

# Supporting the Spiritual Development of Young Children

by Ruth A. Wilson and Deborah L. Schein

Few would argue that early childhood education is about promoting the development of the whole child — that is, meeting the needs of the young child in all the developmental domains (usually considered to be the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). At times,



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aesthetic and language development are included, as well. While these developmental domains may seem comprehensive in addressing all the major areas of child development, one area not included is that of spiritual development.

There are many reasons for this. Spiritual development is not as well understood or researched as other areas of child development (Hyde, 2008). Additionally, there is a common misconception that fostering spiritual development involves teaching about religion and thus has no place outside of religious institutions. Another reason for this disconnect is that development and practice are not really as connected as one would hope.

Theorists have been promoting a spiritual lens on education for centuries. Montessori speaks of the spiritual embryo as being present at birth in all children, and Steiner uses language such as “spirit-man, life-spirit, and spirit-self” to describe human stages of development (Steiner, 1910/2008, p. 41). Somewhere between theory and interpretation and practice, visions of spiritual development have been lost. This article will address ways in which spiritual development can be supported

by today's parents and early childhood educators as a means of developing the whole child.

## Current Thoughts about Spiritual Development

Recent studies indicate that religion and spirituality can be studied and addressed separately and that spiritual development can be nurtured apart from religious doctrines and practices (Zinnbauer, in Seidlitz, Abernethy, Duberstein, Evinger, Chang, & Lewis, 2002). With this in mind, some educators and community leaders are now suggesting that we make spirituality an intentional part of what we do in education — from early childhood through college (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). Attention to spirituality, they suggest, will not only promote the holistic development of students, but may also help address some of the serious problems facing education and society today, including alienation of many youth, increasing violence in our schools and communities, drug and alcohol abuse, and severe environmental threats (Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Mische, 2006; Wilson, 2010). An interest in listening to the voice of the child (often associated with the rights of the child) and a desire to better under-

stand the world of the child are added incentives for attending to the spiritual development of the child (Hyde, 2008). An emphasis on spiritual development may also help strengthen moral and character development (Schein, 2010).

So how might spirituality be defined when used in a broad educational sense? Perhaps linking the terms 'spirit' and 'spirituality' may be helpful in developing an understanding of how spirituality can become a part of our educational programs. We already use the term 'spirit' in an early childhood education context when we say that education should be about developing the whole child — body, mind, and spirit (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). Spirit in this sense refers to the animating principle of our being, the non-material part of what it means to be human (Wilson, 2010). The Latin word for spirit is *spiritus* meaning 'breath of life,' which has also been defined as soul. Thinking of spirit as 'breath of life' meaningfully connects body, mind, and spirit together (Jenkins, Wikoff, Amankwaa, & Trent, 2009).

'Holistic' is another term we sometimes use in reference to human activities focusing on the integration of body, mind, and spirit. We have holistic health, holistic architecture, holistic pregnancy and childbirth, holistic vacations, and holistic education. 'Holistic' — when used in these contexts — often includes the concept of connections between the physical and nonphysical, between scientific and intuitive ways of knowing, between individual and community, and between humans and the rest of the natural world. Reflecting on how 'holistic' is used in these different contexts — including education — it becomes clear that spiritual concepts are already included, although they may not always be articulated as such.

## Supporting the Spiritual Development of Children

An article in *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* presents "everyday spirituality" as an aspect of the holistic curriculum in action (Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007). The authors use the term 'everyday spirituality' to suggest that everyday life and typical pedagogical practices of early childhood settings can be used to support the spiritual development of young children. The authors work from the premise that "ordinary routines and rituals begin to take on a different feeling when they are imbued with the spiritual" (p. 348).

'Everyday spirituality' in an educational context is linked to wisdom and compassion and to experiences of wonder and joy. It is also linked to notions of well being and belonging. 'Everyday spirituality' is often expressed and supported through relationships. Some of the ordinary routines and practices involving relationships, which can be used to support the spiritual development of children, include: 1) welcoming children and families, 2) listening, and 3) showing caring behaviors. The following discussion of these three routines and practices is built upon and extended from the work of Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007).

**Welcoming environments.** One of the most important spiritual 'lessons' we can teach young children is that they are valued and their presence is appreciated. An opportune time for conveying this message is when a child and family enter the classroom. A welcome imbued with spirituality is based on an "I-Thou" relationship — that is, a relationship where the teacher is fully present and meets the child and family with his or her total being. This meeting is based on genuine regard as the teacher warmly acknowledges each person who walks through the door.

An I-Thou relationship contrasts with an I-It relationship:

- With I-Thou, the relation is of subject-to-subject; with I-It, the relation is subject-to-object (Buber, 1996; Meyers, 1997).
- I-Thou is a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity; I-It is a relationship of separateness and detachment.
- An I-Thou relationship ensures that the inner person — the essence, if you will — is invited into the classroom and given space and voice to emerge and develop. This quality of acceptance is present in most early childhood programs defined as possessing quality.

Acknowledging the deep and essential characteristic of this everyday classroom interaction supports spiritual development. It is more than the act of welcoming itself that is important here, but rather the depth and meaning of the welcoming that actually meets the child and family.

A meaningful and sincere welcome can nurture a child's spiritually and awaken inside the child a desire to be welcoming in return; the will to do what is right; to feel safe enough to explore and share; to build more I-Thou relationships. It is important to know and label what is occurring here so that the act itself is valued for its purpose and goal.

