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THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDREN

SARA GRIECO
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

MaryAnne Mong Cramer
Assistant Professor of Special Education
Thesis Supervisor

Leigh Ann Haefner
Associate Professor of Science Education
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

Students do not come to school as empty buckets waiting to be filled. Every student enters a classroom with a wide variety of experience, both positive and negative. By the time students reach school age, they have already been influenced by society. Knowing a student's background may explain some of their behavior, but some positive actions may be uncharacteristic. For example, a student who typically causes classroom disruptions may quietly console another disruptive student. Many would agree that some of these positive behaviors are part of a spiritual experience, or characteristics that indicate a search for meaning; understanding that one is part of something greater than the present (Mata, 2010).

This study focuses on four characteristics of spirituality: Imagination, Joy, Empathy, and Kindness (Mata, 2010; Paley, 1999). Ten teachers from a rural elementary school in the northeast United States were interviewed regarding their observations of these characteristics in the classroom and which characteristics, if any, they intentionally foster with their students.

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Chapter 1

Literature Review

“I cried out to God, ‘Show me your face’ and God sent me a child.”

- Susan Reed Doyle

This section of the text will include information regarding the current literature on spirituality in children. Using current research, spirituality has been defined for this study. This same research was used to determine what characteristics, if any, are observable in school age children. The four characteristics are outlined below with examples from the literature. The chapter concludes with the relevance of this information to teachers.

Definition of Spirituality

There has been much debate over a definition of spirituality. In fact, Merriam-Webster offers several definitions, such as “of or relating to sacred matters,” “concerned with religious values,” and “relating to supernatural beings.” The word spirit, however is defined by Merriam-Webster as the “inner quality of a person that gives life and power.” Many who have conducted research on this topic have attempted to define spirituality.

In order to fully understand what spirituality is, it is necessary to examine what spirituality is not. Spirituality is not religion. Merriam-Webster defines religion as “an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods.” In addition, spirituality is not morality. Morality is defined by Merriam-Webster as “beliefs about what is right behavior and what is wrong behavior.”

For the purpose of this study, spirituality has been defined as an innate quality that allows us to exhibit characteristics that connect to a greater being. It is the search for meaning; understanding that one belongs to something greater than the present (Mata, 2010; Paley, 1999; Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). This definition was formulated taking into account much of this research. When recounting a Spiritual experience, one often connects it to a person, place, or one of the five senses (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). For example, one may be reminded of an overpowering emotion due to a spiritual experience through a smell or a song. When recalling Spiritual experiences throughout their life, very few mention an experience within the school setting (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). Many of the stories written by Vivian Paley, however, describe Spiritual experiences in the classroom. According to Mata (2010) and Paley (1990, 1999) the following characteristics were observed most when inquiring into the Spirituality of children.

Imagination in Children

Young children struggle to effectively communicate thoughts and feelings due to their immature, but growing, vocabulary. Children instead communicate and attempt to understand feelings through play (Paley, 1990). Play in education is becoming more prevalent as educators are accepting the important value of play. Aside from valuable educational purposes, play allows children to enjoy their childhood, rather than being treated as adults (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). Typically, play is a developmentally appropriate practice for young children, especially when they first begin school. In order to meet the performance standards on state tests, academic content has become more rigorous in all grades. This is not developmentally appropriate for children who should be learning through discovery and play.

Standardized testing pressures school districts, teachers, and students to reach the benchmarks. The pressure continues to increase as teachers and school districts are scored on how well students perform (William, 2010). This has forced educators to choose between student-centered curriculum and

test-centered curriculum. In addition to this performance anxiety, budget cuts are limiting many resources and personnel. Subjects that are not tested are the first to be eliminated. Typically, these are the subject students enjoy and are just as important to education as Math and Reading (Grose, 2012). However, there is more to education than simply words and numbers.

Vivian Paley frequently uses storytelling in her classroom as another means of communication for students. She often connects the students' home lives to the actions in their stories. In the same way that children use play to view problems from a different angle, storytelling allows the child to be any character in the story and still see the events. In, "*The Boy on the Beach*," Paley (2010) tells the story of a young girl in her classroom who had a dinosaur that always got yelled at for eating "bad stuff." The teacher later explained that this child's mother frequently yells at other parents for taking their children for fast food rather than making a healthy meal at home. In order to gain new perspective on these events, the child made herself the one receiving the scrutiny; she was now the one eating the "bad stuff" and being punished.

Early in their school career, children often learn the most valuable lessons through the wonders of play. New ideas or thoughts may not be accepted in society, so a child may mask these ideas in play to attempt to understand them, such as in the aforementioned example of the angry parent. Play allows children to exercise many aspects of their very being. In creating new storylines and characters, children can look at an issue through a different lens, allowing them to work toward finding solutions (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). In addition to allowing children to communicate thoughts and feelings, play also develops relationships (Paley, 1990). Children practice making relationships and grow to understand how behaviors elicit responses from others.

