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Author(s)	Teo Chua Tee
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Helping Bored Children: The Dawn of Spiritual Intelligence

Review by Chua Tee Teo

Introduction

“HELLO, Tinkle Friend, I am feeling very bored today.” (Sim, 2002, p. H1).

Boredom and loneliness have recently surfaced as top of a list of issues facing primary school pupils today (Sim, 2002). According to the Singapore Children’s Society, which runs a national hotline for children, Primary 4 to 6 pupils logged in more than half of the 8,600 calls in 2001 (Sim, 2002). These bored children are apparently “obedient kids who don’t go out unaccompanied...” and have been deriving “no satisfaction from watching television” (Sim, 2002, p. H1).

That so many children profess to being bored behind closed doors surely has important implications for parents and teachers. This paper hypothesizes that the main, or root cause of boredom and loneliness is an imbalance in the holistic growth of children. More specifically, children are bored because of a lack of development in their spiritual capacities or “spiritual intelligence”. Boredom could also be attributed to the *Flynn effect* (Flynn, 1999). This article examines the concept of spiritual intelligence and discusses implications for classroom teachers and parents. Possible solutions to boredom in children are offered in the light of current literature.

Review of Research

Few schools seem overtly to strive to produce happy children, or even non-bored ones. Adults seem to be interested only in “nurturing” children to the extent that they perform well in school, oblivious of the stress that the children are undergoing, or the boredom they are facing with repetitive practices of innumerable

assessments. The children's genuine interests in life, their hopes and aspirations, are hardly taken into consideration in the planning of curriculum or activities. Children in Singapore are commonly known to be "obedient". In giving their parents and teachers brilliant grades in school achievement, including the winning of multiple intellectual competitions or non-intellectual games, many children are drained of energy and time. Why then is there an alarming increase in the number of bored kids?

The perceived boredom in children must have a cause, if not multiple causes. First to be mentioned is the *Flynn effect*, a noted global increase in mean IQ scores of a significant magnitude (Begley, 2001; Flynn, 1999). It seems that IQ scores have risen by 27 points in Britain since 1942, by 24 points in the United States since 1918, and by 22 points in Argentina since 1964, with comparable gains throughout China, Canada, Western Europe, Japan, Israel, Australia and New Zealand (Begley, 2001, p. 40).

The Flynn Effect (Flynn, 1999) informs teachers and parents that children are becoming increasingly smarter with each age cohort. Using the language of neuro-feedback, we understand that the waves of a powerful mind are intense and ceaseless. Several Singapore schools have started to organize enrichment programmes to challenge their pupils intellectually (Quek and Ariff, 2002) and thus engage these powerful minds before they become bored.

With higher IQ and the *same* amount of daily routines at home, it is no wonder that young children are becoming bored more readily than before. Suggestions given by adults, such as playing with more sophisticated toys (including navigating on the Internet) (Dawson, 2002), reading more books, playing a musical instrument, solving puzzles or simply talking to a friend, may temporarily help children overcome boredom. We need to note, however, that these are only "firefighting", or temporary measures: as soon as the child has completed an activity, s/he will have to look for the next activity to kill time. These activities may engage the children's time but not their heart or spirit. They usually perform these activities in a mundane manner and derive no meaning as a result thereof. The crux of the matter is that the spirit of the child is yet to become alive or radiant with these activities. These activities are haphazard and do not contribute towards long-term gains or enhancement of the growth of the spirit of the child. This understanding leads adults to the root cause of boredom among school children.

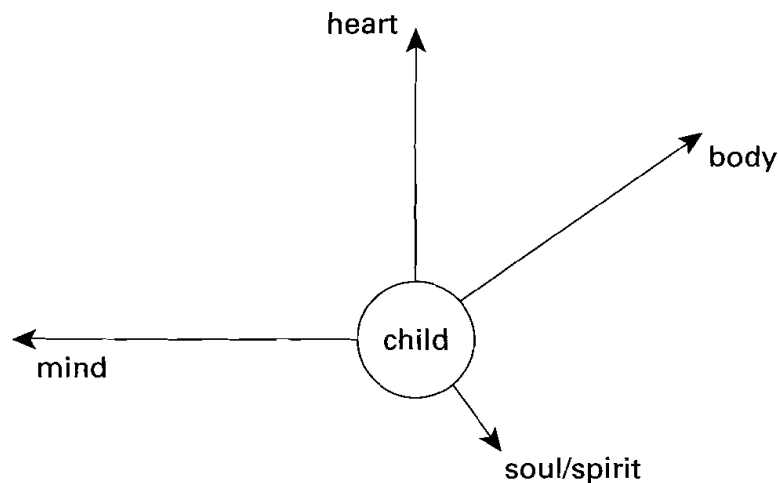


Figure 1. Holistic development of a person with respect to heart, body, mind and soul.

