Spirituality and Wellbeing: Primary teacher and school counsellor perspectives

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Abstract

Addressing the spiritual wellbeing of students in New South Wales (NSW) schools is not only important for their overall wellbeing but is now part of the NSW Department of Education and Communities' (NSW DEC, 2015) Wellbeing Framework for Schools, However, research indicates there may be challenges due to difficulties and confusion regarding how to address student spiritual wellbeing in a secular education setting. Using a qualitative design, the current study aimed to explore teacher and counsellor perceptions of spiritual wellbeing, and how these may impact their ability to address spiritual wellbeing in practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers and three school counsellors and the transcripts were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Implications and recommendations for reducing barriers to implementation are considered and avenues for future research are highlighted. In particular, it is recommended for governing bodies of teachers and counsellors to recognise this challenge as an ethical dilemma, to provide education and training to develop teacher and counsellor understandings of spiritual wellbeing and to reflect on their own beliefs within this framework.

Keywords

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Keywords: spirituality, education, wellbeing, teacher, school counsellor, Wellbeing Framework

Introduction

The NSW Department of Education and Communities *Wellbeing Framework for Schools* (NSW DEC, 2015) is meant to underpin the work that goes on in education in NSW in regard to student wellbeing. The development of the Wellbeing Framework came about as a result of the combination of an increased understanding of the relationship between wellbeing and the educational, social and emotional outcomes of students, and the desire of the Australian government to improve the educational outcomes and retention rates of students (Noble et al., 2008). Within the document, wellbeing is said to incorporate several domains, one of which is 'spiritual wellbeing'. A search through NSW DEC policies on student wellbeing indicate this is the first time this term has been used in documents about student wellbeing. The term 'spirituality' has many varied connotations and interpretations (Fisher, 2011; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Robert & Kelly, 2015) that could make it problematic for educators and school counsellors who are required to work within the guidelines of the Wellbeing Framework. Previous studies have focused primarily on teachers, their views of how spirituality could be incorporated into the curriculum and how it could potentially be facilitated in classrooms (Mata-McMahon, 2016). However, prior to

curriculum implementation must come an awareness and acceptance of their responsibilities regarding student spiritual wellbeing and an understanding of spirituality and its relationship to wellbeing.

This study will provide information regarding the understandings that both primary school teachers and school counsellors have of the relationship between spirituality and student wellbeing, and will comment upon how teachers' and counsellors' own spiritual beliefs may impact upon their ability to fulfil the NSW DEC requirement to include spiritual wellbeing into their practice. The results may provide a greater understanding of the implications of attempting to provide a more-holistic approach to student wellbeing in schools and the challenges faced by teachers and counsellors as they strive to meet departmental expectations. Directions for education and training will also be discussed.

Literature review

The idea that schools have a responsibility to provide a holistic education that aims to develop more than just a child's academic ability is well supported (Burrows, 2006; Chittenden, 2003; Harris, 2016; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008; Smith & McSherry, 2004). It is a recognition that there is strong evidence that students who are supported in all dimensions of wellbeing have higher academic achievement and better life outcomes in relation to health, employment, social inclusion and economic independence (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Noble et al., 2008).

The Wellbeing Framework serves as a commitment by the NSW DEC to ensure schools incorporate wellbeing into planning and process, while embedding wellbeing across all areas of school life. Student wellbeing can be defined as: "a sustainable state of positive mood and attitude, resilience, and satisfaction with self, relationships and experiences at school" (Noble et al., 2008, p. 7). The Wellbeing Framework identifies wellbeing in terms of dimensions and specifically the following five dimensions as integral for student wellbeing: physical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. This report will focus on the inclusion of 'spiritual wellbeing' in the Wellbeing Framework, and the implications this has for primary teachers and school counsellors.

Defining spirituality

It is difficult to provide a working definition of the term 'spirituality', and some believe it is more important therefore to offer a description instead (Hyde, 2008). When seeking a definition of spirituality a multitude of interpretations and a vast array of concrete, abstract, metaphysical, relationship-oriented, inner-motivation-oriented and existential-oriented definitions can be found. Often confused with religion in society and perpetuated in research, definitions of spirituality can become inexorably linked with religious overtures (Jacobs, 2012). Some go to great lengths to extricate them from each other (Saucier & Skrzypińska, 2006; Tacey, 2003; Walton, 2015) while others use the terms interchangeably (Blazer, 2009; Hill & Pargament, 2003). Religion can be seen as one of many influences of spirituality, such as culture and community, and a means through which spirituality *may* be expressed (Noble et al., 2008). It is an ongoing argument and not within the scope of this paper to add to this debate but to work within the framework of existing approaches. The various

forms of the words 'spirit', 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are often used interchangeably and add further confusion (Tregenza, 2008). Bellous and Csinos (2009) encapsulate one possible view on the subject, "our primary assumption about the human condition is that people are spiritual, whether or not they are religious" (p. 213).

By far the most frequent terms arising in given definitions of spirituality include: a sense of meaning and purpose (Robert & Kelly, 2015; Sink & Richmond, 2004; Smith & McSherry, 2004; Tregenza, 2008; Yust et al., 2006); connection/relationship with the self (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008; Hill et al., 2012; Jones, 2005); connection/relationship with others (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008; Hay & Nye, 2006); connection/relationship with the environment (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Vialle, Walton, & Woodcock, 2008); and our connection/relationship with some higher power beyond the self (Burrows, 2006; Fisher, 2001; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Tacey, 2003). A definition that seems to encapsulate the many broad attempts to define spirituality is that of Yust et al. (2006):

> Spirituality is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred-something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced, formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious narratives, beliefs, and practices, and is shaped by many influences in family, community, society, culture and nature. (p. 8)

Spiritual wellbeing

Previous research has explored whether spirituality has a biological basis (Hay & Nye, 2006; Sink & Richmond, 2004), and there is a move toward studying spiritual development empirically to place it within mainstream scientific research into human development (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Indeed, some research indicates that, from birth, spiritual development occurs in association with other domains of a child's whole development (Miller, 2015). Finding meaning and purpose has been identified as a core developmental task for all young people and especially for adolescents (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). Considering this, it is not surprising that many believe spirituality to be an innate part of human experience (Fisher, 2011; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Tacey, 2003; Yust et al., 2006).

