Children’s spirituality in social context: a South African example

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This discussion presents a critical and thorough review of spirituality in Religion Education in the South African context. In the democratic South African education system issues such as personal well-being, spirituality and multi-religion education are confronting teachers and learners who have to cope with a new approach to religion in education and life skills. It is not quite clear whether teachers understand the concept of children’s spirituality as outlined in the policy document Religion and education. As the purpose of schooling should also be to promote human well-being or personal wellness, and education for life, the curriculum should reflect the priorities of life in general, and the values of a society in particular. For many years curricula in religion education in South Africa had no indication or any content concerning spirituality per se. In this article, the understanding of spirituality, especially in its different social and economic contexts, in the school curriculum and the challenges thereof will be discussed.

Keywords: Social context; Life orientation programmes; Non-religious spirituality

Introduction

I would like to start this article with a quotation from one of the most remarkable and well-known painters in South Africa, Fr Frans Claerhout:

During my years in Africa spirituality was the driving force of soul and beauty and fallibility … The Africa sun supplied warmth to my spirituality, made it human, gave it life force … Africa fashioned my spirituality so that I can go to God through others, with others. (Du Toit, 1996, p. viii)

The following issues will be outlined to demonstrate the context of the above quote:

● A critical and thorough review of spirituality in religious and religion education in the South African context, past and present.

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The new approach to personal well-being: is that spirituality?
The social context and spirituality: an educational approach.

A critical and thorough review of spirituality in religion education in the South African context

Before 1994

Children’s spirituality has been one of the most interesting and widely debated topics in education and especially in Life Orientation programmes and Religion Education\(^1\) in South Africa since 2003 with the publication of the policy document Religion and education (2003). In the previous dispensation, before the democratic elections in 1994, the only options in handling children’s spirituality were either through Bible Education\(^2\) or Religious Education classes. In South Africa, Religious Education was defined as a single-faith confessional moral education programme. In the period 1960–1970 it was also understood as a form of catechism in Christianity in many schools (Rossouw, 1995, p. 2; Roux, 1998). Religious education in all the different provincial departments of education prior to 1994 was mainly a confessional Christian National Education approach (Roux, 1997, 1998), which alienated many South Africans from different religious and cultural groups. Non-religious learners or non-Christian learners were exempted from the religious education classes. Private religious schools, however, could teach their own religious conduct.

Spirituality was never mentioned as a concept for facilitation or teaching in the curriculum. Spirituality was also never given an opportunity to develop as a new approach in Christian, Bible or moral education, as, for example, in Britain, in the Education Reform Act 1987 (Watson, 1987) and developments thereafter (Best, 2000, p. 27). In South Africa spirituality is still discussed mainly in the context of theology in general. Spirituality was and is still seen as a religious domain within a religious institution. The same notion occurs in comparing spiritual development with religious development and spirituality with religion, as argued in some British literature (Hay, 1999; Thatcher, 1999; Drees, 2000; King, 2002).

Spirituality and the reflection of learners on their spirituality and/or religion was never part of any religious education curriculum in South African schools. The effect was that spirituality, in the broader sense of understanding religion and personal wellness from a holistic point of view, was not part of any school or tertiary curriculum or teachers’ training programme. A thorough examination of the curricula for religious education in schools, prior to 1997\(^3\) and 2003\(^4\) showed that content was mainly linked to values and morals in the religious society and embedded in the teacher’s own religious views. In public schools mainly Christian values from the religious education curriculum were presented and discussed. The result was that learners never questioned the validity of certain values and morals in a changing or non-religious society, nor worldviews other than their own. Spirituality was also never seen as part of moral education and learners were not exposed to the opportunity to become spiritual in a broader sense, except from a Christian religious point of view.
One may argue that spirituality was regarded only as part of the religious worshipping components within the whole-school curriculum.

