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### **Children's Spirituality and Music Learning: Exploring Deeper Resonances with Arts Based Research**

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to examine children's spirituality from the perspective of music learning, using arts based research as a mode of inquiry. Six interrelated themes are chosen to explore the landscape of music and children's spirituality and to evaluate the potential of arts based research to inform the intersections between them: a landscape of relational consciousness, soft boundaries and transitional spaces, pilgrims on a journey, telling stories along the way, stories form a collage, and transforming the self in/and the landscape. Resonances between music learning, children's spirituality and arts based research are strong, both in premise and possibility. Among them, the epistemological scope of arts based research is broad and accommodates non-verbal and non-dualistic ways of knowing that are fundamental to spiritual and musical experience. Children's spirituality is presented as centered in relational consciousness, musical meanings

are embodied in a set of relationships, and arts based research, with its focus on reflection, multiple forms of representation and process, is well suited to probing those relationships. The sensory and embodied nature of musical experience juxtaposed with the contemplative and sacred nature of spiritual experience can be captured within the realm of arts based research.

### **Children's Spirituality and Music Learning: Exploring Deeper Resonances with Arts Based Research**

*On the seashore of endless worlds  
the children meet with shouts and dances.*

- Rabindranath Tagore

The phenomenon of spirituality has emerged as an important aspect of human development and is reflected in contemporary educational discourse and inquiry. Several factors can be seen to have influenced this development—a holistic approach to human learning, increased interest in contemplative pedagogical practices, and a human quest for meaning in response to the realities of a post-modern world. A notable increase in publications on spirituality, education and human development in recent years speaks to the significance and popularity of the topic (Oser, Scarlett & Bucher, 2006; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Souza et al., 2010; Wane, Manyimo, & Ritskes, 2011; Wickett, 2005). The scientific study of spiritual development is now an established field in developmental psychology (Oser, Scarlett & Bucher, 2006), and spiritual development is viewed empirically as part of normal human development (Boyatzis, 2008). Yet, as an area of inquiry, Boyatzis points out that “it still lacks definition, measurement, theory-building, and empirical foundations” (p. 44).

Attention to the spiritual in general education is reflected in a growing interest in the topic within arts education (Bresler, 2007; Campbell, 2006). The arts are known to stimulate the qualities associated with spirituality and to transform states of consciousness (Boyce-Tillman, 2007, 2009; Hay & Nye, 2006/1998; London, 2007; Snowber, 2007). Eisner (2002) states that the arts are means of exploring “our own interior landscape” (p. 11), and elsewhere he writes that they provide access to “forms of experience that are either un-securable or much more difficult to secure through other representational forms” (2006, p. 11).

The spiritual affordances of music as an art form are beginning to be addressed in music education literature, reflected in recent publications (McCarthy, 2009; Palmer, 2010; Yob, 2011) and the development of a professional interest group, Spirituality and Music Education (<http://spirituality4mused.org>). Music making gives voice to children's expressions in response to their human experiences. It can initiate connections between the literal world and

the imaginary, stimulate exploration of existential questions, facilitate expression of curiosities about life, and guide the child to respond to mysteries she encounters in the process. As Bresler (2008) puts it, “sound allows for the interpretation of the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible.... [It] has the power to bond, ... [it] penetrates the individual” (p. 227). Rather than attempt to define the term spirituality, I follow the path of many scholars and describe what are known to be spiritual dimensions of human experience. Benson et al. (2003) regard spiritual development as:

the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs and practices. (pp. 205-206)

This description of spiritual development, when applied to children's music learning, directs attention to connections between participation in music and the realm of the transcendent and the sacred, and meanings ensuing from such experiences. In the context of school music, the focus is on the non-religious, although the child may not distinguish between school and religious practices.

