Belonging, Identity, and Meaning Making—the Essence of Spirituality

Implications for Holistic Educational Programs in Plural Societies

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Introduction

Much has been written about holistic education in the past few decades and yet, mainstream education systems in much of the Western world, and in Eastern countries where Western educational thinking and practice has influenced programs, still do not often reflect the basic principles that aim to address the whole child. Instead, there is much concentration on cognitive learning and an equal neglect of emotional and spiritual learning in schools today. As well, the intention that stems from nineteenth century schooling, that education should prepare children for the workplace, continues to underlie curriculum policies and programs, undeterred by the very obvious fact that the workplace of the future remains relatively unknown. Such uncertainty, alongside the plurality that is symptomatic of both the global and local contexts within which most people live today, have distinct implications for educators at all levels, policy and curriculum writers as well as classroom practitioners. Preparing our students to live in a world of uncertainty requires more than just preparation for the workplace. Children need to learn how to develop as well rounded, resilient people who can engage comfortably with the different Other.¹ As such, children need an education that will address the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of learning so as to provide them with skills to manage their thinking and feelings, to access their intuitive, imaginative, and creative abilities by drawing on their inner lives, and which will help them develop wholly, with all their intrinsic gifts, qualities, and dispositions, into the people they are meant to be.

As well, media and communications technology have impact on the lifestyles of children and young people. On the one hand, these factors have enriched and expanded their learning programs and environments and created means for connecting with others that were inconceivable in the recent past. As teachers and parents have found, when used with care and wisdom, media and technology provide superb and stimulating ways to open up new worlds to children and young people. On the other hand, recent and ongoing research into the effects of social media usage does suggest that there are quite serious problems that need to be acknowledged (for instance, Australian Media and Communications Authority, 2013; Donath, 1999; Pitman, 2008). Some are related to mental and physical health linked to cyber bullying and extensive screen time where children retreat into the
world of virtual reality to avoid facing problems in the real world (for a more detailed discussion of these factors see de Souza, 2014, 2016a; de Souza & McLean, 2012). Other experiences with social media can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with their lives or being somewhat depressed (Kross et al., 2013). More important is the fact that we need to remain aware that some of the long-term negative effects of the use of technology and social media are yet to be discovered.

These factors have created a complex situation where, at one level, efforts to address the more obvious signs of plurality are undertaken by communities and governments but equally, at another level, the less intrusive, more subtle, and elusive elements of cultural and religious plurality pose quite substantial problems for teachers in classrooms who have not always been trained adequately to recognize or address them. Further, it is almost impossible for schools and teachers to control the duration and content of screen time of their students. Therefore, it comes down to individual teachers or school teams to identify and find ways to employ innovative and creative ways to use technology to promote learning.

As well, given the global context that now exerts some influence on different aspects of people’s everyday lives, teachers need to address problems associated with plurality such as identity, prejudice, and racism, which can also involve bullying. These are some of the issues that have relevance for developing and maintaining a holistic approach to learning that I address in this chapter.

The Significance of Contemporary Contexts for Educational Policy and Practice

A particular aspect that has relevance for any education system is the fabric of the society from which it gets life. I have discussed in detail, elsewhere, the changes that have taken place in the fabric of Australian society in the past 40 years (for instance, de Souza, 2006, 2016a,b) and their relevance for education. While I will focus on Australia, it is important to consider that this discussion is relevant and applicable to other Western societies where the political, technological, cultural, and religious elements have changed dramatically in the past 50 years. Many communities that were, once, largely homogenous are visibly pluralistic in culture, religion, and language today and, in general, many classrooms reflect this plurality. It is inevitable, then, that the racial and cultural tensions that emanate from within the broader social community also arise in the classroom and need to be attended to.

With the speed of travel today assisted by new developments in technology, the world has rapidly become a much smaller area to traverse. This has meant that, over the past few decades, large numbers of people have moved across the globe, for all kinds of reasons, where they find themselves engaging with people who are quite different from themselves in terms of religious and cultural worldviews and practices. Given the tribal nature implicit in human beings (Law, 2006), it is not surprising that the otherness of Other can become a confronting force. To be sure, these are aspects that present a certain challenge in societies such as Australia, where, for a few generations, people only engaged with others like themselves—European and Christian. When people suddenly encounter different worldviews and belief systems, which sometimes appear to conflict with their own, the safety of their own world feels threatened so that the Other who is different becomes ‘them’ who is not one of ‘us’. Experiences of ‘them and us’ are common for people who live in societies where the social fabric has changed significantly from mono-cultural and mono-religious to multicultural and multireligious.

