

# **The concept of the child through a spiritual lens: implications for interdisciplinary approaches and Religious Education**

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## **Abstract**

Developing an understanding of what is meant by the terms ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ is essential for teachers as it shapes their approaches to teaching and learning (Grajczonek 2011). Contemporary discourse on these meanings is dominated by sociologists working in the field of the ‘new sociology of childhood’ but this paper argues that notions of spirituality also need to be considered. The paper re-interprets data collected from children aged 7-11 (n=56) in England about their perceptions of childhood. Previous analysis (Adams 2013; 2014) was contextualised entirely in sociological theory. However, whilst that analysis facilitated a coherent and meaningful exploration of childhood which synthesised children’s perspectives with theory, this paper argues that sociology alone was insufficient. Without a spiritual lens, the very nature of the children themselves and their descriptions of childhood were lacking. This paper revisits the data and, whilst acknowledging the centrality and value of sociology’s contribution, it re-interrogates the data from the perspective of spirituality. Key themes emerging are: relationship with self; relationship with others; connectedness; beings and becomings, and its darker aspects. The paper concludes that interdisciplinary approaches to understanding childhood should also include the spiritual. The implications of the findings for Religious Education are discussed.

## **Key words**

Childhood; children’s spirituality; child’s voice; Cambridge Primary Review; new sociology of childhood; children’s views of childhood

### **‘Child’, ‘children’, ‘childhood’ and education**

The concepts of ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ – as well as ‘children’ are fundamental to explorations of spirituality, education and RE yet they are rarely debated systematically or critically outside of the field of the new sociology of childhood. Jan Grajczonek (2010; 2011) is an exception. She published a two-part contribution in this journal which explored the implications of the constructions of ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ in the church’s official educational documents and considered the implications for religious educators. Grajczonek (2010; 2011) revealed a tendency for those documents to portray children as passive, deficient and vulnerable. These conceptions of children expressed in the church documents lie in stark contrast to contemporary educational and sociological views of children which tend towards framing them as active agents who are resilient, capable and unique individuals (James and James 2004).

Furthermore, Grajczonek (2010) found that the notion of the universal child – one child representing all children was – inherent in the church documents. However, sociologists have argued that there is no ‘universal child’ (see Smith 2010). Grajczonek (2011) explored the implications of these contradictions and the ambiguities for the Religious Education (RE) teacher, particularly in the context of early years teaching in Catholic schools in Australia. She argued that RE teachers to be aware of their own constructions of a child and to consider how those relate to the notion of the child in the church documents, as well as local cultural understandings.

Grajczonek’s (2010; 2011) study has wider relevance to classrooms and Religious Education beyond Catholic schools in that its principles – of the various socio-cultural

influences of conceptions of child and childhood (as well as ‘children’) – inevitably shape teachers’ understandings, both explicitly and implicitly. Of course, other Christian denominations and other faiths also have their own understandings of childhood and education. For example, The Church of England (2016) frames their vision for education as the promotion of ‘life in all its fullness,’ which enables holistic development embracing ‘the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social’ (p. 3). Significantly, this inclusivity relates to all children in all schools, albeit that church schools will express the vision in distinctive ways through the teaching and learning in RE and the wider curriculum and in their worship and ethos.

In addition to the Catholic and Anglican churches’ understandings, this notion of acknowledging the conceptions also moves beyond various faith teachings and countries’ wider national education systems. For example an extensive independent review of the primary curriculum in England, led by Cambridge University (Alexander 2010) recognised childhood as an essential element. The Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) included childhood as one of three overarching themes of its study, recommending that it should be at the centre of primary education, and be a key focus in initial teacher training. This principle relates to all teachers of all children irrespective of the school or children’s faith or non-faith perspective. To achieve this aim of embedding childhood into initial teacher education, it would be essential to draw heavily on the new sociology of childhood which has come to dominate discussions of childhood (see James and Prout 1997; James and James 2008). Furthermore, to attain the respective church visions of education, this too requires understandings of childhood. Both would also involve facilitating trainees’ and practising teachers’ reflections on their own conceptions of childhood, as well as reflexivity of any researchers engaging in this area.

