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Nurturing the inner lives of children: an exploration of children's spirituality in three educational settings

Kori Nemme
University of Wollongong

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**Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children:
An Exploration of Children's Spirituality
in Three Educational Settings**

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the award of the degree**

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

**Kori Nemme
B. Ed (Hons 1)**

Faculty of Education

2008

CERTIFICATION

I, Kori Nemme, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Kori Nemme

18th August 2008

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ABSTRACT

Using the theoretical framework of Howard Gardner (1999) and David Hay and Rebecca Nye (2006) this qualitative inquiry aimed to identify and describe children's day-to-day experiences of spirituality in a range of social settings. In the context of this study spirituality was described in terms of meaning and connectedness and as a means to direct and give value to an individual's actions and beliefs.

Case studies were employed at the early childhood, primary and lower high school settings to gain an understanding of spirituality across childhood. The research focused upon the classroom context and other social situations, investigating both formal teaching of spirituality and children's informal interaction and exploration of spiritual matters. Data collection methods were primarily based upon observation but also included interviews, work samples and journal entries.

The research involved two phases of data collection. In the course of Phase one, each of the research sites were visited for one day per week across eight weeks, whereby data collection focused on the whole class situation and on all consenting participants. After the eight weeks, data continued to be collected on all participants yet focused more specifically on six case-study children selected purposely for more detailed study.

This thesis extends the classic work in the area by Gardner (1999) and Hay and Nye (2006) by illustrating what four spiritual sensing categories – *State of being: Awareness-sensing*, *State of being: Mystery-sensing*, *Concern for existential issues: Mystery-sensing*, and *Concern for existential issues: Values-sensing* – surfaced as in the day-to-day lives of children in secular educational settings and other social environments. What also emerged through the case studies was the existence of various factors that supported children's engagement with their spirituality. Differences were identified regarding the approach of families and the educational settings, however, the influences of the media, sports, peers, and religious teachings were also recognised. In particular, spirituality was addressed differently at the three educational settings in terms of the teacher's influence, school curriculum, and physical environment. Variance among these elements impacted the ways in which children could express their spirituality at school, thus affirming the important

contribution that public school education can make towards young people's spiritual development.

As the result of this investigation, this present study suggested several recommendations for nurturing children's spirituality at their home settings and in secular educational settings. These included: recognising children's spirituality as an integral aspect of the child's development; the provision of adequate time; demonstrating an open and approachable manner; awareness to spiritual dialogue and nonverbal communication; facilitating and addressing spiritual questions; creating belonging and community; encouraging self-reflection; demonstrating role-modeling behaviours and attitudes; attending to informal moments; awareness of expectation; creation of space and environment; and, supplying resources and experiences for engagement with the spiritual domain.

Several factors were also identified specific to facilitating spirituality at educational settings. These included, building teacher-student relationships to develop awareness of the context in which children are located and employing spirituality as both an entry point and subject matter to engage learning. The recommendations also indicated the need for further policy development based upon empirical work, integrating the understanding of children's spirituality into teacher training courses, and, future research which extends the spiritual framework of this inquiry to other populations of children.

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