

Spirituality in the workplace: a reality for South African teachers?

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In this article I identify the concept spirituality as an often neglected dimension of the lives of teachers in South Africa. The concept spirit is elucidated and, from the various definitions, criteria of spirituality are distilled. The spirituality of teachers in South Africa is viewed in the light of these criteria. Thereafter I speculate on the various reasons why a condition of spiritual stuntedness seems to be prevalent among many teachers in South Africa and conclude with suggestions on how to counteract the spiritual stuntedness of teachers, so that their spiritual dimension is acknowledged and developed in the workplace.

Keywords: connectedness; meaning; spirituality; spiritual stuntedness; transcendence; wholeness

Introduction

In this article I argue for the importance of making a teacher's spirit a legitimate topic in debates on education in South Africa. The language of spirituality is rarely used explicitly in the educational debate in South Africa and I argue that this omission can result in an incomplete, one-sided, technicist view of education, because "intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best" (Palmer, 1998:4). Consequently, the exclusion of the spiritual dimension leads to the spiritual stuntedness of teachers.

Not all scholars are positive about the influence of spirituality on education and some challenge the very notion of spirituality in education. The range of contributions in Spirituality and Ethics in Education (Alexander, 2004) illustrates the tensions in the literature between optimistic and pessimistic approaches to the question of spirituality. The markedly disparate views between, for example, Semetsky (Alexander, 2004:54-64) and Gur-Ze'ev (Alexander, 2004:223-232) can only contribute to healthy scholarship, but it is not the aim in this article to expand on this debate.

Literature relating to spirituality abounds. Spirituality is the new buzzword, not only in theology but also in business science and in business leadership. "The intersection of spirituality with business leadership is currently the most published new topic in business school literature" (Delbecq in Leigh-Taylor, 2000:20). According to Fry (2003:702) there is an emerging and accelerating call for spirituality in the workplace. However, this is not true of the educational debate in South Africa, in spite of Starratt's view (1995:196) that "educational leaders should be most attuned to their own spirituality." Roux (2006:152) concurs that: "In South Africa spirituality is still discussed mainly in the context of theology in general."

In this article the complex and elusive concept of spirit is discussed and categories of spirituality are distilled. These are then used as norms to determine whether the reality of being a teacher in South Africa leaves any scope for spirituality. Possible reasons for the neglect of the teacher's spirit will be debated and finally some suggestions will be made on how to counteract this. I try to understand and explain spirituality as a neglected dimension of teachers' lives within a dynamic web of relations from a hermeneutic, interpretative perspective. The hermeneutic approach is valuable in trying to understand the spirituality of teachers because it implies that there are no preconceived theories of spirituality, but works with different and often competing perspectives on being human. This aligns with constructive postmodernism which accepts that no one meaning is possible and teachers' spirituality is viewed as a construction of meaning, and does not have established, independent status outside the narratives and texts that constitute it. Constructive postmodernism, being one of the major contributing factors to the upsurge of interest in present-day spirituality, does not try to eliminate, but rather to revise modern premises and traditional concepts. In concordance with one of the most significant characteristics of constructive postmodernism I emphasise the interconnectedness of all life (Kourie, 2006:30-31). Arguments are developed within holistic anthropology because spirituality is seen not as an independent aspect of human beings but as an integral part of every human being.

An elucidation of the concept spirituality

The premise of my argument is a belief that human beings are essentially spiritual beings. Dyer (1993:310) strikingly endorses the need for such a departure point, grounded in the perspective on our human condition that: "We have to see ourselves as spiritual beings having a human experience — rather than human beings who may be having a spiritual experience." Spirituality is a very elusive concept and although various attempts have been made to offer generic definitions of spirituality, some authors question the validity of these attempts (Alexander, 1980:247-256). Swinton (2001:12) describes spirituality as a "slippery concept" in western culture and Carr (1995: 85) purports that notions of spirituality in an educational context are often no more than a hotchpotch of vaguely connected items of cognition, intuition and feeling, between which it is nearly impossible to discern any coherent conceptual connections.

