

A Critical Analysis of the Role of Spirituality within the Early Years Curriculum

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Abstract

This study critically analyses the role of spirituality within early years education and asserts the need for spiritual development to become a recognised and valued part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). In addition the study reflects on the role of the practitioner in supporting spiritual growth. Spiritual development is arguably a crucial part of early childhood, and integral to the holistic well-being of the child. Yet, within the early years curriculum in England, the EYFS, there is no recognition of spiritual development. Equally, no guidance is given to practitioners who work within the early years around supporting and promoting spiritual development. This study highlights the benefits of spiritual development within the early years, including mental well-being as well as developing autonomy and resilience, and proposes that spiritual development should be a recognised and supported part of early years' education. This can, however, only be achieved through a redefining of the curriculum and how teaching takes place, through reflective pedagogy and practice. The study concludes that in order to incorporate spiritual development within the early years curriculum a shift in focus needs to take place away from value-measured outcomes as the current approach cannot effectively support either spiritual growth or the holistic well-being of the child, which is crucial for children if they are to truly develop a sense of agency, be more fulfilled and achieve a lifelong love of learning.

Introduction

This study critically assesses the role of spirituality within early years education and asserts the need for spiritual development to become a recognised and valued part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). In addition the study reflects on the role of the practitioner in supporting spiritual growth.

Spirituality is noticeably absent from the current early years curriculum, although it is a recognised and essential part of holistic development (Watson, 2006). Moreover, no guidance is given to practitioners around how to incorporate or support spiritual development within early years settings (Dowling, 2010). This study identifies the numerous benefits of incorporating spirituality within the early years, including promoting mental well-being (Dowling, 2010), as well as autonomy and resilience (Eaude, 2006, 2009). Furthermore it illuminates how spirituality is intrinsic to all aspects of learning (Nye and Hay, 1996), and clearly demonstrates the need for inclusion of spiritual development within the EYFS.

Additionally the study aims to illustrate both the benefits and difficulties for practitioners in supporting spiritual development within early years settings, and proposes that reflective, inclusive practice can be a way of hearing children's spiritual voice. Arguably, this can however only be accomplished by altering the

focus of early years education away from value measured outcomes to the holistic well-being of the child.

In England's increasingly value-measured education system it is important to remember that not all development is either immediate or measurable. Spiritual development may not be quantifiable but is according to Eaude (2009) essential for lifelong fulfilment and happiness.

Research question and aims of the study

The main aim of this study is to demonstrate the importance of spirituality within the early years for true holistic development and explain why it should be recognised and promoted within the EYFS. In addition the paper will critically reflect on early years pedagogy and practice.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed by using library based research to examine both spirituality and education in greater detail and reflect on the topic within an early years context.

The study began by analysing the current EYFS. After identifying the lack of recognition around spirituality, government policies concerning the inclusion of spirituality within the English education system were examined. Although not all the evidence was specific to the early years, it highlighted the importance of spiritual development within an educational setting.

Considerable time was spent analysing the benefits of spiritual development within the crucial period of early child development. Comparing and contrasting the EYFS with other early years curriculums has also been useful.

Although much of the research around spirituality is religion-based, the study has purposely tried to focus on the holistic aspect of spiritual development which will hopefully address the inclusivity of the subject, particularly in relation to child development within an educational context. However, because of the personal nature of spirituality, the study acknowledges that faith or religious beliefs can be included.

"The spiritual landscape is eclectic, complex and ambiguous, and this makes the quest for ultimate meaning and purpose in life all the more significant." (Wright, 2000:57)

Spirituality is an essential component of holistic development (Watson, 2006), intrinsically linked to each child's personal, social and emotional well-being. Although a holistic approach to child development underpins the core principles of the EYFS, spiritual development fails to be acknowledged. There is no mention of the role of spirituality or spiritual development within the current early years curriculum, even though Ofsted (2004) has recognised the importance and value of spirituality within education and the beneficial role it plays in all areas of the curriculum.

