

Chapter 7

Engaging Children in Spiritual Conversations Through Children's Books

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ABSTRACT

Children's books are a brilliant medium for nurturing children and youth in their spirituality. When children are provided with the proper time, space, and context for discussing the various facets of a story, they can explore their innate ability to discuss deeper thoughts and ponderings about life, relationships, and experiences beyond their immediate circumstances. This chapter provides guidance to teachers on how to create, within the school day, time for spiritual discussions by using children's read-aloud books for deeper conversations. Educators will learn that activities can be implemented before, during, and after the reading that can unlock new possibilities for learners to internalize and express newfound spiritual concepts and goals for themselves personally, and as a class. A preliminary list of relevant books is presented at the end of the chapter, which were selected based on the research-based framework of the seven spiritual identities to allow young learners to experience their spirituality in a variety of ways.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers, families, and those who care for children and youth, can benefit from the use of children's books, especially picture books, either in print form or digitally presented. These read aloud moments, either one-on-one, or with a group of children, can unlock the innate spirituality that can be explored and nurtured through deep conversations at the evaluative/critical level of comprehension. This chapter focuses on how teachers in a holistic classroom, or a government-funded public/secular classroom, can find space, time, and the creativity to engage their students in discussions that address the spiritual

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dimension. Educators, and all those working with children and youth, will find activities that can be implemented before, during, and after the reading of a specifically chosen book. These techniques can be applied to unlock new possibilities for both teachers and learners to internalize and express spiritual thoughts, discoveries, and goals for themselves personally, and as a class.

The authors present a preliminary list of relevant books that can be used for this purpose, which were selected using the research-based framework of the Seven Spiritual Identities outlined by Kirmani and Kirmani in their study (2009 and 2013). Teachers can use these read alouds to facilitate the sharing of expressions of spirituality. Because picture books come in a variety of contexts, they can provide many scenarios suitable for ages three through eight, and in some cases, with youth up and through late adolescence. This chapter also puts forward a plan for organizing discussion time and a set of guiding questions that promote reflection, sharing, and creative action at the spiritual level.

One factor that determines the success of these guiding questions and the time used for reflection is the key role that the teacher/facilitator plays in the use of picture books and stories in nurturing spiritual growth in the learners. Furthermore, the use of the Seven Spiritual Identities can be used, not only during reading classes, but in content area subjects such as earth sciences, biology, citizenship/civics, astronomy, history, and any form of social-emotional learning.

BACKGROUND

Stories, fables, myths, poems, and proverbs, among other art forms, have been used over the millennia by many cultures to convey to their children and youth core values, rituals, life's truths, and the wise ways of the world (Blazer, 2020; National Geographic Society, 2022; Heath, et. al., 2017). These culturally embedded beliefs and practices are usually taught in settings that are confined to a single culture, or related cultures. But, increasingly, over the last century, forced migrations, diseases, natural disasters, and collapsing ecosystems have uprooted populations of families and children to seek a more viable future in countries far from their native lands. (Dimach, 2016)

Therefore, current schools in many parts of the globe have classrooms that are increasingly full of students who need educators who are ready to bridge the similarities and differences in the cultures and backgrounds of their students. The teachers must understand how to facilitate a discussion so that all can share their insights, perspectives, and vital life lessons, while respecting each learner's heritage and rituals. The multiplicity of the task of educating children to their full potential is not isolated to academic skills but must include many aspects of inner growth such as a willingness to struggle with seemingly complex realities, to reflect, ponder, and to dream about becoming more resilient, confident, just, courageous, and compassionate, to name a few. This adds new challenges to educating all children and youth equitably and thoughtfully, but the impact of including spiritual conversations within the class day outweighs the challenges for everyone involved.

Issues for Educators

While there are many organizations such as educational, religious, social justice, and psychological associations that raise consciousness about the importance of healthy relationships with self and others, educators cannot be naive about the barriers and opposing forces that can thwart efforts to support learners in these areas of growth. Adverse and dissenting elements have strong voices that can run

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