

# **Valuing languages of spirituality: listening to two- and three-year olds in a day nursery in England**

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## **Introduction**

Given that the fostering of spiritual development is embedded in English education legislation, there is little research in the UK on children's spirituality and particularly that of very young children (David et al., 2003). This paper considers how a small, qualitative study in an urban day nursery explored two and three year olds' language(s) of spiritual expression. Multi-layered data collection methods for listening to young children were chosen including direct observation, participant and non-participant observation, audio recording and digital photographs. A hermeneutic approach underpinned the analysis and interpretation of the data. Findings reveal the multi-dimensional nature of young children's spiritual languages expressed in relational and imaginative spaces through creativity, reflection and embodied meaning making. Finally, this paper argues for a broader acknowledgement of spirituality in early childhood education and suggests ways practitioners might notice, recognize and document young children's spiritual languages.

## **Background**

The fostering of children's spirituality or spiritual development is embedded in British care and education legislation (see for instance The Education Reform Act (HMSO, 1988); The Children Act (HMSO, 1989). Curriculum frameworks for young children, despite being underpinned by the principle that children's learning and development is holistic, provide very little reference to spirituality

(Dowling, 2005). The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) provided no explicit exemplification of how spiritual development was to be promoted and it received no mention in the *Birth to Three Matters* framework (DfES, 2002).

Arguably, the original *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) framework (DCSF, 2008) provided more explicit acknowledgement of a spiritual element to children's development, recognising within one of the four underpinning guiding principles - 'a Unique Child' (DCSF, 2008, p.8) – a spiritual dimension to children's development, health and well-being. However, there remained no rationale for the inclusion of 'spiritual' as an aspect of babies and children's development, nor exemplification of the notion or meaning of 'spiritual well-being' within the EYFS (DCSF, 2008) guidance to practitioners.

### **Defining spirituality**

Empirical research into spirituality has seen more focused attention paid to understanding the spiritual experiences of children (e.g. Erricker et al., 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998; McCreery, 1996; Champagne, 2003; Hyde, 2005; Bone, 2008), but this is largely with children over four years and, excepting Bone, (2008), linked to a religious discourse, if only implicitly.

Spirituality has multiple meanings and is a difficult phenomenon to define (Eaude, 2005; Adams et al., 2008). In predominantly secular Western societies, such as that in the UK (Bruce, 2002), the imperative that practitioners promote children's spirituality is not necessarily a contentious goal, but the perceived connection with religion (Adams et al., 2008) and the traditional linking to Christian religion in English education policy creates

tensions, particularly those who are not religious believers. Some (e.g. Carr, 1995; 1999) argue that spirituality should only be located within religious traditions, but many today adopt a more inclusive definition (e.g. Hay and Nye, 1998; Adams et al., 2008; King, 2009), recognizing spirituality as fundamental to human experience. The definition underpinning this research (Goodliff, 2013a) then asserts that children are spiritual beings and that they therefore have a natural capacity for spirituality.

### **Theoretical framing of the study**

A socio-cultural perspective of the child and childhood underpins the study. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1978), the child is recognised as an active participant in the world; and childhood, rather than being a period of preparation for adulthood, is understood as socially constructed and contextualized according to the historical and cultural environment (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Vygotsky asserts that children use everyday cultural tools to mediate their learning, and language, spoken and unspoken, holds the key to transforming their meaning making. Children exercise their own individual agency in varied ways to initiate meaning making through observation and active participation with others, both adults and children (Rogoff, 2003).

As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Goodliff, 2013b), the Reggio Emilia philosophy and pedagogy (Rinaldi, 2005) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory provided helpful theoretical frameworks for exploring how young children express spirituality. The Reggio approach (Rinaldi, 2005) acknowledges the rich potential of each child. A distinguishing metaphor of the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, based on the child as a social being, is that of

relationships and listening. The construct of the 'rich child, an active subject with rights and extraordinary potential and born with a hundred languages' (Rinaldi, 2005, p.17) supports the argument of this paper that spirituality can be meaningfully expressed by young children in different 'languages'.

The holistic approach to children's development of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory emphasizes the importance of the relationships and interactions that children encounter within each environment they inhabit as they grow up. Whilst children are directly and indirectly influenced by the dominant values and beliefs in each environment (Penn, 2005), so the children themselves also bring influence from their personal experiences.

### **Research design and methodology**

The data discussed in this paper comes from a small-scale, ethnographic case study. Ethnographic approaches aim to capture the expressions of children's real life experiences, in this case within the day nursery, in ways that exemplify the complexity of context, feelings and interactions. The case study day nursery, located in a suburban community in central England, is situated in a mobile classroom on a primary school site. The nursery, as a secular setting, has no affiliation to a faith community and neither the Nursery Manager, nor any of the practitioners, acknowledged any personal religious beliefs, but all expressed an interest in spirituality. The twenty children participating in the research overall were all aged between two and four years. Five were aged two and fifteen aged three years.

