

Growing empathetic, compassionate, meaningful and hope-filled students: Re-discovering the spiritual dimension in education

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This paper will draw on existing literature to argue that spirituality is an innate element of being which therefore should have an essential role in the learning process. It will explore the relational nature of spirituality and discuss the implications such an understanding may have for the development of school environments and educational programs where teaching for resilience and connectedness; empathy, compassion and meaning may be promoted. This may lead to a more accessible and well-balanced learning process which may reduce chances of students becoming isolated and alienated and increase their chances of becoming productive and affirmed community members who will work towards greater social harmony and cohesion.

Background

For many decades now, the educational arena in Australia has continued to be subjected to new policies, ideas and initiatives thereby requiring the expenditure of huge resources for the development of training programs, curriculum materials and personnel. One of these directions has been the outcomes based approach to primary and secondary education in the nineties where the cognitive dimension in education has been the main focus. Learning outcomes are articulated which relate to the achievement of knowledge and skills in particular curriculum areas, and these form the basis of learning programs. With this focus on cognitive learning, there has often been little time for affective and reflective learning, particularly inner reflection, as in silent reflective times, stillness, contemplation and/or meditation. In other words, periods of time for children to just be themselves, and actually get to know themselves including how and why they may experience certain thoughts or feelings, has not always been evident in busy classrooms.

In addition, more attention has been given to standardized testing programs at different levels which, possibly, has put teachers under pressure to develop learning tasks that are test-related since, in some instances, the results of these tests have been used to promote one school over another. In particular, in the last few years of secondary schooling, learning and teaching has been focused on preparing students for the Year 12 end-of-school certificate which will give them a pathway to university, other tertiary study, apprenticeships or the workplace. Once again, these results are often used for schools' promotional purposes, and in a highly competitive world, this puts enormous pressure on teachers and students. Hence, learning programs continue to compartmentalize knowledge and skills and often they may become more concerned with particular disciplines or career paths (at secondary level) that have been prioritised according to social, political and commercial perceptions of their usefulness, usually in terms of material gain. All these features contribute to creating an environment where competition, fragmentation and division are promoted amongst students. In such a context, little is done to nurture the relational aspects of a student's life, or to connect them to their inner lives in terms of their self-knowledge, creativity, imagination and intuition which, in this paper, is described as the spiritual dimension of learning.

Because of its previously close association with religion and religious traditions in the western world the word spirituality sometimes provokes distrust and even hostility within secular

educational contexts; therefore it is essential to describe the concept as it is being used here. While there has been much discussion and debate in other western countries about the importance of spirituality in education, in recent times in Australia, most curriculum advisors and educators have been discussing values in education with little or no reference to spirituality. Instead, it is the adolescent health professionals and youth and social workers that have recognized its role in promoting the wellbeing of young people. This paper, then, presents a case to explore a contemporary understanding of spirituality and its implications for education and learning.

Contemporary understandings of the nature of spirituality: An expression of connectedness

In recent years there has been a considerable body of literature that recognizes spirituality in the contemporary world as relational (for instance, Eckersley, 2004; Groome, 1998; Hay & Nye, 1998; Tacey, 2000, 2003) which is demonstrated through the individual's expressions of connectedness to Self and to Other in community and in creation, and to a Transcendent Other. Significantly, a growing number of professionals in areas of mental health, youth and social work, and education both here and overseas, have been exploring this notion of spirituality as a means to helping young people find meaning and a sense of belonging (Commission on Children at Risk, 2003; de Souza, 2001, 2002, 2004; Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2000, 2005, 2006; Miller & Nakagawa, 2002; Moffett, 1994; Palmer, 1990, 1998; Wilber, 2000, 2001) and organizing conferences around this theme (for instance, the Annual Suicide Prevention Conference, Brisbane, 2003; the Spirituality and Health Conference, Adelaide July 2005).

In addition, spirituality has been regarded as primordial and more recently, new evidence about the nature of spirituality as an essential and distinguishing human trait has been revealed through neuroscientific research (Newberg, D'Aquili & Rause, 2001; Persinger, 1996; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998). Newberg, D'Aquili & Rause (2001) highlight the relational dimension through their claim that it is 'nothing more or less than an uplifting sense of genuine spiritual union with something larger than the self' (2001, p. 101). Supporting the notion of the biological nature of spirituality, Ramchandran (Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1998) has dubbed the area of the temporal lobe the 'God spot' or the 'God module' since there appears to be increased activity in this part of the brain when an individual discusses things of deep meaning and value. These findings have led to the identification and articulation of Spiritual Intelligence (Emmons, 2000; Zohar and Marshall, 2000) or Existential Intelligence (Gardner, 1999) both of which, while still somewhat controversial, do raise some pertinent questions in relation to the human person.

