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THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING AND THE CURRICULUM: SOME EDUCATORS' VIEWS

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'Spirituality' continues to be an elusive term, with many attempts being made to define it (for an overview, see Fisher 2000). For quite some time, spiritual aspects of educating the whole child have featured in the core of the curriculum in the United Kingdom (Office for Standards in Education 1994) and have been discussed in relation to education and the health of young people in American schools (e.g. Banks 1980; Banks, Poehler & Russell 1984; Bellingham, Cohen, Jones & Spaniol 1989; Goodloe & Arreola 1992; Hjelm & Johnson 1996); but the notion of spiritual development of children first appeared in official Australian curriculum documents in 1994 (Australian Education Council and Board of Studies). Since that time further discussion has taken place in Australia about spirituality and adolescents' health (Gehrig 1998; Stanton, Willis & Balanda 2000) and its relationship to values education (Wallace 2000).

I have been concerned about the meaning of 'spirituality' and 'spiritual well-being' used in these contexts, and thus have faced the challenge to find out what educators perceive 'spirituality' to mean, how it relates to health, the nature of spiritual health, and the implications of a concern for spiritual health in children and adolescents for the school curriculum. My study inquired into one aspect of students' spirituality, namely how well it was reflected in their spiritual health and well-being. Ninety seven school staff were interviewed, drawn from 22 secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The schools from which the staff were drawn included state (4), Catholic (4), and other non-government schools (14), with the latter including Aboriginal, Islamic, Jewish and Steiner schools; and the staff included people in such roles as the principal, curriculum coordinator, chaplain or Religious Education (RE) coordinator, and student welfare coordinator.

The selected staff participated in semi-structured interviews, ranging in length from 45-90 minutes. Some ice-breaking questions related to the key features of the respondents' school and their opinion of the most important life goals held by students in the school. These questions were followed by questions relating to the respondents' personal background, then those related to their description of spirituality, how it relates to health, who they thought should be responsible for young people's spiritual well-being, their perception of what place spiritual health should have in the school curriculum, where it should be included, and how students' spiritual health/well-being can be measured and promoted.

From the educators' responses, the following definition of spiritual health was derived:

- a. Spiritual health is a fundamental dimension of people's overall health and well-being, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health (i.e. the physical, mental, emotional, social and vocational).

- b. Spiritual health is a dynamic state of being, shown by the extent to which people live in harmony within relationships in the following domains of spiritual well-being:
- Personal domain (wherein one intra-relates with oneself with regards to meaning, purpose and values in life. The human spirit creates self-awareness, relating to self-esteem and identity)
  - Communal domain (as expressed in the quality and depth of inter-personal relationships, between self and others, relating to morality, culture and religion. This includes love, justice, hope & faith in humanity)
  - Environmental domain (past care and nurture for the physical and biological, to a sense of awe and wonder; for some, the notion of unity with the environment)
  - Transcendental domain (Relationship of self with some-thing or some-One beyond the human level, i.e. ultimate concern, cosmic force, transcendent reality, or God. This involves faith toward, adoration and worship of, the source of Mystery of the universe).
- (modified from Fisher 1998, p. 191)

The quality or rightness of relationship in each domain is an expression of a person's spiritual well-being in that domain. An individual's spiritual health is indicated by the combined effect of spiritual well-being in each of the domains embraced by the individual. A model of spiritual health drawn from this definition can be found in Fisher (2000).

People differ in the priority they place on the four sets of relationships to nurture their spiritual well-being. Their world-views filter the knowledge aspect of the four domains of spiritual well-being, whereas their beliefs filter the inspirational aspects of (that is, the essence of and motivation for) each of the domains of spiritual well-being. Four main groupings of people can be identified by my model:

1. *Personalists* are people who feel spiritually contented by developing clear meaning, purpose and values in their lives without the need for spiritual connection with other people, the environment, or some-thing or some-one beyond themselves.
2. *Communalists* are people who build on and build up the Personal aspects of spiritual well-being by embracing morality, culture and the interpersonal aspects of religion.
3. *Environmentalists* are people who build up and build on the previous two domains by connecting harmoniously with nature.
4. *Globalists* are people who embrace the other three domains as well as a relationship with a Transcendent Other (however that may be defined).