Spiritual wellbeing can be related to an individual's ability to successfully meet their spiritual needs and strivings. Fisher (2001) describes spiritual wellbeing as "the fundamental dimension of people's overall health and wellbeing, permeating and integrating all the other dimensions of health (i.e. the physical, mental, emotional, social and vocational)" (p. 100). He proposes a four-domain model (see Table 1) connecting spirituality with health and wellbeing where each domain is comprised of two aspects: knowledge (cognitive framework) and inspiration (transcendent aspect of spiritual health/wellbeing). Fisher describes spiritual health as the extent to which people live in harmony with themselves, others, the environment and some 'other' beyond the human level.

Fisher (2011) further proposes that when problems occur between these relationships, it can impact on the health of the individual. This view aligns with Zohar and Marshall (2000), who believe that the search for meaning is "the primary

motivation in our lives and that people come to feel shallow or empty when this search for meaning goes unmet" (p. 8).

Table 1: Four domains model of spiritual health and wellbeing (Fisher, 2011, p. 23)

DOMAINS OF SPIRITUAL WELLBEING				
	PERSONAL	COMMUNAL	ENVIRONMENTAL	TRAN-SCENDENTAL
Knowledge aspect – filtered by worldview *Inspirational aspect* – essence and motivation – filtered by beliefs	**Meaning, purpose, and values** – human spirit creates awareness – self-*consciousness*	**Morality, culture (and religion)** – in-depth inter-*personal relations* – reaching the heart of humanity	**Care, nurture and stewardship** of the physical, eco-political and social environment connectedness *with Nature/Creation*	**Transcendent other** – ultimate concern Tillich – cosmic force New Age – God, for theists *Faith*
Expressed as	joy, fulfillment, peace, patience, freedom, humility, identity, integrity, creativity, intuition, self-worth	love, forgiveness, justice, hope & faith in humanity, trust	sense of awe and wonder, valuing Nature/Creation	adoration & worship, being: at one with Creator; of the essence of the universe; in tune with God

A review of the literature reveals a growing body of evidence on the positive relationship between spirituality and wellbeing. Many have noted a serious decline in the mental health of modern youth (Eckersley, 2008), with higher rates of suicidality, anxiety and depression, and some indications it is related to lack in spiritual wellbeing (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). Ivtzan et al. (2013) measured people's psychological well-being for self-actualisation, meaning in life and personal growth initiative, and confirmed the importance of spirituality on psychological well-being. Kidwai et al. (2014) assessed the effect of spirituality on the relationship between negative life events and psychological distress and found that spirituality may play a role in how people experience and deal with difficult life situations. Other studies report that individuals with a higher number of spiritual strivings were also found to have a greater purpose in life, better life satisfaction and higher levels of wellbeing (Emmons, Cheung & Tehrani, 1998). A review on studies involving spirituality and mental health by Koenig (2009) concluded that spirituality is related to increased coping ability when stressed and less depression, suicide, anxiety and substance abuse across all demographics and diverse cultures.

Studies related specifically to children and adolescents are less abundant but indicate parallel results. A study of ethnically diverse, at-risk youth showed that overall spiritual wellbeing predicted lower levels of anxiety (Davis, Kerr & Kurpius,

2003), and that spirituality can act as a protective factor against suicidal ideation in adolescents (Abdollahi & Abu Talib, 2015). A study of 320 children aged 8–12 from public and private (i.e., faith-based) schools on the relation between spirituality and happiness found that children's spirituality was strongly linked to their happiness: children who were more spiritual were happier (Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2010).

Spirituality in education

The growing body of evidence linking spirituality with wellbeing instigated the inclusion of spiritual wellbeing in the *Wellbeing Framework for Schools* document (NSW DEC, 2015). Studies investigating spirituality in schools are scarce, however, due to the influence of the naturalistic and scientistic paradigms of the modern era. The tendency towards 'neutral education', has dominated education in the West for the last century. Burrows (2006) notes that for some schools there is still some reluctance to use the terms 'spiritual' or 'spirituality' because of its connotation with religion and, without pointed education and training in this area, it is unlikely that this will change. There is a global movement which currently devotes considerable effort to developing a practice around spirituality education (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013), however, there is a gap between theory and practice when it comes to spirituality in schools, a view supported by Crawford and Rossiter (2006): "Teachers have inherently understood the role they play in supporting the whole child, and the importance of this spiritual-moral aim has probably never been in question, but articulating what it implies for classroom practice has remained a perennial problem" (p. 243). Current practices for developing spiritual wellbeing tend to occur as either informal, relational teaching or as a result of contextual approaches, where ethical, moral and values-based discussions occur but are not the primary focus (Taplin, 2014).

Spirituality in counselling

Similarly, while the primary role of school counsellors is focused on student wellbeing, the spiritual element of wellbeing continues to be an oft-forgotten or avoided area due to the same unease and uncertainty experienced by teachers (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013). Considering the ever-increasing evidence of the benefits of addressing the spiritual wellbeing of clients in counselling (Barnett, 2016; Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Sink & Richmond, 2004) and the ethical obligations to respect, accommodate and competently work within the belief systems of all individuals (Australian Psychological Society, 2007) there continues to be a gap between what is suggested in the literature and in the practice of counsellors and teachers when it comes to spirituality.

Mind the gap

Evidence on the importance of spiritual wellbeing and its connection to overall wellbeing led to its formal inclusion in the Wellbeing Framework. However, there is little evidence to suggest this has resulted in changes in the way schools address the wellbeing needs of students. There are numerous theories on the contributing factors for the gap between the knowledge regarding the benefits of addressing spiritual wellbeing and common practices in teaching and counselling. One theory relates to a lack in education and training. Studies from the United States have indicated that

education and training in spirituality/religion has increased over recent years (Schafer et al., 2011), however, no similar studies have been conducted here in Australia. As mentioned earlier, there is a suggested confusion surrounding the term spirituality and its connection to religion. The inclusion of spiritual wellbeing in the Wellbeing Framework indicates a movement toward the need to incorporate spirituality into schools, however, it could be argued that very little has been done to facilitate its implementation. The main arguments explaining why this may be the case tend to point to three main factors: 1) a lack in the amount of training provided; 2) confusion around the terms; and 3) arguments about religion in schools.

