Research Note

Diverse Voices: Children's Perceptions of Spirituality

Kelsey Moore[1], Victoria Talwar[1], Sandra Bosacki[2], Jeeseon Park-Saltzman[3]

McGill University[1], Brock University[2], Ohio State University[3]

At an early age, children have clear ideas about the nature of the divine, the concept of faith, and the meaning of prayer, although these ideas change as they develop and mature (Coles, 1990; Fowler, 1981; Houskamp, Fisher, & Stuber, 2004). However, systematic research into the connections between spirituality and children's psychological development and well-being remain sparse (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2003), with most research focusing on adults and adolescents (French, Eisenberg, Vaughan, Purwono, & Suryanti, 2008). Furthermore, many studies have looked at religious practice and affiliation, which may not necessarily attend to the complexity and diversity of individual spiritual experience.

There is limited recognition of the diversity of religious and spiritual experience in educational research (Hill & Pargament, 2003). External measures of religious practice are particularly difficult to use effectively to understand children's spirituality because children often are not the decision-makers as to whether they attend religious functions (Barnes, Plotnikoff, Fox, & Pendleton, 2000). Thus the question about the role of spirituality in young children's educational development and social adjustment remains unanswered. This research project examined children's spiritual experiences across diverse faith orientations.

Method

Participants

Thirty-one participants (ages 7-11) from various religious and cultural backgrounds were interviewed on their conceptualization of spirituality (52% boys). Parents were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and to rate the level of religiosity of their children (e.g., very religious, somewhat religious, not at all religious). In total, 29% of parents rated their children as being very religious, 32% rated their children as being somewhat religious, and 39% rated their children as not being very religious at all. Furthermore, parents were asked to report their children's affiliated religion (see Table 1).

Interview and Procedure

A semistructured, open-ended interview was developed for the children and a demographic questionnaire for the parents. The main interview guide consisted of 11 thematic clusters with

Table 1

Demographic Information

Religion	Children's Religious Affiliation (%)
No Religion	26%
Roman Catholic	23%
Baha'i	16%
Hindu	6%
Evangelical Christian	6%
Jewish	6%
Armenian Apostolic	6%
United Christian	3%
Eastern Orthodox	3%
Lutheran	3%

potential probes. For example, one thematic grouping consisted of questions about children's perception of God. Questions such as "Tell me what you think about the word God" were used to prompt a narrative about children's thoughts about the nature of the divine. Although several thematic clusters were addressed in the semistructured interview, the child's personal narrative was strongly encouraged.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo software. Following open coding, each interview was read a second time and the codes were placed into thematic clusters. Given the emergent research design, themes were grounded in the data derived from the participants' responses. Thus how the themes are described and labeled uses the language found in the transcripts based on the participants' voices (Willig, 2007).

Findings

Preliminary results suggest that there are common themes regarding the role of spirituality in children's lives regardless of religious background. Prayer was the most commonly discussed theme across all children's narratives. Children frequently spoke about their rationale for praying, reporting that they prayed about problems (65%) that ranged from a death in the family to achieving a desirable outcome on a quiz. They also highlighted that a central purpose for prayer was to thank God (74%). Children who prayed in gratitude presented specific examples such as praying in gratitude for having a good day or being surrounded by a loving family. Thus although children report praying to God about various hardships and struggles, they also report finding value and purpose in praying in thanksgiving to God (see Table 2).

Another prevalent theme was God's ability to help both directly and indirectly as a result of prayer (74%). This theme encompassed three conceptualizations of help. Some children conceptualized God as an entity that had the transcendent ability of directly intervening in specific worldly situations (e.g., cure illness), whereas others suggested that God had the ability to provide them with the necessary tools to help them deal with or cope in a given situation (e.g.,

motivation to do well on a test). Further, some children proposed that God could not help them and suggested that they had to overcome life's challenges themselves (see Table 2).