It is also important to note that there may be quite significant challenges when educators who have little engagement with different cultures and religions teach about other worldviews and belief systems. Erricker (2008) identified a situation pertinent to this situation that occurred in the UK where “the emerging teacher graduates did not reflect the new ethnic and religious population of England and Wales in their number, but often sought to represent them in the curriculum” (p. 6) and argued that, “there is always a tendency to understand the other in terms of your own cultural
'grammar' and its conceptual base” (p. 50). Echoing a similar issue from a Canadian context, Van Arragon and Beaman (2015) argue that any discussion about belief systems or worldviews in public schools cannot be undertaken in isolation, since schools are social structures which are designed to mirror the attitudes and ideals of the wider society in which they operate and serve. Moreover, their contention is that such structures are weakened when the societies become fractured by cultural and religious plurality. As they observe, this is particularly the case where the opinions and values of majority stakeholders, usually the state, claim precedence while the voices of religious minorities are neglected. Generally, teacher training programs do not prepare teachers effectively to address such problems. Therefore, teachers who have to deal with issues related to such tensions very often rely on their own personal and professional experiences, which result in varying degrees of success.

Returning to the Australian situation, it is quite probable that knowledge and understanding of other religious and cultural belief systems and practices among educators may be reduced to an understanding contextualized by a marginalized Anglo-Australian perspective. Further, they could have particular views about certain religious or cultural groups generated by nonconscious assumptions about the superiority of their own religious and cultural practices. Indeed, over the years, I have heard colleagues at the Australian Catholic University who are of Anglo Australian origin refer to newly arrived Indian Australian Catholics as being very ‘devout’. I was interested that each time, the person added that they did not mean to be derogatory or cause any offence by using that word. It is quite possible that the additional statement showed their awareness that their initial statement may have betrayed their feelings of superiority towards the Other who was different so that they hastened to correct it. This is a clear example of how nonconscious learning may show attitudes through a spontaneous response before the conscious mind is activated to display a politically correct one.

Thus, we may see instances of cultural racism (Helms, 1993) and religious racism (de Souza 2016b) in societies divided by plurality. Helms’ (1993) conceptualization of cultural racism alluded to those groups who felt that their beliefs, customs and traditions were superior to other cultures. He stated that “Cultural racism exists when there is widespread acceptance of stereotypes concerning different ethnic or racial groups” (accessed May 16, 2014).

It could be argued that the concept of cultural racism may be extended to include a concept of religious racism where an assumption about the superiority of one’s own religious beliefs and practices lead to attitudes that marginalize other belief systems or, indeed, other religious practices that exist within a particular tradition because of different regional histories and influences (de Souza, 2016b). This was evident in the earliest days of Christianity in Australia, when British and Irish people brought over their differences from the old world. In fact, Australian Catholics were marginalized people for most of the first two hundred years (for instance, see Hughes, 2003; Kenneally, 2011).

The sobering fact is that cultural and religious marginalization exist even in societies that appear to be homogenous, as in Australia’s past (Hughes, 2003; Kenneally, 2011) and the potential for divisiveness is heightened when religious and cultural plurality become the norm. When the pressures of such situations are compounded by acts of terror, which are committed by extremists belonging to a particular religious group, sharp divisions arise between all members of that particular religious group and the rest of society. This has been the case in Australia for Australian Muslims, and for Muslims who have settled in other Western countries. Many of them share the same condemnation of terrorists that non-Muslims have, but have suffered prejudice and racism because they share the same religion as the terrorists. The rise in Islamophobia is one consequence and its life is renewed constantly by non-Muslim fundamentalists and extremists who live within the mainstream community (Pratt, 2015). Some relevant research, here, comes from scholars from the University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt University, and the Islamic Sciences Research Academy. They undertook a collaborative research project and reported their findings in November 2015. Their study included nearly 600 Muslim participants and they discovered that most Muslims still experience verbal and,
sometimes, physical abuse as they go about their everyday lives. Further, while 86% believed relations between Australian Muslims and non-Muslims were friendly:

