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Abstract

This article reports on a collaborative action research project conducted in New Zealand, during 2012, exploring spirituality in teaching within a Christian school context. The experienced primary school teacher participant chose to take action around the issue of personal fear and insecurity which were believed to be hindering professional growth and relationships. Through self-directed inquiry, critical reflective journaling, Bible study, fellowship and prayer with trusted friends, the teacher experienced a renewed sense of peace and freedom in Christ. This personal transformation was believed to be influential on subsequent professional practice, assisting the teacher to become more relational, responsive and compassionate. The findings provide a rich description of the participant's spirituality, the lived reality of a person's spiritual life. This report will be of interest to teachers, teacher-leaders and teacher-educators who desire to explore Christian spirituality through practitioner-led inquiry.

Exploring Spirituality in Teaching Within a Christian School Context Through Collaborative Action Research

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Abstract

This article reports on a collaborative action research project conducted in New Zealand, during 2012, exploring spirituality in teaching within a Christian school context. The experienced primary school teacher participant chose to take action around the issue of personal fear and insecurity which were believed to be hindering professional growth and relationships. Through self-directed inquiry, critical reflective journaling, Bible study, fellowship and prayer with trusted friends, the teacher experienced a renewed sense of peace and freedom in Christ. This personal transformation was believed to be influential on subsequent professional practice, assisting the teacher to become more relational, responsive and compassionate. The findings provide a rich description of the participant's spirituality, the lived reality of a person's spiritual life. This report will be of interest to teachers, teacher-leaders and teacher-educators who desire to explore Christian spirituality through practitioner-led inquiry.

Introduction

Spirituality literally refers to our spiritual lives or the lived reality of what we perceive to be spiritual. In the literature, spirituality is recognised as a complex and controversial human phenomenon (Waaajman, 2002), the meaning of which may be shaped and reshaped by people's diverse perspectives and experiences. It includes personal, social-cultural and transcendent connectedness, meaning making about life and living, and a desire for greater authenticity, resulting in consistency between people's beliefs, moral-values, attitudes and their actions (Gibson, 2011a). For some people spirituality is juxtaposed with religious, ontological and epistemological meanings and in part defined by their socialization within religious organisations and for others it is not (Gibson, 2011a). This diversity of views towards spirituality is consistent

with human history and reflects New Zealand's pluralistic society.

The spiritual dimension to life continues to be acknowledged within public education documents in New Zealand, albeit from an inclusive, secular, socio-cultural perspective. For example, the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2007, p. 22) refers to the importance of spiritual well-being of children through the Maori concept of *taha wairua* (literally the spirit), within the learning area of health and physical education. The curriculum also promotes the teaching and learning of values which are to be "encouraged, modelled and explored" (MOE, 2007, p. 10). The document says, "Students will learn about different kinds of values, such as moral, social, cultural, aesthetic and economic values" (MOE, 2007, p. 10). Values are widely acknowledged in literature as an integral aspect of people's meaning-making of spirituality (Gibson, 2011b).

In the New Zealand Teachers Council Code of Ethics for Registered Teachers (2004, 1f), it states that teachers will "*strive* to promote the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual well-being of learners." These two examples of public education documents affirm the spiritual dimension to be an integral and important part of children's health. They also emphasize the concomitant responsibility of teachers to actively facilitate spiritual well-being and values in their students through appropriate learning experiences.

Understandably, the documents do not describe a particular interpretation of spiritual well-being. This is consistent with the need for public education to remain secular or non-partisan towards what can be a contentious and divisive topic. Nevertheless, State recognition of the importance of spiritual well-being and moral values supports the argument that teachers could benefit from learning more about spirituality in teaching. This was confirmed to me

when I explored spirituality in principal leadership and its influence on teachers and teaching within three State primary schools for my PhD, which was completed in 2011.

