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Conor West

University of Wollongong, cw606@uow.edu.au

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The confluence of education and children's spirituality in New South Wales

Abstract

This paper will look at the underpinnings of spirituality, with particular reference to the relationship between, and context of, spirituality and religion. This will be done by looking at education as a microcosm due to education's role as a lens for future societal direction. Specifically, the New South Wales public primary school system will be viewed through this lens, due to current practice within this system. Particular reference will be made to the federal government's National School Chaplaincy Program, which was instituted to attend to children's spiritual wellbeing, with consequent linkage to the New South Wales Primary Ethics program, which runs parallel to Special Religious Education (SRE) in the New South Wales curriculum. Future directions aimed at increasing the functionality of the programs will be put forward.

Keywords

spirituality, children's spirituality, ethics, chaplaincy, primary education



The confluence of education and children's spirituality in New South Wales

Journeys in youth are part of education; but in maturity, part of the experience.

Francis Bacon

Conor West

*Bachelor of Primary Education (second year), Faculty of Education, University of
Wollongong, Australia*

This paper will look at the underpinnings of spirituality, with particular reference to the relationship between, and context of, spirituality and religion. This will be done by looking at education as a microcosm due to education's role as a lens for future societal direction. Specifically, the New South Wales public primary school system will be viewed through this lens, due to current practice within this system. Particular reference will be made to the federal government's National School Chaplaincy Program, which was instituted to attend to children's spiritual wellbeing, with consequent linkage to the New South Wales Primary Ethics program, which runs parallel to Special Religious Education (SRE) in the New South Wales curriculum. Future directions aimed at increasing the functionality of the programs will be put forward.

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Introduction

As the Western world grows ever-more complex, its inhabitants are becoming increasingly drawn to finding a connection to something meaningful (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2004). The elevation of the individual over the community, the depersonalisation of everyday tasks and the never-ending barrage of information that technology provides are just some of the factors that have left many in Western culture feeling groundless, a phenomenon that will be felt even more deeply by generations born into this shift (Carrette & King, 2005). This cultural climate has seen a sharp increase in the focus on personal development of the mind, body and soul outside of formal systems of belief (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008), with corporations, the media and educational institutions all utilising a variety of options to express and address the concerns of balance, ethics, deeper meaning and security that have recently become so apparent in the modern Western world (Cavanagh *et al.*, 2004).

There are a variety of avenues that this expression can take, from Eastern religions to self-realisation seminars. There exists no exhaustive list of spiritual activities, for, despite the term's recent popularity, spirituality's meaning is often used



to represent socially constructed ideas, and so is subject to a variety of contested meanings and diverse functions at different times (Carrette & King, 2005). ‘Spirituality’ is an elusive and controversial term that has come to mean different things to different people (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). A result of this personalised definition is that spirituality is, and will remain, a sensitive and intimate topic of thought and discussion for many people. Our spirituality is an ontological reality that belongs to every human being (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008), constantly seeking expression throughout a person’s life. It is this spiritual element that helps define the personality of an individual from birth to death (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Templeton & Eccles, 2006). A sense of connectedness with self, the world and – for some – a transcendent dimension affords individuals with a host of ever-growing benefits (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2005; Mahoney, Pendleton & Ihrke, 2006; Oman & Thoresen, 2006; Walker & Reimer, 2006).

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of fulfilment in the spiritual domain of humans (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; DeBlasio, 2011; Gottlieb, 2006), there is yet to be a notable consensus in the scientific community about the nature and scope of this dimension, particularly in childhood (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Carrette & King, 2005; Roehlkepartain *et al.*, 2006). Much of the current knowledge of spirituality has been divided amongst textbooks, journals and interest groups focused on a particular discipline, geographic area or religious tradition. Additional to this, much of the research finds a place within the psychology of religion, a field more connected with social psychology and personality than with developmental psychology (Roehlkepartain *et al.*, 2006).

Defining spirituality and religion

Until recently, people would have used the word ‘spirituality’ principally with religious connotations, referring to the devotions, prayers and practices of those from a specific religious group (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). This association was so strong that, over the centuries, religion claimed an exclusive ownership of spirituality by implying the impossibility for spirituality to exist outside of the religious context (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). The lack of its own clear definition often meant that spirituality could only be discussed from a subjective viewpoint, resulting in many explorations into spirituality becoming a conflict between practitioners of differing religions (Carrette & King, 2005). In spite of this contention, many – particularly the young – are now searching for and giving expression to their spirituality outside the institutionalised religions of Western culture (ABS, 2007; DeBlasio, 2011; Lippman & Dombrowski-Keith, 2006; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

These Westerners have come to see ‘spirituality’ as generally referring to a person’s ultimate and innate values, their true and individual identity, their ability to identify and appreciate sacredness, and an awareness of and connection to something greater in their daily existence (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008; Templeton & Eccles, 2006), expressed through the ethics, morals and values that an individual holds and practices. This discussion is predicated on an understanding of this definition.

