A LITERATURE REVIEW: FACILITATING SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Children with intellectual disabilities are often treated as having less value. Increased awareness of holistic personhood, however, brought questions to the need to facilitate spirituality in these children, besides facilitating the development of other aspects. Previous studies argued that children with intellectual disabilities have potentials to develop spiritually despite the very few studies addressing the spirituality in children with intellectual disabilities. This literature review, then, aims to explore methods and interventions to facilitate spirituality in children with intellectual disabilities, through a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the themes drawn from existing literatures and research studies. After the analysis and synthesis process, four themes emerged for intervention methods to facilitate spiritual development in intellectually challenged children, which are: narratives (from Scripture and personal narratives); symbols, liturgies, and rituals; arts and kinesthetic learning; and community, group, and social support. Further research studies, especially using quantitative methods, are encouraged to be conducted in the future in order to assess the efficacy of each method of interventions.

Keywords: Spirituality, Spiritual Development, Intellectual Disability

INTRODUCTION

Children with deficits in intellectual abilities share history of being the underserved population and experience stigmatization of being "less" than so-called "normal" children. In some cultures, children with disabilities are viewed as having "lesser value," "undesirable," and often victimized with stigma, rejection, trauma, and abuse; even in some Western cultures (such as Roman Empire), they were terminated (O'Hara, 2014). However, as the awareness of equality in human rights emerges, awareness of developing holistically is urgently raising. Jones and Butman (2011), calling this holistic approach as "biopsychosocialspiritual" model, promote holistic understanding of human as a biological, psychological, social/cultural, and spiritual being.

With this understanding of holistic approach to treatment, it becomes pertinent to look at the development of children with intellectual disabilities. Extensive research studies and interventions are dedicated for the physiological or cognitive well-being of these children, for example, the research on neurocognitive development and psychopharmacology. Many interventions have also been applied and proven to be effective to help children with intellectual disabilities function psychologically, such as play therapy (Astramovich, Lyons, & Hamilton, 2015), behavior modification (McRay, Yarhouse, & Butman, 2016), and Individual Educational Program (IEP) in

schools and special needs classes (Easom & Irwin, 2007). It also provides supports for social interventions, such as parenting class, support groups, equal employment advocacy, and anti-bullying programs. However, spiritual aspect of children with intellectual disabilities is almost neglected. Very few studies conducted to address this issue, and very few organizations are advocating for it. Therefore, this literature review aims to answer how to facilitate spiritual development in intellectually challenged children.

There are many definitions of spirituality. Spirituality, from both psychology and theology, is a common core concept of searching for the sacred (Thomas, 2008). As Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, and Wagener (as cited in Thomas, 2008) reported, researchers usually viewed spirituality in three perspectives – as an integral part of religiosity, as separate from religiosity, and as synonymous with religiosity. Throughout the sources used in this review, most authors viewed spirituality as an integral part of religiosity. In their studies, researchers often operationalized spirituality into spiritual development, which Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude (in Thomas, 2008) profoundly define:

Spiritual development is 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. (p. 31)

Meanwhile, intellectual disabilities range from mild to severe. The term "intellectual disabilities" used in this review is not necessarily a diagnosis of Intellectual Developmental Disorder as described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Intellectual disabilities, here, were viewed broadly, which can be one of the symptoms of child developmental disorders (i.e. Intellectual Developmental Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Down syndrome, learning disabilities), and other child developmental disorders with deficits or challenges in intellectual capability.

Perhaps, the preliminary question that researchers and practitioners would ask is whether it is "realistic" to promote spiritual

development in children with intellectual disabilities. Literatures support, individuals with intellectual disability could still have some kind of relationship with God (spirituality) and are teachable in this area. Watts (2011) said that a spiritual dimension is present in each human being independently of their abilities/disabilities. Children with intellectual disabilities also have soul and reflect the image of God, and therefore, there is potential for spiritual development (Watts, 2011).

This review only covers spiritual development of Christian faith, due to limited availability of scientific articles, while considering the objective to narrow the scope in order to enhance the pragmatic value for its implementation. It also only covers intellectual disabilities in child development, and does not cover intellectual/cognitive conditions in adult psychological disorders.

