guarded when discussing and sharing their spirituality and spiritual experiences with others.

#### **4.1 Description of Participants**

The children participants in this study met the criteria of experiencing TGL. All of the child and parent participants described themselves as belonging to a Christian faith and clarified that they were spiritual but not really religious. Clinicians were not asked about their faith although some shared that they were spiritual and not religious, and two clinicians shared that they belonged to a Christian faith.

Iza, an 8-year-old female, experienced severe bullying, grief, and other mental health concerns, and her parent Destiny had also suffered significant mental health struggles and bullying as a child. Nikita Drew, a 12-year-old female, experienced several traumas and child neglect, and had been placed in foster care, and then in kinship care with her grandmother. She did not have a parent or caregiver who wished to participate. Jessie Meyer, a 9-year-old female,

and her parent Amelia Waldon, experienced multiple deaths in the extended family, and other mental health concerns. Mookie, an 11-year-old female, had experienced mental health struggles, attachment concerns, and exposure to past parental substance use, as well as death of extended family members. Mookie's parent is Charlie. Allochka, a 10-year-old male, experienced multiple traumas including the loss of his father, neglect and exposure to past parental substance use, and was residing in foster care. His parent Natacha shared that she had experienced a lot of TGL and abuse in her life since childhood. Bobby Boblehead, an 11-year-old female whose whole family experienced grief and loss and mental health concerns due to her mother Beatrice having had cancer and serious effects from surgeries that included a loss of career. They had also experienced abandonment, rejection and loss due to extended family conflict. Four clinicians working with the above mentioned children and families were interviewed, and three other clinicians also desired to participate. The clinicians had between 7 and over 25 years of experience. See Table 1 below for a list of participant groups.

<b>Table 1</b>					
<i>List of Participant Groups</i>					
<u>Children</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>Clinicians</u>	<u>Sex</u>
Iza	8	F	Destiny	Rose	F
Jessie Mayor	9	F	Amelia Waldon	Hercules	M
Mookie	11	F	Charlie	Sunshine	F
Allochka	10	M	Natacha	Lily	F
Bobby Boblehead	11	F	Beatrice	Rathdin	M
Nikita Drew	12	F		Martha	F
				Sandy	F
<i>Note.</i> F=Female, M=Male. All parents were Female					

Table 1

#### **4.2 The Theoretical Model**

In response to the research question, the most salient phenomenon that best captures the essence of the participants' experiences was that all of the participants were secluded and alone as they navigated through the various experiences and processes concerning children's spirituality and TGL. Therefore, *navigating in seclusion* emerged as the core category which best depicts this phenomenon. It describes how they understood these experiences in relation to the external meaning constructions they had encountered, and their resultant actions and responses to the social conditions, contextual factors, and influences. It also depicts the internal and personal experiences and the meaning constructions they have developed regarding spirituality and TGL. The development of categories considered both the explicit and implicit

descriptions of participants. In a few instances, not all of the participants in each group expressed all of the properties within the categories although most did. The clinician responses varied and a lot of the properties in the categories related to their struggles associated with a lack of training, competence, and space for dialogue and supervision.

A model of the theory of *navigating in seclusion* is provided below in Figure 1, with its associated substantive and sub categories. The model shows that children, parents, and clinicians all experienced this phenomenon. Two dichotomous contexts and associated meaning constructions which exist simultaneously were illuminated through the data analysis. The phenomenon of *navigating in seclusion* within the terrain of children's spirituality in TGL was understood and experienced to be *normal and important*, and considered to be *weird and taboo* at the same time. These two major categories depict the concurrent meaning constructions with the associated substantive categories which include meanings and processes that are intertwined and interconnected. Therefore, this theoretical model represents how children, parents, and clinicians interpret and attempt to manage and navigate within this complex dialectical world.

*Navigating in seclusion* between the margins and intersections of *it's normal and important* and *it's weird and taboo* creates a lot of complexity, ambiguity, and isolation for all of the participants. In one of the pilot interviews Aleigh Jane's first words when asked about her understanding of spirituality were "it's complicated." Hercules stated "how do we negotiate, or like, it's complicated, it's messy." And the results demonstrate that the terrain is very complicated and messy to tread through. The *normal and important* natural features of the rich spiritual lives of children, along with the difficult and problematic *weird and taboo* surroundings which subsist in children's spirituality and TGL are overviewed.

Figure 1

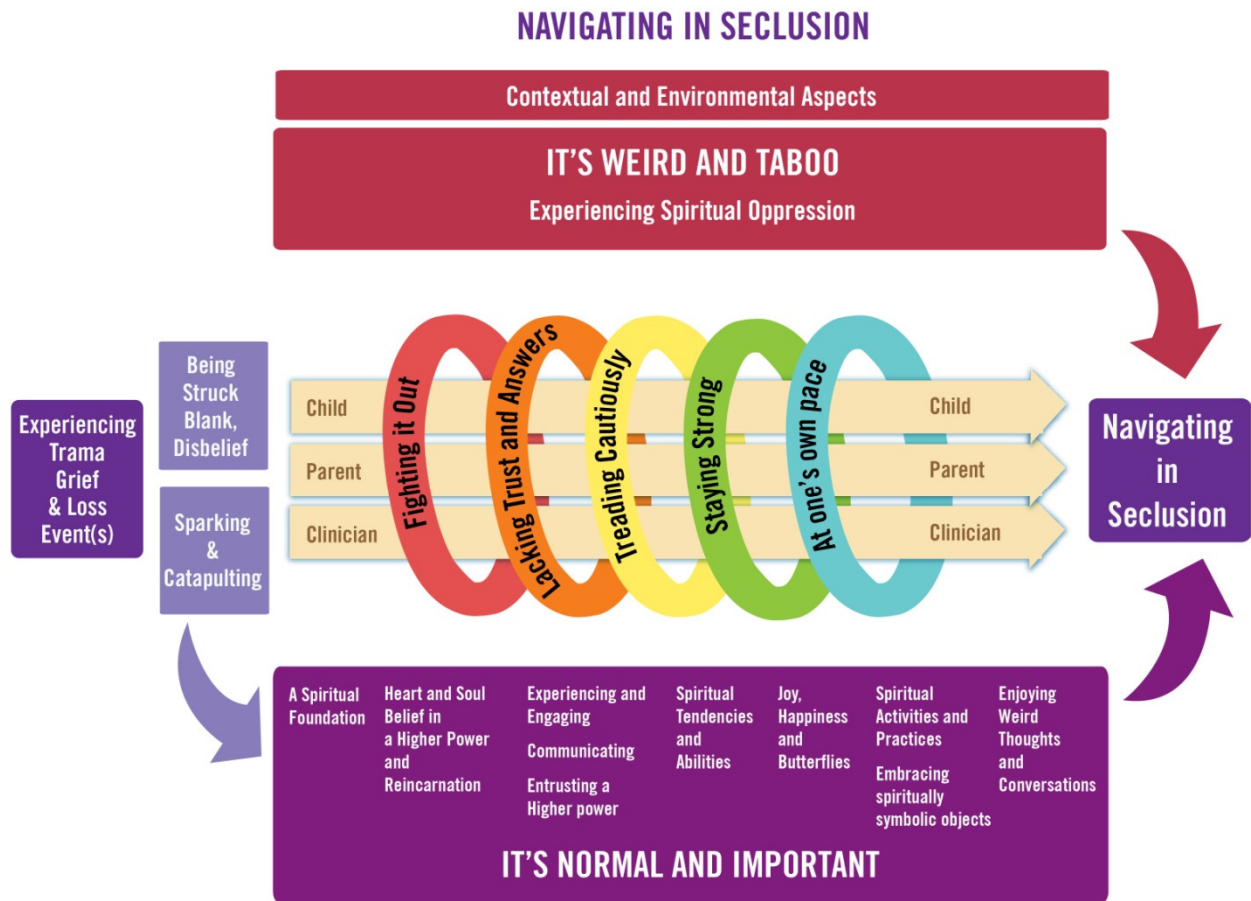


Figure 1: Navigating in Seclusion is the core category of children’s spirituality in trauma, grief and loss.

### 4.3 Defining the Word “Weird”

Spirituality was viewed by participants as an innate, natural, mysterious, unique and wonderful aspect of life. It was also viewed to be “weird” and strange, and not something that was openly accepted in public environments. The unique and individual nature of this “weirdness” can create social discomfort and a lack of understanding, and thus open dialogue and expression of spirituality in social milieus is rendered as “weird and taboo.” This forces



individuals to move away from the exposure of a public path, and to move underground to more protected and safer terrain and to engage spiritually in private domains.

As I engaged in the data analysis process I found the definition of the word weird, as it surfaced numerous times in the interview data. Merriam Webster (2014) defines weird as “1: of, relating to, or caused by witchcraft or the supernatural: magical” and “2: of strange or extraordinary character: odd, fantastic” (p.1). This is congruent with how participants used the word weird. At times participants used the word weird to describe spiritual phenomena and experiences as magical or fantastic in a positive manner when they could not find descriptive language to fit. However, the word weird was mostly employed with a negative meaning construction that conveyed strangeness or things viewed as odd, or something to avoid. It became apparent that the English language lacks words and concepts to fully articulate the vast realm of spirituality, rendering it as weird. Further, individuals experience spirituality through physical, emotional, and psychosocial aspects and beyond, which comprise a complex phenomenon beyond the confines of language, making it strange and weird.

#### **4.4 Contextual and Environmental Aspects**

This study was conducted in a city in Northwestern Ontario where the environment plays a significant role. Trees, water, and the landscape are very much a part of people’s lives and there is a spiritual connection and relationship with the natural environment. There also is a considerable and influential aboriginal population, and the natural world and our interconnectedness to it are significant components of aboriginal spirituality. Although participants did not identify as being aboriginal and were not asked about their racial backgrounds, the influence of aboriginal spirituality was mentioned by several participants. One

parent talked about using the spiritual ritual of smudging, another talked about giving thanks to mother earth and being grateful especially when fishing and hunting, or eating harvested foods, and several mentioned the importance of mother earth.

Several clinicians spoke about the influence of the aboriginal culture on the community, as well as the strong sense of community and family as important spiritual features in the region. They also mentioned that aboriginal teachings occur in the schools and in the community which have an effect on the spirituality of people living here. Several clinicians noted the influence of aboriginal teachings, and Lily shared how her exposure to aboriginal teachings was very influential on her work with children:

*And sometimes the medicine wheel teachings...it really resonated with me. So those teachings...that's what I use when I work with the kids that I work with now...like the physical part of our lives, the emotional part, the mental part, the social part. In the centre of the circle is the spiritual part and then above was the heavens or connections to our history or to our ancestors...Yeah, it's a really nice frame to work from because, yeah, it's super easy language and it's easy to remember in my head how it works, and to have that conversation.*

The aspect of time or temporal factors seemed to arise particularly in relation to children's age and stage of development. Participants described spirituality evolving over time and in general spiritual development was seen as a natural progression with age. Children talked about being in the moment, and having time pass quickly, or being lost in time, as aspects of spirituality. Allochka felt that this occurred various times for him and he attempted to describe it but found it difficult to articulate the actual feeling of it:

*When I play football at school, it's fast. Because usually when I have so much fun, I just...time goes fast... So it's like – I don't know how to say it – maybe like...oh, I don't know???*

Children also talked about how they wait for time to pass when life is difficult. Allochka described how long he has to wait for things to improve:

*Just day by day... I don't know. But for sure I get through it...Well, sometimes I just wait for a while and then it's over... It doesn't take like months and months and months. It takes like maybe a week, probably.*

Most of the participants searched for a safe and right time to share spirituality with others, or to discuss spiritual concerns associated with TGL, but found this was lacking. Parents mentioned not knowing the right time to talk with children or when to expose them to life events concerning death such as funerals. Clinicians felt time was required to facilitate building a therapeutic relationship, rebuilding trust in the child, healing and meaning making.

Contextual factors within general society which influenced children's spirituality involved a lack of acceptance and tolerance for open spiritual dialogue and expression. This lack of acceptance and attention also was seen to be an aspect within the social work academia and practice realms. Safe and open pathways for spirituality are not socially viable or validated.

#### **4.5 The Phenomenon: Navigating in Seclusion**

The core category that emerged was *navigating in seclusion* which is a process and a way of being that encompasses various processes and relationship dynamics in the human experience of children's spirituality and TGL. Data analysis of the interview content uncovered that all of the participants were navigating multiple subordinate processes involved in TGL and spirituality

while seeming to be relatively secluded, isolated, alone, and at a loss. This preliminary theoretical model of *navigating in seclusion* seems to be an integrative spiral of meanings, processes and factors of influence. All of the children were found to have a strong spiritual foundation and spirituality was very important to them especially in TGL. However, under the umbrella of “*it’s weird and taboo*” spirituality was understood as something which was not socially acceptable. Resulting from experiences of oppression regarding spirituality, where their spirituality was rejected or dismissed by others in social milieus, participants engaged in a variety of processes in order to navigate the rocky terrain of children’s spirituality.

The pathways that include the categories and processes in the model are not necessarily linear or sequential. The initial response to a TGL event was *being struck blank and having a sense of disbelief* and this was found to be followed by a *sparkling and catapulting* of spirituality for children. However, individuals moved in and out of and between the other various processes in the model. While explaining what she shared in the interview the child Bobbie Bobblehead stated “*It’s a spiral. You start in the middle and then you go out and out, and then you go to a different one.*” She used her hands to demonstrate a process that was spiralling, or spherical, interwoven and interconnected, and that bounced around, and this depicts how individuals experience this phenomenon of *navigating in seclusion*. The social, cultural, and environmental contexts were external aspects factoring into the personal and social meaning constructions and the resultant processes.

*Navigating in seclusion* further describes how children, parents, and clinicians desire and attempt to find some safe ground for children with positive trusting relationships in order to resolve difficult experiences, emotions, cognitions, and questions pertaining to spirituality in

TGL. Children and parents desired to share positive spiritual experiences and conversations. Although participants were quite secluded while navigating, children felt very connected, nurtured, supported, and entrusting of their spiritual world and its silenced and hidden terrain. All of the clinicians stated that there was a lack of space in practice to discuss the spirituality of clients in meetings or in supervision.

All of the children and adults felt strongly that spirituality was *normal and important*, especially in TGL. However, they also felt that often spirituality was deemed to be *weird*, in both the positive and negative sense of the word, and they felt talking about it openly was considered to be *taboo*. *It's normal and important* and *it's weird and taboo* were found to be two major opposing categories encapsulating the magnitude of participant's internally and externally comprised meanings, understandings and experiences of children's spirituality in TGL. Participants expressed a desire for safe and solid ground to explore, share, and dialogue about children's spirituality, and yet experienced the terrain as often unknown, obscure, precarious, or even perilous.

All but one of the parents were unaware of, or surprised by, the depth of their child's spirituality and spiritual concerns, as well as the profundity of the things they shared during the interviews. They were surprised by the abundance of the spiritual resources, thoughts, ponderings and musings of their children. They expressed a desire for their children to have a solid and positive spiritual foundation, and were open to their children being exposed to many spiritual avenues in order to develop their own individual sense of spirituality. Parents also recognized the need for support through the TGL experience, yet they were not aware of the degree to which their child was experiencing spiritual struggles, distress, and concerns. During

the interviews the parents described their own experiences, spiritual struggles and crises associated with TGL events, which factored into the communication process of TGL and spirituality with their children. Parental spiritual struggles related to TGL seemed to contribute to a lack of emotional and spiritual conversations between parents and children as they refrained from sharing these things with children.

All of the clinicians had engaged in spiritual matters of some form with clients, such as existential or spiritual meaning making, religious aspects, spiritual practices, rituals, or activities. However, this was not always explicitly done, and a few clinicians had not really engaged with preadolescents in open dialogue regarding spirituality. Two clinicians felt that preadolescent children were not developmentally capable of understanding spiritual matters in abstract or advanced ways.

Clinicians were very aware of the spiritual component that can arise for clients in TGL. For example, Rose revealed that in her experience children had expressed spirituality in sessions with her and stated it was *“because of a trauma in their lives and it becomes more present and they’re more triggered to talk about it, you know.”* However, clinicians described navigating through this terrain in seclusion as well, and this process was associated with a lack of training, dialogue, understanding, openness, and acceptance of spirituality in the practice and academic realms.

None of the clinician participants had received any training in the area of spirituality within their professional education and felt this was a critical gap. They expressed a lack of open and full acceptance of spirituality in practice, along with a great lack of direction, practice

frameworks or theories, and resources for spirituality within both academia and the practice setting. Sandy discussed her struggles in navigating due to a lack of training:

*No. I still have no training on how to talk about it...But if I ask the initial, "Do you have a sense of spirituality?" – Past that, I don't really know what to do. I don't really know like how to bring it up more. I've learned through some colleagues how to ask more of a spiritual, general question and not like the religion question. But from there I really don't know where else to go if kids are struggling to articulate it. It kind of goes nowhere. So I'm not able to bring it out the way I would like to, if that makes sense.*

Clinicians described spirituality in TGL as an area of practice that was not discussed openly in clinical supervision or at team meetings. The topic was avoided, not recognized as important or they felt it was not entirely safe for them to openly discuss this area with supervisors or colleagues. In a member check interview Martha shared that she felt she could not talk openly or even clearly document aspects of a client's spirituality or dialogue in sessions:

*No! there, is not a sense of openness at all! If you try to go there in meetings the body language you notice in others, or the silence and looks you get are very discouraging. You don't even want to put things into reports that are critical components of spirituality due to a fear that you should not be addressing these things with clients, and yet they are so critical for their treatment and wellbeing! And it is a part of accreditation standards!*

Even during the interviews two clinicians asked to have the tape recorder shut off to express things or ask questions regarding verbal content and what was okay to share, demonstrating that social spiritual dialogue was difficult for them.

Clinicians stated that they were required to ask clients about their spirituality as part of accreditation standards at their agency, but had not received any direction or training on how to do this. Some clinicians talked about not knowing what to do if clients shared their spirituality once they asked about it. They did not know how to explicitly, intentionally, effectively, and successfully navigate or manage spirituality in counselling with children and families, and described a sense of feeling incompetent and having a lack of support in this area of practice. When I asked Rose what she felt were important or significant areas, issues, or concerns in spirituality and mental health for children her initial response was:

*Oh, training! Encouragement to be trained professionally in this area, to get as much training as possible; and to be working in places where you're encouraged and there's that awareness that exists already that this is a growing phenomenon and we have to address it because it is linked to mental health. I think that we have to, and in the training the focus is mind, body, spirit - how we're affected on all levels by the traumas or just life. Not just traumas, but we have to work it out and integrate it. And mental health practitioners have to feel comfortable in doing that, know how to do it.*

There was hesitancy expressed by clinicians around engaging fully in spiritual aspects in practice for varying reasons. Some clinicians shared that they did not want to cause distress or harm to the client due to their lack of training and expertise, or to impose their own biases on others, and felt a lack of guidance and support. Some described both explicit and implicit rules to 'not talk about it,' and as a result they often avoided the topic of spirituality with clients. Sandy communicated that she had experienced this in academia and practice:

*No... I really kind of felt like that was a topic I wasn't supposed to talk about it; and*



*somewhere along the lines you were taught you don't really talk about it. You don't put your beliefs on other people. So therefore I avoided the topic whatsoever. So if kids went there, most of the time I think I shied away from it because I didn't know what to do with it. So it was easier to just sort of avoid it.*

#### **4.6 It's Normal and Important**

All of the child participants appeared fairly open in discussing their spiritual beliefs and spiritual worldview, and sharing their spiritual lives. It was evident that all of the participants felt spirituality was a significant component of life especially for children going through TGL. Spirituality was understood as part of being human, and the experience of life on earth. Some spiritual qualities were viewed to be innate such as intuitive abilities. The category *it's normal and important* is multifaceted, and there are several associated categories which include *establishing a spiritual foundation and worldview; relating to the heart and soul; experiencing and engaging with the spiritual world; having spiritual tendencies and sensory abilities; joy, happiness and butterflies; engaging in spiritual activities and practices; and enjoying weird thoughts and conversations.* Some of these categories also have associated subcategories.

As noted above the parent and child participants in this study identified themselves as spiritual but not religious. Although they were affiliated with religions of their upbringing they had evolving spiritual worldviews that appeared to be complex and expansive beyond religion. All participants felt that humans develop their own unique spiritual worldview, and most shared the belief that individuals have a right to choose what they believe and practice in regard to spirituality.

Children integrated spiritual aspects from diverse cognitions, feelings, and experiences into a unifying holistic spiritual worldview. They relied on and drew upon their spiritual relationships and connections, and their spiritual practices and activities during times of distress. Parents also described spirituality as important in their lives and in the lives of their children. Several clinicians shared aspects of their own spirituality in the interviews in relation to the content on children's spirituality.

The children felt that spirituality and thoughts about spiritual matters were natural, normal, and important in their life. Children shared parts of their rich and deep spiritual lives with some highly scrutinized and selected trusted others, such as parents, counsellors, or peers, and described their spiritual lives as complicated and lively, although mainly private and personal. They had pondered the deep existential questions of life, and enjoyed hypothesizing about these topics. Their spirituality involved many aspects such as cognitions, intuition, feelings, bodily and sensory experiences, relationships of varying kinds, communication with the natural and spiritual worlds, and various practices, rituals, and activities. They expressed that some of their spiritual experiences were ineffable, and they experienced a wide range of positive and negative spiritual events.

Children shared many understandings of what spirituality was about and how they conceptualized it. Iza was the first child to be interviewed and right away she demonstrated she had a strong grasp of what spirituality meant to her. Her understanding of spirituality was that it had to do with love and kindness, being authentic and true to yourself, and healing:

*It means that...okay...Spirituality means to me that you have to love someone in your life and be nice to them and be kind and if you're not kind then this can't happen...my*

*strong points are actually being nice to friends, trying to let them take their own actions and also being kind... Being you...Yes being me is how you want to be...Life is the four elements, Life is the talent of healing, Life is believing in yourself, Life is loving yourself, but that's not all!*

Participants described spirituality as a way of being and it is a natural and innate characteristic of life. They described how an individual is actively engaged with the spiritual realm and many mentioned that one's spirituality evolves over time. Children felt that spirituality involved aspects of one's whole life such as relationships with significant others, the natural world, and the spiritual world. It also involved activities that provide and create purpose through connectedness, compassion, and meaning. Bobby Boblehead mentioned other aspects such as honesty loyalty, and appreciation:

*Well, family, friends. I think animals are a really important part of life, especially if you're in a city and you're all alone. It's the little things like lizards – I want to get one – it's just that you know there's another presence other than yourself. You just feel a whole lot better. That's what I think anyway. But I think having like kindness and honesty and loyalty and school is very important to me, and so is soccer. And like being – just being compassionate or you know, accepting and understanding of others and non-judgmental... I think that's pretty important in life, just with life as it is instead of worrying about what else is going on...When I'm like appreciative of family, friends, animals, nature, sports and anything like that. I find it easy to tell especially... you can catch yourself doing it. I think that's the most fun because you don't even know until afterwards. I'm like, Well, yeah. I was being spiritual there.*

The children explained how spirituality is experienced by them internally through thoughts, prayers, feelings, and physical sensations. It is experienced through positive emotions such as love, joy, and happiness, and feelings of comfort and protection. They felt that spirituality could also be experienced through negative emotions including anger, mistrust, and despair. They described spirituality as being experienced through the senses. They depicted an intuitive or perceptive nature to spirituality which individuals experience in varying degrees.

All of the adult participants felt that spirituality was very significant, important and critical for children, especially in managing TGL events. Sandy, a clinician, felt it was a resiliency factor in TGL:

*Well, in my opinion I think that spirituality is a huge component of resilience and that's what gets people through some really difficult things. I think you can have all the coping strategies in the world, but you still have to have those sorts of internal resiliencies and I think spirituality is one of them. And I think because trauma, grief and loss is such – it's not necessarily an event that occurs that you need to get over. It changes so much about people's belief systems and their world views and how they view themselves and others. So I think that spirituality is a huge component in getting people beyond that and because trauma, grief and loss is something that's a life-long struggle. Like it doesn't just go away after a certain amount of time. You can't take a pill to make it go away. It's something that people will live with for the rest of their lives and they need things that they can take with them to get them through that. And I think that spirituality is what gets people through and sort of continue on. And then I think it's a huge component of the meaning-making and a sense of closure in a sense. Because if*

*you don't make sense of what you've experienced and how your world has changed, then how do you continue on?...And I mean I don't know if it's helpful, but when I think about my own experiences with loss and grief and trauma, spirituality and my beliefs were really – and my connectedness to lots of things – is really what got me through as well. So even personally I've been able to see that.*

All the parents were aware of some of the spiritual thoughts, questions and practices of their children. However, as noted above all but one parent communicated surprise at the content and level of spiritual cogitation and expression that was disclosed by their child during the interview. Destiny exclaimed: *“She's just blowing me away today. I didn't think she had a grasp on it...as strong of a grasp as she does.”*

All of the clinicians had encountered some form of experience with spirituality in their work with children and families. However, some clinicians felt that spirituality seemed to be confounded with religion or religious aspects. Sunshine stated *“So I don't think we think of it. I think we're lumping it right now into religion.”* The analysis demonstrated that spirituality and religion were often intertwined and interconnected.

In general, clinicians felt that spirituality often was not openly and explicitly attended to in practice. The clinicians varied in terms of their views and experiences of children's spirituality and spiritual development in children. They also differed in their levels of awareness, knowledge, strategies, practices, comfort, and competence of spirituality in counselling. Clinicians who had worked more extensively with children experiencing TGL seemed to be more aware of, and feel somewhat more comfortable with, the area of children's spirituality. Sunshine felt that spirituality was like other areas of expertise such as sexual abuse treatment,

which needed to be developed through education and training and she felt she was fairly comfortable with the topic:

*And it also might be similar to when you have specializations. Like, for example, working with sexual abuse...you kind of have a knowing on how to go about doing that; and I think spirituality is probably the same way. Unless you get some general knowledge on how to and use your own natural skills on where you're going with it. Because for me, if someone told me some spiritual things in a session, I think I can go there with them.*

Several clinicians felt that preadolescent children were more spiritually open and in tune with the spiritual world, and their spirituality had not been suppressed yet. Rose shared her thoughts:

*I think that children haven't had the longevity at that point in their lives to become inhibited with barriers related to social constructs, logical, rational thinking being impressed on them as the appropriate way to respond to the world and life. So, yeah. I agree that they are more perceptive up until a certain age because...But depending on their life experience, maybe some become less involved in thinking that way or it becomes...it recedes.*

Four of the clinicians had encountered many children who had opened up about spiritual aspects either verbally or expressed it through art, writing, or drawing. Rose reflected on and gave numerous examples of the ranges of spirituality being brought forth by children:

*Some are more sensitive somehow – temperamentally, emotionally - and they may literally ask the questions about spirituality or talk about it. If they're not asking about*

*it, they're incorporating it into the work they do with me. Occasionally it comes up. Others are expressing it because of a trauma in their lives and it becomes more present and they're more triggered to talk about it, you know...incorporating thoughts of spirituality into their artwork. They'll be doing poetry. They may be interested in spiritual stuff, especially now that they have so much access to the internet. They're talking about Wicca...they're asking questions about heaven. They're asking questions and talking about the heart connection, which is pretty interesting... as it going on even after the person's died. But then one little girl I had – more than one, actually – talked about seeing the person who'd died after that person had died.*

Some of the clinicians expressed being amazed or surprised by some of the deep existential and spiritual thoughts, struggles and questions that children had shared with them during counselling sessions over the years. Martha declared:

*I think kids can have a lot of amazing insights that are there and you may not know them if they hadn't come out somehow. And then when they come out it's – whoa!*

Two of the clinicians had not really encountered very much in relation to spirituality in children. On the other hand, it was an area that they had not really explored in their work with children. They shared that they did not explicitly engage in these types of open spiritual discussions with children experiencing TGL, but that it was an area that should have attention. Hercules shared his thoughts:

*Well you know I haven't really thought or read a lot about spirituality in children so umm...this is kind of new for me getting into it and thinking about that cause I think about it a lot with adults, but children I think developmentally um you know even*

*thinking about coming today I was thinking well how do you understand that in children developmentally because of the cognitive and emotional changes that happen they don't think about things in the same way, so one of the things that I wondered about is that they might have views about God or religion or more spiritual... umm... thoughts about the world or people and things. But it would be a lot more simplistic or different. It wouldn't be adult like... That's what I would... that would be my first thought... that's what I would think. Although I haven't...it's not an area that I've done... mmm...that's why I am interested in what you're doing too...cause what do kids do? And what do they think? Cause I don't know that that's really been looked at much... Well you see I think that is an interesting question right there...What do kids experience at that young age in terms of a spirituality or connection? Because they're not fully developed in terms of the emotional cognitive aspects... I wonder what their experience is? Like... ahh... is it as, you know it's not the same as an adult kind of sense of you know I'm part of this larger picture and larger world, and how do I fit in and what is the meaning of life. Umm I'm curious about that, like what would be their experience? I'm not sure I have a good answer.*

#### **4.6.1 Establishing a Spiritual Foundation and Worldview**

The children in this study seemed to be quite engaged with the spiritual world and were establishing their own unique spiritual worldview and spiritual foundation. Children described having a spiritual life and being curious about things. They enjoyed questioning, wondering and hypothesizing about existential, strange, and 'weird' things in life. They were capable of articulating their own spiritual beliefs, spiritual experiences, spiritual cogitations, and evolving



spiritual worldview, at what appeared to be a fairly advanced level. Many discussed having experiences and exposure to a variety of spiritual faiths and religious traditions through relationships with peers, relatives, and at school. Jessie Mayor talked about how parents and friends were important in her exploration of spirituality:

*They help me out along with stuff. Like my friend – she’s religious and she believes in God. So she’ll help me along with that sometimes. Yeah... Or even my dad. I ask if I can go to church just to see what it’s like and he says, “Yeah, sure.” Because I was wondering what it was like because I’ve never been to church or anything, and I wanted to know more.*

All of the children discussed having spiritual and moral thoughts and beliefs, as well as struggles and concerns, and they described learning about spirituality from differing environments, and embraced and integrated perspectives that fit or resonated for them. The children wanted to exert their individual choice in their spiritual beliefs and to do things at their own pace. Some of their spiritual beliefs were influenced by family beliefs, along with religious and spiritual exposure that occurred in church or school. Their beliefs also evolved through interactions in their lives with peers, through social and community activities, sports, and through media, as well as through their connections and relationships with animals and nature. However, the children did not appear to have been provided with regular and consistent spiritual mentorship, guidance, or spiritual nurturance, aside from incidental teachings at home. They did not have relational spaces for spiritual dialogue where they could engage and wrestle with cognitions, questions, paradoxes, struggles, or existential angst.