Through play, children learn about the world around them. They are given the freedom to become whoever and whatever they want. Play allows students to view issues they may not understand from a new angle. It also acts as a means of communication when children are unable to articulate their

feelings. Although play is mostly fictional, it is always true (Paley, 1990). Children honestly convey whatever is on their minds into a reality to better understand themselves and the surrounding world.

Joy in Children

As previously mentioned, play allows children to use many skills that they already possess. Unlike academics, which are mandatory, play allows children to choose what skills they use at what times. They practice social skills, learn about occupations, discover what colors mix to form new ones and how to get objects from one container to another. All of these experiences elicit joy because children are using everything they already possess to grow (Paley, 1990).

Joy is an entirely organic experience; it cannot be controlled by the child, but is simply found in daily successes (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). Because joy is such a wonderful experience, it is only natural to seek out situations that will provide this experience. For children, many of these experiences occur through friendships. In seeking friends, children find joy and in turn avoid unpleasant feelings of fear and loneliness (Paley, 1990). Vivian Paley recognized this when she created her rule “*You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*” (Paley, 1992). With this rule, she recognized the desire to be included by others, and to avoid the negative experience of being alone (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998).

Empathy in Children

Developmental theorists have reported that children believe that any misfortune that occurs in life is their fault, until around age 10 (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). Children who are young when their parents decide to separate often believe they are the cause of the separation. How is this possible for children who come from very loving homes? The definition of empathy according to Merriam-Webster is being able to share another’s “experiences and emotions.” Young children are often asked to focus on

sharing early in their education, however, it seems that they have a deeper understanding than they are credited with.

Vivian Paley gives several examples of empathy in her writing. One of her most widely recognized stories is that of Teddy (Paley, 1999). This is the story of a school in London. A group of children with disabilities are brought to the school regularly to interact with other children. A boy named Teddy arrives in a wheelchair, eager to play. With him, he brings a red car that he is placed in and permitted to move about the room. The children do not hesitate to include Teddy in their games of store, and also in their storytelling. As the children are preparing to act out their stories, Teddy's car is taken away as the children are preparing to leave. The students insist that Teddy needs his car to be in the story, and are willing to retrieve it for him themselves. Their complete understanding of Teddy, and desire to include him is deeply moving, and encouraging.

Even when children are reluctant to change themselves to do what is right, they are able to understand and explain why the choice is correct. For example, in Vivian Paley's book "*You Can't Say You Can't Play*, (1992)" she adopts the new rule in her kindergarten classroom. The students agree that it is a good rule, but that it will not work in their classroom. To gain perspective, and to help her students understand, she interviews students in first through fifth grade to listen to their thoughts on the rule. Many stated that the rule is fair, but offered numerous reasons why the rule would not work. Students stated that it is impossible to allow someone to join a game if all the necessary roles are filled; a new role cannot be made for them because it would ruin the game. They also expressed their desire to play only with friends. Paley also found an issue of "the boss" in the game, who decided who was allowed and who was not allowed to participate. Although many believed the rule would not work, they could all relate to feeling left out and understand the benefits that could come from the rule.

Students who a teacher would not expect empathy from often show it toward their peers. Vivian Paley (1990) writes her book "*The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter*" about Jason, a boy who always pretended to be or had a helicopter. Typically something on his helicopter was broken and required

fixing. When another student would try to engage Jason in conversation or play, he would immediately proclaim that something on his helicopter needed fixing, and seclude himself to a small section of the room. However, when one of Jason's peers was upset, Paley writes that Jason's helicopter was never broken. In fact, he often attempted to comfort the child in whatever way he could. Jason's story illustrates that even when children have their own struggles, they are willing to help another if they know it is important to them (Paley, 1999). In Jason's case, his many struggles were hidden behind his broken helicopter. He was able to put the helicopter aside when he saw that one of his peers was struggling too.

In young child's play, superheroes are very important. Children love to run around in capes fighting bad guys and saving those who are in danger. Play mimics the real world at times, and although superheroes are fictional, what they stand for is very real. This type of play is so popular because children also want to be the hero (Paley, 1999). They want to defend their peers and stand up for what is right.

The desire to do what is right often comes from experiencing the consequences of doing something wrong. Children know what it feels like to be punished, and once they have experienced it, they do not wish to do so again. In addition, they would not wish a punishment on their peers. In "*Wally's Stories* (Paley, 2002)," we learn that Wally often caused physical harm to his classmates. At a loss of how to handle Wally's behavior, Paley turns to her class for help. The students respond that she needs to remind him to not be rough, and to keep telling him this until he learns. Paley realizes that her students do not want Wally to be punished, and Wally claims this is because they are his friends. The children have experienced punishment before, and although Wally is causing them pain, he is their friend, and they would not wish for him to receive unpleasant treatment.