The second, and perhaps the main cause of boredom and loneliness among school children is hypothesized to be a lack of spiritual education in the holistic development of children. Educators and teachers are fully cognizant of the need to develop the whole person, since the introduction of the official document, *The Desired Outcomes of Education*, in 1998 by the Ministry of Education (Tan, 1998). Indeed, the new ability-driven education system is all about “nurturing the whole person, his moral, cognitive, physical, social, and aesthetic development” (Tan, 1998, p. 1).

Holistic Development

Holistic development may be classified into the four main areas of intellect (mind), emotions (heart), physical health (body), and morality or spirituality (soul/spirit) (Teo, 2000), and these may be represented pictorially on four axes (as in Figure 1), with the length of each axis representing the amount of development in each domain.

This classification coincides with various kinds of education. There is a training and development of the physical body, which ensures the development of strength and growth. Schools and colleges are mainly founded with the intent of promoting mental training or intellectual education. In later years, schools have also become sensitive to the importance of emotional intelligence in development. More recently, attention has been drawn to the role of spiritual intelligence (Khavari, 2000; Levin, 2001; Walsh, 1999; Zohar and Marshall, 2001) as a source of happiness. The concept of spiritual intelligence and its development, however,

has yet to be introduced in schools. Until the meaning and importance of spiritual intelligence is realized, the development of the spirit of the child is not possible.

What is the Human Spirit?

As we have never seen the spirit, heard it, smelt it or touched it, we know that the spirit of a child is not definable in the material realm. We can only infer its existence through its effects and attributes. Consider the world of dreams, for instance. In sleep, the body of a man is immovable, seemingly dead, and not subject to sensation: the eyes do not see, the ears do not hear, nor does the tongue speak. However, the *spirit* of the man is not asleep in the dream. He perceives in his dream, converses and moves about without the use of the physical organs. It is apparently evident that the spirit of the man is not affected by the change of physical conditions of his body and is able to function as quite a 'separate' entity of its own.

Many meanings have been given to the word "spirit". It is called "an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms"; "the immaterial intelligent or sentient part of a person"; "a supernatural being or essence, or soul"; "an inclination, impulse, or tendency of a specified kind, or mood"; "a special attitude or frame of mind"; "a lively or brisk quality in a person or a person's action" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993, p. 1134).

Careful observation of natural phenomena informs us that human beings are not the only creatures endowed with a spirit. The plant kingdom, for example, possesses a 'spirit' as well: namely, the spirit of growth. When a stalk of a rose possesses the spirit of growth, it blossoms beautifully. When the spirit ceases to exist, we observe that the rose does not grow but withers and dies. In the classrooms today, the flourishing of the spirit of children occurs at random, yet the cultivation of the human spirit should not be left to chance.

What Constitutes Spiritual Intelligence?

Spiritual intelligence has several interpretations. Zohar and Marshall (2000), for example, say that "spiritual intelligence" is the soul's intelligence. The Dalai Lama calls it "spirituality, inner peace or mental happiness" (cited in Walsh, 1999, p. ix). It appears to be an intelligence residing in the deep part of the self that relates to wisdom from beyond the ego. It is that intelligence with which we discover new values. It helps us to understand who we are and what things mean to us, and how these give others and their meanings a place in our own world. The development

of spiritual intelligence seems to help us to transform our motivation, to find our soul's desire, live ethically, wrestle with problems of good and evil, the problems of life and death, and the deepest origins of human suffering (Walsh, 1999; Zohar and Marshall, 2000).

Levin (2000, pp. 12–13) defines spiritual intelligence as the spirit that infuses all living things, the (inner) peace a person craves for, an intuition or an energy that connects all human beings whose foundation is love. For Khavari (2000, pp. 23–37), spiritual intelligence is equivalent to moral intelligence and it is subject to enhancement as well as deterioration. The hypothesis is that mankind has a higher spiritual saintly moral nature and a lower animalistic amoral nature (see also Teo and Crawford, 2000, p. 39), and that spiritual intelligence is what bridges the chasm^{er} that separates knowing what is right and actually doing the right thing.

Spirituality has been defined as “direct experience” of the sacred, and is related to spiritual principles in the development of the soul as given in the world's religions (Walsh, 1999, pp. 3–9). Khavari (2000) points out that spirituality and materialism are opposing forces, and that while human needs are few, their wants and desires are endless. By relinquishing lower appetites and desires through conscious voluntary and volitional choice, humans can safeguard their destiny. This is the route to inner peace, to living peacefully with others, fulfilling family and societal responsibilities and eliminating all conflict and violence.

It follows that a person with an abundance of spiritual intelligence is likely to have a high degree of self-awareness and a reluctance to cause unnecessary harm. Such a person has a capacity to be flexible, to adapt actively and spontaneously, and a capacity to face pain, to transcend it and to learn from suffering. This person also has a tendency to see the holistic connections between diverse things and a facility for working against convention. A spiritually intelligent person is inspired by vision and values and tends to ask “why?” or “what if?” questions and to seek “fundamental answers” (Zohar and Marshall, 2000, p. 15).

