

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND IMAGINATION
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

A DISSERTATION

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BY

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DEDICATION

For my family.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

According to Merriam-Webster, to *acknowledge* is to

1 : recognize the rights, authority, or status of

2 : disclose knowledge of or agreement with

3 : express gratitude or obligation for

With this in mind, I wish to *acknowledge*

The faculty and staff in the Human Development, Family Studies, and Counseling department, especially those whose passions for teaching inspired me to continue my journey with purpose.

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ABSTRACT

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RELIGIOUS IDENTITY AND IMAGINATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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The purpose of this study was to explore the imagination scores of young children whose families self-affiliate with one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. This study used secondary data and included 92 families with children between the ages of three- and 10-years-old. Correlation, MANOVA, and two linear regression analyses were used, yielding statistically significant results for multiple tests. Findings suggest significantly positive relationships between multiple variables in this study, as well as a predictive relationship between parental encouragement of imagination with children's scores on the Child Imagination Questionnaire (CIQ; Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). The results of this study have implications for families and religious educators who seek to nurture young children's spirituality through imaginative thought and play.

Keywords: early childhood, imagination, religious identity, spirituality

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Behold, I will make something new...”
(Isaiah 43:19)

Introduction

Imagination is the basis of all creative thought and activity. Rooted in the Latin *imago*, meaning image, at its core is the human capacity to envisage *something new*, that which has “never existed in consciousness or in past experience” (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 340). Imagination drives the forces of cultural life, and is essential for advancements in art, science, technology, and social innovations. In early childhood, imagination is intricately linked to cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development, both rooted in reality and transcending it at once.

The impact of imagination on children’s development has been explored by multiple theorists, including Lev Vygotsky. In *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, Vygotsky argued that the process of creativity is the primary force for all human development:

If human activity were limited to reproduction of the old, then the human being would be a creature oriented only to the past and would only be able to adapt to the future to the extent that it reproduced the past. It is precisely human creative activity that makes the human being a creature oriented toward the future, creating the future and thus altering his own present. (2004, p. 9)

Imagination drives individual and communal development. Children whose imagination is nurtured have optimal opportunities for their own developmental potential, imagining their lives into existence, which may ultimately position humanity to move further into the future.

As children develop intellectual capabilities, their potential to imagine is strengthened. The growing brain's ability to combine and rework elements of past experiences and "generate new propositions and new behavior" allows children to actively create their futures by reimagining their present (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 9). Moreover, speech development represents new mastery when children can assign language to the wonder, awe, and curiosities that drive their burgeoning imaginations. Words free young children from precise objects or representations, granting new found freedom in "the sphere of impressions" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 346). Children's social development contextualizes their imaginative potential through cultural engagement, all of which is "the product of human imagination" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 10). Rich emotionality is also present in imaginative thought and activity, as children's feelings are evoked through their creation of newly constructed images. Whether newly created images represent reality or a fantastical alternative, the emotions present in the envisioning process and the response to what has been imagined is real.

In 2015, one of the more relevant studies exploring religious influence on children's imagination was completed by researchers at Princeton University and the IMT Institute for Advanced Studies in Lucca, Italy. Using multiple waves from the *World Values Survey*, Benabou et al. (2015) discovered that when adults were given a list of traits and qualities from which to identify as the most important for children's understanding, imagination was negatively and significantly associated with the adults' religiosity. Specifically, greater religiosity, measured as

adults' religious beliefs and frequency of attendance at religious events, was almost "uniformly and very significantly associated to less favorable views of innovation," which included a specific understanding of imagination as an important trait to impart to young children (Benabou et al., 2015, p. 349). These findings echo similar research and raise questions about the relationship between religious identity and children's imagination. Given that religion "relies heavily on imagination for the very core of its existence" (Brelsford, 2015, p. 249), the resistance among religious families (Benabou et al., 2015) and religious educators (Selçuk, 2015) to promote imaginative thought and activity is alarming. Moreover, the discrepancy between our modern philosophical valuing of imagination for individual and social development and the disregarding of imagination as a human trait worthy of imparting to young children is an important study worth investigating (Brelsford, 2015).

This study includes recent research on children's spiritual development that has breathed new life into a space occupied by fading misconceptions about religiosity, including a movement away from stage theories of faith development. Researchers in the United States, Western Europe, and Australia have successfully reimagined developmental theories, instruments for data collection, and best practices for investigating spirituality in early childhood (King, 2013; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012; Stoyles et al., 2012). Such recent advancements are exciting because they validate children's spiritual needs and strengths as realities that transcend religious identity (Miller, 2015). By recognizing important distinctions among religious identity, personal faith, and spirituality, researchers postulate that spirituality is a separate domain that influences other areas of child development (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional; Miller, 2015). These new perspectives on children's encounters with all that transcends the material world open

possibilities for families and religious educators to rethink the role of imagination in children's development.

This research study explores imaginative thought and play in the lives of children whose families identify as one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. This study also seeks to offer research-based theoretical foundations for revisioning imagination in Christian religious education, by interpreting Vygotsky's perceptions of imagination as a driver for human development.

Statement of Problem

Imagination is a crucial component for development in early childhood. Imaginative thought and activity are directly linked to 1) children's willingness to learn in classroom settings (Latham & Ewing, 2018); 2) increases in academic skills, including storytelling and language arts (Cavanaugh et al., 2017); 3) socioemotional competencies such as empathy (Rowe et al., 2018); 4) an ability to prepare for the future (Redshaw et al., 2018); 5) increased intelligence in *multiliteracies* — necessary for global citizenship in the 21st century (Comber et al., 2017); and 6) healthy personality development, as conceptualizations of the *Other* unfold within the mind (Kudryavtsev, 2017). Research shows that religious identity can be a deterrent to children's imaginative development in some families (Benabou et al., 2015). When this happens, families jeopardize their children's potential for development. They also grossly misunderstand the power of imaginative thought and activity in Christian religious identities and traditions (Brueggemann, 2001).

For the last several years, Christian religious leaders in the US, representing multiple denominations, have lamented a loss of religious identity due to the enculturation of a

contemporary church to the American ethos of consumerism, a rising trend that castrates human imagination (Brueggemann, 2001; Douthat, 2012; Edgar, 2006). The lack of imagination in religious communities has resulted in an inability to energize adherents toward a just and hope-filled social existence by uncritically absorbing resources external to Christianity's essence. Unlike the prophetic imaginations of 20th century giants such as Dorothy Day, Bishop Fulton Sheen, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Martin Luther King, Jr., expressions of Christian leadership today are borrowed, stolen, and otherwise stripped from popular culture. While the writers of Titus (Swinson, 2018), and First Corinthians (Campbell, 2017) call for followers of Jesus to be countercultural, the reality is that Christian churches in the US have enthusiastically embraced multiple facets of American culture in the name of both relevance and prosperity.

Although prophetic imagination is at the core of Christian traditions, many decry imagination as antithetical to religious identity; as curiosities introduce questions that cause conditions for doubt, long viewed as an "interruption of inherited meanings" (Wills, 2019, p. 349), typically passed along through dogmatic instruction. When Christians deny their children religious resources for imaginative thought and activity, they not only jeopardize each child's optimum developmental potential, but also threaten the future of Christianity itself. Researchers who are interested in the role of familial religious identity for nurturing children's development should examine the dissonance between what developmental theorists understand about the importance of imagination in early childhood with the denial of its use for thought and activity among families who identify as Christian.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research design is to examine differences in imagination among children from diverse Christian religious identities, as measured by the Child Imagination Questionnaire (CIQ; Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). This study performed a secondary data analysis of a sample subset of the *Cultural Perspectives on Imagination* research study, which was conducted in 2018, led by Rachel Beth Thibodeau, professor at the University of Missouri, et al. Christian religious identities include three affiliations: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. Each religious identity is defined for the purposes of this study in a following section. The mean scores of child imagination for each religious identity were analyzed by using data collected with the CIQ, and results of this study may be used to inform religious leaders on the differences in children's imaginative thought and play among families from multiple Christian identities, potentially influencing religious education by offering research-based theory for nurturing imagination as a vital component of children's spiritual development.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Research Question #1

Research Question: Are there relationships among the following variables when exploring imagination in early childhood: child's religious identity, child's attendance frequency at religious events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, child's access to props in the home, child's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, child's scores in imaginative companionship and impersonation, and child's scores in imaginative (fantastical) play?

Alternate Hypothesis: There are relationships among a child's religious identity, child's attendance frequency at religious events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, child's access to props in the home, child's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, child's scores in imaginative companionship and impersonation, and child's scores in imaginative (fantastical) play.

Research Question #2

Research Question: Do imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative [fantastical] play) differ among children with different religious identities?

Alternative Hypothesis: There is a statistical difference in imagination scores among children with different religious identities.

Research Question #3

Research Question: Does religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance predict imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative [fantastical] play) among children with different religious identities?

Alternative Hypothesis: Religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance, predicts imagination scores among children with different religious identities.

Research Question #4

Research Question: Does parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, predict imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative [fantastical] play) among children with different religious identities?

Alternative Hypothesis: Parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, predicts imagination scores among children with different religious identities.

Theoretical Framework

The primary theory that guides this research study is relational consciousness, a relevant understanding in contemporary developmental research, promoting imaginative thought and play in early childhood as a resource for children's spirituality. It was initially identified and described by British researchers, David Hay and Rebecca Nye (1998) in their exploration of English primary school students' responses to religious education courses in public schools in the United Kingdom. Relational consciousness is a *trans-religious concept*, informed by "the relational ideas of [philosopher Martin] Buber and [philosopher Georg] Hegel" (Hay & Nye, 1998, p. 51). This manifestation of spirituality is the child's natural process of relating to the self, the world, and to animate and inanimate Others, including a Divine Other. This process requires imaginative thought and activity, promoting each child's spiritual development through encounters with the human and nonhuman world, and all that transcends the material world.

Definitions

This research study includes the following terms and definitions. Although some terms may be familiar (e.g., imagination, spirituality), specific definitions for this proposed study are offered.

Imagination is the “power of the mind to consider things which are not present to the senses, and to consider that which is not taken to be real” (Martin, 1995, p. 395), resulting in the “creation of new images or actions” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 9).