### **The context: sociology, the ‘new sociology of childhood’, and interdisciplinary approaches**

Choi and Pak (2006) note that the terms ‘multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary’ are often ambiguous and used interchangeably. They define interdisciplinarity as ‘analyzing, synthesizing and harmonizing links between disciplines into a co-ordinated and coherent whole’, based on an extensive literature search of definitions (p. 351). When applying their thinking to the topic under current discussion, some key points of clarification regarding the two fields in question – the new sociology of childhood and spirituality - are required.

Sociology has been concerned with childhood since the nineteenth century (Mayall 2013). Whilst sociology is a discipline in its own right (compared to spirituality which may be considered a field), an area within sociology concerned with studying childhood critically emerged in the late 1990s and 2000s, termed the ‘new sociology of childhood’ (James and Prout 1997). James and James (2004) explain that the study of childhood is in itself interdisciplinary. For example, the complexity of the subject requires consideration of how social, economic, legal and political systems shape childhood. In addition, understandings from history, biology, anthropology and psychology are also influential. Furthermore, this situation is also applicable to spirituality. It too is a field, rather than a discipline, which draws on a number of disciplines such as theology, psychology, philosophy and art *inter alia*. The principles of interdisciplinary approaches, as described by Choi and Pak (2006), are thus appropriate to researchers in both of these interdisciplinary fields.

A criticism of a number of sociological texts on childhood is that many were adult-centric, and failed to incorporate the child’s voice. This is surprising given that the notion of children as having agency is a core thread in contemporary sociological literature. However, in recent years, an increasing number of researchers have actively engaged children in studies about their lives (e.g. Mayall 2003; Brooks 2006; Madge 2006). Yet, despite the growth of studies exploring childhood from children’s perspectives, relatively few have directly asked children for their definitions of the related terms. Exceptions include Harcourt’s (2011) Australian study which engaged

15 children aged three to six years who shared their views on childhood and adulthood through conversations, drawings and/or writing. Data pointed to a disjunction between adults' conceptions of what their children did at pre-school and what those experiences meant to the child, leading Harcourt to suggest that adults may need to revise their constructions of childhood. Lowe (2012) worked in England with early years' children aged three to four to elicit their understandings of the terms 'a child' and 'childhood'. Her findings highlighted discrepancies in how adults and children conceptualised play. In a large scale study also in England, Madge (2006) surveyed 2000 pupils aged 7-15 and interviewed 500 adults about the meaning of childhood and associated cultural influences. She found that the majority of the children participating viewed childhood as a largely happy time, as a period with relatively few worries. Negative elements included feeling restricted, having to go to school and being told off. Madge (2006) emphasised the need to avoid discussing children as a homogenous group, to acknowledge individual differences and avoid making generalisations about children.

## **Method**

My own study (Adams 2013; 2014) explored the perceptions of children older than those in Harcourt (2011) and Lowe's (2012) work. It comprised of a case study of 56 children aged 7-11 in a state-funded primary school in the east of England with no religious affiliation, situated in an area of relative economic deprivation. Children were mostly white British in ethnic origin. Ethical approval was obtained from the university and informed consent was subsequently obtained from the school, parents and children, and all names cited below are fictional to protect confidentiality (BERA 2011). The final sample comprised 29 girls and 27 boys with a median age of 9. Semi-structured group interviews were the primary method, with children also being invited to draw and/or write during the group session. Most questions were deliberately wide and open ended. These included 'what is it like being nine?' and 'how will being an adult be different to being a child?' - framed as such in order to facilitate children

leading the direction of the conversations. However children were also asked directly to explain their definition of a child.

Thematic analysis was employed underpinned by a sociological approach. The first paper (Adams 2013) reported on the study's main findings, contextualised in education's well-being agenda and the wider debate about whether or not childhood is in crisis in some of the world's richest nations. The key findings were that children spontaneously identified childhood in a positive way, preferable to adulthood which was perceived as tedious and stressful, albeit that adulthood held some advantages such as freedom. For them, the negative aspects of childhood included restrictions, powerlessness and anxiety caused by other children.

The subsequent paper (Adams 2014) focused specifically on the children's definitions and understandings of the concept of 'a child'. Data were categorised into four themes, situated in their understandings of what it also meant to be an adult:

- Physical descriptors (e.g. relating to size);
- Lifestyle descriptors (e.g. playing, going to school);
- Behavioural descriptors (e.g. less sensible than adults, always learning);
- Criteria-referenced descriptors (e.g. their age indicated that they are a child).

In both papers, analysis highlighted the following key sociological concepts: social constructionist elements of definition; agency; voice; relational and generational components of childhood and adulthood; and children as beings and becomings. However, the latter paper (Adams 2014) reported on two key divergences from that core literature which were apparent in the children's responses. First that the biological constituents of being a child were more important to the children than some of the literature focusing on social construction suggests; and second, a strong awareness of themselves as becomings, combined with their sense of self in the present moment, as beings.

## **Reflexivity**

However, as a researcher of children's spirituality, undertaking a reflexive approach to my work, I was conscious that whilst the sociological approach was valuable and central to a study of childhood, it did not adequately address the spiritual nature of being a child. As Berger (2015) notes, scholars recognise that a reflexivity is essential in order to ensure standards in qualitative research, particularly because research is affected by whether or not the researcher shares the participants' experience. In my case, three decades ago, I majored in Sociology for my Bachelor's degree and my natural interest in the subject has remained since, influencing my ontological and epistemological approaches to some extent. However, my doctorate was on children's spiritual dreams, the theoretical framework for which drew on several disciplines. The original analysis of this current data set (Adams 2013; 2014) was a journey back to my academic roots, and felt natural; yet whilst engaging with the sociological literature my concerns about sociology's ability to fully convey the nature of childhood were tangible, and were even more substantial as I reflected on the initial analysis.

Since my studying at undergraduate level, the 'new sociology of childhood' had emerged (see James and Prout 1997). It arose from critiques of earlier research which had framed children as adults-in-the-making and adopted social constructionism as the key means of understanding childhood. Concurrently, over the last two decades, my own research has focused on children's spirituality and drifted away from sociology until I engaged in my recent project on children's perceptions of childhood. Throughout the process of conducting that research, I was cognisant that whilst there were similarities in the themes discussed in the sociological literature and that focussing on children's spirituality (which in itself draws on a range of disciplines), there were subtle differences in the ways in which they are used, as deliberated below.

## **Aims**

In order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the children's perspectives, to fill the gap that appears to be missing, data are re-visited here from the standpoint of the children's spirituality literature. This re-analysis enables a comparison of findings which arise from undertaking different theoretical and conceptual approaches. It facilitates discussion between spirituality and the new sociology of childhood, to consider their relationship in understanding the nature of children's views of childhood. The findings are then considered in relation to the RE classroom and spirituality in schools, in light of Grajczonek's (2010; 2011) earlier papers and Alexander's (2010) English curriculum review.

## **Findings and analysis**

The ensuing analysis foregrounds themes from the spirituality literature which were not included in the initial analysis. Under each subheading, resonances with the sociological enquiry are briefly noted in order to set up a comparative discussion in the subsequent section.

### **The spirituality of 'childhood'**

When drawing on the literature on children's spirituality, several interconnected themes emerged in the data. These were: identity(ies); relationships with self; relationships with other and connectedness, and the darker sides of childhood.

Throughout this analysis, the comments of children are incorporated to illustrate how the spiritual elements were expressed. In addition, the narratives of a 10 year old girl referred to as Whitney are woven in to exemplify how several points raised applied to one child. First, then, a short introduction to Whitney.

## **Whitney's biography**

Whitney presented herself as a child who is confident of her views, although she did not dominate her group's discussion, and interacted comfortably with her peers, supporting and extending their contributions. Her group consisted of three other girls, 10 year old Grace and Alexa, and 11 year old Jessica, and one boy, Josh aged 10. The children were clearly relaxed in each other's company, with a carefree element of light hearted banter at times, which at times was punctuated with more serious concerns about getting older, notably the upcoming transition to secondary school at the end of the school year.

