READING BEYOND:
CHILDREN’S LIVED SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES OF FANTASY LITERATURE

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe four children’s lived spiritual experiences of literary texts as generated through their responses to two toy fantasy novels for children, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* by Kate DiCamillo (2006) and *The Mouse and his Child* by Russell Hoban (1967). The theoretical framework was situated within interpretivism, reader-response theory, and a conception of spirituality as a universal tendency in humans to reach out for deep connection with something greater than themselves.

Four children, aged ten and eleven, were interviewed three different times, and their artwork drawn in response to the two novels was collected. The method of phenomenological thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts and artwork of the children. Three themes of a spiritual reading were generated through the children’s responses to the two novels, and these included applications of the central ideas of the novels related to the human experience, the Divine, and the mysterious.

The findings of this study offer several implications for both research and teaching in elementary language and literacy education. Though this study has provided a rich description of some children’s spiritual experiences of literary texts, there is room for further research to broaden and deepen our understanding in the area of children’s spirituality and children’s literature. This understanding could be expanded through future research with children, of different faiths and none, reading and responding to other genres of children’s literature. Other genres of possibility include picturebooks, children’s literature in translation, and folktales. Research focused on small groups of children talking about their responses to literature with their peers could also provide
fruitful data. Additionally, the field invites other methodologies such as grounded theory or ethnography.

Educators are encouraged to select stories for their students that reflect spiritual dimensions and illuminate questions of meaning. With such texts curriculum writers might develop resources that give children the opportunity to express their spirituality through both literary and artistic activities. Finally, these findings point to the importance of adults truly listening to children’s spiritual ideas that emerge as they respond to literature through multiple methods.
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“And when light comes from nowhere I can see,
when my soul is clothed in golden bandages, ribbons of grace, how can I tell you?
Or even tell myself so I can write it down? No words are bright enough to catch
those fingerprints of radiance that flicker on my wall.” (Shaw, *Harvesting Fog*,
2010)
We read books to find out who we are…. A person who had never listened to nor read a tale or myth or parable or story, would remain ignorant of his own emotional and spiritual heights and depths, would not know quite fully what it is to be human.

-Ursula Le Guin, *The Language of the Night* (1979)

**Chapter 1.**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Approaching the Topic**

As a life-long, avid reader of children’s literature, visiting the children’s book section in a bookstore entails more than a casual exploration. Some titles transport me to a reflective space in which I remember how a book engaged my spirituality, whether it deepened my connection to God or my awareness of the power of deep connection between people. Some books depicted characters appreciating the beauty of the natural world; the way they connected to the Divine through their experiences in the outdoors resonated with me.

These moments of reflection reinforce something simple and yet profound: the stories read during childhood can have lasting and multi-dimensional effects on young readers. In others words, some texts can affect readers’ intellects, emotions, and spirits. These books represent some of children’s first encounters with the complex nature of the world and assure them there are some mysteries too large to comprehend. Some readers even discover deep spiritual truths in narrative during childhood.

Madeleine L’Engle speaks of developing a theology out of story: “All my life through stories, those I read, and those I write, I have been building (intuitively, rather than consciously) a theology. The term ‘theology’ means the word about God” (1985, p. 13). I can relate to L’Engle and her awareness of this developing theology; the books I read as a young person illuminated spiritual concepts and values that encouraged
different aspects of my spirituality, including the desire for deep connection with others, my relationship with the earth, and my capacity to engage with a supernatural, divine source.

Specifically, I can recall moments as a young person when a story’s characters, setting, plot, and themes spoke to my spirituality, and I become lost in the experience of reading. These experiences cultivated in me a deep love for reading literature and encouraged me to think more about my relationship with God, others, and the natural world. Sven Berkerts discusses reading as a state of being: “When I am at the finest pitch of reading, I feel as if the whole of my life—past as well as unknown future—were somehow available to me” (2002, p. 229). In Birkert’s opinion, the reader’s feelings about a book are just as important as the subject of the text. Such a perspective highlights the significance of the role of the reader in the reading transaction, a viewpoint I share.

Some books read during childhood stirred significant responses in me, and I spent time after the last page was turned, thinking about the book. I wrote in my journal often, and occasionally wrote about what I was reading. As I look back at my journal entries, I can see that in many ways, my reading influenced my writing and my spirituality. For example, at the age of ten, I read _Anne of Green Gables_ (1908) by Lucy Maud Montgomery, and continued to read almost all of Montgomery’s other books. I could relate to her protagonists whose spiritual selves were engaged by the beauty of the natural world, as well as by the wonder embedded in daily activities. I had never read descriptions of the natural world like those in Montgomery’s books, and as I read previous journal entries, I noticed how my own portrayal of the natural world sometimes echoed Montgomery’s in vocabulary and style. This is not something I remember
consciously trying to do, but I recalled the relationship between my time outdoors and my
closeness to God. As I reflected on my spiritual life as a young person, the pattern I
noticed is that I often felt closer to God when I was near the ocean or in the woods or
mountains. As a result, I could strongly relate to Anne’s comment to Marilla that her
chosen method of prayer is to “go out into a great big field all alone or into the deep, deep
woods…” and “feel a prayer” (1908, p. 99).

France Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911) represents another classic of
children’s literature that sparked my sense of wonder at the beauty of the earth, and
highlighted the connection between the spiritual and the physical world. Situating Mary
Lennox in a place where she must actively search for a way into the garden, the book
instilled in me an awareness that unexplored spaces in nature could hold multiple secrets
and wonders. Since I switched schools many times as a child, I could relate to Mary’s
experience of living in a new place and reaching out to others to develop new friendships.
The power of Mary’s connections with Dickon and Colin strongly impressed upon me the
power of relationships on one’s spirituality. By the end of the story Colin, previously in a
wheelchair, is able to walk and his relationship with his father is, in many ways, restored.
In this way, Burnett highlights the role of the natural world as well as the power of
friendship on people’s spiritual growth.

My gravitation toward fantasy as a young and now older reader is partly due to
my exposure to C.S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956). I vividly remember
lying on the couch in our family’s living room, reading *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955)
and marveling at the multiple dimensions present in the story. A theme emerging from
Lewis’s book and others included the idea that what is unseen may be just as real as what
is seen. Now as an adult reader, I don’t know if I have ever forgotten this concept. As Ralph Hodgson stated, “Some things have to be believed to be seen” (n.d.).

Victor Nell’s work, *Lost in a Book* (1996) discusses in detail how readers become lost in a book, highlighting those psychological processes operating within the minds of those who become entranced in a story (p. xiii). Nell likens intense reading to a trance and this state of being lost in a story is a term I would use to describe my own reading patterns as a young person. For example, the boundaries of time became blurred as I stepped into the world of a sand fairy that granted wishes in E. Nesbit’s *Five Children and It* (1908). It was imperative that I discover what wish the children would articulate in the next chapter—I was forced to keep reading!

Reflecting on my reading experiences as a young person encouraged me further in wondering how young readers today describe their experience of stories in spiritual terms. Do young readers engage with stories on spiritual levels? What kind of meaning do they make from reading books for pleasure, also known as “ludic reading” (Nell, p. 2)?

I wondered if I would have benefited from talking with others about my responses to the books I was reading—namely, my spiritual experience of a literary text. In fact, I did respond through journal writing, but adults rarely asked me to share my responses. I think I would have welcomed the opportunity to talk about my reading and my thoughts on spirituality at school as well as other settings where books were being read and discussed. The connection between my reading history and the research question about children’s literature and children’s spirituality I developed meant that this dissertation
would reflect an explicit autobiographical aspect. Like the children, I read the same stories and reflected on my spiritual readings of the two toy fantasy novels.

**The Problem**

Research indicates that children do express their spirituality through daily activities and that they talk about spiritual concepts when they discuss literature (Coles, 1990; Trousdale 2005a; Schoonmaker, 2009). Literature can nurture children’s spirituality when there is an adult that facilitates and encourages the child through open-ended questions (Trousdale 2004b, 2006). This research suggests that spirituality is important, even within educational spaces, and that educators can nurture the spirit of the child through the language and literacy curriculum, or in any situation where children are reading and responding to literature.

My interest in children’s literature and spirituality led me to investigate perspectives surrounding the issue of children’s spirituality and language and literacy activities, specifically related to children around the ages of ten and eleven. My investigation illuminated two major concerns. The first major concern is that children are not receiving a holistic education, or rather, an education that attends to all parts of the child, including physical, psychical, and spiritual aspects. Through my review of the literature on this topic, I found many reporting on the importance of accommodating the spiritual aspect of the individual within the public educational setting (Coles, 1990; Groome, 1998; Hade, 2002; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998; Palmer, 2004; Tisdell, 2007; Wolf, 1996). Some express concerns over the largely test-based curriculum that does not engage children on spiritual levels (Hade, 2002; Kohn, 2000). Others argue that the elementary curriculum should not split children’s identities within the classroom; rather,
curriculum might engage the whole child on intellectual, emotional, and spiritual levels (Kessler, 2000; Moffett, 1994; Myers, 1997).

The second major concern I developed through my review of the literature grew out of recognizing the gap in the understanding of children’s experiences of a literary text in spiritual terms. These experiences illuminate a reaching beyond on the part of the reader, either to a Divine source, to others, to the natural world, or into a deeper awareness of the self. They can also raise profound questions about the meaning of life and highlight children’s relationship with something greater than themselves. Some researchers employed the phenomenological approach to explore children’s spiritual experiences, but there are few studies that focus specifically on descriptions of children’s lived experience of spirituality through reading literature (Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Hyde, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c;).

Though there exists a substantial amount of work on the broader area of children’s spirituality and education, studies featuring rich descriptions of children’s spiritual experiences of books are few. For example, Barbara Kimes Myers and Michal Elaine Myers (1999) discuss their ideas about encouraging children’s spirituality through literature in the early childhood classroom, but this piece is limited to a small study within a kindergarten classroom. Ann Trousdale has written extensively on the ways narrative can speak to the spiritual growth of children (Trousdale, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010). Others have written theoretical pieces focusing on the general topic of elementary education, but focus only small sections on the ways in which literature might be used to engage children’s spirituality (Suhor, 1998). Furthermore, these publications speak to ways literary texts can treat children’s spirits, but some don’t
include as much description of children’s spiritual experiences of literature, or what it is like for a child to read a book in spiritual terms.

The research problem has thus emerged through attention to the literature about children’s reading of literary texts as well as work on children’s spirituality in the context of language and literacy activities. Based on my survey of research into children’s spirituality and education, there exists a fairly large gap in understanding what it is like for children to read a literary text in spiritual terms. One way to respond to this problem is to specify an aspect of elementary education—the language and literacy curriculum, and pursue further inquiry into developing a conceptual description of children’s reading of a text in spiritual terms as seen through the eyes of children themselves.

Rationale

This rationale is situated within the perspective that educators and parents can treat children’s spirituality in language and literacy activities, thereby providing young people with a more holistic education. A detailed description of how children’s spirituality is encouraged through literature can help educators, parents, administrators, and curriculum developers consider how they can create space for the spiritual dimension of the child to be encouraged in the context of reading, reflecting on, and talking about literary texts. Through this research, I suggested that children can read texts on multiple levels, including both intellectual and spiritual levels. These encounters with literature might operate inside the classroom and outside of it. Educators may be interested in findings related to children’s spirituality as generated by their responses to literary texts because of a growing desire within elementary education to treat the whole child, and not just the intellectual dimension. This study has produced a conceptual description of children’s lived experience of a literary work in spiritual terms, and a deeper
understanding of a phenomenon can potentially affect teachers’ classroom practices. Administrators and curriculum developers are also groups that would be interested in this study, due to the possibility of a richer understanding of children’s spiritual experiences of books within language and literacy activities. Parents also represent an important group to which the findings of this study would be relevant due to their interactions with children and the potential benefit a fuller understanding of children’s spirituality in the context of reading and talking about books might provide for their lives with their children.

**Purpose Statement**

In this study I described and interpreted children’s experiences of a literary text in spiritual terms using the phenomenological approach. I attempted to answer the questions: What is the nature of children’s spiritual engagement with a story? What does it mean for texts to nurture young readers’ spirits, or illuminate their reaching out for something beyond the immediate, present reality? Through the use of multiple methods in data collection, I listened to and observed children’s reflections of their lived experience of a book in spiritual terms.

The results of my study contributed to the development of a rich, multi-layered description of the meaning of children’s spiritual reading of a book. I defined a spiritual reading as a response that engages and reflects the reader’s inner life, and encourages his/her reaching out for something beyond the material realm. This can be understood in the context of Rebecca Nye’s notion of “relational consciousness”—a deep and heightened awareness of self, God, others, and/or the natural world (1998). Relational consciousness is an intense perception that is illuminated through a significant interaction within any of these four relationships. I expand further on Nye’s concept in later chapters.
In summary, I am interested in children’s reflections of their spiritual reading, that emerged through their oral responses, as well as through artwork they created to represent their ideas about the stories.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study in no way attempted to generalize children’s lived experiences of literature in spiritual terms. I did not aim to generate a theory of the process by which children talk about spirituality in response to their reading. Description is the intent of phenomenology, and while hermeneutic phenomenology does entail interpretation, my research was heavily focused on describing, rather than explaining. I used the interpretive method of phenomenology to “uncover hidden meanings” of the phenomenon (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 146). Additionally, this study only took place over several months with two fantasy novels. No qualitative study can cover every aspect of a phenomenon, but each study adds to the richness of the existing discourse about that particular topic, and this is what my own phenomenology accomplishes.
Chapter 2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I first contextualize the field of scholarly research of children’s spirituality historically before surveying literature that conceptualizes spirituality generally and children’s spirituality more specifically. This framework situates discussion of theoretical and empirical work focused on children’s spirituality within language and literacy activities. Based on the research purpose of my qualitative study, I was interested in work related to children’s lived experiences of a literary text in spiritual terms. How do children share their ideas about spirituality as they respond to a picturebook or a novel and what is the nature of this spiritual talk? One assumption undergirding the research purpose included the idea that spirituality within activities involving literature for children deserves scholarly attention. As a result, this literature review also focuses on work about spirituality in elementary education, and the ways educators engage children’s spirits within the classroom.

Beginning with the general and moving towards the specific, in this chapter, I explore theories and perspectives about children’s spirituality, contextualizing some conceptions of “spirituality” within the existing theoretical discourse. Discussing literature related to spirituality within education, I examine viewpoints about its role and importance for contemporary schooling in English speaking countries. I also review theoretical and empirical work focused on the potential for educators to cultivate children’s spirits within the classroom. Finally, I examine literature about children’s literature and children’s spirituality. In conclusion, I recognize the gap in scholarship of
rich descriptions of children’s spirituality generated by literature response and discussion, thereby justifying the direction of my own phenomenological research.

**Historical Developments in Children’s Spirituality Research**

Though the first study of children’s spirituality was published in 1892, it is only in the past few decades that the area of children’s spirituality as a scholarly enterprise has witnessed significant growth (Ratcliff, 2007). In his article on the past century of children’s spirituality research, Donald Ratcliff outlines four distinct phases of children’s spirituality research. These include a period (1892-1920) during which children’s religious experiences were explored and a period (1930-1960) when quantitative research of children and religion grew and researchers paid little attention to spiritual experience. The “Cognitive Period” (1960-1990) featured a connection between Piaget’s ideas about children’s development and children’s religious thinking while the period from 1990 to the present is firmly situated within attention to the spiritual experiences of children (2007, p. 226).

Empirical and theoretical studies have emerged out of many different countries, and this work has supported a stronger argument for the importance of children’s spirituality as a scholarly endeavor. In an article assessing the current strength of the research foundation into children’s spirituality, Ratcliff & Nye highlight two directions the research has taken—toward the notion of spirituality as innate within humans, and into the arena of religious development (2006, p. 473). My study is most concerned with this first sphere of children’s spirituality research, and as a result this review particularly engages with literature situated toward this direction. First, however, it is necessary to illuminate those key figures whose seminal works represent important contributions to the field of children’s spirituality.
Robert Coles

*The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990) by American Robert Coles, a now retired university professor from Harvard and child psychiatrist, represents a significant and groundbreaking study. Investigating children’s talk about God and spiritual matters, the book has influenced the field in several ways, though it was written for a general audience. With experience in both pediatrics and “psychoanalytically informed child psychiatry,” Coles is seen as paving the way for many to embark on research specifically into children’s spirituality (Coles, 1990, p. 22; Ratcliff & Nye, 2006, p. 475). Coles spoke with a large group of children, mostly from around the age of eight to the age of twelve, from different cultures, as he aimed to understand more about children’s spirituality within various groups. He particularly wanted to elicit talk about children’s religious beliefs as well as their personal ideas about God and spirituality. “I have wanted to learn from young people that exquisitely private sense of things that nurtures their spirituality” (Coles, 1990, p. 36-37). At the same time, Coles attempted to keep his own interpretations of spirituality from interfering with his study, and expressed that he was not looking for a clear-cut theory:

I do indeed try to make sense of such experience by examining the children’s remarks, their pictures, my response to those drawings and paintings. But I don’t move massively to the kind of formulations, the theoretical emphasis, that many social scientists and psychiatrists find so welcome. (1990, p. 39).

Coles’s research reinforced the idea that knowledge of a religious tradition does not necessarily point to spiritual awareness. His discussions with children illuminate the notion that people of all different religious orientations think in profound ways about God
(1990, p. 74-75). He also discovered that silence and activities such as creating artwork could play an important role in children expressing their ideas about spirituality.

Importantly, Coles strongly emphasizes that children reflect on and talk about spiritual and religious matters from a very young age. In other words, children can philosophize, question, and approach spiritual and religious ideas in very sophisticated ways. This finding is important as it encourages researchers to maintain openness to and awareness of children’s thinking about spiritual matters.

**David Hay & Rebecca Nye**

Another important touchstone within the historical context of children’s spirituality research is the work of British scholar, David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (1998), featuring theoretical and empirical work focused on children’s spirituality and its expressions. Hay approaches spirituality as a universal human capacity, something “biologically built into the human species” and not always linked to religion (1998, p. 63). He asserts that there exists “no area of human experience that is not potentially open to spiritual awareness” (p. 63). Such awareness is not limited to religious expression, and exists within every child. This notion of spirituality as affecting people’s survival is strengthened by research from social anthropology, psychology, animal behavior, and psychical studies (Hay, 1998, p. 24).

Hay presents three categories of spiritual sensitivity developed by him and Nye, who wrote several chapters in the book. These include awareness sensing, value sensing, and mystery sensing (1998, p. 65). Hay details this notion of “awareness” by highlighting four areas providing insight into spiritual awareness: the here-and-now, tuning, flow, and focusing (1998, p. 66-71). The here-and-now refers to a child’s intense being in the
present while the experience of tuning can unify the child with a point of focus, such as a piece of music or the natural world (Hay, 1998, p. 66-68). Hay highlights “flow” as a period of “concentrated attention” in which children can become lost in the moment, while “focusing” refers specifically to a physically “felt” sense of a situation (p. 68-69). In the context of mystery sensing, he discusses the importance of wonder and awe as well as the imagination. The third category, value sensing, refers to children’s conscience and moral sense, encompassing “delight and despair,” “ultimate goodness,” and “meaning” (p. 74-44). These three categories provided Hay and Nye with different ways of articulating children’s expressions of spirituality, and have benefited many researching in the field today.

In her chapters in *The Spirit of the Child*, Nye developed the idea of “relational consciousness” using grounded theory analysis in her study of children’s spirituality, and divides this “consciousness” into four kinds of awarenesses (Nye, 1998, p. 108). The term actually refers to a kind of “meta-consciousness” and includes “an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness, relative to other passages of conversation spoken by that child” as well as “conversation expressed in a context of how the child related to things, other people, him/herself, and God” (p. 109). Nye found that this raised awareness enabled the child to connect to self, others, the world, and God in deeper ways. She suggests that spiritual experiences are situated within one or more of these four connections, which I will discuss later in this literature review. Hay & Nye’s work represents a solid foundation for any qualitative study into children’s spirituality.
Tobin Hart

Professor, researcher, and therapist Tobin Hart conducted over one hundred interviews in order to explore the secret spiritual world of children in his book of the same name (2003). Like others in the field, Hart recognizes the gap in understanding about children’s spirituality, pointing out, for example, that one can find nothing on the topic in a child psychology textbook. Hart’s work illuminates the notion that children have an innate spirituality, and that this spirituality can be encouraged and nurtured by the adults surrounding them. He suggests three significant elements that can affect children’s spirituality: intuition, imagination, and play. Positing that the spiritual dimension of the individual is innate and fundamental, Hart argues that rather than physical beings having occasional temporary spiritual experiences, we are spiritual beings having physical experiences (2003). Hart conceptualizes spirituality as “the mystery that animates all things” and his argument is supported by a spiritual worldview that “all things, including us, are sacred and infused with or part of spirit” (2003, p. 7, 9). He argues that children express their spirituality in unique ways, and that adults can learn something from them: “…children perceive the world in a deeper way than we may have come to believe. Their inner senses may reveal a world that is vastly richer than we may have imagined” (2003, p. 131). Like Coles, Hay, & Nye, Hart distinguishes between religion and spirituality, pointing out that the seed of religion is “spirit,” but religion refers to standards, codes, and rules. Spirituality is more of a personal link to a Divine, supernatural source, in Hart’s conception. It is “the very personal and intimate expression of our relationship with the Divine” (2006, p. 173).
Hart posits that the spiritual aspect of the individual can reflect a connection to the Divine, and *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* describes many children’s spiritual experiences, illuminating expressions of their connection to a Divine source. Hart discusses five spiritual capacities including wisdom, wonder, wondering, the meeting between you and me (compassionate interconnection), and seeing the invisible. Jean Piaget’s research in children’s cognitive development posits that children experience distinct phases of development, and that, for example, from birth to age two, children cannot consider the perspective of others. Hart’s work challenges such assumptions about childhood development as explained by Jean Piaget, and suggests that children possess the capacity for compassion, even from a very young age (Piaget, 1977; Hart, 2006). Devoting a section to each capacity, he highlights how these emerge within the everyday activities of young children. Children can enter a special state of consciousness for wisdom, Hart suggests, and he refers to wisdom as how we know and what we know. Children also have the capacity for compassion, to reach out to those around them in need of emotional support, for example. Wonder is an awareness that enables children to note the Divine in the “small things” of life, while wondering happens when children are asking the large, serious questions about meaning in life such as “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?”

Hart’s study presents evidence suggesting that even very young children are capable of thinking about serious topics from a philosophical point of view. However, Hart, like others, does not believe that classrooms offer space for children to discuss and reflect on these serious topics. He highlights the notion that there are unseen realities surrounding us, and that children may tap into aspects of this reality: “in some way
children are tuning into these more subtle levels of reality as they see visions, hear
voices, feel energy, know things at a distance, and find insight and inspiration” (2003, p. 115). In each section, Hart offers vignettes and examples of these dimensions emerging in children. His book concludes by noting that “The secret spiritual world of children reminds us to listen for inner wisdom, find wonder in the day, see through the eye of the heart, live the big questions, and peer into the invisible” (2003, p. 271). He suggests that spiritual education involves interacting with children in order to “draw…out that spirituality” (2006, p. 171). Thus, Hart’s discussion of children’s spiritual worlds can speak to any research that requires the researcher to “interact” with children.

**Alister Hardy & Edward Robinson**

Alister Hardy, a zoologist, delivered a speech in 1965 explaining his theory that spirituality is a universal awareness that has evolved over time through natural selection. He proposed a biological basis for spirituality, explaining that the many religions are “the richly varied cultural responses of human beings to their natural spiritual awareness” (Hay with Nye, 1998, p. 23). As a result, Hardy’s work suggests that spirituality is a positive contributor to humans’ survival. He served as director of the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford, and his successor, Edward Robinson, published a book reinforcing Hardy’s conception of human spirituality as beneficial. This 1983 study, *The Original Vision*, posits that childhood contains a unique space in which religious and spiritual experiences occur, and that adults should strive to maintain this “original vision” even into adulthood.

Robinson analyzed descriptions of people’s religious experiences, many of which occurred during childhood. Robinson conceptualizes this “original vision of childhood”
as important for adults and children; he found that early childhood represented a special space for spiritual awareness through people’s accounts. He also discovered that some spiritual experiences during childhood had remained significant in people’s lives for as long as they could remember. As stated earlier, Piaget’s concept of children experiencing distinct developmental stages can be challenged. Both Robinson and Hart suggest that Piaget’s developmental model of children’s personality may not hold as much relevance in light of observations about children’s spiritual expressions. This is grounded in evidence indicating that children do have spiritual experiences from a very young age, also highlighted in Hart’s 2003 study. Therefore, the question of how these experiences manifest in different contexts, including within the situation of reading literature, is relevant.

**Brendan Hyde**

Australian Brendan Hyde has written and collaborated with other researchers about children’s spirituality, specifically from a phenomenological approach (2008a; 2008b). Hyde’s research focuses on the “life expressions” of children and he suggests that adults can specifically nurture spiritual awareness within young people. He frames his suggestions around a potential pedagogical model including cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions (2008a, p. 168-169). Hyde urges adults to consider that children’s expressions of spirituality are not always recognized, and that their experiences may be connected with ordinary, everyday activities (Adams, Hyde, & Woolly, 2008, p. 38). The issue of attending to children’s spirituality within education can be complicated due to the difficulty in measuring the spiritual dimension of childhood. However, “education and the growth of the whole person are synonymous” (Adams, Hyde, & Woolly, 2008, p.
In this regard, Hyde clearly sides with those in the field who argue for nurturing children’s spiritual lives within public educational spaces. Because Hyde uses the phenomenological approach in his studies of children’s spirituality, his work is especially relevant for an exploration into children’s lived experience of a text in spiritual terms.

**Sturla Sagberg**

Sturla Sagberg, a Norwegian researcher focusing on spiritual education in kindergartens, recognized the gap in empirical studies into children’s spirituality research (2008). Using a case study approach, Sagberg discusses conception of the spiritual within early childhood education, perceiving it as both an ability to transcend the immediate realm as well as a moral sense of being human. Sagberg’s research illuminated that very young children “transcend time and space in search for meaning” within “an intentional framework for experience and expression” (p. 360). Additionally, Sagberg suggests that the children in this case study felt “empowered by symbols of a spiritual world” (p. 360). Like others, Sagberg recognizes that spirituality is not explicitly considered within public education in his country, employing hermeneutical approaches to spirituality within the context of Norwegian education. These ideas can be applied in other countries where the attitudes towards spirituality within education reflect similar patterns.

**Current Status of the Field**

Following a historical overview of the field of children’s spirituality, it is helpful to underscore other developments in the past decade that point to the topic’s growth in scholarly significance. *The International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* represents the central journal in the field, established in 1996. Though the journal engages with a multiplicity of topics, Ratcliff and Nye point out that the majority of the articles deal with
education mostly in the United Kingdom (2006, p. 476). In addition to a journal, The First International Conference on Children’s Spirituality took place in 2000 in Chichester, England. This conference has continued every year, and also helped produce the triennial North American conference on Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives conference in 2003. The ChildSpirit Institute has hosted three North American Conferences on Children’s Spirituality in Atlanta, Georgia in 2002, in Pacific Grove, California in 2004, and in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2007. As a result, these conferences and the publication of a journal have contributed to a burgeoning scholarly interest in children’s spirituality, creating a space for the exchange of ideas and research for those working in or interested in the area.

By situating the field of children’s spirituality historically in relation to the work of many of the leading figures and voices researching this topic, I now move into a deeper discussion of conceptions of the spiritual, using the seminal works of children’s spirituality research as a springboard.

Describing the ‘Spiritual’

Spirituality as Universal Human Attribute

Coles, Hay, Nye, Hyde, and Hart, among others, perceive spirituality as a universal human attribute, a fundamental aspect of existence (1990; 1998; 2008a; 2003). In other words, spirituality is an “innate human trait,” playing an important and beneficial role in people’s lives and is not limited to one religious tradition (Hyde, 2008a, p.23, 29). Hardy concluded that “there is a form of awareness, different from and transcending everyday awareness, which is potentially present in all human beings and which has a positive function in enabling individuals to survive in their natural environment” (Hay, 1998, p. 22). Theorizing about spirituality and education, Thomas Groome perceives
spirituality as a “human desire” (1998, p. 329). Furthermore, through exploring children’s lived experiences of spirituality, Hyde discovered that some spiritual experiences are related to mundane matters (Hyde, 2008a, p. 38).

**Spirituality as Holistic**

Researchers in children’s spirituality often draw attention to the idea that spirituality encompasses more than just one aspect of the individual. Sandra Schneiders posits that “spirituality is a project of life-integration which means that it is holistic, involving body and spirit, emotions and thought, activity and passivity, social and individual aspects of life” (2003, p. 167). Consequently, the spiritual expression of the child can operate in the context of everyday activities and events. The idea of life-integration connects with Hyde’s description of spirituality as “a movement toward Ultimate Unity,” illuminating the idea of connectedness (Hyde, 2008a, p. 118). Hyde perceives this as communing with the “Other” and engaging in “higher levels of consciousness” (2008a, p. 118). Aline Wolf understands spirituality as a “lifeforce” in the universe and suggests that it is “inherent in every culture” (1996, p. 7). She stresses the benefit of attending to the physical, psychical, and spiritual dimensions of the person—body, soul, and spirit.

**Dimensions of Spiritual Sensitivity in Children**

Mentioned earlier, Hay with Nye’s The Spirit of the Child (1998) provides in-depth exploration of some dimensions of spirituality sensitivity in children. These dimensions include awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing (p. 65). Awareness sensing refers to a child’s “being aware of one’s awareness” (p. 65). It can feature an intense engagement within a specific activity. Hyde discusses this engagement in his study with Australian children, suggesting that it can operate through reading a
book (2008a, p. 84). Children can be wholly involved in an activity, reflecting a link with something outside themselves, accessible through their complete being in that moment. Hay and Nye use “tuning” to refer to another aspect of this awareness, and this can operate through listening to music or participating in a family event (1998, p. 68).

Mystery sensing alludes to immersion in wonder or awe, and also refers to the role of the imagination in reflecting on the mysteries of life (Hay with Nye, 1998, p. 71-72).

Children’s play highlights the important role of the imagination in their everyday lives. Hay and Nye divide “value sensing” into delight and despair, ultimate goodness, and meaning. It is through moments of delight and despair that children communicate what is valuable, and this engages with children’s ideas about morality as well (Hay with Nye, 1998, p. 74).

Hay and Nye also suggest that children believe in the existence of an “ultimate goodness,” the idea that there is a structure in which people can trust, or criteria one can call on for making moral decisions. There is an order to the way things should be in the world, and the authors point out that even very young children are aware of this. Finally, value sensing encompasses children’s search for meaning and the asking of questions related to identity and belonging (Hay with Nye, 1998, p. 75-77).

Nye’s case study with participating children in two British primary schools reflects her attempt to represent children’s voices, and highlights the individuality and uniqueness of each child’s spirituality. She discovered that the children’s spirituality was tied to their individuality, and the core concept she developed is the idea of “relational consciousness” (1998, p. 109). This awareness, or “mental activity,” was pointed out as the central feature of children’s spirituality and Nye summarizes it as “an unusual level of
consciousness or perceptiveness, relative to other passages of conversation spoken by that child” and “conversation expressed in a context of how the child related to things, other people, him/herself, and God” (p. 109). This second understanding of relational consciousness reveals the idea that there are four relationships within which spirituality manifests. These include connection to self, others, the natural world, and the Divine.

