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## **Does spiritual wellbeing have a place in public education? AARE Conference paper/presentation 2006**

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Increasingly, when we talk about 'learner well-being' in education circles the dimension of spiritual well-being is included along with the physical, cognitive, emotional and social dimensions (DECS, 2005). While many policy makers and educators appear to wish to retain the dimension of spiritual well-being, there is by no means universal agreement as to what it is what it means for education. The need for an inquiry into spiritual well-being emerged as a result of feedback to *the DECS Well-being is Central to Learning Working Paper* circulated in 2005. A number of respondents asked for clarification on what was meant by the term and what implications its inclusion might have in the future for educators. This led to the preparation of two discussion papers (<http://www.schools.sa.gov.au/schlstaff/pages/LearnerWellbeingProject/Dimensions>) that were written to encourage a deeper consideration of the issues and implications involved in including the dimension of spiritual well-being in the overall Wellbeing Framework. Teachers and leaders were encouraged to contribute to an inquiry into the dimension of spiritual wellbeing in relation to education. Feedback was sought at site, district and central levels, via surveys and presentations. The richness and diversity of responses highlighted the complexity and sensitivity of the topic under inquiry. This paper outlines some of the issues in the literature on spirituality and spiritual wellbeing in relation to education and reports on the outcomes of the inquiry project conducted in 2006. It does not purport to be an official account of the inquiry but is rather to be placed in the context of the writer's continuing learning and research in the area.

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### **Introduction**

That there has been some degree of interest in the spiritual dimension in government education, at least on the level of rhetoric, in Australia in recent years is evidenced by various federal and state education frameworks including: the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (1999); the *Essential Learnings Framework* (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2001); the *Queensland Department of Education Manual*, (Education Queensland, 2004); the *Every chance to learn Curriculum Framework for ACT schools Pre-school to year 10* (ACT Department of Education and Training, 2006) and in South Australia, the draft *Wellbeing Framework* (Department of Education and Children's Services 2005). All of these documents include a reference to the spiritual dimension as part of a holistic approach to education as outlined in the Holistic Education' Network's web page: *Australia and Education Goals* ([http://www.hent.org/world/rss/files/spirit/oz\\_spirit.htm](http://www.hent.org/world/rss/files/spirit/oz_spirit.htm) accessed 29/1/06)

I suggest however that the journey beyond rhetoric in curriculum and goal statements towards a consideration of what spirituality in mainstream education in Australia might actually mean for teachers or look like in practice has only just begun. The purpose of this paper is to share a range of emerging views, experiences and approaches of a small number of teachers, leaders advisors and support staff at site, district and central levels who chose to participate in the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) inquiry into the nature of spiritual wellbeing, and to convey a sense of the individual and collective journey that this has entailed. The paper is written from the perspective of a project officer who has been involved in the development of the draft

Learner Wellbeing Framework, been involved in data gathering and analysis and the presentation of workshops in writing a discussion paper (Burrows,2006) but is by no means intended as a 'official account'. It should be viewed in the context of the writer's ongoing interest and research in this field.

The inquiry into spiritual wellbeing was undertaken in response to the circulation of the draft DECS *Wellbeing is Central to Learning* Working Paper in 2005. Feedback from the field indicated that the multidimensional (cognitive, physical, social, emotional and spiritual) model of wellbeing presented in the draft framework was generally well received. A number of respondents however indicated that they would appreciate further clarification about the spiritual dimension, what it meant in terms of a definition, and also what implications its inclusion in the framework might have for teachers.

Teachers and leaders were invited to respond to a system-wide survey for the DECS Learner Wellbeing Project: *Resolving the Spiritual/Values/Beliefs dimension of Wellbeing; Have your say*. Discussion papers (available at <http://www.schools.sa.gov.au/schlstaff/pages/LearnerWellbeingProject/Dimensions> ) were written and distributed to encourage reflection. Survey questions included:

- What should DECS name the dimension of wellbeing currently entitled the spiritual/values/beliefs dimension and what unique concept/s should it frame?
- What are the implications for educator practice of retaining the current name and concept of spiritual/values/beliefs dimension and of your alternative if you have proposed one or any?

