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**Spaces of spiritual citizenship: children’s relational and emotional encounters with the everyday school environment**

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**Abstract**

*This article addresses the issue of children’s spiritual, relational and emotional encounters with the primary school environment, with reference to concepts and theories from both education studies and human geography. Drawing on mixed-method qualitative research in two case study institutions, the article examines pupils’ photographed ‘special places’ and the embodied spiritual practices that occurred within everyday informal spaces around the school environments. The significance of adult power and children’s spiritual agency is explored in the analysis, emphasising the potentially political nature of spiritual practices and processes. In so doing, the implications for spiritual citizenship are addressed as*

*part of the current wider interest in children’s rights and participation in school*

*ethos and decision-making.*

**Keywords:** spirituality; agency; environment; citizenship; primary school

**Introduction**

Since the introduction of Citizenship Education for all English schools in 2002, there has been an increased focus on pupil voice and participation in both education and social policy and the associated academic literature. With the recent emphasis on children and young people taking on citizenship responsibilities in the community and wider society, some writers have argued that adults should therefore be taking their citizenship rights more seriously as a consequence (e.g. Lockyer 2003). Drawing on the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, scholars have highlighted the potential of pupil voice to create a more democratic model of schooling, through vehicles such as consultation groups and school councils to facilitate shared decision-making (Alderson 1997; Apple and Bean 1995). However, as Whitty and Wisby (2007) discovered, many school councils focus narrowly on

the provision of institutional facilities, rather than empowering pupils to make real

changes to school ethos.

In this article, I show how a focus on space and place can help to deepen understandings

of spirituality in the school context and its significance for children’s citizenship and participation. Through a consideration of pupils’ spiritual, relational and emotional experiences of the primary school environment, I draw attention to the role of adult power and children’s agency in structuring these subjective and non-material processes. Although there exists a large body of research in childhood and youth studies that points to the ways in which children act as social agents in a variety of school contexts (e.g. Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000; Pike 2008; Shilling and Cousins 1990; Thomson 2005), spirituality has generally not been a key concern of this work. The research presented in this article addresses this gap by exploring how children’s everyday embodied practices and experiences of the school environment demonstrate their potential as spiritual agents and citizens, within the context of institutional power structures.

I begin the article with a discussion of the concept of spirituality and its presence in childhood research, before exploring related ideas and developments in the literature on emotions and the environment. Next, I go on to present empirical data from two case study schools and document children’s spiritual, relational and emotional encounters with their everyday school environments though a focus on ‘special places’ around the schools and embodied practices within the assembly hall and other spaces. Finally in the conclusion, I draw together the emerging findings and implications for children’s spiritual citizenship status in the school context, and some of the ways in which teachers might respond to these.

**Children, spirituality and environment**

Spirituality is an important part of education provision in England, with all state schools legally required to promote the ‘spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical developments’ of children. Yet the term ‘spirituality’ is a vague and contested one, and the concept tends to mean different things to different people, making it difficult to define (Eaude 2003). For example, Copley (2000) collects together a number of definitions of spirituality, including those that focus on the non-material, the mysterious, the relational and the inner self, while Hyde (2008, 23) points to diverse descriptions such as ‘interior life, religious experience, the search for meaning and purpose, expressions of relatedness, transcendence, immanence, ultimate values, integrity, identity, connection to something greater [and] awareness’. Despite the varied nature of these definitions and descriptions, they do tend to cluster around aspects of human existence that can be understood as non-material and nonrational.

Spirituality can refer to both religious and non-religious experiences, reflecting the argument that whilst religion may be one vehicle for expressing spirituality, a historical perspective indicates that the two concepts cannot necessarily be assumed to be one and the same (O’Murchu 1997). This argument has been reflected in changing definitions of ‘spiritual development’ within education, which have widened from their Christian origins to encompass more secular understandings of the non-rational and non-material aspects of human life, such as awe and wonder, and feelings and emotions (e.g. see National Curriculum Council 1993; Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted] 2004). It is also apparent in the body of research on children and spirituality found in education studies, some of which has operated within a religious framework (e.g. Adams 2001; Coles 1990; Heller 1986) and some of which has focused on broader understandings of children’s spiritual lives (e.g. Champagne 2003; Hart 2003; Hay and Nye 1998).