Religious education, also referred to as “religious instruction, is a religious activity designed to nurture young people in a particular faith, and thus to preserve that faith across generations” (Halstead, 2005, p. 7731). Religious education is both formal and informal pedagogy, occurring in the home, religious institutions, and even public schools in cultures where the majority of citizens share a common religious identity (Halstead, 2005). In the US, the separation of church and state has primarily meant that public schools “maintain a position of neutrality between different religions and denominations, and also between religious and nonreligious worldviews” (Halstead, 2005, p. 7735), thus leaving religious education largely to denominational teaching in Sunday schools and other formats for formal religious instruction.

Religious identity is debated among scholars who question whether religious traditions, as expressed in denominational doctrine and affiliation, accurately reflect one’s religious identity (Kim & Wilcox, 2014). Because individuals may not always agree with the teachings of the denomination to which he or she is affiliated, religious research offers an alternative, understood as *religious self-identification*, asking respondents to “identify themselves as being part of one of

several religious traditions” (Kim & Wilcox, 2014, p. 556). The secondary data used for this proposed study utilized *religious self-identification* as a way to categorize children’s religious identity into one of three Christian identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic, based upon self-identification of the parent who participated in the original study.

Evangelical Christianity is a religious identity in which participants self-identify as one of multiple Christian denominations, following teachings rooted in a class of Protestants that “emerged from the religious awakenings of the eighteenth century” (Marsden & Svelmoe, 2005, p. 2887). Evangelical denominations emphasize the following four religious’ tenants: (1) the authority and reliability of the Bible; (2) being born again through an atoning Christ as the only possible way for eternal salvation; (3) evidence of a transformed life; and (4) evangelical and missional zeal. While denominational distinctions exist, collectively, Evangelicals promote “conservative political ideals [and] successfully revived the antievolution crusade” (Marsden & Svelmoe, 2005, p. 2892). This study includes Evangelical Christians representing various Baptist denominations and Nondenominational religious communities.

Protestant Christianity is a religious identity in which participants self-identify as one of multiple Christian denominations, following teachings that adhere to the theological lineage and traditions deriving “from sixteenth-century reforms of Western Christianity” (Marty, 2005, p. 7446). While variations exist among Protestant denominations, elements held in common include “resistance to papal claims” (Marty, 2005, p. 7448), which resulted in a “formal separation from the papally controlled church...transformed by the fact that one’s tradition changes through such separation” (Marty, 2005, p. 7449). Although mainline Protestantism as “an heir of establishment has been languishing” (Marty, 2005, p. 7459) in the US, revitalized movements have emerged

around the world. This study includes Protestant Christians representing the following denominations: Church of Christ, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, and Presbyterian.

Catholic Christianity is a religious identity in which participants self-identify as Roman Catholic, follow the teachings outlined by the Roman Catholic Church, as headed by the Bishop of Rome, and date back to the first centuries AD. Catholicism “refers both to a church (or more accurately, a college of churches that together constitute the universal Catholic church) and to a tradition” (McBrien, 2005, p. 7874). This religious identity, “before all else...[understands and affirms] human existence before [its] corporate conviction about the pope, or the seven sacraments, or even about Jesus Christ” (p. 7880); a religious perspective more so than a philosophy or study of humankind.

Spirituality is an “increasing awareness, subjective inner experience of wonder and curiosity, striving for something greater than oneself, believability in unseen forces, and playful transcendence” (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015, p. 246).

Relational consciousness is a “natural human predisposition which transcends the religious-secular boundary, is universally identifiable in young children, and expresses itself in forms apart from the religious” (Hay, 2000, p. 37).

Delimitations

The following delimitations are identified in this study:

1. Participants completed data collection during the 2018 research study *Cultural Perspectives on Imagination*.

2. Participants are the biological, step-, or adoptive parents of at least one child age 3- to 10- years-old.
3. Participants identified with one of several Christian denominations categorized as Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Imagination is a research topic in many cultures and contexts. As globalization increases worldwide, there are simultaneous increases in research exploring how innovation, divergent thinking, and creative potential impact education, psychology, and business (Leggett, 2017). One of the most prevalent topics of inquiry today is how imaginative thinking impacts human development, including the benefits to young children's growth and wellbeing (Eagleman & Brandt, 2018; Robinson, 2017). While the influence of imagination on children's development has been previously explored, only within the last two decades have researchers turned keen attention toward imagination in children's spiritual development. The appropriate intersection for investigating the relationships among imagination, religious education, religious identity, and spirituality is through a lens of relational consciousness. This developmental theory recognizes the significance of imagination for religious education and children's religious identity development.

Imagination

Imagination, and its impact on childhood, was written about extensively by Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist from the early 20th Century. He is credited with developing a cultural-

historical theory, which recognizes, explores, and otherwise prioritizes the significance of social interactions for children's development. Vygotsky's work posed a framework for conceptualizing how a child's engagement with culture and history, via encounters with significant others, nurtures development in multiple domains. His theory on imagination is helpful for understanding the interactions between imaginative thought and play in early childhood as well as other aspects of growth and wellbeing.

Vygotsky's Theory of Imagination

Vygotsky's theory of imagination (2004) is intricately intertwined with lived experience, associated with children's burgeoning cognition of the worlds in which they live. He presents four links, which present imagination as not mere mental amusement, but "rather a function essential to life" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 13): imagination is based on a child's previous experiences; fruits of imagination broaden a child's experiences in the world; imagination fuels emotions that hold universal potential; imagination, and its creative products, become a child's new reality. These links help child development researchers connect a child's imaginative thought and activity with other developmental domains; namely, cognitive, social, emotional, and moral.

The first association between imagination and reality is that all images, thoughts, ideas, and products that the imagination creates are based on components of a child's previous experience. When a child draws a two-headed, purple monster, with a long tail, fierce claws, and pointy ears, each characteristic is rooted in elements taken from realities the child has already encountered: multi-headed creatures; the color purple; and body parts of creatures both real and as objects of others' fantasies, such as the Brothers Grimm. According to Vygotsky, the

imagination “builds using materials supplied by reality” (2004, p. 14), raising questions regarding which materials are provided to children, how they are provided, and for what purpose. Echoing, or perhaps foreshadowing, what other developmental theorists would later argue, Vygotsky understood that children’s imaginative potentiality is dependent upon the richness and multiplicity of lived experience. Children with access to vast worlds, both real and fantastical, will have more abundant resources for imaginative thought and activity compared with children whose lived experiences are unlayered or unvaried.

The second link between imagination and reality is one that Vygotsky named *complex association*, describing the interaction between a “final product of imagination and some complex real phenomenon” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 16). When children create new combinations based on either personal experiences or social experiences (those the child is exposed to because others have relayed their personal experiences to the child in words, writings, or pictures), these creations broaden a child’s encounters with the world via the ones just imagined. Even as imagination is based on reality (Vygotsky’s first association between imagination and reality), so too is a child’s reality based on imagination. This reciprocity nurtures children’s imaginative development in tandem with their cognition; reflecting upon reality in order to create new ideas and innovations, while simultaneously allowing imagined creations to drive cognitive development.

Vygotsky’s third association between imagination and reality considers the emotions a child assigns to his or her images. According to this theorist, emotions are a force that can “select impressions, thoughts, and images that resonate with the mood that possesses” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 17-18) children at particular moments. The child who draws a two-headed, purple monster,

with a long tail, fierce claws, and pointy ears, may do so because of silly feelings, choosing to draw the most ridiculous fantasy creature imaginable. However, the child may draw this same creature out of fears felt while remembering a recent nightmare. In this manner, imagination provides “an internal language for [children’s] emotion,” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 18), while also expressing a language of emotion through imagined products and other manifestations of creative expression. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the law of the general emotional sign, because images with common affective impact can produce similar emotional effects in individuals. Additionally, each child’s developmental capacities significantly influence his or her unique emotional reactions to personal imaginations, and its resulting products or creative expressions. Similar to the link between reality and imagination, the “inverse relationship between emotion and imagination also holds” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 19) as emotion impacts a child’s imaginative potential, while imaginations affect his or her feelings.

The final association posed between imagination and reality is that ultimately, imagination becomes the reality of each child’s lived experience. According to Vygotsky, once imagination becomes externally embodied, it is crystallized, and “begins to actually exist in the real world, to affect other things” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 20). Examples include imagined technological possibilities leading to advancements in computers and phones, imagined scientific discoveries leading to advancements in medicine and space exploration, and imagined artistic mediums leading to advancements in fashion and sculpture. Once imagination is actualized, reality possesses new creations that inspire and ignite yet-to-be-imagined potentialities within each child, which is significant for further discussion on the importance of imagination for children’s religious identity development.

Imagination and Cognitive Development

Imagination is a specific form of conscious activity (Vygotsky, 1966) with intimate connections to a child's cognitive development. For an image, idea, or innovation to exist, a child must concentrate in order to actualize the imagination (Ribot, 1906), necessitating cognitive competence for imaginative potential. Development moves in tandem with children's burgeoning cognitions, as the imaginative potential of a 9-month-old child will be substantively and structurally dependent upon the cognitive capabilities of a child this age, and certainly different from the imaginative potential of a 9-year-old child. Imagination utilizes knowledge and skills, especially those that are cognitive, transforming them into fantasy thought and activity (Meadows, 2006). Simultaneously, creativity boosts cognition, especially when educators and families work collaboratively toward this aim for every young child (Loughrey & Woods, 2010).

At its inception, imagination grows in the mind of a child, moving through a "succession of kinds of understanding" that are constituted by sets of cognitive tools available to the child (Egan et al., 2016, p. 1002). This phenomenon is supported by research that shows young children have statistically different means scores on creativity assessments, such as the Torrance Thinking Creatively in Action and Movement test, depending upon age (Alsrour & Al-Ali, 2014). Cognitive tools that are resources for children's imaginative development include:

- *Somatic tools*- utilizing the senses, emotions, humor, and other bodily expressions
- *Mythic tools*- relying on oral language for expression through stories, metaphors, jokes, word play, and other verbal expressions

- *Romantic tools*- pushing limits and extremes associated with heroes, wonder, idealism, and other literary conventions and artifacts
- *Philosophic tools*- embracing generalities, metanarratives, schemes, authority, and other theoretical language and values
- *Ironic tools*- questioning where each individual ends and the encompassing world begins, and other manifestations of reflexive language (Egan et al., 2016)

How children utilize these resources is dependent upon cognitive capabilities and mental capacities. These tools grow qualitatively and quantitatively as children mature, providing increasingly richer resources for imaginative thought and activity as a child develops.