**Connection with Self**

One of the contexts in which Nye’s core concept of “relational consciousness” manifested is the “child-self consciousness.” This awareness surfaced through the children’s engagement with their own identity and thoughts. Nye suggests that this consciousness can frame children’s expressions of spirituality as she found this true through listening to children’s discussion about self-consciousness in death and their wonder about their place in the world (1998, p. 117). Maintaining a strong sense of connection to self can encourage children’s awareness of their desires, concerns, and motivations. The meaningful questions associated with this relationship include “Who am I?” and “What is my contribution to this world in which I find myself?” or in Trousdale’s words, “Where do I fit in?” (2004a). Answering these questions necessarily involves an inward journey. Writing about children’s spirituality and children, Wolf asserts that time alone is important for children to develop a strong sense of self so that they can “act from their authentic center” (1996, p. 97). Wolf presents potential activities in the classroom for facilitating alone time for children including “silence games” and “quiet corners” (p. 74). A confident sense of identity can relate to that ability to reach out to others in selfless and compassionate ways. In this sense, then, the connection to self overlaps with another relationship—connection to others.
Connection with Others

Nye emphasizes the importance of children’s social worlds, discovering that references to children’s relationships with others figured heavily in their spiritual discourse. Eugene Roehlkepartain points out that much research has ignored the variety of factors that affect a person’s spirituality, and work has instead emphasized the individualistic nature of the spiritual quest (2004, p. 124). However, other research and developing concepts about spirituality construct it as “a communal experience and phenomenon…embedded in relationships and experiences, with family as well as peers and adults in neighborhood, schools, congregations, and other settings” (Roehlkepartain, 2004, p. 124). John Hull perceives spirituality as frequently manifesting through the individual’s interactions with others (1984). Hart states: “Spirituality is often lived out at the intersection of our lives—at the meeting between you and me. It is the quality of these human encounters that is the basis of a relational spirituality” (2006, p. 172). Some people discuss their spiritual lives in relation to their place within a community of others also on similar spiritual journeys. Hart develops his idea of relational spirituality further: “Relational spirituality is about communion—a profound sense of interconnection with the cosmos; connection—a sense of intimacy with someone or something; community—a sense of belonging to a group; and compassion—the drive to help others” (2006, p. 174). In her book on spirituality and education, Rachael Kessler suggests that students that “thrive” have experienced “deep connection” with others (2000, p. 19).

Connection with the Natural World

Another aspect of children’s spirituality includes their sense of connection with the earth. Children’s relationship with the natural world can illuminate and even
encourage their spirituality. Some children’s experiences in the outdoors are described as spiritual in nature in that they achieve a kind of unity with the earth, and can experience moments of transcendence (Trousdale, 2007, 2009). A child’s connection with the natural world can feature a deep sense of wonder, awe, and appreciation for the beauty of the earth in which we live (Trousdale, 2009). This relationship, then, in many ways, overlaps with and can affect connections with self, others, and the Divine. This echoes Wolf’s idea that everything is connected (1996, p. 90). In the context of spirituality and education, Wolf stresses the importance of teaching children that the earth has a “spiritual presence” in that the earth reflects the hand of a Creator (p. 101).

**Connection with the Divine**

Some individuals perceive their spiritual lives as intimately tied to their belief in or their awareness of some kind of divine or supernatural source. Kessler recognizes the importance of making space for young adults to explore discussion about their spirituality and the Divine:

For some students, religious experience or a sense of union with God or other representations of a higher power are indeed the most important avenue of spiritual development…To exclude such an important part of students’ lives from discourse in a diverse, authentic classroom community is simply unnecessary.

(2000, p. 33)

Kessler speaks from the perspective of an educator, encouraging others who work with children in the classroom or outside of it, to remain aware that some young people may find it difficult to consider their spiritual lives apart from their connection to a higher source or power. It is important to realize, however, that children’s spirituality expressed
in the context of talk about God or a higher power transpires with children of all faiths
and none (Coles, 1990). As a context for children’s spirituality, connection with the
Divine can manifest through a child’s articulation of his/her nearness or distance from a
supernatural, all-powerful source.

Expressions of spirituality are often situated within connectedness to (and
awareness of) the self, others, the natural world, and the Divine. As a result, spiritual
experience, or the awareness of a deep connection with something outside of the self, can
emerge through any of these four relationships.

The Importance of Spirituality

After reviewing a number of works on conceptions of spirituality, noting
similarities as well as differences, it is clear that many regard this aspect of life as
important, especially for children (Coles, 1990; Groome, 1998; Hart, 2003; Hay with
Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008a, 2008b; Myers, 1997; Purpel, 1989; Schlarb, 2007; Trousdale,
2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). Literature about spirituality from a variety of fields including
education, history, and psychology indicates that the spiritual dimension of the individual
is something to which those working with children should pay attention. Furthermore,
some research points to the positive effects of spirituality. Hay’s research revealed links
between “spiritual awareness and ethical behavior” (1998, p. 29). He discovered that the
results of questioning hundreds of people indicate “that the initial effect of their
experience is to make them look beyond themselves. They have an increased desire to
care for those closest to them, to take issues of social justice more seriously and to be
concerned about the total environment” (Hay, p. 29).

He also references some studies illuminating spirituality’s effects on people:
“finding meaning in life, becoming concerned for a just society, losing racial prejudice,
becoming less materialistic” (Hay, 1998, p. 29). Some practicing psychiatric research are beginning to see qualitative research engage with questions about connections between children’s spirituality and their emotional and physical health (Houskamp, Fisher, & Stuber, 2004). Craig Schlarb presented the results of a qualitative study using the heuristic approach in order to explore the meaning of childhood peak experiences for adult participants (2007). His findings revealed that meaningful moments for children that are not assimilated into their identity could have negative effects (Schlarb, 2007).

**Distinguishing Between Spirituality & Religion**

Many of the previously mentioned figures researching children’s spirituality distinguish between spirituality and religion. For example, Hart articulates the differences between spirituality and religion clearly (2003; 2006). While he perceives religion as “an institutionalized approach to spiritual growth formed around doctrines, rituals, and standards of behavior…Spirituality is the very personal and intimate expression of our relationship with the Divine” (2006, p. 173). The ways this connection manifests can operate in contexts other than the physical structure of the church. In other words, spirituality is more expansive than religion, fluid and holistic, and concerned with a deep inner connectedness (Priestly, 2005, p. 211-212). Hart argues that “children’s spirituality may exist apart from adult rational and linguistic conceptions and from knowledge about a religion” (2006, p. 163).

Some people find it difficult to discuss the “spiritual” without referring to religion. However, Hay posits that human spirituality is older and broader than religious traditions, and that as an “essential human trait,” spirituality can manifest outside of religion (1998, p. 23-24). Though spiritual expression can operate within religious traditions, it is not necessary for the existence of spiritual experience (Hay with Nye,
Hay & Nye contrast spirituality and religion by discussing differences in the style of language used. While some discuss religion with vocabulary such as theology, dogma, and rules, others speak of spirituality as warm, all-encompassing, and liberating (Hay with Nye, 1998).

Jacqueline Watson explores different understandings of spirituality versus definitions in her study of people’s descriptions of their conceptions of spirituality (2000). She discovered that the notion of something outside of the self figured heavily in participants’ discussions about spirituality, and even atheists and agnostics highlighted this idea of something beyond in their understanding of spirituality (p. 94). Another concept central to many participants’ understanding of spirituality included an “inner reality” (Watson, p. 95). “For some, both religious and non-religious, the ‘inner’ was understood as the real or true self…” (Watson, p. 95). Additionally, Schneiders distinguishes between religious and secular spiritualities in her article grappling with the tension between the two (2003). She argues that there is no “generic spirituality” but presents a general definition that can then be applied to specific forms of spirituality, such as Christian or Buddhist spirituality (2003, p. 167). Schneiders conceptualizes the spiritual as an active transcending of the self through assimilating various parts of one’s identity and aiming for an “ultimate value one perceives” (p. 166). It is helpful if researchers recognize that the spiritual dimension of life can manifest in a multiplicity of ways, and that there are key differences between religion and spirituality.

**Spirituality and Education**

Some educators and researchers are interested in the intersections of spirituality and education, raising the question of whether curriculum can accommodate the spirit of the child (Groome, 1998; Huebner, 1993; Kessler, 2000; Myers & Myers, 1999;
Schoonmaker, 2009). Frances Schoonmaker argued that the classroom is a spiritual space, harboring the potential for teachers to nurture children’s spirituality within routine events (2009). She agrees with Dwayne Huebner’s ideas that the spiritual is already woven into educational curriculum, but the issue is that educators are ignoring it within classroom activities (Huebner, 1985a). Schoonmaker states: “The challenge for professionals who work with children and youth is to teach ourselves to see the spirituality inherent in the acts of learning, in coming to know, and in being in the classroom…” (2009, p. 2717). Literature on spirituality and education reveals work by several figures worth mentioning in the context of children’s spirituality and language and literacy activities.

**Dwayne Huebner**

Dwayne Huebner, an American, published frequently on spirituality and education between the 1950s and the 1990s. His work covers a broad area within the field of education and religion, and is respected by those working to see spirituality cultivated within education. Additionally, some have described him as “one of the most important minds the field of curriculum has known” (Pinar, Introduction, 1999, p. xxiv). Huebner emphasized the important function of language within discussion of spirituality and the curriculum, and perceived teaching specifically as a vocation, a kind of religious call. He discusses the important relationship between spirituality and education, suggesting that all aspects of life are infused with a spiritual dimension (1985a). He argues that education should strive to help the learner on the journey of the soul. Rather than suggest that educators and curriculum writers should add something spiritual or moral to the curriculum, Huebner states, “Everything that is done in schools, and in preparation for
school activity, is already infused with the spiritual” (1985a, p. 414). This perspective, then, requires a specific response from the teacher—the aim is to nurture what is already taking place, rather than striving to create a “spiritual experience” for the students in a classroom. Huebner’s ideas about spirituality within education encourage educators and researchers to think about how language and literacy activities already provide space for children to express their spiritual selves.

**James Moffett**

Author of *The Universal Schoolhouse* (1994), James Moffett introduces thought-provoking ideas about spirituality and education in the United States, discussing what he thinks is the right kind of reform for public education. Arguing for the “decommercialization” of public education, Moffett discusses spirituality as “a way of being in the world” and “way of perceiving reality” (1994, p. 23). Suggesting that government should move out of the way of school reform, he argues that “questions about the nature of the world and the purpose of life should undergird education just as they underlie our routine activities (p. 31). Perceiving one problem with public education as the issue of “alienation,” he stresses the importance of connection with others, but also suggests that the learner should be empowered to make his/her own choices. Moffett lauds the value of the arts within education, and states that “the arts develop the whole person, precisely because they deal at once with correlated forms of feeling, thought, and nature” (p. 77-78). Suggesting that public education has largely turned into a business, Moffett also identifies the problem of schools’ methods of assessments: standardized tests. Schools are teaching students in order to take tests, and Moffett highlights multiple problems with this approach to education. If the spirituality of young people is to be
nurtured within education, this perspective must be re-worked and re-aligned. Moffett’s theoretical work highlights important areas of revision for those wishing to see spirituality play a larger role within classroom practices.

**Rachael Kessler**

Though Rachael Kessler uses the term, soul, in her book, *The Soul of Education* (2000), she treats the concept in a similar way to those who discuss spirit and spirituality in education. Kessler argues for the nurturing of the soul within education and ties this to the inner life, a desire for something more that exists within young people. Though a theoretical work, her book provides many techniques and strategies educators can apply in their classrooms in the context of nurturing the spirits of their students. Some of these activities include personal storytelling, cloud watching, drawing our dreams, and deep listening. Schlarb’s research also suggests that children experience significant moments most often in natural settings (2007). In her book, Kessler highlights the importance of connections with one another, the natural world, and a higher power. This idea reinforces the notion that spirituality can strengthen connectedness among people, the world, and the Divine.

**Parker Palmer**

American Parker Palmer has written for years on spirituality and education, particularly drawing attention to the importance of living a holistic life. In his books, he argues against compartmentalizing these significant aspects of life. In other words, the spirit is an important dimension of human existence, and this awareness can be carried over into educational and public spaces. Palmer often discusses the soul, developing phrases such as “soul spaces,” “inner teacher,” and “soul talk” (2004). *A Hidden*
Wholeness particularly highlights specific ways people can develop safe places to communicate and work towards living an undivided life (2004). Palmer devotes a substantial part of his text to outlining principles for facilitating open, safe, and honest discussion in order that individuals can engage in soul talk—talk that reflects the honest, open feelings of a person. Palmer’s work is well-known within education, especially in relation to the movement encouraging spirituality within educational spaces. He sides with those who believe that teachers should attend to their own spirituality if they want to see it flourish within their students. Palmer’s work is important in that it supports further research into how spirituality might operate within public educational spaces.

The Spiritual Dimension: Missing from Education

This work in spirituality and education illuminates a gap in research surrounding the topic, and by extension, a dearth in understanding about how children’s spirituality emerges within different contexts. In addition to America, other countries are considering the topic of spirituality within public education. For example, British education, since 1944, features a “legal requirement for schools to develop the spiritual aspect of children’s lives” and therefore, educators must engage with a clear concept of spirituality (McCreery, 1994, p. 93). Though the United Stated does not have the same legal requirement as the United Kingdom, many educators and administrators sense a need to attend to the spiritual dimension of the child in the classroom (Groome, 1998; Myers & Myers, 1997). Some have expressed the concern that education could be missing a crucial dimension if children’s spirits are not nurtured in schools. In Young Children and Spirituality, Barbara Kimes Myers asserts the importance of a more complete approach to child development:
My concern is the whole child. To suggest that spirituality is not an appropriate topic for public discourse about children seems shortsighted, particularly since the richness of such conversation (especially when a variety of cultural voices are engaged) often provides a sense of hopefulness for our future. (2007, p. 55)

Even without a legal mandate, American educators might consider how to facilitate this “sense of hopefulness for our future” that spirituality can encourage.

Though some recognize the importance of flexibility in definitions of spirituality, Elaine McCreery argues for a clear articulation of spirituality in the context of specific research purposes (1994). Schoonmaker highlights two conceptions that would each lend itself to a different approach, including groups “who see spirituality as inherent part of being a human of any age, and those who see it as something that children possess in nascent form but that needs to be taught or built through adult intervention” (2009, p. 2715). Nurturing spirituality within activities for the child, then, might manifest differently based on which of these two conceptions the educator adopts. Others argue for attention to the connection between teachers’ personal spiritual practices and conceptions of spirituality and their awareness of the role of the spiritual in classroom spaces (Huebner, 1985a, 1985b, 1987; Schoonmaker 2009; Wolf, 1996).

**Teachers & Spirituality**

Like Huebner, Schoonmaker, and Wolf, Ping Ho Wong, a Chinese scholar, also perceives the link between teachers’ spirituality and their nurturing of children’s spiritual development (Huebner, 1985a; Schoonmaker, 2009; Wolf, 1996; Wong, 2006). Wong suggests that “…the regular engagement in spiritual practices will enhance one’s spirituality as an attribute of one’s inner being” (2006, p. 83). Wong believes that teachers must attend to their own spirituality if they are to encourage the spiritual
dimension of their students (Wong, 2006). As Marge Scherer and Wong have argued, children’s spiritual expressions may already operate in the classroom, without educators explicitly drawing that out (1999; 2006). However, teachers can aim to cultivate that spiritual expression and incorporate classroom practices that encourage that spirituality. In light of determining whether educators’ personal spirituality is important for their teaching, one could ask the question, would an educator teach history if he/she had no interest or experience with the subject?

In a theoretical piece, Daniel Hade (2002) explores how children’s literature might speak to readers during difficult times. He writes out of a post-9/11 context, a time during which many of his student teachers faced discouragement due to the recent tragedy in the U.S. Additionally, Hade’s students felt overwhelmed and burdened by the standardized testing requirements of the state, which limited the time they had in the classroom to help their students play with books. Hade argues that poetry and stories can provide significant meaning for readers, referencing four paths of human experience that these texts can engage. These include the positive, negative, creative, and transformative path. However, some texts that explore these paths, according to Hade, are sometimes kept from young readers. Teachers would often rather stick with simple stories, rather than those books that might bring up complex and painful subjects. Hade posits that such texts should be made available to children, for they hold great potential for speaking to children’s spirits and encouraging a search for meaning in life.

**Children’s Literature & Spirituality**

**Theoretical & Empirical Studies on Children’s Literature & Spirituality**

After considering perspectives on children’s spirituality in relation to educational activities more broadly, it is necessary to examine works that focus specifically on links
between language and literacy activities and children’s spirituality. Investigating children’s literature and spirituality requires openness to children’s responses as well as an awareness of the various conceptions of spirituality existing within varying social and cultural contexts. The small number of studies that treat children’s spirituality and the language arts strengthens the case for further research into the topic. However, some empirical research on children’s spirituality and literature exists. These studies develop various conceptions of spirituality and illuminate the potential spiritual dimensions of texts (Myers & Myers, 1999; Trousdale, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b).

The reader-response approach represents one school of thought among those researching children’s spirituality and children’s literature (Pike, 2000, 2002; Trousdale, 2005a, 2005b, 2006). This way of viewing the reading experience engages with three factors: the reader, the text, and the transaction between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Louise Rosenblatt’s ideas about reader-response theory bring this transaction between the reader and text to the forefront. Rather than focus explicitly on text or on the reader, this theorist examines both through investigation of the actual meeting of book and individual.

Myers & Myers’ “Engaging Children’s Spirit and Spirituality through Literature” advocates treating children’s spirits through literature, specifically within an exploration in an early childhood classroom (1999). Myers and Myers discuss the activities of one kindergarten teacher who used literature to nurture her students’ spirituality. The authors conceptualize spirituality as “a quality of being fully human that ignites our potential to transcend the conditions of our experience” (1999, p. 1). The second author, Michael, is the teacher of focus, and she intentionally listened to the children’s responses as they
heard stories read aloud. In this way, she reflected an awareness that their spirituality might emerge through their responses. Using the book, *The Rainbow Fish* by Marcus Pfister, Michal included group readings, one on one readings, and the presentation of an audio version of the story. The children also developed a play of the story, creating costumes, returning to the book, and discussing plans with the other children and teacher. These activities developed out of the children’s initial experience with the story, and Michal remained flexible as this process emerged. The result is that the children learned to work together and made connections with other significant events, such as the recent death of the class fish. Myers & Myers affirm that such practices can be helpful for children as they develop and learn to care for those around them. Michal shared literature with the children that encouraged a spirituality of caring and focused on concerns and situations the children were facing. Myers & Myers limit their work to the kindergarten classroom but show that literature is an important tool for discussing meaningful matters with children, and this clearly has implications for any research with young readers and literature.

Mark Pike’s longitudinal study on spirituality and poetry illuminated how spirituality, morality, and poetry are intertwined due to the notion that talking about poetry can provide opportunity for discussion about spirituality (2000). Pike remarks that the close attention to language required in order to discuss poetry mirrors the kind of process some people use in order to articulate their spirituality. This is due to the fact that discussion about the spiritual can feature an intense introspection of one’s own “spirit” or “soul.” Pike situates reader-response pedagogy as a phenomenological perspective, and stresses its importance within classroom practices.
Using a case study approach, Pike talked to six students about different poems over three years, from age thirteen to age sixteen, and discovered that the students often made links to spiritual and moral issues through their talk about the poetry. The students’ responses to the poems were acquired through annotation and journal writing. Pike discovered that the students’ responses to poems by William Blake, for example, elicited “moral and spiritual questions about the nature of God, human nature, poverty and oppression” (2000, p. 183). Students’ journal entries reflected spiritual and moral insight through prolonged engagement with and reflection on the poems. Furthermore, the gaps left in the poems for the readers to fill resulted in the offering of moral and spiritual ideas about the texts. The reference to Wolfgang Iser’s notion of gaps reinforces the importance of providing readers with challenging texts that leave room for in-depth exploration (Iser, 1978). Pike also found that some students’ personal responses reflected their spiritual development in that in responding to a poem, “Daily London Recipe”, by Steve Turner, one student, Anne, “recognized the need for self-respect and creativity…in order to experience non-material well-being” (2000, p. 187). Pike concluded that the reader-response approach contributed in helping the students “engage personally with poems and to read themselves as spiritual and moral agents” (2000, p. 182).

In a theoretical piece, Pike discussed the idea that reading can particularly help students to consider their existence and their “being” in the world (2004). He draws on Heidegger and reader-response theory to consider how reading is a “spiritual gift” and opens up opportunity for children to ponder profound questions of meaning. Pike concludes his article by suggesting, “If we can do some of the prompting by providing
young readers with spiritually significant texts and teaching them how to be receptive we will be facilitating their spiritual as well as their literary education” (2004, p. 161).

Schoonmaker from Teachers College at Columbia University conducted a phenomenological study with her doctoral students, “‘God Doesn’t Wear a Baseball Cap’—Exploring Children’s Spiritual Experience Through Picture Books” (2003). In “Only Those Who See Take Off Their Shoes: Seeing the Classroom as a Spiritual Space” she discusses the results of this study (2009). The researchers spoke with around thirty children between the ages of three and eleven. The boys and girls were mostly between the ages of four and six, and represented various religious traditions. The one on one interviews took place in the children’s homes, the researchers’ homes, school, and Sunday school. As the researchers spoke with the children about different books, their initial conclusions were that the children did not bring up the spiritual aspects of the texts. However, after going over the transcripts, the realized that they had often failed to truly listen to the children, and by so doing, they had missed significant moments of spirituality.

More often than not, we were researchers who approached our study from an adult research paradigm, becoming more concerned about our questions than those of the children, being so afraid that we would fail to find any spiritual moments that we blundered over and past them. (2009, p. 2727)

The team discovered that children expressed their spirituality through a simple being in the experience of the story. In this way, Schoonmaker and her team found that children’s literature can encourage children to express their spirituality. They concluded their study by recognizing that researchers must make a concerted effort to listen to the children in
“ways that we are not accustomed to listening and it requires that we be with them sometimes in silence” (2009, p. 2728). Drawing on reader-response theory, Schoonmaker states that the meaning the children make in the story is what researchers must attend to, and not the meaning we, the adult readers, necessarily bring to the reading experience. Schoonmaker suggests that researchers must continue investigation in order to develop conclusions about classroom practice and theories about children’s spirituality and literature.

Trousdale’s research focuses specifically on the intersections between children’s spirituality and literary texts for young readers. Trousdale contributed an important essay in the 1400 page handbook, *The International Handbook on the Religious, Moral, and Spiritual Dimensions in Education* (2006), and emphasizes the importance of narrative and storytelling in the human experience. She discusses the different constructions of the implied child reader historically, and emphasizes the benefits of the reader-response approach when thinking about children’s literature and spirituality. After discussing some ways spirituality manifests in children, Trousdale discusses reader-response theorists, such as Rosenblatt and Iser, and proposes that readers can bring their own spiritual identities into the book and reader equation. In other words, young readers can respond to texts on a spiritual level, and their reading can impact their spirituality. She calls attention to the importance of social interaction for readers, and affirms that “Literature circles” are a means for this space for talk to develop (Trousdale, 2006). Literature circles provide children with an informal space to talk about the reading, raise questions, and encourage further thinking. Along with literature circles, Aidan Chambers’ “Tell Me” method of talking about literature is also relevant (1996). In his classic text, *Tell Me*, Chambers
encourages teachers to use such prompts with children in book discussion: Tell me why you liked the story. Tell me why disliked the story (1996). The “Tell Me” frame encourages honest response, and is less threatening than the question, “Why did you dislike the story?”

In “And What Do The Children Say?” Children’s Responses to Books about Spiritual Matters,” Trousdale employed a multiple case study design to talk to children about their response to specific books through one on one interviews (2005a). Using open-ended questions, Trousdale read stories with the participants, occasionally stopping at different points to ask questions. She also asked each child to retell the story, as her earlier research pointed to the idea “that the retelling of a story often provides insights about children’s interpretations of stories that interview questions do not discover” (2005a, p. 25). Asking the participants to share their idea of a lesson in the story is another method Trousdale suggests can illuminate what children perceive as the main point. In one story, though adult readers may find the relationship between one character and God fairly explicit, the children in Trousdale’s study did not bring up the allusion. When she incorporated questions about the children’s perceptions of God after the reading concluded, Trousdale discovered that their ideas were influenced to different degrees by their religious traditions or the text, or both. The study reflected that different children draw various meanings from a text, interpreting the story on both literal and symbolic levels. Like Schoonmaker, Trousdale concluded that adults should listen to children in order to find out what they think about spiritual matters. Adults should be wary, however, of expecting children to understand the same spiritual meaning they draw from the text.
Trousdale, Bach, and Willis’s work on the choral reading of poetry with sixth grade children highlights how reading poetry can engage children’s spirituality (2010). The authors had expected that the content of the poems would work primarily to nurture readers’ spirits, but what they discovered was that the activity of preparing the choral reading stirred student’s spirituality. Their analysis illuminated four themes: “a sense of freedom in interpretation; the importance of physicality in the act of interpretation; a sense of friendship…; and the opportunity to express their ‘feelings’” (2010, p. 321).

Exploring how children’s spirituality is nurtured as they read and study poetry illuminates the potential for engaging the spirit of readers as they experience literary texts.

Pedagogical Implications

Research into children’s literature and spirituality can add to our understanding of the phenomenon, but can this knowledge transfer to actual classroom practice? Trousdale and Pike both attempt to move into application of these ideas by speaking to issues of pedagogy, and suggest that valuing the reader’s responses to the text provides a way for children’s spirituality to emerge safely. For example, Trousdale discovered in her case study of children of seven and eight years old “that their perceptions of God were expanded through reading the text” (2004a, p. 183). She suggests two exercises in which children can talk about texts: an adaptation of Jerome Berryman’s Godly Play and literature circles. Berryman’s *Godly Play* presents a structure for children to communicate their ideas about religious and spiritual concepts (1991). This approach rests on the assumption that imagination, play, and creativity are significant. Though the term of Berryman’s approach alludes to a religious exercise, the structure of the activity can be transferred to any setting.
Since some children’s ideas may only emerge as they live through and play with the text, Berryman’s Godly Play is beneficial. Godly Play includes a series of wonderings from the adult facilitator such as, “I wonder where you are in the story? I wonder what part of the story is about you?” Berryman’s strategies are slightly different than other discussion frameworks, such as Chambers’ *Tell Me* framework in that Godly Play strategies encourage readers to situate themselves in the middle of the story (Chambers, 1996). Literature circles represent another obvious choice for cultivating children’s spirituality as they respond to stories. Literature circles feature different methods, and one approach provides children with specific roles to play in the discussion, delegating more responsibility to young readers. Through these activities, adults can encourage children’s spirituality within safe and flexible environments. Educators and researchers would benefit from studies such as Trousdale’s and Pike’s due to their practical implications for facilitating space where children’s spiritual identities can be nurtured. In addition to reviewing qualitative research with children focused on responding to literature and spirituality, I considered work exploring textual analyses of the spiritual dimensions of children’s literature.

*Textual Analyses of Spirituality in Stories*

including *Emily of New Moon* (1923), *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), and *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977). L’Engle discusses substantial passages from many texts to illustrate how spiritual values are woven into stories for children, often drawing from her own reading experiences of these treasured books. Love, courage, appreciation for the beauty of the natural world, and the wonder of spiritual awareness are all topics she illuminates between the pages of familiar narratives. Many of the books explored are not explicitly religious, reflecting that the strict division between the sacred and the secular in society is not always helpful. L’Engle’s work is one of the only book-length enquiries into the topic. She admits she might have used many texts for her study, but with a limited space, only few could be included in her book with Brooks of one hundred and thirty-five pages.

James P. Higgins’ *Beyond Words: Mystical Fancy in Children’s Literature* charts how the best literature speaks to children’s spirits and engages the inner child (1970). He discusses a variety of texts including those by Tolkien, Lewis, Macdonald, as well as fairy tales and Greek myths. Suggesting that such stories invite the existence of the spiritual realm, Higgins argues that these narratives encourage the child to listen to her heart and to recognize the value of the emotions. Indeed, many works of children’s literature engage with realities that readers find difficult to fully understand.

Trousdale’s “Intersections of spirituality, religion and gender in children’s literature discusses some examples of texts illuminating a spiritual geography, particularly in terms of their relationship with religion and gender (2005b). Interested in how contemporary children’s literature engages the intersections of spirituality, religion, and gender, Trousdale developed three categories of texts she identified. The include books featuring spiritual dimensions, books focused on a conservative religious
perspective, and books engaging a liberal religious perspective. Trousdale concludes her article with useful discussion questions for those considering how a text engages with spirituality, religion, and gender.

Academics may fill this gap in the future through more critical engagement with the spiritual dimensions of children’s literature, including both realistic and fantasy texts. At the time, however, those working in the area of children’s literature and spirituality must draw on the available resources and continue to contribute their own conclusions about texts and spirituality based on rigorous and detailed readings from a variety of theoretical perspectives. There is a tension that must be recognized between the formalist, critical approach to a book’s spiritual aspects and the reader’s responses to a book, resulting in the creation of a unique spirituality developed through the transaction of reader and book. In some cases, a researcher may excavate the surface of a text, discovering multiple spiritual dimensions. However, adults must be careful to not impose the awareness of these spiritual aspects on the young reader. Nevertheless, rich, critical readings on the adult’s part can result in the discovery of significant spiritual spaces in the text (Posey, 2003). Though there are few books and articles related to the relationship between children’s literature and spirituality specifically, a growing interest in the topic will hopefully fuel further scholarship.

**Conclusion**

Though educators and researchers are actively pursuing further inquiry into children and spirituality, the literature reveals space for further rich descriptions of children, aged ten and eleven, engaging in spiritual discourse through their discussion of literary texts, including picturebooks and novels. Though some studies feature children talking about spirituality in the context of one on one interviews and groups, there
remains a need for further studies in which children describe their experience of a literary text in spiritual terms.
Chapter 3.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter contains the outline of the methodological orientation for this study employing the phenomenological approach to children’s lived experiences of a text in spiritual terms. Methodology is not only limited to data collection but includes all those “procedures, practices, and principles for obtaining knowledge about the world” (Gallagher, 2009). I discuss the research questions and justify using phenomenology to answer those questions. Next, I focus on the research design, discussing phenomenology, the interpretivist paradigm, and reader-response theory in order to situate the study within existing theoretical discourse. Then, I provide a detailed explanation of the data collection and data analysis stages of the study. Throughout this chapter, I incorporate description of my own identity as a researcher, in order to highlight my prejudgments and assumptions (Van Manen, 1990).

The Research Question

Before formulating a research question for a qualitative study related to children and children’s literature, I considered my own reading experiences as a young person. It was important for me to look back on some of my journal entries and explore how my reading affected my writing about important matters in life. It was also significant for me to return to the texts that elicited my spirituality as a child as I developed a study seeking to describe a similar phenomenon. Because I remembered some ways my spirituality was affected by the literature I read, I wondered if children’s experience of a literary text featuring spiritual dimensions might engage the reader’s spirituality. Additionally, I began to reflect on how children might connect their spirituality to their experience of reading a book.
As a result, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe children’s lived experience of a novel or picturebook in spiritual terms. The central research question of this study asked: What is it like for child readers to experience some texts (those that contain explicit or implicit spiritual dimensions) spiritually? Or, what does it mean to read a book in spiritual terms—in a way that highlights the child’s “very personal and intimate expression of…[her] relationship with the Divine” and/or that “expresses or enhances one’s awareness of and commitment to the transcendent dimension of life”? (Hart, 2003, p. 173; Helminiak, 1996, p.34). Hart’s and Daniel Helminiak’s expressions of spirituality, however, only represent two dimensions of it, and I remained open to the ways the children’s spirituality in this study diverged from this conception.

Why this study?

A richer understanding of children’s lived experiences of literary texts can help those who work with children to think further about the ways they provide opportunities for children and texts to meet in meaningful ways. A positive attitude toward spirituality’s place within language and literacy activities could also lead researchers to consider how their studies can speak to teacher’s classroom practices. My approach to the topic of children’s literature and spirituality developed out of a particular conception of spirituality, which recognizes the potential for people’s meaningful connection to others as well as to a Divine source. I viewed children’s expressions of spirituality as something to be encouraged within educational and extracurricular spaces, and I assumed that different forms of children’s discourse might reveal their spirituality. Specifically, I
wondered if children’s spirituality might emerge through their discussion of books they read and discuss with others.

Listening to children’s responses about literary texts holds the potential for a richer understanding of children’s spirituality due to the emergence of children’s sociocultural literacy, a literacy that illuminates “how children bring their worlds to bear on the text and the text to bear on their worlds” (Mikkelson, 2005, p. 177). It is the spiritual world of the child reader that a text can illuminate through that child’s aesthetic reading of it. Nina Mikkelson asserts: “Children have a great deal to teach us about their worlds, and children’s books can be magical gateways to what children know and see and are in those worlds” (p. 171).

