


## Chapter 2

# Reflections on the Role of Spirituality in How Young Children's Identities Are Constructed

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores how young children's identities are constructed and how this is linked to spiritual growth as one dimension of the education of the whole child. The concepts of identity and culture are discussed. Identities are seen as constantly changing narratives involving non-linear and uneven processes, especially socialization. The influence, especially on self-esteem, of intersecting socio-cultural factors, notably gender, ethnicity/race, class and religion, and of consumerism is considered. Recognizing that spirituality defies exact description, an inclusive understanding is presented which sees spiritual growth as a process of searching for meaning, identity, purpose, and connectedness. This involves considering existential, often difficult, questions and becoming more connected to other people, the world around, and (for some) a transcendent being. Qualities such as resilience and reflectiveness and a sense of agency and belonging are emphasized, as are caring environments, trusting relationships, interdependence, adults being attuned to children and time and space.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to unravel the complexities of how young children's identities are constructed; and how ideas associated with children's spirituality can contribute to understanding this process. It addresses particularly the influence of external, intersecting factors, notably gender, ethnicity/ race, class and religion, and of the macro-culture. As such, it presents a more socio-culturally based, less individualized view of children's spirituality than most recent literature and says little about internal processes. The

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discussion draws on various disciplines and cross-cultural studies, including those not explicitly related to spirituality.

An explanation of the approach adopted may help to indicate why the chapter does not start with definitions of contested terms such as spirituality, identity, and culture. Such concepts are often used, consciously or otherwise, in subtly different and confusing ways which reflect underlying assumptions. For instance, how children's spirituality is understood depends to a considerable extent on one's culture, background, and beliefs, including those about children. And the language used to describe identities reflects assumptions about the extent to which identities are fixed or fluid and change over time. Rather than treating children's spirituality as a phenomenon which can be directly observed or precisely defined, the broader process of how children's identities are constructed is considered first, making connections, in the second half of the chapter, with the literature on children's spirituality. This approach is similar to Symington's (1986) when he writes:

*I am talking of a single reality but coming at it from different perspectives. This is the Hebrew rather than the Greek way of treating a human phenomenon. The Hebrew way is to go round and round a subject, each time using different images to illuminate what is most profound. The Greek way of arguing by logical stages can never, in my opinion, do justice to any deep experience. (p. 11)*

Such an approach is intended to enrich and deepen one's understanding of difficult, paradoxical, and sometimes confusing concepts. Too definite a view of what these concepts mean may restrict one from seeing a more nuanced picture, considering perspectives from different cultures and disciplines. Therefore, readers are encouraged to be reasonably flexible, for now, about questions of definition and to see how exploring the broader process of children's identity construction can help in considering what spiritual growth entails and how to nurture this.

One's own background, culture, and assumptions influence how one understands ideas such as identity and spirituality. This chapter is written from the perspective of a white, middle-class, English man born in 1953 who has spent most of his adult life as a teacher, headteacher, and writer about young children's education and is not a member of a faith community. Inevitably, therefore, many assumptions which accompany these experiences underpin the argument. The approach draws on constructivism and virtue ethics (Eaude, 2016), concerned with nurturing children to be equipped and motivated to live a good life, rather than behaviorism, which sees children's behavior as mainly controlled by reward and sanctions.

It will be argued that spiritual growth is one important, but not separate, element of how each child comes to understand him or herself; involving exploration of questions of identity, meaning, and purpose - such as who am I? where do I fit in? and why am I here? - and achieving greater connectedness with other people, the world, and (for some) a transcendent being, within environments characterized by nurturing relationships (see Hay & Nye, 1998, Eaude, 2003, Hyde, 2008). Spirituality is seen as one dimension of identity which applies to people, including children, of all backgrounds, within or outside frameworks of religious belief. However, this is manifested in different ways dependent on many factors such as temperament, culture, background, and individual experience (Eaude, 2019).

While thinking about identity formation frequently focuses on adolescence, identities are constantly shaped and re-shaped from a very young age, through relating to other people, in a variety of ways, not just or even mainly through language. The term 'young children' is used loosely, as the needs of, and the appropriate approach to adopt with, a three-, a seven- or a ten-year-old differ. Moreover, children within any age group vary considerably, depending on their background and prior experience and the

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