METHODS

This review used non-systematic method, with keywords combining "spirituality," "intellectual disability," "cognitive disability," "spiritual development," and "spiritual formation." Sources were gathered using PsycINFO, while unavailable articles were ordered through Worldwide Library System (Interlibrary

Loan/ILLiad). Google Scholar was used for hand-searching related literatures. 23 sources were obtained, including journal articles, dissertations, literature reviews, and book chapters.

Further evaluation was conducted on the abstracts to screen out research focus and scope, participants, and suitability to the aim of this literature review (on the interventions/methods). Nine sources were selected. Most of the reviewed sources used qualitative research design, and only one literature used quantitative research design. The writer then organized them into a matrix addressing the type of study / literature, research question / aim of study, findings / ideas, and coding for each literature.

RESULTS

A matrix was used to organize data. Number coding was used for themes coding. Six themes emerged on the methods of intervention to scaffold and promote spiritual formation of children with intellectual disabilities: Personal relationship (1), liturgy and rituals (2), arts and kinesthetic learning (3), narratives (both from the Scriptures / literatures / story books or personal narratives) (4), language of symbols (5), and community, group, and social support (6). See Table 1.

Table 1
Matrix of Reviewed Literature

Type of study / literature	Research question(s) / aim(s)	Related themes
Dennis, R. (2002).		
Paper report	How playback theater can facilitate expression and development of spirituality for a small group of people with intellectual disabilities?	3, 4, 6
Francis, M. R. (1994).		
Book chapter	How should church view sacrament for people with intellectual disability?	2, 5
Hauerwas, S. (1995).		
Book chapter, essay	To explain the challenge and the function of church in serving mentally handicapped people.	2, 3, 4, 5
Thomas, C. N. (2008).		
Doctoral dissertation	What is the description of relationships between cognitive deficits and spiritual development in individuals who qualified for special education under the category of Specific Learning Disability? If the awareness that spiritual development emerges as cognitive abilities advance what, then, occurs in the spiritual development of an individual whose cognitive abilities are not as well developed as others?	4
Vogelzang, A. (2001).		
Journal article	What are the rationale and process for a worship service conducted with people with severe mental disabilities and multiple disabilities?	1, 2, 3, 6
Watts, G. (2011).		
Conceptual paper	To what extent is it a co-requisite of spiritual growth that one has to have a given intellectual capacity?	1, 5
Webster, J. (2004).		
Journal article	Are we envisioning an equal cooperation between our intellectual (or cognitive) and emotional (affective) faculties, or is a more intuitive approach required? To what extent does the content of the knowledge we seek influence the way we engage in our pursuit?	4

Zhang, K. C. (2010).

Journal article	What is the impact of spirituality on children with disabilities?	1, 3, 4, 6
	What are some practical strategies teachers can use to help foster the spiritual development of students with disabilities?	

Zhang, K. C. & Wu, D. I. (2012).

Journal article	What is the relationship between spirituality and education for students with special needs?	1, 3, 4
	What are the implications in education?	

Note. Related Themes:
1. Personal relationship
2. Liturgy and rituals
3. Arts and kinesthetic learning
4. Narratives (both from Scripture and personal narratives)
5. Language of symbols
6. Community, group, and social support

Most supported themes are use of community and group settings (five articles) and use of narratives (five articles), followed by use of arts and kinesthetic learning (four articles). Two themes (language of symbols; liturgy and rituals) seem similar in ways they use symbols, merged as the use of symbols, liturgies, and rituals (making it supported by four articles). Personal relationship, however, viewed as the foundational principle in working with children with intellectual disabilities. Results presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Methods of Interventions to Scaffold or Promote Spirituality in Children with Intellectual Disability

Coding no.	Methods (Themes – Updated)	Number of articles
6	Community, group, and social support	5
4	Narratives (both from Scripture and personal narratives)	5
3	Arts and kinesthetic learning	4
2, 5	The use of symbols, liturgies, and rituals	4

Community, Group, and Social Support

Almost all articles specify interventions in group settings, such as group setting in drama/playback theater (Dennis, 2002), church community (pastors, ministers, parents) in taking part in sacraments (Francis, 1994), liturgical group celebration (Volgezang, 2001), small group to share stories, encouragement, and service learning to learn social issues around them (Zhang, 2010), and school-wide organized activities for staff to better address spiritual issues in children in special education settings (Zhang, 2010). Some groups even

have names and organizations, such as L'Arche movement and Special Religious Education for People with a Developmental Disability (SPRED; Watts, 2011).

