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The status of childhood and the image of the child are increasingly significant aspects of contemporary society as children’s right to actively participate in decisions and matters that affect them is increasingly acknowledged. This focus on children’s participation rights gained significance in 1989 with the introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations). The concept of the child as active participant rather than as passive recipient has been embraced and reflected in policy and curriculum documents around the world including Australia as demonstrated in the Federal Government’s recent publication of its first national early years curriculum document Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Two notions directly linked to children’s participation rights are children’s agency and voice which acknowledge and advocate children’s rights to be, to act and enact, as well as to express their own thoughts, feelings, experiences and so on. In addition to the influence of the UNCRC, the Reggio Emilia approach to young children’s care and education continues to influence and shape early childhood. This approach which emphasises the child as strong, capable and active rather than as weak, needy and passive, has been adapted by significant numbers of early childhood organisations and institutions that value children’s present being, rather than seeing them as on their way to adulthood.

Religious education has also taken a strong interest in the image of the child and the state of childhood as demonstrated in the increased research and scholarship in the area, as well as the increased interest in, and implementation of, classroom religion programs specific to the early childhood context. The nature of childhood and the image of the child have been impacted upon by globalisation and greater movement of people around the world. Australia, along with many Western nations, is an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious country and this diversity is reflected in all schools, including Catholic and other religiously-affiliated schools. Our approach to children’s participation rights in the religion classroom also needs to reflect such diversity in both what we include in religion programs, and how we implement those programs to ensure and afford young children’s agency and voice.

Many of the issues explored in this special edition of the journal focus on the image of the child and the state of childhood in terms of the implications these have for religious education in early childhood across the three key contexts of parish, school and family. They come from a number of different international perspectives including Belgium, Ireland, England, the United States of America as well as Australia and offer important insights into religious education in early childhood. All authors have a keen interest in young children’s participation rights in religious education and how such rights impact on curriculum development and implementation, as well as on religious educators.

In her article, Annemie Dillen pays attention to the notion of ‘power’ distinguishing among three types: ‘power within’, ‘power with’ and ‘power over’, children. She highlights a number of critical insights regarding educators’ approaches to religious education in nurturing young children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition and identifies that the particular approach religious educators might take in their teaching establishes a specific ‘power’ relationship between child and teacher.
The participation of young children who display features of attention deficit disorders in the religion classroom as well as in the liturgical gatherings of the faith community is explored by Joyce Mercer. She argues that it is in the early years that such disorders manifest themselves and children with these disorders can be quite disruptive, particularly for those teachers who may not possess the special training to know how to address such behaviours. Joyce focuses on the intentionality of teaching and suggests a framework that would enact children’s participation in religious education in a number of contexts, including the church, early childhood centre and school.

In the third article of this edition, Australia’s first national early years curriculum document Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) which includes several references to the spiritual aspects of young children’s learning is interrogated to determine how children’s spirituality and educators’ called responses to that are constructed. It then investigates the opportunities and challenges that such construction imply for religious education. Catherine Meehan also focuses on Australia’s first Early Years Learning Framework paying specific attention to how teachers’ beliefs impact on their practice in the religion program in relation to the three states of childhood: belonging, being, and becoming. Her research has found that religious educators’ beliefs are aligned with, and influence, their practice in positive ways.

Writing from an Irish context, Patricia Kieran argues that the area of family religious education requires much closer attention and support from the church. She also considers young children’s increased participation rights and voice as key factors in the eventual choices they make regarding their continued practice in their religious communities. As families become more diverse in structure and lifestyle Patricia calls for increased research into this important area. Tony Eaude considers a rationale for young children’s learning in religious education for different contexts. Children’s agency and engagement of both conscious and unconscious processes are emphasised, as is the pivotal role of the environment as ‘hospitable space’.

All articles in this special edition of the journal offer key insights into early childhood religious education, but at the same time they highlight gaps. The increased emphasis on children’s participation impels religious education in early childhood to continue to embrace more intentionally the early childhood philosophy of children’s active participation, agency and voice. The tenets that inform good teaching and learning in early childhood must also inform religious education. Young children need to experience a wide range of pedagogical approaches including play in all its forms, to ask their questions, to initiate, to investigate and move beyond the ‘religion lesson circle’ into, in, through, across and around the environment. There are many challenges, some still unidentified, awaiting us and ongoing research into the theory and practice of early childhood religious education is imperative.


Jan Grajczonek
Guest Editor

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EMPOWERING CHILDREN IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: RETHINKING POWER DYNAMICS

Abstract

An analysis of the nurturing of children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition in terms of power reveals the complex interplay of various forms of power dynamics within the pedagogic relationship. Nurturing children’s spirituality is aimed at empowering children and thus at stimulating the ‘power within’ children. Various reflections on nurturing children’s spirituality use methods where power is shared between adults and children (‘power with’). Nevertheless, forms of ‘power over’ interact with forms of power with. When the content of the tradition is perceived as being unalterable, there is a greater probability that one will use a teaching style where ‘power over’ is more central. This does not mean that ‘content’ is not important in ‘nurturing children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition’. The author explains various aspects of a ‘theology of theologizing’ that forms the basis for an open way of dealing with the balances of power in the pedagogical relationship and in relating to the content of the theological tradition.

Nurturing children’s spirituality and power dynamics

Research concerning children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition has highlighted a new way of looking at children within theology (e.g. Berryman, 2009; Champagne, 2005 & 2009). At the same time, this more recent image of children – as active agents or competent subjects, rather than passive receivers of faith and not-yet-adults (Miller-McLemore, 2003 p. 137-160) – has also stimulated research concerning the spirituality of children since this image takes children more seriously. There is plenty of literature regarding the relationship between our image of children and their spirituality (Dillen & Pollefeyt, 2010; Dillen, 2007). In this contribution I focus on another aspect that is less developed, namely ‘nurturing children’s spirituality’ and ‘power’.

I consider power broadly as “each opportunity to impose one’s will upon others or to influence others in social relations, even if one encounters resistance” (Weber, 1984, p. 89). In literature, reference is made to the triad of: power over, power within and power with (Störtz, 1993). Power over, is a form of hierarchical power possessed by one person over another, and refers to the most common interpretation of the term power. Power within, refers to the strength a person has in him/herself, and the ability to control his/her own feelings/thoughts and to use them in positive ways. When we use the concept ‘empowerment’, this is aimed at stimulating the power within people. Power with, refers to shared power, to a form of power people have when they clearly recognize their interdependent relations with others. This form of power could be seen as more of a democratic style of power.

These three concepts are useful in describing what happens in nurturing children’s spirituality. Stimulating children’s inner strength is a form of power within. In getting to know their own resources of hope, meaning and being loved, they develop their own spirituality and learn words that enable them to give expression to spiritual insights and experiences. They may also learn how to refer to their spirituality in times of crisis and find ways of coping.
Power within

This first description of nurturing children’s spirituality as stimulating the power within a child seems evident to those familiar with research on children’s spirituality, but it is not so obvious when one considers actual church discourses. Within some Catholic churches (as e.g. in Belgium) we see a tendency to shift from children’s catechism to adult catechism because children’s catechism does not culminate in the desired results: children stay away from church as they get older or are no longer obliged to attend church. Sometimes there is a focus on intergenerational catechism, where again the focus is on ‘initiation in the life of the church’, but in this case for adults and children together. Only seldom is a reflection encountered on the relevance of nurturing children’s spirituality for the sake of the children themselves, with the purpose of stimulating their own power within.

Power with

Whereas the concept of ‘power within’ helps to describe the aim of nurturing children’s spirituality, the concepts of ‘power over’ and ‘power with’ help us to reflect on how children’s spirituality is nurtured. The way Rebecca Nye speaks about nurturing spirituality, summarized in the acronym ‘SPIRIT’, reflects an approach that accentuates ‘power with’ (Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2009). SPIRIT stands for ‘space’, ‘process’, ‘imagination’, ‘relationship’, ‘intimacy’ and ‘trust’. She encourages the creation of a safe environment and sufficient emotional ‘space’ for children, in order to nurture their spirituality. The principle, ‘talk less, listen more’ (Nye, 2009, p. 45), characterizes a ‘power with’ approach. Recognizing the value of silence, and especially the silence of some children, is recognizing the child’s own ‘voice’, even if this voice is silent, and is then also ‘sharing power’. A concern for ‘process’ in nurturing spirituality also emphasizes power sharing between teacher and child, as well as sharing in determining what should be learned and ensue from the reflection. In describing the value of imagination, Nye focuses on the imagination of children, and warns against reducing the value of the imagination to the objectives the teacher has in mind when presenting a Bible story. Here we see Nye’s encouragement of both ‘power within’ and ‘power with’ children. Relationship as a key element in nurturing spirituality clearly reflects the ‘power with’ dynamic. Nye describes the real spiritual work as ‘how we treat one another, not the topic for the day’ (Nye, 2009, p. 52). The concepts of ‘intimacy’ and ‘trust’ refer to the relevance of relationships characterized by a ‘power with’ approach for spirituality.

In the German literature, the concept of ‘theologizing with children’ can also be considered a form of exercising ‘power with’, as the focus is on a form of symmetrical communication with children about religious themes, in line with philosophizing with children (Martens, 2005; Schwarz, 2007).

It is important to think about nurturing children’s spirituality in terms of ‘power with’, in order to really empower children. When spirituality becomes a theme left to children alone, and is no longer the subject of a ‘shared process’, various power dynamics come into play. In schools where there is no religious education in the classroom, children will talk about spirituality during breaks, in the playground. There the teacher has no input. But it may be that the child with a faith that claims a high authority or a child that asserts a great deal of power over others (because of his or her status, body, competences, etc.) will dominate discussions. Children who are more insecure, children searching for their own spiritual path, may be impressed by others, but this may at times be hazardous, as some forms of spirituality really do require correction. At the same time, each child needs to be able to think about and experience spirituality in a right way, without experiencing the ‘power over’ of other children and their possibly doubtful spirituality. A proper religious education that places ‘power with’ central is therefore relevant.

Power over

Although both in Nye’s, and other author’s, view of nurturing children’s spirituality (Yust, Johnson, Sasso & Roehlkepartin, 2006; Yust, 2004), and in the Germanic concept of theologizing with children, the emphasis is given mainly to ‘power with’, it is also important to pay attention to forms of ‘power over’, as these are
never totally absent. I will explain how forms of ‘power over’ will always be present, and need to be consciously reflected upon, after I have explained how ‘power over’ plays a role in classical teaching methods.

Instructing children and socializing them in a specific religion is a teaching style that puts the focus on the teacher, who thus possesses a certain amount of power over the children. The teacher decides what is to be learned and often prefers the students to be silent listeners. Forms of ‘power over’ can also be discerned in more dialogical styles of teaching and learning, where it is not so much the teacher who is central, but the content of what is being considered. Elements of the tradition are then used as a tool that furnishes adults with power over the children. For example, in a textbook for confirmation catechesis in a parish context, the authors of the book also seek to involve the parents. The example gives the appearance of being dialogical, but nevertheless, does not really take the voices of children seriously.

In the model ‘Geestdrift’, developed by the Flemish priest and professor Jef Bulckens and his team in 2008, a number of assignments are provided for children to do at home (For a reflection on this method, see Dillen, 2011). On page 44, parents are encouraged to ask their child about the four tasks of the Christian church (community building or koinonia, liturgy, care for each other or diaconia and proclamation or kerugma), elements the children will have learned about during the confirmation catechesis session (Bulckens, Leeman, Platteau, Vanhaelemeesch & Van Thielen, 2008). Further, parents are encouraged to read a new version of the Lord’s Prayer with their child and to compare this revision with the explanation the children have received during the confirmation catechesis. Parents are prompted to ask their children questions. This is a dialogical form of learning, but the focus is on the content of what is to be learned, and a more or less parroted reproduction is sought from the children. In relation to these set topics, the child’s own reflection only receives limited stimulation. This form of ‘nurturing children’s spirituality’ is based on a concept of children as not-yet-adults, who are to be initiated in Christian faith, without taking into consideration the experiences and insights of the children themselves.

Even in forms that seek to nurture children’s spirituality (in the Christian tradition) and that centre on the child’s own spirituality as an active agent, forms of ‘power over’ are still recognizable. One important element in every form of ‘theologizing with children’ is the input of ‘theological language’. Theologizing with children is very similar to philosophizing with children, but the teacher or catechist will introduce some specific religious content and elements of the tradition that form part of the reflection process, and search for ways in which the children themselves can respond to these elements (Martens, 2005, p. 23). These elements of tradition have their own ‘authority’ and thus form an ‘heteronomous’ element in the dialogue or learning process, which may be considered a type of ‘power over’.

From daily experience and empirical knowledge, it is recognized that the more these elements of tradition are conceived of as a ‘fixed packet’, the greater the possibility that the teaching will take on a more authoritative style, reflecting more ‘power over’ than ‘power with’.

In our own quantitative empirical research with teachers of the Catholic religion to children between the ages of 10 and 14 years old, we found a correlation between the teachers’ own beliefs and the objectives they have in mind/ for their teaching (Henckens, Pollefeyt, Hutsebaut, Dillen, Maex & De Boeck, 2011, p. 112). We distinguished two scales in relation to the style and objectives of the teaching, namely those of ‘certitude’ and ‘reflection’. ‘Certitude’ refers to the measure of a teacher’s need for children to find certainties in the religion class. The autonomy of the child is less important than the general wellbeing of the child and the authority of the Christian tradition. Children are generally seen as individuals in need of certainty and answers to fundamental questions, and the Christian tradition then offers the answers to these needs. Some items on this scale are: “what is most important is that you offer children certainties, for they still have a huge need for certainty” and “what is most important is that children, through their religion classes, become familiar with the central elements of the gospel”. The other style or approach to the objectives of religious education is called ‘reflection’. This scale measures the degree of importance the teacher places on children’s reflection in dialogue with the teacher and encouragement in making their own choices. Communication is central in this approach. Some items here are: “what is most important is
that children are encouraged to reflect and to talk about beliefs that people find valuable” and “what is most important is that, in the religion classes, children may explore their own experiences”.

The first scale, ‘certitude’, correlates with another subscale concerning the way in which people do or do not believe, namely ‘literal belief’. The second scale, ‘reflection’, correlates with the scale ‘second naïveté’. Briefly this means that the teachers who consider it very important to communicate essential elements of the tradition in order to give children a form of certainty, are generally also those who believe in a more literal approach, whereas the teachers who consider the goal of religious education more in terms of reflection and dialogue in order to make personal choices, generally believe in a more hermeneutical approach, which we call ‘second naïveté’. I will explain these two subscales systems further. Both scales are part of the ‘post-critical belief scale’, as developed by Dirk Hutsebaut, professor of psychology of religion in Leuven, Belgium. The post-critical belief scale consists in two main axes, one of belief/unbelief or positive/negative acceptance of transcendence and one of literal or symbolic belief. Both ‘literal belief’ and ‘second naïveté’ are situated on the axis of ‘belief’. ‘Literal belief’ consists in items such as ‘you can only live a meaningful life if you believe”, “God has been defined for once and for all and therefore is immutable” and “Ultimately, there is only one right answer to each religious question”. The scale ‘second naïveté’ (referring to Ricoeur’s term) or ‘symbolic belief’ refers to items such as “The Bible holds a deeper truth which can only be revealed by personal reflection”, “In order to understand the meaning of the miracle stories in the Bible, these need to be considered in their historical context” and “The Bible is a guide, full of signs in the search for God, and not a historical account”. Second naïveté refers to an attitude where one acknowledges the contingency and critique of a faith tradition and belief, but nevertheless engages oneself as a believer. The correlation between ‘reflection’ as an educational aim and ‘second naïveté’ as a style of belief is 0.36 (significance ***), whereas the correlation between literal belief and certitude is 0.32 (**). Generally, the teachers who completed our questionnaires scored higher on reflection (mean: 5.71 on a 6 point scale) than on certitude (4.62), and higher on ‘second naïveté’ (5.30) than on literal belief (2.29).

Other research regarding religious education also indicates a relationship between the goal orientation and the method of religious and moral education. The research of Isolde Driesen, from the Netherlands, shows for instance how adult educators seem more often to choose the educational methods of ‘experiential’ and ‘mediated’ learning rather than ‘guided learning’. When they consider the aim of learning to be ‘transformation’, they are more open to plurality and take a critical stance towards a hierarchical church (Driesen, Hermans, de Jong, 2007). The relation between methods and goals is mutual, meaning that the methods influence the ideas concerning the goal of learning and vice versa. ‘Transformation’ as a goal of education refers to the aim that the learner develop his/her own ideas and stimulating the ‘authority inside the person to dialogue with elements outside him/herself. It is distinguished from ‘conformity’ and ‘self-determination’ as other goals. Guided learning is considered to be the mere transmission of structured information, with the teacher as expert and the tradition in the centre of learning. Experiential learning refers to people’s own experiences. Mediated learning is considered as a mixed form, where educator and participants both have a guiding role in the learning process. This last ‘method’ is clearly ‘power with’. Driesen’s research has shown that the choice of this method is negatively correlated with an ecclesiological view focused on centralized decision-making (Driesen, 2007b).

The two examples of empirical research to which I have referred, one with children, one with adults, both indicate that educational methods are clearly linked with theological perspectives. Consequently, it becomes evident why theologizing with children is not only a matter of dealing with children in a new way and reconsidering the relationship in terms of ‘power’ (more as power with in order to stimulate the power within), but also a matter of a new theological view. These results also show how a specific theological position is closely related to a specific style of interaction.

Does this mean that thinking about ‘nurturing children’s spirituality’ should avoid offering theological contents to children and to be as open as possible by eliciting content from within the child?

No, because if the child receives no stimulation for its spiritual development in terms of ‘content’ or
‘commitment in a certain community’, this may neglect the educational responsibility of adults towards children. The thesis of Friedrich Schweitzer (2000) that children have a ‘right to religion’ is well known. He states that it is important for children to receive the tools and frameworks to deal with their questions, such as questions about life and death, morality, God, different religions, etc. It is important that adults, and especially parents, teachers and catechists, therefore actively offer some kind of religious education. In order to help children, adults need to offer some form of content and should not only trust the child’s independent development.

There are both theological and psychological arguments supporting the relevance of giving some ‘content’ to children. In the first place, we can say that interpretation and experience always go together and that there is a mutual exchange between them (Schillebeeckx, 1989). This means that the spiritual experiences of every child needs to be confronted with methods of interpretation, it needs to be confronted with verbal or visual elements of one or more traditions in order for the child to be able to ‘grasp’ the experience, to be able to share it, to be able to speak about it and so on. On the other hand, elements of a tradition are lifeless if they do not refer to real experiences. This last element is very important in seeking to prevent a purely deductive approach to religious education, where the content is central and communicated in a top-down way. People’s experiences are very important and need to be taken seriously at all times, and certainly when working with children.

The psychological or pedagogical argument, that in order to nurture children’s spirituality one needs to offer some ‘content’, is borrowed from the American-Hungarian psychiatrist Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy (1986). Nagy himself does not speak about religion but about family relations in general. Nagy uses the concept ‘parentification’, referring to the situation where children have to take up the role of ‘parents’, where they are overloaded with responsibilities. Some children have to care too much, or have to bear responsibilities that are not appropriate for their age and competences. When this situation goes unrecognized or when it lasts too long, it may become problematic. Children are then merely ‘giving’ to others, whereas they also need to ‘receive’. The balance of giving and receiving may then be disturbed. Similarly, the same principles may be applied in relation to religion or spirituality. When children are asked to develop their own spirituality without examples, without real input from adults, they may be overburdened. One could say children are ‘parentified’ by this as well: they are forced to take on a role for which, in light of their age, they are inadequate. This argument does not mean however, that one has to consider children as ‘not-yet-adults’, as passive receivers of faith or as empty boxes that need to be filled with religious knowledge. No, children can certainly be seen as active agents, as individuals with their own competences, but they are nevertheless different from adults. Children need to be confronted with a form of spirituality or religion as it is already developed and lived by others, nearby or further away in time and distance. Of course, they should be challenged to think and to experience for themselves, and their own way of dealing with elements of the tradition should be stimulated.

In order to find a proper balance between the spirituality of children in the Christian tradition, their own thinking and feeling, and what is offered by others, it is important to reflect on what kind of ‘tradition’, ‘theology’ or even ‘spirituality’ is being offered to children. If we want to encourage nurturing children in terms of ‘power with’ rather than as ‘power over’, we have to develop a theological reflection not only on ‘didactical aspects’, but also on the contents considered important to nurture children’s spirituality and the way in which these can be interpreted in a hermeneutical way.