**Why qualitative?**

In *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (2003) by Norman Denzin & Yvonna Lincoln, qualitative research is defined as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a series of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). Because I was interested in how children’s perceptions of the spiritual manifest as they respond to literary texts, it was appropriate to use qualitative research since I as the observer needed to be situated within a setting where I could talk to children about their responses to stories. Denzin & Lincon’s description of the process of qualitative research was helpful: “The gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)” (2003, p. 30). This explanation very clearly structured the process and suggested that each aspect of the research study is crucial.
Researching Children’s Spirituality

In thinking specifically about methodology in relation to studying children’s spirituality, Chris Boyatzis and Babette Newman state: “to understand children’s spirituality in a valid and complete way, methods must account for the multiple ways children perceive, experience, and express spirituality” (2004, p. 168). Multi-method approaches are lauded by some working in the field of children’s spirituality as children’s spirituality reflects a multidimensional nature (Boyatzis & Newman, 2004, p. 169). Furthermore, those researching in the field understand that the researcher’s conception of children and childhood necessarily affects the data collection and analysis of the study. As a result, it is important to make the theoretical framework of any study explicit. Moreover, to study expressions of children’s spirituality is one matter, but to study children’s spirituality and children’s literature invites even more complexities. The phenomenon under investigation now includes not only readers and works of literature, but also the transaction that operates within the meeting of reader and text.

Rigor

Discussing current methodology for exploring children’s spirituality, Ratcliff and Nye, well-established in the field, emphasize the necessity for rigor in the methods section of any investigation into children’s spirituality (1992). Furthermore, they repeatedly state that the researcher must offer a definition of children’s spirituality and it should be clear whether spirituality refers to the whole person or to a specific domain of life. Ratcliff and Nye perceive a weakness in a study as the lack of a clearly articulated conception of the spiritual, which results in weak methodology overall. Definitions can be either too broad or too obscure. As a result, my own study presented a conception of the spiritual featuring several dimensions. In addition to Ratcliff and Nye’s suggestions,
however, I am also aware that Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba encourage the investigator to maintain an “emergent” design due to the complex nature of any research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Conceptualizing the Study**

In considering the theoretical framework of my study, I specifically drew from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective, incorporating the interpretivist paradigm as well as reader-response theory.

**Phenomenology**

*Goals of the Phenomenologist*

Some in the field of children’s spirituality emphasize that it requires skill and rigor to capture expressions of the spiritual in children and to articulate those expressions (Scott, 2006). This perspective of investigating the spiritual fits well with the phenomenological approach to research (Van Manen, 1990). Max Van Manen suggests that

To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. (p. 18)

This reiterates a challenge the researcher faces when attempting to represent the essence of experiencing a book spiritually. Though a study may result in a richer description of a phenomenon, there are always other descriptions that continue to add to the depth of this richness.

The phenomenological approach does not result in clear-cut empirical generalizations. What Van Manen states about phenomenology is that one cannot
generalize about human experience (1990, p. 22). In this respect, the aim of my study was to gain a richer description and understanding of some children’s lived experience of some texts in spiritual terms. Van Manen states, “Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim…is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence…” (1990, p. 36). Rather than solve some kind of problem with a clear answer, my study investigated the essential nature of a child’s experience of a book in spiritual terms. I asked a question of meaning—what does it mean for a child to experience a text in spiritual terms? What is it like for a child to read a book and think about the spiritual dimension of life—that capacity within each person to reach for something beyond the immediate? The first step I took was to identify my interest—a children’s lived experience of a book in spiritual terms—and then to determine whether it was a “true phenomenon…as some experience that human beings live through” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 40).

Van Manen distinguishes phenomenology from other types of research because it “makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience” (1990, p. 32). In describing lived experience, he explains that it is a “pre-reflective awareness” and that its meaning can only be discussed through reflection, after the lived experience has taken place (1990, p. 35-36). Van Manen further discusses the interpretive aspect of phenomenological research in relation to exploring lived experience: “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (1990, p. 37). In my study, it was through interviews and creating artwork that the children were able to reflect on their lived experience of reading the books in spiritual
terms. Obviously, it was not as easy as asking the children to tell me about their experience of reading the book spiritually. As a result, one challenge was developing discussion questions that elicited the children’s reflection of their reading in spiritual terms.

*Getting to the Essence*

Van Manen urges the researcher to avoid “simply recall[ing] experiences” (1990, p. 41). Instead, one must recall the experience in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience are lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in such a way that we recognize this description as a possible experience, which means as a possible interpretation of that experience. (1990, p. 41)

Edmund Husserl described the exercise as employing “the use of intuition to reach the essence” (Barritt et al., 1985, p. 20). It is through intuition and the imagination that the phenomenologist is able to “get to the roots, the essence of consciousness” (Barritt et al., p. 20). Husserl realized that one cannot separate consciousness out; the researcher can only explore it in the framework of something else. In other words, “consciousness existed in its intercourse with things; it was always consciousness of something” (Barritt et al., p. 21). In this sense, then, the readers’ discussion of the spiritual experience of the books was informed by other contextual factors.

Husserl discusses one aspect of the phenomenological as getting to the essence of an experience. At one point he defines phenomenology as a “viewing of essences” and these essences include the “essence of perception, judging, feeling…” (2000, p. 106). Van Manen describes “essence” as a “linguistic construction” or a “description of a
phenomenon” (1990, p. 39). And, it is “in our experience of a thing, the thing and the meaning of the thing are one” (Barritt et al., 1985, p. 22). I recognized the challenge in attempting to view the essences of the children’s spiritual reading of these two novels, and I tried to remain conscious of how I could best describe those dimensions of the children’s spiritual reading of the texts without over-interpreting their verbal and artistic responses to the stories.

Description and Interpretation

Van Manen uses the term, description, when referring to the phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, even though one emphasizes description and one emphasizes interpretation (1990, p. 26). The two terms, though, are often interchanged, and perhaps this is why some researchers simply state they are using “hermeneutic phenomenology.” Because the description of children’s experiences of a text in spiritual terms was communicated through both oral discussion and art, an element of interpretation was obviously present. Van Manen attempts to define a “good phenomenological description”: “collected by lived experienced and recollects lived experience—is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (1990, p. 27). He then turns to outlining six events within a phenomenological research study. They include orienting to a phenomenon of interest, exploring experience as it is lived rather than conceptualizing it, “reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon,” writing and rewriting in order to describe the phenomenon, keeping a solid “pedagogical relation to the phenomenon,” and thinking about the smaller portions of the phenomenon as well as the entire piece (1990, p. 30-31).
Phenomenology, like other research approaches, illuminates the ordinary as extraordinary, and the act of looking closely at particular events can actually fuel a “sense of wonder” in the researcher (Barritt et al., 1985, p. 25). As I asked the question, “What is it like for children to read a work of literature in spiritual terms?” I endeavored to remain open to what emerged from the process of listening to the experiences of my participants as they talked about and drew their responses to the stories. Like many other types of research, phenomenology invites space to consider implications of the conclusion of the study. As Barritt et al. state, “From phenomenological study one hopes to achieve an awareness of different ways of thinking and acting. It is a search for new possibilities” (1985, p. 32). Thus, in my conclusion, I suggest potential future directions of investigation in my conclusion, and also make suggestions for the dissemination of research about children’s spirituality and literature.

**Perspective & Context**

Phenomenology investigates a topic through the eyes of the participant, and the field of children’s spirituality certainly invites more studies illuminating children’s spiritual experiences in their own words (Ratcliff & Nye, 2005). Additionally, it is helpful for the researcher to enter children’s worlds. Phenomenological studies are context bound and are explorations of an entire situation, rather than “a set of preselected variables” (Barritt et al., 1985, p. 24). This is something I kept in mind as I listened to the four children’s descriptions of their readings in the context of the interviews. Rather than divorce the children’s discussion of their ideas about the book from the interviewing situation, I took into account contextual factors affecting each interviewing event.
**Interpretivism**

Within discussion of my methodological choices, making my theoretical framework explicit was important. Rather than pointing to one overarching theory about children’s spirituality, my framework was developed through the synthesis of multiple theories and ideas about children’s spirituality and children’s literature.

As a qualitative researcher, I situated myself within the interpretivist paradigm, which attempts “to understand the social world as it is (the status quo) from the perspective of individual experience…” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 46). Selecting a paradigm means that issues of epistemology, ontology, and axiology are all addressed. Because the aim of this perspective is to illuminate individual experience, an element of subjectivism supports this particular epistemology. Though my perspective in this study was obviously the “etic” or outsider’s perspective, I attempted to represent the “emic” or insider’s perspective as richly as possible. I recognize that it was my interpretation of children’s perceptions of spirituality that are represented in this study, but at the same time, I endeavored to study the children’s verbal and artistic discourse closely. In this way, I presented descriptions of their lived experience of two toy fantasy texts in spiritual terms, as revealed through their responses to questions about those texts. I recognized that we can learn about children’s experiences through their own words, actions, and artwork, and as a result, the child participant was at the center of this study.

**Reader-Response Criticism**

The reader-response approach to literature accords importance to the reader within the book/reader transaction, and as a result this perspective accommodated my study. Reader-response theory “offers a new perspective on the moral values of reading literature by asserting the importance of the individual’s ‘reading’ of a text” (Benton,
1988). This study specifically investigated readers’ descriptions of their experience of a story in spiritual terms, and thus, the transaction between reader and book is one area of focus. In his study on “Spirituality, Morality and Poetry,” Pike suggests that applying the reader-response approach to situations with young people and books “fosters spiritual growth because attention is focused on the growth of the whole reader and not simply on the text” (2000, p. 181).

Though it emerged in the 1930s, the reader-response approach did not develop extensively until the 1970s (Tyson, 2006, p. 170). “Reception theory,” another term for reader-response, was first used in Germany (Nikolajeva, 2005, p. 251). Rather than assume that a text means only what is on the page, as advocates of New Criticism strongly believed, reader-response critics view the reader as playing a necessary role in the meaning readers draw from a text. During the 1990s reader-response research occupied a significant position within the field of education, and many continue to apply its tenets to contexts where readers are responding to texts (Hancock, 2008; Iser, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978). The history of reader-response criticism and its popularity has resulted in a plethora of studies applying this methodology to studies of young readers and books (Beach & Hynds, 1991). This research has ranged from investigating readers’ stances to exploring types of responses emerging from particular structures of discussions.

Wolfgang Iser

Iser, a major theorist within the field of reader-response criticism stated: “Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient” (1978, p.21). Iser describes the act of reading as a space in which the text meets the reader’s worldview and beliefs; in other words, he is suggesting that reading is
not a one-way process. The reading event contains many possibilities for the reader since she helps to create the meaning drawn from the text. He suggests that the reader is sometimes unaware of what is happening to her when caught up in the experience of reading the text. This description of the reading event can be likened to one way of thinking about spiritual experiences, since one can be similarly caught up in a spiritual moment.

Readers work to make inferences about what is left out—they apply experience from their own lives or worldview to create meaning and to fill in the gaps left by the text. Iser describes gaps as those spaces in a story that the reader must fill in—descriptions may not be provided or events in the story may invite multiple explanations. As Iser explains of the reader: “He is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said” (1978, p. 168). These gaps allow the reader to create sense of the text's indeterminacy. In this way, readers can become more engaged in the reading experience, creating paths of meaning and experiences provided by those gaps left in the text. Iser argues that the presence of gaps in a text create the potential for a deeper reading experience: “…as the unsaid comes to life in the reader’s imagination, so the said ‘expands’ to take on greater significance than might have been supposed: even trivial scenes can seem surprisingly profound” (1978, p. 168). Reading can be both “active and reactive,” as pointed out by Benton (1988). For example, a reader might fill certain gaps in a story, and then respond further to that first level of meaning produced by the filling of gaps.

Iser stresses that the meeting of book and reader is an important event to study, for it is out of this event that meaning is created. Good literary texts call the reader to fill
in gaps and to contribute to the meaning that emerges from that reading act (Bruner, 1986). For Iser, “the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity but, if anything, a dynamic happening” (1978, p. 22). Literary critics have not always paid attention to the relationship between reader and text, but this phenomenological study illuminated that relationship through children’s descriptions of the reading experience in spiritual terms. Rather than focus solely on the actual text as a manifestation of the author’s psychology, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, investigate only the child’s responses and ideas about the text, my study described children’s spiritual understanding of a text resulting from the reading event. As I analyzed my data, I kept Iser’s advice in mind: “Any description of the interaction…must therefore incorporate both the structure of effects (the text) and that of response (the reader)” (1978, p. 21).

*Louise Rosenblatt*

Rosenblatt, another major figure in reader-response criticism described the connection between reader and text as a “transaction” and she suggested that the true meaning of the story emerges in the middle of this transaction (1978). Her book, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* has equipped many educators with theories about bringing children and books together through meaningful discussion (1978). In this work, she distinguishes between reader, text, and poem. The reader brings his/her life experience and worldview to bear on the text, which represents the words on the page, while the “poem” is created when text and reader meet. Rosenblatt defines the poem as the event that takes place when reader and book meet; it is the literary work that is the result of the transaction between reader and book. The text and the reader are necessary for the poem but neither produces the poem on its own. The poem is influenced by the reader under the
direction of the text. Each reading of a text is personal, because each reader brings her unique life experience and background to the reading event.

For Rosenblatt, the live reader is a crucial part of the meaning-making equation within the reading experience. The reader helps to shape the meaning of the book through the act of reading because the reader’s background, worldview, and ideas about the world necessarily affect the meaning he/she draws from the story (1978). As a catalyst, the reader helps to activate the significance of the narrative; the text AND the reader are both necessary for meaning to be generated through the transaction (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 27). In other words, this approach “focuses on the reader as the final arbiter of a text’s meaning” (McGillis, 1996, p. 186). From a reader-response theoretical perspective, there is no escaping the role of the reader in the meaning of the story.

Rosenblatt identifies the stance that a reader takes when approaching a literary text as a “selective attitude” (1978). For example, what kind of attitude does the reader bring to the text? Two stances she highlights include the efferent stance and the aesthetic stance. An efferent stance means that the reader is looking for specific information to take away from the reading event. History books or cookbooks represent texts that often invite this stance. An aesthetic stance, however, includes a focus on what is happening to the reader during the reading. The reader is more closely aware of the ideas and feelings she experiences in the middle of the reading event; this stance creates a living through of the text. “…aesthetic reading places the experienced meaning in the full light of awareness and involves the selective process of creating a work of art” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 75). It is from this stance that a meaningful transaction occurs between reader and text.
How does one determine the correct interpretation of a literary work? Or is there a correct interpretation? Some discuss the meaning of a text as tied up in what the author intended it to mean. However, the author’s intention is the not the only interpretation, according to Rosenblatt. However, she stresses that the reader’s subjective interpretation of the text is not the basis for a valid reading. Rather, she suggests that the answer is found in “the transactional solution to the problem of validity in interpretation” (1978, p. 113). She does not believe that any meaning a reader draws from a text is necessarily valid. Instead, she discusses several “criteria of validity”: “that the reader’s interpretation not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis” (1978, p. 115). These criteria then present an acceptable alternative to the “anything goes” view of the reading transaction. Extrinsic evidence in the way of historical, cultural, and biographical information can influence the emergence of a handful of valid readings of a text. Understanding this idea about valid interpretations is important for those bringing students and readers together in the literature classroom.

Readings of texts should be carefully considered in light of these criteria, and Rosenblatt closes one chapter in her book with a solid synopsis of this method:

The transactional view of the “mode of existence” of the literary work thus liberates us from absolutist rejection of the reader, preserves the importance of the text, and permits a dynamic view of the text as an opportunity for ever new individual readings, yet readings that can be responsibly self-aware and disciplined. (1978, p. 129-130)
Readers can make equally valid interpretations of texts because they bring different assumptions and attitudes to the same patterns of words. There may be a reading that is nearer to the author’s intention, sometimes revealed by bringing in biographical and historical evidence, but one cannot assume this is the only valid reading (1978, p. 120).

*Variations of Reader-Response Theory*

Within the field of reader-response theory, there exist multiple branches of reader-response approaches. These include transactional reader-response theory, affective stylistics, subjective reader-response theory, psychological reader-response theory, and social reader-response theory (Tyson, 2006, p. 172). The boundaries among these different types, however, can be flexible. In the context of this study, I am most interested in transactional reader-response theory because this approach examines the interplay of text and reader, and also highlights the notion of “gaps” in the text—those spaces the reader must fill by drawing on his/her background and experience of the world (Iser, 1978). In light of this literary theory, then, my study attends to the child reader’s spiritual reading of a text, and I necessarily reference the stories to the extent that they are helpful for understanding this “transaction” more deeply.

*Defining Spirituality*

As I present a concept of spirituality by which my own study is guided and framed, I recall what one Norwegian researcher of children’s spirituality, Sturla Sagberg, states in an article on children’s spirituality within the context of Norwegian education: “Theories of spirituality must be discussed and developed, but it is hermeneutically and epistemologically sound to keep in mind that a theory carries the marks of distance from
the actual experience” (1997, p. 364). A definition of spirituality formed a framework around my thinking about children’s lived experience of a text in spiritual terms, and as a result, I kept Sagberg’s advice in mind: “The concept and the theory belong to the researchers, the experiences and expressions belong to the children—a fact which should fill the researcher with some humility” (1997, p. 364).

I conceptualize spirituality as a universal tendency in humans to reach out for deep connection with something greater than themselves, recognizing that there is something beyond the here and now, beyond the physical realm. This spirit potentially exists in every human being (Hay with Nye, 1998). I also affirm the idea of spirituality as a lived reality, discussed in Helminiak’s 1996 book, *The Human Core of Spirituality*. Spirituality “refers to everything one does that expresses or enhances one’s awareness of and commitment to the transcendent dimension of life” (p. 34).

My understanding of spirituality is framed within the concept of connectedness or relationship. This intangible, deep connection might manifest through a richer awareness of self, or through relationship to other people, the natural world, or to a divine source, such as God. Nye’s concept of relational consciousness figures into this conception, since it is a raised awareness she identifies as a fundamental aspect of children’s spirituality. Also central to this idea of spirituality is transcendence, a going beyond or outside of the self. An aspect of spirit may include an awareness of destiny or sense of purpose for the future. I am particularly aware of Hay and Nye’s three categories of spiritual sensitivity: awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing (1998). However, I realize expressions of children’s spirituality reflect diversity within different contexts, and recognize that this is not the only way of conceptualizing it. Furthermore, though I
articulated my own definition of the spiritual, I attempted to learn from my participants’ ideas about spirituality.

Data Collection

Recruitment

This study took place in the children’s homes or at a church where one of the participants attended. The choice of location was based on what was most convenient for the children and their parents. I recruited participants by sharing the details of the study with friends who knew others with children that enjoy reading. I was either given phone numbers of email address of mothers who had children that might be interested. After I connected with these mothers, they spoke to their children about the study, and after a follow-up call or e-mail, I was able to plan a time a meet the parent and child. At that time I conducted the first interview. First, however, I provided parent and child with consent and assent forms. I specifically recruited four child participants in the 5th grade or who were age nine or ten, and could read independently books of the difficulty I chose. All expectations were clearly explicated in the recruitment flyer, which is located in Appendix B.

In terms of what researchers discovered about young people’s responses to narratives, David Bleich points out that “More is known about response and reading processes from small numbers of detailed reactions than from large numbers of one-word judgments” (1980, p. 356). In response to Bleich’s observation and other studies, including Pike’s research (2000) with young people and poetry that included six children’s responses in detail, I recruited only four children for this study, in order to closely study their responses to two specific books.

Recruiting Child Participants
Because my study involved children, there were key issues that were addressed due to complexities of working with young participants. Parents signed an informed consent form in order to enroll their children in the study. Furthermore, I gave the children their own assent forms. In their book, *Researching Children’s Experiences*, Melissa Freeman & Sandra Mathison state that “children need to be informed of their rights as participants in concrete, action-centered ways” (2009, p. 47). To go along with this assent form, I opened the first interview by sharing with the children a concise description of my study, answering any questions they had, and stating that they could stop participating in the study at any time, if they chose. I also made it clear that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions I posed about the books they read. In this sense, I attempted to establish an atmosphere of trust and safety from the very beginning of the study.

**Researcher Roles with Children**

Freeman and Mathison stress the importance of self-reflexivity in the researcher, specifically in relation to assumptions about children:

How researchers present themselves to participants, the beliefs researchers have about children…and how researchers (who also embody multiple demographic and personality traits) are perceived by children play a role in fostering or hampering the researcher-participant relationship. (2009, p. 58)

Nesbitt also mentions reflectivity as a key issue in research with children and spirituality, in addition to sensitivity and language (1999). In a discussion of different roles adult researchers take with children, Freeman and Mathison illuminate the benefit of the “least-adult” role; “that is, a role that aligns the researcher more (in language and behavior) with
children than with adults” (p. 60). I strived to take this “least-adult” role and connect with the children on their level during the discussion of the texts. I attempted to present myself as someone who could learn something from the children, rather than as an adult who knows everything.

**Sampling**

Baptiste (2008) states that there are three tasks related to sampling within a qualitative study, and these include discovering the unit of analysis, the unit of observation, as well as artifacts connected to the units of analysis and observation. It was helpful to first identify the unit of analysis for this study, 5th grade children’s responses to a literary text, as this phenomenon was able to elicit the spiritual lived experience I was interested in describing. The members of my unit of analysis then, included children in the 5th grade or of age nine or ten. I chose this age range because readers in this grade make up the implied readership for the two novels I have chosen. The members included both boys and girls who enjoy reading independently in the local surrounding area, and have time to participate in the study. This was the only other criterion for my study, besides the age range for both boys and girls. Thus, I used criterion-based (or purposeful) sampling for my study, and more specifically, I employed convenience and snowball, chain, or network sampling (Merriam, 1998, p. 61-62). Snowball, chain, or network sampling implies that the first participants recruited in a study might refer the researcher to others who would then agree to participate. In this way, it was through connections and networking that further research participants were found.
Baptiste encourages researchers to determine what must be observed in order to learn about the unit of analysis (2008, p. 5). The unit of observation for my study, then, included children discussing their responses to literary texts. I also observed the participants in a specific location in the midst of a particular event, responding to stories by creating artwork. The children’s art represented another medium through which their spirituality could emerge. In the context of their study on young readers responding to poems, Benton, Teasey, Bell, and Hurst propose that children may find it difficult to verbalize their responses to a text (1988). Using art as a mode of response for the participants, then, can potentially open up feelings and ideas about the stories that might not emerge through verbal communication.

I recruited four children to meet with individually three times. I used the phenomenological three interview series with each participant. Within phenomenological studies, the intent is to describe in detail the experience of participants of a particular phenomenon. The aim is not to develop general claims, and this is why sample sizes are small. Some studies reflect that using small numbers of children is necessary in order to keep comparisons small (Benton, Teasey, Bell, & Hurst, 1988, p. 33; Hade 1988). Lee Galda’s dissertation entitled, “Three Children Reading Stories: Response to Literature in Preadolescents” featured three fifth grade girls for a reading group exploring the individual and group responses of young readers to certain juvenile literature (1980). Galda focused in-depth on just three participants, but her dissertation yielded very interesting data about the child and reader transaction. Others suggest that researching a small number of children can result in a richer and deeper understanding of their experiences and this keeps the data easier to manage (Benton, Teasey, Bell, & Hurst,
1988; Tisdall, Davis, and Gallagher, 2009). Rather than conduct a complex and extensive study in terms of participants, texts, and time, Benton encourages the researcher to strive for in-depth analysis (1988). Based on my reading of Benton and other qualitative studies, I took this advice. For this reason, I limited my project to four children reading two fantasy novels, specifically in the genre of toy fantasy.

Freeman & Mathison highlight the individual interview as a space where children can “share an experience or reflect on an event” (2009, p. 88). Whether it is a fifteen minute or an hour-long interview, the individual interview can yield rich data (p. 102). Transcriptions of interviews can be challenging to analyze, reflecting the need to keep the number of interviews lower rather than higher (Tisdall et al, 2009, p. 75).

**Interviews**

It was important for me to consider previous research methodology with young readers and texts specifically in the context of developing interview questions and eliciting responses from children about books. Research suggests that some readers may reflect a more engaged response to a literary work when this response is prompted orally (Beach, 1972).

My framework for developing and asking the interview questions was situated within Berryman’s ideas, as discussed in *Godly Play* (1991), and within the work of Coles (1990). Teachers in one faith-based school used methods of assessment that revealed children’s spiritual growth through the Godly Play method (Helm, Berg, Scranton, 2007). Berryman’s technique is designed to help children enter into Bible stories and engage more deeply with them. Though the Godly Play method is used specifically for religious instruction through the sharing of Bible Stories, the mode of
questions can be applied to other situations where children are discussing their responses to stories. Berryman’s questions’ “wondering” framework construct the adult researcher as a participant in the study, in that she does not know the answer, but is wondering along with the child. Using the Godly Play questions in one school setting, Stonehouse suggests, “As adults respect the child's spiritual potential and leave them to wonder about meanings and applications, children learn that they can make their own discoveries” (2001, p. 39). Stonehouse found that using Godly Play with the children resulted in a higher degree of creative engagement and meaningful insight from the stories (p. 38). Examples of questions I asked the children for this phenomenology can be found in Appendix A.

Coles’ study reflects that individual interviews with children can result in positive, rewarding, and rich conversations (1990). His research suggested that interviewers should maintain an open mind in talking to children, and realize that children may share perspectives vastly different than those of adult researchers. As researchers of children’s spirituality, we should stress to our participants that there are no right or wrong answers to questions about their readings of literary texts (Trousdale, 2005a).

The intent of the first interview was to learn about the children’s lives, their reading habits, and their ideas about spirituality and God. This interview represented what is called the “focused life history” interview in the phenomenological process, and was semi-structured and open-ended. Because I asked questions about a sensitive topic—spirituality—I allowed the parents and participants to choose the interview space. If a parent wanted to be present while I talked to the child, I accommodated the participant’s
family. In the context of interviewing, Freeman and Mathison state that the researcher must maintain flexibility and the ability to adapt; in other words, plans may change but this does not mean the interview will be any less meaningful (2009, p. 88).

This first interview encouraged rapport between researcher and participant, and I developed questions in order to find out about the children’s favorite kinds of books and reading experiences. I used simple language, rather than asking bluntly, “What is your idea of reading a story on a spiritual level?” I attempted to be a good listener as the children shared about their lives. In the second and third interviews I asked more specific questions about the selected books the children read for the study. Each interview was digitally recorded and no video was collected.

The length of the interview session was determined by several factors including how long the child remained engaged in the conversation and how long it took to discuss the central questions regarding the book. As some researchers point out, even a fifteen minute interview can result in satisfactory conversation (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Phenomenological interviews are often ninety minutes long, but this is often too long when interviewing younger participants. The interviews for this study ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour and fifteen minutes. Since each participant drew a picture for the second and third interviews, sometimes our meeting took up to one and a half hours.

In order to talk to the participants as soon after they finished the novels as possible, I requested that their parents contact me by phone after they completed each book. This reflected my desire to elicit the participants’ experience of the book close to when it took place. I kept Trousdale’s advice in mind regarding the idea that a retelling of a story can provide additional understanding into a child’s ideas about the narrative
(2005a). As a result, I asked the children to retell the story in their own words. I was interested in providing the opportunity for the children to provide insight that might not emerge in other portions of the interview. Though I could not interview the children as they were reading the text, I sometimes reviewed specific passages of the novel with them. This gave the children opportunities to reflect on their first reading and provide dialogue after reviewing to the story.

I was interested in capturing the lived experience of the text in spiritual terms through the participants’ reflections on their readings and on the meaning of the spiritual landscape of the story. Though time and the busyness of life might have affected the children’s discussion of their experience, my interview questions were developed to help elicit the participants’ reflection of their initial response. Because I focused on the reflection of the lived experience, my only concern was that I could interview the children within the week that they finished the novel.

This concern was realized with one of my participants who finished the first novel for the study while I was away for Thanksgiving break. This meant that a longer gap transpired between his reading of the book and our discussion of his response to the story. This was not an ideal situation, as I had hoped to talk to the readers about each novel fairly soon after they finished them. In “Patrick’s” case, however, there was no way to remedy this issue as I was three thousand miles away, and could only conduct the interview when I returned. As a result, he expressed that it had been awhile since he had finished the story, and he sometimes had trouble answering my questions. Certainly, this situation showed me that researchers should strive to plan their interviews so that such a scenario does not happen. If it does happen, however, the interviewer can exercise the
best judgment about which questions to phrase differently or the most effective way to help jog the young reader’s memory about the story.

Two aspects of interview questions that Freeman and Mathison mention include the what of the question as well as the how of the question, or the way in which the question is asked. Additionally, it was important to vary the types of questions, including both direct and indirect ones (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 93). Open-ended questions are particularly beneficial in research situations with children, and phrasing the questions carefully is important for drawing out in-depth answers. “This is especially important with children because many of the words we take for granted are abstract, and so rethinking abstract terms in relation to children’s daily experience is important” (Freeman & Mathison, p. 95). In a discussion of phenomenology, Ray points out that children share more when the interviewer utilizes analogy (1994, p. 128). In light of these suggestions, I carefully planned my interview questions, also attending to the structure of the interview.

The second and third interviews were focused on the children’s experiences of the novels in spiritual terms. Using Berryman’s theories about discussing spiritual ideas, I included prompts such as “I wonder what the most important thing about this story is” and “I wonder what your favorite part of the story is.” All of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The phrasing of the questions in this way was meant to encourage the children’s honest responses, and to keep my own assumptions about what the children might say to a minimum. It was crucial to look carefully for hidden agenda and assumptions within the interview questions. Benton recognizes this problem in reader-response studies: “how the readers respond will depend upon the signals the
teacher-researcher gives, and that what he, in turn, discovers in their responses will be, to some extent, what he expects to find” (1996, p. 35).

**Visual Arts in Data Collection**

This phenomenology utilized multiple methods of data collection, in order to accommodate the fact that expressions of children’s spirituality emerge in a variety of ways. In addition to interviewing participants about their experience of particular literary texts, I asked each child to create a picture in response to the two novels they read. By providing them with a focused question, I wanted to provide opportunity for them to draw something that reflected their own experience of the text, rather than just a replication of a picture in the story. However, if they wished to portray a scene in the story, I gave them freedom to do so. Materials provided for the children included large pieces of white paper, several colors of markers, pencils, and crayons. In this way, the children selected the paper and medium of their choice for creating their pictures.

Van Manen describes phenomenology as an “artistic endeavor” because it attempts to create a representation of the essential structure of an experience. This idea is one that supports the role of the arts within a phenomenological study (1990, p. 39). Noe suggests that “art can be an effective, although previously neglected, tool for phenomenological research…” (qtd. in Leavy, 2008, p. 226). By creating artwork, participants had the opportunity to represent their ideas and meaning-making of the literary texts through images they selected and combined into a whole. Freeman and Mathison highlight the benefit in providing different ways for young participants to share ideas because they allow children to have “numerous opportunities to express their thoughts and share their experiences in ways that built on individual differences and
styles of interaction” (2009, p. 59). They also mention that when responding to something by creating art, “children are in control of language and perspective” (p. 66). As they choose how they want to construct their piece of art, they make the stylistic choices and also determine from what point of view the observer sees the image. This provides them with power and control that may not be available in other discourses.

**Why Arts-Based Research?**

It is true that asking for arts-based response from participants can take extra time and resources in a study (Freeman & Mathison, p. 126). Arts-based research carries its own tradition, and represents a rich and multi-layered approach to studies with children. However, my justification for using visual arts-based participatory methods as one way of collecting data includes the fact that what I was trying to capture and describe is not always adequately represented through oral discourse. As pointed out by Boyatzis & Newman, “some spiritual experiences may not be amenable to linguistic expression. Many adults know that their own experiences can surpass their ability to convey them verbally” (2004, p. 171). In *The Nimble Reader*, a text focusing on literary theory and children’s literature, Rod McGillis suggests that response to a text can operate through multiple forms of discourse (1996). Because “spirituality” is intangible and can be ambiguous, using art as a method for expressing it may offer rich and multi-layered understanding unattainable through more traditional methods. Coles’ groundbreaking research on children’s spirituality illuminated the idea that children who are more reticent in talking about their spirituality were able to depict it visually, through art projects (1990). A child might possess ideas about spirituality and God that are too multidimensional to articulate verbally, and thus, art represents an appropriate vehicle for
the expression of such ideas. Furthermore, the activity of drawing provides space for research participants to reflect on the topic at hand, whereas in an interview or group discussion, this reflection time is not always present.