After 1994

Since the democratic elections in 1994, a new education model has been adopted. Outcomes-based education, with eight learning areas, forms the basis of the new curriculum. In *Curriculum 2005* (1997) and the *Revised National Curriculum statement* (2002) outcomes and assessment standards were provided for all learning areas for grades R–9. The guidelines for the curriculum and learning areas for the Further Education and Training phase (grades 10–12) have been finalized for most of the learning areas and subjects. This new phase will be implemented in 2006. These outcomes and assessment standards form the core of the curriculum of the different learning areas. The learning area Life Orientation as a fundamental in the school curriculum consists of four major elements, namely personal well-being; citizenship education; recreation and physical activity; and careers and career choices.

It is, however, interesting to note that the concept spirituality was removed from both the first drafts on education and the curriculum (*Curriculum 2005*, 1997) and did not surface in the later policy documents or revised curricula (*Revised National Curriculum statement*, 2002). I believe that the obvious reason is the lack of knowledge of the meaning and opportunities spiritual development requires from teachers and in teachers’ training. Another question that arose is whether the evasion of the term spirituality was meant to avoid confrontation within the academic, education and public domains. Although whole-child development is a fundamental approach both in Outcomes-based education and the curriculum (*Revised National Curriculum statement*, 2002), there was still no discourse, rigorous critique or discussions on spirituality in education. It still seems to be still a theological and religious domain.

Outcomes 2 and 3 (grades 3–9) in the learning area Life Orientation in the curriculum are the only outcomes where an awareness and a holistic approach to education and spirituality can be facilitated in the understanding of social and personal development. However, in principle, spirituality, just like wellness, is significant in all the outcomes as assessment standards of the Life Orientation learning area. In the Further Education and Training-band outcomes 1–4 deal with personal well-being. The concept of spirituality was only mentioned in grade 11 as part of the competence descriptions and described as follows: ‘debate a wide range of contemporary moral and spiritual issues’ (National Curriculum Statement [Life Orientation Subject Guidelines], 2005). There are no guidelines for teachers on how to handle these spiritual issues or what it entails. In the assessment reports on Curriculum 2005 (*National Curriculum statement*, 2002) it seems that spirituality was confused with aspects of mysticism in religions only, and not with the holistic approach that is generally understood in academic circles (Watson, in Carr & Haldane, 2003, p. 157). Another reason may be that the political and social public debate against multi-religion education at that time urged the curriculum designers to change the wording to a less controversial (then) issue.
At present and with the implementation and functioning of the outcomes-based model, the education perspective shifts from *indoctrination* in values and beliefs to *information* about values and beliefs—from a *product-orientation* to a *process-orientation* model. Why, then, was there a change in the educational approach in South Africa after 1994? The main reason was to engage in a holistic approach to learners from all societal structures for the sake of personal and educational development. The previous South African social structure was crumbling and learners from different cultural and religious environments could now attend the school of their choice. The normalization of society supported the idea of a holistic approach to personal development and education. However, disparities in social structures and the differences between economically advanced and economically deprived schools are still a huge problem, and there is no solution in the near future.

One must argue that learners should develop a sense of critical enquiry and engage intelligently to understand their own questions on humanity, society, truth and meaning. They need to engage in dialogue on values, worldviews, belief systems, economics, themselves, the environment and most of all, their own spirituality. They should engage in religious and spiritual questions in an informed, sensitive and intelligent manner. The multicultural South African society, with its social and economic differences, therefore urges teachers to facilitate the concept of spirituality in social context and in everyday life for the benefit of their learners. Although spirituality is not named as a specific concept in the outcomes in the Life Orientation programmes, there is a desire that in-service and pre-service teachers’ programmes will be equipped with these notions to empower them to facilitate learners in schools. However, the question is: *Are teachers in Life Orientation programmes aware of the fact that children need to engage in dialogue on issues where they should understand their personal life stances, different beliefs, value systems and spirituality?*

