



Spiritual Development in Child Literature

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ABSTRACT

To explain the term c can be very challenging because the experience it refers to is not a rational or obvious one. There is no particular mode to explain spirituality. Berryman (2001) asks why is it that "we know 'spirituality' when we meet it, but can't define it? Why do our explanations fail to satisfy?". He seeks to give these questions answers by proposing that maybe the fact that spirituality is part of our non-verbal communication system is the reason it is so complicated to define, and thus our efforts should be geared towards showing the non-verbal nature of spirituality in its place of searching for verbal brevity.

Keywords: spirituality, rational, non-verbal communication, geared, verbal brevity

Beyond the specifics of verbal or non-verbal ways of defining spirituality, some authors argue between the relation of spirituality to religion or its independence from it. The widely held view of authors is that even though religion can be a system of manifesting and living spirituality, they are not attached to one another and thus having a particular religious belief is not obligatory for being spiritual for the purpose of this paper I will focus on spirituality and religion as separate, independent concepts from each other. These concepts can be related if we view religion as a "systematic approach to spiritual growth formed around doctrines and standards of behaviour", and spirituality as the substance of religion or as DeMarco (2000, as cited in Stutts and Schloemann, 2002) would put it, as a set of beliefs that can be manifested through religious practice, but are not limited to it. I will embrace Champagne's (2001) understanding that "spirituality and religion are interdependent rather than equivalent", to be able to study spirituality more freely.



Mc Creery (1994) in her quest for defining spirituality encountered different authors who had faced similar difficulties as her own. She found that there were three most important concept under which spirituality could be understood: spirituality as a fundamental aspect of human nature, spirituality as "something other" and spirituality as energy, power, and essence. Champagne (2001) also has found in the literature common threads to the notion of spirituality as: human experience, unification and integrity, and consciousness. I will describe the different definitions of spirituality under these three approaches.

As far as the theory of spirituality as an aspect of human nature is concerned, most writers agree that to speak of spiritual aspects is to speak of "something that is shared by all human beings and not just a few". Hay (1982) explains that in his study he has come across a great number of people who are aware of a spiritual side to existence, whether they are "religious" or not, thus understanding it as a human characteristic.

Hart (2003) agrees that spirituality is in reality so imbedded in human nature that he proposes "rather than thinking of ourselves as human beings occasionally having spiritual experiences, I find it more helpful to think of ourselves as spiritual beings having human experiences" (P.8). Elkins (1998) also asserts that "spirituality is a universal human phenomenon found in all cultures and in every age; it is not the exclusive possession of any religious group".

Scott (2001) establishes his work with spirituality on the hypothesis that all humans are spiritual and have spiritual experiences with a assortment of characteristics that may or may not be mediated by religious doctrines or institutional frames.

Therefore, it is understood that regardless of the fact that we choose to view spirituality through religion or not, tied to an impression of God or away from it, it is regularly conceived as a human attribute or characteristic.

Spirituality as Unifying with "Something Other"

Focusing on the view of spirituality as other, Hart (2003) explains that "spiritual refers to an intimate and direct influence of the divine in our lives" (p. 8), giving the sense that spirituality originates outside of us although it significantly influences us in our inner core. McCreery (1994) explains how in England, in the 1988 Education Reform Act, the spiritual is listed as something evident from the moral, cultural, mental, and physical.



Priestley (1985) also suggests that we can "only talk about the spiritual in terms of images rather than concepts. To tie spirituality down to intellectual discourse is to lose it, because it cannot be limited to the static forms of intellectual models". From these authors it can be gathered that spirituality can be portrayed in images that stem from outside of us, which have a distinct and powerful impact on our lives.

Bosacki (2001) complies that the majority of research hints at that the term spirituality deals with "connections and relations to ourselves, others, and the world around us. It refers to both a sense of inferiority or an inner reality and a sense of being connected beyond one's own self, connected to something 'greater'". Myers and Myers (1999) view this connection as a construction of meaning that informs the way we engage in "the processes of transcendence". This process of transcendence is then what gives consent to us to move past what is known towards what we do not yet understand; that which is beyond us.

Other authors define spirituality as a combination of the aspects found by McCreery (1994). In their study Stutts and Schloemann (2002) tried to ascertain how spirituality came into play when deciding what is best for the sick child. They defined spirituality in DeMarco's (2000, in Stutts and Schloemann, 2002) terms, as "the relationship between the self and a higher power that is dynamic, interpretive, rational, and integral part of human life", thus combining the notion of an integral part of the human being and the "something other" views of spirituality. Champagne (2001) aggress with this combining notion and states "spirituality cannot de dissociated either from the human or from what is beyond the human, in transcend and in immanence".

Children's Spirituality

Many authors maintain that young children have a natural sense of the self and the spiritual in that they are more connected to the genuine in themselves and others (Coles, 1990; Hay and Nye, 1998). The problem arises when children share their spiritual experiences with adults. These experiences are usually undermined, deemed as unreal and in the best cases, when recognized as true, asked to be forgotten or not shared with anyone else because they can be dangerous to the child. Hart (2003) explains that children have a secret spiritual life. "They have spiritual capacities and experiences-profound moments that shape their lives in enduring ways. These are



sometimes stunning, often tender, and reveal a remarkable spiritual world that has been kept largely secret".

