

Lutheran Conference

Researching Children's Spirituality

This paper explores some aspects of my PhD thesis (2010) with the hope that it will be of some practical use for members of this conference in their roles in Christian Education.

What is spirituality?

In the Christian past spirituality has been equated with religious experience. However, in this century many people claim to be spiritual who are not religious. Modern research has explored many types of spiritual experience in adults and children. The consensus is that spirituality is an innate part of being human, and is experienced in many ways, such as mysticism, nature worship, or even as a humanist ethical concern for the wellbeing of humanity and the planet. My mentor, Brendan Hyde, (2006) defined spirituality as a search for Unity between Self, Others and the Transcendent (often understood as God). Pioneers of research into children's spirituality, such as Hart (2003) and Hay and Nye (2006) concluded that all children are born with a spiritual sensitivity, and awareness of the Transcendent. However in our secular society many people reject religion and the possibility of a realm beyond the merely physical. Therefore by the time a child reaches the age of 10, this awareness of the transcendent is usually suppressed or denied. This means that in order to discover how a child relates to Self, Other and the Transcendent we have to explore their everyday lives: their relationships with family and friends, and the environment, their moral values and their formation, and their sense of awe and wonder about life, death and existence.

Introducing my research

This research was influenced by a number of authors, including Hay & Nye (2006), Hart (2003), Hyde (2008), and Elaine Champagne (2003), who introduced the concept of *Spiritual modes of being: Sensitive, Relational and Existential*, as explored in my book..

The aim of my recent research was to investigate the spirituality of children in Victorian state primary schools. The method involved semi-structured interviews with 24 children aged 8 to 10 in three schools in a provincial city, a small rural community, and a Melbourne suburban school with a high migrant enrolment. The first 2 interviews were with groups of 4 children, and the third interview was with each child individually.

A summary of the interviews is as follows:

Meeting 1 – Consciousness

Phase 1 - wondering

Activities – choose a photo of something amazing (add photos)

Discussion – the choice of picture, and what children find amazing

Phase 2 – The Big question

Activity – show the cartoon picture of the thinking child

Discussion – Big questions, and what children wonder about

Meeting 2 Relationality

Phase 1 – group activity – jigsaw puzzle – observe the interactions and strategies used.

Discussion – Doing the puzzle, doing things together, being alone

Phase 2 – Read the story *The violin man* (Thompson 2004)

Discussion – The story: Oscar being alone, but felt presence of his dead daughter, also relationships to families, friends, death

Meeting 3**Phase 1 – Identity**

Activity – make a drawing of yourself.

Discussion – sense of identity, what makes you special, special people

Phase 2 – Roadmap

Activity – show the picture of the Kosovo refugees. Explain the picture as necessary.

Discussion – Plight of the refugees, helping people, good and bad deeds, 3 wishes

Activity – draw a picture of “Your Journey” - real or imaginary.

Using a research method called “hermeneutic phenomenological research method”, the material gathered from the videotaped interviews was transcribed, then analysed initially by preparing a spiritual profile of each child, using Champagne’s (2003) spiritual *modes of being*. The model for

structuring my research and further analysis of the research findings, represented in the diagram below, arose out of literature on spirituality and recent research in children's spirituality.

Insert Figure 1

Explaining the Model

This model has the following four dimensions: a) Consciousness, b) Relationality, c) Identity, and d) Roadmap (Moriarty, 2010). These four dimensions, which were presumed to be complementary, are represented as in equilibrium. At the periphery of the diagram are the various external influences on the development of children's spirituality. *Consciousness* refers to a heightened awareness of the spiritual in the world around, and in the transcendent world, whether one believes in a God or not. This consciousness is expressed as mystery sensing and responses of awe and wonder. "*Relationality*" refers to relationship with Self, the world, other people and the transcendent. *Consciousness* (or sensitivity) and *Relationality* are often conceived of as a single dimension (Hay and Nye, 2006). *Identity* refers to self-image or self-awareness. "*Roadmap*" refers to the values and aspirations which provide a moral compass and vision in a child's life. *Worldview* is represented centrally as a meaning-making factor which binds all the other factors together. The conclusion of my analysis led to a slightly modified model, based on some unexpected findings.

The Modified Model

(Insert Figure 2 here)

This diagram represents a more dynamic conceptualisation of children's spirituality than the original model, Figure 1. It suggests a circular, and possibly a spiral movement, representing a process rather than a state of being. There was some evidence that identity formation developed out of experiences of heightened Consciousness, leading to enhanced Relationships and a sense of meaning or value, (Roadmap). This in turn seemed to lead to children forming a sense of Self or Identity through the story of their lives, and possibly leads to a further level of heightened consciousness. External influences are represented as affecting spirituality at any point in the cycle. For these children, worldview seemed to be in the process of development, and part of Identity rather than a separate construct.

This conception of children's spirituality as a process of development rather than a state of being is consistent with the views of other writers, such as Hart (2003), Eade (2005), and Webster (2005).

Spirituality in early childhood – modes of being

My analysis of the children's interviews was based on the Canadian researcher, Elaine Champagne (2003). She made her observations of the spirituality of pre-school children by listening for "signals of transcendence" in their everyday experiences. She found these transcendent moments to be expressed in relationships, rituals, questioning the mysteries of life, and in the existential modes of time and space. These observations were refined to identify three spiritual "*Modes of Being*": *Sensitive, Relational and Existential*. Champagne described these *modes of being* through "keys" of observable behaviour. After describing these behaviours, Champagne went on to discuss what she saw as the spiritual dimension and the theological implications of the various modes of being.