Narratives

Narratives are commonly taken from the Scripture or Bible stories (Thomas, 2008; Webster, 2004) or by using personal narratives, either from themselves (telling their stories), others (other tells their stories and the others listen), or story books (Dennis, 2002; Thomas, 2008; Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Wu, 2012). Dennis (2002) asked each child to tell their stories, then someone in the group will act the story out. Bibliotherapy (story books in which children identify with the characters of the books and learn from the characters' experiences) is proposed to encourage sense of values, meaning, and purpose by talking about important things and people in their lives, values, fears, and dreams (Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Wu, 2012).

Arts and Kinesthetic Learning

The use of arts is explored by using creative and expressive arts (Zhang, 2010; Zhang & Wu, 2012), drama/playback theater (Dennis, 2002; Zhang & Wu, 2012), as well as music, songs, and musical instruments (Volgezang, 2001; Zhang & Wu, 2012).

Kinesthetic learning is also utilized with children with intellectual disabilities, such as in the use of outdoor activities (Zhang, 2010), or physical activities (Volgezang, 2001).

Symbols, Liturgies, and Rituals

Liturgy or ritual in worship and activities might effectively facilitate spiritual development in intellectually disabled children (Francis, 1994; Hauerwas, 1995; Vogelzang, 2001). Watts (2011) explored the use of symbols in teaching children with intellectual disability, from sacraments, liturgy, or simply, things that they can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. Francis (1994) voiced the need for intellectually disabled individuals to participate in sacraments, and for church community (parents, pastors, ministers) to monitor them and assess their readiness to participate in sacraments. Vogelzang (2001) described an activity using an Easter candle and liturgy. They light the candle on, circle around the candle, sing and make music, talk to each other quietly, fellowship (eating food), and then put the candle off.

Personal Relationship as Foundational

These interventions are carried out on the foundation of personal relationship with the child and the acknowledgement of their

personhood, which can be pragmatically expressed, such as welcoming each person with name (Volgezang, 2001), or activities together with them (Zhang, 2010).

DISCUSSION

Spirituality is an integral part of holistic personhood. This statement stands true even for children with intellectual disability. Recent neurocognitive studies scientifically support facilitating spirituality in children with intellectual disability. They found that cognition and affection are interrelated and function together; even if one is impaired, a person will not compartmentalized each part and function solely on it (Webster, 2004). Love (in Thomas, 2008, p. 39) also states, "One's level of cognitive development need not be similar to one's spiritual development, though because they both relate to the development of meaning-making, it is hard to imagine a situation where they would be significantly divergent in an individual." The statements give objectives to provide spiritual resources for these children.

There are two kinds of knowing – the scientific knowing and the artistic-symbolic knowing (Francis, 1994). Children with intellectual disabilities might experience difficulties to comprehend scientifically,

but they can learn and understand in artistic-symbolic ways. It implies that teaching (including religious education) should target cognitive and affective dimensions (Webster, 2004). Education involving both intellect and emotion will provide a holistic way of being. God created us with cognitive processes, "so then He would appeal to His creation through theses cognitive functions" (Thomas, 2008). The same thing also applied for affection. God created us with affection, so then He would appeal through affection. This notion is supported by Saroglou (2011) through one of the dimensions in religiosity scale, Bonding, the affective dimension of spirituality.

Believing in transcendence is connected with meaning-making process (Park, 2005). Creative methods associate to children's affect in making meaning spiritually, in which they learn through affective knowing. Through narratives, children learn to appreciate events and language, and derive meaning from associating with the stories affectively (Webster, 2004). Using stories through preaching, Scripture reading, and personal testimony might affect Long-Term Retrieval (LTR) in children with cognitive deficits, which is the domain that helps one to have mental

representation of God and understands one's relationship with that perception (Thomas, 2008). By telling and listening to stories or narratives, children also learn to develop social and emotional skills, life management skills, and meaning and values (Zhang & Wu, 2012). Liturgy and sacraments also provided symbolic, experiential nature to spiritual meaning, and are very helpful for children with intellectual disabilities as they reflect human actions in everyday life (Francis, 1994).