The theological tradition is closely related to aspects of power. More often than not, we find the term ‘authority’ in literature, to refer to the ‘power of the tradition’, where power is used to refer to some influence that an individual may exercise, whereas authority refers to the value something/someone has in itself and that may be recognized. Tradition can legitimize forms of power over, but may – when it is conceived in a more hermeneutical way – also stimulate forms of power with.
A ‘theology of theologizing’

I distinguish (at least) eight characteristics of a theology that forms a basis for nurturing children’s spirituality by ‘sharing power’. I call this a ‘theology of theologizing’ because the central characteristic of this theology is that opens people’s minds to theologizing with children, or nurturing children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition, in a way that limits the use of hierarchical power. I speak here from a Christian perspective, but one could probably develop similar theologies from various religious perspectives.

A first characteristic of a theology open to forms of theologizing with children that mainly stimulates power with and within, is the idea of tradition as an ‘adventure’, tradition is not fixed in itself, but is changeable and has been adapted over time (Haers, 1999). Children may offer various interpretations of reality, of theological expressions. The common exploration of these various ways of looking at religious issues may be enriching for every participant in the dialogue, and may offer new insights in a tradition as well.

Secondly, this theology does not seek to ‘domesticate God’, but may see traces of God in daily life, even in the midst of chaos (De Haardt, 2001). God works through people who are often considered as living in the ‘margins of society’. So many women in the Old and New Testament are examples of people who were very important for God’s work, although only a few people considered them as ‘good enough’ to be bearers of God’s love in the world (Van den Eynde, 2011). God is at work at unexpected places, in a little child like Jesus, or in a foreigner as Ruth, or in a woman from a simple village, as Mary. God may be found in daily life today, in for example, the wondering of children about simple aspects of life, in the love of parents for their children, in the care of children for their brothers or sisters, and so on. Even if religious education at home or in parishes or schools seems to be chaotic, this does not say anything about where God can be encountered. Of course, it is important that people prepare catechesis, for instance, and create a good environment for spiritual experiences, but at the same time they do not depend on human efforts alone. A theology of theologizing is built on trust in God’s marvelous ways, even where they would not usually be expected, also in the mouth or the cares of children. It is not a question of finding the ‘right’ answers, answers that can put God or people into a proper ‘box’, it is a matter of searching together, trying to see whether some answers may be more appropriate than others, while at the same time, constantly reconsidering the answers.

A ‘theology of theologizing’ is also an incarnated theology. The faith in Jesus as Son of God, refers to the relevance of life on earth, in all its concreteness. Bodily experiences, rituals, caring for others, are all relevant aspects for spirituality. Nurturing spirituality and theologizing with children is not only a matter of verbal discussion, it is also a question of physical expressions, concrete experiences in daily life and sharing about these concrete elements, that may enrich people as much as big theological theories (Miller-McLemore, 2007).

This theology places the Holy Spirit as central, as the Spirit inspires people to think in new ways, to hope and to dream. This is what educators want to stimulate in children, and for which they may use dialoguing methods that take children seriously. One can say that in communication (verbally or non-verbally) the Spirit is leading people.

Part of the ‘theology of theologizing’ is the reference to a practical ecclesiology where structures are relevant, but not ontologically founded and unchangeable. When speaking about the church as the People of God this means that all Christians may participate in the church, that everyone’s contribution counts. It also means that leadership needs to respect everyone and seek to avoid the rough use of ‘power over’.

An inclusive community, where there is a place for everyone, also for children’s naïve or spontaneous utterances or expressions of God, is sought in this kind of theology. Welcoming children within churches and taking children seriously can be considered a kind of ‘mystagogical practice’ (Dillen, 2009, p. 140). Rahner (1971) uses the word “mystagogy” to refer to the relevance of experience as a way to learn about
Welcoming children, taking children's own spirituality seriously, may function for the church as a whole as a mystagogical practice. The church may learn to know the mystery itself, by practising ‘theologizing with children’. The church practice of creating an inclusive community may work in a mystagogical way for adults, who can discover part of the unrealized kingdom in a church practice where everyone is welcome, where everyone counts, independent of competences and social statute.

A theology of theologizing is hermeneutically oriented, which means that interpretation is a central element. This kind of theology recognizes that sacred texts as well as elements of tradition and actual faith are human constructions. Believers recognize God’s word in these human constructions, but acknowledge that each construction may be interpreted in various ways or could – in some cases – take another form. This constructivist approach is important for recognizing the value of theologizing.

A constructivist approach does not mean that it is no longer possible to speak about truth. Truth can be considered in an eschatological way, as something to strive for, something in the future. Didier Pollefeyt (2003, p. 56) speaks about truth as 'utopia': something that has no fixed place, that changes, that cannot be fully grasped, but that refers nevertheless to a 'good place' (eu-topia).

Conclusion

One could continue with similar characteristics, but these are at least eight main points in a theology that supports theologizing with children, in addition to a new theology concerning children, which places children’s dignity central. This last aspect has been developed extensively elsewhere (Marty, 2007; Wall, 2010). We need an open theological reflection on tradition and on the content with which we want children to be confronted, in order to develop a way of nurturing children’s spirituality in the Christian tradition that can avoid making children the object of power exercised over them by others. I distinguished ‘power over’ in two ways: in the didactical approach, as the adult exercising power over children, or in the didactical process where theological content is used to legitimize a didactical approach to power over, or that may function as an authoritarian voice that limits a child's own reflection. ‘Power over’, will always exist in some way, and it is very important to be aware of the fact that it cannot easily be contested. On the other hand, one can strive in relations to minimize ‘power over’ and to maximize elements of ‘power with’ and within. We need therefore, not only to reflect on the relevance of children’s spirituality and nurturing their spirituality, but also on general theological conceptions that may stimulate these methods of theologizing.

References


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Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia: Opportunities and Challenges for Early Years Religious Education

Abstract

This paper examines Australia’s first statement on the education of young children between birth and five years of age, Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) and considers its particular implications for religious education in religiously-affiliated early childhood centres and settings. The recent publication of this landmark document has elevated and emphasised the position and place of early childhood education in contemporary Australia. This document seeks to guide and shape curriculum across the entire early childhood sector including religiously-affiliated centres and settings. In addition to its significance in being the first national statement regarding early childhood education, this document is also significant in terms of its several explicit references to children’s spirituality and educators’ called responses to that. What is the nature of such references and what do they imply for early childhood religious education within religiously-affiliated early childhood centres and settings in the Christian tradition, including those attached to schools and/or parishes?

Introduction

Early childhood education currently occupies significant attention in Australia particularly since the landmark publication of Australia’s first national document, Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009). This framework’s influence and impact extend to all early years settings, including those provided by religiously-affiliated institutions such as Catholic diocesan education offices and agencies, for whom early childhood care and education also currently occupies significant interest and attention. There has been an increased growth in some dioceses of Catholic Child Care Centres (for example in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, the Centacare Child Care Services), and several Australian Catholic Diocesan Education Offices and Commissions have published early years religious education curriculum guidelines and/or positional statements (Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia, 2009; Catholic Education Office Diocese of Ballarat, 2007; Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, In press; Crotty, 2006; Rush & Truasheim, 2007) and more recently the Queensland Catholic Education Commission has commissioned a literature review of young children’s spiritual and religious development (Grajczonek, 2010b) and subsequently released the Framework for Early Years Spiritual Development in the Catholic Tradition (Grajczonek, 2010a). For those religious bodies involved in care and education of young children, the nature and purpose of their distinct position and place within the early childhood sector takes on a noteworthy dimension, as they seek to implement a national government framework within a distinctly religiously-affiliated setting. How does such a framework with its several references to the spiritual aspects of young children’s being, enable and/or inhibit the religiously-affiliated early childhood setting?

This paper seeks to analyse the document Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) in which several references are made to the spiritual aspects of young children’s lives as well as to educators’ responses and responsibilities to those aspects. In other words, how does the language in the text of this document function to construct its reality (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). In order to gain clearer insights into the particular construction of the spiritual in the Early Years Learning Framework,
it is first important and helpful to briefly review the extensive literature regarding spirituality, particularly relevant to this paper: (i) the nature of the relationship between spirituality and religiosity, (ii) young children’s spirituality, and (iii) nurturing young children’s spiritual development.

**Literature Review**

**The nature of spirituality and its relationship with religiosity**

The notions of spirituality and spiritual development have received considerable attention in research and scholarly writing. Such scholarship suggests that rather than being finitely defined, spirituality tends to be described in terms of its attributes and characteristics (Eaude, 2003, 2005; Harris, 2007; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006; Tacey, 2004). However, despite the many and varied attributes and characteristics attached to spirituality, the literature generally agrees that spirituality is innate to all humans and is said to arise from our deepest humanity (Hay with Nye, 2006; O'Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2004). Key attributes or characteristics of spirituality include: a person’s relationship or connectedness to themselves, others, the environment and for some to God or an Ultimate; a sense of wholeness or becoming whole; a quest for meaning and purpose; a sense of value; an appreciation of the wonder and beauty of nature as well as of the nature of human accomplishment; a sense of mystery and transcendence; and moral sensitivity (Eaude, 2003; Hay with Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2007; Robinson, 1977; Rossiter, 2010a, 2010b; Tacey, 2000).

Whilst it is accepted that spirituality is universal to all humans and related to religiosity, it is important to acknowledge that spirituality is not synonymous with religiosity and that a person can be spiritual without being religious (de Souza, 2009; Rossiter, 2010b; Tacey, 2000). Rossiter’s (2010b) two descriptions of spirituality and religiosity offer some insight into this confusion as they clearly differentiate between the two. Of spirituality he writes:

> The spiritual is the natural dimension to life that includes: thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose in life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic. Spirituality is the way in which a spiritual/moral dimension enters into, or is implied in, the thinking and behaviour of individuals. (p. 7)

Rossiter sees religiosity as, “a measure of one’s religious behaviour such as attendance at church/mosque, frequency of prayer, engagement in a local community of faith” (p. 7), whilst for Ryan (2007) religiosity can most simply be described as religious spirituality, or spirituality which finds expression through religion. Rather than using the terms spirituality and religiosity, some make the distinction between ‘secular spirituality’ and ‘religious spirituality’ in terms of their overall aims or goals. Meehan (2002) for example argues that “‘Secular spirituality’ seeks to find meaning and purpose in universal human experience rather than religious experience per se” (p. 292). These are important distinctions to note particularly in contemporary Christian child care and/or education settings whose families continue to reflect Australia’s increasingly pluralist population. Whilst all children are innately spiritual, this does not equate to their being religious and this distinction must be reflected in the religion programs offered to young children in that they must not presume to impose or catechise, as stated in the Church document, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988)

> Not all students in Catholic schools are members of the Catholic Church; not all are Catholic. The religious freedom of the personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church. On the other hand, a Catholic school cannot relinquish its own freedom to proclaim the Gospel and to offer a formation based on the values to be found in a Christian education; this is its right and its duty. To proclaim or to offer is not to impose, however; the latter suggests a moral violence.

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Young children’s spirituality

The earliest research exploring people’s spiritual and/or religious experiences came out of Alister Hardy’s (1965) research which was continued by Edward Robinson (1977) who found that people’s spiritual or religious experiences most often occurred in childhood and that rather than being something rare and extraordinary, such experiences were ordinary and commonplace (pp. 144-148). Research which focused more intentionally on young children’s spirituality was initiated by Robert Coles (1990) whose study, conducted with children themselves, led him to conclude that children are interested in the meaning of life, understand life as a journey and are able to ask questions of ultimate meaning. Further significant insights into young children’s spirituality and spiritual development came out of David Hay and Rebecca Nye’s (1998) research which led them to claim that all children have an innate spirituality suggesting that each child possesses his/her own ‘personal spiritual signature’. Essential to this personal spiritual signature is children’s ‘relational consciousness’ (Nye, 1998). Linked to this ‘relational consciousness’ is children’s identity and sense of belonging as they both come to know themselves in relationship with others and find their place in the world and with others (Adams, 2009; Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Coles, 1990; Eaude, 2003, 2005; Fowler, 1981). Myers (1997) emphasises children’s relationships with significant adults claiming that their development as whole human beings is dependent upon their relationships with people who love, listen, respond to and guide them.

Important aspects of young children’s spiritual lives include their meaning and searching as they seek to find significance in the many experiences they encounter both joyful and painful (Eaude, 2009; Fowler, 1981; Hay with Nye, 1998, 2006; Hyde, 2005, 2008). Other aspects of children’s spirituality are their sense of mystery, transcendence, awe and wonder (Hart, 2003, 2006; Hay with Nye, 2006), imagination (Fowler, 1981; Nye & Hay, 1996; Priestley, 1981), wisdom and knowing (Hart, 2003, 2006). Some argue that it is essential to give children the chance to explore, to search, and to reflect on, all aspects of their spirituality so as to reinforce their resilience and sense of agency, and further when such opportunities are provided children will flourish (Eaude, 2009). In other words, it is essential to nurture children’s spirituality.

Nurturing young children’s spirituality

The intentional nurturing of young children’s spirituality is argued to be of the highest importance with some claiming that if it is not nurtured, children’s spirituality and capacity for the spiritual will fade and be lost (Crompton, 1998; Eaude, 2003). Scholarly literature is replete with teaching and learning activities and strategies that intentionally and explicitly nurture the spiritual aspects of children’s lives and their learning. An important factor in the intentional nurturing young children’s spirituality is the classroom environment itself which must be open and sensitive to the spiritual (Adams, 2009). From the research conducted by Hay and Nye (1998, 2006), Hay (1998) claims that spiritual education is the reverse of indoctrination and suggests that educators in nurturing children’s spirituality have four major responsibilities: (i) helping children to keep an open mind; (ii) exploring ways of seeing; (iii) encouraging personal awareness; and (iv) becoming personally aware of social and political dimensions of spirituality.

Educators’ roles are key at the planning stage of a curriculum that seeks to nurture children’s spirituality and educators are urged to not only attend to the cognitive domain in their planning, but also to both the affective (the felt sense) and spiritual domains (de Souza, 2004; Hyde, 2006) by providing time and silence for inner reflection, for creative, imaginative and intuitive responses and for transformed action (de Souza & Hyde, 2007, p. 100). Others have suggested frameworks/approaches which consist of steps that intentionally nurture young children’s spirituality. Hart’s (2003) research into children’s spiritual development led him to design a series of steps or what he calls the “Ten Sources of Power and Perspective” (pp. 171-209). Five ideas for “putting the spirit into practice” have been articulated clearly by
Thomas and Lockwood (2009) who suggest: practise the value of being; connecting and relating; routines and ritual; connecting with the natural world; and cultivating compassion (pp.17-25). Baumgartner and Buchanan’s (2010) understanding of, and approach to, spirituality includes three elements to be intentionally nurtured within children: their sense of belonging; their respect for self and others; and their awareness and appreciation of the unknown (pp. 91-93).

In the context of early childhood Christian settings, many advocate that the starting point for religious education for young children should begin with, and seek to develop, their spirituality ahead of a more formal religious education (Hyde, 2007; Liddy, 2007; Nye & Hay, 1996). This argument is premised on two contemporary realities: first, young children entering early childhood settings reflect our increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious society; and second, that an increasing number who are not practising members of their own faith communities, lack or have limited knowledge and language to engage with specific, complex religious concepts.

Of particular note and import for religiously-affiliated early childhood settings is Bradford’s (1999) proposal that by nurturing and satisfying children’s fundamental needs - that is nurturing the “human spirituality” - can lead to the development of a more “religious (devotional) spirituality”. The fundamental human-spiritual aspects of the essential needs of children are love, peace, wonder, joy and relatedness, and Bradford argues that these five essential needs or categories are fundamental to religious identity of all kinds. A critical implication that arises from Bradford’s insights is that in the nurturing of these essential needs a pluralist approach that would acknowledge and respect all children’s religious backgrounds or their diverse religiosities, would be enabled. Whilst a religiously-affiliated child care or early childhood centre could not be considered a faith community as such (given the pluralist nature of the children and their families in such settings), Bradford’s guidelines nevertheless provide some practical and effective actions that would nurture young children’s spiritual development that in turn could lead to their religious development.

The study being reported on in this paper builds upon and extends research conducted thus far into young children’s spirituality paying particular attention to the construction of children’s spirituality in the document Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework of Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009).

Present Study

Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework of Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) is not only a landmark document as Australia’s first such statement regarding the education of young children, but also because it explicitly refers to the spiritual aspect of children’s lives and considers its (the spiritual’s) role in children’s learning and wellbeing. Educators also have been assigned particular roles in the consideration of children’s spiritual aspects of their lives in terms of children’s learning. Educators and carers are very familiar with the usual aspects of children’s lives, including their cognitive, physical, cultural, social, emotional, personal, linguistic and creative aspects, but not so familiar with the ‘spiritual’ being included in this list. This marks a significant shift in perception of the nature of the human person from the normally secular government perspective. Educators traditionally have been directed to be concerned with children’s physical, cognitive, social, personal and emotional development. Now, for the first time educators are called to also consider children’s spirituality. Spirituality is related to religiosity although not synonymous with it, but no connection is made between the two in the document. It does however, refer to children and their families’ diversity of culture, belief systems, world views and spiritual aspects.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how both children and educators are associated with the ‘spiritual’ in Australia’s first national early years framework so as to ascertain the implications such associations might have for early years religious education. The specific questions guiding this research
How are children and educators constructed in terms of the notion of ‘spiritual’? That is, what specific ‘spiritual’ attributes/characteristics are assigned to children and educators in the *Belonging, Being & Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework* document?

How does the document construct the notion of the ‘spiritual’?

In what other ways are children and their families’ diverse backgrounds constructed in the document?

What opportunities and challenges do such constructions offer and/or imply for early childhood religious education?

**Methodology**

In the main body of the document several references are made to children’s spirituality and diversity as well as to educators’ roles in relation to these areas. Extracts that explicitly refer to these were selected and analysed using Membership Categorisation Analysis an Ethnomethodological method. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 1984) is an interpretive methodology, which seeks to interpret members’ everyday activities *in situ* and *in vivo*, that is, in the place of the event as it is happening. Membership Categorisation Analysis affords insights into how knowledge is organised and constructed in interaction and/or texts (ten Have, 2004) in terms of Categories and the Category Bound Activities which include characteristics, attributes, rights, obligations and so on (Baker, 2004; Freebody, 2003), assigned to those Categories by speakers and/or writers (Sacks, 1992). By analysing relevant sections of text from the document in terms of the specific Categories ‘children’ and ‘educators’ and their assigned Category Bound Activities associated with spirituality and diversity, a closer examination of how spirituality and related notions are constructed in the document is made available (Freebody, 2003).

**Findings and discussion**

Before this interrogation is revealed, it is first helpful to note how the word ‘spiritual’ is understood and interpreted throughout the document and this can be located in the document’s glossary as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: The definition provided for ‘spiritual’ in the Glossary**

| Spiritual: refers to a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, and an exploration of being and knowing. (p. 48). |

In this definition/description precise attributes and/or characteristics for the word spiritual are not made available. Initially spiritual is referred to as a “range of human experiences” and this description is then followed by one example of those experiences, “a sense of wonder and awe”. This one example is then expanded to include “an exploration of being and knowing”. The extensive research into the area of spirituality, some of which is outlined in the literature review of this paper, provides descriptions of many human experiences and aspects of the spiritual. In contrast to the experiences and aspects of the spiritual as described in the review of the literature, the definition for ‘spiritual’ provided in the document is limited.

In the main body of the document those sections that refer explicitly to children’s spirituality and diversity as well as to educators are interrogated in order of their placement within the document. The first insight to note is that children are constructed in terms of spirituality a total of five times and educators are linked to the notion of ‘spiritual’ a total of three times. The first references focus on how children are constructed in terms of the diverse backgrounds as they appear in the vision statement of the document (p. 7) as shown in Table 2.
Table 2: Vision for Children’s Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fundamental to the Framework is a view of children’s lives as characterised by belonging, being and becoming. From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place. Their earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children’s first and most influential educators...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BELONGING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighbourhood and a wider community. (p. 7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section introduces aspects of children’s diverse contexts in terms of their connections to family, community, culture and place and the significance of family as children’s first educators is acknowledged. Other aspects of children’s diversity are not made available.