Through my doctoral literature review, I became aware that spirituality in teaching within Christian schools was an under-explored topic within education in New Zealand. Various writers have engaged with the challenge of articulating what Christian teaching or teaching Christianly might mean (Estep, Anthony, & Allison, 2008; Ireland, Edlin, & Dickens, 2004; Van Brummelen, 2009; Van Dyk, 2000). This is a challenge because no book in the Bible is specifically addressed to school teachers. We, therefore, have to develop a theoretical understanding of the desirable characteristics of a Christian who is a school teacher, from a range of scriptures.

One characteristic of a Christian teacher could be expressed as someone who authentically models the virtues and dispositions of a disciple of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 16:24; Acts 11:26; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Peter 1:14-15). Alternatively, a Christian teacher might be described as someone who walks in the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25), is gifted to teach, humble, kind, compassionate, patient, and wise (Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 3:8; Ephesians 5:15; Romans 12:7). Another characteristic might be a teacher, who, motivated by love (Matthew 22:37-39), intentionally, prayerfully, and appropriately integrates Biblical Christian teaching into the students' learning experiences (2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 14:6; Romans 1:16; Ephesians 2:8-10).

But what might the actual lived reality of Christian spirituality in teaching mean? As a Christian teacher educator in a Christian institution, I was aware of the inconsistencies between my own theoretical understanding and lived experience of spirituality in teaching. Desiring to learn more about spirituality in the professional practice of teaching and to serve others by contributing to the literature, my overarching research question became, "What might spirituality in teaching mean within a Christian school context?"

Research Design

Numerous methodologies and methods could be employed to inquire into this question. I chose a qualitative interpretive methodology based around a modified collaborative action research (CAR)

method. CAR allowed me to gain an insider understanding of the participant's meaning-making of spirituality in teaching within a particular Christian school community. This is an important feature of qualitative research: to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, p. 3). Secondly, CAR allowed the teacher-participant to self-identify an area of spirituality in teaching for professional inquiry. This helped to position the research as meaningful and motivating to the participant, being directly related to professional practice. Thirdly, CAR engaged the participant in exploring spirituality in teaching through a systematic, dialogical, and reflective process. This provided an in-depth, triangulated approach to the research, an important consideration for assessing the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2003).

Collaborative action research is understood as a flexible, recursive, iterative, and spiralling inquiry process (Pine, 2009). It is designed to engage participants with their own needs, leading to valued insights and improved professional practice. It asks participants to be intentional, systematic, ethical, vulnerable, and to have a psychological and spiritual readiness for transformation (Stringer, 2007). In these ways CAR is characterized as dialogical and reflexive, focused on understanding and reframing praxis – the intersection of beliefs and professional practice (O'Brien, 1998). This understanding links with Whitehead's (2008) living theory methodology which emphasizes the importance of each individual's experience in improving practice and generating knowledge.

Various action research models are described in the literature (Hill & Capper, 1999; Kemis, 1998; Shula & Wilson, 2003). According to Kinsler (2010), educational action research "has multiple forms and levels that permit a range of possible design capabilities" (p. 173). Ideally, action research involves successive on-going cycles of professional inquiry. Due to time constraints, the CAR model used in this project was modified to one cycle spread across a period of two school terms during 2012. There were both technical and practical aspects embedded in the collaborative action research model employed. Kinsler (2010) says, "Technical AR is orientated toward functional improvement measured in terms of success in

changing particular outcomes of practice. Practical AR seeks to improve practice through the development of personal wisdom derived from true and reasoned deliberation” (p. 174). The specific components of the CAR model used required the participant to frame a research intention or problem, gather data, reflect, implement, and evaluate a course of action (Stringer, 2007). I also added the requirement that a participant engage in discussion with a trusted critical friend or colleague to assist with reflective processing and decision-making. Referring to critical collegiality, Pine (2009) says,

It is important to engage colleagues in a process of collaborative inquiry to advance the developing research effort. Particular colleagues may be enlisted at the beginning of the research for a variety of reasons – because they are especially sensitive to emerging problems, or are creative and have ideas about how educational issues might be addressed, or are skilled in problem definition, or are greatly interested in a particular issue. (p. 235)

My collaborative role was in facilitating engagement in the action research process, collating and analysing the data, and writing up the report. My fieldwork involved conducting two semi-structured interviews, the first at the beginning of the project to understand the participant’s personal and contextual meanings of spirituality in teaching. The second interview took place at the end of the project to understand the participant’s journey and to obtain critical incidents that illustrated spirituality in teaching. Another way I gathered data was through email communication in which I obtained updates on the participant’s planning and reflective thinking. I also provided feedback on emerging ideas and where appropriate, I forwarded articles on the topic the participant was interested in.