For the purposes of this article, the term spirituality is used to denote meaning, through language, to a specific dimension of life and experience. Vokey (2003:174) emphasises spirituality as a relational event; it either consists of or leads to experiences of connectedness with our deepest selves, other human and non-human souls, to the natural world and the cosmos beyond and the larger purposes and powers that transcend an ego's limited concerns. This coincides strongly with the emphasis placed by Hay and Nye (2006:21-22) who propose the term "relational consciousness" as being prefer-

able to the term spirituality. Wigglesworth (2006:4) also stresses the relational aspect when defining spiritual intelligence as “the ability to behave with compassion and wisdom while maintaining peace regardless of the circumstances.” Authors like O’Murchu (1997) and Elton-Chalcraft (2002) also agree on the relational character of spirituality. Chatterjee (1989:6) adds another dimension by focusing on the importance of community in spirituality, stating that “there can be no spirituality shorn of community.” Palmer (1998:5) describes the spiritual as “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life — a longing that animates love and work, specially the work called teaching.” This article can therefore be placed within the holistic relational theory with authors like MacMurray (1991) and Buber (1958) who also described personal relationships as the heart of spirituality. This philosophical approach has much in common with the care ethics of Noddings (1984) and resonates with the philosophy of *ubuntu*. A discussion of the indigenous philosophy of *ubuntu* is beyond the scope of this article; see Swartz (2006) for an excellent explanation of *ubuntu* and Van der Walt and Valenkamp (2008) for an exposition of the spirituality embodied by *ubuntu*.

Spirituality also includes a sense of transcendence, a sense of calling or being called and therefore also one of meaning. Calling refers to the experience of making a difference to others through service and, in doing so, finding meaning and purpose in life (Fry, 2003:703). Where the spiritual plays an important role there is a shift from earning a living towards living a meaningful life, because spirituality is not primarily about success, but about significance and meaning. Meaning has to do with turning one’s job into a vocation, thereby achieving a sense of personal wholeness, purpose and direction: “Spirituality links with integrity and wholeness” (Louw, 2005:133). The word integrity comes from the noun “integer” which means wholeness or completion (Peck, 1998:58). Spirituality, as an expression of wholeness, is therefore directly linked to the ability to act with integrity. When defining spirit and spirituality, Myers (1997:61) also accentuates aspects of transcendence and meaning: “Spirit is that property of being fully and wholly human that fuels our predisposition to transcend each and every condition in our experience. Spirituality is a construction of meaning meant to inform the human way we engage in that process of transcendence.” Spirituality therefore relates intimately to establishing existential meaning, and often invokes questions of meaning: *Why am I here? What really matters in life? What is the meaning of my life and how do I help others find meaning in their lives? What is my calling or vocation in life?* The answers to these spiritual questions impact profoundly on what a teacher does and on how his/her actions are performed. Indeed, for Frankl (1964:99) “Man’s search for meaning is a primary force in his life”. Van der Walt and Valenkamp (2008) conclude that spirituality symbolises the human being’s quest for meaning, depth and values, and describes how a person relates his or her actions towards the Absolute and towards others and to their own being, core values and practices.

The above dimensions of spirituality, especially connectedness (including membership and having a sense of being understood and appreciated) and a sense of transcendence (a sense of having a calling or being called and the meaning derived from that) are of critical importance for a teacher's spiritual journey.

Spirituality also stresses "the dynamic wholeness of self in which the self is at one with itself and with the whole of creation" (Zohar & Marshall, 2001: 124) and it requires that people regard themselves and others as whole beings. Louw (2005:16) offers a striking expression of this wholeness when he describes a human being as "an embodiment of soul and an ensoulment of body. One does not have a soul; one is one's soul in terms of mind, will, emotions and body. The religious dynamic in this embodiment and ensoulment is spirituality, our directedness towards transcendence (the divine and the ultimate)". Spirituality can therefore also be defined as the way(s) in which people strive to find meaning in their lives in the light of their deepest personal perceptions about the ultimate meaning of life. Waaijman (2002:1) defines spirituality as that which touches the core of human existence, namely, our relation to the absolute.