This report will seek to gain perspectives of primary school teachers and school counsellors about their understanding of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing and the perceived implications for their role as teachers and counsellors. It will also attempt to determine how their own beliefs about spirituality might influence their response to the Wellbeing Framework. As such, the following questions will be presented as the focus of this research:

1. How do primary teachers and counsellors perceive the 'spirituality' aspect of the *Wellbeing Framework for Schools*?
2. What impact, if any, do their current beliefs and perceptions have on their ability to incorporate spiritual wellbeing into their role?

The results of this study will provide information about how teachers and school counsellors are likely to respond to the NSW DEC objective to include spiritual wellbeing as part of an overall wellbeing strategy. It may also provide educators with a better understanding of the factors involved when introducing a previously unknown aspect into the education arena and the barriers that may inhibit successful implementation.

Method

Research design

For the purpose of this study, a qualitative approach using single, 30-45-minute, semi-structured interviews were used. Semi-structured interviews are exploratory and ask open-ended and in-depth questions (Dempster & Hanna, 2015), which suited the exploratory nature of this research project. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to gather data concerning teacher and school counsellor interpretations of: (a) spirituality and spiritual wellbeing; (b) their perceptions about their role in relation to these concepts; and (c) how these perceptions influence their ability to address spiritual wellbeing.

Participants and sampling

Six participants taken from a purposeful, convenient sample of the study population were interviewed for this study. As the Wellbeing Framework was designed to underpin the work of all those who work with students in state schools in NSW, the criteria for selection stipulated that participants must currently be employed as a primary teacher or school counsellor in a New South Wales public school, working

directly with students. The Wellbeing Framework is targeted at all employees, regardless of personal spiritual beliefs, therefore, personal spiritual beliefs did not form part of the selection criteria.

Three of the participants were female school teachers, two were female school counsellors with teaching backgrounds in primary school and one was a male school counsellor with a high school teaching background. All the participants currently work in schools in the same geographical area in the western Sydney region. Two of the counsellors and two of the teachers each have over 15 years of experience in their current role, while one counsellor and one teacher each have less than five years of experience in their current role. Participant mean age was 51 (range 32–73, SD 13).

Participants were conveniently selected from the researcher's professional acquaintances on the basis of their role as teachers and school counsellors. Each participant was approached informally and verbally asked to participate, and then more formally via email, when participant consent and information letters were forwarded. Participation in this project was at the request of the researcher, and teachers and counsellors were ensured anonymity. Permission to conduct the study was obtained by the ethics committee of the university under whose auspices the study was conducted.

Data collection

Data were generated through individual 30–45-minute, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Interviews took place in no particular order in the private home of the participant in a quiet and private room, at a time mutually convenient to both parties. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with an information sheet summarising the purpose and method of the research and were given the opportunity to ask questions. During the course of the interview, participants were shown a printed copy of the Wellbeing Framework and directed to read the definition of spiritual wellbeing provided on page three. Audio recordings were made for each interview. A list of focus questions was used to guide the interviews, which were orthographically transcribed by the researcher shortly after the interview and prior to subsequent interviews. Sample focus questions included:

1) What is your understanding of what it means when we talk about the 'wellbeing' of students?
2) What policies, documents or guidelines are you aware of that inform you of your role in the welfare of students? How familiar are you with them?
3) How would you interpret the spirituality domain of the Wellbeing Framework through which wellbeing can be experienced?
4) How would you define/describe the role spirituality plays in your own life?
5) What do you perceive your responsibilities are in relation to the spirituality dimension of the Framework?
6) Do you believe your professional training has adequately prepared you to fulfil these responsibilities?
7) Tell me what you know about the views and practices of your school in relation to the spirituality component of wellbeing.

Time was also allowed post-interview for debriefing. Interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed; identifying details were removed or altered to preserve confidentiality. Participant self-reports of their personal spiritual stance were as follows:

- Not spiritual – two school counsellors and one teacher
- Religious based spirituality – one teacher
- Non-religious based spirituality – two teachers.

To maintain confidentiality, each participant has been assigned a code consisting of a number and a letter reflecting their role as either teacher (T) or school counsellor (SC).

Data analysis

The aim of this study requires insights into individual participants' psychological worlds, therefore, interview transcripts were analysed in accordance with the principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). With its emphasis on experience, IPA welcomes an empirical exploration into perceptions of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing (Willig, 2013). True to an idiographic mode of inquiry, each interview was read, reread and coded. Coding involved identifying significant statements in the interview transcripts that reflected semantic responses, interpretations of semantic responses, and interpretations of gestures and non-verbal responses. Statements were considered significant if they appeared to be relevant to either the focus questions or the main study questions. These statements were listed together and repetitive material was removed. Importantly, all data were given equal weight in the initial analysis phase.

Due to the differences in the responsibilities and roles between school teachers and school counsellors, coded data was then divided into two groups: 1) teachers and 2) school counsellors. Each group was analysed and the codes were grouped into units of meaning that served to illuminate responses that answered the overarching questions. This involved an interpretative relationship with transcripts, obtaining meaning through a sustained engagement with the text and several cyclical stages. These descriptions were substantiated using verbatim quotes from participants (Willig, 2013), and emerging themes within each group were recorded. Themes and categories were identified by reading the codes and raw data several times and then looking for recurring themes, which were then designated as the various categories. The codes were then analysed across both groups and further themes were identified.

An example will illustrate this: teachers and school counsellors were asked to give their own definition of spirituality. When reading the raw data, the theme of confusion emerged, meaning that several teachers and school counsellors either said they were unsure, were observed to struggle to answer the question,or provided contradictory or incomplete answers over the course of discussion. Thus, 'confusion' became one of the categories.

Themes were then ordered to produce a logical and coherent research narrative and some themes were dropped because they had a weak evidence base or did not fit

well with the emerging structure. The final themes are the product of a continuous dynamic process of moving between various analytic stages.

