



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong  
Research Online

---

Faculty of Education - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Social Sciences

---

2008

# Children's spirituality: an essential element in thinking and learning in new times

W. Vialle

*University of Wollongong*, [wvialle@uow.edu.au](mailto:wvialle@uow.edu.au)

Russell Walton

*University of Wollongong*, [rwalton@uow.edu.au](mailto:rwalton@uow.edu.au)

Stuart Woodcock

*University of Wollongong*, [stuart.woodcock@mq.edu.au](mailto:stuart.woodcock@mq.edu.au)

---

## Publication Details

This book chapter is published as Vialle, W, Walton, R and Woodcock, S, Children's spirituality: grappling with student ethics in postgraduate workbased degrees, in Kell, P, Vialle, W, Konza, D and Vogl, G (eds), Learning and the learner: exploring learning for new times, University of Wollongong, 2008, 236p. Complete book available [here](#).

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

## Chapter 9

---

### **Children's Spirituality: An Essential Element in Thinking and Learning in New Times**

Wilma Vialle, Russell Walton and Stuart Woodcock

#### **Introduction**

As the twenty-first century unfolds with its emphasis on global concerns and typified by technology that is obsolete before it is out of its packaging, we need to reconsider what we understand by thinking and learning. Such reframing is essential if we are to adequately educate the twenty-first century learner. In the past, we neatly separated the cognitive realm of thinking and learning from the physical, social and emotional realities of the learner. However, substantial research has clearly established the interdependence and connectedness of each of these spheres within individuals. Spirituality, though, has barely been considered in these constructions of young people.

Other schisms are prevalent in our conversations about our social world. These include the dichotomisation of West and East, individualism and collectivism, self and other, to name a few. In education, and in schools particularly, the separation of church and state is a central tenet. It is within this context that the closing decade of the twentieth century witnessed renewed emphasis on spiritual concerns, perhaps to satisfy a desire for connectedness with others that seemed to be disappearing rapidly from our world. The resurgence of interest in spirituality has taken diverse forms, ranging from New Age philosophies to the embrace of Eastern religions and alternative health remedies. Nevertheless, the call for attention to our spirituality has had little impact in Australian education systems. Our schools still reflect the traditional separation of church and state, and in government schools, reflections on children's spirituality are largely absent. We suspect that the majority of teachers would not mention spirituality as one of their aims in teaching.

Investigation of children's spirituality and the part schooling should play in its development was a personal journey for the first author. She was nearing the end of the data collection phase of her PhD studies in the United States and was analysing the vast reams of observation and interview data. Her study (Vialle, 1991) was using Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) as a framework to closely observe the intellectual profiles of young African-American preschoolers who were living in poverty. It was hoped that Gardner's framework would provide insights into the intellectual potential of these young children that was not captured by traditional IQ testing. Gardner's theory proposes that we all possess a blend of eight distinct intelligences, which include the linguistic,

logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal. While the framework appropriately captured most of the data in Vialle's research, there remained some questions about the children's spiritual qualities that were not adequately represented by the MI framework. Vialle's study suggested that Gardner's theoretical framework would be enhanced by the addition of spiritual intelligence.

Although Gardner has cast some doubt on the existence of a spiritual intelligence (see, for example, Gardner, 2000), several books bearing the title of Spiritual Intelligence were published at the turn of this century (see, for example, Noble, 2001; Sisk & Torrance, 2001; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). These authors regard spirituality as a significant and neglected part of the cognitive realm and therefore advocate the existence of a spiritual intelligence. In line with this argument, for example, Zohar and Marshall (2000) define it as "the intelligence with which we address and solve problems of meaning and value, the intelligence with which we can place our actions and our lives in a wider, richer, meaning-giving context, the intelligence with which we can assess that one course of action or one life-path is more meaningful than another" (pp 3-4).