Whitney spoke pragmatically about issues in her life; references to her family were a recurring theme, a source of companionship and love but also of frustration and restriction, and living with economic challenges. Whitney made reference to having a physical disability which limited her movements at times.

## **Identity(ies)**

By asking children what it is like to be a child, and how they thought life as an adult may differ, they were able to express aspects of their identity. Identity is a key and recurring element of the children's spirituality literature. Webster (2010) argues that identity is by definition spiritual because it is embedded in a person's purpose in life and how they relate.

Identity is closely linked with what Hay and Nye (2006) termed relational consciousness. They identified relationships with self, others, the world and God/the transcendent as being core expressions of children's spirituality.

## ***Relationships with self***

Relationship with self was evident in a variety of ways. One of the key differentials between being a child and an adult, for these children, was the heightened awareness that they were physically smaller than teenagers and adults. Physical descriptors such as these comprised two-fifths of all answers (n=27, 41%) to a direct question of what a child was; how they would explain it to a creature from another planet who had not seen human children before. The majority of these answers (n=24, 89%) related to being small in size (Adams 2014). For these children being smaller had advantages and disadvantages. Billy, aged 8, commented on the positives of being small:

*When you're playing hide and seek and other [older] people are counting they've got less places to hide but we've got more cos we can crouch down and stuff.*

In a different group, 8 year old Callie detailed the negative impact of being small:

*Sometimes we go to a very busy space where there's lots of people and I feel quite small. You feel a bit like people don't really care as they stand on your toes and stuff.*

The place of the physical has been a recent focus in the field of children's spirituality, particularly in relation to education. Trousdale (2013) and Webster (2013) highlight the historical separation of body and spirit particularly in western cultures; Trousdale (2013) notes specifically how this polarisation has permeated Christianity, a phenomenon not evident in eastern mystical traditions. Webster (2013) applies the separation to contemporary western education, contesting the compartmentalising of children into different elements, such as cultural, mental and spiritual. Drawing on Heidegger and Dewey, Webster argues that such an approach only serves to fragment personhood, as indeed does including spiritual development as a distinct strand of

education rather than offering an integrated and hence, he argues, a truly holistic approach.

Trousdale (2013, 27-28) maintains that children present 'embodied spirituality', for example being completely immersed in a physical activity, at time encountering 'peak experiences'. Whilst these were not the topic of this study there was nevertheless evidence that the children's physicality was an integral part of themselves, of who they are, used as a means of locating themselves within the category of 'child'. As Billy and Callie's comments above suggest, their physical size was not separate from their sense of self; it affected what they could do in daily life and at times, how they felt. Whitney provided further insight into the effects of physicality. Implicitly referring to her own restricted ability to move, she was also conscious of her 'becoming' into adulthood in the future:

*I think you need to flexible cos if you're not flexible then you won't be able to move when you're older. My mum said when she was young she could do 10 cartwheels in a row and now she can barely do a handstand.*

Whitney's comments here about becoming an adult were also evident in other groups where children were confident in talking about themselves in the present and also in the future. Seven year old Lucas loved to play football and saw this as part of his identity, and talked of being a wealthy footballer when he was older. Eight year old Ellie envisaged being a model when she grew up. Others did not refer to jobs or careers but instead looked a little closer into the future in relation to 'growing up' and moving onto secondary school.

Jessica: I'm looking forward to doing the work experience [at secondary school] cos then you can see what it's like. Also you can actually enjoy it as well cos you can do lots of good things like Whitney does now.

Josh: I'm not sure if secondary school will be better.

Alexa: Everyone says secondary school is the best years of your life.

Jessica: Yeah cos you can do also do some more subjects, they do more like chemistry.

Whitney: I think being an adult's better cos as long as you stay sensible basically you can do a lot of things and then you can go to pubs, buy wine from the shop [laugh]... You can stay up til midnight without your mum shouting 'get your butt into the bedroom now!'

One comparable sociological notion is that of children as beings or becomings (Uprichard 2008) whereby children are envisaged for who they are in the present time and/or as adults-in-the-making.