**Defining spirituality in a social context**

The reason for arguing for a definition of spirituality in social context is that the ambiguity of the concept *spirituality* creates so many different points of departure. The arguments in the definitions of the term seem to be rightfully embedded in a specific theoretical notion. It is, however, also interesting to note that many arguments and definitions on spirituality originate from a religious frame of reference. Drees (2000) argues that spirituality ‘is not only how we think about God, but also how we see ourselves and our responsibilities, how we live with our failures and accept life’s darker sides’. King agrees that there are many definitions for spirituality, and takes another line by asking if spirituality should not be declared in what it *does* instead of what it *means* (King, 2002). Kourie (in Du Toit, 1995 p. 3) emphasizes the fact that, for many people, spirituality ‘is identified with piety or otherworldliness’. He argues that this narrow definition is not in line with the post-modern questions of unqualified activism and the ‘glorification of the measurable and replicable’. However, one can contend that the images of humanity as presented by most religious traditions have a crucial role to play. Traditions present models and guidelines for overcoming the
present, its conflicts and inhumane practices in societies, but they also give their followers the potential to become human again. Religions can offer to guide humans through the ambiguity of spirituality.

From an educational viewpoint, one can adopt Grey’s argument (in Thatcher, 1999, p. 12) that ‘it is an illusion to think that theology and spirituality emerge from a timeless, context-free vacuum, or that there is a consensus as to how their insights should be used for education’. When spirituality was considered as part of the school curriculum, Religion Education was the most obvious environment in which to slot it in. Previously, Roux (1999a) also argued that religion education, in the South African context, could be best facilitated in the understanding and expressing of spirituality, diversity, morality and human nature because ‘religion is the indispensable foundation of spirituality’.

However, the failure of religious education in schools (Ferguson, 1999; Roux, 2000), and specifically the idea that the single-faith, confessional approach was the sole bearer of children’s spirituality, can no longer be defended. The single approach of religious education had a hermeneutical problem. Wrong interpretations led to the moralization of religious content (especially in Christian religious education), which was certainly not an effective means of facilitating values and spirituality in a changing society. Religious Education can no longer be the subject which teaches learners stories from old scriptures and related content, or which urges them to adopt certain behaviours and values. From a hermeneutic point of view, religion, and therefore religion education, has to make more sense to learners in a post-modern world. Although Rouhani (1997) argues that the application of a spiritual or moral principle can cultivate a universal culture of understanding and peace, the two domains are in some instances not compatible. Clive and Jane Erricker (in Thatcher, 1999 p. 129) argue that spiritual development was/is linked to traditional religious nurture, ‘and morality was a matter of instruction and appeared to be the prime justification for considering spiritual development’.

Therefore the core of the argument is that, in many instances, religion was moralized in RE, without resulting in a well-behaved moralized society. What would the results be if spirituality were only to be defined in religion education? Arguments for a post-modern approach to society and life have made us aware, especially in a democratic South Africa, of social factors, economic situations and disparities, cultural diversities and priorities, and universal values that are not embedded in religions only, but can also be defined from our common history and goals: ‘The spiritual can be distinguished from the moral domain insofar as it pays attention to those motivations, or what we might call inherent qualities that constitute our highest aspirations in human beings’ (Erricker & Erricker, in Thatcher, 1999, p. 132).

One may ask: What is the meaning of children’s spirituality in the social context in 2005 and beyond? On analysing this question, I came to the conclusion that curriculum designers—and probably academics—who are not in this field of study (primary and secondary education schooling) must feel the pressure to understand the vibrancies of change and the paradigm shift that the post-modern learner is demanding from teachers and educators.
For years, I have embarked on the most interesting journeys of discovery into children’s spirituality, the significance and the influences thereof, in order to discover the meaning of wellness and the expression of experiences of their life stances. Research through literature and experiences in research did not give me a clear description and/or definition of spirituality that explains all the possible aspects of religion, society, education and well-being, personal experiences and social context. Thus, I would like to argue that spirituality, and therefore children’s spirituality, consists of more than only personal well-being and personal experiences. It is a whole-person approach, involving the person religiously, affectively, emotionally, cognitively and physically, with all aspects embedded in personal experiences.

