

Teaching Religious Language to Nurture Spiritual Development

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Abstract

Religious language learning is crucial for children's spiritual development and how each child is encouraged to speak about the Sacred will drive the capacities for healthily connecting with one another, God, and the nonhuman world. Religious educators have an ethical imperative to teach religion with a commitment to celebrating lived experiences, while resisting dogmatic instruction that stunts linguistic, cognitive, and spiritual development. Cultural influences must encourage approaches that nurture children's wonder and inquiry, by teaching religious language as a tool for meaning-making and expression.

〈 Keywords 〉

Religious language, Religious education, Relational consciousness, Spiritual development, Cultural influences

I. Introduction

From the time we receive them into this world, children are immersed in language. We talk and sing with them, encourage them to make preverbal sounds, and applaud when they speak

their first words. For many families, language instruction is *intentional*, and includes teaching young children names of loved ones(e.g., 'Mama,' 'Dada,' 'Bubba') and words that will aid communication(e.g., 'Bottle,' 'More,' 'Yes,' 'No'). Religious language instruction is also often intentional, prioritizing dogmatic teachings, or *theological assertions*, which teach children 'right answers' to questions about their faith. This article will explore the importance of religious language for children's spirituality, and suggest that exploring cultural and communal experiences through open conversations should be educational priorities for teaching religious language.

What philosophers, theologians, and religious educators most often consider to be *religious language* is largely a concentration on theological statements, including "assertions of the existence of God [and] the activities of supernatural personal beings"(Alston, 1967, 168-169). Furthermore, such religious language is perceived as being derivative, "primarily because it is impossible to teach theological language from scratch"(169). When we advise a young child, *God loves you and you are special to Him*, we assume the child understands what it means to be loved by someone who values the child's existence. Religious educators, which includes *families as educators*, may even contextualize the statement by reminding a child that she belongs to a family whose members love one another, value one another, care for one another, etc. When the child assumes what she has been taught by proclaiming, *God loves me and I am special to Him*, we celebrate this child's mastery of a theological use for such language and applaud her indoctrination. However, this 'mastery' of language is perhaps not mastery at all, but rather *imitation* - considered by language theorist Jerome Bruner(1983) to be a "lame explanation"(17) for children's adop-

tion of adultlike speech. Simply because a child can repeat religious terms, and even use them with correct grammatical function and theological assertion, evidences neither learning by induction nor spiritual growth and development(Kim, 2020, 167).

II. Children's Spiritual Development

The possibilities for rethinking *how* we teach children religious language depends upon what we believe about spirituality. Religious educators who indoctrinate children by adhering to invariant, hierarchical, sequential stages of faith development (Fowler, 1995; Parker, 2010) may be unwilling to reimagine religious language that opens dialogue, wonder, and mystery. Many educators promote 'Sunday School answers' as the most significant manifestation of a child's faith formation: as if knowing the correct number of books in the bible, being able to regurgitate the lineage of Jesus, or accurately cite truisms about atonement theology somehow demonstrates a child's budding awareness of *the Sacred*. However, if educators can prioritize engaging children's *experiences of the Sacred* over equipping them with 'right answers,' the methods by which religious language is taught may shift toward a process that is congruent with what science understands about language development (Bruner, 1983) and growing scientific evidence about spiritual development as well(Miller, 2015). Children who are exposed to engaging, experiential religious language teachings will develop spiritually, not because they have been told what to believe, but because they have been given educational opportunities to uncover their intimate awareness of life's sacred experiences.

Over the last thirty years, research in the West has shifted

exploratory foci, as studies in the United States (Miller, 2015; Yust, 2003), Australia (Hyde, 2008), and the United Kingdom (Hay & Nye, 1998; King, 2013) have examined spirituality as its own developmental domain. This renewed interest in the intersections between science and religion is exciting for educators who aim to nurture children's spirituality in developmentally meaningful ways - building foundations for lifelong growth and maturity. Recent findings promote multiple benefits for valuing how children develop awareness and appreciation of *the Sacred*, prioritizing experiential narratives and inquiries over learning dogmatic religious instructions and imperatives (King, 2013; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2012; Stoyles et al., 2012).