Welcoming each child and family as unique and whole is no easy matter. Early childhood classrooms are busy, bustling places. Yet, the act and conditions of welcoming should not be minimized. Welcoming, as expressed by Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) "is a bridge between inside/outside and has the potential to affirm the sacred nature of meeting and recognition" (p. 348). It is also a way of establishing a spiritual milieu in one's classroom (Schwab, 1969).

The concept of milieu defines the tone, the relationships, the light, the order of the day, the interactions, and all that exists between and around the child as learning occurs (Schwab, 1969). Montessori would call this a “prepared environment.” A prepared environment that is welcoming reflects the child’s interests and culture; it “speaks the child’s language.” Teachers learn about the child’s interests and culture through observation, dialogue, and by creating relationships. The offerings of an environment can make the difference between the child feeling a sense of security and belonging or feeling alienated and emotionally unsafe. Welcoming environments support the spiritual life of children by putting them in touch with beauty, inviting them to enter a caring community, and deepening their sense of self.

A welcoming environment is equipped with materials that invite children to try things out, express their creativity, and demonstrate their competence. The materials are accessible to the children and carefully arranged to scaffold their learning. In a welcoming environment, “everything is in its place and seems to be waiting for the children to animate it” (Bone, Cullen, & Loveridge, 2007, p. 348).

A welcoming environment radiates warmth and generosity; it is hospitable, inviting to others, feels right, and makes each person feel good about themselves and others. Yet, modeling and creating a welcoming environment is but one way to support the child’s spiritual development. There are many opportunities in an early childhood classroom to demonstrate, encourage, and acknowledge spiritual qualities. Really listening — or deep listening — is another effective way to support spiritual development.

**Listening.** Most early childhood educators encourage listening behaviors in the classroom. They expect children to listen to directions, to stories read aloud, and

to other children as they share ideas and experiences. Teachers generally view listening as an effective way for children to learn basic concepts and to practice social etiquette. But listening and being listened to can also support spiritual development.

Listening, on the part of teachers, children, and families contributes to a calm environment, and being listened to helps children and families feel respected and welcomed. Being listened to also encourages deeper reflection and sharing on the part of everyone. When children realize that someone is really listening to what they have to say or how they are feeling, they may concentrate harder to make what they say authentic and meaningful. In a classroom that honors listening, children are also encouraged to speak and listen to each other. In such an environment, all individuals become teachers and learners — providing rich opportunity for individual growth and community.

This same type of deep listening can also be practiced by children in their developing relationship with the world of nature. Nature walks — where sounds of the natural world are heard — can have a profound effect on young children (Crain, 2001).

Practicing listening helps children appreciate both sounds and silence. Teachers can invite children to listen to silence. When introduced with reverence, collective silence can be a powerful experience. One idea teachers might try is inviting children to listen for the silence to move in. Learning to be still so that silence can be heard increases children’s ability to control their own body and emotions, to focus, and to connect to the world in a different way than experienced when moving around and making noise. Increasing one’s ability to listen nurtures spiritual development again by strengthening the I-Thou relationship. Children can hear their own breath

and heartbeat, they can sense their own spirit, and know themselves more deeply when listening to silence. When children know themselves, they are better able to develop relationships with others and the rest of the world. In a cyclic way, this process makes the child more welcoming.

**Showing caring behaviors.** The third practice identified by Bone, Cullen, and Loveridge (2007) as supporting the spiritual life of children is that of caring for others. Related spiritual qualities — for both children and adults — often include feeling regard for others, forgetting the self, and embracing a sense of oneness. Unfortunately, these qualities are often lacking in today’s society.

David Callahan (2004), in *The Cheating Culture: Why More Americans are Doing Wrong to Get Ahead*, presents a volume of research on people’s willingness to act selfishly to get ahead, even when their actions cause serious harm to others. Many of us can think of examples of this occurring all around us.

As so beautifully expressed by Dorothy Law Nolte (1998), “Young children learn what they live.” If children live with kindness and respect, they learn to be kind and respectful. If they live with compassion and love, they learn to be compassionate and loving. To learn caring, they need to live in a caring environment. Caring, in the early childhood classroom, is not a lesson but a way of being (Wilson, 2003). Yet, as the practice of caring for others isn’t something that tends to appear spontaneously (Berkowitch & Grych, 1998; Wilson, 2003), teachers would do well to intentionally foster caring behaviors in the classroom, hallways, and homes, beginning with a heartfelt welcoming and instilling in children and families that important lesson of listening. Teachers should make caring such an explicit part of what they do that there is no room for doubt in the minds of children and their families that

early childhood classrooms are places where caring really occurs.

## Spiritual Development for a Better World

Education cannot be truly holistic unless spiritual development is addressed and included. Teachers can use ordinary routines and practices to support young children's spiritual development. Following are a few specific ideas on how to do this:

- Begin by creating a welcoming, beautiful, inviting, and stimulating environment (milieu).
- Support this sense of welcoming with a refined ability to really listen to others.
- Encourage children to listen to their own breath, to the world of nature, to each other.
- Learn to truly acknowledge, respect, and care about the person who is standing in front of you.
- Then invite the children and their families to do the same.

The stakes are high. To change education, to better the world, and to create a more peaceful society, we need to take steps today. One important way to do this is to add spiritual development to what is being fostered and nurtured in early childhood classrooms. In many classrooms, practices that foster spiritual development have been present all along; now it is time for everyone — teachers, children, and families — to recognize it, give it language, and nurture it for what it is: an essential part of who we are.

Finally, for those educators who are concerned about standards and assessment, be assured that a focus on spiritual development using welcoming, listening,

and caring, does not negate, but rather enhances children's ability to meet standards and perform well on assessments. A focus on spiritual development will also make your classroom a richer place for learning and a more peaceful, pleasant place to be.

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