

Teachers and Curriculum



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EDITOR:
Catherine Lang

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:
Fred Biddulph
Ken Carr
Sherrin Jefferies
Greg Lee
Merilyn Taylor

COVER DESIGN & ILLUSTRATIONS:
Donn Ratana

LAYOUT AND DESIGN:
Barbara Hudson

EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE AND MANUSCRIPTS SUBMITTED FOR PUBLICATION should be addressed to:
Catherine Lang
School of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105, Hamilton
New Zealand
email: cmclang@waikato.ac.nz

WEBSITE: www.soe.waikato.ac.nz/tandc/

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Teachers and Curriculum provides an avenue for the publication of papers that:

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- iii provide examples of informed curriculum focus
- iv review books that have a curriculum focus

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Hilary Monk
Ross Notman
Margaret Scratchley
John Smith
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Barbara Whyte
Hilary Wynyard
Jenny Young-Loveridge

SPirit-AWARE TEACHER AND LEARNER: RELATIONAL CONNECTEDNESS IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

COLIN GIBBS
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
TE KURA MĀTAURANGA
AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY OF
TECHNOLOGY

Abstract: The power of education is in its potential transformative effects on individuals.

Many writers suggest that the prime task of the teachers is to awaken joy and wonderment through creative expression and in the quest for understanding.

If education is to be a liberating experience then its central concern must be on the holistic nature of teachers and students creating and nurturing meaningful relational connections with self, others, place, and their world. This transcends the physical, intellectual, and social, and engages the spiritual — the spirit and soul of teachers and students. Teachers are instrumental in enabling students to experience such engagement.

This paper explores teachers and the curriculum, relational connectedness, and what it means to be a spirit-aware teacher teaching for spirit-aware learners. Given these comments, some reflections are made on the preparation of teachers.

Between the ages of five and sixteen, most young people spend around thirty per cent of their waking hours in formal schooling. The impressions they gain from these experiences, and the personal effects they report of the education process itself, remain powerful life-long influences. These experiences are often instrumental in explaining how people come to think, act, learn, believe, and develop. For some, schools are where "learning is made so dull that, once we get out, we don't want to learn again" (Palmer, 1999a, p.17). James K Baxter (1939/2001), "poet, postman, teacher, dramatist, writer, social critic" (Scholefield, 2000, p. 39), was one such child. At age thirteen years he wrote:

At school I have no time to dream
'Mong darkening clouds my vision thins
And lesson-times unfold.

For others, though, the formal education experience provides a sense of being in touch with themselves, their world, and their learning. This sense of relationality or relational connectedness is instrumental in the formation of their developing self. These individuals feel that their personal self has been transformed through the learning and other experiences associated with education. They sense that they are relationally-connected to the world around them, to others, and importantly, to their personal innermost being. Education, in this sense, is more than simply the acquisition of skills and knowledge. It is knowledge and skills transformed through beliefs into action. And it involves not just the cognitive, physical, social, linguistic, affective and emotional domains, but also the aesthetic and spiritual. When teachers teach in ways that honour this complexity, we know that inspired teaching is likely, for the focus is on the transformative nature of learning for the whole child. As Wesley (1999) says "... we know inspired teaching when we see it. Perhaps that is because inspired teaching, the kind that encompasses the spiritual, is not only seen, but it is also felt and experienced" (p. 45). In this regard, the art of the teacher is to stimulate awe and wonderment in students through experiences of appreciating, creating, and entering into new knowing.

Einstein (1954) develops this theme by elaborating on the awe and wonderment that ought to be central in education.

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his (*sic*) eyes are dimmed. It was the experience of mystery -- even if mixed with fear -- that engendered religion. A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which only in their most primitive forms are accessible to our minds: it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute true religiosity. In this sense, and only this sense, I am a deeply religious man... I am satisfied with the mystery of life's eternity and with a knowledge, a sense, of the marvellous structure of existence -- as well as the humble attempt to understand even a tiny portion of the Reason that manifests itself in nature (p.X).

