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Speaking of what matters most

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H6 Stimulating the spirituality of children. Proposing a design study to test a prototype program for primary schools assessing and stimulating the sense of spirituality of children between 7 and 12 years old.

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(submitted)

Abstract

Aim: To propose a research design study to test and further develop an optimal evidence based educational programme for assessing and stimulating the spirituality of children.

Background: A study to validate a scale to assess the sensitivity regarding spirituality of children in primary school was forced to be redesigned because of COVID-19. In this process an educational programme was developed to stimulate the development of children's spirituality in which the scale functions as an assessment instrument for teachers.

Design: The first steps of research design were completed resulting in a set of classroom activities that was provided to all primary schools in the Netherlands, ready to be tested and evaluated in educational practices.

Methods: The steps of research design in which the prototype is tested and evaluated and the reflection on the theoretical base to impact the redesign are described in order to collect congruent data.

Discussion: An educational programme is needed, but the content and construct of this programme needs to be tested and developed further. Input from primary schools is essential to address the right themes and develop effective activities.

Keywords: Educational research design, spiritual development, spiritual education, primary school children

Introduction

While researching the spirituality of sick or dying children it is prominent that researchers and professionals in both education as well as health care call for implementation of effective interventions in settings with healthy children (Pridmore and Pridmore, 2004). The beneficial stimulation and support of children's spirituality should not only be restricted to children who are sick or dying as all children develop their spirituality as it is a natural part of being a human being (Roehlkepartain et al., 2005). The social context of children, including the school environment influences the sense of wonder in children regarding meaning making (Boynton, 2011) and therefore part of a holistic approach to education. That this is not a novel thought is apparent in reviewing the right of children declared by the United Nations in 1989, where in article 27 the spiritual development is mentioned as a right of life, and in article 28 and education is seen as a child's right to develop its personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential (United Nations, 1989). Stimulating a child to its fullest potential in education is only possible if all aspects of the child are included. In some countries this is slowly understood, for example in Australia where Tebyani (2014) wrote a white paper with educational aims and outcomes. There has been a recent international study (Sampras, 2019) testing the effect of a spiritual educational program (SEP) in kindergarten, including more than 500 children from Canada, Australia and Europe. They concluded that based on the positive effect on well-being and quality of life each kindergarten should incorporate a SEP that comprises of the spiritual domains of calmness, silence and quiet; listening; accepting; loving nature; and using imagination, resilience and efficiency in everyday functioning. But in most countries, there is still no specific programme for education that stimulates the spirituality of children.

Spirituality is variously defined, and is sometimes confused with religiously, making matters complicated. But to design a comprehensive educational programme a theoretical framework is needed, and this starts with a working definition. This study started from the assumption that any SEP should include the three main components found in most definitions: connectedness, transcendence and meaning of life (Weather, McCarthy and Coffey, 2016). As a working definition the three domains of spirituality formulated by the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC) were used: the first, existential questions regarding identity, meaning and topics such as suffering but also hope and joy; second, value-based considerations and attitudes, which they describe as: 'the things most important to each person such as...family,...ethics and morals, and life itself' (Nolan et al., 2011, p.88); and religious considerations and foundations such as faith, religious and other beliefs and practices.

To fit the targeted population of young children, it is important to compare definitions and descriptions designed for adult populations with existing literature focussing on children. Especially the component of connectedness is most prominent in children according to Hay and Nye (2006), who concluded in a study of healthy British primary school children that the spirituality of children appears to be focused on relational aspects, which they termed 'relational consciousness' to the self, to others, to nature and to the Other. This is found in the definition that received internationally consensus: Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions, and practices (Puchalski, Vitillo, Hull, & Reller, 2014, p.643).

Method

Study design

A research design was used as a methodological framework (figure 1), incorporating methods described specifically for education (Kelly, Lesh and Baek, 2014). Research design in education is in the opinion of Bakker (2018) the scientific endeavour to envision education as it could be or should be. It aims to solve a problem occurring in educational practice by adding to the scientific knowledge we have of the problem.