The next reference refers to children’s spiritual aspects of their learning (p. 9), as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3: Children’s Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHILDREN’S LEARNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The diversity in family life means that children experience belonging, being and becoming in many different ways. They bring their diverse experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills to their learning. Children’s learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated. (p. 9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this section children’s diversity is acknowledged in terms of their family backgrounds wherein they experience belonging, being and becoming in different ways. Children’s diversity is also defined in terms of their experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills. Children’s learning is described as “dynamic, complex and holistic”, and in addition to physical, social, emotional, personal, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of their learning, a spiritual aspect is also attributed. The inclusion of the spiritual attribute to children’s learning explicitly acknowledges that for learning to be holistic, a spiritual aspect must be included, and further, it also acknowledges that this spiritual aspect is “intricately interwoven and interrelated” with other aspects of their learning.

In the section, ‘Early Childhood Pedagogy’ (p. 12), attributes assigned to educators have particular significance for educators in religiously-affiliated centres as outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Early Childhood Pedagogy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educators’ professional judgements are central to their active role in facilitating children’s learning. In making professional judgements, they weave together their:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• awareness of how their beliefs and values impact on children’s learning personal styles ... (p. 12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The attribute referring to educators’ own beliefs and values is helpful to note in terms of how such beliefs and values may have been shaped; for some educators in religiously-affiliated centres their values and beliefs may have been shaped by their own religious traditions. It is important to bear in mind that such religiously-affiliated centres are open to all and children enrolled in them represent a diverse range of religious beliefs and values. In this regard, educators occupy a delicate space/position that includes three aspects: (i) being respectful of, and at the same time reflecting the religious affiliation of the centre; (ii) being authentic to their own values and beliefs (which might be that they do not be reflective of any particular religious affiliation); and (iii) being respectful of young children’s own beliefs. More is articulated about diversity in section 4 of the document, ‘Respect for diversity’ (p. 14), as outlined in Table 5.
4. Respect for diversity

There are many ways of living, being and of knowing. Children are born belonging to a culture, which is not only influenced by traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, but also by the experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Respecting diversity means within the curriculum valuing and reflecting the practices, values and beliefs of families. Educators honour the histories, cultures, languages, traditions, child rearing practices and lifestyle choices of families. They value children’s different capacities and abilities and respect differences in families’ home lives.

Educators recognise that diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides a valid evidence base about ways of knowing. For Australia it also includes promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

When early childhood educators respect the diversity of families and communities, and the aspirations they hold for children, they are able to foster children’s motivation to learn and reinforce their sense of themselves as competent learners. They make curriculum decisions that uphold all children’s rights to have their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths acknowledged and valued, and respond to the complexity of children’s and families’ lives.

Educators think critically about opportunities and dilemmas that can arise from diversity and take action to redress unfairness. They provide opportunities to learn about similarities and difference and about interdependence and how we can learn to live together. (p. 14)

Several key insights into how children are constructed in terms of their diversity are made available in this section. First, it acknowledges that children are born into a culture. Culture here is assigned specific attributes including traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, as well as experiences, values and beliefs of individual families and communities. Again, the specific aspects of values and beliefs are not aligned with religion. This section continues and articulates specific attributes of children’s contexts including their cultures, identities, abilities and strengths.

Educators’ roles are also assigned particular responsibilities within this section. They are called upon to ensure the curriculum both values and reflect families’ diversities, explicitly noting those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The next explicit reference to children’s spirituality is in the section, ‘Holistic Approaches’ (p. 16) as outlined in Table 6.

### Table 6: Holistic Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holistic approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Holistic approaches to teaching and learning recognise the connectedness of mind, body and <strong>spirit</strong>. When early childhood educators take a holistic approach they pay attention to children’s physical, personal, social, emotional and <strong>spiritual</strong> wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An integrated, holistic approach to teaching and learning also focuses on connections to the natural world. Educators foster children’s capacity to understand and respect the natural environment and the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land. (p. 16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two insights into spirituality are afforded in this section: first it recognises that a child’s spirit is connected to his/her body and mind and therefore must be considered along with the body and mind in holistic approaches to teaching and learning; and second, a child’s spiritual wellbeing is also an important aspect to which attention needs to be paid. This section leaves no ambiguity as to the significance of the spiritual aspects of children’s learning which educators must consider, but is silent about the nature of this spiritual aspect and how educators might be able to achieve this aspect.

This section also includes an explicit reference to the natural environment in which educators are called upon to foster children’s understanding and respect of the natural environment and “the interdependence between people, plants, animals and the land” (p. 16). Relationship is a key aspect of spirituality (Hay with Nye, 2006; Rossiter, 2010b) and a key element of that relationship is between the person and the natural environment. In this section, although not explicitly stated, in attending to this directive, educators are indeed nurturing children’s spiritual aspects of their learning. (Specific examples of how educators can nurture children’s connections with the environment are provided in ‘Outcome 2: Children are connected

...
with and contribute to their world’ (p. 31). However, this outcome is not part of the research outlined in this paper.)

Further insights into how the document constructs children’s diverse lives are made available in the section ‘Cultural Competence’ (p. 18) as outlined in Table 7.

**Table 7: Cultural Competence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators who are culturally competent respect multiple cultural ways of knowing, seeing and living, celebrate the benefits of diversity and have an ability to understand and honour differences. This is evident in everyday practice when educators demonstrate an ongoing commitment to developing their own cultural competence in a two way process with families and communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators view culture and the context of family as central to children’s sense of being and belonging, and to success in lifelong learning. Educators also seek to promote children’s cultural competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural competence is much more than awareness of cultural differences. It is the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. Cultural competence encompasses:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• being aware of one’s own world view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures. (p. 18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this section educators are explicitly required to be culturally competent which in turn requires a respect for diversity and an understanding and honouring of differences. The specific attributes of cultural competence are articulated and include an understanding of world views and cultural practices. What is not acknowledged in this section, is that world views and cultural practices can also emerge from, and be shaped by, families’ religious traditions.

Another attribute that is assigned to children throughout this document is their sense of identity and it is explicitly acknowledged that their belonging, being and becoming are integral parts of that identity, as described in “Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity” (p. 22), shown in Table 8.

**Table 8: Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUTCOME 1: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF IDENTITY</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belonging, being and becoming are integral parts of identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In early childhood settings children develop a sense of belonging when they feel accepted, develop attachments and trust those that care for them. As children are developing their sense of identity, they explore different aspects of it (physical, social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive), through their play and their relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The concept of being reminds educators to focus on children in the here and now, and of the importance of children’s right to be a child and experience the joy of childhood. Being involves children developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world. (p. 22)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this construction it is noted that children in the early years are developing their sense of identity which includes a number of different aspects. Along with physical, social, emotional and cognitive aspects, the spiritual aspect is also explicitly assigned to children’s identity. Implicit in this construction is that spirituality is therefore an attribute of children’s belonging, being and becoming. The final sentence in this section also deserves interrogation, “Being involves children developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world” (p. 22), particularly the words “social and cultural heritage”. Diversity is at the heart of this statement as it acknowledges children’s diverse backgrounds and contexts but only in two areas of this background: social and cultural. The explicit inclusion of other forms of diversity, such as religious heritage is not articulated.

Various aspects of the outcome are elaborated and include a description of evidence which might indicate children’s development of confident self identities (p. 25) as shown in Table 9.
Several references are made to children’s cultures, social and cultural heritage, as well as to their cultural identities. Whilst these have the greatest significance for children’s identities, a number of children’s world views, personal beliefs and values also come out of their religious traditions. Again, there is no reference to either religious or spiritual diversity in this section, or to how both these aspects of children’s lives also shape their personal beliefs and values. If educators are to fully understand children’s identities and the place diversity occupies within that, it is important that they are aware of all aspects of diversity, including religious diversity.

Outcome 3 focuses on children’s sense of wellbeing which is acknowledged as including a spiritual aspect, as shown in Table 10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 10: Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OUTCOME 3: CHILDREN HAVE A STRONG SENSE OF WELLBEING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s wellbeing can be affected by all their experiences within and outside of their early childhood settings. To support children’s learning, it is essential that educators attend to children’s wellbeing by providing warm, trusting relationships, predictable and safe environments, affirmation and respect for all aspects of their physical, emotional, social, cognitive, linguistic, creative and spiritual being. By acknowledging each child’s cultural and social identity, and responding sensitively to their emotional states, educators build children’s confidence, sense of wellbeing and willingness to engage in learning. (p. 32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators promote this learning, for example, when they:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• welcome children and families sharing aspects of their culture and spiritual lives (p. 33).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this section, educators are required to support children’s learning by attending to their wellbeing in affirming and respecting all aspects of their being including the spiritual aspect. In the list outlining how educators can promote children’s learning the following example is given “when they welcome children and families sharing aspects of their culture and spiritual lives” (p. 33). Now in this particular construction, a spiritual life has been assigned as an aspect of children and their families’ lives and cultures. However, what is not described or articulated is the nature of that spiritual life or what it encompasses. Does it refer to families’ religious beliefs or affiliations? Is it somehow linked to their culture? Such clarifications are not available and begs the question how educators might share aspects of children’s spiritual lives.

However, there are some salient points to highlight regarding the document’s particular construction of children’s spirituality and diversity as well as with what it has omitted. The document provides a description/definition for spiritual, but this definition is limited with spiritual explained as referring to “a range of human experiences such as awe and wonder, and an exploration of being and knowing” (p. 48). In the main body of the document there are six references made to the spiritual which are linked to aspects of children’s being in terms of their identity, and to their learning constructed in the following ways:

- the spiritual is identified as an aspect of children’s learning;
- it is intricately interwoven and interrelated with other aspects of children’s learning including the physical, social, emotional, personal, creative, cognitive, and linguistic aspects;
• educators are called to recognise the connectedness of children’s mind, body and spirit;
• educators’ implementation of holistic approaches to teaching and learning must pay attention to children’s spiritual aspects of their wellbeing as well as to their physical, social, personal and emotional aspects of wellbeing;
• the spiritual is acknowledged as an attribute of both children’s identity as well as their being; and finally;
• alongside children’s cultures, their spiritual lives are also explicitly named as part of their home lives.

The document also refers to children’s diverse lives in several ways including their cultural and social contexts. It is acknowledged that children’s lives are shaped by family, community, culture and place. Several attributes are assigned to culture including: traditional practices, heritage and ancestral knowledge, experiences, values and beliefs. Educators are required to be culturally competent and to understand and honour difference in terms of families’ histories, cultures, languages traditions, and the like, and are called to ensure the curriculum both values and reflects diversity. Educators are also called upon to be aware of their own values and beliefs and how these might impact on children’s learning. Whilst diversity is acknowledged in a variety of ways there is no reference made to families and children’s religious diversities. This omission is surprising given Australia’s increasing religiously diverse society. More than ever, it is important for all to understand and honour the Other not only in terms of their cultural diversity, but also in terms of their religious diversity.

The EYLF document is a significant for many reasons, but in terms of this study, its acknowledgement of children’s spirituality and call for educators to consider both the spiritual and diverse aspects of their learning are noteworthy and imply a number of opportunities as well as challenges for religious education.

**Opportunities and challenges for religious education**

A number of critical elements have been left unsaid in the EYLF document and such silence potentially creates ambiguity, which can in turn, result in omission. It is from within this sphere of silence that a significant opportunity for religious education arises, beginning with a clear and explicit articulation of the role religion can play in children’s spiritual and diverse lives. Linked to this is the need for a clear articulation of the nature of religious diversity and how to acknowledge and pay attention to that in early years settings both informally in the lived daily routine, and formally in the early years religion curriculum. Further, a clear and succinct statement regarding the nature of children’s spiritual development in relation to their religious development is essential. Many have written about the nature of children’s spirituality suggesting that it be the starting point for a more formal religious education (Hyde, 2007; Liddy, 2007; Nye & Hay, 1996) but the nature of the actual shift from a child’s spiritual development to his/her religious development along the lines that Bradford (1999) suggests remains unclear. Religious education is well placed for deeper investigation into this area. The document makes references to the formation of children’s beliefs and values, world views and cultural practices but does not acknowledge the role religion *can* and *does* play in these vital aspects of their identities and being. This silence in contemporary Australian society is one that must not remain and again an opportunity begs for expression of religion’s role in these key aspects of children’s belonging, being, and becoming.

Another opportunity for religious education is to design, plan and implement appropriate professional development in a number of areas arising from the EYLF document including educators’ understanding and appreciation of the nature of the spiritual aspects of young children’s learning, and how they can intentionally pay attention to, and develop those aspects. Further, it is essential that professional development regarding the nature of children’s religious diversities and the impact that such diversity has not only on their learning but also on their sense of belonging in early years settings, is designed and implemented. In many religiously-affiliated centres children’s religious diversity is not acknowledged, thus it too, is silenced (Grajczonek, In press).
Whilst such opportunities exist, it has to be recognised that each opportunity also presents a challenge for religious education. In seeking to implement an authentic religious education that pays attention to children’s spiritual aspects of their learning, the challenge would be that such a program does not become ‘so’ spiritual (as articulated in the EYLF document), that it becomes secular in all respects. Linked to the acknowledgement and articulation of diversity at all levels (staff and families) within a religiously-affiliated early years centre is the challenge at the same time, to maintain the religious identity and mission of that centre. For many who seek to articulate and cater for such diversity comes the struggle to also articulate and live the centre’s religious identity.

Further, the document’s call for educators to be aware of their own beliefs and values presents a challenge and deserves closer attention on several levels in religiously-affiliated centres. A number of these educators might belong to the religion affiliated with the centre and it would be important that they understood how their own values and beliefs have been shaped by that religion. It is also imperative that they understand that other staff in the centre as well as a number of families and children might not share these same religious values and beliefs. Further, for those staff that do not belong to the centre’s affiliated religion, they too need to understand their own values and beliefs and their possible impact on children. This area is much more intricate and complex than it appears in the document and professional development is vital to ensure all educators understand not only their own values and beliefs, but also those espoused by the centre, their colleagues, and the centre’s families and children. All need to understand how the origins and diversity of such values and beliefs impact on everyone’s place in the centre, especially on children. The document’s references to values and beliefs in terms of people’s culture do not go far enough; religion’s role in such matters must be acknowledged and respected, a point that is explicitly stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) as noted in Articles 1, 14 and 29.

Conclusion

Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (Australian Government Department of Employment Education and Workplace Relations, 2009) makes a substantial contribution to the early childhood sector not only because it is the first national statement outlining policy and practice for the education of all young children, but also for its significant acknowledgement that in addition to children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, social, personal, creative aspects of their beings is a spiritual aspect. The significance of this acknowledgement in such a document as this is profound and its impact cannot be either diminished or dismissed. At the same time however, much regarding the spiritual, the relationship between spirituality and religion, as well as educators’ responses to those areas, remain silent. Religious education has an opportunity to illuminate and contribute to this void. Whilst those opportunities are at the same time challenging, they are necessary if the document’s fullest potential within the religiously-affiliated early childhood setting, is to be realised.

References


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BELONGING, BEING AND BECOMING: THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE EARLY YEARS

Abstract

With the backdrop of the recent introduction of Early Years Learning Framework for Australia, this paper presents some of the findings from doctoral research which investigated Australian early childhood teachers’ beliefs and practices within classrooms teaching four to six year old children in Catholic schools. It will explore the literature related to this study, with particular reference to beliefs and practice and the relationship that exists between them; examination of the barriers which impact on teachers’ teaching in accordance to their beliefs, and an exploration about what constitutes ‘good’ learning and teaching in the early years with regard to religious education. Examples from four case studies will be used to exemplify key findings from this study.

Introduction

A common feature of good early years practice around the world, are the beliefs and values held by those working with young children. Generally, good early years practice aims to support children’s learning and development within a range of contexts and valuing the relationships that enable children to grow and develop. With the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework in Australia, the emphasis for teachers has changed to focus on the three themes of Belonging, Being and Becoming. This comes at a time internationally where pressure exists on teachers to demonstrate children’s learning and development in terms of targets and outcomes, with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy skills.

This paper explores the gap that exists between beliefs and practices and the barriers faced by early childhood teachers. Specifically, the teaching of religious education will be the focus of this paper. It draws on the findings from doctoral research which investigated Australian early childhood teachers’ beliefs and practices within classrooms teaching four to six year old children in Catholic schools. Contemporary literature related to this study is drawn on to contextualise the study, with particular reference to the relationship between beliefs and practice; an examination of the barriers that can impact on a teachers’ abilities to practise according to their beliefs; an exploration about what constitutes ‘good’ learning and teaching in the early years with regard to religious education in the early years.

This paper aims to explore reasons why it is important for teachers to understand their beliefs, and the impact they have on their daily practice so that the lofty aims of enabling children to ‘belong’, ‘be’ and ‘become’ can be realised. This is of particular importance in the teaching of religious education in a faith based early years settings.

Research context

The research was conducted in Australian Catholic schools with teachers working with children between four and six years in the year before the first formal year of schooling. At the time of the research, there was no common early years’ curriculum for the states and territories in Australia. There was also no one Religious Education curriculum for all Catholic schools in Australia. However, at the time of writing this paper, The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia has been produced by Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and has been rolled out nationally. The framework has a particular focus on children from birth to five years of age (DoEEWR, 2009).
Some of the questions central to the research were echoed by writers such as Hess (2010), who pondered about the notions of ‘learning religion and religiously learning’. This is particularly important in the current time we live in, when we see ‘fanatical’ and extreme religious motivations in politics and instability around the world (Hess, 2010). Peace, tolerance, kindness, dignity, respect, humility, patience, love, compassion, fairness, justice are all words that represent a way by which many humans aspire to live. However, in the name of religion, learning can sometimes become limited and tunnelled. Palmer (1998) suggests that this may inhibit the possibilities for infinite learning and the possibility of experiencing the ‘impossible’. This paper presents the case studies of four teachers and explores how their beliefs and practices take shape within their individual work contexts.

What are beliefs? What is the relationship with teaching practice?

Beliefs have been the subject of research in the field of education since the 1980s. The research has highlighted the importance of personal beliefs and their impact on actions and behaviour (e.g. Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Stipek & Byler, 1997). A range of definitions for beliefs has been presented in this body of literature. For example, beliefs are adaptable to a range of contexts and are a form of knowledge that guide practice (Meehan, 2007). As a form of knowledge, beliefs can provide the ‘road map’ for decision making and direction. Kuhn (2001) described beliefs or epistemological positions as “what they take it to mean to know something - influence the ways in which they are disposed to use their intellectual skills” (p. 1).

Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta and LaParo (2006), drawing on the work of Nespor (1987) and Pajares (1992), described teachers beliefs as “a window on teachers’ decision-making, practices and in some cases, effectiveness. This research identified seven elements to make up their definition of beliefs, drawing on the previous work of others (e.g. Borg, 2001; Evans, 1996; Kagan, 1992; Lortie, 2002; Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996; Romanowski, 1998). The elements constituting beliefs:

1. Based on judgement, evaluation, and values and do not require evidence to back them up
2. Guide their thinking, meaning-making, decision making and behaviour in the classroom
3. May be unconscious such that the holder of beliefs is unaware of the ways in which they inform behaviour,
4. Cross between their personal and professional lives, reflecting both personal and cultural sources of knowledge
5. Become more personalised and richer as classroom experience grows
6. May impede efforts to change classroom practice and
7. Are value-laden and can guide thinking and action” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006, p. 143).

As ‘meaning makers’, teachers make sense of their environment and experiences based on their individual knowledge and skills, in relationship with others they encounter (Erricker, Herrick, Sullivan, Ota & Fletcher, 1997). Bondy, Ross, Adams, Nowak, Brownell, Hoppey, Kuhel, McCallum and Stafford (2007), suggested that beliefs about teaching and learning were ‘truths’ held by teachers. It is one’s personal beliefs, not only about the nature of knowledge but also about how learners’ learn, that can impact on the understanding and the ‘motivations’ of teachers to limit or enable their practice (Pintirch, 2002). This was echoed by Nespor (1987) who went further to claim that beliefs had more impact than knowledge in the actions of teachers.

