Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Learnings from Employing IPA as a Qualitative Methodology in Educational Research

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Abstract
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Keywords
children's spirituality, descriptive case study, educational research, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, phenomenological philosophy, qualitative research

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Christine Robinson and Heath Williams
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Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an established qualitative methodology widely adopted within health-based research. However, one gap in the literature is that little has been written about IPA’s employability within educationally situated research. Our paper aims to demonstrate that IPA is a suitable methodology for education research. This paper has two parts. In the first part, the authors utilise the method of exegesis and theoretical analysis to explicate and provide clarity concerning the often-misunderstood philosophical and theoretical background of IPA. In the second part, we advocate for IPA as a suitable option for qualitative research in educational contexts. To execute this advocacy, the authors present a specific example of qualitative research that successfully employed IPA as its methodological approach and system for analysis. We present the details of a research project that utilised IPA to explore spirituality in early childhood education contexts, and in doing so the authors illustrate how the theories and methods of IPA can be actualised, thus introducing IPA into education contexts in a coherent fashion. The overall aim of the paper is to affirm IPA as a viable qualitative approach for education researchers.

Keywords: children’s spirituality, descriptive case study, educational research, Interpretative phenomenological analysis, phenomenological philosophy, qualitative research

Introduction

Qualitative social science research is particularly adept at apprehending the complexity of social situations or events (Creswell, 2014), allowing researchers to explore a topic “through the eyes of the participant” within their social context (Neuman, 2014). The strength of the qualitative approach lies in its capacity for in depth engagement with participants and examination of social processes (Babbie, 2020).

It is already recognised that qualitative studies “provide insight into the subtle nuances of educational contexts” (Kervin et al., 2006, p. 37), and qualitative methods are already commonly employed to conduct educational research (Babbie, 2020). At the core of qualitative research is detailed narrative, and the things that educators find salient or important are captured well by narrative-style data (Kervin et al., 2006). However, amongst the suite of approaches that the qualitative researcher in education might adopt, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is underutilised for both informing research design and the process of data analysis (Noon, 2018). IPA’s “use within educational settings is emergent” (Holland, 2014), and there are only a handful of existing studies that currently employ it in this arena (Bainger, 2011; Crawford, 2019; Holland, 2014; Noon, 2018; Tamachi et al., 2018). In broad terms, IPA resides within a qualitative methodological approach to research, but its
uniqueness lies in its systematic process for undertaking qualitative research that explores the lived experience of study participants via an interpretivist lens.

This underutilising of IPA in educational research is surprising, as IPA is the research weapon-of-choice in other disciplines that lean heavily towards the qualitative paradigm, such as healthcare (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). The authors suspect that this may be because IPA inherits from its philosophical heritage a daunting conceptual framework that is often explained poorly and left opaque (Mapp, 2008; van Manen, 2016; Williams, 2021). In this paper, we hope to initiate a change in this trend and facilitate the use of IPA by education researchers. Towards this end, we do two things: firstly, we try to accurately explain the philosophical roots of IPA in easy-to-understand terms, linking these roots to practical methodological outcomes. Secondly, we provide the results of one study that has employed IPA in educational settings to investigate children’s spirituality, explaining how the theories and methods of IPA can be put into practice. The purpose of this paper is to affirm IPA as well suited to educational research via the presentation of research findings that employed IPA to explore educational practices that promote young children’s spirituality.

Part 1. Background and Philosophical Phenomenology

Historical, Philosophical, and Theoretical Underpinnings of IPA

As far as the philosophical underpinnings of IPA are concerned, it is best to begin by recalling that it was Immanuel Kant – the great synthesiser of the Modern period of philosophy - who famously divided all reality into “noumena” and “phenomena” (Kant, 1781). The noumena were also known as the “thing-in-itself;” the inner core of reality hidden behind outward appearances and manifestations. The latter concept – the phenomena – was the way things appeared to cognising subjects like us.

