

Chapter 20

Applying Contemporary Early Childhood Theory & Pedagogies to the Process of Intentionally Scaffolding Children's Emergent Spiritual Awareness

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This chapter reviews literature on contemporary early childhood theory and pedagogy and uses it to suggest implications for best practice in nurturing children's spiritual awareness and faith formation in faith-based early childhood settings. Also recommended are alternative pedagogies to traditional approaches' overreliance on whole group Bible story pedagogy for three-to-five-year olds. Reflections on lived experiences will be used to illustrate the findings of the literature review.

Children's spirituality is viewed as an inner experience of the sacred through personal awareness, a sense of awe, and mystery sensing, together with the process of wondering, and meaning making (Hay & Nye, 2006). Such a spiritual awareness speaks to the child's heart as it develops within them an understanding of just who God, and Jesus are, and how they work in his/her life. This type of spirituality is always empowered by the Holy Spirit.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF METACOGNITION AND SPIRITUAL AWARENESS

The faith-based curriculum in Christian early childhood contexts should be based on a careful consideration of the wisdom and beliefs of contemporary theories of child development and decisions about the best pedagogical approaches to use to scaffold emergent spiritual awareness. Nurturing faith formation and spiritual awareness has

its roots in cognitive development, neuroscience, social emotional development, and socio-cultural theory. Theories of development and implications for practice can be found in early childhood development textbooks (Berk, 2006). A number of Christian researchers—Westerhoff (2008), Hay & Nye (2006), Stonehouse & May (2010), Allen with Adams, Jenkins, & Meek (2012)—have also posited suggestions about spirituality and character development in young children. All teachers in faith-based classrooms need to take these factors into consideration when they work with the child, the child's parents, and the Holy Spirit to nurture spirituality, and faith formation.

A careful perusal of the writings of the authors listed above leads to the recognition that the development of spiritual awareness is in fact a multidimensional and multimodal process, occurring over time, through the active engagement and interaction of the child's senses, thinking, feelings, emotions, and morality within a cultural setting. The use of a variety of approaches in combination with the technique "reflective engagement" is recommended (Stonehouse & May, 2010, 86).

One facet of a multidimensional approach is to engage children's emotions and feelings through "experiential awakening" (Hammond, Hay et al., 1990, 179). Bible stories, like all stories, draw children into a world that is outside of their reality (Trousedale, 2007), evoking the "felt sense" of spirituality (Hyde, 2010, 510). As they listen to the narrative, they begin to imagine it, experiencing it through their own lens of familiarity, identifying with the characters, settings, and situations. This entails sensitizing children to their own emotions and relationships, using questioning and insights from their own lives to unpack the intentions of the characters within the stories with the result that this also awakens children to the spiritual truths within each Bible character's experience. It is at this moment that children begin to encounter God. Hay & Nye (2006) frame this spiritual moment through the lens of relational consciousness, defining it as an unusual level of perceptiveness that manifests itself through awareness sensing, value sensing, and mystery sensing. Awareness sensing is defined as an intense felt sense of a situation; mystery sensing is the sense of awe, wonder, questioning, and fascination, while value sensing is defined as moral sensitivity.

There is a rich and long history of theories and beliefs about how young children learn and develop. It is to this history that we turn to shed light on best practice for scaffolding spiritual development in young children. There are a number of notions upon which most early childhood theorists appear to agree. Children are capable and competent. They are active agents in constructing their own knowledge either alone or with the help of adults or more competent peers. Their learning is dynamic, complex, and holistic (EYLF, 2009) occurring within a socio-cultural framework. Table 1 summarizes the beliefs and implications for practice of a number of influential early childhood theorists. These can be used by educators to support learning, development, and spiritual awareness.