The purpose of the article is to examine children's spirituality from the perspective of music learning experiences. In an effort to gain access to the intersection of these phenomena, I draw on some fundamental ideas of arts based research described by Barone and Eisner (2012). A variety of forms of representation exists to describe and understand the world; each form imposes its own constraints and affordances; arts based research raises questions rather than proffers final meanings, and it can capture meanings that measurement cannot. On this conceptual landscape there is a predominance of undefined and murky terrain, with few clear boundaries. For example, how do we take a phenomenon such as spirituality and make it fit the language and practice of education, music education specifically? What is the nature of arts based research and how can it facilitate the study of spirituality in children's music learning, especially when its practices are themselves emerging and multifaceted? On the surface, the landscape lacks the qualities that facilitate inquiry—the well-worn methodological pathways on which to tread, the clear boundaries between properties, and the data in neat piles to provide the frameworks for further investigation.

Even in the face of these challenges, the topic of children's spirituality in education is important and relevant to deepening insights into human development. In order to carve out pathways and bring these ideas and phenomena forward together, I draw on established beliefs about the human condition: To be human is to have the capacity to be spiritual;

children have a natural disposition to connect with their spiritual nature; and, artistic forms such as music can function as expressions of human spirituality. The primary questions that underlie the inquiry are as follows: In what ways is it useful to frame children's spirituality as part of the educational process? How can arts based research serve to enlarge human understanding of children's spirituality in the context of music learning?

### **Framing Children's Spirituality**

At the outset of the article, the quotation from Rabindranath Tagore's poem, *Gitanjali*, speaks to the "endless worlds" which children inhabit. Piaget called the young child the "child of the dream" while Rudolph Steiner viewed her as the "ethereal child": "one foot on earth, the other still in the imaginal world of the spirit, intuitively aware on levels later lost" (Hart, 2003, xi). Butler (2009) observes that children are "more open to their spiritual reality than adults" (p. vii). Citing Carl Johnson, Boyatzis (2008) states that in their frequent "why" questions, young children are already oriented to the existence of "something more" beyond the given world (p. 46). With a strong philosophical foundation that argues for a spiritual dimension to children's consciousness, what theories help to expand on that foundation?

According to Allen (2008), children's spirituality was first addressed at the turn of the twentieth century by William James and John Dewey, among others. The next development in scholarship occurred beginning in the 1960s, with a focus on stages of children's faith and religious development. These discussions were predominantly framed within a cognitive developmental view (Elkind, 1978; Fowler, 1981; Goldman, 1964), drawing particularly on Piagetian stage development theory, and also on Erikson's developmental stages and Kohlberg's views of moral development.

Although children's spiritual development was studied since the turn of the twentieth century, in this article I focus on developments since the beginning of the 1990s. Robert Coles' *The Spiritual Life of Children* (1990) was a landmark publication, in which he reported on interviews with 500 children from various countries and religious backgrounds, most of them between the ages of 8 and 12. Around the same time, spiritual development entered the formal language of secular education in the United Kingdom and Australia, and this change stimulated dialogue about the implications of introducing spirituality into the curriculum of non-religious schools. The founding of the International Association for Children's Spirituality in 1996 coincided with the increased attention to this realm of human development in education. In the United States, although the topic of spirituality has not been introduced formally into educational policy, it is being addressed in several related contexts such as mindfulness studies, contemplative inquiry and holistic education.

More recently, David Hay and Rebecca Nye in the United Kingdom and Tobin Hart in the United States, among others, have conducted research on children's spirituality. In the book, *The Spirit of the Child*, David Hay with Rebecca Nye (2006/1998) report on a three-year study into young children's spirituality. Based on data obtained through interviews, the authors developed a theory of "relational consciousness" which they considered to be "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. 109). They recognize children's spirituality as "a distinctive property of mental activity<sup>1</sup>, profound and intricate enough to be termed 'consciousness', and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain" (p. 109). They further argue that children have relational intuitions at an extraordinarily early age involving self (I-self), people (I-others), things (I-world), and divinity/transcendent (I-God).