Spirituality is deeply rooted in childhood's earliest experiences; interwoven with each child's personhood and behaviors (Nelson, 2009). As natural inquisitors, children instinctively possess awe, wonder, and imaginative insights about their interactions with society, asking questions that guide their spiritual development (Hart, 2003; Lynch, 2015). *Why are we here?* and *What happens when something dies?* are examples of meaning-seeking childhood wonderment that demonstrate "innate, biological, and developmental" (Miller, 2015, 9) elements of children's spirituality. Even before children ask such questions, there is evidence of pre-verbal meaning-making that impacts both spiritual and language developments. "Spirituality is natural to children," writes researcher Ursula King. "There is in fact a biological basis for spiritual awareness since it is essentially part of human evolution ... Thus there exists a pre-linguistic experiential foundation of spiritual sensibility in human beings" (2013, 6). Also existing for the prelinguistic child is a "natural predisposition to acquire culture though language" (Bruner, 1983, 24). Children who are preverbal are "geared to respond ... to the

world of human action”(26-27). Precisely because of both pre-linguistic capacities: those for spiritual awareness and cultural acquisitions, the ways in which we teach young children religious language must be addressed.

III. Spirituality as Relational Consciousness

In 1998, researchers David Hay and Rebecca Nye used a grounded theory approach to interview children between the ages of six and eleven years in response to the Education Reform Act in England and Wales. This act mandated that educational curricula must promote the “spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of students”(Hyde, 2008, 51), and their research sought to explore how spirituality manifested among children who were representative of various religious and secular worldviews present in British public schools at the time. Prior to Hay and Nye’s groundbreaking work, spirituality research was largely related to faith formation(Fowler, 1995; Westerhoff, 2012), prioritizing protestant Western theologies achieved through stage development. Although Hay writes frequently about children’s spirituality within a child-God context, with God being reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian God(Wills, 2012), relational consciousness is nonetheless a *trans-religious concept*, informed by “the relational ideas of [philosopher Martin] Buber and [philosopher Georg] Hegel”(51). This manifestation of spirituality is the child’s “intentional and natural process of relating to the world, to all things animate and inanimate, to others, including a Divine Other, and to the self”(Hay & Nye, 1998, 119-124). Hay and Nye proposed three components of relational consciousness that are evident in children of all ages. Awareness sensing occurs when

children demonstrate a sensitivity to attend to the immediateness of an experience; mystery sensing is manifest when children demonstrate awe and wonder through words and/or behaviors; and values sensing references children's moral compass, which enables them to express awareness good versus evil, right versus wrong, injustice versus justice, and so on (Hyde, 2008). A fourth component of relational consciousness was identified in 2012, and describes children's community sensing. Its discovery resulted from the re-norming process of the Spiritual Sensitivity Scale (for adults) to the Spiritual Sensitivity Scale for Children (SSSC), and noted children's demonstrated awareness for the importance of belonging to a group in which they "feel accepted and liked" (Stoyles et al., 2012, 207).

Children's abilities to attend and interpret their encounters requires thoughts and actions rooted in these spiritual sensitivities, qualifying each child's response to lived experiences, including those that are moral or mysterious (Ter Avest, 2020, 19). This movement in research away from stage formation and toward an organic process of spiritual development resonates with the realities of human existence. "Several authors [convey] that the area of spiritual development must move beyond stage theory and include sensory and experiential knowing from a more fluid and dynamic perspective" (Boynton, 2011, 116), which necessarily impacts *how* educators teach children religious language.

IV. Teaching Children How to Speak

In his 1983 book entitled *Child's Talk: Learning to Use Language*, linguistic theorist Jerome Bruner contends that children's entry

into language is multi-functional and shifts as their cognitive abilities expand. In the earliest stages of language development, children learn terminology and demonstrate rudimentary skills for grammatical rules. As they develop a capacity to reference language, children learn to create meaning with their speech. The final phase of language acquisition involves children developing an effectiveness for using language to “get things done with words”(18). Seen as the apex of language development, accurate uses of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics evidence the child as a *native speaker*.