Findings and discussion

The four major themes that emerged from the data can be grouped into two superordinate categories: 'confounding issues' and 'guiding forces' (see Fig. 1). Each theme will be discussed and participant quotations will be used as evidence for their construction. An interpretation of these themes will synthesise findings from all participants in a discussion following each theme. This process will ensure the double hermeneutic approach that is critical to the IPA process (Dempster & Hanna, 2015). It is important to note that every participant mentioned some aspect of the themes and categories discussed in this section, unless otherwise stated.
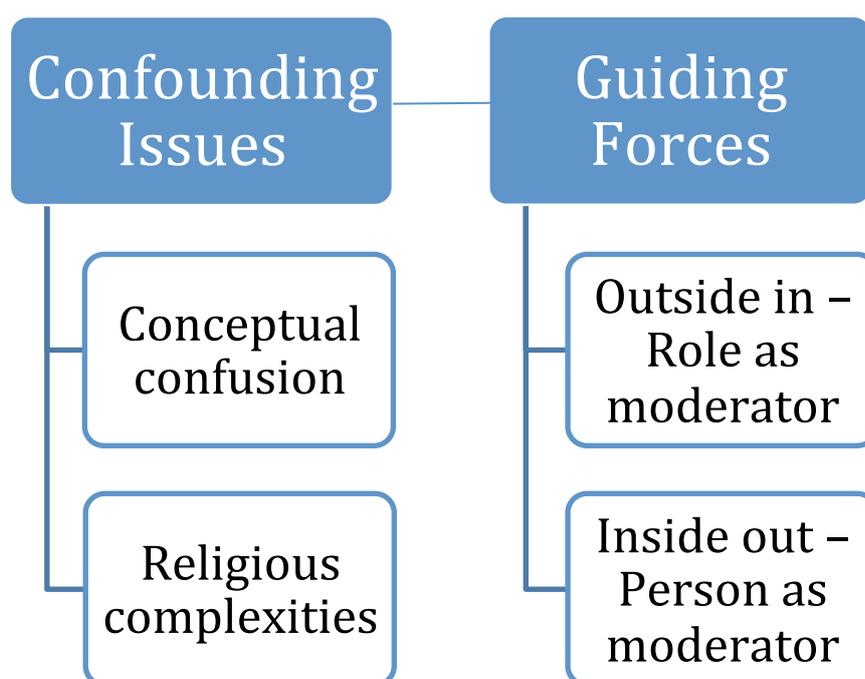

Figure 1. Themes and categories

Confounding issues: Conceptual confusion

The aim of this paper is to determine how primary teachers and school counsellors perceive the spirituality aspect of the Wellbeing Framework, and the impact these perceptions and their personal beliefs have on their ability to incorporate student spiritual wellbeing into practice. Current literature identifies much confusion around the term 'spirituality' (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Taplin, 2014) and this phenomenon was also found within the data, as confusion around the concepts of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing repeatedly surfaced as a recurring pattern across all interviews. Confusion existed in participants' own perception of spirituality and was also acknowledged as confusing for others.

Within this sub-category the researcher had to be especially mindful not to allow personal beliefs about spirituality to interfere with the process of interpreting participant responses. The overarching theme of confusion relies on comparing given responses to a known entity, however, the concepts of spirituality and spiritual

wellbeing do not have empirically agreed-upon definitions. Therefore, interpreting responses as evidence of confusion relied heavily upon the researcher's own perceived definitions following extensive research. Some of the statements coded into this category were based upon these interpretations, however, many of the following statements will offer evidence directly from semantic content supplied from the participants themselves. In addition, they provide evidence based upon observed personal gestures, response times and incomplete sentences that indicate participants often struggled for words, or avoided providing a direct response.

At the outset, participants were asked to give their own definition of spirituality. Some of the words used included: religion, culture, sense of purpose, relational, connection to nature, morals and values, and existential. However, most participants initially struggled to provide a response:

> Um, I suppose I didn't … (pause), I haven't … (long pause), I didn't take that much notice of it. (SC3)

> I find that a little bit difficult … I find it a difficult concept to actually put words on. (SC1)

When questioned about the inclusion of spiritual wellbeing in the Wellbeing Framework most participants were unsure about its relevance, and linked spirituality and religion:

> I don't know, um, like I know that scripture happens in the primary schools. (SC2)

> Um, [pause] I thought that spirituality was a bit of a tricky kind of domain to have … because some people think of it just … well, that's just special religious education classes and ethics and things like that, um … [left unfinished]. (T3)

Even with a teacher who considered herself to have a strong sense of personal spirituality and who did not express conceptual self-doubt or confusion acknowledged being aware of confusion in co-workers:

> So they are still sort of struggling with that … how um, spirituality … they just don't understand spirituality. (T1)

There appeared to be varying levels of confusion that seemed to correlate with the level of spiritual awareness that each participant self-reported. Participants who identified themselves as not really spiritual (SC1, SC3), struggled the most to answer questions about their perceptions of spirituality and exhibited the highest amount of confusion, while the participants who considered themselves to have some level of spiritual awareness (T3, SC2) exhibited slightly less confusion. This was determined by the researcher by observing the response times, depth of responses and facial expressions of the participants as they answered questions about their personal spirituality.

