The spirituality of student teachers: a blind spot?

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Abstract

The spirituality of student teachers: a blind spot?

This article, which is framed in a Christian perspective, argues the importance of creating a space to nurture the spirituality of student teachers since that colours the entire educational experience. Teacher education ought to be done in an environment which is conducive not only to intellectual growth, but also to spiritual growth. First, the concept of spirituality is briefly explained. The particular experiences of a lecturer in the Philosophy of Education, who is attempting to provide support for the spiritual dimension of students by challenging them to explore some of the fundamental questions of life, form the central part of the article. Ways are suggested of not only acknowledging the spirituality of education students, but also nurturing and deepening it. Finally, suggestions for further research are outlined.

Opsomming:

Die spiritualiteit van onderwysstudente: 'n blinde kol?

In hierdie artikel word die belangrikheid van die skep van 'n ruimte vir die ondersteuning van die spiritualiteit van onderwysstudente beklemtoon. Die spirituele behoort erken te word as 'n onmisbare deel van die holistiese voorbereiding van onderwysers. Gedurende hulle opleiding behoort 'n omgewing geskep te word waarin nie net die intellektuele nie, maar ook die spirituele kan gedy. Daar word gebruik gemaak van die ervarings van die skrywer as dosent van die Filosofie van die Opvoeding waar daar in die klasse gepoog word om die spirituele dimensie van die studente te ondersteun deur hulle

onder andere met sommige van die kernvrae van die lewe te konfronteer. Spiritualiteit, wat 'n integrale deel uitmaak van 'n onderwyser se lewensfilosofie, kleur die hele opvoedingsgebeure. In hierdie artikel wat vanuit 'n Christelike raamwerk geskryf word, word die konsep "spiritualiteit" kortliks verduidelik en voorstelle word gemaak ten einde die spiritualiteit van onderwysstudente nie bloot te erken nie, maar ook te ondersteun en uit te bou.

1. Introduction

The vital role of spirituality is acknowledged not only in the theological training of religious leaders, but also in the training of doctors (Yuen, 2008:1-3), nurses (Stern & James, 2006) and even business leaders (Leigh-Taylor, 2000:20; Pheffer, 2003). At present, however, little attention is paid to spirituality at faculties of education.[1]

Published research on teacher education mainly focuses on institutional and curriculum restructuring, which includes some attention to the professional identities of student teachers (Lewin *et al.*, 2003). According to Alexander (2001:12-24), growing interest in the spiritual, within the last few decades, is largely because people in this postmodern age no longer have a firm hold on what meaningful living involves. Frankl (1971:99) postulates "… man's search for meaning is a primary force in his life …". The meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by man alone, and Rossouw (1981:5) argues "man is primarily engaged in a search for meaning in his life".

This article begins with an exploration of the complex concept of spirituality. The main part of the article focuses on my attempts as a lecturer in the Philosophy of Education to create ways of supporting the spiritual dimension of students and help them to become more aware of the role that this dimension plays in education. This approach emphasises the importance of students in education formulating their own life philosophies in order for them to crystallise their deepest convictions, values and calling and thus give greater meaning and direction to their personal and professional lives. In the next section of the article, ways of acknowledging and developing

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1   There is one other faculty of education in South Africa that I know of, where attention is given to the students' philosophy of life and also to existential questions in the course of Philosophy of Education.

spirituality as an essential facet of the holistic preparation of teachers are suggested.

It is important to note that the article is framed in a Christian perspective. This, however, should not be seen as suggesting that Christianity has the monopoly on spirituality.

2. Spirituality

Although spirituality is a word that is frequently used nowadays, a clear definition of this concept remains elusive. There have been many attempts to provide a generic definition – it has been questioned by several writers such as Alexander (1980:247-256). Both Zohar and Marshall (2001:4) and Dwyer (1993:310) regard man as essentially a spiritual being. In attempting to describe what this means, Louw (2005:16) emphasises that directedness towards the transcendental is the distinguishing characteristic of spirituality. "A human being is an embodiment of soul and an ensoulment of body. One does not have a soul; one is one's soul in terms of mind, will, emotions and body. The religious dynamic in this embodiment and ensoulment is spirituality as expressed in our directedness towards transcendence (the divine and the ultimate)." According to Van der Walt and Valenkamp (2008), spirituality symbolises one's quest for meaning, depth and values, and it describes how one relates one's actions to the absolute and towards others and to their own being, core values and practices. Spirituality, therefore, is concerned with one's longing for meaning, wholeness and connectedness in the sense of connectedness with one's inner self, with others and with a higher power.

