
Supporting Children's Search for Meaning and Spirituality. Pedagogical and Theological Approach

Elżbieta Osewska¹

Abstract

A range of constructs can be used for interpreting change in meaning and spirituality. However, by themselves, none of them seem to provide an adequate interpretation, because changes in meaning and spirituality are multi-dimensional. This article responds to children's search for meaning and spirituality by seeking to develop an interpretation of how and why contemporary spirituality has changed that will better support the work of educators and pedagogues in kindergartens and primary schools. A number of constructs like globalisation, privatisation of religion, secularisation, pluralism, relativism, world views strong consumerism, etc., have been used to describe the significant change in spirituality of children and youth in Europe over the last 50 years from a more traditional religious spirituality to more an eclectic vision. An interpretation of change in spirituality in terms of change in cultural meanings has been developed for the purpose of understanding contemporary spirituality. Such an interpretation may be more persuasive in encouraging education and pedagogy authorities firstly to accept the significant change in contemporary spirituality; and then secondly, to take steps to address this change positively and constructively in curriculum and practise. Taking into consideration a variety of challenges and threats arising from 'liquid modernity', it is important in accord with personalistic inspirations to support children's path in spirituality. This article is concerned with the understanding contemporary, children spirituality and meaning and also some examples of practical follow-up activities.

Keywords: Changes in spirituality, cultural meanings, children, Christianity.

Introduction

While the culture, human life and human dignity are under growing threat, the milieus in which humans may feel secure, grow and live a fully human life assume special importance. That is why at the beginning of the 21st century, pedagogues and teachers search for the best environment of human growth, upbringing and education, the environments which, to a large extent, shape the human condition, choices of values and norms, personal and religious integrity. The main objective of this article is to present approaches to children's spirituality that face various challenges and threats, flowing from violent changes of

¹ Elżbieta Osewska, redovita profesorica na Odsjeku za pedagogiju Fakulteta humanističkih znanosti Sveučilišta primijenjenih znanosti u Tarnowu, Poljska

political, social, cultural, ideological, educational and religious character that take place in Europe and even in a broader context of present civilization (the North Atlantic civilization in particular). Among crucial questions that need to be addressed are: are the family, kindergarten and school capable of supporting humans spirituality? If so, to what degree? Where do these main educational and pedagogical challenges and threats arise from? What do they consist of? What influences do present social, cultural, economic, political, ideological, mental and religious changes have on the process of bringing up a child and adolescent? What civilizational factors support, or hinder, the pedagogical process? To what degree? Who determines the educational priorities in the present socio-cultural context in Europe?

This article suggests that the search for meaning is a theme that could well be more prominent in both the language of kindergarten pedagogy and school education and in the content of the curriculum. This would entail a study that is more clearly linked with the questions children ask about meaning, purpose and identity, life, relationship, Transcendence and reasons for living could be taken up in pedagogy and specifically in different parts of the curriculum.

1. Change in cultural meanings: A basis for interpreting spirituality changes

The understanding of spirituality assumed here has been outlined in detail in a great book written by Mary Crawford and Graham Rossiter (Crawford, Rossiter, 2006) and their latter articles. Many constructs have been used for interpreting changes in spirituality and most of them have some explanatory power; but none by themselves seem to provide an adequate interpretation, because present changes in spirituality and meaning of life are diversified and multidimensional. These changes are connected with a complex set of many influences that need proper understanding, because they are strongly influence the process of upbringing in present context. Table no 1 presents a range of sociological, psychological and ideological constructs that have been used to interpret social change, and that in turn can be applied to spirituality. This table has been prepared carefully by Australian Professor of Moral and Religious Education, Graham Rossiter (Rossiter, 2013) and relying on his friendly approach towards Central and Eastern Europe, we added some elements, mostly references from this part of Europe. In our opinion this table may be easily used as a very important signposts for pedagogues, teachers, parents, grandparents and even the experts in pedagogy and education without attempting to analyse them in any detail.