All of these examples have illustrated how students consider the thoughts and feelings of others. They are always honest about their feelings even when they do not understand the feelings, or cannot find the exact words to describe them (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). The ability of a student to put themselves in someone else's shoes and console them is truly a spiritual experience (Paley, 1999).

Kindness in Children

Even from an early age, society begins to shape how young children see the world. From a very young age, children are able to recognize and label something as “good” or “bad” (Paley, 1990). Children naturally experience compassion, but they learn how this instinct fits into society through examples. In school, children use this early recognition and the teacher guidance to identify what is “good” and “bad” behavior in the classroom. Helping students understand the difference between these behaviors at an early age will allow them to recognize and change their behavior in the future (Paley, 1992).

Every child comes from a different background and has a different way of viewing the world. It is necessary for everyone in the classroom to have a consistent understanding of right and wrong, and for this reason, teachers must model the expected behaviors for their students (Paley, 1990). In a society where families are extremely diverse, often teachers are faced with an increasing amount of responsibility (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). In some instances, teachers provide the only structure and discipline a child will have. In others, the teacher must simply remind students of the behavior expected of them at home and in school.

Most early elementary classrooms are highly structured; students look to these rules and rituals as cues for how to behave in the classroom and society. They may refer to the guidelines for sharing or including others (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998).

The idea of fairness (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998) is also a major part of classroom environments. Students need to know that the teacher is an authority figure who will attempt to ensure that every student is treated fairly. Students begin to consider fairness when interacting with their peers. In Vivian Paley’s book *“You Can’t Say You Can’t Play,”* she tells of adopting the new rule in her classroom. Although most students were against the rule being implemented, they agreed that the rule was fair. Students wanted to play solely with their friends, and not be forced to include another. Even so, they agreed that if someone wanted to be included, it would be fair to include them. Once the rule was set in place, students

quickly adapted to the change. In fact, they helped each other remember the rule, and became positive examples in the classroom.

When students exhibit kindness in the classroom, they encourage other students to be kind as well. Kindness is contagious (Paley, 1999). When speaking to a high school, Paley told the story of Teddy, the child with multiple disabilities that was included by his peers. A young lady in the high school classroom was so moved by this story that she shared one of her own. This young lady told how she got on the bus everyday, found a seat, and did not move or speak until the bus arrived at her stop. One day, a man ran onto the bus and told an amazing story of a gorilla saving a young boy at a local zoo. Everyone on the bus was so encouraged by this news, that they all began talking and laughing. The young lady even gave her seat to an elderly person, which she had never done before. The man's story of kindness brought such a change over the crowd on the bus, and the young lady telling this story encouraged a change in her peers. She helped them to reflect on the kind acts they had done in the past, and how they have changed. This story inspired another member of the high school class to say:

See, we're used to so much shit ... garbage. We're always thinking about bad stuff. This Teddy kid and those others just seem to be, like, well, let's put it this way: while you were telling us those stories, I kept trying to remember if that's how I used to be, so nice and all. I recalled a couple things, and it made me feel, like, well, more relaxed, you could say (Paley, 1999, p. 23).

From an early age, students should be taught the difference between right and wrong. They are taught how to be fair, and they are taught how to show kindness to others and the positive effects this can have. Even when they grow older and forget these lessons, a simple hint from one of their peers can remind them of what it means to be kind.

Meaning for Families and Teachers

The definition of spirituality and four of the characteristics are supported by research, and suggest that spirituality is present in the classroom. It manifests in the child who is elated to play pretend, in the child who is able to forget their own trouble and comfort a friend who is hurting, in the child who is learning to express their feelings through play, and in the child who's kind acts encourage their peers to be kind as well.

The characteristics of what constitutes an American family have changed dramatically in the last 100 years, and remain a contentious socio-political topic. Many children are adopted, live with a single parent, divorced parents, gay or lesbian parents, grandparents, and sometimes no parents at all. It is a natural part of childhood to reflect on one's family history (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). For some children, this is challenging because it may not be a clear path. Vivian Paley gives an example in her book, *"Kwanzaa and Me"* of a family tree project typically done in schools. With an increased number of children being a member of an adopted family, this project was not as insightful as it was designed to be. Children were faced with the decision of whether they investigate their biological family tree, or that of their adopted family (Paley, 1995).

Due to the different dynamic of a family today, it is imperative that a teacher be open and accepting to students differences. Before determining a method for fostering spirituality, it is important to know your students. Know who they are as a learner and what their home life is like. According to Jane Ward, knowing your students also involves understanding how the environment and people in their life are influencing them (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). Society has created a very specific definition for a spiritual experience (Roof, Paley, & Ward, 1998). However, the current study demonstrates that spiritual events are as unique as the students who experience them.

Chapter 2

Context

“The moral universe rests upon the breath of school children.”