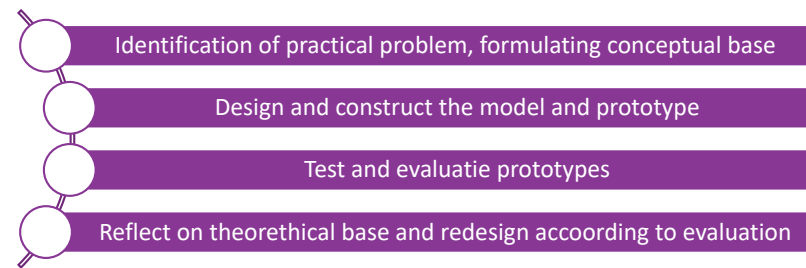


Figure 1. Basic circular model for design research.

Identification of the practical problem

The problem as identified in the introduction is a lacune in educational programmes to stimulate the spirituality of healthy children. Therefore, the aim of this study is to deduce from the literature a specific evidence-based model for classroom activities that creates a safe space in the classroom to discuss matters that really matter.

Formulating conceptual base

To formulate a conceptual base, the concepts described in the introduction will serve as main ingredients. Through a process of group consensus, with the group consisting of the corresponding author and four research assistants, a first conceptual base will be designed. This does not yet have to be practical applicable, but solely theoretical consistent.

Design and construct of the model/prototype

With the input of the experts available from a previous study (Damsma, Roodbol & Van Leeuwen, 2021) on appropriate vocabulary and age specific adjustments, a first prototype will be designed. First the concepts will be divided in main themes giving opportunities for educational activities. Then the educational activities will be designed using four basic, but universal, components: Assessment, Activities, Student engagement and Evaluation.

Test and evaluate prototype

The first two steps will result in the theoretical base for the educational programme, which can be seen as the intervention of study that this paper will propose a research protocol for. This will include all the usual elements of a method sections: aim, design, sample, data collection/analysis and ethical considerations.

Reflect on theoretical base and redesign

The description of the educational intervention and an execution of the proposed study should lead to reflection on both the theoretical design as well as on the educational activities included in the program. Reflective items will be described according to the direct elements of the conceptual base and the intervention program.

Results

The conceptual base

The three concepts usually included in definitions of spirituality were the starting point in formulating a conceptual base: connectedness, transcendence and meaning of life. These concepts were compared with the three domains of spirituality described in the introduction: existential questions, value-based considerations and attitudes and religious considerations and foundations. This was complemented by the notion of Hay & Ney (2006) of relational consciousness to explore connectedness. Connectedness to the self, others, the mysterious and the Other was combined to the three concepts were fitting, only the connectedness to the mysterious was added as a separate concept, also driven by the fact that the study of Sampras (2019) emphasised the importance of nature. This process was consensus based; the research group had to agree on dividing and grouping the theoretical concepts logically. One specific matter led to discussion as the concepts did not allow a more general introduction in the concept of spirituality. Although the theoretical base does not have to be practical yet, it was deemed necessary to include it in order to have a complete theoretical base, allowing a general assessment of spirituality instead of solely separate elements. After deliberation the general concept was therefore included to allow this introduction and assessment element in the program. This step resulted in six main theoretical concepts as the base of the intervention (see table 1)

The second step was the transition or operationalisation from theoretical to more practical as in this step the main themes were chosen. From the description of the working definition and subthemes the programme was based upon. The subthemes (see table 1) were designed in an iterative process of the researcher and four independent research assistants until consensus was reached.

For every theme the research team used a creative inductive dialectic method based on the Socrates method (Carey & Mullan, 2004) where a series of questions leads from the abstract to the concrete. These are partly inspired by knowledge already in focus, but also gives space to intuitive knowledge on sub themes that may serve the goal of the intervention program.

Theoretical concepts	Themes	Subthemes for classroom activities
Spirituality	Introduction	What matters most? Assessment
Existential questions connectedness/ 'relational consciousness' to the self,	Identity Suffering Hope Joy	Who are you really? Happiness Anxiety Sadness
Meaning of life	Purpose The Future	Who do you want to be when you grow up? Having all the power...
Value-based considerations and attitudes, connectedness/ 'relational consciousness' to others	Most-important-things Family Values Life	What is valuable in life? Love Empathy Friends
Connectedness/ 'relational consciousness' to the mysterious	Nature Music	Silence Being with nature Together in nature Moved by music
Religious considerations and foundations transcendence/ 'relational consciousness' to the Other	Faith, religious and other beliefs Practices	What do you believe? All that people believe...