Zohar and Marshall's definition casts spirituality as a key concern for society's educational institutions. A cursory glance at most schools' mission statements and visions will find statements attesting to the school's aim to foster the development of their students' world-views. Why, then, has spirituality not been overtly acknowledged as a school responsibility? We would contend that there are two reasons for this situation, both of which stem from equating spirituality with religion. First, there remains an overarching philosophy in Australian government schools of separating church and state. Second, the current climate arising from terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, in Bali in 2002 and in London in 2005, and the continuing tensions in the Middle East, are reflected in conservative attitudes toward the expression of religion. A recent example has been the call by some Liberal politicians in Australia for the banning of burqas and similar headwear in schools on the alleged grounds that they were being worn as signs of protest rather than religious belief. The result of these attitudes is a reluctance to place spirituality as a central concern in schools. In this chapter, we contend that spirituality is a secular concern and that spiritual learning is as important a matter for schools as the development of children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional competences and skills.

Another reason that mitigates against broader acceptance of the place of spirituality in schools is that the literature base is largely speculative rather than research-based. Writings on spirituality range across many disciplines and, consequently, there is no "single metalanguage" to discuss ideas, leading to confusion around the use of particular terms. For example, spirituality has been used in some literature to refer to morals, ethics, or emotions. We would anticipate that such confusion will remain until there is sufficient research to balance the more plentiful writing on spiritual theory and practice.

Our analysis of the literature on spirituality has identified four central themes that are relevant to the task of schools. These themes are:

1. Spirituality is an integrating construct that works with our cognitive, emotional and social sides (integrating heart, mind and soul) to provide meaning and purpose.
2. Spirituality emphasises the connectedness of all things (ideas, people, other life-forms, nature, and so on).
3. Spirituality involves making ethical and compassionate choices, a determination to live a 'good life'.
4. Spirituality is symbolised by a search deep within and a rising above our physical realities. (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2005)

### **Foundations of Spiritual Intelligence**

Although the notion of spiritual intelligence is relatively recent, the concept draws heavily on important work on spirituality in the fields of psychology, neurology and philosophy, particularly, that associated with Eastern mysticism and indigenous beliefs. The work of Carl Jung, for example, has been particularly influential in shaping the writings of contemporary scholars on spirituality (Campbell, 1991; Sisk & Torrance, 2001; Zohar & Marshall, 2000).

Other psychological theories relevant to spiritual intelligence include Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which he described as the individual's ability to abandon habitual ways of thinking and behaving in favour of compassion, integrity and altruism (Dabrowski, 1967); Maslow's (1968) theory on self-actualisation which emphasised values such as justice, beauty, truth, wholeness, and uniqueness; Carl Rogers's (1959, 1980) humanist psychology that emphasised the centrality of the individual's innate drive to become a better person through values such as openness, caring for others, and desire for wholeness of life, body, mind and spirit; and, Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow:

When a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, pg 71)

In addition to the relevant psychological theories listed above, researchers have postulated that there is neurological evidence to support the existence of spiritual intelligence. Gardner (1983), while dismissing the idea of spiritual intelligence, acknowledged that there was some neurological evidence for "spirituality" in patients with temporal lobe epilepsy: "Whatever their previous personal orientation, they tend to become introspective, given to writing extensive tracts, increasingly tending toward the study of philosophy and religion and the relentless pondering of deep questions" (pg 267). The research

studies of Persinger (1996) and Ramachandran and colleagues (1998) demonstrated a relationship between heightened temporal lobe activity and discussions or experiences of spirituality. Despite this research evidence, further investigations are needed to conclusively establish the existence of a “God spot” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, pg 91).

In addition to the ideas on spirituality that we can derive from psychology and neurology, we can also look to the different belief systems of Ancient civilisations, Eastern religions, and indigenous cultures. A central theme in these traditions is that of connectedness or the belief that everything is part of one cosmic whole. Contemporary society acknowledges the inherent wisdom and spirituality of indigenous people (Kerr & McAlister, 2002), which in Australian Aboriginal communities is apparent in their connection to the land and values that place collective needs above those of the individual. For many indigenous cultures, adolescence is a significant time in the spiritual life cycle and rites of passage guide individuals in the journey from childhood to adulthood.

### **Gardner, MI and Spiritual Intelligence**

Many of the advocates for spiritual intelligence cite Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences to support their contentions. Ironically, though, Gardner is sceptical, stating that many of the elements that current theorists are calling spiritual intelligence do not represent cognitive activity (Gardner, 1998, 2000). Nevertheless, he acknowledged three possible dimensions of a spiritual intelligence or spirit-related intelligence:

1. Spiritual as concern with cosmic or existential issues.
2. Spiritual as achievement of a state of being.
3. Spiritual as effect on others.