Data from this survey has been combined with information from a project report from one school that chose to focus on the spiritual/values/beliefs dimension in the Learner Wellbeing Project trialling of the Learner Wellbeing Framework (DECS, 2005). Other data was gathered from participants in a Learner Wellbeing Project Core Learning Day (2003) and from personal conversations with two teachers who responded to the survey in particular depth as well as from two reports on the inquiry prepared by external consultants (Stacey and Deane 2006, 2006a) .Teacher education students in their final year at a South Australian university who were involved in a new topic on wellbeing were also invited to express their views on the spiritual dimension via an informal survey.

The focus is on weaving together ideas from the literature on spirituality, current issues and responses from teachers, leader, advisors and teacher education students who describe their values, beliefs and views on this topic. As Milojevic (2004) has argued the

*the new spirituality movement is about education **through** the experience of the **spiritual** as opposed to education **in** or **about** religion (p10).*

The new spirituality is also about uncovering and expressing heartfelt experiences rather than presenting more 'shoulds' in term of curriculum frameworks and policies. Miljavec (2004) suggests that these experiences can be brought about through a range of pathways and that it is the journey (and the process) which is most significant. This nicely describes the spirit of this paper which aims to show some emerging stepping stones on the journey toward locating teachers' experiences of the spiritual dimension in their work. Following Miljevic (2004) I suggest that spirituality (and education) should be viewed is a 'work in progress' ... (p10) or in the words of deVille Kirk (2000), a 'movement', or a 'continuum' (p3).

## **Spirituality and religion**

It is important at the outset to be clear that the concept of spirituality as it has been used here is not the same as religion. American academic and holistic educator Kesson (1994) has argued that the intent in differentiating between spirituality and religion is not to discredit one and privilege the other but rather to provide a context for a discussion of spirituality and education that is not confused by the discussion of religion and education. She also suggests that nothing would more impede a sympathetic hearing of educational theories advocating spirituality in education than the failure to distinguish between spirituality and religion. In retrospect, this could have been made clearer in the discussion paper by Burrows (2006). This writer hesitated to provide a particular point of view, since the purpose of the paper was to present a range of perspectives from the literature to inform readers and give them space to form their own view. However it is important to be very clear about the distinction, particularly in the context of the current focus at the federal level on values and the funding of chaplains in government schools. A definition similar to that provided by the Queensland Department of Education for example could perhaps have been presented in the interests of being clear about the territory.

*The spiritual dimension refers to an individual's capacity to reflect on the ultimate significance of life and to adopt and/or develop a meaningful set of beliefs, attitudes and values which influence behaviour.* Queensland Department of Education Manual (2003)

Spirituality has begun to be recognised in the literature as a construct distinct from religion for many people (Ingersoll, 1998). The inquiry into spiritual wellbeing is occurring in a time in which as Tacey (2005) suggests 'Australian attitudes to spirituality appear to be undergoing a profound and dramatic change' (p1). One junior primary principal expressed the view that:

*Spirituality we believe is not religion and the terms spiritual/values/belief provide options for different yet linked approaches* (response to survey)

Another respondent believes:

*We need to go past the religious meaning* (primary teacher response to survey).

For some respondents to the survey however, the word spirituality did have an association with religion with one view being expressed that

*Some religious groups own the term (spirituality) ..... Given the strong sense of ownership of the term by very different groups there was concern that this may lead to confusion/conflict as these groups see inclusion of this as validating as universal their particular view. Given associations with religion does this undermine perception of the secular system?* (central office advisor team response to survey)

A primary principal from a rural school appreciated the complexity of the issue:

*Unfortunately for some in our community spiritual will conjure up all sorts of issues related to religious and religious practices. If we are looking at spirituality*

*in a more global sense than our students should understand more about the work around them and the influence over people of all walks of life, cultures and the determinants of the values, attitudes and beliefs. (Learner Wellbeing project report)*

According to Nord (in deVillie Kirk 2000), American public schools tend to indoctrinate children to a secular world view. Public schooling can therefore be viewed as not necessarily neutral under the separation of church and state, as is often claimed, but rather as potentially hostile to religion and religious world views (deVillie Kirk, 2000). For one respondent, to the survey, certainly:

*The secular view of religion has often been to deride and discourage belief. This attitude is detrimental to the wellbeing of those for whom belief and commitment to a spiritual path is important. (special school teacher/chaplain)*