There are three main reasons why it is critical for teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their own beliefs and its relationship to practice. First, the role of a teacher includes responsibility for others’ learning. Blanton, Sindelah, Correa, Harman, McDonnell and Kuhel, (2003) described the relationship that exists between the quality of teaching and children’s learning. This was supported by further work about how teachers’ beliefs about learning and teaching impact on children’s experiences (Bondy et al., 2007). Pajares (1992) found that teachers’ beliefs impacted directly on student performance, in particular making links to children’s feelings of efficacy and self-worth.
Closely linked to the first reason, the second reason for teachers gaining a deeper understanding of their beliefs and practice is about improving teaching effectiveness. Hofer (2002) suggested that “beliefs about knowledge and knowing have a powerful influence on learning, and deepening our understanding of this process can enhance teaching effectiveness” (p. 13). Rimm-Kaufman et al (2006) found that “Teachers have limited time in their classrooms and prioritize some practices over others” (p. 143). For example, they found that teachers use two types of practices. These practices include both the ‘instruction’ or teaching, and those that provide a ‘social support’ for the learning environment.

The third reason for an improved understanding and appreciation of teachers’ beliefs and practice relates to comments made by Nespor (1987) and Rimm- Kaufman et al. (2006). Both suggest that teachers’ beliefs about children can “illuminate understanding of their interactions with children” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006, p. 145). This illumination can allow the teacher to explore assumptions about the child as a learner, through the interpersonal dimension, that is the child’s learning dispositions and attitudes towards learning and their ‘likeability’ and by understanding the learning process. Teachers need to understand children’s needs as learners. That is, they require active engagement in the learning process, and an appreciation of the importance of choice and the best ‘methods’ for teaching (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2006, p. 145-6).

**What are the barriers to teaching according to one’s beliefs?**

As highlighted already, the relationship between beliefs and practice is a complex one. There is generally a congruent relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practice. However, in cases where there is a ‘mismatch’ between stated beliefs and observed practices, the literature suggests that there are some key factors which impact on this complex relationship. Factors can be divided into intrinsic (personal factors) or extrinsic (contextual factors). For example, intrinsic factors may include a teachers’ beliefs and knowledge (both theoretical and practical), values and ethical positions, impact of stress, experiences as a teacher and student, attitudes towards learning and learners, and feelings associated with self-worth, self-efficacy, self-esteem and locus of control (Charlesworth et al., 1991; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Whereas extrinsic factors include education and qualifications, perceived and real workplace pressures, social networks, familiarity or lack of familiarity with curriculum subject knowledge, access to training and professional development, classroom climate, colleagues and school or setting administration/leadership (e.g. Abbot-Shim, Lambert & McCarty, 2000; Cassidy &Lawrence, 2000; Delaney, 1997; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006; Vartuli, 1999; Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004).

**What does good child centred learning and teaching look like in the early years, with regard to Religious Education?**

Child centred learning in the early years and religious education involves understanding children and their learning. Critical to this is an appreciation of the three ‘states’ of childhood, that is ‘belonging’, ‘being’ and ‘becoming ’ (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Papatheodorou, 2010; White, 1992). The impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) has recently challenged the notions of childhood, and there has been an increase in the children’s rights based discourses of childhood. Additional importance on the child having time and space to ‘be’ whilst at the same time learning and growing to ‘become’ and the right to ‘belong’ in their family, school, community and society (White, 2002).

The themes of belonging, being and becoming appear to be a consistent themes in early years’ curriculum around the world (Papatheodorou, 2010). An example of this is in the recent publication of the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (2009) which bears those three words in the title. Ambitiously, this new curriculum framework, aims to take into account the complexity and diversity of young children’s lives and to have some recognition of this in the early years of education and care (Sumison & Wong, 2011). This framework has some parallels to what the literature suggests might be good practice for early years religious education.

In an effort to explore religious education in the early years, the themes of belonging, being and becoming are explored. Belonging is “knowing where and with whom you belong- is integral to human existence. Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they become.”
Belonging requires knowledge and knowing, so that the child can be a confident learner and effective communicator. Hyde (2010) drew on Fisher (2008), Hay and Nye (2006) and Tacey (2003) to define children’s spirituality as “a person’s connectedness and relationship with self, others, the cosmos, and for many, with a Transcendent dimension (God)” (p. 506). This affinity is present in the early years. Particularly, the child’s developing sense of self and relationship with others and the world around is a key feature of early years’ curriculum frameworks around the world (e.g. DfES, 2007; DoEEWR, 2009; Papatheodorou, 2010). The sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves is a key feature of religious education in the early years.

Court (2010), in presenting three goals for young children as her core tenet of her work, suggests that ‘knowledge’ is the way for children to connect to God. The first goal is the development of the ‘mind’ through textual knowledge and analytical skills. This is not done through rote learning, but through ‘engagement’ through play, language, ideas, explicit teaching, and use of stories so that children’s understanding of religious education concepts can be embedded in their daily lives (p. 500). The second goal relates to the development of morality. This is evidenced in the ways in which children and adults interpret and live out the gospel values and develop positive social skills which treat others with kindness, dignity and compassion (p. 501).

Being is “a time to be, to seek and make meaning of the world” (DoEEWR, 2009, p. 7). Court’s (2010) third goal relies on the ‘pursuit’ of the other goals outlined above (Court, 2010, p. 501). Fostering the development of spirituality comes through children’s fascination with God and the mystery surrounding creation and faith. This is best supported within an environment that facilitates a space for awe and wonder. This goal enables children to ‘be’, to have space and time, to explore with curiosity, imagination, confidence, creativity and enthusiasm (Court, 2010; DoEEWR, 2009). Memory, faith, imagination and play are all elements children need to develop cognitively and to acquire complex religious concepts (Court, 2010). Similarly, Hyde (2010) proposed that giving children opportunities to make meaning via the manipulation of materials with opportunities for reflection and storytelling enabled children to experience the “parable, sacred stories, liturgical actions and also the meditative silence” (p. 526).

By respecting and nurturing children’s ‘being’ through valuing their play and imagination, teachers can enable children to ‘become’ full members of the faith community of which they are part. The use of a language rich environment, which supports children’s approximations and developing ideas will allow for cognitive and conceptual development. The use of strategies such as modelling, active listening, and use of oral and written storytelling; provide opportunities for children to express ideas through a range of art media (Court, 2010).

Becoming is a change process related to learning and development, leading towards full participation in society (DoEEWR, 2009). “Children’s identities, knowledge, understandings, capacities, skills and relationships change during childhood” (DoEEWR, 2009, p. 7). Belonging to a ‘Community of Knowers’ as described by Court (2010), in which living respectfully, with love and compassion, valuing prayer and being prayerful all occurs within a safe and sacred space and fosters the change and development enabling young children to become full members of their faith community.

Methods

Drawing on both interpretivism and positivism, as the researcher, I was attempting to make meaning about the questions which had originated from my own experiences and was aiming to explore these with other teachers. This process required both a deductive and an inductive approach. In the first phase of the study, I surveyed a large number of teachers to test out a theoretical stance derived from the literature and previous research. In the second phase of the study, I explored the individual stories of four teachers and collected rich and in-depth case studies to develop a new theory about teacher’s beliefs and practices, given the particular contexts of the four case studies. The study was given Ethical Clearance from the Australian Catholic University and all efforts have been taken to protect the identities of the research participants.
A mixed method approach to data collection and analysis was adopted in this two phase study. The findings presented in this paper draw on both sets of data. An instrument was developed, validated and used in this study to ascertain early childhood teachers’ beliefs about learning, teaching and Religious Education. The Early Childhood Teachers Beliefs Learning Teaching and Religious Education (ECTBLTRE) instrument contained 65 items and tested seven scales. In addition to the 65 items, several open ended questions were asked to gain more insight into practice and the context of the respondents.

Participants in the research were confined to early childhood teachers working with four to six year children in the year before formal schooling in Australian Catholic schools. Twenty five Diocesan Education Offices consented to teachers in their diocese participating in their study. The ECBTLRE questionnaire was mailed to 1172 schools. After the instrument was administered, a total of 540 valid questionnaires were received, a response rate of 46%.

Of 540 participants, 88% were female, 52% were aged between 26 and 45 years of age. The highest level of qualification was a Masters degree with 2% of teachers holding this level of qualification. The majority of teachers held a Bachelors degree this group represented 61% of the population. Sixty percent of the teachers surveyed had been teaching for more than 6 years, with the largest group having 11 to 20 years experience. As there were no male teachers who indicated willingness to participate in phase two, four female teachers were selected. The four teachers represented the 26-55 year age groups with the Bachelors degree being the highest level of qualification. All four teachers had more than 10 years teaching experience, with one having 35 years experience.

**Results**

The analysis of the ECBTLRE questionnaire data lead to the purposeful selection of four case studies. Each case study represented different characteristics measured in the data. (See Figure 1)

*Figure 1.* The positions of the four teachers on the criteria used for selecting teaching-combinations for further study.

The four extreme cases agreed to participate in the second phase of the study which included classroom observation visits, semi-structured interviews, digital photos of each setting and interactions, and the
utilisation of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised Edition (ECERS-RE). Each case presented provided evidence of the complexity of understanding beliefs and practices of teachers. There were no simple answers; teachers’ beliefs are not easily categorised and appear to be different in practice due to the complex social realities of classrooms. Figure 2 graphically illustrates the final categorization of the four cases based on all the data collected and analysed.

**Figure 2.** The four teachers’ positions on the continua post observation of early childhood and Religious Education practice.

The observation of the four cases saw one teacher ‘shift’ from their original position on the continua, that is, Teacher A’s changed positions when observed teaching Religious Education. Teacher A was a confident and experienced teacher. Teacher A had continued to access formal education and was an active member in a local network. Her practices for everyday teaching were consistent with religious education. Her results from Phase 1 suggested that Teacher A had a Ministry orientation, although there was some evidence to support that in practice, there was more evidence of an integrated or educational approach to teaching Religious Education. There were no changes to everyday early childhood practice to teach Religious Education in this classroom. In this case, the Teacher A’s education, life and teaching experiences may be contextual factors that explain some of the differences between beliefs and practices. Teacher D also shifted position on the continua, but this was related to her early years practice. Teachers B and C remained in a similar position pre and post observation, their beliefs and practices being congruent.

Appendix 1 (Table 1 (pg 47)) highlights several significant contextual and personal factors that may explain the variance between beliefs and practices in each case. In practice, Teachers A, B and D were categorized in the high emergent and high integrated category. These differences may be explained by the processes employed in collecting data which enabled the research to probe individual teachers’ understandings in more depth about what constituted their beliefs about learning, teaching and Religious Education. Teacher C was the only case to remain in a consistent position. It was conjectured that her extensive teaching experience (34 years) has given her clarity and insights into her beliefs and practices. There were also differences in the emphases of the curriculum documents used in each setting.
Discussion

Stated beliefs of teachers are not static, but change according to the circumstances they find themselves in (Benjamin, 2003; Wooley & Wooley, 1999). The four teachers at the centre of this research articulated the factors that impacted on their ability to teach according to their practices. Two dimensions of factors were confirmed in this study which is consistent with previous studies (Abbot-Shim, Lambert & McCarty, 2000; Cassidy & Lawrence, 2000; Charlesworth et al., 1991; Delaney, 1997; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006; Stipek & Byler, 1997; Vartuli, 1999; Wilcox-Herzog & Ward, 2004). Extrinsic factors which included school administration, families, children, colleagues, professional networks, education and teaching experiences, classroom structure, and the school/setting. Intrinsic factors which included beliefs about learning and teaching, confidence, real and perceived expectations from others were named by the teachers as factors impacting on their work.

An exploration of teachers’ beliefs about learning, teaching and religious education and what this looks like in practice was the purpose of the research. Good practice in early years teaching is characterised by practitioners who are reflective, reflexive and cognisant of their own personal beliefs and values and the impact of these on their teaching and interactions with young children. The nature of knowing and knowledge is complex. Where teachers lacked confidence, particularly in subject knowledge, their practices reverted to those that may have been inconsistent with their stated beliefs (Bondy et al., 2007). Understanding what constitutes good practice in the early years and with regards to Religious Education, ensures that Being, Belonging and Becoming are realised in early childhood settings.

What does good child centred learning and teaching look like in the early years, with regard to Religious Education?

The themes of Belonging, Being and Becoming are central to good practice in the early years. This is of particular importance for the teaching of Religious Education. Examples from the four case studies are drawn to highlight the links between the theoretical positions and practice. Belonging, being and becoming are intricately linked. Examples from the data are used to highlight good practice in religious education in the early years.

Belonging

When children are baptised into the Catholic Church they are welcomed into the faith community. As a member of that faith community, one needs to learn particular vocabulary, signs and symbols. The teachers in the study recognised that children’s previous experiences varied greatly, and that Catholic schools were educating an increasing number of non-practising Catholics and children from other faiths. Teacher C commented on the fact that many children are Catholic, but their experiences prior to coming to Prep vary.

One of the first things they are asked for with immunization record is their baptism certificate. To be honest I would not know how many are baptised. Parents may not be attending mass on Sunday but they still want a Catholic education for their children. I remember a few years ago when I came here, we had a mass for preps and two of mine [parents] turned up and in days gone by maybe two of them didn’t turn up. It made me realize that our church has changed. Society has changed and probably this area as well. You could go to another Parish and you would have a full house. It depends; I think that we have a lot of people moving in and out of our town all the time. So it is not the community that has always been here.

A similar trend was reported by Teacher A:

Many families are Catholic, in the fact their child has been baptized and I think that the directive from the Catholic Education Office is that we do give priority to Catholics and there are a few who are Church of England or Uniting. They have accepted that the children will be taught Catholicism in the school. There are some that have no religion or are not baptized but they have accepted that as well. A very high percentage of the families are Catholic but I do not know if they are practicing or not.
In order to scaffold children’s learning, Teachers spent time giving children language to develop strong connections and a ‘Catholic Identity’. For example, vocabulary and naming things they see in the Church and school were also important. Teacher A commented that:

Naming... we go over to the Church and we learn the names for different parts... for some it is just amazing. Some of the children are walking into an unknown world. An example of that, the Sacristy, oh I, mean the Tabernacle, at the back of the Altar has a red pleated curtain and we went in there and one of the children said to me... “Why do they have a sports skirt up on the wall?” We had been talking about what happened to Jesus and they walked and saw the big crucifix with blood, it was highly dramatic but then we went through the story and there is an emphasis on the risen Christ and a happy new life that we experience at Easter. I think that it has to be tempered and the information that they're given and that there is not a gory side or evil side to religion... it is more that God is good and has something good to give us.

Teacher B believed that Religious Education in preschool should focus on the:

Need to know that there is a God who loves them, that their families love them dearly. They are part of a community, the Church and the school community. They have trouble differentiating between God, Jesus and Fr F in the church.

Teacher A recognized that children’s family context and prior experiences may lead to some experience before starting at pre-primary.

If they have older brothers and sisters they have been exposed through the brothers and sisters. There are some families who are very strong practicing Catholics so they have a strong, good knowledge. Then there is a group of them that would have no knowledge at all and in kindergarten they talk a little bit about God, Christmas and Easter. Then they come here and they are given more. They are growing and evolving their understanding of religion.

The examples above show strong evidence of the feelings of belonging which the Early Years Learning Framework aims to achieve. The four cases demonstrate how the teachers support children’s belonging to their faith community and the development of ‘knowledge’ which will support the children’s development of competence (DoEEWR, 2009, p. 7).

Being

The four teachers’ approaches to teaching Religious Education included questioning, discussion, hands-on experiences, worksheets, stories, drama, art, craft, movement, music, excursions, through interactions, props, photographs, dramatic play, and knowledge that is passed onto children about values, beliefs and attitudes that are associated with Catholicism and Christianity, and sharing and learning new ideas from others. This was consistent with the approaches outlined in the literature (e.g. Hyde, 2010; Fisher, 2008; Hay with Nye, 2006; Tacey, 2003). Each classroom had a prayer table that was the focal point for prayer and quiet times. Teacher B said that for her:

RE looks like the altar (prayer table), it changes according to what is happening. We had a little boy whose mum is in a lot of pain. At one stage, someone had plonked his shoes onto the altar...

The above example showed an insight into the way in which this teacher incorporated Religious Education into daily life in the classroom. The children knew that the child in question was finding life challenging and had frequently been away; this was a way in which the children reminded each other to think about and pray for one of their classmates. For this teacher, Religious Education was more than topics and concepts, it was about caring, sharing and loving and being Christ to others.

Time set aside to ‘teach’ Religious Education varied. Teachers A and C both planned explicit lessons and had a certain number of topics that needed to be covered in a year. For Teachers B and D there were no expectations from the school that any particular amount or type of content had to be covered. Teacher B commented:
There are times we spend doing RE. But there is a lot of incidental RE. Even the way we get children to look after each other, to care for each other, as well as the Bible stories and the play that comes out of that.

The case was similar for Teacher D, who had daily prayer, but other RE was covered during the day when she and the children made connections with everyday experiences.

Teacher A commented that:

I like, in the guidelines... when they say to set up a Christening Font in the block corner with dolls and baptize their dolls... very much a hands-on approach to Religion. We do prayer services around the candle and we reflect and we bring our work to the community circle and share what we have learnt at that time. All of those sorts of things I think are more appropriate than attending big long ceremonies that the children do not have the concentration, patience or understanding for. It is very appropriate for their level what we are learning now. I think those things.... The Hail Mary we are learning now it is in the Guidelines for “We are special”... that they have started to talk about Mary the Mother of God and are not doing it as a rote learning but as a liturgical movement and have now moved to the prayer aspect of it. I like the way they have got it, very sensitive to children’s learning.

The examples provided here, clearly exemplify the practical ways in which the teachers engage young children’s minds in learning about religion an how to be religious. There are examples of both formal and informal opportunities to learn, play and experience various aspects of what it means to be a Christian.

**Becoming**

The four teachers observed had strong and effective early years practice. With regard to Religious Education they took this aspect of their role seriously. In most of the four cases, teaching was viewed as a vocation or ministry. When reflecting on her role in teaching young children about God and religious concepts, Teacher C commented:

The role that you are playing... you are trying to impart this feeling of God, this presence of God. At this level the Christian values are so important and I think you can see it in the way that they play with each other. You can quickly relate to ‘let’s be kind to each other’, ‘resolve issues’ it is just being a bit kinder to each other. I see myself as a participating and practising Catholic so therefore I impart that to them and I try to give a bit of my God to them. The sense, that God is around us and with us.

The above example highlights the moral aspects of religious education highlighted by Court (2010). The notion of becoming a full member of the faith community was a central belief of the four teachers, and the personal role model they exemplified was a significant part of their teaching. The teachers viewed their role as being critical, as all strongly believed that the early years of life were the foundations for life. Consequently, they saw themselves as ‘planting seeds’ that would one day reach their potential.

**Conclusion**

Belonging, Being and Becoming are three ‘states’ of childhood recognised internationally as being important in the early years. Enabling teachers to support young learners more effectively will ensure rich experiences for children. An appreciation of teachers’ beliefs and their relationship to teaching and practice is critical for teachers because of their direct responsibility for others’ learning, the potential impact on the effectiveness of their teaching and the illumination of their assumptions about children which impact on teaching and learning contexts. This study found that the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practice concurred with previous research. Stipek and Byler (1997) and Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2006) found that teachers’ practice is not always consistent with their beliefs, due to a range of contextual factors related to the teacher (age, level of qualification, number of years teaching, confidence, self-esteem, knowledge of subject matter) or the context (access to continuing professional development, peer support, children in class and school/setting). Both the statistical and descriptive analyses of the data revealed that teachers cannot be categorised into one lineal teacher-type. One of the key implications of this study...
sustains that the future training and professional development of teachers should enable trainee teachers and experienced teachers a ‘space’ to reflect on practice. This will enable teachers to support the learning and development of young children using the three states of childhood, ‘belonging’, ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.