These criteria for spirituality, namely, the longing for connectedness, meaning and wholeness and the directedness towards ultimate meaning and transcendence, will be used in this article to determine whether teachers' spirituality is acknowledged and nurtured in their workplace.

Teachers' spirituality in the workplace

Teachers as spiritual beings long to experience connectedness and a sense of personal wholeness and meaning in their lives, including their vocational lives. Teachers who incorporate the spiritual dimension in their work are more inclined towards self-reflection; they are attentive to the relationship with their inner self, with others and with a power greater than the self. Their decisions tend to be influenced by virtues such as empathy, humility and love where love is viewed through the lens of Peck's (1997:148) definition as "the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." They are more apt truly to listen to others and to create spaces that release others' creativity and potential. Teachers' inner spiritual quest for connectedness, meaning and transcendence often leads to a reaching out to others, to an acceptance of and regard for their human dignity and to the forming of meaningful relationships (Palmer, 1999a:11; Zohar & Marshall 2001:14-15).

Spirituality underpins ethical behaviour and encourages social cohesion, but it is often privatised and according to Hay and Nye (2006:30) this privatisation dissipates its potential to change society because it cannot feed easily into public understanding or political legislation. When spirituality is restricted to the private realm of people's lives and teachers are unable to integrate spirit in their lives and classrooms, teaching degenerates into a technical and

a de-spirited activity. Teaching, in the sense of experiencing and finding meaning in life, cannot be separated from spirituality.

I want to propose the idea that the emphasis on spirituality in schools equals a non-instrumental view of education whereas the absence of spirituality results in an overwhelmingly technicist approach to education. The material conditions of the South African context cannot be denied. Three out of five children live in poor households and are faced with appalling conditions of child abuse, malnutrition and interrupted schooling and are therefore exposed to the risk of impaired physical and mental development (May, Woolard & Klasten, 2000:33). Education cannot be divorced from solving societal problems, because if the issue of poverty is to be addressed, if export trade is to be increased, if the number of job opportunities is to be increased, and if the country is to grow economically, South Africa will have to produce better educated people. Hence we are confronted by the paramount importance of education for reducing poverty. I would like to propose a complementary view of education where instrumentality for the purpose of securing economic interests is not to be considered independently from putting spirit into education. The call for reinstating spirit in education is therefore not a stance that is in conflict with the important role of education in solving the problems of our society and in teaching learners useful knowledge that is of economic value for them. Incorporating spirituality in education is in fact not contradictory but complementary to solving societal problems, because one of the overarching themes in the literature on spirituality in education is that of connectedness — of connection with our deepest selves and an Ultimate Power or Powers, and also with other human and non-human souls. Out of this connection grows compassion and caring and therefore “spirituality in schools has been presented as antidotes to a wide variety of student problems and social ills” (Vokey, 2003:174).

Spiritual stuntedness is in essence a state lacking in spontaneity, where people carry around too much self-consciousness, become overly concerned with form and appearances and shut themselves from what matters deeply (Zohar & Marshall, 2001:181). Teachers’ spiritual stuntedness results in the absence of spirituality in teaching and this, in turn, influences all their relationships and every aspect of their work. In his interesting research on workplace spirituality, Pfeffer (2003:29-45) defines four dimensions that people really want their work to have, and all four can be interpreted as spiritual dimensions. They want their work (1) to be interesting and meaningful, allowing them to learn, develop and have a sense of competence and mastery, and (2) to give them some sense of purpose in their lives. They also want (3) to experience a sense of connectedness and positive social relations with co-workers, and (4) to live an integrated life where their work and other roles are integrated into their identity as a human being. The first two aspects are related to calling and the last two to connectedness and membership. Teachers as spiritual beings desire their work to be meaningful and to give them

a feeling of purpose and achievement. They want to experience positive social relations with colleagues and learners. They want to live an integrated life where their role as a teacher is part of their identity (Kelchtermans in Vandenberg & Huberman, 1999:184-190).

Is there room for teachers' spirituality in South African schools?