This respondent, who has dual roles as a teacher in a special school and a chaplain in a nearby high school, has spoken of the welcome he receives for his support of young people from Moslem and Sikh families and communities in his role as a high school chaplain. He suggests that his commitment to his own faith means that he is sought out by cultural groups who similarly share a commitment to faith, even if it is from a different tradition. He feels a concern for the impact of our secular society on these young people. (personal conversation, 21/11/0)

Certainly for one policy advisor who responded to the survey, there is a concern about the possible 'blurring' of this separation:

*While I do not think the term spiritual is inextricably linked to religion, it is clear that for many people it is. Its inclusion would validate for them what is already a blurring of the separation of religion and state in our schools eg chaplains. ... some members of the Christian community are very keen to be involved in schools and do not respect or understand the notion of a secular system. (response to survey, central office adviser)*

In the midst of recent heated debate about the Federal Government's plan to fund chaplains in schools, The Daily Telegraph reported that the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Association president Jane Gorrie wanted religious organisations to reject the proposal as:

*We think it's a very divisive proposal. Government schools are secular, so putting in religious chaplains is basically giving religious groups access to government school and young people at their most vulnerable moments (Rehn, 2006).*

Former NSW premier Bob Carr was also reported (Rehn, 2006) as saying that

*It abandons the principle of the separation of church and state.*

For a primary principal of a rural school in South Australia, however, it is possible to meet the challenge. It is worth including his comments on this theme in full, as they clearly demonstrate his deep reflection on the issue of spirituality and religion.

*A reasonable proportion of our parent group are strongly committed to the Uniting Church and the Christadelphian faith and were fully in support of both the concept and the name (spiritual wellbeing). I think a true reflection of the feelings of this group of parents is that they value the spiritual dimension of life for everyone. They see the specific teachings of their own religion as one take on spirituality but not the only one. They feel that the discussions we have had with students around purpose, beliefs, values, altruism, legacy et reinforce the importance of the spirituality they value but from a non religious perspective. We are very lucky to have a very humanist, supportive, and community spirited parent group, probably not typical. They are confident that they different beliefs are respected by staff and appreciated they were given time to discuss spiritual wellbeing Feedback has included comments such as thank you very much for teaching this stuff to our kids.( Wellbeing Project report)*

For deVille Kirk (2000) spirituality in education is much less about inculcating a particular religion in schools than about altering the hidden curriculum of secularity to accommodate a more holistic worldview.

For one cluster of sites, it was of great importance that

*training and development occur for teachers so that they can clearly define the concept of spiritual intelligence and understand that religion and spirituality are not one and the same. (cluster response to survey)*

### **Spirituality and education**

Noddings (1992) has observed that 'possibly the greatest lack in modern public schooling is spirituality' p81). Certainly for one primary school principal from a Learner Wellbeing trial site that focused on spiritual wellbeing:

*Spiritual wellbeing is important but largely unaddressed in our learning (site project report)*

Similarly, for the psychologist Carr Gregg, there exists what he refers to as a 'spiritual anorexia' in Australian schools today (The Australian, 30/10/06) and for educator and academic de Souza (2004), there is a pressing need to explore contemporary understandings of spirituality and its relationship to education and learning. Prime Minister John Howard has stated in the context of the controversial issue of funding chaplains for government schools that:

*My assessment of the Australian community is that whatever its view about formal religious adherence may be, that it does hunger for looking more at the spiritual and pastoral side of life. (in Rehn, 2006)*

For Tacey also (2000), it is timely that we begin to address the issue of spirituality in Australian society since he has observed the emergence of 'new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and wellbeing'(p24). He holds the view however that:

*secular education bestows a new kind of baleful authoritarianism in which the soul and spirit are imprisoned and not allowed to take flight. Our deepest spiritual impulses are repressed and denied by secular education (p27).*

Tacey (2000) believes that we are currently in a testing time, with a clash of paradigms about spirituality.

