

Nurturing the Spirit in Early Years Settings

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From the research conducted by Edward Robinson (1977) we learnt that the adults in the study were significantly influenced by religious experiences they encountered as young children. More recently, Rebecca Nye and David Hay (as cited in Liddy, 2007) have conducted further studies into young children's spiritual and religious experiences. From their studies, Hay and Nye argue that young children possess an innate spirituality, which must be nurtured if it is not to be lost. They categorised children's spirituality into three areas:

Awareness sensing refers to that ability by children to appear to be lost in a dream as if

they were transfixed by the moment or event at hand. They are intensely in tune with whatever is happening and seem to be experiencing all aspects of this moment intensely.

Mystery sensing is a similar awareness but one that is more wondrous and awe-filled. Young children seem completely fascinated and experience a deep sense of questioning or mystery because of their limited understanding to help explain the moment. The simple act of turning on a tap, which results in the flow of water, can initiate such a sense.

Value sensing is a deep and intense emotion such as despair or delight, and is related to moral sensitivity. Such a feeling can assist young children to sense where meaning is to be found. At such times, Nye argues that children experience "an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness... and appeared in the context of the child and God; the child and others: the child of the world; the child and the self" (as cited in Liddy, 2007, p. 13).

This research provides us with a number of insights into how we can nurture children's spirituality and assist them with the language to be able to articulate their experiences. There are a number of experiences we can give them that might serve to heighten these senses and thus nurture their spirituality. Liddy argues that such opportunities should not be the realm of formal religion, as this can restrict children's innate spiritualities.

Some of the experiences that religious educators could offer include:

- Sharing stories that ignite children's imagination and cause them to wonder about the world and life. It is important that rational answers are not always provided; some things can remain as a mystery. The teacher's role can be significant here in terms of asking the right questions that might prompt young children's wonderings: "*I wonder if heaven was a colour what it might be...*"
- Providing young children with opportunities to imagine and ponder about situations such as those shared from a story. Reading the text of a description and having students paint their own interpretation of those words before revealing the accompanying illustration. (A particularly useful book for this is *Imagine a Night* reviewed in the children's literature section of this issue.)

- Story is also a rich source to explore the value of relationships not only with others but also with self and with the environment. Students can enter into discussions centring on characters' relationships suggesting how they could strengthen such relationships, or repair relationships and so on. The personal sharing of book characters' own self-realizations and personal insights are much safer for young children to discuss than to have to reveal their own selves.
- Varying prayer sessions to include elements that affect different senses such as playing different forms of music during quiet prayer; or burning incense during prayer; having prayer in different places within the school environment. Such actions help children to become more aware of their surroundings or elements within the surroundings, since what is happening is different from the norm.
- Making use of a variety of symbols to include with prayer, such as Aboriginal artefacts and music or Australian flora, so as to heighten the sacred sense of the local environment.
- Inviting students and their family members from different faiths to share their own prayer experiences with the class. Even an explanation of the sacred religious days they celebrate can assist young children to expand their imaginations.

It would be important that teachers scaffold children's early attempts to articulate their responses to spiritual experiences like those above, such as providing a word that helps them capture more precisely what they are trying to express. This does not mean you take over, but rather, such involvement can assist the conversation to flow and build children's repertoire for future discussions. The more often they are given the opportunity to verbalise their feelings, thoughts and understandings the more articulate they will become.

Equally as important are teachers' own responses to children's articulations. When you ask them to wonder, ensure that you yourself do not have a precise answer that you want to hear. Young children soon learn what teachers want (or do not want) to hear and might choose never to respond to such questions. This would have permanent and damaging effects on their spiritual nurturing. Keep such sessions open and inviting so that young children come to realise they do have something of value to share and that their ideas and thoughts are indeed worthwhile. This is when a pedagogy of listening is paramount.

References:

- Liddy, S. (2007). Spirituality and the young child. In J. Grajczonek & M. Ryan (Eds.). *Religious education in early childhood: A reader* (pp. 5-18). Brisbane: Lumino press.
- Robinson, E. (1977). *The original vision: A study of the religious experience of childhood*. Oxford: Manchester College.