Such a view highlights that teaching is complex. Yet, the task of teachers is often viewed as relatively functional. Criticism of teachers and the curriculum is not new. In 1976, the then UK Prime Minister James Callaghan criticised teachers for allowing too many students to study subjects such as the arts which he considered were not of ultimate usefulness. Educationalists generally agree that the arts have the power to be transformative in people's lives. Even Hitler recognised this and actively removed the arts "partly because they were provocative and daring, and also because many Jews were involved" (Moser, 2001, p. 96). *The arts in the New Zealand curriculum* (2000) document outlines the central role that the arts play the school curriculum as an important source of assisting students to understand more about themselves and their world. While there remains a dearth of research on the specific effects of the arts on students' learning in New Zealand, a comprehensive three-year study on the effectiveness of arts education in English and Welsh secondary schools (Bolton, 2000) highlights that:

what matters is not what the arts do for other disciplines - what they might or might not contribute to other areas of learning - but rather what they do for those who engage in them as participants and audiences (p. 11).

In short, this report shows that case study schools which had strong provisions in art education, enjoyed an improved school ethos, enhanced student enjoyment, self-esteem, and achievement. But the wider sample in this study showed that few schools make such provisions in the arts. The majority of Year 11 students in the wider sample indicated that dance, drama, visual art, and music generated none of the prescribed outcomes. Some two-thirds of the sample reported that while music played a large part in their out-of-school lives, they learned very little from their music education in schools. "The positive effects of the arts in schools are only present when the subjects are well taught" (Bolton, 2000, p. 12). Not surprisingly, the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) revealed that teaching which was described as effective was demonstrated by teachers who also had high levels of personal involvement, passion, and commitment to the arts. Students also indicated respect for teachers who were able to demonstrate their art-form practically. In a similar vein, Osborne and Simon's (1996) review of science education highlights that many primary teachers in Wales and England generally held weak subject knowledge and that often they considered that, at best, they were simply 'getting by' in their teaching. It would not be surprising if similar findings were to be found in the New Zealand context.

LEARNING AND TEACHING FOR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Indian politician and the former President of the United Nations' General Assembly, said that "education is not merely a means for earning a living or an instrument for the acquisition of wealth. It is an initiation into life of spirit, a training of the human soul in the pursuit and the practice of virtue."³ What we know is that the spiritual is present regardless of whether we are talking about State 'secular' education, or education that is explicitly spiritual such as Christian schooling. Indeed, The arts in the New Zealand curriculum (2000) reiterates that:

the arts develop the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience. They contribute to our intellectual ability and to our social, cultural, and *spiritual* understandings. They are an essential element of daily living and of lifelong learning (p. 9: *my emphasis*).

Further, the same curriculum document acknowledges that:

The arts are powerful forms of personal, social, and cultural expression. They are unique 'ways of knowing' that enable individuals and groups to create ideas and images that reflect, communicate, and change their views of the world. The arts stimulate imagination, thinking, and understanding. They challenge our perceptions, uplift and entertain us, and enrich our emotional and *spiritual* lives (p. 9: *my emphasis*).

Both the curriculum for New Zealand schools and for early childhood education are quite explicit on the presence of the spiritual dimension and the need for teachers to acknowledge and address this in their teaching. Palmer (1999b) suggests that the term 'spiritual,' when relating to teaching and learning, does not:

mean the creedal formulations of any faith traditions ... [but] the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and more trustworthy than our egos — with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, and the invisible winds of the spirit, with the mystery of being alive (p. 6).

Implicit in the notion of spirit is the expression of relationality or relational connectedness (see Gibbs, 2004). Spirituality, in this sense, is not something that is an 'add-on' to the existing curriculum— rather, it is implicit in how and what we teach (Palmer, 1999b). Oládélé (1999) also speaks of connectedness, and defines spirit as:

the spark of life that resides within every human being: it is the connection to the fabric of all life and to the source of all creation, and it is the essence of what it means to be a human being. Spirit is a gift from the Source, what some people might call the Creator (p. 62).

While there is often a confusion between spirituality and religion, Nell Noddings,

in an interview with Joan Halford, suggests that:

[s]pirituality is an attitude or a way of life that recognises something we might call spirit. Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality and usually requires an institutional affiliation. Spirituality does not require an institutional connection (Halford, 1999, p. 29).

SPIRIT AND SOUL IN LEARNING AND TEACHING

In a sense, the notion of *spirit* is often used interchangeably, and perhaps mistakenly, with the concept of *soul*. As we have seen earlier, Pandit saw these two entities as being different when she spoke of the "initiation into life of spirit" and "a training of the human soul." For our purposes as teachers, it is suggested that there is a distinction between soul and spirit, and this becomes useful as we consider how, what, and what we do when we teach. While spirit is related to the notion of being, connected to our *beingness* and the wonderment of that beingness, soul is related more to the pursuit of satisfaction. It is not surprising, then, that some religions use the term *save my soul*, but equally do not use the term *save my spirit*.