Table 1: Theories of Development and Implications for Practice

Theory	Major beliefs	Implications for practice
Piaget Cognitive Development Theory (1962)	Children develop spontaneously due to interaction with, and exploration of, physical, and social environment—assimilation, and accommodation Universal stages of development	1. provide age/stage appropriate experiences 2. treat children as individuals 3. scaffold concrete active discovery learning 4. use close observation 5. use a play based experiential program 6. use open-ended questions
Vygotsky Socio-Cultural Theory (1978)	Cognitive development not universal Relationships, and learning through interactions within zone of proximal development	1. encourage scaffolding by more capable peer, and adults to support learning, and development 2. engage in co-construction
Bruner (1983)	Scaffolding	engage in guided participation
Rogoff (1990)	Development occurs during cultural activities and through using cultural tools	Influenced by: 1. physical, and social setting 2. historical customs 3. practices/rituals
Bronfenbrenner (1979)	Culture and a web of relationships influence knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values Environment — layers of influence	1. influences of relationships bi-directional, dynamic 2. need a cohesive approach between layers of influence
Brian Research	Pruning, and hard wiring Environment—Positive, and negative potential on learning, and development Negative effects of high cortisol levels Increasing capacity for sustained attention, and language development (Berk, 2006, 294)	1. critical periods when negative experiences can have a sustained impact, (Shore, 2003, 37) 2. stress inhibits learning 3. hardwiring 4. responsive caregiving 5. sustained shared thinking
Bowlby Attachment Theory	Attachment—long term meaningful relationships	1. engage in warm consistent care 2. quality of early attachments influence all future relationships
Hay & Nye	Relational consciousness –awareness, sensing, mystery sensing, value sensing, (Hay & Nye, 2006)	Discovery through "self-conscious reflective attentiveness," (Stonehouse, 2001, 3)
Stonehouse & May	Nature of children's spiritual experiences—emotional connectedness through story, prayer, worship within a faith community, sense of belonging, (Stonehouse & May, 2010)	1. scaffold awareness, reflection, wondering, and the expression of feelings, and moral insights (Stonehouse & May, 2010, 86)

NURTURING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH THE INTENTIONAL APPLICATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGIES

A consideration of a range of twenty-first century pedagogical approaches (based on notions of the nexus between theory and practice) further suggests age appropriate strategies for nurturing spirituality and faith formation in early childhood settings. They include: Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Multiple Intelligences, Godly Play, Curtis & Carter's Curriculum Framework, High/Scope Approaches to Pedagogy, and the Montessori, and Reggio Emilia Pedagogical Approaches. Table 2 summarizes these approaches and their implications for practice in early childhood classrooms.

Table 2: Approaches to Pedagogy

Approach	Major beliefs, and practices	Implications
Montessori	Learning occurs through active involvement with the physical, and sensory environment. Independent problem solving skills	Combining direct instruction, and careful observation with play based curriculum Self-paced learning
Gardner (2003)	Learning occurs through multiple intelligences	Plan a variety of learning experiences across a broad range of intelligences
Curtis & Carter (2008)	Teachers coach children to learn about learning	Foster dispositions to learn Teacher's role: stage /prop manager, coach, model Designing aesthetically stimulating environments, create a sense of community Open ended hands on materials (Curtis & Carter, 2008)
DAP (2009)	Learning occurs through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual, age, and cultural appropriateness Individual, and small group experiences Planned, and flexible curriculum 	Play-based curriculum based on close observation of children's strengths, needs, and interests
High/Scope (2007)	Intentionality of teacher behavior Teacher's role: facilitator, model, scaffolder	Share control of the curriculum Celebrate the learning Plan-do-review
Berryman	Learning occurs through Godly Play	Set aside a special place to be with God Time, and quiet to be with God Stories told with concrete items Availability of props for child re-telling, and play "Wondering together" about God (Stonehouse, & May, 2010, 89)