A similar trajectory exists for religious language learning. Children are exposed to vocabulary and learn to use religious jargon to fit the rules of their faith community. This frequently includes receiving affirmations when they use particular words as the *right answers* to questions about faith. Even when young children use abstract terminology, and may not understand the definitions or theology of the terms they recite, educators reinforce children’s earliest utterances by celebrating such *right answers* as evidence of a child’s faith formation. Young children who learn contextual cues for talking about the complexities of religion, such as Christianity’s terms: ‘sin,’ ‘sacrifice,’ and ‘righteousness,’ typically lack the cognition to understand these abstract ideals; a likelihood too often lost on educators whose primary concern is whether a Sunday School class can recount perceived fundamentals of personal faith. Even as children grow into the mental maturity needed for theologically weighty concepts of their religion, speech is too often reiteration of dogmatic truisms rather than a dialogical engagement with *the other*. How we teach children to talk about *the Sacred* should prioritize nurturing each child toward *native speech* that honors the richness of revealing, confessional nar-

ratives about encounters with God, self, the other, and all of creation.

Often called the 'land of the morning calm,' the Republic of South Korea has emerged from a twentieth century mired in occupation(1910-1945) and social and political divisions to become "a developed welfare state renowned for its booming industry and one of the world's fastest economic growth rates"(Vogelaar, 2016, 40). Even with this laudable and exemplary progress, representatives from the World Council of Churches, which convened in Busan in 2013, noted that "issues of justice and peace are still very crucial" in South Korea, and that for the country's people, "education is everything"(41).

One of South Korea's greatest strengths is its religious diversity, consisting of approximately twenty-five million people who practice their own traditions, with Buddhists comprising 22.8% (10,726,463 members); Christian Protestants, 18.3%(8,616,438 members); and Christian Catholics, 10.9%(5,146,147 members) representing the largest groups of religious adherents(Kim, 2018, 2). Additionally, South Korea has followers of Confucianism, Shamanism, and other various New Religious Movements, making the country a rich tapestry of religiosity. However, with this diversity has come multiple challenges, many of which originate with how children are being taught religious language(Cho, 2016; Kim, 2007; Kim, 2018; Yu et al., 1997).

V. Teaching Awareness of Community

Children's sensitivities for being in community supports optimum spiritual development, and how we teach religious language can promote communal relationships. Nurturing chil-

dren's increasing awareness of community can be understood as what South Korean religious educator Uijun Yu calls *systematic discerning*, occurring when communities "give priority to raising holistic humans who live together with many people"(Yu et al., 1997, 128). This communal coexistence highlights the significance of *shared* language, an important feature for religiosity. Linguist Stephen Pinker argues there are many "ways of thinking"(Kenneally, 2007, 105) including ideas of the supernatural and folklore, that would not be possible without languages shared in community. When children hear about and speak of the Sacred in communal contexts, they increase both an awareness of the stories that are sacred for the religious communities they inhabit and an appreciation for the community itself.

Young children in preoperational stages of cognition cannot yet categorize and classify, however they can create stable ideas and engage in fantasy and other symbolic thought and play (Piaget, 2002). Whereas this fantasy and symbolism often begins in monolithic speech, cognitive theorist Jean Piaget notes that young children's language evolves toward communal conversation, indicating both linguistic and cognitive maturing(Piaget, 2002). When children can partner with others in conversation about sacred encounters using shared religious language, they solidify the underlying meaning of those experiences, and fulfill an intrinsic human need to share their lived experiences with others(Kenneally, 2007, 129). Communal partnerships become especially important when childhood experiences are sources of spiritual discomfort, including emotional pains, personal illnesses, or the deaths of loved ones(de Souza, 2012; Richardson, 2015), allowing children and community partners to "extract meanings, assign interpretations, and infer in-

tentions,"(Buner, 1983, 29). Moreover, research indicates that children generally enjoy engaging communal conversations and attend to others' perspectives in respectful ways(Watson, 2011, 101) when they are invited to participate in meaningful dialogue about spiritual matters.

