


Chapter 6

Children and Spirituality: Inhabiting a Culture of Performativity

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal school reform agendas have served to create a culture of performativity in which learners' success is measured in terms of how well they perform against sets of externally prescribed educational standards. In response, this chapter proposes the notion of a rights-respecting curriculum to nurture and promote the spiritual development and wellbeing of learners in the classroom. Such a curriculum assists learners to develop the skills and qualities of collaboration, social responsibility, empathy, and creativity. These qualities reflect the notions of connectedness and relationality, both of which are key elements in the descriptions of spirituality found in academic literature. Some examples of ways in which rights-respecting curricula might nurture and promote the spirituality of learners in the classroom honor learners' ontological and innate spirituality, and which place worth and value on these learners as people, rather than on their ability to attain particular standards.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, the neoliberal school reform agenda in western countries has served to create a culture of performativity in which learners' success in both the classroom, and the early childhood setting is measured in terms of how well students perform against sets of externally prescribed educational standards (Ball, 2003; Wilkins, 2012; Zajda, 2020). Learners find themselves at the center of those practices and pedagogies that effectively shape their subjectivities in potentially destructive and disconnected ways. The culture of performativity is damaging to the learner's identity. Instead of fostering connectedness, a search for meaning, and spiritual wellbeing, such a culture forces them to craft their identities in response to neoliberal imperatives which seem to them, to be the norm (Hyde, 2021). It can render them as calculating, competitive, and compelled to conform to the expectations of others, living a narrow vision of *studenthood* and citizenship (Keddie, 2016).

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This chapter proposes the notion of a rights-respecting curriculum as a means by which to nurture and promote the spiritual development and wellbeing of learners in the classroom. This type of curriculum assists learners to develop the skills and qualities of collaboration, social responsibility, empathy, and creativity – qualities that reflect the notions of connectedness and relationality, both of which are key elements in the descriptions of spirituality found in the academic literature. The chapter begins by outlining the term *spirituality* and its application to children and young people with reference to the academic literature. It then proceeds to explore the notion of a culture of performativity, examining how this culture effectively forces learners to craft their identities in response to neoliberal imperatives, and is potentially destructive to their spirituality. The chapter then introduces the notion of a rights-respecting curriculum, presenting some examples of the ways in which such curricula might nurture and promote the spirituality of learners in the classroom. These examples aim to show how such curricula honor learners' ontological and innate spirituality, and place worth and value on who these learners are as people, rather than on their ability to attain particular standards.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The section below briefly explores some of the key themes concerning the distinction between spirituality and religion, and the way in which spirituality is described in relation to children and young people, noting the critical role of both the teacher and the environment in which spirituality is nurtured.

Religion and Spirituality

It is important to first distinguish spirituality from religion. While these two terms are often used interchangeably, there is a clear distinction between them. Religion comprises the organized structures, rituals, beliefs, and practices belonging to institutionalized religious systems who usually assume the existence of a supernatural entity (Bruce, 2011; Victor & Treschuk, 2020). Spirituality, on the other hand, although difficult to neatly define, concerns the primal search for meaning, and is often expressed in terms of an individual's sense of connectedness with self, others, nature, and, for many, God (de Souza, 2016; Hyde, 2008; O'Murchu, 2012; Pargement, 2007). Phillips (2003) effectively expresses this distinction, conceiving of religion as "an extrinsic organized faith system grounded in institutional standards, practices, and core personal beliefs, while spirituality is intrinsic personal beliefs and practices that can experienced within or without formal religion" (p. 249).

In particular, spirituality addresses the existential questions and concerns that all human beings, including children and young people, may have. Psychologist Tobin Hart refers to this as "wondering", which pertains to children's considerations of the questions of ultimate concern, meaning or value, such as "Why am I here?", or "What happens when I die?" In this sense, children are "natural philosophers" (Hart, 2003, p. 91) capable of deep and thoughtful considerations of such questions. Similarly, Jerome Berryman refers to children experiencing "existential limits" to knowing and being, maintaining that although children might experience these in ways different from adults, they are nonetheless real for them. Using the language of story and metaphor enables children to "approach the limit indirectly" (Berryman 2013, p. 81) as a means by which to address these questions.

There is much evidence to suggest that spirituality is ontological, that is, a natural human predisposition. It is something that people are born with, and which continually seeks expression throughout

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