A critical finding was that most of the children felt that their spiritual foundation was stable in their life even through TGL, although their spiritual cogitations and practices became activated when they encountered distress and struggles in their lives. They relied on their spirituality for support, comfort, and hope through difficult times. Some children felt that their spirituality had not changed over time, although some of the children recognized that they began thinking more deeply spiritually and existentially as they aged. Some youth felt that their spirituality was evolving, and would continue to evolve, as they integrated new learning and experiences over their lifespan.

The parents of the children expressed that they felt spirituality and building a positive spiritual foundation was important for their children, and they wanted their children to have some choice in their own beliefs. The parents appeared open to their children exploring spirituality independently and being exposed to various spiritual worldviews. Amelia Waldon shared her thoughts on her daughter Jessie Mayor's spiritual development process:

*She sort of...it's almost like she wants to get the groundwork down first – you know the whole, how did this all get started before I figure out why am I here and what's my role in it all? Like let's get this figured out first, is sort of more the question she's been asking.*

Parents shared their own positive spiritual beliefs and thoughts at times with their children but were also open to providing their children with diverse opportunities for spiritual exploration and learning. The parents allowed their children to be exposed to a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs and activities and wanted them to develop positive spiritual

relationships and practices. Parents were aware of how their children were integrating various aspects and Amelia Waldon elaborated on this:

*...and she's pulling different...I've seen her pull different pieces from different people. Her one friend who is involved in the Baptist Church and, you know, often gets her to go to different religious functions. So she gets her little pieces from there; and then I see her trying to connect it with little pieces from, you know, what we'll talk about as far as our beliefs in maybe a Higher Being, but not necessarily the God or a specific god and the Mother Nature, which obviously she's picked up very strongly. So I can see her pulling from different places and my parents – they're again not of a specific faith. But they'll bring in more of the specific native culture or religion, not that we're native, but it's an interesting...and it fits in with her whole Mother Nature thing. And so I can see that she's pulled from different places and she's bringing it together in her own way.*

In general, spiritual development was perceived by most of the adults, including clinicians, to evolve much like other developmental processes such as social, moral, and cognitive features. Sandy elaborated how her beliefs on development may affect how she works with young children in relation to the spiritual aspect and how her inexperience is a factor:

*But I think my inexperience – and I don't even know if its inexperience – but the fact that I don't know what to do to pull that out what I think really impacts that. Because I think that maybe there's a good chance that these kids could do it. But I don't know how to pull it out and I'm almost thinking all those concrete – of taking what they say and sort of leaving it because I don't know how to help them to get to that deeper level*

*because it might not come naturally to them. So I think my inexperience plays into my belief on their cognitive abilities.*

However, through the data analysis it was evident that TGL influences the developmental milestones or features in conjunction with the spiritual component. Spirituality seems to be sparked and activated through TGL, and children are catapulted into deeper spiritual meaning making processes including questioning, analyzing, and finding purpose.

#### **4.6.2 Relating to the Heart and the Soul**

This category truly captures the core of, or the heart and soul of the spiritual aspect of children's lives. Spirituality was described by many adult and child participants as relating to the heart. It involved feelings of love and it was felt in the heart. It also was associated to aspects of the soul which was understood as our true essence which is present in our bodies, especially in our heart. A central feature emerging from the data was the conceptualizations by participants that individuals have a soul or essence that is eternal. The heart was described as highly connected with the soul, and the two elements were deemed to be central to spirituality. Some of the participants mentioned the eyes as windows to the soul, and the eyes were described as portals for soul connection to one another. The child Jessie Mayor commented on the powerful connection she felt in looking into the eyes of another being:

*Just looking into something or someone's eyes, it's like wow. Like it's a different world. It's like yeah, I feel so much more connected.*

Many of the participants mentioned the heart or heart connection in describing spirituality or children's spiritual processes. Spirituality involved love, virtues, intuition, and joy, all of which were connected with feelings, knowledge, or actions associated with the heart. The first

mention of the word heart being central to spirituality came in the initial interview conducted with the clinician Hercules. He described how our spirituality occurs in all of the various environments in which we engage, and how our spirituality differs if we are at home, playing hockey, singing in a choir, or attending school, and these spiritual experiences contribute to our wholeness as a spiritual human being. He articulated that *“it’s the collective, cause that’s kind of at the heart of spirituality, that all these areas make up who we are as a person.”*

Several children and clinician participants expanded upon the knowledge or intelligence of the heart. The clinician Rose offered her experience and beliefs around the heart connection as a critical component of spirituality, and in her experience children asked questions and talked about the heart connection. Rose linked the heart with emotional intelligence, and she believed this was a route for authentically and therapeutically relating with children:

*Well, it’s my holistic perspective, belief system, and that’s combining personal and professional, that the heart is the seed of emotional intelligence. Cognitive intelligence comes from the brain. Emotional intelligence comes from the heart and it’s a very...and that’s where you get the connection with kids... I think heart and soul are one, in a way. It’s the feeling part of us. And the feeling part of us is the part that’s the spiritual part of us because through that vehicle of understanding it, knowing it, allowing it to express, and hearing it express itself, is what creates our connectedness because we can put ourselves in the other person’s shoes... And it’s through that that we can get to know ourselves...And the heart, I guess, is symbolic. But when we can express authentically, there’s a knowingness that comes...So this does an interpretation of that (pointing to her head and her heart) in order to function more fully.”*

Iza, the first child interviewed, wanted to draw a picture to show her thoughts and meanings of spirituality. When she was offered a basket of markers she chose a red one with a heart stamp, so I asked her about her choice of this marker. The heart connection was emerging as a conceptualization for the adult participants, and therefore I was curious and wanted to hear about this from the child perspective. Iza confirmed that the heart connection and love were significant to her spirituality, and it was part of her connectedness with the important people in her life:

*I picked that one to stamp some hearts on the page...the hearts symbolize love...Me and mommy for example.*

Children believed that aspects of the heart are connected to, or are intertwined with a soul, and when I asked Jessie Mayor to elaborate more on her descriptions of an afterlife, and to describe what she believed, she stated outright that it was “*the cardiac*” that lives on. This was congruent with what the clinician Rose had previously shared regarding her experience of children’s spirituality.

When participants were asked about what advice they would give to social workers about spirituality and working with children, the child Jessie Mayor responded with “*They just need to have their heart and their thought that they know.*” She also mentioned heart knowledge, and her heart knowing the truth, when she shared her experience in talking with trees. She felt that other people would not believe her, or think that she was strange or weird if she told them about how trees communicate with her; however, she knew this to be a truth for herself in her heart:

*It’s like okay, if they think that about me, they can think it all they want. Because I know in my heart that this is whatever about me. I know the truth about me. And say it’s like*

*a rumour and then you're like, you know what? I don't care what other people think. I don't care what other people say. I'm just going to know in my heart that I know the truth...*

When I asked her to describe what it felt like to know in her heart she responded: *"It feels strong, and sometimes it feels...encouraging and tempting."*

Several clinicians elaborated on the heart connection as being a central part of meaning making of TGL in their work with children. They discussed intentionally using art therapy and creative techniques in their work with children to access the heart centre and its knowledge.

Rose stated that in working with children authentically you need to engage in creative and expressive activities as mediums for spiritual healing processes. She emphasized *"But what you really want to get at is the heart and soul of the child, and that's the only way to do it, really."*

Several clinicians articulated that through the use of creative and expressive activities meaning making and spiritual processes transpired involving the capacities of the heart. Sunshine described the work she does, which includes art therapy that connects the heart and soul connections. This often involves drawing a heart and tapping into the heart knowledge of the child, maintaining love and connectedness through the heart, and healing:

*And sometimes I direct that, but then they fill in the heart what they want in there; and it's about how to get your needs met, how to fill that up in a healthy way...And speaking of heart, one little girl's mother was dying in the hospital and she was about eight, and made the heart. Put two arms on each side of the heart. Put the girl's picture in the middle with her mom. And we talked about how the memory that she can keep, with her mom and about saying goodbye... and being safe and being loved, and saying goodbye*

*at the same time.*

Lily highlighted another example of a creative therapy which she facilitated with Bobby Boblehead which tapped into the child's heart centre and awakening her to her individual value and authentic self:

*So we'll make like an origami cup and that cup will represent who she is and what she needs to do to fill that cup in terms of self love, in terms of importance, in terms of what she values... But where I go beyond that where it's tapping into what she feels about herself and to that heart centre. And she gets it.*

Martha also brought up the link to the heart when talking about how our society and culture has led us away from the heart centre, how spirituality has been suppressed. She felt that the heart connection was a significant and huge aspect of spirituality and critical for children:

*Our culture is very split and so we want to reinforce those beliefs that we have to be in our head and not in our heart...I think kids are very much in their heart – very much in their heart. Far more in their heart than in their head. You know, when I think of some of the strategies that we're supposed to be using like CBT [cognitive behavioural therapy] with kids, I think kids would struggle with that because they're just so naturally into their hearts. You know, I'm not going to really sit with a kid and tell the kid what to think. But it's easy to talk to them about what's in their heart.*

**4.6.2.1 Belief in an afterlife and reincarnation.** A fascinating finding which falls under the category of heart and soul was that the children all held a belief in heaven or an afterlife. The children believed that one's soul or spirit is eternal and lives on. The children described the processes involved with the soul returning to our world, or being reincarnated, or coming back to



life as a butterfly or something magical. They also appeared to draw upon their religious and moral teachings at times to make sense of death, as some of the children talked about the existence of Satan and hell. Some children described how the soul would go to hell if the individual had not acted properly, or that the soul had to apologize and ask for forgiveness for any wrongdoing. Most of the children enjoyed hypothesizing and talking about what might happen after death; this did not seem to frighten them but aroused their curiosity and wonder.

Most of the children held a level of acceptance in not knowing for sure what happens when a person dies, and described reincarnation as a reality of the death experience. Children shared that they continue to wonder about the soul and reincarnation off and on and grappled with existential questions and cogitations. They really became animated and engaged when discussing what occurs after death. These conversations with the children were interesting and fascinating, at times mystical, and were unique, although there were many similarities. Bobby Boblehead tried to wrestle with what happens, *“Like you go up to Heaven or hell or whatever – I mean, what happens after that, though? You’re just like that for the rest of eternity? That’s what I’ve always been wondering.”* Some drew upon stories or movies in their interpretations, for example, I asked Jessie Mayor further about her comment about the cardiac living on:

*Yeah. And what I really deep inside believed in at that moment, like that will...I may die, but my heart is still living on and on and on. And like, it’s like in a Neverland.*

She also felt that really strong emotions such as happiness could live on. Mookie mentioned heaven and described her thoughts on reincarnation and shared a recent discussion with a peer:

*Yeah. Like we’ll just say stuff like – like we had this discussion in the girls’ change room yesterday, me and her, after gym. She said, “What happens after you die?” And*

*I'm like, "Well, you die and then like a baby reappears on the world." She's like, "So when somebody's praying, and that could be like your grandfather." And I'm like, "Yes." ...Your body goes like – whoosh. And then you're in this big white place called Heaven, and then you go whoosh back down on earth as a baby.*

The child Nikita Drew hypothesized that the soul needed to find a body before becoming human, and that there could be a cycle of before life, actual life and real life and it just kept going on in a never ending circle or birth, death and rebirth. Iza's Pagan beliefs included the soul living on and feeding on offerings, and when she died she would visit those who were good to her:

*Yes, and the people who are good to me when I die my spirit will come back to visit them and I'll be in control of my spirit and I will desperately try to find their house where they live and thank them for what I did by giving them stuff and leaving little notes but they'll probably not know who it's from but...*

Mookie also shared her thoughts on the soul's purpose of experience and gaining wisdom, and to be guides for our children, as the reasons we exist:

*To like become what we will become, I guess. Like...yeah... Like in your life you have to make mistakes and those mistakes make you a person, and a person makes you human. So yeah.... Just like how to fix the problem and all that. Yeah....like teach your kids not to do that or...yeah.*

The parents noted that questions were openly raised by their children when a person or a pet had died. For example, Amelia Waldon stated, *"And you know cremation and heaven and whatever; and there's been a lot of in the car conversations about what goes on next and what happens and they're very open about it."* The parents described attempting to provide factual

information along with offering their child a sense of hope of an afterlife or heaven.

A couple of the parents mentioned the soul as well. However, Destiny was the only parent who alluded to reincarnation as she mentioned the eyes as soul related, “*if you look in those eyes you’ll see that she’s ageless you know she’s been here many many times.*” Destiny believed that her daughter had been in existence longer than she had, and as a result she felt that Iza’s soul was more expansive:

*You can feel the energy just beaming off her. You feel the energy beaming off her and you can feel the power from that child. And it’s just nuts. I’ve never felt a level of power like that from an 8-year-old. It’s almost as if she’s like her body can’t contain the spirit.*

Some of the clinicians indicated that children believed in a soul presence, and that the spirit of a person who had died had been depicted in children’s drawings or artwork. Some clinicians said children had brought up a variety of questions related to death and thoughts on heaven or an afterlife, or what happens to the soul. Some of their client’s had mentioned seeing ghosts or spirits of relatives, and had talked with them about God or a higher power as connected with the heart and soul. Martha discussed her experience with children:

*And spirituality. I would say it’s very...I think it’s part of the makeup of kids, is my sense. I think they tend to be spiritual beings. I think they’re far more in touch with it than adults and I find that they talk about it with a lot more ease and with less guardedness. And I think especially kids that are going through grief and loss – I think they tend to be quite attuned to a higher power or a sense of that there is more to things than just that someone’s here one day and gone the next and that they don’t believe that. I think they intrinsically know that that’s not so and I think they can tap into that*

*sense of hope a little bit more keenly than adults can... I mean they grieve they're not there. But at the same time I think they tend to have a feeling that that person is still...that person still exists and I think that helps give them some strength. I think it helps to minimize the grief perhaps more than adults because I think they'll let themselves go there more naturally. Yeah...I think they're more open to communicating with that person and to thinking about that person and about thinking about that person as still existing. Whereas I think with adults, I think they tend to think – okay, a person's dead. They're gone. Or I have to think of them as gone. I have to move on. Whereas with kids I think it's no, they may be gone physically, but they're still present.*

**4.6.2.2 Believing in a protective and caring higher power.** All of the participants interviewed had a belief in a higher power, a Creator, a spirit, or a Goddess or God, and children associated being connected through the heart and soul to these higher powers. Although the children and parents stated that they were spiritual but not religious, it appeared that religious faith had noteworthy influence on some level for all of these participants as it had offered them such things as teachings, morals, values, and contributed to some of their beliefs. They described their spirituality as diverse, that it was much more complex than religion, and at the same time it was inclusive of many things including religion.

All of the children in this study felt that there was something that was spiritual in nature and were able to articulate these thoughts and beliefs. They believed and felt that God or a higher power watched over, cared for, listened to, and protected them, and this power was ever-present. Jessie Mayor offered her experience with Mother Nature as a protector:

*Well, with Mother Nature I've had...like I'll be outside and I'll just feel that she's in there watching me and I just have the feeling that she's going to make everything okay. Because I'll know that I'm protected by her, so I don't need to worry about the dark or anything like wolves or anything like that.*

Some of the children mentioned guardian angels as being present and protecting them. Bobby Boblehead said *"I mean, I believe in guardian angels and everything."* Nikita Drew shared her belief that guardian angels existed in heaven and on earth:

*It's probably just a place where you can watch over people that you want to be guardian angel to... Yes, except I think my guardian angel is alive (looking meek she points to adult in room without her seeing and smiles).*

Some parents talked about how their religious faith did not support or align with all of their spiritual thoughts and experiences. Some of the participants believed in Gaia, or a mother earth goddess. Several commented on mother earth and Mother Nature which was a spiritual entity of importance in some of their lives. The parent Amelia Waldon talked about Mother Nature being important in her family life:

*Well, my husband's a big hunter, fisherman; so the kids are too. So I guess bringing in the Mother Nature, maybe native spirituality or whatever, we're very strong on showing respect for nature and the connectedness between us and the natural world and that we need to give our thanks for, you know, whatever we're provided with and that sort of thing.*

Natacha shared her belief that God, the Creator, a higher power, and Mother Nature all were intertwined together. Parents also revealed feelings of gratitude towards a higher power. Charlie

stated how she was grateful to God for her children:

*I have my higher power and it's been tested more through...I mean; I've always had my own version of God. You know, I don't need to go to church to do that. I thank God every night for my children and keep them healthy and safe – away from anything to do them any harm. So I'm very grateful to God, I think. It's a real blessing he entrusted in me.*

Some of the clinicians mentioned how children had spoken to them about their beliefs in a higher power and it was something that they could turn to for help, support, comfort and hope. However, a couple of clinicians felt that most children did not share their spiritual beliefs with them openly. In their experience some children would share beliefs and talk about going to Sunday school and church, and some stated that they did not believe in a higher power. These clinicians did explore a little bit of the child's spirituality and religion, but felt that it was not a significant focus for children in their work. Sandy felt that her discussions on spirituality with children did not get very far:

*I find that when I ask that question –they mostly don't understand what I'm talking about, so I usually have to clarify it. And then they tend to go right to religion and say, "Well, I don't believe in God" or "My family doesn't believe in God". And then I ask a little bit more and then it tends to not really go anywhere. And so most of the time kids don't seem to have a relationship or, if they do, they don't realize it and they don't know how to articulate it very well.*

As a result, Sandy seemed to feel that the spiritual aspect was there but had to be drawn out in different ways and with different approaches with some children and she struggled in how to do this in a more effective manner.

#### **4.6.3 Experiencing and Engaging with the Spiritual World**

The interconnectedness of human life, nature and the spiritual world and its importance was very evident in participant conversations. Children experienced the spiritual world through their bodies, their senses, and through their minds. They described engaging with the spiritual world through their own spirit, through human relationships, and with the natural world, as well as with various types of spiritual entities. As noted previously, they felt that their heart was a place of engagement and connection with the spiritual world, as well as through their eyes. Children felt that the spiritual world was a place of safety, love, nurturance, support, beauty and awe, and it seemed to be experienced by them as mysterious, magical, and a place of wonder. Their relationships with the spiritual world provided them with hope, and they placed great trust and faith in these relationships. Parents and clinicians also described situations which involved their own, as well as children's, experiences and engagement with the spiritual world.

**4.6.3.1 Communicating with nature and spiritual entities.** Several children in this study described beliefs in a variety of spiritual entities. They felt that spirit was alive in nature and in animals. Some felt that nature or animals protected them and cared for them. They communicated with, and felt very connected to animals, and this was evident in their body language while conversing. Bobby Bobblehead voiced enjoyment in spending time with her pet,

*“I love to be with my little dog, especially because she’s so goofy and she farts and everything and she’s really fast.”* Jessie Mayor described her relationship with her chickens:

*I have six chickens and I’m always outside with them because they make me laugh...just the way they look at me and the way they just make their little funny noise. I don’t know. It just makes me believe in that. I don’t know. Just the way they look at me and the way they make their “buck-bucks” and the way they move and stuff, it just makes me think of Mother Nature. I don’t know why.*

Many children felt that nature was very important and that spending time in it brought comfort and peace in their lives. Iza and Jessie Mayor felt that we needed to take care of nature and the trees. Iza stated that if we didn’t take care the trees would hurt and would die and we would cease to exist. Allochka was intrigued with the natural world in other countries around the globe and felt it was a beautiful aspect of life. He spent time researching other places on the computer and thinking about where he wanted to visit and live. Jessie Mayor felt she could communicate freely and openly and entrust nature more so than humans:

*I would share it with a tree. I would go up to a tree and I’d talk to the tree; and I don’t know why, but I’d be outside and I’d just be talking away, talking away, just basically to trees, to the sky, to the ground, to the dirt, to whatever – to everything outside, to whoever is listening...Well, when I’m around sometimes like animals or something, like I’ll be talking to myself and they make their noise; and it’s like they’re talking back and forth to me and it’s like they understand. Like I had to give my chickens to the neighbour because we can’t keep them for the winter; and they have a dog. So he was guarding watch and I was really upset to let my chickens go, because I’m really*



*connected with them. So I just sat down with the dog and it was...he was like so, he had so much courage. I felt that he would protect my chickens so I wouldn't have to worry. He would protect them. He knew what I felt like. He knew what it feels like. Like because he puts his paw on my shoulder like yeah, you know.*

A couple of children talked about believing in folklore, as well as seeing, believing in, and communicating with fairies, wizards, and angels. Nikita Drew described one of her spiritual experiences with spiritual entities:

*Sometimes when I'm walking past trees I hear whispers and the answer to that was the fairies and pixies in the trees whispering to you. Like sometimes you don't understand it...and like people usually think it's the wind but it actually happened to me there was no wind it was about 45 no like about 90 humidity no wind at all or no chance of rain and I just heard whispers, no one was with me and there was like just in the forest so I was like, what's that?*

Several children felt that spirituality had to do with ghosts, and they expressed a belief in ghosts or spirits. Two children, Nikita Drew and Mookie, talked about the Ouija board as being a medium to communicate with ghosts and shared stories of personal experiences or those of others. Nikita Drew elaborated on her experience with using one:

*Yeah well it happens in our family. My Grandma she one time played the Ouija Board like had a séance with her friends... I wanted to try a Ouija Board just to see what happens and she had one and like why do you have one in the first place? So I tried it and then um like it actually worked and cause it was with my Grandma and like I knew*

*she wouldn't play those jokes on me. But if I was with my friends they always move it (laughs).*

Many of the parents talked about their child communicating with nature or with spiritual entities. Jessie's mother Amelia Waldon felt her daughter had a strong connection with the natural world and with animals, *"Yeah. And she does have a very, and always has, like this connection with animals; and it is like she speaks to them and they speak to her, I think."* A few parents mentioned that their child could sense ghosts or spirits and this occurred from a very young age for some children. Some parents also mentioned their own experience with spiritual entities.

Some of the clinicians mentioned the connection of nature and children communicating with the spiritual world in their work, and noticed it in conversation, art, and play. Martha shared her experience of children animating nature through play and art:

*And I've noticed kids in the playroom do that sometimes with the toys – like with the trees and the stuff. They'll animate the tree talking or something. Or they'll talk about the purpose of the tree and why the tree is there or something... Yes. Now that I think of it, I had this little girl who – did she lose a parent or a grandparent? I think it was a grandparent. And she used to create this bird scene. She made sort of a bird nest and she made little eggs under the bird; and she used to sort of give the bird a voice. Yeah.*

Several clinicians discussed how children talked about communicating with ghosts or other spiritual entities during their work. This was quite prevalent with children who had lost a loved one and they continued to communicate with or see that person's spirit or soul.

**4.6.3.2 Entrusting a higher power.** Children shared that when they go through difficult times they communicate their needs to a higher power or entity and they entrust things to a higher power to take care of. This was the most salient spiritual activity children appeared to engage in during adversity and seemed to be a helpful and supportive coping practice for them. They would ask for situations in their life to improve, for others to be healed, for help and assistance, and they entrusted the spiritual power to follow through with these requests. They also shared deeply personal struggles, thoughts and feelings with the spiritual entity. Nikita Drew prayed when she was in troubled times and this made her feel deeply connected and that God answered her:

*Sometimes when I'm in deep need I will pray to God like I don't do it regularly but when I need it and I just need something to guide me I will pray to God, I'll get down on my knees by the window and say God if you're out there can you please answer me and try and help me?...Yeah usually ummm like the door will like if it's opened a crack it will either open a bit more or like shut. That's how I... And then usually if it's like something with bullying the next day the bullying stop...hmmhmm (smiling brightly).*

Some of the children shared that they had responses from a higher power through dialogue, signs or symbols. This was reassuring for them and they felt good when it happened, and they felt listened to and taken care of. Iza stated:

*Oh yeah I do I talk to Gaia but...mostly just talk to Gaia... wheee...she has thanked me for my talking to her.*

This communication practice gave children hope and they held faith in the higher power. An interesting finding was that all of the children believed that their prayers and requests had been

answered by a higher power. They believed that this higher power had control over life situations that they did not. Bobby Boblehead held on to hope and stated:

*You should just keep hope though, right? So then you keep praying to God and asking, because you know it might be working. I don't know...It might. Because there's really nothing I can do about it...I mean if I could make things better for myself, I would.*

This was also noted by parents and clinicians to be an aspect for children.

#### **4.6.4 Having Spiritual Tendencies and Sensory Abilities**

Several participants talked about spiritual tendencies and sensory abilities. Spiritual tendencies included things related to virtues of the heart such as empathy and caring, purity and gratitude, as well as intuitive capacities. Iza described the picture she drew in more detail and stated “*Well the hearts connecting us to the other hearts are a symbol of love and the blue rainbows are symbols also with the stars and they signal caring things and...*” Her mother Destiny finished this sentence with “*empathy.*” Iza and her mom mentioned water as a symbol of purity and purification, and when I asked Iza what purity and purification meant to her she responded “*purification means pure hearted and joyful and being grateful for what you have.*”

In most of the children's discussions there were times when they described spiritual knowledge and abilities as being part of themselves or innate functions. They discussed having sensory experiences of seeing things or having visions, hearing things, or feeling things. For example, Iza talked about how she just ‘knows’ how to heal with her hands, how she is able to see auras around people, and hear spiritual things. Jessie Mayor described a unique vision she experienced while thinking about existential matters:

*Oh, about the world I always think...when I was worried I'd always think well, if God created the world, did he create all the other planets? But who created Him? It's like I'm thinking it's like hmm, do you think for a long time and I'll look over to my closet and it's like this...some person appears and it's like – oh, so you created the world and it's like they're almost invisible, but they're like dust. And it's like, so you created God and God created the world, and it's going on and on like a food chain, but it's not food... Yeah. I don't know what it is. It's like dust that becomes a person somehow. Yeah. Now I wasn't quite sure, was that someone other than God that created God, or was that part of God? Someone else who created God because can God create Himself somehow? It's like a really good question that...*

Some children shared that they communicated with spiritual entities. Nikita Drew described how she hears spirits telling her what to write when she sits down and clears her mind, and opens herself to the writing process. The content communicated to her by spirits involved heartfelt love and believing in love, and she often experienced receiving knowledge from a spiritual source that was heart and love related:

*Like one time, it was a fan fiction about one of my favorite celebrities and umm...the person, like someone whispered to me like make it a story about someone who had such a hard life... and falls in love.... with someone who doesn't believe in love, but she falls in love.*

Several parents described their children as having a sense of caring and empathy, and also having a knowingness that others were in need of support. The parents described these as innate spiritual characteristics of their child where their child seemed to be able to connect with

an empathic knowing of the needs of others who were strangers, and wanted to provide them with support and comfort. Destiny described her daughter Iza as having an intuitive ability where she could tell what was occurring for strangers, what they were feeling and experiencing. Natacha shared that Allochka also had a real innate sense of the need of others and a desire to extend help:

*Whenever we walk by a store and there's one of those people outside asking for money, he'll grab me, "Mom, can I have a dollar to give?" Like he's...they're poor, they need help. And I have to explain to him, "Well, some of them do need food. But some of them just want the money to go and get drugs or alcohol." So he didn't really get that. But I mean he's got a really...he's got a sense of helping the poor.*

All of the parents described their children as having some innate spiritual aspects. Some mentioned their child's ability to know, see, hear, or feel spiritual things. Natacha said that Allochka had numerous experiences of feeling spirits from a young age:

*Just feeling that somebody's there. Feeling touched. Not really hearing voices, but feeling somebody's there and especially at night. Or different places where we'll visit, he'll feel something...He's had that since he's two.*

Some parents shared having their own spiritual experiences involving intuitive or sensory abilities, and some recalled having these in childhood. Beatrice commented that she missed the spiritual connections and abilities she had as a child and yearned to re-experience them now. She felt that these aspects of her spirituality had been squashed or lost.