In answering the above question, one can also argue for the consideration of a non-religious spirituality in education. One can define non-religious spirituality as referring to the spirituality of art, of historical, traditional and indigenous contexts, of the environment, language, literature, music and of science—all the elements that connect with the whole-person wellness. It implies that it is also a means by which, for example, art, music and the sciences contribute to the fulfilment of human nature—the spiritual well-being, the wellness of a person—which can help one to make sense of life and one’s life experiences. There are so many dimensions involved in a person’s well-being that religion cannot be the sole bearer of spirituality. We must distinguish between that which extends our humanity from that which transcends it. In the post-modern society, religion generally cannot accomplish the transcendence. This is especially true with regard to learners in schools. The implication is that being spiritual is not synonymous with being religious. An increasing number of school children are not believers in one of the main world religions or any indigenous or traditional religious upbringing. This growth of non-believers in school communities has urged educators to rethink religion as a prerequisite for understanding spirituality in a social context.

**Does Life Orientation, the new approach to personal well-being, emphasize spirituality?**

In the *Revised National Curriculum statement* (2002), the emphasis is on knowledge, skills, values and attitudes as points of departure. This means that the new education model demands a holistic approach to learners’ education and their whole-person development. As stated before, personal well-being is part of the fundamental learning area of Life Orientation. What is more important is that in every outcome and assessment standard of this learning area, which includes career, health, emotional well-being, religion, citizenship and recreation, the emphasis is on the self and the importance of understanding values and developing skills to handle life issues (life skills). One may argue that the implementation of a spiritual dimension or outcome would help teachers to concentrate on spiritual issues regarding the learners’ own experiences and to take note of social structures relevant to the learners. However, irrespective of the arguments for or against the place of spiritual education and religion education as outlined and argued by some academics (Roberts, in Best, 2000,
Children’s spirituality in a social context

p. 38; Carr, in Carr & Haldane, 2003, p. 214), it seems that the dangers of understanding the notion of spirituality in a broader social context, is still debatable. Therefore, the fact that elements of spirituality are embedded in the entire Life Orientation programme makes it easier for teachers to concentrate on methodologies to facilitate learners’ life experiences, instead of dealing with specific curriculum topics on spirituality. This underlined the fact that in South African school education, there is no spiritual education content in the public education sector or in the published curriculum (Revised National Curriculum statement, 2002).

According to Wright (2002, p. 76), a critical engagement in spiritual education would allow learners to engage intelligently with the ambiguous claims and counter-claims surrounding questions of ultimate truth and meaning. Is it then possible that schools or learning areas can provide spiritual experiences, when other experiences outside the school are powerful and all-pervasive? Schools and teaching can certainly provide experiences that will affect children’s emotions other than by emulating outside stimuli such as those provided by computers and other technological issues. However, according to Taggart (2002, p. 9), the problem is that in the development of critical education, the complex issues are surrounded by spirituality.

One can argue that the general purpose of schooling is to promote human well-being or personal wellness, education for life as well as the development of a critical mind. It seems that one should teach children the skills to acquire knowledge via a sustained contact, but only if the forms are identifiable in terms of distinctive concepts and truth criteria. As schooling takes up a large part of a young person’s life and time, the goals of the school should cover a wide range of human wellness. Education and the curriculum should therefore also reflect the priorities of life in general, and the values of society in particular. One can assume that children can then also be critical moral agents in society.

If one critiques the Life Orientation programme, it appears that at least the notion occurs that learners will be able to engage in a humane manner (spiritual experiences?) on social issues in a social context, and in a coherent manner, with concrete expressions of their own social environment. One can thus argue that this is the main aim of the programme in schools.