Table 1. Range of sociological constructs that can be used for interpreting change in spirituality

Sociological construct	Notes on the focus of the constructs	Some references
Constructs related to religion & change		
Religiosity	Measure of religious identity and behaviour such as attendance at church etc., frequency of prayer/religious rite, engagement in a local community of faith.	Fuller, 2001, Osewska, Stala, 2003; Mariański, 2006, Dillen, 2007; Bravená, 2011; Osewska, 2018; Hanesova 2021.
Secularisation	Decline in the prominence of religion in personal, social, cultural and political life; less reference to the idea of God in spirituality.	Fenn, 2001; Norman, 2002; Wright, 2004; Crawford, Rossiter, 1996; Crawford, Rossiter, 2006; Mariański, 2006; Dillen, 2007.
Privatisation of religion	Religious beliefs increasingly becoming a private matter, decline in the social prominence of religion.	Crawford, Rossiter, 2006; Dillen, 2007; Lombaerts, 2011.
Social reality of religion	People construct a view of what they think religion is; religious knowledge is socially constructed.	Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1973; Mariański, 2006; Sullivan, 2021.
World views	A scheme of meaning through which people make sense of the world and life. A collective world view may function like a religion.	Naugle, 2002; Lombaerts, 2011; Osewska 2020.
Constructs related to social change		
Social reality	Knowledge is constructed through social interaction; leads to particular, contextual perceptions of what constitutes reality.	Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Berger, 1973; Osewska, 2008; Mariański, 2006.
Cultural postmodernity	The cultural situation characterised by: uncertainty about personal knowledge, which is socially constructed and contextual; disbelief in meta-narratives; extreme individualism; scepticism; existentialism.	Bridger, 2001; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Mariański, 2006; Kawecki, 2011; Lombaerts, 2011; Osewska, 2016; Osewska 2020.

Individualism/ individualisation	Very strong emphasis on the individual, often at the expense of a community dimension; emphasis on individual freedom and choice.	Crawford & Rossiter, 2006. Schweitzer, 2004; Schweitzer, 2007; Boeve, 2007.
Pluralism	Diversity of cultures, policies and religions making a pluralistic society.	Jackson, 2004; Baum, 2007 Mariański, 2006
Relativism	Arises from the capacity to make multiple comparisons. Tendency to see religions and morality as much the same in principle; hence a decline in sense of religious uniqueness, religious morality and in religious authority.	Baum, 2007; Crawford, Rossiter, 2006.
De-traditionalisation	Decline in the sense of family, religious and cultural traditions; life lived more independently of cultural traditions.	Hermans, 2004; Boeve, 2007; Boeve 2011; Osewska, 2016.
Ideology	The value basis to a particular way of thinking, or of a cultural group. The set of values that motivates and drives particular political groups. Ideology may be somewhat covert.	Darder et al., 2003.
Inter-cultural communication	The process of promoting mutual understanding and conversation between cultural groups. Learning from various cultures from different contexts.	Gallagher, 1992.
Constructs related to institutional change		
De-institutionalisation	Decline in the prominence and power of social institutions – like religions. Decrease in the power of certain bureaucracies.	Hermans, 2004.
Social psychological constructs		
Meaning and purpose	The thinking that helps individuals interpret their experience and the world. It helps justify and motivate behaviour. It can help give coherence to one's explanations of what is happening in the world. Inner resources that are developed through interaction with cultural meanings.	Osewska & Stala, 2003; Crawford, Crawford, Rossiter, 2006; Osewska, 2008; Rossiter, 2013; Hanesová 2021.

Identity	How individuals draw on both cultural and inner resources for their self-understanding and self-expression. May be multidimensional including moral, spiritual, religious, cultural, identity elements.	Taylor, 1989; Crawford, Rossiter, 2006.
Wellbeing	The general feeling of wholesomeness in the individual's self-understanding and life. Includes physical, social, spiritual and economic dimensions.	Fisher, 2001; Eckersley et al., 2005.
Resilience	Capacity to function well as a person despite difficulties and problems. Capacity to cope with setbacks and difficulties in life.	Brown, 2001; Witham, 2001.
Character	The moral 'fibre' of the individual. The set of virtues that gives the individual moral integrity. The values and commitments that help make a strong and contributing person.	Osewska & Stala, 2003; Nucci, Narvaez, 2008; Horowski, 2020.
Virtues	The moral qualities that are embedded in the individual like 'habits' of mind and good acting. Has a long history within thinking about religious virtues.	Horowski, 2020; Osewska 2020.