A pilot study which explored this concept of spirituality (de Souza, Cartwright & McGilp, 2004) also found that the participants aged between 16 and 20 perceived themselves to be spiritual people and their expressions indicated varying levels of connectedness to their immediate and their wider communities, and to a Supreme Being. It could be argued that the ever widening and ever deepening relational circles which encompassed the lives of these young people led to layers of connectedness where, eventually, the Self became one with Other in a journey to Ultimate Unity. Certainly, the layers of connectedness they experienced appeared to promote their sense of Self and place, and provided their lives with meaning and purpose. Thus the findings from this small study supported the concept offered by Newberg et al in their neurology of transcendence where he described a movement towards Absolute Unitary Being, that is when the self blends into other and mind and matter become one and the same (p. 156).

The findings of the pilot study highlighted the fact that in Australia, today, the traditional institutions that have nurtured human spirituality such as religious traditions, families and local communities have changed noticeably in their structure and importance, and their influence in

the lives of many young people have seriously diminished. Therefore, new structures and processes are required to nurture spirituality, and this is an area that educators and education should address because, firstly it is a human trait and therefore requires nurturing and expression, and secondly, we have new understandings about the learning process and about the interdependence of mental, emotional and spiritual aspects in promoting wellbeing.

In an educational context, then, spiritual refers to the element that helps students become connected to themselves and to the Other in their communities, in the world and, perhaps using X-file language, to 'something out there'. This sense of connectedness, may give each child a sense of self and place within their classrooms and communities which, potentially, may provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. To this end, I use a model with my student-teachers that evolved from this understanding of connectedness. It is drawn from theories of intellectual, emotional and spiritual intelligences (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000; Emmons, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2000) and acknowledges the cognitive, affective and inner reflective or intuiting dimensions in education. Further, it recognizes that these correspond to the processes of perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting elements in the learning. This is discussed in more detail below.

A learning model that promotes connectedness

The centrality of the intellect in western education has for a long time resulted in an undisputed focus on cognitive learning. Gardner's Multiple Intelligence theory also evolved from cognitive learning theory. It is only in the past decade that theories of Emotional Intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer, Salovey & Caruso, 2000) and Spiritual Intelligence (Emmons, 2000; Zohar & Marshall, 2000) have been articulated and investigated and it is argued by their supporters that they are imperative in helping the individual to live and function effectively as thinking, feeling and reflecting beings:

Neither IQ nor EQ, separately or in combination, is enough to explain the full complexity of human intelligence nor the vast richness of the human soul and imagination... We use SQ to wrestle with questions of good and evil and to envision unrealized possibilities – to dream, to aspire, to raise ourselves out of the mud. (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 5)

While these theories have invited both support and criticism (for instance, Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Fontana 2003) they do provide a rationale to consider the development of holistic learning programs that address the three aspects of being: rational (thinking), emotional (feeling) and spiritual (inner reflecting or intuiting). Indeed, the framework for the learning model that I am proposing here recognizes that both the outer world and the inner world of the individual are significant for learning and growth to maturity. Certainly, the emotions and intuitions are elemental to the inner world of the individual, allowing the individual to connect to (inner) Self. If education seeks to address the whole person, both the outer and the inner lives of the individual need to be addressed and nurtured.

I will now turn to the elements that, I suggest, operate in the learning process, that is, the connections between rational thought which is linked to the process of thinking, the emotions which trigger feelings, and spirituality which draws on the unconscious mind to enable the individual to creatively and intuitively find solutions. This concept of the learning process supports Jung's theory that humans experience phenomena in four ways:

1. Perceiving the facts; that is, taken in through the senses.
2. Thinking about them logically.
3. Developing feelings which produce value judgements.

4. Intuiting by looking beyond the facts to certain other possibilities (O'Connor 1988, p. 75).

The integration of these four processes, perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting enables us to become familiar with both our inner and outer worlds. It raises the potential for the integration of learning which can become transformational. Without such integration it is possible that learning may remain at a superficial or 'surface' learning level.