One of the most useful ways that children utilize imagination for cognitive growth and development is through acts of resilience during adversity. Children who demonstrate *cognitive flexibility* — “the ability to appropriately disengage and reengage attention from one stimulus and attend another” — have the ability to *shift perspectives*, imagining new possibilities and implementing new scenarios (Schibli et al., 2017, p. 32). When used as a tool for managing disruptive circumstances, children’s imaginations, and the use of props in imaginative thought and activity (Schimmel, 2007), can drive cognitive development toward healthy reasoning, problem solving, and metacognition. This use of imagination is an important and particular nuance on Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development. Vygotsky argued that children’s cognitive development exists on two planes: social and psychological. “First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category” (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 163). When children experience social realities that demand newly imagined possibilities, their cognitive development is optimized through growth processes

that accept the realities of lived experiences and forge new creations for how to be and respond in these circumstances.

Imagination and Social Development

The social contexts within which children are born and nurtured impact all developmental domains (Fehr & Russ, 2016; Raby et al., 2015). This necessarily includes the imaginative. As children engage others through meaningful interactions, the “knowledge, belief systems, and social practices that [others] have developed over...time” influence children (Agbenyega et al., 2017, p. 113). Because imagination is “always based on elements taken from reality” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 13), social participation impacts each child’s imaginative potential.

The integration of children’s imagination and social development is well-researched through play (Holmes et al., 2019). Pretend play utilizes children’s imagination via flexible and affective activities that produce multiple positive outcomes for children, including creativity and divergent thinking (Delvecchio et al., 2016). While children utilize imagination during solitary pretend play, it is *sociodramatic play* — activities that incorporate communication and social interactions with others — that best increases children’s imaginative possibilities and potential. Sociodramatic play optimizes children’s imagination in two ways: 1) children imagine and communicate play scenarios, including newly created scripts, role assignments, and use of props; and 2) children imagine resolutions to social interactions that require conflict resolution, negotiation, and other useful social skills (de Assis, 2019). Research demonstrates that *social pretend play* — activities that utilize multiple social skills, such as assertion, cooperation, and self-control — is more closely linked with children’s overall social competencies when

compared with children who pretend play in isolation (Li et al., 2016). This link underscores the interconnectedness between social development and imagination.

One helpful area of research that further explores this interconnectedness between social development and imagination is *radical imagination* theory and practice; understood as an exercise of social visionaries who “think outside the confines of our present perceptual reality, to consider memories of the past and possibilities for the future, and to weigh alternatives against one another...[making] possible all our thinking about what is, what has been, and, perhaps most important, what might be” (Thomas, 2004, as cited in Jackson & Shaw, 2006, p. 105). Children’s ability to struggle with personal and political injustices, while imagining to escape a “labyrinth they do not understand” (Barnetz, 2015, p. 253) is heard in children’s protests ‘But, it’s not fair!’ — rightly observing social inequities that push against their moral core. Similar to research that explores children’s ability to use imagination as a tool for resilience, radical imagination offers children “hope and courage to join or initiate social struggles...understanding [their] reality and a direction for action” (Barnetz, 2015, p. 254). Imagination’s central position in social change processes, whether in large scale movements, or smaller ones that may occupy early education classrooms, tightens the relationship between a child’s ability to survive difficult social interactions while working for a newly imagined social reality.

The impact of children’s imaginations on social development is demonstrated through children’s agency in arts programming and educational curriculum that invite students to “imagine themselves outside of their own zip codes...as authors of their own lives” (De la Rosa, 2018, p. 87). The National Guild for Community Arts Education, Massachusetts Literary Education and Performance Collective, Boston Pulse Poetry, Miami’s Arts for Learning, and

Ohio's MyCincinnati programs demonstrate the potential for children's imaginations to radically impact their own social development; becoming change agents of the communities in which they live by impacting the cultural milieus where their very development takes place. The ultimate implication of children whose imaginations are leveraged for individual social development, and the development of an entire society, is the movement from constructed fantasy toward a crystalized imagination, birthed to "actually exist in the real world, to affect other things" (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 20).

Imagination and Emotional Development

Numerous studies have explored emotion and imagination as central aspects in children's abilities to develop healthy self-regulation and appropriate empathy (Thompson & Tawell, 2017), especially during early childhood, as children develop the consciousness and personalities that nurture self-regulation and internal control (Önder, 2018). One significant connection involves children's ability to imagine the Other as they work collaboratively in relationships with peers, educators, and family members. Drama-based interventions, whether formalized pedagogical and therapeutic approaches, or informal ones that take place on playgrounds and during circle times, are opportunities for children to reengage with the community. Art, collaborative dance, storytelling, singing, mask-making, collaborative writing, and film-making offer children creative spaces for strengthening their emotional well-being (Thompson & Tawell, 2017). Research finds that role plays occurring through these dramatic interventions allow children to "take risks within a supportive but challenging environment" (Thompson & Tawell, 2017, p. 19), receiving acceptance from others even in the midst of possible failure. Imagination opens children's emotional growth and development when they realign their identity through

meaningful social interactions. Motivation, increased empathy, and tolerance of others are potentially nurtured when children imagine newly discovered emotional responses explored through a creative medium.

Just as the use of imagination nurtures children's social development through sociodramatic play, imagination can also build children's emotional competencies when they are invited to engage worlds of both fantasy and reality. As children create and maintain newly imagined scenarios, they embody emotions through pretend play, sociodramatic play, acting, and other performance arts. Such feelings often require intentionality, attentional control, multitasking or task-switching, and other executive functioning skills that can increase emotional understanding and control (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018; Happé et al., 2017). One study found that children who participated in guided dramatic pretend play had lowered levels of personal distress when compared to children who participated in story time or guided block play, activities that did not require the same intensity of imaginative investment (Goldstein & Lerner, 2018). Additionally, research finds that such imaginative activities can improve self-inhibition (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015) and emotional states (Kapsch, 2007). By inviting children into imagined expressions of the Other — whether the Other is a fairy tale character, animal, alternate ego of the self, or another human or nonhuman entity — children explore what Vygotsky called the dual expression of feeling, “an external, physical expression, [and] an internal expression associated with the choice of thoughts, images, and impressions” (2004, p. 18). This exploration of internal feeling with the external affect strengthens children's emotionality and nurtures their development.

Imagination and Moral Development

There remains controversy over the nature and significance of moral development in young children. While many researchers in the western world follow moral philosophies pioneered by Lawrence Kohlberg and others who sought to defeat ethical relativism (Lapsley, 2006), there are theorists who acknowledge the function of imagination in moral development, specifically its ability to open multiple possibilities for resolving moral dilemmas. When ethical orientations use imagination for abstracting “alternatives to the present face-to-face situation,” there exists potentiality for prosocial systems, ultimately “leading to a communal imagination” wherein children “learn virtue from the bottom up” (Narvaez, 2016, p. 227, 229). Such processes nurture children’s ability to reverse course through imaginative thought and activity, as they “develop new habits and intuitions about life and living” (Narvaez, 2016, p. 230-231), driving moral development and expanding empathy and a sense of relation with others.

Demonstrations of morality are often nurtured through indoctrination via character education, which — when executed in its best form — invites children to consider the virtue of justice by invoking civic virtues (Suissa, 2015). Children frequently imagine how they are to live together; a moral imperative that presents itself through social interactions with others, including among diverse individuals and communities. Recognizing that the “question of what form our society should take is not fully decided, that the crises facing us today demand radical solutions, and that perhaps a way to encourage [response] is to foster” imagination (Suissa, 2015, p. 114), children intuitively wonder what if the world were substantively and structurally different from what currently exists. When imagination is intertwined with children’s moral development, they

are enabled to “project an image of the world [that perceives] certain ends as deserving more or less priority over others” (Ferrara, 2012, p. 40).

Religious Education

Religious identity is fostered primarily through education, influencing the way that a child makes individual choices (Scolnicov, 2007). Recent research confirms that religious education largely prioritizes “transmission of religious beliefs and tradition from adult socializers” (Golo et al., 2019, p. 179), rather than nurturing each child’s spiritual potential by cultivating wonder, awe, and imagination. Pedagogies such Godly Play (Berryman, 2019) and Spark Rotation (Hodges, 2015) prioritize creativity in religious education, however curricula and other materials are costly and require training to maximize their efficacy with young children.

Children’s religious formation is considered more complicated today than for previous generations because families cannot assume that religious vestiges (e.g., character development, moral development) “of a civil religion will be sufficient to help children embrace a robust sense of themselves” (Yust, 2017, p. 260) as individuals with sacred, or transcendent, relationships. Children’s religious education is optimized when it is intentional, as families and faith communities “find ways of linking the big picture of [religious history and tradition] with the immediate experiences of” each child’s life (Brueggemann, 1979, p. 31), helping children understand their interconnectedness to both religious institutions and religious ideals. The religious education of young children helps to alleviate the “core concern of many religious communities [to socialize] the next generation” (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014, p. 205), by inviting their active, imaginative participation as contributing members of the community, modeled by

parents' religious adherences (Bunnell et al., 2018; Francis et al., 2020; Voas & Watt, 2014).

Children's religious activity in Christian communities is typically demonstrated by "going forward for baptism, to present special music, to light candles, and to give testimonies of their faith and good works [as] signs of hope for the continuity" of religion as a communal institution and cultural influence (Gallagher, 2007, p. 181).

Religious traditions and teachings are selected by a child's family, who has "control over the child's religious identity through choice of education" (Scolnicov, 2007, p. 259). Moreover, the rights to religious education are not each child's, but rather the rights of parents, supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document states that "parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children," and although not explicitly naming religious education, religion is one of the "important choices protected by [the Declaration]" (Scolnicov, 2007, p. 262). Families who take seriously their rights to select religious education for their children should explore pedagogies that nurture imagination, inviting each child to evoke a relational "consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant" and secular culture in which the child lives (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 3).