**Data Analysis**

As Freeman & Mathison point out, “Data analysis brings together the data, the purpose of the study, and the instincts of the researcher. There is no magic formula” (2009, p. 152). In other words, analyzing the data does not only consist of looking closely at the products generated through data collection. In addition to “a careful reading and rereading of the data,” analysis also involves “an inventory of the content of the data, an examination of the contexts—personal, interpersonal, and situational—that inform the construction of meaning, and the stance of the researcher” (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 156). Though analysis is woven into many different phases of the research process, my study included a particular stage of focused analysis and interpretation of data. Rossman and Rallis describe the period of data analysis as including three activities: immersion in the data, organizing the data, and developing meaning out of the data (2003, p. 270). Importantly, data analysis is an ongoing phase and requires systematic organization and management from the beginning of the study.

The method of analysis I chose to use was phenomenological thematic analysis (PTA). Another term for this is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The aim of this technique is to describe the meaning of an experience, and thus it places heavy emphasis on the participant’s experience of the phenomenon because it is an attempt to “understand what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, to take their side” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Van Manen highlights the challenge in this kind of research: “The insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process
of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience” (1990, p. 77). I considered the influence of the fantasy genre on the generating of this phenomenon of children’s spiritual reading of two novels. Each novel included some illustrations, and so I recognize that I specifically investigated the children’s experience of an illustrated fantasy novel in spiritual terms. Additionally, I attempted to describe the spiritual experience of the books from both boys’ and girls’ perspectives. I did not analyze the responses in terms of issues of gender, as this was beyond the scope of my research question. However, with more time and resources, exploring the children’s responses in terms of issues of gender may provide significant insight.

The first part of the analysis phase involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, my field notes, and examining the children’s art. I referenced Smith and Osborn’s suggestions for interpretative phenomenological analysis in addition to Braun and Clark’s (2003; 2006). Using Braun and Clarke’s suggestion, I became familiar with the data and started writing notes in preparation for coding (2006). These notes represented my thoughts about what seemed significant in the data. I then created space in the interview transcripts to generate codes, which represented the transcript segments in basic, smaller units. For example, a comment by one my participants connecting a fortune the characters in *The Mouse and His Child* receive with the events in their subsequent journey was coded as “Explains how prophecy relates to toy mice's journey.” I attempted to be data-driven in my codes rather than theory-driven.

I coded all segments of every interview transcript, and this cleared the way for the phase involving the interpretative stage of the analysis. In this stage of the analysis, I
explored the codes for potential themes, making notes and highlighting significant segments of the transcripts. A theme connects ideas and is made up of patterns significant to the epistemic interest of my study, which was to describe children’s reading experience of a text in spiritual terms. But, Van Manen warns that getting to the themes of the data is not a “rule-bound process but a free act of ‘seeing’ meaning” (p. 79). He describes themes as “the structures of experience” (p. 79). These themes, then, represent the makeup of the phenomenon, or the experience the researcher is trying to describe.

Each theme describes one dimension of that lived experience, and in the case of my study, this was the lived experience of reading a fantasy text in spiritual terms. Van Manen points out four aspects of thinking about theme in relation to the studied phenomenon. These include the view of theme as a tool to get to the experience’s meaning, a way to give “shape to the shapeless,” a depiction of a major attribute of the phenomenon, and “always a reduction of the notion” (p. 88). Themes contain a unique role in the study when they equip the researcher to develop a phenomenological description (p. 90). Van Manen proposes a particular kind of hermeneutic phenomenological reflection that enables the researcher to think about themes as “knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 90). I used this reflective process throughout the analysis phase of my study.

After I finished making preliminary notes from the codes, I developed a list of possible themes that were tied to specific codes in the transcripts. It was out of my notes and codes that my themes were generated, and though I developed a list of many themes initially, I later trimmed this list as I discovered which were major themes and which
were minor ones. Additionally, I named and re-named themes as I worked with them more.

Once I developed a list of themes, I connected the data extracts with the themes in the order they appeared in each interview transcript. Some themes were generated during different moments in the interview. As a result, one example of this first list might have been: Theme D. (Data Segments), Theme A. (Data Segments), Theme B. (Data Segments), etc. This illuminated the fact that Theme D., for example, might have been generated at the beginning of the interview, but perhaps it was also reflected by data extracts in the middle. I then created another list, in which I grouped all the themes together with their respective data extracts, and not in the order in which they appeared. This list developed as follows: Theme A. (Data Segments), Theme B. (Data Segments), etc. This allowed me to explore how often the theme was generated through the child’s discussion in that particular interview. I also considered connections among the themes. As I reviewed themes further, I removed some from the list that did not have enough data to support them. I combined themes that overlapped and were too similar to warrant the development of two categories. Relating the themes back to my research question, I trimmed the list further as I recognized themes that did not completely relate or did not appear in all of the participants’ interviews. Following Cresswell’s suggestions for phenomenological analysis, which is a concise version of the “Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method,” as discussed by Moustakas, I developed a list of important statements participants made related to their experience of the phenomenon (Cresswell, 2007, p. 159; Moustakas, 1994). This is known as “horizontalization of the data” and each statement is given equal attention until later organized into themes (p. 159).
After the phase in which I reviewed themes, I made note of discourse related to spiritual dimensions in the texts that I had noticed or aspects I had not identified, but that the children had mentioned. I also remained aware of themes that reflected Hart’s notion of “wondering” in which participants discuss the “big questions” in life. Finally, I was interested to note any themes pointing to the children’s awareness sensing, value sensing, or mystery sensing, categories of spiritual sensitivity developed by Hay and Nye (1998). I did not, however, try to impose these categories on the children through my interview questions. I also sketched a thematic map in order to note relationships among the themes, and this activity helped me to identify potential sub-themes.

Returning often to the participant’s actual words was necessary in order to verify that the generated theme was reflected in what the participants actually said. This opened the possibility for some themes to disappear from the list, if the evidence for them was not present in the transcript or if they did not work within the emerging structure of themes. After analyzing the other transcripts, I developed a table of “superordinate themes,” and these themes were not created solely based on how many times they appeared in the data. On the contrary, they were selected based on “the richness of the particular passages that highlight the themes and how the theme helps illuminate other aspects of the account…” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 76). Van Manen reminds the researcher that no one theme can completely encompass the experience, but rather, it represents an aspect of that experience (p. 92). Though I analyzed my data in order to discover themes that were generated across the discussions of the participants, I also took into account Smith and Osborn’s advice to consider differences among the discussions.
“Thus, one is aiming to respect convergences and divergences in the data—recognizing ways in which accounts from participants are similar but also different” (p. 73).

Moustakas recommends creating a description of the “what” aspect of the phenomenon, and this represents the “textural description” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 159). The “structural description” relates to the context for the phenomenon, and in the case of this study the framework represented the actual interview conditions (Cresswell, p. 159) The combining of the textural and the structural descriptions results in a segment of text that details the essence of the experience. I developed both textural and structural descriptions after generating the themes of the study, in an attempt to respond to recommendations for phenomenological studies.

I also applied PTA to the artifacts of the children’s artwork, their pictorial representations of their responses to the stories, and I explored the pictures for themes within both their content and structure. I situated the analysis phase of the participants’ artwork within some existing literature about children’s artwork (Emmison & Smith, 2000; Kellogg, 1969; Pearson, 2001; Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000; Wilson & Wilson, 1979; 1982) However, as Pearson points out, I maintained awareness that the act of drawing and the actual artifacts of drawing are not one and the same (2001, p. 356). I chose to concentrate on the artwork as artifact, but this included the children’s own discussion and interpretation of their art. I also recognized that the presence of illustrations in both novels could have affected the pictures the children created within the study. Several other concepts I drew on for the analysis of the children’s artwork in my study included binary opposites and subject position (Emmison & Smith, p. 66-69).
Leavy highlights an advantage in using visual methods to analyze data. This period of analysis can slow the researcher down during an important segment of the research: “…one of the major strengths of using visual methods of analysis and interpretation is that they call attention to the interpretive phase of research, which, due to conventions and practical constraints, is often rushed” (Leavy, p. 231). Van Manen also draws attention to the “reflective mood,” which is an element of an artistic exercise (p. 97). Visual data representing a research subject’s experience of a phenomenon can provide the researcher with the opportunity to explore “deeper structural messages” which may not necessarily emerge from oral discourse (Emmison & Smith, 2000, p. 65). Artwork created in response to a phenomenon can reveal hidden dimensions of that experience, which could be untapped through other methodologies.

**Limitations of Study**

Though some research has suggested that large group discussion of books can activate responses in children, my study did not include a group discussion. I was interested in the individual children’s experiences of the books in spiritual terms, and as a result, I could not justify including a group discussion for this study. However, a study exploring children’s spiritual expression as generated through small group discussion could provide significant insight. This study was concerned with representing both genders, and my recruitment did not feature a particular bent towards one gender or the other. Though different genders may reflect different orientations towards texts, this study was focused on exploring how readers’ express spiritual talk through their responses to literary texts. As a result, I included two boys and two girls because I aimed to describe the phenomenon from the perspectives of both genders. Though all of the participants in the study had different religious upbringings in the Judeo-Christian
tradition, I did not specifically recruit children from a specific religion. I recognize that a study of children’s spiritual experiences of a text featuring children of any faith or none also could illuminate rich insight.

**Researcher Identity**

This study was inevitably affected by my own background, worldview, gender, and social class. Marshall and Rossman stress that the qualitative researcher should be aware of how her background and worldview influence the study (1999). As a result, it is important to provide a substantial description of the researcher’s identity, in order to illuminate the fact that the researcher necessarily shapes the research. I viewed the participants, the setting, and the data through my own unique lens as an individual. Rather than hide that fact, I am intentional about highlighting my own background and how it was an integral part of my study.

As a young reader, many books I read increased my wonder at the universe, and cultivated my awareness of a world, both literal and figurative, beyond my own. Some stories such as *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Wind in the Willows* illuminated depictions of the natural world to which I was drawn, descriptions that nurtured my own desire to connect with the Divine through the beauty of the natural world (Grahame, 1908; Montgomery, 1908). Reflecting on my early reading experiences, I perceived that my spirituality was affected by what I read. I wish I had been given the opportunity to respond to what I was reading specifically in relation to my spirituality and my perceptions about my relationship with God, the natural world, and others. It is partly because of this connection I experienced between literature and my own spiritual life that I became interested in children and spirituality, specifically in the context of their responses to literary texts. As a result this study reflected a clear autobiographical aspect.
As a female, Ph.D. candidate, aged thirty-one, with a bachelor’s degree in English and French and a master’s degree in children’s literature, I was familiar with many types of children’s books and had written critical papers focusing on children’s texts from a scholarly perspective. It was important that I acknowledged this tendency of mine to approach any children’s book from a particular theoretical perspective, because I recognized that this might have influenced how I asked questions of my participants and how I responded to their questions and ideas. Because I could not simply forget what I know about analyzing and evaluating children’s literature, I recognized that it was crucial to step back and reflect on how the different ways I approached texts might affect how I structure questions and analyze data. At the same time, because I was aware of this, I made a concerted effort to refrain from making too many judgments or assessments in response to my participants’ ideas. Because I aimed to create a safe and secure space for the children to share their ideas, I offered encouragement and affirmation of their ideas. I did this so the participants felt comfortable sharing, and did not assume that as the interviewer I thought there was only one “right” answer. Furthermore, every individual has a unique background, upbringing, and worldview, and thus, the way their spirituality emerges in their literary talk would vary from one person to the next.

I consider myself a spiritual person with a Judeo-Christian worldview, which I also bring to this study. As a result, I consider spirituality an important aspect of human experience, and it is a dimension I think should be encouraged, based on how my own spiritual life has evolved. My spiritual experiences inevitably shaped how I conceptualize spirituality, though my definition necessarily grounds itself within the theories of others, such as Hay, Nye, and Hart (1990; 2003). My conception of Christian Spirituality,
however, is grounded in a connection to the figure of Jesus, situated within the concept of the Trinity, or the idea of God as three parts—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I also recognize a relationship between the spiritual and the supernatural within my personal definition of spirituality, though I did not force this connection within my conception of spirituality for this study. However, my personal idea of spirituality did influence what I deemed important within children’s spiritual talk, and even that which I categorized as spiritual discourse.

As discussed earlier, I situated myself within the interpretivist perspective, a point of view that attempts to study the phenomenon from the standpoint of the research subject. Though I came to the study as an outsider, I attempted, as much as I could, to understand what it meant to experience a text in spiritual terms as an “insider.” I recognized that I could learn from the children about the phenomenon, but at the same time I realized that my own worldview and ideas about spirituality influenced the study. I attempted to be open to ideas about children’s spirituality that might have differed from my present conceptions of how that spirituality is expressed through young readers’ responses to literary texts. However, based on my experience of these two texts in spiritual terms, I tended to identify spiritual responses as those related to the mysterious or supernatural aspects of the stories, or as comments about the central ideas in the narratives as they related to the human experience. At the same time, because I intentionally developed a broader conception of spirituality beyond a Christian one, I identified aspects of the children’s spiritual reading that did not necessarily relate to this specific manifestation of spirituality.
I include a more detailed section on my own spiritual reading of the texts in the next chapter. I did not want to allow my own conception of the spiritual in these stories to limit the children’s spiritual readings I identified. However, it was crucial to be aware of how my own assumptions and ideas about reading fantasy novels in spiritual terms informed the collection and analysis of the data.

**Reliability & Trustworthiness of Study**

My study did not intend to generalize, or make nomothetic statements, because as Lincoln and Guba point out in their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, “what is found in some particular context has meaning only in the idiographic sense for that context as that time” (1985, p. 216). Furthermore, my values necessarily affected the data collection and the analysis of the study. As a result, I attempted to be self-reflexive and systematic in establishing the trustworthiness of this study.

Four areas I considered in relation to the trustworthiness of my study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 219). In order to ensure creditability of the findings of a study, Lincoln & Guba suggest specific activities and techniques: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checking (p. 301). Not all of these methods were relevant for this phenomenology, but I chose several techniques, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation.

In order to achieve prolonged engagement, I attempted to understand the “culture” of those children in my study and build trust with my participants. Persistent observation was crucial for “identify[ing] those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail”
(Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). In order to triangulate my data, I purposefully used
different methods so as to learn about children’s spiritual experiences of a text, including
their discussion of the books, field notes generated during observation, and the children’s
artwork.

Transferability or “external validity” refers to the extent to which the findings of
the study, or the “thick description” can be applied to another case (Lincoln & Guba,
1985; 1986). However, Lincoln & Guba clearly state that the researcher’s central
responsibility in this area is “to provide the data base that makes transferability
judgments possible on the part of potential applicers” (1985, p. 316). In summary, the
researcher furnishes the “detailed comparison of the receiving contexts with the ‘thick
description’” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p. 75). By making the methods of how I went
about developing the study, collecting the data, and analyzing the data clear, I aimed to
establish dependability. The study of the research process directly engages with the
dependability of the project, while attention to the findings links to its confirmability
(1986). Denzin & Lincoln also discuss the issue of “educative authenticity,” which is
aim was that the results of this study enhance understandings of children’s spirituality in
the context of their responses to literature.

Though I attempted to make my own values explicit and emphasize the issue of
researcher subjectivity, I recognized the importance of attending to particular activities in
order to ensure the trustworthiness of my study. By incorporating the techniques and
procedures that Lincoln and Guba suggest, I intended to strengthen my study in terms of
its methodology, description, and analysis.
CHAPTER 4.
THE TEXTS

Book Selection

Selecting the texts for this study represented a challenge, as a significant number of books for children reflect the potential to generate spiritual discourse in readers. In his article on “Spirituality, Morality, and Poetry,” Pike suggests that literature is a natural medium to which our spirituality responds (2000). Walter Wangerin, writer in residence at Valparaiso University, states:

The best stories are often religious, but the experience of a good story is always profoundly spiritual, because it helps children connect with deeper truths and ultimate meanings in life, as well as move them into a different realm that transcends everyday life and the world as youngsters usually see it. (qtd. in Ratcliff with May, 2004, p. 12)

Though a book may not reflect explicit religious or spiritual themes, it can cultivate a spiritual experience in the reader. A book might not be spiritual by definition, but what happens to the readers may be spiritual. As I brainstormed ideas for this study, I inevitably came to the topic with examples of books containing spiritual dimensions, based on my own reading experience. My conception of spirituality in literature allowed a large number of texts to emerge. I perceive spiritual themes in narrative when an awareness of the transcendent dimension of life is illuminated through any of the four important areas and relationships within the human experience: self, other people, the earth, and the Divine.
My criteria also referred to the capacity of these books to encourage what Hart terms “wondering” in readers (2003). “Wondering” takes place when children raise the large and significant questions in life, such as “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?” and “What is my place in the world?” Though I could not be absolutely certain that the books would encourage wondering in the participants in this study, as I read the texts I identified whether the potential to encourage such questions was present. I also selected books that engaged a sense of mystery or wonder at the surrounding world, and/or provided a gap relating to whether people are guided by some exterior, divine source.

As a result, I chose two novels that feature some manifestations of spirituality I identified through my own reading of the spiritual landscapes of the texts. Both toy fantasies for this study feature a number of gaps that invite potential spiritual interpretations, and the texts also reveal a number of significant parallels with each other. Both novels provide gaps for readers to ask serious questions such as “What is my place in the world?” and “Is my life of value?” Additionally, both stories invite the reader to consider whether providential aid is at work helping Edward Tulane and the mouse and his child. Pike’s states that “It is impossible to separate literature from moral and spiritual awareness because response to literature entails a response to these dimensions of our existence” (2000, p. 179). I recognized that I selected the texts based on my personal responses to them. Furthermore, what I define as a spiritual children’s book is particular to my standards and ideas about spirituality in literature. In *Honey for a Child’s Heart: The imaginative use of books in family life* (1969), Gladys Hunt devotes an entire chapter to the definition of a book of high standards for children to read. She approaches this by
thinking about the elements of a book, including theme, plot, characters, and style.

However, her awareness that there is a “spirit of literature present” is something to which I gravitated:

> The sensitivity of the readers says, “This is true.” “This is real.” And it sets in action something in the reader which profoundly affects him. It has been an experience—spiritual, imaginative, intellectual or social. A sense of permanent worthwhileness surrounds really great literature. Laughter, pain, hunger, satisfaction, love, joy—the ingredients of human life are found in depth and leave a residue of mental and spiritual richness in the reader.

(1969, p. 51)

Hunt conceptualizes an excellent book for children as one that creates a space of possibility for the young reader; such books are “experiences that make us grow, that add something to our inner stature” (p. 14). A “good book has genuine spiritual substance, not just intellectual enjoyment” (p. 18). Though a good book may not always necessarily include spiritual dimensions, many excellent books that are considered excellent do stir spiritual responses in readers. Other criteria I applied to the novels for this study included their ability to engage readers intellectually and emotionally and their level of indeterminacy. As stated earlier, both fantasy novels construct an implied reader that must fill in gaps in the narrative.

Some literary works reveal spiritual aspects and themes that encourage young readers to engage with issues relating to the transcendent dimension of human existence. Through their narratives, fantasy writers such as Madeleine L’Engle, C.S. Lewis, and Philip Pullman demonstrate the power of stories to communicate spiritual ideas and
truths. Books such as L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), Lewis’s *The Magician’s Nephew* (1955), and Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass* (1995), to name a few, provide readers with launching pads for asking serious questions of meaning about themselves and the surrounding world. Furthermore, it is not only works of fantasy that accommodate the spiritual. Authors of realism such as Katherine Paterson, Kate DiCamillo, and Allen Say provide children with stories that illuminate issues of forgiveness, grief, and hope, and highlight the importance of deep connection with other people. Poetry for children represents an important genre of literature for nurturing young reader’s spirits. The winner of the Lee Bennet Hopkins Poetry award for 2010, C.M. Millen’s *The Ink Garden of Brother Theophane*, illustrated by Andrew Wisnewski, introduces readers to a character who is comfortable in his spirituality, even if it differs from those around him. Brother Theophane’s spiritual life is engaged through his relationship with the natural world and his surprising discovery results in the practice of illuminating manuscripts for those working in the monastery. It is clearly apparent that the world of children’s literature is rich with stories of spiritual substance.

I applied Hunt’s conception of a good children’s book to guide my own criteria for inclusion of the texts for this study (1969). These books contain “genuine spiritual substance” that provide opportunity for discussion of specific aspects of children’s spirituality with readers. I chose stories that illuminate spiritual values through children’s relationships to themselves, others, the natural world, or the divine. The two novels that I chose particularly focus on the characters’ understanding of themselves as well as the importance of their connections with other people. When selecting the texts, I was also aware that stories for children that highlight “universal concerns” could elicit children’s
questions and ideas about spirituality (Trousdale, 2004b, p. 138). The texts for this study can nurture spiritual talk in readers due to the way the books treat universal issues. Both stories position their protagonists as searching for identity, a secure and loving home, and authentic relationships with others. Additionally, these books were not explicitly religious or didactic texts that force a spiritual/religious stance upon the reader.

Though readers’ responses to texts can be influenced by the genre and number of books they read, my study was limited to two novels (Beach and Hynds, 1996). Because my study aimed to offer a rich description of a child’s experience of a text in spiritual terms, it was not necessary for me to include a large number of books. As some studies have pointed out, a group of children’s individual responses to two novels could yield a large amount of data to analyze in terms of the research question (Benton, Teasey, Bell, & Hurst, 1988, Hade 1988; Tisdall et. al, 2009). Thus, I took these issues into account as I developed my study.

I selected two toy fantasy novels, including The Mouse and His Child (1967) by Russell Hoban, with illustrations by Lillian Hoban, and The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane (2006) by Kate DiCamillo. Both texts highlight the significant inner journeys of the characters, and though they are toys, their struggles and victories reflect aspects of the human experience. The stories grapple with similar trials and joys in the human experience, and they both engage clearly with the issue of maintaining hope and perseverance in the midst of extreme pressure and despair. My personal responses to the texts as well as some critical and professional analyses of the novels played a role in my selecting them. Though they highlight spiritual themes, they are not explicitly religious. Additionally, choosing a contemporary children’s novel along with a slightly older
classic exposed the child readers to two different styles of children’s literature. I include detailed plot summaries of both novels in order to equip the reader of this dissertation with more than a superficial glimpse into each narrative.

**Summary of The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane**

Abbreviated as Edward Tulane

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane, by Kate DiCamillo and illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline is a novel of two hundred pages that charts the journey of a china rabbit, about three feet tall, who lives on “Egypt Street” named Edward Tulane (2006). A ten year-old girl, Abilene Tulane, receives Edward as a gift from her grandmother, Pellegrina, who acquired his clothes and person from her home country of France. In the beginning of the story he is depicted as an egotistical and proud individual who takes Abilene’s love for granted. Each day she places him in a chair by the window, assuring him she will return after the school day is over. In the evenings he sits at the dining room table with the family, though Edward is not very interested in what the members of the Tulane household talk about at dinner: “And also, he did not care for Abilene’s parents and their condescending manner toward him. All adults, in fact, condescended to him” (p. 9). Only Abilene and her grandmother speak to Edward, “as one equal to another” (p. 9).

On Abilene’s eleventh birthday the family announces they will be sailing to London on the Queen Mary. However, Pellegrina will not accompany Abilene and her parents. That night she tells Abilene and Edward a story about a selfish princess who flees her family and potential suitor and is turned into a warthog by a witch for her inability to love any other person. The witch says to the princess in the story, “You disappoint me” and moments later Pellegrina whispers to Edward the same phrase (p.
32). The family prepares for their journey to England and leaves Pellegrina behind. As soon as the family is onboard the ship, Abilene is approached by two boys, Martin and Amos, who kidnap Edward, strip him of his clothes, and toss him back and forth like a football. When Abilene attempts to grab Edward back, she inadvertently disturbs the boy’s aim and Edward instead goes flying overboard. He lies at the bottom of the ocean until a fisherman, Lawrence, comes along and rescues him, taking him home as a gift for his wife, Nellie. Edward is dressed and addressed as a girl, but doesn’t mind, eventually enjoying a wonderful life with the older couple. His personality begins to change and he realizes he enjoys life with the couple.

However, after a long while of contentment and happiness, Lawrence and Nellie’s daughter arrives and deposits Edward in the dump, jealous and upset at her parents’ treatment of the china rabbit. Edward is left under a pile of trash in the dump for one hundred and eighty days until a dog, Lucy, comes along and transports him to her master, Bull, a hobo wandering the country. Edward is given new “hobo” clothes and travels with Bull and Lucy, enjoying the community of the tramps he encounters, and appreciating the fellowship of the kind man and his dog. However, after seven years, the three are sleeping in an empty railroad car and discovered by a guard, who kicks Edward off the train and into the night. The next morning a woman discovers the rabbit in the dirt road and decides to use him as a scarecrow in her vegetable garden.

A young boy arrives to work in the garden, and seeing Edward strung up on the pole, decides to rescue him and takes him to his ill sister, Sarah Ruth. There he again experiences love and acceptance with Bryce and Sarah Ruth, and loves the girl even
though she dies of tuberculosis. After her death Bryce takes to the road for Memphis where he and Edward attempt to make a living by dancing and singing in the streets. After Bryce is caught without money to pay for a meal in a diner, the owner of the diner becomes and angry and smashes Edward’s head open. The following chapter in the novel details an experience that points to a moment near death, in which Edward is able to walk, and nearly flies into the sky, which he is told harbors the “Sarah Ruth Constellation.” All the friends he has met along his journey are present, and they entreat him to stay on earth. Bull succeeds in pulling him back down.

Edward wakes up in a toyshop, repaired by a skilled doll mender. Bryce is forced to sacrifice the china rabbit in exchange for this mending, and leaves Edward to be sold on the shelves of the toyshop. In the toyshop Edward is advised and encouraged by an old doll that someone will eventually arrive for him, but the rabbit nearly loses hope during the process. However, one day a girl and her mother step into the shop, and the girl sees Edward. As the mother approaches, Edward realizes it is Abilene and he is once again reunited with his first owner. The story closes with a “Coda” that summarizes the plot and expands the ending.

It is the emphasis on relationships with others and the role these connections play within a person’s spiritual development that represents an important aspect of spirituality in Edward Tulane. The inclusion of the word “miraculous” in the title suggests that this novel might carry religious undertones, but in fact, the story is not overtly religious or didactic. Like The Mouse and His Child, this literary work carries the potential to deliver a meaningful reading experience through its engagement with powerful themes of the
importance of relational connectedness, selfless love, and the power of hope. These aspects all support my inclusion of this novel in the study.

**Summary of The Mouse and His Child**

**Abbreviated as Mouse**

*The Mouse and His Child* (1967) opens with the first stanza of a poem by W.H. Auden, “Leap Before You Look.” The stanza perfectly encapsulates the tone of the mouse and his child’s journey, depicted in the one hundred and sixty five page novel. Considered a classic, the toy fantasy features symbolic and philosophical levels that will keep both adult and child reader engaged with the trials and victories of the windups. In fact, some scholars of children’s literature consider Hoban to have intended this book more for adults than for children (Kuznets, 1994; Nikolajeva, 1996; Stephens, 2000). Nikolajeva calls Hoban’s novel “one of the most underestimated masterpieces of children’s literature” (1996, p. 156). Like DiCamillo’s novel, Hoban’s text features a plethora of interesting characters, including both toys and animals. Though a human appears at the beginning and the end of the story, the characters are largely toys and animals throughout.

A toy fantasy, Hoban’s text portrays a pair of toy mice, a mouse father and his child, who go nameless throughout the story. The story opens with a tramp observing the mouse father and child dancing after being wound up in a toyshop. The mouse child longs for a home and a family, stirred after seeing the dollhouse in the toyshop where he and his father wake into consciousness. There he meets a toy elephant and seal, and requests the pair to become his mother and sister. Eventually, however, the toy mice are sold and later broken. The tramp reappears on the scene, discovers the mice in the rubbish, and fixes them. Now, rather than dancing in a circle the father walks forwards
while the mouse child walks backwards. The hobo winds them up and releases them with
the message, “Be tramps” (1967, p. 11).

The narrative details the toy mice’s quest to find the dollhouse, a family, and
become self-winding. As they make their way in the world, the pair encounters Manny
Rat, the evil mob boss of the dump, who sends them off with one of his henchman to
steal treacle brittle from the bank. Along the way, the toy mice receive an encouraging
fortune from a fortunetelling frog. Frog delivers what seem at first to be cryptic words,
assuring the pair there will be “a painful spring, a shattering fall, a scattering regathered.
The enemy you flee at the beginning awaits you at the end” (p. 26). After he discovers
that his henchman has been killed and the windups are on the loose, Manny Rat vows to
hunt them down and smash them. Throughout the novel a bluejay broadcasts the
movements of the toy mice, acting as a traveling newspaper for the region. The second
time the toy mice meet Manny Rat, they are with Frog, who delivers a different kind of
fortune to Manny Rat. This message indicates that Manny Rat’s days are numbered with
the phrase “a dog shall rise and a rat shall fall.”

After the tin toys end up in the middle of a shrew war, they are rescued after
winding down by a traveling theatre group called “The Caws of Art” who are staging a
play called “Beyond the Last Visible Dog.” The Last Visible dog refers to the label of a
dog food can portraying an infinite number of dogs. The windups land roles in a play
when things go awry, but Manny Rat catches up, and attempts to destroy them once
again. The mice incorporate the rat into the play as a villain, and the audience storms the
stage and mobs him. The toy mice are lifted out of the crowd by Euterpe, the parrot, and
transported to the beaver pond, where Old Muskrat lives. Now winter, the mice discover
that Muskrat is not as helpful as he was rumored to be, and plagues them with strange
equations. Next, Muskrat decides to construct a contraption that will fell a tree, powered
by the toy mice. He expects it will take months for the completion of the project, and the
mice spend the winter participating in Muskrat’s project. Eventually, Manny Rat arrives
on the scene with the elephant as his prisoner, now looking a bit worse for wear. When
the tree finally falls, it crashes into another tree that in turn produces a domino effect,
destroying the dam and flooding the valley. Manny Rat loses the mice again as they go
flying into the water, carried along with the flood.

They finally sink to the bottom of the pond, and become stuck in the mud. There
they encounter the sea turtle, C. Serpentina, who leads them in a lengthy discussion and
time of reflection on the meaning of infinity. During this time, the mouse child
experiences a moment of revelation about the nature of infinity and pronounces,
“‘Nothing is what is beyond the last visible dog’” (p. 98). With the help of Miss Mudd,
the two eventually make it out of the pond, but discover that they can no longer be
wound. A hawk sweeps them up, thinking they will be a tasty lunch. When the pair sees
the dump, the mouse child goads the hawk into dropping them. They shatter upon hitting
the ground, but Frog eventually shows up and puts each back together, though they are no
longer connected as a pair. They discover the dollhouse in the dump, now controlled by
Manny Rat, but engineer a plan to invade, recruiting old friends to help them, including
the seal who becomes the mouse child’s sister and the mouse father’s daughter. The
group successfully takes over the dollhouse, rescues the elephant, and knocks out Manny
Rat’s teeth in the process. The mouse and the elephant marry, and the group works to
restore the house. Manny Rat begs to be allowed to work as a servant, and suggests that
he can install electricity in the house. He fixes the mouse and his child so that they become self-winding. However, his intention is to blow up the house and its inhabitants, though this backfires, resulting in his electrocution. He does not die, but survives, and reappears, finally, redeemed and restored. The narrative ends with the tramp returning and charging the mice to be happy, with their new hotel for traveling animals, known as “The Last Visible Dog.”

Like Edward Tulane, Mouse concludes with the central characters reunited in a secure community, but unlike Edward, the mouse and his child now do have a certain degree of independence. However, the pair actively voices their need for those around them to assist them, and so they even though they are self-winding, the story ends on the note that they will still depend, in some ways, on their friends. In this way, both novels illuminate the significance of relationships within the human experience.

Several aspects of each novel elicited responses concerned with the spiritual dimension of life from the children. As discussed in Chapters Five and Six, these parts of the stories came under the category of the mysterious, and sometimes alluded to the supernatural. I briefly discuss these aspects of the stories in preparation for discussion of the findings of the study.