Some people focus on a particular domain to the exclusion of other relationships, for example the so-called “Greenies” who appear to care more for the environment than for their own or others’ well-being. So-called *Transcendentalists* are those who focus on relationship with a Transcendent Other to the exclusion of the other sets of relationships for spiritual well-being. Another group of people, called *Rationalists*, are willing to embrace the knowledge aspects of ‘spiritual’ well-being, but not the inspirational aspects.

EDUCATORS’ PERSONAL VIEWS OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH

A classification of the 97 educators’ views of spiritual health is presented in Table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

When the educators in the state schools (those indicated with ‘S’ in Table 1) were considered as a group, their personal views of spiritual well-being, compared with the whole sample, were rated more highly as Rationalists, Personalists, and Communalists; and markedly less as Globalists. This was not surprising, considering that half of these educators expressed no religious affiliation. The educators in the other non-government schools (those indicated with

‘N’) expressed mixed views of spiritual health, with proportionately less Globalists and slightly more Communalists and Environmentalists than in the whole sample. As would be expected, the educators from Catholic (indicated as ‘C’) and other Christian schools (indicated as ‘T’) contained the greatest share of the Globalists. The RE coordinators, with one exception, were classified as Globalist, including ‘relationship with God’ in their personal view of spiritual well-being.

During the interviews it became obvious that the personal views of spiritual health held by some of the educators were not those they were espousing in the curriculum. Some of the interviewees commented that their ideals could not be realised due to restrictions placed on them by the school’s ethos, principles of operation, or time constraints.

EDUCATORS’ MAJOR CURRICULUM CONCERNS RELATED TO SPIRITUAL HEALTH

Not only were there variations in the personal views of educators, there were also marked differences in their perception of the importance of spiritual health to the curriculum.

Careful reflective analysis of the transcripts was used to determine what the educators considered to be the greatest concern or focus needed to be included in the curriculum to promote student spiritual well-being. During the initial analysis of the transcripts of the first 54 interviews, my thinking about major curriculum concerns was limited to the four sets of relationships related to spiritual well-being, namely with *Self*, *Others*, *Environment* and *the Transcendent*. Each educator’s response to the interview question relating to the rank ordering of the four relationships was used as the basis for assigning major curriculum concern. When attempting to classify each educator’s major concern for spiritual health in the curriculum by assigning it to one of the four areas, it soon became clear that two further categories were needed: 1) *Self & Others*, to allow for a shared concern in the two areas; and 2) *All Equal*, for when the interviewee considered the four relationships to be of equal importance.

These six categories provided a reasonable fit of the data for the first 54 cases. However, I had some misgivings about the *Environment* focus, as it seemed somewhat isolated from the rest of the data; and the *All Equal* focus did not appear to tie the four relationships together satisfactorily. When the remaining 43 cases were added, a new idea seemed to leap out of the much richer data. What should have been an obvious notion – *Wholeness* – encompassed the views previously listed in *Environment* and *All Equal*, together with a few others which had been sitting precariously elsewhere.

The data reinforced the importance of three subsets of *Self*: *meaning*, *purpose*, and *values*. But two additional factors became evident – *self-esteem* and *peace*. The data also supported the inclusion, together with *relationships*, of *ethics/morals*, *culture*, and *religion* as subsets of *Others*. The only *Transcendent Other* referred to by the educators in this study was *God* (whether Allah, Yahweh, or Father God). Two subsets of *Wholeness* were apparent: 1) the teachers who embraced God as part of their view (w); and 2) those who sought wholeness from a humanistic perspective, or, acknowledged God’s existence, or included religion, but, not a personal relationship with God (w’).

The major curriculum concerns which resulted are summarised in the left hand column of Table 2.