Upbringing refers to a long-term goal to be set for the young generations in a particular economic, political, socio-cultural, ethnic, moral, religious and educational context. For many years already, pedagogues, educationalists, expert in familiology and other experts in pedagogy and education underscored the ongoing character of upbringing, particularly when understood in a regional, national or world perspective (Osewska, 2016). Not only children and young people, but adults of all ages are absorbed in the modern world as a comprehensive upbringing environment. It is worth mentioning that not only socialisation from the older to younger generation, but also inter-generational and co-generational relationships, illustrate that individual people and organizations are confronted with new situations which, continuously, need initiation, supporting, learning and upbringing. It is almost impossible to provide proper upbringing in our present European context without understanding of constructs related to social change, but also construct related to institutional and psychological changes (Rossiter, 2013).

Upbringing is connected with transition which takes place inside a person, but also in the concrete socio-cultural context. The upbringing process is not as simple as some journalists think, because it is not a passive acceptance of

the ideas given to someone from the outside, but a personal, relational, co-independent and very creative process strongly connected with culture and prompted by virtues. This is why culture becomes synonymous with upbringing is, *paideia* in the full sense of the word. On the one side, it includes integrally functioning and involvement of all human powers (each and every human being in its integrity), so that they would bear good ‘fruit’, and on the other hand, it contains works of culture that affect the human and which are able to shape them and make them free through upbringing. We are talking about precious works dealing with values and covering a wide range of topics, which constitute products of a given culture but which were discovered and enriched by a human who presented them independently, that is, ethically (Ingarden, 1987). That was very strongly understood by Pope John Paul II, who underlined that culture is more powerful than all other forces and he owes his own spiritual formation from the beginning to Polish culture, to its literature, its music, its arts, its theatre, traditions, rites, virtues, norms, schools and the universities (John Paul II, 2005). So upbringing or formation is a precious work that is undertaken not only by parents and teachers, but by the whole society or whole nation. Moreover, time ‘takes care’ of the most valuable things that are worthy of being handed down from generation to generation. In fact, these are the elements of culture and tradition and as such they are formative in character. What is more, they produce more works of culture, and generate wealth and welfare, which are only supplementary in character, because they provide means which turn out to be appropriate and favourable for upbringing and culture (Rossiter, 2013).

The notion of culture is ambiguous and very complex. In its original meaning the term culture applied to human is synonymous with the term ‘upbringing’ that puts first of all “to take up with love” what may ‘shape’ humans or let them achieve concrete aims to be better, free human. Culture is always connected with love, freedom, truth and upbringing. That is why, the construct of ‘change in cultural meanings’ is helpful in understanding children’s search for meaning and spirituality. Cultural meanings are understood as the sets of socially constructed ideas, values, assumptions and emotions that form people’s thinking and behaviour. There are various cultural meanings in every society, but it is always possible to identify the sets of meanings with which individuals identify. Cultural meanings are often a blend of social, cultural, religious, spiritual and political ideas, that are in turn meshed with feelings and values that reinforce the ideas. People draw upon and interact with these cultural meanings when forming their own personal ideas about life. Religion, especially Christianity can be prominent and influential in people’s accepted cultural meanings (Osewska, 2016).

The notion of cultural meanings is a composite scheme that draws upon a number of the constructs listed in Table no 1. Polish sociologist Janusz Mariański

provides the general characteristics of a pluralistic society and analyses in detail the phenomenon of sociocultural pluralism in societies of liquid modernity or postmodernity. A modern pluralist society is characterized by a far-reaching differentiation of individual areas of life, which include the economy, politics, education, leisure, healthcare, culture, morality, and religion. All these areas have their own autonomous structural systems with their own codes of conduct and laws, as well as their own logics of action. This is why the present context of social life consequently leads individuals to be confronted with fundamental, existential questions. Identifying cultural meanings and showing how they have changed is a useful way of interpreting change in spirituality. This provides a potentially valuable contribution to pedagogy; children can be engaged in a research-oriented process of appraising cultural meanings, experiences and spirituality (Mariański, 2006).