The word “phenomenon” derives from the Greek words “phainein” meaning “bring to light” and “phainesthai” meaning “to appear.” It also directly derives from the late Latin word “phænomenon,” meaning “that which appears.” Generally, a “phenomenon” is anything that appears to and is thus experienced by subjects (people like us) in some sort of way. “Logos” too, has an ancient Greek origin. For our purposes, we can define “logos” as an organised body of thought – a “science” in the classical sense - about a topic (Liddell & Scott, 1940). Thus, a logos of phenomena is a science of the things that appear to, or are experienced by, people like us. We can therefore say in shorthand that “phenomenology is the science of experience.”

The earliest recorded usage of the German term “Phänomenologie” is by Johann Heinrich Lambert in 1764. The term was also used by the great German idealist GWF Hegel. However, the science of experience that we know as “phenomenology” today was brought to prominence by another great German philosopher, Edmund Husserl, often referred to by his followers reverently as “the master.” The way the term “phenomenology” is used today owes its genetics to Husserl. Another great philosophical theoretician who has impacted the theory of IPA is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was a student of Husserl’s until they fell out over differences between their conceptions of phenomenology, differences which emerged around the time they attempted a failed collaboration on an entry on phenomenology for the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Both Husserl and Heidegger are behemoths, giants of philosophy. Husserl’s works alone, which are still being translated and published, currently span 45 weighty tomes, and it is difficult to imagine a topic he did not write on. Husserl and Heidegger are difficult authors

\[1\] It is worth noting for clarity that, phenomenology certainly uses the concept of phenomena, but does not accept the distinction between phenomena and “thing-in-itself” as rigorously as Kant does.
to understand due to the nature of their prose. Due to the length and complexity of their corpus, a significant amount of time, background and training in philosophy is required to come to terms with and understand their projects. Moreover, it is worth noting that many aspects of their project have nothing to do with IPA. However, there are also several themes that these pioneering phenomenologists were concerned with that directly impacted the genesis of IPA.

**Five Ways Phenomenological Philosophy Informs the Theory of IPA**

**Experience Matters**

Husserl thought that “experience” was a concept that was being burdened with excess theoretical baggage by the empiricist philosophy and introspective psychology of his time. Husserl thought that other philosophers of his time - but also novices and, in fact, all of us – import and overlay our own philosophical theories and biases into descriptions and accounts of experience. Husserl thought that we ought not rely on our pregiven philosophical ideas about experience but instead provide close descriptions of experience as it is given. Methodologically, Husserl called for a “bracketing” of our pregiven theoretical presuppositions and a return to “the things themselves” (i.e., the “lived experiences”: Erleben; Husserl, 2001). Husserl then extracted the philosophical significance of experience in a rigorous way. Similarly:

IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience… in a way which as far as possible enables that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems. This is what makes IPA phenomenological and connects it to the core ideas unifying [it with] phenomenological philosophers. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 34)

**Focussing on the “Lifeworld”**

In the final work he published during his lifetime, *Crisis of the European Sciences*, Husserl (1970) refined the concept of the “lifeworld.” This is the world we all live in every day: the one that contains our ambitions, the things we value, the people we love, the objects we find to be beautiful, and the things we think are true. The lifeworld is to be contrasted with a purely naturalistic vision of humankind according to which we are nothing but a collection of “atoms in the void.” Even though Husserl thought that the lifeworld held great philosophical importance, he also thought that the lifeworld was the proper object of study for human sciences like psychology (Husserl, 1989). IPA inherits from this, as Smith et al. (2009) note, a focus on experience “in all of its various aspects, but especially in terms of the things which matter to us, and which constitute our lived world” (p. 11).

