

The spiritual life of children

by Ruth A. Wilson

Over the past 10 to 20 years, early childhood professionals have witnessed a number of initiatives and movements which have added a spark of energy and interest to the field. These initiatives and movements have been informed, in part, by new research in a number of areas including how the brain develops, the role of emotions in cognitive development, the need for multicultural perspectives, and the importance of strong connections with nature. Of these, the importance of connecting children with nature is, perhaps, the one area receiving the most attention at the present time.

In 2006, participants at the Working Forum on Nature Education for Young Children generated a list of 15 advantages of connecting children with nature. These advantages include the development of the whole child with specific mention of the cognitive, social,

and emotional domains. Other benefits include 1) the development of caring, pro-social behavior; 2) the preserving of culture, community, learning, healthy being, and world habitat; and 3) the promotion of peace (Exchange, 2006). While this list is impressive and may sound comprehensive, one area of child development not specifically mentioned is spirituality. A look at other initiatives and materials for early childhood education reflects this same omission.

One reason for not including spirituality may be a lack of understanding about the meaning of spirituality and how this relates to young children. A misconception about spirituality is that it is tied to religion (i.e., belief in and reverence for a supernatural power). Yet, the term 'spirituality' is derived from the word 'spirit' — often defined as the vital principle or animating force within living things. This definition may reflect some overlap with what is generally covered in religion, but it also represents a reality that can stand apart from religion.

Soul — a term sometimes used as a synonym for spirit — represents an integral dimension of who we are as humans. This dimension, which may or may not be nurtured through religion, can be fostered through a variety of nature-related

experiences — sometimes referred to as 'soul-making' experiences (Wilson, 2008). But while nature can be one avenue for the deepening of our spiritual lives, there are other paths, as well. Showing compassion for others, philosophical thinking, and immersing oneself in the creating of something beautiful are examples of other paths to spiritual development. These paths are available to children as well as adults.

The spiritual life of children

A growing body of evidence indicates that children have spiritual capacities and experiences, which shape their lives in powerful and enduring ways (Hart, 2005). According to Hart, these capacities and experiences include wonder, wondering, relational spirituality, and wisdom. While spirituality plays a critical role in children's lives, it has gone "largely unrecognized in the annals of child development" (Hart, 2005, p. 163). This may be due to misguided efforts to fit spirituality into the constraints of developmental theory.

Theories about cognitive development suggest that young children don't have the intellectual capacity for meaningful reflection and thus cannot have a genuine spiritual life. A number of well-respected researchers and theorists in the field of



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child development and early childhood education, however, have been strong believers in a rich and significant spiritual life in young children. These believers include Frederick Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rudolph Steiner.

Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, advocated “a garden for children” as an educational setting where young boys and girls could observe and interact with nature and where they, the children themselves, could grow and develop in body, mind, and spirit. According to Froebel, the purpose of education should not be reason, *per se*, but rather the unfolding of the divine essence within the child. He urged educators to respect the spontaneous and essentially creative nature of this unfolding and to build on the child’s intrinsic spiritual capacities.

Montessori held similar beliefs about education and young children. She expressed belief in a spiritual force that guides human development and encouraged teachers to respect the natural unfolding of the human soul, especially during the first six years of life (Montessori, 1972). These early years, she felt, are particularly crucial to the holistic and spiritual development of the child.

Steiner — an Austrian philosopher, literary scholar, and educator — held similar views. As a philosopher, Steiner looked for a synthesis between science and mysticism and a connection between the more cognitive focus of Western philosophy and the inner and spiritual needs of the human being. Steiner believed that human nature is comprised of body (physical being), soul (personal inner life), and spirit (ultimate being). As an educator, Steiner recommended that teachers foster growth in all areas of human development, with a primary focus on the unfolding of the individual’s spirit. Steiner’s views are exemplified in Waldorf Schools where education is viewed as an awakening from within,

and the curriculum is implicitly infused with spirituality.

Related issues and concerns

Unfortunately, there are forces in our culture which work against the spiritual development of children. In fact, such forces are systematically impoverishing our souls and leaving our children chronically undernourished in their spiritual development. Some of the forces working against the development of the human spirit — in both children and adults — include materialism, mechanism, unbridled competition, and individualism. These forces “tend to ‘desacralize’ the world, leaving it as inert matter for our manipulation” (Hart, 2005, p. 165).

A dismissive attitude about the spiritual development of children is also part of the problem, as many adults think of children as not being particularly spiritual or not considering the role of spirituality in the holistic development of children. Reasons for this dismissive attitude include equating spirituality with religion, thinking of human development in terms of separate stages, and equating spiritual development with ‘higher’ mental functions, such as language and abstract thought. While most young children have limited abilities to think and talk about concepts relating to spirituality, they can (and do) have deeply spiritual experiences.

Spirituality isn’t just about — or even primarily about — thinking. We have a tendency to cling to a narrow understanding of ‘knowing’ — that is, a type of knowing based solely on theoretical and rational thought. Spiritual development, however, engages “other ways of knowing” including aesthetic knowing — a type of direct apprehension or intuition. This type of knowing is especially pronounced during childhood when, as Rachel Carson says, the world is experienced as “fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement” (Carson, 1956, p. 42). A way of

knowing based on wonder and intuition is nonrational or transrational — yet real and powerful (Hart, 2005).