References


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## Appendix 1

### Table 1

**Case summaries of the four teachers including beliefs, practices and personal and contextual factors.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher background &amp; current context</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Factors impacting on beliefs and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TEACHER A</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Female</td>
<td>Early Childhood teaching</td>
<td>Early Childhood</td>
<td>Extrinsic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 46-55 years</td>
<td>High emergent</td>
<td>Responsive to children</td>
<td>School administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 15 years teaching in Catholic school</td>
<td></td>
<td>Based on planning done in advance</td>
<td>Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 20 years experience working with three to six year old children</td>
<td></td>
<td>Linked to Curriculum Standards Framework outcomes</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of a range of strategies including discussions, self selected activities, “have to” activities, visual arts are supported in this environment and viewed as a means of expression</td>
<td>Colleagues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early years’ classroom, four to six year children in the year before formal schooling.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Values partnerships with families, children and colleagues</td>
<td>Professional networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classroom is physically located at the end of other buildings, own playground area, separate from rest of the school.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Documentation of children’s learning is presented on walls</td>
<td>Education and teaching experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Confident teaching in this setting with this age group</td>
<td>Intrinsic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Early Childhood teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td>Play is valued and used as a learning and teaching strategy</td>
<td>Beliefs about learning and teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Education</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Based on diocesan guidelines, topics used encourage children to wonder about the topics and relate to their own experiences</td>
<td>Real and perceived expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Uses age appropriate experiences that draw on children’s prior knowledge and experiences, including visual and dramatic arts, group work and discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Confident about content, knowledge and skills related to Religious Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Role as teacher is to share Gospel values through interactions but to teach specific topics as per RE guidelines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Three half hour sessions planned and used each week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
<td>School based monitoring of RE program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>• Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher background &amp; current context</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Factors impacting on beliefs and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychologist</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bachelor of Education (Primary)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Bachelor of Psychology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher of four to six year old children in Catholic school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Classroom is physically separated from the rest of the school, own outdoor play area</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Education approach</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- High integrated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Follows diocesan recommended guidelines in planning, but delivery of material is less formal than plans.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- RE included in interactions and general topics that are discussed with whole groups and small groups.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Explicit links are made with RE concepts, for example being kind to others is what Jesus would want for us.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visits to church and participation in liturgies are regular events in the program</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Worksheets/ black line masters used to respond to topics covered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Formal time planned each week, often does not occur as planned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Teacher’s role is to share good news and to model “Christ-Like” behaviour in all interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- No school based monitoring of RE program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrinsic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Beliefs about learning and teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Confidence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Real and perceived expectations</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TEACHER C                           |        |          |                                        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----------|                                        |
| - Older than 55 years               |        |          |                                        |
| - Bachelor of Education (Primary)   |        |          |                                        |
| - Teacher in Catholic schools for 34 years |        |          |                                        |
| - Currently teaching five to six year old children in early years classroom |        |          |                                        |
| - Classroom is physically located within school, adjacent to other classrooms. |        |          |                                        |
| **Religious Education approach**    |        |          |                                        |
| - High ministry                     |        |          |                                        |

| Early Childhood teaching            |        |          |                                        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----------|                                        |
| - Formal teaching of reading, writing and mathematics based on outcomes based Curriculum Standards Framework |        |          |                                        |
| - Children’s work in books and work sheets is marked and monitored. |        |          |                                        |
| - Play is used as a ‘free’ time activity or reward for hard work |        |          |                                        |

| Early Childhood                     |        |          |                                        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|----------|                                        |
| - Use of diocesan based curriculum documents, a workbook that children have and take home weekly to share with families |        |          |                                        |
| - RE is a planned, four x 30 minute sessions a week |        |          |                                        |
| - School based monitoring of content, end of semester reports are provided for families |        |          |                                        |
| - Lessons are conducted on the floor, usually in a circle with props to assist children to |        |          |                                        |

| Intrinsic                            |        |          |                                        |
| - Real and perceived expectations    |        |          |                                        |
### Teacher background & current context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Factors impacting on beliefs and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| make connections with their own experiences  
- Children encouraged to ask questions and make comments  
- Teacher’s role is to share the message of the Gospel in the way presented in the text; questioning of content is not encouraged, the facts are presented |

#### TEACHER D

**Early Childhood teaching**
- 26-35 years age group  
- Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood)  
- Teaching in Catholic school Two years, other teaching in state education system six years.

**Early Childhood**
- Play-based program, large blocks of time for play.  
- Teacher’s role is to observe and to support children’s learning: Stand back and not interfere with interactions  
- Praise for children’s efforts and these are valued and used to promote positive outcomes with other children  
- Routines are important and they provide predictability for children  
- Table top activities are used inside to focus on fine motor development. Outdoor activities promote development in gross motor areas.  
- Large, small and individual groupings used for learning experiences

**Religious Education**
- No school-based monitoring of RE  
- No planned time for RE  
- RE is the family’s responsibility  
- Interactions and social learning experiences provide opportunities for Gospel values to be taught in informal ways  
- Prayer circle a daily event used to welcome Jesus into classroom each day

**Extrinsic**
- School administration  
- Classroom structure  
- Families  
- Colleagues

**Intrinsic**
- Beliefs about learning and teaching  
- Confidence  
- Real and perceived expectations
CHILDREN NEGOTIATING THEIR OWN BELIEFS: THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN FAMILIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Abstract

In Ireland the traditional family, encompassing two heterosexual married parents with biological children, has undergone dramatic reconfiguration in recent decades. Indeed one might legitimately describe the changing structure and social and religious position of the family as having undergone momentous revolution. This article profiles the changing nature of the Irish family, its legal basis as well as the complex social changes which have affected it. Furthermore the article examines studies and legislation pertaining to young children in families in Ireland. There is a dearth of research and data on the topic of the religious education of young children in Irish families. There is no national organisation, programme or systematic structure to support the religious education of young children in families. The scarcity of research or national data makes any attempt at a comprehensive and accurate profile and analysis of the religious education of young children in families difficult, if not impossible. Findings from existing research suggest that religious education in families in Ireland is multi-directional. Children often initiate and negotiate their own religious education and identity in the family. Transmissive models of religious education are incapable of describing the complex dynamic which characterizes religious education within Irish families. Furthermore in two parent/guardian families one cannot assume a synchronicity of beliefs or attitudes to religious education among adults. Children are cognizant that both adults and children are engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating belief within the family.

Irish Families: Historical and cultural context

Ireland is situated at the most western frontier of Europe. The cycle of invasion and assimilation has given the island of Ireland a diverse and often contradictory, cultural, social, political and religious history that makes even generic statements concerning national identity and family life difficult. Foreign invasions and settlements were a feature of Irish life since the Middle Stone Age. Celts, Vikings (from mixed backgrounds of Norway, Scotland and later England) and Normans from Wales, England and France, have settled in Ireland (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010, Kieran 2010). George Bernard Shaw (1911) recognised this hybridity when he said “I am a genuine typical Irishman of the Danish, Norman, Cromwellian and (of course) Scotch invasions”. Given this syncretistic historical backdrop it is unsurprising that contemporary Irish society is characterised by linguistic, social, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. The 2006 national census revealed that the Republic of Ireland has a substantial non-indigenous population and that 10% of its people originated outside of Ireland (Central Statistics Office,[CSO], 2006).

The country is currently undergoing a period of population growth and preliminary results for the 2011 census indicate that its population of 4.5 million is the highest recorded since 1861 (CSO, 2011c). Recent population growth has resulted from a combination of factors including the wealth, and almost full employment, associated with Ireland’s years of economic boom. From 1994 to 2007 Ireland’s miracle economy, widely termed the ‘Celtic Tiger’, attracted young immigrant and migrant workers at the family formation stage of life. Although the Celtic Tiger economy ended dramatically in 2008, population growth has continued. Ireland’s current financial crisis has effected Irish families and required them to adopt new coping skills to deal with rising unemployment (14.7%), as well as widespread government expenditure cuts in education, social welfare and health.
A classical study of Irish family life by the anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball (2001) portrayed rural Irish family life in the early 1930s as predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal. In the early part of the 20th century arranged marriages, close networks of neighbours and a gender-based division of labour were not uncommon. In recent decades the traditional family, encompassing two heterosexual married parents with biological children, has undergone dramatic reconfiguration. Marital break-up, cohabitation, single-sex couples, lone parent families and an increasing number of family units without children, have contributed to a variety of forms of family life. Indeed one might legitimately describe the changing structure and social and religious position of the family as having undergone momentous revolution. In 2008, in an attempt to analyse and profile the extraordinary changes impacting on families in Ireland, a national Céifin conference was organised on the theme of ‘Family Life Today, The Greatest Revolution?’ In summary contemporary Irish families are heterogeneous, dynamic and complex and are characterised by changing structures and functions (Bohan, 2009).

The legal position of the family in Ireland

Since the founding of the Free State in 1922, the family has been accorded powerful legal, social and religious status. Articles 41and 42 of the 1937 Constitution were heavily influenced by Catholic teaching (Maher & O’Brien, 2011). Article 41 recognises the family as the “natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society” (Irish Government Publications, 2004). The Constitutional privilege given to the family means that the State guarantees to protect it from anything that might threaten it, since the family is “the necessary basis of social order” and is “indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State” (Irish Government Publications, 2004). The Constitution’s emphasis on the family, founded on the institution of marriage, has accorded marriage economic, legal and social protection in Irish legislation on tax, inheritance and social welfare. Article 42.1 of the Constitution also recognises that that family is “the primary and natural educator of the child” (Irish Government Publications, 2004). However the introduction of same sex partnerships in 2011, 18 years after the decriminalisation of homosexuality, provides State protection for gay and lesbian families. Legal and social understandings of what constitutes a family have been radically reconfigured. Research indicates that same-sex couples’ households represent 0.15% of the contemporary population in Ireland (Lunn, Fahey & Hannon, 2010). In a 2008 poll 80% of Irish people supported the introduction of equal marriage rights regardless of a person’s sexuality (Lansdowne Market Research, 2008).

The Irish Constitution allocates a largely domestic role to women when it pledges that the State will endeavor to ensure that women will not be economically obliged to work outside the home “to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Article 41.2). In reality many women are committed to working outside the home and are more likely to have a third-level qualification than men, although they are also less likely to be employed than men (CSO, 2010). While there is a growing trend for fathers to become the primary carers of children in the home it must be noted that in one recent study the overwhelming percentage of primary caregivers of infants was 99.6% female, relative to 0.4% male (Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010).

Children in Ireland

In Ireland a child is defined as a person under 18 years old who is not married. For the purposes of this article, the term ‘young children’ refers to those from birth to age 12. The Irish National Children’s Strategy: Our Children Their Lives (Government of Ireland, 2000) aims to protect the rights of children, to co-ordinate and develop agencies, organisations and research and to give children a voice and improve their lives. Recent years have witnessed the growth of a widespread movement (Children’s Rights Alliance) to amend the Irish constitution and to acknowledge children in their own right and not as a unit in a family (Bernardos, 2007).

As part of a multi-agency attempt to improve the lives of children, Síolta: The National Quality Framework for
Early Childhood Education (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006), and Aiste: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009), identify the kinds of learning experiences that children up to six should benefit from in Ireland. Aiste: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework provides parents with themes, ideas and examples of ways of enabling children to grow and learn in the home. The spiritual dimension of young children’s learning is central to this overall development as the child’s sense of wonder, awe and curiosity is nurtured (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). While these frameworks provide practical support for parents in families they are used largely by educators in formal childcare settings and not routinely by parents in families. Children’s development in primary school is covered by the 1999 Curriculum which includes Religious Education as one of the seven curricular subject areas (Government of Ireland, 1999). In recent years there has been widespread popular debate about the appropriateness of the inclusion of Religious Education as a curricular subject in Ireland’s schools (Kieran, 2008).

Religious influences on family life in Ireland

When it comes to the religious affiliation of families in the Republic of Ireland, the census figures reveal that 86.8% of the population is Catholic (CSO, 2007). Irish society has been heavily influenced by Catholic mores with a keen emphasis on children being raised in a family based on marriage. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that marriage and family are “willed by God in the very act of creation” (John Paul II, 1982). This understanding of married family life is based upon a divinely blessed heterosexual, monogamous, freely given, life-long, indissoluble commitment which provides the context for a loving sexual relationship which is open to procreation. The Irish Catholic bishops have repeatedly emphasised this point.

As a Church we have always promoted the ideal of a man and a woman, committed to each other in married love, as the best situation in which to bring children into the world. (Irish Bishops’ Conference, 2006)

Ireland’s National Directory for Catechesis, Share the Good News, (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010) stresses that parents carry out the first and vital work of educating their children in faith. Parents are called to introduce their children to a family life of faith where prayer, gospel values, love and moral formation form the foundation and bedrock of all of their children’s subsequent religious education. However the Catholic hierarchy is increasingly aware that family life in Ireland is complex and pluriform.

Research has shown that marriage is best able to provide the stability that allows children to flourish. However, for a variety of reasons, some of them outside the control of the people concerned, this ideal is not always reached. At times we may have been less than sensitive to the goodness to be found within all kinds of families in our Church. (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2006)

For most Catholics birth, marriage, and death are marked by religious ceremonies (Inglis, 2007). The 2008 European Values Survey results for Ireland show that nearly 70% of the population self-describe as ‘religious’ and only 1% self-describe as convinced atheists. Over 66% of Irish people pray once a week or more and 45% pray everyday. Just 10% of the population never pray (European Values Survey, 2008). Statistics for religious observance are relatively high as 45% of the population profess to attend religious service at least once a week (O’Mahony, 2010). While these results suggest that Ireland is one of the most religious nations in Europe and that young children are brought up in a society where religion is a significant social factor, it must be noted that relative to levels of religious practice and attendance at religious ceremonies in previous decades, Ireland has recently experienced a seismic shift in religious thinking and practice. Furthermore Growing up in Ireland (Williams, Greene, Mc Nally, Murray, & Quail, 2010) the largest longitudinal study of 11,100 infants (from 9 months to 9 years) and 8,500 children (starting at 9 years), shows that approximately 8% of mothers and fathers of infants self-describe as having no religious affiliation.
In recent decades the nature of the Irish family has changed dramatically. Ireland has the highest fertility rate in the 27 European Union states with an average of 2.07 children per woman (CSO, 2011b). In contemporary Ireland more people are becoming parents at a later age and having fewer children (Fahey & Russell, 2002). In 2006 one in six families consisted of lone-parent families and a majority of couples getting married cohabited prior to marriage. Commentators suggest that cohabitation is not always selected as a long term alternative to marriage (Fahey & Field, 2008). One survey of parents and children in Ireland uncovered higher rates of cohabitation and lone parenthood among lower socio-economic groups (McKeown, Pratschke, & Haase, 2003). In the last twenty years the least popular type of family in Ireland is the family based on marriage. Furthermore at the age of 25, people in Ireland are twice as likely to cohabit as they are to be married. The Growing up in Ireland (Williams, Greene, McNally, Murray, & Quail, 2010) study shows that 14% of 9 months to 9 years old children live in lone parent families. Interestingly, the research also shows that the younger the child, the more likely it is to live in a two parent family and 86% of nine-month-olds live in two-parent families.

Clerical child-sex abuse and its impact on families in Ireland

It is important to note that since the 1990s, revelations about the Irish Catholic Church’s involvement in child abuse and its mishandling of complaints of clerical child-sex abuse have had a significant impact on religious belief and practice in families. For instance the Ryan Report in 2009 identified over 800 known abusers in over 200 religious-run institutions in Ireland during a period of thirty five years. The report’s findings indicated that beatings and humiliation by nuns and priests were common at institutions that held up to 30,000 children (The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, CICA, 2009a). Furthermore the Murphy Report, also released in 2009, investigated a sample of cases documenting the rape and molestation of 320 children by 46 priests in the Dublin Archdiocese, over a period of 30 years (CICA, 2009b). The national outrage after the publication of these reports led to the resignation of four bishops as well as an extraordinary meeting between the Irish hierarchy and the Pope and the issuing of a papal pastoral letter in 2010. Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged “In almost every family in Ireland, there has been someone – a son or a daughter, an aunt or an uncle – who has given his or her life to the Church. Irish families rightly esteem and cherish their loved ones who have dedicated their lives to Christ, sharing the gift of faith with others, and putting that faith into action in loving service of God and neighbour” (Benedict XV1, 2010). Benedict simultaneously recognised the weakening of faith and loss of respect for the Church’s teachings in Irish families as a consequence of a variety of factors, including child sex abuse. His encyclical speaks directly to the victims of abuse and their families by saying “You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry” (Benedict XV1, 2010).

Any examination of religious education and faith formation in families in contemporary Ireland must take cognisance of the crises of public confidence in the teaching authority of the Irish Catholic Church to deal with issues of morality, social justice and child-protection (Littleton & Maher, 2010; Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2011). The education of young children in faith within families is particularly effected by the shame and outrage felt at the abuse of young children. This has left many Catholic families disorientated and disconnected from the Church (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010).

The religious education of children in families

In exploring the religious education of children in families in Ireland it is important to distinguish between two overarching approaches. On the one hand, catechetical or faith formational approaches to religious education are those which are transmissive in intent and nature and explicitly nurture faith in children. However, religious education is broader than faith formation and includes approaches which provide children with education about religion and belief which are primarily informational. Thus understood religious education prepares children to live in a world where religion is a significant cultural, social although not necessarily an important personal factor for the child. In Ireland these two approaches often overlap and intersect in the one family.
One parent may favour a confessional or faith formational approach whereas another may adopt a more formal and informative approach to teaching children about religions and beliefs. Furthermore at different stages in children’s lives parents or guardians may adopt different approaches. In early childhood the main emphasis in the family may be on transmissive approaches whereas in teenage years as children develop independent critical cognitive faculties the family orientation may focus on more informational and less overtly transmissive approaches. It would be incorrect to polarise both approaches or present them as mutually exclusive. For the purposes of this article religious education is understood as a broad category which includes education about religion and which has a strong transmissive and faith formational element.

In families in Ireland the vast majority of education in, for and about religion occurs in a spontaneous, often implicit, organic and unstructured manner. The flexible and diverse process of nurturing the spirituality of young children is as variable as the multiplicity of idiosyncratic styles of parenting. Very young children are egocentric and their realm of consciousness and concern is limited to their own immediate needs and desires. Parents or guardians, as the most significant people in their lives, and the primary points of attachment, are conduits through which young children’s needs and desires are answered. While many parents engage in prayer during pregnancy and experience the delivery and arrival of a newborn baby as one of the most spiritually overwhelming and enriching events in their faith lives (Hebblethwaite, 1984), there is no significant body of literature in Ireland documenting if, how or when, families begin to educate their young children in, for and about faith. Indeed the absence of such research raises serious questions.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the Catholic Church has nothing to say on the religious education of young children in families. It has a large body of teaching which presents a broad, general vision of parental roles in nurturing the faith of children. *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican II, 1965) teaches clearly and emphatically that parents are the initial and most important educators of their children. Parents carry the prime responsibility for the faith development of their children and the Church supports them in this role. However, apart from these broad brush strokes parents are left to their own devices, to interpret what to do in their own unique family circumstances as well as the methodologies of how to do it. Furthermore, in Ireland there are few resources, outside of the formal school or the parish structures, which parents can avail of in the religious education of their children.

It is important to note that every part of family life potentially contributes to the religious education and faith development of children. Through being affirmed, loved and respected by their parents, young children implicitly learn about a loving God who comforts “as a mother comforts her child” (Is. 66:13). Parents or children may not always make connections between life and faith. Religious education in the family can often occur in the spontaneous, inconsequential aspects of family interaction as well as in the explicit discussion of religious ideas, prayer and the deliberate communication of faith. Recent research suggests that the transmission of faith in Irish families is under strain and that while 9 persons out of 10 of the Irish population are baptised and socialised into the beliefs and practices of Catholic Christianity, Ireland’s Catholics are often sacramentalised without being evangelised (Lewis, Barnes, Kieran, Cruise, Francis & Mc Guckin, 2009). Where this occurs transmission of faith within families becomes problematic not alone for parents or guardians, but also for children, who are unsure of the content and relevance of faith to their lives. In a *National Survey of Religious Attitudes and practices in the Republic of Ireland* (Mac Gréil, & Rhatigan, 2009) two-thirds of the total sample believed that handing on one’s religious views to children is important, although there was a 19.2% increase in the number of respondents who wished to let children “make up their own mind”. Further, those in the potential parent and grandparent age cohort perceive handing on the faith as far more important than those in other age cohorts.

For many parents in Ireland, the birth of children challenges them to reassess their values and to articulate their spirituality and beliefs. The birth of a child and the request for baptism is often the catalyst that brings non-practising Catholic parents back to their faith. Through the distinctive rhythm of each family’s life, individual and idiosyncratic patterns of faith formation are established. Sometimes this occurs through family prayer rituals in the home, sometimes through discussion or through the transmission of values and
love that unites the family community. In contemporary Irish society prayer in the family is less structured than in the past. Christian faith practices have blended with popular culture.