All participants indicated confusion around the definition of spiritual wellbeing provided in the Wellbeing Framework. For some participants, it did not align with their own personal view of spiritual wellbeing:

> I suppose it does get tricky because, um, here [pointing to Wellbeing Framework definition] they have sort of connected to religions and all the rest of it … with this bit about the spiritual wellbeing, to me there's still grey areas in there. Because someone who is very religious, and reads that, probably wouldn't get the understanding of what I would consider to be authentic spiritual wellbeing. Because if you are still connected to rules and regulations of a particular dogma, then that's still one step away from how I perceive spirituality. (T1)

> It's not how I would have thought of spirituality. I would have thought of it being much more a, like a culture and religious thing, rather than beliefs, values and ethics. I wouldn't have thought of that as spirituality … it's not how I would have defined it. (SC1)

> My definition was a little bit more narrow and not everybody would then … it wouldn't apply to everybody. (SC2)

Some participants readily accepted the definition provided in the Wellbeing Framework as superior to their own versions, while others argued that it was too vague and inaccurate:

> I've never seen it in a document as well as that. (T2)

> It's a construct that means different things to different people…It's not defined well enough. I think for a lot of the time you could swap it with values, with their understanding of what values is, or um, ethics, or things like that, that are equally broad and vague … it's just soooo massive [the definition] … it's so broad it's become meaningless … that's a fail grade from me, a definition [laughs]. (SC3)

> But I didn't really think it was very clear about what the Department really think it is. (T3)

Others found it too vague and broad to offer any kind of guidance, and suggested that more clarification is required:

> I think that if it's going to be pulled out like that [spiritual wellbeing specifically mentioned in the Framework] I think that it probably needs to be identified in what that's going to cover, what does it look like? … it depends on what you see as spiritual because you could put your own connotations on it. (T2)

Another area of confusion that emerged for five out of the six participants indicated confusion around the connection between spirituality and wellbeing, and how it develops in children. School counsellors in particular indicated they believe spiritual wellbeing is not a factor for primary-school-aged children:

> [On spirituality in children] I feel it's less of a factor in primary schools … again, more when it comes to counselling high school students … [it is my role] to be aware of that [spirituality] as one of the underpinning factors. (SC2)

> In high schools you'd be looking more … I think that spirituality would be becoming more important by that definition, because that's when adolescents start to question the beliefs that they've been given from their parents or from society or whatever, so I think that in high school, that domain would become more important. (SC1)

Theme discussion: Conceptual confusion

The data reveals that the perceptions of the spirituality dimension of the Wellbeing Framework are strongly clouded in confusion around four aspects of spiritual wellbeing. The first relates to confusion about how to define their own personal spirituality, the second relates to confusion around how personal definitions of spirituality were in conflict with the definition provided in the Wellbeing Framework, the third revealed confusion around the practical implications for addressing student spiritual wellbeing, and the fourth identified confusion about spiritual development in children and its relevance to primary aged students. The following discussion will address each of these aspects in turn.

Participants' broad responses regarding personal definitions of spirituality reflect the varying definitions that can be found within the literature on spirituality. Confusion around the definition of spirituality is not uncommon and is often found in participants involved in research on spirituality (Blazer, 2009; Jacobs, 2012). What this highlights in terms of this study is that teacher and school counsellor perceptions of spirituality are likely to make it more difficult for them to respond to the inclusion of the spiritual wellbeing domain of the Wellbeing Framework.

The definition of spiritual wellbeing in the Wellbeing Framework conflicted with the personal definitions of all teachers and school counsellors and two participants found it too broad. This problem was highlighted by Crawford and Rossiter (2006), who agree that the broader and more generic the definition, the more that everything in life seems to become a part of spirituality – hence the problem in interpreting what is to count as spirituality (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). One of the main reason efforts to reform schools can stall is that educators resist change because they feel burdened or conflicted by the process (Evans, 1996), therefore, if teachers and counsellors perceive the definition in the Wellbeing Framework to be confusing and in conflict with their own definitions, they may be less likely to address spiritual wellbeing in their practice.

It is interesting to note that the participant who reported a high awareness of personal spirituality, and therefore did not exhibit any confusion, was also the only participant who was consciously and actively seeking to develop the spiritual wellbeing of students:

> Because my project was mindfulness, I could connect my mindfulness to how they were talking about spirituality in that [Wellbeing] Framework. (T1)

This may be an indication that it could be beneficial to assist teachers and counsellors to develop a greater understanding and awareness of their own spirituality so they are better placed to develop and nurture the spiritual wellbeing of students. This idea is reflected in a study by Taplin (2014) who found that teachers were less effective in integrating values messages into their existing curriculum when they did not have the background/depth of understanding of either the affective or the spiritual dimension of wellbeing.

The final two areas of participant confusion related to the practical implementation of addressing student spiritual wellbeing and if in fact it was necessary at all. This means that most teachers and counsellors felt they will need further information and guidance before they will be able to understand how the Department expects them to address the spiritual wellbeing of students. In addition, confusion regarding the process of spiritual development and the role it plays in overall student wellbeing is an indication that little importance may be placed on this dimension of the Wellbeing Framework by those working with younger students. Considering that it is believed that the foundation for personal spirituality is laid in the first decade of life and that spiritual education is an important part of a child's development (Miller, 2015), the ramifications of ignoring this aspect of a child's wellbeing could be significant.

Confounding issues: Religious complexities

Confusion regarding the relationship between spirituality and religion was a common pattern that emerged in the data. All of the participants identified an understanding that religion can be a part of spirituality. This understanding was reinforced by the inclusion of the term 'religion' in the definition of spiritual wellbeing provided in the Wellbeing Framework. Confusion stemmed from the perception that the inclusion of spiritual wellbeing in the Wellbeing Framework must also encompass religion, and this does not appear to conform to the philosophy of secular education. Most teachers and all school counsellors acknowledged that public education is the right of all and cannot be seen to support one religion over another. As such, they indicated varying levels of confusion about how to include spirituality without crossing these boundaries:

> Some children are more-needy in a cognitive area, some are more-needy socially, physically, and I guess in a sense, the spiritual area, really, I'm not sure that as teachers we have ever touched on it too much because it's sort of been like this 'no-no' area. (T2)

It would appear that participants may be receptive to addressing spiritual wellbeing in their work, but are often hesitant due to the ethical responsibility to not impose their values on students:

> I'd certainly be fine to ask about religion but I'd be hesitant to, to push that in any way … (Researcher: Why would you say that?) … Because I hate it when people do it to me. I absolutely detest when people try and push their religious beliefs onto me. (SC2)

> Given that we are working in the public service, working for a government
> job, you have no problem in discounting any religio-spirituality component
> … that can cause some conflict I suppose, and obviously you have to be
> careful about that, sensitive about how you explain your own beliefs. (SC3)

Theme discussion: Religious complexities

Most participants associated spirituality with religion, which indicates that, in their minds, religion and spirituality are either seen as the same or as concepts which are intimately linked. This concurs with the findings in the literature that many people perceive spirituality and religion as linked (Blazer, 2009; Jacobs, 2012). It also aligns with the belief that the inclusion of religion in models to promote spiritual wellbeing in schools can be problematic (Taplin, 2014). The belief that it is safer not to address spiritual wellbeing at all than to risk breaking ethical standards has also been found (Souza, 2002).

