

Children as Spiritual Beings: Restoring Our Sense of Awe and Wonder

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Abstract

Children enter the world as spiritual beings, deeply connected to the spirit. However, through their involvement with adult society, these spiritual aspects can become increasingly latent or invisible. Children's spiritual selves are often not seen, respected, or valued by the adults in their lives. It is vital that adults who engage with children experience awe, wonder, beauty, intuition, mystery, and respect for all life themselves. Adults may not need to construct nor contrive activities to cultivate and foster spirituality in children, but rather allow the space and time for children to unfurl, naturally. It is our work to offer children the space and time to be who they are. Natural play experiences combined with unhurried daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms foster security and trust, contributing to a solid foundation for their spirituality and overall well-being.

Keywords: *awe, wonder, holistic, play, spirituality, young children*

“Our highest endeavor must be to develop free human beings who are able to impart purpose and direction to their lives. The need for imagination, a sense of truth, and a feeling of responsibility —these three forces are the very nerve of education.” - Rudolf Steiner

The Whole Being - Spirit, Body, Mind

In the early childhood field, children are entrusted to our care. That is worth repeating: children are entrusted to our care. Families depend on us to provide the best possible care for their blossoming children. The future will be theirs to hold. This is not to be taken lightly. What kind of adults will the children of today become? Will their thinking be

open and curious, their hands capable, and their hearts kind and warm?

Taking care of children is a gift, a challenge, and a potentially daunting responsibility. In order to stand in our strength and certainty in this task, who we are as human beings is of the utmost importance. From a place of integrity, we endeavor to love what we do, attentive to our individual path of inner development, creativity, and overall flourishing, thus forming the roots for what we offer the children and families. We are here to support the well-being of all, not to require children and families to conform to ambiguous standards. We notice that when things are harmonious between families and early learning programs, health typically abounds and children

tend to be free to take risks that will serve them well in deepening their sense of understanding and belonging.

These first seven years form the foundation upon which their future is built. To the innocent young child, the world is good and the world is beautiful. It is essential that we pay attention and demonstrate this through everything we bring to the children. Our work is to nurture and nourish children with intention and mindfulness so that they may flourish in their own individual way. The preschool, or early childhood program, is a place where attention is given to the utmost well-being of the child and their family. “The adults who surround the children are extremely important as they provide a rhythmical and ordered structure for the children. They can demonstrate an enjoyment of work as well as the willingness to work hard” (Jaffke, 2006, p. 71).

In the holistic early childhood program, our days are unhurried and quite simple, with nature walks and adventures, creative activities, wholesome stories and beautiful books, bread baking, daily tasks, (such as preparing food, setting, and clearing the table) along with ample time and space to play, explore, and discover. At this point in time, these practices may sound quite old-fashioned, but what could be better for the children than allowing them the space to discover who they are, what they are capable of, how they feel, and their place in the world? We all have our place and most often love to contribute to the well-being of others. It is deeply moving to witness the simple and pure essence of children caring for themselves, one another, and the environment, from their own inner impulses, rather than being instructed to do so. Space, along with the freedom to stretch and breathe is necessary for children to discover these attributes for themselves. Such qualities cannot be learned through instruction, as they are not elements of the intellect, but live in the soul of

each being. Together, children and adults alike ensure that the environment of the holistic early childhood program is beautiful, nature-rich, and cared for. The children and surroundings are lovingly attended to by warm-natured, caring adults. Who we are as adults matters. We care for ourselves, each other, the environment, our belongings, the world in general, and are conscious of our thoughts, actions, and practices. We respect all life, demonstrating this through our way of being in the world with the children and families in our care. Everything matters as we rise to the task at hand.

In holistic programs the school is bright, clean, and orderly, yet not institutional, the lighting as natural as possible, warm, and welcoming. The play spaces are tidy and uncluttered, intentionally beautiful and home-like with thoughtfully chosen playthings, many handcrafted by the teachers, parents, and children. Here, less is more. There is a natural purity and simplicity to the space reflecting the innocence of children. We protect the child’s developing senses from chemicals, noise, violence, odors, and support them by providing nourishment to their senses, for their whole being (Abraham, 2012).