Central to Lev Vygotsky's work is the belief that cognition is "formed and built up ... by social phenomena"(Meadows, 2006, 296), paramount for how we teach religious language. While children may experience personal moments of mystery and transcendence, it is the community of interpreters who provide young children with the language for sacred encounters. The best religious educators will craft tools that invite children to use their own language in communal conversations, without prescribing terms marked as the only way to describe religious experiences.

Teaching children religious language includes inviting them to wrestle with religious concepts in community. Although some religious adherents may discourage questioning one's faith or encounters with the Sacred as a form of weakness, it is precisely through a dialogic accounting of thoughts and actions that spiritual development can thrive. Piaget prioritizes the self-structuring and restructuring systems as the way in which children grow. Equilibration, the belief in cognitive stability that balances internal and external changes(Meadows, 2006, 266), is met with disequilibrium during crucial developmental milestones, moving children toward maturity when they can (1) recognize an instability; (2) recognize its cause; (3) want a resolution; and (4) have means to improve on the disequilibrium state(267-268). When religious educators teach language that is dogmatic and unquestionable, young children may be stunted both cognitively and spiritually. Religious language teaching should equip children with verbal tools for exploring spiritual

experiences with wonder, awe, and inquiry, alongside a community that is aware of their developmental potentials and supports their journeys toward optimum spiritual health(Groome, 2020, 45).

VI. Teaching Openness in Conversation

Current controversies in South Korean programming include a “strict enforcement of religious education in parochial schools … [and] excessive doctrinal propaganda in Christian schools” (Kim, 2007, 33). Chongsuh Kim, a researcher at Seoul National University, notes that interreligious dialogues in South Korea have not been as “successful as expected, mainly because they are infrequent and involve only religious leaders”(35). He advocates for a regularization of religious education that supports multiple opportunities for children to meet regularly and “talk to each other frankly”(34). One perceived benefit is a decrease in religious conflict through an increasing openness in how children from diverse religious communities speak together about their sacred experiences. Kim’s proposed priorities for conversations that open relationships, promote understanding, and create pathways to interreligious partnerships support an evolution of language that is largely dependent upon humans having “something to say”(Kenneally, 2007, 92). When children are encouraged to explore spiritual ideas, topics, convictions, and material prior to developing open dialogues with one another, the confessional narratives they bring to their conversations become tools for discovering the Sacred and can shift not only what children say but also how they think; cognition directly resulting from being able to talk about what and how we

think(Kenneally, 2007, 94). When children are taught religious language as a way to open conversation with others, they gain tools to openly explore sacred experiences.

Among the English language color wheel, “blue” and “green” are distinguished from one another, although many other languages do not make this distinction(Kenneally, 2007, p. 107). Merely because of these two distinct terms, English language speakers discuss skies and grasses differently from native speakers of languages that do not make color distinctions between the two. Children who have a rich color wheel of sacred terminology can categorize ideas in ways that enhance their spirituality. Such nuanced linguistic abilities shape how children perceive sacred ideas, and shape the ultimate potential(King, 2012) that spirituality has for children’s cognitive development. Although encouraging children to use nuanced language to explore mystery may result in unpredictable outcomes, it may also result in “insights and meaning in children’s lives” as they learn how to speak about what is often ineffable(Moriarty, 2009, 51).

One component of a nuanced language is the socialization that happens in conversation. Vygotsky’s exploration of the impact that education - as it occurs in community - has on children’s cognition invites faith communities to consider both the pedagogy and hermeneutics of religious language because the conceptual systems children learn can accelerate or impede cognitive development(Meadows, 2006, 162). In faith communities in which a particular religious language is promoted as the sole truth for understanding human mystery(e.g., love, suffering, joy, forgiveness), children’s cognitive development may be forced, in both functionality(Bruner, 1983) and meaning-making. Forcing language through dogmatic instruction can hinder children’s typically developing cognitive abilities by sti-

fling spiritual curiosity and wonder.