- 57% had experienced racism;
- 62% had experienced racism in the workplace or when seeking employment;

Other statistics which indicate levels of discrimination towards Muslims are revealed in the annual Scanlon Surveys into social cohesion in Australia which have been conducted between 2010 and 2016:

The Scanlon Foundation surveys find a relatively high level of negative opinion towards Muslims, similar to the findings of VicHealth. Over the course of six surveys between 2010 and 2016 negative opinion has been in the range 22%–25% (11%–14% very negative), at an average of 24.2%. This compares to 4%–5% negative opinion towards Christians (average 4.2%) and Buddhists (average 4.6%). However, in an important finding of relevance to contemporary commentary, while concern over national security and the threat of terrorism has significantly increased, there has been no statistically significant shift in negative opinion towards Muslims over the course of the six surveys.

(Markus, 2016, p. 43)

Moreover, the 2016 Scanlon survey indicated the levels of discrimination reported by different racial groups: 11%–15% for a number of European countries, 39% for those born in India, 39% China, 55% South Korea, 67% Kenya, 75% Zimbabwe, and 77% South Sudan (Markus, 2016, p. 62). These statistics serve to indicate the subtle or obvious divisiveness in Australian communities today that can be linked to racial, cultural, and religious plurality and it is possible that such statistics may be reflected in other countries with similar multicultural and multireligious populations. Since school populations mirror the society in which they function, anxieties and stresses related to plurality are also found in classrooms and need to be addressed.

Impact on Young Australians

What is important here is that many young Australians were confronted with these conflicting and tension-generating attitudes from their infancy, particularly since September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through the early years of their childhood, they witnessed their parents’ reactions to news items on television about the atrocities committed in the name of Islam. Such experiences through their vulnerable years were bound to affect their sense of self and identity as well as belonging to a community that was being vilified in the media. There is little doubt that their nonconscious minds (de Souza, 2008, 2009) have taken on these images along with the emotions or the reactions of the adults around them. It may, indeed, be the nonconscious learning that took place during those vital early years that has prompted Muslim adolescents as young as 14 or 15 years of age to react to the hostile attitudes towards their communities, thereby becoming involved in some of the recent terror activities that have been witnessed both here in Australia2 and elsewhere (de Souza, 2016a).

As always, there is another side to this situation, which relates to the nonconscious learning of non-Muslim adolescents. The reaction in children from mainstream communities who have also
been exposed to media reports about Muslims and terrorists may, in fact, have been instrumental in their developing attitudes steeped in fear and hostility towards their Muslim neighbours, thereby presenting a collective face of Islamophobia. And while their formal education may teach them that not all Muslims are terrorists and they learn at a conscious level to display a more inclusive attitude, when faced with a fearful or threatening situation, their nonconscious learning will determine the attitude or stance they display. Timothy Wilson (2002) refers to this as the “adaptive unconscious”:

The adaptive unconscious might have learned to respond in prejudiced ways, on the basis of thousands of exposures to racist views in the media or exposure to role models such as one’s parents. Some people learn to reject such attitudes at a conscious level, and egalitarian views become a central part of their self-stories. They will act on their conscious non-prejudiced views when they are monitoring and controlling their behaviour, but will act on the more racist disposition of their adaptive unconscious when they are not monitoring or cannot control their actions.

(p. 190)

In this discussion, I have focused on religious tensions because this has been a dominating factor in the rise in prejudice and hostility for some years now. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there are several other minority communities in Australia who have also experienced cultural and racial abuse, as shown in the Scanlon surveys mentioned earlier. Accordingly, when a child experiences anger or hostility just for being who they are, their sense of belonging and identity may become damaged and they may suffer withdrawal symptoms and alienation.

Essentially, both teachers and students need to become aware of their nonconscious learning in order to make wise and informed decisions about their attitudes and relational behaviour in the classroom. They need to take steps to creating an inclusive environment of openness towards and acceptance of the otherness of Other. As long as they remain unaware of any nonconscious learning that underlies their own prejudicial opinions and stances, they will be unable to take the crucial steps to connect sincerely with people different from themselves. These are some reasons why holistic approaches to learning which include addressing the spiritual dimension is a worthy and extremely relevant proposition for the twenty-first century, since spirituality is about relationships and connectedness. But first, I examine the ambiguity that often surrounds the concept of spirituality and the changed understandings of spirituality that have occurred over the past few decades.