Gardner postulated that a more accurate candidate for an intelligence would be existential intelligence, which meets many of his original criteria for an intelligence. However, it does not meet all the criteria, failing to meet the evolutionary and the neurological criteria. Hence, Gardner concluded that existential intelligence, a more-narrowly defined form of spirituality, is promising but in need of additional empirical evidence.

### **The Integrative Intelligence**

Contrary to Gardner’s views on the existence of spiritual intelligence, several writers have theorised on the nature of a spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 1999; Kerr & McAlister, 2002; Noble, 2001; Sisk & Torrance, 2001; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Each of these theories argues that spirituality operates as an integrative intelligence, albeit in different ways. In their various writings, these theorists depict

spirituality as connectedness to others, to nature, and to the wider cosmos as well as connectedness within the individual, integrating mind, heart, body and soul.

The cognitive element that we would require of an intelligence and of thinking and learning, has also been delineated in the literature. Emmons, for example, defined spiritual intelligence as “the adaptive use of spiritual information to facilitate everyday problem solving and goal attainment” (pg 176). He theorised five characteristics of spiritual intelligence:

1. the capacity to transcend the physical and material;
2. the ability to experience heightened states of consciousness;
3. the ability to sanctify everyday experiences;
4. the ability to utilize spiritual resources to solve problems; and,
5. the capacity to be virtuous. (pg 164)

In addition to these characteristics, Noble (2001) highlighted two key ideas: the conscious realisation that our physical reality is part of a bigger multidimensional reality; and, the conscious striving to attain psychological health for oneself and for the greater good. The emphasis on consciousness in Noble’s description underscores the cognitive dimension of the spiritual way of knowing.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) have written extensively on spirituality, drawing on evidence from psychology, neurology and religious tradition. They argue that spiritual intelligence is an integrating intelligence because of its role within individuals. They propose that we have three intelligences, which include rational intelligence (as captured by IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) and spiritual intelligence (which they term SQ). Spiritual intelligence, they assert, may be seen as an integrating intelligence because it helps individuals make sense of their world that is experienced through rational intelligence and emotional intelligence.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) state that indicators of high SQ include:

- the capacity to be flexible;
- a high degree of self-awareness;
- a capacity to face and use suffering;
- a capacity to face and transcend pain;
- the quality of being inspired by vision and values;
- a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm;
- a tendency to see the connections between diverse things;
- a marked tendency to ask ‘Why?’ or ‘What if?’ questions and to seek ‘fundamental’ answers; and,
- being... ‘field-independent’ – [that is] possessing a facility for working against convention. (pg 15)

## Spirituality and Children

As indicated previously, there is a substantial literature base on spirituality but it is overwhelmingly based on adult spirituality; there is very little literature on children's spiritual development (Ault, 2001). Helminiak (1987) proposed five stages of spiritual development but these begin at adolescence. Robert Coles (1990) has published one of the few comprehensive works on spirituality in children, which he derived from interviews with young children from various countries and religious persuasion. Despite the children's different backgrounds, Coles noted that they still expressed similar spiritual concerns and aspirations. He commented that children's spirituality emerges from their desire to know, not just *what* but *why*. Further, every aspect of their mental life connects with their spiritual thinking. In particular, moral attitudes and emotions such as shame and guilt form the basis of much of their early spiritual understandings.

Coles's research suggests that the drive for spirituality comes from an innate sense of curiosity and fascination with the world and is therefore evident from an early age. Similarly, Carlsson-Paige (2001) argued that, by the age of five, children pose questions about God and have started to formulate theories on the meaning of life. Coles used his conversations with children to illustrate that, regardless of their ability, age, experience or culture, children wonder about philosophical and theological questions. He concluded that spirituality affirms the humanity of children and therefore parents and educators have a duty to foster children's spiritual wondering.

While there is little research into children's development of spiritual understanding, there is an expanding body of literature that argues for the inclusion of spiritual—not religious—perspectives in the school curriculum (see Halford, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 1999; Suhor, 1999). If such attempts are to be effective, they need to be based on a clearer concept of how children's understandings of spirituality develop. To rely on current models of cognitive, moral and emotional development may not be adequate. The importance of mapping children's spiritual development, then, is essential as a precursor to the integration of spirituality in school curricula.