--- Table 2 about here ---

Table 2 demonstrates that the Personalists had an expected major curriculum focus on *Self*. The Communalists were mainly focussed on *Others*, with some key interest in *Self*. The Environmentalists were focussed on *Wholeness (w')*. The Globalists spread their interests over the four sets of relationships, most of them being focussed on the *Transcendent Other* or *Wholeness (w)*. The majority of the educators in the Globalist category, who had as their major curriculum concern either *Transcendent Other* or *Wholeness (w)*, fell into the Transcendentalist category mentioned earlier in this paper, under Ideal types. None of the Rationalists, Personalists, Communalists and Environmentalists had a curriculum focus on the *Transcendent Other*, which was to be expected as their personal view of spiritual well-being excluded consideration of such an entity.

When the curriculum focus was analysed for the different educators, the seven chaplains were all focused on the *Transcendent Other* or *Wholeness (w)*, as were six of the eight RE coordinators. In contrast, all ten welfare coordinators were focused on the areas of human concern (*self*, *others* and *wholeness*) without the assistance of a *Transcendent Other*.

Even though people go to great lengths to draw philosophical distinctions between spirituality and religion (Fisher 2000, pp. 40f), nearly half the people in this study (total n=97) stated that relationship with God (n=28 for *Transcendent Other* and n=12 for *Wholeness (w)*) and religion (n=5), from the *Others'* category, were their major curriculum concerns for promoting students' spiritual well-being.

It is not surprising that education in, and about, religion should feature so highly in the views of these educators, as 77% of them came from schools with a religious ethos, although only 36% of secondary school students attended such schools in Victoria in 1994 (Association of Independent Schools of Victoria 1996).

THE PERCEIVED PLACE OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH IN THE CURRICULUM

All the educators in this study indicated that spiritual health had a place in the school curriculum, and more than two-thirds of them expressed the view that spiritual health should be integral to all areas of the curriculum. This view is supported by the development of Christian resources for the subjects of the curriculum by the *Charis Project* of the Stapleford Centre in the U.K., reported by Smith (1999, p. 30): "It has been important...to ensure that [the materials] promote spiritual and moral development in the subject being taught, forming a valid part of the task for which the teachers of the subject are being paid..."

The school staff in the present survey who wanted spiritual health included in core and/or specific curriculum subjects did so for two main reasons:

1. The nature of the content: where the focus was seen to be on areas different from the traditional academic fare, focusing on religious education, or faith; and
2. Life experience and quality of staff.

This second concern was a key one for more than half the principals and the chaplains, who raised this issue in the context of the suitability of teachers nurturing spiritual well-being in young people. Examining what makes RE teachers special, Rymarz (1997, p.16) emphasised two special skills: "The need to witness what is being taught and the ability to transmit a sense and understanding (of) culture and the Christian's place within this culture." Liddy (1999, p.36) reinforced the important influence of teachers' personal beliefs and values with the statement that "research has shown just how basically teachers' spirituality shapes their whole subject orientation."

All the chaplains agreed that spiritual health should not be integral to all areas of the curriculum. This less-than-integral approach was also supported by a number of RE teachers and coordinators, who had a major curriculum focus on the *Transcendent Other*. Some other Christian school staff, concerned with *Wholeness*, countered this separatist view with discussion of the integral curriculum they actually use in their schools. Although their integral curriculum model would not be acceptable in secular state schools, it could well find acceptance in other schools with a religious affiliation.

Educators in the Catholic schools surveyed expressed an holistic concern about education for spiritual health. More than 80% of them wanted to see spiritual health integral to all areas of the curriculum. This is in contrast to the state school educators who were Rationalists and Personalists, who saw their focus on the individual (*Self*) being most appropriately placed integral to the curriculum in nurturing students' spiritual well-being.

CURRICULUM CO-ORDINATORS' VIEWS OF THE IMPACT OF RELIGION ON SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

There were obvious variations both across and within the four school types as to where spiritual health fitted, but about one third of the total staff interviewed thought that it should be in core studies like religious education.

