

HYD04476

Title of Paper

**ATTENDING TO *THE FELT SENSE*: A CHARACTERISTIC THAT MAY LEAD
TO A CONSCIOUS SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIAN
CATHOLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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A paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference,
University of Melbourne, Melbourne Australia, November 29th 2004.

ATTENDING TO *THE FELT SENSE* – A CHARACTERISTIC OF CHILDREN’S SPIRITUALITY

This paper describes and reports on one characteristic of children’s spirituality that became evident in my research investigating the characteristics of children’s spirituality in Australian Catholic primary schools. The characteristic has been termed *the felt sense*. In using hermeneutic phenomenology, three examples of *the felt sense* – the texts – are explored using van Manen’s (1990) notion of lifeworld existentials as guides to reflection. The four lifeworld existentials are *lived body*, *lived space*, *lived time*, and *lived human relation*. The lifeworld existentials have been well utilized in phenomenological research (for example, Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1996). As well, I have drawn upon them in preparing the ground for my own research (Hyde, 2003, 2004).

Describing spirituality

The understanding of spirituality as it is used in this paper accords with the majority of recent research that suggests spirituality is more primal than institutional religion, and is concerned with an individual’s sense of connectedness and relationality with self, others, the world, or universe, and with the Transcendent (see for example, Bosacki, 2001; de Souza, 2003, 2004; Elton-Chalcraft, 2001; Fisher, 1997; O’Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2000; 2003). In their research with children in Britain, Hay and Nye (1998) coined the term ‘relational consciousness’ to describe this sense of connectedness:

In this ‘relational consciousness’ seems to lie the rudimentary core of children’s spirituality, out of which can arise meaningful aesthetic experience, religious experience, personal and traditional responses to mystery and being, and mystical and moral insight (p. 114).

Spirituality is also understood to be holistic. It is a ‘dynamic wholeness of self in which the self is at one with itself and with the whole of creation’ (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 124). It requires people to regard others as whole beings and to respond to them, each with her or his own sense of wholeness (Priestly, 2002).

Further, contemporary literature has also described spirituality as an inherent and fundamental quality of what it means to be human (Helminiak, 1996; O’Murchu, 1997; Tacey, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Groome (1998) has stated that “spirituality is ontological – it belongs to every humankind’s being. It is more accurate to call ourselves spiritual beings who have a human life than human beings who have a spiritual life (p. 332). Supporting this, several studies have indicated that spirituality is an attribute that has been selected in the evolution of the human species (Hardy, 1966; Hay & Nye, 1998; Newberg & d’Aquili, 2001). In other words, spirituality has biological foundations. It is “rooted in life itself, and thus has biological and evolutionary origins” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 88).

Methodology

The researcher met with two groups of children in Year 3 and Year 5 in each of three Catholic primary schools – one in an inner city location, one in a suburban location, and one in a rural setting. A period of 5 weeks was spent in each of the classrooms from which the children were to be drawn getting to know them generally, and assisting the classroom teacher, particularly during the morning literacy block. This notion of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) helped to build a sense of trust and familiarity between the researcher and the children. At the end of this five week period, the researcher met with two groups of 6 children – one in Year 3, one in Year 5 – in each of the 3 schools.

The particular meeting reported on here took as its focus Hay and Nye's (1998) notion of awareness sensing. Awareness sensing involves attending to the here-and-now of experience, the total engagement in a particular activity and the alertness of what might be experienced in moments of concentration or stillness. In order to evoke this sense of awareness, the children were invited to select from a variety of activities that may have involved attending to the here-and-now of experience. These activities included jigsaw puzzles, seed planting, 'bead' creations, and drawing. The children were invited to select from these activities the one(s) in which they wished to engage.

Each of these meetings lasted for about 45 minutes, and were videotaped so that the recordings could form the basis of the texts that would be reflected upon. These recordings captured not only the dialogue between the researcher and the children, but

also their body language, facial expressions, posture and gestures, all of which could be reflected upon and may have indicated something of their spirituality. The video recordings became the texts of this study. In viewing these videotaped recordings, the researcher was able to reflect upon the texts by maintaining a reflective journal. The journal contained phenomenological descriptions of and reflections upon the life expressions of these children during each of the group meetings.