Typically the food available for the children in the holistic program is wholesome, locally grown, and prepared with love and attention by those who actually enjoy making food. Children are invited to participate in each step from sprouting the seeds and growing the food in nutrient-dense soil to watering, weeding, harvesting, and preparing the meals. We understand that when there is a connection to the food we eat, we have agency in it. Preparing meals and baking bread together from simple, unprocessed, and readily available ingredients is a joyful practice. There is art, reverence, and creativity in setting the table with flowers, handmade cups, carved wooden spoons, and cloth napkins. Through these simple practices,

the spirituality and connection between all are nurtured and nourished. At mealtimes the older children take turns passing the bowls as the group sings a blessing and enjoys their meal sharing stories and jokes together. All is well.

The children easily sink into the natural rhythms of the days, and seasons deepening their sense of belonging on this magnificent planet of which we are part. This is what we are fervently striving to protect — childhood innocence, awe, wonder and a deep sense of belonging. During these early years care is taken not to hurry the children from one activity to the next, more attention is given to the natural rhythm or flow of the child's learning. Families are encouraged to cultivate a peaceful transition from home to preschool as rushing clearly interferes with the young child's well-being. We cannot thrive in hurried settings—it is all a child can do to put on their brakes and refuse, often not very quietly, to be hurried. In most conventional programs there is a tendency to keep children busy, busy, busy, which can get in the way of creativity and their sense of belonging, independence, and interdependence. The absence of electronics in holistic programs offers time for boredom and stillness, space to daydream and create. The natural learning rhythms and inner life of the child are supported by healthy daily routines and flow imbued with warmth and love.

Uninterrupted time to play in all types of weather, music, singing and handcrafting, along with nature-rich stories and games deepen the child's overall well-being.

As these qualities are essential to the flourishing of children, so are they necessary for our own well-being and thriving spirituality (Miller, 2000). Who we are as adults, and how we do what we do really does matter. Children, childhood, and family are to be respected, valued, and supported, as are the practitioners, materials, and beautiful play spaces. When the flow of the program meets the needs of the children, families, and practitioners,

the reverence and innocence of the early years is palpable. From our observation, when children, families, and staff are nourished and enriched, staff turnover is low, sick days are minimal for all, and the environment exudes health. When education comes from within, there tends to be a deep connection to the self, one another, the space, community, and environment overall, as we intentionally nourish the heart, hands, and head of all in our care. In his book *Magical Child*, Pearce (1992) states that the child's spirit is not something to be taken lightly but is the essence of life itself.

It is understood that these practices are not typical in most early childhood programs in the United States. We wonder, what it would take for holistic practices in early childhood education to be the norm; where childhood innocence and children are fervently protected, valued, nurtured, and nourished; where all life is respected and revered, and practitioners have a deep and natural yearning to do whatever it takes to support the flourishing of themselves and those who count on them? What else is possible, how could things be even better than they are?

Spirituality

More attention is being directed to spirituality in young children as an interwoven thread which could very well expand to all other areas of development when recognized and nurtured. "*Spirituality* naturally pertains to the spirit, that unquantifiable force, the mystery that animates all things and of which all things are composed. There is really no separating us from it" (Hart, 2003, p. 7). In many programs, the child's drive for self-expression is considered an inconvenience. What happens to children's sense of self, when freedom of thought is diminished, when their very 'soul' is disregarded? Authentic play can "become a doorway to a new self, one much more in tune with the world...play can provide a dramatic and

obvious example of transformation” (Brown, 2009, p. 92).

Adults who struggle with recognizing their own inner spiritual self may have difficulty recognizing it in others (Hart, 2003). Early learning educators who are unable to include spiritual development along with cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development, limit children’s access to their inner selves (Miller, 2015). The teacher, already fatigued from the overwhelming task of proving a child’s readiness, puts aside their own sense of awe and wonder, their own spiritual self, in relation to the child. The curriculum is then narrowed to performance standards with little or no attention to the developing human right under our noses.

We are at a time when the inner life of children is in jeopardy, when only a measurable display of cognitive growth is valued. What stirs in the tender heart and soul is no longer relevant because it cannot be measured. The early learning classroom has been altered, no longer a “children’s garden” as Froebel (2005) envisioned, full of possibilities and potential. Curricular decisions become an intervention, framed mostly through economic decisions that policymakers have mandated versus creating engaged and enlightened democratic citizens (Brown, 2021).

Play

Childhood is on the chopping block. There is no time for play, no time for associating with peers, no time for the outdoors, no time for discovery of self or others or the world in which children live. This is in direct conflict with what research shows is a healthy beginning for children before the age of seven (Brown, 2009). It is exactly during this critical time-period that the foundation of being and becoming is laid. Play is central to childhood and the main influence in becoming human and

connecting to the human world. Play shapes who we are and who we will become.

