

“LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD”: A REFLECTION ON A FACTOR WHICH MAY INHIBIT CHILDREN’S EXPRESSION OF THEIR SPIRITUALITY

Abstract

While there has been an increase in empirical research which explores the spirituality of children, few studies have explicitly named and described in detail factors which may inhibit children’s expression of their spirituality. This paper, emanating from the author’s own research into the characteristics of children’s spirituality in Australian Catholic primary schools, presents and describes one such factor, which has been termed *material pursuit*. Examples of hermeneutic phenomenological writing – the texts – in which *material pursuit* was revealed, are presented, followed by a reflection upon the text guided by van Manen’s lifeworld existentials (lived body, lived time, lived space, lived human relations). In the light of this reflection some initial implications for nurturing the spirituality of children within primary religious education classrooms are suggested.

Living in a material world, and I am a material girl
Madonna (1985)

Introduction

In recent years a growing body of literature has sought to explore and describe various aspects of the spirituality of children (e.g., Fisher, 1999; Adams, 2003; Champagne, 2003; Hart, 2003; Eaude, 2004; Hay & Nye, 2006). Much of the author’s own research into children’s spirituality, conducted within an Australian context, has also identified various characteristics of children’s spirituality. These have been reported elsewhere (Hyde, 2003, 2005a, b, 2006a; forthcoming). Recently, however, the author reported on one of two factors identified in his research which may inhibit children’s expression of their spirituality (Hyde, 2006b).

This paper discusses the second of these factors, which has been termed *material pursuit*. This particular factor was gleaned from data forming part of a larger research study investigating the spirituality of Catholic primary school children in Australia (Hyde, 2005c). The epigraph to this paper provides a fitting backdrop to the exploration of this inhibiting factor. Although the line from this popular song (Brown & Rans, 1985) emanates from American culture, it describes aptly the materialist and secular context in which Australian children can find themselves, and in which *material pursuit* was exhibited. An awareness of this particular factor on the part of religious educators working in Catholic schools who seek to nurture the spirituality of their students is necessary in order that a means by which to counteract its emergence may be sought and implemented.

Describing spirituality

Throughout the author’s research, spirituality has been understood to be more primal than institutional religion, and to be concerned with an individual’s sense of connectedness with self, others, the cosmos, and with the Transcendent (e.g. Elton-Chalcraft, 2002; Fisher, 1999; O’Murchu, 2000; Tacey, 2000; 2003). In expanding upon such an understanding, de Souza (2004) has argued that spirituality involves a journey towards Ultimate Unity. Such a movement can be understood to spiral

through different layers of connectedness with self, others, the world, and possibly with the Transcendent, which generally move forward towards deeper and wider levels, but which could recede depending upon the particular contexts of an individual’s experiences. de Souza has further argued that such forward movement, for some individuals, has the potential to lead to the deepest and widest level of connectedness, where the individual experiences becoming one with Other, that is, Ultimate Unity. These conclusions support aspects of neurobiological research, particularly that of Austin (2000) and of Newberg, d’Aquili and Rause (2001) who have described the neurobiology of transcendence as a movement towards Absolute Unitary Being, when Self blends into Other, and mind and matter become one and the same. Newberg and his colleagues have proposed the notion of a “unitary continuum” (p. 145), where at one pole, a person may interact with the world and with others, but may experience this interaction as something from which she or he is apart. As that person progresses along the unitary continuum, the sense of separateness becomes less distinct, and could lead to individual experiences of sacredness, and experiences of unity with Other as encountered in community, creation and possibly in the Transcendent. Such a notion would be consistent with, and describe in neurological terms, the Buddhist meditative state of *anatta*, literally meaning *no-self*, or the Hindu notion of an individual’s authentic “Self” as being identified with the Absolute, the Brahman, or the Christian mystical experience described by Merton (1978) of Self as being one with the Divine.

Characteristics of children’s spirituality may then be described in terms of a movement towards the type of unity described above, that is, in terms of being located somewhere along the unitary continuum. They are characteristics which may lead children towards experiences of unity with Other. However, factors which inhibit expressions of spirituality effectively prevent movement towards the deeper and wider levels of connectedness. Therefore, contexts in which inhibiting

factors are present may result in children experiencing their interaction with the world and with others as something from which they are apart.

