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Relating for Learning:

Teaching to Nurture Children's Spiritual Growth

A grounded theory study of New Zealand teachers
making students' learning significant in their schooling

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

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in
Education

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New Zealand.

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This thesis is dedicated to my father,
Richard Thomas Joyce (Dick) Clarke,
(1933 – 2004)
who nurtured in me
a sense of wonder for the physical world in which we live,
a yen for a relationship with God,
respect for every person,
and belief in myself.

We are all grounded theorists about our daily life.

Barney G. Glaser (1998:33)

Abstract

The thesis proffers a theory called *relating for learning* about spiritually nurturing teaching, generated using grounded theory research. Spirituality is defined as that to do with the part of a human being that transcends human life, that is to say, that to do with the soul. The human lifetime is understood as but a phase in the growth of the soul, and, therefore, all of life is a spiritual journey. *Knowing* is consciousness of relationships in one's life and what is known is always known in relation to oneself. Furthermore, *learning*, which is understood, in the thesis, to be the means by which human beings come to know and progress through life, is seen as spiritual growth.

Teachers, who are in the business of serving others by assisting them with their learning, are in a prime position to nurture their students' spirituality. The call in the New Zealand Health and Physical Well-being curriculum statement for school teachers to tend to the spiritual well-being of their students is therefore appropriate, although the directness of the request is unprecedented in New Zealand schooling history and teachers are unsure of just what it means for their practice. The broad aims of the doctoral research inquiry are to add to existing understandings of the place of spirituality in New Zealand state school education, and to explore the practical implications of the new understandings for teachers and other educationists. 'Continuing the conversation' (Josselson, 1999) about spirituality in education, and about spiritual nurturance in particular, is important at this time when school teachers are overtly expected to tend to students' spiritual well-being.

The *relating for learning* theory is generated from nine practicing teachers' ideas and talk, and observations of the teachers interacting with students. The theory proffers a psychology of teachers relating to students to nurture their spiritual growth. It identifies establishing and maintaining a trusting, learning-directed relationship with each student as essential to effective teaching. The relationship involves the student trusting the teacher as a capable educational leader, and trusting that the teacher respects and cares for the student. The student's trust, in turn, facilitates the teacher gaining the information and conditions required to effectively develop the student as a learner and assist the student to learn the formal curriculum.

Preface

I was born in 1959 and I had a loving, sheltered and liberal upbringing in middle-class New Zealand. My general feeling throughout my compulsory schooling was one of not wanting to be there. It was not until I left school and was free to live and learn about the world in my own way that I became enamoured with life and learning. It occurred to me, then, that school education in New Zealand could be improved, and I embarked on my tertiary education in the field of education with emancipatory ambitions to save New Zealand school children from the time-wasting doldrums of ineffective compulsory schooling. I was young and passionate in those days!

In 1986, I was one of a team of researchers who conceptualized and conducted a curriculum design research pilot in a New Zealand secondary school. The pilot successfully integrated knowledge and skills selected from Biology, Geography, Outdoor Education, English, Mathematics and Computer Studies. The fifteen mixed-ability, Form 6 (Year 12) students achieved such remarkable results on the pilot course, that the (then) New Zealand Department of Education, IBM and Massey University agreed to fund the Freyberg High School Integrated Studies Project (Freyberg Project), an extensive 3 year project to further develop the findings of the pilot with Form 3, 4, 5 and 6 (Year 9, 10, 11 and 12) cohorts.

The integrated curriculum designs of both the pilot and the Freyberg Project featured: (i) fieldtrips to learning environments beyond the classroom; (ii) student use of computers as learning tools (as distinct from computer-assisted instruction); and (iii) the combining of traditionally separate subject curricula into inter-disciplinary thematic studies. The educational merit of the three respective design features had already been suggested in prior research and literature¹. The Freyberg Project researchers saw potential in pulling the three design features together into an “educational programme that would capture students’ interests by challenging them intellectually, emotionally and physically” (McKinnon, Sinclair, Nolan, 1997:2).

Indeed, the venues of the fieldtrips immersed students in wilderness experiences and pushed the boundaries of their physical endurance. Cooperation was required for survival and students quickly developed a sense of belonging to the group. Teacher-set assignments solved real-life problems and developed, in students, feelings of achievement, competence and usefulness. Student-initiated projects gave students the opportunity to pursue an area of passionate interest.

In the context of progressively developing and field-testing integrated curricula within the Freyberg Project, the research aims included investigation of the educational effectiveness of the innovative curriculum in terms of students' academic performance, motivation and attitudes². Analysis of longitudinal data from the Freyberg Project showed that students in the integrated studies programme performed³ significantly better in English, Mathematics and Science, and had more positive attitudes and higher motivation for learning, than students in the traditional school programme (McKinnon, 1995; McKinnon, Sinclair, Nolan, 1997). In literature about the project, the researchers proffered explanations for the favorable effects of the curriculum innovation in terms of things like the motivating force of computers and fieldtrips, and better opportunities for students to see the connections between traditionally separate subject matter. The Project was deemed a success by the researchers.