VII. Teaching Otherness of Culture

Children's capacity for learning religious language depends on appropriating themselves to "modes of acting and thinking that exist not in genes but culture"(Bruner, 1983, 23). Children become native speakers when they integrate their experiences with familiar concepts of people and objects into their language development(35). Educators who expose children to rich cultural realities, including sacred encounters with others, are helping to harness religious language within each child for exploring relational consciousness. Children's knowledge of religion is rooted in the testimony of adults(Saylor et al., 2016), including their ability to describe absent things, such as ideals(e.g., love) and entities(e.g., angels) that are transcendent. This learned ability to speak about what is not seen is crucial for development(206).

In his examination of religious conflicts in South Korea, Kim writes that "ignorance of each other is likely to be the most fundamental cause"(2007, 34), even among religious adherents who uphold peace and love as core tenets of spirituality. Because language is not innate, but taught(Kenneally, 2007, 21, 202), teaching children to honor religious language as a way to explore the otherness experienced in cultural diversity increases linguistic nutrition, which is crucial for children's cognitive development and strongly associated with future literacy (Zauche et al., 2017). Moreover, conversational turns in the cultural contexts of children's social engagements with others, especially among those who are diverse, increase multiple devel-

opmental benefits(494).

In 2018, professor of religious studies at Sogang University in Seoul, Chae Young Kim, noted that “most South Korean religious education can be categorized as ... either [teaching children] to understand [or teaching children] to be religious in a particular way”(2). He argued for an understanding of religious education that would explore and promote the diversity and value of religion as a global phenomenon. Such a transparent and bold teaching of the otherness we experience in diverse cultures as something to be celebrated with wonder and inquiry will have lasting effects on future generations. Especially in a country such as South Korea, wherein “religion, especially Christianity - has been invited to play a considerable role in the shaping of public education”(Cho, 2016, 100). Educators who teach children how to use religious language to interact in diverse cultural milieu, enrich capacities for development by establishing joint attention, providing “additional information [to children] that help to scaffold” development(Zauche et al., 2017, 496) among multiple domains: cognitive, linguistic, social, and spiritual.

VIII. Conclusion

Teaching religious language to promote relational consciousness among all children benefits development in multiple ways. When children are encouraged to use language to express curiosity and wonder about the Sacred within their faith communities, they have richer spiritual experiences than when they are merely taught religious language as ‘right answers’ to questions of personal faith. Religious educators who promote open

conversations honor children's innate abilities to discuss life's most meaningful experiences alongside others whose journeys differ from their own (Park, 2017, 213). Rich cultural tapestries, such as the vibrance found in South Korea's religious landscapes, offer children opportunities to encounter otherness in ways that highlight their connectedness to God, self, and the human and nonhuman creations.

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 한글 초록

영적 성숙을 증진하는 종교적 언어의 교육

레니 드 아시스 (텍사스여자대학교/교수/미국)

종교적 언어의 학습은 아동의 영적 성숙을 위해서 중요하다. 아동이 거룩함을 말하는 것이 격려되는 상황 속에서는 아동의 동료 관계, 하나님과 자연의 건강한 관계를 형성하는 역량이 강화된다. 종교교육가의 윤리적 당위성은 종교를 가르치며 삶의 경험을 긍정적으로 갱신하는 과정 속에서 확보된다. 특히, 종교교사는 언어적, 인지적, 그리고 영적 발달을 저해하는 교리적 훈육에 저항해야 하는 책무에 능동적으로 반응할 필요가 있다. 문화적 영향은 아동의 신비와 탐구, 자아발견의 계발에 긍정적인 역할을 한다. 문화적 접근을 통해서 종교교사는 아동에게 종교적 언어를 가르치고 의미-형성과 표현을 위한 도구로 활용이 가능하다.

〈 주제어 〉

종교적 언어, 종교교육, 관계적 의식, 영적 발달, 문화적 영향

- Received: 02/08/2021
- Evaluated: 02/20/2021
- Accepted: 03/28/2021