One of the main concepts conveyed by the literature on children and spirituality is that of ‘relationality’. Many religious and secular conceptions of spirituality view the individual’s relationship with the self, other people, other objects, the environment and God or the divine as central to understanding this dimension of human life (Hyde 2008). Others take this idea further, suggesting that the blurring of boundaries between self and ‘other’ (Hart 2003), or the journey towards unity with the ‘other’ (de Souza 2004) is key to understanding spiritual experience. Champagne (2003) points to the ways in which children perceive their environment and relate and interact with others within it, as part of her three spiritual modes through which young children act – the ‘sensitive mode of being’, the ‘relational mode of being’ and the ‘existential mode of being’. However, particularly influential for

making sense of the relational dimension of spirituality in children’s lives has been

the work of Hay and Nye (1998) who coined the phrase ‘relational consciousness’.

Working from the assumption that all individuals have an innate spiritual awareness,

Hay and Nye (1998) began their research with three categories of children’s spiritual sensitivity. These included ‘awareness sensing’ (an awareness and focus on the present and the moment), ‘mystery sensing’ (awe, wonder and fascination for the world) and ‘value sensing’ (deep emotion and moral sensitivity). Talking to 6–7-year-olds and 10–11-year-olds of Muslim, Catholic, Anglican and Atheist backgrounds, Hay and Nye (1998) identified particularly unusual levels of perceptiveness and consciousness in specific conversations concerning relationships with the self, others, objects and God. They termed this sense ‘relational consciousness’ and outlined some of the ways in which children had described it. This included ‘waking up’ and ‘noticing things’, a sense that their brains felt ‘scrambled’ or

particular experiences of trust. Hay (2000) argues that spirituality as ‘relational consciousness’ can be understood as something that transgresses religious and secular

distinctions because it can be part of both religious and non-religious experiences.

However, the concept of relationality is not something confined to the study of children and spirituality. It has also been a key component of the geographical literature on emotions and affect. For example, Bondi (2005, 443) argues that rather than feelings that belong to individuals, ‘emotions are relational, they arise and flow between people, producing as much as manifesting what may be felt to belong to one person or another’. Similarly, Thien (2005, 451) argues that ‘affect is used to describe (in both the communicative and literal sense) the motion of emotion’. Although emotional processes are not necessarily the same as spiritual ones, there is clearly significant overlap between the wider non-material, non-rational and relational understandings of spirituality and the accounts of emotion and affect that emphasise their mobile, embodied and interpersonal nature. Whilst some understandings of spirituality emphasise its out-of-body, transcendental qualities, this article works with a definition of spirituality that recognises its intensely somatic, emotional and relational nature, in the context of the school environment.

The relationship between human emotions and the environment was famously explored by Tuan (1974), who wrote about the ‘affective bond’ that people develop with particular landscapes, forged through their senses and their emotions. He argued that landscapes become imbued with particular contradictory and changing meanings, illustrating the socially constructed nature of emotional responses to the environment. Hubbard (2005) criticises such humanist approaches, arguing that they fail to adequately account for the embodied nature of our relationship with our surroundings. Emotions not only help us to make sense of our surroundings but also actively form and constitute both self and environment. For example, Conradson (2005) discusses environments that people visit for their perceived healing qualities. He argues that these therapeutic landscapes are ‘affective outcomes of relational encounters between the self and the landscape’ (Conradson 2005, 104). Individual selves therefore emerge in relation to, and through a moving between, other people, places, things and times.

Some of the work in human geography on emotions and affect has been criticised for its failure to adequately account for social difference, treating human experience as somewhat universal (e.g. Tolia-Kelly 2006). Tolia-Kelly (2007) reports how images of the English Lake District evoked expressions of fear, terror and anxiety amongst her research participants, all of whom were from Asian migrant communities in urban Lancashire. Some of her participants drew explicitly on spiritual concepts such as awe, wonder and the sublime in their responses. Tolia-Kelly (2007) argues that ‘race’ and power were important components structuring these affectual encounters, offering alternative readings of English landscape to traditional (white) images of beauty and serenity. Similarly, Milligan, Bingley, and Gatrell (2005) point to the way in which space and place can play a role in the facilitation or constraint of emotional expression, in the context of age identities. Elderly people in their study reported positive emotional experiences of social and gardening

clubs, in contrast to other public spaces where they felt isolated and marginalised. Both of these studies point to the importance of social identity and power for structuring emotional and affectual encounters with the environment, concepts that are also important for exploring spirituality in this article.