- Rabbi Yehuda Nisiah

According to the 2010 census, the Wilson¹ school district is home to 1,796 people. Approximately 98% of the population identifies as White, non-Hispanic. The average income is approximately \$25,000. Elementary enrollment includes 466 students in grades Kindergarten through 4th-grade, with 38% eligible for free or reduced lunch. There are 21 general education teachers, a special education teacher for each grade, reading intervention specialist, and autism support class.

The Wilson school motto is “Love and Literacy are the best gifts you can give a child.” In all subject areas, teachers are encouraged to involve families whenever possible in the daily curricular activities. The school takes great pride in their anti-bullying program. Students participate in a school wide program that focuses on the recognition of students who demonstrate exemplary behavior in one of eight identified characteristics. Each month, students are educated about and encouraged to practice one of the characteristics. The words used throughout the school year include: responsibility, self-control, cooperation, kindness, honesty, helpfulness, trustworthiness, acceptance, and perseverance. This education occurs in the general education classroom as well as in a bi-weekly guidance class.

All students participate in a school-wide behavior program, which parallels the commitment to the bullying program. Every teacher uses a variation of the clip system. Teachers in grades Kindergarten, First, and Second have a chart. Students move their clip up the chart for positive behavior, and down for negative. Third and Fourth grade students each have three clips they must keep for the entire day.

¹ The name of the school district has been changed to protect the identity of the school.

Negative behavior and poor choices will result in losing a clip. Modifications are made for students with other factors contributing to their behavior, such as ADHD. If students are able to prevent moving their clip down a set number of times, or are able to keep a certain number of clips by the end of each month they will attend a reward event. Rewards include a teacher talent show, magician, therapy dogs, PJ and movie day, bloodhound rescue dogs, a student talent show, and more. Students who fail to control their behavior do not have the privilege of attending these activities with the rest of the school.

Chapter 3

Methods

All four of the characteristics mentioned above are innately a part of children, or they can be taught. To determine how the characteristics manifest in children, a sample of teachers at the Wilson school district was interviewed. Participants were asked to provide observed examples of the four characteristics in their classroom. The questions were also designed to better understand how these characteristics, as well as others, are fostered in the classroom, if they are observable at all. Information has been obtained from several early childhood educators using the following research questions to guide this investigation:

1. Do you include character education in your classroom?
2. Why do you include character education in your classroom?
3. Have you seen imagination in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
4. Have you seen joy in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
5. Have you seen empathy in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
6. Have you seen kindness in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
7. What characteristics do you focus on in your character education?
8. Why do you focus on these characteristics? Is this intentional?
9. Have you noticed any positive results from your efforts?
10. Would you make any changes?

Participants

Data for this study was collected by interviewing teachers teaching Kindergarten through 4th-grade. Of the 18 female and 3 male teachers range from 25-60 years old, 10 teachers participated representing a sample of the population. Informed consent was obtained from each individual (see Appendix A). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Responses to the questions were transcribed and saved using the respondent's anonymous code. No identifying information was used when writing interview responses.

Analysis

Participant identity was coded to protect confidentiality. Responses were analyzed individually and collectively. The responses were reported using a direct interpretation and categorical aggregation methods (Stake, 1995). The Findings section contains individual responses given by the interview participants to each question. The Discussion section assimilates answers to questions as well as supporting information given on a topic by the participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

This chapter describes the answers provided by participants to the interview questions. Each participant was asked if they had observed the four characteristics, as well as others, in the behaviors of the students. Teachers gave specific examples of how these characteristics were observed in the classroom, and what teachers were doing to foster these characteristics. Finally, teachers reported positive effects they have noticed from their efforts, and any changes they would make in the future.

All interview participants included some form of character education in their classroom. The manner in which character education was incorporated into the classroom routine varied by grade level, but did follow a trend. Kindergarten through first grade teachers stated that character education was the very core of their curriculum. In every subject area, participants discussed positive aspects of behavior, and how it could be applied in the classroom.

Second through fourth grade teachers all participated in classroom meetings with their students. In classroom meetings, students are given the opportunity to express their feelings and discuss solutions to problems with friends in the classroom and on the playground. These meetings occur on a weekly basis and in emergency situations. For example, a student may cause physical harm to a peer. These actions need to be immediately addressed to ensure they are not repeated.

Fourth grade teachers, in addition to holding classroom meetings, rely on literacy instruction as a means of beginning discussions. They purposefully choose texts that encourage critical thinking. For example, the fourth grade teachers use the book "*Wonder*" (Palacio, 2012) to discuss character traits with students. They look at how the characters are changing and growing throughout the text, and examine each character's strengths and weaknesses. Through these conversations, students begin to look at their own identity. Students explore various viewpoints by contrasting how they view themselves to how peers view them. They also consider the identity they want to have, the identity they think they have, and what positive changes they can make to become who they want to be. Students can use self-reflection to

determine if they are proud of the person they have become. Finally, teachers capitalize on teachable moments in their daily conversations. When the subject of character comes up in a lesson, they take the opportunity to discuss it with their students before continuing the lesson.