A person’s spirituality may find expression through an organised system of belief (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008), meaning that, on a purely pragmatic level, a



religion is a group of people whose spirituality is reflected in that religion's practised set of morals, ethics and sacred traditions. By practising a particular religion, a person is showing a commitment to the beliefs and characteristics of a particular religious tradition (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Although the current scale of exploration into spirituality, as distinct from religion, in the modern Western world is unprecedented, according to Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008), the idea itself was first proposed by Harvard psychologist William James, in the academic year of 1901–1902. It was James who suggested that it was the psychological experience of the individual – their inner spiritual experience – that was the primordial religious experience and, in doing so, implied spirituality to have preceded religion. Religion, by James' understanding, was simply a response to the spiritual experience of an individual or a community (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008).

The growing distinction between religion and spirituality is an important one to make, as the youth of the Western world are far outpacing their elders in this realisation. An increasing number of academics have recognised this concept gathering momentum in the modern Western world (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005), and have begun to critique the traditionally held assumption that an individual could only complete their spiritual development by placing any spiritual experience within social and communal reality via a system of shared beliefs and values – a religion (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). It is now becoming more widely accepted that a person can be spiritual, despite not having a theology to articulate it (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008).

Dissatisfaction with traditional religions among Western youth

While academics debate the credibility of this concept, the development of spirituality outside of traditional religions is occurring in the real world. The speed and magnitude of this shift in thinking is so advanced, it may even be outstripping academic output. Recent data (ABS, 2007; DeBlasio, 2011; Lippman & Dombrowski-Keith, 2006) into the spiritual dimension of children have found that the younger generations of the Western world are moving away from institutionalised religions, which they feel no longer nurture their inner lives or provide them with a sense of wholeness (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008).

Many traditional religions have been slow to adopt the modern Western world's shift to more liberal and inclusive beliefs and, by doing so, have left an ever-growing percentage of today's youth on the outer of the rigid and archaic moral systems of many traditional religions (Carrette & King, 2005). Ideas, perspectives and experiences are more readily exchanged over a wider community due to technological advancements, causing an even greater sense of disconnection between younger generations and what they perceive as a lack of relevance with traditional religions (DeBlasio, 2011). These younger generations have also generally attained a higher level of education than their elders, and use their critical minds to navigate a wider variety of reading and information that is available to them (Lippman & Dombrowski-Keith, 2006). When asked, younger children will refer to themselves as 'religious, but not practicing' while older children will overwhelmingly claim to be 'spiritual, but not religious' (Cusack, 2011; Lippman & Dombrowski-Keith, 2006). Affiliations with traditional Western religion in the general Australian community have been falling



gradually since the middle of the 20th century (ABS, 2007; Russell, 2009), so it is reasonable to assume that this trend will continue at the same rate in the future, especially when considering the sway parents' religious affiliations have over the development of their child's beliefs (Boyatzis, 2005).

Through viewing religion as the expression of the shared spirituality of a group, it is clear that religion serves to meet a need within our lives (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). Having a strong spiritual conviction has been linked to resilience (Crawford, O'Dougherty-Wright & Masten, 2006), an increased recovery rate from illness (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008), morality (Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2008), empathetic development (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008), and happiness (Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2008, cited in Boynton, 2011). A spiritual awareness could also be included in the socio-emotional element of a child's development and, as such, would have not yet fully understood implications for the physical and cognitive aspects of children (Oman & Thoresen, 2006; Vialle, Lysaght & Verenikina, 2008). Taking these attributes into consideration, the shift of modern Western youth away from traditional expressions of spirituality may have worrying implications. Without the adoption of a similar outlet, Western youth's wellbeing may be jeopardised. This need to address the spiritual development outside of traditional Western religions has come to the attention of educational services in Australia, who have defined, developed and funded three main programs through which to achieve this end.

Special Religious Education

Special Religious Education (SRE) is an anachronistic attempt at providing students with a spiritual outlet. From Kindergarten enrolment in the public primary education system, students' parents are asked to select a religion for their child. Little or no emphasis is placed on the non-compulsory nature of the SRE program (DEC, 2011). Non-informed parents perceive the program to have an educative value due to its inclusion in the education system, when, in fact, this is not its purpose. Its purpose is to promote particular religious values in a secular education system, without making educative allowances for those students who do not fit within standardised belief categories. Prior to 2011, these students were not entitled to any form of ethics, values, civics or general religious education within the hour dedicated to SRE (Mayrl, 2011; Russell, 2009).