My involvement with the pilot left me with two lasting impressions that have had profound effect on my thinking about education. The first was a realization that the 'means-end' model of school education did not adequately explain the student learning that occurred.

The second was an overwhelming conviction that the design of the curriculum in the Freyberg Project was such that the students could not help but learn. *I had witnessed students being exposed to profound experiences that deeply affected the way they*

¹ For example, Papert, 1980; Turkle, 1984; Lawler, 1985; Stenhouse, 1980; Kleinfeld, McDiarmid & Hagstrom, 1985.

² The Freyberg Project researchers also aimed to investigate curriculum innovation adoption and professional development of teachers (Nolan & McKinnon, 1989).

³ Judgements of student 'performance' were based on students' results in School Certificate, an externally set examination administered at the end of Form 5 (Year 11).

thought about the world. This, to me, is real learning and is of ultimate importance to one's life. Nonetheless, my conviction about the inherent educational quality of the curriculum design remained largely unexplained by the Freyberg Project research. This was because the educational effects of the Project's design features were evaluated mainly on the basis of examination achievement. Measurement of specific learning was not attempted. The learning-related findings of the research were consequently limited to identifying general effects of the curriculum design on student achievement. Study of the possible causative relationships between the curriculum design features and specific learning were not possible.

Since then, my academic interest has moved towards the psychological effect of teachers' curriculum design practices on students, and the direct relationships between curriculum design features and specific learning instances. Contemplating the meanings of the words 'learning' and 'knowing', and trying to understand the very essence of learning in childhood, I found myself delving into psychological theories of consciousness, and the relationships between emotions and motivation, value and memory, and connection and attention.

Furthermore, I came to understand that what I call 'real learning', that is to say, profound changes in the way an individual thinks about his or her world, is what constitutes his or her personal spiritual development. (This idea is developed in Chapter 3.) Worldwide academic interest in 'spirituality' is now burgeoning and, not coincidentally, the concepts of 'emotions', 'value' and 'connection' are common in the discourse.

It occurred to me that the design of the curriculum in the Freyberg Project allowed the students to connect spiritually with those aspects of the world that were being presented in the course materials, and I entertained the notion that herein lay the value of the curriculum design to the students' learning. This notion was the inspiration for my doctorate.

Soon after the commencement of the doctorate, which turned out to be a study of teachers teaching rather than curriculum design, it became clear that grounded theory

was the appropriate research methodology. Consequently, I conducted the research “minus mentor” (Stern cited in Glaser, 1998), since grounded theory research about spirituality in education was unprecedented in New Zealand at the time of commencement and my supervisors were relatively inexperienced with the methodology. My main sources of information on how to do it were books on grounded theory and verbal accounts of Masterate students’ experiences of employing the methodology.

In his “Issues and Discussion” book, Glaser (1998) warns of the time and energy wasted by pitfalls such as attempting literature reviews prior to data gathering and analysis, forcing pre-conceived ideas on the emerging theory, and telling colleagues about emerging concepts before the theory is generated. Despite having the warnings in black and white, I learned such lessons very much by experience and, in the reports of the research process in Chapters 5 and 6, I attempt to capture the trials and errors as well as the triumphs I experienced. Far from being counted as a waste of time and energy, however, the obstacles along the way were seen to enrich my understanding of grounded theory research methodology.

The initial stage of the doctoral journey was characterised by a lack of confidence in my own professional authority and I thought that my feelings, my convictions, my insights about spirituality would stand for little in a doctoral thesis. I turned to the literature in order to see what others thought and to use others’ authority to legitimate my own ideas. In the process of responding to others’ ideas, I developed not only my own rapidly crystallizing notion of spirituality, but also the language with which to communicate and debate my ideas with others.

Successfully completing the doctoral research using an unfamiliar methodology could not have happened without supportive supervisors who granted me the autonomy and professional responsibility to do things my way, and allowed me the time, space and encouragement to find my own feet.

Deborah Ayres

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Glaser (1998:33) said “We are all grounded theorists in our daily life.” I have found this to be true, at least about my own way of thinking. I believe we all practice constant comparison at various levels of consciousness during most of our waking hours, and perhaps even in our sleep, as well. We all go through life processing incoming information, checking it off against and adjusting our existing theories and sometimes generating new theories. But I must say, the time to commit myself whole-heartedly to generating a new theory does not present itself readily in my ordinary life – although I try hard to make time in my everyday busy-ness to stop and smell the roses, that generosity to myself rarely extends to allowing time to actually *contemplate* the roses.

I would like to thank Massey University for granting me a Massey Doctoral Scholarship and thereby creating the opportunity for me to devote time to generate a new theory – time to read extensively about children’s spirituality and about education, both topics dear to my heart, time to meet and watch and talk to, not just one, but *several* inspirational teachers, time to deeply contemplate the essence of their inspirational teaching qualities, and time to articulate and write down the theory that emerged from my contemplations.

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