Children need environments and provisions that are based on long-held principles that support the budding artist, scientist, and explorer in ways that bring awe and wonder in thought and action. Play provides the process of immersing oneself into a life where a child’s spirit-self connects with the physical-self and vice versa. Play encircles the spirit of childhood. If we truly believe that the spiritual life of the child is as much a part of human existence as other areas of development, then who is it that determines this separation in the name of education? We have already separated the thinking child from the moving and feeling child.

To see the whole child, we must look with a deep understanding of the fullness of childhood. We describe developmentally appropriate programs focusing on the *whole child*, *child-centered*, or *child-led*. Considering the current urgency for academic achievement prior to entering elementary school, we are stunned at the duality. Many recent early learning initiatives now disregard the voices of the past, theorists whose legacies framed possibilities for human potential. These constructions assist in understanding children’s inner selves, with deep noticing of their creativity, intuition, and sources of inspiration. Piaget for instance, provides a language that describes compelling patterns of behavior during authentic, uninterrupted exploration and play. Further, he describes all play patterns as being governed by a child’s biological drive to know, to make meaning and understand the world around them (Louis & Featherstone, 2013). Froebel (2005) recognized play as spiritual work, as a divine right, and as “the most beautiful expression of child-life” and “spontaneous play of the child discloses the future inner life of the man [adult]” (p. 55). Play informs not only how to look but to fully see children’s inner nature.

The integrity of our work has been laid aside, even ignored, and replaced with requiring children to perform particular tasks by a certain time and in a certain way that will validate our existence in a classroom of young children. The child's inner drive to play finds itself at odds with uniform policies. Rather than focusing on the here and now, we are fiercely distracted by futuristic goals that are much too abstract for the preoperational learner. Young children live and think in the present moment. Our practices, then, must be relevant to the child's life, interests, and strengths.

Standardization: Not Aligned with Whole Child Practices

The tension between a play-based pedagogy and kindergarten readiness policies has created obvious division in early learning. The latter requires data-keeping protocols that do not align with whole-child practices, demanding performance-based assessments and rigid schedules for young children wired to explore and move. This tension adds to the struggle for practitioners to individualize and support full human development, including the child's budding spiritual nature. Standardization has transformed education to being dispensaries of information, heavily influenced by industries whose financial gain is largely based on developing tools that promise to increase student performance (Hansen, 2021). Political pressure is placed on districts using incentives which in turn have responded using punitive measures such as eliminating recess and art programs in many schools.

The early learning classroom has been impacted in many ways. The child is reduced to a standardized product, continually evaluated by those, who in many cases, hold data collecting devices waiting for a particular moment to check a particular box rather than holding space with the child. The

teacher has been reduced to a deficit-finding oracle versus a co-creator of knowledge and understanding with the child, in many cases dispensing a prescribed curriculum that promotes readiness and testing success. Teachers are no longer invited to use their own wisdom, sensitive natures and creativity to meet the needs of individual students nor nurture positive human diversity (Stoddard, 2010). There is no room or time to focus on human potential or on the gifts the child already possesses. The increase in mental health issues in young children is concurrent with the shortages of mental health professionals equipped to address the ever-growing emotional needs of young children (American Psychological Association, 2023). Yet at the heart of a child's well-being lies the need for moving one's body, transforming objects, singing, building, and making, which is the heart of human existence. Allowing children more time to play, which is the vehicle driven for self-discovery and learning, is no longer a priority. The demoralization of teaching is evident when early learning practitioners are no longer able to use their intuitions and observation skills to create curricula, plans, and possibilities based in theory that recognizes the human greatness in each child, a process that encourages continual reaching for deeper learning and understanding. It begs these questions: Who is the child? What do children need? What are schools for? What does it mean to be well-educated? What does it mean to be human? How can the spirit or spirituality of the child survive, thrive, or even flourish under such soul-killing circumstances? A bleness is not readiness. Childhood cannot be measured nor sacrificed.

The early learning environment has most certainly changed with a great deal of attention on standardizing that which cannot be measured. We understand that when teachers are encouraged to access their own wisdom, knowing, and creativity,

all manner of wonder and curiosity, joy, and delight transpire.

Spirituality at Risk

Heart, body, mind, and spirit are connected and cannot be isolated (Miller, 2006). The child knows through their body, hands, heart, and play. Due to our oblivion around the spirituality of children and ourselves, children, who are the most important aspect of education, are lost (Miller, 2015). Their time in school is not respected. Teachers are overwhelmed, overworked, undervalued, and are continually asked to do more and more to provide evidence that they are meeting the standards (Education Week, 2024). The carrot and stick mindset prevails, requiring teachers to prove that children are consistently meeting standards, senselessly measured for monetary impact and accountability (Brown, 2021). Children are missing the true joy, pure sense of belonging, and of dignity, as adult role models scurry disconnectedly around them. With the urgency to meet standards and raise test scores, recess times have been eliminated as well as art, music, and physical education (Hansen, 2021). Even lunch periods have been slashed. Would we eliminate breaks and deserved leave time for adults? Yet we routinely do this to our children, without flinching. There is a sense of helplessness throughout. We may well wonder why we see more depression, anxiety, and suicide in young people (Haidt, 2024). At a most critical and impressionable period, young children are exposed to the adult world of consumption-driven lifestyles, careless choice of unhealthy diets, and excessive busyness, without regard for the next generation's ability to exist and flourish on the planet with other humans.

At times adults do not understand the uniqueness of each child nor do they recognize childhood as a sensitive time period. In the name of schooling, we may have, unconsciously or consciously, crushed

children's spirituality, overlooking innocence and freedom of being (Miller, 2015). We now realize that the earth is ailing from the destruction and pain we have caused. Mental illness has risen exponentially while mental health has significantly declined, particularly in children (Haidt, 2024). Violence is prevalent, leading us to question how we have become such. We have recklessly made a huge mess since the Industrial Revolution, in many ways destroying humankind and mother earth. We have gone to the moon and back, yet we may not know our neighbors or our inner selves.

We are moved to consider our ponderings in relation to teachers, new and seasoned. What do the teachers need in order to be willing and able to show up for the children in the ways that are essential to the preservation of childhood innocence, creativity, imagination, and respect?

Teachers' Inner Development and Spirituality

In contemporary teacher education, the predominant focus of new teacher training has been on content, methods, and skills—commonly referred to as curriculum, pedagogy, and competencies. Within just one or two years, student teachers are expected to rapidly absorb and build their knowledge base around their grade-level curriculum in order to become “qualified” teachers, prioritizing their intellectual capacity above all else. Unfortunately, the spiritual dimension of teaching has not been emphasized in conventional teacher training (Hansen, 2021). A teacher's inner soul and spirit are just as essential as their subject knowledge (Palmer, 2017). Greene and Kim (2019) highlight the concept of a teacher's self-development as a “radically untraditional orientation” to the learning process, suggesting that personal growth and spirituality should be integral components of teacher training.

Traditional teacher education has undoubtedly spent too much energy on fragmented forms and products, common core standards, evidence-based assessment, and standardized testing, as opposed to cultivating the inner qualities of the developing teacher (Korthagen, Kim, Greene, 2013). The prevalent image of a “successful” teacher emphasizes classroom management, where teachers maintain control over student behavior and keep them “on-task.” Unfortunately, a teacher's inner attributes and spiritual traits are not given the importance or value they deserve in early training. To nurture the spirituality of children, teachers must first understand themselves and their own potential. By connecting with their innermost being, they can be fully present and engaged when guiding their students through authentic and timeless learning experiences (Miller, 2006).

What if we took the time and created space for our students to share their wounds and hurts, their pain and longings, dreams and curiosities, fears, self-doubts, and even their joys? In a safe environment, they could learn to trust and deeply understand each other. Through vulnerability and humility, we grow into genuine, honest individuals, finding the courage to nurture our spirits and open our hearts and minds (Palmer, 2017). One of the core aspects of holistic teaching is to nourish the spiritual dimension through self-discovery of core qualities known as core reflection (Korthagen et al., 2013). In the core reflection approach, the value of self-reflection and self-exploration of the teacher needs to be acknowledged—in physical, emotional, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual nature—to *teach from within*. It takes time to be deeply observing and sensing (self-examination), connecting to the self (self-identification and/or disidentification), understanding the self (self-knowledge), grounding and refining self-agency (self-confidence/self-competence), building and broadening with inner qualities (core values and gift) and operating from the best

potential self (self-actualization). As adult students reflect and confront their vulnerabilities, it can feel risky, challenging them to detach from limiting beliefs and a deficit-oriented, fixed mindset. The stresses, worries, desires, fears, limiting thoughts, and even joys of the transformation process can lead us to a deeper, more truthful, and genuine self. This journey, though vulnerable, allows us to experience our inner being in profound and spiritual ways.

