

**SPIRITUALITY AS A COPING STRATEGY: A CASE STUDY
OF TEACHERS
IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN KWAZULU- NATAL**

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ABSTRACT

For years the teaching profession has been universally recognized as one of the most challenging working environments for teachers (Arokium, 2010; Behera & Dash, 2015). By no means is South Africa an exception, particularly with public school teachers facing challenges that appear to continually propagate.

The South African education system still falls prey to the ghosts of Apartheid's past. Even today, traces of historical inequality perpetuate a challenging and more stressful reality for many public South African schools. Although existing literature has considered various coping strategies employed by teachers, *spirituality* has not been extensively explored. Particularly in relation to how it may be utilised by teachers in their experiences of work.

The current study used a qualitative research method to explore the lived experiences of teachers' in relation to spirituality and the role it plays in their work life. A case study methodology was employed, placing the teachers at Primary School X as the unit of analysis for this study. Data was obtained from six semi-structured interviews.

The findings revealed that, similarly to existing evidence, South African public school teachers still largely experience their work environments as challenging. Consistently mentioned issues included overcrowded classrooms, difficulties with the National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) as well as the sensitive social issues routinely experienced by learners.

Overall, the teachers have managed to deal with most challenges strategically however, in instances where personal/professional control over the situation completely lacked, the teachers turned to spirituality as a resource to meaningfully deal with such challenges.

For the teachers at Primary School X, the practice of spirituality facilitated a process of positive meaning making that allowed for a more constructive appraisal of difficult realities. An inclusive set of values, beliefs and assumptions informed the reinterpretation of the teaching environment and positively influenced their work function.

The challenges faced by South African public school teachers are unignorable and should be treated as a priority of systemic rescue. This study highlights how spirituality was used as a means of personal strength and should be explored further to understand its unique contribution, both personally and professionally for South African teachers.

DECLARATION

I, Loren Martin, declare that

1. The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This thesis does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted, then:
 - a. Their words have been re-written, but the general information attributed to them has been referenced.
 - b. Where their exact words have been used, then their writing has been placed inside quotation marks, and referenced.

Signed:



Date: 03/12/2020

Loren Martin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Declaration.....	iii
Table of contents.....	iv

CHAPTER ONE: SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 Summary.....	1
1.2 Introduction.....	1
1.3 Background of the study.....	1
1.4 Problem statement.....	3
1.5 Aim of the study.....	3
1.6 Objectives of the study.....	3
1.7 Research questions.....	4
1.8 Rationale.....	4
1.9 Significance of the study.....	4

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction.....	6
2.1.1 Schooling in South Africa: A historical overview.....	6
2.1.2 Primary School X.....	7
2.2 The challenges of teaching.....	8
2.2.1 Classroom management.....	8
2.2.2 Maintaining a disciplined classroom.....	9
2.2.3 Time Pressure and workload.....	10
2.2.4 Change.....	10
2.3 Teacher stress.....	12
2.4 The negative effects of stress in the teaching profession.....	13
2.4.1 Burnout and fatigue.....	13

2.4.2	Stress related conditions.....	14
2.4.3	Absenteeism.....	14
2.5	Coping strategies.....	15
2.5.1	Direct-action strategies.....	16
2.5.2	Palliative strategies.....	17
2.6	Understanding spirituality.....	18
2.6.1	The Humanist.....	18
2.6.2	The Existentialist.....	19
2.6.3	Religiousness versus spirituality.....	20
2.6.4	Multidimensional spirituality.....	21
2.6.5	Workplace spirituality.....	21
2.7	Conclusion.....	23

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1	Introduction.....	25
3.2	Spiritual appraisal.....	25
3.3	Spiritual person factors.....	26
3.3.1	Religious orientation.....	26
3.3.2	Spiritual problem-solving styles.....	26
3.3.3	Hope.....	27
3.4	Spiritual coping behaviours.....	28
3.5	Spiritual connections.....	29
3.5.1	Nature.....	29
3.5.2	Others.....	29
3.5.3	Transcendent other.....	29
3.6	Meaning making.....	30
3.7	Conclusion.....	30

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

4.1	Research Design.....	31
4.2	Research setting.....	32

4.3	Sampling and participants.....	33
4.4	Measuring instruments.....	33
4.4.1	The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale (SSRS).....	34
4.4.2	Interview schedule.....	35
4.5	Procedure.....	35
4.5.1	Ethical clearance.....	35
4.5.1.1	Informed consent.....	36
4.5.2	Conducting the study.....	36
4.5.2.1	Initial contact with Primary school X.....	36
4.5.2.2	The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale Questionnaires (SSRS).....	37
4.5.2.3	Scoring the SSRS.....	37
4.5.2.4	Data collection.....	38
4.6	Data analysis.....	39
4.7	Reflexivity.....	40
4.8	Limitations.....	41
4.9	Conclusion.....	42