Influential educational pioneers such as Pestalozzi, Montessori and Steiner based their models of education on the idea that children's search for meaning can only be realised by their connectedness to others, to nature, and to the world. While the particulars of their models differ, they all proposed that children's questions should be at the heart of the school curriculum. Similarly, contemporary writers have also argued that schools should become places for the development of spirituality rather than the mere accumulation of knowledge, facts and figures (Egan, 2001; Glazer, 1999; Palmer, 1999).

Despite these proposals, the question of how spirituality might be incorporated into the school curriculum is still largely speculative with few explicit approaches finding their way into mainstream educational practice. Some specific suggestions have included Cajete's (1994) contention that the indigenous philosophy of closeness to the natural environment should be integrated into contemporary education. In an interview with Halford (1999), Noddings proposed that schools should have gardens, aquariums and animals to foster students' connections with nature. Campbell (1991) argued that story, and particularly myth, connects with the spiritual understanding of the reader and, hence, discussions about stories provide scope for the enhancement of children's spirituality. Kessler (1999) and Palmer (1999) proposed that spiritual questions should be embedded into the curriculum. Again, what many of these suggestions emphasise is the notion of connectedness.

A champion of the development of the imagination, Kieran Egan (2001) has drawn on Plato's belief that the primary role of education was to challenge children's conventional beliefs. He stated:

Education is the maximizing of the students' acquisition of the cultural artefacts generated by other human beings, so that they become what may be, inadequately, called cognitive tools. The more of these we have available for making sense of the world and experience, the better chance we have of appreciating those visions of human experience we collectively call Spirituality. (Egan, 2001, pg 7)

Egan outlined five components to an educational program that would promote the development of children's spirituality:

1. Encourage children to question their conventional beliefs about the world and experience;
2. introduce them to the various ways people have struggled to make vivid a range of intense human experience;
3. introduce them to scholarly virtues, such as precision, caution, careful and intense observation, and delight in discovery;
4. encourage them to feel the pleasure of self-sacrifice for the good of others; and,
5. engage them in discovering the past and how it shaped the present. (Egan, 2001, pg 6)

Another promising starting point for integrating the dimension of spirituality into education is the Philosophy for Children approach. The program was developed by Laurance Splitter (2001) who saw it as a means by which children could engage in big questions about existence, and "of belonging to something larger than oneself but not at the expense of one's sense of self" (Splitter, 2001, pg 113). Splitter believes that in an educational climate where the emphasis is on accumulation of facts, children do not have the opportunity to think in ways that enable them to make good judgements and decisions. An alternative approach to encourage deeper and more meaningful learning and thinking is to involve students in a community of inquiry. Such an approach will help children understand rather than simply



know. This type of thinking is that currently being advocated in Australian educational initiatives such as Queensland's Productive Pedagogies project and the New South Wales Quality Teaching Framework (see, for example, Gore, 2001; Hayes, Lingard & Mills, 2000; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003).

### **Charting the Development of Spiritual Understanding**

Whether the construct of spirituality can be accurately termed an intelligence or not, we think it is important that children's spirituality is accorded value and nurtured in our educational settings. However, before we can hypothesise how this might be accomplished in our schools, we thought it was important to understand more about how children's spirituality develops, how it is expressed, and how it relates to other aspects of children's development.

As we have indicated, apart from Coles's work, there is very little research on the nature and development of children's spiritual understanding. In order to address this lack of literature, we designed a program of research in New South Wales schools (Vialle, 2004) that is ongoing. The challenge we faced was in designing a research methodology that would enable us to gain insight into children's spirituality when it is so ill-defined. In particular, we wanted to avoid asking direct questions about God or organised religion, which was one of the approaches adopted by Coles (1990). We decided, therefore, to trial an approach that drew on much of the literature cited above in its focus on nature and story. The threads we draw together relate to:

1. Gardner's first element of spiritual intelligence: Spiritual as concern with cosmic or existential issues.
2. Indigenous beliefs, often deemed spiritual, related to people's connectedness to each other and the natural world.
3. Coles's and Carlsson-Paige's observations that children as young as five are naturally curious about why the world is as it is and ponder the meaning of life.
4. The importance of contact with nature stressed by early educational pioneers such as Pestalozzi, Steiner and Montessori.
5. Contemporary educators' calls for the inclusion of opportunities to connect with nature.
6. The centrality of story in stimulating children to think about their connections with others and the natural world.
7. The importance of engaging children in discussions about the nature of existence, as proposed by Egan and Splitter.