A variety of life experiences could trigger change in the personal meanings of humans – including upbringing. The new personal meanings usually resulted from a shift in their favoured cultural meanings. The main principles of personalistic approach to upbringing are as follows: uniqueness as the aim and condition of education (personalisation, individualisation, acceptance of needs and interests of pupils, tolerance of individual differences); self-development of pupils, as the aim and condition of education (support of positive relationship of a pupil toward himself/herself, active involvement of pupils in all phases of education, self-evaluation, auto-regulation, meaningful motivation, positive learning climate at school, support of independence, support of curiosity and creativity); integral development of personality (balanced proportionality of cognitive, affective and psychomotoric areas of personality, use of all educational resources, development of all channels of learning); priority of relationships in the life of a specific person, priority of attitudes and abilities – these should be the aims of education (instead of pure cognitive knowledge), emphasis on experience (moral socialization, development of practical skills, preference of ability to performance and of creativity to memorizing, emotionalisation, elimination of stress, development of positive inter-personal relationships, positive influence of feedback, learning by doing and experience).

The cultural context in which a child or young person is raised can be an important factor that supports or hinders the nurturing of spirituality, understood as relational awareness. A secularised society may instil in children a lack of openness to religion or limit the relational aspect of their spirituality (Osewska, Stala, 2003).

2. Children's spirituality as an innate human ability

The literature on children's spirituality published in books and academic articles presents a very positive picture of children's spiritual development both at early childhood and primary school age levels, just a few selected names: S. Cavalletti (2002), A. Dillen (2007), B. Hay & R. Nye (2006), B. Hyde (2008), R. Nye (2009), J.W. Berryman (2009), J. Grajczonek (2011), Ch. Robinson (2023). It is also possible to find very interesting articles in the "International Journal of Children's Spirituality". When the authors from Western Europe, Australia and North America are well known, those from Central and Eastern Europe (mostly because of their native languages) are known mostly in this part of Europe. As we talk about children's upbringing and spirituality in Croatia, it will be important to refer also to this part of Europe: N. Bravená (2011), N. Bravená (2014); D. Hanesová (2021); E. Osewska, J. Stala, (2003), Osewska (2016).

There are various interpretations of spirituality that are closely linked with terms: 'meaning', 'religiosity', 'spiritual sensitivity', but also 'culture' or "relationship with Transcendence". Traditionally, spirituality has been linked with religion (mostly Christianity), but today spirituality is recognised also outside of religious contexts. The relationship between religion and spirituality is complex, with many people who have no religion identifying themselves as spiritual, but with others maintaining that the two cannot be separated. Such issues have implications for upbringing, where children and youth may represent a huge diversity of religions, or none. The spiritual aspect of life is helping people create frameworks of meaning and providing individuals with a way of being in the world which influences their decisions and actions. It enables them to interpret their life experiences (Rossiter, 2013).

Spirituality is a multidisciplinary field, and so its academic and professional inquiry necessitates an interdisciplinary approach with diversified paradigms, approaches and methodologies. When spirituality is considered as a human trait, it is more clearly understood as being distinct from religion (Robinson, 2023). On that presupposition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child identifies spirituality as one very important aspect of a child's development, that requires continuous support and nurturing. Article 17 states that governments must "ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his/her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health". Later in the same document, Article 27 indicates that "the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development" and advises the right of the child to be free from any form of exploitation that may impact their physical, cognitive, emotional, moral, social and spiritual development. This Convention explicitly

