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1. SITUATING CHILDREN IN THE DISCOURSE OF SPIRITUALITY

INTRODUCTION

How is it possible that I have an undergraduate degree in Child Development and am completing my final course for a Masters in Education in Developmental Psychology and I have only just been introduced to the validity of the concept of ‘other ways of knowing’? ‘Other ways of knowing’ explore alternative, non-scientific ways of interpreting and understanding reality. Western scientific models of knowledge production rely almost exclusively on linear theories and empirical evidence that place logical reasoning as the definitive source of knowing. Spiritual ways of knowing rely on intuition and wonder, aspects that Western scientific models discount as taboo. My interest in writing about children’s spirituality has arisen from the startling realization that my current knowledge of child development is dangerously limited. Until now I have been led down a singular path in my education. Without an appreciation for other ways of knowing, my understanding of spirituality has been restricted. I believe that spirituality lies at the core of our humanity and is a gateway to knowledge, not the obstruction that I’ve been taught.

Imagine how different our lives might be if we approached each day with an appreciation of ourselves as spiritual beings. Placing spirituality at the centre of our lives opens a realm of possibility that leads to our deepest self. Everyone is spiritual; however accessing this facet of our lives can be challenging if we are taught as children to disregard our connection with spirit. Often, the innate spiritual nature of children is disregarded because children are often perceived as immature and selfish. Their ability to squeal in delight at the sight of something new or twirl around in circles just to watch the world go by is viewed as frivolous and juvenile rather than as an uninhibited expression of their innate spirituality. A child’s sense of self is the source and origin of his or her spirituality. The experiences and relationships children have in their lives will enhance and further their spiritual development. When adults make space for and honour children’s authentic expression they are accepting and nurturing children’s spirituality. Children’s spirits grow when they experience a sense of belonging in, and interact within, an environment that acknowledges and provides opportunities for diversity of expression and critical reflection.

In Western society spirituality is not supported in the curriculum and consequently our education system fails to socialize children’s spiritual identity. Providing support to parents and educators to facilitate children’s spirituality
begins with knowledge building. Our understanding and teaching of child
development needs to incorporate spiritual development and adults need to apply
this knowledge in their relationships with children. In Western society we rely
primarily on traditional developmental theory that is purely evidence-based in
exploring the lives of children. Accordingly, our work with children often focuses
on the domains of development that are readily visible and externally measured.
Unfortunately, highlighting only the quantifiable elements of development negates
the ability to appreciate the multidimensional, interconnected, and dynamic nature
of spirituality. Our knowledge of child development becomes incongruent with the
lived experiences of children when we overlook the non-quantifiable spiritual
domain that encompasses internal elements and permeates the whole child. I will
introduce postformalism as a theory capable of expanding our understanding of
development. The theory of transformational learning will be applied as the vehicle
for developing greater insight into the complex nature of spiritual development and
depening our awareness of our spirituality.

This chapter originated from my desire to holistically represent child
development – inclusive of spiritual development. As an Early Childhood
Educator, I have observed children and witnessed their spiritual nature. However,
my university texts neglected to mention spiritual development alongside physical,
cognitive, social, and emotional development. Until recently, I had never been
taught how to recognize or nurture a child’s spirit. I am writing from the
perspective of a white woman of European descent, who has benefited from all the
unearned privileges associated with my position. My knowledge of child
development is rooted in Western scientific thinking; thus only recently has it
occurred to me that my understanding of child development is limited and
exclusionary. Over the past few months, I’ve become aware that I’ve unwittingly
been working within a dangerous structure that relies on exclusionary and
oppressive processes that limit ways of knowing. This course has been my
introduction to theories related to epistemology, power structures, and oppression.
By challenging my privileged position, this course has opened my eyes to
opportunities for transformation.

According to Dei (2004), transformative learning is a form of education that
involves a “shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our
ways of being in the world” (p. 4). For learning to become transformational, it
needs to become more “inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of
experience” (Mezirow, 1997 as cited in Robinson, 2004, p. 112). I’m now
becoming increasingly conscious of privileged assumptions I’ve made about
children and how they grow and learn, and I’m questioning the supremacy of
Western scientific thinking. I am developing what Robinson (2004) refers to as
‘reflexivity’, or the ability to see my historical and cultural conditioning and its
influence on my worldview.

Through an exploration of transformational learning, I hope to address the
limitations of my knowledge by highlighting ways of knowing that transcend the
essentialist and reductionist tendencies of purely evidence-based developmental
theories. I am not proposing the complete discounting of Western scientific