In a recent presentation for the DECS Learner Wellbeing Strategy, the well known co-author of *The Wellbeing Manifesto*, Richard Eckersley (2006), expressed the view that the relationship of spiritual wellbeing in education is an area that is only just beginning to be investigated, and that he was therefore encouraged and heartened by the work being done within DECS in 'making a concerted effort to tackle the difficult questions' (Key note presentation, DECS Learner Wellbeing Core Learning Day). That there was interest in this issue for DECS teachers was made clear by the external audit report (Stacey & Deane, 2006) on the reception of the draft Wellbeing Framework (DECS 2005) which stated that:

*Of all the dimensions, .the spiritual dimension attracted the most commentary, ranging from appreciating it was included, being unsure of what to do about it, and questioning the appropriateness of the term through suggesting it was not the domain of educators. (p11?)*

The challenges posed by the call to teach values, support chaplains and reintroduce religious instruction in government education have served to highlight the challenges inherent in any discussion about spirituality within secular education. For Tacey (2000), however it is important that we do not remain silent and refuse to enter the fray as this could lead to increased misunderstanding and opposition, since:

*This is after all the Australian stamp upon our spiritual experience: to preserve the integrity of individual difference and the right to disagree even as we attempt to fit in and connect. (p4)*

The writers of the external audit report on the inquiry into spiritual wellbeing (Stacey & Deane, 2006) have suggested that many of the responses to the inquiry from DECS teachers

*may reflect the struggle in dominant culture in Australia, given the emphasis on the scientific or proven to recognise the importance of spirituality and to understand it in ways other than the religious (p?)*

Tasmanian educator Sue Stack (2004) has argued that Australia is well-situated for a debate about spirituality and education since for her it

*does seem to have its own unique slant on spirituality probably as a result of many influences including multi-cultural society, Aboriginal viewpoints, a fairly laid back mentality as well as considerable autonomy within state education systems enabling grassroots decision making and allowing people to talk to each other. (Integral Education Forum 9/12/2004)*

While I will not debate the issue here of whether or not there is 'considerable autonomy within state education systems to enable grassroots decision making', I do suggest that the DECS inquiry into spiritual wellbeing has provided teachers and school, district and central office leaders with the opportunity to talk to each other about this topic. Even more importantly, perhaps as noted by one respondent to the survey, it has 'given

educators permission to explore the possibilities' (special school teacher/chaplain response to survey, 2006).

As another teacher from Tasmania, Roger Stack (2004) has noted however,

*A great deal more discussion and sharing of best practice is required before we can lay claim to have reached a shared understanding of exactly what we mean by spirituality, spiritual literacy and spiritual intelligence in the context of mainstream state education. (Integral Education Forum6/12/04)*

This purpose of this paper is to share some initial findings about how teachers in DECS who participated in the inquiry understand and currently practice spirituality in education settings. As Rosenbert (in Hart et al 2000) has suggested

*Spirituality is often interpreted individualistically and privately rather than more communally and publicly making collective inquiry more difficult (p179).*

Neal and Bennet (2000) in their exploration of spirituality in workplaces express the view that people are increasingly feeling called to live in greater congruence with their spiritual principles. This, they suggest '*can be a lonely process until you find like-minded seekers and begin to create community.*' (p 1)

I propose that the process of exploring and sharing views emergent views within DECS about spiritual wellbeing can begin in a very small way to form the foundation of what Wilber (2006) calls 'a nexus of shared interpretations and understandings' (p156) that can support the development of conceptual frameworks and practical strategies to assist the translation of these experiences into the everyday world of the self, relationships and world (Ghaye, 2004) and in particular the classroom. I hope that this paper is able to convey something of what Wilber (2006) has described as:

*the actual texture of those experiences, thoughts, shared insights, emotions, feelings – the actual felt texture of that shared space. (p156).*

### **Creating space for conversations about spirituality and education**

Spirituality in education begins in the hearts and minds of individual teachers. Conversations and reflections generated through the space provided by the DECS inquiry into spiritual wellbeing have the potential to assist others who have become discouraged by what many describe as a one –sidedness in contemporary public education (Kessler, 1992, Noddings, 1998, Palmer, 1998).

Participants were able to provide feedback in the inquiry through responding to a questionnaire sent out electronically to all sites. This feedback was analysed by an external consultant who provided a report. Other feedback was gathered in through reports provided by trial sites for individual inquiries in a range of aspects of wellbeing, and from a presentation on multidimensional models of wellbeing as well as through informal conversations and interviews.