CHAPTER FIVE: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1	Introduction.....	43
5.1.1	Summary of Themes and Sub-themes.....	43
5.2	Overcrowded classrooms.....	45
5.2.1	Classroom management.....	46
5.2.2	Misbehaviour.....	47
5.2.3	Didactical neglect.....	48
5.3	Coping with overcrowded classrooms.....	50
5.4	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).....	51
5.4.1	Lack of time.....	52
5.4.2	Volume of work.....	54
5.5	Learner-related challenges.....	58
5.5.1	Learners' domestic and socio-economic realities.....	58
5.6	Spirituality.....	61
5.6.1	Teachers' conceptual understandings.....	61

5.6.2	Spiritual practice in the work context.....	63
5.7	Spiritual coping.....	66
5.7.1	Spiritual connection with the transcendent other.....	66
5.7.2	Spiritual connection with others.....	67
5.7.3	Meaning making.....	67
5.8	Conclusion.....	68

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

6.1	Introduction.....	69
6.2	Summary of findings and recommendations.....	70
6.2.1	Overcrowded classrooms.....	70
6.2.2	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS).....	71
6.2.3	Learner related challenges.....	73
6.2.4	Spiritual coping.....	73
6.3	Conclusion.....	74

REFERENCES	75
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethical clearance from the Department of Basic Education.....	88
Appendix B: Ethical clearance approval from the Research Ethics Committee.....	89
Appendix C: Request letter to Principal.....	90
Appendix D: Informed consent form.....	91
Appendix E: The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale (SSRS).....	94
Appendix F: Interview schedule.....	95
Appendix G: Turn It in Originality Report	96

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Spirituality Self-Rating Scale Questionnaire Scores.....	37
Table 2 Summary of Themes and Sub-themes.....	44

CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 SUMMARY

The following chapter provides an overview of the research study. The background and problem statement of the study indicates some of the pressing issues experienced by teachers. The aims and objectives of the study are presented below. The structure of the research study is offered to provide the reader with an overview of this study.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The following case study was designed to gain insights into the unique experiences of South African Teachers at a local primary school, under the pseudonym of Primary School X. In particular, the study was interested in the ways in teachers both understand spirituality and practice it their everyday work practices and experiences. The study was of an exploratory nature and utilised interviews to discover rich, qualitative data. This was achieved by exploring the views of teachers' lived experiences in relation to their daily encounters and how they may practice spirituality in their work context in order to negotiate the challenges which they experience. The results of this study were used to posit future recommendations.

1.3 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The knowledge that the teaching profession is one of the most stressful occupations (Arokium, 2010; Behera & Dash, 2015; de Klerk-Luttig, 2008; Steyn & Kamper, 2006) is no cutting-edge discovery. However, the work environment for teachers in South Africa, particularly in public schools, is still largely stressful (Arokium, 2010).

From the year South Africa was declared a democratic country in 1994, to date, the South African school system has undergone rapid changes towards the democratisation of education. Some of these changes include the introduction of the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) philosophy, which over a few years has been iterated in a number of different curricula including Curriculum 2005 (C2005), the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) which was later changed to the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), and finally the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (Caps) introduced in year 2012 (Ragha, 2015).

Each modification required teachers to adapt accordingly and implement new approaches to the way lessons have been taught (Arokium, 2010).

In addition to these changes, South African teachers are characteristically faced with challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, assessment of learners with varying learning abilities and a lack of resources (Boshoff, Potgieter, Ellis, Mentz & Malan, 2018), typically within public schooling. These accumulated demands and responsibilities increase teachers' experiences of stress, often having a negative impact on their physical and psychological well-being (Denhere, Ngobeli & Kutame, 2010; Haydon, Alter, Hawkins & Theado, 2019). The final hurdle for teachers often included lowered productivity (Holmes, 2005) and often absenteeism (Fouché, Rothmann & Van der Vyver, 2017; Statistics South Africa, 2013), among other things. Thus, as a result, there is a need for teachers to equip themselves with effective coping strategies to manage challenges in the workplace.

Although existing literature has considered various coping strategies employed by teachers, "the concept of spirituality [is] an often-neglected dimension of the lives of teachers in South Africa" (de Klerk-Luttig, 2008, p. 505). It would seem that spirituality escapes the remit of the religious professional and extends into the working life (Walton, 2012). This implies that spirituality may not only facilitate a journey of self-discovery, finding meaning and making connections – rather an inclusive set of values, beliefs and assumptions also feed into the interpretation of the teaching environment and influence the cognitive appraisals of its contextual challenges. As such, it is probable that one's spiritual background and practices inform the way in which one carries out their work function.