In order to listen to the multiple ways two and three year old children communicate about their lives, a multi-modal approach (e.g. Clark and Moss,

2001; Clark, 2005) to data collection was used. Data in the form of field notes, observations, audio recordings of children's conversations and spontaneous expressions – often collected simultaneously - digital photographs (taken by the researcher and the children) and one day's filmed material, provided the core data for analysis. Data were collected over a period of nine weeks. On each visit I spent 4-6 hours in the nursery (Goodliff, 2013b).

### *Ethics*

Informed consent was gained from the children, their parents and from nursery staff, with the right to withdraw, for any or no reason, at any time. The children's keyworkers were identified as adult gatekeepers of the children's ongoing consent (Flewitt, 2005). The names of all participants were changed. The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (BERA, 2004<sup>1</sup>) were adhered to and approval gained from the Open University Ethics Committee.

### **Analysis**

Influenced by Reifel's (2007) approach to interpreting young children's play, and based on the work of Gadamer (2000), a hermeneutic approach was adopted to interpret the data. Four broad dimensions and behaviours related to meanings of children's spirituality – *relational*, *reflective*, *transcendent* and *creative* – were identified (Goodliff, 2013b). These four interrelated, and non-hierarchical, dimensions reflect researcher's pre-understanding and were used as an initial lens for analysis of the data.

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant at time; since updated BERA (2011)

The process of text analysis involved first creating narrative texts – vignettes of the children’s everyday actions and interactions – drawn from the different forms of data. Over fifty narrative texts were generated. To select specific texts for analysis the focus was the relation of each text to the research question, ‘*how do two and three year old children express spirituality?*’

To illustrate the hermeneutic conversation then undertaken with each of the narrative texts, two texts are presented. These episodes of play and interaction include reflection and interpretive dialogue; a dialogue between the researcher and the context of listening to gesture, word, relationship and embodied expression of emotions through which expression of spirituality might be mediated.

*Rachel*

*Context:* On several occasions episodes were observed and recorded when children’s key-workers interacted with children to comment or recall together a recent family event. In the following observed and recorded exchange between Sandra (key-worker) and Rachel (3 years 2 months), reflections on the context, ethos and potential spiritual meaning are included.

<b>Week 5: 16<sup>th</sup> June 8.50-8.55 a.m - transcription of audio recording and field notes</b>	
<b><i>Transcription of recording</i></b>	<b><i>Field notes, reflection and interpretation</i></b>
<p><b>Rachel</b> calls out ‘I haven’t done my bottle yet... whoopsi Daisy!..’</p> <p>She moves to take one. ‘I’ve chosen a pink bottle!’</p> <p><b>Sandra:</b> ‘like Annie?’</p>	<p><i>Sandra had been talking with Rachel’s parent/carer... she extends a conversation from a knowledge of change in who is sleeping where in Rachel’s home;</i></p>

<p><b>Rachel:</b> 'Yes' ...</p> <p><b>Sandra</b> continues in conversation – 'who's sleeping in your pink bedroom Rachel?'</p> <p><b>Rachel:</b> 'Louisa! – she came on an aeroplane...!'</p> <p><b>Sandra</b> explains to me that Louisa is a German exchange student.</p> <p><b>Rachel</b> sits by role play area sees me and smiles; sings to herself whilst holding a book;</p>	<p><i>Warm and friendly exchange – secure... a connecting or meeting place between home and nursery (2 layers of her environments); Rachel is known.</i></p>
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### *Interpretive reading*

In this *relational* episode I reflect on how the adult (through her engagement with Rachel's parent/carer at a time unobserved by me) creates what I have called 'a connecting space' between Rachel's home context and her lived experience in the nursery. This space signifies a sense of connectedness and awareness of personal involvement with others, foundational to the development of belonging to a community where spirituality might be expressed and nurtured through relationships. The exchange between Rachel and Sandra reflects tenderness: the memories of family that Sandra engenders embody the warmth of being known and belonging to a community. These connections can also represent the bi-directional influences in meaning making as the children's different environments – home and nursery – intersect at different moments.

### *Esther*

**Context:** In the following extract from the transcription of an extended filmed sequence, Esther (2 yrs 3 months) demonstrates an expression of self-delight linked to a particular achievement. Esther has only recently started attending the nursery for three sessions a week.

Esther (2) and Christopher (2) are playing outdoors with seven children (6 boys/1 girl, aged 4-7 yrs) attending after school club; all free to choose any activity: Ride on cars/bikes; sand tray; water tray; ‘insects’ tray; two small climbing frames with slides. Two adults – Sharon (S) and J are supervising. The camera follows Esther as a silent observer.