There are multiple ways that religious educators, families, and other adults religiously educate young children. The best religious educators nurture children's wonder, awe, and imaginative inquiry through these pedagogies, encouraging each child to play an active role in his or her religious formation.

Encouraging Religious Language Acquisition

Teaching religious language is crucial for children's religious identity formation, and should be taught with a commitment to experience and conversations, while resisting dogmatic instruction that stunts each child's imaginative potential. Children should learn the "vocabulary and [narratives] of faith stories if they are to participate" in individual and communal religious experiences (Yust, 2017, p. 263). Open pedagogical methods, such as questioning, dialoging, and reflective listening, nurture children's imagination and curiosity by teaching language as a tool for meaning-making and expression.

Exposing Religious Beliefs and Values

Children are at risk of missing the cultural richness that comes with religious beliefs and values because of alternative social narratives that cultivate a sense of need for material possessions in order to achieve personal happiness and positive esteem (Mercer, 2005). As children take moral clues from their religious educators, they develop a worldview that incorporates religious beliefs and values, supported through education via an "experimental God-talk" (Yust, 2017, p. 265), which nurtures children's imagination about sacred and meaningful aspects of human existence.

Nurturing Spiritual Practices

Religious educators teach young children how to engage "spiritual practices that animate and embody" religious identity (Yust, 2017, p. 267). Practices such as *Lectio Divina*, keeping silence and lamenting, add value to children's imaginative potential because they present spaces for children's awe and wonder to flourish. Additionally, teaching young children meaningful

spiritual practices instills tools for each child to strengthen his or her religious identity through continuous studying and learning of religious ideals. These practices connect children to their religious communities through active participation as contributing members.

Educating Through Symbolic Images

For children who are educated in Christian traditions, they may find Biblical narratives incorporated as visual, artistic elements in corporate worship, typically designed to nurture individual's imaginative experiences. The *crèche* during Advent and Stations of the Cross during Lent are images reminiscent of Jesus' birth and passion, narrated in The Gospel of Luke 2:1-20 and 23:1-56, respectively. The Gospel of John's account of Maundy Thursday's foot-washing, found in 13:1-20 and the Three Kings processions at Epiphany, described in the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12, offer performance art of Biblical stories. Statues of the Blessed Virgin and the *Pietà* adorn many Catholic churches and cathedrals, while stained glass often depicts various Biblical scenes in Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic spaces of worship. These images open children's awe and wonder by encouraging creative engagement with the iconographic elements of religion. They also rival the "ubiquitous icons of popular culture...[solidifying] a sense of identity and community" (Yust, 2017, p. 270) in young children.

Religious Identity

Young children begin to develop a self-concept in early childhood, which is foundational for identity development that occurs throughout their entire lives. Healthy achievement is a crucial milestone, ultimately "enabling a young person to make positive contributions to society and divert [personal despair]" (Furrow et al., 2004, p. 17). As children come to believe certain

truths about who they are as individuals, their budding awareness of self and others is greatly influenced by the cultures in which they are raised. For example, children growing up with a collectivist orientation may view themselves as parts of the larger social network to which they are connected, whereas children growing up with an individualistic orientation may prioritize autonomy, personal identity, and competition for shared resources (Feldman, 2019). These cultural distinctions impact religious identity because children must negotiate the social relationships they have through their affiliation to a particular religion. Religious frameworks, similar to those children espouse because of their gender and race, is one of many “ideological sources relevant to identity development” (Furrow et al., 2004, p. 17), is profoundly influenced by culture, and is nurtured by children’s imagination. When children reimagine a religious identity by questioning or criticizing their religious tradition, they may transform the cultural symbols of their religion and move toward hybridity; an in-between and imagined space of culture (Bhabha, 1994).

Because religious affiliation (e.g., Evangelicalism, Protestantism, Catholicism) is one cultural influence for children, religious education, and its forming of each child’s religious identity, is crucial for the total development of a child. Moreover, religious educators, including religious leaders, parents, and other adults who significantly impact a child’s development, intentionally engage children for the purpose of constructing a meaningful religious identity. Children learn to “actively reflect on the meaningfulness of religious values and behaviors” through their social interactions, informing a religious self-definition and the “significance ascribed to religion in one’s self-definition” (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014, p. 206). This formation sustains children with purpose and belonging (Erikson, 1959) and is a mutable identity

that is formed “relative to but separate from” the family (Scolnicov, 2007, p. 251). However, like religion itself, a child’s religious identity is not developed in a vacuum, but rather “changes and evolves through an interactive process with social factors and influences...[and] formed through interaction between our core self and others...shaping our identities through participation in social structures” (Hemming & Madge, 2011, p. 40). Additionally, multiple diversity markers (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, class) also impact a child’s religious identity development and contribute to the complexities of that development (Hemming & Madge, 2011).

Religious identity is multifaceted because of the complex nature of religion, as well as the complexity of a child’s identity development, which includes both personal and social identities (Hemming & Madge, 2011). The distinctions between these two identities are demonstrated through the following: (1) affiliation and belonging; (2) behaviors and practices; (3) beliefs and values; and (4) religious and spiritual experiences (Hemming & Madge, 2011). The practical manifestations of how families, religious educators, and other adults nurture children’s identity formation include encouraging language acquisition, exposing beliefs and values, engaging spiritual practices, exploring symbolic images, and experiencing congregational life (Yust, 2017). It is crucial for adults to understand that nurturing children’s religious identity should be conceptualized as a developmental and formative “process rather than transmission of adult beliefs and practices” (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014, p. 212), especially considering that some researchers argue a “child’s identity is determined from, or even before, his or her birth [as a] product of social and legal mechanisms, not of individual choice” (Scolnicov, 2007, p. 252). Each child’s imagination, demonstrated through awe, wonder, and inquiry, for creating something new should be celebrated as a core component for how children can and do actively

impact their own religious identity and spiritual development. Moreover, as religious resources, children “are visible signs of truths and goods that reflect and embody aspects of...religious identity...[instantiating and reflecting] core ideals” (Gallagher, 2007, p. 169) that uphold social respect for the dignity and integrity of each child as is, regardless of developmental level and competence (Moinian, 2009).

Spirituality

Spirituality refers to an individual’s increasing awareness of phenomena and events that are greater than him- or herself. This term is used to describe experiences that happen in children’s relationships with all that is transcendent or sacred (Cervantes and Arczynski, 2015; Nelson, 2009). Transcendent experiences move children beyond their current ways of thinking and feeling because these moments often surpass their senses (Quinton, 1995), propelling them toward wonder, awe, and inquiry. Transcendence can also defy understanding, moving children into deep curiosity and meaning-making; both nurturing a child’s imagination while also using imaginative thought and action to pursue greater spiritual development.

Spiritual development is an appropriate domain from which to consider how children access and demonstrate imagination. Recent research has moved away from stage theories of faith formation and toward an open conceptualization of how children create meaning through relationships with self, other, and nature. Findings link children’s development with their imaginations, including their perceptions on mysterious elements of life, universal visions for wellbeing, commitment to human and nonhuman worlds, and curiosity for transcendence (King, 2013).

Rather than a separate nature or characteristic of being human, spirituality is interwoven with a child's personhood and behaviors (Nelson, 2009). As natural inquisitors, children instinctively possess awe, wonder, and imaginative insights about their interactions with society, asking questions of families, religious educators, and religious institutions that guide their development (Hart, 2003; Lynch, 2015). "Why are we here?" "What happens after death?" and similar meaning-seeking explorations demonstrate both biological and developmental elements of spirituality, as well as imaginative insights that are embedded in children's wonder. Multiple research findings demonstrate spirituality's connections to an individual's non-verbal communication system, solidifying the spiritual imaginations in children of all ages — including those who are pre-verbal (Frady, 2019). Regardless of linguistic competence, children who seek meaning in lived experiences and shared relationships, express awe and wonder, and demonstrate a sense of exploring newly imagined worlds of ultimate value.

In 2011, the Child Theology Movement led researchers to explore children's spirituality in current social and political realities. Their inquiry included assessing children's imagination through creativity and play, and how current cultural norms have increased awareness and opportunity among researchers to explore children's spiritual development as its own developmental domain. The movement is a "network of theological enquiry... [placing] the child in the centre of serious thinking about how we should live," a new awareness that Mountain contends is "a sign of our evolving consciousness" (Mountain, 2011, p. 262-263). Imagination is at the core of consciousness; a "power of the mind to consider things which are not present to the senses, and to consider that which is not taken to be real" (Martin, 1995, p. 395). Only when

children can fully imagine their existence can they move toward optimum spiritual growth and development.

Cervantes and Arczynski (2015) also uncovered the link between children's spirituality and imagination in their research comparing elements of development with four distinct theories of children's spirituality. In their review of multiple qualitative research studies, Cervantes and Arczynski (2015) discovered:

in "child's play," children worked to understand the world around them, demonstrated awareness of their socialized reality, engaged in quests for meaning, and rehearsed life scripts through imaginary roles. Consequently, relationship and transcendence were found to be primary aspects of play that can frequently prompt existential questions commonly asked by children. (p. 250)

These findings offer families and religious educators a new perspective on imaginative thought and activity as a vehicle for spiritual development, as "children naturally live in an altered state of consciousness by virtue of their propensity toward play, imagination, and belief in unseen forces" (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015, p. 251). When leveraged by adults who are committed to nurturing children's imagination, this altered state of consciousness can promote spiritual growth and development by "[developing] relationships, and [prompting] social consciousness...to the importance of relational connection and responsibility to others" (Cervantes & Arczynski, 2015, p. 251).