A number of resources support that a positive relationship exists between spirituality and various positive work outcomes. A few of these correlations included relationships between spirituality and work commitment, job satisfaction (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Sledge, Miles & Van Sambeek, 2011), job involvement (Van der Walt & Swanepoel, 2015), employee performance, organisational effectiveness (Karakas, 2010), leadership (Phipps, 2012) and employee adaptability (Sony & Makoth, 2017).

For the last few years, spirituality (particularly in the work context) has been of worldwide academic interest. Although still in its formative stages, a call for spirituality continues to emerge in the workplace, proving to provide a sense of meaning at work, increase well-being and resilience in the stresses of the teaching profession in New Zealand (Gibson, 2014), the USA (Mata, 2014) as well as the United Kingdom (Mogra, 2010).

Arguably, there is a need for an ideological shift that will help improve the experiences of South African teachers (Kuhn, 1970), like those at Primary School X. This study, therefore, aims to explore the ways in which teachers at Primary School X, understand and practice the concept of ‘spirituality’ in relation to their experiences in their work context.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Spirituality in the workplace has gained the attention of psychologists, sociologists, clinicians and other health professionals for many years (Haydon et al., 2019). Spirituality has been found to have various constructive impacts on the experiences of employees at work, as well as positive influences on their physical and mental well-being (Seybold & Hill, 2001). A comprehensive body of literature considers the positive impacts of the practice of spirituality in various occupations (Haydon et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002); however, little is known about how South African teachers recognize spirituality and utilise it in their experiences of work. Therefore, this study aims to share the insights of teachers’ interpretations of spirituality and the role it plays in their daily work life. Insights gained from this study strive to produce a rich and authentic appreciation of how spirituality influences the experiences of teachers, and therefore, attempt to encourage an awareness of the importance of spiritual development among South African teachers.

1.5 AIM OF THE STUDY

To explore the ways in which teachers at Primary School X understand and practice the concept of spirituality in relation to their lived experiences in their work context.

1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To explore how teachers experience their work environment.
- To explore teachers’ conceptual understandings and experiences of spirituality.
- To explore how teachers, practice spirituality in their work context.

1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How do teachers experience their work?
- 2) How do teachers conceptually understand and experience spirituality?
- 3) How do teachers practice spirituality in their work context?

1.8 RATIONALE

The manner in which teachers define spirituality and conceptualise it even within their working experience will have noteworthy implications, not just for further development in the ontology and epistemology of teachers, but also for other professional health care practices (Haydon et al., 2019; Ramberg et al., 2019). There are few published studies on spirituality and religion from a South African perspective that focus on spirituality as a palliative resolution within the challenging and complex teaching environment. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to the dearth of literature in what is considered a very important area, given the challenges experienced by teachers.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Through conducting this case study, it is hoped that the findings would be useful to many current and prospective teachers of Primary School X, as well as other South African schools much like it. Light will be shed on some of the recurrent challenges related to a typical public school in South Africa and the experience of stress in this work environment. Moreover, it can be expected that this case study will elicit the possible usefulness of exercising spirituality to effectively resolve, at least to some extent, such stress.

As a nation which is still developing, South Africa should continue to strive for effective resolutions to teacher stress, if a further increase in stress related conditions and mental ill-being to be avoided. As it presently stands, provision of quality education is a consequential challenge given the rise in absenteeism and decrease in teacher-learner engagement (Statistics South Africa, 2013), that will only worsen with the pervasive nature of teacher stress. The provision of quality education relies upon the successful retention of teachers and school leadership (Fouche, Rothmann & van der Vyver, 2017), as well as the maintenance of teacher motivation and their overall well-being (Denhere, Ngobeli & Kutame, 2010). Therefore, the

search for solutions to alleviate teacher stress needs to extend beyond the traditional approaches of maladjustment or ill-being, but should rather consider factors associated with positive psychological functioning and well-being in effort to build the personal resources against stress (Vazi et al., 2013).

By exploring the work experiences of teachers and identifying the sources of stress that currently exist, it is aspired that management and other decision makers would be able to intervene more effectively and make appropriate decisions in improving the working lives of teachers. It is also hoped that this study would not only spark an interest among teachers, but also prove beneficial by providing insight into spirituality as an alternative means of coping with stress, enhancing strength and personal well-being, and encourage a more positive existential experience.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Spirituality in the workplace is an area of interest that has grown considerably over the years (Hayden et al., 2019). A reason for this trend would be that spirituality has been found to have various advantageous influences on employees both in their professional and personal spheres (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Sledge, Miles & Van Sambeek, 2011; Van der Walt & Swanepoel, 2015; Sony & Makoth, 2017). A comprehensive body of literature considers the positive impacts of the practice of spirituality in various occupations (Haydon et al., 2019; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002); however, little is known about how South African teachers recognize spirituality and if they utilise it in their experiences of work. To this end, this case study was initiated – to gain insights into the ways that teachers of Primary School X both conceptually understand and intersperse spirituality in their work experiences and practices.