Drawing on these ideas, we implemented a pilot study to see if we could encourage children to talk freely about these issues. Rather than direct questioning, we wanted to record their spontaneous

reactions to stimulus materials that related to the natural world. The preliminary research was conducted in two primary schools—a government school and a Catholic school—in Kindergarten, Year 2, Year 4 and Year 6 classrooms. The method employed was to spend about half an hour each week with focus groups of five students from each of these year groups at each school. Each week we started the conversation by bringing in a different stimulus (these included stories such as “Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge” by Mem Fox, rainforest music, photographs of wilderness areas, and natural objects such as seashells, spiders, feathers and rocks), inviting the children to reflect upon the stimulus and share their ideas. The children were allowed to take the conversations wherever they wished, with the researcher only intervening with probing questions when the conversation stalled.

The conversations were transcribed and then analysed for emerging themes. Based on these preliminary data, the following themes were identified:

- Links to knowledge and personal experience
- Importance and utility
- Importance and aesthetics
- Importance and uniqueness
- The nature of Nature
- “Circle of Life”
- Learned concepts

#### ***Links to knowledge and personal experience***

In each of the focus groups, without exception, the initial reaction to the stimulus presented was for children to express the knowledge they held about the stimulus. They also frequently recounted personal experiences that they had had that were relevant to the particular stimulus. The following comments were typical across the different grades, the different schools, and the different stimuli.

*“We know when there’s spiders about because there’s spider webs.” (Kindergarten)*

*“I was watching this other show because I like watching discovering insects, and like spiders are very good to our world because they eat...they get flies caught in their web. Sometimes flies give out diseases.” (Year 2)*

*“We get spiders a lot in our house but we just leave them alone. We find them up on the roof, in cupboards and things. We leave them for a couple of days, see whether they’ve gone and then we’ll catch them and put them into the garden.” (Year 4)*

*“It strikes fear into me, because I had a really bad accident with a spider. We were out riding our bikes and I ran into a spider web. There was one on my back. I had to roll on the road to kill it.” (Year 6)*

#### ***Importance and utility***

Most of the discussions led to children debating the importance of the particular stimuli for their own existence. The notion of what made something valuable and important, and therefore worth protecting, was a recurring discussion across all the focus group interviews. The most common response to the

question of importance was whether the stimulus had some utility for their own lives. Typical responses included the following:

*“They are [important] to me because they are fun to play with...it is nice to have a collection of shells.” (Kindergarten)*

*“They’re important to us because otherwise we wouldn’t really have any place to sleep, like because you can make feather beds and everything.” (Year 2)*

*“Rocks are important because when bricks weren’t invented you would go down to the beach and get a big basket of them and then you could build your house out of them.” (Year 4)*

*“We could probably live without spiders because there would be some other creatures or things that could kill flies and mosquitoes and stuff. But spiders are probably kind of important because some people are scared of them and then those people would have to be scared of something else.” (Year 6)*

### ***Importance and aesthetics***

After utility, the most common reason given for something being important was related to aesthetic concerns. The following comments reflect the kinds of statements that were expressed in all the focus groups.

*“You could put it around the sand castles and make it look good.” (Kindergarten)*

*“They make the sky nice because the birds are colourful.” (Year 2)*

*“I like rocks because, like, if they are smooth then you want to pick them up and feel them and look at them. They are pretty cool ...some do have patterns on them that are really interesting.” (Year 4)*

*“The rocks that are coming together are sort of like fingers, crossing in the middle.” (Year 6)*

### ***Importance and uniqueness***

Another recurring theme to emerge when children discussed the value or importance of particular objects related to their rarity or uniqueness. Most of the children believed that the more rare something was, the more value it possessed. The following excerpts from the data illustrate this line of thinking.