The search for meaning often associated with spiritual development is commonplace for young children who constantly have to cope with new and unfamiliar things. This makes the early years an ideal time to encourage this quest for knowledge, helping to keep alive the sense of awe and wonder (Ofsted, 2004) of the world that young children often exhibit. Spirituality is, however, an incredibly difficult concept to define, particularly within an educational setting. This is demonstrated in a study by McCreery (2000, cited in McCreery, Palmer and Voiels, 2008:70) in which 162 teachers interviewed gave 90 different definitions of the term 'spirituality'. It is the difficulty in attempting to quantify what is essentially intangible which often leaves spiritual development undervalued (Elton-Chalcraft, 2002). Equally as Dowling (2010) points out, no guidance is given to practitioners for promoting spirituality within the early years. Moreover, because of its ambiguity, Eaude (2006) argues there is a danger that spiritual development can be used to encompass whatever meaning practitioners wish to place upon it.

Religious denominations often view spirituality and faith as interlinked. Montessori's Christian based perspective on early years' education viewed children's spiritual development at the embryonic stage, requiring careful nurturing and emotional nourishment in order for children to grow and realise their full potential. For Montessori, the spiritual development of each child was a "collective mission" for the creation of a better world (Miller, 2002:19). Yet as Meehan (2002:292) claims, "religion is not a necessary condition of being spiritual". The British Humanist Society (2013) describes spirituality as fundamental in the human condition, with spiritual development helping to create meaning, purpose and self-worth. This humanistic perspective can be visualised through Maslow's (1954) *Hierarchy of Needs*, where nurturing of the human self through positive relationships and a secure environment results in increased self-esteem and fulfilment.

Spiritual Interconnectedness

Jung (1912 cited in Hunt, 2012:78) believed that all humankind was connected by what he termed 'the collective unconscious'. This intrinsic interconnection, often viewed in terms of the spiritual, is evident throughout history in the use of global symbols, images and collective representations. This idea of interconnectedness across humanity is shared by Froebel, who also claimed this was extended to our unity with the world and the cosmos (Joyce, 2012). Froebel advocated these beliefs in his educational work with young children through his '*Kindergartens*'; outdoor areas where children could explore their unity with nature. However, England's increasingly secular society tends to avoid discussion around the philosophies Froebel promoted as well as the topic of spirituality itself, with spirituality often considered a 'strange' subject not to be broached (Kimes-Myers, 1997). Children are very often aware of this "suspicion of the spiritual" (Hay, 1985:34), which leaves them feeling uneasy about expressing their own spirituality. This can leave spiritual matters relegated to the private world which fails to acknowledge the crucial community and collective aspect.

According to Kimes-Myers (1997) everyone engages in the spiritual or transcendence process, as this is an integral part of the human condition; all humans yearn to 'reach out' to others. Lagercrantz and Changeux (2009) believe this begins even before birth with foetuses responding to external stimuli from within the womb.

These pre-natal experiences establish a connection between the child and the wider world (Surr, 2012). From birth children's very earliest interactions and experiences act as a foundation for both the child's holistic well-being (Bowlby, 1965) and spiritual growth (Surr, 2012). This is supported by Kimes-Myers (1997) who claims that spiritual development is often gained through experiences. It is here that the role of the early years practitioner is crucial in creating 'enabling environments' (EYFS, 2012), which can provide young children with opportunities to engage with their own spirituality. These experiences can include everyday activities within an early years setting, such as being immersed in play or creative activities. Being completely absorbed within an activity creates what Csikszentmihalyi (1992) describes as '*flow*'; gaining deep fulfilment through total engagement. Gaining a sense of pride from accomplishments can also give children what Dowling (2010:19) terms the "joyous experience of achievement" which in addition to being spiritual also improves confidence and self-esteem.

Kimes-Myers (1997) claims all experiences add to our understanding and growth as a person. The important role that practitioners play in facilitating this growth is discussed by Rogers (1983), who claims that educators need to create an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and freedom. It is in this environment that children's spiritual voices can truly be heard. Greenfield (2000 cited in Eade, 2006:20) claims that children experience emotions more intensely than adults. These emotions, intrinsically linked to spiritual development are often expressed through pictures, actions and play. Imaginative play according to Nye and Hay (2006) helps children to transcend, giving children the ability to conceive what is beyond the 'known' and their own lived experiences. Although there is a connection between religion and spirituality, it is not exclusively religious. Nye and Hay (2006) illuminate the holistic element of spirituality which reflects both the uniqueness of the individual as well as the importance of humanity and the world. Integrating these concepts within the early years curriculum through spiritual development helps children to value themselves, others and the wider world.