Therefore, the following body of literature was reviewed to support the exploratory research process. The researcher considered the contextual significance of Primary School X, as a local public school in South Africa and the unique challenges of such a context. Various frameworks around spirituality were also explored, elaborating on its advantageous influence in the face of stressful challenges. The following literature review was also used in the synthesis of the analysis and to arrive at overall conclusions.

2.1.1 Schooling in South Africa: A historical overview

The South African schooling system, much like many other systems in the country can be understood as a product of a deeply rooted history. The vast evolution of the country is mirrored through the reformation of the South African classroom. However, despite efforts to destroy the ghosts of the Apartheid, historical and structural inequalities and challenges continue to have an impact South African education and teaching.

From the years between 1905 to 1976, the South African education system was explicitly designed to maintain white supremacy and dominance both economically and in the state. During the 1950's racially-differentiated schooling systems – such as the Bantu Education system – only continued to consolidate (Chisholm, 2012). Four main streams existed for African, Indian, Coloured and White children, where each was organisationally segregated and

unequally financed. Beyond just systematic segregation, geographical separation further entrenched political, economic and educational disparities.

As a result of the Apartheid Group Areas Act, thousands of Africans, Coloureds and Indian people were forcibly relocated into 'Bantustans' or 'homelands' away from the White population (South African History Online, 2020). Bantustan schools and pupils were characteristically poor and unfortunately, this is a legacy that remains strong in the present. Historical inequality is a hurdle that remains a reality for many South African schools today. Poorly resourced socio-economic and school contexts, overcrowded classrooms and distortions of the educational system are just a few of the challenges leading to an often more stressful teaching experience. Primary School X, which was the sample of the current study, show symptoms of these historical challenges.

2.1.2 Primary School X

Primary School X is a typical South African public school that still battles the difficulties of the past. Over the past few decades, the school has provided a service to thousands of pupils from as far as areas like Kwamashu, Umlazi, Durban central and closer into the Sherwood, Sydenham, Bonela and Mayville areas. During the years of Apartheid, all these communities would have fallen under the 'KwaZulu' Bantustan umbrella. From post-Apartheid to the present, not a great deal has changed in many of these townships, particularly the 'African' townships (South African History Online, 2020). Children, their parents and often grandparents live in overcrowded, underserviced and gravely neglected living conditions.

The socioeconomic situation of many of Primary School X's pupils is often bleak, including living in public housing, being raised in a single-income home or a home where parents/guardians are unemployed. Consequently, many parents/guardians cannot afford to pay school fees (Masuku, 2018). With thousands of Rands outstanding, this only further stretches the already limited resources of the school – a pivotal challenge for many public teachers and schools in South Africa (Fiske & Ladd, 2004).

The domestic reality of the many pupils also manifests in the classroom. As concurrent to the socioeconomic, the domestic reality of many pupils also becomes challenging. Homes are overcrowded, pupils often do not have enough to eat, do not have adequate time nor attention to complete homework effectively and are often subject to domestic abuse. Not only does this reality often manifest itself as disruption, distraction or disengagement in the classroom

(Martens et al., 2014), but ultimately becomes a burden for many teachers, as the so-called secondary caregivers of their pupils.

2.2 THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING

The numerous challenges and stresses within the teaching context appear to be characteristic to the profession (Arokium, 2010; Behera & Dash, 2015; De Klerk-Luttig, 2008; Naghie, Montgomery, Bonell, Thompson & Aber, 2015). Accumulated demands and responsibilities increase teachers' experiences of stress, often having a negative impact on their physical and psychological well-being (Denhere, Ngobeli & Kutame, 2010; Haydon, Alter, Hawkins & Theado, 2019). Despite the corpus of research studies based on the causes, consequences and possible interventions of psychological stress, it remains a prevalent concern among international (Ramberg, Låftman, Åkerstedt & Modin, 2019) and South African teachers (Boshoff, Potgieter, Ellis, Mentz & Malan, 2018). This particular phenomenon, coined as 'teacher stress' refers to the unpleasant or negative feelings experienced by teachers, as a result of having the perception that they are unable to effectively deal with professional tasks and demands (Naghie et al., 2015; Steyn & Kamper, 2006).