Relational consciousness researcher David Hay (2000) continued his work until his death in 2014, by proposing an approach to children's spirituality which "transcends the religious-secular boundary by conceiving of spirituality as a natural human predisposition labelled 'relational consciousness'" (Hay, 2000, p. 37). By offering a non-stage theory and radically new

perspective on spiritual development, apart from faith formation (Fowler, 1995), Hay argued that research demonstrating a disposition toward relational consciousness is universally identifiable in “young children and expresses itself in many forms apart from religion” (Hay, 2000, p. 37), while nonetheless providing the imaginative foundation for a possibility of religious belief. The original research Hay completed with colleague Rebecca Nye (1998) identified two patterns present in young children’s spirituality: (1) an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness, relative to other passes of conversation spoken by each child; and (2) conversation expressed in a context of how the child relates to the material world, themselves, other people, and God. Hay suggested a tension between children’s open, perceptive relationships and the prolific presence in Western cultures toward individualism and privatization, which obscures the biologically natural predisposition for communal connectedness among human beings through imaginative thought and play. Hay (2000) further argued that numerous attempts at a critical response to individualism are inadequate, especially the “inability of liberal democracies, particularly in the United States, to maintain social coherence” (Hay, 2000, p. 43). Because imagination is one way for Christian communities to recapture lost traditions and practices (Brueggemann, 2001), researchers can utilize relational consciousness to recapture and reeducate religious communities toward the power of imagination in nurturing children’s overall development and well-being.

Relational Consciousness

Using the personal stories and experiences of children from multiple religious and nonreligious backgrounds, researchers have identified at least four categories of spirituality that are present in childhood. Each category refers to the various ways that children express spiritual sensitivity through their relationships with others and care for the world. The categories also

intersect with children's developing imaginations, as a child envisions a new something that transcends what was previously experienced or is currently understood. These findings position children's spirituality in the developing and relational consciousness — the child's perceptive awareness of self and others. The first category is *awareness sensing*, demonstrated in children's attention to the here and now: attending to the immediate present, expressing alertness to spiritual matters, and demonstrating a metacognitive awareness of their personal attentiveness (Hyde, 2008; Mata-McMahon, 2016). The second category is *mystery sensing*, which manifests as children demonstrate awareness of lived experiences that are incomprehensible or ineffable (Hay & Nye, 2006). This category includes children's use of awe and wonder, as well as deep questioning of life's meaning. The third category is *value sensing*, children's perceptions of what carries significance and ultimate meaning in their lives. Emotions and recognized feelings help children measure what has value (Mata, 2015). These recognized values help children imagine the potentiality of what is true and good. The fourth category is *community sensing*, evidenced by children's seeking out relationships with others in social interactions that nurture a child's sense of belonging and connectedness to a group or community (Quinn, 2017). Seeking the Other solidifies their imaginations of how to exist in community. Collectively, these four categories provide a framework for how children's thoughts, language, and interactions promote spiritual development, and the possible intersections with children's imagination.

Conclusion

While the literature offers rich resources for exploring children's spirituality, questions remain about children's imagination and families and religious leaders who resist creative thought and activity as a tool for religiosity. This study sought to explore those questions by

analyzing the differences in imagination scores among children whose families identify as one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. Additionally, this study explored whether religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance, predict imagination scores in children whose families identify as Christian. This study also investigated whether parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, predict imagination scores in children whose families identify as Christian. The results of this study may be used to inform religious leaders on the function of imagination in Christian education, by interpreting Vygotsky's perceptions of imagination as a driver for human development.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology of the study, which examined the imagination scores of children whose families identify as one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. The study's sample, protections and approval to conduct research, and instruments for data collection are explained in detail and include a rationale for the selected analyses.

This research study is a secondary data analysis. It is a quantitative design and uses two instruments for data collection: a demographic survey and the CIQ (Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). For the MANOVA analysis, the independent group variable is religious identity, with the following three levels: Evangelical Christian, Protestant Christian, and Catholic Christian. For the linear regression analyses, parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, are independent variables. Also for the linear regression analyses, religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance, are independent variables. The dependent variables identified for this study are sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and imaginative (fantastical)

play. Each of the three dependent variables is measured as a summed score from Likert scale responses to questions related to children's imagination.

Sample

This study comprised a secondary data analysis collected from the *Cultural Perspectives on Imagination* research study, which was conducted by Thibodeau et al. in 2018. The purpose of the 2018 survey was to examine factors that impact children's inclination towards imagination or pretend-play. The researchers also sought to identify possible barriers to children engaging in imaginative play. The study used nationwide survey data that were collected online by Qualtrics, a third-party panel provider which recruits potential research participants from various sources: website intercept recruitment, member referrals, targeted email lists, gaming sites, customer loyalty portals, permission-based networks, and social media. Once Qualtrics validates potential participants, they are subject to additional quality control measures such as LinkedIn matching, phone calls to places of business, and other third-party verification methods. Those individuals who meet eligibility requirements are sent an email invitation or prompted on a survey platform to begin a research study. Participants in the original study included 210 parents living in the US, with a child between the ages of 3- and 10-years-old. Each participant completed several research-based questionnaires, including the CIQ ($\alpha = .93$).

The sample for this research study is a subsample of participants from the *Cultural Perspectives on Imagination* study. This subsample includes 92 respondents from the original study who self-identified as Christian. Participants who identified with a religion other than Christianity, including but not limited to Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, were excluded from the

analyses because the research question specifies that children of Christian religious identity are the focus of this research. Of the 92 respondents included in the study, 39 identified as Evangelical Christian, 33 identified as Protestant Christian, and 20 identified as Catholic Christian. Fifty-one percent lived in the Southern U.S. region, 21% in the Midwest, 15% in the Northeast, and 13% in the West. Each respondent answered several additional demographic questions about the child for whom they were completing questionnaires (see Table 1). The children included 44 females and 48 males. Thirteen children were identified by their parent as Hispanic, and 79 as not Hispanic or Latino. Sixty-three percent were identified by their parent as Caucasian, 13% African-American, 13% more than one race, 7% Asian, 2% unknown, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Seventy-eight percent attended public schooling, 13% attended private schooling, 3% attended charter schooling, 2% were homeschooled, 2% were not in school, and 1% were in preschool. Twenty-two percent were in pre-kindergarten, 18% were in second grade, 17% were in kindergarten, 12% were in first grade, 11% were in fourth grade, 10% were in third grade, and 10% were in fifth grade.

Recruitment of Sample

Participants for the original study were recruited from various online sources using Qualtrics' third-party panel providers, including targeted email lists and social media (Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). Panel members who were deemed eligible following verification measures were sent an email invitation or prompted on a survey platform to proceed with the study. Participants gave informed consent on the first page of the study, which provided information about the research in which they were participating. Participants were provided with information concerning their rights as research participants, as well as contact information

should they have questions about their participation or the study. To increase protection of human subjects, the consent page was written in simple language to ensure comprehension. Rather than signing their name, participants checked a box stating they understood and agreed to participate in the research study.

Protection of Human Subjects

The original study secured IRB approval from the University of Missouri prior to data collection. To assure that the quality and integrity of research and programming was maintained, the study's researchers identified three ways in which they mitigated potential risks for participants:

1. The consent form was written in simple language to ensure participant comprehension of the study and its requirements.
2. Because participants were asked personal information, including their views on social, economic, and religious realities, participants were reminded that all responses are anonymous.
3. Participants were given the opportunity to skip any question they were uncomfortable answering by selecting "I do not feel comfortable answering," which was included as a response option for each question in the questionnaires.

For this research study, the Texas Woman's University IRB committee approved the application for exempt status for research utilizing secondary data (see Appendix L).

Instrumentation and Variables

Data used for this research study was collected through two measures: a survey completed by the parent about demographic information related to both the parent and the child and the CIQ (Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). The CIQ uses scale scoring and calculates the mean scores of three subscales: sociodramatic play (5 questions), imaginative companionship and impersonation (5 questions), and imaginative (fantastical) play (4 questions). Each of these three subscales is a dependent variable for the proposed study.

Christian religious identity is the independent variable for the MANOVA analysis, and includes three levels: 1) Evangelical Christian; 2) Protestant Christian; and 3) Catholic Christian. On the demographic survey, participants were prompted “Religious Affiliation (select all that apply):” and were provided with 11 options, including “I do not feel comfortable answering.” Those who selected Christian were further asked “Which denomination do you most closely identify with?” and were provided with 15 options. Participants who chose Baptist or Nondenominational were categorized as Evangelical Christian. Participants who chose Church of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian were categorized as Protestant Christian. Participants who chose Catholic were categorized as Catholic Christian.

Linear regression analyses explored the predictive relationships between religiosity and children’s imagination scores, and parental support of imaginative thought and activity and children’s imagination scores. Religiosity is measured by a child’s attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance; the independent variables used to explore Research Question Three. Parental support of imaginative thought and activity is

measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home; the independent variables used to explore Research Question Four.

Participants were asked to complete the CIQ (see Appendix A). Fourteen questions were answered on a Likert scale and coded for analysis by the original researchers (Thibodeau et al., 2019). Questions included “How often does this child come up with a play script on their own (‘Let’s pretend to be...’)?” and “How often does this child engage in pretend play (role play, imaginative play) during free-play time?”

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to analyze the imagination scores of children whose families self-identify as one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. It is a secondary data analysis that used data collected in the *Cultural Perspectives on Imagination* research study (Thibodeau et al., 2019). This current study analyzed four research questions and hypotheses using IBM SPSS. This chapter discusses the study's coding and statistical procedures, along with results from correlations, MANOVA, and linear regression analyses.

Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

Frequencies and percentages were calculated for multiple demographic characteristics: child sex, child ethnicity, child race, child schooling, child grade level, religious affiliation, and geographical location (see Table 1). Descriptive analyses were completed for each variable. Descriptive statistics in the form of mean, standard deviations, range, skewness, and kurtosis values are provided for the following variables: sociodramatic play, imaginary companionship and impersonation, imaginative (fantastical) play, child's attendance frequency at religious

events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, child's access to props in the home (see Table 2).

Coding of Data

Coding of demographic data followed codes established by the original data collection in 2018. Demographic data coding follows. Frequencies are included in Table 1.

Child Sex

Participants were prompted "Child's sex" and responded with either Female or Male, coded 0 and 1, respectively.

Child Ethnicity

Participants were prompted "Child's ethnicity" and responded with Hispanic or Latino, Not Hispanic or Latino, or Unknown, coded 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Child Race

Participants were prompted "Child's race (select all that apply)" and responded with one of 16 selections (see Appendix B). In Table 1, respondents who selected numbers 12, 14, 15, 24, 25, 34, 45, and 145 are categorized into one category ("More than one race") because of low frequencies.