Method

Three Australian Catholic primary schools – one in an inner city location, one in a suburban location, and one in a rural location – were chosen as the research sites in which to conduct the investigation. The participants comprised small groups of children in Year 3 (approximately 8 years old) and in Year 5 (approximately 10 years old). Initially, the researcher spent one 2 hour session each week over a period of 5 weeks in each of the classrooms from which the children were eventually drawn. The purpose of these visits was for the researcher to orient himself to the research site. Such prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) also assisted the researcher to establish a rapport with these children.

At the conclusion of this 5 week period in each school, two small groups of 6 children – one at Year 3 and one at Year 5 – were selected on an indiscriminate basis from among those who indicated a willingness to be involved, and whose parents had given permission for their participation. The researcher then met on three occasions with each of the two groups of 6 children, in each of these school locations. These meetings lasted for approximately 45 minutes.

Each of the group meetings was guided by one of the categories of spiritual sensitivity outlined by Hay and Nye (2006) – awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing. The data reported in this paper (the text) was gathered during the third of this series of meetings, and was guided by the category of value sensing, concerning the moral sensitivity of children.

In order to evoke this sense of value, the children were invited to respond to the question “I wonder what you think really, really matters?” (R. Nye, personal communication, May 9, 2002). They were also invited to respond to a second question “If you could have three wishes, what might you wish for?” These questions asked what it was that was of ultimate value or concern for these children, and so directly connected to their search for meaning.

The group meetings were recorded using videotape so as to capture the life expressions of these children. From the videotaped recordings, hermeneutic phenomenological texts were written, and subsequently analysed using van Manen’s (1990) lifeworld existentials – lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived human relation – as guides to reflection. In the phenomenological literature, the lifeworld existentials have been well utilised and have been seen as belonging to the structure of the lifeworld (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1996, 2004; Heidegger, 1980). As well, the author has drawn upon these lifeworld existentials in reflecting upon another’s life expression (Hyde, 2003, 2005a).

The findings

The texts outlined below, in which the children’s names have been fictionalised, suggest the emergence of a factor that appeared to inhibit these children’s expression

of their spirituality. The factor has been termed *material pursuit*. It refers to the children’s apparently genuine belief that what mattered most to them was the acquisition of money, material wealth and possessions. Although in these same group meetings, the children had indicated their desire to search out authentic ways of relating to Other (Hyde, 2008), they also indicated their active seeking of the material as that which mattered most to them. For instance, when asked what really mattered to them, the Year 3 children from the inner city school responded as follows:

Marco and Tran immediately interjected. “My computer!” “TV!” They shouted almost simultaneously.

Ali thought momentarily and then replied, “Nothing – OK, money!”

At this, Amina, who was growing impatient with her classmates’ seemingly trivial responses, asked “What about food? You wouldn’t be alive if you didn’t eat food or drink water. What about McDonalds? Isn’t that important to you?”

Ali shook his head. He was determined. “If I can get enough money,” he began, “I can buy everything. I’d spend ten dollars every day.”

At this, Tran declared, “I’d wish for more money – I always ask for my mum’s money.”

There was also evidence of *material pursuit* among the Year 5 children from the inner city school as the following text indicates:

“I wonder what you think really, really matters”, I probed.

Slowly, even reluctantly, some responses were offered – soft toys, music, books. Yet, when I inquired as to whether the children might like to say something about these, there was an awkward silence, and a sense of uneasiness. I wondered if they could have three wishes what they might wish for.

“I’d wish for money,” declared Fadde, “so that I can be rich and buy whatever I want.”

The other children nodded in agreement. I could sense that this was not a comment made in jest. Fadde seemed to be quite serious – and so did his classmates. In a moment of honesty and genuine response to my question, it seemed that money was that which was of value and importance.

Similarly, the text below, involving Year 3 students from the rural school, indicates the presence of *material pursuit*. When asked what they might wish for if granted three wishes, the following replied ensued:

“To get a horse,” replied Susan quickly, almost struggling to give voice to the many possible wishes that were entering her mind at a rapid rate of knots, “and to get lots of money for a holiday just for me!”

"I would wish for a bigger motor bike," added Imelda thoughtfully, "and to get a new car (if I was allowed to get a car) and to buy a bigger farm."