The characteristic of *the felt sense* became especially evident among the children from three of these group meetings – the Year 5 children from the suburban school, the Year 3 children from the inner city school, and the Year 5 children from the rural school. This characteristic is explored below using the lifeworld existentials (van Manen, 1990) as guides to reflection.

The felt sense

Attending to the felt sense refers to the intensity and immediacy of awareness of the present moment. In attending to the felt sense, an individual may become lost in the activity in which she or he is engaged. Also of importance in attending to the felt sense is Gendlin's (1962, 1981) notion of *focusing*. Focusing entails the attending to the bodily awareness of situations, persons, or events. Bodily awareness, as Gendlin (1981) has maintained, is not a mental experience, but a *physical* one:

A felt sense doesn't come to you in the form of thoughts or words or other separate units, but as a single (though often puzzling and very complex) bodily

feeling... Since a felt sense doesn't communicate itself in words it isn't easy to describe in words. It is an unfamiliar, deep-down level of awareness (p. 33).

Gendlin (1981) has maintained that individuals encounter and act upon the world with the whole of their bodies. An individual's corporeality is then a primary source of knowledge. Attending to the felt sense may enable a person to draw upon the wisdom of the body in assisting with personal difficulties and in being sensitively aware in relationships. In other words, it may enable an individual to get in touch with the felt sense of a particular situation.

The awareness sensing meetings provided much evidence of this particular *felt sense* characteristic. The following reflective journal entry on the Year 5 suburban school children is indicative of this¹:

The children proceeded to their selected activity. Adam headed for the seed planting, the materials of which were located on one of the tables. Alicia, John and Cameron made their way to the table containing the materials for the bead creations. Although the three children sat next to each other, there was no interaction between them. They could well have been physically situated in separate countries, or at opposite ends of the earth, for there appeared no dealings between them. Each was engaged and focused on her/his own activity. Each seemed content and, although they were seated within close proximity to one another, each seemed to be oblivious to the presence of her/his peers.

Adam carefully and skillfully engaged in the tactile experience of placing potting mix into the seed boxes. He seemed to acknowledge the texture and consistency of the soil by rubbing it between his finger tips and thumb before patting it into each of the sockets. Then, delicately, placed one or two of the seeds into each of the sockets, and gently compressed them into the potting mixture. In a way that could almost be described as lovingly, he added a little water to each. Adam too seemed to be oblivious to the presence of his peers at the adjacent table.

Except for the sounds of the beads being placed onto the templates, and the occasional trickle of water from the seed planting, there was almost silence. A pin would have been heard to drop. Their focus and engagement in their chosen activities was at once intense, yet also relaxing. None of the children appeared anxious or stressed. They appeared to be calm, even tranquil, lost in the tactile activity to which each was attending.

This characteristic was also exhibited by the Year 3 children in the inner city school during their awareness sensing meeting:

Eagerly, the children moved to select their activity. Marco headed straight for the bead creations activity. He selected his stencil and began to choose beads to place on it. "I'm going to finish this," he murmured almost to himself as he settled and began to engage in this activity. His focus was almost immediate.

Carefully and skillfully, he manipulated the beads, selecting his colors and moving them into position. His actions and awareness seemed to merge as a look of delight came across his face.

Soon, he was joined by Tran, who had been planting seeds. His arrival was unacknowledged by Marco, and so Tran too began to engage in this activity. Quite consciously and deliberately, Tran gently ran his fingers across the pile of beads, acknowledging their texture and shape. He selected his beads with thought and care.

“Oh no,” whispered Marco. He had accidentally knocked some of the beads from their position on the stencil. Painstakingly, he set about restoring his work. There were one or two short exchanges of whispers between the two boys at this point about which color beads to select. Yet, quiet prevailed. One might intuit a reverence – almost a sense of the sacred in this activity. It was as though both children desired to maintain the silence and tranquility of the space in which this activity was undertaken, and which this activity seemed to deserve.

It was interesting to observe these two boys and their absorption in this activity. It was fascinating to see these two boys, who, as I had observed in the classroom context, could often be quite active and boisterous, now consumed in the concentration and the quiet that this task demanded. There seemed to be a sense in which these two children had become one with the activity in which they were

engaged. It was a unified experience, and there was a sense in which the divide between themselves and the activity had been bridged. It was almost as if there was no physical separation between each of the two children and the activity in which each was engaged.