Several clinicians described children as having an innate knowing of spirituality and connectedness, and were more open to spiritual experiences. However, not all clinicians talked

about this area of spirituality for children. As seen above, a few clinicians described children seeing ghosts, or knowing that a spirit or presence was around them. Martha shared her opinion:

*I do think a lot of it is innate. I think...I guess it's also social conditioning and what our parents tell us about spirituality and religion and life and death. But I think with kids it's...I think for some reason they're far more open to it and I think they're far more...less judging of it. So I think they can look at the experiences they have and just accept them rather than try to sort of push them down or deny them. So I think kids have more of that easy access to those types of processes or phenomena...They're in the moment with it. Yeah. They're not trying to talk themselves out of it or deny it or say – oh, I can't think that or feel that because it's not socially acceptable. Whereas I think an adult would. Yeah. So I think they're more in tune to it.*

#### **4.6.5 Joy, Happiness, and Butterflies**

Many child and adult participants talked about feelings of joy and happiness in their descriptions of spirituality and spiritual experiences. Child participants described these powerful pleasant feelings when they connected with spiritual entities or a higher power. Various participants described the emotions of joy and happiness as felt in the heart or stomach regions, within their central core. Several children described feeling excited, their heart speeding up, or a sensation of butterflies in their stomach. Nikita Drew described her feelings when she felt forgiven by and connected to God, “*Yeah like I just get butterflies and I just start smiling, getting excited like I don't know why that happens.... but I know he's connecting with me.*”

Jessie Mayor described intense spiritual feelings of happiness and excitement and butterflies when spending time in nature:

*I'm pretty happy and excited...I feel that I cannot be touched in a hurtful way. I feel that I am just surrounded by happiness and that everywhere I go, my smile gets bigger and it makes me even happier that the day is going to be so perfect because I'm outside...Yeah. It feels really spiritual! ...I feel kind of twitchy and kind of a weird feeling of butterflies...It feels a little weird...Yeah. It's not a bad butterflies... It's a good happy.*

One of the clinicians reflected on feelings of joy in two incidents. Martha shared a spiritual encounter she had as a child, and communicated how the experience of seeing beauty elicits feelings of joy in children:

*That spiritual experience, really. Yeah, because it was with some kind of an entity – some kind of an entity that it wasn't something that I could have created. It was just...it just appeared and left me feeling a lot of joy as a kid...I think kids – you know, if they see something beautiful they'll just recognize – wow, there's beauty in the world and what does that mean, and I can use it to my own advantage. I can feel joy from seeing beauty.*

#### **4.6.6 Engaging in Spiritual Activities and Practices**

The participants described a wide variety of things that they felt were spiritual activities and practices children engaged in. Every child seemed to have their own unique repertoire of activities and practices that they felt were spiritual and brought them peace, hope, comfort, and connectedness. Some talked about going to church or bible camp, and as noted above all of them shared that they pray to a higher power, God or Gaia, or to whoever was listening. However, they felt many other daily activities were spiritual as well, such as playing by themselves or with others, reading, art, drawing, writing, music, sports, Tae Kwon Do, or walking the dog. The



children mentioned using these activities to feel connected or as distractions from the stressors in life. Some children talked about spending time with, or communicating with, pets or animals as spiritual activities. Some mentioned spending time in nature, communicating with trees and spirits, or collecting items from nature as spiritual activities and practices.

Bobby Boblehead discussed spiritual practices such as being mindful, and focusing on the present moment. She also described sports as something she felt she could lose herself in and feel fully engaged with. Several children described being fully engaged in activities and losing themselves, or losing time, or feeling something larger than themselves. Some talked about feeling as if something was creating through them, as if they were a channel for something spiritual, which often occurred through drawing and writing. Adults also discussed how they saw children as being fully engaged or in the moment with activities.

Some children used the internet for spiritual purposes, such as searching for spiritual information, or for posting positive spiritual messages for others to see and read, and for connections with others. The children talked about focusing on the positive things in life, or hoping for positives in the future, as spiritual practices that were helpful practices to get them through distressing times.

Clinicians discussed engaging in spiritual activities and rituals with children. They also shared various activities which allowed children to communicate with the deceased, to stay connected or to remember a loved one, or to allow the child to process spiritual aspects associated with TGL events. Activities included letter writing, poetry, drawing, and videos. Rathdin disclosed that he had engaged in spiritual activities and rituals with children:

*Let's go visit Mom's gravesite. Let's..." I mean, if you think...if I say yes, I've written*

*a letter with a child to their dead mother, I mean yes, I have. I have done those things.*

Sunshine described a number of rituals and activities that she did with children. She described a very emotional and important activity she had done where a mother was dying and the family was in the process of saying goodbye:

*So that was another ritual that we did...we took a video of the mom with the mom's permission so she could give this to her daughter after she passed; and her daughter will have it with her for all her life.*

#### **4.6.7 Embracing Spiritually Symbolic Objects.**

The category *embracing spiritually symbolic objects* emerged in the data, which was a process where individuals find and use objects that connect them spiritually to someone or something. These objects hold spiritual significance and may be objects belonging to deceased people, or objects which are reminders of, maintain a connection to, or that hold spiritual significance for the person. These objects are embraced by being held or put somewhere in close proximity to provide solace, comfort, and to maintain connection. Participants identified a variety of items or photos of deceased family members or significant people that were spiritually symbolic.

Children mentioned various items that they interacted with in order to provide comfort, such as worry dolls and worry stones. Jessie Mayor used items she had collected in nature for spiritual connection:

*Like I collect lots of outdoors stuff. Like I have a weasel skin and I've got like a partridge foot and a rabbit foot and stuff like that. And I'll just look at those and I'll be like – cool. Like I think it's so neat and I'll just be looking at those and I'll get lost in*

*time, and I don't even know I'm worried anymore because I'm looking at all these really neat things and I was like, wow. It really helped the time pass.*

Parents noticed their children using spiritually symbolic objects, or used objects themselves. The children did not always openly talk with their parents when they were struggling or needing spiritual support, however parents seemed to be aware of the struggle. They noted that their child would spend more time alone and would engage with these spiritually symbolic objects. Amelia Waldon noticed this behaviour in her daughter Jessie Mayor:

*She has a worry stone that she bought in the summer. I don't very often...I think it was in the bottom of her purse for months, but I see she has it out now on her bedside table.*

Some of the parents shared that they had their own spiritually symbolic objects. Natacha felt her rosary brought her meaning and spiritual symbolism:

*I am not a religious person. But I love rosaries and they just remind me of a higher power of God and I have one in my car hanging there all the time.*

Some of the clinicians mentioned spiritually symbolic objects that were part of spiritual activities and rituals they facilitated for children. These included stones, toys, art creations, photos, and belongings of importance. Sunshine mentioned having children find rocks that would bring them courage and alleviate worry. Rathdin felt that individuals find spiritual symbolic objects and rituals which help to facilitate keeping spiritual connections alive. Sandy helped children make spiritually symbolic mementos:

*I know that I've talked to kids about memory books and I've talked about...one of them was a bracelet. I talked about using a bracelet to have different charms that would*

*mean different things; and some of it was aspects of a loved one that they could carry with them.*

#### **4.6.8 Enjoying Weird Thoughts and Conversations**

As noted above, all of the children appeared to enjoy talking about spirituality and hypothesizing about life and death, existential questions and facets, and the unknown aspects of life. Their questions and conversations were incredibly deep, and they appeared animated, and for the most part they were happy to be sharing their spiritual thoughts and experiences.

Allochka was quite reluctant during the taped part of the interview to talk about his spirituality, however once I turned off the tape recorder and talked informally with his mother about spiritual things he opened up and talked about believing in a higher power, praying, and other aspects of his spirituality. His mother had previously cautioned him not to talk about spiritual things with counsellors. He shared that he enjoyed prayer and liked how Muslims used a mat to pray upon and moved up and down, he shared that he emulated this himself when he prayed. His body language was much more animated and expressive during his conversations about spirituality once he opened up.

Overall, the children shared that they wondered about all kinds of spiritual matters and interesting thoughts and questions. They often described spiritual things as weird or strange in part because they were unexplainable and because spiritual experiences were beyond the confines of the descriptive ability of language. The word 'weird' was used in a positive sense at times to describe aspects that were magical, paranormal, fascinating, or extraordinary. Jessie Mayor described her thoughts on spiritual matters and likened them to the struggles, and fun involved in trying to figure out a tough puzzle:

*Yeah... You think and you're like...because it's not often that you think about that. It's like sometimes when you're just sitting by yourself, you start thinking – wow, I never knew that. Yeah, it's like I never really thought about that before. It's a really cool question that I'd really like to know...Yeah. Like I have a Rubik's cube... It's so hard to figure out. It's like – arghh. Yeah, and sometimes even when I'm there, I'll just do the Rubik's cube and thinking, thinking; and I'll keep – oh, I'm so close. Like I did this math question and I got ...like I do not like math. I don't like math. It was...and I'm in there and I'm like so deep in thought that it was fun. It's like I almost had it. Its like – whooh! It's like, oh I was so close. It's like wait, I wonder if this would work. It's like really exciting. It's fun.*

Mookie felt she had a lot of different thoughts and questions and shared an example of how she hypothesized on existential things like reincarnation, *“I thought about it. I'm like, but what if your grandma or grandpa died and then they came back as quadruplets. How would that work?”* She also shared a fun and ‘weird’ conversation she had with a relative (however her glance at her parent and her body language seemed to indicate that she was taking a risk in talking about this openly with me in front of her mom, and she blushed as well):

*So we were sitting there eating pork chops from leftovers and then all of a sudden she's like, “Mookie, I wonder what a human would taste like.” And I'm like – what? And it's just like, “Would it taste good? Because most of our body is made up of meat and water. Wouldn't it taste like a pork chop?” “I don't know.” And then it just took a really weird turn and we just started...(giggling).*

Nikita Drew and I both enjoyed a ‘weird’ dialogue pertaining to life and death during the

interview. The following excerpt from an interview demonstrates how spiritual dialogue with children can be fun and engaging:

*Nikita Drew: Mmhmmm for all we know, we could like, it could be a cycle it could be umm before life, actual life and then real life umm afterlife it could all just go in a circle and you just don't know it...*

*Heather: Yeah and some people believe that right?... Hmmm, we don't know do we?  
(both laugh)...*

*Nikita Drew: Cause say it is a dream. So how could we know? Say like I was someone else, say I was umm Madonna? No wait she's still living...*

*Heather: Yeah...Princess Di*

*Nikita Drew: Yeah*

*Heather: Or Michael Jackson*

*Nikita Drew: That's right or Michael Jackson, he could come back*

*Heather: He may be back already!?!*

*Nikita Drew: Exactly!! (both giggling)*

#### **4.7 Experiencing TGL**

Although TGL events were not the major focus of the interview questions on children's spirituality participants shared many aspects associated with TGL on their own. This likely was due to knowing the parameters and criteria for the study which was on posters, information letters, and the consent forms. Therefore, during the interviews children and parent participants shared various experiences, feelings, thoughts, spiritual struggles, and concerns associated with TGL.

The data revealed how TGL events affect individuals on cognitive, emotional, and spiritual levels, and the situation results in a variety of reactions, actions, and behaviours. TGL events also have an impact on relationships with others, the world and beyond. TGL events evoke a need for meaning making and a sense of purpose, which are spiritually rooted. Two distinct phenomena resulting from TGL events emerged in the data, as various adult and child participants described *being struck blank*, and *having a sense of disbelief* regarding what had occurred.

Some adult participants were not aware of the depth of children's spiritual lives in general and especially in regard to how it was *sparked and catapulted* by TGL events and processes. However, some adult and child participants described how children appear to be catapulted beyond their expected level of spiritual development through TGL. Children experiencing TGL appeared to contemplate deep spiritual questions; cogitate on aspects of existence, death, and the purpose and meaning of life events and life itself. Spiritual activities and rituals seemed to be sparked and activated, and children appeared to place faith, and to have trust and confidence in their spiritual relationships.

#### **4.7.1 Being Struck Blank and Having a Sense of Disbelief**

A number of participants described that when adversity strikes it creates an initial sense of being struck blank, feeling immobilized, and being unable to stop or control what is occurring. There is a process of being halted in normal daily life, and stopped in one's tracks for a period of time. This process is accompanied by emotional shock including feeling confused and disoriented, and TGL seems to create a jarring process on one's thoughts, feelings and emotions. Hope, faith, belief, and sense of self also appear to get jarred or halted, the pre-trauma spiritual

worldview alters, and a sense of normalcy and of a safe and stable reality is shattered and disappears.

One child, Jessie Mayor, articulated how she experienced this:

*Sometimes they just, like you're not expecting them. It's like poof, they come out of nowhere and just happen like automatically and you weren't even expecting that. Like but then as soon as it is about to happen, you realize oh, this is going to happen. I know this is going to happen, but it's too late to stop it from happening... Well, when you think about it you're kind of just struck blank, like you don't really know what happened. You don't know anything for a couple of minutes and then you're like, you come to your senses and you're like, oh, I think I know what happened now and you really just think it over. But sometimes you're just staring, like did this really happen and this can't be true. Did this happen or no, or you don't know... Yeah. It starts... like the gears are stuck for a minute in your brain and just something that breaks and it pops and it's gone.*

A few parents described how they experienced a loss of an ability to function, maintain and cope. They struggled with parenting and believed their child was affected by the TGL, but were unsure as to the extent due to their own emotional state. They recognized that they were not able to provide the emotional support they felt their child required, and they had feelings of guilt associated with this. As a result, they felt that they required counselling support for their children. Charlie shared how her experience of TGL affected her ability to function:

*I kind of went off the wall like a freight train, but did she? Did she get what she needed? Or was she worrying about her mom? Do you know what I mean?*



Clinicians felt TGL events affected a child's sense of knowing and they needed to understand how the TGL events and its effects fit into a new worldview. Rathdin described this process as the child's foundation becoming cracked and the need to support them in rebuilding meaning and connections:

*I do a lot of work around family violence issues or family relationship issues... that foundation in our culture is a cornerstone for who we are and how we branch out to make sense in the world. So when the foundation's cracked or when it's crumbling in that respect... the connection is still made through some belief system of some sort, right? The connections, the stability that these kids need... you're going to help do those linkages for them to continue the meaning, the connection, the growth, the development – all that kind of ... so where are you? Are you stuck? I do do work in kind of little t and capital T trauma kind of issues. And so part of treatment is helping to find out how that sits for them and what meaning they've given to that and what cognitive structures they've developed as a result, and that kind of thing.*

Some clinicians described how TGL events created a reality crisis, or even a death of the child's pre-trauma reality, which necessitated a rebirth of a new and revised worldview for the child.

Martha stated:

*it may be a death of their self-esteem or a death of their sense of stability in life...or their identity, for sure.*

Clinicians deemed that children required support with these crises and changes, and children had reduced abilities to function and cope as a result of TGL. They described how they

had to assist children to build up coping repertoires, to be aware of strengths and resources, and to reconstruct supportive relationships. Sunshine felt these to be common issues:

*Yeah. They lose who they used to be and their knowing of self. So then their boundaries and coping have all been reduced... Yeah... Themes would be about self – loss of identity and self – and reconnection – some way either to self, to the ground, your history, so that you have a place to stand safely and then explore the world again. Yes, that’s a common theme.*

Clinicians also saw their role to include the creation of a safe space for children to unpack the events bottled up through TGL, including conflictual and confusing feelings, bodily sensations, and cognitive struggles. They also described how they facilitated meaning making, along with reconnection, reconstruction, and transformation in TGL. Lily felt that she facilitated, and was witness to, a healing transformation for children and families:

*Because I think really, when you look at the work that we do, not only with the kids, but with the entire family unit, it’s all about making meaning of difficult circumstances. It’s about the...the foundation is about moving forward and how do you move forward? Well, you move forward through understanding, through letting go, through forgiveness, and through trust. I think that in essence is what we’re doing. Like we are in the act of healing and we’re witnessing some pretty profound changes in our work with kids and families.*

#### **4.7.2 Sparking and Catapulting**

*Sparking and catapulting* emerged as a substantive category and is quite important as it illuminates and describes a process of increased spiritual activity, and a process of engaging in

an advanced developmental level of rumination, questioning, and reflection for children.

Spiritual practices, rituals, and activities are sparked and activated by TGL events, and children rely on their spirituality and increase spiritual behaviours and actions when feeling distressed by life. TGL events seem to spark spiritual and existential questions regarding meaning and purpose, relationships and connections, social justice, morals, values, worldview and beliefs.

Children get catapulted into deep spiritual cogitations beyond their expected level of development when wrestling with advanced perspectives regarding the meaning of events and of life. Children were described as growing up too fast through the experience of TGL, and appeared to be at a higher cognitive, emotional, and spiritual level than their peers. Parents and clinicians depicted how children were exposed to the greater complexities of life earlier than their peers. The impacts of TGL to children's worldview, and the relationships with self, others, and a higher power seemed to create further depth in their cognitive analysis, re-shaping of values, and meaning making.

The children participants talked about their spirituality becoming stronger and more active through TGL. TGL seemed to spark spiritual cogitations, and children engaged in spiritual and existential rumination, questioning and reflecting, and had a need for spiritual and existential meaning making surrounding the TGL. For example, Jessie Mayor likened the process of sparking to a line graph going upwards:

*When I'm nervous, I rely on it more and I think, okay. I wasn't nervous before, but I think of a line graph. Okay, so this is how my day went. It started to go up, but then it went down a little. But then it went up because I talked to God or something like that. And I see how it helps me, like I picture the line graph in my head.*

Children shared that they relied more heavily on their spiritual activities and spiritual relationships with a higher power, spending time in the natural world, or embracing symbolic spiritual objects. Children felt that these spiritual activities were already part of their spiritual foundation, and described being more dependent upon their spirituality and utilizing their hope and faith during TGL experiences. Children talked about prayer being sparked and Nikita Drew stated:

*Sometimes when I'm in deep need I will pray to God, like I don't do it regularly but when I need it and I just need something to guide me I will pray to God, I'll get down on my knees by the window and say God if you're out there can you please answer me and try and help me?*

The children were not able to discuss the depths of their experience, understandings, thoughts, and feelings with same aged children. Bobby Boblehead felt she had no one to talk with:

*I rarely ever tell my friends anything because I'm just so closed. Like I'm not an open book at all. I'm just shut, underneath a pack of closed books.*

A couple of children felt that their knowledge of the world and their spiritual worldview was disrupted and changed, and recognized that their spiritual worldview seemed to evolve and deepen after experiencing TGL. Bobby Boblehead expressed how it changed her thinking pattern:

*you're always worried when you go out on what will happen when you're gone... If you think about it, you're always thinking about the negative or what could happen. And*

*it's hard to just enjoy anything when you're going through that. Because it changes your life so much, it's hard to...you know...*

A significant finding was that social relationships were viewed by the children as not being supportive of spiritual dialogue. Children felt that they were unable to share, discuss, find support, and be open with their spirituality and TGL experience with others. They found that it was taboo to talk about certain aspects of life including TGL and spirituality, and as a result they built emotional walls as a protective mechanism, or a method of containment. As Bobby Boblehead illustrated some aspects of *self* become closed off, masked or hidden from others:

*Like if something really depressing happens... I don't open up to people very well. Like I'm more, I keep private to myself. So I'm just like sad and everything and I try to mask it so nobody will notice.*

A lack of response from the social world resulted in children engaging independently in spiritual activities, and depending upon their personal spiritual relationships. Jessie Mayor said she could not tell others her thoughts and continued by stating, “*Well, I just felt it was kind of a weird feeling telling someone else that.*”

Parents explained how TGL seemed to spark spiritual practices, as well as spiritual questions in their children. Children would ask parents about death and what occurs after death. Parents described how children would pray, or become more spiritually active. Parents did not engage in prayer or practices with their child but noticed that their child engaged in various spiritual activities in private at home, outside, and in their bedrooms. Parents believed that prayer, spiritual communication and relationships, rituals and practices provided support and comfort for their child through TGL. Amelia Waldon depicted how her children brought up

questions and engaged in dialogue regarding existential matters more during distressing times, and specifically how her child Nikita Drew engaged more in spiritual activities:

*I don't know. It tends to be...you know we've had a few losses and it always sparks stuff. So whether that's because now they're doubting, I don't know. Or because they're feeling stronger, I'm not sure. But it definitely brings it to the forefront. Yeah...Maybe if I know that something is going to take care of me – that there's something that'll take care of me – maybe I won't worry so much. You know if I know that something will get me through it and that this is happening for a reason or whatever, then maybe that'll help me a little bit. So maybe she'll draw on it a little more...She has worry dolls and I think she...I don't know if she talks to them or not, or tells them her worries. She puts them under her bed most nights to help her with her worries...She has a worry stone that she bought in the summer. I don't very often...I think it was in the bottom of her purse for months, but I see she has it out now on her bedside table.*

Beatrice noted how the catapulting process moved Bobby Boblehead beyond her expected level of development and as a result her peers could not relate:

*She doesn't connect with anybody spiritually, I don't think. She doesn't have friends that she can talk to. I know that for a fact... No. They're much more immature than she is... They haven't experienced anything like that... I always tell her when she gets into the higher grades that maybe she'll connect better with older kids.*

Clinicians described how children became more active spiritually through TGL by praying, and engaging in rituals and spiritual activities. They believed that children found

nurturance and support in dialogue with a higher power, and felt comforted by spiritually symbolic objects. They also noticed that children questioned and wondered about spiritual things more. Lily offered her experience of this sparking and catapulting process with children and families:

*It becomes more active in their mind. They think about it more. They pray more. They do those kinds of things. So they, I guess, rely on it. It becomes more active, is what my sense is. However, it doesn't seem to – or it might cause them to ask deeper questions according to the parents. The parents say they start asking these deeper questions.*

Some clinicians noted that children started to question, or doubt the existence of a higher power, their own existence in life, and the meaning and purpose of everything. Rose shared some of the questions children have asked and the soul searching process that is sparked and catapulted:

*Again, it's more with the traumatized children. But they're seeking meaning for themselves and reassurance that their existence is important in the world. And that comes out through poetry, art; and sometimes they write songs. And in that there is the angst related to what could or has happened to them or other people they've known. But within that context is that whole spiritual search for meaning-making. "This happened to me. Why? What does it all mean? What is my life going to be like?" It's almost like, through their artistic expression, they're saying, "Who am I? What am I? Why am I"... and that's what I would call it – soul searching and meaning-making. And in doing that, you do connect with spirituality.*

The two male clinicians considered preadolescent children as generally not being developmentally capable of thinking deeply about existential and spiritual aspects. However, they stated that they had not really engaged in this type of spiritual dialogue with this age group. Rathdin reflected upon his experience explaining it was rare but occurred a few times:

*You're talking 8-12-year-olds. So you may not necessarily start on the meaning. So you're helping them explore it and maybe not so much in the label of meaning or in spirituality, but how does it affect them? No. I don't think...it's not very common...and I don't think it...maybe twice, truly...Yeah. I mean, at the 8-12 –year old, they don't sit there and they're not necessarily world weary existentialists that say, what is the meaning of this, right? I think they know life sucks and I don't like it, but not necessarily the deeper level meaning of things. So it's rare that someone has the cognitive ability and that sense of self to go at that level – at the deeper level – at that age group. I mean, I'm not saying it has never happened because you'd have kids who are just very much into their head and they think a lot, and that's the nature of who they are. So I mean it does happen, but they're probably more concrete.*

Most of the female clinicians noted that cogitations, questions, meaning making, and dialogue about existential and spiritual matters of children were often well beyond the child's expected level of development. TGL events caused children to think more existentially and maturely about life and its experiences. Clinicians described being surprised by the high level of analytical thinking and dialogue that young children engage in as a result of TGL. Rose expanded upon one of her experiences:



*One client I had who was seven years old was born with a heart condition, a very severe heart condition that could shorten his life...he raised questions related to thoughts he was having about death and dying, about his shortened lifespan. His mother happened to be severely handicapped with diabetes, so he was asking questions like, "Do you think my mom and I were meant to be together because we understand each other, because we each have something that really hurts us, affects us?...that's a spiritual component. That's not the sort of question a seven-year-old would necessarily...would ask... you know, there's an advancement here at some level because probably life circumstances, health, and knowing life is fragile he knows it a lot sooner. So he's catapulted into and triggered into thinking about spiritual thoughts – life beyond or how life is impacted by this heart condition and his mother's illness. And so in terms of whether or not, how could I answer, "Are we meant to be together?" From a spiritual perspective, from a social work clinician's perspective, I could say yes because I believe that his mom with her condition in a practical way would be able to empathize with him and help him and what not, carry on his daily life. But, for him, he just from nowhere wanted to know if they were meant to be together because they had the same thing. So the only way I could answer that is to say, "Well, quite probably". It's a good fit, but its working and...but for me the question was, why is he asking it from that perspective?...Yeah, that context. It was just a question that came through and I believe it was spiritual in nature.*

#### 4.8 It's Weird and Taboo

Most of the participants found that discussing and expressing spirituality with others often proved to be a negative experience and it was considered to be *weird and taboo*. Many children and parents described the experience of being judged or labelled as weird or strange after discussing or expressing spirituality in a social context. Several clinicians expressed not being able to speak about spirituality in meetings or supervision. They also found discussing TGL to be taboo, and that it was something to be kept private, or hidden. So there was a double edged sword effect occurring through the experience of TGL and spirituality with both topics being *taboo*. This caused participants to suffer and to go what may be described as “underground” with their spirituality, their spiritual concerns and their struggles associated with TGL.

As a result, children engaged with their spiritual world, and tapped into spiritual resources and practices privately and independently. Although children desired open human support and guidance for managing spiritual aspects occurring in the TGL trajectory, their experience was that these pathways or avenues were not readily available. This process led to social isolation.

Several categories emerged which were interconnected with the umbrella of *'it's weird and taboo'*, and the foundation of *it's normal and important*. A striking finding was that a few of the children and parents openly disclosed *experiencing spiritual oppression*, which was a process where their spirituality had been rejected, or dismissed, or they had been negatively labelled, bullied, or ostracized due to expressing their authentic spirituality. This phenomenon of oppression in relation to spirituality in social situations was prevalent or implicit in the

conversations of other participants. The effects of experiencing this type of oppression to their spirituality resulted in several behaviours and actions for participants including *fighting it out*, *lacking trust and answers*, *treading cautiously*, *staying strong*, and *at one's own pace*. *Fighting it out* is twofold as there are external and internal processes that were revealed. *Lacking trust and answers* pertained to lacking trust in others and in a higher power, and for adults lacking trust in one's ability to respond. *Treading cautiously* emerged as a broad category encapsulating four interconnected processes for individuals including: *withholding*, *protecting and shielding*, *testing the terrain*, and *waiting it out*. *Staying strong* involved donning a cloak of competence and feigning a sense of normality in situations that were difficult. It also included utilizing one's inner strengths and resources. *At one's own pace* was about having some control in processes and in sharing one's spirituality.