**Methodology**

The material presented in this article originally formed part of a wider study on the role of religion and spirituality in the spaces of the primary school (Hemming 2009). This study employed a mixed-method qualitative approach, focusing on two case study schools located in multi-faith localities of an urban area in the north of England. One of these schools was a Community primary school and one was a Voluntary Aided Roman Catholic primary school. In both institutions, the views and experiences of children, parents and staff were explored using a range of qualitative methods. However, in this article, I will focus specifically on the data generated through participant observation, paired interviews with children and a group photography activity, again conducted with the child participants. Previous research has highlighted how attention to space and place can uncover new perspectives about children’s experiences and understandings of educational environments (e.g. Clark 2004), and this research aimed to capitalise upon such approaches. All research data were collected in accordance with university ethical guidelines.

The observations were recorded in the context of my role as a classroom assistant, which lasted for 10 weeks, for three days a week in each study school. They reflected a presence in the classroom, playground, dinner hall and around the school in general. The paired interviews were carried out with 8–11-year-olds and consisted of 11 pairs and one group of three in the Community School and 10 pairs and one group of three in the Catholic school. Although the first part of the pair was chosen to reflect religious and gender diversity within the focus classes, children were given the opportunity to choose their own partner in order to facilitate more relaxed interview encounters. All interviews took place during the school day, for around 30 minutes in private locations (such as the learning support room), and

anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, which children selected for

themselves.

The photography activity aimed to discover more about spirituality through the identification of children’s ‘special places’ around the everyday school environment. Although Erricker et al. (1997) used a similar method to explore children’s spiritual relationships with space, their study focused on home and community environments such as gardens and bedrooms, rather than the primary school. However, their findings did identify that certain places may take on special spiritual meanings for children that may not necessarily be known to adults. Photography has increasingly been used as a research method with children in recent studies (e.g. Newman, Woodcock, and Dunham 2006; Young and Barrett 2001) and Einarsdottir (2005) points to the way in which such methodologies may empower children to frame pictures of their choosing, act as effective facilitators for accessing their perspectives and offer an alternative to verbal research methods.

Children in my study were invited to use disposable cameras to take photographs of two special places around school of their own choosing. Unlike Erricker et al. (1997), who specifically defined special places as locations where children went to explore their inner thoughts and feelings, I instead left ‘special places’ as a vague instruction. However, if children struggled to decide on what this meant, I suggested that such places might include somewhere they went to be quiet on their own, or somewhere special they went with friends or somewhere they particularly liked for whatever reason. In the Community School, this method was undertaken with pairs of children aged 9–11, following the paired interviews. For logistical reasons, this was not possible in the Catholic School, so instead groups of four children aged 7–8 took part in the same activity. However, individual children each chose their own place to photograph within these arrangements. Participants were asked to explain why they had chosen their special places, what they did there and who they took part in those activities with, in the style of a walking interview (Kearns, Collins, and Neuwelt 2003; Kusenbach 2003).

**Special places**

Educational research in schools has traditionally tended to focus on the spaces of the classroom, at the expense of the ‘forgotten spaces where informal learning occurs’ (Hart 2002, cited in Burke 2005a, 573). As Burke (2005a, 492) points out, ‘walls, canteens, corridors, desks and doors do not only act as containers of the school child; they act also as spaces for resistance and sites of contested desires’. The ordinary and mundane nature of such school spaces makes them ideal sites to investigate the concept of citizenship, increasingly understood as constituted and negotiated through everyday practices and concerns (Dickenson et al. 2008), as well as the everyday spiritual, relational and emotional dimensions of primary school life. As Hyde (2008, 61) points out, ‘expressions of spirituality are in essence expressions of human life, often involving awareness and responses to ordinary, everyday phenomena’. My first engagement with spirituality and everyday space in this article is through the reporting of the ‘special places’ photography activity. Throughout this section, as with the rest of the article, the term ‘spirituality’ is used to refer to the relational, emotional and affectual environmental encounters that children experienced in everyday school life.