This distinction is oftentimes confused when teachers begin to focus on increasing the spiritual aspects of their practices in working with children. In searching to enhance the spiritual dimension of their teaching some teachers use soft music, silence and solitude, fragrances and such like to infuse the classroom in ways that are designed to relax children. While such practices are not in any way discouraged, it is suggested that primarily these address the soul aspect, rather than necessarily heightening spiritual awareness.

Interestingly, the debate about spiritual and soul dimensions of learning and teaching is now traversing many areas of educational literature. These include ideas such as Gardner's intrapersonal intelligence (1983), Goleman's emotional intelligence (1995), Miller's (1994) contemplative practitioner, participatory consciousness (Heshusius, 1994), and enactive cognition (Davis & Sumara, 1997). Many of these ideas are now common in educational research in mainstream scholarly journals. In acknowledging this development, Suhor (1999) makes the point that "[t]hese connections have contributed to ever-expanding conceptions of the universe and of the brain, mind, and spirit of the learner" (p. 13). Nevertheless, the distinction between soul and spirit is not often clearly demarcated in many of these theories and practices.

LEARNING FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

The idea that the whole child should be the focus of learning is not in any way new. Holistic education, in its many guises, has promoted the idea of the interconnectedness of the learner with their sense of individuality and identity, environment, teacher, subject matter, and place. Dewey (1957) wrote that:

the supreme task of all political institutions ... shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society (p. 186).

Dewey's comments are important for at least two reasons. First, as Darling-Hammond (1997) wrote, "[e]ducation should be a source of nurturance for the spirit as well as a means of reaching understanding" (p.?). Our national interest in developing knowledge and skills is, at best, supported by a desire that learners demonstrate healthy attitudes toward these. However, this is insufficient in that while the spiritual dimension is inevitably present, it is essentially ignored. Why this is so is probably best explained perhaps by teachers' fear of crossing the secular boundary, fear of being seen to be advocating particular beliefs or practices, and fear of not personally understanding the spiritual dimension of self - as teacher and teaching and learning.

Secondly, Dewey's comments support the principle that all learning ought to be relational or provide meaningful connections. "Learning does not happen when the subject is disconnected from the learner's life" (Palmer, 1999b, p. 9). The notion of relationality or relational connectedness is central to achieving a deeper understanding of self as a unique individual with physical, emotional, social, cognitive, affective, and spiritual capacities. In this light, I propose at least five kinds of relational connectedness which are central to learning.

- a. **Meaningfulness and purposefulness**
Both meaningfulness and purposefulness are essential prerequisites for deep learning to occur. Without meaningfulness, learning becomes disconnected from the realities of learners. Without purposefulness, learning becomes task-driven by requirements rather than being motivated by an intrinsic hunger to resolve the unknown and to connect with the new.
- b. **Relational identity: connectedness with others**
Relational connectedness also refers to receiving the deeper inner

understandings that come from establishing, experiencing, and maintaining relationships with others as individuals or as meaningful groups. The experience of such connectedness through relationship provides an increased sense of place, belongingness, and identity within the learner.

- c. **Relational identity: connectedness with place**
The deeper knowings resulting from relational connectedness with place, nature, and environment, also help forge the learner's sense of identity and belongingness. *Whakapapa* provides one example of this. This sense of relationality or relational connectedness includes not only the knowing about one's place with the land, and recalling memories associated with that place, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the spiritual connections (personal, collective, localised) to this place. Such a concept of relational connectedness to place, while perhaps uncomfortable for some, nevertheless is a widely shared phenomenon and is not necessarily ethnically exclusive. Such spiritual connections not only affirm belongingness but may be associated with a range of emotions such as a sense of inner peace, joy, and delight which, in turn, enhance the soul.
- d. **Relational identity: connectedness with creation**
For some, the experience at times of awe and wonderment at that which is present in nature and the environment around them is pleasurable in itself and serves to feed the soul. The experience of appreciating the aesthetics of nature, the beauty of landscape, and so on, registers emotions which are pleasurable to the soul. As one gleans a sense of the awe of mysteries we cannot yet unravel, the sense of what Einstein (1954) terms "the mystery of life's eternity ... (and the) marvellous structure of existence" (p.?), then the individual begins to connect with the spiritual. For others, the experience of awe and wonderment at that which is created around them is attributed to some higher power, which, in turn, establishes relational identity connectedness for individuals.
- e. **Relational identity: connectedness with self**
Through their adventures and interactions, children experience and learn to understand and master their changing physical, cognitive, social, linguistic, and emotional demands. Through mastery of each of these domains, children create a sense of self-identity. They also come to identify the great questions, and may seek to resolve them while ensuring that they remain central in those solutions. Likewise, as children explore their personal understandings about the spiritual dimension, "the spark of life that resides within" (Oládélé, 1999, p. 62), and while at the same time are "training ... the human soul" (Pandit, n.d.), their sense of identity formation is enhanced.