Similarly, the Year 5 children in the rural school also exhibited this particular characteristic of their spirituality:

The three girls set to work on the jigsaw puzzle. They worked cooperatively, although there was no unnecessary chatting. Any talking was directed at the task, and was, for the most part, carried out through whispering. Kristy's finger tips gently run across the individual pieces that were laid out on the floor, searching for the correct interlocking parts. There seemed a need and a desire to honor the quiet – the sacredness – that this activity required.

Soon, the children who were engaged in the seed planting joined the jigsaw group. They began working on a separate section. Their finger tips seemed to run across the individual jigsaw pieces, almost as if to “get a feel” for the right piece. It was almost as if the resulting bodily sensation would somehow indicate the correct piece that might be required in order to complete their section. Although they were using their sense of sight to search the array of patterns presented by the jigsaw pieces, they seemed to be relying on the wisdom of their sense of touch to guide them in locating the required pieces in order to attempt and complete this particular task.

With the arms and hands of the different children moving across one another, and in and out of each other's way, there was a sense in which a communal space had been created for the completion of this activity. The children seemed comfortable with this arrangement. They worked together with purpose. They continued to speak in whispers, but appeared to contain their conversation to the task at hand. It was not long before various sections that were being completed were ready to be attached to the original larger segment. There was some excitement as this was undertaken, accompanied by looks of pride and satisfaction.

My announcement that it was almost time to conclude was met with cries of surprise and disappointment. "Oh no!" they lamented as one voice.

The felt sense and lived body

In reflecting upon the texts of this study, *the felt sense* seemed to involve a conscious perception of physical bodily awareness. In each of the hermeneutic phenomenological descriptions presented, there was a sense in which the children were aware of their bodily engagement in the activity of their choice. For example, when engaging in the seed planting activity, Adam in Year 5 from the suburban school seemed to consciously manipulate the soil between the tips of his fingers and thumb, acknowledging the texture and consistency of the potting mix. He gently compressed the seeds into the soil mixture and watered them. All of this was undertaken consciously, and

involved a sensorial and bodily interaction with the materials involved in the seed planting activity. In a similar way, Marco and Tran in Year 3 from the inner city school consciously manipulated the materials of the bead creations activity, carefully selecting their colors and positioning these beads with care and skill. Tran deliberately ran his fingers across the pile of beads, consciously acknowledging their shape and texture. Marco painstakingly set about restoring his work when he had accidentally knocked some of the beads from their position on the template. These two children, while they seemed oblivious to the physical presence of others around them, appeared to be quite conscious of their own engagement in their task, and of their own senses acting upon the task, that is, their sense of touch particularly in handling the beads, and also their sense of sight in deciding where exactly to place the beads onto the template.

The Year 5 children in the rural school also seemed to exhibit a conscious perception of bodily awareness in relation to their chosen activity. This group of children engaged in the jigsaw activity appeared to consciously move their finger tips across the jigsaw pieces, almost as if the resulting bodily sensation would somehow indicate the correct piece that might be required in order to complete a particular section. That is to say, although they used their sense of sight to search the array of patterns presented by the jigsaw pieces, they seemed to be relying on the wisdom of physical sensation inherent in their sense of touch and shape in locating the required pieces in order to attempt and complete this particular task. While they probably would not have possessed the language to name what they were doing in this way, they seemed to be quite conscious of their actions in relation to this act. Further evidence of this could be seen in the expressions of

pride and satisfaction on their faces when the correct interlocking pieces were located and positioned.

In this conscious bodily experience could also be seen something of Thomas Merton's concept of ontological awareness (Del Prete, 2002). Merton maintained that an ontological way of knowing is a natural predisposition of humankind, although it is one that is largely neglected in Western culture. Ontological awareness is the ability to perceive with one's whole self – one's whole being – in a direct, experiential and concrete way. In such a way of knowing, one enters the domain of holistic experience. That is, the whole of the individual is involved – mind, body and soul – without distinction or separation, as well the whole of the experience in which one is engaged. This stands in contrast to the scholastic, Aristotelian philosophy that has prevailed in the West, assuming a capacity for distance, that is, to separate one's self from that which is being studied or considered. Ontological awareness is an integration of the whole person with the whole experience.