The Benefits of Spiritual Development within the Early Years

The benefits of spiritual development are numerous and far reaching, pertaining not only to the immediacy of the developing child but also to future happiness and well-being. As Kimes-Myers (1997) shows, spiritual development encourages empathy for others and a deeper understanding of oneself, helping children gain a deeper appreciation of the impact their behaviour and actions have upon not only themselves and other people but upon the world itself.

Ofsted (2004:6) has described spiritual development as "fundamental to other areas of learning". In particular, spiritual development assists children by encouraging questioning and making connections with their learning. Spirituality, Ofsted claims, not only prepares pupils for adult life, but also helps children value each other and the wider world, encouraging sustainability and, as McCreery, Palmer and Voiels (2008) state, responsibility.

Each child can be helped to develop responsibility for their own learning by being encouraged to make connections with their learning, giving them the skills to think in terms of the whole (Ofsted, 2004), and assisting them in achieving the EYFS (2012)

outcomes of becoming critical thinkers and autonomous learners. This clearly demonstrates the advantages of including spiritual development as a fundamental component of the EYFS. Moreover, to become an autonomous learner requires resilience, the ability to cope and possess the determination to be persistent. Dowling (2010), states that spiritual growth helps children to cope, thereby increasing resilience. This is supported by Greene, Galambos and Lee (2004), whose study around resilience in adults identified spirituality as a significant factor and emphasised the importance of developing resilience within the early years.

Mental Well-Being

The mental well-being of children, particularly young children, is unfortunately an area which is much undervalued. This was recognised by the New Labour government who addressed the area of mental health within the early years in their 2001 report *Promoting Children's Mental Health within Early Years and School Settings*. The report advises practitioners to pay special attention to the spiritual well-being of the child. Although this report was published in 2001, the important part both spirituality and mental health play in the holistic development of the child has not been recognised within the current EYFS.

Dowling (2010) suggests that spiritual development can improve mental health by helping children reflect on things of true value and meaning, away from an increasingly consumerist society. Children need time for reflection, contemplation and solitude, a requirement practitioners need to address within the setting through both the physical and emotional environment. Dowling's recognition of how our increasingly consumerist and individualistic society is detrimental for young children is supported in the UNICEF study, *Children's Well-being in the UK, Sweden and Spain: The Role of Inequality and Materialism* (2011). The report highlighted how poorly the UK fared in child well-being, with children describing themselves as trapped within a materialistic culture. In a society where children are increasingly perceived as "consumers" (Adams, Hyde and Woolley, 2008:111), spirituality helps children to develop identities away from materialism and consumerism, increasing positive self-image and awareness of things of true value and meaning. As Maslow's (1954) *Hierarchy of Needs* demonstrates, material security is merely one aspect; children need to feel safe, have a sense of belonging and develop positive self-esteem.

Social well-being is often related to our interconnectedness to each other. This interconnectedness is at the very heart of spiritual development and is evident in our relationships. 'Positive Relationships' (EYFS, 2012) are a key principle of the EYFS which highlights the importance of attachments, listening and respect. A sense of belonging and respect for others is supported through spirituality. Furthermore Ofsted (2004) claim that spirituality helps children value each other thereby creating positive relationships. This is not only confined to the relationship between the practitioner and the child, but also parents and the wider community.

Spirituality and Culture

Community and culture are central to understanding the 'Unique Child' (EYFS, 2012). Respecting and including each child's individual cultural identity develops

positive family and community relationships. The New Zealand early years curriculum *Te Whariki* (1996) is an example of how both spirituality and culture are interwoven in early years' education. Spirituality is at the heart of this holistic curriculum, which promotes empowerment of the child through recognition of the diversity of cultural identity (Bone, 2008).

