

**DEVELOPING THE SPIRITUALITY OF CHILDREN:
OBSERVATIONS OF TEACHERS IN A PRE-SCHOOL**

MUMUNI THOMPSON
Department of Basic Education
Faculty of Education
University of Cape Coast

WINSTON KWAME ABROAMPA
Department of Psychology and Education, Faculty of Educational
Studies
University of Education, Winneba

&
REV. ASARE DANSO
Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education
Faculty of Education
University of Cape Coast

ABSTRACT.....
Spiritual development has been excluded from the schools and has been considered not pertinent to be integrated into the curriculum. Nevertheless, spirituality is part of the life of every person. The study therefore explores how pre-school teachers develop the spirituality of young children. The research included five participants selected from a well established pre-school. The instruments used to gather data included: observations, individual interviews and narratives. The theoretical framework for spirituality in the Pre-school that emerges from the data situates spirituality as fundamental for young children. It contextualizes spirituality in education within the parameters of identifying connectedness with self and others, a higher being and with love, fairness and equity. It was therefore recommended that spirituality should be integrated into the pre school curriculum.

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INTRODUCTION

Painstaking scrutiny of professional literature depicts a limited amount of research documented in Ghana regarding the topic of spirituality in education and particularly in the field of early childhood education. The need to study this topic on deeper levels is evident. Educators, administrators and policy makers have focused on education reforms that emphasized the academic aspect of the development of the child, neglecting to view the child as a whole person (Delpit & White-Bradley, 2003). These reforms have not proven their effectiveness across the years. Studies related to holistic ways in education that include the spiritual dimension might provide other alternatives toward more effective educational processes (Kirk, 2000). In this process it is critical to hear what the teachers have to say. These important voices have been usually excluded from the education discourse and from literature (Jagiello, 2004). Studying early childhood education teachers' perceptions of children's spirituality, the ways they think they can support this type of development in the classroom, and how they think spirituality in early childhood education paves the way toward social justice might offer some alternatives toward more effective educational processes.

An education for the whole child, as fostered historically by educators and philosophers, requires that teachers attend to all developmental domains such as the: social, aesthetic, moral, language, affective, physical, and cognitive, including the spiritual dimension (Clark, 1991). Nevertheless, in Ghana, the history of the religious and spiritual dimension of education has been a chequered one. The 1987 and 2007 educational reforms initially excluded these elements from the basic school curriculum but upon the agitation of religious leaders and other well-meaning Ghanaians, exposing learners to the religions that will engender morality and spirituality was reintroduced into the basic school system. It therefore stands to reason that the period between its exclusion and ditto reintroduction, schools inadvertently imposed a silence regarding sharing about the inner life (Bosacki, 2002). The gap that was created as a result of its exclusion from the school curriculum is both problematic and contradictory in the context of the pluralistic nature of the Ghanaian society. The silence becomes problematic because people in society, as Wright (2000) describes, seem to feel an urgency to search for the meaning and purpose of their lives, and the educational processes are completely alienated from this urgency. The fact that the institution of the school does not foster this type of development is a contradiction, given its responsibility for the integral or holistic development of learners (Lawson, 1996). How can early childhood education be holistic? How can it attend to the whole child if it does not attend to this inner development also called spirituality?

Early childhood educators with a holistic approach have the potential to break the silence about their inner life, and that of their children, imposed by schools. They can opt to do this as a way to share the depth and meaning of their unique spiritual journey. They can opt to do this in order to construct new meaning and as a way to nurture their spirituality and that of their children, without interfering with the state-religious groupings agreement and without violating the constitution of Ghana which engenders freedom of worship.

Although, Western culture tends to make a separation between the intellectual, the emotional and the spiritual, they intertwine in the human and self and in education (Palmer, 1998). These dimensions are interrelated and interdependent with one another. Good teaching, according to Palmer (1998), fosters connection among the educators as subjects, who relate to themselves and to others, including their colleagues and their students. In Palmer's (1999) words:

Teaching and learning, done well, are done not by disembodied intellects but by whole persons whose minds cannot be disconnected from feeling and spirit, from heart and soul. To teach as a whole person to the whole person is not to lose one's professionalism as a teacher but to take it to a deeper level. (p. 10)

As teaching is taken at deeper levels, educators open possibilities to reclaim the power of inwardness in order to transform who they are, to transform their lives and what they do in their classrooms and beyond (Palmer, 1998). This also brings forward the real possibility of transforming education into a context that fosters wholeness and relations (Kirk, 2000). Students and teachers can learn to be a caring community that contributes to the society at large (Miller, 2005). Within this holistic approach to education, students can better achieve academically, and thus, the diverse ways of knowing, such as imagination and intuition, can be acknowledged and fostered without leaving reasoning behind (Kirk, 2000).

