

Press release: embargoed until 00:01 hrs, Thursday, September 3

British Educational Research Association

Why teachers should listen to children who believe they see angels

Children who believe they have seen angels or had other spiritual experiences often keep it a secret for fear of being ridiculed by adults, the British Educational Research Association conference will be told later today (September 3).

Teachers have a special responsibility to listen to children who want to talk about "spiritual" experiences that other adults may dismiss as fantasy, says Dr Kate Adams, a senior lecturer at Bishop Grosseteste University College, Lincoln. Both the 1988 and 2002 education Acts require them to attend to children's spiritual development.

She accepts that this legal requirement is daunting, given the difficulty of defining "spiritual" and the almost impossible task of demonstrating development in spirituality. However, Dr Adams argues that teachers can at least grant children the right to have their "spiritual voice" heard. "By doing this we can show them how important this dimension of their life is and begin to combat the disinterest which can make children feel misunderstood and retreat into silence," she says.

Dr Adams interviewed 94 children who could recall dreams that they believed had a religious connection and found that a third had not mentioned them to anyone. In a separate study of 40 children's belief in, and experience of, the "unseen", one seven-year-old girl told her that she saw an angel beside her bed each night. She felt comforted by the angel's presence but when she described it to her parents she was upset to be told "Oh that's your imagination darling".

"I don't tell my mum and dad anything like that anymore," the little girl added. "They think I am making it up but I know it's true."

Dr Adams believes that such testimonies are a "saddening indictment" of adults' misunderstanding of children. "It shows how communication on matters of personal importance can break down without adults realising it," she will tell the BERA conference in Manchester.

However, a second study to be presented to the conference today suggests that student teachers often feel ill-prepared to deal with children's spiritual development. A questionnaire study of 166 trainee teachers in eight English

universities revealed that 44 per cent of them felt that their courses had covered spiritual development only "a little" or "not at all".

The survey by Dr Richard Woolley, who is also a senior lecturer at Bishop Grosseteste, found that although the overwhelming majority of the student teachers (89%) regarded spiritual development as important, just over one in five of them (22%) were under the impression that they would "rarely" or "never" have to deal with this issue in their first teaching job, even though it is a legal requirement. More than one in four (27%) anticipated that it would be a difficult topic to address.

"Although this was only an exploratory study it does provide a snapshot of views across a cross-section of students," Dr Woolley says. "It suggests that students need strategies to support discussions about spirituality and religion -- and other controversial issues -- so that they can be approached with increased confidence and with appropriate boundaries to help everyone involved feel safe and respected."

Further information from:

David Budge

BERA press officer

(off) 0161 306 7300 (from 9am Wednesday, September 2)

(mob) 07881 415362

email: d.budge@ioe.ac.uk

Notes for editors:

1. The students who took part in Richard Woolley's survey during 2008-9 were either studying for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education or were in the final year of an undergraduate programme leading to qualified teacher status. Over 99 per cent of the students were training to become primary teachers.
2. The annual conference of the British Educational Research Association is being held at the University of Manchester from Wednesday, September 2 to Saturday, September 5. About 700 research papers will be presented during the course of the conference. The conference programme can be accessed via the BERA website <http://www.beraconference.co.uk/>