The *Sensitive Mode of Being* referred to the way children with limited language skills engage with the world through their individual senses of sight, hearing, physical movements etc. to communicate who they are in a holistic way, embodying spirituality (pp 45-46). *Relational Mode of Being* referred to the quality of the children's relationships with adults and their peers. Champagne identified various "keys" to this mode of being, e.g. affirming, referencing, exclusion/inclusion (pp. 46-50). *Existential Mode of Being* referred to "the relation to time and space and to the relation to existence itself through daily activities" (p. 50). Some of her "keys" to this mode are time, space, games, imitations, symbolism, and imagination. In summary, by engaging in the search for meaning, and living in the present, young children express their spirituality by "being-a-child" (p. 52).

Champagne's *spiritual modes of being* became the lens through which this researcher analysed the findings of the interviews with somewhat older children, aged 8 to 10, using similar keys to identify the spiritual content of the interviews. Champagne described the *sensitive mode* as the way young children actively perceive and express themselves in the world that surrounds them (2003, p. 44). Whereas pre-school children express their *sensitive mode* with their whole bodies, the primary school children in this study were also able to utilize their verbal skills to express their consciousness of the world around them. For Champagne, the *relational mode* addressed the quality of children's interactions with significant people in their surroundings (p. 44). To study the *relational mode* I used the "keys" of bonding (relating to others), empathy (putting themselves in the place of another), and value formation (the moral and ethical understanding that came through experiencing relationships with others). This study also considered children's relationships with the natural world and the transcendent. The *existential mode*, for Champagne, "refers to the relation to time and space and to the relation to existence itself through daily activities" (p. 50). This study examined the children's relation to existence also through their "big questions" relating to life and death, to God, and mysteries of creation and human life. Further analysis of the *existential mode* was extended to

the categories of Identity, and Values and Aspirations (or core beliefs). These *modes of being* attention were observed in the children's overt verbal and bodily expressions, and inferences were drawn by the researcher from this material. Many conversations revealed aspects of each of the three modes.

Here is a sample of dialogue between four children, Hahn, Finn, Pham and Tom at the suburban school, which I believe, illustrates these *spiritual modes of being*. The children were discussing a photograph of the newly hatched small bird. (show picture)

Pham: I think they are really cute, because, and I actually held a bird at school once. It was a baby bird. I offered it a worm, but it wouldn't eat it.

Finn: Also I was there with that bird. I think it had bird flu.

W: I don't think so. It was sick, was it?

Finn: It was really fluffed up (demonstrates with his hands, and crouching forward).

Tom: Oh, that's when they're scared.

Finn: It was fluffed up and it was going (makes gasping sniffs through his nose) sort of.

W: Oh, it was really sick...it might have fallen out of the nest.

(Finn has his fingers in his mouth, looking concerned).

(Hahn has her back to the camera, and is watching the speakers).

Pham: It couldn't actually fly. It was going (makes flapping motion with her hands) just flapping its wings and then it would just lie there.

Finn: It just jumped instead of flying (demonstrates jumping movements).

W: Oh, poor little bird. So how did that make you feel when you saw that little bird that couldn't fly?

Pham: Um, it made me feel -

Finn: Sad.

Pham: Um.

Finn: Sorry for it.

Pham: It made me feel that I wanted to keep that bird.

W: *And look after it?*

(Pham nods).

Tom looks bored, not joining the conversation, yawns, and sits with hands on his head and his elbows on the table.

Finn: *When we were at (another suburb) we were at this house, and there was this bird. And you could see its skeleton and all its skin was drying up (touched face, eyes are wide open).*

Tom looks interested.

W: *It was a skeleton?*

Finn: *No it was alive, and it was in the house.*

W *changes the topic of conversation.*

This episode contained a wealth of material on the *sensitive mode of being*. Although the children were able to use verbal communication, they sometimes responded with their whole body. Their responses to the memory of the sick bird were tactile (how it felt to hold the bird), visual and kinaesthetic (the fluffed up feathers and the ineffective efforts to fly). Finn, in particular, responded by imitating the bird's movements, and by facial expressions of his emotions. His verbal responses were both empathetic (he said he felt sad) and also intellectual (existential), in that he tried to explain the condition as "bird flu". The children also demonstrated their *relational mode of being* in this incident. Finn expressed his feeling for the bird. Pham wanted to care for the bird. Hahn seemed to be expressing her empathy with the bird by directing her attention to the speakers, although she said nothing. In various ways, these children were demonstrating empathy with the sick bird. The children, particularly Finn and Pham, demonstrated their bodily identification with what was happening to the sick bird. In this identification they were also demonstrating bonding and empathy.

The demonstration of *existential mode* appeared in the children's attempt to explain why the bird was sick. Tom, who displayed very little emotional response, contributed intellectually to the discussion with "facts" about birds. Tom's interest was only rekindled when Finn turned the conversation in a macabre direction. Pham, on the other hand, tried to analyse her feelings about the bird, in considering her desire to care for it.

Application

Champaign's *spiritual modes of being* is one model for observing individual children in one's class or parish children's group which can help a teacher to understand the spiritual style of individual children, and to adapt the strategies in the classroom to ministering to their particular needs, their strengths and weaknesses. If you have the resources, it is helpful to use your observations to prepare your own profile of some or all of the children in your care.

The following exercise may help you to develop this process. I have prepared paper copies of my edited profiles of the four children in the dialogue above, and two from other schools to give more examples. My suggestion is that you get into groups of 2 to 4, and work out a classroom strategy for addressing the spiritual and faith needs of one of these children. The time allotment is before we wrap up your conclusions.