22 of the 59 teachers, leaders and district and central office support staff and advisors who responded indicated they were comfortable with the name 'spiritual wellbeing', while 12 preferred 'values and beliefs', 2 said the name did not matter, 11 were in favour of spiritual/values and belief, 2 wanted 'cultural wellbeing and 9 believed

that the term was redundant in that this dimension was covered within the other dimensions (social, emotional, cognitive and physical).

The data gathered clearly indicated there were a range of views about the spiritual dimension, ranging from:

*We can't believe there is a need to question the inclusion of this dimension within the student wellbeing framework as it is our belief that without we are not talking student wellbeing.* (survey response on behalf of school, deputy principal)

To:

*Initially I was nervous about the spiritual dimension, but now I think it should stand.* (project report from central adviser).

*'spirituality has to permeate all we do as educators ..... as an overarching underlying ethos of public education'* (personal feedback to paper June 2006).

And:

*..everything we came up with was equally covered by emotional or social dimensions. Therefore the spiritual dimension treated separated can be seen as redundant.* (response to survey, central office team)

The collective response quoted above, however also included the statement that there was value in including this dimension in the draft as it generated discussion in that particular work group. It was also noted that while there was a question mark around the need to call the dimension 'spiritual' the inclusion of the ideas within it were significant

*because that (deeper, philosophical) aspect of humanity was acknowledged.* (central group response to survey)

For one school cluster, it was believed that the dimension under consideration should be referred to as 'spiritual intelligence' and that the other dimensions should also be referred to as 'intelligences'.

*We also believe that at this time in history this is the intelligence students are pulling on more and more to make sense of their world, humanity and their place in society both now and in the future... It is the intelligence that allows them to formulate values and beliefs, that support the way in which they confront challenging issues of mental health, pressures upon the family unit, war, terrorism, and the ethical issues we face as our world continues to advance through science, medicine and technology* (cluster response to survey)

The value of engaging in conversations with colleagues about the issue of spirituality and education were highlighted by comments such as:

*We have been invigorated by the professional discussion around the concept of spiritual wellbeing* (school response to survey)

*Discussions with staff about the concept of spirit, how we observe it in children, how it develops and represents what we call resilience and the things around us that influence spirit have been very useful on providing another perspective on wellbeing.* (Learner Wellbeing Project trial site report 3)

*The spirituality session brought a shared purpose for the Wellbeing day (feedback on DECS Learner Wellbeing Core Learning Day 4/8/06)*

*The (wellbeing) Committee has had a healthy debate on this and decided we should raise the issue on the talk list for feedback. (Secondary Principals Association response to survey)*

*It has led to staff discussion (teacher response to survey)*

*Spiritual dimension brought staff discussion (school response to survey)*

*We are currently engaging our governing council in this important discussion. We believe it should be a site based discussion (report from trial site)*

*The inclusion or exclusion of spirituality has been a discussion point with many people who vary greatly from definitely yes to definitely no. (response to survey, district office)*

Others indicated that the inclusion of the spiritual dimension would help to provide opportunities in the future for ongoing conversations:

*I believe it would be a missed opportunity to not include spirituality in the framework as it gives an opportunity to discuss it with educators, parents and students .(response to survey, district office)*

*The spirituality aspect will encourage debate around the ramifications for practice and school tone/ethos. (response to survey, district office)*

*We need to do more reading about the spiritual dimension as it is very relevant to our site. (LWB day 4/8/06)*

Most importantly for one teacher:

*I enjoyed this session (on multidimensional models of spiritual wellbeing) immensely because it reinforced the idea that spirituality need not be a taboo or scary area for educators (Learner Wellbeing Core Learning day feedback).*

And for another:

*It is seemingly more difficult for adults to verbalise and conceptualise than for the students (feedback on Learner Wellbeing Core Learning Day 3)*

### **Developing a shared language**

While the focus in this paper is on teachers sharing their experience and views on spirituality and education, the classroom is also a space of community and dialogue. For one teacher, everything that happens in the classroom is potentially an opportunity to 'hand down' spiritual values in the context of real life situations rather than 'lessons'. For this teacher, the 'spiritual/values dimension' is brought to life by