When the 19 curriculum coordinators were asked about the role of religion in promoting spiritual health, only six responded. Others might have thought this issue had been adequately covered by their responses to previous questions, as only 15% of the curriculum coordinators supported spiritual health being in core and/or specific areas of the curriculum. The vast majority (85%) thought it should be integral to the whole curriculum. All three of the state school teachers who responded were positive about including religion in their curricula, in the form of comparative religious studies included as appropriate in the Humanities, in Studies Of Society & Environment (SOSE), or in literature studies. Of the three other educators from Christian schools who responded, one spoke of Christian Education as a core study, one had comparative religions in Years 7 and 8 (12-14 year olds), and the third had Christian Education at junior levels with some study of other religions through the *Texts and Traditions* unit at the VCE level (secondary school leaving age, about 17 years).

In his report of a recent survey of Religious Education in state and independent schools in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, Vardy (1997, p. 6) contended that religion should touch all parts of life and as such a "whole school" approach to this area is vital. In his view, "it is essential that the spiritual side of students is taken seriously" (p. 8). To this end, Vardy suggested that "Religious Education that is entirely cognitive and ignores the spiritual dimension does not deserve the name" (p. 8). Vardy made some practical suggestions which could be taken seriously within the non-government school sector in Australia. But *The Education Act 1958* limits Religious Education in state schools in Victoria to 30 minutes a week, which would not allow the "whole school, across-the-curriculum" approach Vardy proposed, even if teachers and parents wanted it. Such legislation raises questions as to how well the spiritual health of students can be nurtured in secular state schools, if the religious aspect of the Communal domain is restricted and the Faith aspect of the Global domain is effectively ignored. Within this context, then, how do teachers believe that spiritual well-being can be nurtured?

THE PROMOTION OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH

When the educators were asked the general question (G9), "How do you promote student spiritual health/well-being in this school?", eighteen factors emerged, as listed in Table 3.

--- Table 3 about here ---

When the interviewees were asked a more specific question (G10), “How do you encourage students to develop positive relationships with: a. themselves; b. other people; c. something/some-One beyond the human level; d. the environment?”, differences were observed, as reflected in the rank order of importance for the 18 factors on the right-hand side of Table 3. The combined answers to questions G9 and G10 were considered more appropriate for use in discussion, as the extra question elicited more information, adding greater depth to the responses of the interviewee.

It was not surprising to find that the educators’ personal characteristics, such as their approach to teaching, the way they lived life (Teacher model) and their enhancement of interpersonal relations, were perceived to have greatest import in nurturing students’ spiritual well-being (Fisher 1999). The specific religious activities featured among the top ten factors, would be most effectively undertaken by teachers with suitable life experiences from which they could draw to encourage students in the development of these areas. In other words, it is difficult, if not impossible, to meaningfully teach anything, especially related to spirituality or religious studies, if one has not experienced it. Again, it was not surprising that these religious factors were rated highly in this study because of the high percentage of interviewees drawn from schools with a religious ethos.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL IN FOSTERING SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING

All but one respondent (a state school principal) expressed the opinion that the Principal’s role was extremely important (88%), or fairly important (10%) in setting the tone to nurture the spiritual well-being of students and staff in a school. By giving priority, encouraging staff and students, being the leader, and selecting staff, the principal effectively decides the extent to which the spiritual health of the school body will be considered on the school’s agenda. Several interviewees commented that principals can have either a positive or negative effect, depending on the quality of life they model to the students and staff of their schools, as well as the tone and content of messages conveyed to people, whether one-on-one or via assemblies. These findings are consistent with Vardy’s comments that “unless the Head feels passionately that Values and Religious Education ‘matters’ in the school” (Vardy 1997, p. 8) it is very unlikely to occur “although the enthusiasm and commitment of many of the teaching staff is also a crucial factor”.