This approach is rooted in an agreement between the churches and the New South Wales government as part of the *Public Instruction Act (1880)*. The agreement was used by the NSW government to attempt to end the dual system under which church and state schools operated side by side (Whitton *et al.*, 2010). The accord was agreed to on the condition that one hour of schooling was reserved exclusively for scripture education for every four hours of secular study. However, the Act was opposed by the Roman Catholic Church, and so the dual system still continues to the current day.

Based on data collected in the Australian context (ABS, 2007), it is clear that this agreement no longer reflects the sentiment of the general community, and yet is still the basis for the current implementation of SRE. It is believed (Mayrl, 2011; St James Ethics Centre, 2011) that 25% of students sat idle during SRE before the



implementation of the NSW Primary Ethics program, discussed below. This estimate was thought to be as high as 80% in some schools and stages (Russell, 2009). Within a crowded curriculum, the compulsory transfer of one hour of prime teaching time to non-trained individuals for non-curriculum activities is alarmingly inefficient (Mayrl, 2011). The establishment of ethics classes from the first term of 2011 has done nothing to affect the way SRE is implemented.

National School Chaplaincy Program

The same philosophical premise as was used for SRE has been used in the federal government's National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP). The NSCP was established in 2006 by the former Coalition government (ABC, 2011; Commonwealth of Australia, 2011a) to support schools and their communities to establish or enhance chaplaincy and pastoral care services (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011a). The code of conduct for school chaplains under the NSCP outlines that a school chaplain's role is to support both "students and the wider community in exploring their spirituality, providing guidance on spiritual or religious, values and ethical matters and facilitating access to the helping agencies in the community" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p.18). Although it is also stated in the NSCP guidelines that school chaplains are not to "impose any religious beliefs or persuade an individual toward a particular set of religious beliefs" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2010, p.5), this criterion becomes inequitable when considering the uneven representation of spiritual orientations within program-funded chaplains. Of the school chaplains currently involved in the NSCP, 98.52% identify as Christian, with 85% being drawn from the National School Chaplaincy Association (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011b; NSCA, 2011) which, despite its name, is a purely Christian association comprised of Christian ministry and scripture unions (NSCA, 2011).

This 98.52% is markedly larger than the 63.89% of the Australian population who identified their religious affiliation as Christian in the 2006 census (ABS, 2007), a figure that will also include a significant proportion of non-practising Christians. All other institutional religions are grossly underrepresented in the NSCP, but perhaps even more worrying is the comparison to the 'no' or 'not stated' religious affiliations. Despite making up 29.87% of the Australian population, these groups only make up less than 0.01% of program-funded school chaplains. These comparisons show a clear misrepresentation of modern Australian culture; for although a chaplain's religious beliefs may not be intentionally transferred to the students, the chaplain's use of these same beliefs to formulate their life's outlook means that, on an individual level, their personal assumptions promote a prescribed set of religious beliefs.

New South Wales Primary Ethics program

The NSW Primary Ethics program was begun in 2011 across the state following an amendment to the *NSW Education Act (1990)*, allowing students who choose not to attend SRE the opportunity to receive philosophical ethics classes by specially trained and vetted volunteers (Primary Ethics, 2011a). These classes use inquiry-based dialogue and discussion to assist students to learn "how to think about ethical matters through the give-and-take of reasoned argument" (Primary Ethics, 2011b). In these



discussions, a wide range of age-appropriate ethical issues are presented to develop the students' capacity for moral reasoning, collaborative learning, logical reasoning, critical thinking and the ability to evaluate good and bad moral reasoning (Primary Ethics, 2011c). The ethical issues presented range in complexity from sharing in Early Stage One to child labour in Stage Three, and cover a scope of topics from rules to personal assumptions to animal rights, with the aim to ready its participants for the moral realities of adulthood (Primary Ethics, 2011c).

St James Ethics Centre (2011) proposed that all material created and used in ethics classes should be given to faith groups for their use in scripture classes, and in doing so complement existing SRE classes instead of competing against them by offering alternative material and exclusive learning opportunities. Despite this, ethics classes have distanced themselves from SRE by not including any discussion of any practised religions in their curriculum (Primary Ethics, 2011c), rather choosing to take a wholly secular focus during all seven years of the program.

The Primary Ethics program's aversion to discussing religion or spirituality with their students is a wasted opportunity to provide students with a deep understanding of the program's content. While in this program, students enable their creative thinking and relational feeling to build a sense of morality, both of which are important elements of building children's spirituality (Adams, Hyde & Woolley, 2008). However, the program limits spiritual development by not allowing its students to make links between the values being discussed and a religious or spiritual context. By doing this, the students fail to develop a deep understanding of where their morals, ethics and values originate, how they may change in the face of future life experiences and, so, how they may be applied to yet unknown situations. It is also crucial that children remain able to connect with others, to help them identify and define both personal and collective idols to support their spiritual development (Schoonmaker, 2009), which is not possible under the current Primary Ethics program. The program looks more at the components of spirituality, rather than the holistic view. This means that the program is, in fact, not addressing spirituality to the extent that it could, with the result that the children are being denied the opportunity to fulfil their spiritual potential.