These finding indicate a possible barrier to teacher and school counsellor implementation of the Wellbeing Framework. While they continue to associate religion with spirituality, teachers and school counsellors may be reluctant to consider methods for addressing the spiritual wellbeing of students. It should be noted that the strength of the link between spirituality and religion seemed to vary between participants, depending on the personal awareness of their own spirituality. However, after reading the definition provided in the Wellbeing Framework, both teachers and school counsellors were able to provide responses based upon a broader definition of spirituality. This indicates that further training to develop a deeper understanding of spirituality may place teachers and school counsellors in a better position to meet the spiritual needs of students.

Superordinate discussion: Confounding issues

An element of confusion underpins teacher and school counsellor perceptions of the spiritual wellbeing domain of the Wellbeing Framework in each of the above themes. Confusion around the terms 'spirituality' and 'spiritual wellbeing', confusion and varying degrees of awareness in the ability to identifying personal spirituality, confusion about the link between spirituality and religion, and confusion about how spirituality can then be ethically incorporated into secular education. This degree of uncertainty is likely to have major implications for teachers and school counsellors when responding to the directives of the Wellbeing Framework. Without explicit education and training to gain a deeper understanding of spiritual wellbeing and what this means for their practice, some teachers and counsellors may be less likely to address the spiritual wellbeing of students. It has previously been suggested that there is a need for teacher (Taplin, 2014) and counsellor (Souza, 2002) education programs to provide explicit training to provide a better understanding of spirituality and its implementation, and the findings in this research provide further support for this suggestion.

Guiding forces: Outside in − Role as moderator

Data analyses revealed that external factors mediated how participants perceived the spirituality aspect of the Wellbeing Framework. The differing roles between teacher and school counsellor emerged as a common external force that shaped participants'

views to either perceive spiritual wellbeing in terms of a protective factor for children's overall wellbeing (teachers), or a possible source of conflict or distress that could negatively impact student wellbeing (school counsellors). These perceptions impact the way participants perceive their role in relation to the spirituality component of the Wellbeing Framework, as well as their readiness and ability to incorporate it into their practice.

Both teachers and school counsellors were able to identify how they currently address the general welfare needs of students. They all identified the need for student wellbeing to consider all aspects of the child, to take a holistic approach:

> It's not just one aspect of them, it's the wellbeing of the whole child … it incorporates their physical health, their mental health, their emotional health. The whole lot. (T1)

However, when teachers spoke about wellbeing they referred mostly to the positive aspects of wellbeing and the need to be supportive and to lessen risk factors while increasing protective factors:

> It's sort of keeping an eye on them and making sure they are OK … having an authentic experience, but coping well, developing their individuality … and personal skills at school … self-regulating. (T1)

School counsellors, on the other hand, all discuss their role in relation to how they work with students on the negative aspects of wellbeing and the need to support and assist student deficits in wellbeing that may be creating distress or inhibiting their ability to function:

> Usually a student is coming in because they're not feeling happy about something, or they feel stressed about something, not usually coming in because they feel good! (SC2)

Descriptions relating to how school counsellors incorporate spiritual wellbeing into their practice focused on targeting areas that are problematic:

> In terms of beliefs and values, you can use it to direct them and help them in other areas like social problems, emotional problems. (SC3)

These comments highlight the differing responsibilities between teachers and school counsellors in relation to spiritual wellbeing.

A focus question enquiring about the extent to which previous training and professional development had prepared them to understand and incorporate spiritual wellbeing into their practice also revealed differences between roles. All teachers spoke about participating in whole-staff professional development where the Wellbeing Framework was presented, whereas this only occurred for one of the school counsellors, who quickly dismissed it as "nothing new" and "common sense" (SC3). It appeared to the researcher that all school counsellors perceive general departmental documents to have minimal value as they are not directly informative to their role:

> I have seen that document [Wellbeing Framework] but I really, I just sort of thought we just had to think about, you know, all aspects of what helps a child. But I didn't really read it. (SC1)

This likely reflects the differing needs they have from departmental documents. School counsellors also indicated that their exposure to some departmental documents is more limited in their role as school counsellors:

> I haven't looked at any of the documents … I was more aware of what the documents were then [when a teacher] but as a school counsellor I don't know that they've really been brought to our attention very much actually. (SC2)

The latter is a possible indication that school counsellors may not receive the same professional development as teachers.

Theme discussion: Outside in – Role as moderator

The external factors moderating teacher and counsellor perceptions reflect what can be considered an obvious assumption: the role of a teacher and a counsellor are very different. However, the Wellbeing Framework is a directive from the NSW Department of Education and Communities (now NSW Department of Education) to provide a common objective to all those working with students to improve student wellbeing. Therefore, the outcomes of this research uncover three important implications for policy makers. The first relates to the differing focus on spiritual wellbeing.

This difference in responsibilities between teachers and counsellors is reflected in the literature. In the various discussions and models that have been proposed for incorporating spiritual wellbeing into the pedagogy of teachers, it would appear that for teachers, the focus is expected to be on the promotion and development of spiritual wellbeing (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010; Taplin, 2014) and incorporating spirituality into classroom practices and curriculum areas (e.g., Harris, 2016). For school counsellors, however, there is evidence to support that their role in spiritual wellbeing should not only address spirituality during times of conflict or distress (for example, counselling for grief) (Barnett, 2016), but could also encourage students to develop spiritual wellbeing by discovering their core values, existential anxieties and unique thinking processes that are involved in their construction of life (Wong, 2011). What this highlights for policy makers is that there needs to be targeted information specific to teachers and counsellors to provide them with details of the practical implications for each of their roles. The results of previous studies on spirituality in education have often resulted in recommendations for changes to be made to educational policy, as well as education programs, in order to both better prepare teachers and regulate spiritual wellbeing in education (Mata-McMahon, 2016).