2.1 Spirituality, religion and faith

Yob (2003:115) extensively explores the complex relationship between religion, faith and spirituality. In his view, spirituality refers to a belief system in which faith plays a seminal role in finding the connection between consciousness of the ultimate and day-to-day reality as a means of giving and arriving at meaning. In other words, spirituality is the different ways in which people try to make sense of their lives and experience meaning in their lives in the light of their view of the ultimate meaning.

Religion, on the other hand, is the set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define the relation between human beings and the sacredness of divinity. The term *religion* refers to both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and com-

munication stemming from shared conviction. It also refers to one's primary worldview and how this dictates one's thought and actions (Wikipedia, 2008). Taking a similar view, Berkhof (1990:8) postulates that despite the differences in content between religions, there are structural similarities. Most religions have a mythical element, a doctrine or proclamation which is the way in which the absolute opens up, a ritual element, which represents the response of men and the moral rules or the consequences of salvation for everyday life. Valenkamp (2008:8-10) interestingly distinguishes between spirituality and religion when he argues that spirituality exists in a more pre-theoretical way: its central concern is with processed inner feelings directed to someone or something, often with a mystical impact. Religion is more rational and involves theoretical thinking. Faith is based on spirituality and religion, but has a story to tell about the absolute, the universal or sacred and these stories become theology when they are systemised in rules of faith, doctrines of faith or creeds (Valenkamp, 2008:9). Thus, spirituality, religion and faith, all have consequences for the inner and outer (their social and moral) life of men: they all play a role in finding basic security in life, they depend on the social context in which they exists and all three are concerned with finding and constructing meaning (Valenkamp, 2008:11).

According to Downey (1991:271), Christian spirituality involves the whole of a Christian's life as this is orientated to self-transcending knowledge, freedom, and love, in the light of the ultimate values and highest ideals perceived and pursued in the mystery of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Thus, for a Christian, spirituality is the way in which consciousness of the grace of God the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit direct the daily life and bring meaning to it.

2.2 Relational dimension of spirituality

Spirituality, which is characterised by relationships, meaning and the transcendental, is the polar opposite of materialism, rationalism, secularism and the individualism of the current society. "Our vision is a future not driven simply by industry and the computer, but one that can add to the technological age the space to breathe, grow and dream, to 'give space for the spirit'" (Bowness & Carter 1999:238). According to Nolan (2006:8), the need or hunger for spirituality is experienced in a variety of ways. Some experience it as the need for the inner strength to cope with life, or peace of mind and freedom from feelings of fear and anxiety. Others experience it as something

bigger than themselves which holds them together when they feel they are falling apart. There is also a sense of being wounded, hurt, broken, and in need of healing. Many people feel cut off and isolated from other people and from nature and they long for connection and harmony. An increasing number of young people in particular, feel the need to be in contact with the *mystery* beyond what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think – beyond the constraints of mechanistic materialism. Some experience the hunger for spirituality quite simply as a longing for God.

Vokey (2003:174) emphasises spirituality as a relational event. It either consists of or leads to experiences of connectedness with our deepest selves, other human and non-human souls, to the natural world and the cosmos beyond and the larger purposes and powers that transcend the ego's limited concerns. This definition of spirituality can be placed within the holistic relational theory of authors like MacMurray (1991) and Buber (1958) who describe personal relationships as the heart of spirituality in line with the care ethics of Noddings (1984). From a Christian perspective, space for spirituality implies space for the renewing work of the Holy Spirit and therefore for service and love of one's neighbours (Rom. 12:2).

Sheldrake (1999:57) describes spirituality as "… the whole of life viewed in terms of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and within a community of believers". Similarly, Hudson (1995:15) explains: "Spirituality is being intentional about the development of those convictions, attitudes and actions through which the Christ-following life is shaped and given personal expression within our everyday lives." When Bowness and Carter (1999:239) highlight the use of the term *spirituality* as a "secular" concept, without any religious foundation or spirituality rooted in a faith tradition, they point out that Christian mystics such as St. Teresa of Avila never spoke of the spiritual without referring to the love for God and one's fellow man.