According to Levin (2000), persons with increasing levels of spirituality also have increasing levels of joyfulness. Other attributes described by Khavari (2000, pp. 31–32) include the adhering to moral and ethical standards, and having the courage to stand up for what is right. Specifically, the spiritually alive person is truthful, reliable, trustworthy and fair; humble, courteous, patient and kind; frugal, generous and tolerant, peaceful and happy, caring and grateful, and prays, loving God and creation, while contributing to the welfare of others. According to

Zohar and Marshall (2000, pp. 16, 33–34), persons with plenty of spiritual intelligence are often servant leaders, like Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi, who were responsible for bringing higher vision and value to others and showing others how to use it, and inspiring them.

Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 16) have commented that we are now living in a spiritually low culture characterized by materialism, self-centredness, lack of meaning and a dearth of commitment. It is surely most difficult for adults living in a spiritually dumb culture to raise spiritual, happy and non-bored children. However, it is noted that when the individuals making up a society take action to raise their personal levels of spiritual intelligence, the collective spiritual intelligence of that society is raised, so children will benefit and be groomed accordingly.

How Do We Develop Spiritual Intelligence?

The development of spiritual intelligence begins when a person embarks on a life path with heart, deep commitment and dedication (Zohar and Marshall, 2000, p. 225). To decide on 'I want that sort of life' and to set about the difficult and painful task of discovering one's own center of motivation appears to be the next step. For Einstein (1956/1984), it was the determination of the meaning of life or the object of one's existence. In the words of Einstein (1956/1984, p. 2):

The ideals which have lighted me on my way and time after time given me new courage to face life cheerfully, have been Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Without the sense of fellowship with men of like mind, of preoccupation with the objective, the eternally unattainable in the field of art and scientific research, life would have seemed to me empty. The ordinary objects of human endeavour—property, outward success, luxury—have always seemed to me contemptible.

A child may be coerced to take up a particular path by the expectations of parents or society, or to seek it out for shallow motives such as personal recognition, personal power or material gains. Parents and teachers need to be prudent in guiding children to determine life goals while not imposing their own aspirations. They must also realize that the children are young and may change their minds as they become more mature.

Meditation, according to Levin (2000), can help develop a person's intuition and spirituality, but she acknowledges that there is really no strict rule for developing spiritual intelligence. Love is the foundation of spirituality, and the sign of success is when the person has an increased level of joy.

Khavari (2000) has suggested that spiritual intelligence may be developed through conscious choice to meditate on one's positive experiences and be happy, to develop one's virtues, to deal with negative feelings, to reduce stress and to enhance the happiness of others in social interactions.

After thorough research into the world's great religions, Walsh (1999, p. 14) offers seven perennial practices:

1. Transform your motivation: reduce craving and find your soul's desire;
2. Cultivate emotional wisdom; heal your heart and learn to love;
3. Live ethically: feel good by doing good;
4. Concentrate and calm your mind;
5. Awaken your spiritual vision: see clearly and recognize the sacred in all things;
6. Cultivate spiritual intelligence: develop wisdom and understand life;
7. Express spirit in action: embrace generosity and the joy of service.

Conclusion

Humans are the noblest of all beings in existence, the sum of all perfections with regard to the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms, and exhibit the human spirit. The existence of the human spirit or soul can be readily proven from its attributes, but the essence of it is unfathomable, even by the greatest minds. Just as they are in need of physical, intellectual and emotional education, humans likewise need ideal refinement through the cultivation of spiritual intelligence.

The understanding of spirituality as an intelligence is only a first step. As humanity embarks on a spiritual quest, it will take further research to ascertain finer concepts like a possibility of having "spiritual emotion" in addition to "spiritual intelligence". After all, complexity of systems in their natural states indicates a possible complexity, or perhaps an interaction between spiritual intelligence and spiritual emotion, if it exists.

To lead a spiritual life is certainly a positive practice. The development of one's spiritual intelligence essentially equips a person with better capacities to face boredom, sorrow, disappointment, fear, frustration, depression and sadness in life. The key to happiness at this juncture appears to be having a spiritual perspective on life to begin with. It goes without saying that teachers and parents must first educate themselves before they can nurture spirituality in children.

Implications

Teachers may like to help children under their care, especially the bored ones, to consider the following precepts.

- Set meaningful life goals and aspirations; engage in past-times of their interest e.g. painting or music; and find like-minded peers.
- Choose to be happy and cheerful at all times; make conscious choices to do good unto others through conscious knowledge and guidance.
- Meditate; concentrate and calm the mind; and be peaceful.
- Develop many virtues like detachment, selflessness and service; be gentle in words and acts; and radiate joy to others.
- Develop insights, wisdom and learn to understand the meaning of life.

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