Due to the busyness of the teacher’s life, the time committed to the project was positioned as professional development and limited to one cycle of a collaborative action research model. In support of this approach, Pine (2009) says,

Enacting change is not easy. It requires time, patience, sound planning, communication, and implementation skills. So, in establishing a foundation for action research, I believe that modest beginnings are no

disgrace and in most respects, preferable to ambitious ones. The visibility and impact of early efforts may be small, but it is advisable to consider carefully the relative merits of simple versus more intricate research plans and data analysis procedures. (p. 235)

The credibility of this qualitative inquiry is supported through the ethical procedures followed for participant recruitment and the robust action research process the participant followed. This process, along with the interviews and emails provided a rich descriptive and triangulated set of data on the participant’s spirituality in teaching. Credibility is also supported by the rigour of my cyclical, inductive, and interpretive analysis of the data (Creswell, 2003) in which I was looking for meaning and significance, rather than frequency (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The participant was able to check the interview transcripts and feedback on the findings as presented in this report.

Participant Recruitment and Demographics

I chose to recruit participants from the New Zealand Association for Christian Schools (NZACS) because it is a well-established (1977) and recognised national, evangelical organization. I sent letters of invitation to a sample of 17 member schools, chosen for their size and practical accessibility to the researcher. Four people within three non-denominational Christian school contexts in the North Island of New Zealand accepted and were recruited to participate; one experienced principal, one experienced senior teacher, and two experienced class teachers. This report focuses on one of the class teachers. The teacher had experienced five years of teaching in three Christian schools. The teacher’s current multi-cultural Christian school was located in a suburb of a city.

Findings

-Living Authentically, Seeking God First, and Being an Agent of Transformation

The teacher was enthusiastic about participating in the project, recognising it as an opportunity to focus on the heart of Christian education, something the teacher said was hard to do: “It is so easy getting caught up in the day to day timetables and roles and all that encompasses teaching” (P4, Interview 1). The participant’s personal life of faith was perceived to be integrated (going hand in hand) with the professional practice of teaching. Spirituality

was also explained as seeking God first, desiring to live authentically as a Christian teacher, and being an agent for heart transformation of the students.

For me spirituality and education go hand in hand because as a person seeks to live a life a faith, faith encompasses all of life, so it's a journey of life...the whole reality of trying to live authentically and with my children [students], with [colleague] and with the team and with the environment, the whole school community... it's seeking God first in all we do... I think it's more about a heart transformation and so for me education is about helping children be transformed by the renewing of their mind, Romans 12, so having that change process from the inside out. (P4 Interview 1)

-Self-control, Being a Role-model and the Importance of Love

The teacher also identified two important aspects of leadership within the role of teaching which were, "managing myself and modelling to those I lead-the connection between personal identity and professional practice" (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012). These aspects of leadership in teaching relate to the Biblical injunctions to exercise self-control (Galatians 5:23) and for elders to be an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3). Being the teacher-leader was also described in terms of having a Biblically informed awareness of love – love of God and loving oneself in a healthy way.