The authors identify three categories of spiritual sensitivity associated with children: awareness-sensing, mystery-sensing, and value-sensing. Awareness-sensing refers to the here-and-now of experience, the process of getting in touch with the felt sense of the reality which each individual inhabits. This quality, Hay and Nye argue, is "the natural knowing of young children" who are holistically aware (p. 70). Mystery-sensing is marked by an imaginative state that moves beyond the immediate physical environment and is characterized by wonder and awe and reflects the ultimate mystery in life. In children's imaginative acts, seen in their play, stories and artwork, "we may at times be encountering a window" onto the mystery-sensing aspect of their spiritual sensitivity. Value-sensing is the third category described by Hay and Nye—that which is meaningful and valuable to the child, that which stimulates curiosity and fosters reverence and appreciation in the child. Hay and Nye's theoretical framework of children's spirituality serves as a foundation for exploring intersections of music learning and spiritual development. The work of other scholars such as Hart (2003) and Hyde (2008) also contribute insights into exploring these intersections.

The qualities of children's spirituality—its reflective nature and focus on relational consciousness, as well as the individual nature of expression—direct this researcher to qualitative methods in order to explore the spiritual in children's lives.

### **Arts Based Research on the Landscape of Children's Spirituality and Music Learning**

Qualitative research, Boyatzis (2008) writes, can help "give rise to definitions of spiritual development" (p. 47). Within the spectrum of qualitative approaches, I draw on arts based research since it is focused on the processes of arts making as data, and it accounts for non-verbal as well as verbal modes of expressions. It has the potential to facilitate access to

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<sup>1</sup> Nye notes that "mental activity" does not suggest that the phenomenon is only an intellectual or cognitive quirk, "but rather gathers together the psychological functions of cognition, emotion, action and sensation" (p. 188).

meanings underpinning children's musical experiences, and to enlarge understanding of the presence and role of the spiritual in such experiences. Barone & Eisner (2012) illustrate the point:

Arts-based research was—and is—an effort to utilize the forms of thinking and forms of representation that the arts provide as means through which the world can be better understood and through such understanding comes the enlargement of mind (xi)... [It is] an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication in order to express meanings that otherwise would be ineffable. (p. 1)

Leavy (2009) points out that arts-based approaches to research offer researchers “new pathways for creating knowledge within and across disciplinary boundaries from a range of epistemological and theoretical perspectives” (p. ix). As researchers engage in inquiry at the intersections of music and children's spirituality, they too cross disciplinary boundaries and examine pedagogical spaces using epistemologies and perspectives from other disciplinary areas such as aesthetics, child psychology, philosophy, sociology and theology.

The aspects of arts based research that I find compelling when related to inquiry in children's spirituality in the context of music learning are presented in these six interrelated themes: a landscape of relational consciousness, soft boundaries and transitional spaces, pilgrims on a journey, telling stories along the way, stories form a collage, and transforming the self in/and the landscape. The metaphor of a journey represents the child learner as a pilgrim and a seeker (Coles, 1990) traversing a particular kind of landscape in search of meaning.



Figure 1. *Soft Boundaries* (1994) © Joan Truckenbrod

We seek out the arts in order to take a ride on the wings that art forms provide

(Eisner, 2008, p. 3)

## **Toward Deeper Resonances**

### ***A Landscape of Relational Consciousness***

Studies of children's spirituality highlight the relational nature of experience and meaning making. As stated earlier, Hay and Nye (2006/1998) place relational consciousness at the core of children's spiritual experiences. Similarly, the arts stimulate relational consciousness. According to Barone and Eisner (2012), they make "empathetic participation possible because they create forms that are evocative and compelling" (p. 3). The processes of arts based research, then, capture the relational worlds created by such forms. Barone and Eisner conclude that arts based research is not a literal description of a state of affairs; it is "an evocative and emotionally drenched expression that makes it possible to know how others feel" (p. 9). Music making, as interpreted by Small (1998), is an "act of musicking" which "establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies" (p. 13). Boyce-Tillman (2009) explores musicking as encounter, drawing on numerous sources from psychology, religious and spiritual literature, consciousness studies, among others. This breadth of intellectual underpinning is most useful in a discussion of children's spirituality, accommodating not only the social dimension but also the I-self, I-world and I-transcendent dimensions identified by Hay and Nye (2006/1998). There is abundant evidence of the potentially rich relational aspects of both musical encounter and children's spiritual experience; the processes of arts based research can accommodate exploration of such experience.