Previous research has shown that stress experienced by South African educators is mostly associated with learners who lack both motivation and discipline, deeply unbalanced learner-to-educator ratios, overcrowded classrooms, changing curriculum approaches and low salaries (Denhere et al., 2010). From the reviewed literature, a few common challenges have emerged as being commonly experienced by teachers who work at South African schools like Primary School X. Some of these challenges include, but are not limited to, the following.

2.2.1 Classroom management

Apart from the act of teaching itself, teachers have the responsibility to make a host of different decisions that influence the ways in which the classroom is managed, and teaching is done. These decisions are influenced by many different factors, some of which include considering the cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of learners, learners' unique domestic circumstances, their personalities and varying capabilities. Understanding and managing the ways in which one or more of these factors influence the task of teaching can indeed be stressful (Willemsse & Deacon, 2015). This is to say that teachers must often process numerous considerations before class and lesson management can be achieved effectively. For a teacher

at Primary School X this could mean considering whether learners have enough energy to start the lesson with reading, keeping in mind that their previous period was a Physical Education class. Alternatively, it could mean having to consider whether to reprimand a pupil who has left their book at home, with the knowledge that pupil is moved between his parent and grandparents during the school week.

In general, managing the classroom calls upon the teacher's intuition and contextual know-how. This also applies to the ways in which a teacher would maintain a disciplined classroom.

2.2.2 Maintaining a disciplined classroom

Another significant source of stress is that of maintaining a disciplined classroom. A disciplined classroom can be thought of as a controlled and safe classroom environment, where learner's positive behaviours allow for effective and fun learning (Scarlett, 2015). In cases where learners are ill-behaved and unable to self-monitor/self-regulate, maintaining discipline can become increasingly stressful. In addition, having to address overly talkative and other disruptive behaviours eats away at valuable time and energy that should have been directed at successfully completing the lesson.

Therefore, stress in maintaining a disciplined classroom stems from two key circumstances. First, the teacher must remain vigilant, monitoring and preventing the occurrence of disruptive behaviour and secondly, having to address such behaviour, should it arise.

However, negative behaviours of learners may run deeper than mere lack of discipline. Learners do not exist within a social vacuum, and the circumstances of their own cultural and socio-economic realities are bound to manifest in behaviours within the classroom (Farooq, Chaudhry, Shafiq & Berhanu, 2011). The home environment created, the level of parental involvement and parental guidance all have an influence on the learner's performance and behaviours elicited in the classroom (Farooq et al., 2011). Primary School does not fall short of such a consideration. Some teachers choose to be more constructive and sensitive in their disciplinary approach because of this contextual awareness. The process of discerning true ill behaviour versus a deeper cry for help, inflicts a sense of inner tension that too can be stressful (Marais & Meier, 2010).

2.2.3 Time pressure and workload

Each day, teachers are required to prepare lessons for various subjects and /or topics in a way that caters to the varied interests, needs and capabilities of their learners – all in a manner that is as time efficient as possible.

Part of teachers' daily tasks include meeting numerous deadlines. These include writing reports, marking and moderating tests and examinations, attending staff meetings and development programs and material preparation for daily lessons. Moreover, the nature of the currently employed CAPS curriculum requires a great deal of administrative tasks to be completed daily (Ragha, 2015). Intrinsically, there are often occasions where a heavy workload and the associated deadlines will accumulate, causing teachers to experience stress (Arokium, 2010). Not only do these tasks need to be completed but should be executed at a standard that is acceptable, pleasing and required by the various stakeholders (such as heads of department, superintendents, learners and parents) that teachers answer to. A few of the teachers at Primary School X testify to this. The reality of one's performance being openly exposed to the critical review of these stakeholders again adds pressure on the teachers to maintain performance at all times. While some people find such pressure motivating (Naz., Liaqat & Ghyas, 2019), others experience it as stressful (Denhere et al., 2010; Ragha, 2015).

It is not uncommon for teachers to feel as though they are constantly racing against time. In addition to deadlines and piles of paper, South African teachers are also called to keep up with an evolving country and ever-changing work environment.

2.2.4 Change

From the year South Africa was declared a democratic country in 1994, to date, the South African school system has undergone rapid changes towards the democratisation of education. Some of these changes include modifications to curricula, the introduction of new subjects, the decolonisation of education and adapted regulations for learner progression.

Changes to Curriculum

An initial change in the post-apartheid educational system was the introduction of the Outcomes Based Education (OBE) philosophy, which over a few years has been iterated in several different curricula. These included Curriculum 2005 (C2005), the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) which was later changed to the National Curriculum Statement

(NCS), and finally the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) introduced in year 2012 (Ragha, 2015).