*“The thunder egg came from a long, long time ago. They didn’t use it, it was a special rock in the olden days, it was very special to the olden people. Aborigines.” (Kindergarten)*

*“They’re feathers from a bird and there’s millions of them so why should they be important.” (Year 4)*

*“R: They could be really precious and their parents gave them to them after they died or something.*

*B: I don’t think it’s precious because there’s billions of them.” (Year 4)*

*“It’s somehow got a connection to what something else does. It’s pretty unique.” (Year 6)*

### ***The nature of Nature***

Given that the items used as stimulus materials were all natural objects, scenic photographs, or stories involving nature, it is not surprising that contemplation of Nature was a strong theme throughout the focus group data. The following extracts reveal the issues that children discussed, but two ideas dominated: the recognition that they were connected to Nature, an idea that was expressed even by the kindergarten children; and the appreciation of the differences between natural and human-made objects.

*“They’re nature and special to us as part of the family.” (Kindergarten)*

*“They’re important to me as well, because they’re a part of nature.” (Year 2)*

*“It looks kind of fake and it looks too perfect. As you can see the rock is perfectly smooth and curved and the place where the water goes down...that’s too perfect.” (Year 4)*

*“I find it hard to believe that water can just change the shape of the rock. Rock is a very hard substance and water is liquid. Just seems pretty weird.” (Year 6)*

### ***“Circle of Life”***

A related theme involved the recognition of the interdependence of different elements in Nature. These discussions grew out of their reflections on Nature and their human connection with Nature. Their discussions led many of the children to rethink their earlier statements about the value of particular items.

*“[If there were no shells] creatures would die.” (Kindergarten)*

*“I think the water is much more important because if we didn’t have water we couldn’t survive.” (Year 2)*

*“Yeah, it is [important] because without that water we wouldn’t be.” (Year 4)*

*“Keeps the circle going.” (Year 6)*

*“If you were talking about the whole world it would be an ecosystem thing because the crab would get in that shell and if the hermit crab doesn’t have a shell the hermit crabs would die then the sea creatures would die after the hermit crabs.” (Year 6)*

### ***Learned concepts***

Finally, the children frequently made reference to what we have termed ‘learned concepts’. These included words such as ecosystem and homeopathic. We call these words ‘learned concepts’ because

they were not always completely understood by the children who used them. Further, the use of such terms tended to close down the conversations. This was particularly noticeable whenever the word “God” appeared in the conversation; it became the final word from an expert source and nothing further could be added. Examples included the following:

*GOD: “Kind of [important], God made them.” (Kindergarten)*

*KARMA: “If you’ve done something cruel to another animal you can whack yourself on the head and that can be karma for you.” (Year 2)*

*HOMEOPATHIC: “They’re good because their venom helps in that homeopathic stuff.” (Year 4)*

*ECOSYSTEM: “If we didn’t have spiders there’d be thousands of flies and I hate flies. They’re important to our ecosystem.” (Year 6)*

While these data are preliminary and the themes likely to be expanded as additional data are collected and analysed, there are several points we would draw out for discussion. From a developmental perspective, we did not observe major differences in the content of the conversations among these primary-aged children. The older children may have known more facts and been more detailed in their utterances but even in the Kindergarten groups, we noted an appreciation of complexity and abstraction that Piagetian constructions of children’s thinking would not acknowledge. In Piaget’s model, primary-aged children are concrete operational thinkers, who are limited in their capacity to engage with abstract ideas (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2005). Rather than seeing differences between Kindergarten children and older children, however, we noted that the transition from concrete thinking to abstract thinking occurred within each focus group interaction. The structure of the conversations tended to begin with a concrete idea whereby children recounted their knowledge about the topic and contributed their personal experiences; they also made numerous intertextual links, relating the stimulus to books they had read or films they had watched. As the discussion progressed, the concepts became more abstract with children expressing notions of beauty and justice, speculation about the future, and the interconnectedness of cultures and species.

A strong thread running through the transcripts is a sense of “otherness” which related both to the children’s awareness of differences among cultures and of different life-forms. Numerous references were made to the beliefs of “olden people, Aborigines” and how these “other” cultures had a connection with the land that was absent from their own culture. The children also discussed the sanctity of other life-forms, such as whether it was right to kill spiders. What is clear from these kinds of discussions is that even from the age of six, children are highly engaged by contemplating their own creation, the creation of others, and the connections among people and other aspects of their world.