<b>Week 6: 24 June 2009 - Extract from filmed sequence;</b>		
<b><i>Timing</i></b>	<b><i>Transcript of observed film sequence</i></b>	<b><i>Reflection and interpretation</i></b>
14:36.40:06- 14:37.24:22	E steers the car away, towards the climbing frame/slide - avoiding a bike; an older boy in another car reverses and pushes E’s car backwards – leans to shut the door. E goes to climb out of the car – seems to change mind; talking to self (inaudible). E drives over to paint easels and gets out.	One of the adults is near the easels where E parks. S (adult) is seen on the ramp from nursery to outdoor area.  <i>I reflect on Esther’s agency – her evident competence and sense of purpose in steering the car and deciding what to do. Her self-vocalisation seems to help her decide what next to do.</i>
14:37.24:22- 14:37.52:23	E walks over to the nearest slide and walks up the slide (not steps) holding the sides. When she reaches the top and stands in the tower she jumps up and down and calls out ‘hey, hey’ excitedly. No-one sees her or	<i>Esther is clearly very excited; her ‘Hey, Hey!’ is very audible on the soundtrack.</i>  <i>She seems ‘chuffed’ with her action – I reflect on the risk she has taken; is this the first time she has attempted to walk up the slope of the slide?</i>



	comments.	<i>I reflect that she expresses what I describe as an uninhibited delight in being. Is this also a transcendent moment for her?</i>
14:37.58:16 14:38.35:15	From the top of the slide she watches a boy on the see-saw. E slides down the slide and goes over to the other (double) slide. She goes to the bottom and then turns back – looks at boy on see-saw and again approaches and repeats the earlier action; she climbs up the slope of the slide. Jumps up and down again ‘ooh! Oooh!’ She stands in the ‘tower’ of the slide looking out and then turns to face the top of slide. Calls out again ‘ooh’ (indistinct).	<i>Again, Esther seems to be reflecting on her own achievement; look at me; I did this – on my own... in jumping up and down it seems to make things more meaningful a visible representation of recognition of being ‘chuffed’ with one’s own ability.</i>  <i>I reflect that her actions – a little dance - somehow capture the creativity of that moment for her. Her delight in being...</i>  <i>No-one notices</i>

### Interpretive reading

No adult responds or acknowledges Esther’s own vocalized self-achievement or enjoyment of the moment; this episode of ‘chuffedness’ does not have the same sense of a shared moment observed on another occasion. Only the camera witnesses Esther’s achievement as she jumps up and down at the top of the slide; observing a moment of ‘here I am, I recognise that what I’ve just done is significant for me’, yet her understanding and self-knowledge is evident. I situated this as predominantly *reflective* – linked to Esther’s understanding and meaning making of who she is, her identity. However it seemed also to be a *transcendent* moment where she experiences an inner

connection perhaps to what she might achieve on another day, something beyond her present self. The intentionality of her climbing, jumping and moving - as Esther's success with climbing up the slide (not by steps!) is evidently a special moment for her of self-recognition – perhaps reflects pride in her motor skills. Although not acknowledged perhaps this might be a *relational* moment because it links to an earlier attempt at climbing the slide when in the company of her family. Her little dance at the top of the slide is also *creative* representing an embodied expression of feelings that might also mediate the spiritual. I wonder if it is likely Esther remembers that at home such achievement would have been admired and acknowledged. 'Well done! You did it...!' perhaps would have been said.

## **Findings**

A major finding of this study exploring expressions of spirituality by two and three year olds, is that the language of spirituality, far from being dominated by the often-cited elements of 'awe and wonder' is actually more everyday. Secondly, it is multi-dimensional - the dimensions of spiritual expression/experience present are not discrete, or isolated from one another. For example, in episodes identified predominantly as *reflective*, dimensions of spirituality linked to relationship, creativity and transcendence are also 'heard'; and for episodes identified primarily as *creative*, elements of spirituality linked to reflection and relationship are also expressed. Indeed, the most commonly present expression (evident in each of the selected texts) is spirituality linked to relationship.

Three spaces (meta-environments) were identified as being where dimensions of spirituality are mediated: friendship/relational spaces; imaginative narrative spaces and solitary imaginative spaces. Within these spaces three inter-related, dominant languages of spirituality: **relationships**, **creativity** and **reflection** are situated, shot through with occasional, fleeting **transcendence**.

### **Implications for practice**

The revised EYFS guidance material (Early Education, 2012) omits the acknowledgement of a spiritual dimension to children's development and well-being included in the original framework (DCSF, 2008). The emphasis in the revised EYFS (DfE, 2012) is on 'school readiness' rather than allowing the youngest members of society to follow an unhurried early childhood (Moyle, 2012). Arguably, an 'unhurried' approach creates more spaces for the 'hundred languages' (Rinaldi, 2005) of childhood to be heard.

As acknowledged earlier, the traditional understanding of spirituality as synonymous with religion, means that words such as *spiritual* often cause embarrassment when introduced to discussion. An important implication of this study therefore is to offer practical ways practitioners might attend to the potential of spirituality in young children separate to any association with religious belief. Based on findings from this study, the following suggestions are intended to support a broader situating of spirituality in early childhood education and to enable practitioners to notice moments when young children might be using languages of spirituality.

1. Practitioners allow imaginative play to voice the child's spirituality, and to work with the perspective that young children create imaginative narrative spaces where dimensions of the spiritual may be recognised.
2. As practitioners recognise significant relationships that children develop, the various dimensions of spirituality as relationality may also be identified and fostered in the present moment, the every day life of the child.
3. Practitioners notice those moments when young children create a space of inner reflection (perhaps in a day dream or silence), or the making of meaning for personal identity; and allow children to process them; to recognise rather than intervene, when perhaps such moments can be snatched away from the child, diminishing spirituality.

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