Participants all agreed that character education is vital in the classroom, and that it has immediate as well as long term effects. One participant, Mr. Smith², believes that teachers are responsible for teaching the whole child. According to him, “Half of education is academics, while the other half is learning to be a good person; a good citizen of the world.” Students need to learn the skills that will help them become well- behaved children, and eventually hard working citizens who will make intelligent choices. He also expressed feelings generated when seeing a criminal on the news saying that most offenses are violations of the skills students are taught in kindergarten. Mr. Smith then posed the question “What do we [the teachers] have to do to make sure our kids do not forget the character skills they have been learning since kindergarten?” In addition, teachers encourage students to become problem solvers. They discuss issues that must be reported to a teacher, and those that students can handle independently. Due to these efforts, many participants have noticed a visible difference in the problem solving skills of their students from the beginning of the year to the end.

The Four Characteristics

As previously mentioned, the four characteristics observed most when examining spirituality in the classroom were Joy, Empathy, Imagination, and Kindness. Interview participants discussed the presence of these characteristics in their students, and provided examples to support their claims.

Each participant viewed the questions through a different lens; some focusing on the school’s guidance program and the lack of effectiveness, others used literacy as their main source of character

² Names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

education. Every teacher, however, was able to give examples of the four characteristics that have been observed in their classroom.

Imagination in Children

Many participants expressed their belief that students come to school with less and less imagination. Although teachers have reported a decreasing imagination in students, it is still present. At recess, students engage in fantasy play, pretending to be teachers and students. Mrs. Williams reported that the boys in her classroom would create skits at recess and perform them for the rest of the class.

Participants believe that Kindergarten and First Grade should be play based. Teachers of older students attempt to incorporate imagination and creativity into as much of the curriculum as possible. They provide reinforcement by asking students to set creative goals for themselves at the beginning of the year. This encourages students to work hard in the classroom and make positive choices. Giving students choices in the classroom is another way to foster creativity and imagination. There are minimal opportunities within the curriculum for students to use imagination. In math, students brainstorm multiple ways to solve a problem. S.T.E.M. programs are very beneficial for encouraging students to be problem solvers. For example, in Ms. Jones' classroom, students built windmills and sails using principles of engineering.

Joy in Children

Most participants claim that joy is visible in their students, but it is not specifically taught within their classroom. The school environment offers many opportunities for students to be joyful. Students enter the classroom in the morning eager to share stories of their experiences at home. At the beginning of a new week, they excitedly recount who they spent time with over the weekend, and what activities

they did. During the school day, students expect to follow a normal academic routine, which does not exhibit much joy. However, when students are given the opportunity to have a holiday party, a school-wide reward day, or even eat lunch with the teacher, their joy becomes evident.

This joyful tone is set early in kindergarten. Students begin their school career learning through songs and chants. Every movement throughout the room is done with an entirely positive attitude. The teacher models for students that school can be a joyful experience. The students then make this a reality for themselves. The positive tone set in kindergarten extends through the later grades.

Empathy in Children

Empathy is a large part of a classroom community. Treating the classroom as a community or a family aids student understanding that they must consider the thoughts and feelings of others. Some students begin school able to express empathy, and others require guidance to develop these feelings. In addition, some students may be unsure how to express these emotions, but feel them nonetheless. Teachers observe students to determine what skills need to be addressed with individual students, and the class as a whole. Fostering these traits begins early in kindergarten. While students are unable to express complicated feelings, they can see how a peer is feeling. Mrs. Maher often asks her kindergarten students to “look at her face” when trying to understand how others are feeling. Using the child’s face as a visual the student may be able to describe that she looks sad, like she is going to cry. In addition, they may be able to describe their own reaction when asked, “How would you feel if he pushed you off the swings?” Once students are able to explore how they would feel in a situation, they begin to act to protect others from these bad situations. Ms. George uses fake money as practice in mathematics as well as a positive reward system. Students attend a reward program when enough money has been earned. One student approached her and asked, “Ms. George, can I give my money to Amanda, and she can go to the reward instead of me?” This student has attended every reward this school year, and reflected on how missing

one would feel. She then offered for a student with behavioral struggles, who has never attended a reward this year, to go in her place.

For some, sympathy is discussed more than empathy. Ms. Johns recounts a “Band-Aid Experiment” done at the beginning of every year. On the first day of school a student may request a Band-Aid for their finger. Ms. Johns distributes Band-Aids to the entire class and instructs all students to place it in the same place on their finger. The day continues normally for a time, and eventually, Ms. Johns stops to discuss with the students. They come to the conclusion that equality is not fairness. One student needed a Band-Aid, but the rest did not. For the uninjured, this became a hindrance when performing daily tasks. A useless Band-Aid is annoying as well as wasteful. From this experiment, students learn that everyone has different needs to be successful. If everyone were given the same assistance and materials, some may not be successful. Therefore, it is imperative to respect differences.