**How children are being religiously educated in Irish families: REMC**

*Religious Education in a Multicultural Society: School and Home in Comparative Context (REMC) (2009)* is an international research project which examined the transmission of religious beliefs and values through the education system in Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Ireland, Malta, and Scotland. It also profiled interactions between home and school in shaping the formation of beliefs among children. Results for Ireland are based on interviews and written submissions from 169 12 year old children. REMC’s findings highlight the complexity of religious education in Irish families. For example, a traditional ‘transmission model’ of religious education “whereby values and beliefs are passed on from the parent to the child unidirectionally” (Schwartz, 2006), does not adequately describe the findings of the research. REMC’s findings in relation to religious education in the family can be classified under four key points.

(i) **Children often act as initiators of Religious Education in the family**

Discussion of religious topics in the family is infrequent and is usually initiated by children. One child comments:

*If I asked my Mum about it then she’d tell me all about it, because I think that she knows quite a lot about religion, but it wouldn’t be a general topic* (REMC, 2009).

Furthermore, the subject area of religious education in school sometimes acts as a catalyst for the discussion of religious topics in the family.

*My Mam asks what did you do today and I’m going oh the subjects that we do and what we talked about in religion, say if I do religion we just talk about it* (REMC, 2009).

(ii) **Young children are aware of multiple attitudes to Religion in the family**

From a young age children are capable of identifying and accepting a diversity religious and belief systems and values in their families. REMC shows that children encounter and are capable of accommodating both religious and secular belief in society and in their families.

*If you are like sad you’d be just be like … think about God and that sort of stuff and then if you are not you just don’t have really any religion, you don’t believe in anything* (REMC, 2009).

Children whose parents have ‘no religion’ sometimes self-describe as religious, and children whose parents are ‘religious’, sometimes self-describe as non-religious.

*What happened for me I was learning about Buddhism (in school) and I kind of you know took to it … So I decided to be a Buddhist* (REMC, 2009).

(iii) **Children wish to negotiate their own religious belief and practice in the family**

Children are not passive recipients of faith traditions. They frequently self-identify as active agents in their own religious and moral formation and are capable of negotiating their own beliefs and differentiating between their own and their parents’ beliefs from an early age. As they grew older children are more likely to question parental religious belief. A quotation from a child from a religious background typifies this process of negotiation.

*But the thing I don’t get with religion is that, do we actually know if this happened or not. Because as you get older they kind of change the story a bit, like when you are younger they tell you like something and then as you get older like they change it* (REMC, 2009).

Another child comments:
My Mam made me make my confirmation. ... Yeah but like she still doesn’t know that I don’t believe in God, the only person who does know is my big brother ... and people in the class (REMC, 2009).

The recent focus on upholding and acknowledging the rights of the child has affected children's self-perception. REMC shows that children are aware of the importance of making decisions for themselves in the area of religion and faith. They accept in principle that: ‘while you are still young your parents should choose your religion so that you can kind of like follow the family tradition’ (REMC, 2009).

Another child suggests: 
When you are younger, you can’t really pick your own choice. When you are only like a baby, your Mam has to (REMC, 2009).

However, the children also exhibited how they are being given choice in the area of religious practice and belief.

My Mam always says to me that I can pick whatever religion I want (REMC, 2009).

One child, whose mother ‘made’ (sic.) her make her communion stated: 
...so I did that. And then all of a sudden she put me in confirmation classes. And I was like why and she goes because you wanted to and I go so if I don’t want to I can just drop out of it and she goes, she just wanted me to make at least my communion, so I have the choice of making my confirmation (REMC, 2009).

(iv) Gender is a significant factor in faith transmission in the family
The mother’s religious belief influences children more than any other family member. Children’s self-description of their religious affiliation is strongly related to that of their parents, especially their mothers. However once again, what is operative here is not simply a matter of a unilateral transmission of faith but a multilateral negotiation of religious faith and ideas within the family.

Faith formation in Catholic families in Ireland
The fact that Irish families are undergoing serious reconfiguration and that Irish society is under economic, social and cultural transition, inevitably impacts upon the religious education of children in Catholic families. In Ireland the Catholic Church tends to focus most of its resources on parishes and schools as the loci of religious education. Consequently few resources, supports and structures exist for parents or young children in families.

There is little research and no national policy document on family-based Catholic faith formation in Ireland. Ireland’s formerly active National Association of Family Ministry Personnel has dissolved and no replacement organisation currently exists. Pastoral support and care for family ministry is overseen by The Council for Marriage and the Family of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference. While many Irish dioceses do invest in family ministry, provision of personnel and resources varies and currently there is no systematic, overarching national structure. One might conjecture that because adult catechesis is the chief form of catechesis in the Church (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Irish Episcopal Conference, 2010) and because schools and parishes are identified as the primary locus for the religious education of young children, insufficient attention is paid to the religious education of children in their families.

Despite the lack of a national programme, organisation or systematic structure to support family faith formation there is evidence that the religious education of children within families is being nurtured in two main ways: (i) through the National Catechetical Programme (Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics,
2004) which supports the development of home-school-parish links and (ii) through Parish based liturgies and sacramental programmes.

(i) Religious Education of children in families supported by the National Catechetical Programme
In Ireland the Christian community has allocated its main energy, resources and focus on the school and parish as the major centres of religious education. There has not been a sustained vision and resourcing of the religious education of children in families. The prioritisation of Catholic schools and parishes as the locus for the transmission of Christian faith has resulted in a lack of appreciation of the needs of diverse families in the area of religious education. Within Catholic primary schools, the National Catechetical Programme Alive O (1996-2004), which will shortly be replaced by a new Religious Education Curriculum, encourages a partnership involving home, school and parish (Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics, 2004). This collaborative approach connecting parent, teacher and parish attempts to link the more formal and structured religious learning which takes place in the Catholic school with religious learning and living which takes place in the family home (O’Farrell, 2004, 38).

However the Alive O programme’s (Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics, 2004) vision of an interconnecting family, school and parish life is often at odds with the complex nature of Ireland’s contemporary family structures. A study of the effectiveness of the Alive O Programme, based on interviews with parents, teachers and children, concluded that the programme’s vision of three intersecting and mutually complementary realms is overly optimistic. The report described the family home as a place of little or no religious discourse or experience, the parish as a place of diminishing religious discourse and experience, and the schools as a predominantly positive place of religious discourse and experience for the child (Kennedy, 2000).

(ii) Religious Education in families supported by sacramental preparation
In order to encourage the transmission of faith in the home and to recognise the family as the primary locus of faith formation for young children, new programmes have shifted the centre of gravity from the school and the parish back towards the family home. In 2004, the Do This in Memory Programme (Mahon & Delaney, 2004) was introduced as a parish-based programme for children (c. age 8) receiving First Eucharist in Ireland. This programme has encouraged families to accept their responsibilities for faith formation in the home. Each of Ireland’s 26 dioceses uses the programme. In 2009 a second parish-centred and family-friendly programme of sacramental preparation for confirmation, You Shall Be My Witnesses (Mahon, 2009) was launched. Almost half of the dioceses in Ireland and in excess of 10,000 children and their families are currently using it. Through these programmes the family home becomes a critically important locus for faith formation and transmission. The family works in tandem with the ongoing liturgical catechesis in the parish. Faith literally became part of the furniture of the home as children are asked to physically demarcate some part of the home for sacred space. Prayers and rituals help to initiate the family into a pattern of behaviour that makes faith part of family life. Children are given a special prayer candle, prayer cards, worksheets and sacred stories to focus their family life regularly around this sacred space. The whole family is invited to participate in the programme and in many instances there is an inversion of the traditional faith formational roles when children become the catechisers of parents.

Concluding Remarks

The Republic of Ireland is in a period of economic, social and religious transition. Families are undergoing rapid transition with a plurality of family types and dissolution of traditional Catholic family structures and values. Religious education in families can be characterised by seven main features:

(i) There is no national organisation, programme or systematic structure to support the religious education of young children in families. This is a cause for concern and one may surmise that many parents are confused, isolated and unresourced in their task as religious educators.

(ii) In effect, little is known about the nature and efficacy of religious education in families. The scarcity of research or national data makes any attempt at a comprehensive and accurate profile and analysis of the religious education of young children in families difficult, if not impossible.
(iii) The Catholic Church’s overarching emphasis on school and parish as the primary context for faith formation has resulted in the neglect of religious education in the family. As the school becomes the main locus for religious education and faith formation it may unintentionally contribute to inactivity and passivity in the family home. Parents may be disinterested in, or content to delegate, their responsibility as religious educators. One might ask if religious education in the family is sufficiently valued by the Catholic Church in Ireland. Furthermore recent debates about the legitimacy of including religious education within the primary school curriculum in Ireland suggest that families may become more crucial centres of religious education in the future.

(iv) Frequently parishes do not provide whole family catechesis and the needs of diverse family groups such as lone parent families and divorced family members may not be addressed. While the home-school-parish model of catechesis which suffuses the current National Catechetical Programme in primary schools is undoubtedly worthwhile, in reality parents are often unfamiliar with religious education programmes or more general frameworks [e.g. Siolta (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009)].

(v) REMC’s (2009) findings suggest that religious education in families is multi-directional. Children often initiate and negotiate their own religious education and identity in the family. Transmissive models do not describe this complex dynamic adequately. Furthermore in two parent/guardian families one cannot assume a synchronicity of beliefs among adults. Children are cognizant that both adults and children are engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating belief.

(vi) REMC’s findings also reinforce the need to ensure that children never view or experience religious education as coercive or indoctrinatory. Children’s awareness of their own rights should be welcomed. Paragraph 11 of Dignitatis Humanae (Abbott, 1967) enunciates a guiding principle on freedom which is deeply relevant to religiously educating children within families: from the very origins of the Church, the disciples of Christ stove to convert people to faith... not by the use of coercion or by devices unworthy of the Gospel, but by the power, above all, of the Word of God. (para. 11)

(vii) Gender is an influential factor in faith education and transmission. The support and education of parents, most particularly of mothers as the primary conduits of religious education, is vital. Further research into gender and the transmission of faith in families needs to be undertaken.

In summary one can state that as long as young children enter the current 98% denominational school system in Ireland they benefit from a relatively well resourced and structured approach to religious education. Before they enter this, while they are in the home, there is a noticeable lack of research, resources and support for their religious education in the family.

References

European Values Survey (2008) data for Ireland


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Abstract:
This article seeks to provide a rationale, drawing mainly on theory from psychology about how young children learn, for how religious educators should work in the early years, recognising key challenges, especially those related to the varying purposes of religious education in different contexts and the influence which adults can exert. The importance of children's agency and engagement of both conscious and unconscious processes are emphasised. To sustain and develop the necessary attributes and dispositions for learning, young children need a predominantly experiential approach, with opportunities to represent activities and experiences in different and developmentally-appropriate ways. This involves encouraging the search for meaning and connectedness, in an environment which offers 'hospitable space', where adults invite and guide rather than prescribe. This is exemplified by considering the role of play and story. Possible implications both in schools and elsewhere and for faith-based contexts are discussed.

Introduction:
This article offers a rationale for how religious educators could work in the early years, based primarily on theory from cognitive psychology about young children's learning and the literature on children's spirituality. The approach is predicated on the belief that religious educators should take account of, and build on, more general theory about how young children learn. Rather than providing specific answers about which aspects to concentrate on and whether to adopt specific programmes, because such decisions are best made by those who understand the specific context, this article suggests considerations which may affect such decisions.

The first section highlights three challenges for religious educators working with young children. This is followed by two sections which summarise key lessons about how young children learn, focusing first on developmental issues and then on conscious and non-conscious processes. A discussion on attributes and dispositions for learning, and environments to sustain these, follows. The importance of how activities and experiences are introduced is illustrated by the example of play and story. Finally, possible implications for religious educators working with young children and for different contexts are considered.

Three cautionary notes are needed. First, while 'early years' is not defined closely partly because children of similar age will be at different developmental points, it refers, broadly, to children up to the age of seven or eight. Second, while this article tries to identify general principles applicable to any context or faith tradition, my perspective is that of a teacher, headteacher and academic in the UK. Third, generalisations should be treated with caution since what is appropriate and deemed effective will necessarily depend on one's aims.

Challenges for religious educators working with young children:
This section identifies three challenges for religious educators working with young children, one resulting from differing views of whether, and how, children should be introduced to religion, the second from the nature of the questions involved, the third from the unequal nature of the relationship between adult and child.
Watson and Thompson (2007, pp. 14-31, especially 18-22) explore how religion has come to be seen in Western industrialised countries, showing that there is no consensus on the role of religious faith. Many adults see it as unimportant and even destructive, while for others it forms a central part of their identity and worldview. While increasing numbers of children have little knowledge or experience of religious ideas or practices, these shape how many others act and think. Moreover, children, from an early age, receive strong, often conflicting messages, notably from the media, both about what is to be valued and about religion. These uncertainties are compounded, for adults, by a lack of consensus as to whether religious education should be the domain of the home, the faith community, where applicable, and/or the school. Many parents, especially within faith traditions, see the prime responsibility as lying with themselves and the faith community. Others are willing for their children to learn about religion in school, but may be wary of any perceived attempt to indoctrinate. In some countries, it is enshrined in legislation that religion is not to be taught in publicly-funded schools. In others, teaching of, or about, religion in schools is expected, although who leads this, and how well, varies enormously and the subject has a widely varying status. This is further complicated by the existence of publicly-funded faith-based schools and the continuing debates on their role (see, for example, Gardner, Cairns & Lawton, 2005).

The purpose and nature of the task of religious educators, both in schools and in faith communities, therefore, remains a matter of debate. Especially those in schools should be wary of assuming a homogeneous background of experience of religion, let alone belief. Moreover, individual children may encounter a variety of approaches, including within confessional settings such as Sunday school or Mosque school which are likely to differ, often significantly, from those in school, and further either of these is likely to vary from those in the home.

Grimmitt (1987, especially pp. 225-226) usefully distinguishes between:

- learning religion, acquiring religious faith;
- learning from religion, where contact with, and study of, religion contributes to children’s broader education; and
- learning about religion, acquiring more factual understanding of religious traditions and practices.

Those within faith traditions may experience a tension between meeting children’s current needs and trying to ensure their longer-term affiliation to the faith community, but I shall suggest that their role is broader than enabling children to ‘learn religion’. Those working in schools are likely to find purposes largely dictated by policy, from Government or religious authorities. For instance, in England, teachers are often expected to include both learning from religion and learning about religion (see for instance QCA, 2004), or some variant of these, given the locally agreed nature of the syllabus. So, one challenge is the extent to which young children should be learning religion, from religion or about religion.

A second challenge results from the nature of the questions which religious education addresses. Donaldson (1992) writes “some kinds of knowledge are in the light of full awareness. Others are in the shadows, on the edge of the bright circle. Still others are in the darkness beyond” (p. 20). Many of the questions with which religious education deals are profound and not open to definitive answers, but, as Hyde (2008, especially Chapter 7) and Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008, Chapter 3, especially pp. 64-6) indicate, young children ask questions which are existential and at times difficult. This seems often to result in adults tending to oversimplify or to inhibit young children from exploring and responding to such questions, whether from a wish to protect the child or the adult, though the extent of this and the reasons why require further empirical research.

A third challenge results from the danger of adults exerting undue influence over the young child, given the uneven relationship of power and experience. This is well illustrated in Hyde (2009) and Berryman and Hyde (2010) who warn against the danger of adults dominating ‘play’. Because young children are, usually, keen to gain the approval of adults and, as Moyles (2004) argues, “Young children are pre-programmed to ensure that potential carers respond favourably to them” (p. 11), educators should be wary of exerting undue influence on young children. However, this danger is rarely made explicit in research related to religious education.
To consider how best these challenges can be met, the next four sections consider key aspects of young children’s learning, in general, making reference as appropriate to the implications for religious educators.

Stages of development and representations of experience:

Piaget’s work on young children’s development, both cognitive and otherwise, has been deeply influential on thinking and practice in the last fifty years far beyond, but also within, religious education. As Watson and Thompson (2007) indicate, Piaget’s ideas were “mediated (in the UK) through Goldman’s work in the 1960s” (p. 117), in relation to religious education, especially that children’s understanding develops in a linear sequence of stages and that adults should wait until children are thought to be ready. The idea of stages of development remains influential in relation to religious faith (Fowler, 1981) and to moral development (Kohlberg, 1987). However, subsequent research in cognitive psychology, discussed below, indicates the importance of development not being seen as a natural, largely individual process, happening regardless of external interventions, but as requiring interaction and apprenticeship to specific ways of thinking and acting (see Rogoff, 1990).

Donaldson’s (1992) research challenges Piaget by suggesting that, when children understand a problem’s purpose and context, they are far more capable of resolving it (and demonstrate a greater level of conceptual understanding) than when the task is decontextualised. Donaldson (1992, especially Chapter 3) argues that very young children develop from ‘point mode’, where they can only focus on the here and now, through ‘line mode’, where they can see themselves as part of a broader notion of time and space, to the ‘construct mode’, where they can think beyond a specific place or time. However, once able to operate in a new mode, children move between modes depending on the task and the context, often more fluidly than adults.

Bruner (1996, especially pp. 155-6) highlights that learning does not just involve experience, but integrating facts and procedures into existing patterns of feelings, understandings and actions. All learners are always making sense of experience of which their understanding is only partial, elaborating an incomplete understanding. So, learning depends crucially on how the learner represents experience. Bruner (2006, volume 1, p. 69) highlights three main ways:

- the enactive, through actions;
- the iconic, through visual means; and
- the symbolic, through symbols, especially language.

While these are sequential, in that enactive representation precedes the other two, and iconic comes before symbolic, children (and to a lesser extent adults) move between these, as between point, line and construct modes, once able to access the more ‘advanced’ ways of representing experience. This depends on the difficulty and familiarity of the task and the learner’s level of experience and understanding. For example, when a task is difficult, and especially too abstract, it may help adults to draw a diagram, make a model, or act out a situation. For children, even more so, since their ability to think is more dependent on the familiarity of context and relationships with those around them. They only gradually become able to use with confidence the symbolic representation on which adults usually rely. Adults too often assume a conceptual understanding which individual children lack and tend to assume that thinking should precede activity. Yet the two are more subtly linked, especially with young children unused to symbolic representation, notably language. In Black’s (1999) words, “one of Piaget’s principles that still commands acceptance is that we learn by actions, by self-directed problem-solving aimed at trying to control the world and that abstract thought evolves from concrete action” (p. 121). As Bruner (1996) writes, “We seem to be more prone to acting our way into implicit thinking than we are able to think our way explicitly into acting” (p. 79).

A deep understanding requires practice and application, not simply instruction. The less the child’s experience in any domain, the more important first-hand experience becomes. Especially for those less capable of, or used to, engaging in abstract thought, firsthand experience, and the chance to represent experience in ways such as play and drama, dance and drawing can help provide a more ‘level playing field’ for all children, whatever their

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prior experience. Young children need opportunities to do and to draw, not just to talk (let alone write), especially at the limits of their understanding. In Salmon's words, (1995);

non-verbal materials, the use of images ... are perhaps particularly fertile in eliciting responses from highly personal, deeply intuitive levels of understanding. Trying too soon to find words for something felt but not yet known can often drive it into inaccessibility. Only after it has been anchored within a visual form can efforts to give it clear verbal formulation be valuable. (pp. 57-58)

Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996, 2006) emphasise the role of a more experienced learner helping to develop the less experienced learner's understanding, since meaning making is a social activity, involving initiation into a culture and its tools, or ways of understanding. However, they argue that this will succeed, at least in terms of cognition, only when the concepts to be learned are within the individual's Zone of Proximal Development – the area 'just beyond' his or her current level of understanding. Rogoff (1990, especially pp. 191-3) writes of 'guided participation', suggesting that adults are best placed to provide the necessary guidance in some respects notably "the development of skill in planning and remembering tasks in which adults are more skilled", whereas "in situations in which children are skilled and in charge ... peer interaction may hold special significance" (p. 193). Therefore, the most appropriate form of guidance will not always be that of an adult.

Dimensions of religion highlighted by Smart (see McCreery, Palmer & Voile, 2008, pp. 12-14) such as the practical and ritual, the narrative and the material are all part of the multi-layered tapestry of religious practice, potentially of both interest and benefit to children, when well presented. However, with young children, other dimensions, notably the doctrinal and philosophical and the ethical and legal, are less appropriate because they are too abstract and decontextualised. So, while activities and experiences need to be matched to the child's current understanding, the multi-layered nature of religious experience may mean that this match need not be as close as in cognitive and conceptual development. For instance, there is more scope for young children to interpret, make sense of the stories of faith or practices such as prayer in their own way than in mathematics or the mechanics of reading. But they should not be expected to 'understand' or represent the dimensions of religion in the same way as adults, especially through words. By expecting prematurely adult responses, or presenting answers in ways that make little sense to the child, educators risk failing to maintain children's engagement, or laying the foundations for later disengagement.