#### **4.8.1 Experiencing Spiritual Oppression**

The category *experiencing spiritual oppression* emerged and relates to participant's experiences of cruel or unjust treatment by others, and the suppression of spirituality socially. This is not connected with spiritual forces or demonic oppression. *Experiencing spiritual oppression* involved occurrences participants encountered where other people disapproved of, squashed or rejected their spiritual worldview.

Several children and parents shared that they had experienced this type of spiritual oppression and had to fight against experiences of spiritual injustice. Children and parents talked about experiences of being put down, labelled or judged by others; being marginalized, ostracized and rejected by others for having a different spirituality; and being teased or bullied in relation to their spirituality. They experienced not feeling safe and that they were not allowed or

able to openly and publicly express, talk about or share various spiritual aspects as they found a pervasive lack of acceptance by others regarding spirituality matters. A few children described the external battles that they came up against, which required them to overtly fight oppressive acts regarding their spirituality. Participants described how the views of the dominant group in society are held as the only valid view, and how fear and a lack of acceptance exists regarding spiritual worldviews that differ. They described how society or larger social systems do not openly accept difference in spiritual beliefs and practices.

Destiny emphasized the experiences she and her daughter Iza encountered and being shunned by others:

*She's basically being told that what she believes is wrong...and that she'll get punished for it which obviously we don't believe." ... It's supposed to be like you're supposed to embrace everyone else's differences. Not shun them for it...It comes with the territory you have to learn who's receptive, who's... who's more open spiritually to different aspects. Ya know, or who's going to turn around and call you a Satanist...and ya know you can't make people understand. Especially people that aren't willing to change their view point.*

A couple of parents stated that they found themselves fighting the larger school system. They expressed feeling angry at the lack of response to teasing and bullying associated with their child's spirituality, and a lack of acceptance for differing spiritual worldviews. Destiny revealed that her daughter Iza had actually been physically hurt by another child for openly expressing her spirituality in the school setting:

*It seems to be now-a-days if you show the slightest difference from other children, it just gets worse...She's been beaten up by boys at school. Like she almost got her shoulder dislocated...By a boy and we don't go for that!... And because she's different...and it's not fair!...There is supposed to be zero tolerance for violence at school, there is not!*

The experience of spiritual oppression was not limited to school settings; it was also experienced in wider public milieus and filtered into social relationships with neighbours, extended family, and peers. It also was prevalent in the mental health field and in social work practice milieus. For instance, a couple of parents described their own experiences of being labelled and judged for sharing their spirituality publicly and privately with clinicians in the past.

For clinicians this category was associated with the lack of training, and the lack of acceptance and openness ingrained in the academic and practice realms. Lily commented on the stigmatization in practice and the need for support:

*But I think management too – like I think in order to keep that conversation open and not having people feel weird or stigmatized or, I don't know. I think management needs to understand that.*

Clinicians were aware of some of the external battles clients faced and assisted them with resolving conflicts both internal and external to self. Clinicians also engaged in their own processes of fighting internal battles connected with decision making regarding practice and spirituality.

#### **4.8.2 Fighting it Out**

The category of *fighting it out* appeared to have several dimensional properties which were both internal and external to the self. *Fighting it out* was an overt behaviour acted out in

the social realm, where individuals fought external battles, stood up to, and/or confronted others in an attempt to defend their rights to individual spirituality. It also was an attempt to gain acceptance, or to find alternate avenues for unique and different spiritual worldviews and practices, and to stop the suppression of differing spiritual worldviews. A very different internal process of *fighting it out* also emerged for all participant groups where they were *fighting internal battles* such as wrestling with difficult or opposing cognitions and decision making. This process involved engaging in thoughts about not wanting to do harm to others, and it involved a desire to try to choose the ‘right’ decision or the ‘right’ path. It involved consideration of empathy, of justice, and thinking about the perspective of the ‘other.’

**4.8.2.1 Fighting external battles.** Through the experience of spiritual oppression participants found that they engaged in an outer active process of *fighting it out* which was an attempt to defend one’s spiritual stance and rights. This action was to gain their right and privilege in the public sphere to their own unique spirituality. It was an act to stop the suppression of spirituality, and the silencing or marginalization of individual spiritual expression, and an attempt to bring attention to injustices.

According to Iza and Destiny, Iza had innate wisdom for healing through laying her hands on others by using Reiki. Iza had attempted to heal another child on the playground and others around were not accepting of her spiritual abilities. Destiny expressed anger and imparted that she was not going to allow social oppression to affect her child’s spiritual growth and development:

*And I’ll be damned if I’m gonna sit there and allow my child’s abilities to be suppressed because somebody’s scared. That’s what it comes down to... It’s fear of the unknown.*

Several participants described experiencing spiritual oppression at school based on religious or spiritual affiliation and their spiritual worldview or practices. Parents noted that spiritual or religious oppression and suppression at school created struggles for their child. Children and parents felt this contributed to the sense of feeling judged, labelled, or weird, and that their personal spirituality was designated as socially taboo. Beatrice commented on her daughter Bobby Bobblehead's experience of being marginalized for her difference:

*She does go to a Catholic school and she's ostracized there because she's not Catholic...Yeah. Other kids say things to them about that too...like, why are you even here if you're not Catholic...making them feel out of place...Which is...Yeah. I didn't expect that. I was quite shocked by that and a little disgruntled by that!*

Children discussed attempting to find safe territory at school by trying to bond with others who held similar spiritual worldviews, or were also spiritually oppressed or labeled as different from the majority group. They sought safe ground to increase their power and sense of belonging with spiritual allies. Bobby Bobblehead had to seek out others in order to find a circle of support during communion time at school. She stated, "*We all like kind of banded together when it comes to that time, you know. We try to get around people that are just like us, in a sense.*" She also described the fear of openly sharing her spirituality at school and fears of being an object of ridicule, ostracizing or bullying. She articulated, "*I usually worry that they'll tell other people...And then there'll be a whole thing starting... (you become) a target...You just need the archers to get ready!*"

Clinicians recognized the oppressiveness and the suppression of spirituality in society and in practice and supported clients at times with aspects of *fighting it out*. The external battles

for clinicians themselves involved the dialectical pressure to ask clients about spirituality, as well as a lack of acceptance of it in clinical discussion, and a lack of avenues for learning how to address spiritual aspects in practice. This resulted in stronger internal battles for this participant group.

**4.8.2.2 Fighting internal battles.** *Fighting internal battles* emerged as a category which represented an internal cognitive process where participants attempted to determine the best route of action in a situation through ethical decision making processes. Participants described working out a chosen path to take through mulling over alternatives, thinking about the perspective of the ‘other,’ and reasoning using moral and ethical evaluation processes.

For children this category was associated with morality and decision making regarding right and wrong or good versus bad or evil. Children described how they were fighting internal battles related to social morals and values or good and evil. Iza first alluded to the process of having to ‘fight it out’ when talking about her anger and her need to control it or to ‘*take the badness out*’ of her. Many of the children mentioned that they engaged in internal cognitive moral battles, and described a process of having conversations in their mind. They described weighing out a good or right choice versus a bad or wrong choice, and at times they struggled with choosing the right thing to do. They had a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, and mentioned God or a higher power versus Satan or the devil. The children felt that it was important to make positive choices, and to consider others in life, but they sometimes found that their moods affected their choices and made it difficult to choose positively. If they were distressed or feeling negative emotions, they struggled to make good choices even though they were putting a lot of thought and energy into choosing the right thing. Iza stated “*you have to*



take action and take control about it...and you also have to try to fight it out.” Mookie articulated that this was her ‘conscience’ at work. Nikita Drew depicted a situation where she actually experienced this battle as a powerful presence that seemed to be spiritual in nature. She described this within the context of a time when her parent had instructed her to leave the foster home without permission:

*It was like the angel and devil came on my shoulders like you know in those cartoons...saying do it, don't do it. Do it, don't do it, yeah...And I didn't like actually see it like you do in those cartoons... Yeah like I heard some... Yeah someone was whispering saying do it, do it, do it you know you want to, you know you do and then the other person the... another whisper like more mystical something like all delicate not firm but soft and gentle... kept saying like you shouldn't do it, you know it's wrong, and you could get in trouble... Well I think I do believe in like how with the negative thoughts it could be like I could be having contact, this may sound weird or crazy, with um the devil... because it's a negative, that's what the devil usually is negative... I'm wondering if I'm actually connecting with both of them at the same time...*

Mookie shared that she often posts positive things on her Facebook wall about God and goodness. She attempts to share her moral thinking and spiritual aspects socially, and her mother Charlie finds it courageous that she does this in a public forum. Charlie sees her daughter's good conscience being exerted and is pleased by what is on her daughter's Facebook page:

*And when she talks about the two – the good and the bad – and the conscience. The conscience...I think it's there and I think it keeps her on the right track...On her Facebook things, you know, that's what spirituality means to her at her age. It's good*

*and bad. If you do the good thing, you've got God. If you do the bad thing, you've got the devil...She thinks good and bad...It is a moral thing with Mookie. It is... which is good... I'd be more worried if she was going to the devil's side of it. You know what I mean?*

For parents this was associated with grappling with their own spiritual struggles, and not knowing what to do or say to their children. Parents and clinicians identified moral concerns as being a critical part of children's spirituality and spiritual development processes. There was evidence in conversations of parents describing their attempts at teaching and guiding their children in making right choices in a spiritual sense and in developing positive morals and values. The parent Destiny described her belief in the three-fold rule where what you do will come back to you three times over. Natacha talked about her child Allochka's interests in political leaders, and their choices regarding war and negative events and how he discussed these things in a spiritual vein. He shared in the interview that he wanted to ask the president of Syria if he would stop the war. Allochka seemed to want to know that people are not inherently bad and will not be seen this way in God's eyes, but that they did bad things because they were treated poorly as a child:

*Well, you know how Hitler – he was like...he got beat up on when he was a kid and then he turned out like his dad. Well, he was in the Nazi army and then he grew up. Well, I don't know how Assad was like – if he got beat up or he grew up and his parents taught him how to hate people...I just hope that somebody knows that if he got beat up when he was a kid.*

Natacha divulged that Allochka was worried about how he himself would grow up due to

the negative life circumstances he had encountered, and being treated poorly by parents in the past. She disclosed that she tries to assist him to understand these things in a spiritual manner and that how he is a good 'soul.' She talked about trying to help Allochka learn and think about morals:

*He asks me about evil stuff. He used to ask me about the devil stuff and ghosts and stuff – spirits...But he also wanted to talk to – was it the president of Syria – to find out if the way he is now is because how he was treated as a child. So he's making these links – these very deep links – about how people come to be who they are...He asks me about evil stuff... So I'm teaching that to Allochka. If you do good, good will be done onto you. And he wants to make the bad people pay; and I said you don't have to. God is taking care of all of that. But I'm really trying to...one of my goals is to try to redirect him in positive ways, to look at what good men have done. You know, when you're in the army, it's not just to kill people. It's to try to protect people. So trying to put some emphasis on the positive.*

Parents described struggling with their own mental health issues and past negative life events of illnesses and abuses such as incest, alcohol and violence. Parents wrestled with how and what to talk to their children about in TGL events. They were engaged in their own internal spiritual struggles and battling extreme feelings and emotions. They were not sure how to approach some things with their children as they wanted their children to be shielded from their own turmoil and to have positive views of spirituality. Beatrice shared some of her struggles:

*Well, every parent I'm sure by this time – when their children or adolescents have gone through some type of battle themselves, spirituality or beliefs and stuff. So you may be*

*tarnished in some areas and you don't want your kids to be tarnished like you are. So they need to get it from somewhere – non-biased and the whole picture, right? Yeah. Why did he do this to me? Why did God make me so sick and continues to make me so sick? I don't want her to know that's how I feel; you know?... And explore it herself, not to be influenced by maybe I have some negative thoughts about it that I'm working through myself. I don't want her to be tarnished by that.*

Clinicians articulated a cognitive wrestling process associated with not knowing how to go about attending to spirituality in practice, and not imposing beliefs on others or not wanting to harm the client due to a lack of competence. Clinicians also discussed an inner battle for children and they noticed how children were trying to sort out the atrocities in life. When exposed to TGL children are presented with spiritual struggles and clinicians feel the question often arises “How can bad things happen to good people?” The clinician Hercules shared his understanding and thoughts on the links of moral, spiritual and relational processes for individuals:

*Like I wonder about... could it tie into things like moral development in children because there is like... spirituality has some aspects like of about meaning of the world, making sense, understanding relationships and how you fit in, and also about like... kind of right and wrong or how are you supposed to conduct yourself, and how do people relate to each other, and care for each other, and how are you connected to each other, and so there is a social process and a relational process but on a parallel level I think there is kind of like a sense of morality and moral judgement or growth that would happen with kids too...in terms of some of their moral judgements ...Like maybe*

*something turned out really bad but you intended to do something good... you know like you intended to help someone but something bad happened out of it you know like it's not what the outcome is but what your intention was...so understanding that piece so I would think on a spiritual plane there'd be a similar kind of process for young kids and that age is where it's a transition.*

Most of the clinicians had an internal battle going on in regard to feeling the importance of spirituality, and yet not knowing how to go about addressing it or attending to it with preadolescent children in practice. There was a real sense from all clinicians that they internally struggled with this. Sandy wanted to address spirituality but struggled:

*Well, I think that's why I value it and I struggle that I don't know how to do it. Because I value it and I've seen how it's beneficial and not just for me, but for other people in my life. And so I really want to help kids get there and it bothers me that I don't know how.*

#### **4.8.3 Lacking Trust and Answers**

The dimension *lacking trust and answers* emerged from the data which entails several aspects. One aspect is that a result of a TGL situation can be that individuals become angry with the higher power of their belief, or no longer hold trust in their pre TGL world, or in others. Several participants openly discussed feelings of anger towards God or a higher power of their belief, and spiritual questions and struggles arose surrounding the existence of the higher power, and the validity of a benevolent spiritual power. A second aspect is that participants felt that they lacked answers in regard to spiritual and existential questions especially when they related to TGL events. They did the best they could in trying to come up with resolve for things, and to

find explanations that would bring comfort and support.

A third aspect was that all of the participants also stated that there was a lack of words in the English language to describe some spiritual experiences. Spiritual things were described as being experienced through the body and through intuitive processes and there was no language that offered an explanation for these experiences.

A few children talked about their belief in a higher power faltering, and they struggled with finding answers to spiritual questions surrounding the experience of TGL. Bobby Boblehead described her struggle with the TGL she experienced:

*Especially like if it's a big part of your life, you're scared. So you pray because you have the belief and in my case God – that he's Creator of the Universe. And everything happens for a reason, everyone says. But in some cases, why does it happen? ... Yeah. Because you pray and you don't think anything happens, but something normally does. And you think – well, why should I even do this anymore because it's not working...Is it torture, or what is it? You know?*

It appeared that the children whose parents were more involved or associated with the TGL event seemed to have greater struggles in trusting others and the world.

Some participants expressed confusion, despair and anger surrounding TGL which impacted their relationship with a higher power. One parent, Charlie, talked about her inner spiritual struggles and turmoil she had experienced, and how she was both grateful and very angry at the same time:

*On the same token with my addiction – that's what brought us to here partially. My sister passing away is another big chunk. But I'm mad at God too. Still thanking him*

*for the children and watch over them; but angry at – I believe I'm one of God's creations and how could a...when I'm asking you to take this character defect or you know, why are we having to go through this to be let down by Him. Not the barter and trade deal, like take this hangover away if you could. It's, you know what? When I've asked you to give me the strength or why...you know what I mean? Why?*

The parent's own personal struggles affected some spiritual processes with their children, for example, it seemed to result in a disconnection in the spiritual dialogical process between child and parent. Parents felt that they did not have the answers to some of the questions their children asked.

Some of the clinicians elaborated on children's experiences of lacking trust in a higher power. For example, Lily described Bobby Bobblehead's experience:

*She was really angry with God and didn't understand why this was happening. Like she wasn't a bad person. Her parents weren't bad. But yet there was a whole lot of suffering happening in their family.*

Clinicians also shared that children also seemed to lack trust in the world and in those involved in the TGL event, particularly if those involved had inflicted abuse upon the child. Sunshine reflected on her practice with children:

*Yes. I get the – why did it happen to me...Why did it happen to me? And then one response from another person is that they now don't trust the world and they don't trust people in it.*

Rathdin shared his thoughts on children's developmental responses to the TGL situation in terms of anger:

*So kind of a very different place in the world for an 8-year-old to get stuck in that than a 12-year-old to get stuck in that; yet the 8-year-old getting stuck in that, you almost have this kind of immature presentation that comes about. You get a 12-year-old stuck in that, it becomes that angry presentation.*

As noted above clinicians lacked trust in their own ability to effectively practice in the area of spirituality which was compounded by the fact that lacked training and theoretical models of spirituality practice.

#### **4.8.4 Treading Cautiously**

*Treading Cautiously* emerged as a broad category which encapsulated various processes all of the participants engaged in surrounding TGL and children's spirituality. Due to the umbrella of spirituality being weird and taboo, and the associated experiences of spiritual oppression and suppression, participants had learned to navigate this rugged terrain by treading cautiously. The category of *treading cautiously* is one of the more complex categories and has multifaceted subcategories. Through the process of *treading cautiously* participants engaged in *withholding* behaviours, and this also was a means of *protecting and shielding* others or themselves. All of the participants described behaviours and actions related to *testing the terrain*, and often engaged in *waiting it out* during this process. For example, they waited for others to bring spiritual aspects up first, or they would share snippets of spirituality and wait for the response of others before continuing. These subcategories are highlighted next.

**4.8.4.1 Withholding.** All of the participants engaged in processes of *withholding*. Data analysis revealed that *withholding* thoughts, feelings, and spiritual concerns was a resultant process of TGL with spirituality being socially constructed as *weird and taboo*. When



individuals experience spiritual oppression and suppression they learn to withhold, retreat into seclusion, or go underground with their spirituality or practices. Through *withholding* participants also appeared to be avoiding labels and judgements by others. Children withheld their spiritual thoughts and ponderings from parents and peers to avoid being judged as silly or weird, parents described not sharing their own spirituality due to fear of judgement and labelling, and clinicians did not share spiritual aspects in supervision or team meetings for these same fears.

As noted above, participants talked about having negative experiences in sharing their spirituality with others in society. Within the counselling realm, the parent Natacha talked about being negatively diagnosed and medicated in the past due to sharing her own spiritual experiences with previous clinicians. She learned to withhold sharing personal spiritual things in order to avoid being labelled or being judged, and she described how she learned to go underground with her spirituality. She portrayed how she had been teaching Allochka this process:

*I'm slowly teaching him all this. But it's hard to talk to anybody, because not everybody's into this stuff, you know. I've been told a lot that I'm crazy. And with Allochka I told him, you know, don't tell anybody about that stuff... So I know not to say anything. It depends. There's people I can talk to and I'll really listen and wait for somebody to come up before I say, "Hey, me too." Because I've been looked at pretty crazily by certain people or agencies; and I have to tell him that too. You know what? You can't. Because we can't talk about that with anybody.*

Since she had instructed Allochka to withhold spiritual things he was reluctant to divulge things until later in the interview once the tape recorder was shut off and he realized that his mother was openly sharing spiritual things. However, he still remained hesitant; therefore, Natacha described in more depth some of the spiritual experiences he had encountered.

Most of the children explained that they did not share their ‘weird’ thoughts or experiences with others, even their parents, so as not to be judged or labelled as weird. Children seemed to enjoy talking and hypothesizing about the weird and unknown, and desired to do this freely. However, adults often seemed to inadvertently suppress children’s spiritual freedom of thought and exploration. This could be through words, or through body language, where a message was transmitted that they felt some things were silly or ‘weird.’ Interestingly, Mookie had glanced at her mom apprehensively prior to sharing her dialogue with a friend where they wondered and talked about “weird things.” When her parent Charlie was asked privately about things that stood out for her or struck her in her child’s interview she brought up the conversation Mookie had shared:

*Oh, I watched the silliness in their thinking, I don’t think we thought we were eating pork chops and wondering what a human would taste like. That kind of freaks me out, actually. You know what I mean? Like that kind of weirds me out...They’re not going out and being a cannibal. Oh, my goodness! We need more therapy or something. Because you know what???*

Withholding was also interconnected with a set of actions that included *protecting and shielding*, *waiting it out*, as well as the category *staying strong* described below.

**4.8.4.2 Protecting and shielding.** The subcategory of *protecting and shielding*, which emerged early in the data collection and analysis, is a process of not sharing personal or spiritual thoughts, and feelings, or struggles and concerns in an attempt to refrain from harming another person. Through data analysis it was evident that participants did not wish to cause harm to another due to their own questions, struggles, or lack of knowledge and answers.

Children engaged in *protecting and shielding* their parents from further distress and emotional harm. Children avoided topics and questions out of fear of making parents cry and becoming upset. They described struggling alone with things in order to not disrupt their parents or other family members. Bobby Bobblehead stated:

*I don't ask my mom because I know she'll get upset. And my dad will too. And my brother will just start bawling as soon as I start asking... Because my dad's mom passed away a few years ago, so he's been really like shaken up for a long time after that. And then my mom has had some too – like great-grandma... Yeah. I just want to keep it to myself and try to think about it, because it's saddening.”*

When parents struggle with spiritually emotional aspects it leaves children in a role of protecting the parent, and as a result they are left alone with struggles and to sort things out independently.

Some parents were aware that their child engaged in withholding behaviour. Charlie was keenly aware of Mookie doing this and stated, *“She takes her distance with me about that. It's almost like if she breaks down and cries it's just going to set Mom off. You know what I mean? Into missing my sister and all of it.”*

Parents withheld their own spiritual thoughts, and negative emotions, or details surrounding TGL, as well as things such as death and funerals from children. Parents did not

want to cause further distress, or to negatively impact their child with their own struggles and faltering beliefs. They also wanted to shield their child from the atrocities and strife associated with TGL. Beatrice talked about her process of protecting and shielding her children from some of the negative realizations surrounding death:

*You try and shield your children from – me personally – from bringing them to a funeral of somebody close to them when they're young. Whereas other people bring their children to funerals... Like I know my kids personally wouldn't do well with that – not even Bobby at her age and maturity level. She wouldn't be able to handle that yet...They're tormented some children... Yeah, especially with the open casket type things, which is all my heritage and that. I don't like those either, personally. And to see that as a child, you can't grasp that. I mean, I was 18 with my first...or I was 21. My brother was 18. That was my first major loss; and at that point I couldn't understand. Where is he? You see it, but it's not him. Where is he? It's just.... yeah. I can't expect a child to understand that.*

A couple of clinicians described this process happening in family sessions, for example Martha depicted how parents avoid topics when they experience intensity:

*Yes, there was one case I'm thinking of actually where his grandfather died. And I remember he would talk a lot about it in the session. But I got the feeling from the parent that it's okay – just talk about it this amount of time and then move onto something else. And I think that put a lot of stress on the boy – inadvertently put a lot of stress. I think the mom was thinking that was helpful; and I didn't perceive it as such... Her own anxiety. I think her own unresolved grief that she didn't know how to process*

*and just thought that she had to shut down the process. Yeah. I think that was rubbing off on her son... Where the parent shut down a process...yeah. Definitely that's very, very true. Or where the parent will say, "You make it shut down." ... And I think if parents can recognize it and support that process, I think that's a good sign. If they can't – bad sign. A very bad sign.*

Clinicians were cautious in talking about spiritual matters with clients as they did not want to impose beliefs or do harm. Due to feeling incompetent in the area of spirituality they would retreat from dialogue in order to not cause further distress or damage to a child's spirituality or spiritual worldview.

**4.8.4.3 Testing the terrain.** Associated with *withholding* and as an attempt to avoid labels and judgements participants engaged in a process of *testing the terrain*. This was an action of sharing small aspects of spirituality with others in an attempt to determine whether or not the ground was safe for treading into. Participants gave examples where they had engaged in a process of checking things out first with others by sharing a little bit and waiting for the response. They wanted to ensure that they would be on equal footing and that there would be acceptance of their spirituality or views, or that it was an area that was okay to talk about. If it appeared to be safe ground, they would then open up and step forward into the dialogue. Some participants stated they had found safe allies through this selective process, whereas others had not.

Participants required knowledge that the other person would not label them as weird or strange, and they could freely talk about spirituality and experiences without judgements and ostracizing. Several parents mentioned having to test the terrain themselves and having to

educate their children on this process. They did not want their children to be exposed to negative reactions and judgements that they had experienced in their life. Destiny explained how she had learned to test the terrain:

*It comes with the territory you have to learn who's receptive, who's, who's more open spiritually to different aspects. Ya know, or who's going to turn around and call you a Satanist...and ya know you can't make people understand. Especially people that aren't willing to change their viewpoint.*

Clinicians also described this process; in their work with clients they found that if they created a safe space that clients often opened up. Sunshine talked about how she had discussed spirituality with a client and her experience of being cautious and testing the terrain:

*Kids have talked to me about sharing things with their friends and that they've found that helpful, just by talking about whatever their situation is. And I'm thinking now of a kid – a person that I've just met – who was talking about angels. And so she believes that there's karma and she believes in spirituality and goodwill. She was saying some people believe her and she can talk to them, and some she's can't. So she's careful. She's selective.*

Some clinicians described how they tested the terrain themselves by testing spirituality out with their clients. They also would check out family belief systems as an assessment of the child's spiritual worldview in relation to spiritual things they shared in session. Rose talked about a girl who had shared that she had experienced seeing ghosts and spirits, and how she approached this to gain a more thorough understanding of the family belief system:

*So I explored with her own biological mother issues of family faith to determine whether, you know, there was a structure that might be facilitating a belief like that, an orthodox...Yes. And whether they were belonging to a church, it would foster that belief system in a child.*

They also shared that they tested the terrain in wider practice realms as well, and would search for colleagues who would safely dialogue about spiritual aspects. A couple of clinicians stated that they sometimes had these discussions behind closed doors as it was not safe to do so publicly.

**4.8.4.4 Waiting it out.** As noted above, participants waited for others to share spiritual things first and would withhold things or be guarded. The process of *waiting it out* has several dimensions as it also appeared to be related to a cognitive inability to manage or make sense of things, a coping strategy, an avoidance method, as well as a component of hope and faith. Another property of waiting it out that emerged from the data was linked to children's and parent's viewpoint on what occurs in the afterlife. Children and parents held a belief that relatives, pets, and others were waiting for them in heaven. This helped them to remain connected to the deceased, and allowed them to look forward to a future reunion they could wait for. This perspective brought them a sense of comfort, hope and peace. Beatrice explained her feelings about heaven and what she imparted to her kids:

*You know, because your parents will be in Heaven waiting for you...My hope is that you'll see everybody that you want to see, that you miss, and that. You wait for the next... up there waiting and you're happy, pain free, you're not sick anymore...We've*

*said that about animals that we've lost...There's Doggie Heaven and Kitty Heaven and Fish Heaven.*

*Waiting it out* appeared to be a component of incompetence for child participants. They lacked opportunities for processing TGL with others, and as a result were left with a smaller repertoire of strategies to manage adversity alone. Since their parents were not aware of their intense and complex thinking, and were not available to assist in meaning making and resolve, a common response for children was that they just waited for things to get better. All of the children mentioned waiting for stressful and difficult things to pass. They also had a sense that time would make things better, and it took some time for a higher power to respond. However, they did not feel that this took a long time. This was partly due to parental teaching and modelling; however, it also seemed to be a real experiential knowingness the child held where a higher power would resolve it in time. Jessie Mayor felt God took care of her:

*I believe that He'll, wherever I am, whether it's outside or inside or another part of the world, I'll know that He's watching out for me and He'll keep me safe and He'll make sure that I'll be okay... like just God will help you through this. I believed it and I thought yes, He will.*

The parents expressed a need to wait to expose their child to difficult situations and the complexities of life such as death and funerals, and this response was viewed as a protective measure. Parents also struggled when TGL events occurred, and expressed not knowing what to do or say at the right time. They would wait for time to pass, or avoid dialogue instead of doing harm to their child. Parents also were in their own process of waiting for time to heal. This process by parents appeared to be a modelling process of waiting, as parents were not addressing



difficult things with their children. Parents also verbally provided messages to children to wait it out to allow for things to improve in order to instill hope and faith in their child.

