

HOW CHILDREN'S FAITH DEVELOPS

By MARY McCLURE

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child . . .*¹

ONE OF THE GREAT PRIVILEGES OF MY MINISTRY in theological and religious education is the opportunity to observe fledgling teachers, as well as seasoned teachers, as they facilitate the learning which takes place in classrooms. When I began in this work, I concentrated on the *students'* efforts with children in class instead of observing the *how* and *why* of children's learning and reflecting upon the particular *contexts* and *strategies* which facilitate that process.

The Education Reform Act (1988) for England and Wales requires, by law, that a school must have a balanced and broadly based curriculum which 'promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of the pupils at the school'.² Thus the *spiritual* development of children should be an integral part of the educational endeavour in all schools. There is, however, a necessary and important distinction to be made between spirituality and faith,³ a distinction which is certainly crucial when one is engaged in the education of young children. And, lest we forget, children are different from adults. They are not diminutive adults. Childhood exists in its own right. It is a significantly different way of experiencing the world from the ways in which adults experience the world. Children are children. Is it possible to assert that children *have faith* or should the question be, is it possible to educate pupils in appropriate *faithed contexts* which create the potential for faith and for faith development? This is my interest and my concern.

I will take a brief look at James Fowler's⁴ work and then propose a different, and, from my own experience, more authentic account of children's capacity for spirituality rather than for faith.

Stages of faith: the works of James Fowler

The works of James Fowler are regarded as among the most influential in the area of research into faith development. He claims that the processes, structures and forms of faith change and develop from

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childhood to adulthood. His research and resulting theory of faith development owe much to other models of development by stages which are found in various types of psychological theory. They are those of Erik Erikson, perhaps the greatest influence on Fowler, who described a series of eight developmental stages which span the human life-cycle; Piaget, who described cognitive construction and development in terms of three stages; and Kohlberg, who proposed that moral reasoning developed over six stages. In more recent writing, Gilligan offered her modification of Kohlberg's theory by the application of gender differences. Fowler's claim is that he has discovered six universal stages or styles of faith.⁵ He also claims that while these stages are universal, very few people make it to Stage 6, which he calls Universalizing Faith/The God Grounded Self; in fact, no one he interviewed for research purposes was classified in this stage. He helpfully gives us examples of this type of faith in the persons of Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Dag Hammarskjöld.

Do children have faith?

For Fowler, children up to twelve years of age are represented in the first two stages of his theory. However, the earliest years constitute a pre-stage, Stage 0, which covers the first four years of life. It is foundational in that a child's early positive experiences of being nurtured by a parent create 'our first pre-images of God', conveyed through 'recognising eyes and confirming smiles'.⁶ The essence of childhood is naturally to trust adults unless the childhood experiences negate this. This natural capacity for trust creates a basis for predisposition for faith.

Children aged from three/four to seven/eight move into the stage which Fowler names Intuitive-Projective Faith. At this stage and age children do not have or need boundaries between reality and fantasy, and both can intermingle without any problem. I once saw a teacher question children about a gospel story which she had related the previous day.

'Do you remember the story about the little girl who was ill . . . and somebody sent for Jesus?'

'Yes,' replied eight-year-old Patti, 'and Jesus came in and kissed her because she had hurt her finger and she had been asleep for a hundred years. And she woke up and he gave her something nice to eat.'

This example illustrates Fowler's stage and meets its criteria – but is it possible to call this *faith*? It illustrates how children confuse, without

any awareness of ambiguity, fairytale and gospel story – and both are regarded as stories about real things. If, as Fowler states, it can be regarded as 'intuitive faith', then I suggest that it is something more akin to a child's insatiable capacity for story than to a child's capacity for faith. At this stage God's story is as real as Toystory, Martians, fairies and Power Rangers.