The social context and spirituality: an educational approach

South African society is exceedingly interesting with its ambivalence on the handling and understanding of values and spirituality. One of the most significant documents on values in education was the publication of the Manifesto on values, education and democracy (2001), in which the Department of Education expressed concern about the lack of mutual values in schools and society due to the degeneration and segregation of society that was part of our violent past. The economic and social disparities are vast social constructions that need to be solved. When economic deprivation (poverty), HIV and Aids are main problems in a society, the need for a spiritual awareness seems to be of less consequence. Physical survival is the main issue.
However, with the implementation of the Life Orientation programmes in schools, and in view of the *Manifesto on values, education and democracy* (2001), one should argue that the incorporation of values in the curriculum and thus in school society may also enhance spiritual awareness. It is well known that values cannot be taught, but that they should be embedded and articulated in ideas and behaviour. If children learn to respect different viewpoints, teachers can help them to change the way they behave (Rhodes, 2004). This brings to the fore the fundamental need for respect and caring as a basic value (*Manifesto on values, education and democracy*, 2001), which may reflect on the spiritual experience of sharing, and which manifests in many religions and worldviews as a basic principle and value.

The social and cultural context in South Africa can be clustered in two main groups: a Western orientation and an African orientation. This, however, does not imply that many South Africans from a Western orientation do not respect an African lifestyle, or vice versa. If one wishes to understand the social context of spirituality in South Africa, one is compelled to consider the diverse cultural context within the country. As mentioned before, one can argue that Westerners, and therefore South Africans from a Western orientation, may understand spirituality mainly in a religious and cultural manner. However, the intermingling of Western and African understandings gives the social context a new vibrancy with regard to the meaning of spirituality and humanity.

Definitions and concepts of an African orientation of spirituality are as diverse as Africa itself. One important aspect of African spirituality is that it flows from African mysticism and from the awareness that there is a unity of beings in the universe. This may be one reason why the concept spirituality does not feature in the revised education documents. South Africans from a Western orientation only may feel threatened by mysticism as understood in African religion and culture (Du Toit, 1995). However, the value and concept of *ubuntu* is widely accepted by all South Africans as a fundamental principle in the Constitution and in many policy documents. It also forms part of the desired values in education (*Manifesto on values, education and democracy*, 2001, p. 15). The saying *Ubuntu ngumntu ngabantu* forms one of the core aspects of the values document. Explaining the concept and meaning of *Ubuntu* within the African concept, Bishop Desmond Tutu explains spirituality (Buthelezi, 1987, p. 96) in the following way:

*The African world view rejects popular dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, the material and the spiritual. All life is religious, all life is sacred. (Tutu, 1995, p. xvi)*

It is interesting to note the educational and teaching approaches towards spiritual, moral, social and cultural development across different subject matters in the book *Education for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development* (Best, 2000). On reading and analysing the approaches, and trying to read this in a South African context, one wonders whether the following were taken into consideration: the social context; cultural differences; religious differences; economic differences; and differences in the understanding of spirituality (contextualizing spirituality). Taking into account spiritual needs, these are the issues one has to reconsider as one tries to define an
One Xhosa-speaking learner from a deep rural area in the Eastern Cape, attending a school in an informal settlement (squatter camp) in a metropolitan area, may live with an extended family member, have traditional cultural and religious roots (African Religion), and adhere to a great deal of mysticism. The other learners may have been born in the informal settlement (squatter camp), have a Western orientation and function within an Independent African Christian church. Their worldviews on and concepts of spirituality will differ from one another and especially from so-called mainstream traditional religions (churches).

What are the educational approaches and issues that need to be considered when facilitating and understanding the diversity in children’s spirituality in the South African context? The reasons for promoting children’s physical well-being may outnumber those for advancing spiritual well-being, or do they?

In order to make sense of a complex society and multifaceted education system, some ideas that featured in a small participatory action research programme with a few teachers in 2003 may illustrate the above-mentioned arguments. The following issues were argued by the teachers in an attempt to understand the facilitation of spirituality in a wider context:

1. The learners’ social context has to be taken into consideration:
   (a) The diversity of cultures and traditions in society, and especially in the school community, from different orientations (Western and African orientations).

2. The learners’ economic stance:
   (a) Stealing for daily bread may be the only means of survival. How can one judge? What can be done to uplift or manage the spiritual needs that prompt these actions?