The first set of ‘special places’ photographs (Figures 1.1–1.4) was taken by children in the Community School and the second set (Figures 2.1–2.4) by children in the Catholic School. Although, a similar range of places and activities was identified in both of the schools, the younger children in the Catholic School tended to have a more limited emotional vocabulary in explaining how they felt in their special places. Among the outdoor photographs taken in the two schools that have not been included in the article, were verandas, grassy areas, school fields, giant sunflowers, walls and metal barriers, particular playground areas, quiet areas, sports zones and pitches, parasols and school gates. Inside, they included areas where children sat and read books such as the library, book corner or corridor, interactive whiteboards and displays in the classroom, dinner halls, computer rooms, medical rooms and changing rooms. In some places, children would sit quietly being calm, reflecting or feeling sad and upset, taking time out on their own from the normal day, recovering from disputes with friends or chatting with classmates. In other photos, places were marked by anxiety, adrenaline, nervousness, pride or embarrassment, such as going up to the front of assembly, being caught kissing a girlfriend or stepping through the school gates for the first time as a young child. Places such as the veranda, the grassy bank and the football pitch were associated with excitement and happy feelings, and usually involved taking part in activities with friends.

A wooden bench sitting in front of a picnic table

Description automatically generated

*Figure 1.1. Playground benches, Community School. Figure shows two of the benches provided in the school playground for children to sit on, and was taken by Ben. He explained that this was where he would sit quietly and think about who he would like to play with at break and lunchtimes.*

*A chair in a room

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 1.2. Book corner seats, Community School. Kavita took the photograph of the seats in the classroom book corner shown in figure. This was where she would sit and cry when she was feeling upset because of arguments or disputes with her friends.*

*A building with a grassy field

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 1.3. ‘Secret’ path, Community School. Figure is particularly interesting, because it shows Mary’s photographic representation of what she referred to as the ‘secret path’ that weaved through the garden area next to the playground. Mary told me that she would walk on the path with her friends or on her own and that it felt magical when she did so.*

*A picture containing indoor, room, sitting, table

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 1.4. Basketball hoop, Community School. David chose to take the picture of the basketball hoop in the school hall depicted in figure. This was where his class was taught physical education and he felt happy and excited while playing basketball games.*

*A picture containing outdoor, building, track, train

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 2.1. Quiet seating area, Catholic School. Rachel decided to take a photograph of the quiet seating area depicted in figure located at the edge of the playground. She told me that this was where she felt happy talking to her friends.*

*A person standing on a lush green field

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 2.2. Grassy bank and school field, Catholic School. Figure shows the school field and the grassy bank leading up to the school building, and was taken by Matt. He would roll down the grassy bank with his classmates during summer, feeling happy as he did so.*

*A close up of a brick building

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 2.3. Playground wall, Catholic School. Moving back outside, figure shows the low wall at the side of the playground, and was photographed by Ruby. This is where she would feel happy chatting to her friends during break time or lunchtime.*

*A picture containing indoor, refrigerator, sitting, white

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 2.4. Interactive whiteboard, Catholic School. Dan chose to take a photograph of the interactive whiteboard located in the classroom, and this is shown in figure. Dan enjoyed being invited up to the front of the class to write on the whiteboard during lessons.*

There were a number of ways in which the special places from both schools could be categorised, drawing on the work of Hyde (2008). In order to investigate Hay and Nye’s (1998) concept of ‘awareness sensing’, he asked children to take part in a number of activities including completing a jigsaw, creating bead art, drawing and seed planting. In his analysis of the intense bodily engagement that each child demonstrated in the undertaking of the activities, Hyde (2008) identified three types of spaces: ‘disintegrated space’ where the intense focus on the activity meant that the child and the object almost became one; ‘cocooned space’ where children were so engrossed in their tasks they were oblivious to the presence of others; and ‘relational space’, where children took part in activities collectively and showed unity in their undertakings. These types of spaces were useful for making sense of children’s special places in my own research but there were also some other characteristics that I was able to draw out from my findings, due to the more contextual nature of the focus on everyday school life.

‘Cocooned space’ was very much apparent in some of the special places that children chose to photograph, particularly in the form of those quiet places where they went to be alone and take time out of the busy school day. In these situations, their surroundings allowed them to express emotions of sadness or simply reflect on events. These moments illustrated the connection between a special place and the emotional sense of self that children experienced as part of that particular environmental encounter. Many of the special places identified were also ‘relational spaces’ because they facilitated emotional ‘closeness’ and affective relationships between friends and classmates. Some of these ‘relational spaces’ were also saturated with intense positive emotion such as happiness and enjoyment, particularly where games and sports activities took place. In these situations, the spaces became ‘disintegrated’ as children totally engaged in the games they were playing and their

associated spaces. But all of the special places identified were in some ways ‘extraordinary spaces’, taking them closer to Hay and Nye’s (1998) ‘mystery sensing’ aspect of spiritual sensitivity. Although the places were all associated with children’s everyday school experiences, they were not part of the majority temporal make-up of the school day. They were instead times and spaces where children took part in more significant events than the mundane routines of timetables and lessons and mostly took place in the more informal areas of the school environment.

