A Place for Spirituality

Patricia Worrell

During his recently concluded visit to Trinidad, Professor Howard Gardner acknowledged that he had considered including a spiritual intelligence among the multiple intelligences human beings are said to possess. However, Gardner has decided to replace the spiritual intelligence with what he has labelled "existential intelligence"—the capacity, as he described it, for asking the "big" questions about the world.

Given the human need to have such big questions addressed, however, the issue still remains: Do we believe there is justification for including a spiritual dimension as we plan formal programmes for the education of our young people? And if we do, have we made adequate room for spirituality in education today?

James Kirylo (1999) defines spirituality as "the awareness of the transcendent dimension which may be distinguished by certain recognizable values in regard to oneself, others, nature, and whatever one views to be the supreme or the ultimate." Most thinkers who have addressed this topic agree that it is a mistake to think that we can separate our spirituality from other facets of our humanity. Yet spirituality seems to be one topic about which there is often a deafening silence when educators come together to plan the education of our society's children.

It is easy, of course, to understand why this is so. For one thing, spirituality is not really a "fashionable" topic today. It represents an intangible, and in an age where technical efficiency and the material world hold sway, we often prefer to ignore the intangible. For years, much the same fear of being thought "unscientific" and absurd led to the exclusion of the affective—the dimension of human emotions—in curriculum planning. Today we acknowledge the existence of emotional intelligence and the role of the emotions in determining what and how human beings learn. However, in the intervening years, students from preschool to graduate school had educational experiences that left many emotionally stunted. Our society today is replete with brilliant human beings who have no sense of how to manage, or even, in extreme cases, how to acknowledge their emotions.

Another reason why spirituality is so underplayed in education is that even for educators who acknowledge its existence, spirituality may become subsumed in religion, and the need to teach the dogmas of what Eliot Eisner (2002) terms "religious orthodoxy." There is often a strong temptation to teach about religion: to focus on the facts and tenets of individual religions, and on the interpretation of sacred texts, but to ignore the spiritual dimension that presumably should inform religious experience.

Still another reason why we often leave spirituality alone is our apprehension about offending any one group in a multi-religious society. It often seems easier, with religion as with race, to sidestep the topic altogether, or to confine ourselves to providing isolated facts and concepts, lest we tread on any one's sensibilities.

Yet our spirituality has a place in our lives, even beyond institutionalised religion, and we urgently need to ask whether we can afford to exclude it from schools, where our children spend such a large part of their formative years. Today we are seeing clear signs that many of our young people are experiencing their lives as arid and unfulfilling. We have evidence that many feel disconnected from their relationships with the natural world, with other human beings, and even with themselves.

Moreover, recent events throughout the world have made it clear that we all need to ask the big questions that will enable us to find some meaning for our existence—the questions about life and death, and about our purpose in the world. We all need to have some understanding about ourselves as part of the natural cycle of our universe. In the end, the big questions to be addressed by Gardner's existential intelligence are questions about our spirituality.

To deal with the problems of our youth, and of our society, we have developed programmes to teach them about society and its structures, and their roles as citizens. We are now attempting to add values education to our curriculum. We employ guidance officers and train peer counsellors. In the meantime, we often choose to leave issues of spirituality strictly in the hands of religious institutions, and to exclude them from our classrooms, so that there is a great chasm between what students learn in school about science, economics, or the social structures that shape our lives and what they are taught about themselves as human beings, and about how they are connected to the cosmos.

If we accept that our spirituality is a necessary part of our lives, are we confident that the approach we now take is working, or that it can work? We, as a society, need to grapple once and for all with what we believe about the role of spiritual education in our children's lives. If we honestly believe that it is unnecessary, then we can move on, prepared to address any possible consequences that may arise from its exclusion. If, however, we feel that it is important, then everything we have learned and now articulate about the importance of integration in helping students to construct understandings about themselves and their world suggests that we need to decide how to include a spiritual dimension as we attempt to develop holistic curricula.

Jack Miller, the author of *The Holistic Curriculum*, has developed proposals for "a curriculum for the inner life." He proposes providing experiences that will expose students to the arts, as well as to studies about the earth and our connection to it and to its cycles and processes, in ways that will connect them to their inner lives. Central to this curriculum for spirituality is what Miller describes as "the soulful teacher," committed to learning, caring about students, and mindful of their needs and responses.

A curriculum for spirituality demands no expensive new technologies. It does, however, require educators to approach the process of planning and implementing the curriculum in a way that recognises human beings as spiritual beings, and acknowledges therefore, that, in the words of one writer, "the main issue is not will we have a spirituality, but rather what kind of a spirituality will we have?"

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine