



# 11

## Spiritual Dimension

This chapter explores the development of the spiritual dimension within the Health and Physical Education (HPE) learning area which sits within the whole child development element of quality physical education (cf. Fig. 1.1). The following literature has been amended and condensed from a previous publication (Lynch, 2015).

### Children's Spirituality

The spiritual dimension of wellness is defined as “the personal search for meaning and direction in life” (Robbins, Powers, & Burgess, 2011, p. 10). Furthermore, there is a strong link between spirituality and one’s self-esteem (Robbins et al., 2011). This dimension may be connected to a religion, but it may not. “In its purest sense, spiritual wellness involves cultivating beliefs, principles, and values that provide guidance and strength throughout all of life’s experiences” (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 10). Having accentuated that HPE is more than the physical dimension, it can be argued that the physical dimension does offer unique opportunities and

perhaps more so than others, for children in primary schools to experience a “sense of connection”, a spiritual dimension.

Spirituality is an essential aspect of all human beings which needs to be given the opportunity to grow (Lavery & Hay, 2004). This is axiomatically the same situation for children, where spirituality is an essential part of child development (Hay & Nye, 2006). There are numerous definitions of spirituality and the same can be said about spirituality experienced in a primary school (Mountain, 2011). Hyde (2008) suggests that the education systems have done little to describe what is meant by spirituality, yet it is advocated that spirituality promotes inner wellbeing and wholeness (Lavery & Hay, 2004). Harris (2007, p. 264) defines children’s spirituality as, “transformational, directive, and peer-relational which involves actively living by being innately connected to a natural source within the moral universe and affectively belonging with relationships that are interconnected within a child’s culture and community”. Hence, the concepts of relationships, self, community and culture are recurring themes.

When exploring children’s experiences of spirituality, it is vital to understand how this may exist and appear. Hyde (2008) identifies four characteristics of children’s spirituality;

- the felt sense,
- integrating awareness,
- weaving the threads of meaning, and
- spiritual questing.

The first characteristic, “the felt sense”, involves physicality and bodily awareness and is the most applicable for the purpose of this study; “Individuals encounter and act upon the world with the whole of their bodies” (Hyde, 2008, p. 120). Hyde, Ota, and Yust (2012) profess that young children often are unable to articulate verbally their thoughts; subsequently, they become “far more in tune with their physicality” (p. 3), using “non-verbal avenues, such as laughter, crying, play and the like” (Hyde, Ota, & Yust, 2012, p. 3).

The “felt sense” was professed by Gendlin, an American psychotherapist:

Individuals encounter and act upon the world in which they live with the whole of their bodies. He called this focusing, maintaining that it involved attending to the bodily awareness of situations, persons and events. Such bodily awareness is not a mental experience, but a physical one. It doesn't come from thoughts, words or other separate components, but rather as a single, though sometimes puzzling and complex, bodily feeling. Attending to one's own body may then assist with personal difficulties and in being sensitively aware in relationships with others. (Hyde et al., 2012, p. 2)

“The felt sense” is defined as “the way in which a child draws on the wisdom of her or his own body as a natural and primal way of knowing. It involves an awareness of the immediacy of experience and tactile, sensory activity” (Hyde, 2010, p. 510). The significance of this characteristic for children involved in PE lessons is axiomatic. According to Hyde, Ota and Yust, “The challenge for those who work with children is to recognise that many of these activities could be experienced by children as spiritual” (p. 3).

“Integrating awareness” “refers to an emerging level of consciousness enveloping, or integrating, a previous level of awareness. This might typically occur, for example, when a person meditates” (Hyde, 2010, p. 511). “Weaving the threads of meaning” “refers to the child drawing on her or his own sense of wonder as a means by which to make sense of the world and events from the many and diverse frameworks of meaning that are available” (2010, p. 512). The last characteristic “spiritual questing”, “refers to the fact that children are seekers. They are actively searching for a sense of life’s meaning and purpose, and this is often reflected in what they claim to value most” (2010, p. 514). Parallels can be drawn with secular spiritual wellness behaviours developed by a child which include:

- develops an awareness of life versus death,
- develops a sense of the importance and expanse of life,
- begins establishing a value system; can distinguish right from wrong,
- begins showing compassion and forgiveness (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 556).

Spirituality is embedded within all strands of the HPE curriculum. Within this “holistic” curriculum, the spiritual dimension is defined as “a sense of

connection to phenomena and unusual events beyond self and usual sensory and rational existence; a sense of place within the universe" (QSCC, 1999a, p. 26). As the contexts of the case study schools were set in Catholic education, it is assumed that the term spirituality may often refer to a Christian expression of spirituality, although it was understood that this may not be the case for all children.

## Findings and Discussion

The data gathered in the case study schools and initial teacher education case study support that there are expressions of children's spiritual cognisance and opportunities within HPE lessons. Harris (2007) defines children's spirituality as "transformational, directive, and peer-relational which involves actively living by being innately connected to a natural source within the moral universe, and affectively belonging with relationships that are interconnected within a child's culture and community". Student participants and lecturer participants verbally articulated connections mainly through the physical activity strand. While connections are of a personal nature, they can be identified as spiritual experiences in HPE.

Children in the early years of the schools did not express spirituality verbally. This is reasoned by Hyde et al. (2012), professing that young children often are unable to articulate verbally their thoughts. However, physical activity lesson observations did display children acting upon the world with the whole of their bodies, subsequently becoming "far more in tune with their physicality" (2012, p. 3). Thus, young student participants (early years) displayed the children's spirituality characteristic of "felt sense".

Where the physical activity strand was of quality implementation, the HPE teacher acted as director and facilitator, peer relations were empathetic, accepting and encouraging which enabled the children to truly belong and feel appreciated within the community of the school. Hence, this was consistent with the concepts of relationships, self, community and culture. "In its purest sense, spiritual wellness involves cultivating beliefs, principles, and values that provide guidance and strength throughout all of life's experiences" (Robbins et al., 2011, p. 10). In case study two school

where PE quality teaching and learning was experienced regularly, children's verbal articulation and observed physical engagement of spiritual expressions were increased. The connection between physicality and bodily awareness was observed for all lessons when children were engaged. For this reason, the data gathered within this research study implies that implementation of QPE lessons increased spiritual connections. In QPE lessons, safety was optimal, children were involved in maximum participation, activities were challenging and differentiated for the engagement of all students and lessons were inclusive and enjoyed. Hence, opportunities for students to experience the children's spirituality characteristic of "felt sense" were observed more frequently.

In case study two school, the children in middle and upper years articulated spiritual experiences through observations and interview. In being attuned to their physical, bodily knowing, these children appeared to have engaged their whole selves in direct, experiential and concrete ways. The children were absorbed in experiences that seemed to bridge the divide between self and object (Hyde, 2008, p. 121). As one middle years' student participant described, "Um, you feel like you're going do it and like you're not going to stop and it's going to help you run and you're not going to hurt yourself". The boy was explaining the importance of the PE learning area as he "draws on the wisdom of his own body as a natural and primal way of knowing. It involves an awareness of the immediacy of experience and tactile, sensory activity" (Hyde, 2010, p. 510).

The majority of upper year student participants and many middle year student participants from all three case study schools connected HPE and the RE Christian expression of spirituality, as well as spirituality generally. This was mainly through the promotion of Christian Gospel values in the Physical Activity strand. One child described "you feel better, about yourself and you have more self-esteem" which relates directly to the strong link between self-esteem and spirituality that Robbins et al. (2011) assert. Again, there was an increase in verbal articulation of links in schools that had a HPE specialist or designated teacher, where lessons were conducted regularly. Observations suggested that QPE lessons promoted student interest (Tables 11.1 and 11.2) and maximised physicality, bodily awareness and relationships.

Table 11.1 Summary of cross-case data analysis findings

School	HPE specialist	HPE specialist in syllabus	Number of Classroom Teacher participants professionally developed in HPE syllabus	Clear knowledge of who is responsible for the different strands	Classroom teacher responsible for Religious Education and HPE	Number of classroom teacher participants who evidenced HPE (Personal Development and Health) in book	Number of classroom teacher participants who evidenced Whole school programme for HPE physical activities
Case study one	No	No	1	Yes	Yes	1	No
Case study two	Yes	Yes	2	Yes	Yes	2	Yes
Case study three	Yes	No	2	No	Yes	0	No

Table 11.2 Comparison of case study school student participants' interest in HPE

School	Teachers' perception of students' interest levels in HPE	Number of students interviewed in each focus group	Number of early years' student participants	Number of middle years' student participants	Number of upper years' student participants	HPE specialist teacher
Case study one	Medium	6	0 0%	2 33%	0 0%	No
Case study two	High	8	6 75%	3 37.5%	4 50%	Yes
Case study three	High	8	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	Yes

The characteristic “spiritual questing”, “refers to the fact that children are seekers. They are actively searching for a sense of life’s meaning and purpose, and this is often reflected in what they claim to value most” (2010, p. 514). The children in the upper years’ group of case study two school valued team sports. One boy stated he preferred team sports to individual: “It’s better than individual, because like, if you like, if you make a mistake or something, there are people to help you out and stuff”. Another girl mentioned that within cooperative teamwork she enjoyed experiencing “good team spirit”. She shared that she enjoyed working together and that it was fun to know that you could enjoy working with other people in the group. All student participants agreed that they do look out, backup and support their teammates.

The data generated suggest that a whole school curriculum programme (WSCP) for HPE increases the likelihood of quality experiences for the children in schools by increasing the rate of developmentally appropriate activities. This resulted in enhanced student interest, a positive effect on students’ attitudes towards physical activities and spiritual connections (Table 11.2). Also, specialist teachers are associated with quality delivery of all dimensions of HPE which includes the spiritual dimension of the HPE curriculum (QSCC, 1999a).

Furthermore, the data gathered are consistent with the literature, which states that HPE may hold particular significance and valuable spiritual experiences for children in relation to good health and wellbeing (QSCC, 1999b). Specifically within Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE), this connection is acknowledged by the document “Religious Education Support Resource for the Early Years – RE and Health and Physical Learning Organising Ideas” (Catholic Education Archdiocese of Brisbane, 2010).

Karen (pseudonym), a lecturer in the ITE PETE course, spoke about “physical literacy” which sat within the spirituality characteristic of “felt sense”, where “Individuals encounter and act upon the world with the whole of their bodies” (Hyde, 2008, p. 120). Karen referred to physical literacy as a journey and “The holistic nature of it, they [some teachers] don’t understand that each child is on their own physical literacy journey and they’re supposed to be guiding those children on the journey”. Although the term spirituality was not mentioned by Karen, there were strong connections made with the “holistic” curriculum. The spir-

itual dimension is defined as “a sense of connection to phenomena and unusual events beyond self and usual sensory and rational existence; a sense of place within the universe” (QSCC, 1999a, p. 26), and the concept of the physical literacy journey was embedded within this definition.

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