The fundamental importance of the notion of spirit, then, relates to the relational connectedness. Relational connectedness helps people to know and to understand more about themselves. The process of engaging in relational connectedness invariably begins to raise the mysteries about an individual's *beingness* — the mystery of life. As an individual confronts this revelation about *beingness*, so too are they likely to encounter the range of 'big' questions about humanity and the wonderment of existence itself (Einstein, 1953). Through these engagements, the individual's sense of identity is continually moulded and nurtured. Identity formation is clarified within multiple scenarios of relational connectedness — with self, with others, with place, with the world around them, and with that which they do not yet understand or comprehend. Through such relational connectedness, it is suggested, people's sense of autonomy and self-determination can be realised, and their creative capabilities released. As this is the case for students, so too is it for teachers.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TEACHERS?

Suhor (1994) makes the point that "[s]pirituality grows in classrooms when teachers see themselves as agents of joy and conduits for transcendence, rather than merely as licensed trainers or promoters of measurable growth" (p. 16).

Certainly, it seems important that the notions of what it means to be a *whole* teacher deserve more thorough research investigation. The principle remains for teachers as it does for students -- all teaching ought to be relational and this is facilitated by making meaningful connections. Innovative teachers, it is claimed, more often than not, recognise the importance of relational and meaningful connections. And they recognise this not only in their teaching acts as teachers, but

as necessarily requisite in the person as teacher. In essence, relationally-connected teaching, then, is an expression of the innermost person, revealing and honouring the spiritual dimensions of both teacher and student. Following are some possible indicators of spirit-aware teaching and the spirit-aware teacher.

- a. The spirit-aware teacher seeks inwardly and outwardly for meaningfulness and purposefulness, in their life as teacher and in their role as teacher. The spirit-aware teacher does not falter even in the presence of the 'big' questions; nor does their hunger to try and comprehend and resolve such great questions in their own lives.
- b. The spirit-aware teacher experiences relational identity connectedness with others such that they become more knowing about others and themselves. Teaching is inevitably relational, demanding that teachers understand what and how secure and appreciative connections can be established between themselves and their learners.

Likewise, the spirit-aware teacher demonstrates and models behaviour, beliefs, and attitudes which reflect the degree to which they as individuals have engaged in relational connectedness with others and allowed such experiences to register new understandings about themselves as unique and autonomous individuals.

- c. The spirit-aware teacher seeks to establish relational identity connectedness with place, including the spiritual sense of knowing where one belongs. Spirit-aware teaching leads learners to deeper appreciations about their sense of place, and connectedness to this place.

Likewise, the spirit-aware teacher will know and continue to seek as an individual that sense of connectedness with their place and belongingness. Through this relational connectedness with place and belongingness, the teacher as person is able to enhance their sense of identity.

- d. The spirit-aware teacher experiences relational identity connectedness with creation, and is able to express and attribute awe and wonderment about that which is around them. Spirit-aware teaching engages learners in not only the revelation of knowledge, but also in the expression of awe and wonderment at the significance of such knowledge and that which remains mysterious.

The spirit-aware teacher equally will share such an engagement in their personal life on the one hand appreciating with awe, respect, and even reverence that which is created around them, and continuing to contemplate their own connectedness to life and creation.

- e. The spirit-aware teacher establishes and affirms relational identity connectedness with self such that they understand not only what they do, what they think, what they feel, and what they believe but also experience the inner sense of belongingness with self. Ultimately, teachers are concerned with enabling students to become autonomous, self-determining, and fulfilled citizens. Spirit-aware teaching, therefore, must promote in learners the sense of connectedness with oneself — a sense of harmony with one's own self.