Eaude (2006) discusses the crucial link between spiritual and cultural development within the English early years system. Children do not live in isolation; their family and community cultural values affect their experiences and perspectives significantly. Although these experiences need to be respected and valued, Eaude (2006) also argues that spiritual development helps young children to 'search, question and reflect'. This can assist children in creating their own value system, allowing critical appraisal whilst remaining open minded and respectful.

Young children's openness to the unknown often means they have no fixed ideas around expected answers or outcomes (Eaude, 2006), making the early years a perfect time for developing independent learning. However, as there are no specific guidelines within the EYFS around spiritual development, practitioners need support and guidance as to how best to encourage this area of learning and the utilising of children's natural curiosity.

Equally there is a broader context to spirituality that stretches far beyond the immediate surroundings of the setting, and allows children to contemplate things outside of themselves, both in a physical and transcendent context. Allowing and encouraging children to engage in this level of freedom gives children the opportunity to develop their own personal narratives (Eaude, 2006), and acquire understanding through their individual experiences and emotions, thus helping them to become critical thinkers.

Recommendations to Support Spirituality

The difficulty in defining spirituality combined with the lack of guidance given to early years practitioners in this area, leaves many early years educators faced with the challenge of how to successfully encompass spiritual development into their own teaching practice. As Kimes-Myers (1997) points out, the setting needs to be supportive and secure for freedom of discussion around spirituality to take place. This involves practitioners being open, honest and reflective in their practice. True reflexivity, as Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008) argue, enlists practitioners to re-evaluate their role within the setting and rather than being an authority of knowledge, it is essential for early years' educators to see 'not knowing' as a way of being. Spirituality itself can challenge practitioners' perceptions around what they perceive they know (Kimes-Myers, 1997). Yet a spiritually conducive environment can be positive for practitioners; reflecting on one's own values and experiences can help educators to grow both as a professional and as an individual. Learning is a journey which practitioners and pupils take together (Rogers, 1983). Spiritual growth reflects this, with both practitioners and pupils becoming active co-constructors in their spiritual learning. The powerful link spirituality has with emotions means that practitioners may need to reflect on their own experiences or as Kimes-Myers (1997:9) describes, confront "the child deep inside". This can perhaps lead to

unsettling experiences resurfacing, presenting challenges for the practitioner on both a personal and professional level.

Furthermore, according to Adams, Hyde and Woolley, (2008) practitioners need to be prepared for the fact that not all spiritual experiences will be positive. Children's connection with their spiritual self often occurs during emotionally challenging times which can bring the topic of spirituality to the fore. A secure spiritual environment can help children cope through these challenges, in addition to helping develop resilience. Practitioners can help promote resilience by being sensitive and supportive listeners, thus creating an emotionally secure attachment with the children in their setting.

Listening to the voice of the child is essential for 'Positive Relationships' (EYFS, 2012) to flourish. The child's voice is internationally recognised through the 1989 *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*; however Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008) argue that children's spiritual voice often goes unheard, with the range of children's experiences failing to be noticed or appreciated. Very young children may, however, have difficulty verbalising spiritual experiences (Adams, Hyde and Woolley, 2008); here the use of photographs, artwork or artefacts could be utilised by practitioners to help children express their inner voice.

Practitioners can utilise the therapeutic qualities of play by making use of resources within the setting to encourage spiritual development. Outdoor play in particular encourages what White (2008:16) describes as an "emotional connection to the world", assisting children in understanding their spiritual unity with nature. Play, using open ended materials as symbolic representations, can also help children develop an understanding of the abstract concepts around spirituality (Stewart, 2011). As this demonstrates, spiritual development intrinsically goes beyond the context of the setting (Kymes-Myers, 1997) into the wider world and beyond.

Creating a setting where children feel confident enough to express themselves requires practitioners to develop an environment where children are confident enough to take risks. Stewart (2011:42) suggests this type of environment helps children to develop a "growth mind set", where children are willing to 'have a go' and therefore develop autonomy. Here the challenge for practitioners lies in the need to balance adult intervention with the freedom and risk taking element which children need to develop.