With each framework modification, teachers were required to practice a unique sense of adaptability (Arokium, 2010) and acquire an operational understanding of the syllabus. Teachers are expected to effectively implement new ways of teaching, recording, reporting and assessing. Ordinarily, such a process is deemed stressful. At times, this is especially so for the teachers at Primary School X. Occasionally, the resources necessary to achieve the demands of the syllabus are not readily available.

Further difficulty is often experienced because changes in curriculum do not resonate with teachers. A large proportion of teachers only find out about fundamental changes once policy has been finalised and are not consulted by union members. As a result, teachers may feel a lack of ownership of the syllabi they must deliver (Arokium, 2010).

Decolonisation of Education and the Introduction of new subjects

During the working process to a democratic society, the Department of Basic Education has made it priority to decolonise the learnings of the South African classroom. This includes the incorporation of a new history curricula and the promotion and teaching of South African languages, history and symbols.

Beyond just moving away from colonized education, new subjects have been introduced in effort to remain abreast with future innovation and economic relevance. These include technology-focused subjects such as computer skills as well as coding. During her annual address, in April 2019, Basic Education minister, Angie Motshekga, reported 43 774 teachers had been trained in computer skills. In a more recent address (March 2021), Motsheka called for comments to amend the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) to make provision for coding and robotics at South African schools.

It becomes evident that for teachers to maintain an edge, a process of continuous development, learning and training is an absolute necessity. A great demand is placed on teachers to remain equipped with contemporary teaching materials and methods. If this demand appears to exceed what teachers perceive they are capable of, this too becomes stressful (Vester, 2018).

Policy and regulation

As the educational framework shifts, policy and regulation shifts accordingly. One of the latest amended policies is the policy of ‘automatic progression’, which includes that a learner may only repeat a grade once in the Foundation Phase (Grade R-3) to prevent them from being retained in this phase for longer than four years (DoBE, 2016). This progression policy often creates a double-edged challenge. Pupils who display learning difficulties are often held back, adding to the already overpopulated classroom (of +/- 30 pupils). These pupils struggle to keep up with the rest of the class and are unable to attain the much needed yet thinly spread attention of the teacher. Teachers are continually faced with the dilemma of promoting a lagging pupil, or risk further backlog in each phase. Not only is the responsibility of making these decisions stressful, but the accountability the teacher holds for the consequences they may have on the learners, further increases levels of stress.

2.3 TEACHER STRESS

The nature of the above-mentioned challenges have been recognised as causing an increased level of stress experienced by teachers (Arokium, 2010; Haydon, Alter, Hawkins & Theado, 2019; Robertson & Dunsmuir, 2013; Steyn & Kamper, 2006, Vazi et al., 2013). According to Lazarus’ Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the teacher will experience stress in a situation where the demand placed upon them is personally deemed or appraised as deeply taxing or exceeding his/her own resources, or even endangering his/her well-being. This definition holds three main assumptions, that:

- First, that there is a relational interaction between the teacher and their work environment as a result of the transaction between them,
- The key to that interaction is the teacher’s own cognitive appraisal of the psychological situation, and
- Finally, that situation must be thought of as being somewhat intimidating or challenging (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This perspective focuses on the meanings that individuals attach to the given situation, through their unique experience, feelings and thoughts about their interaction with the environment. This psychological process of appraisal shapes whether the situation is seen as one of growth

and potential or one that's threatening. It is this process of appraisal that becomes pivotal to the ways in which one's reality is constructed and therefore experienced – a notion that will be explored further in this chapter.

Overall, a few challenges of the teaching environment and related experience of stress have been shown to have various other negative consequences on the work experience of teachers and indirectly on the outcomes reached in the classroom. Some of the most experienced effects of teacher stress are discussed in the next section.

2.4 NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF STRESS IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION

2.4.1 Burnout and fatigue

The prolonged exposure to high levels of stress without sufficient tools or strategies to handle this, often leads to fatigue and ultimately burnout (Ramberg et al., 2019). Academics like Ian Rothmann have done considerable investigation into the experience of burnout within the South African education system. According to Rothmann and Barkhuizen (2008) burnout is an occurrence that affects all occupations but appears to be more pervasive in professions in the human services, such as education. This would appear even truer for the South African education institution that is characteristically faced with an overload of demands and an under-supply of response capabilities particularly when pertaining to finances.

