**Children and Spirituality**

Making prayer meaningful for students and developing skills to go beyond the knowledge of prayer, to touch the heart, is the challenge for every parent. A challenge for us is to come to a better understanding of what spirituality is and not confuse ‘God-talk’ with spirituality as Hay and Nye suggests (Hay & Nye, 1996). Spirituality is accepted as universal and innate in all of us but it is not synonymous with religiosity (Rossiter 2010).

A child is born contemplative which is a natural capacity to know God (Hay and Nye, 1996). Hay and Nye state that this innate spiritual capacity in children changes focus and form as they grow and other capacities develop (Hay and Nye, 1996). We should provide opportunities that deal with these changes not only through knowledge but those that touch the heart so that children’s spirituality can continue to mature. This a major factor in developing the whole child.

It is commonly agreed that spirituality is a natural human predisposition and that all humans possess this quality whether or not they belong to or practice a religious tradition (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008). Biologists and psychologists acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension in humans. A British zoologist Alister Hardy suggests that spirituality has evolved through the process of natural selection because if provides a positive function and enables humans to survive (Hyde, 2008).

Literature supports the psychological perspective that all people are capable of apperceiving of spiritual experience (Hyde, 2008). William James, a psychologist called spirituality ‘personal religion’ and states that numerous people experience spirituality in a variety of ways and is often used to find meaning in life, solutions to difficulties and problems of value (Hyde, 2008). He states, these experiences provide people with insight into the depths of truths which is not measured or understood by discursive intellect (Hyde, 2008).

A Canadian scholar Elaine Champagne proposes that the spiritual experience is the human experience. She states that spirituality is about the search for unification and integrity as the spirituality of each individual helps muster their inner resources to work towards a unified and harmonious existence making them a more relative human being (Hyde, 2008). This then allows them to relate more effectively with themselves and others and in our Christian context, God. Champagne also argues that, ‘spirituality as a quality of consciousness which refers to the capacity of a person to reflect, to maintain a distance from, or describe an experience, and the capacity of abstraction’ (as cited in Hyde, 2008, p. 54).

In contrast to some cognitive theorists Hay, Nye and Champagne believe that young children have these capabilities at a young age. They believe that children appear to be intuitive towards relationships even though they mightn’t have the language to express it (Hyde, 2008).

Tobin Hart, an American Psychologist also agrees with these previous scholars and identified five spiritual characteristics of children’s spirituality:

1. Wisdom which comes from an openness of heart and mind where children easily have the capacity to get to the heart of the matter even though they may not be able to explain it;
2. Wonder/awe which refers to the way the world is sensed by children through their feelings of joy, connectedness, and insight which is the cornerstone of their spiritual life;
3. Relationship between themselves and others which refers to how they treat each other and the capacity they have to show concern for others through feelings of empathy and compassion;
4. Seeing the invisible - Awareness of mystery and the universe being multidimensional where children have the capacity to feel energy, able to tune into more subtle levels of reality and find insightful inspiration; and
5. Wondering in relation to the ultimate questions of life

(Hart, 2003).

Hyde similarly identified four characteristics of children’s spirituality in his research which you can see incorporates the same aspects that Hart denotes:

1. The felt sense
2. Integrating awareness
3. Weaving the threads of meaning, and
4. Spiritual questioning (Hyde, 2008).

Spirituality is concerned primarily with relationships and in our Catholic context could include a deep relationship with our divine God if we seek to nurture this in our children through religious education programs (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008). Prayer is an essential element in developing one’s spirituality (Bretherton, 1995). It is through prayer that children connect with each other and with God and are able to express and deepen their relationship with the divine (Bretherton, 1995). Prayer is at the heart of Christian spirituality through which we are called to love ourselves, our neighbours and God (Bretherton, 1999).

Theorists (Hay, Nye, Hyde, Champagne and Rossiter) suggest that Spiritualty is an essential part of every human and it is the core for faith formation within our Catholic tradition. Children particularly are open and receptive to developing their spirituality because they clearly possess a rich spirituality in their lives (Christie, 2008). It is our job as parents to help nurture each child’s spirituality by spending time with them to build their skills and alerting them to the features and characteristics of their spirituality (Hyde, 2008). If we can build on the ‘spiritual competence’ that each child is born with, as Christie says, then the development of faith can be made possible (Christie, 2008). For this to occur it is imperative that adult understand the long term benefits of Spirituality and value its contribution in developing the whole person.

The study of children’s spirituality is relatively new and although Hart identifies five areas of spirituality and Hyde identifies four, they acknowledge that more aspects will be revealed in time (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008). Using these known features teachers now have a framework in which they can work. To recognise and understand the importance of spiritualty in each of our lives, we need to broaden our view and adjust our thinking to accept the notion that regardless of a person’s religion, spirituality is expressed through relationships with the human and non-human world (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008).

To build spirituality, prayer needs to be invitational where children choose to join in the prayer freely and not forced into a traditional formal prayer style (Nolen, 2014). Beth Nolen promotes that prayer experiences need to engage all the five senses and include both verbal and non-verbal elements (Nolen, 2014). She states that prayer should be seen as a relationship with God which permeates one’s whole life which is more than just talking to God (Nolen, 2014). Nolen suggests while traditional formal and informal prayers of praise, thanksgiving, petition and sorrow have their place and purpose; it is meditation, contemplative prayer and other types of prayer through movement, journal writing and music that can ignite the passion for spirituality (Nolen, 2014). Meditation uses guided imagery, story, scripture, nature and art to focus the senses while contemplative prayer involves silence, mantras and breath prayer to still the body as the person can get in touch with their inner core – the heart. Offering different ways to pray engages the child with the Spirit and can help entwine their personal story into the fabric of Catholic life.

Acknowledging that spirituality is a natural human disposition, a quality that all humans possess, whether they belong to a religious tradition or not could be the catalyst for spiritual integration in children and thus help to retain their spirituality as they become adults (Hyde & Rymarz, 2008). It is essential to understand that the pedagogy of teaching the spiritual dimension that engages children at a personal level is not going to be automatic because personal change both for the teacher and the child is influenced by many factors outside the classroom (Rossiter, 2009). However acceptance and belief in its value is the first step.