Teachers, especially beginner teachers, frequently experience a sense of isolation. When a young teacher reflected in a personal interview in 2005 on the first three years of teaching, she said: "I have never felt so lonely in my life. I dare not tell anyone in the staffroom about my doubts and fears and feelings of loneliness and exhaustion". This sense of isolation and alienation experienced by teachers and the poor or unsupportive relationships they experience with colleagues and/or superiors are also reflected in the research of Jackson and Rothmann (2006:91-92), Swanepoel and Booysse (2003:98), and Montgomery, Mostert and Jackson (2005:266). Goleman (1995:226) comments as follows on the corrosive consequences of isolation: "Studies done over two decades involving more than 37,000 people show that social isolation — the sense that you have nobody with whom you can share your private feelings, have close contact — doubles the chances of sickness or death."

The priority list of schools' management teams rarely includes the need to create spaces where teachers can honestly share their stories and talk about personal issues with a direct bearing on their professional lives, such as: "What inspires or inhibits me?" or "When do I experience meaning in my work?" and "When do I experience feelings of worthlessness and isolation?" Instead, teachers often experience the lack of connectedness and painful "dismemberment" that Palmer (1998:20-21) describes as follows:

On the surface, this is the pain of people who thought they were joining a community of scholars but find themselves in distant, competitive, and uncaring relationships with colleagues and students. Deeper down, this pain is more spiritual than sociological: it comes from being disconnected from our own truth, from the passions that took us into teaching, from the heart that is the source of all good work.

Spirituality not only includes connectedness with others, but also connectedness with a power or being higher than the self that influences the way one operates. In South Africa, with its teachers and learners from many different religious, cultural and ethnic traditions, the tendency in schools is to steer away from discussing spirituality and to avoid questions regarding religion, a topic which can become divisive in a multi-religious country. Although the vocabulary of spirituality contains many religious terms, spirituality is viewed by some authors, such as Fry (2003:705), Harris and Morgan (1998) and the Dalai Lama (1999:22) as a much broader and inclusive term than the creed of any single organised religion. Alexander and McLaughlin (2003:359-360) differentiate between religiously "tethered" and "untethered" conceptions of spirituality and concur that "spirituality cannot be confined to the religious domain". Roux (2006:156) also argues for a non-religious spirituality in edu-

cation in South Africa. Kourie (2006:26) on the other hand suggests viewing spirituality and religion as partners and not rivals, as spirituality can vitalise religion and religion provides a locus which prevents spirituality from becoming rootless and isolated. Schneiders (2003:176) suggests that “religion is the optimal context for spirituality. The great religious traditions of the world are much more adequate matrices for spiritual development and practice than personally constructed amalgams of beliefs and practices”. According to Abdool, Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter (2007:545-546), spirituality seems to form the deep core of religion. I agree with Vokey (2003: 175) when he warns that “the challenges to public education presented by cultural pluralism cannot be avoided simply by declaring spirituality independent of religious or institutional affiliations”. At the moment many teachers in South Africa do not feel free to address the deeper issues in their own lives and the lives of their learners in the light of their spiritual connectedness with their ultimate Source(s) of meaning. But as holistic human beings, teachers cannot leave the fruit of their immersion in their own faith traditions at home when they enter the workplace, because their conviction of the ultimate meaning in life will colour the way they handle life’s ultimate questions. There is the misconception that the religious dimension of spirituality must only function in the private sphere of teachers’ lives and not in the workplace, the public sphere (Hay & Nye, 2006:30-31, Sullivan 2003:128-138). However, the result then is that they are not in a position to respond to other staff members and learners with a sense of wholeness. Therefore, one of the main reasons why spirituality is demeaned or ignored in education is because of this strong tendency to separate the public and private lives of people and to limit spirituality to the private domain of the individual.

In the culture in which we live the good life is seen as a matter of outward appearances in the external world and not as one of inner well-being, meaning and connectedness. “From the moment we begin school we are trained to look outward rather than inward, to focus on facts and practical problems in the external world ... virtually nothing in western education encourages us to reflect on ourselves, on our inner lives and motives” (Zohar & Marshall, 2001: 285). Because spirituality is not about success but about significance and meaning, it is about going inside oneself, not for the applause of the crowd, but in search of one’s own meaning, identity and integrity. In teaching, however, we tend to externalise matters, to put policy and systems in place in order to “fix” problems, because “it is far easier to spend your life manipulating an institution than dealing with your own soul” (Palmer, 1994:29). The overemphasis on the “knowing-and-doing functions” and the neglect or even disregard of the “being functions” is also a result of the beliefs with which we are bombarded by the media, as well as the belief that the external world is all that matters.

