

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

Jeanette de Klerk-Luttig

jdkl@sun.ac.za

*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

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 Booysse (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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### Author

Jeanette de Klerk-Luttig is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Policy Studies at the University of Stellenbosch. Her research interests include moral education, spirituality in education, and the role of parents, communities and schools in the instilling of values.