If we return to Zohar and Marshall's characteristics of high spiritual intelligence, we find that a number of these characteristics are evident in the focus group discussions. In particular, we noted that the children had:

- the capacity to be flexible;
- a high degree of self-awareness;
- a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm;
- a tendency to see the connections between diverse things; and,
- a marked tendency to ask 'Why?' or 'What if?' questions and to seek 'fundamental' answers.

### **Conclusion**

Although our research is in its infancy, we are encouraged by our data. We have found the focus group approach to be a rich source of data to give us some insights into the development of spiritual understanding in young children. At this stage, we have more questions than answers but we would suggest some tentative recommendations on the basis of our conversations with, and observations of, young children. As we indicated previously, the children were highly engaged by the opportunity to talk in small groups about ideas that were important to them. There is not always scope in teachers' programs for children to engage in such sustained existential reflection and we believe that this space is urgently needed. Today's primary-aged children inhabit a world that is incredibly complex; the black-and-white world of previous generations where good and bad were neatly divided is no longer a reality. Terrorism, natural disasters, rapidly-changing technology, the rise of capitalism and the decline of communism, and the shifting sands of religious persuasion and commitment, have all contributed to this complexity. Our first recommendation for practice, then, is that schools provide a space and encourage young children to reflect on philosophical and ethical questions.

There is a danger, and perhaps fear, that some teachers will use such opportunities as a means of inculcating children with a particular set of values rather than allowing them to consider multiple viewpoints. We would therefore recommend that deliberate efforts be made to provide children with stories and viewpoints from multiple sides of any issue. This is not always easy to accomplish as our media, in particular, often limits access to other viewpoints as is evident if we analyse the information that circulated in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. One of the outcomes of September 11<sup>th</sup> and similar attacks has been the prominence of interfaith vigils and memorials as church leaders have united to call for peace. Speaking at one interfaith vigil in 2004, Paul Casey stated:

We've got to hold on to and encourage each other with the moral imagination, that capacity which lets us listen to and sympathize with those who are suffering, lets us live with their reality, not to appropriate their lives for our own, but to know others as like us, to see in them our siblings, children and spouses. The moral imagination teaches us to grant other

human beings their humanity, and to act from that knowledge. (accessed at <http://www.afsc.org/pwork/0411/041114.htm>)

The unity that is expressed in such events is at the heart of what it is to be a spiritual human being, we think, and deserves a place in the curriculum. We would suggest that rather than schools presenting one view of religion, for example, an honest exploration of different religious viewpoints should be explored. This should be undertaken not with the emphasis on differences but on what is common or shared by differing viewpoints. This kind of engagement with multiple perspectives is at the heart of critical thinking that is, in turn, essential for intellectual achievement. We would argue, then, that the inclusion of such explorations and discussions is not a sidebar to the main business of schools but an essential component that underpins school's work.

The school curriculum continues to be squeezed as more and more content is demanded by society. Schools seem to be expected to prepare children for every eventuality. Just recently in New South Wales, for example, there were calls for schools to teach driver education as a response to the disproportionate number of young people killed on the roads. As Gardner (1994) has quipped, "The enemy of understanding is coverage." Instead of trying to cover from "Plato to NATO" (Gardner, 1994), schools should be more concerned with developing the modes of thinking that will enable our children to lead "good lives". By this we mean the kind of lives that embrace the highest moral and ethical standards while participating in a complex, "marketized" society (Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi & Damon, 2001). Schools have an important role in developing these future citizens and one way to do this is to acknowledge and nurture children's spirituality.

As we expand our data collection into preschools and secondary schools, we are hopeful that the developmental trajectory for spirituality will become clearer. Additionally, we are interested in the views that stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, have regarding the role of schools in fostering spiritual understanding. We remain committed to exploring the place of spiritual thinking in learners, something that we believe is essential for the rapidly changing, globalised world we inhabit.