In terms of teacher leadership, I think the greatest commandment where it says love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself... We often forget the last two words-as yourself... taking the time to know ourselves and I love how you said that Jesus actually knew himself and so part of that is loving ourselves and feeling our own worth and not feeling guilty for that. (P4 Interview 1)

-Courage to Face and Replace Fear with God's Truth in Order to Serve Others

After the first interview, the teacher deliberated on what aspect of spirituality in teaching to take action on. Once this became clear, the teacher emailed to say the over-arching goal was to explore being, "free to lead." This was a profound topic that

showed the teacher's sense of connection between teaching and leadership. The teacher could have chosen something small or easy, but decided to be vulnerable and to engage with a topic that was affecting joy and performance. At the outset this topic was theorised as potentially leading to personal and professional transformation, liberation in Christ. The teacher expressed this transformative goal by saying,

I would like to unpack what it means to lead from a place and space of fear inside and to explore how to identify these fear areas in order to replace these fears with God's truth. In my perspective [tentative theorizing] this would release a teacher to be free to lead and when they are leading from this place, they will allow their mentees to also be free and to become who God has called them to be. (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012)

The goal described above reveals the teacher's spirituality in several ways. Firstly, the goal is not limited to self-transformation, but transcends self, having a vision of being a teacher who can facilitate the realization of God's calling in students' and colleagues' lives. Explaining this the teacher said, "In doing so, allowing those I lead the space to be released to be themselves and develop in their own personal and professional journeys." Secondly, the description reveals how the goal might be achieved, being connected with replacing distorted thinking with God's truth as revealed in the scriptures. In these ways the participant explained not only what the goal was and why it was important, but also how to achieve it; invaluable considerations for collaborative action research.

-Inquiry, Bible Study, Critical Reflection, Christian Fellowship and Prayer

The teacher proceeded to map out a self-imposed and self-directed three point action plan to explore the subject of fear and insecurity in teaching. This diligent engagement in the action research process modelled integrity in the teacher's intentions. The participant could have been tempted to make a cosmetic or superficial personal change and then move presumptuously into making changes in professional practice. However, the findings showed that this teacher was authentically living by a personal maximum: "The feet should walk out the heart" (P4 Interview 1).

Initially, this action plan involved the teacher conducting a mini-inquiry about fear in leadership and leading from insecurity. This study comprised a short questionnaire which was sent to four leaders involved in Christian education, all of whom were known to the teacher. These people were asked, “In what ways do personal fear and/or areas of insecurity impact a person’s role as a leader or mentor?” The responses to this questionnaire contained practical insights into the positive and negative aspects of fear in teacher-leadership. The positive aspects being that fear can help teacher-leaders remain humble and cautious, dependent on God, seeking wisdom and support of others rather than acting independently, presumptuously, or recklessly. The negative aspects being that fear can hinder dealing with interpersonal or organizational issues in a godly, strategic, and timely fashion, leading to unhealthy leadership practices and low morale in the culture of the organisation. The results of the questionnaire affirmed to the teacher that fear in leadership was a real and a relevant issue even in Christian education contexts.

The second strategy involved personal reflective writing and prayerful study of mainly New Testament scriptures. For example the teacher wrote, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed, then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012) – quotations based on John 8:36 and 32. Galatians 5:1-26 was also described in journal writing as particularly helpful. This passage by Paul, the apostle, to Christians within the region of Galatia, encourages Christians to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. It contrasts the superlative work of grace and the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life with the limitations and weakness of the law. In a deep personal way this passage spoke to the teacher who emphasized in reflective writing the following passage from a paraphrased version of the Bible called, *The Message* (Peterson, 2002): “For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit.” This matter of sinful self-interest was cited as a challenge the teacher was wrestling with in experiencing a sense of freedom in Christ. This finding highlights spirituality in teaching, that being the willingness of the Christian teacher to study and apply scripture to personal and professional life.

The third strategy involved courageous conversations with a personal trusted mentor and her husband. The time also included prayer to God. Explaining this experience, the teacher metaphorically referred to “stepping out of the boat of my own comfort/safety zone and right into the eye of the storm” (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012). This metaphor links with the experience of the apostle Peter stepping out of the boat and walking on the stormy Sea of Galilee, towards Jesus.

The critical reflection cited below reveals the teacher’s sense that entering the storm was a formidable but doable task. Not in the sense of self-efficacy, but that the task and the timing seemed right. The teacher realised the issue could not be resolved alone: “I knew that my teaching persona was simply a mask and that I was trying in my own strength to cope without facing the fear of acknowledging its vice-like grip on me” (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012). By referring to the challenge as “opening up a HUGE can of worms” (participant’s emphasis, not mine), and “to rip open the wounds and process the deep roots” (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012), the participant vividly alludes to significant personal issues that we are not privy to. This was where the role of a trusted critical friend and supernatural help via prayer was perceived as particularly helpful.

