

Implementation of Spiritual Care in healthcare: A qualitative study on the sustainability of the SpECi project

Background

The project “Spiritual Care at the End of Life: Development and Testing of an Implementation Strategy” was carried out between 2020 and 2024 in cooperation with the Evangelische Kliniken Essen-Mitte, the Professorship of Quality of Life, Spirituality, and Coping at the University of Witten/Herdecke, as well as welfare and professional associations. Its aim was to establish Spiritual Care as an integral part of healthcare.

The curriculum “Spiritual/Existential Care interprofessionell (SpECi)” was tested at seven locations as part of the implementation strategy and evaluated in a quantitative pre-post study with positive effects on competencies and satisfaction with support.

The qualitative study now supplements the quantitative findings with a systematic analysis of the sustainable effects of the project and, in particular, the 40 teaching units on Spiritual/Existential Care (Büssing et al. 2024, Gerundt 2024).

Aim

The qualitative study aims to assess the integration of Spiritual Care into the everyday work of the participating institutions and to identify and describe the resulting individual, structural, and organizational change processes.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with employees trained in SpECi and representatives from the participating project locations. For the training participants, the focus is on individual experiences and work-related changes, while the guidelines for the institutional representatives address structural and organizational effects in particular.

Results

The sample includes 9 participants (5 SpECi-trained employees and 4 representatives of the project sites in healthcare facilities). For both SpECi-trained staff and organizational representatives, four main categories with subcategories were identified (→ Figures 1-3):

Organizational Representatives

- SpECi is perceived as a professionally relevant approach that fosters organizational development.
- The training programs enhance the ability to address spiritual and existential situations.
- Spiritual Care is regarded as a relevant component of professional care.
- The transfer of these practices to other institutions and professional groups demonstrates a commitment to structurally implementing Spiritual Care.

Training Participants

- SpECi enhances awareness of existential concerns and the ability to articulate issues related to meaning, faith, fear, and hope.
- Participants report gaining professional depth and confidence in handling complex situations.
- The training promotes reflection on one’s own limits, values, and stressors, and alleviates the burden of addressing existential concerns without having to “resolve” them.

Figure 1: Category System (Organizational Representatives):