## References

- Ault, N. (2001). Spiritual life as a journey: A metaphor of exclusion for children? *Journal of Christian Education*, 44 (1), pp 29-37.
- Cajete, G. (1994). *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Skyland, NC: Kivaki Press.
- Campbell, J. (1991). *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Carlsson-Paige, N. (2001). Nurturing meaningful connections with young children. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 10 (1), pp 17 - 23.
- Chevalier, J. & Gheerbrant, A. (Eds.), (1996). *The Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Penguin.
- Coles, R. (1990). *The Spiritual Life of Children*. London: Harper Collins.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Dabrowski, K. (1967). *Personality Shaping through Positive Disintegration*. Boston: Little & Brown.
- Egan, K. (2001). Spirituality, Education, and the Moral Life. A paper delivered to the AERA conference held in Seattle, WA, on April 10-14. Accessed at <http://www.educ.sfu.ca/kegan/AERA-Spirituality.html>.
- Emmons, R. A. (1999). *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of Mind*. New York: Basic Books.



Gardner, H. (1994). Multiple Intelligences Theory: Implications for Practice. Paper presented at the National Learning Center Symposium on Multiple Intelligences Theory in Practice and the Theory of the Reggio Emilia Preschools, June 16-19, 1994, Washington DC.

Gardner, H. (1998). Are there additional intelligences? The case for Naturalist, Spiritual, and Existential Intelligences. In Kane, J. (Ed), *Education, Information and Transformation*. New York: Merrill.

Gardner, H. (1999). *Intelligence Reframed*. New York: Basic Books.

Gardner, H. (2000). A case against spiritual intelligence. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 10 (1), pp 27-34.

Gardner, H., Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Damon, W. (2001). *Good Work*. New York: Basic Books.

Glazer, S. (Ed.). (1999). *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.

Gore, J. M. (2001). Beyond our differences: A Reassembling of what matters in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52 (2), pp 124-135.

Halford, G. S. (1993). *Children's Understanding: The Development of Mental Models*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hayes, D., Lingard, B. & Mills, M. (2000). Productive pedagogies. *Education Links*, 60, pp10-13.

Helminiak, D. A. (1987). *Spiritual Development: An Interdisciplinary Study*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.

Kerr, B. & McAlister, J. (2002). *Letters to the Medicine Man: An Apprenticeship in Spiritual Intelligence*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Kessler, R. (2000). *The Soul of Education*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a Psychology of Being*. Second edition. New York: Harper & Row.

Noble, K. (2001). *Riding the Windhorse: Spiritual Intelligence and the Growth of the Self*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

NSW Department of Education and Training. (2003). *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools*. Sydney: Author.

Palmer, P. J. (1999). Evoking the spirit in public education. *Educational Leadership*, 56 (4), pp 6-11.

Persinger, M. A. (1996). Feelings of past lives as expected perturbations within the neurocognitive processes that generate the sense of self: Contributions from limbic lability and vectorial hemisphericity. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 83, pp 1107-1121.

Ramachandran, V. S. & Blakeslee, S. (1998). *Phantoms in the Brain*. London: Fourth Estate.

Rogers, C. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships, as developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A Study of Science* (Vol. 13). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rogers, C. (1980). *A Way Of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Sisk, D. & Torrance, E. P. (2001). *Spiritual Intelligence: Developing a Higher Consciousness*. New York: Creative Education Foundation.

Splitter, L. (2001). Listen to them think: Reflections on inquiry, philosophy and dialogue. In M. Robertson & R. Gerber (Eds.), *Children's Ways of Knowing: Learning Through Experience*. Camberwell, Vic: ACER Press.

Suhor, C. (1999). Spirituality – Letting it grow in the classroom. *Educational Leadership*, 56 (4), pp 12-16.

Vialle, W. (1991). *Tuesday's Children: A Study of Five Children Using Multiple Intelligences Theory as a Framework*. Tampa: University of South Florida. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

Vialle, W. (2004). An exploration of spiritual intelligence. A paper presented at the 10th Conference of the AAEGT, Melbourne, 17 August, 2004.

Vialle, W., Lysaght, P. & Verenikina, I. (2005). *Psychology for Educators*. Melbourne: Thomson/Social Science Press.

Zohar, D. & Marshall, I. (2000). *SQ – Spiritual Intelligence: The Ultimate Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.