The seeds of ontological awareness could be seen in the children in the awareness sensing group meetings. In each case, their conscious bodily and tactile encounter with the materials they were manipulating were experiences that engaged their whole selves in direct, experiential and concrete ways. They were experiences that seemed to bridge the divide – the dualism – between the self and the object. For a short time, it seemed as if each of the children and the activity in which they were engaged had merged into a single entity. There seemed to be a definite connectedness between the child and the activity. It

was as if the activity had become the child, and the child had become the activity. It may have been impossible to separate the activity from the child, because there seemed to be a sense in which they were one and the same. While they may not have been aware of the presence of others around them, it seemed as though these children were ontologically aware of themselves and their connectedness to their chosen activity. This could be seen, for example, among the children from the suburban school. There was almost silence, apart from the sound of beads being placed onto the templates and the occasional trickle of water from the seed planting activity. Although their focus and engagement was intense, it was at the same time relaxing. The children did not appear anxious. They seemed calm, and were lost in the activity to which each was attending. In other words, they seemed to have become one with the activity.

This sense of connectedness and oneness could also be seen amongst the children from Year 3 in the inner city school. There was a definite sense in which their whole selves were absorbed in the corporeal activity to which each was attending. Although in the classroom context some of these children could at times be noisy, boisterous and active (as had been observed by the researcher), in this awareness sensing group meeting they appeared to be consumed with concentration. They were calm and quiet. They seemed to have become one with their chosen activity. There appeared to be no separation between themselves and their chosen activity.

These experiences were holistic. They involved the children's whole being, and seemed to bridge the divides between mind, body, and spirit, and between the self and

that which was not the self, or, everything that was other than the self (the Other). In these holistic experiences of connectedness, it was possible that these children were being led to a sense of their connectedness to the Other in the more cosmic dimensions – in creation, and possibly in the Transcendent. It is more than likely that the children themselves would not have been able to articulate this experience since it was more primal than thought or language (Gendlin, 1981). It was a tactile, sensorial and bodily experience of being – an experience of being whole. In this act of being, Merton might have said, these children had perhaps experienced something of the presence of God, for God had been present to them in the very act of their own being (Del Prete, 2002).

The sense of connectedness with the self and with everything Other than the self accords with the descriptions of spirituality that have been presented in this paper. This is significant because *the felt sense*, as a characteristic of children's spirituality, seemed to entail the individual drawing upon the wisdom of the body, as a natural way of knowing, in order to sense this connectedness. Further, this perception of bodily awareness, although more primal than thought and words, and not capable of being expressed in language, appeared to be a conscious awareness on the part of the children. This may accord with Hay and Nye's (1998) notion of spirituality as *relational consciousness* – a conscious awareness of how one relates to the self and everything that is Other than the self. The children in these awareness sensing group meetings seemed to be consciously aware of their connectedness with the activity in which each was engaged. A reflection upon this characteristic of *the felt sense* through the lifeworld existential of lived body

brings to the fore this relational feature. It is a conscious bodily awareness of one's connectedness to the self and everything that is Other than the self.

Lived body, as a guide to reflection, suggests that for these children, *the felt sense* may be a characteristic of their spirituality. It suggests that a sense of connectedness, or relationality, may be encountered sensually through the ordinary experiences of touch and sight, and possibly also through taste, smell and hearing. Spirituality then may be expressed bodily in the ordinariness of everyday life. The tactile experiences of these children, and the connectedness and oneness experienced, although grounded in the everyday experiences of life, may point to the larger notions of connectedness and perhaps relationship with the sacred. Rather than pertaining solely to the realm of otherworldliness, spirituality as a sense of connectedness, for these children can be experienced and expressed by engaging in the activities of this world.

The felt sense and lived space

There seemed to be two particular kinds of space that existed between each of the children in the awareness sensing group meetings, as well as a space that existed between each child and the activity in which she or he was engaged. The space between each of the children in the group will now be explored.

In the awareness sensing group meetings with the Year 5 children in the suburban school and the Year 3 children in the inner city school, the children, although seated in close proximity to one another – even next to one another on the same table in some

instances – seemed to be oblivious to the presence of their peers. The physical space that separated them was only a few feet, and in some cases, less. Yet, in these two instances, the space that separated the children could well have been more immense. The children seemed totally oblivious to the presence of their peers, even though they were seated in close proximity to them. It was almost as if the children had created for themselves a space that enabled them to focus their attention on their chosen activity. While not setting out to distance others by placing a boundary of sorts around themselves, it appeared that these children had created a space in which they could connect with their activity – in which they could become one with it. This space could perhaps be regarded as sacred space. None of the other children attempted to enter the space that surrounded any one particular child and her or his activity. The space was honored, almost revered.