Reggio Emilia	Pedagogy of relationships—co-construction Pedagogical documentation-visible listening Environment the 3rd teacher Teacher's role- scaffold, co-construct, reflect, evaluate "100 languages" (Rinaldi, & Moss, 2004)	Co-constructed short, and long term projects, aesthetic environments Teachers role: provocateur, model 100 languages bring depth, and new insights to curriculum Documentation
Siraj—Blatchford (2009)	Sustained shared thinking Balance of child, and teacher initiated	Small group, and individual sustained shared thinking Child-centered, adult guided, play based curriculum (2006)
Stonehouse, and May (2010)	Implement reflective engagement approach	Active participation, wondering, and questioning Space for the Holy Spirit's guidance
Habernicht & Burton (2004)	Prayer model—praise, thanks, petition, confession, forgiveness, thanks (Habernicht, & Burton, 2004, 368)	Model praise behaviors Model Christian rituals

Play-Based Curriculum

Twenty-first-century early childhood pedagogies are strongly grounded in play-based curriculum approaches which offer a combination of both free, and or guided play opportunities (Golinkoff & Sharp, 2009) where children can demonstrate learning, metacognition, autonomy, and choice (Arthur et al., 2012) through a curriculum that provides "extensive opportunities for children to direct their own learning in a well-resourced, well-facilitated environment," (Lawrence, 2009, 6). These approaches are favored because, during play, "children willingly work in their zone of proximal development at a level not usually seen in their non-play activities," (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009, 14).

Through play-based experiences children assimilate, and accommodate (Berk, 2006) information in a hands-on concrete manner. This strengthens and develops children's cognitive competence through "countless opportunities for sustained attention . . . symbolic representation, memory development, and hypothesis testing," (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009, 36.)

At the same time, they also develop dispositions to learn such as "enthusiasm, curiosity, commitment, persistence, confidence, cooperation, and reflexivity," (Arthur, 2010, 4). The disposition to be reflective is pivotal in the development of spiritual awareness. It may be seen in the four year-old child who asks you for a box so he can collect money from his peers to *pay* for the building props he wants to barter from other players, to repair the church for Josiah. Or in the child who, having just participated in a role play of Jesus, and the storm, tells you that his dad can't stop a storm, only Jesus can!

Both during, and at the end of play of this nature, it is appropriate for an adult to intentionally (i.e. deliberately, thoughtfully, and purposefully) scaffold the children's reflections (EYLF, 2009) extending, and deepening the play by joining it or asking questions such as, "I wonder why that happened?" "Tell me about . . .?" "What did you discover?" These types of question help children to build knowledge, to communicate, think critically, problem solve, be creative, recall procedures, and collaborate together. In this way adults scaffold the skills of confident, articulate, and competent learners. Watkins, (2008), cautions against pressing young children into religious cognition at the expense of experience, intuition or the felt sense of spirituality. Feelings are just as vital to maturing the Christian experience as are thoughts, and understandings.

Environment As the Third Teacher

Making the environment the third teacher is a further important element in the process of scaffolding children's play. The environment becomes such:

- When teachers provision it in such a way that children are empowered to locate, use, and return materials independently;
- When diverse items are stored in matching containers in specialist areas, enabling children to focus on the contents and support making choices;
- When materials are positioned in smaller, well-defined spaces to scaffold concentration, independence, and more in-depth investigation;
- When materials are presented aesthetically to invite interaction;
- When materials are offered as both individual, and shared experiences;
- When materials used in ongoing projects are able to be left in place rather than packed away at the end of a session (Curtis & Carter, 2008; Epstein, 2007; Walker, 2007).

In environments like this the materials/props act as scaffolds for metacognition, and reframing, deepening children's understanding of the Bible story, and heightening opportunities for them to experience relational consciousness.

Sustained Shared Thinking

A highly useful early childhood pedagogical strategy that teachers can use to scaffold this spiritual awareness involves sustained shared thinking, also called co-construction. It has been defined as:

... two or more individuals working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, and extend a narrative. Both

parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop, and extend the understanding. (Clarke, 2009, 7)

Teachers who use this strategy talk 'with,' and not 'at,' children during their play, and in group times they comment, recall, wonder together, question, and apply connections with personal experience. Children will only enter into this type of thinking when they feel respect, and support for their ideas from the adults and peers in their class. Hand in hand with sustained shared thinking is the gift of time, time to "become engrossed, to work in-depth, to plan, and reflect," (Clarke, 2009, 22.), time to complete their chosen play projects, and opportunities to express their ideas.