Table 1: Theoretical base of the program

Design of prototype: an educational programme 'SPEAK'

The name of the programme reflects the importance of (verbal and non-verbal) communication of what is important to children in their own language and vocabulary, SPEAK stands for Spirituality Promoting Educational Activities for Kids. Educational models differ in form and concept. In this design four basic components were used to base the theoretical model on: Assessment, Activities, Student engagement and Evaluation.

1 Assessment

As assessment is an important tool to determine the starting point of students. This programme was designed to be applicable for international contexts, but also for the Dutch context. There were two options available: the Feeling Good Living Life (Fisher, 2009) or the Spiritual Sensitivity Scale for Children developed by Stoyles et.al. (2012). Both these scales are validated and translated into Dutch by Damsma, Roodbol and van Leeuwen (2021). In the small-scale pilot that was part of said study, the scale also appeared valid for the Dutch situation. The Dutch version of the SSSC-nl is most suitable for a secular context as it does not include religious vocabulary and is already made operational and accessible by the included QR code (see figure 2). In this digital version also some demographics are added, including gender, age, region and religious practices.



Figure 2. QR code to access the SSSC-nl on the public website of Viaa.

For international purposes, the original scale could be used. For contexts, even within the Dutch contexts, where religiousness dominates the FGLL or the FGLL-nl could also be a reliable alternative.

2 Activities

To design the individual activities in a didactically responsible way each activity was set up to facilitate a learning cycle: it started with an introduction of the theme, after which the existing knowledge of the theme of the children is probed, then the activity stimulates a seeking to answer new questions of the children as a follow up to the existing knowledge. This openness and curious attitude are seen as a necessity to nurture spirituality. Each activity is reviewed together to process the learning effects and closed by reflecting on it in class.

The developed programme in Dutch is freely accessible on a website of the university of two of the researchers of this article (www.viaa.nl/lespakket-zingeving/). The program is not yet translated, but this is possibly feasible upon inquiry.

3 Student engagement

To ensure student engagement, the programme is designed to contain no or very limited scientific or religious vocabulary regarding spirituality. It is introduced as 'what matters most in life' in the introduction activity. The introduction activity includes the chosen assessment scale, presented as a (digital) questionnaire. When the class fills in this questionnaire, it serves as a valid contextual framework for thinking and talking about spirituality as the included items tell them implicitly what is meant by 'what matters most'. It also serves as the assessment of the sense of spirituality of the class and the individual children aiding the teacher or educator to select the most fitting subthemes and/or activities. The second part of the introduction activity is a group chat, structured by questions to elicit the most remarkable observations of the children during the completion of the questionnaire. The group chat is also designed to enable children to voice their own wishes regarding specific themes they find interesting or are curious about. Throughout all the activities instruction is added for the teacher or educator at the start of each activity and in the evaluation of the activity to enhance the benefits of the activity in addressing specifically the spiritual development of children, instead of the more emotional, cognitive or social development.

4 Evaluation

The evaluation can be done concluding each activity, or on the programme as a whole. A teacher's guideline was written to address the outcomes of the activities. The outcomes of the activities are formulated based on Tebyani's (2011) outcome-proposal:

1. Children have a stronger sense of identity.
2. Children show in attitude or behaviour that relate and contribute to their world.
3. Children have a stronger sense of wellbeing.

Proposing a protocol to test and evaluate prototype

Design

The proposed protocol is a mix method study. A quantitative element is added by analysing the data of the assessment scales. A quantitative element is needed to evaluate the intervention program with teacher, educators and the children involved.

Sample

The prototype programme is most suited for Dutch children in primary school between 8 and 11 years old. All primary schools can be included; both regular public schools that are run by the government and special schools that are independent, based on a specific religion or educational philosophy. The sample would ideally be heterogenic and representative for the Dutch context.