SUMMARY

The nurturance of spiritual well-being in a school depends on a number of factors. The level of support of the principal has a major influence. Whether the staff have adequate background knowledge, the lived reality of a vibrant faith, and/or the capacity to inspire their students in their search for meaning in life, are perceived to impact on the religious component of students’ spiritual development. School educators can more effectively guide students in this area and in their learning for life as they develop a greater appreciation of their students’ level of understanding of, and their commitment to building up, the four sets of relationships which can constitute their spiritual well-being. As Hill (1998) has commented, “the often-unarticulated cry of today’s youth is for a curriculum which... offers them something to live by” (p. 18), which will help them “interrogate their own cultural conditioning” (p. 21).

The challenge for any school concerned about the realm of spiritual well-being is to ponder carefully the implications of these research findings, and to plot a course of action which will more effectively nurture aspects of the spiritual well-being of both its students and staff so as

to positively impact on the quality of life experienced, and expressed in the school communities.

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Table 1: Personal view of spiritual well-being by educator type.

Educator type n	Personal view of spiritual well-being				
	Rationalist	Personalist	Communalist	Environ- mentalist	Globalist
Principal/ Deputy Principal 22	3S		S T* N*	2N	4C 10T
Curriculum co-ordinator 19	2S T	C	S C* 2T* N*	S	2C 7T
Welfare coordinator 10	S	2S	S N*		2C 3T
Chaplain 7					S 6T
RE Coordinator/ teacher 8			C*		4C 3T
English/ Humanities Coordinator 6			S S* T	S	C T
Other heads of department 17	S	S	C	S	12C 11T
Other teachers 8	T		S* T*		3T 2N
Total 97	9	4	17	5	62

Educators indicated by their school type: S = state; C = Catholic; T = other Christian; N = other non-government.

* indicates view centred on religion, (religious) beliefs, religious/Gospel values, or religious tradition; but not embracing a relationship with God, or a Transcendent Other.

Table 2: Details of major curriculum concern by educators' personal views of spiritual well-being.

<i>Individual's Major Curriculum concern</i> <i>n</i>	Personal view of spiritual well-being				
	Rationalist n=9	Personalist n=4	Communi- st n=17	Environ- mentalist n=5	Globalist n=62
<i>Self</i> 18					
Self-esteem	1.5S	S	1.5S		C T
Peace	1.5S T	2S	C		2C T
Meaning, purpose, values	0.5S		T		2T
<i>Others</i> 30					
Relations	1.5S		0.5T		3T
Ethics/morals	S T		3.5S C 2T 2N		3C T N
Culture			N		T 2N
Religion			S C 1.5T		2T
<i>Transcendent Other</i> 28					
God					S 6C 20T N
<i>Wholeness</i> 21					
w' (without God)	S	C		3S 2N	C T
w (with God)					2C 10T

Educators indicated by their school type: S = state; C = Catholic; T = other Christian; N = other non-government.

NB A “.5” in the results indicates some interviewees' concern was shared over two areas.

Table 3: Factors perceived by educators as important for the promotion of spiritual health.

Factors derived from Answers to question G9	Rank order	% of educators	Factors derived from answers to G9+G10	Rank order	% of educators
Teacher approach	1	41	Teacher approach	1	53
Relation to others	2	33	Relation to others	2	51
Devotions	3	31	Teacher model	3	43
Religious services	4	27	Devotions	4	41
Teacher model	5	25	Environmental awareness	5	36
Discussions	5	25	Religious values	6	34
Religious classes	7	24	Religious classes	7	32
Relation with God	8	22	Discussions	8	31
Home group/ Pastoral Care	8	22	Relation with God	9	30
Religious values	10	21	Religious services	9	30
Self-talk	11	20	Self-talk	9	30
Personal development	12	13	Home group/ Pastoral Care	12	28
Assemblies	12	13	Conflict resolution	13	26
Discipline	14	10	Personal development	14	23
Environmental awareness	15	9	Discipline	15	22
Conflict resolution	16	8	Assemblies	16	15
Outreach	17	4	Environmental awe	17	8
Environmental awe	18	1	Outreach	18	7