The Spiritual Dimension in Life and Learning

In a recent project (de Souza, Bone, & Watson, 2016), which investigated reasons for the uncertainty that appears to be implicit in understandings of spirituality today, we identified two concepts—traditional and contemporary spirituality. The first was linked to religious practice and was, therefore, God-related, and it had been the common understanding of spirituality for most of the twentieth century. However, we also discovered that contemporary notions of spirituality pertained to the relational dimension of being which did not always include a relationship with a Higher Being or Divine Power (see de Souza & Watson, 2016) but was grounded in the physical spheres of human relationality. We discovered that any ambiguity surrounding the concept of spirituality was a relatively new entity and it was restricted to contemporary spirituality. However, in analyzing the views of over 20 academics who came from a range of disciplines, we detected an element that was shared among them all. It was a sense that one’s spirituality was about living in relationship. This confirmed an aspect of my own early research where, along with others, I identified spirituality as pertaining
to the relational dimension of being. My findings led me to conceptualize a relational (or spiritual) continuum where, at one end, the individual is quite separate from the Other. However, as s/he moves along the continuum, the boundaries between self and the Other become blurred until the end point is reached, a point of Ultimate Unity, where self blends with the Other. I was able to find parallels in many worldviews and belief systems where the notion of being part of the Whole and a journey to unity persist (see for instance, Armstrong, 2009; Griffiths, 1976, 1989; Laszlo, 2008; Newberg, D’Aquili, & Rause, 2001; Teasdale, 1999). As well, I was able to align my notion of Ultimate Unity with the sense of oneness as described by many mystics from different religious traditions (de Souza, 2016a).

To summarize, the human person lives in relationship with their families and communities, with the world and, for some, with a Divine mystery that stretches beyond the physical realm. Human spirituality, then, is an essential element in being human, that is, the sense that one is part of something bigger than oneself. It may be perceived as the sense and expressions of connectedness that individuals feel to the Other in their communities and the wider world, and also, for some, to a Supreme Being or Transcendent Other. More importantly, the connectedness that a person feels gives them a sense of identity and belonging and also a sense of self-worth, although this latter may sometime be a negative one. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging to a group or community provides a person with a place and sense of purpose—for instance s/he may feel some responsibility to the group. As well, the shared beliefs and values may help them shape and interpret their daily experiences into meaningful patterns and encounters.

If we accept that spirituality is a vital human element because people live their lives in relationship, and that it is a critical factor in helping young people develop a sense of belonging and identity, which, in turn, brings meaning and purpose to their lives, we should accept that it needs to be addressed in education. In the next section, I revisit a learning approach that explores the spiritual dimension of learning.

The Complementarity of Cognitive, Affective, and Spiritual Learning

It is many years since I developed an approach to learning that recognized the complementarity of the cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of learning. I examined the elements of thinking, feeling, intuiting, and imagination in the learning process, which I aligned with three intelligences—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. In particular, Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall’s (2000) thesis on spiritual intelligence influenced my research when they argued that spiritual intelligence “unifies, integrates and has the potential to transform material” (p. 7) arising from the processes of thinking and feeling linked to rational and emotional intelligences. Spiritual Intelligence, they claimed, facilitated “a dialogue between reason and emotion, between mind and body. It provides a fulcrum for growth and transformation. It provides the self with an active, unifying, meaning-giving centre” (p. 7).

As well, I highlighted the importance of multisensory learning, which implemented the use of multisensory stimuli to engage different senses in the learning process. This is central to the learning approach, since different kinds of information may be absorbed by the different senses, which helps the mind to develop a holistic understanding of a situation and/or topic. Thus, the learning approach attempts to address the fact that the child is a multidimensional being; an individual with a rational mind that thinks, an emotional mind that feels, and a spiritual mind that intuits, imagines, wonders, and creates. And this multidimensional mind is encased in a physical body, which allows the child to engage, mediate, and interact with the world around them through their perceptions and senses. Therefore, it was expected that learning activities, environments, and resources would be designed with the aim that they:
were multidimensional and involved a process that allowed each child to draw on his/her individual gifts, abilities and resources, whatever they were, so as to reach his/her potential to become a well-rounded, whole person;

− would equip each child to engage positively with the world in all aspects of his/her life as each of them experienced it;

− would develop innate strengths and capabilities that would empower each child to make effective and beneficial contributions to the well-being of future communities which, in turn, would promote their own sense of self, place, and well-being.