This space was space of quiet. It was a space of tranquility in a room surrounded by the hustle and bustle of activity of a typical primary school. It was a space in which *the felt sense* could manifest itself, and in which the children could consciously attend to their perception of bodily awareness in relation to the activity in which each was engaged.

Yet, in the case of the Year 5 children in the rural school, a slightly different space seemed to be encountered. These children worked cooperatively in order to complete the jigsaw. Rather than the notion of a personal space, the space that these children seemed to create was a space of inclusion. This could be seen in the way that, for example, the arms and hands of these individual children physically crossed over each

other – entering what might be regarded as the personal space of the other – in attempting to locate the correct interconnecting pieces of the puzzle. None of the children appeared concerned that their personal space had been intruded upon. In fact, it seemed a necessary occurrence if the activity was to be completed with success.

In this inclusive space, there was talking and an exchange of ideas in relation to the task in which the children were engaged. The space was honored, but in a different way from that described above. It was a space of common purpose. Those who entered the space espoused the same goal – to complete the puzzle. The talking, the movement of arms and hands in and across this space was focused in relation to the common goal of finishing the jigsaw, and in this way, the space continued to be honored. There seemed to be a communal flavor to this created space, and this appeared to enable the children to engage in the activity. In other words, the space that was created seemed to be *relational*. It was a space in which the children not only connected with the activity in which they were engaged, but in which they were also able to relate to each other in the shared purpose of completing the jigsaw.

This inclusive, communal and relational space could also have been perceived of in terms of a space of possibilities. There were possibilities in terms of who would attend to which section of the jigsaw. There were possibilities in relation to which way the jigsaw would be positioned, and possibilities in terms of which pieces might fit where. As well, there were numerous possibilities in terms of the combinations of who would work

with whom, and upon which section – there were some instances in which the groups altered slightly according to patience, feeling, etc.

In the individual and group activities described above, a space was created to contain both the personal the communal. In the personal space, the children were able to connect with their activity; in the communal relational space each child had a particular place within the created space. There was also a particular quality to the space that existed between each of the individual children in the awareness sensing group meetings, and the activity to which each was attending. Perhaps it might be better envisaged as a closing of space. There was a sense in which the space that separated each child from her or his chosen activity seemed to disintegrate as *the felt sense* – the conscious perception of bodily awareness – led each child to an experience of unity and oneness with that activity. This could be seen particularly in the cases of the Year 5 children in the suburban school and the Year 3 children in the inner city school. In both of these instances, each child became absorbed in the activity to which she or he was engaged. They experienced a connectedness with their chosen activities. This seemed to bridge the divide between the self and the object. That is to say, the children became one with the task in which they were engaged. In this experience of unity, there was a sense in which the space that separated each child from the activity seemed to disappear as the whole self engaged in the whole activity. In this experience of connectedness with the self and with that which was Other than the self, the space of separation ceased to exist.

This seemed to be case also with the Year 5 children in the rural school. Although there seemed to be a communal flavor to their engagement with their chosen activities, the space that existed between the children collectively and the jigsaw activity seemed to disappear as the children connected with, and became one with the task of completing the jigsaw. Again, the children seemed to enter a unified experience in which any separation by means of space between their collective selves and the object ceased to exist. It was indeed a holistic experience – the whole self absorbed by the whole activity.

These notions of space are significant. When *the felt sense*, as a characteristic of children's spirituality, became evident, the children seemed to create an appropriate space in which to honor the wisdom of their bodies as a primal source of knowledge. The space that was created was either of a personal relational nature, which enabled each individual child to connect with and become absorbed in their chosen activity, or the space that was created was communal and relational, enabling the children to connect both the activity to which they were attending, as well as with each other in the common purpose of completing the activity. Both of these types of spaces are needed in order to nurture spirituality. They enable, in the first instance, the self to internalize – to relate to the self primarily, as well as to the other in the environment, albeit a prepared environment. These spaces also enable the self to relate to the self, to the other in community, and to the other in the environment. That is to say, these spaces enable the self to both internalize and externalize. Potentially also, these spaces enable the self to go beyond the self, beyond the other in community and in the environment, so as to experience the