Michael said that he would like to make it to the AFL and to win a Brownlow Medal. While Wallace, reflecting briefly for a moment, declared that he would wish to be the best at windsurfing and skiing, as well as to get a licence to drive his first motor bike.

These reflections indicate that the responses of these children were serious. They were being honest. The more they were probed, even by their peers, the more they indicated a genuine belief in materialism as that which mattered most to them.

Discussion

The inhibiting factor identified as *material pursuit* is discussed below using the lifeworld existentials (van Manen, 1990) as guides to reflection. van Manen proposed four such existentials that permeate the lived experiences of all human beings regardless of their social, cultural or historical contexts: lived space (spatiality), lived time (temporality), lived body (corporeality) and lived relation (relationality). While these existentials can be studied in their differentiated aspects, van Manen has argued that each existential calls forth the other facets. That is, each of the existentials is both interrelated and interdependent.

Lived Relation

Material pursuit seemed to exhibit itself among the children as a preference to relate to possessions and material wealth rather than to people. There seemed to be reliance upon the superficial self, and upon whatever might satisfy the ego. Although snippets of earlier conversation among these children indicated a wish to connect with Other in relationship and to explore the larger existential questions of ultimate importance, in many cases, the children seemed to succumb to the materialistic desires of the ego, despite the impulses of the inner Self to move towards a sense of unity with Other. For example, among the Year three children from the inner city school, Marco, Tran and Ali insisted that computers, television and money were ultimately important to them, in spite of Amina's suggestion that there might be more important things in life. Ali from this same group had stated that if he could have enough money, he could buy everything. There was a reliance on the spending power of the self, rather than a sense of connectedness with Other. It appeared as if they preferred to place their trust in the material rather than in human relationships.

For many of these children, there was possibly a sense in which they felt that a 'relationship' with the material could offer a greater degree of contingency. It appeared as if relationship with the material could somehow be trusted more than a relationship with people. For example, money is a commodity that one either has or does not have. It is not ambiguous. A Play Station, a television set, a computer game comprise material

possessions that, once acquired, remain constant, at least in the eyes of these children. Relationships with people, on the other hand, possess an inherent element of risk and uncertainty. One needs to be able to reveal something of Self to Other, thereby leaving one vulnerable to potential ridicule and scorn. Their preference to relate to the material inhibited their expression of spirituality and movement towards unity with Other.

For these particular children, it seemed that scientific advances and technology, particularly in the form of computer games, may have hampered their social interaction with other people, thereby impeding the path towards a consciousness of unity with Other. Social interaction and the ability to be able to enter into relationship with Other could be considered as contributing towards a sense of wellbeing and resilience. Mountain (2004) identified that children's sense of connectedness, particularly with their family and peer group, are central in building resilience, a trait that is necessary to combat the stresses and problems that most children are confronted with in the modern world. Consequently, the author's findings presented here suggest that teachers need to be aware of and respond to the possible impact of technology on the lives of children who do not know a world without it.

Lived Time

Material pursuit became evident as a factor that inhibited the children's expression of their spirituality in a time characterised by what Mercer (2004) has referred to as late capitalist consumerist culture. These children live in a time in which society on the one hand appears to support and affirm children with material excess, while at the same time ignoring, or doing harm to their spiritual needs through neglect of their basic requirements, such as their need for unconditional love, their desire to belong, or an affirmation of their inherent worth as human beings. Further, in this consumerist milieu, the notion of children's consumer behaviour is pertinent. Not only can they spend their own money, but they are capable of influencing the spending of their parents. They constitute a future market as "a group of people with purchasing power...who as children are ripe for the establishment of brand loyalty and the development of consumer behaviours that will shape how they spend money as adults" (Mercer, 2004, p. 7).

The consumerist milieu in which these children are growing up places an importance upon the acquisition of money and wealth as being the norm. The influence of the media in suggesting that it is necessary to purchase the latest in a particular fashion or trend, impacts upon the value that is ultimately placed upon those items, particularly those that are desired, but which are financially beyond reach. The time in which these children found themselves was one in which they were effectively consumers in training. They have begun their "consumership" at an early age. Further, it has been noted that when one grows up with consumerism from infancy, one comes to assume its logic and normalcy (Stearns, 2001).