The second implication relates to a difference between school counsellors and teachers in their general perceptions regarding departmental documents. All school counsellors involved in this study did not perceive general departmental documents about wellbeing to be highly informative to their role. Finally, their access to these documents and their perception that they hold little value for direct input to their role

may make them less likely to consider the spirituality dimension of wellbeing. Considering that the sole role of a school counsellor is based around providing a more-comprehensive, psychology-based service to students who have been identified as having a deficit in one or more areas of wellbeing, it is not surprising that general wellbeing documents are considered to offer minimal input into their role.

The important lesson here is that the inclusion of spirituality into school counselling practice needs to come from the governing bodies for school counsellors. While research supporting the inclusion of spirituality into school counselling practice continues to build (Sink, 2004; Wong, 2011), the *School Counsellor Manual* (New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSW DET], 2009) makes no mention of it, nor does the Australian Psychological Society (2008) guidelines. This has implications for the governing bodies to address the lack of education for incorporating spiritual wellbeing into counselling practice.

Guiding forces: Inside out – Person as moderator

Another theme that emerged as an impact on the way participants perceive their role in relation to the spirituality component of the Wellbeing Framework, and their readiness and ability to incorporate it into their practice, were internal factors. Teachers and school counsellors discussed personal characteristics, beliefs and views they felt were often innate to both themselves and others who choose to take on a role within the teaching/counselling professions:

> I don't think you can teach that. I think that's [the ability to make children feel safe and cared for] something to do with the type of person you are. (T3)

> It's part of my belief system that we need to look at each child and say 'what is the best we can do for them?'… so in a way I think that's why the job suits me well because that's part of my belief system … I haven't been prepared by any particular person or any particular thing at Uni, it's just who I am, I think, that has made that [implementing the spiritual wellbeing domain of the Framework] … makes it easy for me. (SC1)

These quotes reference the participants' inner beliefs, personal attributes and core values that they acknowledge as important in their role as teachers and counsellors. Their narratives indicate that their everyday interactions, communication methods and values modelling are seen as personal innate characteristics that develop and promote spiritual wellbeing in students.

Teachers also mentioned the importance of the relationship with the child as a critical influence for promoting protective factors and student spiritual wellbeing:

> Because anybody can pick up a book and follow a program to teach spelling or math, you know … but if they're not getting a teacher who is nurturing and caring and looking after the spiritual child, then that child's missing out aren't they. (T2)

> It's your, who you are, you know, and the biggest thing is your, you know, relationship with the students, bigger than anything else for their wellbeing. (T3)

These quotes suggest that the manner in which a teacher relates to students is significantly based around their personal characteristics, beliefs and innate qualities.

Personal spirituality was also seen as important factor contributing to their ability to naturally promote spiritual wellbeing in students:

> I do feel like our job helps in that I get satisfaction from helping people, so that gives me a sense of purpose. (SC2)

> I guess there's my golden rule, 'Do unto others as I have done to them', and so in every way that I teach, that would oversee the type of person that I am. …and that's what spirituality is. It's about who you are and … and you are the model of that in everything that you say and do in front of the children. (T2)

Theme discussion: Inside out – Person as moderator

Within this theme, participants acknowledge the important part their own innate characteristics play in responding to the spiritual wellbeing of students, which for some also includes their level of spiritual awareness. Both teachers and counsellors acknowledge the power of informal moments to support student spiritual development and wellbeing as they provide opportunities to model values and beliefs, to guide students' social interactions during authentic moments. This aligns with Baumgartner and Buchanan (2010), who believe it is impossible not to address children's spirituality every day in every classroom, because "even when a teacher chooses to ignore spirituality, a child may receive spiritual direction" (p. 93), and with Schoonmaker (2009), who promotes addressing spirituality during ordinary events in classroom life.

Positive innate qualities of teachers and school counsellors have not gone unrecognised. Both teacher and school counsellor professions are considered 'helping professions', in that they require the person to work and care for children for their greater good. Considering that many teachers and school counsellors choose their profession based upon altruistic motives (Alexander, Chant & Cox, 1994; M. Barnett, 2007) and that altruism is related to both empathy and spirituality (Huber & MacDonald, 2012), it is not surprising to find participants identify their own beliefs and values as contributing factors in their ability to meet the spirituality domain of the Wellbeing Framework. Noble et al. (2008) report that the research literature indicates that altruistic behaviour impacts positively on student wellbeing and mental health, positive mood, social competence and self-esteem and increases an individual's sense of meaning or purpose. This suggests the innate characteristics of teachers and school counsellors may automatically position them to develop spiritual wellbeing in students.

Teachers also identified the importance of the relationship with the child as influential to student wellbeing, and related their own personal characteristics as playing a critical role in relationship development. Korthagen (2004) believes a teacher's professional identity is an "unconscious body of needs, images, feelings, values, role models, previous experiences and behavioral tendencies" (p. 85), and that their personal identities influence the outer levels of beliefs, competencies and behaviour. For teachers, this can mean having more acceptance of differences

between people and creating feelings of self-worth in children, all of which are integral to building meaningful relationships.

There were varying levels of awareness of personal spirituality and, as such, some participants struggled to identify their spiritual beliefs. It is proposed that the personal values participants seem to regard as inextricably bound with their existence are a reflection of their own personal spiritualties, and are instrumental in supporting the spiritual wellbeing of students. The definition offered earlier in this report provides a guide for the researcher to gain an insight into the worldview and the sense of meaning and purpose held by the participants. Their narratives spoke of their innate qualities, based upon personal beliefs, values and morals and offers insight into their own spiritual development. For some participants, their own level of spiritual awareness was seen as influential on student spiritual wellbeing. Jones (2005) believes that people who have a greater sense of personal spiritual wellbeing are better positioned to be a positive influence on the spiritual wellbeing of others. Spiritual awareness or awakening has also been linked to the expression of positive traits such as compassion, love, altruism and empathy (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). English, Fenwick and Parsons (2003) believe there is a need for educators and trainers to foster their own spirituality as a basis for integrating spirituality into their practice, a view shared by Carlson, Erickson and Seewald-Marquardt (2008).