Such a responsibility is associated with a commitment that teachers themselves are consciously affirming their connectedness with self and seeking self-improvement. Colin McCahon, teacher and perhaps New Zealand's most famous artist, saw this need for self-improvement as a person so that he could be a better artist:

I must say, I do feel pleased about the last paintings... they were good... Now, I just can't paint. This last summer's series just wore me out. The next lot has to be better and I just don't feel capable of being better yet. I have the awful problem now of being a better person before I can paint better (Simpson, 2001, p. 105).

SPIRIT-AWARENESS AND TEACHER EDUCATION

Having said this, however, teacher education programmes show increasing signs of undervaluing the development of the liberal dimensions of student teachers. Liberal studies provide, at least for some teachers, a unique opportunity to explore not only their talents and skills as individuals, but to think about and centre on their own inner selves.

Sadly, over the last two decades there has been a radical decline in the perceived importance of liberal studies and studies for personal

development in preservice teacher education programmes in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Part of this may be attributable to the expansion in scope of the curriculum that teachers, and especially primary teachers, are now required to learn to teach. Not only do student teachers now spend less and little time on their personal development in the arts, but the widening scope of the curriculum means that the amount of study time devoted to understanding and learning to teach the arts curriculum is now extremely minimal, at best (Gibbs, 2003, p. 7).

Recovering liberal studies in teacher education programmes may be a small start. So, too, might be new orientations towards preparing the ways in which student teachers learn to exercise increased autonomy over viewing their world. John Ruskin, one of the greatest figures of the Victorian age, poet, artist, critic, social revolutionary and conservationist says that "[t]he whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye" (Hewison, 2000, p. 80). Such a contemplation about the artist may well have parallels in how we ought to be considering teacher education.

In one unique programme of teacher education, teachers are trained to experience contemplative observation from a Buddhist perspective and to apply this into the act of teaching (Brown, 1999). "Contemplative teaching begins by knowing and experiencing ourselves directly. We unlearn how we habitually think, sense, and feel so that we can return to the present moment freshly and clearly" (p. 70). In the process, perceptual exercises are used to help teachers learn to awaken their hearing before they observe and teach.

Palmer's Teacher Formation Program which is designed to help teachers explore their inner lives (including their spirit) and how this relates to their teaching has been instrumental in bringing about change. Teachers who participated in this program reported that they felt:

more grounded in their selfhood, more at home in their own lives, less likely to burn out and more likely to flourish. Second, they feel they are better teachers, able to see their students for who they are and to respond to them in life-giving ways. Third, they feel that they are better citizens of their

own workplaces, able to deal with conflict from a place of peace, to advocate for change from a place of hope (Palmer, 1999b, p. 11).

In the same way that we acknowledge the inner world of the teacher, so too ought we consider the inner world of the child. Russell, in her introduction to *Teacher*, explains Ashton-Warner's view that teaching that is imposed from without interferes with integration, and it is upon the integrated personality that everything is built. Ashton-Warner herself puts it this way:

We've lost the gracious movement from the inside outward... There is a common bridge for a child of any race and of more moment than any other: the bridge from the inner world outward. And that is what organic teaching is ... Without it we get this one-patterned mind (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 9-10).

When we consider what it means to be a spirit-aware teacher who is nurturing spirit-aware learners, and to teach and learn with an appreciation of the spiritual dimension, the literature and substantive research is sparse. There are inherent risks — the risk that over-zealous enthusiastic teachers will breach the code of respecting the individuality of people's personal beliefs, and the risk of parental reaction and concern, to name just two. Nevertheless, the journey of exploration is worthwhile if we are to promote a generation of spirit-aware teachers and spirit-aware students.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper titled "At school I have no time to dream... Spirit of the teacher and learner: Learning and teaching for spiritual development", was presented at the Conference of the Teacher Education Forum of Aotearoa-New Zealand, Auckland, July 2004.
- ² Correspondence should be addressed to Professor Colin Gibbs, School of Education Te Kura Matāuranga, Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland, New Zealand colin.gibbs@aut.ac.nz
- ³ This source and date of this quotation is unknown, but the quotation itself is well-known. Retrieved 18 August 2005 (<http://www.dailycelebrations.com/081800.htm>)