However, the academic culture does not encourage this type of holistic approach based on a sense of connectedness with the self, other human beings and nature. On the contrary, it promotes disconnection and distance from the inner self, and from the others (Kirk, 2000). The school's goal is to prepare the children to compete in a global economy; thus its emphasis is on the academics and on tests without taking into consideration the whole person (Miller, 2000). Hence, education turns out to be a process where students and teachers become alienated, isolated, and disconnected from who they are and from others. This reality of fragmentation is what Palmer (1998) denominates the pain of 'dismemberment' or disconnection. In order to change this reality in education and in the academic culture Palmer recommends emphatically: "we must talk to each other about our inner lives" (Palmer, 1998, p.12). Dialogue could serve as a very powerful transformative tool (Freire, 1999).

Freire (1999) defines dialogue as the true act of love, as the profound commitment to the liberation of all oppressions. Freire, further elucidates that dialogue is about being in relationship with other persons and with the reality of the world. Teachers are human beings who are in relationship with other persons and with the world and who have the responsibility to contribute toward the transformation of injustice (Hooks, 2000). This investigation was done with the intention of providing a space for the voices of the teachers regarding their spiritual journey and its influence in their teaching. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore with preschool teachers, their understanding of the spirituality of young children and how they think educators can support this type of development in the classroom. The inspiration for this study came from experiences in the course of working with teachers in early childhood education. Many interactions with these teachers had been around questions that children have shared about life, relationship, their immediate

physical world and reality. The depth of their insights, their sense of wonder and their longing for deeper meanings were indeed very intriguing. These elements precisely are part of the definition of children's spirituality (Waite & Halstead, 2001), form the nexus of this study.

Statement of the Problem

African spirituality comprises various traditions and practices. But spirituality is more than beliefs, practices, and institutional affiliations (Noddings, 2005). The emphasis on the separation between religious bodies and state, reinforced by lack of stable and well-defined spiritual education curriculum at the preschool level many a times serves as a barrier that paralyses some teachers in their efforts to nurture the spiritual dimension of young children (Kirt, 2000). As a consequence, these teachers are not able to support children holistic development in the schools setting (Miller, 1990). This study focused on how teachers define children's spirituality and on the ways they think educators can foster the spiritual development in the classroom. It explored teacher's notions on children's spirituality and the alternatives that they identify to support children in this developmental domain. The questions that guided this inquiry are the following:

1. How do preschool teachers perceive the spirituality of young children?
2. In what ways do preschool teachers foster spiritual development in the classroom?

METHOD

Participants

The case study approach was employed for this study. This was found appropriate since it allowed an in depth study of the issue at stake in a natural setting. Desnscombe (2008) posits that "the case study approach works better when the researcher wants to investigate an issue in depth and provide an explanation that can cope with the complexity and subtlety of real life situations" (p. 38). Participants of this study were five preschool teachers in the kindergarten section of the Mother Theresa School in the Bawku Municipality of the Upper-East Region of Ghana. The school was chosen because it is one of the well established kindergartens in the country. It is well-equipped with facilities and all teachers are professionally trained. All the 5 teachers in the kindergarten were selected for the study. This is consistent with the assertion by Fontana (2000) that every member of the population would be studied "when the population size of the whole population is small". (p. 58)

Instrument

Three main instruments were used for this study. These included unstructured interview guide, observation and narratives. The individual interviews were mostly unstructured. Unstructured interviews was chosen because it has the potential to “provide a greater breath of data than other types given the qualitative nature of the study (Fontana, 2000). As a way to foster a dialogic interaction and a sense of mutuality, the participants had the opportunity to ask questions as desired. Self-disclosure was not avoided during the interview process when the participants elicited it. Field notes were written during the interviews.

Procedure

The observations, the unstructured interviews and the narratives were undertaken in the case school in November, 2009. To address the research question, the participants were interviewed individually. In addition, classroom observations and narratives were employed to address these research questions. The observations were realized in the classroom and other contexts related to school activities such as at the play ground. The integration of narratives provided a space for voicing lived experienced and for interpreting and sharing the meaning of these experiences. For Scot (2001), “personal narrative is one means of expressing spiritual experiences in a form that allows meaning to be constructed” (p. 120). Scott further argues the act of sharing spiritual stories is an act against the strong cultural message of keeping silence regarding spirituality.