Child Schooling

Participants were prompted "What type of school does your child attend?" and responded with one of 11 selections (see Appendix C). In Table 1, respondents who selected numbers 3 and

4 are categorized into one category (“Private”) because of an error in the original data instrument.

Child Grade Level

Participants were prompted “Child’s current grade level in school” and responded with one of 7 selections (see Appendix D).

Religious Identity

Participants were asked to complete a Demographic Survey that included multiple questions, including questions related to their religious identity. Participants were prompted “Religious Affiliation (select all that apply)” and were provided with 11 options, including “I do not feel comfortable answering.” Those who selected “Christian” were further asked “Which denomination do you most closely identify with?” and were provided with 15 options.

Participants with Evangelical religious identity selected one of two Christian denominations: Baptist or Nondenominational. This data was dummy coded into EVANGEL. Participants with Protestant religious identity affiliated with one of five Christian denominations: Church of Christ, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian. This data was dummy coded into PROTEST. Participants with Catholic religious identity affiliated with Catholic when asked to select their Christian denomination. This data was dummy coded into CATHOLIC.

Geographical Location

Participants were prompted “What state do you currently reside in with this child?” and entered their response. These responses were categorized into regions by the research team of the original study (Thibodeau, et al., 2019; see Appendix E).

Table 1
Summary of Demographic Characteristics of Sample.

		<i>n</i>	%
Sex			
	Female	44	47.8
	Male	48	52.2
Ethnicity			
	Hispanic/Latino	13	14.1
	Not Hispanic/Latino	79	85.9
Race			
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	1.1
	Asian	7	7.6
	African American	12	13.0
	Caucasian	58	63.0
	Unknown	2	2.2
	More than one race	12	13.1
Schooling			
	Public	72	78.3
	Charter	3	3.3
	Private	12	12.9
	Homeschool	2	2.2
	Not in School/None	2	2.2
	Daycare/Preschool	1	1.1
Grade level			
	Pre-kindergarten	20	21.7
	Kindergarten	16	17.4
	First grade	11	12
	Second grade	17	18.5
	Third grade	9	9.8
	Fourth grade	10	10.9
	Fifth grade	9	9.8
Religious Identity			
	Evangelical	39	42.4
	Protestant	33	35.9
	Catholic	20	21.7
Region			
	Northeast	14	15.2

Midwest	19	20.7
South	47	51.1
West	12	13

Attendance Frequency at Religious Events

Participants were prompted “How often does your child typically attend religious activities such as services, classes, or events?” and responded with one of seven selections (see Appendix F).

Parental Perception of Religious Importance

Participants were prompted “On a scale from 1-10, how important is it to you that your child is religious?” and responded with 1 of 10 selections on a Likert scale, with 1 equaling *Not important at all* and 10 equaling *Very important*.

Parental Encouragement of Imagination

Participants were prompted “How often do you encourage imagination/pretend-play in your home?” and responded with one of 6 selections (see Appendix G).

Child’s Access to Props in the Home

Participants were prompted “Please list any props or materials that you have in your home that might encourage imagination (if you do not have any, please write ‘none’)” and further prompted to classify available props with one of three selections (see Appendix H).

Sociodramatic Play

Participants were asked to complete the CIQ. Five questions related to the child's sociodramatic play were answered on a Likert scale wherein participants responded with *Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, Almost every day*, or *I do not feel comfortable answering*. These items were coded 1 through 5, and 88, respectively. This data was summed into the dependent variable SOCDRA (see Appendix I).

Imaginary Companionship and Impersonation

Participants were asked to complete the CIQ. The following five questions related to the child's imaginative companionship and impersonation were answered on a Likert scale wherein participants responded with *Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, Almost every day*, or *I do not feel comfortable answering*. These items were coded 1 through 5, and 88, respectively. This data was summed into the dependent variable ICOMP (see Appendix J).

Fantastical Play

Participants were asked to complete the CIQ. The following four questions related to the child's fantastical play were answered on a Likert scale wherein participants responded with *Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, Almost every day*, or *I do not feel comfortable answering*. These items were coded 1 through 5, and 88, respectively. This data was summed into the dependent variable FANTPL (see Appendix K).

Table 2*Predictor Variables and Imagination Scores: Descriptive Statistics*

Variables	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	SK	KU
Sociodramatic play scores	92	17.196	4.551	6 - 25	-.482	-.294
Imaginary companionship and impersonation scores	92	14.087	4.404	5 - 23	-.013	-.721
Imaginative (fantastical) play scores	92	13.348	3.421	4 - 20	-.437	.226
Attendance frequency	92	1.389	.849	0 - 3	-.496	-.940
Perception of religious importance	92	7.38	2.651	1 - 10	-.852	-.159
Encouragement of imagination	91	3.64	1.216	1 - 5	-.746	-.105
Access to props in the home	90	.96	.669	0 - 2	.051	-.717

Preliminary Analyses

Preliminary analyses for this study included a priori power analysis using G*Power to determine a sufficient sample size using an alpha of 0.05, a power of 0.80, and a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$; Faul et al., 2008). Based on the aforementioned assumptions, the desired sample size for a MANOVA analysis with three groups and three response variables is 51. The desired sample size recommended for a linear multiple regression analysis with two predictors is 68. This research sample includes 92 respondents: 39 Evangelical Christian, 33 Protestant Christian, and 20 Catholic Christian, therefore meeting sufficient power for the study design.

Prior to completing the primary analyses, all variables were checked for acceptable levels of skewness and kurtosis. Each had levels between 1 and -1; therefore, no transformations were necessary. Multicollinearity was assessed by reviewing tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). Tolerance was above 0.1 and VIF below 2; therefore, no multicollinearity issues were presented (Field, 2018).

Primary Analyses

Primary analyses included bivariate correlations, a MANOVA analysis, and two linear regression analyses. Bivariate correlations explored research question number one. A MANOVA analysis explored research question number two. Linear regression analyses explored Research Questions Three and Four.

Research Question One

Are there relationships among the following variables when exploring imagination in early childhood: child's religious identity, child's attendance frequency at religious events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, child's access to props in the home, child's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, child's scores in imaginative companionship and impersonation, and child's scores in imaginative (fantastical) play?

Correlations analyses were used to examine the relationships among variables. Statistically significant, positive correlations were found for multiple relationships between two variables (see Table 3). Strong, positive correlations were found between the following seven variable pairs: frequency of attendance at religious events and parental perception of religious importance; parental encouragement of imagination and sociodramatic play scores; parental encouragement of imagination and imaginary companionship and impersonation scores; parental encouragement of imagination and imaginative (fantastical) play scores; sociodramatic play scores and imaginary companionship and impersonation scores; sociodramatic play scores and imaginative (fantastical) play scores; and imaginative (fantastical) play scores and imaginary companionship and impersonation scores. Medium, positive correlations were found between the following three variable pairs: parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home; a child's access to props in the home and imaginary companionship and impersonation scores; and a child's access to props in the home and imaginative (fantastical) play scores. A small, positive correlation was found between the following variable pair: a

child's access to props in the home and sociodramatic play scores. While running analyses, missing data were excluded pairwise.

Hypothesis One

It was hypothesized that there would be statistically significant relationships among a child's religious identity, child's attendance frequency at religious events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, child's access to props in the home, child's scores in sociodramatic play, child's scores in imaginative companionship and impersonation, and child's scores in imaginative (fantastical) play. Correlations analyses revealed that multiple relationships were positively and statistically significant, while other relationships did not meet Hypothesis One (see Table 3).

Table 3*Religious Identities, Predictor Variables, and Imagination Scores: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics (N = 92)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Catholic	–								
2. Protestant	-.39**	–							
3. Evangelical	-.45**	-.64**	–						
4. Sociodramatic play scores	.18	-.09	-.07	–					
5. Imaginary companionship and impersonation scores	.16	-.03	-.11	.66**	–				
6. Imaginative (fantastical) play scores	.17	-.09	-.06	.78**	.67**	–			
7. Attendance frequency	.09	-.12	.04	.46	.10	.10	–		

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
8. Perception of religious importance	.08	-.18	.11	.63	.07	.10	.66**	–	
9. Encouragement of imagination	.09	-.46	-.03	.69**	.57**	.64**	-.01	-.01	–
10. Access to props in the home	.16	-.05	-.08	.21*	.31**	.37**	.01	-.10	.36**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Research Question Two

Do imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative (fantastical) play) differ among children with different religious identities?

A MANOVA was performed to explore means differences in imagination scores among children from families who self-affiliate with different Christian religious identities. This analysis was performed to protect against inflating a TYPE 1 error rate in performing follow-up analyses (Field, 2018). The analysis was not significant, $F(6, 176) = .646, p = .693$; Pillai's trace = .043, partial $\eta^2 = .022$. Pillai's trace was selected for interpretation because of its robustness to violations of assumptions compared with other statistics (Olson, 1974). Thus, children's imagination scores are not significantly different among children with Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic identities. Because there was not a statistically significant MANOVA, interpretation of the between-subjects effects statistics and univariate test results was not warranted. Moreover, post hoc tests, such as univariate F tests and descriptive discriminant analysis (DDA), were not completed, which would have identified differences in imagination scores between groups (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Hypothesis Two

It was hypothesized that there would be a statistical difference in imagination scores among children with different religious identities. No significant differences were found in imagination scores among children with different religious identities.

Research Question Three

Does religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance predict imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative (fantastical) play) among children with different religious identities?

Linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the association a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance with children's imagination scores. The model was not significant, accounting for .009 of the variance in imagination scores, $F(2,89) = .409, p = .665$. It was found that the child's attendance frequency at religious events did not significantly predict imagination scores ($\beta = .789, p = .668$), nor did parental perception of religious importance ($\beta = .185, p = .753$).

Hypothesis Three

It was hypothesized that religiosity, measured by a child's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance, predicts imagination scores among children with different religious identities. A significant predictive relationship was not found (see Table 4).