The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane

Pellegrina’s Character

Abilene’s grandmother, Pellegrina, represents a mysterious character that appears to play a small but significant part in the story. Since she bought and helped to commission the creation and dressing of Edward Tulane, she can be understood, in a way, as his creator. In addition to Abilene, Pellegrina treats Edward as an equal, and the bedtime story she tells her granddaughter and the rabbit indirectly focuses on Edward’s
egotism and selfishness. However, this is a gap left open by the author, and the reader is invited to consider its significance and implications for Edward. Later, when Edward is stuck on the bottom of the sea, he considers whether Pellegrina had played a role in his being thrown overboard. He remembers her words whispered to him after the bedtime story: “You disappoint me” (DiCamillo, p. 35). He also thinks about Pellegrina when he is strung up on a pole as a scarecrow, stating to a crow he thinks is Pellegrina that he no longer cares if she turns him into a warthog or not, referencing the fate of the unloving princess in the story (p. 112). When Edward and Bryce seek their fortune in Memphis, and Edward dances in the street, he thinks he glimpses Pellegrina in the crowd, and again, speaks to her, explaining that his heart is broken (p. 149). Though Pellegrina appears as herself in the beginning of the story, the references to her influence later reflect a deeper significance to her character. This creates a sense of mystery and speculation surrounding the role she plays, and clearly illuminates the author’s deft ability to create significant gaps for the reader.

**Edward’s Dream/Near-Death Experience**

Chapter Twenty-Two constructs a moment in Edward’s life that can either be understood as a dream or as a near-death experience. This chapter opens immediately after the rabbit’s head has been cracked on the counter of the diner, and thus, the end of Chapter Twenty-One implies the possibility that the rabbit is entering eternity. One significant aspect of this experience is that Edward is able to walk, and while walking, he discovers that he has grown wings. When he realizes that Sarah Ruth is represented in the sky as a constellation, he attempts to fly up to her, but Abilene, Bryce, Lucy, Bull, Nellie, and Lawrence are present and request that he stay on the ground. The chapter represents the only moment in which Edward is surrounded by all of his friends he has met during
his journeys, except for Sarah Ruth. In this sense, then, it seems to function as a pivotal point in the narrative, since he refrains from going up to the constellation, and yet, though he remains with the others, he feels intense sadness at the prospect of living without Sarah Ruth. In addition to walking, he is able to cry, an action he cannot perform as an inanimate object in the rest of the story. Furthermore, this chapter is represented visually on the cover of the novel, illuminating it as an important aspect of the story.

Two aspects of Mouse also relate to the category of the mysterious and deserve a closer analysis in preparation for their inclusion in the responses of the participants.

_The Mouse and His Child_

**Uncle Frog**

Another character of interest within the children’s discourse about spirituality was the character of Frog, or as the mouse child calls him, “Uncle Frog.” Frog’s first genuine fortune is depicted as spiritual in nature in the text. The previous times Frog had delivered fortunes, he spoke exactly what he felt the hearer wanted him to say. Frog’s experience with the mouse and his child, however, was quite different:

So the frog intended, but as he looked at the coin and the seeds he found himself unable to speak the words he had planned. He had practiced the seed and coin oracle many times, but never before had he experienced anything like what was happening to him now. All else beyond the patterns in the snow departed from his vision; his ears hummed, and other sounds all vanished, leaving him alone with the voice of his mind and the dark seeds dancing in the stillness of their mystic changes. (Hoban, 1967, p. 25)

This passage reflects a mystical quality as Frog experiences for the first time the revealing of something completely outside his understanding. What he shares with the
mouse and his child, and later with Manny Rat, can be considered “prophecies” of sorts. Lois Kuznets calls Frog’s fortune to Manny Rat about the rise of a dog and the fall of a rat as a “disturbing prophecy” (1994, p. 176).

Though Hoban does not explicitly label Frog’s fortunes as prophetic, some readers describe his messages in this way. One possible reading of the character of Frog is as a figure that helps the mouse and his child, and speaks into existence the future, as a means of helping them to reach it.

**Infinity**

The concept of infinity emerges in *Mouse* through the repeated appearance of the Bonzo dog food can label, depicting a dog holding a tray of Bonzo dog food, which depicts another dog, and the pattern continues. The toy mice continue to run into the dog food can label, whether it is through the theatre troupe who are performing the play, “The Last Visible Dog,” or through the philosophical ponderings of C. Serpentina at the bottom of the pond. The sea turtle poses a question regarding the meaning of infinity, directed toward the toy mice. The mouse child does not hesitate to grapple with this complex notion, and young readers of the text may choose to adopt his stance. Certainly, Hoban constructs a child reader who is invited to consider the mystery of infinity, and spend time reflecting on complex issues and ideas. The participants in this study demonstrated a marked interest in the concept of infinity as presented by the novel, and their responses provided evidence of this.

In both novels, these dimensions relate to the category of the mysterious, and their role in the stories invite readers to speculate and consider what is beyond. Such aspects of the stories allude to the idea of “religious mystery,” something that Pinsent suggests “can be created only if the reader realizes that there is no natural explanation for the events
which occur…” (2001, p. 18). Neither author provides a direct explanation for these dimensions of the stories; instead, they only imply their potential significance, leaving gaps for multiple interpretations of the same event. In any case, the character of Pellegrina, Edward’s dream/near-death experience, the character of Frog, and the concept of infinity construct a child reader that may wonder what is beyond a surface level interpretation of these phenomena. In the next chapter I discuss the findings of this study, as revealed through my interviews with the participants, my field notes, and the children’s artwork created in response to the stories.
Chapter 5.

FINDINGS

Themes of the Children’s Experiences of the Texts in Spiritual Terms

Themes of the children’s experience of the texts were generated as I looked for discourse that related to their responses to some spiritual dimensions of the texts, or discourse that concerned a reaching beyond on the part of the participants. Though my theoretical framework, as discussed in chapter three, illuminates some theories about spirituality as well as others, I wanted to avoid restricting the expression of themes in the data by imposing pre-set categories. At the same time, I know my own experiences and some theories of spirituality informed my work. Since the researcher is an instrument in the data collection and analysis, it is inevitable that the research is informed and shaped by the researcher’s background and worldview.

First, I recognized the children’s spiritual understanding of the story through their responses that reflected an engagement with the central ideas in the story related to the human experience. For each book, the application of a central idea in the story that the children shared related to realistic conflicts and issues. Even though these were two fantasy texts featuring toys as their protagonists, the children’s discussions of the stories highlighted relevant themes for both the child and adult reader, particularly in relation to the human condition. Bruner suggests that “‘great’ storytelling, inevitably, is about compelling human plights that are ‘accessible’ to readers” (1986, p. 35).

Second, I discovered that sometimes when the children were asked about whether they recognized the Divine in the story, they talked about spirituality, though their spiritual discourse certainly emerged before this point. I identified this as spiritual
discourse, rather than religious discourse, because the children’s ideas reflected spiritual ideas that were broader than a specific religion. My own experience has indicated that discussion about the supernatural can lead into or reflect talk about the spiritual dimension of life—a reality that is beyond the known. As a result, thirdly, I detected examples of talk about spirituality within the participants’ responses to aspects of the stories that reflected the mysterious or the non-material. These dimensions of the story seemed to accomplish what Wangerin noted about a “spiritual book” as discussed in my methodology section. This type of book can “move them into a different realm that transcends everyday life and the world as youngsters usually see it” (qtd. in Ratcliff with May, 2004, p. 12). The supernatural is often considered mysterious, and certainly, all aspects of the novels related to this third category featured some element of mystery or the unknown. They included Edward’s dream or near-death experience and the character of Pellegrina in Edward Tulane, and the fortunetelling Uncle Frog and the question of infinity in Mouse.

Thus, the major themes that emerged from the data that I suggest characterize the children’s experience of the stories in spiritual terms include applications of the central ideas in the stories, the Divine, and the mysterious.

**Introducing the Participants**

For this study, two girls and two boys, aged between ten and eleven, participated by reading two fantasy novels and meeting with me each a total of three times. In this chapter and the next, I describe the participants and discuss their responses to the two toy fantasy novels, *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* and *The Mouse and His Child*. I introduce each child by describing their family, reading habits, and
spiritual/religious background. My discussion of their responses to the books focus only on those aspects of their spiritual reading of the text, or the dimensions that represent the “essence” of the experience of reading a book in spiritual terms. I explored the interview transcripts and the children’s artwork in terms of how their responses reflected their awareness of spiritual dimensions in the story or their own spirituality. This led to my developing categories to organize those themes that I identified as characterizing the children’s spiritual reading of the texts. These categories included applications of the central ideas in the stories, the Divine, and the mysterious.

Three of the children were Caucasian and one child was African-American and Caucasian. All the children were from middle-class families living in the local area, and three attended different elementary schools, while one child was homeschooled. Two of the children attended a Mennonite church, while one went to both a Catholic and Methodist church, and another attended a Baptist church.

The names of the children have been changed to protect their identity. When transcripts are presented, the researcher is referred to as “Katie.”

**Leonora**

I recruited “Leonora” for my study after informing a friend that I was looking for children in the 5th grade who would be willing to read two novels and meet with me three different times. This friend is in a ballet class I attended locally, and she shared with the women in her Bible study at the local Methodist church that I was seeking children for a research study. Leonora’s mother said that her daughter might be interested and she later emailed me after talking to Leonora about the project. Through email, Leonora’s mother, “Susan,” and I planned a time when I could visit their home to conduct the first interview.
It was a weekday evening, around six-thirty when I arrived for the first time at Leonora’s house. Sitting down at the dining room table, we talked while her mother watched television with Leonora’s brother and sister and also prepared dinner.

Eleven years and one month old, Leonora was in the fifth grade at a local elementary school at the time of the study. Animated, she talked with her hands, and had chin-length brown hair and brown eyes. My first impression of her was of a talkative girl who seemed willing to answer any question I posed. She chatted freely about books, school, writing, drawing, her pets, and her family, and friends.

The eldest in her family, Leonora has a younger brother of age nine and a younger sister of age seven. Describing her parents as “funny,” she informed me that her father is a veterinarian and her mother works in the children’s department of the library part-time. Her family members are long-time residents of Pennsylvania, and Leonora herself has lived in the state her entire life. Considering the career paths of a lawyer, actress, or pastry chef, Leonora has not decided on one vocation yet. Her favorite subjects in school include reading, writing, science, and everything else but math. She enjoys reading fantasy, mystery, and school stories, though not science fiction. Heidi (1880) by Johanna Spyri and Dragonrider (1997) by Cornelia Funke are two of her favorite books. Leonora likes to garden, draw, knit, swing, and sit in her fort. At home she and her younger brother and sister play a “town game” in which each player possesses a house, a plot of land, and a garden. She stated that she liked to draw but doesn’t do it a lot, though she enjoys drawing outside.

Leonora’s mother is Methodist and her father is Catholic, so the family attends two churches. She sometimes helps her father with hospitality at the Catholic Church and
though she is too old for morning Sunday School, in the evening Sunday School, she said they were learning about God’s creation as well as the church’s basic beliefs about God. She was excited that she would help create puppet shows for the younger kids at her mother’s church and wanted to suggest this idea to her father’s church.

When I asked Leonora what she thought God was like, she replied, “I think he’s like who you think the most caring person would look like. So he’ll look the way the most caring person would look like to you.” She then shared a moment from her earlier childhood: “I told the Sunday School teacher I hate having brown hair and she told me, ‘Well, Jesus had brown hair. So.’” She seemed to take comfort in this idea. “And we don’t actually know that. But I’m hoping he did. ‘Cause then I feel better about it. Because so many people have brown hair. I think it’s boring.” When I asked Leonora to further elaborate on someone who might be as caring as God, she replied: “Probably I picture him as my 3rd grade teacher, Miss Hardy.” She explained, “She was like strict for the first month of school. And once we had everything down, she did some fun things. Instead of the Africa unit, we made paper machè mummies. Yeah. Painted them gold and put little jewels on them. And then she also had us make a scrapbook for each unit.”

I then asked Leonora if she had ever felt God, and she recalled a situation from the 4th grade. She had “decided that God wasn’t real because of all the crazy stuff that happened in the Bible.” She said her perspective changed after a dream in which her teacher, Miss Hardy said, “‘Leonora, believe.’ And like I could feel like some strong thing was there and I thought it was cool.” I asked, “So did you feel differently after the dream?” She replied, “Yeah. I started believing again. And I also helped a new student in our Sunday School class at my mom’s church.”
Leonora thought that God could speak to people in dreams, or that he “probably” could since he spoke to individuals in the Bible such as Joseph and Solomon. I asked her what she wanted to know about God. She said:

I probably want to ask him what happens um what would happen when I die. I have this theory, no one believes me, but um when you die I think you get to choose what your favorite age is and you get to stay that age forever…But other people have told me that no, when you go to Heaven, you stay an old person. But I think God wouldn’t want us to have that discomfort.

Leonora also said that she sometimes thinks about God when she reads, such as when reading the Greek myths. She enjoys comparing what the myths say about the origins of the world with what the Biblical accounts say. In another story Leonora read about people in Heaven and in Hell. She summarized the story, explaining that people in both places were in the same seated position at a table, but those in Heaven were feeding one another. For her, the most important parts of life included family, friends, and comfort.

Leonora talked about different supernatural abilities, and communicated that she is drawn to stories featuring the topics of royalty and superpowers. She said she would like to have the superpower of telekinesis, as well as the ability to fly or become invisible. Though she relished the idea of annoying the boys in her classroom by pushing books off their desk while invisible, she considered the implications of helping the world with her superpowers.

Leonora: And I think um I’d also be interested in super powers that could somehow help the world. Like maybe being able to reproduce stuff that you normally can’t reproduce like oil.
Katie: Mmm hmm. That would be a really good superpower to have.

Leonora: Yeah. Telekinesis technically could do something for the oil spill because someone with telekinesis could lift the oil out and just put it wherever they need it.

Katie: Mmm hmm.

Leonora: Yeah. So they could have people doing that instead of all the stuff they’re trying to do.

Leonora communicated her concern for the natural world, and considered how the possession of supernatural abilities might respond to problems related to endangerment of the earth. During a later interview she reiterated the idea of using superpowers to help God within the natural world and the wider society:

Yeah, and I also think a superpower could help to do God’s will better because more like the superpowers you read about, telekinesis, you could lift the oil spill off of the ocean and stuff like that and also you could steal from the poor and give to the, I mean, steal from the rich and give to the poor and you could just stare in the window.

In this way, she considered how supernatural abilities might respond to issues of ecological destruction and poverty.

During our last interaction, I posed the question of whether there were any spiritual superpowers Leonora thought she might have. She replied, “Well, maybe it’s that I’m really good at making friends and also I can make someone feel welcomed easily.” She then shared an example of helping a new student in Sunday School to adjust. Her comments throughout all the interviews reflected her understanding of the
importance of friendship and connection with others, and also pointed to her ability to think outside of herself and consider how others feel.

Leonora’s responses revealed her to be a sensitive, caring, and creative eleven year old, comfortable sharing her thoughts about God, church, her friends, and the spiritual dimension of life. Leonora’s responses in all three interviews revealed a tendency to make personal connections. Additionally, she often transitioned into more mysterious topics such as dreams and the possession of superpowers through her discourse about her reading. At the end of our first conversation, Leonora asked about the two novels she would read for the study. We arranged that her mother would telephone me when she had finished Edward Tulane.

It was five thirty on a weekday evening when I arrived a second time, two weeks later, at Leonora’s house to talk to her about the first novel for the study. We sat at the same dining room table while her mother and siblings were in the general area busy with other tasks. Leonora and I first spoke about the approaching season of fall and aspects of the season she enjoyed, such as changing clothing styles and painting pictures of the trees. We transitioned into talking about the book with the question of whether Leonora enjoyed reading it. She said that she did like reading the story, but disliked the fact that the young girl, Sarah Ruth, died.

Applications of the Central Ideas in the Stories

As we talked about the most important part of Edward Tulane, Leonora shared an application of one of the novel’s ideas for the reader by saying, “you shouldn’t really be that selfish. So, if something happens and like you get really upset you should still leave your heart open.” She developed a lesson with an application, and articulated a hypothetical situation relating to a best friend moving away:
Well, because then there might be an—I think that God has this plan and you’re destined to meet somebody who will be your best friend. So if your best friend moves away um it’s sort of like an opening to show you that maybe there’s someone else destined to be like your best friend. So, if you don’t open up your mind, um, for new possibilities you won’t really find that person.

And…so…yeah.

Leonora’s comment suggests that there may be a divine source guiding connections in people’s lives. Within this discourse, she referenced the idea of “destiny.”

In her discussion of the most important part in Mouse, Leonora also talked about a central idea in terms of what the reader should do.

Leonora: That you should keep on trying I guess because the mouse child really wanted to keep trying to find everybody, the seal, and…

Katie: That’s good. You should keep on trying. And did his father always, so how come you said just the mouse child? Was his father wanting to keep on, or only the child?

Leonora: Only the child. The father had, sort of had to because they were connected.

Katie: Yeah, and keep on trying to do what, exactly?

Leonora: Trying to achieve your goal.

Leonora’s response indicates how the reader might learn from the story’s central conflict and resolution, similar to her response to the same prompt for Edward Tulane. To apply this core idea, readers should recognize their goals and “keep on trying.”
The Divine...Or Not

For both novels, I asked each child whether the book reminded him or her of God. Early in the interview, Leonora brought up the notion of the Divine through her discussion about God having a plan for our relationships through her response about Edward Tulane. This can be situated within Leonora’s perception of God as the most caring person an individual could conceive, as stated during our first interview. Her discussion about the divine did not concern God in the story, but emerged as I asked her why it was not good if people chose to be selfish and kept their hearts closed. Later in the interview, when I asked Leonora if anything reminded her of God in the story, she replied, “No.”

Her response to Mouse indicated that she did think about the Divine in relation to the story. Leonora said that the character of Muskrat had reminded her of God “‘cause he tried to help them.” I asked her what it was about Muskrat that stood out from the others who tried to help the toys. She replied: “‘Cause he was willing, um, he was willing to help them. They helped him.” When I asked Leonora to tell me more, she said, “Well, he was going to fix them, but he sort of died.” In the context of Leonora’s conception of God as a caring individual, Muskrat fits partially, though he employs the help of the mice for his own project of cutting down a tree, which forces the mice to stay in his part of the woods for several months.

The Mysterious: Edward’s Near-Death Experience, Pellegrina’s Character, Frog’s Fortune, and Infinity

Edward’s Near-Death Experience

Three pages of the interview transcript were devoted to discourse about Edward’s near-death experience in Chapter Twenty-Two of Edward Tulane. A snapshot from this
experience is depicted on the cover of the book. Leonora highlighted this as a “very interesting part” during which Edward “was sort of in a way dead and he saw all the people he loved but then, and he started to go up to the stars and um Bull caught him, and in a way, I guess, saved his life.” I then asked whether she thought he was near death or having a dream, and she reiterated her last statement that he was near death, and there was a reason for this opinion:

Yeah. And he, like, I guess he was sort of knocked out and he was sort of like going to when he was…and like at that part what I think could have happened...(looking at pages), I think what could have happened, I think he was sort of going towards death because the girl they said was up in the sky so he was sort of floating up towards the sky like he was going to die. So I think he probably was. ‘Cause I think if something dies it might, like, it might have a flashback of anything they could have done better in their life. So that’s probably um what he’s flashing back on all the people he liked and he’s sort of going away but Bull helps him.

As Leonora interpreted Edward’s near-death experience, she considered it in terms of what happens when people are about to leave this world. She stated that Edward learns a lesson through this moment as “he stayed because he had a lot of people that he loved and he needed to be with them.”

Without any prompting from me, Leonora considered the implications of this chapter in the novel:

Leonora: I wonder what it would have been like if they didn’t have that chapter in there.
Katie: Mmm hmm.

Leonora: ‘Cause that chapter he sort of realizes that he doesn’t want to die and he stays on earth.

When I mentioned that this moment in the story is depicted on the cover, I wondered what Leonora thought it meant—the fact that Edward is walking towards the door of a large house. “Well, um, I think the picture means he’s like um maybe he’s walking towards his death and everybody comes outside and so technically they’re stopping him.” This interpretation illuminates the cover as rather ominous, since the house represents Edward’s death. Leonora used both the text and the cover illustration to support this interpretation.

This chapter in the novel illuminated a mysterious experience that elicited much discourse from Leonora. She specifically pointed out that she had gone back and re-read that portion of the story, “the part where he like almost dies.” Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, this chapter represented the focus of Leonora’s artwork for the novel. On a twelve by eighteen inch piece of white paper, Leonora drew the figure of Edward Tulane flying in the night sky (see Figure 1).
Complete with yellow and purple wings, the rabbit takes up the entire surface of the paper and his arms stretch in front of him towards the moon, depicted in the upper right hand corner of the picture. Stars outlined in black are peppered around and beneath Edward, and he is wearing a red blouse with green trousers. She explained, “Well, I really like purple, red, and yellow….And green. But I didn’t like want to put red in this because it sort of clashed with the shirt, so um, and green was also in the pants so I put those colors.” Leonora said she wanted to emphasize the happiness of Edward and explained that she accomplished this by making him as large as she could. Because he really wanted to fly, his joy is complete through his soaring in the sky. She filled in her drawing with hatching and cross-hatching, creating a colorful and luminous picture.
Edward’s near-death experience elicited many comments from Leonora, represented by both her verbal and artistic discourse.

Pellegrina’s Character

Leonora brought up the character of Pellegrina two times during our discussion, and she attributed a magical ability to Pellegrina by suggesting that she was a witch and cast a spell on Edward. Later, she said that she really wanted to know what happened to Abilene’s grandmother and if she did see Edward dancing in Memphis. Recalling the “witch” label Leonora had given her, I asked if she thought Pellegrina was a “wicked” character. She replied, “No, like I think she was sort of telling a story to what she thought might happen to Edward, almost as if she knew it was going to happen to him.” She stated that Abilene’s grandmother told the story on purpose, and that Edward realized that by describing the character of the princess in the story, Pellegrina was talking about him.

Frog’s Fortune

Her discussion of characters with strange and unexplainable abilities also emerged from her responses to Mouse. As I asked Leonora about her thoughts on the lines of poetry at the beginning of the novel, she suggested that only after she read the entire book did she understand its significance. She then commented, “It’s almost like a prophecy, I guess, like in the Percy Jackson books.” When I asked her how it related to the story she said, “Like prophecy sort of tells what’s going to happen…Just like Uncle Frog’s prophecy.” Leonora opened the book and reviewed the passage. She explained how the Frog’s fortune related to the mice’s journey: “I guess the scattering is all the people they meet and then they're all re-gathered.” When I asked her if she thought it was important for the mouse and his child to hear Frog’s message, she said, “I guess ‘cause he sort of
knew that all the people that they knew would get scattered and that's why he wanted to find the seal and the elephant.” Leonora’s response indicated a close reading of the text, specifically in terms of the content of Frog’s fortune and its relationship to the lines of poetry at the beginning of the story.

*Infinity*

The Bonzo dog food can in *Mouse* introduces the notion of infinity into the story. I asked the children to describe for me their definition of infinity. For Leonora, infinity represented “forever” but she said, “Technically nothing lasts forever. Um, everything that you think lasts forever is really perpetual.”

Katie: So tell me, so—

Leonora: But I guess the dog technically did last forever because it kept going and going and you couldn’t really find the stopping.

Katie: Yeah. So infinity, so if infinity is forever, what would you use the word infinity to describe? Is there anything we can describe with that term?

Leonora: Um, I think it could be, I’m not sure because the sun’s not infinity. Um, maybe God’s infinity?

After discussing the idea of going on forever, she moved into making a link to a school project that involved the students painting a wall at the end of the school hallway.

Yeah, and my teacher joked they, we were going to hang on the school for infinity and she said someday it will be in a museum and “this was what the kids in the old days….”

As this comment demonstrates, some of her responses reflected a frequent connecting to personal aspects of her life including school, friends, and family.
During the interviews about the novels, Leonora showed no difficulty in responding to any of the questions I posed. Her responses were interesting, insightful, and reflected a close reading and re-reading of the books. I certainly enjoyed listening to her interpretations and thoughts on both books.

I continue by introducing Roland and sharing his responses to the novels, highlighting themes generated by his discussion of the books.

Roland

“Roland” was introduced to me by a friend who attended the same Mennonite Church as Roland and his family. I received an email from Roland’s mother who informed me that he loved to read and would be willing to participate in the study. Through e-mail we established a convenient time to meet and I discovered that I could talk to Roland at the local Mennonite church while his mother attended choir practice. I arrived at the church on a weekday evening, meeting Roland and his mother in the front of the church. We sat in a room filled with books and a television, just down the hall from the choir practice.

At the time of the study, Roland was ten years, nine months old, and had lived in Pennsylvania his entire life. With bright blonde hair and blue eyes, he was the youngest sibling in his family. He has two half-sisters, one away at school and one who is married. His father works in construction and his mother’s job is at a retirement home. Two cats and one dog made the family complete. Family represented a significant aspect of Roland’s life as evidenced by what he deemed the most important parts of life: “…Being well-liked and having good relatives and good people around you.” Roland said that he had many friends at both church and school, and sometimes shared and recommended books to his friends.
In school, Roland’s favorite subjects were reading, math, and science. He liked to spend time outdoors, and this included reading outside. Though he also liked to run, play with his cousins, chop down dead trees, and race his dog on his bike, reading outside represented the main activity Roland talked about in detail. Reflecting an aesthetic appreciation for the natural world, Roland explained that inside,

There are not enough things for you to see and enjoy while you’re reading at the same time…if you look up to think about what you’re reading you’re looking at a blank wall…And outside I just like the fresher air and the leaves around me shining through the leaves—the sun shining through the leaves.

While his favorite genres of books are fantasy and science fiction, Roland highlighted *The Lord of the Rings* series as an example of good fantasy, stating that it features monsters of old and the use of swords rather than guns (Tolkien, 1954-55). He mentioned *The Hunger Games* as an example of science fiction, and other fantasy texts he enjoyed included the *Legend of Drizzt* series, the *Warriors* series, the *Animorphs*, and *Naruto* (Collins, 2008; Salvatore, 1988-2003; Hunter, 2003-2009; Applegate, 1996-2001; Kishimoto, 2002-09). He often re-read books in these favorite series, and said that he read a book in the *Legend of Drizzt* series six times. Preferring books with epic journeys in them, Roland brought up *Dragonrider*, which he had read six times (Funke, 1997).

Roland also mentioned *The Bartimaeus Trilogy* by Jonathan Stroud as one of his favorite series, a series that he has listened to on tape with his father (2003-2005). For Roland, the best kind of book is “either a really hilarious, well-plotted book, or a fairly epic book that has funny parts in it and has a really good storyline.” After reading a very good book, he expressed that he felt “happy and pretty pumped, if it’s really good.”
Roland attends a local Mennonite church with his family, and in Sunday School they were exploring the book of Exodus as well as the Creation story. Roland’s favorite part of the Bible is the Creation story, when everything began. He explained, “I really like how first there was nothing and then there was everything, kind of in a matter of a week. And how He’s that—God is that powerful.” He said that he liked the “story of Eden and the snake,” explaining that it is a “moral story and it sort of goes with today how we’re destroying everything.”

When I asked Roland what he thought God was like, he said, “I try to. It’s really hard.” Referencing the difficulty in describing a supernatural entity, he suggested:

I either think he’s three balls of glowing light…with a mouth in the center of them, or how most people portray him, some big old guy with a big beard and white hair, curly white hair.

I asked where he thought people came up with that idea of God looking old with a beard, and he replied, “Maybe from old guys being very…wise.” I asked Roland if he thought anyone has ever seen God. In response, he shared a story he had heard recently at church:

….Somebody…I forgot who it was. Just in our church, shared that they had to go to Ghana because they had a boyfriend who was in Ghana, well who was from Ghana and her parents didn’t approve of that. So she went there to show them that it was ok and she couldn’t have money and then a lady who worked at a shop that she kind of knew, gave her her month’s pay so she could get a both way ticket. Roland suggested that this lady was either an angel or she was “unconsciously doing that.” Later, he expressed that the “number one” mystery he would like to discover about God is “what he looks like.” I asked if anyone in the Bible had ever seen God, and he
brought up the Burning Bush with Moses. He also mentioned Joseph with “the pretty coat.” I was curious to know what Roland thought of the connection between Jesus and God: “I think that they were drawn to him because they sort of saw a bit of God in him.”

Does Roland ever think about God when reading? He responded with an immediate “Yes,” mentioning *The Hunger Games*, a series in which he thinks the gamemakers were “playing God with the natural resources and animals.” He also said, “And…I read *Jurassic Park* and I definitely think that they were pretending to be God. I don’t think he liked that very much” (Crighton, 1990).

I also asked Roland if he thought that God was concerned about our lives and our futures. Nodding yes, he expanded by referencing his earlier discussion about his definition of God: “Well, when I said about like the three glowing lights, like, it would be like the past, the present, and the future. And they were each different colors.” When I asked him if he thought that God spoke to people today, he replied with the story of the girl from his church receiving the money to go to Ghana. He also stated that God could “definitely” speak through dreams, and he highlighted the notion that resting and being quiet could open up people to hear from God: “Usually if we just sit down or just don’t do anything or if we’re doing, if we might just start doing the wrong thing, he’ll sort of nudge us on to do the right thing.”

During our conversation about God, I asked Roland what he thought happens when we die. He said, “I’m not sure” and then informed me that his grandmother has recently died.:

So I wonder what’s happening up there. I’m kind of tempted to try it. Because I don’t know if you just stay dead and you just like forget about everything and you
don’t even know if you’re something. Or if something like heaven actually happens. I’m not sure.

When I asked him what the Bible had to say on the subject of life after death, he replied, “When they die, the good souls go up to Heaven and they get a good old harp.” I mentioned a story I had heard about someone taking a trip to Heaven and coming back to life to talk about it. He then said, “Or it may be, I think, like when you’re knocked out and almost dead you go up to heaven and see what it’s like.” At seventy-four, his grandmother had died unexpectedly, but occasionally still appeared in his dreams. As we were talking about dreams, I presented the idea that some people view dreams as spiritual, and believe that God can speak through dreams. To this Roland replied, “…I like that. I think that too. That sounds…sounds really real.”

Roland spoke freely about his reading and his thoughts on spirituality, providing a substantial foundation for our discussion of the two novels for the study. I continue by discussing his responses to the two toy fantasies that illuminated themes of his lived experience of the stories in spiritual terms. Our second and third interviews took place in the same location as the first, as this represented the most convenient location for me and Roland and his mother.

**Applications of the Central Ideas in the Stories**

Like Leonora, Roland engaged with *Edward Tulane* by expressing one of its lessons in terms of wisdom and application for the reader. When asked if there were any lessons in the story that people should know, Roland shared:

You should definitely not let yourself like forget about love and not remember to love even if you're pampered with stuff and love, and you forget about how to
return, and you should just keep returning it instead of what Edward did and eventually learn not to do.

In his interpretation of Edward’s “dream,” Roland explained, “I think it means that he shouldn’t give up ever in trying to find, in finding people who love him. I think it means he should just keep going and they’re all trying to say that.” This comment resonates with the theme of Roland’s lesson for the story, and it also includes similar word choice, such as the phrase, “should just keep.”

In response to whether there were any lessons in Mouse, Roland provided one sentence: “Never stop what you’re trying to get.” At the same time, he mentioned that the mice were made of tin and so “it was pretty easy because they can’t really be killed.” I asked him if they would have accomplished their goal without the help of others, and he replied, “No.” He said that “lots of people” were helping the toy mice, including Muskrat, Frog, the bittern, and the kingfisher. Later, I asked Roland why he thought the author incorporated a lot of fighting into the story. Roland said, “To make it more exciting and to stress that the mouse and his child were overcoming a lot of perilous things to finally get to what they needed in the end.”

**The Divine**

Roland said that the character of Sarah Ruth in Edward Tulane reminded him of God. He shared that it almost made him cry, but he recognized, “How even though she died and it was sad she still was in the sky and it helped Edward to find more people to love.” This is significant because this conception of God contrasts with Roland’s earlier ideas about God as three balls of glowing light or as an old man with a beard and white hair.
Roland: I thought how even like she died but still she was sort of with Edward the whole time even before she was sort of there even before she sort of met him, it felt like he was being loved still.

Katie: Yeah.

Roland: Maybe other people but still the same type of love that she might've sort of passed and she died but she was still with Edward. She still hung on to Edward sort of.

Roland’s comment indicates that the love Sarah Ruth had for Edward continued through other connections he formed. Roland described this love as something that “just kept going and sort of like sickness, except good.”