The recorded interviews were transcribed the same day, or as soon as possible, in order to remember the dialogical interaction more accurately and to be able to inform the next stage. The next step included seeking the participants to check for any type of errors about the information, and modifying the transcriptions by incorporating the content edited by the participants. Subsequently, possible emergent themes and categories were identified. In addition, the words, phrases, or sentences in the transcript that were possible pointers to the emergent themes were highlighted. For a span of two weeks, the researchers went to the classroom to observe lessons. These experiences in the classroom offered them the opportunity to do observations, to tape interviews with an audio recorder and to write field notes as well as to listen to narratives from the teachers.

Findings

The findings are organized in categories and themes that emerged from the different methods used.

The **first research question** sought to find out the perception of preschool teachers about the spirituality of the children. Some of the participants pointed to the notion that children’s spirituality is about relationships, about connecting with the self, with other people and with a higher being. When talking about how teachers perceives spirituality in children’s lives, one of the teachers responded:

“Spirituality means a deeper understanding of yourself of the people around you, a deeper connection with yourself and a higher being, whatever being that a person

believes in: God, ... it's a deeper connection, a connection that goes beyond doing things".

The second teacher described spirituality as follows:

"spirituality especially in the classroom situation is very much about community. The kids all work together; as people see them doing their own problem solving. In this vein, there is the need for teachers to provide a variety of teaching and learning materials for children to work with because this enhances their spirituality".

For the third teacher, children's spirituality is *"related to their families and how they are brought up"*. The teacher explicated that *"some kids are introduced, for example, to some specifics, like religion and they get used to it and are involved in it"*.

According to this teacher, that is how spirituality "comes up" or develops in children. In this way, this participant established a relationship between children's spirituality and other childrearing. In addition, the teacher in question linked children's spirituality with play:

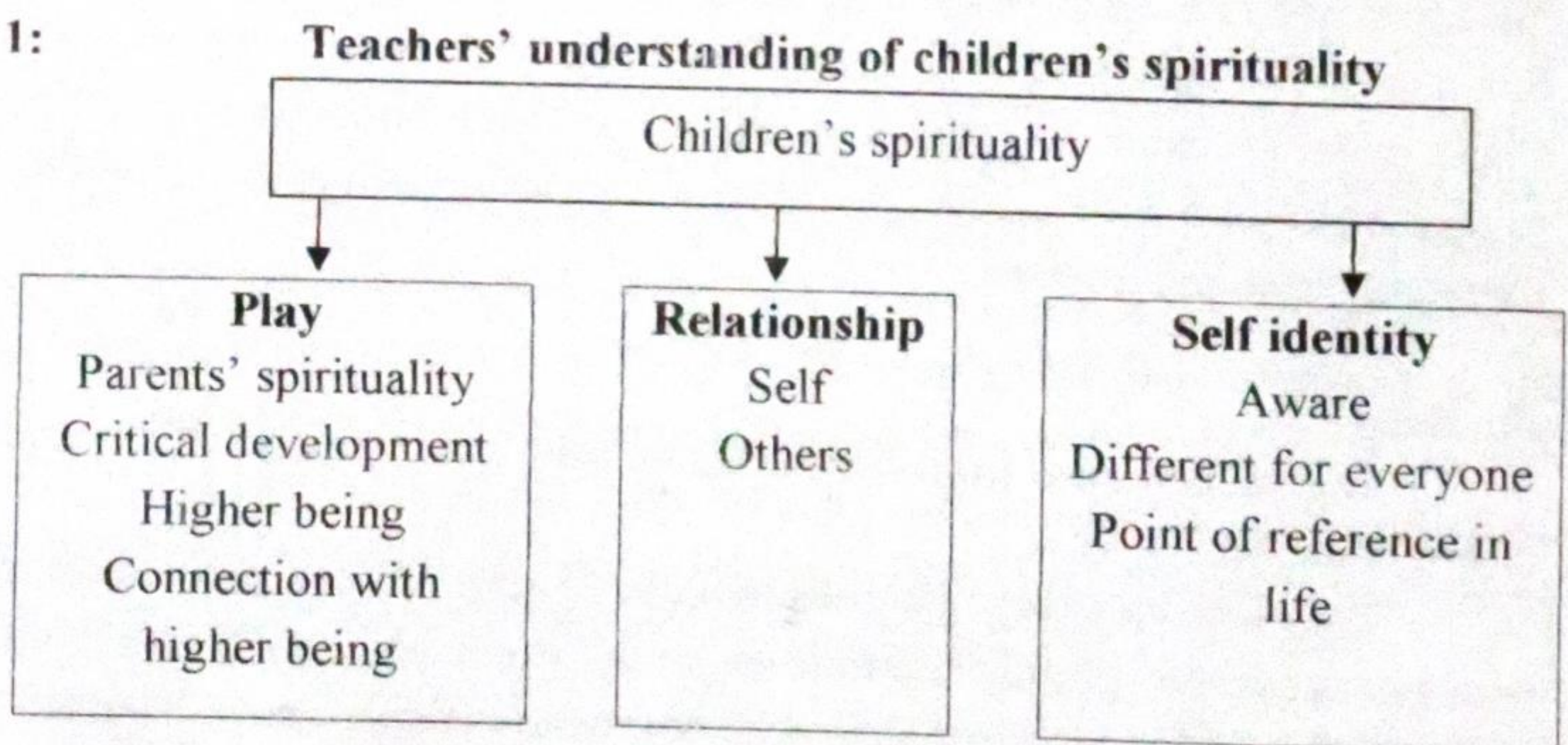
"Their sense of self (that of the children) ... comes play, their sense of right or wrong comes out through their play. In a lot of ways I think whether you try to or not it comes up. With the children, spirituality comes out through play".