*beginning every day by greeting each other in different languages and taking a little time to ensure that everyone is feeling accepted, acknowledged and comfortable. Humour, laughing and **fun** are very much part of every day (individual primary teacher/counsellor response to survey).*

It could be argued that there is a need to develop a shared and accessible language that can be of assistance in developing our formal and informal conversations about spirituality. There is often certain awkwardness in conversations about spirituality and its role in public education. Myers (1997) has drawn our attention to the difficulties that can be experienced when we sense there is a spiritual dimension to child development, along with the physical, social and emotional aspect but struggle to put our thoughts into words. For Myers (1999)

*Until there are ways to understand and name spiritual life within the secular world, a dynamic component of development remains ignored. This severely limits our ability to address issues related to the whole child even as we claim that this is what we do. (pxi)*

There can be a difficulty in analysing spirituality as it is fundamentally experiential and phenomenological. As one teacher put it:

*We don't currently have a language to describe what we are doing, but at the class level it is not difficult to bring in the spiritual dimension. (feedback on Learner wellbeing conference day 4/8/06)*

It is possible that a person may not be able to articulate what spirituality actually is but that they know when it is present. As one survey respondent put it:

*A 28 year old PhD student could not find the words to describe his experience when sitting on his board in the blue expanse – but recognised it was a spiritual experience (special school teacher/chaplain)*

For some teachers however, the language is less important than the experience. For example:

*The name is not of high significance to me: the content is (district leader response to survey)*

For another respondent:

*That spiritual experience is often difficult to describe – that does not lessen the value of the experience. (special school teacher/chaplain)*

Certainly, for some teachers, the concept of spirituality is confusing, challenging and somewhat confronting. For at least two respondents, more work was needed on developing an acceptable definition of spirituality:

*I believe the spirituality dimension has not been adequately explained. (teacher response to survey)*

For another:

*Our feeling is that the word spiritual sets this dimension apart from the cognitive/emotional/social. It is important and different but understanding the difference is difficult. The difficulty arises from the lack of 'thinking' and analysis that has been done in this area. (school response to survey)*

And:

*Not conducive to clarity – unacceptable confusion. (district response to survey).*

*It will be controversial whatever it's called – (district response to survey)*

The external consultants who reported on the outcomes of the inquiry into the spiritual dimension of wellbeing made the point that *'educators may feel inarticulate and need assistance in this challenging area'* (Stacey & Dean, 2006)

Conlan (2004) writes of how the ABC program *The Search for Meaning* drew a large number of responses by viewers who shared their relief at hearing others articulate experiences of meaning and purpose that were similar to their own.

A teacher/chaplain who reflected about how a spiritual approach to education might be described wrote:

*'Spiritual' can be filled with more meaning as we learn to articulate what it expresses. (response to survey)*

The importance of beginning to use and practise the language of spirituality highlighted is highlighted by a story from one school that focused on spiritual wellbeing in their trialling of the Wellbeing Framework. This small rural school had chosen to focus on teaching aspects of spiritual wellbeing such as purpose, altruism and meaning to their primary school students. Concepts such as values and morality were introduced to the students who then participated in a range of activities such as making board games to show their understandings. Two year 5 students who had participated in the program and were talking about an incident involving another student in the yard were overheard as one said to the other.

*'Jo was really altruistic just then.'* (group sharing, Learner Wellbeing Project Core Learning Day no 4)

Perhaps this student teacher is right when she says:

*I have found that children connect to the idea of spiritual wellbeing really easily, much easier than adults and is great that this is starting to be recognised (student teacher response to informal survey)*

### **Teacher spiritual development**

Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue in their book on spiritual intelligence that in Western forms of education there tends to be little appreciation of the importance of self reflection, imagination and our inner lives. De Souza (2004) has suggested that teachers need to be encouraged beyond the achievement of surface knowledge and

recognise the role of feelings and intuition in the learning process. For a special school teacher/chaplain who juggles two roles, his inner development has involved:

*Embracing a world view that encompasses the spiritual – a shift in focus from self to others, self sacrifice, acceptance of delayed reward, a renewed confidence in self worth, and a hope that expresses itself in confidence in the future* (response to survey)