Spiritual growth is devalued not only by a materialistic culture aimed at the pursuit of more profit, but also by an academic culture which is increasingly regulated by the language of the market. This language of business, in which teachers have to think in business terms of their work as being made

up of factors such as inputs and outputs, value-addedness, performance indicators, quality measurement, value for money for the different stakeholders and cost efficiency, is changing the moral context in which education takes place. Ball (2003:215-228) eloquently highlights the effects of the terrors of “performativity” on the teacher’s soul. In an atmosphere where the emphasis is on the performative worth of individuals, on productivity targets, achievement and constant comparison and competition, a profound change creeps into the way teachers think about themselves, about others and about their own work. Teachers experience a kind of “values schizophrenia” (Ball, 2003: 221) when commitment, caring and authenticity are sacrificed for external impression, where effectiveness is given a higher value than honesty and people are no longer expected to care about each other but mainly about performance and excellence. According to Codd (2005:194) this is true in New Zealand. South Africa appears to be experiencing a similar trend towards an overbearing performativity with its accompanying high stress levels (Arnold, 2004; Milner & Khoza, 2008:168-170, Montgomery, Mostert & Jackson, 2005: 266-272) that is terrorizing the inner lives of teachers often preventing or inhibiting their spiritual growth.

“Teaching in essence consists of initiating the young into a worthwhile way of seeing the world, of experiencing it, of relating to others in a more human and understanding way” (Pring, 2001:106), and the “product” of this kind of learning cannot be defined in a detailed, outcomes-based curriculum such as the Department of Education’s National Curriculum Statement (2003). In trying to find meaning in their learning, learners will not necessarily arrive at neatly predetermined, well-formulated outcomes because in their struggle to make sense, they encounter the messiness of life.

If we are to open up the spiritual dimension of education, we must understand that spiritual questions do not have answers in the way math problems do. When people ask these deep questions, they do not want fixes or formulas but compassion and companionship on the demanding journey called life (Palmer, 1999a:8).

Within the OBE paradigm in South African schools, opportunities ought to be opened for learners to use their imagination, construct meaning, and explore. When a teacher’s role is limited to the realm of explanation, verification and specific outcomes he or she seldom reaches the deeper spiritual level of teaching, namely, that of understanding, wisdom and meaning. This can often lead to teachers not experiencing their work in a wider context and to the realisation that they are not true to their calling.

Overload of administration and red tape, overcrowded classrooms and increased workloads are part and parcel of the day-to-day experience of most teachers in South Africa, and are in fact the main reasons why they leave the profession (Human Sciences Research Council and Medical Research Council of South Africa, 2005). Studies by Olivier and Venter (2003:186), Montgomery, Mostert and Jackson (2005:266) and Van Wyk (1998:5) conclude that teachers are constantly functioning under feelings of stress because of a range of factors, such as a lack of discipline in schools, large numbers of unmoti-

vated learners, unfavourable pupil–teacher ratios, demands made by the new educational approach of OBE, the management style of principals, the high crime rate in the country, coping with political change and corruption in state departments in the face of inadequate resources. Research by Swanepoel and Booyse (2003:99) suggests that “the imposed educational changes since 1994 were too ambitious and far-reaching for teachers to cope with”. As a result, a significant number of teachers experience burnout that “involves a subtle but progressive erosion of behaviour, attitude, health and spirit that eventually inhibits an individual’s ability to function effectively at work” (Berg in Olivier & Venter, 2003:186). Slabbert (2001:304) purports that teachers’ successful implementation of the various educational changes in South Africa depends on “... an inevitable journey inward”. According to Hargraves and Fullan (1998:2) teachers all over the world are feeling beleaguered; even passionate teachers are exhausted in the face of apathy and resistance from those around them.