2.3 Spirituality, calling and meaning

Fry (2003:703) highlights two aspects of workplace spirituality, namely a sense of transcendence, calling or being called and a need for social connection or membership. Personal calling for a Christian is, according to Hudson (1995:113), responding to the inner promptings of the Spirit, expressing the unique essence of who we are and giving ourselves away in some particular way that enriches the lives of others. According to Burger (2005:24-25), a calling affects one's whole life; it is God's entrance into one's life:

"… calling assumes a firm conviction that I and my whole life are in service of the living God" (Burger, 2005:21). The connection between calling and profession becomes clear when Christ is brought into relationship with both. Being true to one's calling in one's professional life is described by Paul as "living Christianity" (Rom. 12:1-2).

According to Rogers and Dantley (2001:601), the spirituality in the workplace movement is the manifestation of a deep yearning for meaning and purpose in the work lives of individuals. People want to know that their work matters, that their efforts are in the service of something worthwhile and that they are contributing to the betterment of humankind.

2.4 Spirituality in education

Johnson (quoted in Lickona & Davidson 2005:194) has identified eight distinct ways of understanding and fostering spirituality in education, namely spirituality as meaning-making, spirituality as self-reflection, spirituality as mystical knowing, spirituality as emotion, spirituality as morality, spirituality as creativity, spirituality as ecology and spirituality as religion. Lickona and Davidson (2005:94) added spirituality as the quest for connectedness.

For the purpose of this article, I will elaborate on four aspects most pertinent to teacher educators.

- Spirituality as meaning-making poses the following questions: Do we create opportunities for student teachers to develop a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives? Do they have the opportunity to freely explore whether money or achievement will be the measurement of significance for their lives or whether there is a higher meaning to life?

- Spirituality viewed as self-reflection evokes the following questions: Do we create a space for students to reflect on existential questions, e.g. the purpose and direction of their lives? Do they have the opportunity to develop a personal mission and formulate meaningful goals for their lives as well as a perception of teaching as their calling, as a vocation that involves much more than just doing a job?

- Spirituality through the lens of religion leads to the following: Can student teachers freely discuss their own beliefs in the classroom without any fear of being stigmatised? Is there an opportunity to

deepen their own faith and to gain an understanding and appreciation of faith perspectives that are different from their own?

- Spirituality as the quest for connectedness asserts that human beings long for connection and leads to the following questions: Do we create a safe space in the classroom where student teachers feel welcome and where they feel they belong and do we try to make them aware of their connectedness with other people, the community, nature, history and a higher power? Do we try to support students teachers in their inner spiritual quest for connectedness and meaning that can lead to a reaching-out to others, to an acceptance of and regard for their human dignity and to the forming of meaningful relationships? How can faculties of education at universities and colleges incorporate wholeness and connection in our lives?

3. Experience at a faculty of education[2]

In his intriguing book, *Faith, hype and clarity: teaching about religion in American schools and colleges*, Nash (1999) argues that students hunger for opportunities to explore the role of religion and spirituality. If teaching is primarily not a technical enterprise, but one concerned with the inner life of teachers, with spirituality, meaning and purpose, and with identity and values, what can be done to enhance the inner life of student teachers at institutes where they are preparing to become teachers? If spirituality is a lived experience, it can never be limited to a specific academic course. Although philosophy of education is far from being the only place where spirituality can be nurtured, it has allowed this author space to develop a context and a metalanguage in the lecture room in order for students to have the opportunity to undertake an in-depth exploration not only of the intertwined nature of the intellectual, emotional and spiritual, but also of the interrelatedness of the subjects they are going to teach, the learners and the spirituality of the teacher.

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2 The interesting pedagogical argument of Theodor Litt (quoted in Lassahn 2000:53) could be of interest. He explains that the difference between "Fürhren" and "Wachsenlassen" is not all that great. In his argument, he demonstrates that the tension between giving direct guidance and allowing people to develop into adulthood independently, are not really in opposition to one another. He thus sees the concept of "Bildung" as having a dialectic character. It is not possible to discuss his argument here, however, without digressing from the main purpose of the article.