Burnout may manifest in roughly three different ways, namely psychically, emotionally and attitudinally (Joubert & Rothmann, 2007; Kyriacou, 2001). Physical burnout is usually experienced as extreme and persistent physical tiredness/exhaustion and depletion of energy (Ramberg et al., 2019). Emotional exhaustion more often leads to feelings of hopelessness and low morale, as well as an attitudinal shift, where teachers are no longer enthusiastic about their work nor their learners (Bhui et al., 2012). Ian Rothmann explains that at this point, one's "fire to teach dwindles to a mere spark", (Joubert & Rothmann, 2007, p.440). This is also understood as a *work-related depressed mood*, resulting from the inability to successfully resolve stress in the work situation, and thus an overwhelming experience of negative stress (Madsen et al., 2017).

It is possible that the teachers at Primary School X may experience a sense of fatigue or even burnout as a consequence of having to proactively deal with limited resources, crowded

classrooms and an active flow of daily demands. More than fatigue, teachers may experience other stress related conditions.

2.4.2 Stress Related Conditions

One of the primary concerns about the experience of stress is the increased susceptibility to other physical and mental illnesses. Exposure to high levels of stress can also lead to the adoption of various unhealthy behaviours such as smoking alcohol misuse/abuse, lack of/irregular sleep and unhealthy eating habits. Often it is as a result of these adaptive behaviours (and not the stress directly) that causes an inability to function/perform effectively at school, and further catalyse illness of the body and/or mind (Bhui et al., 2012). Additional consequences include lowered self-efficacy, reduced job-satisfaction, a lowered ability to maintain student achievement and engagement, and in severe cases comorbid depression (Haydon et al., 2019).

Stress related conditions become a chief concern because not only does it negatively influence the life of the teacher but inevitably sabotages a positive classroom climate. If not properly attended too, the stressful experiences of a teacher may lead to increased absenteeism (Fouche et al., 2017).

2.4.3 Absenteeism

A study performed in South African schools in the Gauteng Province, Mashaba and Maile (2019), showed that the increase in teacher stress was mirrored in the rising average of annual days absent as well as a growing number of early retirements. The results of teachers being absent are manifold, including increased medical costs for the teacher, lowered productivity within the school and overall poor learner achievement (Arokium, 2010; Mashaba & Maile, 2019).

Teacher absenteeism has a profound impact on the performance of the learner and fundamentally the quality of education that is delivered (Fouche et al., 2017). In the absence of a teacher, students are either appointed a substitute or evenly distributed into other classes – both of which cause disruption to the usual routine of the learner. Learners may not always adequately adapt to a different teaching style or environment, causing a negative impact on learner achievement and undermining the value of teacher-learner interaction (Bowers, 2004; Haydon et al., 2019).

When considering the above-mentioned challenges, contextual stresses and the effects thereof, it becomes undoubtedly clear how these would have unfortunate repercussions for both teachers and their pupils. One way to combat the effects of stress and other negative feelings associated with challenges is to ensure that teachers have been equipped with healthy and effective ways of coping.

This study argues that spirituality may be a positive and tangible means of dealing with the daily challenges of a teacher's world. There is evidence to suggest that spiritual individuals are more likely to negotiate challenges in a more positive way. Through a more positive sense of work commitment (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Sledge, Miles & Van Sambeek, 2011) spiritual people are likely to decipher opportunity in crisis and therefore display a desirable degree of adaptability in the face of misfortune (Sony & Makoth, 2017). Therefore, spiritual individuals may also exhibit certain job involvement (Van der Walt & Swanepoel, 2015) and effective employee performance (Karakas, 2010). Therefore, having real advantageous outcomes, spirituality is argued to be an invaluable asset to the overall well-being of the teacher.

As such, the following sections will review, first, some of the general measures teachers make use of when coping with workplace challenges and stressful experiences; understanding spirituality and its place in the world of work; the exercise of spirituality in the face of challenges and coping with work-related stress.

2.5 COPING STRATEGIES

When referring to coping, some of the literature most referred to would be that of Lazarus and Folkman. According to Lazarus et al. (1984), coping can be defined as “the person's constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources” (p. 993). In other words, when a potential challenge is perceived, the individual adapts their way of thinking about the situation in order to deal with it more effectively or adopts a more successful pattern of behaviours.

Using the work of Lazarus and Folkman, academic John Arokium conducted his own study, exploring the coping strategies employed by primary school teachers in KwaZulu-Natal. In his study, Arokium (2010), discusses two principal coping strategies, which are *direct-action strategies* and *palliative strategies*.

2.5.1 Direct-action Strategies

Chris Kyriacou (2000), suggests strategies of direct-action can be split into five key categories. These include employing a direct attack, choosing to enhance one's skills and ability to act, adapting to the situation, attempting to remove the source of the stress or seeking help from fellow colleagues.