More radically, the Steiner oriented philosopher and psychologist Kuhlewind (2004) suggests that education for children and young people can only be effective under the condition that teachers train and increase their attention leading to spiritual experiences. He suggests that schooling in consciousness and attention should be one of the main topics in teacher training. He has expressed the view that once teachers have experienced their own spiritual self as self-aware consciousness they will then be able to see this aspect in others, including students and colleagues. In this way they will be able to witness, as one pre-school teacher noted

*Children's growth in body, mind and spirit* (response to survey)

The importance of educators focusing in on their own spirituality in the first instance was highlighted by the comment from one Learner Wellbeing Project participant:

*I now believe that if teachers (we) had more awareness of spirituality ie educated ourselves, we wouldn't find it such a difficult area.* (formal feedback from Learner Wellbeing Core Learning Day no 3, 4/8/06)

Three student teachers also commented on this theme:

*I had a confused understanding about it (spirituality) before. Now I understand its importance as a means of internal understanding and thought.* (student teacher response to informal survey)

*Teachers will need to be aware of self if they are to be able to teach holistically.* (student teacher response to informal survey)

*I can now see that we would have to be very committed to developing our students emotionally and spirituality. We have to live there in our own life first or it won't come across as believable and the kids will know it.*

At the same it is important to keep in mind the point raised by one teacher:

*We must recognise that most students will not necessarily make up their minds about this area of living during their teen years, but we must present them with a range of possibilities keeping our own values/beliefs out of the process so they can think about what it means to them and what they might explore further.*

This theme was also commented on by student teacher:

*It would allow students to think about their lives and high level of life without forcing particular teachers' values and beliefs* (student teacher response to informal survey)

It might not be essential to keep our own values and beliefs completely out of the process, but it is necessary indeed to present students with a range of possibilities in order to leave them free to form their own views in later life.

For Victorian secondary teacher/researcher/academic Fisher (1998) developing spirituality is a pathway to the growth and development of a sense of personal wellness and wholeness and:

*A fundamental dimension of people's overall health and wellbeing, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health (ie the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual).*

For one teacher it is essential that adults 'internally embrace' values such as respect and empathy before they can try to teach them to children:

*'spiritual/values education is not so much about what we are doing but rather about being.... We can academically and externally teach the value of respect, but if we are not being respectful in the process, then it is less likely to be internalised.'* (primary teacher response to survey)

As the visionary educator and philosopher Rudolf Steiner has powerfully stated:

*You have no idea how unimportant is all that the teacher says or does not say on the surface, and how important is what he himself is as teacher. ( CE lecture 2 )*

Similarly for Parker Palmer (1998) teachers need to develop the courage to teach 'who they are'. For a pre-school teacher, if teachers and children are to have to opportunity to develop a sense of *spiritual wellbeing* they need:

*time to be, contemplate, dream, be yourself, and fee a connection to the world*  
(pre-school teacher)

DeVille Kirk suggests that spirituality in education

*involves the whole person, it conceives of knowing as a gestalt of thinking, feeling, willing and acting – 'at bottom it involves balance'. (p110)*

This balance can be difficult to achieve for busy teachers and leaders since:

*Public life has too much centrifugal force; it spins us away from our centre and can cause personal fragmentation; it needs to be balanced by the centripetal spin of inward experience which brings us back to the centre from which wholeness comes (deVille Kirk (2006, p32).*

### **Cultural aspects**

As suggested elsewhere (Burrows, 2006) a holistic understanding of spirituality and wellbeing has the potential to build cross cultural bridges of understanding within Australia and with other countries. Indigenous concepts of wellbeing focus on spirituality as an integrating life force within a holistic paradigm. The close work for health within indigenous languages is *punya*, translated as wellbeing. The term is multidimensional in

that it involves the interplay of social, emotional, spiritual and cultural wellbeing within a community framework (Khavarpour and McLennon, 2004).