A quick overview of these aims will reveal that many mission statements and educational goals would have similar statements. However, in general, programs and practices still reflect the scientific, dualist, objectivist, and reductionist mindset of a past era. Such a system compartmentalizes learning, focuses on competition and assessment, and gives weight to some gifts and skills over others, thus dehumanizing some students and creating divisive elements within the class and school community. As Ken Robinson (2001) states: “academic ability has been conflated with intelligence” (p. 7) and schools are structured on the assumption that there are only two types of people in the world, academic and non-academic, which leads to the rather discriminating attitude that labels them: “The able and the less able” (p. 7). In addition, the aim for children to be constantly exposed to learning environments that recognize the role of their feelings, or that stimulate their thinking beyond comprehension and memorizing facts is too often relegated to the idealist’s basket. Ventures into areas of wonderment, imagination, compassion, feelings of liberation and self-transcendence, and, finally, a holistic approach to problem solving are usually perceived as generally unobtainable in the current system, requiring too much time, expense, and resources. The result may lead to classroom practice dissolving into the tedium of mind-numbing and uninspiring learning activities.

Indeed, there are many teachers who strive to improve the learning experiences of their students so that everyday classrooms may be enlivened by thinking outside traditional frameworks. These are occasions when children find that they enjoy their learning; it is relevant to their interests and needs, they are encouraged to cooperate and respect one another, and they are more likely to maintain a happy and hopeful outlook in the process. However, maintaining this visionary approach within the restrictions of existing educational systems can lead to stressful and oppressive states, thereby diluting the enthusiasm of classroom practitioners.

To conclude, if teachers aim to nurture children in their wholeness and provide them with learning experiences that help them to develop their potential, attention needs to be given to a holistic approach where cognitive, affective, and spiritual learning interact with one another. More activities that draw on the inner self and involve creativity, imagination, storytelling, and reflection should be explored and trialled to evaluate their effectiveness in addressing the three dimensions. The use of the arts as a resource to teach various topics across the curriculum is an effective way forward. The arts promote learning through different senses leading to a plethora of perceptions that generate different thoughts and feelings. When students share these varied thought patterns and the feelings associated with them, their respective horizons may be enlarged to stimulate further creativity and imaginative thinking. This is equally the case with the use of other visually and aurally stimulating resources and activities, which connect and resonate with students’ stories and lives, so that they become more relevant and meaningful. Such activities, conceivably, may reduce the otherness of the Other and connect children from different cultural backgrounds and belief systems.

Also, daily timetables and classroom structures can be designed to promote communication, connectedness, and an integration of learning across different subject areas. Further, attention needs to be given to incorporating periods of stillness, silence, and contemplation into the everyday. These are all ways in which this learning approach can be implemented effectively. Such learning, then,
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has the potential to be transformative and have a more lasting impact, something that the children may be able to revisit throughout their lives. As well, the learning experiences may help children develop a raised awareness of their connectedness to themselves and to the Other in their worlds. Such experiences provide those moments that both teachers and students remember as enjoyable and meaningful.

If educators develop holistic learning programs and environments that provide space and time for an integrative learning approach where the interplay of cognitive, affective, and spiritual learning is enabled, they will be creating the potential for today’s students to become balanced, insightful, inclusive, and concerned citizens for tomorrow’s world. Surely this is the goal of every educator.

Notes
1 I use Other as a collective noun for all others.
2 See the news report on the shooting in Paramatta, NSW in 2015 on the following website: www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-03/nsw-police-headquarters-gunman-was-radicalised-youth/6825028.
3 I have discussed this in detail in Chapter 1 in de Souza, (2016a).
4 I have discussed this at length when examining the shadow side of spirituality. See de Souza (2012, 2016a).
5 For instance, see de Souza, 2004, 2005, 2006 for a more extensive discussion.

References
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