**Conscious and non-conscious learning:**

Bruner (1996,), summarising his own research, writes “infants ... were much smarter, more cognitively proactive rather than reactive, more attentive to the immediate social world around them, than had been previously suspected” (p. 71). In Isaacs' words, (1970) “the thirst for understanding springs from the child's deepest emotional needs” (p. 102). We are, from the start, learning creatures, searchers for, and active participants in meaning making. This is often described as agency - which, as Bruner (1996) suggests, "takes mind to be proactive, problem-oriented, attentionally focussed, selective, constructional, directed to ends" (p. 93). So, conscious learning is usually based on attending to, selecting and resolving problems and doing so actively and constructively.

However, learning does not only occur through conscious effort. Claxton (1997) describes 'slow ways of knowing' in which the brain discovers patterns and develops responses, often without conscious thought, involving intuition and imagination. He contrasts (1997) what he calls “conscious, deliberate, purposeful” learning with instantaneous, “instinctive” reactions and with another mental register that is “less purposeful and clear-cut, more playful, leisurely or dreamy” (p. 2). Enactive and iconic representation and response seem at times to by-pass conscious processes. Often, learning occurs when such ways of understanding and representing experience are used. For the unconscious to be allowed to work requires space and time, opportunities for reflection and silence. Too much effort, or interference, may block the search for meaning. Examples include where an idea from a picture or a story is allowed to resonate, rather than being subjected to immediate scrutiny, enabling connections and associations to be made. De Souza (2010), exploring the role of
conscious and non-conscious learning in enhancing spirituality, though not specifically in relation to the early years, emphasises the importance of the arts.

Traditions of moral education, especially, (see McLaughlin & Halstead, 1999), present example and habituation as particularly powerful learning mechanisms for young children, for instance by their conduct being modelled more on the actions of adults whom they know well, than on what is said. And the internalisation of values and beliefs comes more from repeated practice than from conscious intention, such as in becoming respectful, empathetic or inclusive. How adults act and interact matters at least as much as what they say, indicating the importance of qualities such as warmth and care and the ability to be attuned to young children’s emotions and responses.

Attributes and dispositions:

Much research (e.g. Claxton & Carr, 2004; Bruner, 1996) on learning in the early years emphasises what are variously called dispositions, habits of mind and attributes. For instance, Claxton (2002) highlights what he calls the 4Rs, resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and reciprocity. Eaude (2008, p. 63) lists others, suggesting that many, including the 4Rs and sociability are protective, while others such as wonder or playfulness, imagination and creativity are transformational, with many such as thoughtfulness, insight and enthusiasm helping both to protect and to transform. If the child is to be an active maker of meaning, these attributes are the building blocks of successful and sustained learning; and whatever activities or experiences are set up must be designed to help children to develop and use these.

While most attributes are not specific to religious education, and those which are may vary according to its purpose, religious education would seem particularly fertile for developing some. For example, Fuller (2006) suggests that “wonder prompts thinking in more abstract terms” (p. 81) and that it “connects us with something more” (p. 93). He cites Armstrong’s comment “the purpose of religion is holding us in a state of wonder” (p. vii) and Nussbaum’s conclusion that “wonder is the principal emotion which can lift us beyond the immediate pursuit of self-interest” (p. 14). Fuller (2006) argues that wonder is closely connected with curiosity, suggesting that “a life shaped by wonder ... is characterized by intellectual and moral sensibilities that open up the widest possible world of personal fulfilment” (p. viii) and that wonder is one defining aspect of spirituality and elicits belief in the existence of more-than-physical reality. Experiences which evoke wonder can help children (and adults) to gain a sense of their own perspective. Lack of experience makes experiences of wonder - by definition out of the ordinary - likely to be more usual for young children than for adults. Moreover, they may occur in specific contexts designed (in part) for that purpose (such as a visit to a beautiful place or a religious ceremony), but will often do so within the normal course of life.

This discussion indicates that in what context, by whom and how young children are introduced to activities and experiences matters profoundly, with the challenges related to the nature of religious ideas and adults exerting undue influence making this particularly pertinent for religious educators. Therefore, learning environments, considered in the next section, are especially important.

Creating appropriate environments:

Claxton and Carr (2004, pp. 91-2) summarise four broad types of learning environment:

- prohibiting - making it impossible or dangerous for children to express particular kinds of learning response, to persist and remain engaged over sustained periods, often as a result of a tightly scheduled programme;
- affording - providing opportunities for the development of a range of learning attributes, but in ways which may not be sufficient for all children;
- inviting - both affording the chance to ask questions or working with others, for example, and clearly valuing these, making them attractive and appealing; and
- potentiating - not only inviting the expression of certain dispositions, but actively ‘stretching’ and
thus developing them, often involving frequent participation in shared activity, with children taking some responsibility for directing activities.

While potentiating environments offer the greatest opportunity for children to develop attributes and dispositions, any learning environment should, as discussed in Eaude (2011, pp. 97-100), provide a balance of constraining and enabling elements such as:

- structure and freedom;
- haven and challenge; and
- conformity and creativity

Too much emphasis on the constraining elements risks over-protecting children and too much on the enabling ones risks providing insufficient guidance. Too much adult control restricts the search for meaning, whereas too little leaves children like unanchored ships. While this is true across the board, the unfamiliarity of many practices and the abstract nature of much of the language of religion emphasise the need for what Myers (1997) calls 'hospitable space' (p. 63). This enables children to question, to take risks and to create meaning, using a range of appropriate modes of representation, without the fear of failure. Such space offers the chance for three elements identified by Hay with Nye (1998):

- values sensing;
- awareness sensing; and
- mystery sensing

so that children can explore what matters, make sense of their feelings and experiences and approach what is uncertain, paradoxical or puzzling without necessarily having to reach definite explanations, as is often expected. Hospitable space involves opportunities for reflection, for silence and, if appropriate, for prayer, as well as for activity and experiences, and is an important element of an environment which potentiates (or empowers) children.

Hull argues (2007, pp. 178-9) that a 'systems' approach where several religions may be taught separately and systematically is inappropriate for young children; and that a thematic or topical approach where themes are illustrated from material drawn from several religions is only appropriate from about 9 years upwards. He advocates a more 'experiential' approach with young children - sensing, doing and touching, rather than relying on someone else's interpretation. Such an approach might involve, in general, singing, composing or listening to music, or observing an egg hatch or a plant grow or reflecting on the beauty of a poem or the death of a pet. In more specifically religious terms, this may involve visiting places of worship, seeing and perhaps handling artefacts and sacred texts and being introduced to the practices and festivals of different faiths and, as appropriate, taking part in elements of these. In schools, especially, this may entail helping children to engage with the richness and complexity of religions through hearing the stories of faith, recognising the significance of rituals, sacred places and symbols such as icons, the 5Ks of Sikhism or the pillars of Islam, and discussing how these are similar to, or differ, from their own experience. However, such activities can easily be tokenistic and superficial and children may understand in ways at odds with what adults intend. So, how they are introduced is very important, with Hull (2007) providing the useful framework of engagement, exploration, contextualisation and reflection in how to approach this; and, as discussed by Hull (2007) in relation to the Gift to the Child and Berryman (2002) to Godly Play, adults offering, inviting and giving. This can help even very young children both to learn about and, when done well, from religion, though they will often respond differently from adults; and possibly more directly, given that they rely less on language.

Play and story:

To exemplify the importance of how activities are introduced, this section considers the role of play and story, neither of which involve predetermined outcomes.
Play is widely seen to be central to how young children learn. Yet it is regarded in different ways among religious educators. For instance, in Berryman’s words, (2002) “play is much more important to religious education than either science or theology have led us to believe” (p. 47), yet this is little mentioned especially in relation to schools. For example, Ashton (2000) does not mention play and McCreery et al. (2008) only briefly. Among the reasons would seem to be a fear of the child being in control of the process and an emphasis on measurable outcomes.

A satisfactory definition of play is hard to find because the term covers so many types of activity and process. In McMahon’s words (1992) play is “a spontaneous and active process in which thinking, feeling and doing can flourish since they are separated from the fear of failure or disastrous consequences” (p. 1). In play, the individual, however small or insignificant, can experiment and explore, without having to take the consequences, especially the emotional ones, of failure. The child can operate with the meaning of something detached from what it appears to be, or is ‘in reality’. Hyde (2009) cites research which offers a theoretical rationale of how children’s play helps them imitate, and re-live, what they have experienced and enact events which enable them to express emotions (p. 38). This indicates that, in play, children can move easily between layers of pretence and reality. Hyde (2010) explores the links between agency, play and spirituality in greater detail.

Hyde (2009) discusses two approaches based on play which are widely used in faith communities, namely Godly Play (Berryman, 2002) and the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd (Cavalleti, 1992). Both involve the sharing and re-telling of stories through enacting a drama, with the adult guiding rather than dominating the activity. Berryman talks of the invitation to wonder as a central aspect of Godly Play. However, Hyde warns against what he calls pseudoplay, particularly dangerous as it disguises itself as play, with its features being that participation is:

- required rather than inherently pleasurable;
- based on predetermined learning outcomes rather than engaged in for its own sake;
- directed rather than spontaneous;
- passive rather than requiring engagement.

Hyde identifies four types of danger in pseudoplay:

- compulsion, misusing power to take control of the activity and the outcome;
- entertainment, making children into passive consumers;
- manipulation, exerting undue influence; and
- competition, since making meaning is inherently non-competitive and for every winner there are losers.

This resonates with Berryman and Hyde’s (2010) distinction between finite and infinite games, where the former is played within boundaries and the latter with boundaries, and their argument that religious education requires the latter, where the point is not to win, but to keep playing the game, in this case the making of meaning. So, adults must be careful not to misuse play or to over direct its outcomes.

Stories are a powerful means of teaching, working in multiple, subtle, often unconscious ways, including:

- connecting with other people and cultures;
- posing questions to encourage investigation of inference and motivation;
- nurturing the imagination;
- prompting reflection; and
- helping to provide a language through which to explore feelings and beliefs. (Eaude, 2011, p. 54)

Good stories are not only enjoyable and accessible but are open ended, allowing for alternative possibilities and courses of action. As Erricker (1998) writes, “real stories by virtue of being lived are necessarily
unfinished and beg questions rather than provide answers” (p. 101). Stories suggest and resonate, rather than preach, at least when told well, because they bear repeated re-telling by both teller and listener and provide a route for young children into generalisation and abstraction. In Anning’s words, (1991), “for children the function of narrative can be to enable them to move from the here and now of their immediate experiences to the more distanced ideas about what happened then and what might happen next. In other words, the narrative form is a potent resource to help children move to abstractions” (p. 37).

The role of stories in religious education may seem more obvious than that of play. The stories of faith have always been one key way in which faith communities have passed their messages across generations. Archetypal stories such as those of the Old Testament tell of human dilemma and frailty and those from different faith traditions indicate ways in which beliefs, practices and actions are linked. So stories are especially valuable for religious educators working with young children, as long as adults do not over explain or moralise. In Arendt’s words (1970), “storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it” (p. 105). Stories should be allowed to excite, to resonate and to set off new questions.

Implications for working with young children:

Bone (2010) suggests that young children need to:

- be accepted for what they are rather than just for what they may become;
- become transformed through the activities and experiences they encounter; and
- belong to larger entities and groups.

This highlights that many experiences not specifically 'religious' may contribute to young children's religious development. For instance, rites of passage such as a teacher leaving or celebration of a festival (see Bone, 2010) may help children to belong to a bigger group, for some an experience associated with religious faith, for others not. Some will rightly be individual, some shared with another person, some within a larger group; and some with specific religious input, others more to do with enabling children to reflect and to belong. However, the length and depth of young children's engagement is hard to judge. Therefore, activities and discussions should be led by children's questions and responses, providing opportunities to follow their lines of enquiry. This emphasises the importance of flexibility in planning and responsiveness in practice.

Similar themes are emphasised in the literature on young children's spiritual development, much of which (e.g. Hay with Nye, 1998; Eaude, 2005, 2008; Hyde, 2008) argues for an understanding which is inclusive and universal, rather than associated with a particular religious tradition. Eaude (2005) suggests that this involves “the search for answers to certain types of questions help(ing) one see it as a process, rather than a set of specific experiences. While the exact formulation can vary, these questions are of the type: ‘Who am I? Where do I fit in? Why am I here?’, questions of identity, place and purpose” (p. 245). This resonates with Coles' work (1990; and see Liddy, 2007 pp. 8-10) where children are seen “as seekers, as young pilgrims ... as anxious to make sense of (life) as those of us who are further along in the time allotted to us” (Coles, 1990, p. xvi). The subtitle of Hyde's book (2008) - searching for meaning and connectedness - summarises this succinctly, but adults must recognise that this search, whether within a religious context or not, may involve issues which may be distressing or painful for both adult and child. Moreover, this calls for an approach which is not just internal and individualistic, but rooted in children gaining a wider understanding of their place in society and beyond (see Eaude, 2009 and Wright 2000, pp. 75–7).

The literature on children’s spirituality emphasises the importance of relationships and a growing sense of connectedness with what is larger than oneself. For example, Hay with Nye (1998) identify four elements of ‘relational consciousness’:

- awareness of self;
- awareness of others;
- awareness of the environment; and
• (for some) awareness of a Transcendent Other.

This is closely linked to an emerging sense of identity, since young children are often centred on their own needs but learn over time how they fit into a ‘bigger picture’. But it leaves space for an understanding which may, but does not necessarily, include particular beliefs about God.

Priestley (2000) raises the intriguing question of whether children do develop spiritually, arguing that the connotations of this term with a gradient of improvement, value, and end-product, suggest an inappropriately Piagetian view of sequential stages. Both he and Smith (1999) suggest the alternative metaphor of growth, with Smith (1999) writing that, instead of a programmed sequence, we should think “in terms of creating spaces where spirituality is affirmed and spiritual growth can happen” (p. 4). This recalls the message of many religious traditions that children have attributes and insights not (easily) available to adults and of the importance of providing hospitable space rather than seeing children as vessels to be filled.

The implications for religious educators in different contexts:

This article has argued that religious educators should provide opportunities for young children to engage in the search for meaning in a variety of ways, but primarily through an experiential approach which involves nurturing children's spirituality and attributes such as wonder, often through indirect means such as play and story. The types of activity and experience will differ, because different settings will have varying aims and constraints placed upon them, by context, government or religious authorities. However, these should be appropriate to the age and current understanding of the group, so that different modes of representing and understanding experience, especially the enactive and iconic, are encouraged. Environments need to invite and enable, rather than restrict and prohibit, offering hospitable space, with relationships of trust and security and adults modelling attributes such as respect and wonder. With young children, especially, adults must recognise the danger of exerting undue influence and of closing down the search for meaning by avoiding ‘difficult’ questions and presenting answers too definitely, using language beyond the child's current level of understanding.

Recalling Grimmitt’s distinction, learning religion should, I suggest, be restricted to faith communities and, in some respects, schools with a religious character, although this will always be only one of several aims. Learning from religion(s) should be a key component of religious education in every type of early years setting. This helps those not affiliated to a faith community learn something of what religious faith entails and enriches the experience of those who are, by helping them to understand more fully their own tradition. However, teachers, especially, should recognise the danger of misrepresentation or tokenism, since there is a strong argument that religion can only be understood from ‘within’. Learning about religion(s) contributes to education more broadly, for instance in understanding differences of religious practice and belief, whatever the child’s background. Knowing at least some of the stories, beliefs and practices of different faith traditions would seem part of one’s cultural heritage. In the early years, this is likely to involve working from the child, group and local community's experiences to help children to recognise the place of religion in these.

Schools face particular challenges since children and families bring a wide range of experience and beliefs, especially given the demands of legislation and policy and the current emphasis on measurable outcomes. In the early years, this would seem to call for an approach which, where possible, draws on and celebrates the range of religious traditions within the school and local community. While adults should be sensitive to avoid expecting children to act in ways that conflict with the religious practices and beliefs learned at home or out of school, such sensitivity should not lead to an avoidance of religion or of profound questions, though the latter should usually emerge from the children’s own responses and questions. Similar considerations apply for those working in faith-based settings for pedagogical, pragmatic and ethical reasons. While an emphasis on incorporation into the faith community is likely to be more appropriate and easier in such settings, the danger of exercising undue influence is one particularly to be recognised. Leaving space for children to wonder and ask further questions is often harder for those who bring a definite, but adult, understanding of
faith. But, in every setting, religious education in the early years should have broader purposes than incorporating children into a faith community or simply providing them with information about religion; and should take account of the different ways in which young children learn.

References:


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IDEAS FOR PRACTITIONERS

Maureen Hemmings*

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD INTO THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Introduction

Over the past five years many schools in Australia have begun to adapt the principles of Godly Play to break open scripture in the Religious Education classroom. Both Nye, (2003) and Berryman, (2002a) acknowledge its use in different settings such as schools. Developed by Jerome Berryman Godly Play incorporates story, wonder, awe, and silence to help children learn religious language, experience God, and “confront the....existential questions that all people, even children, have” (Nye & Privett, 2008, p. 8).

Crossing the threshold

In a Godly Play lesson there are two significant adults with specific roles to play, the doorperson and the storyteller. The role of the doorperson is to greet children at the door (threshold) by name and welcome them into the space asking them if they are ready to hear the story. The threshold or doorway becomes the entering space between the outside world and the story space through which the child enters to hear the story. When the child enters the room the storyteller is waiting with the story materials ready to welcome each child into the circle. As children cross the threshold they enter into a new space leaving the outside world behind. Once every child has entered the room and is seated, the time of storytelling begins.

Telling the story

Stories are told simply and without interpretation or moral instruction (Nye, 2004). The doorperson has a significant role ensuring that children who might disrupt the telling of the story are within view. While ‘telling the story’ the storyteller focuses on the materials avoiding eye contact with children. After a story is presented the storyteller again makes eye contact with children while they wonder together about aspects of the story. Some of the wondering questions might be: “I wonder what part of the story you liked best. I wonder what part of the story is about you” (Nye & Privett, 2008, p. 3). As explained by Nye (2004), “there is no attempt to manipulate responses to reach a premature ‘teaching point’ or to explain what the storyteller really means” (p. 3). The storyteller is an important part of the ‘wondering’ process. Wondering is about modelling and supporting as opposed to ‘what is your answer?’ The storyteller must be supportive to the needs of the group and have an awareness of when it is appropriate to invite a child, or adult to say more about their initial response or when it is appropriate to ask a follow up, unplanned, wondering question (Long, Nicholson, Langford, & Hemmings, 2009).

Responding to the story

After a time of exploring and wondering, the story is put away and the children choose materials they would like to work with to respond to the story. This individual response time allows time for further discovery of meaning as the children each choose for themselves ways to respond using a wide variety of art and craft materials, or the actual story materials themselves ‘in their own way’. These are not ‘craft activities’ with a finished product in mind. The art and craft materials are there to provide tools for the child’s imagining, expressing and reflecting (Cleary & Moffat, 2009, p. 4). Typically this personal time ends
with re-forming as a group, for a prayer response drawing upon their experiences. In some instances the children may share ‘the feast’ which could be a drink of cordial or water and a biscuit.

This approach uses simple, yet beautiful, natural materials, sparse language and movement, and quiet centering response time and is useful for all ages, though it is especially designed for children 3 to 11 years old. This tradition honours the child’s natural sense of the sacred and enables children to experience God while learning about God. It is learned from the inside out. Godly Play is also deeply satisfying for the adults who engage the stories along with the children. Each Godly Play classroom and time will be different based on the space, the storyteller and doormark, the children and the time allotted. One day the focus might be just on the storytelling, other days the focus may be on responding to the story. The overall goal is to use this Godly Play approach to help children learn religious language and, even more importantly, to be able to use that religious language to process their lives.

Community

Godly Play focuses on the importance of community, especially the community that exists amongst the children. In a Godly Play space children learn and practise basic ideas such as sharing and respecting the work and play of other children. Berryman (2002a) writes that “Godly Play teaches kindness and mutuality through its rituals and by the way it organizes physical space, objects and the community of children. A Godly Play community embodies the biblical ethic of how people are to live together” (p. 19). Children learn how to live and be together in the Godly Play classroom environment.