As I begin to understand fear a little more in terms of the strongholds in my own life and the implications in my role as a teacher and mentor, I could see this being an area where I could take action this year. Knowing that I was opening up a HUGE can of worms for myself and knowing that I would have to be vulnerable and courageous to rip open the wounds and process the deep roots of the issues that would surface. (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012)

Personal things that the participant did not feel comfortable discussing with me as an external researcher could be discussed with a trusted Christian friend and with God. The process was believed to produce a tangible realignment of the teacher’s sense of equilibrium: “Peace reigned again... I found laughter... the things that bugged/stressed me before about my other colleagues suddenly seemed so insignificant... I had

found truth to replace the lies, freedom” (P4, personal communication, May 20, 2012).

-Becoming a More Relational, Responsive and Compassionate Teacher

Over the next three months, the teacher’s personal transformation described above was believed to contribute directly to five areas of transformation in professional practice. These areas were in relational management practices of students, having the courage to take an active role in learning experiences outside the classroom alongside students, responding empathetically and compassionately with students struggling through profound grief, adjusting devotion plans to respond to student social issues, and reacting positively to a feeling of anger towards another colleague.

Freedom to lead through relational management was perceived as particularly important to this teacher who taught a pre-teen/early teen age group. With a heightened sense of inner peace through the absence of fear and by living out scriptures such as those found in Galatians chapter 5, this teacher felt a greater ability to exercise self-control when provoked by students. The teacher described the desire to intentionally focus on relationships, citing “Fervent love covers sins 1 Peter 4:8”, and to step back from confrontation “only by pride comes contention, but with the well advised is wisdom, Proverbs 13:10” (P4, Interview 2). This took courage because the age level was a new experience for the teacher. In the quote below the teacher describes shifting the focus away from needing to be in control, a default arising from fear, to building positive relationships.

Being able to get alongside them, to know them and understand and help them through and everyday looks really different... It triggers some things in terms of maybe some things that I didn’t process well from that age or maybe some things that press my button in terms of making me really want to get upset and lose the plot at them but instead of doing that I’ve been more intentional in focusing on the relationship and focusing on stepping back and thinking is this actually about them or is this about me, is this reaction that I’m feeling actually something that has raised a question or an issue for me that maybe haven’t resolved in my own life. In terms of freedom I think that

comes as a cyclic or flow on effect because as you work through things that raise the issues or raise a feeling of fear in yourself then for me personally once I get to overcome that or work through that that’s okay... a big thing for me personally has always been and I’m being really honest now, is being in control, ... and I realised over the course of this year that the whole feeling of being in control actually stems right back to fear because when you’re not in control then what could happen. (P4 Interview 2)

The second example of transformed professional practice centred on a critical incident of the teacher having the courage to move from a position of spectator, fearful of performing an unfamiliar activity, to being an active learner alongside students. The incident involved an outdoor education experience of ice-skating whereby the teacher joined in with the class skating around the rink. Stepping onto the slippery ice alongside students required freedom to be vulnerable and to risk falling over and being laughed at. The experience connected with the teacher’s desire to mentor students and to model to them that it’s okay to try new things and to make mistakes along the way. The teacher identified this as a practical way of building a positive learning focused rapport with students, particularly with the boys in the class:

... which is something I would never have done a long time ago because that feeling of being really vulnerable and exposed and you can fall over and get wet, and absolutely crash land is scary but today I did it- it was quite cool for me and the kids really appreciated it – especially the boys and I got out and did it with them. (P4 Interview 2)

In reflecting further on this theme, the teacher described how important it was to actively engage in the life-world of students. Freedom to do this, within appropriate boundaries, was believed to contribute to more effective relational management.