Other in the Transcendent. These understandings again reflect the descriptions of spirituality as relational that have been drawn upon throughout this present study

If the spirituality of children is to be nurtured within the classroom context, spaces such as those described above, need to be created. Opportunities for the children themselves to create such spaces need to be consciously planned on the part of the educators. Activities such as those drawn upon in this study could easily be planned by the classroom teacher, and may provide the catalyst for the children to create such spaces in which their spirituality might be nurtured. Also, educators themselves are in positions to create spaces within their classrooms that might be conducive to nurturing children's spirituality. Such spaces can readily be created by due consideration being given to the placement of furniture, the use of music and essential oils to establish an ambiance, setting aside an area of the classroom for quiet. Even the lighting of a prayer candle may lead to the creation of relational space in which children can be invited to pray, and to connect with the Transcendent. Educators are skilled at creating environments that are conducive for learning. The challenge may be for them to create environments that for nurturing the spirit.

The felt sense and lived time

In being absorbed in the activities to which they were engaged, each child was effectively attending to the here-and-now of the experience in which s/he was occupied. That is to say, each child appeared to be aware only of the present moment of their experience. For example, in the case of children in Year 5 from the suburban school their

focus and engagement with the activities they had chosen was concentrated. They appeared to be centered on the immediacy of their experience, lost in the activity to which each was attending. Similarly, the Year 3 children from the inner city school also seemed to be centered on the activity to which each had chosen. In particular, Marco seemed to focus his attention almost immediately. His comment “I’m going to finish this” may perhaps have suggested that, for him, time was not going to prevent the completion of this task. There was a sense in which, for Marco, time, for all intensive purposes, was literally going to stand still to enable him to complete his work. In this concentration and stillness, Marco was perhaps aware only of what he was doing – not of the passing of time.

This notion accords with the work of Donaldson (1992), who has referred to this immediacy of awareness as the *point mode*. As one of the most basic operations of the mind, point mode has prominence in children even after they have developed the capability to focus on the past and future of experience. These children seemed to be alert to that which was being experienced in their moment of concentration – the here-and-now of the experience in which they were engaged.

This immediacy of awareness was also evident in the Year 5 children from the rural school. These children, who had worked cooperatively as a group, were focused on the task of completing their jigsaw puzzle. They seemed not to have noticed the passing of time in attending to their activity. This became evident when the researcher announced that it was almost time to finish. At this point, there were cries of disappointment, and

looks of surprise that a significant passage of time must have passed. It seemed that, for them, time had somehow “sped up” in their enjoyment of and engagement in their chosen activity. These children seemed to experience the passing of time subjectively, rather than objectively. Perhaps this could be said of all the children in the awareness sensing group meetings. In their subjective experience of time, each apperceived a sense of unity, oneness, or wholeness with the activity to which they were attending. They were responding to the corporeal encounter of their activity in a temporal way, each with the whole of her/his being. Perhaps their holistic experience as a connectedness with their chosen activity was one that was literally timeless.

Thomas (2001) has referred to this notion of here-and-now time as an immediate temporal horizon. A temporal horizon constitutes how far ahead in time a person thinks, or plans. In contrast to adults, children have a limited concept of what it is to plan ahead in time. The temporal horizon of children is immediate. Although as children mature, engagement in the immediate temporal horizon gives way to *line mode* (Donaldson, 1992), that is the ability to focus on the past and future, the children in this present study, aged about 8 to 10 years old, seemed to indicate their ability to maintain a focus on the immediate temporal horizon when absorbed in an activity that engaged the whole of their being – that is, a holistic activity. While, as maturing children, their ability to focus on line mode was in all probability developing, in this instance, they were focusing on the present and immediate temporal horizon. They were engaged in the here-and-now. There was perhaps a real sense in which, for them, time seemed to stand still as their consciousness focused on the activity at hand, rather than on the passing of time. Further,

it seemed that while these children were engaged in the here-and-now of the experience to which they were attending, they encountered a sense of unity or oneness with the task in which they were absorbed. It was in the immediate temporal horizon that the encounter between themselves and their activity was *relational*. It was in this particular experience of time that the divide between self and object – the space of separation – ceased to exist, resulting in a unified apperception.