The effects of this consumer time and the inhibiting effect of this upon their expression of spirituality could be seen in some of the many responses to the question, "Imagine you had three wishes, what might you wish for?" For example, Susan in Year three from the rural school replied that she would wish for a horse, for lots of money and for a holiday just for herself. She appeared to struggle to give voice to her many possible wishes as they seemed to enter her mind so rapidly. The consumer choice was almost overwhelming. There was an excitement in this as the many possibilities forged their way into the consciousness of this child, almost like a rush of adrenalin. Similarly, Wallace in this same group wished for a licence to drive his first motor bike, as well as to be the best at windsurfing and skiing – two leisure activities that would be considered expensive to maintain. There was no shortage of possible consumer choices. The children's thought process seemed to be almost instantaneous. It was as if their minds had become suddenly awash with the possibilities of what they could wish for to satisfy the consumer drive.

This temporality served to impact in a destructive way upon the spirituality of these children. Having grown to understand consumerism as the norm, that which was of ultimate value to them was often perceived to be the acquisition of material possessions, and the spending power to purchase that which they believed might fulfil their desire. Fuelled by the influences of the media and their peers, these children appeared to often place their value of consumerism at the expense of human relationship with others. Their sense of connectedness – indeed unity – was being sought not in Other, but rather through the material.

Lived Space

The space in which this inhibiting factor emerged could be considered a dangerous space. It was, in some instances, a space that seemed to actively encourage the children to search elsewhere for a sense of connectedness, and appeared to be successful in doing so. It was a space in which the pursuit of material acquisition was valued and seen as that of ultimate importance. This seemed to occur at the expense of genuine human relationships. It appeared also that this was an inescapable space. These children had been raised with images of consumerism from an early age. They had, as noted, effectually become consumers in the making in a space that had been created and that was conducive for this purpose. At the same time, it was a space from which some of these children expressed little desire to escape. For example, Marco and Tran in Year three from the inner city school seemed quite contented in their attachment to their computer games and television viewing. It was almost as though there was no reason for them to wish to seek an alternative space in which to be. Similarly, some of the other children in this study – Wallace and Susan in Year three from the rural school – seemed to be satisfied with this space in which they found themselves. For these children this space was normal. They had known no other. Having grown up with consumerism from infancy, this space had taken on the deception of normalcy.

Material possessions may serve a purpose in that they can contribute to the defining of one's identity and sense of belonging. The above reflection certainly could be interpreted as children seeking such an identity and sense of belonging through their material possessions. For instance, Maslow's (1970) motivation theory suggests a hierarchy of human needs corresponding to growth and maturity. When the human person's basic needs are met – food, shelter, clothing, and the like, other higher needs emerge. In this instance, the basic needs of these children, in terms of food, water, a secure home were mostly met which led them to another level – the search for belonging outside their immediate family unit. This was a factor necessary for their sense of identity and self. It would appear that their material possessions had a role in the process. These objects provided them with a sense of identity as well as a sense of belonging, since to acquire these possessions was to 'fit in' with both the peer group and society. These material possessions, then, could satisfy the concerns of the outer self and once these needs were met, the children may have been in a position to identify those things that really mattered to them, and so begin to move beyond the ego to discover the true Self. However, the children did not seem to have yet moved beyond this need for material possessions, and to achieve this, guidance and mentoring may be required to enable them to move from the outer to the true Self.

Although this was a space lurking with hidden dangers, it was at the same time an enticing space. The possibility of wealth and consumer choice carried with it a certain temptation and excitement. It was a space in which the children could dream of having their material desires fulfilled. Perhaps in this sense it was an escapist space. It was a space to which the children could retreat so as to place instead their hope in the promise of material, or consumer fulfilment. Evidence of this could be seen in the almost immediate responses of the children to the question "Imagine you had three wishes, what might you wish for?" The invitation to enter a space in which to dream about the fulfilment of their materialistic desires was almost too good to be true. They did not need to be asked a second time. The children seemed to take full advantage of the invitation, and, in some instances, were for a brief time almost overwhelmed by the infinite possibilities presented to them.

Lived Body

As a factor that appeared to inhibit the children's expression of their spirituality, *material pursuit* could also be portrayed by a lack of embodiment, or at least a reluctance to embody a sense of meaning and value in relation to Other. Rather than embody those values that might lead them to connect in relationship with others, particularly their peers, these children seemed to choose instead to embody a desire and a preoccupation with materialism. They appeared to physically withdraw from their peers to express their reliance upon the self and their pursuit of the material that, in their eyes, might provide the contingency they were seeking.