I think a lot of people think that to have respect, you have to be the one that they [the students] obey all the time and if you’re really authoritarian with teenagers it doesn’t work because they can react to that. So you have to find a way to get alongside them,

still be able to put your foot down and still be able to hold consistently to what you've said that you expect of them, but to get alongside and laugh and to have fun and still know they will respect you- that's a risk in itself... I've been really close and up front in their personal world and shared things in my own life with them, that that's been able to happen. (P4 Interview 2)

A third example of transformed practice was the teacher's sense of freedom to express empathy and compassion towards students suffering profound loss and grief. Recent personal life-experiences of grief also contributed to this teacher's ability to respond with compassion. Working with deeply troubled students was not straightforward or easy.

One really big example in terms of fear and freedom is around the idea of grief and for me personally until last year, I'd never experienced grief and losing a loved one at all... and last year I lost two very significant people in a space of four months...and for me I never knew how I would respond to grief and I lost it I was such a mess it took me probably the entirety of last year to be able to come to a place where I was okay and to understand that things happen in life and since then I have got four children in my class who have lost a father. (P4 Interview 2)

The students' antisocial behaviour in this teacher's class was closely linked to their profound grief over the loss of their fathers. One of these students had recently come from another school where the boy's previous teacher had requested the student be prescribed medication for impulsivity. However, the participant in this project felt a renewed sense of confidence to engage with the behavioural challenges in another way.

Now I'm free to be able to be there for the child and not worry and not react out of my own insecurity around the idea of grief. He's running away from feeling pain and I know that, I've been there and I've done that in my life too and so I recognise it in me and I was able to recognise it in him and I've processed it with me so I know that with him I just allow him space and time and love him... and put my foot down and put some

boundaries and safe boundaries and be consistent and I was able to do that. (P4 Interview 2)

A restorative justice meeting with the student, parents, and some of the staff was also necessary to support the repairing and rebuilding of this student's well-being. The following day the teacher gently checked up on how the student was feeling,

I just said to him – you were quite upset last night aye? And he said yes. Are you okay today, before I sent him off to his first class and he just looked at me and sat in in the chair and cried and he sat there for half an hour and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed – and because I'm okay with that now I just sat and rubbed his back and at one point put my arms around him and hugged him. He couldn't physically find his voice, he couldn't talk to me and he just shut down... for an hour while I worked at my desk and he is someone who got kicked out of school for being too ADHD, off the charts and was still for an entire hour and didn't want to move. (P4 Interview 2)

A week later another incident triggered a grief reaction within the student, whereby he ran from the school auditorium during a performance by a visiting school group. The teacher asked another colleague to supervise the rest of the class and went to find the boy who was in the teacher's classroom.

He sat by my desk and fell on the ground on his knees and broke down and absolutely body shaking sobs and just sat there and I rubbed his back and said it's okay, it's okay crying and let it out, it's been there a long time, it's okay I know, and I feel no idea what it's like to lose a dad, and he just cried and cried and cried...so his mum came and collected him... and so for me that's freedom because yes that's painful to watch, yes that's out of control, yes he's missing class and he's not doing all the right things he's supposed to but because I know that for me it is something I haven't been able to deal with in children really well, I haven't known how to do that. (P4 Interview 2)

The teacher's expression of compassion extended to intercessory prayer, woven in with the gospel narrative of the life of Jesus, and servant-hood.

Being compassionate was motivated by love. This incident of compassion was not easy, the outcome was unpredictable, yet it was perceived as vital and foundational to effective teaching and learning.

And when I was rubbing his back I was praying out loud for him and I just prayed and said, “God you know what it’s like to lose a son and you know how painful that is,” and when I was praying he just sobbed and sobbed and sobbed... and that for me was me living my faith every day in practice... the Bible says to love God and love your neighbour as yourself and that’s what it’s about and effective teaching and learning can’t happen unless I’m free to be me and then I’m free to serve others. (P4 Interview 2)

A fourth example of transformation in professional practice was in being a flexible and responsive teacher. The critical incident described in the findings related to the teacher adjusting what was planned for class devotions in response to the immediate needs of the students. The teacher described feeling free to lead discussion without having to have all the answers to the students’ questions or all the solutions to their struggles in life. Being able to admit to the grey areas in life and to concede that the teacher doesn’t know everything was linked to a sense of freedom from fear and a renewed sense of freedom in Christ.