presents the spiritual capacity together with the other human domains, in other words, it simply highlights the importance of spirituality (the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Speaking about spirituality from theoretical perspective it is possible to refer to various epistemologies within the paradigms of positivism, psychoanalysis, behaviourism, postpositivism, humanism, existentialism, transpersonal theory, quantitative measures, interpretivism, including constructivism & constructionism - qualitative approaches, mixed methods and postmodernism. In this article, I refer to spirituality as an important and integral aspect of human life, according to Christian and personalistic pedagogy. Christian pedagogy affirms this view that spirituality gives humans deeper understanding of being, meaning of life and purpose. The personalistic pedagogy is grounded in the theory of human being (philosophical anthropology, philosophy of the human acts). The person understood as a value with such attributes as dignity, autonomy, uniqueness, integrity and rights. In terms of personalistic pedagogy, the child is perceived as the whole (complete, integral) human person. The child, along with his/her childhood, is recognised as a subject/co-creator of self-development, growing up, continuous development of human nature, including both one's own well-being and the common/public weal.

So, in order to speak about spirituality, it is necessary to take the perspective in which human is a person endowed with value and dignity, from Christian perspective as the one created by God, saved and sanctified. The human as a person is not only a thinking being that is free and capable of creating culture but, above all, open to others and called to respond to the gift of love through interpersonal relations with the other person. Human being cannot live without love and connection with others. Humans who wish to understand themselves thoroughly and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of human being must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness, draw near to meaning of life and spirituality (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* 10). So, all people starting from childhood need to know more deeply and to make their own a genuine spirituality as a mode of life that is expressed in virtues and the daily life. Therefore, children's spiritual capacity may growth as the cultivation of inner life or religious belief.

3. Creating an environment to nurture spiritual sensitivity of children

Spirituality is not the victory of the spirit over the body, but rather the integration of the whole human being. Even if a child will more easily ask for something connected with everyday needs as food or drink than spiritual needs, still children are often believed to have a natural capacity to be spiritual; something

which pedagogy education has the potential to nurture. Some authors demonstrate that spirituality is culturally mediated and always exists within particular cultural contexts that shape how it is expressed, understood, attended to and manifested, as well as how it evolves in human beings (Hay and Nye, 2006). Annemie Dillen tries to see children's spirituality as the middle ground between faith and culture, as a kind of 'osmosis'. This term is the Greek word for 'thrusting' and permeation, so that a reciprocal exchange between faith and culture takes place, but no fusion. Similar to the biological process in which osmosis substances pass through from both sides, still both the faith and the culture preserve their own identity. This perspective assumes that there is no automatic mono-correlational relationship between faith and culture, but diversified arising from various contexts can be confronted with each other without the one vision 'swallowing up' the other. This perspective allows to refer to a multitude of processes of supporting children's spirituality using resources from Christian tradition and secular one (Dillen, 2007).

Elżbieta Osewska and Józef Stala call to mind a home where the family practices faith on a daily basis. The family manifest in their whole life and functions, the connection with God and fulfils the prophetic, priestly, and royal functions. In such a setting even very young children would readily absorb some feelings, talks, norms and ideas about Transcendence. Therefore, when children hailing from Christian families go to kindergarten or primary school, they bring with them a familiarity with spirituality and religion. This fundamental and existential orientation will affect the way the children interact with peers and teachers (Osewska, Stala, 2003). Today, living in a secularised context, children often do not have the opportunity to learn the language that helps them to express their spiritual and religious experiences, and the meaning they make of these experiences. Increasing pluralism in the society leads to competition among different ways of life and children may feel unsure how to organise their understanding of themselves, life, relationships, values. When spirituality may be regarded as the reflective and active expressions of meaning of life, this provides the open space for children for their personal response, on the condition that is not restricted to teachers' spirituality (Robinson, 2023).

What is the starting point for growing children's spirituality? Some authors underline children's spiritual capacities as a very good starting point for explaining spirituality of infants and children. The simple experience of wonder and awe, asking questions, being in silence, connecting with others open children for spirituality. The pedagogies developed specifically for children's education as a way to spirituality that is so different to adults, just to name a few: "Godly play" (Berryman, 2009; Hyde, 2008); "Catechesis of the Good Shepherd" (Cavalletti, 2002); "Theologising with children" (Dillen, 2007; Bravená, 2014; Hanesová, 2021).