For one primary teacher/counsellor who responded in depth to the survey:

*We can learn much from different cultural groups such as traditional Aboriginal Australians about the concept of the sacred eg sacred land People/ceremonies etc, all of which nurture a deep respect and connectedness to every aspect of their world. (individual teacher response to survey)*

For this teacher, it was also important to develop a recognition, understanding and respect for the various cultural beliefs about spirituality within Australia. Another teacher noted as part of a whole school response to the survey:

*So many of our students have close connections with cultures for whom the spiritual dimension is an integral part of their wellbeing, particularly for students from different parts of Africa (whole school response to survey).*

### **Future pathways**

Clearly teachers, whether newly graduated or highly experienced are likely to require some support if they are to be able to integrate and incorporate spirituality in their work in classrooms. This support could take the form of resource and curriculum materials, professional development and or opportunities to undertake formal study. One teacher noted that:

*With the right training, resources and expectations it could provide one of the more interesting and relevant parts of the school curriculum (teacher response to survey).*

For a student teacher:

*Something that is new to me is the idea of including spiritual wellbeing into the curriculum. I think that I have subconsciously been spiritual wellbeing into my ideas about teaching. (student teacher response to informal survey)*

Another expressed the view that

*explicit curriculum documents would be required so that the hundreds of different beliefs of teachers had some direction (teacher response to survey)*

While a district leader believed that

*Teachers need masses of exemplars which provide the experiences necessary for understand why people act as they do, developing ability to link an action or way of being to a belief principle or value – understanding impact of individuals and group belief driven activities on other individuals and groups (district leader response to survey)*

And as one adviser has noted:

*I think the team now needs to move beyond the theory about the spiritual dimension and be talking about what it means for the classroom teacher in all learning bands. (central response to survey)*

One student teacher has already thought about how she might work with this dimension in her classroom:

*I am finding that the spiritual dimension appeals to me most. I am a real advocate for getting students to centre themselves, achieve a sense of inner piece. I want to help students find their own ways of calming down. (student teacher response to informal survey)*

While curriculum resources are likely to be necessary, it is also possible to argue that spirituality in education does not require special programs or training, or expensive materials. It does however require a change of heart and mind on the part of teachers and leaders and is possible more about the **how** of teaching and learning than the **what**.

There has been a recent decision, made during the writing of this paper, to draw the spiritual/values/beliefs dimension back from its prominent position in the framework. It will not disappear but will be more embedded within the document. As stated in the introduction, spirituality in education is about much more than being included in policy documents and frameworks and the inquiry process has elicited many rich reflections, discussions, debates and conversations. Spirituality in education cannot be mandated. As deVillie Kirk (2005) has suggested spirituality education is not top down, even bottom up, it is more from within or between (p155).

In the collective words of one district team:

*the spiritual dimension will continue to challenge delivery and content of subject matter. It will challenge site culture and processes in the respective learning communities to ensure inclusivity. (district site report)*

## **Conclusion**

I suggest that the inquiry in spiritual wellbeing and its associated opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences has resulted in a number of teachers, leaders and district and central office support staff and advisors beginning to think about the place and role of spirituality in public education in South Australia. This marks a small shift from isolated experiences of spirituality in education for individual teacher towards a more relational understanding of spirituality in community. If the momentum is continued, if those teachers and others within the educational community committed to spirituality in education can continue meet to share their ideas and experiences there will be an opportunity to collectively find a voice, refine arguments and develop an accessible and inclusive language in preparation for engaging the education community so that the issue continues to be passionately discussed and debated. Further research into the work of teachers committed to working with the spiritual dimension is also intended to facilitate ongoing networking and sharing of ideas and experiences.

I would like to conclude this paper with a story that was told to me by a principal of a tiny rural primary school that had been working on teaching the students about virtues and values.

*Sport is valued very highly in our local community and there is healthy competition between us and the neighbouring school. During our recent sports day which took place while we were teaching our unit on values, two boys were racing neck and neck, one from our school and one from our competitor. Their lad fell over. When our lad realised, he ran back to see if the other boy was all right and waited for him to get up. Meanwhile another child from the other school raced past! Part of me really wanted us to win that race, but I knew at the same time that it this was a sign that our program was working. (personal conversation, Learner Wellbeing Core Learning Day 4)*

The depth and scope of spirituality in education may at times seem challenging but it can be implemented along a continuum and continue to be 'a work in progress' as suggested in the introduction to this paper (Milojevic, 2004). In the words of a wise young student teacher:

*Teachers plant the seed but it has to be an ongoing process. It's a life journey for students and teachers (student teacher response to informal survey).*

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