As is apparent in the above analysis, children in the study did not all choose the same places to designate as special and different children reported different relational encounters with them. However, these variations were not completely random and were strongly influenced by social identity and power. There were a few special places reported that may have been influenced by gendered identities and expectations, for example boys tended to choose the computer suite and the football pitch somewhat more than girls, while as those children who reported being upset or crying in particular quiet places were more likely to be girls. Generally, however, there was little evidence of strong preferences along gendered, ethnic or religious lines. In contrast, the age-influenced power dynamics were very evident.

The importance of age was demonstrated through the way that many children chose special places where their rights of access were heavily restricted by adults. Interestingly, these places were comparable in nature to those documented in studies that have investigated children’s preferences in out of school contexts (e.g. Burke 2005b), possibly for similar reasons of access. Children were only able to visit most of the places during their free time, whether that was during break time, lunchtime or at other less directed points of the school day. Many of the participants talked about ‘being allowed’ to take part in certain activities in their special places, such as using the computer or playing football. The most striking example from the Catholic School was the school field and the grassy banks, which were selected by over half of the children who took part in the activity. Interestingly, these spaces

were only made accessible to children during the summer months and using them was seen as a real novelty. It was therefore the impact of adult–child power relations that effectively made these places special for children, marking space as extraordinary because of the way that power structured affective processes. Pupils’ spiritual and emotional relationships with the school environment were therefore heavily structured by adults, but children nevertheless found ways to renegotiate such power geometries, as I now go on to illustrate.

**Making spiritual spaces**

In addition to the everyday places that children selected as ‘special’ in the photography activity, I was also interested in observing children and talking to them about the role of informal spaces around the school environment for expressing and experiencing spirituality. In these contexts, there were two processes occurring that were directly related to children’s embodied practices. Firstly, children were using their bodies within these spaces to contest and renegotiate some of the intended spiritual environments that each of the schools was providing and promoting. These observations were in line with previous research that points to the ways in which children use physical practices to challenge institutional power in school (e.g. Hemming 2007; Gordon, Holland, and Lahelma 2000). Secondly, children were also creating new spiritual spaces as a result of their somatic activities. Holloway (2003) argues the distinction between sacred and profane space is actually enacted by bodily practice, and this process was also evident in the two study schools in my research with regard to spiritual space. In order to illustrate what I mean by this, I will now consider two areas of spirituality that occurred within everyday spaces within and around the case study schools: assemblies and collective worship, and religious practice and prayer.

***Assemblies and collective worship***

All primary schools have a legal obligation to provide daily collective worship that is ‘wholly, or mainly, of a broadly Christian character’. Webster (1995) argues that this daily assembly ritual is one of the places in which spirituality can be found in the school context, and the school inspectorate considers this area when assessing provision for spiritual development. In both of the schools, assemblies were an everyday part of the school routine, taking place at least two or three times a week in the school hall. Whilst assemblies in the Catholic School were often faith-based, the Community School offered more generically spiritual gatherings, but both entailed certain embodied practices such as singing, applause and listening to calming music. As outlined in the school prospectuses, all of these practices were intended to create an environment conducive to children’s spiritual development.

During one of the assemblies in the Community School, I recorded in my research

diary the extent of the embodied nature of the event:

*During [assembly] there was clapping, shuffling, concentrating, sitting up, tapping,*

*fiddling, breathing, looking around, whispering, laughing, watching, listening, and*

*minds wandering – you could tell by the way some of the children’s eyes were*

*unfocused.* (Research Diary Extract, Community School)

Previous research on school assemblies has reported that there is sometimes a gap between the way that school staff members view assembly and the way that pupils experience it (Gill 2004; Kay 1996). In my study schools, one of the main comments about assemblies was the amount of time that children were required to sit and listen to the proceedings and the effect this had on their bodies (e.g. see quote below). These experiences were far more significant for the interviewees than prayers, reflection, singing or any of the other spiritual provisions that were included in the assemblies.