Silverman and Worden (1992, as cited in Garbarino & Bedard, 1996) did a research with children of whom a parent had died, and found that "57 percent reported speaking to the dead parent; 43 percent of those children felt they received an answer; and 81 percent believed their dead parents were watching them" (p. 471). In contrast, Kalish and Reynolds (1973, as cited in Garbarino & Bedard, 1996) reported that only 12 percent of adults described such direct contact with the dead. It is not my intent to claim that believing in the spirit outliving the human body is a requirement for spiritual development; nevertheless, these studies indicate that children seem to be more open to spiritual experiences and to admitting their spiritual beliefs overtly to others, than adults.

Garbarino and Bedard (1996) also make an important point when differentiating children's spirituality from that of adults. They state that since the initial structures of meaning, which are necessary for spiritual development, are most efficiently and effectively established in early childhood, children tend to be more open to developmentally enhancing experiences than are adults. Nevertheless, this "critical period" of spiritual development places children in a vulnerable position and thus makes it imperative for adults to protect them providing for safe and nurturing environments for spiritual development to occur. As adults there are some aspects that we can be aware of to help free and uncover children's secret spiritual lives, and some authors have made a point of making some recommendations for parents and adults in general.

Children's Spirituality in Education

Regarding spirituality in education, McCreery (1994) explains that great educators of the past, such as Froebel and Steiner, have analysed spirituality as an vital aspect of children's education, but what appears to be missing is the way of formally encompassing this work into the curriculum. While there also seems to still be some uncertainty of what spirituality is. Bosacki (2001) indicates that spirituality in education needs to go "beyond knowledge acquisition and enter the realms of personal meaning and purpose". Hart (2003) explains that the problem with schools, in terms of



spirituality, is not that they lack answers; it is more that they lack depth, and he claims that profundity is associated more with asking good questions than with having all the answers.

Along these lines, Alexander and Ben-Peretz (2001) propose "pedagogy of the sacred" to teach spirituality in schools. This type of pedagogy consists of "an instructional concept that engages us in reflection about ritual and liturgical aspects of the curriculum". They claim that curriculum designers should, when deciding which knowledge is of most worth and how to communicate or create it, examine their fundamental beliefs about the purpose of life and the nature of a good society. They believe that "the design, construction, implementation and evaluation of educational materials can and should be conceived as a sacred task". Therefore, the spiritual aspect of education should start in the planning and designing of the curriculum.

Ratcliff (1992) explains that to understand child-like faith better we have to empathize children. He bases his arguments on theories of child development by Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, Alice Honig and Bettye Cadwell and proposes that spiritual programs for children should be led by trustworthy people, carried out in predictable environments, having those in charge care for the children responsibly, paying attention to their signals.

When referring particularly to infants and toddlers, he suggests using generous amounts of body language and facial expressions to convey affirmations and encourage self esteem.

Stories and Narratives:

One of the recurrent strategies that come up in the literature to help children develop and live their spirituality is the notion of listening and telling of stories (Berrymann, 1990; Bosacki, 2001; Champagne, 2001, Priestley, 2001; Scott, 2001), Berrymann (1990) maintains that the spiritual "awareness best takes the form of narrative" and that when "the experience of God shifts to the form of story, it enters space and time" (p. 531),

Story telling of spiritual experience can be a complex job, especially because in our Western cultures we are neither anticipating to hear nor willing to affirm personal narratives of spiritual experiences (Scott, 2001). Scott (2001) describes that "to begin to



tell personal spiritual narratives is to act against a strong cultural message. This creates difficulties in both telling and listening to stories of spiritual experiences". Spirituality has been hushed in Western cultures, and this has had lasting consequences of inhibiting growth and development in the spiritual ambit.

In terms of how we do research on children's spiritual experiences, Scott (2001) implies that our approach must change; the spiritual experience needs a shift in understanding for effective research to take place. The researcher must be keen to suspend "subject-object dualism, listen for multiplicity; accept ambiguity and uncertainty in order to participate with narrators in engaging the experience and its implications"

Conclusions

After reviewing the literature on spirituality, it is noticeable that there are many interpretations and definitions to the term spiritual. Even though there are commonalities to the definitions such as spirituality as a human characteristic, spirituality having to do with being in touch with a higher essence, and also having to do with opening up one's consciousness to the greater world, the authors in this field still have to come to a consensus. This consensus would facilitate the implementation of a spiritual curriculum and would help the educational field address spirituality in school settings.

One future task that can be achieved by theorists and researchers is to outline and define spirituality as something a bit more substantial, to the extent that this may be possible. This common ground of understanding would make easy the task for adults to take care of children's spiritual development.

Another focus for researchers could be, once the definition of spirituality is clear, to describe the spiritual programs and curricula that are being realized at the moment and determine, if possible, their influence of spiritual development. This would then consent researchers to propose spiritual curricula and specific spiritual curricular activities and strategies that could be applied by teachers in classrooms.

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