Superordinate discussion: Guiding forces

Perceptions of spiritual wellbeing and the impact of personal beliefs on professional practices could be seen to be influenced by two guiding forces: external and internal. The working role may be seen as an external factor moderating the focus of student spiritual wellbeing. The role of a teacher was perceived to focus more on the positive, protective factors of spiritual wellbeing, while the role of a school counsellor was deemed to focus more on dysfunction in spiritual wellbeing. The important implication arising here is that teachers and school counsellors require very different professional development for education and training to prepare them to implement the spirituality dimension of the Wellbeing Framework. It further identified the need for the governing bodies of school counsellors to work in tandem with the NSW Department of Education to provide school counsellors with guidelines and training specific to the psychology service.

The theme relating to internal forces recognised that both teachers and school counsellors perceive themselves to have innate qualities that position them to naturally address the spiritual wellbeing of students. It is recognised that the innate qualities, traits and personal ethos that may have attracted them to seek employment in a helping profession are also likely to provide them with the core values and beliefs that are required to develop and promote spiritual wellbeing in students. Teachers also identified that informal, authentic moments contribute to student spiritual development and wellbeing in ways that may be just as beneficial as curriculum-based activities.

Limitations

The sample was predominantly female and located in the western Sydney area. A different sample may have produced a different set of conclusions about perceptions relating to the spiritual wellbeing dimension of the Wellbeing Framework. The

findings are conditioned on a select group of teachers and school counsellors who were invited to participate. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample, more-diverse geographical locations, balanced mix of genders and the inclusion of high school teachers, in order to determine the extent to which observations from the current study apply to the wider population of teachers and school counsellors.

The nature of qualitative research places the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), therefore, the biases and shortcomings of the human instrument should be noted as possible limitations. Every attempt was made by the researcher to put aside personal knowledge, preconceived ideas, beliefs and judgements during data collection and analysis. This involved withholding judgement statements, asking open-ended questions and seeking clarification of participant responses during interviews. The researcher did not attempt to fit the data into pre-existing themes, but instead used the data itself to identify the patterns and themes that emerged. However, IPA involves the ability of the researcher to conceptualise and make sense of the participants' personal world through a process of interpretive activity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) – another researcher may make different interpretations and thereby identify different themes within the data.

Future directions

Findings from this study may serve as starting points to engage the governing bodies for teacher and school counsellor education in discussion about provision of training and professional development opportunities to increase the understanding that teachers and school counsellors have of spiritual wellbeing and how to incorporate it into their practice. In particular, this study has highlighted the need for Australian psychological organisations to consider the need for spirituality to be incorporated into professional guidelines. These documents may be more influential for school counsellors, who appear to play a different role in addressing the spiritual wellbeing of students. Additionally, research into training models designed to aid teachers and school counsellors in developing an ethical analytic framework would be helpful for teachers and school counsellors to work with spiritual beliefs.

While this study has begun an exploration into this important area of teacher and school counsellor perspectives of spiritual wellbeing, there is a need for further exploration to understand the complexity of how personal perceptions of spirituality influence the ability of teachers and school counsellors to address the spiritual wellbeing of students. Most notably, participants in the current study had various levels of spiritual awareness. Although this diversity provided rich data, it would be fruitful to investigate the specific impact that levels of personal spiritual awareness have on their approach toward incorporating spiritual wellbeing into teaching and counselling.

Conclusion

With increasing expectations for teachers and school counsellors to work with spirituality in their everyday practice, it is important to not overlook the significant challenges they face. The aim of this research report was to attempt to answer the following questions:

1) How do primary teachers and counsellors perceive the 'spirituality' aspect of the *Wellbeing Framework for Schools*?
2) What impact, if any, do their current beliefs and perceptions have on their ability to incorporate spiritual wellbeing into their role?

Two superordinate themes were identified in response to these questions: 'confounding issues' and 'guiding forces'. The first recognised confusion as one of the unifying dimensions underlying participants' efforts to discuss spiritual wellbeing. Confusion was apparent in participants' efforts to describe how they perceive spiritual wellbeing, the juxtapositioning of their own definitions of spiritual wellbeing with the definition provided in the Wellbeing Framework and with their conceptual knowledge of spiritual development. Confusion around the link between spirituality and religion and how to work ethically with students' spiritual beliefs in a secular education setting posed another challenge. Consideration and reflection on this ethical dilemma is important to help teachers and school counsellors develop a confident and ethical practice approach to spiritual wellbeing. These findings support previous research presenting confusion as a barrier when introducing spirituality to teacher pedagogy (Harris, 2016) and counselling practice (Tregenza, 2008). They also add further support for recommendations to provide training and professional development to promote a higher level of teacher and school counsellor understanding of spiritual wellbeing and practical implementation (Kimbel & Schellenberg, 2013; Taplin, 2014).

In the process of negotiating myriad forms of confusion, the participants' narratives underscore the second superordinate theme that mediates responses to the initiatives in the Wellbeing Framework – guiding forces. The differences between the role of teachers and school counsellors served as an external force that influenced their response to departmental directives. Perceptions of low validity and less exposure to departmental documents by school counsellors indicate the need for the psychological governing bodies to include spiritual wellbeing in their guidelines and for more professional development and training opportunities, specifically for school counsellors, to educate them on spiritual wellbeing and its role in counselling. This report may contribute to instigating a movement by the Australian Psychological Society, that is already occurring in psychological institutions in the USA, to officially incorporate spirituality into psychological services (Schafer et al., 2009).

Participant narratives also recognise internal forces that guide their response to the Wellbeing Framework. The innate qualities and characteristics that teachers and school counsellors bring to their role offer subtle evidence that they have been naturally addressing the spiritual development and wellbeing of students during authentic interactions with students all along. This concept is recognised and supported in the discourse within the literature for student spirituality (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010). However, results indicate that further training to increase the personal awareness of spirituality in teachers and counsellors could possibly be the link required to decrease the gap between evidence-based knowledge of the benefits of addressing spiritual wellbeing and current practices of teachers and counsellors.

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