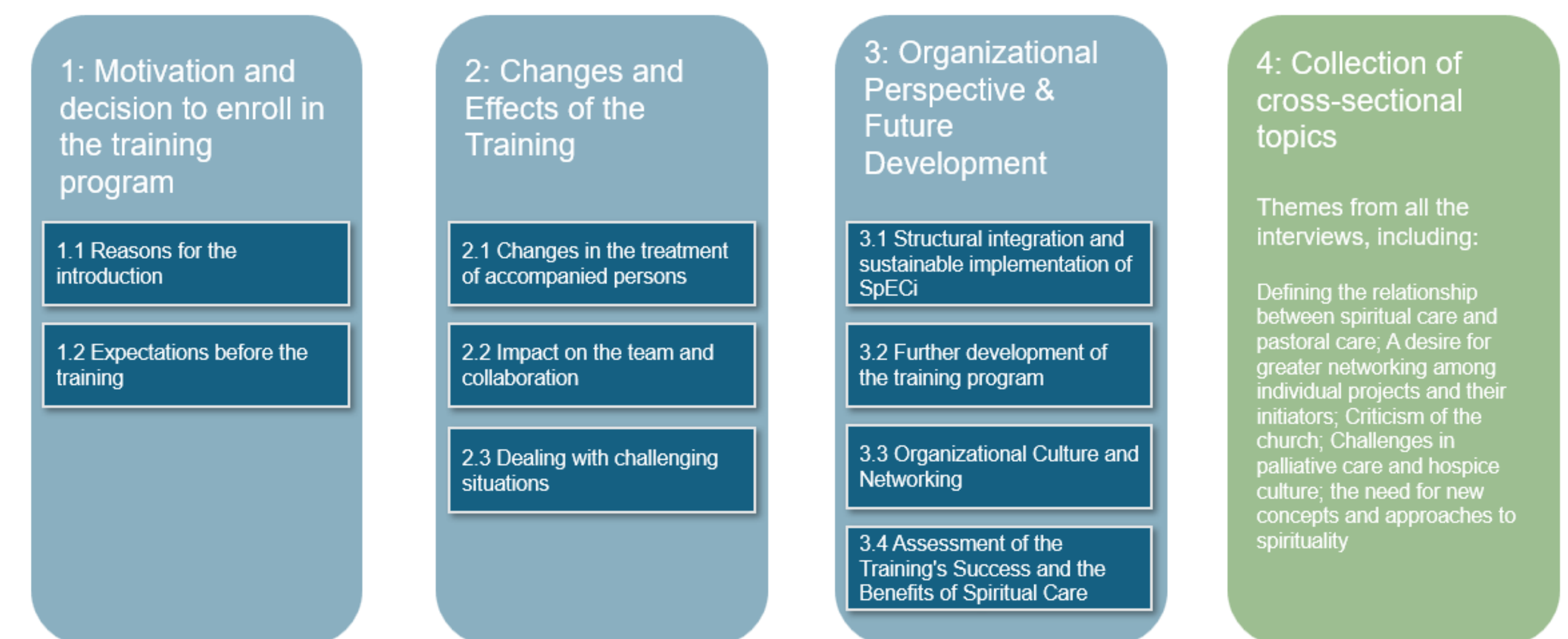


Figure 2: Category System (Training Participants):