Other relationships that the participants established were between children's spirituality and self. Identity and spirituality are critical dimensions which begin to be developed from childhood. Defending children, a one of the teacher's stated: *"I think that spirituality makes them who they are"*. Another teacher contended that:

"Being a child is the most important time to develop your spirituality; I think it is embedded in you ... and it stays with you for the rest of your life. Note that it won't evolve in adulthood, but I think that spirituality is critical at the children's age ..."

The following synoptic chart presents the perceptions of the participants discussed above.

Figure 1:



The teachers think about in children's spirituality in multiple ways. This is reflected by how they view children's spirituality as represented in the following diagram as it emerged from the data.

The **second research question** explored ways teachers' foster children's spiritual development in the classroom. Some emergent themes related to the category of tending to the spiritual dimension in the classroom include: equipping oneself before teaching, relationship and connection with children, respect, learning community, challenging, being able change and bringing in the scriptures. Other topics that emerged were time, space and opportunity.

One of the teachers observed that before a lesson commences, there is the need for equipping oneself. The teacher shared:

"once I get to school I need to meditate and focus myself back on God, focus on the reason he chose me to have this career, this gift". For this teacher this implies listening to Music. The second teacher described how the spiritual dimension of children in the classroom is tended:

"I bring the spirituality through love, through my guidance, my care for them making sure that they are okay, through my nurturing attitude and behaviour..." The teacher expressed a concern: *"In public schools, a lot of times, many teachers can't do that because they may be afraid of the reactions of parents because of the negative attitude of parents towards teachers..."* the teacher defended emphatically:

"That physical touch is a spiritual connection as well. Everyone needs human touch: And without it, especially children, it's very dear to them. Imagine, no physical touch, not getting close to your teacher?"

Some concrete ways in which the teacher fosters connections and relationships with the children are: sitting "next to each other on the carpet" for some activities, providing "everybody a chance to sit" by the teacher or to "hold" and holding hands as everyone stands when praying. In an effort to be "fair" with all the children, the teacher tries to "get the chance to touch everyone at least once during the day.

Another teacher brought up the theme "bringing in the holy scriptures" as part of the spiritual experience in the classroom. According to the teacher, integrating the Holy Scriptures for example is a way to integrate the spirituality. The teacher said:

"if children are playing and they have a problem... I can bring in the Bible .I can bring in how that makes another person feel".

The teacher explained that the holy scriptures can be integrated in the math subjects or social studies or science and in anything the children are doing. They articulated that issues can be explained spiritually as well as intellectually. The meaning of this conception was explained in the following way:

For example, *"I can say: this may happen because of A, B and C but let's look at it this way. Someone may feel bad because you did something wrong to him or her but let's look at the deeper level. I talk about what it may do to the spirit, how it may hurt the spirit, the soul...things like that. Thus, explaining things spiritually as well as intellectually"* implies talking about the consequences of one's actions toward other people.

Another teacher stated that tending to the spiritual was for him about "time, space and opportunity", he stated: *"If you create an environment where the kids are comfortable about who they are, they are comfortable about their interaction with*

others, you'll really get to see how open up and really find out who this child is, what kind of things they know and what they can do".