Students learn to assist those in need. Miss Brown informed her students in December of a local family in need of assistance during the holiday. The students decided to provide all that the family required, and much more. Using empathy, the students reflected on their feelings during Christmas, and how they would feel if those were removed.

Kindness in Children

Kindness is one of the character traits focused on in the bullying program, and so all students have at least minimal exposure to this characteristic. Many participants believe kindness is the most valuable skill students learn in school. Each year on Earth Day, Mrs. Johnson wrote a Peace Poem with students. Each student chose an aspect of peace to add to the poem. According to her, “there is at least one student each year who chooses kindness to include in the peace poem.”

Some participants believe that if students are going to be kind as adults, they have already developed a kind heart by about age nine. This means that children are first exposed to kindness in the

home. Teachers and students set a tone in the classroom that everyone understands: kindness is expected, and unkindness is not acceptable. For some students, kindness is not something that is important at home. These students need to be prompted to think about how their actions impact others. For example, they may need to be prompted to consider why they treat someone poorly and if they would want to receive the same treatment. Students are motivated by kindness in the classroom to assist their peers by picking up books they dropped on the floor. At a young age, children are very accepting of differences among their peers. They offer any assistance they can and ignore behaviors adults may find distracting. For example, Ms. George has a student with severe emotional problems. When this student has a meltdown, others offer to help any way they can. Now, the students understand that positive reinforcement is best, and they will report to the teacher every time this student is on task. Children celebrate students with other disabilities as well. During a student talent show, an autism support class of approximately five students performed a synchronized dance. After their performance, Ms. George reports, "One of my students said 'I loved watching the special kids dance!' She didn't mean it in a degrading way, but that they hold a special place in her heart. That was so touching to hear." This student values the presence of everyone in the school.

Through classroom meetings, students work on skills and discuss problems they face among their peers. Some of the skills they work on are problem solving, specifically using "I" statements. When students are instructed on how to handle situations they do not like, the result is a decrease in tattling. In addition, students are kinder to one another as they increase their ability to express their feelings.

Other Characteristics

According to these results, spirituality is expressed in Joy, Empathy, Imagination, and Kindness. Teachers have noticed that spirituality is expressed in other characteristics as well. All teachers include the bullying program word of the month in some aspect of their classroom. The class discusses how they

can embrace each characteristic. At the beginning of the day, students have a moment of silence, and are asked to reflect on what they could do to help a peer, and how they can best exhibit the word of the month.

Mr. Smith gives his kindergarten students a “Big Word of the Week” to help students broaden their vocabulary and learn a variety of character words. These words include prejudice, integrity, chivalry, and advocate. The students are also introduced to opposite words that have negative meanings, such as malicious, and abominable. According to Mr. Smith, “it is important to expose children to these words. Even though they are young, they understand the meaning of these words, and even begin to use them in conversation.”

Other teachers include words such as honesty, gratitude, and what it means to have a hard work ethic. These words are important to help students develop positive attitudes and become comfortable with who they are. Teachers have noticed that many students are not grateful when they receive something, and often ask for more. Mrs. Garcia believes that “parents are responsible for modeling gratitude for their children. If children are not exposed to these positive examples early, they are less likely to learn later in life.”

In older grades that use literacy to discuss character, students discuss what it means to be “nice.” Mrs. Williams believes that “nice is an opinion. I encourage students to look beyond being nice, and use descriptive words that can be proven by looking at actions, such as responsibility, respect, and perseverance.”

All participants have noticed positive effects from the character education they included in their classroom. At the beginning of every school year, classroom rules are created. As the students progress through the year, they become less concerned with following the rules, and more concerned with becoming someone they can be proud of.

Chapter 5

Impact of Character Education

Participants have observed all of the four characteristics in their students. Several factors have contributed to these observations, including the bullying program, which is relatively new in the school. Although there have not been any drastic changes since the implementation of the program, the consistency of the program throughout the school has helped teachers and students. Students begin learning skills in kindergarten and continue to hone those skills through fourth grade. The instruction develops more depth as the students mature. For example, in kindergarten, students may develop kindness through sharing, while fourth graders may work on using kind words when expressing feelings. The program has also made character education easier for teachers because the students are already exposed to the skills they will be working on. Students also benefit from this consistency; a school wide tone is developed for how students are expected to behave. These expectations remain from kindergarten to fourth grade.

The bullying program melds easily with the academic goals, especially in kindergarten, where students are first exposed to the school community. It is very important at such an early age that teachers set clear expectations for students in their classroom, and throughout the rest of the school. If students develop this understanding early, they will be more successful in their school career.