Clinicians were very aware of how parents own struggles could impact the process of healing and dialogue with children. Clinicians also waited for clients to address spiritual aspects or share spiritual things before attending to this dimension of practice, and sometimes clinicians would avoid addressing spirituality out of fear of harm as well. Some clinicians talked about waiting for children to bring things up before probing, so they would work on creating safety and developing the therapeutic relationship. They were patient while facilitating the healing process and would wait for children to trust them.

#### **4.8.5 Staying Strong**

The category *staying strong* emerged and as noted above is interconnected with *protecting and shielding* and it is associated with spiritual strength. This process involved portraying a strong facade or masking one's troubles in order to appear steadfast and not fragile or inadequate. Children and parents felt that there was a perceived need for *staying strong*, which evolved from meaning constructions of not wanting to be seen as vulnerable or struggling through TGL and spiritual distress. It was socially understood that individuals do not share struggles in life and they need to put on a facade that all is normal in their life and that they are managing well. This understanding resulted in the behaviour of masking their turmoil, struggles, and distress. All of the participants felt a great social need to stay strong in the face of difficulty and in areas of uncertainty.

Children seemed to have learned from their family, as well as from social environments that there is a need to stay strong through adversity. Children described how they kept their

struggles close to their heart in order to seem less vulnerable, as well as to avoid exposing others to potential emotional distress. Children found that complex things were hard to explain to friends, as they may not understand, or be able to grasp, or handle the conversation. Children found social pressure to endure things and carry on as if nothing happened. Bobby Bobblehead shared some examples of how she had withheld things or had to stay strong in situations:

*Not really. Because if I've had a bad time, I usually wouldn't share it with my friends – not the opposite – like when my mom was sick, they were telling me – well, one of my friends, I guess. I only have one. She said keep carrying on. Try to live in the moment instead of thinking about your mom or whatever. Just try to like...just don't think about it. It's kind of hard...So I'm just like sad and everything and I try to mask it so nobody will notice...like being there for people that need you and trying to be a strong person in a situation if it's bad, instead of like – well, if it's about something, like say your little brother is more upset, you have to stay strong for him. And you've got to – well...it's hard to explain it. Like most people say, "It's a long story". So sometimes it's easier not to tell them about it or something.*

Staying strong was also about accessing and utilizing one's inner strengths and resources. Iza felt that an aspect of spirituality was “*strongness.*” Iza shared what she felt were her strong points, “*My strong points are actually being nice to friends, trying to let them take their own actions and also being kind.*” The children brought forth their inner empathy, compassion and nurturing strengths for others who were suffering. Jessie Mayor felt that strong positive feelings felt in her heart centre were part of her spirituality.

Children described a process of going underground or retreating to private terrain in order to access their spiritual resources which helped them to stay strong. They embraced hope for a changed and better future which assisted in their ability to maintain strength and to envision smoother pathways. Children also believed that their spirituality stayed strong and constant in their lives.

The parents also described situations and their need to stay strong for their children. Charlie had brought Mookie in for counselling so she could talk about things, as Charlie felt she could not do this with her daughter as she needed to stay strong for her:

*I was worried that... My children even...I didn't want to grieve almost, you know, for fear it would upset them all... So that was a big thing. You know what I mean? I didn't want Mookie to stuff that in or have no outlet, you know... Yeah. Not to break down and cry, because that would be like a double whammy. She knows I get upset when... You know what I mean? I'm right there with her. So I have, like I said, brought her here. I mean now like I'm choked up because I don't want that to be a weight on her.*

Parents also felt that spirituality provided their children with an ability to stay strong through adversity. As noted previously, Charlie felt that Mookie's ability to share her spirituality on Facebook demonstrated strength. Charlie also mentioned that she entrusted God to provide her with strength to carry on and manage through TGL.

Destiny shared how adversity contributed to her and her family's ability to learn and grow stronger. Parents accessed resources and supports for their children so they could stay strong for their children. Charlie mentioned that life events have made her stronger "Oh, boy. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger."

Clinicians felt that spirituality offered children an ability to stay strong and it was a part of their inner strength. Hercules talked about how spirituality plays a role in staying strong and is part of a strengths perspective. He stated, “*it has some overlap with strength based, cause it’s important to them it’s a significant part of their life, a strength, a positive experience.*” Sunshine felt spirituality offered children reconnection, strength and hope, and Martha elaborated:

*I think it adds a big piece of strength. I think it adds resilience for kids to have that support, to have that feeling of that connectedness to that process...I think it can be a critical variable. Kids that have it I think can sail through.*

The process of *staying strong* for clinicians was about feeling competent and practicing in areas they felt well trained in and comfortable with. It involved staying strong for clients, and supporting clients while facilitating posttraumatic growth. However, they felt that often they stuck with what they knew and were proficient with. Lily stated:

*Because it’s so easy to go back into like the kind of superficial CBT – like that type stuff – whereas okay, why are we here? What’s the meaning of us?...And I think clinicians too – I think a lot of times we don’t trust ourselves sometimes around those conversations and I think the more that we become more intentional and understand that these questions are really important and that’s where the conversation lies, I think hopefully people will be more confident and feel more competent in answering or in providing questions and kind of go into that place of meaning.*

#### **4.8.6 At One’s Own Pace**

Many participants felt that TGL and spirituality were highly personal and sensitive in nature, and they needed to go *at one’s own pace* when engaging in dialogue about them.

Children shared that they needed to have a great deal of trust in someone in order to discuss, share and open up around these areas of concern. Therefore, children felt that they required some level of control in when, where and with whom they would disclose things. They did feel that these areas were important for them to talk about with their counsellors. Bobby Bobblehead offered her opinion on this:

*I guess it's different for every kid, you know...Some kids might be – be in the moment. Others might be appreciating everything.... So you want them to be able to talk to you. You want them to be able to have... like... the okay of talking to you about what you want to talk about too. I mean, sometimes they choose a subject. It's cool...It's like working in partners, you know. You both trade information and then you come up with an answer to it together...And if it was like – oh, we're talking about this, you know, ease into it.*

Parent participants navigated dialogue with their children and with others at their own pace. They felt that counsellors should tread carefully and go at the child or family's own pace. Some parents felt that clinicians may have to go along a different path or go 'around the bush' to get there. Nonetheless, all of the parents and children said that they desired spirituality to be addressed in counselling, and felt strongly that it should be an area that counsellors should talk with clients about especially in TGL. Beatrice shared her thoughts on how it should be approached:

*I think they should be open to discussing it, certainly – doing it in a – like Bobby was saying – doing it in a... Like not coming right out and saying what's your beliefs? Because I think that kind of might put up walls with kids, you know...Yeah... Getting a*

*feel of who they are and then kind of gently going into and seeing how they react to it. But I think it's important. I think it's an important part of counseling with a child...It's usually some type of a struggle around understanding, belief and a spiritual struggle. Like family abuse or whatever. I mean, there's so many different...but for someone like my daughter, I think it's really important.*

Clinicians also were keenly aware of the need for pacing in the territory of TGL and spirituality. They noted that these were delicate subjects that required a great deal of skill and competence. They also recognized that practice and academia needed to address spirituality and clinicians needed to gain skills and competence to become comfortable with attending to spirituality in practice. They felt that there needed to be space and time for opening up to this area of practice, and it was not honoured due to other accountability and responsibility factors. Clinicians therefore were trying to become comfortable and competent in navigating spirituality at their own pace. Lily stated:

*Well, I think within this organization I think there needs to be a more openness around those conversations and a more – I think historically the focus has always been around the cognitive piece of someone's life. And I think people are slowly seeing that there's more to that conversation than just  $A + B = C$ . So I think there needs to be a willingness, not only for like the supervision/management, but I think also for the clinicians too, to be able to feel comfortable asking those questions...How to ask – yeah, totally – because I think really, when you look at the work that we do, not only with the kids, but with the entire family unit, it's all about making meaning of difficult circumstances. It's about the...the foundation is about moving forward and how do you*

*move forward? Well, you move forward through understanding through letting go, through forgiveness, and through trust. So you don't necessarily ever use those words with clients because those are really heavy and value-laden words to some extent. They mean something different to every single person in the world. But I think that in essence is what we're doing. Like we are in the act of healing and we're witnessing some pretty profound changes in our work with kids and families. And I think sometimes that component really gets lost because the supervisors are focused on, "Did you do the treatment plan? Did you do this?"*

## Chapter Five: **Discussion**

The focus of this concluding chapter is on the interpretation and theoretical renderings of the findings, the emergent substantive theory, and it is based upon what has been learned from this study. As the literature review in chapter two demonstrated, there have been very few studies pertaining to children's spirituality in general, and a considerable lack of research specifically as it pertains to TGL, particularly in the field of social work and especially with preadolescent children. Therefore, this research project aimed to explore and conceptualize children's spirituality from the perspective of children who have experienced TGL, as well as from their parents, and clinicians. Following a constructivist grounded theory approach, this research revealed actions, meanings, processes, and contexts of the studied phenomenon from as close to the participants' perspectives as possible (Charmaz, 2000; 2006/2009). The interpretations and experiences that were unearthed included the ways that all of the participants came to know, understand, conceptualize, and act, in the complicated pathways of children's spirituality within the territory of TGL. It further aimed to develop a substantive theory of this phenomenon including the interacting contextual influences involved.

Research on spirituality with preadolescent children has informed the beginnings of a theoretical framework illuminating some of the characteristics and manifestations. Many of the findings in this study were congruent with existing theoretical frameworks, and previous research findings and constructs support these findings. Interrelated themes of spiritual awareness and experiences of the participants are reflected in previous research. However, there were some unique findings that contribute to and extend the existing research and theoretical concepts. The first section of this chapter discusses the findings and contributions of the model



*navigating in seclusion* in relation to existing empirical literature. The next two sections address considerations of the research findings, and the implications and importance of spirituality in academic and clinical practice settings. The last section presents the limitations of the study and offers some implications for future research.

### **5.1 Overview of Navigating in Seclusion**

The emergent substantive theory from this study begins to answer the question: “*What are the processes, experiences, and understandings of children’s spirituality in response to trauma, grief, and loss, as manifested in outpatient counselling?*” In listening to the stories, wisdom, and personal experiences of the participants in this study what became clearly evident was that the territory of children’s spirituality in TGL was very complicated. As noted in the previous chapter, children’s spirituality was shaped by complexity, ambiguity, and isolation, and the core category that emerged was *navigating in seclusion*. This complex phenomenon was experienced within a precarious social world of contrasts and uncertainties, as well as, a spiritual world that was safe, nurturing, and considered to be supportive.

The model *navigating in seclusion* shown in Figure 1 of the results included the internal and personal experiences, thoughts, actions, behaviours, and the external experiences, contextual and ecological factors involved. This core process was an integrative spiral of the meanings, processes, and factors, influencing the experiences of participants in the study. TGL events precipitated processes described in the categories *being struck blank and having a sense of disbelief*, and *sparkling and catapulting*. The category *sparkling and catapulting* captured a noteworthy process of spiritual activation for children, where they became more engaged in spiritual relationships, activities, and cogitations. The thrux of the model consisted of the

contributing dialectical forces of *it's normal and important*, and *it's weird and taboo*, which influenced and gave rise to the other processes involved.

Individuals in this study encountered many challenges in the multifarious terrain, and the concurrent opposing aspects ultimately created a harsh or difficult landscape to journey along. Participants struggled to find safe open pathways as they experienced contradictory intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social meaning constructions. Exposure to and experience in social realms was encountered with oppressive forces on children's spirituality, and suppression of dialogue. These processes profoundly shaped participants' understandings, meanings, and experiences. The troublesome social experiences resulted in participants engaging in various protective strategies, going underground or seeking hidden terrain, in order to access safe havens of comfort and spiritual support. Spirituality was understood to be such an important and normal part of life. It was also considered critical to managing TGL. Yet it was forced into the private personal realm, as it was not socially accepted, respected, validated, and supported.

The category *it's normal and important* demonstrated that the children had a strong supportive foundation of spirituality as seen through its associated categories: *establishing a spiritual foundation and worldview; relating to the heart and soul; experiencing and engaging with the spiritual world; having spiritual tendencies and sensory abilities; joy, happiness and butterflies; engaging in spiritual activities and practices; and enjoying weird thoughts and conversations*. The category *it's weird and taboo* was extremely buttressed by the powerful, silencing, and disturbing category *experiencing spiritual oppression*, which was associated with processes of self-preservation and protection. The inner categories within the model were processes which were strongly influenced or created by the disparate darkening cloud

encompassing *it's weird and taboo*, and the robust foundational aspects of *it's normal and important*. The resultant processes included *fighting it out*, *lacking trust and answers*, *treading cautiously*, *staying strong*, and *at one's own pace*. These categories were interconnected and processes could co-occur.

One of the most important goals of qualitative research is to explore complex social or human phenomenon within a natural setting to provide a deep holistic understanding and description of the qualities involved (Creswell, 2007). These results offered a representation of children's spirituality in TGL in the model of *navigating in seclusion*. My hope is that this discussion of the results and model will integrate the findings within the existing literature, as well as offer an extension or expansion of the existing bodies of literature on TGL and preadolescent children's spirituality.

## **5.2 Contributions to the Literature**

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on children's spirituality and also TGL. As noted previously, this project was conducted within the parameters of TGL resulting from a deeply disturbing or distressing life event. Existing models of TGL describe how individuals move through phases or stages, face tasks, go through various processes, and engage in coping in order to maintain functionality in life. The existing theoretical frameworks on children's spirituality illuminate the aspects of children's spiritual awareness and cognitive abilities, how spirituality is experienced and understood, and spiritual activities. Although, many theories and frameworks are extrapolated from research with adults, and research that is out of context (Scott, 2004), they continue to inform the area of children's spirituality and TGL. The

facets of this research that are congruent with the literature, and those that extend or expand the literature are presented below.

### **5.2.1 Contributions to TGL Models**

Findings in this study align with previous research, and contribute to the growing body of literature on processes that can occur for children experiencing TGL. The findings revealed that spirituality is a critical component in children's lives, and it is accessed during TGL. This study supports the need for the spiritual component to be included within the theoretical models and intervention frameworks of TGL. Assessing the spiritual strengths and resources, as well as the struggles and challenges should be an initial first step in TGL treatment interventions.

This study illuminated the effects of *being struck blank and having a sense of disbelief*. The processes in this category were congruent with many models of TGL that portray initial phases of shock, denial, realization, and recognition of the event (Cohen, Mannarino & Deblinger, 2007; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007; Worden, 1996). Responses include overwhelming realizations, thoughts, and arousal (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996). However, Nader (2007) contended that a lot more research was required to fully understand the impacts of trauma on children, especially affects over time. Participants in this study noted that children felt immobilized, confused, disoriented, a lack of control, and an inability to stop what was occurring. Emotional constriction and physical numbness resulted for some children. TGL created a jarring process on children's thoughts, feelings, emotions, sense of hope, faith, belief, and sense of self, and there was a sense of normal daily life being halted. The pre-trauma spiritual worldview was altered, resulting in a shattering and disappearance of a sense of normalcy and of a safe and stable reality. Most models do not identify the initial effects

of TGL on spirituality, and particularly they do not identify spirituality as an area of importance for children.

These findings are congruent with literature pertaining to the experience of adults where spiritual meaning making is activated through TGL. For example, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) professed that typically one's belief of the world is stable, meaningful, benevolent, predictable, and comprehensible. However, traumatic events which are sudden, unexpected, or beyond normalcy, disrupt our worldview, tax our coping capacities, and create a need for re-appraisal, re-orientation, and re-framing (Janoff-Bullman, 1992; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Park & Ai, 2006; Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun, 1998). Frankl (1985) asserted that finding meaning is a primary motivation for survival, and is integral in successfully enduring and reconciling trauma and suffering. Maslow (1968) classified intense life-changing events that cause confusion, despair, or grief as "pit" experiences (opposite of peak) or a "nadir." Canda and Furman (2010) conveyed that a nadir experience can become a spiritual crisis in which a person's sense of meaning, purpose, and belief is shattered. But the fact that this is a disruption of one's ordinary psychosocial status quo opens the possibility of a person working through to a new, higher plateau of spiritual awareness. The findings in this study identified that children experienced spiritual crises, struggles, and rumination, especially in the initial phases of TGL. Their spirituality was activated by the TGL event.

### **5.2.2 Sparking and Catapulting: An Emergent Process**

The category *sparking and catapulting* that emerged in this study is a category requiring attention. In these findings, a result of experiencing TGL was a sparking or activation of spiritual processes and behaviours, and increased engagement in spiritual activities and spiritual

relationships. This was coupled with a catapulting of spiritual cogitations, and a need for existential meaning making as noted above. Following TGL events, children entered into a process of spiritual rumination. They questioned and reflected on the event, the changes it created in their life, the meaning of the event, and on life itself. Although research has demonstrated that children find spirituality and spiritual activities to be helpful in managing TGL (Jackson et al., 2009; Kilmer et al., 2009), this sparking and activation process has not been fully identified. The findings in this study suggested that children were mature in relation to existential cognition, and spiritual processes were generated.

Previous research has found that negative impacts from TGL often occur in the social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Briere, 2006; Cook et al., 2007; Ford, 2002; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Thompson & Cui, 2000; Gammonley & Dziegeilewski, 2006). Conversely, not much is known or discussed regarding the impacts on the spiritual dimension for children. In general, spiritual development was perceived by most of the adults in this study to evolve much like other developmental processes such as social, moral, and cognitive features. Yet, several clinicians and parents in this study found that children experiencing TGL asked mature existential questions, pondered death and the afterlife, engaged in spiritual reasoning, and queried the spiritual purpose of phenomena. Children experiencing TGL were found to be more actively engaged in deeper spiritual meaning making processes including questioning, analyzing, and finding purpose. The spiritual domain may be as, or more important for children in TGL than the interrelated social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of development.

In this study children were viewed by adults as ‘growing up too fast’ as a result of TGL. Most did not have peers who could relate, understand, comprehend, or empathize with some of

the cognitions, emotions, and spiritual struggles they experienced. This created isolation for the children. Morals, values, and social justice issues arose in relation to TGL and spirituality, and seemed to be beyond the children's expected levels of development. The experience of maturity advancement is congruent with some of the literature. For instance, Scott (2007) studied adults who had experienced bereavement in childhood. Similar to this study, she also found that individuals expressed growing up too fast, losing peers, and lacking an ability to talk with others. Additionally, Hooyman and Kramer (2006) conveyed that children who experienced a loss often emerged from it with advances in empathy and maturity. They valued the depth of relationships more when compared to peers who had not experienced a major loss. However, the catapulting process and related advancements in spiritual cogitations and development resulting from TGL are not discussed or well understood in the literature.

A critical finding of this study was that the enormity of the spiritual struggles for children was greatly overlooked and under-acknowledged. This left children isolated and alone while engaging in deep existential meaning making. McCann and Pearlman (1990) suggested that life events which are "out of the ordinary" can be difficult for individuals to navigate because they are unfamiliar, and beyond their normal range of experience. The literature on children's grief highlights that when a loss cannot be publicly or socially mourned and supported it is disenfranchised (Attig, 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006 Walters, 2008). This study illuminated that the experiences and opportunities for dialogue surrounding the topics of both TGL and spirituality were silenced and invalidated, creating a doubled effect of isolation. Children's experiences were disenfranchised in various social environments including family environments, as well as at school, and with peers. The literature conveys that this lack of acknowledgement

and disenfranchisement can result in a greater intensity of negative feelings such as guilt, anger, powerlessness, or ambivalence (Attig, 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). The children in this study also described feeling rejected, alienated, and isolated. Crenshaw (2005) characterized disenfranchisement as dehumanized loss, which results in the suffering of invisible wounds to the soul and disconnection. The long term effects of this spiritual disenfranchisement remain largely unknown. This disenfranchisement of children's spiritual struggles and need for spiritual meaning making as a result of TGL extends the literature, and also requires further attention.

### **5.2.3 The Process of Protecting and Shielding in TGL**

The process found in this study of children *protecting and shielding* parents and others from emotional harm, while attempting to deal with their own spiritual struggles independently is informative. This finding is not new to the TGL literature; although it appears to be an emerging concept associated with children's spirituality, and is part of a withholding process. It is remarkable that adults noted that children asked deeper and more frequent questions surrounding distressing events; and yet children stated that they withheld a lot from parents in order to not distress them further.

The process of children attempting to protect parents is consistent with the literature concerning parentification processes, which are evident when abuse and violence exist in family life. Research in families with domestic violence and substance use have found that children can become parentified and engage in care taking roles (Schier, Herke, Nickel, Egle, & Hardt, 2015). Emotional parentification occurs when a child sacrifices his or her own needs for emotional comfort, support, and nurturance in order to attend to the emotional needs of the parent or sibling



(Schier et al., 2015). Additionally, Schier et al. (2015) denoted parentification as an attachment disorder, which can lead to struggles in peer relationships and depression.

The effects of parentification on spirituality and spiritual development are not known, although in this study it appeared that TGL and spiritual cogitations were involved in the parentification of children. The long term effects of this phenomenon could be a function in both positive and negative spiritual development, coping, and relationships. It seemingly would depend on the child's ability to find meaning and purpose, make sense of, and integrate the event into their life experience. It also may depend on the extent to which they feel supported and nurtured by their spiritual relationships.

Parents were also found to engage in a process of *protecting and shielding* their children. Parents wanted to reduce exposure to negative life events for their children, such as attending funerals. They also did not want to share emotional strife with them. Given that research has found parents often underestimate the impact of TGL on children (Brown, Pearlman, & Goodman, 2004; Hooyman & Kramer, 2006), it raises concerns that children may be neglected from an ability to discuss and process TGL and related spiritual concerns. Death is a natural part of life, however in the Western world attempts to protect children may lead to emotional stunting and feelings of spiritual abandonment (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Walters, 2008). In this process of *protecting and shielding* children may be excluded from essential spiritual rituals, events, and discussions that may actually be of benefit, bring resolve, and support meaning making and spirituality.

Urman, Funk, and Elliot (2001) found that children negotiated between normalcy and differences in their life, in an attempt to maintain balance after TGL. This was deemed to be an

adaptive process. Children attempted to integrate a sense of security, familiarity, and ‘everydayness,’ from their pre-trauma worldview. Since children in this study felt they had to withhold spiritual struggles and questions, and attempted to not disrupt a sense of normalcy in their environment, makes one wonder about the extent of their grief and spiritual distress. This may be amplified if adults do not recognize these factors. This process of *protecting and shielding* may be linked to the appearance of attempting to maintaining balance, but may actually be maladaptive. A lack of recognition of children’s spiritual needs and processes may impact their spirituality and contribute to deeper spiritual struggles. More attention to the process of *protecting and shielding* and its impacts on the parent/child relationship is warranted. The parentification process, the exclusion from potential opportunities of resolve, adaptive spiritual meaning making, and spiritual development are areas requiring greater consideration.

#### **5.2.4 Contributions to the Meaning Making Literature**

Most of the literature on children and TGL focuses on the behavioural and emotional reactions of children, and not on their spiritual meaning making processes or aspects. In this study children experienced spiritual struggles surrounding the purpose and meaning of events. They had changes to their worldview, and required support in the reappraisal process. They engaged in deep spiritual meaning making. Some of the children described attempting to understand the greater atrocities of life they had encountered. They searched beyond their own TGL experience for greater understanding and insights, and attempted to associate meanings, and plausible reasons through existential meaning making.

Erricker (1997) found that children experiencing TGL had deep thoughts and emotions regarding their experiences, which they only shared in environments where they felt it was safe

to do so. Furthermore, he found that children constructed metaphorical explanations beyond their expected levels, and they exhibited moral, and spiritual maturity. They utilized images and symbols which were important in facilitating connectedness. He illuminated that children experiencing TGL were isolated from adults who could assist in the facilitation of meaning making, leaving children with unfulfilled needs. This study was consistent with Erricker's findings, and demonstrated that children have spiritual needs requiring support. Some clinicians found that they were surprised by children's responses and dialogue, and they lacked competence in addressing the existential and spiritual cogitations of the children. Parents also were surprised by their child's extensive spiritual thoughts, and felt they lacked an ability to address their child's needs.

Clinicians in this study noted that TGL can affect a child's worldview, and cause a crisis of reality. They illuminated that children experienced impacts to their identity, and had a need for a re-birthing of their identity. Processes clinicians engaged in included the facilitation of reframing and reappraisals, reconstruction of relationships, and meaning making. They assisted children with transformation of self, identity, and worldview. Supporting the child's self-esteem and building strengths, resources, and coping repertoires were also significant tasks for clinicians. These findings paralleled the contentions of Mossige, Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Rechelt, and Tjersland (2005). These authors conveyed that when traumatic events occur that violate societal and cultural norms, and lack contextual fit, then children struggle with rebuilding shattered assumptions regarding the world and themselves. They also struggle with meaning making and coping, and require support.

Cognitive restructuring and processing of traumatic memories allow children to tolerate negative emotional reactions and to construct adaptive meanings (Simon et al., 2010). Walters (2008) contended, “when a child is assisted in making grief meaningful, he or she is also afforded an opportunity to enrich their spiritual resourcefulness” (p. 277). I would echo the contentions of Walters (2008), as the findings in this study illuminated that when provided an opportunity, children can engage in existential analysis, and share their personal spirituality and unique spiritual qualities in regard to TGL.

This research study extends the grief task and process models by illuminating the need for resolving spiritual struggles, support for spiritual crises, and spiritual meaning making. In the grief task model developed by Worden (1996, 2009), which is based on developmental psychology, children need to move through four cognitive and emotional tasks. These tasks include accepting the reality of the loss, experiencing and processing the pain of grief, adjusting to the world without the deceased, and finding an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. While these tasks hold merit in what was found in this study, there is a significant need to recognize and support the spiritual catapulting and meaning making aspects, the changes to spiritual worldview, to identity, and to sense of self for children. Models of TGL require a greater focus on these spiritual tasks and processes. Identification of spiritual struggles, support with spiritual meaning making, reappraisal of a spiritual worldview, and capitalizing on and building spiritual strengths and resources, are important aspects for children found in this study.

The TGL literature that does include spiritual content has imparted that TGL events can disrupt one’s spiritual foundation by creating spiritual challenges, destroying spiritual beliefs,

dissolving spiritual trust, and shaking spiritual confidence (Angell, 1998; Attig, 1996; Smith, 2004). This literature mostly pertains to adults. Some literature has posited that trauma and mental health struggles trigger, or even demand, a search for meaning and purpose, which in turn increase spiritual activity, and may influence spiritual development (Decker, 1993; Frankl, 1985; Sveidqvist, Joubert, Greene, & Manion, 2003). However, the mainstream TGL literature does not adequately represent spirituality aspects as being salient for preadolescent children.

The deeper spiritual awakening and awareness, and the support offered by their spirituality which was found for children in this study, resonates with some of the adult research on recalled TGL in childhood (Krejci, et al., 2004; Skogrand et al., 2007). Studies with adults have found that the trauma of childhood abuses was associated with higher levels of spiritual activities, and enhanced spirituality (Galea, 2008; Grossman, Sorsoli, & Kia-Keating, 2006; Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincellet, & Penk, 1998). Spirituality has been viewed as an anchor of support for individuals in overcoming and transcending TGL, as it is important in resolving meaning and purpose, and it offers connection (Houskamp, Fisher, & Stuber, 2004; Skogrand et al., 2007). In this study spirituality was deemed to be a source of strength in times of turmoil, as spiritual practices and relationships were accessed for support and coping by the children during adversity.

### **5.2.5 Children's Spirituality: It's Normal and Important**

Spirituality was a normative and important part of children's lives, which was strongly voiced by all participants. Children engaged in the spiritual world and experienced it in multiple and unique ways. They were aware of their own cognitions and capable of reflecting on their own spiritual beliefs. They also were capable of considering abstract notions including life and

death, meaning, ontology, epistemology, justice, ethics, interconnectedness, metaphysics, and logic.

Children described spirituality as pertaining to feelings, thoughts, knowledge, relationships, activities, and occurrences and encounters with others and the spiritual world, which contributed to a unifying holistic spiritual experience. They articulated that spirituality was associated with virtues in life such as love, kindness, authenticity, integrity, fairness, compassion, honesty, loyalty, and appreciation. Their descriptions of spirituality included aspects of joy, reverence, protection, healing, and happiness. Spirituality was experienced through the body and the senses, as well as through intuitions and perceptions, which were encountered in varying ways and degrees.