Carson, an American marine biologist and nature writer, urged parents and teachers to recognize a child’s sense of wonder and work to keep it alive by frequent contact with the natural world. Unfortunately, many educators and parents aren’t heeding Carson’s advice. Children today are being pushed harder than ever to perform in academic, personal, and social realms so as to give them ‘an edge’ for success in the future (Crain, 2003). Such an achievement-oriented environment does little to cultivate a child’s sense of wonder and their aesthetic and spiritual development.

Perhaps attention to the spiritual experiences and capacities of children presented by Hart (2005) could serve as starting points in understanding and supporting children’s spirituality. Following is a brief description of each — wonder, wondering, relational spirituality, and wisdom.

Wonder

Both Hart (2005) and Carson (1956) recognize that childhood is a time of wonder and that wonder allows children to experience, not only the rich and beautiful aspects of the physical world in which we live, but the nonmaterial, spiritual aspects of the world, as well. According to Hart (2005), a child’s experience of wonder includes feelings of awe, connection, joy, insight, and a deep sense of reverence and love. According to Hart, there is a strong link between wonder and a sense of the sacred.

Wondering

In her book *Little Big Minds*, Marietta McCarty (2006) refers to young children as natural philosophers and provides ample evidence of their ability to reflect on ‘big questions’ addressing such

things as the meaning of life, truth, justice, peace, and death. As children wonder — or philosophize — they search for answers about their own identity and seem to never tire of exploring the unknown. Wondering comes naturally for children, as they don't yet take for granted many of the things that adults consider everyday normal events (Hart, 2005).

Young children are naturally curious and spend a great deal of time guessing, speculating, doubting, inferring, and experimenting. Because of this, we can easily understand the concept of 'The Young Child as Scientist' (Chaille & Britain, 1991). A close look at how children approach and learn about the world, however, suggests a blending of scientific and philosophical inquiries (Wilson, 2001). Gareth Matthews (1980, 1994) — whose study of philosophy and children focused primarily on children under 10 years of age — maintains that philosophical curiosity is natural during the early childhood years. Young children not only ask about and experiment with the physical aspects of things, they also probe for answers to such questions as "Why should we do this?" and "Does it matter?" Once children's questions address the 'why' of behaviors and the meanings behind actions and events, they've moved into the realm of philosophy and ethics reflecting an active spiritual life (Wilson, 2001).

Relational spirituality

Hart (2005) describes relational spirituality as that which is "lived out at the intersection of our lives — at the meeting between you and me" (p. 172). In the wisdom traditions, he says, this is often recognized as love or compassion and usually begins with an experience of empathy.

Empathy involves an 'open-heartedness,' an understanding and caring for others which includes — but is not

limited to — human relationships. Children tend to care for other living things, as well — such as the plant that needs to be watered and the bird whose nest blew out of the tree. 'Ecological perspective taking' is the term used by Chaille and Britain (1991) in reference to children's ability to take the perspective of other living things. This skill, they note, leads to a sense of respect and compassion.

Wisdom

Wisdom includes an understanding of what is true, right, or lasting. While we have a tendency to think that such understanding can be obtained only after many years of experience (and thus more prevalent in elders than young people), it is not unusual to find expressions of wisdom in what children say and do. Young children, in fact, often go right to the heart of an issue and tend to recognize pain, injustice, and phoniness very quickly (Hart, 2005). This ability, Hart says, is a reflection of wisdom and a way of knowing that is intuitive in nature.

Spirituality and the creation of a peaceful society

While supporting the spiritual life of children offers multiple benefits to children, it may also lead to a more peaceful society. A part of wondering is the ability to imagine something other than what is; and a part of wisdom is understanding what is true and right. We see reflections of wondering and wisdom in what one very wise eight year old had to say about war and peace: "The reason for war is that everybody has forgotten what peace means" (McCarty, 2006, p. 10).

The connection between spirituality and peace is not a new idea. Dr. Frederick Kettner, the founder of biosophy and the inspiration for the establishment of The Biosophical Institute, spoke of the

need to 'soulize' a human being. For this to occur, he said, a new kind of love has to be created in human nature — that is, a love for peace (Kettner, 1955). Patti Bailie (2009), Education Director for The Biosophical Institute, is concerned that children's spiritual development is often ignored or not named. According to Bailie, children's spiritual development should be afforded the same status or recognition as their cognitive development.

As peace is more than the absence of violence, hostility, and war (Wilson, 2009), can there be any doubt that real peace necessitates a foundation built on spiritual attitudes and values, including compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and hope? If peace education is to be effective in bringing about a more peaceful society, we may need to start at the early childhood level and make a priority of bringing attention to the spiritual life of young children. We may need to restructure early childhood education around the concept of peace as an integrating context and recognize spirituality as a key component in this approach. The framework for this approach would include a philosophy of nonviolence, love, compassion, trust, fairness, cooperation, and reverence for the human family and all life on Planet Earth. This philosophy would have to permeate, not only the content of early childhood education, but the process as well.

Conclusion

As plants need certain conditions to flourish, so do children. This is true for all dimensions of child development, including children's spirituality. Young children are natural philosophers and ready to grapple with serious philosophical questions: What makes something living? Am I more alive than a tree? What is the right way to live with plants, animals, and other people? These questions, while philosophical in nature, also relate to matters of the spirit. To promote both the well-being of young children

and the creation of a peaceful society, adults would do well to attend to the spiritual wonderings and dispositions of young children.

Maybe the next 'big step' in early childhood education is to recognize the importance of spirituality and find ways to support this critical area of human development. Such a step would not only infuse the profession with additional energy, meaning, and excitement, but would also enrich the lives of young children and give society a chance at peace.

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