When discussing Mouse Roland said that he liked the fact that there was a hobo at the beginning and the end. When I asked if there was anything that reminded him of God in the story, he simply replied, “The hobo.”

Katie: Yeah. So tell me about that.

Roland: How he sort of was like a prophet. And like how he prophesies sort of. In the beginning and in the end.

Katie: So what does he prophesy in the beginning?

Roland:….It doesn’t say. But he danced like the mouse and his child once. Yeah, it doesn’t say.

As we turned to these passages, Roland re-read them and stated that the hobo said “Be tramps” in the beginning, and “Be happy” in the end. He commented that he liked the hobo’s dog and that it reminded him of the hobo Bull and his dog Lucy in Edward Tulane. The notion of God as an old man with a beard perhaps connects to this idea of
God as represented by the tramp, at least in appearance. Additionally, someone with prophetic abilities might be perceived as having closer proximity to a Divine figure, though they themselves may not be Divine.

The Mysterious: Interpreting Edward’s Near-Death Experience, Pellegrina’s Character, and Infinity

For both novels, Roland’s experience of the story featured more discourse related to talk about the mysterious events in the story than any of the other categories. He did not seem to engage in spiritual discourse when discussing the character of Frog, though, in contrast to the responses of Leonora, Charlotte, and Patrick.

Edward’s Near-Death Experience

At first Roland constructed Chapter Twenty-Two in Edward Tulane as a “really weird dream” that Edward has “where everybody he’s met is there, except the little girl, who’s a star, constellation in the sky. And that gets him sad and he grows wings.” Roland suggested the dream played an important role in fueling Edward’s strength to persevere. For him, the house represents “all the people he’s met and they’re living in there and he comes to see them.” As we discussed why Edward wants to fly up to the Sarah Ruth constellation, Roland proposed: “He tries to find more, I’m guessing, but it’s kind of hard. Not everybody will love him like she did.” This comment relates to Roland’s discussion of Sarah Ruth as a representation of God, with a special kind of love that endures. When I wondered aloud about the part in which Edward is trying to fly, Roland replied,

I thought that maybe it was sort of like death even though he couldn’t die. They were trying to keep him down there like in the real world, not where he could be. So there could more people like her on it.
Even though Roland at first described this moment as a dream, he later explained it as a moment near death, and this adds a different dimension to his interpretation of the experience. As we talked about Edward’s injury, which happened right before the “weird dream,” he shared, “Yeah, he was kind of delusional. Oh, like he was sort of going up and they said it’s not time to die yet.” At this point, Roland began to consider Edward’s dream as a near-death experience, and the intonation of his comment reflected an element of discovery.

Roland chose to depict the scene from Chapter Twenty-Two in the lower half of his artwork for *Edward Tulane*. He portrayed the moment when Edward has wings and attempts to fly up to Sarah Ruth. Using pencil to outline his figures, Roland filled in the color with crayons. Besides Edward, Bull, Lucy, Abilene, Nellie, and Lawrence are also included in the scene, standing on a grassy hill. All of Edward’s friends have their arms lifted up, expressing their fear that he might get away. Edward’s wings are black and red, and though Roland thought the text indicated these colors in a description, when he re-read the passage he realized they were actually orange, red blue, and yellow. There is a lone star just above Edward, perhaps signifying part of the Sarah Ruth constellation. The worry that Roland said he depicted in the faces of Edward’s friends provided the visual representation of the role of the dream he had explained earlier in our discussion. The dream, he had argued, was geared to encourage Edward to keep going in finding people to love, and these figures are “all trying to say that.” Roland connected the paper with the cracked background with the shattering of Edward’s head in the diner. I gave him a choice of paper, but he chose the cracked background because “it would be better for Edward who cracked his head and he was a China rabbit and that’s sort of an antique
thing, and you would put it with this.” He said, “I really like this part and I put it on the bottom because well, this came first and I really wanted to draw this because it would be cool to draw a flying china rabbit.” Roland was detailed in his choice of paper as well as in the content of his drawing (Figure 2).

The upper half of his picture concerns another part he said he especially enjoyed, which takes place at the dump when Edward is found by Lucy, Bull’s dog. Earnest, the “king of garbages,” chases Lucy down the hill of the dump when he realizes she is taking something that is rightfully his. Roland talked about Earnest’s statement that the world is made of garbage, and while he laughed, he suggested that this was not far from the truth about the state of the world today. He discussed Earnest as a crazy character, but one that has the right idea.
Like Leonora, Roland also seemed to attribute a magical or supernatural characteristic to the character of Pellegrina. He especially liked the point in the story at which Edward is at the bottom of the ocean and the rabbit considers Pellegrina’s role in his demise. Pointing out that Edward thinks Pellegrina to be a witch he read aloud: “True, she did not turn him into a warthog, but just the same she was punishing him, although for what he could not say” (DiCamillo, 2006, p. p.54-55). Roland reiterated that he liked that part, and I asked him to tell me more.
Roland: I think that by telling him the story, she was sort of warning him and trying to give him one more chance to love.

Katie: Mmm hmm.

Roland: And then when she finds that he doesn’t, that he can’t anymore—

Katie: Mmm hmm.

Roland: Then she curses him to be thrown out to sea.

Here Roland fills in multiple gaps in the text, and describes the relationship between Edward’s actions and Pellegrina’s actions. Certainly, Roland constructed Abilene’s grandmother as one who could both warn Edward through the telling of a story and also curse him to be thrown out to sea.

Infinity

When we discussed the point in the story at which the toy mice encounter the sea turtle, C. Serpentina, I asked Roland how he would define infinity. He paused a moment, and then said that money could represent infinity: “‘Cause there is so much money, and it can just keeping going on and on and on and on.” As we spoke further about this idea of taking infinity to talk about infinity, Roland said that he had thought about the notion when he was six years old:

‘Cause when I was really small there used to be this old Buzz Lightyear movie. It wasn’t like Toy Story. And I always noticed, “To infinity and beyond.” I thought about, I asked my parents what infinity was and so it took awhile thinking about it then.

His parents told him it was a number that kept going, and his verbal and artistic discourse suggest that thinking about a complex notion like infinity held appeal for him, even as a
young child. One part of Roland’s drawing featured the Bonzo dog food label (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3-Roland’s Drawing in Response to* The Mouse and His Child*

Dividing the paper with a wavering diagonal line, he drew the shrew battle in the upper left half, and the dog food can made up the bottom right half, with the toy mice directly in front of it. When I asked him why he chose to draw the Bonzo label, he replied, “I thought it would be fun to draw enough dogs to go on forever.” The dog food can rests on the bottom of the pond floor, and seaweed rises above one side of it. The toy mice almost appear to be part of the dog food can. Roland has very adeptly represented a
string of dogs disappearing into the top right corner of the can. He said that he remembered that the text described the can as “nestled in like sort of a bed of seaweed.”

A fish swims by the can, and C. Serpentina, the sea turtle crouches in the bottom right hand corner of the drawing. As Roland depicted the notion of infinity visually, he drew the disappearing pictures of dogs extending up into the right hand corner of the can. The structure of the picture draws the eye to the dog food can first, highlighting its significance.

Roland shared his responses to both novels freely, and offered rich insight into symbolic dimensions of both novels. I now introduce the third participant in the study, Charlotte.

**Charlotte**

“Charlotte” joined the study in a similar way as the other participants, through snowball sampling. A friend of mine who knew about the study asked a woman, “Julie,” in her neighborhood if her oldest daughter would be interested in participating. Julie told her friend that I could call her, so she could learn more about the study. She talked to her daughter about it, and we planned a time for me to stop by, meet her oldest daughter, and conduct the first interview. During our first interaction I discovered Charlotte to be a voracious reader and a bright, talkative young girl.

The eldest in a large family, Charlotte was ten years and nine months old at the beginning of the study. She was waiting outside on the front porch with one of her younger sisters when I pulled into the driveway on a weekday afternoon. Tall with curly brown hair tied back in a ribbon, she wore a skirt and short-sleeved blouse. Having lived in Pennsylvania for five years, Charlotte was born in California but moved to New Jersey at the age of one. Her father is an engineer and her mother is a homemaker who
homeschools the six children. Charlotte is a part of a larger network of homeschooled children and sees her friends often, many of whom go to her local Baptist church or are in her dance classes.

Charlotte enjoys games involving running, jumping on the trampoline, and reading. Fantasy and mystery books are two of Charlotte’s favorite genres, but she said she reads “pretty much any kind of book you can think of.” *Harriet the Spy* (Fitzhugh, 1964) being one of her favorite books of all time, is a book that keeps her turning the pages and she mentioned that she felt “sort of excited,” “relaxed,” and “happy” when reading this kind of text. Explaining that she liked “all the secrecy” in the novel, she shared her perspective on the villain in stories:

Like I don’t know, I don’t know if this makes me weird but in books like where there’s a bad guy, um, it it makes me feel like better if the bad guy has someone on their side or something. ‘Cause like if it’s not a fair fight then the good side’s always going to win and that’s just not fair. But if the bad guy has someone on their side it makes me feel better about like being happy when the good side wins.

Charlotte mentioned that she enjoyed *Heidi* (Spyri, 1880):

I like that she’s so spirited. Like she’s not one of those people that just sits around and watches movies all day…And I like the way she causes mischief but she doesn’t mean to. Like when she brings the cats into the house.

When Charlotte described the aspects of the novel she enjoyed, she referred to the traits and the actions of the characters. For example, she spoke positively about Heidi teaching Peter to read, but “Mrs. Rottenmeier reminded me of Satan because she’s so mean and
Grandmama...I like her. She seemed very Christian.” As her comments indicate, Charlotte sometimes used religious vocabulary while evaluating characters.

Charlotte also mentioned *Little Women* (Alcott, 1868). She explained that the unique personalities of each sister endeared her to the novel and she liked the way the marriages resolve differently than the reader expects. She highlighted Kate DiCamillo’s *The Tale of Despereaux* (2004) as a favorite book, referencing that the family owned the movie. She stated that she liked “the way it communicates that little people can do big things.” Immediately after sharing this idea, she said, “I feel like that. Like kind of like that Disney Show, Phineas and Ferb.” The show features two children who create rollercoasters and other large objects.

The most important parts of books include the ending because to Charlotte, “if a book didn’t have an ending it wouldn’t be a book at all.” A beginning is also necessary, she pointed out, and the triumph of good in the battle between good and evil is especially important. Books that are pointless represent texts she will avoid:

Well, I think a book isn’t a good book if it’s pointless. You know, a book that’s just like, there’s one book, *Matilda*, did you ever read it? It’s absolutely pointless. She explained that she prefers texts with a meaningful idea wrapped up in the story.

Charlotte attends Sunday school for the 4th through 6th graders, and sometimes the children have different teachers, one of whom is Charlotte’s father. In Sunday school the class is focused on the concept of salvation, which they are exploring through several stories in the New Testament. Charlotte did not seem shy in her responses to questions about a Divine source such as God. As with the other participants, I asked her what God was like:
Well, I think he’s like someone who watches over everyone and it’s kind of hard to imagine but I think he’s someone who can hear all the prayers at once so even if like a trillion people are praying at the same time and um I think he’s very glorious so he’s not just like something that fades like a ghost or something and I think I’d like to ask him someday how he can have no beginning or no end.

The most important parts of life, according to Charlotte included serving God and loving other people. I asked her to tell me her thoughts on serving God, and she outlined the following aspects: “having time alone with God every day,” “helping others and reading the Bible. Going to church. And like not going to weird parties.” I asked Charlotte if she ever told her troubles to God, since she had mentioned God as a resource to call. She replied that she did pray to God at night in bed, sometimes on road trips, and during thunderstorms. Charlotte’s grandparents, when visiting the family, ask the children to sit still and remain quiet during a storm. As a result, she shared that this was a perfect time to talk to God.

In conclusion, Charlotte was friendly and eager to answer my questions but seemed to have the feeling that there were correct responses to supply. I assured her that I was interested in whatever she wished to say. During our first interview, we talked for one hour, and she shared candidly about her reading, hobbies, and family. I now discuss her responses to the two fantasy novels for the study, and highlight the central dimensions of her spiritual reading of the texts. Like my first visit to Charlotte’s home, the second interview took place on a weekday afternoon and it was not long after our initial meeting. Charlotte had informed me that she was a fast reader, and I certainly discovered this to be the case.
Applications of the Central Ideas in the Stories

Talking about the novels in terms of the applications readers can absorb figured heavily into Charlotte’s experience of the stories. As she discussed the end of the story, what she deemed the most important part of the book, Charlotte appreciated that the girl who first loved Edward re-discovered him. However, there were “all those other people” he was not able to reach. When I asked her what she thought about the author’s decision to construct the ending in this way, she replied, “I think the way she did it was ok cause then it kind of teaches you that you have to give some things up.” As we talked later about the idea of all the sad experiences Edward lived through, Charlotte said, “I would say it’s kind of like life, you have to deal with the sad things. Like no life is perfect with everything you could possibly want. Um, so you just have to deal with it when it comes up.”

I asked Charlotte if there was one idea in the story that was the most important, and she said, “I’d say if you want to be happy you have to love.” Like the other participants, she constructed one of the core themes in the novel as an application for life. Charlotte listed Pellegrina’s story, his separation from people he eventually grew to love, and the encouragement of the doll in the toyshop as factors that helped him internalize this idea. She reiterated what Edward learned in the toyshop: “I think it’s good that he learned that hope can last forever. Um, so even if he waited ten years hoping for something, it can last forever.” Additionally, she shared: “Like if your hope comes true then you can form another hope.”

Charlotte articulated another application for readers in response to my question of whether there were any special lessons in the story. She said, “I liked how um Edward was so haughty and arrogant in the beginning and then he softened and later on and so I
think that’s a good lesson.” As I asked her to explain further, she stated, “Um, I’d say if someone’s really proud of themselves, you’ve got to give them time. Give them time to love people.” Here she again links an idea in the story with a real-life application.

A little later, we talked about what assisted Edward’s transformation, and she said that Sarah Ruth’s death might have helped. She said that she could relate to losing someone close to her:

Charlotte: …And… I think the fact that Sarah Ruth died ‘cause like I had to go through that when my cousin died and it was just really hard ‘cause they had just released her from the hospital and then she collapsed.

Katie: Oh, that’s too bad.

Charlotte: So, um, but I think that helps you to learn to love them more.

Three of her applications of ideas in DiCamillo’s novel involved the ability to love and relationships with people. Additionally, she often made personal connections in the midst of articulating these applications.

The idea of developing a life plan surfaced as Charlotte talked about identifying with the character of Bull in the story: “I think, um, with Bull I could identify a lot with him.” She said that Bull was walking all the time, but never going anywhere. She likened this to life, again using “you” to relate her idea to the reader.

Charlotte: I think it’s ok like if you’re going on a trip to the United States. If you don’t have it all planned out I think that’s ok cause you might end up seeing something really fun. But, but in life if you don’t intend to have a dest—if you don’t have a destination then you’re not really going to do well so…
By discussing the character of Bull, Charlotte talked about the idea of wandering in the context of a life journey. I asked Charlotte about her “destination” and she explained that she intends to get married, have a family, and become a midwife. She also said that she wanted to go to college. Connecting with Bull, she discussed that someone can have many different options in life, and even if one reaches a destination, “it’s just like now where do I go?” Charlotte said that one is always “traveling,” in a way.

She also articulated lessons implicit in *Mouse* through her ideas about the story. She stated that the most important part of the story was the fact that the mouse and his child were together throughout the entire book. She said, “…like the child was very positive and the father was kind of negative but they always stuck together.” Later, she highlighted the relevance of the toy mice’s journey for the reader by sharing what she thought was a lesson in the story:

Charlotte: Um, well I think I learned from the father and the child to endure like to, to not give up when one, ‘cause they went through a lot.

Katie: Yeah they did.

Charlotte: And they did not give up when one little thing happened.

She remarked that the father almost gave up, but the toy mice reached their destination, largely due to the mouse child’s perseverance. The wisdom of staying optimistic and persevering surfaced as Charlotte connected an aspect of *Edward Tulane* with *Mouse*.

Charlotte: And I think the mouse father and Edward had something in common because Edward was kind of prideful and negative but then he learned to be positive in the end and so did the mouse father.
She also developed a principle out of the story related to the character of Manny Rat and his transformation. Considering if people that do bad things can change, Charlotte stated that “there’s got to be some effort put into it.” Earlier, she said that there is hope, even for the most evil of people: “probably love something like that, something that no matter how evil you are you can still find some of that somewhere in you so like hope, something like that.” Additionally she said, “And they probably need someone to help them like you know they can't do it by themselves.” Her comment indicated that she realized the importance of relationships in the context of a person’s character transformation.

The Divine

As we talked about Edward Tulane, I asked Charlotte if anything in the book reminded her of God. She said “the stars were kind of like God.” When Edward was on the pole as a scarecrow, “[he] told his troubles to them. And God’s kind of like that. And…yeah.” This certainly links to her perception of God as someone who watches over everyone, as stated during our first interview. In the next sentence, she said,

And then when the stars were mocking him. ‘Cause when we get into bad fortune, and we haven’t believed in God enough, God will mock you so, and it seemed like he hadn’t loved enough so…

Charlotte’s comment pointed to a causal relationship between Edward’s earlier inability to love Abilene, and his subsequent trials and separations from people.

When I asked Charlotte if anything in Mouse made her think about God, she first replied, “Not really, no, it was kind of an unreligious story, sort of.” Immediately after this sentence, she said:
But partly Muskrat because God doesn't always make sense and Muskrat didn't really make sense and sometimes God will like change the subject or something so you know you're asking can I get married and he then sends you on a mission trip, and you get hooked on it or something and you know you spend your whole life as a missionary, you know, you never know what would've happened, kind of like my favorite movie which is *It's a Wonderful Life*, but um yeah it's kind of like that.

Earlier in our discussion about puzzling aspects of the story, she mentioned how Muskrat changed the subject while the mouse and his child were talking to him about becoming self-winding. Charlotte questioned this, and thought it both “crazy” and “very strange.” As she discussed God being like Muskrat, though, she said that “…the thing is God always answers no matter, you never hear him or anything, you never actually hear him talking but sometimes his answers is wait for an answer, so then you just have to trust him.”

**The Mysterious: Interpreting Edward’s Near-Death Experience, Pellegrina’s Character, Frog’s Fortune, and Infinity**

*Edward’s Near-Death Experience*

As she responded to *Edward Tulane*, Charlotte, like Roland (at first) and Patrick, perceived the cover as a dream. When I asked her what she thought about this dream, she stated, “I thought if it were real, it would be really good.” Charlotte explained that in a dream one has no limits, which is why Edward is able to walk. Unlike the other participants, Charlotte did not talk at great lengths about this chapter in the novel.
**Pellegrina's Character**

Charlotte did not bring the character of Pellegrina up in her summary of the novel, but later said that the story Pellegrina told Abilene and Edward helped Edward during his journey. In the same discussion, she also mentioned Sarah Ruth’s death as helping him, in a way. I asked Charlotte her thoughts on the character of Pellegrina and she replied, “I think she just represents a mysterious character…It’s fun when books have characters like that.” She also wondered aloud about the story Pellegrina told shortly after she said it helped Edward.

Charlotte: Um, I wondered sort of why she said he disappointed her. Um…

Katie: That was interesting.

Charlotte: Um, and I wonder why she told that story ‘cause it seemed like it was kind of, it was a really suspenseful story so I wonder why she told that.

Charlotte’s comments point to her grappling with the nature of the story in the context of the teller, and attempting to think through the significance of the tale.

**Frog’s Fortune**

Like the other participants, Charlotte discussed Frog’s fortune and offered an interpretation of its significance. For example, I asked her why she thought the mouse child was comforted by looking at the dog star:

With that I think it was because, did the frog say something about or some fortune teller said like a dog shall rise and a rat shall fall? So I think maybe he was comforted because the dog was in the sky and like that's about as high as you can go.
Here she fills in a gap, suggesting that the mouse child remembered the fortune that Uncle Frog had given the toys, and accordingly situated it in light of the rising dog star.

Charlotte: And I think that was part of the reason well part of the reason that they kept going because they knew that he was going to be destroyed in the end or something like but with, you can't always, you can't really tell that like nowadays. She attributed significance to Uncle Frog’s fortune in the unfolding of the plot, suggesting that it helped to keep the toy mice fixed on their goal.

Infinity

In her discussion of Mouse, Charlotte talked about the notion of infinity. She seemed amused by the fact that the characters throughout the story were “always talking about the last visible dog.” As the conversation led into the toy’s grappling with infinity, I asked Charlotte what she thought about the meaning of the word:

I think about something that has no beginning and no end so, or like something that will last forever like one of those things is probably love, something like that. Something that no matter how evil you are, you can still find some of that somewhere in you. So like hope, something like that.

I asked her if this idea tied in with Manny Rat and she replied, “Mmm hmm, cause you think Manny Rat can never change, he’s so evil and mean, but that he does change in the end.”

Charlotte’s responses to the two novels featured a significant tendency to articulate applications of the stories’ ideas and “lessons.” As a result, her discussion related to the first category of themes in the children’s spiritual readings of the texts more
than the other categories. I conclude my sharing of the study’s findings by discussing the fourth participant, Patrick, and his responses to the two novels.

Patrick

At the time of the study, “Patrick” was ten years and one month old and in the fourth grade. The same friend who gave my contact information to Roland’s family also connected me to Patrick and his family. As a result, Patrick’s mother emailed me, letting me know that Patrick loved to read and would be interested in the study. I arranged to go to Patrick’s home on a weekday evening to meet him and conduct the first interview.

Patrick’s mother, “Anne,” welcomed me into the home, and I sat on a couch in the living room, surrounded by bookshelves, while Patrick sat at the other end. With brown hair and bright blue eyes, he sometimes gazed out the large front window, and would often pause before responding to questions. Patrick’s mother and father are both botanists working at the university, and his mother is currently finishing her Ph.D. in the subject, while his father already has his Ph.D. He has one younger sister who is seven years old, and they both attend a local elementary school. The family keeps a cat, who was sleeping indoors when I arrived. An avid reader, Patrick said that he spent a lot of time with books, and then added: “Well, the whole family reads a lot. Like you sort of figured that out.” He gestured to the book-filled room. Patrick and his family have lived in Pennsylvania for as long as he can remember.

Patrick shared that he liked school “as much as anybody could ever like school.” With friends at school and church, he enjoys running around and “going crazy.” Patrick likes to work with origami and collect items with which he creates new objects. Music is very important to him, and in addition to singing in the choir he plays the piano, some recorder, and the trumpet in the school band. He enjoys the outdoors, but does not
particularly like strenuous activities, such as hiking mountains. Camping each summer was a regular activity for the family.

Patrick and his family attend the local Mennonite church, and he explained that Children’s Church took place once a month with Bible study and crafts, but no music. He didn’t like the fact that they have no music, since he enjoys being in the choir at school. As part of a large group, he described singing as a “thrilling” experience. He said he enjoys listening to the pastor’s sermons, because his pastor uses stories to make his points. For those in the church, issues of social justice are important. Patrick mentioned a Mennonite group in which his parents participate. The group has sent relief and helped out in countries such as Honduras and Haiti. He said that peace is important—world peace, explaining that it was a priority “because we go to the Mennonite church.” For Patrick and his church family, the natural world is also extremely important. He said that it sometimes makes him cry when he thinks of how people are destroying the environment, and that people should protect the earth.

Patrick reads often and at a fairly rapid pace. He enjoys fantasy the most, mentioning Brian Jacques’ *Redwall* series as well as Lloyd Alexander’s *Chronicles of Prydain* as examples of good fantasy (Jacques, 1986-2011; Alexander, 1964-68). He remarked that it was difficult to choose a favorite book, but said he especially liked the entire *Redwall* series. For Patrick, the best kind of book included a combination of both adventure and humor, and he felt the *Redwall* series possessed this criteria. In the *Redwall* series, Jacques includes rich, detailed descriptions of the feasts, and such passages made Patrick “very exceedingly hungry.” For him, these sections in the novels were “poetic.” He tied the idea of engaging the readers’ senses with how his writing
teacher encourages the students to include detail in their own stories. Another series that Patrick highlighted in terms of its humor was the *Percy Jackson* series (Riordan, 2005-2011).

Complicated plots drew Patrick to Alexander’s *Chronicles of Prydain* and he discussed specific plot twists in some of the books in which the author “does things you don’t expect.” Patrick is currently reading *A Wrinkle in Time*, a book he says he loves (L’Engle, 1962). He thought it would be “cool” to combine science fiction and fantasy by mixing the *Percy Jackson* series with *A Wrinkle in Time*.

In addition to fantasy novels, Patrick also enjoys survival stories. Highlighting Gary Paulsen’s *Hatchet* and Jean Craighead George’s *Julie of the Wolves*, Patrick is also drawn to nonfiction, especially books in the *Eyewitness* series (1987; 1972; DK Publishing). He stated that he returns to informational texts again and again, but not always for the same purpose:

Like, maybe there was an Eyewitness book about art and there is a picture in it that I really, really liked and then later I said, hey I want to try and do something like that so then so then I go to the library and check out the book and…

Patrick appeared knowledgeable about many subjects, and perhaps his tendency to investigate, research, and read widely contributed to this. He did not favor one genre over the other, but explained that he liked both fiction and nonfiction the same, but for different reasons. I recognized that Patrick most likely shifted from an efferent reading stance to an aesthetic one based on the genre of book he was reading.

In response to my question, “What do you think God is like?”, Patrick prefaced his response by stating that he wasn’t going to say whether he was an evolutionist or
creationist. He said he didn’t think Adam and Eve were real people, but he understands
the Bible as making a point about something. He described God as a person who starts a
car, which represents earth, and guides it. He also said that God will lock the car to
protect it. He conceptualizes God as a figure who started the Earth and is stepping back to
allow humans to manage it.

Well, so, like God is like this guy so he walks out to his car and turns it on…And
he drives it and he guides it along, it helps it not to crash although sometimes,
sometimes it does crash which would be like the world wars and stuff because of
course we’re representing God as human, and humans aren’t perfect and so and
I’m and I guess maybe one day he’ll turn the car off.

He said that we can’t describe God—it is beyond our conception. I suggested that he
spoke about it like it was a mystery, and he agreed with the usage of the word “mystery.”

I asked Patrick if he thought that God was involved in the lives of people.

Patrick: Yes.

Katie: Okay, yeah, tell me why you think that.

Patrick. Well, he answers prayers, I guess….Well, not all of them. Like if he sees
fit.

Katie: Have you, um, have you ever felt like you had God answer one of your
prayers?

Patrick: Yes.

Katie: Okay, well, can you give me an example?

Patrick: I don’t really remember but like…

Katie. But you know that—
Patrick: Maybe like getting rid of a cold or something.

I referred back to an earlier conversation about whether God speaks to people, through dreams, for example, and Patrick mentioned the Biblical character of Joseph. I then asked him if God still spoke in this way today, and he said, “Yeah, I suppose, although we might not have people like Joseph to tell us what it means.”

Did books ever make Patrick think about God? In response to this question, he brought up *The Chronicles of Narnia* and mentioned that the lion, Aslan, is meant to represent God (Lewis, 1949-1954). He described Aslan as “majestic, loving, and caring.” Another book that made him think of God and heaven was the *Redwall* series (Jacques). He talked about The Dark Forest and mentioned that it is almost like Heaven but “not as pleasant.”

When I asked Patrick about the most important parts of life, he mentioned the natural world, protecting the earth, helping other people, world peace, and music. We talked about connecting to God through music, and Patrick realized that one way of helping others was through music, so in this sense the two overlapped.

It was snowing the December afternoon I visited Patrick’s house to talk to him about his ideas of *Edward Tulane*. We sat in our same seating arrangement as our first meeting, on the couch in front of a long window looking out into the front yard. Patrick’s sister sat reading in a chair on the other side of the living room while Patrick and I talked about the book. Patrick would often look out the window during our discussion, staring at the falling snowflakes.

**Applications of the Central Ideas in the Stories**

Patrick’s response to my question about the most important thing in the novel was to bring up the story Pellegrina told Abilene and Edward.
Well, one interesting thing was the story that the grandmother told. It was just sort of different. Like nobody lived happily ever after.

During his summary of the story he had mentioned that this story within a story was important for the rest of the book, and I asked him to tell me why he thought it did not have a happy ending. He explained that it was because “the princess was not a nice princess.” Pellegrina’s story seemed to represent, to Patrick, an aspect of one of the central points in the novel. I asked him if he thought the novel would be different without Pellegrina’s story in it: “Well, it might not of, I think it’s, it’s sort of highlights one of the main points of the book which is sort of hard to explain but I mean it might’ve gotten across but maybe not as strongly.” This “main point” reflected a similarity to the central ideas of the novel that the three other participants articulated: “That if you don’t like love people you, you aren’t going to be a happy person.”

Patrick did not find any lessons in Mouse, and he said that “nothing really kind of grabbed me.” When I asked him what the most important idea in the story was, he replied, “Well, Manny Rat gets good.” I asked him then why he thought this was significant and he said, “Well, at first it looked like he was going to be like, you know, the sole bad guy who ends up dying at the end and everybody lives happily ever after.” I asked him if he had expected Manny Rat to die at the end and he answered, “Sort of.” A little later in the interview we returned to the topic of Manny Rat “becoming good” and I asked Patrick if he thought that “people that do really bad things can change?” He shared, “Mmmm, yeah, they could change. They often don’t.”
The Divine…Or Not

When I asked Patrick if anything reminded him of God in Edward Tulane, he said, “Mmm, not really.” I asked the same question about Mouse and his reply was similar: “Um, not really.”

The Mysterious: Interpreting Edward’s Near-Death Experience, Frog’s Fortune, and Infinity

Edward’s Near-Death Experience

Patrick’s comments about the cover illustration of Edward Tulane, which depicts Edward’s dream/near-death experience, reflected awareness that events are circular, and conclude with a return to the beginning. He interpreted the meaning of the cover illustration of the novel as a “coming back idea” because Abilene finds him again. He suggested that the house represents Abilene’s house, and his ideas indicate that the cover symbolizes the conclusion of the story—the fact that he does end back with Abilene. I then asked Patrick about the part in the novel when Edward is thrown on the ground by the owner of the diner. He interrupted me and asked, “Oh, was it like a dream?” I responded, “Do you think that was a dream? He replied, “Yeah.” I then asked him what he thought the meaning of the dream might be and he said that he did not remember because it had been awhile since he read the book. I then summarized the chapter for Patrick, and when I talked about the part in which Edward tries to fly up into the sky, I asked him why Edward attempted to fly.

Patrick: Because of the constellation.

Katie: The Sarah Ruth constellation. So what do you think that means, why did they call it the Sarah Ruth constellation?

Patrick: Well, it was the brother of the girl that had died and I guess he felt like…
Katie: He felt like he wanted to go up there?

Patrick: Or he felt like he wanted to make a constellation.

After a brief review of this passage in the book, as demonstrated by these comments, Patrick shared interesting insight about Edward’s dream.

We talked about other books Patrick had read that featured dreams in them, and he mentioned the *Redwall* series by Brian Jacques.

Patrick: …they’re always having visions and stuff.

Katie: Ok, so how are those visions important to the plot?

Patrick: Well, like the spirit of Martin the warrior is telling them what to do, etc., etc.…And turning it into a riddle so that’s always interesting.

The notion of dreams as guidance or direction is a concept that emerges in some fantasy texts, but Patrick did not consider Edward’s dream to be direction. During this discussion about dreams in fantasy texts, Patrick’s sister chimed in about the fact that in Sunday School they had been discussing the character of Joseph in the Bible who was a dream interpreter. Patrick then informed me: “I was reading in New Scientist about how sometimes you have a dream where you can actually control your dream’s self.” This led into further discussion about lucid dreaming and the dreams depicted in the Bible.

*Frog’s Fortune*

Patrick shared a few thoughts about the character of Uncle Frog, but he did not talk about the fortune given to the mouse and his child for long. He said that he had expected Uncle Frog to play a very minor role in the book, but discovered as he read further that this expectation was not quite accurate:
Well, I didn’t think, I think he was just going to be, well, one of those character’s who’s not going to very involved in the story and he’ll just like go away and be forgotten about. That actually didn’t really happen.

I asked him what he though about the fortune he gave the toy mice. He replied, “I wasn’t…I’m not quite sure.”

Infinity

Like the other participants, Patrick made noteworthy statements about his conception of infinity during our discussion of Mouse.