Table 4

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Imagination Scores (N = 92)

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>B SE</i>	β
Attendance Frequency	.789	1.834	.060
Religious Importance	.185	.587	.044
R^2		.009	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Research Question Four

Does parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, predict imagination scores (children's scores in imaginative sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and or imaginative (fantastical) play) among children with different religious identities?

Linear regression analysis was also conducted to determine the association of parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home with children's imagination scores. The model was significant, accounting for .49 of the variance in imagination scores, $F(2,86) = 41.84, p = .000$. It was found that parental encouragement of imagination significantly predicted imagination scores ($\beta = 6.042, p = .000$); however, a child's access to props in the home did not statistically predict children's imagination scores ($\beta = 1.556, p = .253$).

Hypothesis Four

It was hypothesized that parental support of imaginative thought and activity, measured by parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home, predicts imagination scores among children with different religious identities. A statistically significant predictive relationship was found between parental encouragement of imagination and a child's imagination scores (see Table 5).

Table 5*Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Imagination Scores (N = 92)*

Variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Parental Encouragement	6.042	.748	.000***
Access to Props	1.556	1.353	.253
R^2		.493	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Summary

This chapter reviewed the data analyses for this exploration on religious identity and imagination in early childhood, including significant findings for Research Questions One and Four. A review of statistical tests that were used was included. Results from multiple analyses were presented through narrative and tables. The statistics show that there are positive, statistically significant relationships among multiple variables included in this research study. Additionally, parental encouragement of imagination is shown to predict a child's imagination scores.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research study focused on imaginative thought and play in the lives of children whose families identify as one of three Christian religious identities: Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic. The findings reveal significant correlations among parental encouragement of imaginative play, children's access to props in the home, and children's imagination scores. Findings also reveal that parental encouragement of imagination predicts higher scores in children's imagination, using the CIQ (Gilpin et al., *manuscript in preparation*). These findings confirm that families have significant influence on children's development, including the importance for parents to provide resources that nurture children's imaginative thought and play.

Discussion of Findings

This researcher completed a secondary data analysis to explore four questions related to children's religious identity and imagination. Ninety-two families were represented, and answered questions on religious identity, a child's attendance frequency at religious events, parental perception of religious importance, parental encouragement of imagination, and a child's access to props in the home. These variables were explored using correlation, MANOVA, and linear regression analyses, with statistically significant findings of correlation analyses and one linear regression analysis. These findings are compatible with

the literature, while also opening possibilities for future research to further explore questions of how children's spirituality, including religious experiences, impacts the development of imagination.

Family Influence and Children's Imagination

This study reveals significant correlations among multiple variables, indicating the strength of family influence on young children's imagination. There is a medium, positive correlation between parental encouragement of imagination and a child's access to props in the home. Strong, positive correlations exist between parental encouragement of imagination and children's scores on each of the three subsets of the CIQ: sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and imaginative (fantastical) fantastical play. These correlations are unsurprising, given the long-term influences that families have on their children from birth (Raby et al., 2015). Play that is influenced by adults effectively improves young children's skills, including those related to pretend, or creative, play and story-telling (Fehr & Russ, 2016); skills that benefit children across their entire lives. Families who encourage imaginative play boost young children's creative development, as recent findings reveal that pretend play variables, such as story stems and props, "significantly account for 17.0% of the variance in [children's] creativity...[suggesting] that in this age group, a child's overall pretend play ability may be more predictive of creativity development than specific play processes" (Fehr & Russ, 2016, p. 304).

There is a strong, positive correlation between a child's access to props in the home and the sociodramatic play score, and a medium, positive correlation between a child's access to props in the home and the imaginative (fantastical) play score. Props, and other dramatic tools, invite young children to step into roles and explore emotions that are outside of typical

experiences (de Assis, 2019). Thus, play props become the tangible manifestation of children's cognitive tools (Egan et al., 2016); equipping them for the fullest developmental potentials. These tangible and cognitive tools increase in value and functionality as a child's mental capacities grow. When children have access to resources that nurture their abilities to wonder about and create something new, they experience a deeper integration of their play activity with their self-expression (Schimmel, 2007) and learning, thus, boosting imagination development.

Strong, positive correlations are also found among each of the three subset scores in the CIQ: sociodramatic play, imaginative companionship and impersonation, and imaginative (fantastical) play. Rich intersections among multiple manifestations of imaginative thought and creative play are evidenced in research studies exploring connections among children's storytelling, language, and creative play (Holmes et al., 2019). Moreover, young children's abilities to implement imagination and creativity into multiple aspects of self-expression and learning have proven to boost children's overall skill sets as they develop socially and cognitively (Delvecchio et al., 2016; Goldstein & Lerner, 2018; Happé et al., 2017; Loughrey & Woods, 2010; Vygotsky, 2004). Children's robust integration of multiple facets of creativity underscore development as a holistic phenomenon in which all domains — cognitive, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual — grow collaboratively with imagination (De la Rosa, 2018; Narvaez, 2016; Raby et al., 2015; Thompson & Tawell, 2017; Vygotsky, 2004).

Family Influence and Children's Religiosity

This study revealed a strong, positive correlation between children's attendance frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance, echoing

research on parental involvement in religious education (Bunnell et al., 2018). When Christian parents were interviewed by researchers from multiple universities in the West North Central and South Atlantic regions, results revealed that parental involvement significantly influences children's attendance at religious events. One participant told researchers that church is "just...what we do" (Bunnell et al., 2018, p. 6). Study participants offered eight themes that were priorities for how they sought to influence their children's religiosity; an underlying motivation for their parenting decisions. Each theme speaks to tangible fruits that manifest in their children's lives, such as salvation in Jesus Christ and an understanding of doctrinal tenets (Bunnell et al., 2018, p. 7). Families who place great importance on children's religiosity will necessarily expose them to religious events that teach the creeds and nurture the beliefs families deem most important for children's religiosity. Moreover, research shows that young churchgoers "consistently [identify] the key importance of...family... in sustaining their connection with church life and the Christian faith" (Francis et al., 2020, p. 35). Parental practice and their own self-affiliation with a particular religion have a statistically significant impact on their children's religiosity, including frequency of attendance at religious events (Voas & Watt, 2014).

Religious Identity and Children's Imagination Development

A MANOVA analysis sought to explore the differences in mean scores on the CIQ among children from families representing Evangelical, Protestant, and Catholic identities. Findings reveal that there is no difference in mean scores. Moreover, children's frequency at religious events and parental perception of religious importance do not significantly predict children's scores on the CIQ. These findings echo research revealing that greater religiosity, including parental perception of religious importance and frequency of attendance at religious events, lead to less favorable views of imagination (Benabou et al., 2015). Moreover, some

religious educators' resistance to attend to the imaginative insights of young children by ignoring their curiosities, wonder, and awe about God and other sacred mysteries of life, give "no room for [children's] imaginations to flourish" (Selçuk, 2015, p. 256).

The findings of this study, coupled with previous research, offer multiple points of inquiry for future exploration. Reasons for family resistance to imagination as a driver for spiritual development; teaching priorities at seminaries and other institutions where religious educators are trained; and case studies of Christian faith communities that do nurture imagination in early education are all points for deeper investigation. Children's religious identity and frequency of attendance at religious events could offer young children rich possibilities for exploring their imaginations through the lens of spirituality. However, "religious education seems to have embraced either the heart or the mind, but not both" (Selçuk, 2015, p. 256), by prioritizing transmission of dogmatic information that promotes separating cognition from emotion, resulting in a "harmful and destructive impact on" religious education (Selçuk, 2015, p. 257). Continued research and exploration have the potential to mitigate these effects if findings are used to shift current realities toward reimagined religious education content and design.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to this study, including a small sample size and recruitment method. However, the most concerning limitations are a consequence of using secondary data, which limits a researcher's access to available data to information collected by the original researchers. The questionnaires used in the original data set, including construction of questions and response choices, could not be modified by this researcher, which restricted the course of this exploratory research. The original study was not designed to recruit subjects from specific religions, rather religious affiliation was one of more than 40

demographic questions asked of participants. A study design that includes recruitment of families representing specific religious identities (i.e., recruitment via gatekeepers at places of worship or faith-based organizations, may yield statistically significant results). Additionally, variables were treated in this study as continuous when their question and response design was categorical. For example, participants were asked “How often does your child typically attend religious activities such as services, classes, or events?” and selected one of the following responses: *Never*, *Rarely/Occasionally*, *Holidays Only/Few times a year*, *Monthly*, *Weekly*, *Daily*, or *Other*. Treating a categorical response as continuous creates pause for the researcher when interpreting results and may influence significance levels and overall analysis outcomes. A more robust question and response construct may ask multiple questions related to the frequency of attendance at religious events, such as average durations of events, how many years of the child’s life he or she has attended religious events, and whether the most frequently attended events are instructional, peer-led fellowship, intergenerational socials, sacred gatherings, etc., perhaps yielding a more accurate attendance frequency composite variable.

Another limitation to this study was the inclusion of respondents who had children between the ages of 3 and 10 years. Some questions in the CIQ were either not developmentally accurate for children of all ages, or would manifest in varying ways depending on the child’s age. Measuring the imaginative thought and play of a child who is 3-years-old should be different from measuring the same of a child who is 10-years-old, given that previous research reveals differences in mean scores on creative assessments depending on age (Alsrour & Al-Ali, 2014) and the integration of children’s cognitive abilities with imaginative potential (Egan et al., 2016; Meadows, 2006).

Another limitation, which may have impacted the results of Research Question Four, is that all responses were self-reported by the adult completing the questionnaire. Following the CIQ questions related to a child's thought and play behaviors, respondents were asked "How often do you encourage imagination/pretend play in your home?" Those who reported higher scores for their child on the imagination scales may have also reported that they encourage their child *Frequently* or *Almost everyday*, especially if they believe that their parenting influences their child's play behaviors.

Although these limitations are present in this study, the findings nonetheless present important considerations for how families and religious educators can promote imaginative thought and play through quality religious education, therefore nurturing each child's overall spiritual development.