Another aspect of student success is feeling safe in the classroom. Establishing a welcoming classroom environment is one of the first steps a teacher can take at the beginning of a school year. Children typically spend over 1,000 hours in the classroom per year. In many ways the teacher and peers become family, and so the classroom must become a community rather than just a room. Spending so much time together helps students develop an understanding of boundaries; the right way to treat

someone who is a friend. The reputation a child develops early on follows them through their entire school career. Students need to decide how they want to be remembered; as a “good kid”, or a “bad kid.” This type of self- reflection will allow students to determine if the choices they make are part of creating the reputation they desire. It also prompts them to make better choices to develop a positive opinion from peers.

A student’s character can promote success, or block their path. Positive character traits aid students in reaching their full potential, and negative traits may cause set backs. Some of these positive character traits include trustworthiness and honesty. Students learn that truth is necessary to be trustworthy. These skills become imperative in March and April when students are more easily annoyed with each other. Spending so much time together in the classroom begins to weigh on students, and more problems develop. At this point in the year, having already discussed necessary and unnecessary tattling is vital. They learn that some problems can be handled independently, or at least attempted before approaching a teacher. From the beginning of the year, students have been discussing that getting punched is a reason for tattling, while not being included is something that students should attempt to resolve before involving adults.

Character education encourages children to become self- aware, and think critically about their actions. These skills allow students to reflect on their identities and decide how they want to be viewed by society. As they mature, children can make positive changes due to the strong foundation that has been built by character education. These positive changes will assist in developing a positive reputation, and consequently, a meaningful relationship with peers and teachers.

According to the teachers, standard driven curriculum does not offer many opportunities for imagination in the classroom. Play, imagination, and creativity all allow students to practice various scenarios that require the use of many skill sets. It is during this time that students learn valuable success skills such as problem solving, respect, and responsibility. For example, a student who is playing house, and is the child practices respecting parents. In addition, a child pretending to be a parent practices

responsibility when taking care of a child. Lack of opportunities to practice these skills could be detrimental to a student's social success. In addition, rigorous academic content is not developmentally appropriate for young students; discovery through play is more meaningful. Children need to be discovering and creating at such early ages. Compared to the older grades, kindergarten includes more imagination in the curriculum. Students are given many more opportunities to create and make stories and scenarios for play. Older grades can only offer these opportunities during recess, and also during writing.

The curriculum domain that offers the most opportunities for imagination is writing. Students are given complete autonomy over what they write, even when responding to a prompt. In Kindergarten and First Grade, any writing students produce is celebrated because it is a new skill. Kindergarten students write simple stories that include a beginning, middle, and end. The demands become more rigorous as students mature. Students are asked to write narrative stories on a topic of their choosing. Another important part of writing is visualization, which requires the use of imagination. Students may be asked to visualize what is happening in a story to add more details. They may also be asked to write a narrative based on a picture, which requires critical thinking to ensure that the text matches the picture.

The participants believe that several factors have contributed to a decrease in imagination. Video games continue to devour a large portion of children's free time. Some video games do require the use of imagination, but students are often at a loss when not in front of a screen. When given the opportunity to play outside for recess, some students request to return to the classroom because they are bored outside. Some children are unsure how to have fun without a device in their hands, or being instructed of what to play. Teachers connect this boredom with the reported decrease in imagination.

Teachers have observed that students experience joy when they reach goals. Learning to read is challenging; but nothing matches the excitement of a child who has successfully read their first sentence. Many teachers talk about seeing "lightbulb" moments in their students. This occurs when a student finally understands a concept, and their expression shows how proud they are of this realization. Joy is

also visible when a teacher compliments a student on their success. An experienced teacher knows to give compliments only when they are deserved. When students receive them using this method, they mean so much more; the student knows they have truly done something amazing.

Students exhibit joy when they are given free choice. So much of the academic content is already decided, students are given little choice over what occurs in school. Allowing students to work with a friend of their choice, choose which center activity they complete, or even collectively make decisions about the classroom environment, such as the seating arrangements or decorations, encourages the student to be an active member of the community because they are valued. Educators realize the importance of student autonomy in the classroom; The Danielson Framework, which is used to evaluate teacher effectiveness places great emphasis on this category. When students are given autonomy, not only do they experience joy, but they learn the value of making decisions that make them happy, as well as their peers.

Upstanding students protest unfair treatment and bullying in the classroom. Self-reflection allows students to consider how they would feel in certain situations, and how they would prefer to be treated. Through literacy, students think critically about poverty and the rights of the disadvantaged. These discussions prepare students to stand up for what they know is right both civilly and in the classroom.

Students show compassion in many ways. Literacy helps them develop compassion for others who do not have the same rights as they do. Students comfort friends when they are sad. They bear each other's burdens; if a peer is upset, then others attempt to guide them along. When a child is successful, others will celebrate victory with them. Students love to share in another's success,

Classroom meetings have been helpful for students to be able to express their feelings. In a safe environment, students learn how to confront challenging situations, and also learn to describe how they feel so others can understand. Teachers introduce new vocabulary to help students express these feelings. For example, after several discussions, students began to use the word "disrespectful" when describing the actions of a peer.