Patrick: Well, it’s not really, really something…It’s more like an adjective.

Katie: Okay, that’s good. So if it’s more like an adjective, would you use that adjective to describe anything?

Patrick: Well, like the dogs on the Bonzo dog food can are infinity… Because you know like asking what is infinity it's asking like what is seven or what is ten.

Well, ten would be ten of something. Well, what is ten? It always comes back to this same thing.

Patrick’s comments reflected a confidence in understanding the nature of the usage of the word, infinity. He also shared his ideas about the logic of Muskrat’s equations.

Katie: Tell me, what were the parts you really liked in the story?

Patrick: Um, I thought that the beaver was funny….All his equations….if you wanted to makes them more realistic I think you would probably use addition rather than multiplication.

Katie: You think?

Patrick: Because you know, like trap groups of them. (laughs)
Patrick also chose to draw a picture of the Bonzo dog food can at the bottom of the pond for his artwork in response to the novel. This was the same content that Roland chose for this picture, except Patrick’s dog food can took up the entire picture (see Figure 4).

![Patrick’s Drawing in Response to *The Mouse and His Child*](image)

Using pencil, he placed the can in the center of the twelve by twelve inch white piece of paper, and created a dog carrying the can of dog food, and this continues into the distance. Some seaweed takes up part of the left side of the picture and Patrick used large squiggles to represent the water of the pond. Before he drew the picture, Patrick had
commented that the illustration in the novel helped the textual description of the dog food can. He said that the textual description was a good one, but he also felt that the visual depiction of the can added to the understanding of the concept. As Patrick talked about his drawing, he said that he drew squiggles on the smaller dog food can because he couldn’t fit any smaller images of cans. Patrick explained the idea as simply popping into his head: “I just think about, like, well, oh what can I draw, and pop.” He said he did not include the toy mice because he portrayed the moment before they arrived at the bottom of the pond. Patrick was not shy to suggest his interpretations and thoughts about infinity or Hoban’s strange mathematical equations.

Patrick’s responses featured more discussion about some mysterious aspects of the two novels than talk about the central ideas in the stories or about the Divine. He often made logical conclusions about cause and effect in the narratives. In his responses to both novels, Patrick made connections to other topics with which he was familiar or had read about. His discussion also reflected a logical perspective of events that other readers might consider having magical or unexplainable origins. Sharing that he was not a superstitious person, Patrick assumed that the happenings in the narratives were more coincidental than anything else. Additionally, when we talked about strange or unconventional aspects in *Mouse*, Patrick would often respond with “I thought that was sort of random.”

After I developed labels for the themes that reflected the children’s spiritual discourse, I considered how they could be situated within the research on children’s spirituality. In the next chapter I include my analysis and interpretation of these findings.
I explore the children’s responses in dialogue with one another, as well as in dialogue
with research into children’s spirituality and reader-response theory.
Chapter 6.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I present my analyses of the children’s verbal and some of their artistic responses in terms of the research questions of this study. I consider patterns across the children’s responses related to themes in their spiritual readings of the two fantasy novels. Specifically, I compare the children’s discourse with one another and I also contextualize my findings by discussing how they reinforce, extend, or challenge the existing research in the field of children’s spirituality and literature. As discussed in Chapter One, I was interested in the nature of children’s spiritual engagement with a story. I aimed to describe what it meant for a child when a work of literature encouraged his/her reaching beyond the immediate, present reality.

Articulating Applications of the Central Ideas in the Stories

Issues of the Heart

The children’s responses about the central ideas in both novels reflected their engagement with issues of the human heart and struggles in the human experience. These findings resonate with Pike’s research of young adults’ spiritual responses to poetry (2000). As Pike’s students read and responded to poetry, they discussed serious spiritual topics including issues surrounding human nature and the problem of evil. The children in this study discussed both of these issues through reflection on the character of Edward Tulane and his struggle to love others, and on the issue of Manny Rat’s transformation in Mouse. Though the protagonists of each novel were toys, the children seemed to have no trouble relating the characters’ experiences to their applications of ideas for readers. This discourse across the interviews thus revealed patterns pointing to the children’s ability to situate the issues in the novels within the human experience.
In the context of *Edward Tulane*, Leonora, Roland, and Charlotte suggested that people should not be selfish during hard times; there will be difficult moments for everyone. All four of the children mentioned that in order to be happy, one has to love others. For *Mouse*, Leonora, Roland, and Charlotte emphasized an understanding of the theme of perseverance woven into the narrative. Patrick’s understanding of the central idea was tied up in Manny Rat’s redemption. In this way, the children’s responses revealed a similarity in that they engaged with the human tendency to keep going and not give up, or, as in Patrick’s case, the ability for someone with evil character to transform. In this way, one pattern across their responses was engagement with challenges and issues in the human condition.

Based on the frequency of the children’s discourse about the meaning of the protagonists’ sufferings and journey, it seemed important for them to articulate the meaning of the protagonist’s experience for readers. Many of them highlighted the suffering and pain the characters endured during their journeys, but according to the children’s discussion of the plots, somehow it all paid off. I discovered the pattern to reflect their extracting of what happened to Edward and the mouse and his child, and the lessons they learned, and articulating these as an important idea. The lessons or ideas all related to common experiences in the journey of the human life. Hart mentions that one aspect of the “secret spiritual world of children” is the ability to “see through the eye of the heart” (2003, p. 271). The children’s responses point to the fact that they recognized significant issues of the heart within both novels. These issues include the importance of keeping one’s heart open to new relationships, avoiding selfishness, persevering during difficulty, recognizing that people’s character can change, and believing that hope is
powerful. Their filling in gaps to make moral and spiritual meaning from the stories resonates with Pike’s study exploring how young adults drew spiritual meanings from poetry (2000).

**Child-People Connection**

Many of the children’s comments indicated their understanding of the importance of the toy mice’s connections with others in order to achieve their goal. Their expressions of a central idea or lesson in both novels related to relationships with others, and this affirms Nye’s ideas that spiritual expressions can be situated within the child-people connection (1998). In addition to Nye’s research, this category of the children’s experience of the text resonates with others that highlight how spirituality is frequently expressed within community and connections, pointing to a justification for why people often talk about spiritual ideas in this context (Hart, 2006; Hull, 1984; Roehlkepartain, 2004). The three children that spoke about the theme of perseverance highlighted the significance of the other characters assisting the mouse and his child during their journey, and this talk emerged at different points in the conversation. Leonora and Charlotte often talked about friendship and their relationships, frequently linking their own experiences with those in the story. The discourse of the two girls in all of the interviews about their connections reinforced the idea that children’s relationships can feature a strong role in the expression of children’s spirituality.

**Value Sensing**

The children’s responses resonated with Hay and Nye’s research about categories of spiritual sensitivity. One category, value sensing, seemed especially relevant in the context of the children’s discourse about what was most important in the stories. Their value sensing emerged through their highlighting areas of meaning in relation to the
human experience, particularly in the category of relationships. Their value sensing in the context of discussing the central ideas of the novels can also be connected with the value sensing I encouraged when I asked them to talk about the most important parts of life. All four children mentioned the importance of other people in their answers; Leonora and Roland said that family and friends were important while Charlotte and Patrick pointed to loving and helping others. As a result, their value sensing in the novels also related to what they considered most important in life.

Thinking about the Divine….Or Not

The children’s discourse about the Divine in the context of the novels was certainly shaped by my asking them if anything reminded them of God in the stories. However, this question revealed significant insight about the connections between a Divine source and the stories. Like Trousdale, encouraging the children to think about connections between the Divine and literary works might result in future readings that “resonate on deeper levels of spiritual insight” (2005a, p. 37). Leonora found nothing in Edward Tulane that reminded her of God, while Roland and Charlotte both discussed aspects of the story that reflected their perception of the Divine. Patrick found nothing in either Edward Tulane or Mouse that made him think about God, while Leonora, Roland, and Charlotte all mentioned characters that reminded them of the Divine. Charlotte connected her ideas about God in the novels with her own construction of God explicitly, while Leonora and Roland’s discourse only implied connections between their ideas and their previous depictions of the Divine. This is similar to what Trousdale discovered in her study of children’s responses to literary texts. Her findings also revealed diversity in the children’s perceptions of God in the stories: “in some cases the children seemed to be
influenced by both text and tradition; in some cases their responses seemed more predominantly influenced by the text” (2005a, p. 34).

**Mystery Sensing**

Leonora, Charlotte, and Roland’s discourse about the Divine can be understood as an example of “mystery sensing” in the context of Hay and Nye’s categories of spiritual sensitivity. This mystery sensing operated through the use of their imagination, for as Hay and Nye state, “To investigate mystery requires the imagination to conceive what is beyond the known and what is ‘obvious’” (1998, p. 72). As the children considered characters that reminded them of God in the story, perhaps they were grappling with the mystery of what God is like. Additionally, their conceptions of the Divine in the stories could be situated within their earlier descriptions of God. Hay and Nye discuss the imagination in the context of mystery sensing by highlighting its importance particularly in the context of talking about religious issues: “Imagination is central to religious activity through the metaphors, symbols, stories and liturgies which respond to the otherwise unrepresentable experience of the sacred” (1998, p. 73).

Though Leonora did not say that *Edward Tulane* reminded her of God, her discussion of the Divine earlier in our conversation is significant. When she shared the most important idea of the novel as avoiding selfishness and keeping one’s heart open, she talked about God’s plan in the case of a best friend moving away. The fact that she spoke about the Divine in the context of her response to the story reveals that she was comfortable sharing her ideas about God. Furthermore, her discussion of the Divine at this point reinforced her conception of God as caring. Out of the four children, she was the only one who brought up God within her response to the novels without any
prompting from me. Charlotte had volunteered ideas about who symbolized God in other books she had read, but not in the context of Edward Tulane or Mouse.

In Mouse, the character of Muskrat reminded both Leonora and Charlotte of God. For Leonora, Muskrat “helped” the mouse and his child. She brought up the fact that he died, but he had intended to fix them. This conception of the Divine through the character of Muskrat was surprising, and did not resonate as much with Leonora’s earlier description of what she thought God was like. Unlike Leonora, Roland talked about the Divine in the context of both novels.

In Edward Tulane, Sarah Ruth made Roland think about God. Roland showed no difficulty in considering a representation of God that was not a male character. He actively filled in gaps in the text and illuminated a telling spiritual perspective of Sarah Ruth’s character by highlighting the power of her love in Edward’s life, even after her death. In Mouse, Roland’s perception of God as the hobo was justified with the idea that the tramp prophesies. Someone with a prophetic ability may be closer to the Divine, so this conception of God in the novel is significant. This idea can also be situated within Roland’s earlier notion of God as representing the past, present and future; the perception of the Divine as outside of time, and the hobo’s prophetic awareness of the toy mice’s steps reveal similarities. Roland’s picture of God as an old, wise man with a beard and white hair links to the hobo in the novel, since his prophetic ability can be considered a type of wisdom. Charlotte was reminded of the Divine in the novels in quite different ways than Roland.

As evidenced during our first interview, she was familiar with thinking about the Divine in the context of narrative. For example, she would sometimes share her
interpretations of characters that symbolized spiritual entities. For example, Mrs. Rottenmeier in *Heidi* reminded her of Satan “because she’s so mean” and the blue fairy in *Pinnochio* represented God. I did not ask Charlotte to supply these interpretations, but she wove them into her comments about her favorites books. Her discussing the blue fairy as God went a step further in that she commented that the blue fairy is able to do miracles, “and that kind of shows that God can do miracles.” This represents another example of how considering God in a text might illuminate his attributes in a unique way.

In *Edward Tulane*, the stars reminded Charlotte of God. She made an explicit connection between her idea of what God is like and her conception of him in the text by highlighting that he may mock us if we have not believed in him enough. Framed by her earlier depiction of the Divine as one who is very glorious and watches over everyone, this picture of God as the stars makes sense.

Though at first Charlotte said that *Mouse* did not remind her of God because it was largely an “unreligious” story, she very soon after began discussing the character of Muskrat as a possibility. Like *Edward Tulane*, she connected her ideas of God explicitly through her explanation that Muskrat does not make sense, and sometimes God does not make sense either. However, during her summary she had shared that the toy mice’s encounter with Muskrat was one of her favorites. In light of this depiction of God in the text, perhaps it indicates that for her confusion or complexity is not necessarily negative. Charlotte’s further discourse about a hypothetical situation in which one asks God for an answer points to her attempt to illuminate the link between Muskrat and the Divine. Though it was a different parallel than the one Leonora drew, it is significant in how it revealed Charlotte’s perception of the Divine more deeply.
Though Patrick did not talk about the Divine in either of the stories, and said that neither novel reminded him of God, I aimed to keep Schoonmaker’s advice in mind (2009). She urged researchers to recognize and pursue discussion around what the children find important in a story, rather than what they, the adults, consider significant and worthy of discussion. Patrick’s responses to the novels did reveal significant insight about some of the more mysterious or supernatural aspects of the narratives.

The Mysterious: Edward’s Near-Death Experience, Pellegrina’s Character, Frog’s Fortune, and Infinity

The children often provided insight into aspects of the stories that reflected supernatural or mysterious dimensions. In some cases of the children’s discussion, they were engaged in mystery sensing, similar to what happened as they discussed the Divine in the stories. This manifested through the children’s imagining of what is beyond the known in the context of particular events in the novels. I separated these two aspects of their responses due to the fact that discourse about the Divine is more specific, and the mysterious or unknown aspects of life can relate to a broader class of phenomena. In my review of the literature on research into children’s spirituality and their responses to literary texts, I did not find as much work relating to children’s engaging with more mystical and mysterious dimensions of stories. As a result, I recognize the need for further research that might either resonate with or challenge the findings of this study.

There were four events or characters in the stories that highlighted ambiguity or mystery. Some of the children discussed these mysterious aspects of the stories more than others. For example, Leonora and Roland brought up some aspects of the stories on their own, and the transcripts revealed a substantial amount of discourse related to this category. Charlotte spoke less about mysterious aspects of Edward but much more when
talking about *Mouse*. Patrick offered interpretations or explanations about potentially supernatural events in both novels, often supplying a logical and well thought out analysis. Leonora, Roland, and Patrick also chose to create artwork about either one or both of the novels that related to their interpretation of a mysterious concept in the story.

I now compare patterns in the children’s responses about each of these dimensions before analyzing their individual reactions.

**Edward’s Dream/Near-death Experience**

Edward’s dream or near-death experience (depending upon the children’s interpretation) elicited both verbal and artistic discourse from the participants that reflected their grappling with what it means to be near death as they supplied interpretations of a crucial moment for the protagonist relating to his inner journey. Of the four children, only Leonora brought up Edward’s near-death experience without my asking her. Leonora constructed the chapter as depicting a near-death experience while Roland at first thought it was a dream but later said Edward was near-death. Charlotte and Patrick discussed it as a dream.

Leonora’s comments took up three pages of the interview transcript, reflecting her interest in this ambiguous chapter. She interpreted what transpired during Edward’s experience, actively filled in gaps in the narrative, and shared her thoughts on what might happen when someone is near death. In this way, the novel acted as a catalyst for discourse from Leonora about what can be perceived as an uncertain and heavy issue: being near death. This discourse can be situated within Leonora’s desire to ask God “what happens when I die,” shared during our first interview. The question of what happens after death constitutes a serious question of meaning, and it is one young and old have been grappling with for centuries. Leonora also chose to focus on Edward’s near-
death experience in his artwork. Wilson and Wilson discovered that a significant number of the drawings of children they analyzed involved the subject of death. They recognized that “Children are no more immune to contemplations of death than any other group” (1979, p. 15).

In addition to providing a space for Leonora to express her ideas about an inevitable aspect of life, death, her speculating about the chapter also revealed deeper thoughts about Edward’s character and the central conflict of the story. Leonora shared her idea that the chapter portrayed Edward making a crucial decision for the plot’s resolution, and her artwork amplified the notion of Edward’s desire for connection. In this way, working through an interpretation about what transpired in an ambiguous chapter of the book engineered deeper understandings of the narrative as a whole.

Her wondering about life after death may also reflect her engaging a serious question of meaning, understood as value sensing in the context of Hay and Nye’s categories of spiritual sensitivity (1998). This resonates with one of the characteristics Hyde discovered when researching children’s spirituality, “spiritual questing” (2008c). One aspect of spiritual questing involved the children talking about major issues and values of life (p. 125). Hyde discovered that the children’s search for meaning was not always expressed in the context of their religious framework. Certainly, Leonora’s comments reflect her thinking about life after death, but this thinking was not explicitly situated within the beliefs of her religious tradition. Though Roland first understood Edward’s experience as a dream, he eventually suggested that it was a near-death experience.
Also like Leonora, Roland asked questions, offered interpretations, and revisited the chapter in the novel. As he re-examined the events in the chapter and interpreted them, he concluded that, “it was sort of like death.” He shared an insightful interpretation of the significance of Edward’s dream or near-death experience by connecting it with a larger theme in the narrative related to the importance of being open to relationships. His understanding that Edward’s friends in his dream tried to keep him on the earth pointed to his perception of the experience’s importance within the story. Like Leonora, his comments during our first interview reflected an interest in what happens after someone dies. During this first interaction he had expressed uncertainty, speculated, and considered life after death in the context of Biblical story. He had also suggested that one might be near death and catch a glimpse of Heaven. Thus, his speculating of and interpreting Edward’s near-death experience can be situated within this earlier wondering about life after death.

Roland discussed his own dreams during all three of our interviews, another dimension of life that can be considered complex and mysterious. While Roland responded to the story, he interspersed his discussion sometimes with discourse about his own dreams. This reflected the frequency and interest of his dreaming in his own life. In fact, talk about Roland’s personal dreaming provided an opportunity for me to ask him about the significance of Edward’s “dream.” All of Roland’s dreams featured either friends or family, and the conflicts in each dream were related to these important relationships in his life. The easy transition between expressions of Roland’s spirituality as manifested through his dreams and his discourse about the more mysterious aspects of the novel engages with Hart’s research (2003). Both Hart’s idea about children’s seeing
the invisible and his suggestion that children can perceive the world in sophisticated, meaningful ways are relevant for these aspects of Roland’s responses. Unlike Roland, Charlotte did not talk about her dreaming in any of the interviews, and only commented briefly on Chapter Twenty-Two in Edward Tulane.

Though Charlotte’s comments about this aspect of the story were brief, they did reveal that she was intrigued by the cover illustration and that she understood dreams to enable the dreamer to do what normally is impossible. To Charlotte, this was a positive aspect of dreaming; she assessed Edward’s dream as “good” if it had been real. Though she did not talk about her own dreaming during the interviews as Roland had, this is something we might have explored more during our conversation. Though Patrick did not talk about Edward’s “dream” as long as Leonora or Roland, he did discuss some potential interpretations of the event.

Patrick understood the purpose of Edward dream as related to the rabbit’s revelation about his relationships with the people in the scene. His comments reflected a difficulty in articulating what he wanted to say. For example, he shared, “Yeah, I think he might, he might be like saying to himself, well I’ve met all these people but is, are they like…were they ever like, were they like ever…I don’t really know how to…” His difficulty in articulating what he was thinking reflected his working through his ideas to express them verbally. This may again reinforce the value in allowing children to respond to literature using multiple sign systems. However, though Patrick sometimes waited and reflected on his answers to questions, his comments revealed an intuitive thinker who took time to consider his words.
Patrick’s suggestion that Edward wanted to fly up to the constellation because he possibly wanted to create a constellation was a little ambiguous to me at first. At the time, I did not ask him to explain further what he meant by Edward creating a constellation in the sky. Only later as I read and re-read the transcripts did I realize that he was possibly pointing to Edward’s death. Sarah Ruth was a constellation in the sky and had died, so one way of interpreting Patrick’s idea is that Edward might have died and would then become a constellation. Though I assumed that Patrick had not thought for long about this portion of the novel, I realized that his difficulty in articulating his thoughts verbally did not necessarily point to a superficial level of reflection about this aspect of the story. It is also helpful to remember Hart’s suggestion that spirituality “lives beyond words, beyond rational ways of knowing” and that children may struggle with expressing their ideas about spiritual concepts or in this case, about concepts that are “beyond the known” (Hart, 2003, p. 214).

**Pellegrina’s Character**

The mysterious character of Pellegrina, the one “responsible for Edward’s existence,” represented a figure that Leonora and Roland labeled as a witch, Charlotte as a mysterious character, and Patrick as the grandmother. Patrick highlighted the importance of Pellegrina’s story for communicating the main point of the book, but did not discuss her as having any kind of magical or supernatural ability. The children’s comments reflected a general interest in a type of character who appears to have a significant role in the story, and yet is shrouded in mystery.

Leonora and Roland, who had both talked at length about Edward’s dream, demonstrated more interest in Pellegrina’s character than the other two participants, at least based on their verbal responses. The children all seemed aware that Pellegrina
played an important role through her telling of the story, and their comments indicated their belief that she did exercise some power over the fate of Edward. For example, Leonora attributed a prophetic ability to Pellegrina while Roland suggested that she cursed Edward. Roland seemed to appreciate the fact that there was a figure in the story that held power over the protagonist. His comments reflected an understanding of the causal relationship between Edward’s response to the story of the selfish princess and his subsequent removal from “home.”

Though Charlotte understood Pellegrina as a mysterious character and Patrick only spoke about her as the grandmother, their responses indicated their understanding of her significant role in the narrative. In this way, though the role of Abilene’s grandmother in the grand scheme of Edward’s journey was only implied, the children recognized a gap in the story they could fill. By filling in such gaps, their responses reflected their understanding of the implicit ideas and principles at work in Edward Tulane. Like Pellegrina’s character in Edward Tulane, Mouse also featured a character that played a significant part in the journey of the protagonists, and embodied mysterious characteristics at the same time.

**Frog’s Fortune**

Uncle Frog’s fortune represented another aspect of Mouse that elicited comments from the children relating to dimensions of life that are mysterious or ambiguous, such as prophecy. As a result, exploring this character and his role in the story opened up an opportunity to further discuss more mystical parts of life, such as the idea of prophecy or dreams. Leonora and Charlotte both discussed the prophetic characteristic of Frog’s fortune, though only Leonora used the term “prophecy” explicitly. Roland did not talk long about Uncle Frog’s fortune, but his response to this part of the story transitioned into
talking about dreams, another dimension of life that can be mysterious and unclear. Patrick was uncertain about what he thought of Uncle Frog’s fortune, but he did refer to him as a helpful character and one that was important in the overall narrative.

Leonora’s responses again reflected her close reading of the text. Her discussion about searching for the meaning of the lines of poetry at the beginning of the novel, and connecting their message to Frog’s fortune reinforce Pike’s idea that reading and responding to poetry can encourage readers’ spiritual discourse (2000). As she went through the passage detailing the fortune in the text, Leonora supplied interpretations for phrases such as “a painful spring” and “a scattering regathered.” She effectively situated Uncle Frog’s fortune within the plot of the story, though its rhetoric at first seemed ambiguous and mysterious. This demonstrated that she was comfortable with working through the meaning of an unclear aspect of the story.

Though Roland did not talk about Frog’s fortune for long, the little he did mention led him into discourse about another mystical topic: as he described Frog’s feelings in the midst of the fortunetelling act, Roland began to talk about the topic of dreams. His transition into talking about his own dream and a Sunday School class on the topic of dreams reflected a transition from one mystical experience to another. Some have considered dreams as mystical messages or as spiritual in nature, and though Roland did not voice this perspective, it seemed noteworthy that he chose to interject his comment at that exact moment. Rather than steer him back to the summary, at that point, I listened to his dreams and we talked about the subject for a few minutes. This is significant to mention because it points to the idea that children’s discourse about spiritual moments in text can acts as bridges into discussion about other spiritual aspects of their lives.
Charlotte’s discussion about Uncle Frog’s fortune connected its message with the reason for the mouse child’s feelings of comfort while observing the dog star. She also highlighted the role of the fortune in energizing the toy mice’s journey. Though she did not explicitly call the fortune a prophecy, her comments implied its prophetic nature through her interpretation of its role for the mouse and his child.

For Patrick, the character of Uncle Frog represented a surprise of sorts since he had assumed Frog would play only a minor role in the story’s plot. He revealed himself as a reader who could remember his earlier assumptions and expectations during the reading process, and afterwards return to these and talk about them. Patrick wasn’t “quite sure” what he thought about Frog’s fortune. However, he later acknowledged that Uncle Frog was a helpful character for the mouse and his child throughout the story, communicating his understanding of the significance of Uncle Frog’s role in the narrative.

Like the character of Pellegrina in Edward Tulane, Uncle Frog delivering a fortune to the toys in Mouse represented an aspect of the novel that provided an opportunity for the readers to share their ideas about something bordering on the mystical and ambiguous. Even if children do not articulate fully formed ideas and interpretations about such aspects of novels, it may be helpful to ask them open-ended questions about these issues, thereby making space for reflection. In addition to Uncle Frog’s fortune, another part of Mouse represented a point of discussion that illuminated telling insight on the part of the participants. The character of C. Serpentina and her ponderings about infinity concern the next section of this analysis.
Infinity

All of the children suggested different conceptions of infinity. While Leonora at first said nothing last forever, she later questioned whether God is infinity. Roland said infinity was money, while Charlotte suggested love or hope, and Patrick explained that it is not a noun, but an adjective. In this way, each of the children’s notions of infinity reflected great variety, and this made for insightful and telling responses. This pattern speaks to Rosenblatt’s argument that every reader brings their unique background and worldview to bear on the text (1978). As a result, the meaning for each reader of any aspect of a literary work can be different.

Leonora’s idea about God as infinity was a tentative question at first, reflecting her thinking through the idea as well as her initial uncertainty as to whether anything deserved the term. She then transitioned into a personal experience that had made her think about infinity. At her school, she and her classmates helped decorate a part of the hallway, and their teacher commented that they would be represented by their work for years and years to come. The notion of their lasting beyond their lives brought up Leonora’s thinking about infinity. This shift from a tentative question that maybe infinity was God to something a teacher said reflected Leonora’s processing a complex concept by applying both her worldview and her experiences.

Hart’s suggestion that even very young children can reflect on philosophical, complex topics is relevant here, particularly in the case of Roland discussing infinity. The fact that Roland asked his parents about the meaning of infinity as a six year-old demonstrates this idea that both Coles and Hart support (1990; 2003). In a way, Roland took the subject position of the mouse child from the text, since it is the child and not the father who asks about the meaning of infinity and grapples with the concept. Some of the
children’s responses amplified Hart’s findings that children’s spirituality is expressed in unique ways and that children’s perception of the world can teach adults something (2003, p.131).

Charlotte’s ideas about infinity affirmed these ideas. One aspect of her conception of infinity reflected her depiction of God during our first interview. Stating that infinity is “something that has no beginning and no end,” her response to the question of what God is like featured the same description. The suggestion that infinity can be conceptualized as love or hope reflects Charlotte’s idea that infinity is not a material object, and yet perhaps it is more important and substantial than anything physical. Her notion of infinity as love is powerful, for she suggested that even in the most evil of persons, a measure of love can be found.

Patrick’s understanding of infinity as an adjective rather than a noun reflected his confidence in talking about a complex concept. He did state that one could not use this adjective to describe many nouns. His confidence may be related to his vast knowledge of subjects, as gleaned from the many nonfiction texts he reads. Additionally, it may be that Patrick has talked about such concepts with his parents or his teachers. Certainly, my first interview with him revealed that he was comfortable talking about scientific issues such as the debate between evolution and creationism. Both Patrick’s verbal and artistic discourse revealed an insightful and observant reflection on the notion of infinity. In the next section I discuss how some of the children’s artwork further amplified their experience of the novels, particularly in the category of their thinking about and grappling with mysterious dimensions of the stories.
The Children’s Artwork as Spiritual Expression

I introduced some of the pictures the children drew in response to the novels in the discussion of my findings. I did not discuss all of the pictures created by the children because not all were relevant in extending or amplifying their experience of the texts in terms of the research questions for this study. However, some of their artistic responses illuminated their deeper engagement with some spiritual aspects of the stories. These were the pictures drawn by Leonora and Roland in response to Edward Tulane and those drawn by Roland and Patrick in response to Mouse. Coles found in his research that exploring children’s pictures helped him to understand the children’s ideas about God and spirituality (1990).

As I examined the children’s artwork in terms of their content and structure, and also analyzed the children’s discussion of their artwork, I recognized themes in the images that connected with the themes in the children’s experience of the texts. These themes illuminated a deeper understanding of the children’s experience of the stories. As Pike mentioned, there is a “potential for spiritual engagement” when children create art and respond to it (2002, p. 13). Certainly, many of the children’s responses related to intangible and ambiguous content in the stories, and as they responded through multiple methods, their experience of the story was deepened.

For example, as I explored the content and structure of Leonora’s picture of Edward Tulane, I discovered that her picture illuminated her further engagement with one mysterious aspect of the story (see Figure 1).
Her picture featured a drawing of Edward attempting to fly up into the sky, the scene discussed in Chapter Twenty-Two. Using three bright, primary colors to color in the most space, Leonora’s drawing did not appear ominous, as the cover might to some readers. She certainly engaged a different color scheme than the one featured on the cover of the novel, using bright red, green, blue, yellow, and purple markers. Black was used to outline the rabbit’s body and wings, for the stars, and for the outline of the moon. Edward appears to have a pleasant expression on his face, but Leonora commented that he is very happy in the picture, and so she made her drawing “really big.” I asked the children
questions about their artwork in an attempt to understand their pictures from their perspective. As Wilson and Wilson have discovered, every drawing contains significance and therefore adults should ask questions and strive to enter the child’s drawing world (1979, p. 37). Leonora effectively expressed a happy atmosphere in his picture through both literal expression, as indicated by Edward’s facial appearance, and through content expression, as reflected by the usage of bright colors (Jolley, 2010, p. 37). His hands are raised in front of him in his attempt to fly, but it almost seems as if he is worshipping the stars and moon. Our perspective of Edward is a closer one than we receive in the illustration on the cover of the novel. Thomas & Silk suggest that investigating the constructed perspective in the illustration provides further understanding of the representation (1990, p. 89) Leonora has chosen to give the viewer a detailed view of Edward’s attempt to fly, and the placement of the stars beneath him imply that he may already be airborne.

Her choice to depict this moment visually reflects Leonora’s deep interest in an event that was not fully explained by the text. She had re-read this chapter in the book, considering it worthy of a second look. Her re-reading, speculation, and interpretation of this moment in the story alongside her drawing all reflect her interest in Edward’s near-death experience. The power of this chapter lies in the gaps it leaves open for the reader, and Leonora did not hesitate to supply potential meanings for such indeterminate sections. By drawing a picture of the scene, she continued to fill in gaps, even after her discussion about the narrative had ceased. As a result, it may be that by asking children to draw a picture related to a book they have just discussed will actually expand the child’s
engagement with the story. Like Leonora, Roland also chose to draw the moment
described in Chapter Twenty-Two, a part of the story that he discussed in great detail.

Roland’s artwork also revealed his further engagement with the content of
Edward’s dream (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2-Roland’s Drawing in Response to The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane](image)

The bottom right half of his picture features the scene in chapter twenty-two, a scene that
is not illustrated in the novel. Though the cover features Edward approaching a large
house, this illustration only concerns the very beginning of his “dream.” Wilson and
Wilson suggest that children create “story drawings” in order “to grasp more fully the
realities of their lives” (1979, p. 13). I wonder if drawing as response to literature is also a way to more fully understand the reality of a literary work. If so, it is possible that the art form was one method that allowed Roland to engage more deeply with the reality of this significant scene in the book. Since this part of Edward’s dream was not visually depicted in the story, it illuminated an aspect of Roland’s aesthetic reading of the text that might not have been captured through his verbal discourse.

Additionally, Wilson & Wilson found that many of the children’s drawings they studied featured themes of death, and in this study both Leonora and Roland chose to depict this near-death moment for Edward. Roland had talked about his interest in what happens after death during our first interview, providing a context for thinking about his artwork of Edward Tulane. Wilson & Wilson suggest that children’s story drawings give them an opportunity to “anticipate their futures, ponder their origins, master life’s processes and rhythms, come to know themselves, and decide how best to behave” (1979, p. 16). This can also apply to children’s artwork created in response to their stories. As he drew one representation of Edward’s near-death experience, Roland was showing his interest in this event in the story as well as providing evidence for his earlier articulated interest in what happens when one dies.