You can know the right answers and know the Bible verses and you can know what you believe, you know right and wrong, you know all those things but it’s not black and white – it’s the grey that brings the contrast and the depth to a picture... and so for example when you’re asked the grief questions and the faith questions and where did they go [departed loved ones] sometimes as a teacher if you don’t know the answer that can trigger a huge button of control and what will happen... and so for me I’ve recognised that I don’t have to have all the answers and I clearly tell that to my children. (P4 Interview 2)

The fifth and last significant theme from the data was the teacher’s perception that personal freedom from insecurity and fear led to improved

interpersonal relations with colleagues. The teacher described the belief that

sometimes people in leadership can be the ones who are there because they want control ... and I’ve struggled with that right through... and that’s been my big realisation that looking at them in terms of how God’s created them and looking past those things and not trying to change them to be the perfect teacher. (P4 Interview 2)

In this case personal freedom was believed to liberate attitudes and afford greater self-control towards others.

The biggest thing is that I need to allow other people to be themselves too as colleagues... and so I’ve come to a place where yes free to be me but the next part of this action research I want to look at is freedom of other people to be them – but maintaining who I am in the process... Because normally in the past I would have either changed what I did to allow them to have it their way, and have no conflict at all or expect that they’d totally do it my way... and then it ends up being really selfish or get really frustrated and upset and angry over little things. Because I’ve been able to realise when it pushes my fear button and when it feels like people are controlling me or it makes me feel like that’s not freedom... that’s control or bondage or whatever word you want to put to it then I’ve been able to step back and work through it and along the way there’s been peaceful and gracious opportunities to grow and get to know them. (P4 Interview 2)

The teacher also shared a critical incident of reacting differently towards a colleague who was described as annoying. With a renewed sense of perspective in Christ, the participant decided to respond lovingly and give the teacher a gift with words of encouragement – to build the relationship rather than let the friction move them further apart. The result was transformational. The next day, the teacher said that the colleague who had been perceived as annoying, “hugged me and they were having a really hard time and they were stressed about a whole lot of things.” In reflecting on this critical incident the participant said, “It helped me

more than them but that was a big thing for me... and I haven't done that but for this research; that's a result of where I'm heading [now] in my learning" (P4 Interview 2).

Discussion

The findings portray the participant's spirituality, the lived reality of one's spiritual life, like a complex tapestry, comprising many interwoven threads. In this case we see a picture in progress, where past threads of fear and insecurity are being replaced by new threads of peace and freedom in Christ. We also see personal, social, and transcendent threads of spirituality as the teacher studies scripture, shares hurtful issues with a trusted friend and cries out to God in prayer. The findings include colourful threads about the meaning of life and living through the teacher's love of God, positive relationships with students, and desire to be a more authentic role model. Intricately woven into this tapestry are the teacher's beliefs, attitudes, and values towards the Bible, members of the school community, and the Lord Jesus Christ. However, I believe it is the strong threads of the teacher's actions that make the picture on the tapestry stand out. Stepping out of the boat took courage, spending time with the broken-hearted took compassion, and choosing to give a gift to an annoying colleague took love. The following quote from the participant captures a small but significant part of this tapestry, the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This action research – I've loved it and yes it's been busy but it hasn't been an extra thing for me because it was something I was trying to grapple with and come to terms with anyway. So it provided the opportunity to be intentional about it and to sit back and say okay let's nail this, and I remember thinking what topic I'm going to do and I was umming and arghing about a safe one that I could do well that would fit nicely with everyone else and I could do it all and not really think too much about it, but I just had this nagging feeling inside me that said, the Holy Spirit saying, "No you should actually explore that big question you've got..." So I'm really pleased that I did that. (P4 Interview 2)