Discussion

Gleaned from the children's voices, the present study's key themes suggest that children's thoughts and feelings about the nature of the divine, the concept of spirituality, and the purpose of prayer may help shape their perceptions of the meaning of life and aspired goals. Earlier research suggests that associations exist between children's and adults' experiences of religiosity and/or spirituality and positive mental health outcomes (Aalsma & Lapsley, 1999; Hill & Pargament, 2003; for a review see Regnerus, 2003). Thus if children feel as if they derive a sense of help or find purpose in spirituality, it is plausible that this may play a pivotal role in their social and emotional development and learning experiences.

The findings are preliminary and need to be interpreted as such. Future research needs to seek greater diversity in the recruitment of participants (e.g., Muslim, Jewish, Hindu). To best provide a realistic portrait of the Canadian population's faith orientations, the current research has a focus on recruiting participants from these specific communities. Because a primary goal of this research project is to explore the spiritual experiences of a religious, spiritual, and culturally diverse sample, recruiting participants with various beliefs and backgrounds is central to the study.

As the research in children's spirituality remains at an early stage, there is a lack of valid and reliable self-report measures assessing children's spirituality and religious experiences

Table 2
Themes of Children's Conceptions of Spirituality

Theme		Quotation
Purpose for Prayer	Praying about Problems	"Usually when you pray, as I said before, you either compliment or talk about your problems or talk about something that is wrong" (female, 9 years 6 months).
	Praying in Gratitude	"Yeah, sometimes if I had a good day I'll thank God for the day I had" (male, 11 years, 9 months).
God and Help	Direct Help from God	"My dad had a stroke and I went to the synagogue and I went on my knees and started praying and praying and praying and after my dad did survive. So I felt like God has helped me" (female, 11 years 4 months).
	Indirect Help from God	"He'll give us the supplies to make the change- our bad to good. If we do a bad thing He'll say: Here's a wrench, here are your hammer and nails, fix it" (male, 11 years 3 months).
	Independent from God	"I have to learn them by myself" (female, 11 years 4 months).

(Houskamp et al., 2004), and there is very limited recognition of the diversity of religious and spiritual experiences (Hill & Pargament, 2003). The themes derived from the interviews will help to create a contextually sensitive measure of children's spirituality, which could be used in future research to examine the relations between children's spiritual understandings and their social and emotional adjustment. The findings will assist in the development of innovative research tools and holistic educational strategies to promote children's spiritual development and provide impetus for future research on children's spirituality.

References

Aalsma, M., & Lapsley, D. (1999). Religiosity and adolescent narcissism: Implications counseling. *Counseling and Values, 44,* 17-29.

Barnes, L., Plotnikoff, G., Fox, K., & Pendleton, S. (2000). Spirituality, religion, and pediatrics: intersecting worlds of healing. *Pediatrics, 106*, 1–19.

Coles, R. (1990) *The spiritual life of children.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Fowler, J. (1981). *Stages of faith: the psychology of human development and the quest for meaning.* New York: HarperCollins.

French, D.C., Eisenberg, N., Vaughan, J., Purwono, U., & Suryanti, T.A. (2008). Religious involvement and the social competence and adjustment of Indonesian Muslim adolescents. *Developmental Psychology, 44,* 597–611**.**

Hill, P.C., & Pargament, K.I. (2003). Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of religion and spirituality: Implications for physical and mental health. *American Psychologist, 58,* 64–74.

Houskamp, B.M., Fisher, L.A., & Stuber, M.L. (2004). Spirituality in children and adolescents: Research findings and implications for clinicians and researchers. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics North America, 13*, 221-230.

Ream, G., & Savin-Williams, R. (2003). Religious development in adolescence. In G. Adams & M. Berzonsky (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of adolescence* (pp. 51-59). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Regnerus, M. (2003). Religion and positive adolescent outcomes: A review of research and theory. *Review of Religious Research, 44*, 394-413.

Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Press.

Kelsey Moore is a graduate student in the integrated Master's/PhD School/Applied Child Psychology program at McGill University.

Victoria Talwar is an associate professor in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology at McGill University. She specializes in the social emotional development of young children.

Sandra Bosacki is an associate professor in the Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education at Brock University and teaches courses in social-cognitive development and educational psychology.

Jeeseon Park-Saltzman is a senior staff therapist in the Counseling and Consultation Service at the Ohio State University.