Data collection and analysis

The objective of the data collection is to test the educational programme, although the program is flexible in use, a test should include the introduction activity as a minimum, with the chosen additional activity or activities based on the wishes or needs of the class. Researchers should work together with participating teachers to (digitally) record the quantitative data from the questionnaire as well as the qualitative evaluation information. The quantitative data can be collected using the programme Analyzer, an online tool for data collection, for the included scale this is already in operation to simplify the quantitative data collection (see QR code in figure 2 that links to this option). The quantitative data can be analysed by using statistical software like SPSS to assess the sense of spirituality of Dutch children of a small scale (the classroom) and large scale (national analysis). By including variables like the type of school, the region, gender, and religious background more analysis can be done to determine specifics per variable and possible correlation. The qualitative data of the evaluation can be collected by visiting the participating school or sent in digitally, via email or a public website and should be collected with a designated feedback form on the four elements of the programme and an evaluative review of the outcomes. Directive content analysis can be done with a software programme like Atlas.ti to cluster evaluative feedback.

Ethical Consideration

Research involving children need extra consideration of the ethical aspects (Damsma, van Leeuwen & Roodbol, 2020). An informed consent should be included, and all children should receive two informed consents: a regular one for their parents and one simplified for themselves. Children should be able to decline participation even if parents give their permission. The educational programme is designed to address spiritual themes as life unfolds for the children over time. Life events may occur during this time, for example children can getting sick, parents' divorce, loved ones die, in short: events that make children reconsidering what matters most in their lives, now as well as in the future. Participating teachers should be aware that although talking about the events and the impact on the spiritual development of children is the main goal of this educational programme it is paramount to see the activities as a tool to stimulate the spiritual development, not a goal in itself. The classroom should be a safe space to talk about diversity, identity and life, but also needs to be that safe place where children feel they belong in order to do so. Lastly, the scale is not yet proven valid on a large, national scale. To do this the quantitative data of questionnaire could also be used to prove cultural validity by performing a power analysis. To do so, a minimum of 10 classes of approximately 25 to 30 children need to participate, resulting in about 250-300 respondents. When this is a secondary objective of the study, this should also be included in the informed consent.

Reflection on theoretical base and redesign

A design study carried out as proposed in this paper could determine cultural validity when a power analysis of the data on the Dutch version of the scale is tested. It should also derive an evaluative conclusion on the use of the scale in combination with the introduction activity. Where individual

activities are used and evaluated by teachers in their classrooms, this data can confirm or help further develop the theoretical base of the educational program as well as improve those activities. It also can give insight in missing activities regarding certain themes. A thorough qualitative evaluation should include:

- Evaluation of the six theoretical concepts as framework for the intervention
- The completeness and operationalisation of the main themes and the subthemes
- The usefulness of the assessment scale for introduction and selection purposes
- The effective activities based on the four educational components of the program in relation to the desired outcomes

Conclusion and Discussion

It is important to equip teachers with evidence-based tools to assess and stimulate the sense of spirituality and spiritual development of healthy children, but the objective should always be to create an open and connective dialogue in case life events foster spiritual needs in children. This educational programme, although based on a theoretical framework from the scientific literature, is not yet proven to be evidence based in operation. This study provides additional and practical evidence for effective elements and activities and aided the further development of an effective educational programme.

This program is designed to create a safe space in primary schools to talk about what matters most to children. From research among health care professionals, we know that this demands specific competencies, as health care professionals feel uncomfortable or untrained to include the spiritual dimension in their practice. A recent international project called EPICC resulted in the formulation of these competencies for nursing and midwifery via a consensus-based process (Van Leeuwen et al., 2020). Two of those competencies: the intrapersonal competency, emphasizing the need of awareness of the impact of spirituality on well-being for the professional; and the interpersonal competence, stressing the importance of acknowledgment of children's unique spirituality when engaging with them, are also very applicable to educational practices. These competencies can assist teachers that feel the need for professional development to become confident in addressing topics like spirituality in a way that does justice to them and to their pupils.

Another great challenge of the study will be the active participation of teachers and their class. Especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools prioritize catching up because of the cognitive and social learning loss. It is however of equal importance to talk with children about perspective, identity, connectedness and belonging as children also very well may have struggled with their place in the world and perspective on life and on what really matters during this difficult time.

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