Considerations for Spiritual Development

Children explore spiritual potential through relationships with God, humans, and the nonhuman world; potentialities aligned with increasing knowledge of neuroscience (Miller, 2015). In early childhood, spirituality is intertwined with human bonding, leading to "experiences of transcendence through relationships" (Miller, 2015, p. 52), especially the loving connections that children may feel with their families. Parents who support their child's imaginative thought and play honor creativity as an integral part of spiritual development by nurturing children to explore all of life's possibilities (Winnicott, 1971), creating spaces for imagination that transcend time and place (Robinson, 2017), and recognizing the wonder that grows out of their child's relational consciousness.

Children express spiritual sensitivities in simple and complex ways. Their perceptions when engaging others, curiosities at life's mysteries, and confronting questions on morality and justice, are demonstrated in children's conversations as well as nonverbal (including

preverbal) behaviors. Imagination is at the core of children’s spirituality (Champagne, 2003; Fraser & Grootenboer, 2004; Goodliff, 2013; McCreery, 1996), providing children with resources (e.g., wonder, curiosity) for deep, creative engagement with the world. Moreover, imagination provides tools necessary for total health and wellbeing: stretching cognitive capabilities when children shift perspectives to implement newly imagined scenarios (Schibli et al., 2017); ushering social growth through imagined realities that uphold morality and justice (Barnetz, 2015); strengthening emotionality as children explore relational consciousness when considering the Other (Vygotsky, 2004). Spiritual development that leads to a deeper discovery of oneself — both who I am and how I can move toward my fullest potential — requires curiosities and creativities that imagination opens up within young hearts and minds. Because play is the “leading line of development” (Vygotsky, 2016, p. 6) in early childhood, imaginative thought and activity is each young child’s opportunity to discover who they are (Bruce, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005), and who they would like to become (Wright, 2011) — tasks at the core of spirituality.

Implications for Religious Education

Religious education begins in the home, as families “function as the interpreters of religious ideology for children” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 129), in part, by choosing the methods and content of instruction they allow their children to engage. Parents who understand that religion is more than mere cognitive knowledge (Ratcliff, 2008), provide their children with opportunities to fully embrace a religious identity that nurtures optimum spiritual growth and development. However, the dissonance between researched-based understandings on the benefits of creativity in early childhood with the resistance toward imaginative thought and play among some families who self-affiliate with Christianity remains concerning. Moreover, religious educators who prioritize dogmatic instruction at the expense of children’s curious

questioning and genuine wonder also stifle children's imaginative, and religious, potential. Materials such as Godly Play and Spark Rotation offer imaginative-driven options for Christian communities seeking to integrate creativity into religious education programming. However, these materials are costly and publishing houses suggest specialized training for educators who use the curricula. While both Godly Play and Spark Rotation are high-quality options for religious education in early childhood, nurturing children's imagination does not require such resources. Just as props, story stems, and other dramatic tools are effectively incorporated into early education classrooms, boosting young children's imaginative potential, so too can they be included in religious programming. Age-appropriate biblical narratives provide rich story stems when children are invited to play the part of a character; take the story further; envision an alternate ending; or explore the emotions, motivations, or social responsibilities for each character. Props that enhance learning in early education classrooms have the same promise for religious pedagogies, especially when teachers use these materials in "adult-child co-operation [promoting] children's affective and aesthetic" religious socialization (Cekaite & Björk-Willén, 2018, p. 52). Rosary beads, palm crosses, iconography, hymnals and other prayer books, and vestments can be used to nurture imaginative thought and play that honors sacred rituals, while also encouraging children to curiously and creatively engage religious artifacts. Finally, religious educators should embrace the same pedagogical priorities as the best early educators; encouraging rich language development, exposing beliefs and values, teaching creative practices, and using symbolism (Yust, 2017) to nurture young children's religiosity, all of which open imaginative thought and play in early childhood.

Conclusion

As a driver for human development, (Eagleman & Brandt, 2018; Vygotsky, 2004) imagination is at the core of our abilities to create, and recreate, the worlds in which we live. Religious imaginations have shifted human history for thousands of years; leading the Israelites to a world outside of bondage, designing faith communities following the death of Jesus, inspiring desert fathers and mothers into monastic ways of being, nudging Luther to envision new accountabilities, planting seeds of hope in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr., and countless others who dreamed of something new.

Young children's imaginations drive their personal, and our collective, development toward existences that uphold the wellbeing of every child's cognitive, social, emotional, and moral potential. They demonstrate sensitivities through shared and sacred encounters, exercising a spiritual agency that nurtures each child's fullest developmental potential. Imaginative thought and play flourishes through cognition, when children explore language and symbols to sharpen their religious identities. Imagination boosts children's capacities for rich cultural engagement when they envision social transformations rooted in religiosity. Imaginative thought and play open capacities for emotional growth by inviting each child to empathize with the Other through interreligious encounters. Imagination is at the core of moral development, when children envision justice in light of a relational consciousness that moves them toward transcendence.

Religious education that nurtures imaginative thought and play honors the spiritual potential of young children, while also promoting their total wellbeing. Religious identities can be strengthened in early childhood when children are encouraged to imagine the world as it should be, especially in places where the world as it is dehumanizes and destroys.

Educating and caring for young children should always include nurturing imagination — inviting each child to join in the sacred promises to make something new.

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APPENDIX A

Childhood Imagination Questionnaire

Instructions

The following questions ask you about how frequently your child engages in imaginative activities.

Response Scale

1 = Never

2 = Rarely

3 = Occasionally

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost everyday

88 = I do not feel comfortable answering

Questions

1. How often do you observe this child interacting with an imaginary friend?
2. How often does this child engage in pretend interactions with invisible characters when playing alone?
3. How often does this child come up with a play script on their own (“Let’s pretend to be...”)?
4. How often does this child engage in pretend play (role play, imaginative play) during free-play time?
5. How often does this child engage in pretend play on the playground?

6. How often is this child's pretend play reality based (pretend to be mommy, pretend to be fire-fighter, pretend to talk on the phone, etc.)?
7. How often is this child's pretend play imaginative (pretend to be princesses, superheroes, pretend to fly, etc.)?
8. How often does this child use props or articles of clothing to enhance their pretend play?
9. How often does this child impersonate another character from a book, TV show, etc.?
10. When this child plays with other children, how often does the play involve interactions with invisible imaginary others?
11. How often does this child interact with characters from books or TV shows during their pretend play?
12. When given a choice, how often does this child self-select fantastical toys, books, games or media (Dr. Seuss, Disney Princesses, Superheroes, etc.)?
13. How often does this child involve imaginary (invisible) props in their play (e.g., imaginary phone, sword, hose, toy)?
14. How often does this child try to engage their peers in their imaginative play?

APPENDIX B

Child Race

1 = American Indian or Alaska Native

2 = Asian

3 = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

4 = African American

5 = Caucasian

6 = Unknown

7 = More than one race

12 = American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian

14 = American Indian or Alaska Native, African American

15 = American Indian or Alaska Native, Caucasian

24 = Asian, African American

25 = Asian, Caucasian

34 = Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, African American

45 = African American, Caucasian

145 = American Indian or Alaska Native, African American, Caucasian

245 = Asian, African American, Caucasian

APPENDIX C
Child Schooling

1 = Public

2 = Charter

3 = Private: Non-Secular

4 = Private: Religious

5 = Other

6 = Homeschool

7 = Not in school/None

8 = Daycare/Preschool (public vs. private not specified)

9 = Magnet School

10 = Cyber School

11 = Special Education

APPENDIX D
Child Grade Level

0 = pre-kindergarten

.5 = kindergarten

1 = 1st grade

2 = 2nd grade

3 = 3rd grade

4 = 4th grade

5 = 5th grade

APPENDIX E
Geographical Location

1 = Northeast (CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT, NJ, NY, PA)

2 = Midwest (IL, IN, MI, OH, WI, IA, KS, MN, MO, NE, ND, SD)

3 = South (DE, FL, GA, MD, NC, SC, VA, WV, AL, KY, MS, TN, AR, LA, OK, TX)

4 = West (AZ, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, UT, WY, AL, CA, HI, OR, WA)

APPENDIX F

Attendance Frequency at Religious Events

0 = Never

.5 = Rarely/Occasionally

.75 = Holidays Only/few time a year

1 = Monthly

2 = Weekly

3 = Daily

4 = Other

APPENDIX G

Parental Encouragement of Imagination

1 = Never

2 = Rarely

3 = Occasionally

4 = Frequently

5 = Almost everyday

88 = I do not feel comfortable answering

APPENDIX H

Child's Access to Props in the Home

0 = No props

1 = Representational props (e.g., boxes, paper, dress up, costumes)

2 = Explicitly fantastical props (e.g., capes, crowns, wands)

APPENDIX I
Sociodramatic Play Questions

“How often does this child come up with a play script on their own (Let’s pretend to be…)”

“How often does this child engage in pretend play (role play, imaginative play) during free-play time?”

“How often does this child engage in pretend play on the playground?”

“How often is this child’s pretend play reality based (pretend to be mommy, pretend to be fire-fighter, pretend to talk on the phone, etc.)”

“How often does this child use props or articles of clothing to enhance their pretend play?”

APPENDIX J

Imaginary Companionship and Impersonation Questions

“How often do you observe this child interacting with an imaginary friend?”

“How often does this child engage in pretend interactions with invisible characters when playing alone?”

“How often does this child impersonate another character from a book, TV show, etc.?”

“When this child plays with other children, how often does the play involve interactions with invisible imaginary others?”

“How often does this child interact with characters from books or TV shows during their pretend play?”

APPENDIX K
Fantastical Play Questions

“How often is this child’s pretend play imaginative (pretend to be princesses, superheroes, pretend to fly, etc.)?”

“When given a chance, how often does this child self-select fantastical toys, books, games or media (Dr. Seuss, Disney Princesses, Superheroes, etc.)?”

“How often does this child involve imaginary (invisible) props in their play (e.g., imaginary phone, sword, horse, toy)?”

“How often does this child try to engage their peers in their imaginative play?”

APPENDIX L
IRB Approval Letter

Date: 11-11-2019

IRB #: IRB-FY2020-94
Title: Religious Identity and Imagination in Early Childhood
Creation Date: 10-31-2019
End Date:
Status: **Approved**
Principal Investigator: Renee Blanchard
Review Board: TWU IRB - Denton
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Exempt	Decision	Exempt
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Key Study Contacts

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