When people are exhausted they do not ask the spiritual questions such as “Who am I?” and “Does my life have meaning and purpose?” They tend to turn to a survival mode where they exist but do not live with zeal, hope, purpose and meaning. Many teachers feel that they are merely surviving and no longer experience any meaning or purpose in their work. Where teachers experience feelings of vulnerability, disempowerment and isolation, accompanied by a negative mindset, there is little space for spirituality to flourish.

When considering these criteria for spirituality, namely, experiencing connectedness, meaning, including ultimate meaning, and wholeness, one may safely postulate that South African schools are not hospitable environments for teachers’ spirituality.

Suggestions for counteracting teachers’ spiritual stuntedness

Although I acknowledge the fact that teachers’ spiritual stuntedness cannot be rectified by any quick-fix solution, the following suggestions are made for creating spaces so that spirituality can be incorporated into the working lives of teachers.

Teachers should be helped to see and experience the connection between the vision, mission, and values of the school or institution where they work and their own vision, mission, and values. When this happens teaching can be experienced as a vocation or calling, and their work as meaningful.

The school should be an environment where the emphasis falls on “being” functions and on character, where learners and teachers are encouraged to be the best human beings they can be, without constantly being measured, monitored and appraised for their “productivity”, their “doing”.

The market-orientated language of teaching and learning ought to be restrained, and visible substance given to spiritual concepts such as meaning, vocation, vision, connectedness, and wholeness, so that these concepts and their underlying values are not dismissed as obscure, irrelevant, or insubstantial.

Teachers’ professional development should not be viewed as a crash

course, where teachers can learn a new skill in a week, but ought to focus on support for teachers' spiritual growth so that they can experience greater meaning in what they do. The focus should not only be on the development of skills to use in the material world but also on the ability to go within and make the spiritual journey. Though this may sound very idealistic, teachers need to find time and ways to nourish their spirit. This can be done by solitude and silence, meditative reading, and walking in the woods, keeping a journal and finding a friend who will listen (Palmer, 1998:31-32), painting, dancing, or immersion in great literature and music. Teachers' work allocation should provide for these activities.

Teachers should be brought together in a safe space, not to talk about curriculum, budgets or policies, but to discuss the deepest questions of their lives. They should have opportunities to share and interpret their own stories in the light of their views on the ultimate meaning of their lives. This emphasises the importance of a "place of rest", for example, a private staff room for teachers. School management should focus on creating a working community of which teachers feel they are truly part and where they feel safe to share their inner journey with colleagues that are willing to listen. This will give them a chance to experience both meaning and membership.

Mindfulness should be developed in teachers so that they can bring greater awareness to everything that happens at school, be more present in the moment and more aware of the dynamics of relationships. Teachers are engaged in the service of others and this dedication to the welfare of others creates a space for spirituality.

There are many questions to be answered and pitfalls to be avoided. When we put spirit on the agenda, we will also have to rethink existing structures and ask the following questions: How does a greater understanding of spirit challenge established structures and practices? Isn't the concern with spirituality irrelevant in a situation where poverty is rife and teachers are struggling to survive? How can spirituality be integrated into schools so that it becomes an integral part of teaching and learning, without it becoming a servant of the performativity master? How can outcomes-based education be used to engender a new, still unimagined approach in classroom pedagogy where spirit is included? The answers to these questions are complex and beyond the scope of this article because the process of searching involves a significant amount of commitment. A responsible articulation of a new world-view, grounded in a post-positivistic metaphysics and epistemology, is needed in which the claims of science and of spirituality are reconciled. (The work of Ken Wilber, 1997, is an example of this kind of integrated worldview.) It will also be necessary for higher education to become a more hospitable environment for the spiritual development of both faculty and pre-service teachers (Vokey, 2003:180); and a new focus is needed where the emphasis is on showing respect to the deepest questions of a teacher's life. To be able to do this, we will have to challenge and even dismantle our own mental habits, preconceived ideas and orthodoxies, but the result will be to discover greater wholeness, authentic relationships, and new meaning.

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