**The Hermeneutic Turn**

A related theme that IPA shares with its philosophical heritage is an acknowledgement of reflexivity and a resulting hermeneutic turn. Heidegger emphasised reflexivity when he wrote that the human person, which he referred to as Dasein, was the type of being for whom its own being is in question (Heidegger, 2010). Who am I, how do I think, what is important, what’s my place in this world? To ask these questions is to examine one’s own being. Heidegger did not think it was possible to grasp one’s own being objectively and adopted a hermeneutical position according to which the undertaking of phenomenology was always an interpretive activity. Heidegger and other latter phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty
emphasise, then, that Husserl’s edict to bracket out our own presuppositions can never be completely enacted (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). For the hermeneuticist, during interpretation, new understanding is achieved not based on already securely held beliefs but, instead, through renewed interpretive attention to our own presuppositions which, sometimes tacitly, inform the understanding that we already have. Heidegger emphasised especially the presuppositions inherited from the existential and historical contexts in which we find ourselves (George, 2021).

Thus, IPA does not just purport to describe experience flatly given. Firstly, the IPA approach is based on coming to an understanding, by the researcher, of the experience as interpreted by the participant. IPA wonders not only what the experiences of interview participants are like, but how participants interpretively grasp what their experiences of the world are like (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11). Secondly, IPA investigations that seek to interpret the participants’ experiences of their lived world simultaneously acknowledge that such an interpretation is informed by the subjective nature of the researcher who is themselves always already embedded in their own environmental and historical milieu. Smith (2004) articulates this well when he describes IPA as involving “…a double hermeneutic. The participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40). A double hermeneutic therefore explains the relationship of the researcher to the research and to the participant’s experience.

As Smith et al. (2009) put it, the bracketing of the presuppositions of the researcher which Husserl advocated is “a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved” (p. 34). They thus hold that during IPA research, the researcher’s “attempts to understand other people’s relationship to the world are necessarily interpretative” (p. 24). The focus on hermeneutics as a key theoretical underpinning has methodological implications. Namely, that:

*It is a key tenet of IPA that the process of analysis is iterative – we may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data, rather than completing each step, one after the other. As one moves back and forth through this process, it may help to think of one’s relationship to the data as shifting according to the hermeneutic circle.* (Smith et al., 2009, p. 30)

**Intersubjective and Objective Sharing of Experiential Structure**

Husserl’s approach to phenomenology was interested in individual experience only insofar as it was the instantiation of a universal structure of experience. Only by moving from the singular to the general or preferably the universal through an act termed *Wesensshau* (literally, the “seeing” of essential structures) can we begin to establish a scientific approach to experience (Husserl, 1977). In contrast to this, Smith et al. (2009) are skeptical about nomothetic approaches that look to discern universal features of human experience. They note that while “Husserl was concerned to find the essence of experience, IPA has the more modest ambition of attempting to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people” (p. 19). They thus characterise IPA as idiographic: “concerned with the particular” (p. 31).

Other qualitative researchers who draw on phenomenology do explicitly aim at universal or essential structures. Giorgi’s adaptation of phenomenological philosophy for the purpose of qualitative research suggests that if “one does not… arrive at an essence… [of] the concrete, detailed description of an experienced phenomenon by one or several participants, proper phenomenological procedures have not been followed” (Giorgi, 2008, p. 4)
In aligning IPA with idiography and setting it off from nomothetic approaches, Smith et al. (2009) situate IPA in a long tradition of phenomenological psychology going all the way back to Karl Jaspers and Wolfgang Blankenburg who placed great emphasis on the importance of individual case studies (Summa, 2023). As part of this tradition, they also support a methodological notion of “analytic induction.” The latter was first thought of by Florian Znaniecki in 1934, and then developed by W. S. Robinson and Alfred Lindesmith in early 1950s. Early researchers in ethnography were criticized for lacking a systematic method to generate, refine, and validate generalisations. Researchers required a means to formulate and present their theories in a way that would facilitate the identification of negative cases and potential tests of their theory. To this end, Znaniecki argued that researchers should use inductive, rather than deductive, reasoning to create generalizations (Allard & Anderson, 2005).