Another important characteristic that is part of the school bullying program is honesty. In every class there are a few students who will readily admit willful disobedience. For these students, it is important to praise their honesty before issuing a punishment. From these actions, they learn that there will be consequences for making poor choices, but positive choices such as honesty will still be respected.

When asked what changes should be made, all participants responded that more time in the day should be spent on character education. Children are not developmentally ready to work as much as they do. They need time to develop character skills so that they will be successful before they begin academics. Participants believe that parents and teachers need to have the same expectations for their children. This makes it easier for everyone in the classroom to be successful. With these changes, we would be better serving our children.

There is evidence that spirituality is present in children when we use the characteristics of joy, empathy, imagination, and kindness as indicators. Teachers foster these characteristics in a variety of ways in the classroom. Younger students begin school working on problem solving and character building skills. As they mature, they learn how to express their feelings and have meaningful conversations to examine these feelings. Literature can be used to originate conversations and give students a new perspective. Teachers are actively working to help their students be successful in and out of the classroom, and given the opportunity, would do so much more.

This study represents a small portion of the teaching population, and so cannot be generalized for all teachers. It does, however, offer hope that our children are coming to school equipped with the skills they need to be successful citizens. In addition, teachers at this school are working to foster these characteristics as well as others that are equally important. Future research may look at what types of character programs may best benefit students, the benefits of having character programs everyday in the classroom, and the difference between the classroom teacher working on character as opposed to a guidance teacher teaching this class. From this research, it is clear that students do express spirituality, and these characteristics can be fostered to help our students succeed.

Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research
The Pennsylvania State University
Schreyer Honors College

Title of Project: The Spirituality of Children

Principal Investigator: Sara Grieco

Other Investigator:
Dr. Maryanne Mong Cramer
Thesis Supervisor
213 Hawthorn Building
Altoona, PA 16601 (814) 949-5562

Dr. Laura E. Rotunno
Honors Supervisor
210 Hawthorn Building
Altoona, PA 16601 (814) 949-5635

1. *Purpose of the Study:* The purpose of this study is to determine if there are innate Spiritual qualities in children and how teachers are fostering these characteristics in the classroom.
2. *Procedures:* Each subject will participate in a brief voluntary interview.
3. *Benefits:* There are no direct benefits from participating in this study. Teachers may learn strategies for fostering Spirituality upon reading the final report.
4. *Duration:* Obtaining consent and the interview itself will take approximately 30 minutes.
5. *Statement of Confidentiality:* Teachers who participate in this study will be assigned a randomized code number. All data will be associated with that code number. No identifying information will be used for the participants.
6. *Right to Ask Questions:* Participants may ask questions about the research using the contact information listed above.
7. *Voluntary Participation:* Participation is completely voluntary. Participants may stop participation at any time without penalty.

Please initial your response to the following question: May the researcher use the answers provided to the interview questions for research purposes?

_____ I DO give my consent to have my responses included in this study

_____ I DO NOT give my consent to have my responses included in this study.

Participant Signature Printed Name Date

Person Obtaining Consent Printed Name Date

Appendix B
Interview Questions

1. Do you include character education in your classroom?
2. Why do you include character education in your classroom?
3. Have you seen imagination in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
4. Have you seen joy in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
5. Have you seen empathy in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
6. Have you seen kindness in your students? Can you think of a specific example?
7. What characteristics do you focus on in your character education?
8. Why do you focus on these characteristics? Is this intentional?
9. Have you noticed any positive results from your efforts?
10. Would you make any changes?

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Academic Vita Sara J. Grieco

sjg5361@psu.edu

3022 Graham Ave.
Windber, PA 15963

The Pennsylvania State University Altoona Campus
BS: Childhood and Early Adolescent Education, PK-4 option,
Minor: Special Education,

May 2016
May 2016

Honors:

- ◆ Penn State Altoona Honors Program

Thesis Title: The Spirituality of Children
Thesis Supervisor: MaryAnne Mong Cramer

Bellwood- Antis
Professional Development School (PDS) Internship,
Lewis M. Myers Elementary School
220 Martin Street
Bellwood, PA 16617
Mentor: Allison Clabaugh
Partner Classroom: Danielle Hoffer

August 2015- May 2016

Awards:

- ◆ Class of 1922 Memorial Scholarship
- ◆ Virginia Gates Endowed Scholarship
- ◆ Fall Achievement Award 2013- 2015

Professional Memberships:

- ◆ Student Pennsylvania State Education Association,
- ◆ KDP International Honor Society in Education,

December 2013- Present
April 2015- Present

Presentations:

- ◆ Kappa Delta Pi Biennial Convocation
Orlando, FL

October 2015

Community Service Involvement:

- ◆ Voluntoona
- ◆ Spring Service Trip to New York City

August 2013- August 2015
March 2014