As well, the material may have provided for these children the sensory and tactile experiences that, in some

instances, may have been drawn upon to fill the void created by mistrust and to provide a degree of comfort. That is to say, being wary of entering into relationship with their peers, or with those they did not trust, these children sought a sense of connectedness through their contingent and tactile experiences with their material possessions. For example, it is possible to imagine Marco and Tran in Year three from the inner city school physically manipulating the control panels of the latest computer game, and drawing upon the physical wisdom of their bodies in navigating their way to next level or phase of the game.

The notion of soft toys mentioned by some the children in Year five from the inner city school as being that which really mattered to them is interesting. One can imagine these children confiding in their soft toy, telling about the trials, the joys and disappointments of the day at school – things about which they did not trust to reveal

to anybody else. While, for these children, such conversations may not have been able to be conducted with their peers, or even with other family members, they could tell their soft toy anything because it could be trusted. There may have been a sense in which the soft toy became a projection of themselves. The children were seeking someone they could trust. Because of their reliance upon the self, they may have felt that they could trust themselves. The soft toy, as a projection of themselves then became something that was trusted, and perhaps relied upon. These items then in fact became what really matter to the children. The value of them became immeasurable.

Conclusion

By way of summary, Table 1 presents a conceptualisation the key insights gained from the above reflections on *material pursuit*.

Table 1.
A Summary of the Reflection on Material Pursuit using the Lifeworld Existentials

<i>Material Pursuit...</i>	
Lived Relation	A preference to relate to the material rather than to Other in community. A reliance upon the superficial self and that which might satisfy the ego. A sense of disconnection with Other.
Lived Time	Evident in a time referred to as late capitalist consumer culture (Mercer, 2004). Western society affirms children in material excess, but ignores spiritual needs through neglect of love, affirmation of their inherent worth as people, and so forth.
Lived Space	Dangerous space. Enticing space full of consumer possibilities.
Lived Body	Reluctance to embody a sense of meaning and value in relation to Other.

In terms the primary school context, the above reflection suggests that the types of spaces that are created in classrooms are a key in determining whether or not spirituality is nurtured. While spaces of trust and respect are conducive to nurturing spirituality, spaces that reflect the consumerist milieu of western society or in which mistrust and suspicion thrive are detrimental. The latter may lead to factors that inhibit expressions of spirituality, such as *material pursuit*. While perhaps limited in its scope to alter the space created by society, at the classroom level the context of Catholic religious education then needs to create spaces that encourage mutual respect and trust. This could, for example, in part be achieved through the incorporation of Kessler’s (2000) “gateways” into the classroom context. For example, the first of Kessler’s gateways – the yearning for deep connection – could be drawn upon by the inclusion of trust building exercises in order to foster relationships that are caring, and in which students are able to feel a sense of connectedness to Other, both their peers and possibly to the Transcendent. Such a classroom environment may then be characterised by a genuine love and respect for each individual.

The notion of a consumerist milieu in which the children live is also significant. This temporality impacts in a destructive way upon spirituality. Fuelled by the influence of the media, their peers and in some instances, popular music, the children often placed their value in consumerism at the expense of human relationships with others. The challenge for religious education becomes one of confronting the values of consumerism, and of presenting an alternative set of values which place an importance on connectedness and relationship with Other, thereby enabling children to embody more life-giving ways of being in the world. While religious education would have a pertinent role in such a process, key learning areas that comprise the broader curriculum could also be drawn upon. Education about the concept of consumerism, both of its constructive and damaging influence, could be addressed at all levels of the primary school through key learning areas such as English, Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE), as well as The Arts. An integrated approach may assist students to see the whole concept – that English, SOSE and The Arts, as well as religious education contribute to learning in this area.

An awareness on the part of religious educators to the possible existence of this particular inhibiting factor is necessary if spirituality is to be nurtured within the classroom context. This may enable religious educators to plan learning and teaching activities that counter *material pursuit*, as well as to create spaces within the classroom that are conducive to the nurturance of expressions of spirituality, rather than the inhibition of it.

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