INTERVIEWER:

*Ok is there anything that you don’t like about assembly? I guess you’ve just said you*

*feel sad if you don’t get the trophy …*

AMY (Catholic, Catholic School):

*Yeah I don’t like it ‘cos sometimes Miss blabs on – not being mean to her.*

INTERVIEWER:

*So it goes on for too long?*

AMY & CHLOE:

*Yeah.*

INTERVIEWER:

*How do you feel when it’s going on for really long?*

CHLOE (Catholic, Catholic School):

*Bored and I just want to, you get pins and needles.*

AMY:

*Yeah and you get fidgety.*

However, there were also elements of assembly that interviewees talked about in a more positive light. These were generally associated with activities that they considered to be fun or enjoyable, often involving bodily movements during songs or taking part in activities at the front of assembly. The intense emotional experiences of fun and enjoyment were of much more interest to interviewees than quiet reflection, awe, wonder or any of the official aspects of spirituality defined by the school inspectorate (see Ofsted 2004). In the quote below, John talks about ‘Conkers’ – a popular song frequently sung in the Community School during assemblies – and emphasises the embodied nature of the experience.

INTERVIEWER:

*What about the singing, you said you do singing? What do you like, do you like doing the singing?*

JOHN (Agnostic, Community School):

*No (laughs).*

BILLY (Christian, Community School):

*If it’s a good song, I do.*

INTERVIEWER:

*You do?*

JOHN:

*Like ‘Conkers’.*

BILLY:

*Yeah.*

INTERVIEWER:

*What makes a good song?*

JOHN:

*I think sort of funny, and it’s loud.*

INTERVIEWER:

*Yeah ok.*

BILLY:

*Rhythm, the rhythm of the music.*

Children therefore demonstrated a certain renegotiation of spiritual provisions in school, creating their own spiritual spaces through emotional and embodied relationships with the assembly environment. Although adult power was important for structuring children’s spiritual experiences in this informal school space, these experiences were often rather different to those envisaged by school staff.

**Religious practice and prayer**

Children’s spiritual practices within a more religious framework also showed similar patterns to those described in the last section. Past work has shown how children understand and negotiate religious and spiritual meanings in complex ways (e.g. Hyde 2008; Nesbitt 2004), but often these studies have focused on mental and rational processes rather than the more embodied and relational aspects of spirituality. In contrast, my research also pointed to an embodied and practical aspect to this process.

The easiest way for children to challenge spiritual practices in school was simply to decline to take part fully in the religious rituals. While observing in the Catholic School, there were several occasions when children chatted to each other during hymns or prayer chants in services or assemblies, and it was very rare for every child to keep their eyes closed during the regular class prayers that took place four times a day. Some of the interviewees told me that other children did not pray properly because they wanted to reach the front of the dinner queue before everyone else, whereas others such as Jake and Marlen suggested that it was because they were too lazy to take part.

INTERVIEWER:

*Right yeah is there anyone that doesn’t do the prayers or the singing?*

MARLEN (Catholic, Catholic School):

*Like new people and people that really don’t know prayers.*

JAKE (Agnostic, Catholic School):

*And some people, and some people can’t be bothered singing and doing the prayers.*

INTERVIEWER:

*Oh so even though they’re meant to they don’t do it?*

MARLEN:

*Yeah like they just cross their hands and they just pretend they’re sayin’ it like ‘cos there’s loadsa noise so like they just whisper and stuff.*

Children were also able to renegotiate the terms of prayer in school by creating their own prayer spaces. Armitage (2006) has noted the spiritual significance of school toilets for children’s folklore about ghostly inhabitants. In his research, a character called the ‘White Lady’ commonly featured in primary school children’s stories about the liminal nature of school bathrooms. During one of the interviews at the Community School, William told me that he had heard other children praying in the toilets, and after further investigation, it became clear that Nicole, a Pentecostal Christian and Aisha, a Muslim, had indeed been using the toilets as private spiritual spaces in order to meet their daily prayer requirements. Muslim interviewees from both of the study schools also constructed prayer space in other ways, renegotiating the spiritual nature of the school environment. Many of them told me that they often changed the words of the Christian prayers so that they were acceptable for their own religion, or prayed to Allah in their heads, hence creating mental spiritual space.