Tips for teachers

A story using the principles of Godly Play is best told with two adults working together as storyteller and doormark. The story is also best told not read. In a school setting you can invite a teacher/parent helper to be the doormark. When you cross the threshold into the classroom try to have the classroom looking a little different by creating a new space. You won’t know how successful this can be until you have a go!

References


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BETH NOLEN*

SOME STRATEGIES FOR PRAYER WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDENTS

Here are some practical ideas that might assist early years religious educators create a wonderful learning environment for prayer, and to engage children in positive prayer experiences at an age where faith can be openly expressed and whole heartedly lived.

Step 1: Establish a ‘culture’ for prayer.

- All children in your class need to be able to answer this question: “What do we do when it is time for prayer?” This means that students need to be taught that prayer time is about spending time with God, so it is important that we do not interrupt other people and we learn to be silent. When we spend time with God we need to be able to listen carefully deep in our hearts, otherwise we might miss God’s whispers deep inside us.

- Decide on a focal point for prayer that will be what is usually used in your classroom. This could be gathering around a prayer table or a prayer mat. A highly cost effective and treasured prayer mat can be made by taking a large piece of calico cloth and inviting children to decorate it with paint or pastels (use hairspray afterwards to set the pastel). Children can draw themselves, write their names or paint their handprints to decorate the prayer mat, and a parent might be willing to sew a coloured piece of fabric around the edge as a border. Already, students will begin to love prayer time because they have contributed something wonderful. Teach children that when the prayer mat is placed on the floor it is time to sit around it in silence, because the special time for prayer is about to begin. Each week have two children on a roster system to bring out a candle and one or two other symbols (Bible, crucifix, statue of a holy person…) to place in the centre of the prayer mat.

- If you have space in your classroom for a prayer table, cover it in material according to the colour of the liturgical season and ensure that it is never left to hide under clutter (what message would this give the students?). Keep the display on the prayer table simple, but change it regularly so that it is dynamic because the seasons of the Church, our world and our lives change regularly. The prayer table needs to reflect what is important in our lives that we bring to God through prayer. Another strategy is to hang a ‘poster’ at the front of the prayer table that could change weekly. The ‘poster’ might have the words to a particular prayer for the children to pray that week, or it could be a quote from Scripture.

Step 2: Introduce children to many different ways of praying.

- Prayer without words – ask children to lie down in a sensible place, close their eyes and imagine they are like a sponge, soaking up God’s love. (Teaching points: Not only can we pray lying down, but we can also pray without using words.)

- Prayer using imagination – asks children to find a quiet space, close their eyes and imagine themselves in a beautiful place, talking with God (or Jesus). Encourage children to use this time to tell God (or Jesus) anything they want to about their lives, and to listen to see if God (or Jesus) wants to say anything to them. When children appear to have had enough quiet time (they will be able to engage in this prayer experience for longer periods of time with practice) ask them to say goodbye to God (or Jesus) and imagine themselves coming back to this place, then open their eyes when they are ready. (Teaching points: We can use our imagination for prayer, and we can go to this special place whenever we like to meet God (or Jesus).}

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It can be also helpful to *invite* children to draw what they imagined and talk about it with you, as this gives you an insight into not only how many children could actually engage in the prayer experience but how each child has begun to understand God. However, respect children’s decision if they do not wish to talk to you about their drawings. These insights inform your teaching and provide you with an opportunity to challenge the whole class later about some of the early formed assumptions about God that you heard (“I wonder what God is like? I wonder if God is an old man who lives up in the clouds or if God is very close to us?”) and to affirm some early formed beliefs about God.

- **Mantra prayers** – invite children to sit in ‘a prayer position’ with their backs straight. Encourage children to close their eyes (some children will take a long time before they can do this so just keep gently encouraging and creating the culture where that is what everyone else does so usually they will eventually join in) and notice how their body is breathing. Ask children to join in saying a mantra prayer in time together, such as “Jesus, you’re friend to all”. Explain to children that when they breathe in they say the word “Jesus” and when they breathe out they say “you’re friend to all”. As the class becomes confident with this mantra prayer, repeating the phrase with each breath, ask them if they can be clever enough to keep it going inside their heads, so no one but God can hear what they are saying. Observe carefully. Often young children will raise their shoulders high with each breath, and you will see that some children will engage in this prayer activity with their whole being. (Teaching point: Mantra prayers are prayers where people say the same thing over and over again, and as they do this they can come to the place deep inside them where God is waiting for them.)

Young children can be very good at creating their own mantra prayers once they have been taught how to pray mantra prayers. Ask the class, “What else could we pray to God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit, keeping it short so that we can fit all the words into our breathing?” They will come up with other examples such as:

- Jesus, you are with me.
- Holy Spirit, help me.
- God, I trust you.

Create a class poster or book of different mantra prayers and keep adding to it throughout the year. Sometimes you can invite a child to choose a specific mantra prayer for the class to pray that day, and sometimes you can encourage children to choose their own mantra prayer.

- **Prayer through movement** – take some of the mantra prayers that children have created to make a four line prayer, and ask children to create some actions they could do for each line of the prayer. The following prayer was created by year two students which included actions.
  “God, we praise you” (everyone raise their hands upwards)
  “God, we thank you” (everyone hold their hands out in front)
  “God, we love you” (everyone hold their hands over their hearts)
  “God we follow you” (everyone join hands with the person each side of them and raise arms up).

- **Prayer through drawing** – provide children with paper and pencils and invite them to draw a picture about anything they like. It could be a picture of their family, a place they like to go, our beautiful world...encourage each child to come up with their own ideas for a picture. When children are mid-way through their drawing explain that they can use their pictures to make a special prayer, because if they look carefully at their pictures they can find something that they could say to God about their picture. For example, “Thank you God for the flowers. Please help us to look after our trees and flowers.” Or “God, please help my family”. Talk with each child and ask them to tell you about their picture, and what prayer they would like to say. Write the prayer on the child’s picture (you may need to assist a little with the formulation of the prayer sentence but most children have clear ideas about what they want to pray about based on their picture). When everyone has finished have a special time for class prayer.
Step 4: Cherish and celebrate time for prayer.

Prayer provides students with opportunities for personal healing, growth of their inner selves and enables them to have strategies for decision making and deciding how they want to live. Prayer is a tool for life, so teaching young children how to enter that deep space within themselves where they can encounter God helps equip them with resilience and affirm that they are unique and unconditionally loved. Give students the message that prayer time is very special, and this is something they can do forever. Publish prayers in the school newsletter and in the Church and school foyer to demonstrate that their prayers are valued (and maybe other people might even want to pray their prayers because they are great prayers). Create a class book of prayers throughout the year and invite parents to class prayer times.

Editor’s Note regarding prayer in the early childhood setting:
When planning class prayer it is important to be aware of those young students in the class who are not Christians ensuring that they know that during prayer they can pray their own prayers. In doing this we are not only acknowledging the Other, but also enacting a pluralist approach.

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SHARED COFFEE MUSINGS: ESSENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN HOLDING TOGETHER THE TWO PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES OF INTENTIONAL TEACHING AND PLAY IN THE EARLY YEARS RELIGION PROGRAM

The notions of intentional teaching and the more traditional concept of child-centred, play based learning are not held comfortably together by some early childhood teachers. It has been suggested that many early childhood educators resist the very use of the term ‘teaching’ to describe what it is that they do (McArdle & McWilliams, 2005). In Australia, the introduction of the national early childhood curriculum document, *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) and the legislative requirement to employ university qualified early childhood teachers in the prior to school sector (COAG, 2009) has increased a focus on the pedagogical approach of intentional teaching towards specifically identified learning outcomes. This increased emphasis on intentional teaching has caused some early childhood educators angst, as they fear it could lead to a decreased emphasis on play.

Our intention in this short conversation between the two of us is to explore five key elements that early childhood teachers might consider in effectively holding together these two essential approaches to early childhood education and what that might mean for early years religious educators.

1. **Articulate what it is that teachers do:**

   **Louise:** It is important that early childhood teachers are able to *articulate* to all stakeholders what it is that they do in the work of early childhood education and care (ecce). The work of teachers is to *teach* and the work of children is to *play*. Play is a pedagogical tool drawn on by teachers to support children’s learning, but, for children, play is what they do.

   **Jan:** Gabriel Moran (2002) argues that it is imperative for teachers to make the distinction between the two processes teaching and learning: *teachers teach and students learn*. “The teacher is not responsible for the students’ learning; the teacher is responsible for teaching. The student is responsible for learning; the teacher and the student are responsible to each other” (p. 191). This purposeful focus on what it is that teachers do also needs to be articulated by early childhood religious educators.

2. **Experience a learning pathway with each child and tell different a different story of each child:**

   **Louise:** When early childhood teachers work with outcomes for children’s learning (something they have always done in some way) they can approach this teaching requirement with an understanding that there is
more than one way to find your path through the outcomes maze. Although there may be a set of particular, albeit generalized, outcomes early childhood teachers are working with, each child is different. The path each child takes towards achieving outcomes identified in a curriculum document can be different. Each different path is like an individual story and each child's learning can be a collection of stories. The stories told for each child’s learning are different and each is legitimate. Another important consideration in holding together intentional teaching and play based learning is for teachers to give themselves permission to experience a learning pathway with each child and to have a different collection of stories to tell of each child.

Jan: In addition to the diverse range of familial, cultural, and societal backgrounds from which children come, early childhood religious educators also recognize the diversity of children’s religious backgrounds and seek to find different ways to respond to that individually with each child. For example, for the young child who has never had any contact with the Bible their understanding of the various settings of biblical stories is negligible and teachers know that this affects how they would hear such stories. Teachers then might decide that it would be more effective to activate children’s interest in, and appreciation of, biblical desert stories through play before intentionally introducing and teaching such stories. They might set up the sand pit to include some figures and various blocks for children to explore freely through play over the few days prior to introducing the story in a more intentional way. It would then be important for the teacher to document the story of each child’s engagement in the play and how that might then impact on their later engagement with the story.

3. Valuing difference when working collegially

Louise: Differences in teaching and learning contexts also extend to the ways in which teachers themselves work. Within any teaching team the capacity to work collaboratively while acknowledging the value of difference in pedagogical practices is an essential element.

Jan: Yes, just as it is important for teachers to know they can implement a variety of teaching strategies and activities for individual children, it is also important that they know and appreciate that within a teaching team wherein they plan collaboratively, each teacher is an individual with their own unique gifts and approaches. It is fine to have varying ideas and to implement the agreed curriculum plan differently. For example, after planning a shared unit on the liturgical seasons, one teacher might prefer to initiate the unit through a children’s literature picture book such as “All through the Year” (Godwin & Walker, 2010), whereas another might begin with an excursion to the church to investigate which colour is used to decorate the different parts of the church, or another asking the parish priest to show the children some of his different coloured vestments. One is not more correct than another.

Louise: As an early childhood educator, I would suggest that it is important to focus on why you have decided to take the different approach. If the planning of your teaching approach is informed by the particular group of children you are working with then your approach will be unique to that group of children at that point in their learning. Next time you engage with the same content, but with a different group of children, your approach may be completely different.

4. Decision making and implementation of teaching and learning experiences.

Louise: A child centred approach to teaching and learning does not place sole responsibility for making decisions in the hands of the children. Just because the children are at the centre of curriculum decision making does not mean that the teacher is not part of the mix. The teacher has an essential role in contributing to the decision making process.

Jan: Who is in the driver’s seat and who is the navigator?

Louise: Yes, this I suppose introduces the concepts of agency and power but it is important to consider everyone’s position – the teacher and the children. There will be times when it is appropriate for children (or an individual child) to be the decision maker and times when it is important for teachers to take on that role.

Jan: This is interesting because we can assume that it is the driver who is "in control" but from a different perspective it could be argued that the role of the navigator determines the direction. I once worked with
an early childhood teacher where we introduced process drama (Warren, 1999) based on the gospel of Jesus meeting Zacchaeus. This involved some essential intentional teaching background about tax collection and the role of the tax collector in those times. The drama itself was excellent and certainly the teacher was the driver but it was what happened with this drama after the morning tea break that became very intriguing. Two of the boys ran and found a couple of boxes and set up a form of a stall/barrier in front of the outside play equipment. They then made themselves a sign and took on the role of two tax collectors and would not let anyone onto the equipment until they had paid their taxes. It is as if these boys became the navigators and steered the drama into another direction.

5. Establishing and maintaining the learning environment to reflect teacher’s pedagogical philosophy

Louise: The establishment and maintenance of the learning environment (physical, social and emotional) is reflective of a teacher’s pedagogical philosophy. The environment is representative of your images of children as learners and your image of yourself as a teacher. Do you, through the way in which you organise your classroom, position yourself as the one that needs to be in control and children in a more passive role as learners? Do you create an environment that acknowledges children as competent, capable learners who are able (given the right opportunities) to actively contribute to their learning?

Jan: Mmm... This is such an important consideration and I am not sure how many early childhood religious educators would think about the environment in this way when implementing the early years religion program. It seems that many ‘religion lessons’ are done with children sitting in a circle listening to a Bible story and then ending with a prayer. If teachers could give more explicit thought to how they image the child in the religion program whether as passive recipient or active agent, and then how they might establish the environment to reflect that image, the ‘religion lesson’ could be so much more than the circle of sitting; it could spill out into the wider environment and have the potential to involve play along with intentional teaching. A very exciting prospect.

As the coffee cups are packed away...

Reflecting what we do as teachers, whatever the context, is a constant professional requirement – maybe one ‘constant’ in the ever changing world of education. The current changes in the early childhood context provide exciting opportunities for emphasising the value of intentional teaching within a play focused learning environment. It is how early years teachers themselves respond to these opportunities that will have the greatest impact on raising awareness of the teaching that can and does take place as children engage in play.

References


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Many of the concerns of new teachers centre on practical rather than conceptual issues. How do I plan a lesson? What do I need to consider in developing a seating plan for my class? How do I set out a worksheet for maximum effect? How do I deal with disruptive students? These are some of the questions that would be very familiar to those who work in teacher education. The strength of Mayotte’s book is that it addresses issues such as these. As such, it is a useful book for those who are commencing to teach in denominational schools as it situates these concerns in a faith-based educational setting. Although the title suggests that it is restricted to those who work in Catholic schools it has a broader scope. Mayotte writes from an American context where there is no overarching, national framework for Catholic schools. As a result, the intention in the book appears to be to cover a range of school settings. It could be used by teachers who are working in independent schools with a Christian affiliation. In many cases teachers working in these circumstances are in need of a good, general guide and I think Mayotte’s book provides sound practical advice and some useful suggestions. It is not a comprehensive work but is best used as a complementary resource, alongside other materials.

Each chapter is set out in a thoughtful and engaging way. They begin with a brief summary of recent research on the topic and outline some practical examples, what the author calls “in action”. Each chapter also nominates some teaching and learning strategies that can be used in elementary or high schools. The range of advice used here is a little too broad and detracts from one of the features of the book, namely, its practical focus. I think a more effective way of presenting pedagogical points would be to concentrate on one level of schooling. The tone that Mayotte sets seems to be aimed much more at new teachers who are working with younger students. The book, therefore, would be improved if it took as its target audience beginning primary or elementary school teachers. All the same, the author’s intention is not to be comprehensive but to provide the novice a way into the profession by signposting some key and indicative ideas. The personal comments from teachers in the field, which appear in each chapter, are a little overdone. By providing too many of these, without any obvious editing, the author gives this section an eclectic feel, which is out of the place in the book as a whole.

The first chapter address, “The Catholic Classroom”. Some of this is specific to Catholic schools but much could be used by teachers working in other religiously affiliated schools. The prayer resources provided, for instance, could have general applicability. After this chapter the book deals with some perennial issues, many of which are directly relevant to the new teachers. Chapters are given over to managing the classroom by establishing procedures and routines, effective use of classroom time and ideas about assessment and communication. The third chapter is particularly helpful as it orientates the new teacher toward a rules and consequences approach to cultivating classroom culture. The author sets out a number of foundational principles, highlighting the importance of the teacher – student relationship, which set the basis for an enriching classroom culture. I was surprised that there was there was not a chapter on
teaching religious education as this is a critical part of working in a Catholic school, especially at the elementary level. It is also an area that many new teachers find challenging.

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Within the state and public sectors, the role of religious education within the primary school and the manner in which it should be implemented has been the subject of much debate. In responding to the delivery of a non-statutory framework within the English context, as well as the emphasis on a creative primary curriculum, Clive Erricker and his colleagues present in this book a pedagogical framework which encourages conceptual enquiry, linking theory to its implementation within the broader curriculum in schools. The approach detailed is based upon a specific project in the south of England which was initiated by Erricker during his time as the Hampshire county inspector religious education.

The book is divided into three parts. The first, titled “Religious Education in the primary Curriculum” explores the importance of RE, the factors which might comprise “good” RE, and the components necessary for creating effective learning. From an academic perspective, this is a well written and informative section, presenting a detailed account of RE in England in an historical and contemporary context, and is underpinned by the work of several notable theorists, including Ninian Smart, Michael Grimmitt, and Robert Jackson. However, practitioners and indeed pre-service teachers (the intended audience for this book, according to the publisher), will find this complex reading, in spite of Erricker’s worthy attempts to demystify the material through engaging sub-headings, such as “Religion and religious education – something to laugh about”.

The second part of the book, titled “Conceptual enquiry as an approach to RE and the primary curriculum” details Erricker’s research agenda into the spirituality and worldviews of children, the findings of which led to a conceptual enquiry methodology to show how religious education can be a vehicle for explicitly promoting the formation of young people’s identities and enhancing their religious literacy. In practice, this was realized in the 2006 publication of *Living Difference*, the agreed syllabus for Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southhampton. Underpinning the conceptual enquiry methodology is the notion of constructivism, and in particular, Michael Grimmitt’s understanding of a constructivist pedagogy. In the English context, where religious education is part of the National curriculum, having a place in state schools, this is not particularly problematic. However, in confessional contexts, such as faith-based schools, a constructivist pedagogy in religious education may prove to be more difficult, since it posits that human knowledge is subject to multiple interpretations, and is controversial by nature (Grimmitt, 2000). In faith-based schools, such as Catholic schools, questions could be raised about the extent to which constructivist approaches in religious education (or at least Grimmitt’s notion of a constructivist pedagogy) are both appropriate or effective, since ultimately students are introduced to a meta-narrative which has already been constructed and sanctioned. Just how free can students really be in their constructions, and is the meta narrative of the Christian story open to multiple interpretations? It is precisely this point that was raised by Ota (2001) in exploring the conflict between pedagogical effectiveness and spiritual development in Catholic schools. Nonetheless, this is an interesting part of the book, and practitioners will find much thought provoking material here, as well some practical suggestions in terms of concepts common to many world religions.

The third part of the book, aptly titled “Transforming your practice” explores how an inquiry-based syllabus might be put into practice in the classroom context, the strategies and resources that might be used by
teachers (in particular non-specialist RE teachers – an pressing issue in the English context), and a vision for primary education and RE. The material in this third part tends to have a valuable practical application, but is nonetheless underpinned by sound educational theory.

While this book will be a valuable resource for classroom practitioners, and possibly pre-service teachers here in Australia, the particularities of the context in which Erricker and his colleagues write (RE in state schools in England and Wales) need to be kept in mind. Indeed some familiarity with such a context would be helpful for potential readers of this book outside of England. Pre-service teachers in Australia may, I suspect, struggle with the complexity of the material, particularly in the early parts of the text. It takes time to engage in a text such as this, and for practicing classroom teachers of religious education, time is both a precious and limited commodity. This fact may, unfortunately, render the book somewhat inaccessible to many. At a more philosophical level, teachers in faith-based schools would need to be aware of the constructivist pedagogy which underpins Erricker’s notion of conceptual inquiry, and question whether or not such an approach is appropriate or even realistic in confessional religious education.

Notwithstanding, Erricker and his colleagues have produced a persuasive and compelling text. If afforded the time required to engage with its content, it may provide both academics and practitioners of religious education with a firm basis for further developing their thinking about religious education as a subject, how it is placed in the primary curriculum and how it may be successfully implemented in schools.

References


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JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION is a refereed publication for the academic exploration of the task of religious education in modern society. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in religious education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. It includes a variety of feature sections -- on contemporary educational issues, book reviews, conferences, resources and practical hints for teachers. Articles for publication on religious education in various contexts and on the related areas noted above, as well as on any of the feature sections are welcome. See the inside back cover for details.

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