One could argue that even in the case where the physical dimension of life becomes paramount, the approach to life is still a "spiritual" approach. Thus "materialistic spirituality" is never really non-spiritual. While working on this premise, spirituality is never absent from any educational approach or situation. Therefore a space needs to be created for discussing spirituality openly and not for creating spirituality itself. However, this line of argument is not evident in any of the literature that was consulted.

Students should be assisted to become more familiar with their inner terrain, their spirituality, because "(t)he more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching – and living – becomes" (Palmer, 1998:5). Education is never neutral, but is always informed by particular meaning and normative frameworks; the more certain education students are of their own inner convictions, the easier it will be for them to nurture the next generation in a way consistent with their particular views of life and to respect those learners with a different view and religion.

At faculties of education a large proportion of the available time is spent on focusing on subject content, on *what* learners have to learn and on what methods and techniques are required to be able to teach, on the *how* question. Seldom any serious attention is given to investigate the question *who* is teaching and the *why* question that asks for what purpose he/she is teaching. Schumacher (1978:76) compiles a strong case for this kind of approach:

> Education cannot help us as long as it accords no place to metaphysics. Whether the subjects taught are subjects of science or of the humanities, if the teaching does not lead to a clarification of metaphysics, that is to say our fundamental convictions, it cannot educate a man.

He emphasises that all subjects, no matter how specialised, are connected with a centre; they are like rays emanating from a sun and the centre is constituted by our most basic convictions (Schumacher, 1978:77). The truly educated man/woman is the one who will not be in doubt about his/her basic convictions, about his/her view on the meaning and purpose of his/her life.

In the Philosophy of Education courses I assist students to develop their own philosophies of life and to recognise the ways in which these directly affect not only their philosophy of education, but also their teaching practice and their daily living. The aim is for them to develop personal accountability and to discover the meaningfulness

of their future careers in the light of what they perceive as the ultimate meaning. They should become aware of the way their spirituality impacts on their private and professional lives. Teaching can never be just a job that one does to earn money; it is a calling and an opportunity to manifest the fruit of the Spirit in the classroom and the school.

Students are also required to reflect on their own narratives that influence their answers to questions of identity and meaning. Who am I? Why am I here? Does my life have meaning? One of the assignments given to the PGCE and B.Ed.-students, requires them to formulate their own philosophy of life. They are encouraged to keep a reflective journal while formulating their philosophies and to view this as a record of their inner, spiritual development. One of the aims with this assignment is for them to realise that Philosophy of Education is not about theory divorced from practice, but a reflective activity that is a prerequisite for every successful teacher. Over a period of three months students have to answer the following questions and weave their answers into a personal philosophy of life:

- If I look back at the end of my life, what do I want my family, colleagues, learners and friends to say about me?

- What do I want to do with my life? What is my vocation or calling?

- What are my goals?

- What do I value?

- What do I believe in?

- What kind of teacher do I envisage being?

- What difference is possible because of my teaching?

Some students have not responded well to the assignment. One frustrated B.Comm. student told me in no uncertain terms that he did not like it at all, that it made him very uncomfortable to think about these things and to delve in his innermost being. He felt more at home dealing with numbers and calculations. Surely this is precisely the reaction one is aiming to provoke. In the process of formulating their own philosophy of life, students should become more aware of their personal "inner landscape" as they wrestle with new possibilities. According to Palmer (1999:8), spiritual mentoring is not about dictating answers to the deep questions of life, it is about helping

young people find questions that are worth asking because they are worth living. When we fail to honour the deepest questions of our lives, education is in danger of limiting itself to technical triviality.

Both hermeneutics and critical theory, the epistemological underpinning that informs the course, are intellectual approaches which offer human beings new meaning. Only when students have developed a sense of the meaning in their own lives, can they assist learners to find meaning; only when they have a strong sense of the future, can they give learners a sense of the future. They should be aware how their own faith, stories, identities, values and integrity influence what happens in the classroom. They are prompted to be aware that they may even hinder the spiritual growth of others by being oblivious of the consequences of their behaviour.