Six/seven- to eleven/twelve-year-olds, and some adults, are described as having reached Stage 2, a Mythic-Literal Faith. This is a stage when cognitive development enables the child to begin to order the chaos and distinguish readily between fact and fantasy. That description, it should be noted, is an adult perception of the previous stage, not the child's perception. Not only do children want to know if stories are 'true'; they also want to know the names of people in stories, even if they are generally unnamed as in Scripture – 'But what was the leper's name?' The overriding compulsion of this stage is to be and remain one of the group. If one's friends 'have faith' the individual has faith. Many children will begin to go to church at this stage if their peers are church-attenders. Images of God are concretized into projections of their own experiences of significant adults. I once observed thirty eleven-year-olds 'draw' their image of God – thirty depictions of the Sacred Heart. The class teacher was not only a parishioner of the Sacred Heart parish but also had a great devotion to the Sacred Heart! Another teacher, for whom the Shroud of Turin held great meaning, produced a class of twelve-year-olds with the same devotion to the Shroud.

Like any researcher, Fowler has attracted disciples as well as critics. I think that his model of faith development is very interesting and his descriptions of the early stages of faith development (Stages 0, 1 and 2) certainly resonate with my own experience of children at this stage. I am not convinced, however, that children 'have faith' in Fowler's terms of what constitutes faith: 'Faith has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning'.⁷

As reflective adults, we know that expressions, as well as understandings, of faith change. Appreciation of the content of faith changes and develops as individuals change. Change in individuals prompts changes in the expressions of faith:

One who becomes Christian in childhood may indeed remain Christian all of his or her life. But one's way of being Christian will need to deepen, expand, and be reconstituted several times in the pilgrimage of faith.⁸

Does Fowler's work suggest strategies for enhancing the faith development of children within the context of the Catholic school or more informal contexts for faith development? While many religious education resources refer to Fowler's theory, there is little evidence that it provides a model for any change in the forms of praxis in which religious educators are engaged. By 'forms of praxis' I mean curriculum strategies which aim to change the ways in which religious education is taught in order to create contexts where authentic dialogue becomes a possibility. This dialogue should engage the teacher with the particular culture in which the learner is situated. Religious education needs to be inculturated if it is to contribute to the spiritual development of young people.

My own research in Scotland, into how pupils experience and reflect upon their formal religious education, has shown that most pupils experience religious education in ways which alienate them and effectively close any opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Most syllabuses or programmes of study still have assumptions about levels of practice and commitment which no longer correspond to the pupils' actual experience. And yet religious education continues to be considered to be the main vehicle of 'teaching the faith' in our Catholic schools. If education in faith is a possibility then it is ultimately concerned with a personal and communal search for meaning, value and purpose which contributes to the development of the whole child as a person.

At the risk of being radical, I am much more concerned with the *spirituality or spiritual development* of young children than with their faith development. To focus on the first is consciously to create contexts where the child's level of awareness of the spiritual dimension of life is raised, and so to make possible the second, the development in faith. First there is spirituality: those encounters with the divine mystery. Then faith, like theology, comes as the result of reflection on those encounters.

I propose that as religious educators, and potential animators of faith in young children, we direct our energies towards the promotion of spirituality in young children by the creation of 'curriculums of discernment' in our schools.

Noam Chomsky recognized that 'human beings are endowed from birth with linguistic competence, allowing them to draw on a deep linguistic structure which is common to all human beings'.⁹ It can surely be argued that human beings are also endowed with a similar spiritual competence which enables them to access and draw deeply upon that which is held in common. It is possible to develop children's

awareness of the spiritual dimension of life, a dimension which shares the characteristics of other forms of learning – imagination, emotions, cognition, reason.

Case study: Edward

I have been engaged in the observation of a particular child for two years. I have watched Edward grow physically, cognitively and spiritually. Edward is delightful. He is delightful quite simply because he has a highly developed capacity for delight. The pre-narrative quality of his experience, like that of all young children, enables him to rejoice in each new possibility, whether it is the unexpected brightness of colour, any representation of the sun, moon and stars or the rhythm of music which instinctively makes him dance. For Edward, response to external stimuli is immediate and all-consuming. I have seen him in ecstasy, totally absorbed in and drawn towards realities outside himself. With Edward, what you see is what you get! Young children wear their feelings and emotions on the outside of their skins. The gradual acquisition of language does not diminish this capacity for awe and wonder but enhances it. Edward delights in new words. He repeats the new acquisition to himself and to anyone who will listen.