One-Hundred Languages

The educators of Reggio Emilia add another dimension to the process of sustained shared thinking that they call the "100 languages" (Rinaldi & Moss, 2004). This teaching approach encourages children to investigate the topic in another language, for example clay, drawing, ICT technologies, collage, drama, or painting thus extending, deepening, and often reframing the investigation. For example, a child may create a complex block construction of the ark or Bethlehem during their play. A teacher using the "100 languages" approach would talk to the child commenting on the construction techniques used and the use of it as a prop in the story retell. They may ask questions, wonder together with the child, perhaps take a photo of it, and suggest that the child might dictate and record a story about their construction; or perhaps suggest as an alternative that the child use drawing materials to record their construction. All of these strategies help to progressively extend and deepen the investigation. The result is sustained shared thinking, ongoing or reframed future understanding, and learning that combines to affirm the child's thinking, creativity, and spiritual awareness. It is a strategy that has the potential to be particularly useful in Christian preschool and school settings.

Pedagogical Documentation and the Pedagogy of Listening

Undergirding play-based curriculum lies the "pedagogy of listening" (Rinaldi, 2001, 80) i.e. adult's active participation in careful observation, documentation, and assessment. When teachers observe the child at play, listen to their conversations, record their actions and conversations and use their professional knowledge to reflect on and interpret what they see and hear, they position themselves to respond to the child's meaning making by supporting the child's learning and development through sustained shared thinking. This process, when supported by documentation, makes the child's learning visible to themselves, their parents and peers. The "pedagogy of

listening” (Rinaldi, 2001, 80) also requires teachers to be willing to catch and run with the teachable moment to value these emergent opportunities (Rinaldi, 2001).

Documentation supports this pedagogical strategy through digitally recording children’s actions and conversations during their engagement with experiences and using them to “revisit, re-construct, analyze & deconstruct” the experience, to guide future pedagogical decisions, as well as for display and consultation with the child’s family, and peers (Rinaldi, 2004, 78). When teachers and parents use these snapshots to discuss the child’s learning and development, it “helps them to see things from different perspectives, allowing each . . . to transcend the limitations of their own points of view” (Curtis & Carter, 2000, pxiii).

Process Drama

Grajczonek (2007) cites process drama as a useful pedagogy for helping young children understand in greater depth the events and settings of Bible stories. It also enables them to develop empathy for the character’s thinking and feelings. Process drama involves all of the children in the group participating together in role play and improvisation, e.g. building, and provisioning the ark. It enables the teacher to assume the teacher-in-role strategy in order to sustain the play and deepen children’s meaning making about the story. In my experience this approach is pivotal in provoking relational consciousness in three-to-six-year olds. It nurtures children’s “felt sense” (Hyde, 2010, 510) of God and his character as a three-year old realizes, for example, that God asked Noah to put the food in the ark because he wanted the animals, and Noah to have enough food to eat during the flood.

Godly Play

Yet another pedagogical approach that intentionally supports the child’s development of spiritual awareness is Godly Play (Berryman, 1994; Cavalletti, 1992; Lamont, 2007; Stonehouse, 2001). Through its six-step process, this approach “aims to teach children how to use the language of the Christian tradition to encounter God, and to use that encounter to gain direction for their lives,” (Lamont, 2007). Warm supportive environments that engage the senses and are provisioned with a rich array of materials available for child choice, together with the practice of intentionally using religious language and opportunities for the child to participate in weekly Communion experiences, comprise the pedagogies of Godly Play.