This idea around 'freedom to learn' is central to the educational philosophy of the Steiner- Waldorf approach. The Steiner philosophy believes that each child embarks on their own spiritual journey in order to achieve freedom and purpose. It is crucial that practitioners allow each child the freedom to "discover and become aware of" their own unique developmental path (Nicol and Taplin, 2012:142), which requires respect and reverence from practitioners.

Practitioners are faced with a further challenge around the interconnection spirituality often has with religious education. Hay and Nye (1996) suggest that viewing spirituality through religious education alone neglects the holistic foundation of early years education, and can prove detrimental by creating exclusiveness around spiritual development. They suggest practitioners apply a cross curricular approach, which helps to appreciate the influence spirituality has on all aspects of the

curriculum, thus making it accessible for all. Yet as Elton-Chalcraft (2002:325) claims, many practitioners themselves are “spiritually impoverished”. Our fast paced consumerist society often leaves little time for aesthetic appreciation and altruism (Dowling, 2010). In addition, the ever increasing demands placed upon the teaching profession means it can be difficult for practitioners to give spiritual well-being the quality time it needs (Elton-Chalcraft, 2002). Giving children time and space for spiritual growth is, however, essential (Ofsted, 2004), providing not only holistic benefits for the child but more fulfilment for practitioners (Eaude, 2006).

Measuring Spiritual Development within the Early Years

Although spiritual development is not based around academic knowledge, it is, as previously outlined, a crucial component of early years education. This is even recognised by Ofsted (2004:6) who state there is “more to life than achieving high standards in academic subjects”. However, the difficulty in defining spirituality subsequently creates problems in measuring spiritual development. Perhaps the term development is inappropriate as spirituality is often referred to as a journey in which we each travel our own path (Eaude, 2006). Eaude (2006) further discusses how developed even very young children can be with regard to spirituality through their openness and natural zest for life, qualities which elude many adults. Preconceived perceptions around child development often underestimate young children’s maturity and understanding, with rigid concepts of child development leading to fixed ideas of when certain development should occur; this is a fundamental problem around measuring outcomes (Kimes-Myers, 1997).

Viewing children through developmental stages as Lubeck (1998) claims, limits the perception of children’s capabilities. This is supported by McNaughton (2005) who argues that through this lens children are considered ‘incomplete’, becoming dependent upon the practitioner to impart ‘knowledge’. This in turn arguably disempowers the child thus limiting both their holistic and spiritual growth. The current EYFS (2012) is heavily reliant upon observations by practitioners. McNaughton (2005), however, contests the practice of observation as a reliable means of evaluating development, arguing that children’s true voice cannot be heard through the practitioners’ interpretations. This is particularly relevant with spiritual development, where each child’s unique spiritual voice contributes to their own personal narrative (Eaude, 2006) and holistic well-being.

Measuring development equally has political connotations surrounding ‘school readiness’. The current UK government’s drive towards increasing target setting within the early years not only increases pressure on both practitioners and children to ‘produce’ evidence which can be value measured, but also places economic value upon children and their learning (Adams, Hyde and Woolley, 2008); yet as Eaude (2006:8) states, “There is more to teaching and learning than what can be measured.” Erricker (1998) argues that practitioners should avoid predetermined outcomes. Spiritual development is not a linear process and cannot simply be taught. Practitioners must appreciate the diversity and range of spiritual experiences in order to engage all children regardless of background or faith. Hay and Nye (2006) use the term ‘mystery sensing’ to describe occurrences which transcend our everyday lives and experiences. Such experiences take place beyond our comprehension and they cannot easily be explained or measured. The joy and wonder of art and nature could

be described in this context. In an increasingly avaricious time-consumed world, spiritual and aesthetic appreciation is often undervalued and not always recognised (Hay and Nye, 2006).

The concept of spiritual intelligence is examined by Zohar and Marshall (2001), who claim there is no right or wrong way to be spiritually intelligent, but by being more spiritually attuned our journey through life can be more rewarding and fulfilling. In addition, the authors suggest that our individualistic and materialistic society inhibits our spiritual intelligence developing. Even though this has helped to outline key theories around spiritual intelligence, ultimately as Zohar and Marshall (2001:276) state, "spiritual intelligence cannot be quantified". Although spirituality or spiritual intelligence itself cannot be measured, Elton Chalcraft (2002) has developed a framework of spirituality which could be used to assist practitioners in supporting spiritual development within the setting as it reflects how "spirituality is integral to the whole curriculum" (Elton-Chalcraft, 2002:9). Depicted as a hologram with four dimensions, the inner, the social and moral, the environmental and the transcendental, Elton-Chalcraft (2002) proposes that this framework encompasses the diversity and individuality of spirituality, as well as helping to quell confusion around what spirituality is. In contrast, Watson (2000:92) states that by creating models of spirituality "educationalists may be assuming to know what spirituality is". She argues that an assumption is often made within education that spirituality is universal and that everyone has a spiritual nature which can be developed. This is supported by Wright (1997) who also claims that spiritual education indoctrinates children into a post-modernist perspective of what spirituality is. Watson (2000) further argues that state education should not adhere to one particular model, suggesting that children themselves must decide which model of spirituality they choose to adopt.

Although Elton-Chalcraft's (2002) model successfully gives recognition to spiritual development as well as providing guidance for practitioners within the early years, Watson's critique remains valid. By placing spirituality within the context of a 'model' which predefines what spirituality is, it is placing an adult-constructed pre-defined value upon it. Adult constructed definitions around what quantifies development need to be avoided to ensure that each child's unique spiritual voice will be heard. Practitioners 'goals' need to be based around the holistic growth of each child for lifelong well-being. Short term targets merely based around government expectations and standards, which are evident within the EYFS, will never truly encourage growth and freedom of the individual (Rogers, 1983). To accomplish this practitioners' need to be given trust, respect and professional autonomy to assist children in actively determining their own objectives, development and goals for the future.

Discussion

This chapter will consider the importance of developing a co-construction of knowledge between practitioners and pupils in fostering true freedom to learn. In addition it will also analyse the important role the environment and in particular relational spaces play in spiritual development.

Co-construction of Learning

The topic of spirituality within early years education raises questions around knowledge, with practitioners having to recognise they may not always know the answer. A re-evaluation around current practice within the early years curriculum is required not only for spiritual development but also for holistic development. Practitioners arguably need to reflect and redefine their role within the setting to encourage the co-construction of knowledge. This is supported by Aubrey et al (2000), who state that children can only become active learners by developing their knowledge through a co-construction of learning with caring adults.

McNaughton's (2005) analysis around the role of observations within early years education claims that observations often focus on the physical, things which can be seen. Practitioners need to reflect beyond what can be visibly observed as Bone (2008) argues: communication of the spiritual self does not always require words but can be evident in children's daily life. Spirituality, as Surr (2012) states, is best seen in our interactions with others. Observations within Steiner early years settings, according to Nicol and Taplin (2012), often take place during times of freely chosen play, and are used effectively to respond to the child's individual needs. Steiner practitioners favour a balance between adult intervention and child initiated learning, which they believe encourages growth and freedom to learn (Nicol and Taplin, 2012).

Freedom to Learn

Freedom and independence are essential for spiritual growth. Eade (2009) suggests that practitioners often attempt to protect children from difficult emotional situations. This, he claims, inhibits spiritual growth and resilience within the child. It is important for children to search for meaning themselves and develop their own agency. Although sensitive responsive practitioners are essential, adults within the setting must not encourage dependency (Eade, 2009) but promote independent autonomous learning, the ultimate goal of the EYFS.

Reflective Practice

Practitioners arguably need to engage in reflective practice which requires criticality and empathy. The Swedish forest schools *I Ur Ock Skur* (Rain or Shine) encourage both adults and children to reflect upon their experiences, helping to develop empathy for others (Joyce, 2012). These schools, in addition to the *Te Whariki* (1996), also endeavour to actively engage parents and the community within the setting, recognising the value culture and community have in the spiritual growth of the child. Spiritual growth can be supported by practitioners 'starting with the child'. However, to achieve this both children and practitioners need autonomy away from an outcome based curriculum in order to develop their spiritual selves. Harris, (2007) suggests a redefining of the curriculum is needed, based not only on what is taught but how teaching takes place. A curriculum focused on knowledge acquisition and based on quantification places the teacher in control of all knowledge, when as Eade (2003) points out what we truly need is to learn from each other.

Spiritual Voice of the Child

As it stands, spirituality cannot be fully developed within the current early years' curriculum: measuring what is expected of both practitioners and pupils with regard to spiritual development could be detrimental to spiritual growth. Attempting to integrate spirituality within the current curriculum would, according to Wright (2000:67), "pre-package spirituality in terms of established and obtainable curriculum goals". Worse still, it could silence alternative voices. Although Ofsted (2004) does promote the importance of spiritual development within education, the act of 'inspection' of spiritual provision could actually limit the concept of spirituality itself (Wright, 2000). Arguably it is the voice of the child which is the true indicator of spiritual growth. Nye and Hay (1996) contend that children need to develop their own 'meaning making' for spiritual growth, developing their own quest in search for answers through utilising their experiences. This is supported by Eade (2003) who suggests that children discover themselves and the wider world through play and creativity. This search for meaning which helps to construct the development of the spiritual self is intrinsically linked to education and learning. Nurturing this quest will not only help children develop holistically but also forge a lifelong joy of learning.

Environment

The environment is crucial to spiritual development. Recently the EYFS has seen a shift in focus away from one of its key principles, as expressed in 'Enabling Environments', through the new non-statutory guideline for practitioners, *Early Years Outcomes 2013*. Detraction from the importance of the environment could, according to Eade (2009), prove detrimental to not only children's spiritual well-being but also their mental health, resilience and developing sense of agency. The environment, social, emotional and physical, all play a role in children developing secure attachments, fundamental to growth (Bowlby, 1965). It is through the shared environment of the setting that spiritual development can occur.

Relational Spaces

Children require what Bone (2008) terms 'relational spaces'. As spirituality is a "collective experience" (Bone, 2008:355), children need a time and place to share their feelings in a caring, nurturing environment. Bone's concept of 'spiritual witness' recognises that spiritual development does not happen in isolation but is realised through our connection with others and is part of our everyday life; for as Hull (1996:66) states, "Spirituality exists not inside people, but between them". Zohar and Marshall (2001) claim that our individualistic society has resulted in us being 'cut off' from ourselves and each other. Eade (2009) discusses the damaging effect a materialistic society has on children, influencing their identity and sense of self. Children need to engage with their spiritual self to counterbalance the pervading influence society's obsession with consumerism has upon them. Eade (2009) purports that all adults should encourage children to seek long term happiness and well-being over immediate short term pleasure. This is also crucial for educational goals: short term outcomes should not be prioritised at the expense of lifelong well-being. To foster this perspective requires spiritually attuned practitioners who can engage in their own natural curiosity (Surr, 2012), and whose focus is not centred on targets and measured values. Spirituality is lived in our interactions with others (Bone, 2008); it is "implicit in learning and a source of happiness" (Eade, 2009:186).

Through learning both from and with each other we are able to see spirituality in practice.

Conclusion

Although spiritual development cannot be 'measured,' evidence of spirituality and the benefits it brings can be viewed in practice within early years settings. Positive relationships between pupils, teachers, parents and the wider community are evidence of spirituality in action. Spirituality itself is not only about who we are as individuals but also how we relate to others. As this research has highlighted, inclusive practice is essential. Practitioners must always start with the child, and most importantly recognise and respect the context in which the child lives. In order to achieve this, autonomy should be given to the practitioner to adapt and create an environment suitable for each child's needs. Equally autonomy and freedom should be given to the child. Each child's spiritual voice must be valued and respected, as it is through reflexive practice and a co-construction of shared learning, if spiritual growth is to occur. A curriculum which focuses on pre-determined outcomes such as the EYFS limits both the child and the practitioner, and is unfortunately reflective of wider society's obsession with materialistic and economic gain. Children and adults need to engage with the spiritual to counterbalance this and create a harmonious relationship with their inner self, each other and the world. In an increasingly individualistic and consumerist society it is important for children to gain a sense of belonging and to understand our interconnectedness to each other. We are all part of the wider world and spirituality is something we all share. Children's spiritual learning journey is something which is shared with and supported by others. It requires respect, honesty and the need to keep searching for answers.

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