While educational programs have usually focused, although with different levels of emphasis, on the thinking and feeling processes, the role of intuition has often been overlooked in traditional learning programs. Nevertheless, in more recent times its importance is being recognized. Again, a full discussion of intuition is beyond the scope of this paper but a few insights will be offered here. Del Prete (2002) claims that to activate and grow in our capacity to know the living dimensions of truth requires practice in an intuitive way of knowing, a way that has been largely ignored in western society (p. 171). Claxton (2000) offers the description that intuitions are 'holistic interpretations of situations based on analogies drawn from a largely unconscious experiential database' (p. 50). Eraut (2000) concurs with Claxton's description of intuition but argues that if intuition is a process it should be referred to as a 'way to knowing' rather than a 'way of knowing' (p. 256).

Sensing and perceiving the outer world
Sensing and perceiving the outer world

Intellectual

emotional

Spiritual

*Transformed knowledge,
values and action*

Transformed knowledge, values and action

Intellectual quotient / Cognitive learning / Thinking Process

Emotional quotient / Affective learning / Feeling process

Figure 1. A model for transformational learning - perceiving/sensing, thinking, feeling, intuiting

Gary Klein (see Breen, 2000), a cognitive psychologist, who studied the seemingly intuitive decision making actions of fire fighters concluded that intuition was born out of experience because experienced decision makers perceive a different world from what an inexperienced person may perceive:

Intuition is really a matter of learning how to see – of looking for cues or patterns that ultimately show you what to do... [when] sensory perceptions detect subtle details... that would have been invisible to less-experienced fire fighters (Breen, 2000).

This is further clarified by O'Connor (1988) who draws on Jung to explain intuition as a result of unconscious perception which is different to sensation. While the latter is about perception through the senses by which we learn that something exists, intuition is the 'function that tells us of future possibilities. It is the proverbial hunch and the function that informs us about the atmosphere that surrounds an experience or event (p. 76 – 77).

Thus, to sum up, intuitions arise from tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967) which is knowledge the individual has gained implicitly or through unconscious perceptions and which is stored in the unconscious mind. Therefore, individuals do not know they have this knowledge, nor do they do how they may have acquired it but when they face a situation that has echoes of a past experience, or they respond to a stimulus that triggers an unconscious memory, their response becomes intuitive. It is that 'Aha' moment, that 'gut' feeling, that dawning of a realization that we have found a solution to a problem, or made a decision that 'feels' right.

Returning then to the model of learning that I am proposing (Fig 1), it recognizes that while students' learning is based on what they perceive through their senses, their initial response may be at the intellectual level (knowledge based) or the emotional level (feelings based). Either of these responses can lead to an integration of the two so that the intellect and the emotions work together to produce a higher and a deeper level of knowledge and engagement. However, it also recognizes that unconscious perceptions continue through the process so that learning must go beyond the surface, it must touch the depth of being, which we can call the 'soul' of the student. It must reach that core where conscious learning merges with unconscious learning to become transformed, which may and should lead to outward expressions of changed thinking and behaviour, the ultimate goal of education. It is at this level that intuiting becomes the third aspect of an integrated learning process so that the learner's response becomes transformed without her/him consciously knowing exactly how or why the change has occurred. The motion then is generative, moving from initial conscious and unconscious perceptions at the surface through thoughts and feelings that merge with previous unconscious learning and instincts at the centre before returning to the surface in transformed expressions.

To explain this process further, it is useful to show its applications in the teaching of a topic, for instance, a Just War. The concept of war is a distant, unreal situation for many children in Victorian classrooms. However, many have experienced it vicariously through various media, most usually the television, and such experiences may have led to overexposure which can result in de-sensitization to the topic. Nonetheless, their vicarious experiences may allow them to speak 'knowledgeably' and with a certain level of assumed authority about the topic but, perhaps, dispassionately. Thus, one step towards transforming their knowledge and experience

of the topic is to inject some feelings into the process. This can be done with the use of appropriate music (for instance, Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* or appropriate sound tracks), visual images (different kind of victims; grief; devastation; words; weapons of mass destruction), personal stories of victims told in the first person, and perhaps short poems or selected lines from newspaper reports and so on. Indeed, it may even be possible to use a resource that will engage students with their sense of smell, for instance, having some smoke associated with a small explosive like a fire cracker accompanied by sound like gunfire shots etc. Such a process will ensure that the student will engage with the stimuli through different senses thereby receiving both conscious and unconscious perceptions. With some, the visual image may focus their attention but the combination of the visuals with the music, smell and other sounds will create a different response from one that relies on the visuals alone. Certainly, the evocative nature of music may easily be discerned by watching a dramatic moment in a film with and without the sound. Equally, the fragrance of gum leaves may be reminiscent of youthful camping holidays and so on.