Roland drew Bull, Lucy, Nellie, and Lawrence facing one direction in the picture, and Abilene facing the opposite direction. This structural choice reflects the difference between the first group of people and Abilene; Abilene owned Edward in the beginning and end of the story, while the others met him in the middle of the story, sharing only a brief period of time. Roland reinforced the expression of the figures’ feelings by depicting them with raised arms, reflecting their concern for Edward. Though Roland’s
visual depiction of this chapter differed from Leonora’s in that he chose to draw smaller figures and more of them in his illustration, the two pieces of artwork reinforce the children’s interest in a significant and unclear moment in the story that also served as a pivotal turning point for the protagonist. As they created an artistic depiction of this scene, they gave visual form to a potential answer to the question of meaning of this particular experience. Leonora’s illustration emphasized something about Edward Tulane by highlighting his desire to fly and to be “free.” Roland’s illustration emphasized the significance of Edward’s “life” for other characters. The children’s artwork certainly added noteworthy levels of meaning to their experience of the novel.

The other two pieces of artwork that deserve analysis include pictures created in response to Mouse. Both Roland and Patrick chose to draw the Bonzo dog food can in their illustrations (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). Wilson and Wilson state that “through their concrete visual stories, children are often able to master many more complex cognitive relationships than they can through verbal language” (1979, p. 12). Cox considers drawing as a “constructive process of thinking in action” (2005, p. 123). As Roland and Patrick attempted to depict the impossible concept of infinity visually, they may have engaged with the idea more deeply, especially since they spent some time working on their pictures. By using multiple sign systems to understand a text, “students do not transfer the same meaning, but create new ideas, and so their understandings of a book become more complex” (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000, p. 160). Through drawing children can “symbolically possess” an object (Wilson & Wilson, 1982, p. 36).

Roland chose to draw the Bonzo dog food can label because he thought it would be “fun” to attempt to represent dogs going on forever (see Figure 3).
He used pencil and divided his picture up in a similar way as his illustration for Edward Tulane. The fact that the dog food can is the center of the drawing indicates its importance, and, I suggest, reflects its significance for Roland as it represents a concept he had been wondering about since he was a six year old boy. The placement of the toy mice in the picture makes it look like they are almost a part of the can. This also mirrors the moment when the mouse child spends months and months staring at the infinite line of dogs, attempting to make sense of them, and finally arrives at the conclusion that there is nothing beyond the last visible dog. Roland’s visual depiction of the scene provides a
visual interpretation of a moment that is a difficult concept to comprehend. The size of C. Serpentina also emphasizes the fact that the toy mice were at the mercy of larger and more powerful characters in the story. Even the fish swimming by appears more substantial than the mouse and his child. As a result, Roland’s picture engages with another dimension of the story, particular in the area of the powerful and the weak. Roland did not talk much about his depiction of the Bonzo dog food can in his picture, nor did his artwork seem to reference his earlier comments about infinity. However, the content and structure of the drawing communicate a deeper understanding of some aspects of the story and point to his continued interest and desire to wonder about a complex and ambiguous notion.

Patrick’s picture drawn in pencil situated the dog food can in the center of the page, drawing the eye of the viewer (see Figure 4).
His can resembles a door, in its square-like shape. The idea of the can as a doorway reflects the notion that thinking about infinity is a doorway into the unknown—into the ambiguous. Patrick seemed to want to emphasize the dog food can, and perhaps including the toy mice might have detracted from the can as the focus. The dog food cans, Patrick reminded me, appear throughout the story, and so in a way they represent a character in the narrative. He did not include the mouse and his child in the picture, explaining that his picture captured the time before they arrived at the bottom of the pond. In this way, he
was capturing a visual depiction of a moment in the narrative that is actually not described. The bottom of C. Serpentina’s pond is only introduced in the story when the mouse and his child visit the bottom. This fact illuminates Patrick’s illustration as extending the boundaries of the novel, in a way, through his imagining of a scene before the protagonists enter.

Even though he had not seen Roland’s artwork about *Mouse*, Patrick also included some weeds in the left side of his picture. His can does not feature as many dogs as Roland’s, and he said that he used scribbles because he couldn’t fit any more dogs in the picture to represent infinity. He has, however, created an elegant looking dog with a top hat carrying the “infinite” can. When Patrick described where the idea for the picture originated, he said it was like “pop.” One moment the idea was not there, and the next moment it was.

Though the dog food can was featured in an illustration in the novel, Patrick’s depiction of it in his artwork reflects his taking ownership of the idea of infinity and it also indicates his further thinking through of the concept. Short, Kauffman, and Kahn found that when their students were able to respond to literature through multiple sign systems, this “gave them the opportunity to think more broadly, to consider other ideas, to connect to memories, and to think through feelings” (2000, p. 170).

Besides Coles, there is little research into descriptions of children’s spirituality reflected by their artwork. Specifically, there is not much research into how children’s spiritual responses to literary texts are affected by their artistic discourse. The findings in this study present some patterns about children’s artistic representations of their spiritual responses to books, but these findings can be further expanded or challenged with future
research into the topic. Certainly, providing young readers with the opportunity to respond to literature by creating art can illuminate dimensions of their experience of the text that might not be uncovered through traditional means of asking open-ended questions in an interview.

Summary of Analysis Section

Through my thematic analysis of the children’s verbal responses to the two novels and their artistic responses, I discovered that three categories emerged relating to their experience of the texts in spiritual terms. These included applications of the central ideas in the stories, the divine…or not, and the mysterious. I found that as the children were engaged in responses falling into these categories, they made comments that reflected an allusion to a spiritual dimension of the texts or a spiritual dimension in life. Sometimes these comments were only nascent in spirituality, and other times they reflected clear and pronounced spiritual reflection. Though patterns did emerge in characteristics of the children’s experience of the novels, there were also notable differences that reflected the children’s varying background and interests. Some of the participants’ artwork represented significant data, but not all related to themes in their spiritual experiences of the texts. These differences point to the diversity in children’s spiritual expressions that result in their varying responses to literary works. At the same time, the connections among the children’s responses point to the idea that there may be an essence of the experience that we as researchers can describe and continue to explore.
CHAPTER 7.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

The secret spiritual world of children reminds us to listen for inner wisdom, find wonder in the day, see through the eye of the heart, live the big questions, and peer into the invisible. (Hart, 2003, p. 271)

Conclusions

Experiencing Texts Spiritually, but Not Religiously

As Coles’s research suggests, children are natural philosophers and can talk about complex spiritual matters (1990). Though in some religious traditions adults may perceive young people as needing extra assistance in order to understand spiritual concepts, my experience with these children revealed them as capable of discussing and reflecting on complex and sophisticated aspects of texts, including spiritual dimensions. The children questioned, interpreted, and reflected on complex topics such as perceptions of the Divine, near-death experiences, and infinity. They also drew meaning from the novels in a way that highlighted their understanding of how the toys’ journeys related to the human experience. Some of their responses reflected several dimensions of spiritual sensitivity, as discussed in Hay and Nye’s research (1998). These categories included mystery sensing and value sensing.

Though the participants all possessed religious backgrounds, either Mennonite or Catholic or Protestant, their discussion of the books included a spiritual discourse that was not always explicitly religious. I asked the children whether anything in the book reminded them of God, but as discussed earlier, they did not always find something in the story that encouraged them to think about the Divine. Though some of the children did talk about God when I asked them this question, their responses reflected a perception of God that was not particularly religious. By this I mean that the idea of the Divine as the
character of Sarah Ruth or the Muskrat did not explicitly match a more traditional depiction of God, as might be discussed within the children’s religious traditions. As Coles warns,

Nevertheless, so often our notions of what a child is able to understand are based on the capacity the child displayed in a structured situation. If the child fails to respond to a researcher’s predetermined line of questioning, the researcher is likely to comment on a “developmental” inadequacy. (1990, p. 23)

My findings suggest that adults should not expect children’s spiritual responses to a text to fit their framework of spirituality, though certainly this can happen. What the children’s verbal discourse indicates is that with time and open-ended questions and prompts, adults can encourage young readers to share their ideas about a story in terms of how it relates to the spiritual aspect of life.

All of the children interviewed in this study seemed comfortable enough to respond to the questions I asked about their ideas of God and spirituality. Adults can, with sensitivity and a listening ear, encourage children to share their thoughts about spiritual matters. However, contextual factors should be taken into account such as time, location, and space. Since all four participants were from particular religious traditions and had been raised in homes where attending church was a regular activity, perhaps they were more familiar with conversing about spiritual and religious issues. Discourse that I identified as spiritual within their responses to the texts, however, did not always reflect religious rhetoric. One instance in which a participant spoke about God without any prompting from me was in the case of Leonora sharing her perception of the most important idea in Edward Tulane. She discussed a hypothetical situation of a best friend
moving away, and her example related to Edward’s forming new relationships after he was forcibly separated from those he had grown to love. Leonora situated the predicament within a bigger design, a larger “plan” that God would orchestrate. Certainly, this was a fascinating aspect of Leonora’s response to the novel, but as she and the other participants demonstrated, children’s responses do not have to feature talk about God in order to be spiritual. However, when children do talk about God in the context of a literary work or as part of a topic springing from a story, researchers can encourage them to share their reflections and ideas.

**Perceiving the Divine in Literary Texts**

The diversity in the way the children responded to the question of whether they thought about the Divine in the story indicates that literary works can provide unique opportunities for the expression of children’s perceptions of a Divine source. Asking the children to describe what God was like during the first interview elicited a different type of response than when I asked them if anything in the stories reminded them of the Divine. By considering their perceptions of God in the stories, I gained further insight into the children’s ideas about God, whether their responses were influenced by their earlier depictions of the Divine or not. This points to a diversity in the children’s perceptions of God, and that their ideas about the Divine could be expanded through their consideration of spiritual matters in a story. As Pike suggests, “spiritual attitudes influence reading as well as reading influencing spiritual attitudes” (2004a, p. 123). Sometimes the children’s ideas about the Divine were expressed without any prompting from me, as in the case of Leonora, but it was usually when I asked the children if the stories reminded them of God that they talked about the Divine within the texts. Based on the rich and varied responses of the children, I suggest that we as adults should not be
afraid to ask children their ideas about the Divine in a literary work, but we may need to carefully consider the language we use to ask that question based on the background and worldview of the children with whom we interact.

**Filling in Gaps**

As the children analyzed, interpreted, and speculated about different aspects of the two novels, they actively filled in indeterminate sections of the stories—gaps that were left open for a live reader to complete. Many times the children’s filling in of gaps revealed their reading the texts in spiritual terms. This conclusion suggests that researchers can listen to children’s responses to texts in order to find out more about their spiritual perspectives of those stories, and perhaps even encourage young readers to fill those “indeterminate gaps” in works of literature (Iser, 1978; Schoonmaker, 2009; Trousdale, 2005a).

As research into reader-response has demonstrated, one cannot expect every reader to glean the same central idea from a text. However, I was surprised by the similarity in the children’s responses focusing on the important ideas of *Edward Tulane*, for example. I had expected each child to express a different lesson or main idea of the story, but found that all of their ideas reflected similar sentence structure and vocabulary. Namely, if people want to be happy, they must love others.

**Engaging with Complexity**

Additionally, the children’s responses reflected sophisticated understanding and speculation about the motivations of characters, the authors’ decisions about plot, and the meaning of the stories. As a result, it is helpful to recognize that though some development theories might label younger children as incapable of complex thinking, this is not always the case. Encouraging children to imaginatively engage with stories can be
significant for nurturing their spirituality. As they envision other possibilities and realities beyond the material one, children can accommodate new perspectives and ways of thinking. As Nye has suggested, the imagination can offer children the opportunity to connect more deeply with their spirituality (2009).

**A Spiritual Literacy?**

Nina Mikkelson detailed multiple literacies that child readers employ when responding to fantasy literature (2005). She developed nine categories including aesthetic literacy, which involves

- becoming actively involved in imaginative participation in the work, which leads to searching for meaning and ideas, and discovering a deeper understanding of what it means to live in the story world. (p. 4)

This type of literacy was certainly reflected in the children’s responses, and led me to consider whether researchers could develop a term for a reader’s spiritual lived through experience of a text. Mikkelson does not include “spiritual literacy” on her list, but I wonder if future research about this aspect of children’s meaning making of literary texts would warrant developing such a term. Though the children’s religious literacy was reflected in some of their responses, it seems that the notion of a spiritual literacy is broader and encompasses more aspects of their reading. Since aesthetic literacy refers to the living through of a work, would a spiritual aesthetic literacy relate to a child’s living through of a text in spiritual terms? There are aspects of personal/empathetic and sociocultural literacies that are engaged in young readers as they experience narrative on a spiritual level. However, scholars of children’s literature might consider whether the
field is in need of a more specific term that indicates children’s lived through experience of a text in spiritual terms.

**Artistic Activity as Response to Narrative**

Another conclusion of this study points to the idea that providing children with space and time to create art in response to a literary text may open up deeper levels of engagement with the spiritual dimension of a story. The children’s drawings in this study revealed further insight into the meanings the participants drew from the stories, and their pictures also reflected similarities with one another. Providing children with multiple ways of responding to a text can elicit aspects of their reading experience in a way that discussion questions alone might not (Short, Kauffman, & Kahn, 2000). This study provided limited time for the participants to create artwork, as they drew their pictures at the end of each interview. Future research might provide child readers to spend outside time on their artwork, or provide a longer time of reflection preceding the actual artistic activity. Nevertheless, using multiple sign systems for the expression of children’s responses to narrative can add richness to descriptions of their experiences of literary texts.

**Changing Reading of the Texts**

After talking to the participants of this study about both novels, I realized my own experience of the story in spiritual terms evolved. The children’s discourse about the text inevitably affected and enhanced my vision of the narrative. Rather than disregard this, I considered the ways my perspective of each text evolved through my conversations with the children. My experience reflects the significance of talking with others about stories; our insight and ideas about a text can change as we allow the perspective of others to affect our own.
The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane

Roland helped me to see that chapter seven, describing Edward’s isolation at the bottom of the ocean, highlighted a significant moment for the rabbit, consequently affecting the outcome of the story. This chapter portrays a time of reflection that leads, as Roland argued, to Edward’s ability to open his heart to others. Certainly, his time of seclusion in the ocean depths represents a crucial period, and we can even consider it as a moment before his “rebirth” into a new identity of being able to love and receive love. Furthermore, when he is rescued, he actually does undergo a gender switch, and becomes female, as Nellie calls him “Susanna.” Edward’s life with Nellie and Lawrence reflects the first time he is aware of being interested in someone beside himself. In fact, when he is taken from Nellie and Lawrence, “For the first time, his heart called out to him. It said two words: Nellie. Lawrence” (DiCamillo, p. 78). Roland’s comments about the importance of this scene in the book challenged me to look closer at the text, and to consider how it fit into the overall plot. In this way, I discovered aspects of its significance that I had not noticed earlier.

The Mouse and His Child

My conversation with “Charlotte” gave me more insight into Mouse and the way in which a spiritual reading could be applied. When I asked Charlotte if anything or anyone was looking out for the mouse and his child, she suggested the dog on the bonzo dog food can was looking out for the toys on their journey. For some reason, this dog food can or label kept showing up throughout their travels. The picture on the can’s label features a dog carrying a tray with the dog food can on it, which features a picture of another dog carrying a tray, and the line of dogs continues into the great beyond. As a
result, the dog food can label serves to trigger the discussion about the meaning of infinity that they toy mice have with the sea turtle, C. Serpentina.

The dog food can also represents the idea of infinity as discussed by the mice and the other characters. After Charlotte’s comment, I began to consider a connection between a representation of a Divine source and the dog food can. Since the label is a depiction, it might symbolize a religious text or picture. In fact, the label aided the mouse and his child to persevere in their quest, and in this way it can be understood as having a special status. Perhaps there was a power in this dog food can label—a symbol of luck or favor that ensured the toy mice would make it out of every difficult situation.

**Lessons Learned**

For each discussion of the two novels for this study, the interview framework represented a particular context that inevitably affected the collection of data, and I took this into account during the analysis phase. For example, my second interview with Patrick took place one December afternoon just as the snow began to fall. It had been many weeks since he had finished the novel, and he was gazing out the window at the falling snow. I attributed his short answers to these two factors, but I was aware that there were other forces that might have been at work. Perhaps Patrick was tired or preoccupied with the homework he knew he had to accomplish. Now, looking back, I recognize that I might have taken the time to talk about the falling snow, or waited for Patrick to prompt the discussion of the novel.

For some of the interview settings, a parent was within hearing distance of our discussion. In such situations, I wonder, was the child aware of his/her parent’s presence and did this influence his/her responses? Though I cannot make a judgment on this, it nevertheless may be helpful to recognize that social, cultural, and political forces within
the adult/child relationship play a role in framing the interview situation. I attempted to
remain sensitive to these factors throughout the focused data collection and analysis
phases.

*Paying Attention*

Though I had assumed the children would respond to certain spiritual dimensions
of the novels, I discovered that they did not always talk about what I expected them to
mention in their responses. Moreover, though there were comments that I later
recognized could potentially lead into spiritual discourse, the discussion transitioned into
a different topic or question at the moment when I realized I might have taken more time
to explore a particular idea.

Looking at the transcripts of my interviews with the children, I can see multiple
times where I may have missed opportunities to pursue further explanation about
something a child said. This strongly resonates with what Schoonmaker discovered in her
study of children’s spirituality and their responses to picturebooks (2009). Many times I
was concerned about making sure we had enough time to deal with the important
questions, whereas if I had relaxed and allowed the conversation to flow towards
discovering more about the children’s topics of interest, perhaps they might have
expanded their ideas. At the same time, I do see in the interview transcripts where I did
stop and allow the child to continue on a tangent that I knew was of interest to him or her.
I am certainly glad that I did this.

I recognize my role in shaping the conversation with the children about their ideas
of the books. As Hyde has stated, in a phenomenology, “Meaning and understanding are
codetermined by the particularity of the interpreter and the text itself” (2008c, p. 119).
He points out that the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon is significant within the study, and that meaning is “a fusion of horizons” (2008c, p. 119).

**Implications**

**Implications for Teaching**

As Schoonmaker stated in her article on children’s spirituality and picturebooks, though an interest in children’s spirituality and education is growing, “there is little evidence that this interest has made its way into public school classrooms in intentional ways” (2009, p. 2716). As a result, studies that provide evidence of how language and literacy activities can nurture children’s spirituality could be made available to those educators, curriculum writers, and policy makers that would like to see the classroom as a space where children’s spirituality is stimulated. Studies featuring rich descriptions of children’s experience of texts in spiritual terms might encourage the development of materials for literacy activities that provide students with space to express their spirituality—a lifestyle that is open to awe, wonder, and which encourages the child to reflect on the mysteries of life, and reach out to others in significant ways.

As a result, it is important for the dissemination of research into children’s spirituality, especially as it relates to those working in elementary education. As Myers points out, it is essential that attention to children’s spirituality make its way into “public discourse” (1997, p. 55). The ways in which educators might nurture the spirituality of the child are multiple. Rather than restrict the way spirituality is expressed, Hart suggests that ways to the spiritual vary, and this naturally results in differing methods of spiritual education (2006). Hart outlines ten sources of “power and perspective” that will contribute to the development of children’s “innate spirituality.” Some of these sources include activities such as helping children to discover identity and pursue a life calling.
Other sources focus on nurturing children’s honesty about being themselves and providing them with opportunities to articulate their ideas about the world. Hart also highlights the importance of paying attention to others and developing compassion in the context of activities designed to nurture children’s spirituality.

Children reflect awareness of their spirituality even within early childhood education and thus, it is possible educators, parents, and care-givers can encourage these spiritual expressions (Coles, 1990; Hart, 2003). At “The First National Interfaith, Intercultural Conference on the Spiritual Life of Children” in 1998, Vivian G. Paley stated: “One is struck with awe by what children everywhere have in them before they even start school. Our responsibility is great not to squash those spiritual souls” (1998, p. 115). In order to encourage children’s spirituality, Scheindlin suggests four aims: highlighting the importance of children’s inner lives, cultivating moments of wonder, developing ways to express feelings, and encouraging children’s aesthetic and interpersonal sensitivity (1999). He especially illuminates the importance of a “rich inner life” as a prerequisite for spirituality (p. 193). When discussing the significance of moments of curiosity, wonder, and awe, he states that it is not difficult to “structure learning opportunities in which these emotions may arise” (p. 194). His ideas are also relevant for thinking about investigating children’s spirituality through literature discussion. Any of the four aims he mentions might be applied to a space where books discussion takes place.

**Implications for Research**

There are several possibilities for further research into children’s spirituality and literature. Certainly, the phenomenological method is significant for providing rich descriptions of children responding to literature, and each phenomenology might yield
different insight into what it means for children to respond to literature on spiritual levels. Though this study has provided a rich description of children’s spiritual experiences of literary texts, there is room for further research to broaden and deepen our understanding in this area. For example, a future study might involve conducting a phenomenology with children reading and responding to different genres of children’s literature, and participants might include children of different faiths and none. Other genres that researchers could explore include picturebooks, children’s novels in translation, and folktales. A study focused on small groups of children talking about their responses to literature could also provide fruitful data. This study featured individual interviews with children, but research with children in small discussion groups could also yield significant insight into how children express their spirituality around their peers. Additionally, research involving children of different ages could extend the findings of this study featuring children around the ages of ten and eleven. Either younger children or older children could be important participants for a future study of children’s spiritual responses to literature.

Secondly, few studies have investigated pre-service teachers’ perceptions of spirituality and the language and literacy curriculum, and this is yet another area of potential research. Some have highlighted the significance of teachers’ spiritual lives in the context of engaging their students’ spirituality. Palmer suggests that teachers should seek ways to cultivate their own spirituality if they want to nurture the spiritual dimension of their students (2004). In light of this, researchers might consider developing a qualitative study of how teachers attend to their own inner lives while encouraging spirituality within educational spaces.
How might other methodologies contribute to the scholarly discussion about children’s spirituality and literature? A rich description of the expression of children’s spirituality manifested through their responses to books is helpful, but if pursuing an explanation of the phenomenon, a grounded theory study might be the answer. For example, a study investigating the connections between children’s spirituality and their responses to a work of literature could result in theory explaining how those aspects of a story elicit responses of a spiritual nature. Whereas this study aimed to describe a phenomenon, a grounded theory study seeks to explain.

**Future Studies with Children of Other Faiths or None**

Reflecting on those studies related to the topic of children’s literature and children’s spirituality, I can situate my own investigation within that research and consider those future paths that might be explored. Trousdale’s study of children responding to books featuring spiritual concepts revealed that some books do affect the spiritual development of children (2005a). The results of this study indicate that children can describe aspects of a spiritual understanding of a story, even if that story is not explicitly religious. In light of Trousdale’s study, I understand that further interactions with the children in my study could explore in more detail how their spiritual development might or might not have been affected by their responses to these texts.

Though I did not intend to recruit children of a particular religious background, it just so happened that through “snowball sampling,” the participants for the study all included children who were from families of a religious orientation. Going into recruitment, I was certainly willing to talk to children of any religious faith or none, and a future study with children from Atheist backgrounds or Eastern religions could certainly generate further insight into children’s spirituality. However, the aim of this study was
not to determine if any child could talk about spirituality through their responses to literature. The intent of this study was to describe a small group of children’s individual responses to books, and to explore their spiritual experience, if any, of two specific fantasy texts. Though all the children were of some religious orientation, the questions I asked in order to elicit their experiences of the text in spiritual terms were not loaded with religious rhetoric. One question that was not as open-ended as the others included the question about whether anything in the texts reminded the reader of God, but the children’s religious background provided an opportunity for me to use such language. These same questions could be asked of other children who do not possess a religious background of any kind. I hope to continue investigating children’s responses to texts that reveal their spirituality, and intend to interact with children of other faiths and of none. As Coles discovered, all children are capable of sharing thoughts on spirituality, and even a staunch disbelief in God can illuminate profound aspects of a person’s spiritual life (1990).

**Significant Outcomes of the Study**

In conclusion, the most important outcomes of this study relate to the actual process of the research, as the undertaking of this study illuminated poignant ideas about researching children’s spirituality and the ways in which children as readers can influence adults’ understanding of texts. For example, my conducting this research highlighted key aspects of interviewing children about their reading of books in spiritual terms. I learned that lengthy silences between researcher and interviewee are not necessarily a negative occurrence, and can help to bring forth significant insight. Additionally, I found that open-ended questions were most helpful for providing the interviewee with the opportunity to talk about dimensions of the stories of his/her choice. This style of
question helped to prevent the imposing of the researcher’s ideas of the texts. When I initially drafted questions for the interviews, I noticed questions I had developed that were too narrow in their scope. This reinforced the importance of extensive time and thought in developing interview questions, and this aspect of preparation for the data collection should not be taken lightly.

Though the prompt, “I wonder if anything in the story reminded you of God” might not seem as open-ended as other questions, I attempted to structure the prompt so that the children would feel comfortable responding in the affirmative or negative. Two of the children were comfortable enough to reply that there was not anything in Edward Tulane that reminded them of God, while the other two did relate certain characters to the Divine. Though researching children’s spirituality as generated through their responses to literature can be a tricky endeavor, maintaining reflexivity during the planning, data collection, and data analysis stages of the research can strengthen the study. Furthermore, educators and researchers can learn from previous studies into children’s spirituality, taking note of pitfalls and successes in earlier research.

Another important result of conducting this story was tied up in the way my own responses to the novels shifted and evolved as the children shared their insight into the narratives. Whether it happened during the actual interview with one of the children or later as I read through the transcripts, I can see how my own spiritual reading of the stories was enriched through hearing their responses and insight. I can certainly state that my reading of the stories in spiritual terms was deepened and that I recognized layers of significance I did not recall noticing earlier.
Beyond a Phenomenology of Children’s Experiences of Literary Texts in Spiritual Terms

Danaher & Briod (2005) suggest that making the descriptions of children’s experiences accessible for a broader readership is one way to provide parents and caregivers with valuable insight into the life-worlds of children (p. 233). Researchers investigating children’s experiences can expose those who work with children to studies that ask them to consider what it is like for children in their experience of life. Through such exposure, adults can “rehumanize” their connection to children (p. 233). “The moral conviction behind this kind of research is that a deepened sense of children will translate into social relations among adults and children that are more human for all” (p. 233).

As the findings in this study have demonstrated, using children’s literature to elicit children’s lived experiences of stories in spiritual terms can result in rich and multi-faceted descriptions of children’s encounters with narrative. As Trousdale suggests,

Children’s literature provides an opportunity for children to enter a world not their own, vicariously to identify with the story’s characters and their situations, thus stimulating their emotions, the imagination, the cognitive powers, and moral reasoning. (2006, p. 1233)

The two toy fantasies in this study only represent a small fraction of the excellent literature that young readers have access to, and that adults can offer children, as a way for them to “think beyond their own experiences” (Trousdale, 2006, p. 1233). Children’s spirituality can be expressed as they read and respond to literature, particularly through their engagement with texts that explore questions of meaning, highlight issues in the human experience, and grapple with the mysterious or complex aspects of life. Finally, as
children share their spiritual experiences of stories, they can also teach adults, by imparting wisdom and insight in powerful and profound ways.

As a researcher, I certainly learned and grew in my own understanding of these texts from the children. Encouraging children to engage with stories on a spiritual level through open-ended questions and listening can help adults to grow in sensitivity and spirituality. I can attest to the fact that as I listened to some of the children’s responses that were of a spiritual nature about the two texts for this study, my own spiritual reading of the stories was enhanced. As Iser argues, the meaning of the text for each individual reader is a “dynamic happening,” and this can apply to the spiritual meaning of a text as well (1978, p. 22). It is important for those who select books for children, in any kind of situation, to be aware of the potential for literature to nurture children’s spirituality. As Trousdale states, a story has the power to transform perspective and change the reader (2004b). Certainly, adults who interact with children and witness expressions of young peoples’ spirituality can learn from them. Nye suggests that adults should not grow out of the awareness of spirituality; they should grow into it (2009, p. 81).

I learned much through this fascinating, challenging, and unique study. I became more aware that even if children do not perceive the same spiritual geography of a text that an adult perceives, children can express their thoughts about spirituality as they respond to a literary work. The most important conclusion, perhaps, that I gleaned from this research is that there is much more to discover about how literature can engage the spirit of the child reader, and that even the spirit of the adult can be nurtured and encouraged through interaction with children responding to texts. Though I approached this study with the firm conviction that I could be encouraged through my own
experience of literary texts for children in spiritual terms, I had not anticipated the ways in which the children’s responses to the stories would extend and enhance my spiritual experiences of the texts. This has only reaffirmed the idea that exploring the multi-faceted landscape of children’s spirituality and their responses to literature will be a valuable and exciting life-long journey, certain to uncover deeper and more valuable insight as it progresses.
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APPENDIX A

Interview #1: Life, Reading, and Spiritual History

1. I can’t believe summer vacation is already over. What is your favorite part of summer?
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you lived in Pennsylvania?
4. Tell me about your family.
5. Tell me about your friends.
6. Do you have any pets?
7. Tell me about your school.
8. Tell me about your hobbies.
9. Do you ever wonder about God?
10. What do you think God might be like?
11. Do you ever think about God when you are reading stories?
12. Describe what happens when a story makes you think of God.
13. What are your favorite kinds of books to read?
15. How do you feel during a good reading experience?
16. What do you think are the most important parts in life?
17. Do you ever notice special parts in books?
18. What kind of special parts do you notice?
19. Tell me what kinds of books you are reading now.
20. How would you define fantasy books?
21. What do you think of fantasy books?
22. Do you like to spend time outside?
23. What kinds of things do you like to do outside?
24. Is there anything you want to ask me about this study or these books?
Interview #2: The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane

1. Could you tell me what happened in this story?
2. I wonder what the most important thing about this story is.
3. I wonder whether there is anything you might have liked about this story.
4. I wonder whether there is anything you might have not liked about this story.
5. I wonder if you had any questions about this story.
6. I wonder if you had a favorite part of the story.
7. I wonder whether this story is about you, or if you are anywhere in this story.
8. I wonder if you think a story should always have a happy ending.
9. Did you find any lessons in this story?

Additional Questions:

10. I wonder how you feel when people recognize you and know you.
11. Do you think anything or anyone was helping Edward along the way?
12. Was there anything in the book that reminded you of God or made you think about God?
13. Remember when Edward and Sarah Ruth wished on a star? Is this something you have ever done?
14. Tell me what you think about the sad things that happened to Edward in the story.
15. I wonder what Edward learned about hope in the toyshop.
Interview #3: The Mouse and His Child

1. Could you tell me what happened in this story?
2. I wonder what the most important thing about this story is.
3. I wonder whether there is anything you might have liked about this story.
4. I wonder whether there is anything you might have not liked about this story.
5. I wonder if you had any questions about this story.
6. I wonder what your favorite part of the story is.
7. I wonder whether this story is about you, or if you are anywhere in this story.
8. Did you find any lessons in this story?

Additional Questions:

9. Tell me why you think the mouse child was comforted when he looked at the Dog Star. Remember when Edward wished on a star?
10. I wonder what it feels like to be searching for a home and a family.
11. Tell me what you think infinity is.
12. I wonder what you think about what happened to Manny Rat by the end of the story. Do you think people that do bad things can change?
13. Tell me why you think some of the toys and animals were fighting in the story.
14. Do you think there was anything or anyone looking out for the mouse and his child during their journey?
15. Was there anything in the book that reminded you of God or made you think about God?
APPENDIX B

Recruitment Flyer

YOUNG READERS NEEDED
For a research study through Penn State University
“Reading and Discussing Fantasy Novels”

This study is open to boys and girls in 5th grade or of age nine or ten. The purpose of this study is to understand more about children’s responses to two fantasy novels, specifically their responses about the spiritual aspects of these books.

Participation involves reading and sharing your responses to two fantasy novels, about 160-200 pages long for each book. It also involves three 60-90 minutes interviews (although the interviews may take less time than this) with the researcher (spaced out over several weeks). You will also be offered the opportunity to draw a picture or create a collage of your ideas about the stories, if you wish.

Parental consent is required if individuals under the age of 18 are involved in the research.
A detailed, informed consent form will be provided for all those interested.

Time Commitment: Reading time for two novels, and
Three 60-90 minute interviews.
The research will be conducted at your convenience, in your own home. (Parents can be present during interviews if they wish)
For additional information, contact Katie Posey at: 814-XXX-XXXX
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SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS