

‘I saw the universe and I saw the world’: exploring spiritual literacy with young children in a primary classroom

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This paper explores the concept of promoting spiritual literacy as viewed through the eyes of a holistic educator of young children in an inner-city primary classroom. Similar to discussions of spirituality in education, the idea of spiritual literacy is often elusive and can create discomfort and tensions. Drawing on stories of experience, the complexities of what defines spiritual literacy and how it translates into classroom practice are examined. Three recurring themes emerge: story, relationships and mindful spaces. An alternative perspective of what is significant in creating a learning environment is presented as a milieu that reconceptualises what is important and often missing in the mainstream discourse in child development: the spirituality of the child. It is argued that through spiritual literacy practices, teaching and learning can be transformed and, most significantly, an empowering encounter engages all participants in the learning environment.

Keywords: young children; spiritual literacy; holistic education; lived experience

Introduction

On a class trip to a nearby conservation area, I observed children's responses to being in a natural environment. Some had been to this area before, the majority had not. For most this was the first time they had left the concrete environment of the city in which they lived. It was one of those beautiful autumn days. The air still possessed warmth, the leaves were displaying a rainbow of colours and the smell of fir trees delighted the senses. It was a delicious and sensual experience for the children and the parents who accompanied us. The children's excitement in exploring nature was a wondrous sight. Many commented on how fresh the air smelled. Others observed the quiet as we paused to observe different trees and plants along the trail. I had the children lie down under some spruce trees. They were asked to look up into the sky, through the branches. After a time of stillness and silence, they shared what they saw, felt, heard and smelled. Many talked about the sun shining through the trees and seeing the clouds. Some shared the sounds they heard the birds make and seeing them high in the sky. One child in particular said, 'I saw the universe and I saw the world!' I asked him what the universe was. He replied that it was all the stars, planets and black holes. This child was six years old.

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This story illustrates one of many that reflect my conceptual exploration of spiritual literacy with young children in an inner city school in Toronto, Canada. Parker J. Palmer (1999) asks the question of how might we evoke the spiritual dimension of public education. He starts from the perspective that the spiritual is intrinsic to the entire curriculum and not something separate. Parker also positions himself within a secular frame for understanding spirituality in education. Similarly, I situate myself within a secular place of knowing, yet acknowledging and considering the complexities and challenges presented when discussing spirituality within a public education sphere and as part of everyday practice (Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the pedagogical shifts that occurred through my work with a grade 1/2 class (ages six to eight) and the specific stories of experiences that contributed to a deeper understanding of bringing the spiritual to education in meaningful ways. While the discourse around children and spirituality is a fairly new field of study (Hyde 2008), the concept of children's spirituality is not frequently discussed in the public school domain. My exploration, informed by research, contributes to the growing body of literature on spirituality in classroom and offers approaches to nurturing spiritual literacy. Several questions occurred throughout my educational practice in the inner city: What is meant by spiritual literacy? How does spiritual literacy contribute to spiritually appropriate practices in the learning environment? Placing this discussion in the public school domain in a culturally and linguistically diverse inner-city classroom presents opportunities for alternative and creative approaches to learning and curriculum development.

The search for spiritual literacy in education

Paralleling similar difficulties in defining spirituality (Eaude 2005; Harris 2007; Hay and Nye 2006; Palmer 1993; White 1996) and that which is spiritual in education (Kessler 2005; Miller and Drake 1997) the very idea of spiritual literacy is often elusive, non-existent and one that can generate discomfort and apprehension for educators in the public school system. Lantieri (2001) discusses the difficulty in bringing a spiritual discourse to schools in ways that honour family beliefs. She speaks of the profound necessity of giving permission to educators to explore their own spiritual understandings in order to nurture the spirituality of the children they teach through a connectedness to themselves, others and the world.

This confusion between religion and spirituality causes much debate and often creates misunderstanding in curriculum implementation. In Ontario, Canada's public school system there is no mandate to teach religion, but there exists an understanding that the public education system reflects a myriad of different faiths. A pluralistic approach to belief systems is taken. The Ministry of Education in Ontario acknowledges that religion means different things to different people (Ontario Ministry of Education 1994) but is not a responsibility in the public system. Any discussion around religion is usually connected to the social studies curriculum. For example in the primary grades, differences and similarities are explored through themes such as local community, traditions and celebrations and community features at a global level (Ontario Ministry of Education 2004). The teacher makes the decision on the approach taken to these topics. Specific religious studies are undertaken in the Catholic School Boards and private schools of faith. The idea of spiritual literacy is not part of any educational discussions.

Spirituality

The complexity and ambiguity of defining spirituality is discussed in much of the literature (Bone 2008; Crossman 2003; Hyde 2008). Crossman (2003) suggests that 'from a constructivist and postmodern perspective, no generalised definition of spirituality, as a personally and socially constructed reality, can be definitive so interpretative permutations are to be expected' (504). Spirituality can be conceptualised as a personal search for deep inner understanding and purpose (Lin 2006), connecting to that which is bigger (Palmer 1998) and about wisdom and compassion (Miller 2006). It can be understood as a transformative shift towards humanistic knowledge and sense of identity within one's community and the world (Miller 2007; White 1996). Champagne (as cited in Hyde, 2008) supports Hart's (2003) work on the spirituality of children that suggests their capacity for more abstract conceptions of wonder and relational connections between self and others. Champagne argues that 'spiritual experience is human experience' (as cited in Hyde 2008, 53). It is the ongoing pursuit for a sense of one's place in the universe. This enables the children's capacity for more abstract conceptions of wonder, and relational connections between self and others, extending to something bigger than ourselves. It is here that I situate my understanding and connection.

Bone (2005) suggests that by connecting spirituality to holistic education we contextualise intent and meaning. Benson and Roehlkepartain's (2008) conceptual model for spiritual development supports a more holistic understanding. They view spiritual development as a continuum of three core interactive and dynamic processes. At the centre of the framework are 'awareness or awakening', 'interconnecting and belonging' and 'a way of living' (22). Other dimensions are suggested within the context of other developmental domains (physical, emotional and social, for example). Also viewed contextually and weaving in and out of their continuum are social context, culture and meta-narrative.

Holistic education

J.P. Miller (2007) defines holistic education as 'the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among the various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and our relationship to our souls' (13). Holistic education also has been defined as integral education (O'Sullivan 1999) and partnership education (Eisler 2000). It is not a new concept. The natural learning theories of Froebel (in Brosterman 1997), Steiner (1923/1996), Montessori (1966) and Swimme and Berry (1992) present holistic perspectives on how children learn and develop. The writings of J.P. Miller (2000, 2006), R. Miller (1997, 2006), Noddings (1992), Palmer (1993, 1998) and Sardello (1994) further validate the importance of holistic education through discussions of an education for inner life. Nakagawa (2000) offers a contemporary approach that deals with alternative worldviews that challenge a dominant and fragmented worldview in education. He advocates for a 'connection-oriented education' (72) that also connects to ecological, indigenous and feminist worldviews.

The scholarship of holistic theorists offers a well-researched theory and perspective that is translatable into pedagogical experiences. A transformative pedagogy creates a powerful and alternative paradigm for the 'what' and 'how' we teach, without negating skills or transactional knowing. Through reconceptualising a transformative curriculum, attention to the innate and spiritual potentials of every child alters the

focus of a child-centred classroom to one that is life-centred (Palmer 1993). It is within this context that spirituality in education and spiritual literacy can be explored.

Spiritual literacy

The exploration of spiritual literacy arose from the desire to deepen my holistic practice through arts-based education in inner city classrooms. I had observed that through the provision of alternative forms of expression and experiences, such as visualisation, drawing and painting, young children found the spaces that revealed a deep understanding of their inner landscapes and the world around them. The children I taught came from many different countries with cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. There was communal respect fostered for the different faiths in the classroom. While religion was an important part of their identities, I noticed that there were universal stories beginning to emerge: awe and wonder and questions about the world, their different beliefs. I began to observe and listen to their interpretations and how they read their world and explored their pictorial representations. It was here I was reminded of how children see the 'unusualness' of things, transforming the everyday into something special, and how they venture out to make sense of their world and give it definition. Spiritual expression was embedded in this sense of ownership that they developed while exploring their inner lives.

Frederick and Mary Brussat's (1996) definition of spiritual literacy as 'the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our experiences' (1), offered an opening into bringing spiritual practices to the classroom. Recognising these 'signs' through an understanding of inner self and making thoughts public enhances the connecting experiences to the outer world. The expression of one's spirituality is through a deep awareness of personal identity, compassion and the authenticity of how this interconnects to others and the world (Palmer 1998). Spiritual literacy is about making meaning at a profound level through personal narrative and the teacher being able to listen and to read the texts of children's experiences. It is about providing these spaces for children to ask 'bigger' questions and enabling them to respond and reflect upon their learning.

The current approach to literacy is predominantly print-driven, with a focus on decoding as a dominant concern. Literacy is defined within a narrow traditional dominant paradigm where meaning-making often takes a secondary place. This linear approach is reflected in what can be determined as developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and consequently invariant in nature. It is important to make a distinction in the use of the term literacy here. It is not about conventional reading and writing practices, which can be described as 'educationally anemic' (Eisner 1998, 16). Multiple forms of literacy broaden and extend the traditional use of the term literacy to include any form where meaning is conveyed (Eisner 1998). The New London Group (1996) re-conceptualised and transformed the traditional concept of literacy to embrace a 'multiplicity of discourses' (61). I propose that spiritual literacy can be situated within this pedagogy of thought.

The signs of experience by children can be conceptualised in several ways: as identity texts revealed through talk or images, drawn or painted, and how these different modes interrelate to and with each other. Each child has his or her own unique signature that provides teachers with a socially constructed lens of understanding, but also enables reflection and potential for transforming educational practices (Hay and Nye 2006). Reading these signs is a process embedded in an act of understanding the inner life that we all possess. The concept of external and inner speech

connects to Bakhtin's (1986) insights into 'the actualizing of consciousness' (110), which he viewed as dialogic in nature and at the core of human thought. The transformative quality is the ability to draw from this well of wisdom and meaning, conceptualising these internal forces and allowing them to become visible in meaningful ways. 'Spiritual literacy enables us to define our place at a local, global and universal level' (Binder 2005, 138). If educators allow spiritual literacy to emerge, children can 'recognize these signs, explore them through the inner self and connect the experiences to the outer world' (Binder 1998, 41).

Connecting the classroom space to natural world experiences, such as the trip to the conservation area described earlier, nurtures spiritual literacy. Louv (2008), in *Last child in the woods*, talks about what he calls 'de-natured childhood' (31) and our responsibility to 're-nature' (53) children. He describes the critical need for returning experiences within the natural world to understand the realities of our place in it. Louv affirms that 'children need nature for the healthy development of their senses, and therefore for learning and creativity' (55) and that there is a spiritual essential in nature for young children. The natural world allows the physical self and the understanding of the inner self to connect through the sensual experiences of being in and with the environment and opening the spaces for awe and wonder about the everyday.

In the present public educational system in Ontario, Canada, rarely, if at all, is the spirituality of the child discussed. I believe, however, that it is critical to view the environment of the classroom as an extension of the child's personal world. Within the classroom community, the complex identities of children come together, wanting to have their voices heard. The children's stories become an essential lens to see the world, not only through their eyes, but through the unique spirituality they bring to the learning environment. Often referred to as personal worldviews, I often call these stories personal cosmologies – the innate wisdom that emerges from spiritual literacy.

Spiritual literacy practices

Classroom rituals

Palmer (1993) discusses three major characteristics of an authentic learning space: openings, boundaries and an air of hospitality. Openings are the moments where the teacher can provide stillness. Boundaries are the external structures in the setting of the classroom, the quality of the environment. It is creating a learning space that defines and embraces risk-taking and trust. Boundaries are a way that teachers can provide openness with care and firmness. 'Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care' (73). This is the honouring of individual and group voices.

Providing meaningful classroom rituals that embody these characteristics enables young children to form bonds, bridge interpersonal and intrapersonal issues and co-create an environment of respect. Fostering spiritual literacy through ongoing rituals provides spaces for children to engage in meaningful learning. Emerging from this interweaving of Palmer's authentic learning characteristics with classroom rituals, three themes became evident: stories of experience, mindful spaces and relationships.

Stories of experience

In my teaching experience, meditative practice through visualisation was one of the most significant methods in developing and nurturing spiritual literacy in children. By

allowing children the openings to get in touch with themselves through moments of stillness, entering a place where they could explore their inner selves, integrate mind and body and articulate their thoughts to others, I found a door was opened that allowed children to make meaning in a unique way.

Visualisation sessions were a weekly ritual. Each time more and more children revealed inner stories through the discussions. As an alternative to discussion, the children began to draw and write in journals. I found the magic and meaning that arose orally unfolded in their pictorial representations and writing. Each child had a personal and unique style of depicting images in pictures that explored imaginary worlds, yet drew on their inner landscape. Their stories of experience were reflected in their talk, image and text.

The visualisation sessions were taken from the work of Maureen Garth (1991, 1994). She provided a powerful image of a worry tree as a way for children to enter imagining through meditation. The children put anything that bothered them on this tree. In the journals each child personalised their tree and what it represented to them. This tree became a symbol of significance for many of the children, as they used the image outside of the weekly sessions to help them deal with social interactions and issues. As one child aptly said, 'I used the worry tree at recess. I put my friend on the worry tree so I wouldn't get into a fight with him.'

Though the dialogue that followed the sessions was important, not everyone spoke. The journals provided the space and time for everyone to express their voice, privately or publicly. Sanders (1994) states that 'stories spring from emotional roots that grow as large underground as the stories we hear above. Every time a child rattles one off, he taps deep into those emotional roots, for the stories get told from the inner senses out' (46).

The following story is an interpretation of one session:

Quiet music was playing. The children sat in a circle, eyes closed. On this day the journey took them to the land of the Rainbow People. The intensity of the faces, body movement and smiles showed an internalisation of the story. After the session, the children went to a table with their journals. They began to draw, to create. Music filled the air. A variety of images emerged on the pages. One child depicted the land of the Rainbow People and was very clear in his story. The Rainbow People lived on top of a rainbow and were depicted in an array of bright colours. This child always put a star in his journal drawings, symbolising the star at the beginning of the visualisation sessions. It was a happy drawing, reflecting this child's sense of inner-self. All his drawings had a sense of joy and peace to them. He writes: 'This is my rainbow and my star and my worry tree and the rainbow people. They are nice. And they are different. And they are my friends now. But they has no hair because they are the rainbow people' (see Figure 1).

Here we observe a sense of self-confidence and comfort in this child. We get a sense of his imaginative capacity, how he sees his place in the world and in the possibility of his conception of community (Greene 1995). This example reflects so many similar illustrations I have observed of joyful experiences.

The next example of spiritual literacy provides an opportunity for observing the depth and abstraction young children are capable of. M¹ always put stars in his journal drawings. He was inspired by the concept of God, angels and heaven. He frequently used these icons when expressing himself in his journal. In this particular drawing (see Figure 2), he named the stars after his classmates and a family member and had put me in the picture as well. There was a powerful imaginative quality to this work with



Figure 1. The Rainbow People.

this interconnection of the stars to those he viewed important in his life. While it has been my experience that children of this age frequently place their friends or family members names in their pictures, the depth of his images and the visual metaphor of the stars as people of significance moved the work into an abstract realm. There were two house-like structures at the bottom of the picture with a bridge joining them. One house was the home and the other structure was the school. The symbolic meaning in this drawing was quite profound. The images were ethereal. M had integrated his home world with his school world.

These examples further extend an understanding of spiritual literacy. Through providing the ritual of inner expression through visualisation, non-judgmental

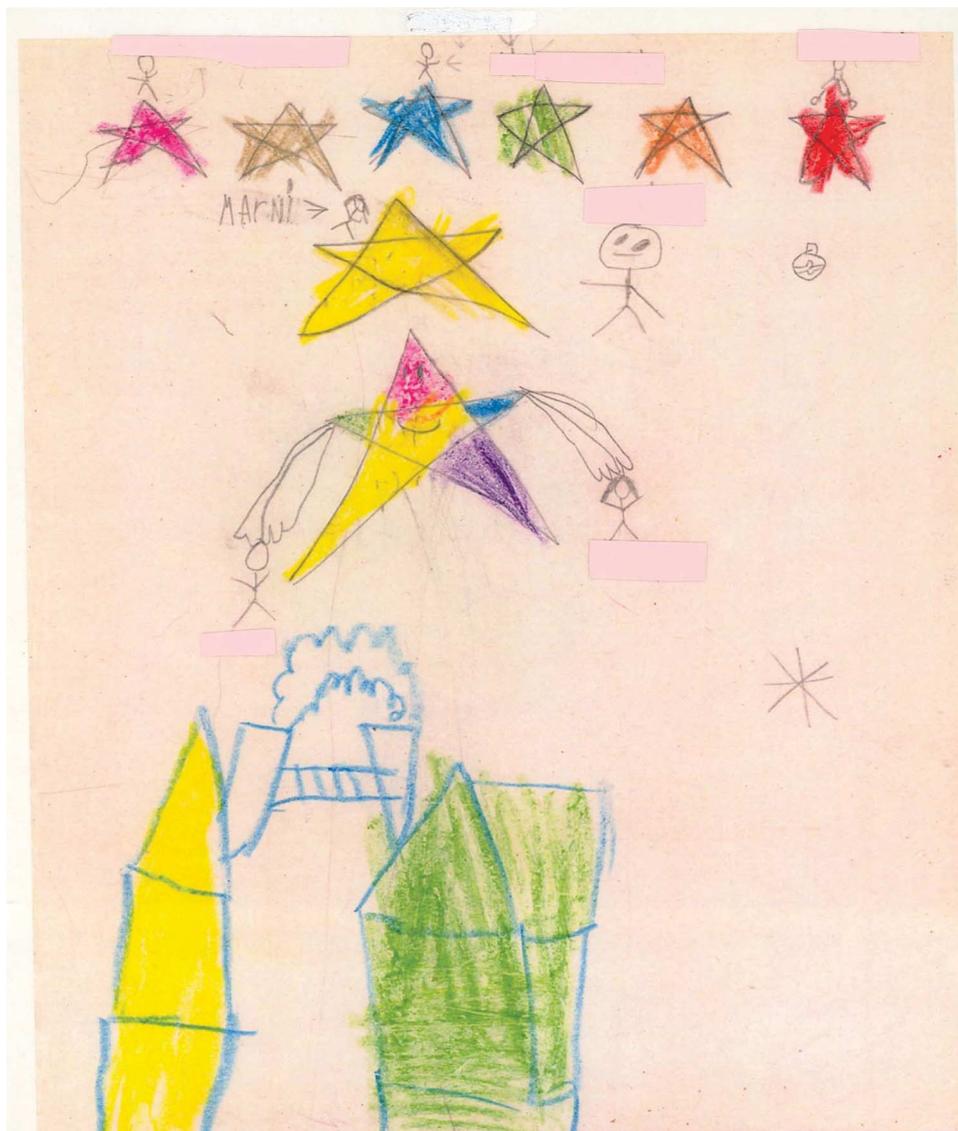


Figure 2. World of Home and School.

boundaries and moments of stillness, with the accompanying discussions and journal-writing activities, these children navigated in and out of each other's personal domains and negotiated the lived space through a universal relationality that embraced their everyday experiences in meaningful ways. When these children came to school, they brought with them many cultural and linguistic frameworks. While personal religious beliefs and practices were honoured, the visualisation sessions drew upon issues of personal significance, often moving between the imaginary and the real. This is supported by Lantieri's (2001) reinforcement of the importance of nurturing the spiritual without necessarily adhering to a particular religion.

The meditative ritual enabled the children to venture outside of external spiritual notions and experience big questions and issues. Hart (2003) talks about children as 'natural philosophers' (91) who explore their sense of wonder and natural curiosity about big things. It is that capacity to see the extraordinary in everyday life. 'Meaningful learning often begins in wonder' (Van Manen 2001, 19).

In classrooms children are frequently silenced, unable to ask questions of significance, particularly about spiritual issues. Children need the spaces in their learning environments to search for meaning and purpose (Kessler 2005). Nurturing spiritual literacy allows for 'an awareness that there is something other, something greater than the course of everyday events' (Hay and Nye 2006, 60).

Mindful spaces

Through playing in, through and with their worlds, children begin to develop a wisdom that emerges from the inside out. If allowed to make their thoughts public, children will have opportunities to articulate their relational understanding of self and become one with the world around them. Children do make integral associations to meaningful experiences and reflect on them if educators present the opportunities to do so. Indeed, it is critical to provide these openings or still spaces.

Miller (2006) articulates the necessity for mindfulness practices in education and the importance of being fully present. He stresses the importance of focusing on one thing at a time. In this 24/7 world of multitasking, I have experienced that children appear to be having more difficulty attending for longer periods of time and in meaningful ways. Through visualisation, the children were given permission to enter into mindful practice. I, as the teacher, was given permission to be fully present with this ritual. This approach became embedded in other areas of learning in the classroom.

The next story embodies what occurs when spiritual literacy emerges through self-directed play experiences. It has been shown (Elkind 2007; Paley 2005) that play is how young children construct, deconstruct and co-construct their world. Play is the way they enter into and engage in real and imaginary enactments of what is seen around them. Play enables children to articulate and experiment with the lived world. They are not passive receptacles (Freire 1970). This constructivist approach to learning and understanding allows children to become active contributors to their learning. Gordon (2008) explains the significance between constructivism and connectedness. It is through interaction with the world that children can discover ways to transform understanding. Play is one way that children are allowed to manipulate and sculpt this connection. It is an example of how spiritual literacy can emerge, making thought public (Vygotsky 1978).

One afternoon, the children were building structures during a Math/Science/Investigation session.² They were able to choose their building materials and use additional props if desired. The children built in pairs. V (boy) and S (girl) called me (T) over to see their structure (see Figure 3). They had created a very powerful image. Looking down on their construction, I could see coloured sticks forming a platform that framed their representation. Strewn across this platform were small plastic people in different colours lying in various positions. Each person had been placed thoughtfully and the arrangement showed a sense of purpose. Two of the structures had not been dismantled, one in particular had a person lying on top of a building and one hanging out from its side. What had originally intended to be just a building session had evolved into so much more.



Figure 3. The War.

What follows is the discussion I had with these two children:³

- S: We build a war where everyone dies and some of the house get knocked down by bombs. And some of the people get knocked down by bombs too.
- V: Some of the people didn't die, but most of them did. Some stepped on mines. [I asked if he knew what mines were]
- V: I heard someone talking about it. I think it was my brother talking about army camp. Someone went to get help and they didn't make it and some of them did get help. And then some of the people risked their lives for other people.

- T: What does it mean to risk your life for theirs?
V: It means to save other people.
S: Some of the people helped the little kids and some of the big kids and adults.
T: Where is this war?
S: Africa. Because you were talking about fighting in Africa a long time ago.

This related to a discussion about images of war the children were seeing on TV. As a class we talked about wars occurring in different countries at different times. We also had discussed why people fought:

- V: Germany. You talked about World War I and II. This was discussed on Remembrance Day.
T: Is this war coming from a particular place?
V: Vietnamese. One of the children talked about his uncle in Vietnam and being in the war.
T: There is nothing we discussed that could give you an image like this. Where did this come from?
S: I sawed it on TV. I didn't like what war was doing. I thought when we had building, I could build it.
T: What does it do to build it?
S: It tells me like what war is like right now. People are dying and stuff.
T: How does building it make you feel? Does it help to build it?
Both: No!
S: It just tells us what is happening in the world.
V: If you asked me, when I see it on TV, I don't like what they are showing us and I thought of building it.
T: How did you decide to build this?
S: We talked it out. We had a problem and solved it. We couldn't decide what to build. We talked and talked and talked.
V: You thought of it S. But if you ask me, it is really bad.
T: What can we do about it?
S: We can pray.
V: We could tell how we feel to everybody.
T: Does it scare you to see it on TV?
Both: It scares me!
S: If it was my family, I would be really sad and I would be crying.
V: And if it was my family, I would be crying for a very, very, very, very long time.

This was a powerful moment. Two children disclosed their feelings about an issue of concern. Instead of drawing or painting their concern, they chose to build it. Their storytelling revealed an honest and realistic depiction of a problem. Stories like these are waiting to come out of all children.

This narrative illustrates the significance in allowing children to question and articulate their world view and reinforces the significance of what Hart (2004) calls the 'children's world-presence, their way of being in the world; not about a worldview that is imposed upon them' (39). Here lies the authenticity of spiritual literacy practice and understanding. The teacher is not imposing his/her interpretation on the experience. The children are empowered through their creation and narrative to express their vision of understanding. Noddings (2004) argues that such experiences are crucial for children to develop critical thinking and an understanding of self and the world around them. These children revealed the texts of their experiences through a process of co-creating, negotiation and dialogue.

Also essential to this experience was the allowance for spontaneity in the classroom. This enabled children to move in a different direction, honouring their learning

process – one that is shaped by the active engagement of a community of learners as they move in and out of each other’s spaces. Most significant were the *mindful spaces* the children had stepped into, where they were present in the moment, in an activity wholeheartedly. Their thoughts and voices were respected, not only by each other but also by the teacher. My classroom was not an institutional box where children were merely receptacles of skills. Fostering the children’s unique signatures in the classroom reflected my strong concern to build a community where there was reciprocity of being and sharing.

Giving children time to cultivate and engage in deep meaning-making is essential for development and learning. Personal cosmologies can emerge when everyone has a voice in this larger story. To create is to transform, and the children’s building activity embodied that. Accepting alternative perspectives and representational expressions through the opening of spaces can lead to a continuous movement of reconnection to significant relational experiences and awareness in the classroom community (Ambrose 2005). Reconceptualising curriculum through a transformative conceptual frame focuses attention on the innate and spiritual potential of every child. In this way not just the children gain insight, but also the teacher.

So often when teachers deal with sensitive issues, they feel discomfort in navigating the discourse that evolves from enabling children to have voice in the classroom. Children have big ideas and questions waiting to be explored. In our world today, visual images of war are commonplace. Young children need the learning spaces that allow them to negotiate their experiences and understandings of uncomfortable issues, facilitated by educators who provide these openings while nurturing concepts of peace in the classroom (Lin 2006).

Relationships

Palmer’s (1993) three conditions for learning manifested in the classroom in many different ways. The concept of hospitality, in particular, emerged in a profound manner. The following story reflects this unique quality and is a powerful example of spiritual literacy:

D had been with me since kindergarten and, at the time of this story, was in Grade 2. He had experienced some intense emotional times. D had been having problems controlling his feelings, which often manifested in aggression and defiance. Usually he responded to me, but for reasons I was only beginning to understand, the connection had been broken. Consequently, I had to put limits and consequences on certain behaviours. Although I had discussed these issues, D’s anger had not diffused. D was a very special child with a cosmic understanding of the world unlike any I had seen before in one so young. He was continually surprising me with questions about the universe and his understanding of the world. These sophisticated aspects of his growth often conflicted with his emotional development.

The day before our weekly class visualisation session, I had met with D and his mother to discuss my concerns and develop ways to support him. After the visualisation session, D handed me his imagining journal without any reservations. It was something he wanted me to see. I must confess that at first I was quite taken aback. D felt safe to express his pain and to lash out at me, the one person he trusted at school. He wrote, ‘There was a war and me and T were fighting and T died and I didn’t care because she is the suckyist teacher.’ The picture that accompanied the writing initially had been a response to the visualisation session. I could see an outline of the world as

if viewed from space. D had scribbled over this initial drawing in black crayon. I went home thinking about what had transpired. D must have felt tremendous anger about the meeting from the previous day and wanted me to know. Most important was D's trust in me. D knew that he could show me how he felt through his drawing and writing. His journal provided a place where he could unconditionally express himself, with no repercussions. The context of his expression was powerful. D had read the signs in the texts of his experiences. The next day in class D found an opening to speak to me. We discussed his drawing and writing. D told me that he really didn't want me dead, but he was just sad and mad, although unable to say why. Years later, when he was in Grade 6, D's teacher called to share an interesting story. The class was telling stories about what they had learned from their primary grade teachers. D said, 'Ms. T. taught me self-control.' I believe that this child's progress and strength was a result of an environment that fostered spiritual literacy through the concept of hospitality.

Although this may be a disturbing story for some educators in the field, and may have been interpreted differently in terms of the child's behaviour and how the situation was addressed, I chose to respond differently. The journals were a place where the children could express themselves unconditionally, without judgment. Even though showing their pictorial interpretations or writings from the sessions was not a requirement, the children usually shared what they had done. If I wanted to maintain integrity in the learning environment and allow for authentic spaces for expression within boundaries of trust and hospitality, I had to accept what D had presented to me. At times there are places, as Palmer (1998) states, 'where the human soul does not want to go' (81).

There were obvious tensions and risks involved for D when he presented his drawing and writing to me. He was angry but unable to articulate his anger, or perhaps unsure whether he could say what he felt. He wanted and needed attention. In my interpretation, the non-judgmental learning environment allowed this child to stretch the classroom boundaries. This was essential to his spiritual literacy growth and a profound teaching and learning experience for me. In her explorations of spiritual intelligence, Sisk (2002) argues that such growth 'urges us to search for wholeness, a sense of community and sense of relationship to create an identity and to search for meaning; and out of this search for meaning will come a sense of empowerment' (210). Spiritual literacy can then emerge out of and embody this multilayered interconnection of mind, body and soul. The story of D illustrates this insightful reflection of both teacher and student reading the texts of their experiences.

Discussion

From my conceptual exploration, the three themes that emerged illustrated the implications for spiritual literacy practice. The first acknowledges the significance of how personal cosmologies are defined by stories of experience, visual or textual. Through self-understanding, voice and identity expression, children are empowered to explore and discuss bigger questions, enabling awe and wonder to enter into the classroom.

The second embraces the need for mindful spaces to allow for reading the texts of experience. Spiritual literacy learning environments need to be created to foster a life-centred approach through situating the children in experiences that offer such possibilities. The children's real world experiences, relational connections to others and interactions with alternative ways of expression allow for a process to unfold that respects these areas.

The third is the development of relationships between teacher and child. Based on Palmer's (1993) criteria for authentic learning spaces, trust, risk-taking and self-defined boundaries are crucial to nurturing the interconnectedness between teacher and learner. It is what Van Manen (2006) defines as 'pedagogy of thoughtfulness' (1).

It is important to consider how these three themes interconnect and are not to be seen in isolation. It is the interweaving of stories, relationships and spaces that creates the authenticity for spiritual literacy practices. As Robert Coles (1990) states:

The child's 'house has many mansions' – including a spiritual life that grows, changes, and responds constantly to the other lives that, in their sum, make up the individual we call by name and know by a story that is all his, all hers. (308)

Conclusion

Early childhood education is often too focused on mainstream conceptions of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). I argue that educators need to embrace also what I consider as spiritually appropriate practice (SAP) through fostering spiritual literacy. While other domains of development are important, including spirituality deepens growth at levels not often discussed or embraced in the classroom: children's interconnectedness to self, others and the world. Nurturing the core of children's inner landscapes provides the still spaces needed to connect to their experiences, the non-judgmental breadth to explore their feelings and the mindful presence to understand what is meaningful. The texts of children's experiences can only unfold if educators offer, as Iannone (1999) suggests, a spiritual curriculum 'where flexibility, creativity, newness, engagement, reflectiveness, and teacher and student stories of meaning are honoured. ... A spiritual curriculum needs to be a process where communication leads to communion, to union, and identity' (741).

Spiritual literacy is about transformation, changing not only classroom practice but shifting pedagogy at a philosophical level that enables teachers and children to co-enact change in the learning environment. The teaching and learning landscape is a place where time can stand still. Children and teacher move back in time to explore who they are in relation to the world. They move forward to shape what lies ahead. In the present, they interpret, connect and attend to the capacities of becoming one with their being. Lin (2006) advocates for the elimination of spiritual illiteracy. This enables students to open up to self-understanding. The transformation occurs when there is a relational understanding of inner wisdom to the outside world and to others.

The stories presented provide insight into the importance of spiritual literacy growth for young children. The children's footprints of meaning-making are revealed and the interpretations that build cohesion in their worlds, opening up multiple potential ways of knowing and being. The narratives exemplify a collaborative learning environment where teacher and learners interdependently (re)define inner and outer relationships.

Attending to the spiritual literacy needs of children is a transformative and empowering encounter that engages all participants in an experiential journey. Spirituality unfolds as children interpret phenomena of importance to them, allowing their personal cosmologies to emerge. This furthers a reconceptualising of young children's learning (Harris 2007). Spiritual literacy embodies the holistic lived world, reflecting authentic learning through interconnectedness and wholeness.

Notes

1. Initials are used to protect children's identity.
2. Math/science investigation is a hands-on and inquiry approach to learning that involves children building with a variety of materials. It is used to teach concepts of number, spatial relations and geometry for example. Children usually are required to build on their own and are given specific tasks to do once the building is completed (e.g. counting the number of blocks by 1s, 2s etc.) looking at the height of the construction and the problems solved during building. I preferred letting children build in pairs as it promoted collaboration in problem-solving and decision-making. Added props could be smaller items such as coloured popsicle sticks, plastic bears, dinosaurs and people.
3. The transcribed dialogue has not been changed to allow the authenticity of the children's voices to be heard.

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