Analytic induction is often used in exploratory research or in situations where little is known about a particular phenomenon. It involves deriving tentative hypothesis (presumably psychological laws) because of a series of individual case studies, and then testing this hypothesis against ensuing cases. Analytic induction, as they see it, “is an iterative procedure, allowing one to reflect on and modify one’s thinking in the light of the next piece of evidence assessed” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 33). A “successful outcome will be a revised hypothesis which accounts for most of the data, for most of the cases examined” (ibid), but which never overlooks individual differences.

Finally, though, finding patterns across cases is a necessary process in the analysis of data within IPA research, IPA researchers observe that themes or super-ordinate themes which are particular to individual cases also represent instances of higher order concepts which are shared by the lower order (Smith et al., 2009, p. 100). Thus, although protecting the primacy of the individual narrative, IPA is cognizant of the importance of identifying experiential features that are shared by a more general group of participants. The move from the singular to the general is therefore still important.

Part 2. Application of IPA in Educational Research

The central aim of this paper is to argue that IPA is a suitable approach for educational research. Having clarified the theoretical and philosophical background of IPA, in this section we present an investigation which employed IPA to investigate educators’ practices for promoting children’s spirituality, followed by the ensuing “learnings” which arose for the researchers because of this investigation. These learnings were garnered from using IPA as both a methodological framework and process for analysis. Not only was IPA found to be a suitable approach for educationally based spirituality research, but the authors assert there is much to be gained for the researcher, the participant and future researchers from applying IPA to educationally based research. In the following sections we hope to demonstrate exactly how the rich theoretical background for IPA that has been previously discussed can be actualised.

Background

As far as previously existing studies go, IPA has been used within the general field of spirituality. For example, it is the second most popular approach to qualitative research into spirituality in the arena of nursing, being used more than a quarter of the time (Martins et al., 2017). It has been drawn on for research into adult spirituality (Joseph, 2014) and spirituality in connection to an outdoor education expedition (Jirásek et al., 2017) and as such, there was some precedence for its applicability to the investigation presented in this paper, prior to its undertaking. Although situated within the same phenomena, that is spirituality, the present
investigation was distinctive in its application to the early years’ education setting. Moreover, as we mentioned, even though educators favour qualitative methodologies and approaches, IPA was rarely applied in this context.

The investigation referred to in this paper sought to uncover educators’ practices for promoting children’s spirituality for a dissertation. Robinson, one author of this paper, undertook the research within the context of educators working with children aged three to four years within faith-based early learning centres in Western Australia. The impetus for the research was an identified gap in existing literature pertaining to young children’s spirituality (Robinson, 2019) a gap that was made more urgent, firstly, as the importance of early years’ education for spiritual development has gained momentum internationally (Robinson, 2020) and, secondly, due to policy development amongst the early learning sector in Western Australia. With regards to policy, the mandated Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming (DEEWR, 2009) tasked educators with attending to young children’s spirituality as part of their holistic development, though little was provided as to how educators might action this. The second author on the paper, Williams, has a background in philosophical phenomenology and its uptake in the arena of qualitative research. The unique nature of the authors’ collaboration emerged within a research forum where Robinson presented her work using IPA for educationally based research on the topic young children’s spirituality.

To determine the educators’ practices for promoting children’s spiritual development, interviews with educator participants (n=9) and observations of their practice (two whole-day visits per educator) were undertaken and informed by the IPA process. In addition, planning documents for a two-week period were collected and analysed using qualitative content analysis (QCA) and this QCA data sits outside the scope of this paper.

Ethical approval to undertake the research was obtained through the HREC at Australian Catholic University (2015-153E). All ethical considerations and guidelines for approval were adhered to within the research.