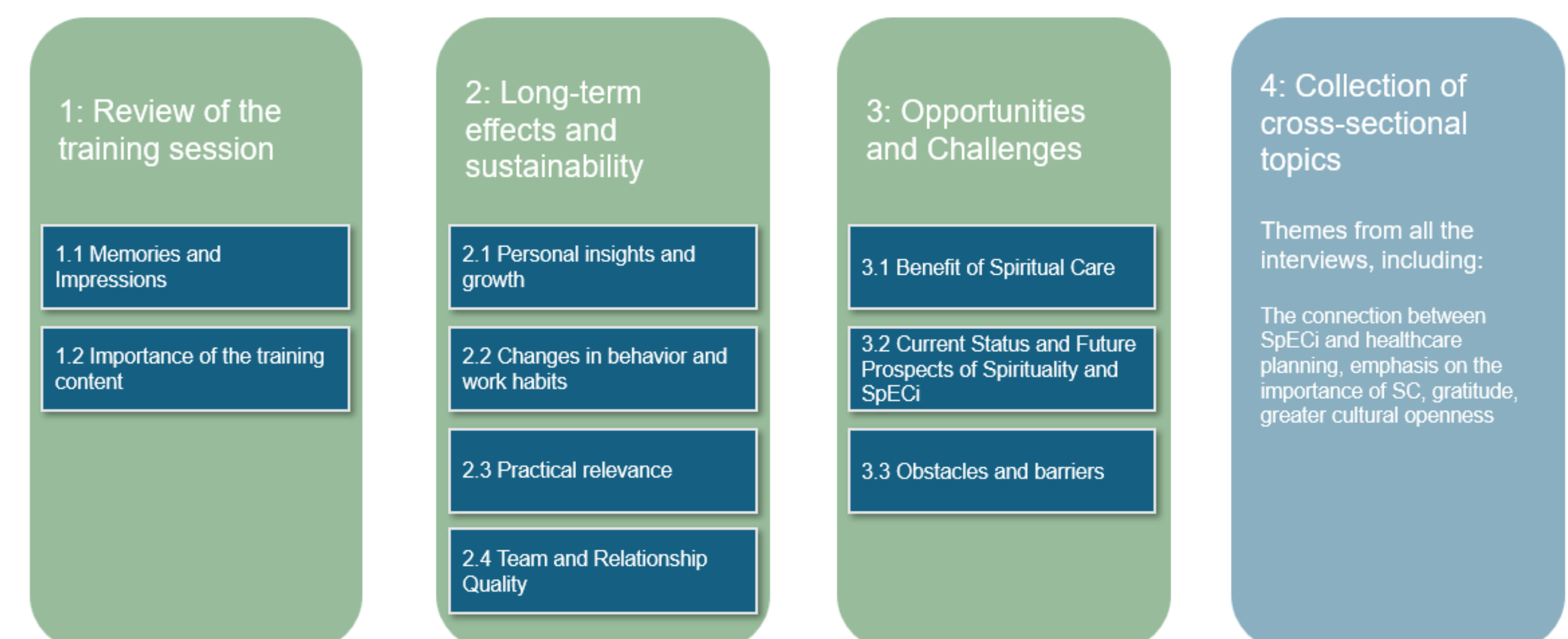
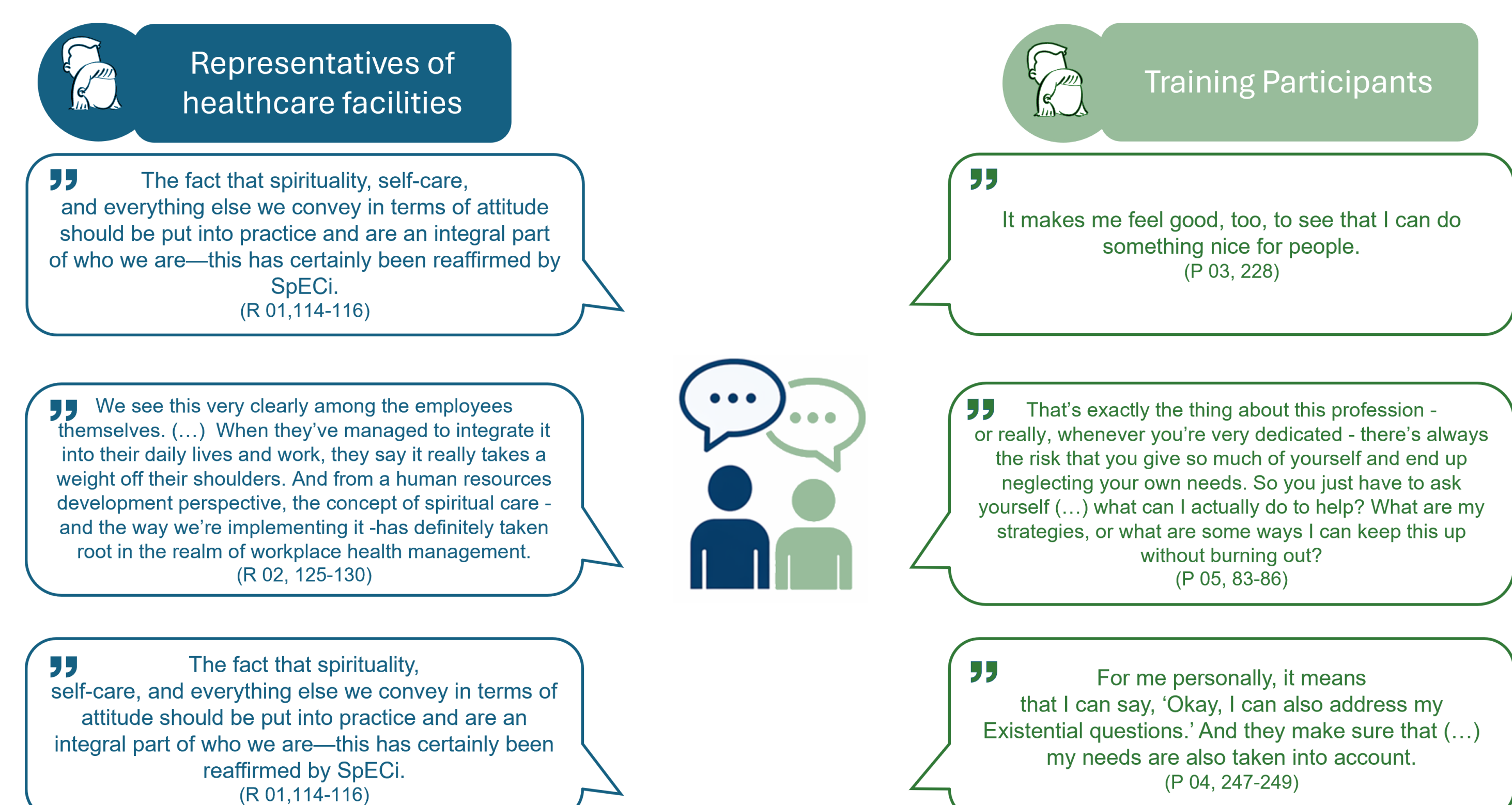


Figure 3: Original sounds of Organizational Representatives and Training Participants:



Conclusions

- These preliminary findings identify success factors and challenges for the long-term integration of Spiritual Care, thereby supporting the further development of training formats and implementation strategies.
- The findings from the participating project sites could provide an incentive for other healthcare providers to focus more on this topic and implement Spiritual/Existential Care.
- The study is ongoing, and further findings will be added as the project continues.