Children described experiencing the spiritual world as mainly a private and personal experience, although at times it did occur through relationships with other people. They found the spiritual world to be a safe haven that provided love, support, nurturance, comfort, hope, and faith, and they entrusted the sacred within their spiritual world. It was portrayed as beautiful, and held a sense of wonder, awe, mystery, and magic.

Spirituality thus emerged as multidimensional and appeared to be innate for children. It included intuition, sensory experiences, relationships with the natural world and various spiritual entities, as well as engagement in numerous types of spiritual practices, rituals, and activities. These findings were consistent with literature on children's spirituality where researchers contended that the capacity for spirituality was natural, innate, not dependent on age, and a universal multidimensional life shaping human domain (Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998/2006; Hyde, 2008; Kimball et al. 2009; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). The

findings pertaining to children's spiritual experiences, understandings, capacities, and activities that contribute to, and extend the literature, are presented below.

### **5.2.6 Establishing a Unique Spiritual Foundation**

Overall, spirituality was deemed to be a natural way of being and a critical component of human life and development by the participants in this study. Thus, it is worth considering what other researchers have described spiritual development to be, as it has been conceptualized as an innate mechanism, or developmental engine, which drives our search for connectedness, meaning and purpose (Boyatzis, 2009; Canda & Furman, 1999; Eade, 2003; Fowler, 1981; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; MacDonald, 2009). This drive was significant for children through the meaning making process of TGL. Some of the children in this study felt their spirituality evolved and would continue to evolve throughout their life, which speaks to the propelling force of spiritual development and awareness.

These results demonstrated that children were actively engaged in establishing their own spiritual foundation and worldview. They sought out diverse spiritual experiences, and both children and parents believed that children had a right to choose their own individual spirituality. An aspect of their spiritual rights was viewed as exercising personal agency in developing personal spiritual beliefs and practices. It was also evident that spiritual generativity and support were provided from extended family members, such as aunts and grandparents. The aspect of spiritual generativity has not been extensively addressed in the literature on children's spirituality. Though not a major focus of this research, it was a curious finding that could be further explored and theoretically developed in future research.

The children integrated aspects of spirituality from experiences with peers, family, nature, various forms of media, stories, cultural influences, as well as spiritual experiences, connections, and relationships. They developed their own spiritual truths and realities based upon past experience, and what resonated or fit for them. This was congruent with the research of Hyde (2008) who categorized this process as weaving the threads of meaning in his study. He found that children exercised their personal freedom to integrate other frameworks of meaning into a personal spiritual worldview. Consistent with Hyde's findings, the children in this study had a strong desire for personal agency in choice and control of their spirituality.

The findings in this study aligned with those of Kimball et al. (2009), who discovered that being spiritually active was a choice for youth engaged in their own spiritual development, which was not dependent upon a religious context. Most child development literature speaks about adolescence being a time when individuation and self-identity occur, and youth separate from dependence on parents. However, within the spiritual dimension it appeared that this individuation process was occurring during preadolescence in this study. Spiritual development and identity were actively pursued independently by each child.

While children in this study had some similar spiritual beliefs, and there were common themes in their conceptions of spirituality, they each had a unique spiritual manifestation and expression. Correspondingly, Hay and Nye (1998/2006) found common aspects, and yet a unique spiritual personal 'signature' or style of spirituality was identified in children. Reimer and Furrow (2001) described this phenomenon in their category of an "existential map." The participants were described to have an existential map that held ideological clusters and common themes amongst participants. However, it also included experiences not shared by others, and



these aspects were often surprising to parents when disclosed, as was the case in this study. This personal signature or existential map seems relevant for children experiencing TGL.

Respectively, this unique spiritual foundation offered an insight into the mental representations, internal spiritual knowledge, and understandings of the children.

### **5.2.7 Spiritual Awareness, Relational Consciousness, and ‘Interbeing’**

As previously discussed in the results, this study revealed that children’s awareness and understandings of spirituality were vast and multifaceted. Children in this study had a high level of spiritual consciousness or perceptiveness, similar to what Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described as a ‘relational consciousness.’ A perceptive awareness of the interconnectedness of self, other things and people, and a higher power, were characteristics of relational consciousness conveyed by these children. This discovery is congruent with other researchers who have argued that humans are predisposed to recognize and understand spiritual interconnectedness, and it is an innate feature exhibited in children at very young ages (Champagne, 2001; Coles, 1990).

Congruent with findings of other researchers, this research revealed that children had spiritual cognitions beyond the developmental level of thinking depicted in Piaget’s (1974) theoretical construction of only concrete and operational capacity. Children in this study held an appreciation of the complexity and abstraction of spiritual knowledge. They seemed to have cognitive abilities pertaining to the spiritual which fell into Piaget’s formal operational stage that he believed occurred after age twelve. According to Parke, Gauvain, and Schmuckler (2010), individuals at this stage can think about multiple variables, formulate hypotheses, consider possibilities and ‘what if’s,’ and can think systemically. They can ponder abstract concepts such as justice, and engage in moral reasoning, which also was evident in the results.

The children in this research demonstrated capacities for caring and intuition. Several parents mentioned their child's ability to sense, feel things, and intuitively know things. Some children had a capacity to know and understand the needs of others including strangers, and had a sense of empathy and justice. Hart (2003) also found that children had a natural intuitiveness for compassion and empathy, and an awareness of moral, ethical and just behaviour. He conveyed that children had a relational understanding which involved a connectedness that he categorized as 'between you and me.' He described this as similar to Buber's (1958) *I-thou* spiritual relationship which occurs between people, and/or between a person and an object such as a tree, where there is extreme interconnectedness and "being with" the other. Hart described this way of being as 'interbeing.' Congruently, the children in this study exhibited this 'interbeing' or interconnectedness, which did not appear to be impeded by TGL. Moreover, it's plausible that children who have lived through TGL may potentially develop a heightened awareness of compassion, empathy, justice, and morality.

### **5.2.8 Spiritual Tendencies and Abilities**

The findings of this research revealed that children had a number of spiritual tendencies and abilities. Some children described being swept up in activities, losing time, or experiencing flow, total connectedness, and/or transcendence. This is in alignment with some previous research with preadolescents. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described this experience as 'flow-sensing,' which was a property in their category of 'awareness-sensing.' Hyde (2008) depicted it as a 'felt-sense,' or an ontological awareness of mind, body, and soul.

Consistent with aspects of Hay and Nye's (1998/2006) awareness sensing, the children in this study were aware of being in the moment, or in the 'here and now.' They articulated

these experiences to be transcendent in nature. Hay and Nye described tuning as a characteristic of awareness-sensing which involves a feeling of oneness with nature, an ability to hold deep emotions of empathy and belonging, and listening attentively. The children in this study had an innate and intuitive sense of knowing in these areas. Their discussions moved beyond a level of awareness or feeling, to one of knowing, or a way of being. Hart (2003) depicted this as ‘wisdom,’ which was a way of knowing and being, and deep consciousness, and this seems to hold congruency.

Children in this study talked about receiving messages, or being a vehicle for spiritual creation for an entity. Some described being channels for writings and drawings. This transcendent aspect of communication and co-creation was more in line with Maslow’s (1994) representation of peak experiences. This has not been well articulated in the literature on children, and this could be due to the fact that researchers have not explored or directly asked children about these considerations. This finding is of interest and could be studied in future.

All but one of the children in this study described having spiritual experiences, such as paranormal experiences, visions, and seeing or hearing spirits, and/or ghosts. Parents also articulated some of these experiences both for themselves and their child. Hart (2003) found that children had an ability to see the invisible, and were more sensitive to subtle energies, visions, voices, and felt things. He discussed that children talked about seeing ghosts and spirits. Coles (1990) described children’s abilities to hear, see, and communicate with spiritual entities as visionary moments. The children in this study had these visionary moments or experiences of seeing the invisible. Clinicians had worked with children who had talked about seeing ghosts or

the souls of deceased persons in their lives, or had drawn pictures of souls or ghosts. However, the ability to talk about these experiences safely was limited for participants.

### **5.2.9 Joy, Happiness, and Butterflies**

Children described spiritual experiences as creating a sense of joy and happiness, which manifested in physical sensations likened to butterflies in the stomach region that felt good, as opposed to anxious feelings of butterflies. No other research with children was found that has delineated a sensory description of spirituality, although there was some literature on peak or transcendent experiences with adults recalling childhood experiences that involved emotive responses of joy and happiness (Evans & Scott, 2009). There has been limited attention to this unique finding for children, nonetheless, it was prevalent among many of the children in this study.

Of relevance to the findings in this study, was research conducted in Canada by Holder, Coleman, and Wallace (2008), who correlated spirituality with happiness and wellbeing in preadolescent children. Through administration of a spiritual wellbeing scale, spirituality (not religion) was found to be a strong predictor in children's happiness, and its association was stronger than in adults. They assessed four domains of wellbeing which included the personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental. They found that the personal and communal domains were most strongly associated to children's happiness. The discovery in this study that children described personal spiritual relationships and experiences as creating joyful and exciting emotional and physical feelings is a promising area for future research. It is also interesting that in the study by Holder et al. the environmental and transcendental domains were not associated with happiness, yet in this study these areas were found to bring children joy, comfort, and

peace. Further research exploring these domains and emotions among preadolescent children who have experienced TGL seems warranted.

Interestingly, children in this study also experienced spirituality through negative emotions such as anger, mistrust, rejection, and despair, which speaks to the wholeness of spiritual experience. This finding appeared to be associated with TGL events. A study conducted with adolescents found that those with higher levels of stress and anger had higher levels of spirituality, including existential spirituality, and spiritual practices (Carlozzi et al., 2009). Carlozzi et al., (2009) surmised that youth experiencing greater levels of stress, grief, and loss turn to spirituality for coping, meaning making, and support. Andrews and Marotta (2005) found that children expressed several positive and negative emotions surrounding their spiritual relationships. However, no further research was found that mentioned negative emotions associated or linked to spirituality with children.

Within their category of 'value-sensing,' Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described how children exhibited delight and despair through emotional experiences of life, and had a sense of ultimate goodness, and identity. They stated that children had modest experiences of personal despair. However, the children in this study had more than modest experiences of sadness and despair, and some articulated how TGL affected their worldview. They cogitated at advanced levels on ultimate goodness, values, and justice, which influenced their sense of identity.

#### **5.2.10 Spiritual Relationships and Attachment**

Children described spirituality as involving relationships within the supernatural realm. They explained that they engaged and communicated with spiritual entities, and they saw and heard things beyond the earthly realm. All of the children and parents in this study believed in

some form of a higher power, and most of them believed in God. The children had a very strong sense that God or a higher power was available to them, protective and caring, watched over them, listened to them, was accessible, and ever present. These were not new findings in terms of the literature and research on children's spirituality, as noted below. Of interest though was that participants in this study identified an array of higher powers and spiritual entities that provided them with comfort, support, and nurturance. These included Creator, Mother Earth, Gaia, goddesses, guardian angels, spirit guides, fairies, pixies, wizards, and the spirits of trees and rocks.

Children held great trust and faith in these various sacred spiritual relationships. They communicated their deeply personal thoughts, struggles, and needs to spiritual entities. Children found emotional and spiritual support more often from a higher power or other spiritual entities than from their human interactions. Some children stated they shared things they would never share with another person, and held ultimate trust in these relationships. They requested assistance and fully entrusted the entity to take care of them and the situation.

Children had positive feelings when praying to or communicating with spiritual entities. Some children felt that spiritual entities communicated with them through life events and their outcomes, and spoke to them through their heart and soul, or in their mind. They also felt responses in other parts of their body. They felt the spiritual entities brought about change, positive things, and guided them in their actions.

Gratitude and thankfulness were deemed to be important in these relationships. It is surmised that the cultural and environmental factors influencing people living in this region of Northwestern Ontario reflect some of these beliefs, such as giving thanks when fishing, hunting,

or harvesting. Cultural and religious diversity are prevalent in Canada, and in this study there was an openness of the families in regard to various spiritual beliefs and experiences. What seems common though is that these cultural and spiritual values and beliefs provided meaning, assisted individuals in making sense of the world, and guided behaviour and spiritual practices.

Children described their spiritual interactions as real life experiences, and not in the realm of magic or fantasy. In terms of child development, Piaget (1974) purported that young children engage in magical thinking and imagination, and as they age they are able to sort out fantasy from reality. Two other studies with children made note of the supernatural realm in children's spirituality. Ubani and Tirri (2006) mentioned that preadolescent children described spirituality within the supernatural dimension; however, this was not an area of emphasis in their findings and discussion. Secondly, Hyde (2008) noticed that children were fascinated and intrigued by the supernatural realm, as did this study. Perhaps many adults dismiss children's spiritual experiences as magical thinking, as opposed to real spiritual experiences children are in tune with, and suppress these natural connections and relationships.

**5.2.10.1 Prayer to a higher power.** The most salient spiritual activities that children engaged in appeared to be prayer, and communication with a spiritual entity. Although some children had questioned why a higher power would allow the atrocity to occur in their life, and had been angry with God, all the children believed their spiritual foundation remained strong. They continued to feel protected, cared for, and connected to spiritual entities. This could be attributed to the fact that the children received some counselling support for the TGL, where they were addressing negative responses, thoughts, and beliefs, and were engaged in meaning making processes surrounding TGL. Children continued to engage in prayer as a spiritual connection

strategy regardless of their spiritual struggles, which spoke to their commitment to faith, and hope, in a supportive spiritual world.

This aspect of children's faith and belief remaining strong was also found in a study by Jackson et al. (2010) with youth in foster care. In their study 95 percent of the youth reported they believed in God, and found that trusting God gave them spiritual strength. Approximately one third of the youth had experienced difficulties believing in God, and 45 percent had been angry with God due to pain and suffering in their life, which the authors felt were spiritual problems. However, even though the youth reported these spiritual concerns, over 80 percent reported feeling joy and finding meaning in hard times. This may be evidence of spiritual coping or posttraumatic growth (PTG). There were no differences in regard to race or ethnicity concerning beliefs in a higher power. These findings congruent with this study demonstrate spirituality and prayer are significant factors for children in TGL.

Prayer was reportedly activated through hardship in this study, which is congruent with numerous studies where prayer has been found to be a vital component of spirituality for children (Bryant-Davis et al, 2012; Fletcher & Ota, 1997; Jackson et al., 2009; Moore, Talwar, & Bosacki, 2012; Mountain, 2005). In a study by Reimer and Furrow (2001), God was viewed by children to be in close proximity and this was particularly important during times of vulnerability, or when children felt a lack of control in their situation. They stated that prayer was an activity associated with spiritual agency, which seemed to be consistent with the findings in this study. Other research has revealed that preadolescent children believe prayer is beneficial to their wellbeing, and God listens to and helps them through adversity based on past experiences of fulfillment from prayer (Fletcher & Ota, 1997; Moore et al., 2012). Furthermore, an



American study involving 1009 preadolescents found that 75.9 percent believed in and communicated with God through prayer, at church, through singing, their thoughts, and actions (Ovwhigo & Cole; 2010). Similar to the findings in my study, Ovwhigo and Cole (2010) discovered some children had signs from God in nature, sunshine, beauty, and mystery, and felt things in their heart such as a sense of peace, which was attributed to God's response.

Pendleton, Benore, Jonas, Norwood, and Herrmann (2004) outlined three religious coping styles of an individual's relationship to a higher power. The first was self-directing where the individual does not rely on a higher power, but instead on themselves. The second was deferring where the individual relies totally on a higher power. The third was collaborative where the individual works with a higher power of their belief. Although the children in this study at times collaborated with a higher power, they mainly deferred to a higher power, which was consistent with research by Norwood and Jonas (as cited in Pendleton et al., 2004). This strategy has been depicted as declarative, where children have expectations that the higher power will implement a positive and desired outcome (Pendleton, Cavalli, Pargament, & Nasr, 2002).

Regarding the strategies outlined by Pendleton et al. (2002), as well as Moore et al. (2012), the strategies employed by the children in this study were similar in relation to God's support, assistance, protection, and the reassurance from God's comfort. Several children in this study not only expected results from their interactions and prayer, they stated that they knew that the higher power would intervene and respond on their behalf. The children mainly used dependent styles of spiritual coping, and were more likely to put hope and faith in a higher power during stressful life situations. This could be due to the fact that they were not able to discuss existential and spiritual cogitations and struggles with parents or peers. Another plausible

explanation could be that parents exhibited dependent coping strategies or inadvertently modelled these themselves. The findings in this study are supported by and extend the literature on prayer and coping styles.

**5.2.10.2 Attachment.** Although this was not a core area of focus in this study initially, the construct of attachment along with trust, perceptions, and images of God were considered during data analysis. There have been discrepant studies pertaining to children's attachments to God. The studies by Granqvist and Dickie (2006), Pendleton et al. (2002), and De Roos (2006) found that children had positive images and attachments to God, which were congruent with the findings in this study. Parents wanted their children to have positive relationships with God or a higher power. Comments made by some parents during the interviews revealed that they were angry with God, and yet were still grateful or held some positive views of God. This positive view may have been modelled for their children contributing to the positive images held by children.

As noted, for the most part children maintained a strong and positive view of, and attachment to, God or a higher power throughout TGL. These findings are pertinent and contribute to the literature on attachment and spirituality. Various researchers have illustrated that positive attachment figures are available, accessible, maintain proximity, provide a safe haven and a secure base, and are stronger during stressful times (Bowlby, 1969; Kiesling, 2011). They also offer sensitive responsiveness to children (Kiesling, 2011). However, frightening events, loss, injury, threats and separation, activate the attachment system, behaviours, and coping strategies (Bowlby, 1969; Kiesling, 2011), which were elements that were pertinent to these findings.

Most children look to parents for attachment bonds. However, many of the parents in this study were highly intertwined with the TGL event through their own struggles. Some parents had engaged in substance use or other negative behaviours, which were a source of some of the strife encountered by some children. A few of the children had experienced neglect, and had been, or were currently in kinship or foster care. Despite their strong desire to be supportive of their children, the ability of parents to provide positive attachment responses was impacted by TGL. They were unavailable to offer comfort, proximity, or emotional and spiritual guidance and support. This resulted in children interpreting that parents were not accessible in various ways. This also could have contributed to the apparent strong attachment bonds children had with God and other spiritual entities.

Parents recognized that they were struggling themselves, and were not able to provide what might be needed by their child, and thus experienced profound feelings of guilt. In attempting to protect their child's wellbeing they had accessed counselling for their child. Several parents discussed their own childhood TGL, and abuses inflicted by their parents, which they struggled with and remained in the process of resolving. These findings stimulated questions regarding potential intergenerational effects of trauma on children's spirituality if TGL is not resolved. Spiritual processing and coping may be reduced or hampered, and require further inquiry.

#### **5.2.11 Belief in an Afterlife and Reincarnation**

Children in this study did not seem frightened while discussing death, in fact they appeared to enjoy talking about and grappling with the mystery surrounding death. They were actively engaged and giggled during dialogue on these topics. All of the children believed in a

positive eternal existence. This is in line with findings of other researchers where children reported a belief in an infinite context of life (Hay & Nye, 1999/2006; Kimball et al., 2009). Children appeared to have a sense of their own mortality, and they drew upon their religious and moral teachings at times to make sense of death and life. For example, some of the children mentioned the existence of Satan and Hell when discussing spirituality and an afterlife. Some described how a soul has to ask God for forgiveness for sins, or be punished for wrongdoings in this lifetime.

However, an interesting finding was that not only did children believe that one's soul or spirit was eternal and lived on, but they also had a belief in reincarnation, which was not necessarily part of their religious teachings. Children engaged in questioning and pondering on how the soul returned or reincarnated into a new human life, and wondered about how this might happen. Some speculated that the soul may return as another form such as a butterfly, and some considered the soul as having multiple life experiences.

There is conflicting research on children's beliefs in an afterlife and reincarnation. For instance, Moore et al. (2012) identified that very few children (eight percent) in their study mentioned a soul or essence that lives on after death. On the other hand, Fletcher and Ota (1997) found preadolescent children had conceptions of heaven, an afterlife, and reincarnation. The children in this study not only believed in reincarnation but were fascinated with questioning and hypothesizing about this concept. This type of thinking may be sparked from grappling with TGL events and attempts at spiritual meaning making, or desires and needs for continued bonds and connections to human life. It also could be due to contextual factors such as location, media,

or influences of diversity in spirituality. Nevertheless, the belief in reincarnation holds merit in this study and seems fairly unique.

### **5.2.12 Relating to the Heart and the Soul**

The category *relating to the heart and soul* appears to be foundational to children's spirituality. It encapsulated the essence of the participants' beliefs regarding spirituality, including their ontological and epistemological conceptualizations. Children's spirituality was strongly associated with the connection of mind, body, heart and soul. Spirituality was understood as being related to and sourced within one's heart, and experienced within and expressed through one's heart. Many participants conveyed that the heart, soul, mind and body were interconnected, and combined to make up one's full essence and human life experience. The heart, soul, mind, and body were interpreted to comprise the entirety of one's being. Spirituality appeared to involve engaging the mind, body, heart, and soul as human wholeness.

Several participants in this study appeared to view the heart as more than a physiological organ functioning in the body relative to life sustenance. There were various capacities of the heart described in relation to spirituality, such as the heart being a source of emotional and spiritual intelligence, knowledge, and intuition. The heart was viewed as a source of the fundamental emotions of love, peace, joy, and happiness, and these feelings resonated and emanated from the 'heart centre.' Results from this study illuminated that some participants felt the intelligence of the heart offered a knowingness in truth, and was a source of authenticity. It was perceived to be the site where bonds of connectedness, and roots of compassion, justice and empathy form. Hart (2003) called this the 'golden root' describing the place within as the source where loving, kind actions, and justice emanate from.

Several adults in this study believed that children were more in tune with their heart centre and this seemed to get lost through aging and engagement in society. The heart was depicted by some participants as a gateway for healing, and central to meaning making. No studies were found that have explored these heart qualities of children. However, the Heart Math Institute (2015) in the United States has begun to conduct research on the intelligence of the heart and its interconnectedness with the brain and body. This institute asserts that the alignment of the heart and mind can connect and awaken one to higher spiritual, mental and emotional capacities. Perhaps TGL factors into the development of spiritual aspects associated with the heart.

The heart and soul were viewed by several participants to be connected and eternal aspects. The soul was conceived to comprise one's true essence or presence that resides in the body, and the heart, and it was believed to be everlasting. The eyes were viewed to be connected to the soul, and were windows or portals for powerful soul connection. The soul was deemed by some participants to have various purposes in human life such as learning and gaining wisdom, healing, teaching, and experiencing.

Some of these findings are congruent with those of other researchers. For example, research conducted by Moore et al. (2012) indicated that children believed God resided in the heart, or was everywhere. Children in this study referenced the soul or the spirit, which lives in the body and lives on after death, and is eternal and part of the spiritual world as opposed to the human world. In Fletcher and Ota's (1997) research with children the notion of the heart was also very prominent, with one participant talking about praying from the heart and not the brain.

This study also conveyed that spirituality was felt within the body and this was congruent with other research with children. For example, Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described awareness-sensing, which included being in touch with the ‘felt sense’ of an experience or bodily awareness, and the body as a source of spiritual knowledge. Hyde (2008) elaborated on the felt sense of an ontological awareness of the connection of mind, body, and soul. Research with adolescents by Kimball et al. (2009) revealed participants described spirituality as the most important thing in life, and it denoted emotions of happiness within the heart. It was evident that spirituality was viewed by youth to be a whole body experience with the heart as a central feature or component. These findings support those in this study.

The significance of the heart and the soul in this research suggests that this awareness or felt sense is a substantial factor, and speaks to the conceptualization of spiritually being and knowing. Hart (2003) elaborated on the ability of children to get to the ‘heart of the matter.’ He posited that the heart holds a knowingness of love, compassion, empathy, and justice that children readily tap into. He contended that there was a need to listen to the heart. Levine (1999) asserted that the heart was “special organ of love” (p. 133), and was the dwelling place of the divine. It allows the presence and knowledge of God to enter, which echoes the descriptions and experiences of the participants in this study. Accordingly, the heart and soul seem to be central characteristics of children experiencing TGL.

### **5.2.13 Spiritual Activities and Coping**

Along with prayer, the spiritual activities and practices of children in this study were quite vast and included mostly personal pursuits, such as, reading, writing, drawing, listening to music, practicing mindfulness, and focusing on the present or the positive. Some children also

felt activities such as Tae Kwon Do, spending time socializing on Facebook and the Internet, or sports, to be spiritual activities. Furthermore, spending time with animals, walking the dog, spending time in nature, and collecting items from the natural world were also cited by participants. It was evident that each child engaged in practices that were suited to his or her own unique spiritual style. These findings were consistent with previous research affirming that high numbers of youth believed that a variety of spiritual activities assisted in coping with TGL (Jackson et al., 2009; Kilmer et al., 2009).

Pendleton et al. (2004) argued that children engaged more in religious coping based on how much greater the stressor or perceived threat was to them. Pendleton et al. (2002) also found that children's spiritual coping was less sophisticated than that of adults. However, given the seclusion experienced by children, their ability to engage in, or develop more sophisticated approaches may be hampered. Notwithstanding this possibility of hampered spirituality, the children in this study not only used more spiritual coping, they also employed a variety of spiritual activities to manage TGL. The increase in their engagement in these spiritual practices during stressful times is not surprising given the severity of the TGL events they experienced.

For the most part, children seemed to engage in positive spiritual coping, aside from some questioning or being angry with a higher power for a period of time. This finding may be associated with developmental aspects. These findings were congruent with other research where children reported more positive spiritual coping strategies compared to adults (Benore, Pargament, & Pendleton, 2008; Pendleton et al., 2002). Furthermore, Benore et al. (2008) found positive spiritual coping accounted for a significant variance related to adjustment, quality of life, depression, anxiety, and spiritual growth in children.



Positive and spiritual methods of coping were reported to contribute to a sense of control, mastery, and hope, which were deemed to be necessary in recovery from TGL (Nader, 2008; Thompson & Walsh, 2010). Kilmer et al., (2009) explored PTG in children and noted that spirituality was the area in which children reported the most absolute growth. They hypothesized that these results may have been attributed to children's contexts and religiosity, or by adults encouraging faith-based coping or framing of the experience through their faith. They concluded that the results pointed to a need to explore the importance of culture and context, and the role of caregivers in PTG processes. It was evident that culture, environment, and context similarly were important spiritual influences within this study.

Participants in this study believed that spiritual activities were helpful in coping during difficult life events. I would conclude, as did Kilmer et al. (2009), that children experiencing traumatic events find strength and support in their spirituality and spiritual practices, and use them for coping and healing. These findings align with other literature claiming spirituality to be a resiliency factor following complex trauma, that is supportive in children's nurturance through adversity (Cook et al., 2007; Collis, 2009; Kimball, Mannes, & Hackel, 2009; Walker, Reid, O'Neill, & Brown, 2009). Spirituality and spiritual coping were beneficial through the process of TGL for children.

#### **5.2.14 Spiritually Symbolic Objects**

One of the unique findings in this study was that children embraced objects that held spiritual significance, and provided them with a symbolic spiritual connection, or a reminder of a spiritual relationship. These objects were held, gazed upon, or put in close proximity, and offered solace, comfort, reminders, and helped maintain a connection to a person, place, or thing.

Children had a variety of spiritually symbolic objects they interacted with such as worry dolls, stones, weasel skins, animal feet, photos, toys, art creations, etc. The children engaged more frequently with these objects when they were going through a difficult period in their life.

Some parents noticed that their children used these types of objects more often through times of distress, and they were cues that their child was struggling. Some parents described their own usage of spiritually symbolic objects such as photos and rosaries, and this behaviour may have been modelled by them. Clinicians also described the use of spiritually symbolic objects by children as facilitative within therapy. Therapists helped children to create memory books and spiritually significant art creations, and these were considered as spiritually symbolic objects. Clinicians deemed these items as useful in coping with TGL, and helpful in facilitating spiritual connections.

These findings are supported by the contentions of Rando (1985;1986), and Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996), who challenged the belief in the need to detach from the deceased, which was previously held as a predominant notion in grief work. They argued that there were benefits in the maintenance of continuing bonds with the deceased. In the continuing bond process, the relationship with the deceased becomes transformed from physical to an emotional and spiritual relationship (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007). However, an individual may remain physically attached to tangible objects or belongings that represent the loved one, and these objects have been coined as linking objects (Andrews & Marotta, 2005; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007).