Bracketing in Practice

As previously mentioned in part 1, during an IPA investigation, the researcher is asked to attempt at least to put aside their previously gathered ideas about the subject via the Husserlian method often referred to as “bracketing.” As Smith et al. (2009) put it, “we need to “bracket,” or put to one side, the taken for granted world” (p. 13). The process of bracketing is adequately summarised by Ashworth (1999) as a practice “not to the turning away of the world and a concentrated detached consciousness but to a resolve to set aside theories, research propositions, ready-made interpretations, etc., in order to reveal engaged, lived experiences” (p. 708).

The process of bracketing involves at least two stages: firstly, researchers consider any shared experiences, pre-conceived ideas, or assumptions to set these aside. Secondly, this information that was bracketed is integrated in the sense that it is considered alongside the analysis of data (Gearing, 2004). In this investigation, during the first stage of bracketing, the researcher was called to put aside previous experiences in education working with children aged 3 to 4 years. In consciously putting aside the researcher’s own knowledge and experience, they are more able to ensure it does not influence the data at the interview stage (Smith, 2004).

As an example, the following extract is from a reflexive statement made during the process of data collection:

As the researcher, I acknowledge my own position within this investigation. I have worked as a teacher in Catholic early childhood settings, although in schools as opposed to childcare centres… It is this experience of working with
pre-service early childhood teachers, along with my experience in early childhood settings at Catholic schools that ignited my interest to investigate educators’ practices to promote children’s spiritual development. Given the nature of my own experiences, it was reasonable to expect that I would have assumptions and possible bias regarding the educators’ practices with young children...

Smith et al. (2009) suggest that bracketing within the interview stage will assist the researcher to ask questions and probe the participant based on attentive listening to what the participant is saying, rather than a preconceived notion or concern held by the interviewer.

**The Interview**

What the hermeneutic circle amounts to, practically and in the context of IPA, is that, even though all efforts are made to identify and bracket our presuppositions prior to engaging in the research, such efforts are ultimately always unfinished. We walk into the interview process with pre-given ideas as to what we might find, and it is impossible to rid oneself of such pre-given ideas entirely. Moreover, one needs to have an interview schedule, which in this research followed a semi-structured format. The semi-structured format enabled a clear direction for the interview whilst permitting the researcher to “go with” the participant on their interpretation of spirituality in the context of education. Semi-structured interview is an acknowledged key method for the collection of data within IPA (Drew et al., 2006). The interview process occurs with individuals and the research involves only a small number of subjects to allow for an in-depth investigation (Larkin et al., 2006).

What we have said above is that respect for experience leads to bracketing. Bracketing is a process designed to let experience unfold on its own terms. Given the focus on the primacy of experience, and also the key philosophical pillar of a respect for an idiographic approach, IPA views the participant as the expert of their own experience (Noon, 2018). What all this amounts to is a quasi- “open ended” approach, where the interview schedule that researchers employ has scope for the interview to be guided and informed by the participant, leading the conversation in different directions. Table 1 illustrates an example of planned interview question and the resulting questions, with probes, that eventuated during one of the interviews with an educator. In the example provided an unexpected theme emerged related to music and to the affordance of choice in connection to spirituality and this required exploring. Hence the researcher “went with” the participant to explore their perspective.

**Table I**

*Interview Question as Planned and as Enacted within a Semi-Structured Format*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planned Interview Question</th>
<th>Participant Response and Interviewer Probing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What practices do you engage to promote children's spirituality?</td>
<td><em>Having music or sound effects, props and different textures and things.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probing Question: What about when they’ve got activity time? Are there any there where you think they could express their spirituality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>We’ve got the new curriculum now, so that really helps with lots of songs and rhymes and stories, and it’s fantastic.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis

The respect for experience and the individual narrative subsequently calls for a systematic exploration of the personal experience gathered in interview (Tomkins, 2017). IPA is described by other researchers as a rigorous qualitative method (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008), and this rigour is partly expressed during data analysis. In particular, the iterative process, outlined by Bednall (2006), calls for a thorough process of reading, re-reading and coding of the interview transcript and observations, allowing the emergence of topics of significance, and then sub-ordinate and super-ordinate themes. In this iterative reading of transcripts and observations, the researcher becomes fluent in the interpretation of the experience by the participant. For the researcher, the methodical approach of IPA ensured reliability of the data and enabled transferability of the research given that each step of Bednall (2006) approach to IPA was documented.