INTERVIEWER:

*So what about when you have prayers in assembly, do you like doing the prayers?*

CRAIG (Catholic, Catholic School):

*Yeah.*

AHMED (Muslim, Catholic School):

*Well I don’t really say the prayers, so I can’t really answer that question.*

INTERVIEWER:

*So what happens in, do you tend to sit there quietly while the rest do it?*

AHMED:

*Yeah, I either say my own prayer inside.*

INTERVIEWER:

*In your head?*

*AHMED:*

*Yeah.*

In both the toilets and mental prayer examples, power and social identity were again salient, through the way in which children of different religious backgrounds were differentially affected by school spiritual provisions and arrangements (see also Hemming 2011 on religious citizenship). Yet pupils’ own emotional and spiritual relationships with their everyday environment, reflected through their embodied practices, were significant for negotiating power relations in school.

Whereas the ‘special places’ activity highlighted the role of adult power in restricting access to places, therefore making them special, investigations of other spiritual practices in school pointed to the importance of adult power in providing (or not) for religious and spiritual needs. However, in the latter case, children used embodied practices to renegotiate spiritual provisions on the one hand and create their own spiritual spaces on the other. This highlighted the significance of children’s agency in constructing spiritual relationships with the school environment (see also Hemming and Madge 2012 for a discussion of children and religious/spiritual agency). All of these findings have important implications for the way in which we view spirituality in school and its relation to children’s citizenship, as I now go on to discuss in the conclusion.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have adopted a spatial approach in order to explore some of the ways in which children experience the spiritual aspects of their everyday school environments. Drawing on an understanding of spirituality that emphasises the significance of relationality, particularly its embodied, emotional and affectual nature, I have investigated children’s ‘special places’ around two case study institutions, as well as some of the embodied spiritual relationships that children developed with informal spaces in the schools.

Children in both the Community School and the Catholic School chose a variety of special places but most of them involved the significance of emotions, solitude or relationships in some way. Power dynamics were also influential, particularly age identities in relation to adults, and the restrictions over use of space that these dynamics reflected. These findings pointed to the extraordinary nature of spiritual space, albeit in ordinary and everyday contexts. In the case of spiritual practices, a focus on assembly and collective worship, and religious practice and prayer, revealed the importance of children’s spiritual agency in informal spaces around the two schools. Existing spiritual provisions, such as calming assemblies and prayer practices, were often renegotiated in order to express different modes of spirituality, more suited to children’s own everyday concerns and experiences. Children also created their own spiritual landscapes through the construction of prayer spaces in toilets and in their own heads.

Spirituality is often considered to be rather a soft and woolly concept, associated with the personal nurture of children and a long way from the rational and material matters of the curriculum and learning. However, this research has illustrated how spirituality and its associated relational and emotional processes are inherently political and imbued with power. Throughout the article, the importance of adult power for structuring children’s spiritual experiences, and the response of children in negotiating these arrangements, has been apparent. Beard, Clegg, and Smith (2007) have argued for an understanding of student agency that encompasses the non-rational aspects of human existence, and I would argue that spiritual agency is one of the ways in which learners can express this, both in destructive and in constructive ways (through resistance and the creation of alternatives). Spirituality can therefore be added to the long list of areas of school life where children demonstrate agency and hence the potential for active citizenship and participation.

This brings me back to the issue with which I opened the article: children’s citizenship and participation. If children are capable of constructing and enacting their own spiritual practices and meanings, then to what extent are schools providing the support for them to do so? How can teachers ensure that children can participate in creating the spiritual ethos of a school, and any problematic issues regarding practices and provisions are addressed? I believe that the answers to these questions lie in a better engagement with pupil voice and the development of vehicles for children to have their say about more than just school toilet facilities, dinners and playground equipment. School councils and pupil consultation processes have the potential to enable children to participate in decision-making that touches every part of school life, including aspects such as behaviour and the curriculum. Such an approach would more effectively respect the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of

the Child, and properly address the issue of citizenship, including spiritual (and religious) citizenship.

There may well be limits to how far children’s spiritual agency can be supported within different school contexts, particularly when it begins to stray onto religious territory. However, an engagement with pupils’ spiritual views and experiences may at the very least avoid situations where children are forced to pray in school toilets for lack of alternatives, or provide ideas and suggestions for making school assemblies more spiritually engaging for children. At best, such an approach could lead to the emergence of more participatory and age-appropriate types of spiritual education developed through partnership between pupils and teachers. It could also help to create a school ethos whereby all children feel spiritually valued and respected. Regardless of how far particular schools choose to travel down this road, a proper recognition of children as spiritual agents is likely to significantly strengthen the role that education has in supporting and nurturing the spirituality of tomorrow’s

citizens.

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