Previous research has found that children used linking objects, such as belongings, photos, jewellery, or items from the natural world, to maintain their relationship with the deceased

(Andrews & Marotta, 2005; Erricker, 1997; Walton, 1996; Worden, 1996). Andrews and Marotta (2005) discussed linking objects and their maintenance effects in relationships with the deceased (Andrews & Marotta, 2005). According to Andrews and Marotta (2005), the spiritual connections evolving from children's grief were the most relevant for them, and were part of spiritual family connections. Linking objects maintained these relationships. They described the relational aspect as representative of an I-thou dynamic, similar to that described by Buber (1958) as a highly connected and spiritual relationship, which also aligns with the findings in this study.

Bonnano and Kaltman (1999) asserted that meaning making was associated with the nature of the relationship and level of continuing bonds that occur over time. Research has demonstrated that the relationship and bond with the deceased becomes transformed and integrated, may last throughout one's life, and can assist with adaptation from losing the deceased (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Rothaupt & Becker, 2007; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2009). Hooyman and Kramer (2006) suggested that continued bonds and the redefining of relationships are essential in reconstructing meaning, worldview, and a sense of self. In this study, spiritually symbolic objects facilitated the continuation of bonds, and were deemed to be important markers of spiritual relationships.

While the literature on linking objects supports these findings, these objects held more significance and purpose for participants in this study than for the continuation of an attachment bond, offering comfort, and support. Spiritually symbolic objects held significance for other spiritual and natural world relationships and connections, and were used for other spiritual purposes and meanings. For example, spiritually symbolic objects were used in rituals, or to

facilitate mindfulness, flow, and transcendence. Objects from nature were used to recall thoughts and feelings from another place and time, assisted with spiritual connections, and they helped with focusing on the moment. Some objects such as worry stones and dolls were viewed as having the ability to absorb and dissipate negative emotions and anxious feelings, and were used when the child was experiencing distress. This is similar to the research of Fletcher and Ota (1997) who found that children also used similar objects, as well as crystals, dream catchers, and incense, to generate spiritual support and combat fears.

These findings demonstrated that children engaged with spiritually symbolic objects more often when emotional and spiritual comfort and support was sought. This corresponds with Kiesling's (2011) assertions that when a child's efforts in finding comfort and proximity to an attachment figure are unsuccessful, then alternate figures, relationships, or substitute objects are sought. Moreover, inanimate objects can fulfill the role of an important subsidiary attachment figure in providing comfort. The findings of the use of spiritually symbolic objects warrants further study.

#### **5.2.15 The Interconnectedness of Nature and Spirituality**

The children in this study communicated with and had deep spiritual connections to pets and forest animals. They also communicated and connected with trees and stones, which seemed to have an elevated importance in their spiritual life. Children felt a strong attachment bond while connecting with animals, the natural world, and other spiritual entities in nature. Most of the children described their relationships with animals and nature from a more spiritual realm than what would be considered as a typical aspect of development.

Children in this study seemed highly in tune with and engaged in nature. They felt connected, supported, and healed in these relationships. Some of the children experienced communicative responses in their bodies, or in nature such as whispers in the trees. They also received responses through representative signs and symbols, such as objects moving, or experiencing feelings of warmth, excitement, and love.

The children in this study held beliefs in our interconnectedness with nature. This is congruent with the findings of Fletcher and Ota (1997), who revealed that children spoke frequently of nature, the interconnectedness, and importance of trees and rocks in regard to their spirituality. However, they did not discuss spirits being associated with these elements as the children in this present study did. Kellert (2002) emphasized that a strong emotional attachment and affection with nature is instrumental in child development during preadolescence in enhancing intimacy, trust, companionship, and capacities for social relations. Children hold humanistic, symbolic, aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual affinities for nature. During preadolescence children begin to more freely explore the natural world, and use nature to secure an identity separate from parents and others, which contributes to autonomy, safety, and security outside of the home. While this seemed apparent in this study, another factor causing children to seek relationships in the natural world was the isolation they experienced from others through the process of TGL.

Kellert (2002) conveyed that during adolescence children develop complex understandings of the ethical responsibilities of humans towards nature. However, the preadolescent children in this study already held these beliefs. For example, children described how trees and nature were critical for our existence and we need to take care of them. They

spoke about our interconnectivity and interdependence with the natural world. They had a deep respect for nature, the environment, and our planet, which could stem from a contextual or environmental influence, or it could be tied to the deep spiritual cogitation occurring for children during TGL.

### **5.2.16 Enjoying Spiritual Thoughts and Conversations**

The children in this study had highly dynamic spiritual lives and held curiosity and enjoyment surrounding deep philosophical and existential questions of life. It was clearly evident that they enjoyed thinking about and discussing metaphysical subjects. Hay and Nye (1998/2006) described their findings of children having curiosity and thoughts concerning aspects of human life that are incomprehensible, or hold mystery without explanation, that involve wonder and awe. This was part of their mystery-sensing category and is supportive of the findings in this study. Hart (2003) described the wondering aspect of children as a spiritual quest which involves pondering, puzzling over, and playing with questions regarding what is real in life. Additionally, Hyde (2008) included similar findings on preadolescent children in his category of 'spiritual questing.' Consequently, it seems that most children engage in a process of spiritual searching, pursuit, or questing, which is experienced as enjoyable. Children in this study had very limited opportunities for dialogue surrounding these aspects, and yet were very keen to talk, conjecture, hypothesize, and theorize about spiritual mysteries. This makes one wonder about the spiritual impact on the cognitive development process, and whether cognitive abilities are more advanced surrounding the spiritual aspects in life. More research is required to determine if this ability is sparked further through TGL.

### **5.2.17 Contributions to the Moral and Spiritual Development Literature**

*Fighting it out* was a process of moral reasoning and choice making, and children described wrestling with moral dilemmas and making right and wrong choices. They ruminated, used moral and ethical reasoning, and evaluation processes in decision making which were linked to their spirituality. Moral struggles have been found to be part of spiritual meaning making and spiritual struggles for adults dealing with TGL (Exline, Pargament, Grubs, & Yali, 2014; Steele, 2005). Therefore, it is interesting to find that children also engaged in similar struggles through TGL.

According to McDaniel, Grice, and Eason (2010), moral development is understood to include influences from family, peers, and other moral authority sources such as teachers, religious institutions, and society, which was found in this study as well. It also involved spirituality and engaged emotional and cognitive components, and relationships with a higher power were salient in moral development for some individuals. They stated that empathy and guilt were moral emotions associated with higher power relationships and spirituality. These aspects were evident in this study as children engaged in moral decision making which was connected with their spiritual relationships.

Fowler and Dell (2006) stated that in the mythic-lyrical faith stage of preadolescence children have a view of God whereby good deeds are rewarded and bad deeds are punished. In this stage children are not capable of extensive analytic reflection and looking at deeper meanings of how and why things occur and what the outcomes might mean. However, the children in this study did engage in such processing of TGL, including wrestling with spiritual struggles and questions, which caused them to deeply consider these aspects more abstractly.

Fowler and Dell further contended that when children recognize that negative consequences do not necessarily occur from negative transgressions that the mythic-lyrical stage wanes. They posited that individuals then move into the synthetic-conventional faith stage of adolescence where interpersonal perspective taking occurs, and God representations involve love, acceptance, understanding, loyalty, and support in times of crisis. Values, beliefs, and identity develop, and the ability to articulate and critically reflect on one's worldview occurs gradually during this stage. However, the children in this study were quite capable of such reflection and articulation on their worldview, ideology, and sense of morality. They also engaged in behaviours associated with the further stages of faith development. In contrast, Fowler (1981) asserted that preadolescent children were not capable of seeing multiple perspectives or making sense of paradoxes. He believed that a yearning for peace and unconditional care evolve in higher levels of faith development. Yet it was evident that the children in this study exhibited some of these characteristics as well despite their younger age.

Parents typically are sources of moral authority, however the children in this study felt they were often assisted morally through spiritual guidance. These children seemed to engage in higher levels of moral processing, which were more in line with Fowler's (1981) individuated-reflective faith. In this stage an individual rejects external sources of authority, relies on their own inner authority, and engages in critical reflection. These findings suggested that through TGL the moral and spiritual trajectory of preadolescent children may be catapulted beyond the mythic-lyrical stage of faith development. Anticipated spiritual development processes may be altered through TGL, as individuals may progress on alternate developmental pathways.



In relation to Kohlberg's (1976) moral development theory, it seemed that children in this study demonstrated developmental advances relative to prescribed age or developmental thresholds. They incorporated aspects of moral reasoning that involved justice and individual rights, empathy and sympathy, which he believed to occur later in life. These findings advance the discourse on moral and spiritual development by demonstrating that children experiencing TGL emerge beyond previously held conceptions of spiritual engagement and expression.

### **5.2.18 It's Weird and Taboo**

One of the most salient, striking, and disheartening categories involved the meaning construction that spirituality in TGL was understood and experienced to be weird and taboo in social arenas. All of the participants discussed the fact that spirituality was not expressed in public spheres as it was not validated or accepted in society, or in social work academia and practice, and it was a topic that was taboo. Participants related that spiritual aspects were viewed to be weird, strange and extraordinary by others. As noted in the results chapter spirituality was a complex phenomenon that was experienced as beyond the conceptual confines of verbal language. Often spiritual experiences are difficult to convey through the use of words or description. Spiritual experiences can be unique rendering them difficult for others to relate to particularly if they have not had similar experiences.

Hay and Nye (1996) mentioned that the obscuring of spirituality was due to a socially constructed pattern, and that the oppressed are less likely to speak about spirituality, which could be a result of psychological damage from unjust social circumstances. Hay (2000) further conveyed that spirituality was privatized and his experience in talking with children about spiritual awareness was encountered with embarrassment, especially in children over the age of

nine years. He described the widespread prohibition of spirituality in public caused in part by an individualistic socio-cultural perspective. Hay believed that this socio-culturally constructed individualism in the Western world has had a direct effect on the repression and suppression of children's spirituality. Given the experiences of the participants in this study, I would concur with these contentions.

Participants in this study understood that spirituality was not only a taboo topic but was an activity not to be shared and expressed socially. Children described that their spiritual activities and thoughts were kept private, and they withheld and secluded them from others. Adults also talked about the taboo nature of spirituality, and in order to remain emotionally safe from public ridicule, or harm, participants keep spirituality hidden from public view and examination. In their study with adolescents around the world, Kimball et al. (2009) found that spiritual development was mediated by the dynamics of social contexts and interpersonal relationships. The youth in their study felt that spirituality and spiritual development could be constrained or encouraged depending upon social context and relationships with others. This social constraining of spirituality seems to be an important factor warranting further attention and concentration especially as it relates to TGL.

### **5.2.19 Experiencing Spiritual Oppression**

Another related and concerning finding was the category *experiencing spiritual oppression*. This terminology is not to be confused with religious terms surrounding demonic forces. This language is utilized within the context of an anti-oppressive theoretical stance to depict the experience of spirituality being rejected, dismissed, or silenced in social realms. It also includes the experience of being ostracized or bullied due to one's spirituality or spiritual

expression. The results of this study go beyond cultural assumptions. They illuminated the direct experience of spiritually oppressive acts and discourse, and the distress caused by them. This resulted in various negative meaning constructions, and the development of, and engagement in associated processes. Participants described having varying levels of experience with oppression of spirituality from blatant physical harm, verbal denigration, and judgements, to rejection, exclusion, silencing, and negative diagnostic impacts. These experiences lead to the mistrust of others, and a need to go underground with spirituality, as it was moved to the private life.

Furthermore, it is greatly concerning that the severity of the spiritually oppressive experiences disclosed by the participants in this study occurred in a multicultural society considered to be tolerant of spiritual difference. Dumm (2008) spoke to the removal of people from connections with others through structural situations as a ‘politics of loneliness.’ He felt that the existential situations people struggle with are relegated and confined to a private and lonely world. This process of suppression creates extreme feelings of loneliness and causes individuals to react or respond to their lonely condition. Fortunately, participants in this study were able to forge supportive spiritual relationships that offered companionship, which somewhat combatted the politics of loneliness described by Dumm.

It is plausible that the oppressive nature towards spirituality perpetuates the lack of language and understanding of the spiritual arena, as the lack of discourse prevents the conveyance of experiences and the development of new language. Individuals adjust their language to conform to palatable conversation in social contexts, cultural conventions, and social roles. The English language also lacks a rich spiritual vocabulary that does exist in other

languages, especially in indigenous dialects (Oliveira, 2015; Wane, Manyimo, & Ritskes, 2011). In the interviews in this study children struggled at times to communicate spiritual experiences due to a lack of language. The lack of spiritually expressive language continues to confine dialogue and maintains the notion that it is weird.

It is distressing that children were forced to withhold their ‘weird,’ fascinating, and concerning experiences, thoughts, and questions to avoid judgement. Alternatively, they may be deemed as silly or strange, or feel embarrassed or ashamed. This study demonstrated that children enjoyed talking about paranormal, supernatural, magical, fascinating or extraordinary things, and yet were limited in their ability to engage this way. Schwartz, Bukowski, and Aoki (2006) asserted that there are reciprocal relationships between spirituality, well-being, and relationships with those that foster one’s spirituality. They stated that as children’s social networks and connections widen so does their capacity for spiritual experiences and spiritual development. And yet as found in this study children’s spirituality appears to be greatly socially controlled.

In this research the children did not appear to have regular and consistent spiritual mentorship, guidance, or nurturance, aside from incidental teachings at home, through attending church, or spiritual content provided at school, or in the media. They did not have relational spaces for spiritual dialogue, or many reciprocal relationships where they could engage and wrestle with cognitions, questions, paradoxes, struggles, or existential angst. And yet, their spiritual worldviews, conceptions, and repertoires were quite vast, leading one to believe that the spiritual development process is an intrinsic human capacity that is fluid and dynamic, and occurs regardless of spiritually supportive human relationships, and across developmental strata.

Some children felt that selected friends were ‘weirder’ than adults as they could engage in free conversation without judgements. Children’s spiritual expression and creativity were greatly obstructed and impeded by adults and some peers, which was extremely unfortunate. The fact that spirituality is viewed as extraordinary and not well understood could very well lead to the mistreatment of clients, and judging spiritual phenomena as psychopathology, which some parents had experienced. Clinicians expressed that they do not have the knowledge, language, answers, or competence, in order to engage fully and effectively with children in the area of spirituality. Yet a fuller engagement may entail presence and acceptance rather than judgement and suppression.

These findings were consistent with other research conducted with social workers and mental health clinicians that found they encountered spirituality with clients and yet had very little training and frameworks (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2015). Clinicians were often left to avoid spirituality as a topic of conversation in therapy. Those who did encounter children who identified spiritual issues did not have avenues to discuss these notions in practice and clinical supervision due to the lack of validation, attendance and support of spirituality. Although spirituality is becoming more relevant and accepted, and research is creating an awareness of its importance in TGL, evidence based practices of spirituality have not emerged. Therefore, it has not been fully espoused or endorsed as an important area in practice.

Through the experience of spiritual oppression, and the meaning constructions that spirituality and TGL were weird and taboo, participants learned and resorted to behaviours and actions that offered them protection from further harm. These understandings, behaviours and processes included *fighting it out, lacking trust and answers, treading cautiously, staying strong,*

and *at one's own pace*. These central processes of the model also were informed by the dialectical understanding and experience that spirituality was a normal and important aspect of life.

The category *fighting it out* involved a process of fighting for and defending one's rights to individual spiritual beliefs and practices. Historically, differing spiritual beliefs have been the source of conflicts and even wars, so it is not difficult to understand that *fighting it out* is a behavioural response to the squashing of one's rights to spiritual freedoms. With initial immigration to Canada came attempts at religious conversion of the First Nation people by the Jesuits. Currently, the dominant religious sect in Canada is Christian, mainly Catholic; however, there is no official religion, and the religious and spiritual landscape continues to expand and diversify. Considering the multicultural nature, the pluralism, and freedom of religion and spirituality that has developed in Canada, it is disturbing to find that children experienced such negativity surrounding their spirituality. Even with the co-existence of a vast range of religious and spiritual traditions it is evident that acceptance of spiritual differences has not fully transpired. No literature was found that delves into this concerning finding of children's experiences, and I believe this topic warrants further investigation.

**5.2.19.1 Treading cautiously.** The category *treading cautiously* is a complex category with multifaceted processes. For example, as part of treading cautiously participants engaged in *withholding* behaviours where they refrained from talking about and sharing spirituality or spiritual struggles with others in order to avoid labels and judgments by others. This finding corresponds with research by Karlsen, Coyle, and Williams (2013), who also found that children kept their spiritual thoughts and experiences guarded and to themselves due to fear, suspicion,

and disbelief from others. Similar to this study, they discovered that children sought safer avenues such as relationships with animals in order to manage. Reasons for children withholding spirituality from parents was reportedly due to parental unavailability due to being too busy, and parents not providing private time for talking about spiritual topics with children. Children in this study experienced death as a taboo topic, parents were emotionally unavailable, and children wanted to avoid stimulating negative emotions in their parents, all of which resonated with these findings. However, in this study it was also found that parents were emotionally unavailable due to their own TGL effects, spiritual struggles, and a lack of skills and ability to support their children.

*Testing the terrain* was another process within the category *treading cautiously* where individuals engaged in small amounts of spiritual dialogue with another in order to assess their response. If a positive response was encountered, and the person was receptive, the territory was deemed to be safe to engage in further spiritual dialogue and expression. Some participants found allies through this process. Participants also engaged in the process of *waiting it out* as another method of *treading cautiously* where individuals waited for others to initiate discussion or sharing of spiritually based content. These processes do not seem to be discussed elsewhere in the literature, hence merit further inquiry.

**5.2.19.2 Staying strong.** In this study it was found that participants engaged in *staying strong*, which had a few properties including accessing and utilizing inner strengths, resources, capacities, abilities, and spiritual supports. Positive spiritual practices and relationships nurtured individual strength through adversity. Children described their spirituality as staying strong even through a TGL event, where it served to buffer distress. This category also entailed children's

innate capacities of empathy, compassion, protection, and nurturing towards others, and their ability to stay strong for others.

Children believed that they needed to *stay strong* for their parents and siblings, resulting in the suppression of inner turmoil. Both children and parents appeared to often mask turmoil, distress, or struggles they were experiencing and put on a false but strong facade. They often did not show others the extent to which they were suffering, feigning that everything was normal in their life, and that they were managing well. There was a socially constructed requirement to stay strong publicly and endure tumultuous events, as there appeared to be a silent rule not to talk about TGL and especially spiritual struggles. However, children did share their strife privately and specifically in their spiritual relationships, as they found this to be a safe avenue for relief and support.

Parents felt that they needed to *stay strong* for their children. They wanted their children to have good spiritual beliefs. Therefore, they avoided engaging in dialogue surrounding TGL and spiritual struggles. However, this likely contributed to children's sense that parents were not able to engage with them around these topics and were unavailable.

For clinicians, staying strong included the need to feel competent and effective in practice. They retracted from areas of spirituality that they felt uncomfortable with, and stayed within boundaries where they felt a sense of competence. They also felt a need to stay strong for clients through TGL, and to assist children and families with staying strong through processing TGL. They engaged in facilitating the reconnection and development of inner strengths, spiritual resources, and relationships to support clients to stay strong. This category warrants further study as it has not really been addressed in the literature.



### **5.3 Implications and Recommendations from the Study**

Formal grounded theory often takes years to develop with prolonged investigation via varying methods. Whereas, a substantive theory results from studying a specific empirical area which addresses delimited problems (Charmaz, 2006). Substantive theory is often used in the development of formal theory. As with any initial study conducted to develop substantive theory preliminary questions are answered and implications surface; however, more questions inevitably arise from the research. There are a number of implications for practice and research, and some of these have come through the advice offered by participants which needs to be honoured. Each participant was asked during the interviews what advice or information they would want to give clinicians. Other implications and recommendations have arisen from the study overall and most specifically from the findings. Questions have arisen from the limitations, the data, and the emergent theory, and I am left with many questions that could invite future research.

#### **5.3.1 Advice from Participants and Implication for Practice**

Children offered very important advice for practice. From the child's perspective spirituality was very important to them, and they wanted counsellors to open their hearts to allow spirituality to be present and validated. They also felt that establishing trust with clients was paramount, and that clinicians should allow the child to share and express their spirituality at their own pace. Children considered that spiritual dialogue is a two-way process and that there is a level of co-creation involved. They wanted spiritual dialogue and content to involve creativity, play, and expression, and felt it was important for clinicians to have an understanding of how the child makes sense of the world and their spiritual worldview. They further felt that attending to

spirituality in practice included figuring things out, talking about spiritual struggles to alleviate distress, and helping the child to not be afraid to talk about their spiritual life. Children wanted clinicians to know that kids have deep thoughts and questions and require help and protection. In relation to spiritual experiences, they strongly stated that it was crucial that children be believed regarding their spiritual experiences, and that these perspectives be accepted as truth for them and their reality. Some of the children envisioned that listening and talking about spirituality in counselling could be fascinating and a fun experience.

From the perspective of parents, clinicians should get to know the child's background, family beliefs, and spiritual beliefs because everyone is so different and unique. Knowing how to approach spirituality would be important and it should be part of social work education. They suggested that counsellors needed to be non-judgmental and open to differing spiritual worldviews and practices. Similar to children, parents conveyed the importance of allowing spirituality to be shared at one's own pace and to go with the child's flow, and not necessarily the clinicians desired path. They posited that listening to the wisdom that comes out even through play was critical, and counsellors should be prepared for this dialogue. Parents considered that it could be difficult and stressful for all parties involved to address spirituality, but viewed it as necessary. They believed that engaging children through hands on exploration of spirituality and nature connections could be avenues of treatment. They also believed that it would be important to explore, facilitate, and teach positive spiritual coping.

From the clinicians' perspectives, more awareness and understanding that spirituality is a critical component for clients was deemed to be most important. This is required at various practice and systemic levels. Several clinicians stated spirituality needed to be legitimized,

validated, and have its explicit place in counselling practice. Clinicians recommended a need for more systemic willingness and openness to attend to and ask spiritual questions. Counsellors believed there should be more intentionality for spirituality with children and parents right from the outset of counselling. Accordingly, it was thought that there was a need to feel less guarded, less afraid, more confident, and more competent in exploring spirituality.

More recognition for spirituality and its link to, and importance for, good mental health is required. Spirituality was deemed to be connected to identity, self-esteem, a sense of hope, and resiliency. Some clinicians felt that it was important to be in touch with one's own spirituality, and to be aware of biases and counter transference issues. There was a strong desire from clinicians for more knowledge regarding the constructs of spirituality, issues, and resources, and they believed that this should be a focus in both the education and practice domains.

Some clinicians believed that spirituality needed to be part of modular approaches and evidence based practices to render a greater presence, voice, space, and avenues for engagement. Clinicians envisioned that attending to spirituality would increasingly allow treatment to go into a place of meaning for children. Some identified the need for champions to give a voice and structure to spirituality. This would allow for peer development, and branching out into greater prominence of spirituality in practice, research, and development. They conveyed it as fundamental, yet it is not fully embraced. Clinicians felt it is critical to be open and inviting of spirituality, and there was a great desire to be trained. Clinicians need to know what a client's spiritual foundations and belief systems are, and be ready and willing to consider this aspect in intervention and treatment.

This study reinforces findings from previous studies which have demonstrated spirituality

is important in counselling practice, that it is being encountered, and it needs to be included in social work education (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007; Metheany & Coholic, 2009; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2014; Canda & Furman, 1999; 2010). Social work educators should consider moving beyond touching on spirituality in courses to developing more structured course work that includes theory, attitudes, and spiritually sensitive skills to increase practitioner's competence around awareness, practice, and efficacy. Continuing education, training and support are needed for practitioners in the field. This is especially important at the levels of supervision and management as these positions hold promise for developing awareness, creating safe spaces for spiritual dialogue, clinical supervision, and reflective practice in the area of spirituality. Processes for addressing spirituality in practice need to be developed and honoured.

These findings suggest that integrating the natural world into treatment of TGL with children could prove beneficial for healing and accessing spirituality. For example, animal assisted therapies have been employed in treatment with children experiencing a range of traumatic experiences including domestic violence, sexual abuse, grief, and illness, as well as other mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and attachment issues (Deitz, Davis, & Pennings, 2012; Geist, 2011). Much of the research and conceptual frameworks on animal assisted therapies include benefits to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural dimensions of children (Geist, 2011). This type of strategy could be more integrated into TGL approaches.

Jackson (2012) stated that animal and nature therapy can be used to develop and enhance empathy, confidence, connectedness, and nurturance in children. However, no studies were found that explored the spiritual aspects associated with animal or nature therapy and this

appears to be a critical element of children's engagement with animals and nature. The natural world potentially may enhance children's spiritual interconnectivity, assist with integrating the mind, body and spirit, and could increase feelings of safety, security, support, and comfort for children. Animals and the natural world may contribute to a source for meaning making through TGL.

### **5.3.2 Implications Arising from the Study**

This study utilized interviews but future studies could explore additional sources of information. For example, further data could be gathered through the observation of counselling sessions, allowing participant dialogue to be captured. Observing counselling sessions could illuminate tacit features of spirituality, implicit and explicit spiritual dialogue, and implicit and explicit spiritual interventions and outcomes, as well as the qualities of the spiritual relationship between clients and clinicians. It could also illuminate more information on the processes of treading cautiously, silencing of spiritual dialogue, protecting and shielding, and associated effects. The category of withholding could be further explored with children experiencing TGL including comparing this to children not experiencing TGL. This could assist in determining whether this process is exacerbated or confounded by TGL, or if it is similar in nature across life experiences.

Future studies could further explore the relevance and fit of the model of *navigating in seclusion* with children from differing cultures, spiritual perspectives, or even children with differing developmental abilities. Future research could interview children independently, and happen over time to develop trust. Using other types of media such as movies, stories, play, and the Internet, may elicit further information on spirituality from children. Focus groups with

children could garner further data, or be used in theoretical sampling. Reviewing case files, policies and procedures, and service delivery manuals, and observing team meetings, and supervision practices, could offer contextual and rich data.

Seeking greater breadth of information with greater numbers of youth and faiths could expand existing categories or elicit new ones. Further studies could explore the fit of this theory with differing types of TGL. Delineating individuals into specific types of TGL could elicit new or expanded categorical information. Furthermore, exploring the effects associated with spirituality in correlation to the timeframe associated with the TGL event could offer new information and salient processes. Studying the actual spiritual practices employed by children immediately following TGL versus those employed over time would be of interest. Further investigation into the immediate effects of TGL on children's spiritual relationships with spiritual entities and comparing this over time would be useful. Comparing outcomes from treatment versus non treatment groups could offer more information into the spiritual relationship development processes and intervention impacts for children.

Exploring attachment factors in association with TGL and spirituality could garner further information as to the parent/child relationship, the category of protecting and shielding, as well as relationships with spiritual entities. Further studies could explore the similarities and differences between children in foster care compared to those residing with biological parents, as well as potential cultural considerations. The level of impact on spirituality due to parental involvement in the TGL merits further investigation. Assessing posttraumatic stress and depression in parents along with children's spirituality is warranted.

Further studies could also take gender into consideration. The one boy interviewed in this study had more of a desire to explore global and social aspects of the world including natural geography, social issues, and political concerns such as war. Fletcher and Ota (1997) found that boys and girls differed in their spirituality, with boys having a more open, flexible, and a wider vision or worldview. In a study with teenage boys Engebretson (2004) found that the participants hoped for a world that was just, equitable, safe, and free from war, and that they had an interest in social and global issues. The similarities and differences in spirituality and processes of spirituality between male and female preadolescents requires further exploration. Furthermore, data from more adult males would be helpful; information was not garnered from fathers in this study and this could offer valuable comparison data to mothers. Comparing the different perspectives, cognitions, processes, and practices between male and female clinicians could also provide interesting data.

Differences in regard to years of experience, and areas of competence and practice for clinicians could also be explored in more depth. Studies on the effects that clinician's spiritual competence and efficacy have on child outcomes would be a logical next step involving practice research. Observing team meetings and supervision practices could provide information on the openness, and spiritual processes, of practitioners, and the dialogue between colleagues and in clinical supervision. Exploring the perspectives and needs of supervisors and managers in the area of spirituality would also be a sagacious next step. These further queries could lead to the formulation of a more formal theory and the development of best practices for attending to and addressing spirituality in practice. Guidelines for reflective practice, case discussions and supervision, as well as treatment could be developed. Support for clinicians practicing in this

area is required in respect to assisting children with spiritual reframing, and supporting and facilitating adaptive spiritual meaning making for children.