### ***Relationships with other and connectedness***

The nature of children's home lives and their relationship with others naturally shaped their experiences and perceptions of childhood and adulthood and sit comfortably within the discourses of relationships which are integral to the spirituality literature (e.g. Champagne 2003; Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008; de Souza 2012; Goodliff 2013). Often the focus tends towards considering how relationships shape identity and sense of self. Whitney exemplified this in her responses to questions about what it was like being a child compared to what it may be like being an adult, all of which drew heavily on her relationship with her mother, father and brother.

Whitney described a loving family and whilst she joined her group in bemoaning a lack of freedom afforded to them by virtue of being a child, such as not being allowed out in the dark, she was keen to interject with a different perspective to that of her peers:

Alexa: Sometimes you're allowed to go to the cinema with your friends and walk round town with no adults just not when it's dark.

Whitney: Yeah cos then they go 'don't be late home cos I worry about you darling!'... My mum says she'd give her life to save me – my mum said she'd risk her life for me.

A recurring theme for Whitney was that she perceived adulthood to be boring, a view which drew heavily on her relationship with her mother. When asked how she defined a child, she responded, 'I'd probably say we are young, we're exciting and adults are just old and boring.' Whitney expanded by drawing on her family's economic struggles, saying:

Whitney: I don't know if I'd like to be an adult cos when my mum goes to the supermarket she has to check every price of flour, or juice – well if I buy two of them that's cheaper than buying one of them, so if I do that – ooh that's a different price, I wonder what that does!... When you're an adult you sort of have to worry about financial things, paying the bills in time otherwise you get a fine, clearing up after your dog muck, feeding your pets –

Alexa: I have to feed my pets anyway –

Whitney: Keeping your garden clean, keeping your house clean and if something breaks you need to figure out how to fix it cos when you're little all you go is 'mum, I broke this, can you fix it for me?... mum I don't like this phone anymore I want a more up to date one...'

For Whitney and others who spoke openly about their family relationships, their sense of identity was clearly bound primarily in these relationships and appeared to be the

primary shapers of their notions of childhood and adulthood. Feeling connected to their environment, most commonly signified by references to family, peers and school, resonated with themes of connectedness which are prevalent in the spirituality literature (de Souza 2004; Hyde 2008).

Sociological discourse on childhood also places emphasis on relationships. These include the fact that the concepts of childhood and adulthood are by definition relational; one category cannot exist without the other (Alanen 2001; Mayall 2003; Qvortrup 2008). Furthermore, some sociological studies have focused on the importance of relationships for children including those with friends and family, particularly where children have stated the importance of relationships to them (e.g. Mayall 2003).

### **The darker sides of childhood**

For the children in this study, the comments about being a child were primarily positive in nature, and further questioning was required to elicit the less favourable aspects. For the older age group who were approaching transition to secondary school at age 11/12, there was a clear sense of trepidation which incorporated feelings of trepidation. Amongst other children, vulnerability was noted when complained of being 'bossed around' by other children; four spoke of being bullied; three talked about teenagers in the town who were intimidating, and eight spoke about loss. Such experiences are located in the spirituality literature which draws attention to the darker side of spirituality (de Souza 2012). Some sociologists have focused on the range of global childhoods which include topics such as child labour (see Bromley and Mackie 2009) and children living in war zones (Cheney 2005).

### ***Childhood and religion***

Finally, it is important to note what children did *not* say. Religious affiliation is also, of course, a key component of identity. During the interviews, no questions were asked about religious affiliation, as the topics were generated by the children. The school setting was representative of the English curriculum in that, as a school maintained by the government, Religious Education is a compulsory subject and schools are also required to have a daily act of collective worship (although parents have the right to withdraw their children from them). Data were collected in the winter at the time when the children were practising for their annual nativity play, and the interviews were slotted in around the rehearsals.

Interestingly, despite this educational context and children talking freely about their home lives and school lives, only one child in this study made any reference to religion or God. Georgia, aged 9 said,

*Last night I couldn't get to sleep and I like writing lists so I wrote a list of all the things that are important to me some of them included rights, people in other countries, religion, what everyone believes in and respect.*

Data on the children's religious background were not available so it is difficult to ascertain why the children made so little reference to religion; perhaps this was a reflection that this was not a particularly religious community, or that for those who were from religious homes, faith was not immediately connected with being a child. Had direct questions about religion been asked, results may have differed.

## **Discussion**

This section considers what has been achieved by re-analysing the data set through a spiritual lens, and considers its implications RE and the principle of interdisciplinary approaches.

### *The spiritual lens*

Certainly, the original four themes emerging from the sociological analysis (physical, lifestyle, behavioural and criteria-referenced descriptors) are no less important in light of this re-interpretation. These initial themes emanated from and resonated with the sociological literature and also illuminated areas of divergence such as the children's emphasis on the biology. However the emerging themes emanating from spirituality texts (identity, relationships with self, relationships with other, connectedness and the darker sides of childhood) – whilst having some comparability with themes in sociology – add an additional dimension.

Themes arising from the children's spirituality literature have both complemented and extended the original analysis. The complementarity is located in the language used; for example, both fields include discussions of children's relationships. However, these are framed differently. In the new sociology of childhood, they tend to refer to the conceptual relationship between adulthood and childhood in addition to recognising the importance of social relationships, the latter linking to spirituality's relational consciousness (Hay and Nye 2006). Sociologists, however, tend not to interrogate the spiritual elements of relationships. Certainly the general tenure of the sociological language in relation to identity sits within the psycho-social domain. In the spirituality literature, whilst it also occupies the psycho-social arena, it often refers to something deeper: the spirit or soul of a child: the intangible element of 'being'. Arguably this latter approach has the potential to add another dimension to a discussion or analysis of data particularly with regards to notions of conceptualising 'child', 'children' and 'childhood'.

Whitney's sense of self, as embedded in her 'as child' and in relation to others and to adulthood can be appropriately contextualised in sociology. For example, the concept of relationality (Alanen 2001; Mayall 2003; Qvortrup 2008) frames Whitney's understanding of herself as child in relation to adult. There is evidence of the social

construction of childhood in her conversations about what she is able to do at her age compared to what she will be able to do when she is an adult. Furthermore Whitney demonstrates agency (James and James 2008; Qvortrup 1994) in negotiating elements of her life. All of Whitney's personal characteristics are accurately theorised sociologically; but the spiritual lens brings additional elements, albeit that some are more subtle. For example, the notion of connectedness with her family brings a depth to the language of relationships which is common to both fields; it implies an embedding of ties and meaningfulness within those relationships which are inherently linked to identity(ies); something that is less easy to capture if using sociological terminology alone.

The darker sides of childhood pose an interesting area for consideration. As I argue elsewhere (Adams 2010) when adults explore childhood, it is easy to romanticise the past and succumb to nostalgia; our lapses in memory alongside the processes involved in aging make it difficult for us to remember what it was like to be a child. Given that the majority of the children's responses about childhood in this study were positive in nature, it is particularly important to retain a critical stance with regards to imposing an idealised view of their contemporary childhoods. It would be erroneous to focus on the more creative and ethereal elements of childhood and not to consider the corresponding frightening aspects of it. For example, one should not over emphasise the spiritual nature and positive impact of some childhood dreams or the creativity and comfort of 'imaginary friends' without also considering their adversaries: the terrifying nightmares or the imaginary companions who may be unpleasant characters, or the arguably grey area of where what are conceived as imaginary friends crosses over with the terminology of ghosts or frightening spirits of the deceased. Both sides – positive and negative – need to be explored and considered in order to gain a holistic understanding of what it is like to be a child (Adams 2010). de Souza (2012) details how the darker side of spirituality is an area of significance that is currently under-researched; yet is an important area for further interrogation, to develop understanding both in terms of theory and application to the classroom.

Certainly, the new sociology of childhood addresses the darker aspects of global childhoods, with considerable work having been undertaken in areas such as child labour and child soldiers (see Cregan and Cuthbert 2014). These are certainly areas which would benefit from critical study by those working in children's spirituality. Again, the two fields can complement each other, with a spiritual perspective being able to convey the inner worlds of children and their fears perhaps more effectively than using sociological language alone.