Discussion

While these attempts at addressing children's spirituality are encouraging, this is due only to their unified admission of the role the educational system has to play in the spiritual development of children. Unfortunately, each focuses on only one area of spiritual growth – SRE on the transference and application of a single prescribed set of beliefs and traditions; NSCP on the support from a single religious perspective; and the Primary Ethics program on the components of individuals' values, circumscribed from their cultural and community context (Primary Ethics, 2011a). A child's spirituality is as unique as their personality or cognitive makeup. However, unlike these elements, the spiritual dimension of childhood is seemingly believed to be satisfied through restrictive, one-size-fits-all programs in the NSW education system, concerned more with maintaining the politically correct distinction between religion and spirituality than with what offers the greatest potential for furthering its students' development.



In all other educational areas, lessons are differentiated and various viewpoints are presented to give students the richest scope of knowledge available. However, when educating the spiritual aspect of students, they are either only offered one perspective or several from a detached and non-personally relevant viewpoint. A deeper understanding of the various religious communities of the world would also position the students of our education system in good stead to cope with the challenges they may face in adult life, by allowing them to find satisfaction in whatever religion's focus, beliefs and practices best address their needs at the time. Knowing their options could also give some students the conviction they need to stand alone in their spirituality and feel confident to draw on many religion's aspects to practise a spirituality outside institutionalised religions.

For the Western world to succeed in the future it must begin now to shift its educational aim away from the simple transference of workforce-ready skills. The workplaces that our students will one day occupy are beyond our past knowledge and current understanding. Instead of ignoring this rapidly approaching reality, Western education must begin to make changes to its curriculum to prepare its students for their complex and unknown adult life. Education's purpose today should be to prepare students to become members of a global culture, which will face more frequent and more complex social, economical and environmental dilemmas than any previous generation. The global community can no longer afford future citizens who define themselves by the invisible boundaries of religion, but rather see religion as an expression of every individual's humanity.

Future direction

The perspective of individual expression can be developed within the classroom by the development of a deep and evolving spiritual dimension in each student. Public primary education in NSW already possesses a promising foundation for this development in the Primary Ethics program. The next step toward meaningfully addressing children's spirituality would simply require the introduction of religion and spirituality within the Primary Ethics program delivered to Stage Two and Stage Three. Such a program would form the basis for a common platform for greater knowledge and act as a frame of reference for each student, and allow them to gain new insight into their lives and the lives of others. The revised program would first develop a sense of self-awareness, self-efficacy and greater purpose through the same scenarios and discussions currently envisaged in the Primary Ethics program during Early Stage One and Stage One. Through these classes, students would explore and develop a personal set of morals, values and beliefs – their spirituality. Although discussion of religion at these stages would not be prohibited, it would be discussed only as a way the students could construct and express their spirituality. As such, a child already connected with a particular religion would not be disadvantaged or vilified.

When the concept of religion is introduced in Stage Two, it is still with this perspective that it is discussed. However, the discussion now requires genuine research and deep understanding through historical research, contemporary societal studies and guest speakers. The guest speakers would talk about their own spirituality, and how and why they choose to express it the way they do. Through these classes,



the students would not only learn the traditions and ceremonies of a particular religion, but the philosophy behind its creation and how this philosophy has affected individuals' spirituality. To complete the program's opportunities for its students, each student would be given the opportunity to select an available SRE class to attend each fortnight. From this perspective, students would be free to view a variety of religions as a practising member, removing the sense of exclusivity that currently surrounds SRE classes.

Conclusion

By giving students the opportunity to freely explore themselves on a deep and extremely personal level, the education system can provide its students with a whole host of experiences they can utilise to develop their identity, beliefs and values. Considering the unknown world educators are preparing students for, the most valuable knowledge they can bestow upon them is knowledge of self, for it is this knowledge that will be with them for life. Spirituality is at the core of what it means to be human and, as childhood unfolds from within, separate from restrictive and impersonal moral knowledge or religious instruction (Nye, 1998, cited in Schoonmaker, 2009). Bringing up children and young people who are secure in their religious identity provides the foundation for respect and tolerance in interactions with people of other faiths or with other belief systems.

It is important to note that giving children spiritual freedom does not mean the end of traditional Western religion. Quite the contrary, it could come to result in a revival of Western religions among the young, who come to practice with more dedication and personal conviction than those before them, who dreamed of the forbidden and unknown alternatives.

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