## **5.4 Delimitations and Limitations of the study**

### **5.4.1 Delimitations**

Delimitations are decisions which limit and narrow the parameters, scope or context of the study (Creswell, 2003). This study involved the exploration of spirituality in preadolescent children ages 8-12 years who had experienced TGL. The research was limited to children referred for outpatient counselling at a centre in Northwestern Ontario, their parents, and clinicians working in outpatient services. Participation was further limited to those participants who volunteered to be interviewed. The timeframe of the data collection was limited by the researcher's graduate studies timeframe. Data collection took place between March 2012 and July 2014. The research design of grounded theory further limited the scope of this research, and the qualitative interviews conducted with a semi-structured interview guide provided some parameters to the questions. For example, the ethics committee at the centre where participants were recruited requested that questions focusing on the specifics of their TGL experiences not be asked of children and parents. This limited further investigation of some of the findings. Interviewing participants can yield different results than prolonged field observations and this no doubt limited the data collection.

### **5.4.2 Limitations**

Several limitations to this study are apparent. First, the sample of participants is in one specific geographical location, and in one agency, which can limit generalizability. The sample was fairly homogenous in relation to faith and ethnicity (predominately Caucasian). Therefore,



the transferability of these results to differing contexts should be viewed with caution, especially given the individualized experience of spirituality as well as TGL. Children and parents from differing ethnic groups, or those who were not willing to participate, may have different experiences. Participants at different geographical locales or at different centres may have differing experiences as well. It would be important to do further investigation with other groups.

Second, the interview data relies on honest responses of participants, which may not be thorough or complete in nature, particularly when addressing a sensitive issue as in this study. An example emerged when one participant did not share much with the tape recorder on. After it was turned off his parent opened up and stated she had previously told him not to talk about spiritual experiences. She began to share her experiences and then he opened up further, it is speculated that a lot more may have been shared over time or in a different context.

Third, informed consent, which includes the limits of confidentiality and mandatory reporting to child welfare authorities, may have limited the openness of some of the participants. Fourth, my own personal characteristics and qualities, and body language may have implicitly, explicitly, positively, or negatively influenced participant responses. Although rigor was sought, the grounded theory design limits the conceptualized theory in terms of validation through quantitative methods.

#### **5.4.3 Fit, Relevance, Workability, and Modifiability**

Validity in its traditional sense is consequently not an issue in GT, which instead should be judged by fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1998). In this study the coding and category development processes attempted to ensure

appropriate fit of the incidents with concepts, and a constant comparison of incidents to concepts occurred in the data analysis. In regard to relevance, this study explored the real concerns of the participants and captured the essence of their experiences. As for workability, the substantive theory explains how participants navigate spirituality and includes some variation. This theory is open to modifiability and new relevant data could alter or adjust certain aspects of these findings.

### **5.5 Summary**

The goal of this dissertation was to explore children's spirituality within TGL. The first two chapters of this dissertation introduced the nature of the study, identified the main research question and sub questions, and contextualized the research study within the existing literature. The third chapter described the methodology employed in the study, while chapter four described the results. Chapter five has discussed the findings in conjunction with previous research which has situated this study. It presented how it was congruent with previous theoretical assertions, and how these were extended. It identified implications for practice, further research, and the limitations of the study.

The findings from this study emphasized the importance of children's spirituality, and understandings and experiences in TGL. This study illuminated the deep and rich spiritual lives experienced by children. It depicted how spirituality was experienced through the mind, body, and spirit, and how it was connected to other aspects of life. Spirituality was found to be a unique and wonderful personal experience that involved various supportive spiritual relationships.

TGL seemed to spark and catapult children's spirituality and spiritual meaning making. These processes activated spiritual cogitation and rumination, spiritual practices, coping, prayer,

hope, and connection with spiritual entities. This study unearthed how children, parents, and clinicians were *navigating in seclusion* through the terrain of children's spirituality and TGL. We know more about the dimensions that influenced the participant experiences, in particular the dialectical nature of spirituality. Spirituality was individually constructed as being *normal and important*, while at the same time it was socially constructed as *weird and taboo*.

Spirituality was normal and important in children's lives, and spiritual relationships, practices, and activities, offered nurturance and support through TGL. Conversely, spirituality and TGL were also understood and experienced as taboo topics and not socially acceptable. Spirituality was suppressed through subtle and blatant acts of oppression, ostracizing, and bullying. The experience of spiritual oppression was evident, social processes which suppressed and silenced the spirituality were noted, and the spiritual voices of children, parents, and clinicians were unveiled. The theoretical model portrayed herein offered the various processes involved and their properties. The processes of *fighting it out, lacking trust and answers, treading cautiously, staying strong, and at one's own pace* were intertwined and resulted from TGL and the dialectical forces regarding spirituality.

These findings have contributed to the complex dynamics of children's spiritual development demonstrating that despite TGL, preadolescent's spiritual capacities and foundations remained robust and strong. The findings emphasized the need for, and importance of clearing and creating safe pathways for hearing and honoring the voices and experiences of the clients we serve. They further identified the need to advocate for greater awareness, education, and training, and the ultimate reduction of stigma and oppressive forces.

The importance and interconnectedness of the spiritual domain in TGL for children, has been unearthed and presented through this study. If children's spirituality were supported in positive ways by adults, then the trauma trajectory and symptoms might be changed. Spiritual development may be nurtured through greater attention and acceptance, which could further support the strong foundations children hold. Spiritually sensitive social work training could garner even stronger relationships with children as well as augment current TGL treatment interventions reducing the effects. Studies that more explicitly explore the connections of spirituality and trauma processes should be a focus of TGL in the future.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge that I am extremely grateful and honoured that the child and adult participants entrusted me, and openly shared their fascinating and incredible insights and understandings of spirituality with me. I also am grateful that they shared their struggles, anguish, and distress associated with their experiences. I hope that I have honoured their voices and experiences, and that these findings will spark a future of awareness, recognition, and validation of the importance of children's spirituality and the need for its private and public nurturance.

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## **APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE LETTERS:**

### **Parent and Child**

**(Clinicians will go through this with potential participants)**

There is a unique and exciting research study being conducted on children's spirituality by a PhD student from the University of Calgary School of Social Work. The researcher is asking for people who have been through difficult life events to participate in this study and to talk about spirituality. The researcher is seeking participants that include preadolescent children ages 8-12, their parents, as well as some counsellors. The participation will require your child, and yourself to be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes. There is also a possibility of second or further interviews.

The questions in the interview will relate mainly to your child's understanding and experience of spirituality in their life. As a parent you will be asked about your understanding of your child's spirituality. Counsellors will be asked about their understandings of the spirituality of children who have been through difficult life events that they have provided counselling for.

For participating in this study you will receive a \$20 gift card for one of the following places: The Canada Games Complex, Mario's Bowl, or Chapters Book Store.

A yes or no decision to participate will not affect the services you are receiving at Children's Centre. Participation in the research is voluntary. You will continue to receive counselling services regardless of your decision.

This study is part of the researcher's PhD in Social Work at the University of Calgary. Ethics approval has been granted by the University of Calgary, and the ethics committee at Children's Centre Thunder Bay has granted permission for this research to be conducted.

If you would like to participate in this study or, if you have further questions or require more information you can speak directly to the researcher. Here is her contact information:

Heather Marie Boynton

807-986-3675

[hmboynton@gmail.com](mailto:hmboynton@gmail.com)

**The following letter is to be provided at a team meeting by supervisors and read through by the supervisor and counsellors:**

I would like to inform you of a unique and exciting research project that is being conducted on children's spirituality. This research is to explore children's spirituality for children who have experienced trauma. The researcher is seeking participants that include preadolescent children ages 8-12 who have encountered a traumatic event and their parents, as well as some counsellors. The participation will require children, parent(s) and counsellors to be interviewed for approximately 60-90 minutes with the potential of a second interview. The researcher is seeking counsellor participants who have worked with preadolescent children (and their parents) who have experienced a traumatic event.

The questions in the interview will relate mainly to children's understandings of spirituality, spiritual process and practices, and their experiences of spirituality. For participating in this study participants will receive a \$20 gift card for one of the following places: The Canada Games Complex, Mario's Bowl, or Chapters Book Store.

The findings of this study are for the fulfillment of the researcher's PhD in Social Work at the University of Calgary. Ethics approval has been granted by the University of Calgary, and permission has been granted by Children's Centre Thunder Bay for this research to be conducted.

If you would like to participate in this study or, if you have further questions or require more information you can speak directly to the researcher. Here is her contact information:

Heather Marie Boynton

807-986-3675 [hmboynton@gmail.com](mailto:hmboynton@gmail.com)

## Participants Needed for a Unique Research Study: Understanding Children's Spirituality

The researcher is looking for children ages 8-12 that have been through a difficult life event, such as something traumatic, grief, and/or loss to agree to participate in one or several interviews.

Parent(s) are asked to be present for the interviews and will be interviewed themselves if they desire. The researcher is also seeking clinicians who have worked with children 8-12 who meet the above criteria to be interviewed.

Participants will be provided with a \$20 gift card at one of the following places:

The Canada Games Complex, Mario's Bowl, Chapters

For further information please contact:

Heather Boynton

[hmboynton@gmail.com](mailto:hmboynton@gmail.com)

or leave a message at 986-3675

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDES**

### **Clinician Interview Guide:**

- Interviews with clinicians will begin with presenting them with a definition and the related constructs of spirituality. They will be asked if this fits with their perspective or view of spirituality.
- Looking at the definition and the related constructs, how have you understood spirituality for children who have encountered trauma, grief and /or loss (TGL)?
- What relationships to spirituality do you see for children encountering TGL?
- Describe any rituals, practices that are part of preadolescent children's spirituality.
- Describe any spiritual processes that occur for preadolescent children, examples?
- How do you think or feel that children experience and/or learn about spirituality in their lives?
- Are there any cognitive or developmental processes you see as important in children's spirituality?
- In your experience what are the important or significant areas, issues, or concerns in spirituality and mental health for preadolescent children?
- How do you or how might other clinicians attend to or incorporate spirituality into their work with children encountering TGL?
- How have you engaged or not engaged in spirituality, spiritual practices, or discussions with preadolescent children?
- Some research on children's spirituality demonstrates that they have a unique feature deemed "relational consciousness" where children can profoundly express relationships to self, others and or a higher power. Have you encountered this in your work, and in what ways?

- Some research in the area of TGL with preadolescent children has demonstrated spirituality as relevant and important to them. Have you had such experiences with children and could you describe this?
- What advice would you have for other clinicians incorporating spirituality with children in practice?
- Is there anything else I should know about spirituality in children and social work practice that I didn't ask or you have not provided?

### **Parent Interview Guide**

- Interviews with parents will begin with presenting them with a definition and the related constructs of spirituality as outlined in the proposal. Parents will be asked if they understand this definition and clarification may occur. They will be asked if this fits with their perspective or view of spirituality.
- What does your child say when he/she talks about spirituality?
- What do they say when trying to understand the purpose of life?
- How do you think your child has learned about spirituality?
- Are there any spiritual experiences you feel have occurred for your child?
- Some research with children has found that spirituality is very important to them. Can you describe how this may or may not be true for your child?
- Are there any spiritual activities your child has taken part in?
- Are there other activities your child engages in that you feel are spiritual?
- In your experience what are the important spiritual themes in your child's life?
- Has your child's spiritual talk or activities been the same or changed?

- Do you have any ideas or advice as to how counsellors can attend to spirituality in their work with children?
- Some research on children's spirituality has found that children are able to talk about their relationships to themselves, others and or a higher power very deeply. Have you seen this in your child?
- Is there anything else I should know about spirituality in children and counselling that I didn't ask or you have not provided?

### **Child Interview Guide**

- Have you heard of the word spirituality and what do you know about it?
- The following description will be provided: Spirituality is about how we feel close to others, to nature or a higher power or beings. It is about how we feel part of things. It is also how we make sense of our life and the reason or purpose for things in our life. It includes our thoughts and activities.
- Does this make sense to you; do you understand what it means?
- Can you tell me what you think of spirituality and what it means to you?
- Do you have thoughts about the purpose of life?
- How do you make sense of things when things happen in your life?
- Have your thoughts and feelings about life and the world changed? If yes, tell me about how?
- How and where have you learned about spirituality? Are there important people, places, or books or shows or things that let you know about spirituality?
- Can you tell me about when you feel close to others? to nature? to a higher power or beings?
- What things do you do in your life that you feel are spiritual?



- What should counsellors know about your or other children's spirituality?
- Are there any important things about how you think, feel or act that counsellors should know?
- Are there any spiritual things you would like to talk about with the counsellor?
- Are there other things we have not talked about that you think or feel are important and you would like to share?

## APPENDIX D: PARENT CONSENT FORM

### Parent Consent Form

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Heather Marie Boynton, Faculty of Social Work, 807-986-3675, hboynton@gmail.com

**Supervisor:**

Dr. John Graham, Faculty of Social Work

**Title of Project:**

Exploring the Meanings of Spirituality for Children Experiencing Trauma, Grief and/or Loss: A Grounded Theory Study

**Sponsor:**

N/A

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

**Purpose of the Study:**

*You and your daughter/son are being invited to participate in this study. Your child is eligible because during the intake you shared that your child had lived through a difficult time. The researcher wants to learn about spirituality for this group of children. You are eligible to participate as the child's parent. Clinicians providing counselling services to this group of children are also invited to participate. Approximately 18 people will be asked to participate in this study. The main purpose of this study is for the researcher to complete their PhD requirements.*

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?****Parents:**

*Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate altogether. You may withdraw information you provided at any time up until the data analysis process begins. Once the interview occurs it will be transcribed approximately 48 hours after the interview by a professional transcriber who will sign an oath of confidentiality. You will have an opportunity to review the transcription. You may withdraw partial content of the interview, or withdraw altogether within two weeks of the interview.*

*If I do not hear from you after two weeks post interview, I will begin data analysis and the information you provided in the transcript will be utilized under the pseudonym you choose or one assigned to you. You may request a summary copy of the results after the project is completed.*

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Should you agree to participate, your personal information such as your name, age, family faith(s) will be collected. You have the ability to choose a pseudonym or one will be assigned to you. Some of your words may become part of the explanatory theory and some of your comments may be quoted under your pseudonym in future writing that may be published in books or academic journals.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There are minimal risks of participating in this research and the researcher will attempt to reduce risks. There is a risk as a participant that your child or you may feel upset talking about situations related to your child's life. The researcher will try to minimize any distress your child or yourself may feel.

If at any time your child feels very uncomfortable and requires the need to speak to their counsellor you can let the researcher know. You may schedule a session with your child's counsellor.

You can also get support from:

The Canadian Mental Health Crisis Response Service at 807-346-8282

The weekly Walk-In Clinic at Children's Centre Thunder Bay or Thunder Bay Counselling Centre.

Catholic Family Development Centre 807-343-7323

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre 807-684-1880

If you have an EAP provider

Your family doctor

Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre Emergency Department

If any knowledge of any threat of or actual abuse is disclosed the researcher is obligated by law to disclose this information to the appropriate legal authority.

Benefits:

You may feel good about sharing your information regarding spirituality.

You can choose a \$20 gift card at one of the following: The Canada Games Complex, Mario's Bowl, or Chapter's Book Store for participating.

This research will benefit the researcher as part of their dissertation fulfillment and possible publications. The data obtained from you will be utilized in developing an explanatory theory that will hopefully benefit other social workers, other students, educators and researchers, and other helping professionals. Ultimately it is hoped that it will also inform practices that will benefit children receiving counselling services.

## What Happens to the Information I Provide?

Consent and pseudonym: The original signed consent form for participation will be kept in a separate file from your pseudonym form to maintain confidentiality. The forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet belonging to the researcher

Digital Recording: No one except the researcher and the paid transcriber, who will sign an oath of confidentiality, will be allowed to hear any of your responses in the digital recording. The recording will be destroyed once it is transcribed.

Transcription: The transcription of the interview will remain confidential and will only have your chosen pseudonym in it and not your real name. The transcription will be kept on a password protected flash drive in a locked cabinet (separate from the consent form) belonging to the researcher. The flash drive will be kept for 7 years and then the file information will be destroyed. The transcription data will also be stored on a password protected file on the researcher's computer during the data analysis phase and then it will be transferred to the flash drive and kept for 7 years. A paper copy of the transcription will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University of Calgary Department of Social Work and only my supervisor or I will have access to this. The data analysis will be utilized in the final dissertation, and one of the copies of this will be kept at the University of Calgary. The data also may be used in possible publications.

Summary report: Children's Centre will be provided with a summary report of the project upon completion. You may request a copy of this summary report.

### *Signatures (written consent)*

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Heather Marie Boynton,*

*Faculty of Social Work*

*807-343-5080, hmboynton@gmail.com*

*And Dr. John Graham*  
*Faculty of Social Work*  
403-220-5156, jrgraham@ucalgary.ca

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## APPENDIX E: CHILD ASSENT FORM

### Child Assent Form

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Heather Marie Boynton, Faculty of Social Work, 807-986-3675, hboynton@gmail.com

**Supervisor:**

Dr. John Graham, Faculty of Social Work

**Title of Project:**

Exploring the Meanings of Spirituality for Children Experiencing Trauma, Grief and/or Loss: A Grounded Theory Study

**Sponsor:**

N/A

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. The Ethics Board of Children's Centre has approved this research study.

This study is being conducted at Children's Centre Thunder Bay, but is not part of Children's Centre Thunder Bay.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

You are being invited to participate in this interesting study. When your parent phoned Children's Centre and asked for you to see a counsellor they shared that you have been through a difficult event in your life. The researcher wants to learn about spirituality for this group of children. Your parent is also eligible to participate. Counsellors who are working with this group of children are also invited to participate. Approximately 18 people will be asked to participate in this study.

The primary purpose of this study is for the completion of the researcher's PhD requirements.

### **What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

You will be asked to talk with me for about an hour or so. You also may be asked to take part in another interview. If you want to take a break at any time you can. Make sure you tell me if you don't want to talk about some things. You can draw a picture or explain things with toys or act things out. You will be asked about your spirituality and how you understand life.

If you agree to participate I will ask you questions about spirituality. I will use a digital audio recorder to record our conversation so that I can remember what we talked about. I will have a secretary type it up and she will sign an agreement to keep everything private. Once it is typed you can have a chance to look at it within about two days and decide if it is okay for me to use the information. You will have two weeks from the time of our interview to withdraw. If I don't hear back from you I will use the information.

You will get to choose a different name that will be used for your information, so no one else but you, or your parent(s), and I will know this is you. If you don't want to choose a different name one will be assigned to you. The secretary may hear your real first name used but she will also keep this secret and use your chosen name in the typing instead. (See pseudonym assignment page below, which will be kept in a separate file from this form in one of my locked file cabinets).

Some of your words may be used with your chosen name in future writing that will be published in a final report and may be published in books or academic journals. If you draw pictures, I may ask to use them in my study and in possible publications of articles or books. The drawings will still belong to you.

Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate altogether. You also may refuse to participate at any time up until two weeks after our interview. If you decide not to participate you will still be able to see your counsellor.

You may request a summary copy of the results after the project is completed.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

If you agree to participate some basic information will be gathered such as, your name, your age, if you are a boy or a girl, your family faith(s), and the intake presenting issues and information. This information will remain private, so no one else will know this is you.

The digital audio recording will be destroyed once it is typed. The typed paper interview will be kept for up to 7 years in my locked file cabinet and on a password protected flash drive and file on my computer, and then it will be destroyed. A paper copy will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University of Calgary in the Department of Social Work and only my supervisor or I can look at it. I may do further work with the typed information up to seven years later. No one else can do this.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

Risks: There are some minimal risks of participating in this research. As a participant you may feel upset talking about situations related to your life. You can stop at any time if this happens. You can tell me when you want to stop and we will stop. I will attempt to keep all risks minimal. If you feel upset, you can call your counsellor.

If you tell me about any threat of, or actual abuse I am obligated by law to tell this information to the appropriate legal authority.

If at any time you feel very uncomfortable and need to speak to a counsellor you can let me know. You can schedule a session with your counsellor.

You can also get support from:

The Canadian Mental Health Crisis Response Service at 807-346-8282

The weekly Walk-In Clinic at Children's Centre Thunder Bay or Thunder Bay Counselling Centre.

Your family doctor

Or go to the emergency department at the hospital.

Benefits: You also may feel good about talking about your life and may find that there are some really good things we talk about and you may find that spirituality is a positive thing in your life. You can choose a \$20 gift card at one of the following: The Canada Games Complex, Mario's Bowl, or Chapter's Book Store for participating.

This research will benefit me as part of my university school work for my PhD, and if I publish the information. The information you share will be part of a theory that will hopefully benefit others social workers, other students, educators, or researchers, and other helping professionals. It is really hoped that it will help children who come for counselling.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Consent and pseudonym: The original signed consent form for participation will be kept in a separate file from your secret name form and kept private. The forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet belonging to me.

Digital Audio Recording: No one except the me and the paid typist, who will sign an agreement to keep things private will be allowed to hear any of your comments in the digital recording. The digital audio recording will be destroyed once it is typed.

Transcription: The typed copy of our conversation will remain private and will only have your chosen or assigned secret name in it and not your real name. The typed copy will be kept on a password protected flash drive in a locked cabinet (separate from the consent form) belonging to me. The flash drive will be kept for 7 years and then the file information will be destroyed. The typed information will also be stored on a password protected file on my computer during the data analysis phase and then it will be transferred to the flash drive and kept for 7 years. A paper copy of the conversation will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University of Calgary Department of Social Work and only my supervisor or I will have access to this. The information will be used in the final project, and one of the copies of this will be kept at the University of Calgary. The information also may be used in possible publications. I may decide to look at the data again within 7 years and do more work on it. You may request a summary report once the project is complete.

Drawings: If you do any drawings and you agree that I can borrow them to use for information or to publish in an article or book I will keep them until the study is over. I will not include your name with your drawing. I will then return them to you



Summary report: Children's Centre will be provided with a summary report of the project upon completion. You may request a copy of this summary report.

### *Signatures (written consent)*

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. If you agree to participate, please put a check mark on the corresponding line which will grant me your permission to do what is asked:

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*I give permission for my drawings to be used in this study: Child's signature \_\_\_\_\_ (to be signed post interview)*

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Heather Marie Boynton,  
Faculty of Social Work  
807-343-5080, hmboynton@gmail.com*

*And Dr. John Graham  
Faculty of Social Work  
403-220-5156, jrgraham@ucalgary.ca*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

## APPENDIX F: CLINICIAN CONSENT FORM

Clinician Consent Form

University of Calgary Logo Here

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**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Heather Marie Boynton, Faculty of Social Work, 807-986-3675, hboynton@gmail.com

**Supervisor:**

Dr. John Graham, Faculty of Social Work

**Title of Project:**

Exploring the Meanings of Spirituality for Children Experiencing Trauma, Grief and/or Loss: A Grounded Theory Study

**Sponsor:**

N/A

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This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study. The Ethics Board of Children's Centre has granted permission for this research study.

This study is being conducted at Children's Centre Thunder Bay, but is not part of Children's Centre Thunder Bay.

### **Purpose of the Study:**

*The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings, perspectives and experiences of spirituality in preadolescent (8-12-year-old) children in Northwestern Ontario who have encountered traumatic events and are receiving counselling services. Preadolescents whose presenting issues included trauma are identified as potential participants, along with their parents. Clinicians who have provided counselling to preadolescents who have experienced trauma are also being invited to participate. The specific initial question of this study is "What does spirituality mean for children who have encountered trauma?"*

*You have been invited as a participant based upon the criteria outlined for participants in this study. Approximately 18 people will participate in this study.*

*Due to the small potential participant pool, total anonymity may not be guaranteed. There is potential that you may be recognized as a research participant by other staff.*

*The primary purpose of this study is for the completion of the researcher's PhD requirements.*

## **What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

### ***Counsellors:***

*You will be asked to engage in an interview of approximately 60-90 minutes in duration. You also may be asked to partake in a subsequent interview of similar duration. You will be asked about your understanding of children's spirituality and aspects of spirituality in relation to your work with preadolescents who have encountered trauma. Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate altogether. There is no professional or personal obligation for you to participate. You may withdraw at any time up until the data analysis process begins. Once the interview occurs it will be transcribed within approximately 48 hours by a professional transcriber who will sign and oath of confidentiality. You will have an opportunity to review the transcription. You may withdraw partial content of the interview, or withdraw altogether within two weeks of the interview. If I do not hear from you I will begin data analysis once two weeks has elapsed and the information you provided in the transcript will be utilized under the pseudonym you choose or one assigned to you. You may request a summary copy of the results after the project is completed.*

## **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. Should you agree to participate, your personal information such as your name, age, and years of experience will be collected and remain confidential. You have the ability to choose a pseudonym or one will be assigned to you. Some of your words may become part of the explanatory theory and some of your comments may be quoted under your pseudonym in future writing that may be published in books or academic journals.

## **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

### **Risks:**

There are minimal risks of participating in this research. Any risks should not be more than might be experienced in supervision or training. As a participant you may feel upset talking about situations related to your work; however, the researcher will attempt to keep all risks minimal and will facilitate opportunities to minimize any distress you may feel. If at any time you feel very uncomfortable and you require the need to speak to someone free of cost, you can end the interview and can access counselling through:

Your EAP provider

The Canadian Mental Health Crisis Response Service at 807-346-8282

Catholic Family Development Centre 807-343-7323

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre 807-684-1880

Your family doctor

Thunder Bay Regional Health Sciences Centre Emergency Department

If any knowledge of any threat of or actual abuse is disclosed the researcher is obligated by law to disclose this information to the Children's Aid Society.

#### Benefits:

Clinicians will be offered a \$20 gift card at one of the following: Chapter's Book Store, the Canada Games Complex, or Mario's Bowl.

You may feel good about sharing your information regarding spirituality. This research will benefit the researcher as part of their dissertation fulfillment and possible publications. The data obtained from you will be utilized in developing an explanatory theory that will hopefully benefit other social workers, other students, educators and researchers, and other helping professionals. Ultimately it is hoped that it will also inform practices that will benefit children receiving counselling services.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

**Consent and pseudonym:** The original signed consent form for participation will be kept in a separate file from your pseudonym form to maintain confidentiality. The forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet belonging to the researcher

**Digital Audio Recording:** No one except the researcher and the paid transcriber, who will sign an oath of confidentiality, will be allowed to hear any of your responses in the digital audio recording. The digital audio recording will be destroyed once it is transcribed.

**Transcription:** The transcription of the interview will remain confidential and will only have your chosen pseudonym in it and not your real name. The transcription will be kept on a password protected flash drive in a locked cabinet (separate from the consent form and pseudonym form) belonging to the researcher. The flash drive will be kept for 7 years and then the file information will be destroyed. The transcription data will also be stored on a password protected file on the researcher's computer during the data analysis phase and then it will be transferred to the flash drive and kept for 7 years. A paper copy of the transcription will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the University of Calgary Department of Social Work and only my supervisor or I will have access to this. The data analysis will be utilized in the final dissertation, and one of the copies of this will be kept at the University of Calgary. The data also may be used in possible publications. You may request a summary report once the project is complete. Further data analysis may be conducted within 7 years by the researcher only.

**Summary report:** Children's Centre will be provided with a summary report of the project upon completion. You may request a copy of this summary report.

### ***Signatures (written consent)***

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from up until the data analysis phase. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

*Please print and sign your name on the corresponding line which will grant me your permission to do what is asked:*

I grant permission to be interviewed and I understand that the interview will be digitally recorded:

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Heather Marie Boynton,*

*Faculty of Social Work*

*807-343-5080, [hboynton@gmail.com](mailto:hboynton@gmail.com)*

*And Dr. John Graham*

*Faculty of Social Work*

*403-220-5156, [jrgraham@ucalgary.ca](mailto:jrgraham@ucalgary.ca)*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact the Senior Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-3782; email [rburrows@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rburrows@ucalgary.ca).

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

**APPENDIX G: PSEUDONYM FORM**

*Pseudonym Assignment Form (To be filed separately from consent form)*

*Participant name:*

*(Print)* \_\_\_\_\_

*I am a: Child* \_\_\_\_\_ *Parent* \_\_\_\_\_ *Clinician* \_\_\_\_\_

*The pseudonym I choose for myself is:* \_\_\_\_\_

*Signature* \_\_\_\_\_

*Date* \_\_\_\_\_