This is significant. It was in the children's attending to the immediate temporal horizon – the here-and-now of experience – that their sense of unity was attained. Their focusing of awareness on the present moment enabled their *conscious* and *relational* interaction with their activity, and in some cases with each other, to occur. Again, these understandings again reflect the descriptions of spirituality as relational that have been drawn upon throughout this paper.

This intensity and immediacy of awareness that was experienced by the children has been accomplished at more sophisticated levels by followers of a number of religious traditions, both Eastern and Western. In these instances, such experiences have been apperceived by those who experience them as spiritual. For example, in Theravada Buddhism, the chief religious practice – *vipassana* or awareness meditation – is an intentional and disciplined attending to the here-and-now. It is achieved by careful attention to either the act of breathing in and out, or to one's movement in walking. Similarly, in the Christian tradition, certain forms of contemplative prayer require a focus on the here-and-now of experience in order for the individual to come to a realization of

the presence of God in all things. For example, Hay and Nye (1998) refer to the eighteenth century French Jesuit Jean Pierre de Causade, and his notion of the “sacrament of the present moment” (p. 62), in which the will of God is discerned not through reading or study, but through an individual’s experience of the Divine in the present moment.

In other words, spirituality – connectedness to the self and to the Other – is experienced in the immediate temporal horizon. A reflection using the lifeworld existential of lived time suggests that *the felt sense* may be characteristic of the spirituality of the children. It was in the here-and-now, in the immediacy of these children’s experience, that this characteristic came to the fore. There is a sense in which an ability to attend to the present moment is a necessary requirement for spirituality.

The felt sense and lived relation

A reflection upon *the felt sense* using the lifeworld existentials of lived body, lived space and lived time seem naturally to draw forth a reflection using lived relation. Each of the preceding three lifeworld existentials has given rise to the *relational* component of *the felt sense*. In each case all of the children in the texts referred to above seemed to be in relation with the self and with everything Other than the self. Their conscious, corporeal and physical encounter led them to experience a sense of unity with the activity to which each was attending. That is to say, they became one with that in which they were engaged. For example, the Year 5 children from the suburban school and the Year 3 children from the inner city school seemed to be quite literally unified with the activity to which each was engaged, so much so that there was almost total

silence. They seemed quite literally lost in their activities. The relationship between the self and the other was perhaps experienced as a unified “oneness”.

The relationship between the Year 5 children from the rural school and jigsaw activity in which these children were collectively engaged was also experienced as “oneness”. However in this case there was also a particular relationship that was experienced between each of the children in that group. It was perhaps a relationship of common purpose. There was a sense in which these children became one with each other in their unified mission of completing the jigsaw. Each child, although distinct and inherently different from her or his peers, played a particular role in completing the jigsaw, and so became one *in* the task. Each used her or his individual talents and skills in the unified undertaking of the jigsaw puzzle. There was a sense in which each of these children became one body with many parts to play in the successful completion of this task (cf. Corinthians 12: 12-27). Although individual children, they were united in spirit and common purpose. Whilst engaged in this activity there was no division between them. They could be seen to act as one in common purpose so that all would be praised and satisfied at the completion of the jigsaw.

The space these children seemed to create could have been described as *relational* spaces, and in some instances, *communal* spaces. In the case of the Year 5 children from the suburban school and the Year 3 children from the inner city school the space that the children seemed to create around themselves seemed to enable them to connect or relate intensely with their chosen activity. In this space they were able to become unified with

their corporeal, physical task. Further, as this unified relational state was realized, the space between each child and their task ceased to exist. They had literally become one with the object – the task. In the case of the Year 5 children from the rural school, the space created enabled them not only to collectively become with the jigsaw task, but also to become one with each other.

The immediacy of the present temporal horizon seemed to be prerequisite for these conscious *relational* elements of *the felt sense*. It was in these children attending to the here-and-now of experience that they encountered their particular sense of relatedness and connectedness to the Other. This relationality was expressed as connectedness to the self, to the other in terms of their peers, to the other in terms of the activity to which each was engaged, and potentially at least, to the transcendent Other. Again, this accords with the descriptions of spirituality that have been drawn upon in this present study. The children in these awareness sensing group meetings exhibited *the felt sense* characteristic in terms of the relationality that contemporary literature describes in relation to spirituality.

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¹ The names of the children in this paper are pseudonyms in order to safeguard their identity.