Furthermore, these methods allow children to learn about themselves and to express themselves. Knowledge of God does not stand independently from knowledge of self. John Calvin (2007) famously wrote, "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God." From listening and acting out of stories, children learn about themselves and others. Dennis (2002) noted that through playback theater/drama, children with intellectual disabilities learn listening, taking risk, expressing themselves in a genuine way, growing in awareness, building relationship, maintaining a sense of fun, and taking pride in what they achieve. The outcomes, they become more comfortable to express emotion toward God and church. Arts, music, and play help

children to express their inner world and experience the world (Zhang & Wu, 2012).

From the pastoral point of view, these methods, conducted properly in church, might serve as an advocacy and conscious expressions from the church in including children with intellectual disabilities as part of the church. Ministry to children with intellectual disabilities has the potential to convey the message of justice and hope, served as validations for the children as well as their families, and in result, promotes spiritual growth. Church community have to be aware that spirituality is an integral part of a holistic person and might be a great source of resilience. "Faith can bring a message of hope, healing, and growth" (Zhang, 2010). In regards of sacraments, Francis (1994) mentioned, "It is crucial to be aware of the fact that readiness to receive a sacrament is not exclusively dependent on one's ability to verbalize the abstract theological propositions traditionally associated with the meaning of a sacrament." It is imperative, then, for church community to have what Francis called as "experiential reflection" to discern whether the person is ready to take part in sacrament or not.

Group settings and community are also found to be effective. Community might serve as a training ground for children with intellectual disabilities to relate with other people. Through activities with others, children develop empathy and tolerance, social support, work ethics, safety in ritual, shared collaborative meaning of their story, independence, and creativity (Dennis, 2002). Community or group activities also provides sense of belonging to God's family that the children and their families need. It celebrates their presence on earth and of being part of community (Vogelzang, 2001). An increased sense of belonging positively impacts one's religiosity (Saroglou, 2011).

From reviewed literatures, four come from special education systems. Although it might be based on the extensive time they spend daily with the children, this finding provides crucial insight that mental health professionals and churches need to cooperate with special education personnel to better address the needs of children with intellectual challenges. Interdisciplinary collaboration provides a more well-rounded approach to the issue as well as joined community resources, and therefore, provide a more holistic intervention for children with intellectual disabilities.

Another interesting point, these reviewed literatures originated from different countries, such as Hong Kong (Zhang, 2010), Singapore (Zhang & Wu, 2012), Australia (Dennis, 2002; Watts, 2011), Netherlands (Volgezang, 2001), and the USA. They elaborate attitudes toward children with intellectual disabilities and provide methods from diverse international perspective. Therefore, the pragmatic applications for teaching and facilitating spiritual development presented in this paper are universal, although limited to Christian faith.

Spirituality has positive impact in intellectually disabled children's lives and their family. Spirituality can also affect children's coping behaviors; a sense of belonging, sense of being valued, sense of safety, respect, and dignity; family and teachers' commitment and involvement with education and services; improved relationship with oneself, others, and the world; a new sense of meaning; and a source of social and psychological support (Zhang & Wu, 2012). Attention to spiritual development, then, is essential to provide education and interventions that meet every child's needs.

CONCLUSION

In summary, some methods of interventions to facilitate spiritual development in children with intellectual disabilities are using narratives (from Scripture and from personal narratives), using symbols, liturgies, and rituals, using arts and kinesthetic learning, as well as utilizing group settings and community as social support. This finding is beneficial for mental health workers (counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, social workers) who are working with children with intellectual disabilities, teachers of special education programs, Sunday school teachers, church ministers, and parents of intellectually disabled children, especially in finding appropriate approach to facilitate spiritual development in children with intellectual disabilities.

Further studies on this topic are very much encouraged. There is a huge need to further research this topic using quantitative design. Study conducted on the efficacy of each method using quasi-experimental design might add value to the topic of spirituality in children with intellectual disabilities.

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