Edward is a member of the worshipping community of his parish, where the resident priests exercise a certain degree of evangelical patience with Edward's 'interruptions' or interventions during Sunday liturgies. Edward spends some time in the crèche, but actually prefers to be part of the liturgical action rather than cut off in a room where only the priest's words, like some kind of dramatic monologue, are transmitted through the sound system. Edward is basically a communitarian, as all healthy two-year-olds are. He also prefers adults to come down to his level so that he can look them in the eye.

Does Edward have faith? No, but Edward is oozing spirituality. Even as a two-year-old, he has a tremendous capacity for silence and reflection. 'Experts' always underestimate young children's capacity for reflection. Edward loves stories, and is an experienced listener. I wonder why it is that when he starts school aged five, most teachers will underestimate his capacity to listen, and speak often about the lack of concentration in all young children. Edward can concentrate. He can delight in play with others and can also amuse himself. He is happy with his own company. He has the capacity to become totally absorbed in what he attends to – a picture, some music, a puzzle. He is exhibiting all the capacities and predispositions of an individual who has an awareness of the spiritual dimension of the life – and who also might come to faith.

Lest you think that Edward is from a middle-class family, his parents would be described in socioeconomic terms as working-class. His parents do not take *The Way*, or have access to any journals which might explore Christian experience in a postmodern society. They are people who consciously try to live out their Christian faith in the market-place; they love and cherish both their children and hope to enable them to live according to gospel values. Both in their mid-thirties, his parents are people who are consciously travelling along on that faith journey. Are they unusual?

The recent survey on European values¹⁰ would suggest that they are. Young people are shunning forms of institutionalized religion, as their parents have done already. Such evidence has serious repercussions for what happens in Catholic schools, for these in turn have the potential to become the only context in which most children, and their families, belong to and maintain their tenuous relationship with the Church. But schools cannot develop faith which is not already present – what they can do is facilitate the child's journey towards faith.¹¹

Back to Edward: strategies for enabling spiritual development

Is it possible to enable children to appreciate and grow in their awareness of the spiritual dimension of life? In my own research, where I studied teachers' perceptions of what they were doing and their classes' experiences of what was being done to them, there was a consistent inconsistency between the intention behind the 'delivered' curriculum and its reception. Where teachers explicitly stated that their aim, not only in religious education, but through the total curriculum, was to enable the children to grow in their knowledge and love of God, pupils did not know that this was what their teachers intended. Pupils often spoke of respecting what their teachers believed, *and preached*, but were unaware of any growth in their own faith or any increase in their knowledge about Jesus or God. There were, of course, regular exceptions: these were teachers who had expressed their awareness of the spiritual dimension of their own lives. There is a direct correlation between children's levels of awareness of the spiritual and teachers who share an awareness of the spiritual. One respondent wrote of her very time-consuming and full involvement with the local church, and also of her inability to remember a single *spiritual* experience. This was mirrored in her class's response to the questionnaire.

Thus, if the possibility of raising children's awareness of spirituality is dependent upon the teacher's awareness, what can be done for all the Edwards and the Edwinas who fill our classrooms? My thesis is that

what is needed is a balanced curriculum building in certain life skills which promote and enhance every child's capacity for reflection. It is only a capacity for critical reflection that will lead to a capacity for theological reflection and then, in turn, a capacity for faith development. All this assumes space and time and patience:

... every mode of learning is a mode of waiting, of hope and expectancy... the pause is important in speech, the incubation period in creative work. The various modes of learning are grounded in the possibility of a different future.¹²

In the course of a typical school day, most children have little opportunity for quiet and stillness. Teacher-talk pervades the atmosphere: pupils are rarely left in peace, and if they are, do not know how to use silence. Periods of silence and reflection must be constructed into each day when children are not 'left' to be quiet, but are actually taught how to use silence – how to reflect. If there is one hope I hold for every child, it is this: that as Catholic educators we gift, in fact empower, children with a capacity for reflection upon their own lived experience.

There is a model for reflection which already exists within Ignatian spirituality¹³ – the consciousness *examen*. This is a tool for discernment which can develop in an individual a growing sensitivity to the movements of the Spirit and awareness of the ways in which that Spirit is leading or beckoning that individual. The *examen* usually takes place within the contexts of faith and prayer. I have already stated that young children do not have faith, but this model for discerning provides an effective framework within which young people can learn how to reflect, in a structured way, upon their lives. It can be used as a framework for pre-faith reflection.