Thematic Findings

Findings from the investigation emerging from the process of IPA were presented as super-ordinate themes. The super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis process of each data set (interview transcripts, observations) and then framed in response to each of the research questions. Figure 2 below illustrates the super-ordinate themes emerging from each of the three data sets in response to the three research questions that framed the investigation into educators’ perspectives of spirituality and their practices to promote to young children’s spirituality. The documentary data that sits outside the scope of this paper is included in Figure 2 for full transparency of the research findings.

Figure 2
Research Questions and Super-Ordinate Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ1: What do educators understand by the term ‘spirituality’?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innate &amp; personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a good person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ2: What do educators know about promoting children’s spiritual development?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is connected to identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is promoted through religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is promoted through play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality is expressed through drawing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RQ3: What practices are educators implementing, intentionally and incidentally, to promote children’s spiritual development?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observed:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wonder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness (self, other, environment, transcendent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity &amp; Imagination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Given that the primary goal of this paper is to explicate the method of IPA and demonstrate its applicability to educational settings, the findings of this study and how they responded to the research questions are not discussed. An overview of the findings from the investigation can be found within Robinson (2020), Robinson (2022), Hackett (2022), as well as Robinson and Grajczonek (2019). Discussion on specific findings, such as the connection of children’s spirituality to nature (Robinson, 2019) and to young children’s wonder (Robinson, 2022) elaborate on the investigation’s contribution to the field of spirituality.

Learnings: Reflexivity as a Researcher Growth Journey

The interpretative nature of IPA is further acknowledged through reflexivity. Being reflexive calls the researcher to evaluate the self. This “explicit evaluation of the self” (Shaw, 2010, p. 234) is not isolated to IPA but a common feature of qualitative research more broadly. However, when situated within IPA and alongside the process of bracketing, the potential for reflexivity is greater. As described by Ahern (1999), “bracketing and reflexivity are fruit from the same tree. One must be reflexive in order to bracket…” (p. 410). In the present investigation, the researcher engaged with a variety of techniques to “be reflexive.” For example, the previously described researcher journal for bracketing. In addition to this, the researcher took time during the period of data collection and data analysis to note thoughts, possible bias and assumptions as they emerged.

At the time of compiling the research into publications, these notes were revisited to further engage in reflexivity. As a result of this re-engaging with previously held thoughts and assumptions, the researcher came to view the research as an outsider would perceive the methodological process and findings reflexively. Because of this, reflexive statements such as the one provided in the following section were included throughout the research to situate the reader within the context of both research and researcher.

As the research progressed from data collection to data analysis and the compilation of findings, the researcher was able to connect more critically and reflectively within the reflexive process. Whereas initially the reflexive process was somewhat forced, as the investigation continued the researcher was more adept in the skill of consciously evaluating the self as if external to the research. Engaging in reflexivity within the IPA methodology came to be one of a personal growth journey for the researcher whereby their own ideas were challenged. By overtly recognising these thoughts and preconceived ideas initially, and through the regular process of bracketing and taking reflexive statements, the researcher was able to realise this growth journey.

At the conclusion of the thesis, the following excerpt was included in the reflexive statement:

During the process of formulating the discussion, and therefore returning to the literature with the insights gained from the analysis of findings, the researcher came to reflect more directly on the specific term “spiritual development.” The word “development” has several connotations, leading one to understand that, as with cognitive development, children would move through stages or criteria to demonstrate progression. Spirituality does not occur in this way. Rather, spirituality is promoted and nurtured through the affordances children are provided to experience and express their innate spirituality. The term “development” limits understandings of children’s spirituality to a linear type of progression. In retrospect, the term “spirituality” would be selected to replace “spiritual development.”
A key learning from the use of IPA within the investigation of educators’ practices for promoting children’s spiritual development was the role of reflexivity, both as a means of transparency but also a skill that challenged the researchers own thinking and assumptions.