### *Implications for RE*

What then, are the implications for RE teachers? Certainly I support Grajczonek's (2011) arguments that RE teachers need to be aware of their own conceptions of child and childhood alongside those in any relevant faith documents and additional local cultural understandings. Furthermore, data from this study (Adams 2013; 2014), alongside those of others who have elicited children's views of childhood (e.g. Madge 2006; Harcourt 2011; Lowe 2012) also demonstrate that the children's definitions also need to be respected and incorporated.

Grajczonek (2011) applied her findings to teachers of Catholic RE but her basic premise also has wider reach, to the respective faith-based education documents from other denominations and religions. Moreover, the proposal also applies to teachers in schools which have no faith foundation yet are required to teach RE, such as those in England and Wales. As in most schools in economically advanced societies, children in any classroom are likely to come from a range of faith and non-faith backgrounds which adds further complexity to the myriad of cultural notions of 'child', 'children' and 'childhood'. However, the RE teacher in these schools in particular has the opportunity to explore spiritual notions of childhood with children as co-creators of those notions, enabling synthesis with their own conceptions as well as any relevant faith-based perspectives.

Notions of 'child,' 'children' and 'childhood' are easily taken for granted but studies from a range of disciplines have demonstrated that they are complex. Alexander's (2010) call for initial teacher training to focus on childhood is pertinent, because children are at the very centre of teaching; all teaching, and not just RE. There are certainly significant difficulties in incorporating it, not least in countries where teacher training is relatively short and/or as in England, it is being steered towards being predominantly based in schools, with less time spent in universities which have traditionally provided space away from the frantic classroom for the interrogation of academic ideas and for deeper reflection.

For education systems which include Religious Education, whether in independent faith schools and/or nationally state-funded schools, the spiritual dimension has a natural home. Some wider curricula are explicit about including the spiritual, such as England and Wales where government maintained schools should promote children's spiritual development across the curriculum alongside their moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). Again, effective inclusion of the spiritual depends on a variety of factors, not least having staff who are confident in teaching about it, but also in being able to create time and space in the curriculum for including it. In a national survey of initial teacher training departments in universities in England and Wales, trainers reported very little time available to teach about SMSC. Where they were able to quantify the amount of time spent on it throughout an initial teacher training programme, the maximum amount of time was stated as two days, in only two cases. Others ranged from one hour (n=6); two hours (n=3); three hours (n=3); half a day (n=6) to one day (n=3). These statistics refer to SMSC as a whole, further implying that spirituality, the most complex and ambiguous of the four elements, receives very little attention (Adams, Monahan and Wills 2015).

Yet if childhood is to be at the centre of teacher training, and teaching, as Alexander (2010) proposes, both the sociological conceptions alongside spiritual conceptions

need to be incorporated, synthesised, debated and critiqued. All of this requires appropriate staff expertise and, importantly, time and space which are of course in short supply particularly where trainees need to evidence meeting measurable criteria.

## **Conclusion**

This re-interpretation of this data through a spiritual lens takes nothing away from the original sociological analysis which in itself offers a largely comprehensive framework for understanding childhood through the dominant discourse. However, I would argue that by combining spiritual and sociological lenses, the analysis becomes richer. The spiritual adds depth, accepting the notion that the child and childhood are largely social constructions but also recognising that the child is a person who is body, mind and spirit. Certainly, body, mind and spirit are also conceived of differently across and within cultures, so in themselves may be considered social constructions, or at least in part shaped by them. Yet writings in spirituality remind us of the richness of a child's inner life, beyond that of play and imagination, which extends to matters of deeper contemplation in their search for identity(ies) and meaning and purpose in life.

Framing a child within notions of social constructionism, agency, voice, relational and generational components of childhood and adulthood and children as beings and becomings is important. But so too is recognising that a child is more than this: they are 'beings' in the most profound sense but this can only be captured by incorporating explicit reference to the spiritual into discussions of childhood. Adopting interdisciplinary approaches to the topic is, therefore, a productive way forward.

Given that the two fields of the new sociology of childhood and spirituality have not entered into any in-depth dialogue about their conceptual similarities and divergences in order to interrogate their respective ideas, this paper initiates discussions which in

turn can potentially enable interdisciplinary learning to support teachers in further understanding the children in their care.

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