The strength of the Godly Play approach lies in the space and time it gives children to use the props to explore, make meaning, revisit, and internalize the Bible story. Each revisit deepens the child’s understanding and scaffolds the child’s awareness, mystery, and value sensing. The responding and prayer time of this approach also act as scaffolds to a child’s encounter with the Godhead while the creating step in

the approach enables children to work at Bloom’s taxonomy’s highest level of cognition as they use yet another language to encounter God, and deepen their spiritual awareness. When combined with process drama and the pedagogy of listening, Godly Play has the potential to add another powerful layer to the multidimensional process of scaffolding relational consciousness in young children.

REFLECTIONS ON LIVED EXPERIENCE

I have trailed a number of these pedagogies in my work with three-to-five-year-olds in faith-based preschools as well as in children’s ministry. What follows is a reflection on my experience as a pedagogical leader in these faith-based early childhood settings.

Re-Imaging Godly Play

My classrooms have been intentionally set up so that the environment acts as the third teacher. Bible story, felt for crafts, true to life props, Bible time dress-ups in a “home-corner,” construction materials, Bible story books, puppets, items from nature, play dough, art materials and such form part of the provisions. This was done because I understood the importance of children constructing their own knowledge with the support of peers, siblings, teachers, and parents, and the significance of using these props as a provocation for working in the child’s “zone of proximal development” (Berk, 2006, 260).

In children’s ministry settings, it has been my experience that three-year-olds often find walking into a session based on whole group instruction, a challenge. When the children arrived with their parents, I warmly greeted them and encouraged them to choose from one of the available activities set up for the day. In these settings, I deliberately chose to move away from the Godly Play format for several reasons. This initial free play model was familiar to many of the children because it mimicked their arrival at preschool. It allowed the children to enter quietly and to settle without overt adult guidance and interaction with peers. It calmed them and supported them to immerse themselves in their own play, in their own way, and at their own pace (Lubawy, 2009). Teachers quietly and respectfully moved throughout the room engaging with the children in parallel play, co-operative play, and conversations, switching between the roles of provisioner, mediator, leader, and relationship builder with children, parents, and grandparents (Arthur et. al., 2012).

Moments of awe and wonder were provoked in children by stimulating their senses through the use of the “100 languages,” (Rinaldi, 2001, 30) by engaging in visual arts, song, dance, drama, interactive materials, and audio visual technologies. I made props and resources available to the children after the story time so they could revisit the story. During the children’s ministry time, attempts were made to balance free play with direct instruction, whole group singing, Godly Play, and process drama.

I ensured that worship routines were consistently predictable and occurred in a warm caring environment with familiar adults.

Questions were used during the Bible story and free playtime to help unpack character's thought, feelings, and actions, as well as God's character and his role in the story. Wondering together in sustained shared conversations was pivotal in the Bible story time because I wanted the children "to both wonder about the unfolding actions of God's story but also to be filled with wonder for our awesome God" (Stonehouse and May, 2010, 89).

In response to children's questions and comments, we explored notions of God's care for Noah and his family and compared this with the way he cares for us today. One child was amazed to discover that God actually chooses people to do special jobs for him. Throughout the entire process I guided them in prayer and praise while role modelling worship behaviors, reflection, and Christian character. Sustained, shared thinking appeared to provoke a mystery-sensing moment in individual children.

I noted a number of interesting results of this model. Most children quickly settled to focused play upon arrival and either ignored their parents or jointly interacted with them and the provisions. Some parents quietly talked with their child about the provisions and took the opportunity to talk about God's goodness and creative power or retold Bible stories. As the year progressed, the children began to interact with each other and to play together in parallel and co-operative play. Older siblings often dropped by before and after their own program to play with their younger sibling in this re-imaged Godly Play environment.

In children's ministry settings, (after about thirty-five minutes of free play), we packed away most of the provisions and transitioned the children to the mat for a time of interactive praise songs and a Bible story. One or two provisions were always left out for the less settled child to engage with, while the other children participated in the story and songs. The story was usually told using process drama and concrete props. Occasionally we told the story using felt crafts, or by using a Bible story picture book or DVD. Whichever method of storytelling was used, it was always accompanied by moments of sustained shared thinking.