From the observation it was evident that the classroom environment of each participant pointed to these themes: The social interactions among children and teachers, reflected negotiations, collaboration, co-responsibility and sharing of food, toys and other materials. The atmosphere was characterized, jokes, laughs and humour during the structured and unstructured activities. Each classroom followed a schedule, yet the teachers were to modify it when needed. There were also time for rest and for recess.

Discussion

The first research question revealed that the participants linked spirituality to a sense of self-identity as individuals and part of a group. Like Dei (2003) they perceived spirituality as part of who they are as historical and cultural beings. Congruent with Dei's (2005) notions, they viewed spirituality as intrinsically related to who they are and what they do in the classroom. For them, spirituality is related to connections with the self, God and others, and to a sense of respect, love and caring for others as well (Hooks, 1994; Noddings, 2005). The perceptions of teachers about children's spirituality are similar to their perceptions regarding adults' spirituality. The perception of children spirituality adds the element of play (Waite & Halstead 2001), critical development and relationship with the spirituality of the parents. The findings confirmed the notion that spirituality is unique in each person (Wenman, 2001), and brings up the idea that there are multiple spiritualities. Akin to Palmer's perspective, the findings suggest that the teachers can learn about young children and about their unique spirituality if they interact and talk with them.

The findings of the second research question offered alternatives that illustrated how early childhood educators tend to the spirit in their classroom. The early childhood educators referred to the notion of loving education with an ethic of caring, as proposed by Hooks (1984) and Noddings (2005) when talking about how to tend to the spirit in the classroom. For them this includes loving and guiding the children, caring for them, building community with the children and their families, knowing one another, showing affection, recognizing and fostering the potential of each child and welcoming, respecting and validating different people and their ideas.

For the early childhood educators, tending to the spirit is about providing time, space and opportunity so that the children develop their potential. They understand that when the teachers tend to the spirit through loving and caring education, the children demonstrate a better academic achievement. The findings suggest that even when early childhood educator's spirituality differs from that of the young child, it is crucial for the teacher to negotiate the spaces for different spiritualities, in order to tend to spirit within the classroom.

Conclusion

The findings evidenced an intrinsic relationship between identity, spirituality and teaching. Spirituality was linked with a sense of self as individual and as part of a

group. It was related to the childbearing of persons to their inner life, feelings and thoughts. Dei (2002) like the participants of this study, asserts that during teaching and learning, teachers and students portray who they are. Dei explains that who the teacher is and who the student is are as important as what they do. The integrated, complex self is situated in a classroom with other complex selves, each one bringing their multiple layers of being, including the spirit, along with their cultural and psychological beings among other layers (Dei, 2002). The self (as identity and subjectivity) is itself linked to schooling and knowledge production” (Dei, 2002).

Education, however, usually focuses on the intellectual and ignores the multiple dimensions of human being. By education that is disengaged from who the persons are fosters disconnection it fosters disconnection with the self, with others in the world and with nature (Seymour, 2004). An education that promotes a sense of connection with the self, others and nature is an alternative to a more human, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environment, (Seymour, 2004).

Moreover, the teachers who participated in this study are conscious of the complications and challenges of tending to the spirit in the classroom. Yet they recognize its importance and they identified ways in which teachers tend to the spirit within educational contexts. They recognize that a holistic and relevant education cannot dismiss the spiritual dimension. Within the theoretical framework that emerged in this research, education is more than an intellectual enterprise. Education is about love (Hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2006; Lerner, 2005). Loving education focuses on a holistic and rational learning approach where the individual learns to live in community and “to act politically and intellectually for the common good. The individual develops a sense of responsibility to the community. Their notion of community extends from the immediate to that of the world. Within this context, the individual learns to challenge the self and others as well as those structures that threaten the life and wellbeing of each and every person. This is one way in which spirituality can serve social justice.

Recommendations

From the results of the study, it gives the impression that it is logical to propose that young children’s spirituality should be nurtured at the kindergarten level, especially now that kindergarten one and two have been added to basic education in Ghana thereby making preschool education obligatory for all children of school age. Activities and learning experiences that would, right from the beginning, nurture learners’ spirituality should be integrated into the curriculum for preschools, since it has not been captured in the existing programme.

There is also the need to close the gap between spiritual knowledge and actions by providing a platform for young children to put into practice some of the spiritual issues learnt on daily basis in the classroom. By this means, a solid foundation of spiritual development of the younger generation would be laid and this would serve as basis of forging the spiritual development of these young people into the future. This invariably would enhance the development of the heart and the affective aspects of learners which seem to have been neglected.

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