**Learnings: The Limitations and Potentials of IPA in Educational Research**

Inherent to any qualitative approach is the recognition that limitations exist. The researcher was cognisant of the limitations within, as well as the potential of, applying IPA as an approach to educational research. In fact, the process of reflexivity, viewed as a strength of IPA, aided the process of recognising limitations and in realising the potential of IPA within educational research. The first of these limitations pertains to sample size. IPA calls for a small number of subjects as this facilitates an in-depth investigation to occur (Larkin et al., 2006). Any critique of qualitative research calls into question the ability for generalisations of findings (Babbie, 2020). When only a small sample size is employed, it is necessary to identify this as a potential limitation of the research. Returning to the research presented in this paper, the sample size contained nine educators across three faith-based early learning centres. This sample was both purposive and exhaustive, and consequently was justified as appropriate. However, an essential consideration in adopting IPA in educational settings is sample size. IPA is most suited to studies focussed on depth, rather than breadth, and consideration of this is key.

IPA is most suited to the exploration of “phenomena,” and this forms the second limitation of IPA within educational research. A “phenomenon” is anything that can be experienced by a subject. But naturally, many items’ researchers are interested in have no experiential component. Developments within the brain, sub personal cognitive processes, implicit and unrecognisable biases, broader social and historical trends – all of these may be uncapturable from within the research framework employed by IPA. As the previous learnings outline, there is also much to be gained from selecting IPA as the methodological framework and process for analysis within educational research. To further explain the potential of IPA, two key benefits are promoted; firstly, that IPA has the potential for gaining a greater depth in understanding of the world of the participant. Whilst sample size is also a possible limitation, when depth and not breadth is the focus, IPA has much to offer.

IPA is founded on the Husserlian concept of what he termed “the lifeworld.” IPA is focussed on the experience of the world as experienced by the participant (Smith et al., 2009). This methodological approach leads the researcher into the participant’s world, and the researcher attempts to interpret the interpretation of the participant, a double hermeneutic as Smith describes it. Herein lies the potential of IPA to take the researcher more deeply into the lifeworld of the participant to garner the core of their experience.

Secondly, reflexivity is viewed as adding strength to IPA. The process of reflexivity alongside the bracketing (within a research journal) added both reliability and rigour to the investigation. The overt nature of IPA in acknowledging the role the researcher takes in the research itself results in the need for the researcher to consciously bracket themselves from the process. This reflexive process facilitates a deeper insight into the participant's world but also a greater sense of self for the researcher.

**Conclusion**

IPA has much to offer educational research. IPA’s philosophical and theoretical underpinnings affirm the ability of IPA to explore phenomena that is experienced within educational settings. The research presented in this paper is testament to how IPA can be applied within a qualitative investigation. The researchers posit that the key learnings derived
from applying IPA in investigating educators’ perspectives of spirituality may inform other researchers’ methodological choice. IPA, through its reflexive and interrogative nature, calls the researcher into a personal journey alongside the participants, summarised most pertinently by the following reflexive statement made by the researcher:

My experience of conducting this research has been both challenging and personally fulfilling. On reflection, the process reminded me of T. S. Elliot’s statement, “…to make an end is to make a beginning.” This journey of research has been one in which I have become acutely aware of my own shift in understanding. It has caused me to reflect on my own personal understanding of spirituality and to consider how this understanding is influenced by, and influences, the spirituality of those I teach. My understanding of the ways that spirituality can be promoted, by educators, in early childhood has also been significantly impacted by the participants in this study.

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