3. The learners’ cultural background and manifestation in society:
   (a) The upbringing of children in African culture by their parents, grandparents or extended family members gives a new meaning to personal well-being in a spiritual manner. The Ubuntu value forms the core of this tradition and may be understood in a different manner by teachers who do not adhere to an African tradition. The value of Ubuntu is now also part of the values, outlined in the Manifesto (2001) taught in school education; however, the emphasis may differ.
   (b) The traditional upbringing, e.g. what parents expect from a multicultural school and the way to cope with change may differ from one another.

4. The learners’ religious or non-religious worldview:
   (a) The growing numbers of non-religious believers (learners) in traditional and religious communities.
   (b) How to deal with diversity if the teacher has no knowledge thereof and how teachers can understand their own spirituality.
   (c) The recognition of a new fundamentalism evoking in different religions and belief systems.
5. **The learners’ understanding of spirituality and mysticism:**
   (a) The diversity of access to educational aids or any other means of the technological world *out there* (the world, society) or *in here* (home).
   (b) The access to different kinds of visual and printed media, the Internet, etc., where children have to make their own choices, while others see that as a first opportunity to be in touch with issues of *the world*.

6. **The learners’ dialogical abilities:**
   (a) The traditional upbringing in certain cultures that forbids children to give their own opinions and communication strategies versus educational methodologies and strategies as *good education*.
   (b) The language and expression abilities of the learner in a social context where mother-tongue education (home language) is not an option, or where expressing oneself becomes a problem in dual-medium education.

Spirituality (whole-child development) seems to be an important issue in many societies, cultures, world religions and worldviews. One can argue that ethics is, to some extent, also based on spirituality that has an effect on the interactive contexts of social, economic, political and all other domains of our existential world. This seems to be an indication why there is a dire need for a holistic approach towards children’s spirituality, and one that includes every subject or learning area in an education programme.

**Conclusion**

The social context and school environments in South Africa are changing fast. As a developing country encompassing two worlds, where a wealthy and developed environment has to live side by side with an impoverished and developing social order, the challenges are enormous. The change from mainly mono-religious and monocultural to multi-religious and multicultural school communities has already affected many spheres of teacher education. Teachers formerly trained within the previous education system are trapped within certain religious and cultural paradigms. They are not always willing to redefine their role, especially in support of the new educational programmes (Ferguson & Roux, 2003).

Very little research on the training of pre- or in-service teachers has been undertaken with regard to the processes or approaches towards children’s spirituality in Life Orientation programmes. In published Life Orientation textbooks, there is also no indication of any learning material on learners’ spirituality, spiritual development or growth. It is imperative that children should engage with a holistic approach to all spheres of life; therefore, one has to create a wellness within, in order to ensure a total physical, emotional and spiritual wellness. Children, irrespective of their social and economic stance, deserve to develop into healthy and happy human beings. The empowerment of children/learners/students to be in control of their destiny, as they travel the road to achieving their full potential, to live a bright, extraordinary life defined by respect and human dignity is imperative.
Notes

1. Religion Education is an education programme that enables learners to engage in a variety of religious traditions in a way that encourages them to grow their inner spiritual and moral dimensions Policy document, 2002, p. 9. The subject was previously known as Religious Education (Roux, 1998), but because of confusion with the aim of the new approach, the name Religion Education was adopted in 2003.

2. Bible Education was also known as Religious Education in different departments of education in the apartheid era.


5. A fundamental is a learning area (grades R–12) that is compulsory for all learners.

6. Outcome 2 = the learner will be able to demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to constitutional rights and responsibilities, and to show an understanding of diverse cultures and religions. Outcome 3 = the learner will be able to use acquired life skills to achieve and extend personal potential to respond effectively to the challenges of his or her world.

7. ‘A person is a person through other [persons]’ is derived from the Nguni (Zulu/Xhosa/Swati), with the noun stem (-ntu) meaning ‘person’. In adding the Class 14 prefix (ubu-), the meaning is changed to ‘humanity’.

8. Archbishop Desmond Tutu was Archdeacon of the Anglican Church for many years and a well-known critic of political inequality in the South African society.

Notes on contributor

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