It is also possible to nurture spirituality in the child by simply showing them what a beautiful world they live in. Contact with nature, which is both a source of beauty, awe and mystery, is of great importance, as it allows the child to stand in a multi-level relationship with the world. Encounters with nature are so strong for the child that they cannot think of anything else for a long time; they express that through play, discourse, drawings. This is because their senses catch every stir among the leaves, every sound, every colour. Natural spaces, trees, bushes, flowers, streams, animals stimulate the child's imagination. Nye (Nye, 2009) summarised this thinking under the acronym SPIRIT: S – space; P – process; I – imagination; R – relationship; I – intimacy; T – trust. This discourse makes a valuable contribution to exploring and understanding the natural 'human' dimension to children's spirituality in psychological terms. The interpretation of what might be called a 'basic human spirituality' in children, complements and informs thinking about religious development and the growth of a personal religious faith (Dillen, 2007) The discourse readily gives an impression, that as far as fundamentals are concerned, children's spirituality is not problematic.

In the light of these developments, one could surmise that the search for spiritual sensitivity of children, especially at kindergarten and primary school level, is necessary. Marian de Souza highlights a few elements: promoting a sense of connectedness to develop tolerance, empathy and compassion, valuing a shared story, including silence and solitude, creating avenues to assist in the search for wisdom, meaning or purpose; offering experiences of awe and wonder, encouraging a heightened awareness of moments of joy and delight, discovering ways to rediscover creation, exploring learning through the arts, identifying moments of mystery and magic in the everyday, recognizing opportunities for ritual, initiation and rites of passage, becoming aware of and responding to a transcendent dimension in one's daily life. Spirituality in terms of 'connectedness' to self, others, the world and the transcendent means daily contact with oneself, others and something overcoming what the child is able to see with senses, but rather with imagination. Wonder, awe search for the unknown, are child expressions of spirituality, exercises of the imagination in stories, drama, acting, playing, drawings, paintings. Young children are active agents in their own spiritual processes, so they need to have their own 'voice' in upbringing. Addressing the perceiving and sensing, thinking, feeling, playing and intuiting processes in the everyday situation, is vital for a healthy spiritual upbringing. Teachers need to address this dimension not only in their classrooms, but also in their lives, so that they may become more reflective practitioners, including in the process of upbringing their own understanding of spirituality and to provide children with opportunities to become resilient, empathetic, compassionate, meaningful and hope-filled people who are more capable of responding to the problems of the contemporary world.

On the findings on children's spirituality, it is possible to recommend that teachers, educators, pedagogues adopt, as contextually appropriate, the activities and experiences in order to more consciously nurture the spirit of infants and children. The most important recommendations for practice are the following: draw upon one's personal spirituality as a resource, prepare a beautiful and well-organised classroom environment that includes quiet spaces, use a flexible schedule; nurture loving relationships, develop children's love for nature through indoor and outdoor interaction with plants and animals, maintain a child-centred curriculum where children explore their interests, emphasize moral and character development by modelling and teaching children about virtues; promote social and emotional development (Robinson, 2023).

By recognizing and then affirming the inner life force within children, teachers may create a new perspective through which to understand integral child upbringing. It is also very important to use language in order to describe how to nourish children's spirituality. As educators become familiar with this emerging language, they may increasingly appreciate the importance of promoting the qualities associated with spiritual development in all children.

Conclusion

This article has provided a simple introduction to children's spirituality, based on pedagogical and theological literature from Australia, Europe and North America where the deep socio-cultural and religious changes resulted in uncertainty about life and the future. When in the past, the meaning, virtues, value system and faith was usually attributed to the young generation, today searching for meaning and spirituality is very individual and personal. The child's own experience is the basis for constructing one's own, authentic spirituality. In the first years of child development, many experts suggest children to be naturally spiritual, easily engaging in wonder, verbal and nonverbal communication, asking questions, expressing their responses and ideas in a various ways, telling their stories, introducing simple rituals, play, games, seeking relationship with others and Transcendence. Therefore, accepting a spiritual potential of children teachers, educators, pedagogues should offer a range of opportunities that might deepen children's spirituality. The author hopes that this article opens the platform for further discussion on spiritual opportunities created in kindergartens and primary schools.

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