In education, self-reflection and self-examination are vital yet often overlooked in teacher training. Traditional teacher education programs frequently do not prioritize self-development beyond standard curriculum coursework. As a result, self-discovery is often neglected, avoided, or superficially addressed due to time constraints and competing priorities like common core standards, curriculum requirements, and assessments. To teach others—especially children—we must first understand ourselves. Many student teachers, even those who appear strong, struggle with confidence in their abilities. New educators often confront unrealistic expectations and find it challenging to “fit in” with systems they may not align with intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually. What if we shifted our focus to create space for deeper exploration of our inner selves as we learn to become teachers (Kessler, 2000)?

To nurture the spirituality of our adult students, we understand it is essential to provide time and space in our teacher education programs for questions, fears, and wonders to be held, shared, and explored together. Through the practice of self-reflection and discovery, our students become more grounded, gain inner strength, and grow in self-acceptance and compassion for others. When their deepest questions are acknowledged and nurtured, their passions are ignited, and their inner strengths illuminated, helping them to recognize

their potential before stepping into the world as educators.

So, how do we foster inner strength, resilience, and confidence? Perhaps we begin with modeling and practicing self-care and well-being, gathering in community circles, holding space for one another with love and care, engaging in deep listening, spending time in nature, and exploring creativity and play. Additional practices like sharing stories and poems, singing and dancing, nature journaling, mindfulness and meditation, place-based learning, humor, self-inquiry, and more all support this inner growth. A holistic early childhood teacher preparation program offers both the space and the process for self-transformation, inspiring students to discover the kind of teacher they aspire to be in service of the whole child. Becoming a teacher is a transformative journey that is soulful and spiritual.

Invitation

We are not alone. We have many allies and visionaries who have been calling for human spirituality and consciousness for some time. Lisa Miller (2015) states:

Spirituality is an untapped resource in our understanding of human development, resilience and illness, and health and healing. The absence of support for children's spiritual growth has contributed to alarming rates of childhood and adolescent emotional suffering...that put them at risk. Knowledge of spiritual development rewrites the contemporary account of spiraling rates of depression, substance abuse, and addictive behaviors, and other health concerns. (p. 3)

More recently, Haidt (2024) implores society, parents, and schools to eliminate smartphones, social media, and excessive access to technology

among children and teens for healthier mental, emotional, and overall well-being.

Children's spirituality mirrors the essence of nature: curious, innocent, peaceful, joyful, aware, present, generous, and more. When we value children as honored guests—believing in them and seeing them as they truly are—we open ourselves to learning from them. This hospitality creates space for them to grow naturally, free from interruption, control, or disruption in their journey of becoming. The wisdom of Indigenous peoples and their ancestors, rooted in reverence for nature, has long guided us in raising children with love and simplicity, respecting nature, elders, and children alike. By living truthfully and with integrity, we model these values for children in our everyday interactions. Early childhood is a reflection of our deepest values, beliefs, and hopes.

Our inner voices call us to slow down, listen, care for our surroundings, reconnect, and learn from nature. We are on this planet for only a brief moment. Modern culture and the relentless pace of life have often disrupted our awareness of our own spiritual nature and our ability to be healthy role models for children. Truly recognizing children as spiritual beings is essential. We invite parents and caregivers to take time to play, create, and spend time in nature with their children, to listen, and to share in curiosity. It is time to do things differently; we have been blind for too long. Now is the moment to honor and respect children's spirituality, rekindle our own, and restore our sense of awe and wonder alongside them.

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Author Bios

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Paula I. Lynam, M. Ed. founded and directed *The Secret Garden Preschool and Kindergarten* for 20 years, is an adjunct faculty member at Southern Oregon University, and Rogue Community College. Paula has been working with children, educators and families in a variety of capacities, including Parent/Child Facilitator, Handwork/Art Teacher, Educational Support Practitioner, Mediator, Games/Integrative Movement Teacher, and Waldorf Kindergarten Teacher and Mentor.

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**Collectively, the authors share over 110 years of experience and knowledge in this paper. They have taught over 3,000 young children and 5,000 adult students in their careers.*