No empirical research has been conducted on the outcome of this approach. However, the written feedback from the students in their evaluation of the course and also in discussions with them, verbally and electronically after they had left the university and started teaching, shows that they found the reflective journaling exercise and the writing of their own philosophies of life very valuable.

4. Possible reasons why spirituality is often a neglected part of teacher training

Unfortunately very little time, if any, is spent on this important aspect of teaching at any forum or congress where teacher training in South Africa is discussed. Perhaps the answer is to be found in Rossiter (1996:202), who suggests that one of the main reasons why teachers in the United Kingdom do not promote the spiritual development of learners is that spirituality was not part of their training and they do not know how to contribute to learners' spiritual growth.

Several questions can surely be asked: Why do academics at faculties of education often give very little attention to their own spirituality or to the spirituality of their students and in doing so, neglect the principles of wholeness, meaning and connection? Why do they often fail to support the student's spiritual growth? According to Vokey (2003:180), "… if schools are to become hospitable environments for the spiritual development of teachers and students, universities and colleges with teacher education programmes must become hospitable environments for the spiritual development both of their faculty and of pre-service teachers".

It is strange that faculties of education continue focusing on dispensing facts at the expense of meaning, when spirituality seems to be the key to wholeness, meaning and connectivity. The explanation may be, as Nouwen (1975:80) suggests, that both students and lecturers are part of a very demanding and often exploitative society in which personal and spiritual growth have become secondary to the ability to produce and earn not only credits, but a living. In such a hostile competitive climate people are reluctant to admit that some of the central questions of life are left out of account. In the same vein, Ball (2003:215-228) highlights the destructive effects of the terrors of "performativity" on the spiritual lives of teachers and Codd (2005:194) warns against the reality of teachers as "managed professionals" in the global education industry.

Other reasons why spirituality is avoided, is the fear that the diverse religious convictions of students in a multi-cultural South Africa could lead to conflict and the notion that religious conviction does not have a place in the public domain of the classroom. I agree with Vokey (2003:175) who warns that challenges related to having diverse religions in classrooms will not be dispelled by simply declaring spirituality independent of religious or institutional affiliations. Some authors (Fry, 2003:705; Alexander & McLaughlin, 2003:359-360 and Roux, 2006:156) view spirituality as a much broader term than the creed of any organised religion. In contrast with them, Kourie (2006: 26) views spirituality and religion essentially related, and Schneiders (2003:176) suggests that religion is the optimal context for spirituality. Abdool *et al.* (2007:545-546) take a similar view when they argue that spirituality seems to form the deep core of religion. As Tillich (1957:4) points out, faith is not something which involves just one "section" or "function" of the person, but faith is an act of the total personality.

Faith determines our worldview, our way of looking at life (Fernhout, 1989:187), and also our way of finding meaning in life. In line with Hay and Nye (2006:30-31), I reject the notion that the religious dimension of spirituality should function only in the private sphere of students' and lecturers' lives and not in the public sphere. Christian students or for that matter Christian lecturers cannot leave their faith at the door of the lecture room – it is impossible for them not to address the deeper issues of meaning and calling in the light of their connectedness with their heavenly Father, their ultimate Source of meaning.

As holistic human beings, lecturers and students cannot leave the fruits of being deeply steeped in their own faith traditions at home

when they enter places of higher education. This compartmentalises peoples' lives into public and private spheres:

> Faculty and staff in colleges and universities tend to demarcate their public and private lives. This is the arena of the intellect. Emotion and spirit are aspects of the non-rational world and thus viewed as suspect; typically, higher education professionals do not speak of their inner lives in their university work. (Rogers & Dantley, 2001:594.)

I support the contention made by Todorov (2008:28) that universities cannot be responsible for the salvation of souls. Unlike him, however, I would argue that a university should be responsible for the formation of students as well-balanced personalities in line with John Dewey's philosophy of education.