### ***Soft Boundaries and Transitional Spaces***

The landscapes of children's spirituality defy clear-cut boundaries. The image of "soft boundaries" better describes the way children move in and out of various modes of being, from physical reality to make-believe worlds—the magical or the mythical, for example—as well as the boundaries and transitional spaces between. Boynton (2011) captures the multiple senses and media that can be engaged in spiritual experience: "Children's spiritual capacities, intuitive ontology, and understandings may occur outside the development of language and linguistic conceptions" (p. 116). Drawing on the work of several other scholars, the author argues that "the area of spiritual development must move beyond stage theory and include sensory and experiential knowing from a more fluid and dynamic perspective" (p. 116). Participation in music immerses learners in sensory and experiential knowing. Furthermore, Boyce-Tillman (2009) presents a compelling case for the transformative possibilities of music and the power of musicking "to produce a liminal space" (p. 197). In a similar vein, Eisner

(2008) infers that the arts can serve to connect everyday reality to conceptual spaces of a different qualitative nature: “We seek out the arts in order to take a ride on the wings that art forms provide” (p. 3).

And there are multiple modes of expression available through music making, some more conducive to stimulating children’s movement into imaginary worlds—improvising, guided listening, creating soundscapes, acting out song stories, or moving creatively to music. These forms of expression can help the child to bridge the familiar and the unfamiliar, the certain and the uncertain, the convergent and the divergent. In the process, children can explore emotions and move from one into the other.

In arts based research, multiple sources of data are available to represent various dimensions of experience, on a continuum from the literal to the imaginative, the physical to the abstract. As Leavy (2009) points out, music can be conceptualized and experienced as a text, an object, a sign system, a performance, or as some combination of these (p. 116). Such diversity provides scope for transforming an ordinary episode of music making to an experience of heightened awareness leading to a moment of intra- or inter-personal spiritual enlightenment.

### ***Pilgrims on a Journey***

The metaphor of landscape is used to imagine a space for exploring children’s spirituality and musical experience. From qualities of the landscape I move to the metaphor of child as pilgrim on that landscape. Coles (1990) approached the child’s spiritual life using the image of pilgrim. It is the journey rather than the destination that effects transformation and illumination. The focus is on process rather than a state of being (Champagne, 2003, p. 283).

The artistic process can also be conceived as a journey with the media of an art form and oftentimes in the company of others. As the arts are capable of capturing process, arts based practices are also generally attentive to processes (Leavy, 2009, p. 12).

If one accepts the idea of the child as a pilgrim on a journey, then sacred epistemology has relevance in relation to the space of inquiry and the disposition of those doing the inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) present the idea of sacred epistemology based on Clifford Christians’ view that “all humans are worthy of dignity and sacred status without exception for class or ethnicity” (p. 37). This statement can be extended to include children who sometimes reside in the margins when it comes to including their voices in educational research (McCarthy, 2010). Furthermore, their interactions with music can elicit spiritual responses. Therefore, teachers and researchers who explore musical journeys for their spiritual significance must give children time to explore exterior and interior landscapes simultaneously through creating, listening, performing, moving, and related forms of expression.

### ***Telling Stories Along the Way***

In the space that is shared on a journey, children relate to one another and stories are woven that contribute to identity work. The narrative capacity of music is recognized at a number of levels, from the programmatic nature of music to the relationship of musical experience to the formation of identity (DeNora, 2000; Small, 1998). In a parallel way, narrative can represent the spiritual journey of a child. Nye (2009) refers to the “spiritual signature” of the child that is woven through their individual expressions. Erricker (1997) considers personal narrative to be central to the evolving worldviews of children. In music making, personal narrative can be expressed in various verbal and non-verbal ways. This aligns well with what Nye (2009) observed in working with children. She concluded that spirituality “is not something that likes to be confined in words. ... It is more ‘felt-sense’, drawing on non-verbal insights, vision, sound, touch and so on” (p. 1).