The pedagogical strategy process drama appeared to be pivotal in raising children's consciousness to the "felt sense" (Hyde, 2010, 510). In the middle of their engagement in the action of the story, they appeared to be more attuned to the feelings and thought of the characters in the Bible story. It was at this point that spiritual awareness emerged and deeper insights were scaffolded by listening to their thoughts and talking *with* them rather than *at* them. After the story, the children who wanted to engaged in a craft activity based on the Bible story while others retrieved the provisions from the shelves and returned to free play. Both types of activities enabled the children to revisit the Bible stories in another of the "100 languages" (Rinaldi, 2001, 30).

The strength of this approach to children's ministry appeared to lay in the unhurried nature of the session, the familiarity of the provisions and the opportunities for revisiting similar provisions each week. Time however, remained a constraint. Each session could only last for sixty-five to seventy minutes and the sessions occurred only once-a-week.

In Christian preschool classrooms, this time constraint did not exist. Children's emerging spiritual awareness could be more robustly and emergently scaffolded. Requests and conversations could be followed up immediately. Closer respect for, and attention to, moments of felt sense could be made through the use of pedagogical documentation. Teachers and children could use these documentations to revisit, reconstruct, and reframe understanding, and awareness, either later in the day or the next time the child attended preschool. The documentations could also be shared with peers and parents offering renewed opportunities for metacognition of the Bible story, God character, and role in our lives. The opportunities for sustained shared thinking were much more frequent and deeper because of the lack of time constraints and the ability to share the action and thinking with well-known adults and peers. Through these emergent curriculum pedagogies, teachers were able to shape a more meaningful and responsive faith-based curriculum for the children in their care.

An example of this occurred a number of years ago in my preschool classroom. At that time, the children's favorite thing to do at rest time was to view a video of Peter Spier's book "The Great Flood" (1979). Each time the children watched it, they discussed the narrative in detail. It appeared that each time the children re-visited the story they deepened their understanding of the plot, setting, character's actions, and the character of God. Teachers co-constructed the children's thinking in their "zone of proximal development" (Berk, 2006, 260).

Throughout the year, on numerous occasions, these same children were able to experience and reframe this same story in a variety of mediums. They read about it in a number of children's Bibles and Bible story picture books during whole group story times and revisited these books, individually and with peers, during their free play. They used dress-ups and building props to tell and re-tell personally meaningful sections of the story through co-operative, parallel, and solitary dramatic play. During this play, they could often be heard singing the songs about Noah that they had learnt in Bible story time. Occasionally, one of the children sat in the teacher's chair and role-played Bible story time with a group of peers. From time-to-time individual children spontaneously used play dough provisions or drawing and painting provisions to make or draw Noah's ark (Ludlow & Fisher, 2010). Teachers documented these experiences and displayed these documentations as part of an emergent "pedagogy of listening" to the children, their peers, and parents (Rinaldi, 2001, 80).

As I reflected back on these experiences, it occurred to me that the theories and pedagogical approaches that were used to inform my curriculum worked together to support children's emerging spiritual awareness. I noticed that spiritual awareness

occurred individually in children during multi-sensory re-imaged Godly Play strategies such as process drama and dramatic free play, or when children engaged with the paint and clay provisions. These pedagogical practices gave the child time to feel a part of the experience. It was then moments of felt sense emerged. Entertainment was consciously avoided. Rather, children's ways of knowing were used to make meaning and to heighten opportunities for relational consciousness to emerge. Scaffolding and nurturing in the child a thinking response to who God is and how he works in their life became the goal. In this moment of spiritual awareness, it was important for me to put my ego and agenda aside and to respectfully leave time for the Holy Spirit to act on the child's heart, following up later with an opportunity for the child to express his or her emerging relationship with God and Jesus through prayer and songs of praise.

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Section Three: Engaging Methodologies

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