What proceeds from these activities are a range of different responses as students process the information from within their own particular experiences and contexts. Some of these responses may be drawn from forgotten memories or they may be intuitive as the student may draw on tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967), that is, knowledge that they don't know they have. Good class discussion strategies are needed at this stage to capture these different responses which, in turn, may trigger further responses from other students. Obviously, in some classrooms there may be students who could draw on personal experience, either their own or of some member of their family. It is important that students experience an atmosphere of safety and security in the class so that they feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings. What is also essential through the process is that time is taken for silent reflection or contemplation of a word or image which may assist in the process of allowing students to accommodate the new learning. This could be followed by journal writing or drawing with or without music/sound in the background when students consider their own thoughts and feelings. Having captured a certain amount of attention and, perhaps, interest, the lesson could progress to the particular war that is to be studied. The facts concerning the reasons for, the progress and outcomes of the war should be studied with attention given to the feelings involved. Why did it happen? How did the respective parties feel about it – politicians, people in the street, different countries, friends and enemies? Did their attitudes and feelings change over the progress of the war? And so on.

The facts that need to be learned can be researched and written up and presented in traditional forms as a research presentation, a prepared talk, a debate, a poster or as a rap song, a scripted drama, a dance drama (exaggerated action to music with accompanying signs as appropriate), or as a board game. If different groups research different aspects, the presentation and performance activities could be used as assessment strategies in terms of the knowledge and content, as also, they could be used for each group to 'teach' their particular topic to the rest of the group. This could be done with interactive question and answers at the end of a presentation or performance, or with each group playing another group's board game and taking notes on the learning. And so on. Ultimately, students should review their own learning, not just the knowledge of the topic but also the wisdom they may have gained about the concept of war.

The process described above, then, has involved the perceiving, thinking, feeling and intuiting elements, each contributing to an integration of deep transformative learning around the topic since they engaged the senses of the students, allowed time for inner reflection, communicating, exploring the feelings provoked, and ultimately, absorbing new information and knowledge about the topic. Such a process may have helped students connect with the topic in

a meaningful way, reflect on their own views of war and whether these have changed as a result of the new learning, and perhaps, consider the wisdom they may have gained which may have transformed them in some way.

In order to apply this learning model, teachers need to be prepared to look beyond the achievement of knowledge that remains at the surface level. They need to recognize the role of the feelings and intuition in the learning process.

This model also challenges the teacher to find new ways to communicate the content in order to seriously engage their students. Using learning strategies that challenge and engage students who may be at different levels of knowledge and experience is vital and they call for the use of excellent resources and appropriate periods of time. For instance, time is needed for discussion and sharing of ideas at group and class levels followed by silent time for contemplation and reflection. Students need to develop skills that allow them to see through the eyes of another, and to walk in their shoes which could be achieved through various forms of play, improvisation and other drama activities, as well, with an effective use of poetry and literature, art works, film excerpts and music. This may mean the need to design learning environments that recognize the inter-relatedness of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual dimensions in learning, and which will provide a framework that allows the individual to connect with Self and Other in the communal, social, physical and non-physical world.

A final word. If educators wish to follow a path that allows them to nurture their students' spirituality in terms of the connectedness they experience, and to help them find meaning and purpose in their lives, there needs to be a whole school and curriculum approach to change. The relational aspect of young people's lives should be recognized as a vital aspect of their spiritual, emotional and therefore, intellectual wellbeing, therefore:

- schools should revisit their learning environments and offerings to discover their effectiveness in addressing both the outer and inner lives of their students which promote a sense of connectedness, trust and hope
- time and space should be included in the daily or weekly timetable that allows for silence, solitude and contemplation in surroundings that inspire peace and a sense of mystery
- resources should be selected which students can access and engage with at different sensory points which may trigger different nuances and dynamics in the learning process
- learning activities should promote reflection, imagination and creativity, and a response to beauty and creation
- students should be encouraged to accept responsibility for themselves and others, to develop empathy and compassion, and to commit to action for the common good
- school assemblies and other occasions when the school community comes together should focus on the celebration of the stories of the individuals and community, and on experiences that promote joyfulness, magic, awe and wonder.

Only then may educational programs and contexts offer students increased opportunities to become empathetic, compassionate, meaningful and hope-filled people.

Endnote

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