Story-telling, then, can take multiple forms in this context, not only in its usual presentation as written or oral text. What combination of media will best serve the child and allow him to represent his story on a musical canvas—as a composition, an audio or video recording of a musical or movement performance, a collage of works, or a written response? And there will be many narratives over time, capturing different events, various points in a child’s evolving view of the world. How can the processes of arts based research highlight and represent the continuity and change in these narratives?

### ***Stories Form a Collage: Integrating Lives***

One of the foundational dimensions of spiritual experience that is reported across the life-span and time and culture is the feeling of being unified in mind, body, and spirit. In relation to the use of music in arts based research, Leavy (2009) writes: “the performing or making of music exposes, challenges, and dismantles the mind-body dichotomy in ways that are relevant to social science and particularly the expansion of the qualitative paradigm” (p. 113). The next step is to organize music making activities in a way that is likely to “dismantle the mind-body dichotomy”, to unite the various threads of personal experience through these experiences, and to document the ways in which children experience such unity. Collage is one strategy that is known to facilitate the integration of experiences, to document a journey by weaving threads of meaning into a whole, or to show individual contributions to a collaborative project. Butler-Kisber (2008) says that collage is an artful way to push the boundaries of understanding; she recognizes the ambiguity that remains present in a collage and how it provides a way of expressing the said and the unsaid, and for interpreting both conscious and unconscious ideas (pp. 268-269). The media used can be a single performance or a portfolio of evidence to piece musical experiences together in a coherent way.

### ***Transforming the Self in/and the Landscape***

The transformative potential of arts based research is highlighted both in theoretical sources and in studies that use these methodologies. When children contemplate their music making, when they trace the story line of their musical experiences through sound, gesture, or symbol, when they respond to questions from someone inquiring into the deeper impressions of their experiences, their spiritual experiences can be highlighted and their spiritual horizons further expanded. But, as Daykin (2009) points out, although music offers a powerful tool of expression, “it may be difficult and even undesirable to pin down and exploit its meanings for research purposes” (p. 124).

Yet, it is at this level of meaning-making and value-sensing that spiritual growth is most likely to be observed in the context of music making. I recall observing a second grade class who during a blues composition lesson decided to dedicate their song to their classroom teacher who had been ill for several weeks—thus they titled the blues song after their teacher, recorded a performance of the song and sent it to her. They used their collective creative skills to connect with another, sending their teacher a spiritual message of healing and well-being. In another case, a middle-school orchestra class chose a social justice theme for their concert project and donated the proceedings of their concert toward the institution that represented the cause. Testimony from the students (Platte, 2010) indicated the power of the project on the spiritual viewpoint of the students. One student named Mel talked about the project:

This experience has taught me the great importance of giving back. Even though we may not see or hear or know the people or events we are helping, they are right there, in plain sight. And along with them the means to help. We just have to open our eyes, open our hearts, open our minds, but we don't always have to open our wallets. There are other ways of contributing to the community. (p. 52)

Another dimension of transforming a group's attitude or spiritual state is offered by McNiff (2008) who views group music making such as drumming as a possible way to resolve conflict, to learn “how the slipstream of group expression can carry us to places where we cannot go alone” (p. 32). Can a class solve problems through music making or bring harmony back into a classroom space? Is an activity such as drumming as effective in transforming group dynamics and resolving a conflict than verbal interventions? How can a group's process of transformation be documented, represented and interpreted through arts based research? These and related questions arise from the themes discussed here, and can form a basis for designing arts based research and giving direction to a study of children's spirituality in the context of music learning.

### **Overlooking the Landscape**

The goal of this article was to form an aperture onto the landscape of childhood, using a musical lens to probe the spiritual and a mode of inquiry that is at once grounded in experience while seeking to pursue the deepest of questions about the human condition. As the landscape unfolded, I found myself in a dance, as it were, between the artistic processes inherent in children's music making and the spiritual moments that can be elicited as children interact with the world. Resonances between music learning, children's spirituality and arts based research were strong, both in premise and possibility. First, the epistemological scope of arts based research is broad and accommodates non-verbal and non-dualistic ways of knowing that are fundamental to spiritual and musical experience. Second, children's spirituality seems to be centered in relational consciousness and musical meanings are embodied in a set of relationships. Arts based research, then, with its focus on reflection, multiple forms of representation and process, is well suited to probing those relationships.

Third, the sensory and embodied nature of musical experience juxtaposed with the contemplative and sacred nature of spiritual experience can be captured within the realm of arts based research where, as Barone and Eisner (2012) put it, "metaphor will be appealed to, analogies will be employed, simile will be used" (p. 9), as well as other such devices to illustrate meaning and to create expressive forms. Fourth, re-presenting the meanings of children's spirituality calls for creative and imaginative use of multiple artistic media and combinations thereof. Although its primary mode is aural and sound based, music's expressive forms—and thus data sources—can afford the student experiences that unite body, mind and spirit. Using digital media to capture the processes of such experiences has tremendous potential when it comes to documenting stories in text, image or sound, and in representing experiences in the form of a collage.

### **Pedagogical and Research implications**

What are the pedagogical and research implications for using arts based research to inquire into children's spirituality in the music learning context? The very phenomenon of spirituality needs much initial exploration, especially in distinguishing and finding overlaps between the spaces of spiritual, aesthetic, social and emotional experience on the landscapes of learning. There will be challenges for the researcher: the spiritual deals with the ineffable and with responses that are holistic in nature. There is a lack of terminology and common language for describing and interpreting the particulars of musico-spiritual experiences. The sensitivity and spiritual competence of the researcher to enter these borderlands and liminal spaces may pose a challenge. The child's voice needs to be integral to the inquiry process. The sensitive and private nature of spirituality and the age of the participants demand that we consider ethical issues in great depth. O'Donoghue (2009) asks if "researching in and with art" requires

different ways of thinking about ethics. He emphasizes the responsibilities when engaging in arts based research: “It requires us to think deeply about how we understand, articulate, and engage in educational research; how we ask and hope to answer questions, as well as the types of questions we might ask” (p. 366). What do we want to know or see happen from such inquiry? How can arts based research be used in a music learning context to help children further explore the inner landscapes of experience? What will serve as data? How will data be presented and analyzed? What does the researcher want to learn from the participants—their levels of awareness, their perception of the spiritual qualities of the experience, or their interpretation of the art they created. How will the form and nature of the data impact the content and form of the research report? (See Daykin, 2009; Leavy, 2009).

When considering implications for the artist/researcher/teacher, they are manifold. How adults respond to children’s spiritual expressions and responses is key to the child remaining open to their spiritual reality and motivated to represent it authentically. The researcher must acknowledge seriously and honor the individual characteristics of each child’s spiritual presence and listen attentively to the children if insight into their spiritual lives is to be gained by both learner and teacher/researcher (p. 59). The suspension of judgment is vital so that multiple responses can be stimulated and brought to expression. Thus, the quality of the psychological space that is created for music learning is particularly important, a space that is at once contemplative and alive with art making.

I revisit the question posed within the title as to the potential of arts based research to provide deeper resonances between children’s spiritual and musical experiences. In the process of exploring six themes around these phenomena, it is clear that the landscape examined is worthy of further study. A set of common qualities between the realms of the spiritual and the musical reveals that arts based research aligns well with gaining access to musico-spiritual meanings in children’s experience. This particular intersection of music and spirituality, though, is unique as a landscape of arts based inquiry. The “forms of thought and forms of representation” (Barone & Eisner, 2012) that music making provides are not only a means through which children’s spiritual lives are better understood. The musical meanings as they intersect with spiritual meanings are at the core of inquiry, thus highlighting the mutuality of these phenomena in the advancement of understanding and the “enlargement of mind”.

The exploration also focuses attention on the need to clarify the relationship between the spiritual and the musical, and to distinguish between the spiritual and other dimensions of child development. In the end, the value of arts based research in this particular inquiry lies in enriching understanding of the “endless worlds” that children inhabit as they engage in music making.

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