Academic institutions where student teachers are trained ought to be places where people are encouraged to bring the multiplicity of their beings, or their "whole" person to the classroom. "Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best …" (Palmer, 1998:4). Bringing your whole self, your faith, religious beliefs, stories, values and calling to the classroom will not necessarily hinder pluralism or mean that indoctrination is inevitable – on the contrary, it can enhance pluralism. "The idea of pluralism begins with the recognition that people in our society have different beliefs (faith orientations) and, in living out these beliefs, wish to shape different patterns of life." (Fernhout, 1989:196.) Pluralism is thus an idea of society which recognises the confessionally pluralistic nature of our times and honours the reality of the side-by-side existence of different faith orientations and therefore different worldviews in faculties of education.

5. Suggestions on how to create a space for spirituality

The important question that cannot be ignored is: How can the role of spirituality be acknowledged so that universities and other institutions of higher learning help students, and lecturers to undertake their inner spiritual journeys and to be more in contact with their inner selves, with others and with the Other? How can spirituality be incorporated in the lives of student teachers? How can we invite not only the intellect, but also the spirituality of the student into the class? How can student teachers be assisted in exploring their spiritual selves and in doing so become more aware of teaching as a life of service to help others? When academics become more con-

nected to who they are and what they truly believe, they will be more able to connect with the inner lives of their students and colleagues. To be able to engage in spirit-filled learning and teaching, adults have to nourish their own spirits and integrate their private and public lives. Each of these suggestions offers a guideline to shift one's perspective to one that is more spiritually orientated.

- Wheatley (2003:25) suggests that lecturers ought to start their day peacefully by driving to work in silence or listening to a soothing piece of music, reflecting on a spiritual phrase, a Bible verse or parable or something beautiful outside the window. She also suggests that lecturers learn to practise mindfulness and to slow things down.

- Try to create an environment in faculties of education where the emphasis falls not only on "knowing and doing functions", but also on "being functions" so that students and academics are encouraged to be the best human beings they can be, without constantly being exclusively measured, monitored and appraised for their "productivity", or their "doing".

- Be aware of the market-orientated language of teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning and counter them by giving visible substance to spiritual concepts such as meaning, vocation, vision and wholeness, so that these concepts and their underpinning values cannot be dismissed as obscure, irrelevant or insubstantial.

- Create a working community in which lecturers and professors can share their faith and the story of their inner journey with colleagues that are willing to listen. Bring them together in a safe space, not to talk about curriculum or budgets, but about the deepest questions of their lives, because this will give them a chance to experience both meaning and membership, something which is often lacking in faculties of education.

- Develop a consciousness among lecturers and students at education faculties of everything they are involved in, so that they are more present in the moment and more aware of the dynamics of relationships. Service is the essence of the spiritual life and should also be the essence of teaching. There also needs to be concern for others. As Waghid (2004:539) puts it,

  As university teachers, we will need to cultivate compassion as an appropriate response to the situation of others: this is a quality that deserves recognition in the education of students

and the democratization of our society. Good universities not only teach students practical reasoning, but also a sense of generosity and appropriate concern towards others, and this forms the basis of compassion.

Within a Christian perspective, Burggraeve (1997:146) refers to the ethics of compassion and compassion as a reflection of one's calling as a Christian. Christians see love of one's neighbour and care for one's neighbour as the prime commandment to honour.

Is the fundamental job of lecturers not perhaps to help undergraduate teacher students to search for their vocation, for the larger purpose of their lives, to become aware of their values and the meaning of their lives, to foster healthy relationships with others and to leave university as better human beings? To be able to assist students with these fundamental existential questions, lecturers will need compassion, understanding, wisdom and insight and not mere factual knowledge. The Christian lecturer should be constantly aware that true wisdom comes only from above and pray for this on their knees (James 1:5, 17; 3:17).

A number of questions is raised in this article that could be fruitfully pursued in future articles. Some of these are: What form should the Christian lecturer's support and nurture of the spirituality of the non-Christian student take? How can the Christian lecturer support someone whose beliefs he/she may find difficult to subscribe to or even oppose? Is a Christian lecturer able to nurture and support students because Christianity encompasses all spiritualities, or is it possible that there is no fundamental antithesis between Christian spirituality and other spiritualities?

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Key concepts:

connectedness
holistic education
meaning
spiritual dimension
student teachers

Kernbegrippe:

holistiese opvoeding
onderwysstudente
sin (betekenis)
spirituele dimensie
verbondenheid