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Spiritual Intelligence: An Important Dimension of Giftedness

Introduction

As the twenty-first century unfolds with its emphasis on global concerns and technology that is obsolete before it is out of its packaging, we need to reconsider what we understand by thinking and learning.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 inter-dependence and connectedness of each of these spheres within individuals. Spirituality, though, has barely been considered in these constructions of young people, and particularly of gifted young people.

The end 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. Nevertheless, this has had little impact in Australian education systems where schools still reflect the traditional separation of church and state and reflections on children's spirituality are largely absent.

Investigation of children's spirituality was a personal journey arising from my PhD research. My study (Vialle, 1991) used Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) as a framework to gain insights into the intellectual potential of young children that was not captured by traditional IQ testing. While the framework appropriately captured most of the data in my research, there remained some

questions about the children's spiritual qualities that were not adequately represented by the MI framework.

Although Gardner argued against a spiritual intelligence (see, for example, Gardner, 2000), several books on Spiritual Intelligence have been published (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 advocate the existence of a spiritual intelligence. 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" (p. 3-4).

This definition casts spirituality as a key concern for society's educational institutions. Most schools express an aim to foster the development of their students' world-views. Why, then, has spirituality not been overtly acknowledged as a school responsibility? There seem to be 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 and a reluctance to include spirituality in school curricula.

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 Dabrowski's (1967) 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; Maslow's (1968) theory on self-actualisation, which emphasised values

such as justice, beauty, truth, wholeness, and uniqueness; Carl Rogers's (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, p. 71)

There is some 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: "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" (p. 267). Research by Persinger (1996) and Ramachandran and colleagues (1998) demonstrated a relationship between heightened temporal lobe activity and spirituality.

Ideas on spirituality are evident in 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 and Spiritual Intelligence

Many of the advocates for spiritual intelligence cite Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. 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:

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 argued instead for an existential intelligence, which meets many of his original criteria for an intelligence, but concluded that existential intelligence, a more-narrowly defined form of spirituality, is promising but in need of additional empirical evidence.

The Integrative Intelligence

Despite Gardner's reservations, 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 with spirituality viewed 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 any intelligence, 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" (p. 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. (p. 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), drawing on evidence from psychology, neurology and religious tradition, 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. (p. 15)

It is important to note that many of these qualities are characteristic of gifted children.

Spirituality and Children

While there is substantial literature on spirituality generally, 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) published one of the few comprehensive works on spirituality in children, derived from interviews with young children from various countries and religious persuasion. Despite the children's different backgrounds, Coles noted that

they 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.

The current research

Whether the construct of spirituality can be accurately termed an intelligence or not, it is 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. Such understanding is essential if we are to understand how spiritual giftedness in children might be manifested.

The aim of the current research was to design a study that would enable insights into children's spirituality without asking direct questions about God or organised religion.

The adopted approach drew on much of the literature with its focus on nature and story, including:

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 young children 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 (2001) and Splitter (2004).

The research was conducted in two primary schools (one government and one 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 a different stimulus was presented (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) and the children were encouraged 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, resulting in the following themes:

- 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 was for children to express their knowledge and personal experiences that were relevant to the particular stimulus. The transcripts from each of the focus group conversations began in an almost identical fashion, regardless of the age of the children. In each case, the children commenced with a comment that identified the particular stimulus, with comments such as “that’s a rock” or “that’s a funnel-web spider”. Such comments were typical across the different grades, the different schools, and the different stimuli.

Following their identification of the stimulus, the students would start to elaborate in more detail the knowledge that they possessed about the particular stimulus. Again,

such elaboration occurred in the younger age groups where the children indicated that it was possible to identify where spiders are by their webs or that a lake would be a noisy place because “where there is water there is lots of animals”. In the Kindergarten transcripts, though, not all the knowledge expressed by the children was necessarily factual. For example, when asked how large boulders were formed, one child commented “from little rocks and they grow, grow, grow”.

The older children also made reference to their knowledge with the only difference being that they were less likely to draw false conclusions and they were more articulate in expressing the information they held. For example, one Year 2 student shared this observation about spiders:

> *“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.”*

Following on from the sharing of their knowledge, the children frequently recounted personal experiences with the stimuli. They would recount times when they were bush-walking with their family or decorating sand-castles with shells, pebbles and feathers. These personal recounts were often emotional with children expressing both positive emotions, such as excitement or “having fun”, and negative emotions such as disgust or fear. For example, many children expressed fears of snakes or spiders, such as the following comment from a Year 6 child: “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.” Sometimes their discussions about their emotions led them into more

abstract contemplation. For example, one Year 6 child observed that creatures such as snakes and spiders fulfilled an important function in scaring people; the child expressed the view that fear was an important and necessary human emotion and if spiders didn't exist then "those people would have to be scared of something else."

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 themselves or for humanity more generally. The notion of utility was related to their own personal lives with children suggesting that shells were important because they collected them or used them in craft work. The children were much more likely, though, to describe the stimuli as important for humanity in making life more comfortable, such as feathers being used to make beds and pillows or rocks being used for shelter, or water being essential for survival.

Importance and aesthetics

After utility, the most common reason given for something being important was related to aesthetic concerns. The children commented on how feathers, shells or pebbles might enhance their sand-castles, for example, but more often reflected on the beauty of nature by admiring the patterns in rocks or the colours of particular birds. These discussions often led to debates about how it was possible to distinguish between what is "real" and what is "fake". Several children, for example, were

sceptical about the colours of the feathers we brought to the discussions, because they found it hard to believe that such bright reds, oranges, and greens could have come from real birds. Similarly, the children debated whether photographs accurately represented what was in nature. They generally agreed that an important part of the beauty of nature was in its “imperfection” or “messiness”.

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. This line of thinking was evident when one group of children got into a heated debate about whether or not feathers were valuable with one child indicating “there’s millions of them so why should they be important.” The other children in the group rejected this statement and debated how something could be commonly available but still have special meaning or spiritual significance. For some children, the uniqueness may have emanated from its being given to them by a special person such as a grandparent who had since died. Other children made connections with other cultures, particularly recognising the connection between indigenous people and the natural world. One Kindergarten child, for example, observed: “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. Aboriginals.”

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 focus group transcripts demonstrated that the children discussed their ideas about nature extensively, 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, the former being regarded as real while the latter was seen as fake. By way of example, children of all ages described other creatures and the natural environment as inextricably linked with humans. One Kindergarten child, who often demonstrated her giftedness through her ability to reason abstractly, talked extensively about the rights of all creatures to live; she ended her thoughts by stating that birds are"nature and special to us as part of the family."

"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. Interestingly, children often shifted from their earlier pronouncements as a result of the discussions. For example, children who expressed the view that feathers, for example, weren't particularly important, were persuaded through the more abstract discussions about nature and the relationships among aspects of the world, that such things were of value. It was at this point in the children's conversations that many references were made to God as the "maker" or creator of all things.

In the context of these discussions, the children were comfortable in discussing death as part of this "circle of life". Their experiences of the death of pets or grandparents

flowed naturally from these reflections and at no point did any child suffer distress in these discussions although they acknowledged the sadness they still felt.

Learned concepts

Finally, the children frequently made reference to ‘learned concepts’, such as ecosystem, karma and homeopathic. I termed these ideas as ‘learned concepts’ because they were not always completely understood by the children who used them. Further, the use of such terms sometimes closed down the conversations. This was often noticeable when the word “God” appeared in the conversation; it became the final word from an expert source and nothing further could be added. In this sense, some children were falling back on what they had been taught at home or Church, or invoking the “voice of authority”; by contrast, the gifted children in the groups often expressed dissent with accepting such pronouncements without discussion, thereby demonstrating more complex reasoning.

Discussion

From a developmental perspective, there were no 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, there was an appreciation of complexity and abstraction that Piagetian constructions of children’s thinking would not acknowledge (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2005). Rather than seeing differences between Kindergarten children and older children, however, there was a transition from concrete thinking to abstract thinking 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 or films they knew. 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. Nevertheless, the gifted children in the groups were far more likely than their non-gifted peers to make complex and abstract observations.

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 (and thus giftedness), a number of these characteristics were evident in the focus group discussions. In particular, 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 this research is in its infancy, the focus group approach has provided some insights into the development of spiritual understanding in young children, from which some tentative recommendations are made. 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 it would seem 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. The first recommendation for practice, then, is that schools encourage young children to reflect on philosophical and ethical questions.

There is a danger 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. Therefore, deliberate efforts should be made to provide children with stories and viewpoints from multiple sides of any issue. For example, rather than schools presenting one view of religion, 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. Hence, 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. While such reflection is essential for all children, it is particularly pertinent to gifted students who are often more drawn to such contemplation from an early age.

The school curriculum continues to be squeezed as more and more content is demanded by society. 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", that is, 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.

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