The significance of the theme of fear and insecurity in teaching ought not to be under-estimated. The apostle Paul reminded the young teacher and

preacher Timothy, "God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7). The findings show that transformation from fear was not achieved through self-effort alone; it required the input from others. Even reading Christian educational literature was deemed to be helpful. In a reflective journal entry the teacher quoted the following passage from Parker Palmer's book, *The Courage to Teach*:

Each time I walk into the classroom, I can choose the place within myself from which my teaching will come... I need not teach from a fearful place: I can teach from curiosity or hope or empathy or honesty, places that are as real within me as are my fears. I can have fear, but I need not fear. (Palmer, 1998, p. 35)

Many situations may give rise for fear in teaching. Teachers can feel vulnerable to public scrutiny in what is a highly critiqued profession. Teachers can feel insecure amidst the complex ever-changing curriculum and in trying to managing diverse students. The participant's survey of four educators and Christian leaders affirmed fear as a relevant issue in their own teacher-leadership practice. At the end of the second interview the teacher stated, "One person, with their Masters in Educational Leadership, said to me the other day, I'm convinced that fear and insecurity have the biggest effect on educational leaders and their decisions." Recent educational leadership literature (Chapko, 2013; Roby, 2008) confirms that fear in teacher leadership is not uncommon. For example, Keller (2006) says,

"It is the nature of the teaching craft and the democratic form that, for success to flourish, teachers must conquer their fears and lead, a challenge that requires teachers to closely examine their own individual fears" (p. 80).

The findings also show the presence of certain personal pre-conditions which influenced the participant's successful engagement with the collaborative action research model. Integrity, humility, a willingness to become vulnerable, being gracious, teachable, and secure were attributes believed to be influential on the findings. The teacher participant clearly understood the importance of integrity, citing the following quote in a reflective journal entry. "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from

the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer 1998, p. 154). This necessity to be ready to learn links to Jesus’ words, “He that has an ear to hear, let him hear” (Revelation 2:11). The significance of these personal pre-conditions is supported by the following excerpt from the second interview, in which the teacher said,

People are too scared to explore their fear... people are afraid of what they’re afraid of... you have to be courageous to go there and explore the nuts and bolts... you have to be gracious with yourself and others to work through this stuff and the baggage and the history... you have to be teachable and you have to learn to be secure... and part of your security is to be insecure to go and look at that. (P4 Interview 2)

The presence of compassion in the teacher’s spirituality was another significant finding. It would have been easier for the teacher to focus on the disruptive behaviour of the students rather than seek their holistic well-being. The Bible encourages compassion to be present in the lives of followers of Jesus (1 Peter 3:8) and scripture affirms that compassion can be instrumental in making a difference in people’s lives (Jude 1:22, KJV). John, in his first epistle, argues that practical expressions of relational, responsive compassion reflect the love of God dwelling in us (1 John 3:17). The effect of an empathetic and caring teacher on children suffering profound grief is an under-researched topic and one that I believe ought to be given more attention, especially in Christian school communities (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009).

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings in this report are tentative and not generalizable to statistical populations, being a non-representative sample of spirituality in teaching within Christian school contexts. However, the findings do provide a rich and credible understanding of this participant’s spirituality as a teacher and in teaching. Readers are advised to take these limitations into account when drawing their own conclusions and when making applications to their own professional contexts.

Conclusion

This article reports on a modified collaborative action research project exploring the meaning of

spirituality in teaching within a New Zealand Christian school context. The experienced primary teacher participant chose to take action around the theme of fear and insecurity which was believed to be hindering professional growth and relationships. The catalyst for change was a desire to become a more authentic teacher. Through engaging in a range of strategies that included discussions with a trusted critical friend, the participant experienced a renewed sense of peace and freedom in Christ. This personal transformation was believed to be influential on subsequent professional performance by enabling the teacher to become more relational, responsive and compassionate. The findings present a complex tapestry of spirituality in which personal, social, and transcendent meanings about life and living are interwoven with beliefs, values and actions. The final quote is a paraphrase of scripture which the participant found particularly helpful:

It is absolutely clear that God called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don’t use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love – that’s how freedom grows. (Paraphrase from Galatians chapter 5, The Message)

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