I have used this model with young children and with adolescents. Does it work? It works for them in so far as it teaches them basic life skills which enable them to reflect on the positive aspects of their lives, and also to name the less positive forces in their lives. It also gifts them with the willingness to want to change. How do I know? Simply because they have shared their hopes and desires with me. I have been moved by the simplicity of unchurched and disaffected adolescents who have shared their struggles to live in more authentic ways in the midst of a culture where their presence is valued as an economic necessity rather than for any contributions they might make to society. In the present circumstances, the threat of unemployment and consequent alienation are never far away. In a culture which discourages

thought and reflection upon one's actions – what I describe as a *fast-forward* culture – the use of the *examen* is in fact a counter-cultural act. By 'fast-forward' I mean the ways in which society indicates that if life now is unpleasant, or unfulfilling, then one should move on quickly to the next relationship or material commodity or pleasure.

Can it be that I am really advocating an *examination of conscience* as a model for critical reflection which in turn might lead to a raising of awareness of the spiritual dimension of life? The consciousness *examen* differs from the traditional expressions of examination of conscience which concentrated on good or bad acts performed during a day. The *examen* is a way of putting individuals in touch with the movements within their growing consciousness of themselves and also with the motivations for their choices. It sensitizes individuals to the gentle nudge of God's presence in their lives, even if they cannot yet name God in any 'faithed' sense.

If children come into school with such an appreciation of the aesthetic dimension of life, then let us, as educators, cherish and develop that capacity through music and art, dance and literature, and through structured silence and reflection. When such activities are integral to what children are offered as curriculum, then even those teachers who claim no experience of the 'spiritual' may also have the opportunity to grow in their awareness and, who knows, ultimately their faith.

In twenty-five years of teaching, of training teachers and working in partnership with teachers and young people, I am still discovering and rediscovering the mystery which we describe as spiritual or faith development. It is harder to be young these days, certainly. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that children today are continuing to have the kind of experience which Hopkins evoked at the opening of *The wreck of the Deutschland*:

Thou mastering me
 God! giver of breath and bread;
 World's strand, sway of the sea;
 Lord of living and dead;
 Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
 And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
 Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
 Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

NOTES

¹ 1 Cor 13: 11.

² The Education Reform Act (1988) introduced a National Curriculum and dramatic reforms into English and Welsh schools.

³ David Hay's research, at Nottingham University Centre for the Study of Human Relations, consistently draws attention to how people describe their experience and belief in 'the spiritual' yet have grown increasingly disaffected from institutional forms of faith or religion.

⁴ James Fowler, *Stages of faith* (HarperCollins, 1976). This would be regarded as his seminal work.

⁵ I am indebted to The National Society, *How faith grows* (Church House Publishing). The six stages of faith development are: Stage 0, Primal Faith; Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective Faith; Stage 2, Mythic-Literal Faith; Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional Faith; Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith; Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith; Stage 6, Universalizing Faith.

⁶ J. Fowler and A. Vergote (eds), 'Faith and the structuring of meaning' in *Towards moral and religious maturity* (Silver Burdett, 1980).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ National Society, *How faith grows*, introduction.

⁹ Quoted in M. Grimmitt, *Religious education and human development* (McCrimmon, 1987), p 79.

¹⁰ D. Barker, L. Halman, A. Vloet (eds), *European values study, 1981-1990* (The Gordon Cook Foundation).

¹¹ In Britain, the level of church attendance is rapidly decreasing. Cardinal Winning, Archbishop of Glasgow, which would be considered a conservative church by British standards, stated when he delivered the Gonzaga Lecture at St Aloysius College, Glasgow, in March 1996, that if the decline continues at the present rate, the Catholic community in Scotland will have disintegrated within the next twenty-five years.

¹² D. E. Huebner, *Spirituality and knowing*, quoted in Mary Boys, *Educating in faith* (Sheed and Ward, 1987), p viii.

¹³ *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius*, paragraph 43, translated by Louis J. Puhl SJ (Newman Press, 1960). George A. Aschenbrenner, 'Consciousness examen', *Review for Religious* volume 31 no 1 (1972), outlines the distinction between examen of conscience and consciousness examen. Given that this exercise takes place within a faith context, I propose that, for young children, the community of the Catholic school provides the *faithed* context for the child.