The first technique, employing a direct attack, implies that the teacher already possesses the skills and ability that they would need to successfully manage the source of stress. An example would be when a teacher feels stressed as a result of high marking load during the fourth term exams. In this scenario the teacher, capable of marking the examinations may choose to allocate extra time before the start of the school day to mark his/her papers.

Although taking direct action may seem simple, this is a task that is often easier said than done. Often the burden of mitigating the challenge is left in the hands of the teacher rather than recognising a systemic shortcoming. Using the abovementioned example, rather than the schooling system acknowledging that the teaching syllabus may not be contextually suitable or even plausible, teachers are expected to do whatever necessary to meet unreasonable deadlines. As a result, South African educational institutions are becoming increasingly imbalanced and demanding working environments (Roothman, 2010).

In the second technique, the individual chooses to enhance their existing skills and ability in order to be more effective if the same stressful situation occurs again. For many of South Africa's teachers, this scenario may have played out during the many changes of curricula. Teachers would undergo training and development to ensure that they are able to adhere to the demands of the new educational system.

What becomes of particular difficulty here, is that training may not always be easily available or accessible (Du Plessis & Marais, 2016). Furthermore, whether training is adequate or not may be debatable. A common difficulty faced by South African public schools is insufficient state subsidy (Motata & Carel, 2019), forcing already scarce financial resources to be stretched further. In such cases, the implementation of training programs may fall short.

A less active but situationally effective technique would be the third, adapting to the situation. This technique of coping adopts the notion that stress is often self-inflicted and by being more adaptable, one may have a less stressful experience. For example, a teacher may grow increasingly frustrated and stressed because a few of the same learners never have their

homework books signed. The teacher may eventually choose to accept the situation as recurrent and an unnecessary conflict. Critically speaking however, here again the individual is assumed accountable for their own challenging experience, while the consideration of making a meaningful systemic change to the teacher-environment interaction is dismissed. It is worth considering whether teachers would benefit from more tailored support systems rather than being expected to 'roll with the punches'.

A fourth technique would include removing the source of stress altogether. Perhaps a teacher finds it particularly difficult to reprimand her pupils. She may alleviate the situation by referring a pupil to the principal for disciplining. This technique, however, may not be achievable in all instances. Some situations may not lean themselves towards a quick removal and could create a source recurrent frustration if not alleviated.

The final action-directed technique involves seeking help from colleagues when dealing with stress. This could involve sharing a heavy workload among other colleagues or even seeking expert advice from a teacher with more experience than oneself.

2.5.2 Palliative Strategies

As mentioned, an alternative means of coping may involve employing a palliative technique (Arokium, 2010). Rather than tackling the challenge directly, one aims to manage the emotional experience of the testing situation. That is to say that by employing a palliative measure, the teacher would have a less fervent experience even if the matter unfortunately remains unresolved.

Palliative techniques may include physical methods such as exercising or meditating, but can also involve more cognitive methods, aimed at changing one's perspective, regulating emotions and thinking more positively.

Both direct-action and palliative strategies have the potential to be deeply effective. Despite the value of these measures, to consider them as the primary solution to the contextual challenges of the teacher is to place a disproportionate locus of responsibility upon the teacher. Unfortunately, the working reality of the average South African teacher is one that lacks the systemic support required. Until radical changes are made in the educational system, at the very least, maintaining the positive well-being of teachers should be prioritised.

Proposing a more holistic approach, this study argues that spirituality may offer as a unique vehicle for positive reinterpretation of the challenges faced by teachers. Studies conducted by

scholars such as Gall, Malette and Guirguis-Younger (2011), put forward that the practice of spirituality has ability to allow individuals to open up themselves to their innate potential and uncover new capacities. People are able to establish a spiritual attitude that not only succours them through life's demanding events, but when committed to, can establish meaningful connectedness with oneself, others and the world around us.

Spirituality is a multi-faceted construct that is receiving increased scholarly attention for its real potential to improve the health and well-being of people (Naghieh et al., 2015; van der Walt, 2018). Therefore, the following sections of this review will explore various understandings of spirituality, spirituality's place in the workplace and spirituality as an effective means of positively coping with challenges.

2.6 UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUALITY

Like many concepts within the human sciences, spirituality is a construct that is both subjectively and contextually given meaning. For this reason, researchers agree that a single universal definition would simply not be feasible. Having regard to the aims of this current study, it too is improbable that the various teachers would have an exclusive understanding of spirituality. It was however, considered that teachers may resonate with at least two of the dominant perspectives of spirituality: theories of spirituality have evolved using many perspectives of which these two are quite regularly referred- the humanist perspective and the existential perspective.

2.6.1 The Humanist

From a humanist perspective, Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf and Saunders (1988), have defined spirituality as a way of *being* or a way of experiencing, that is achieved through the acknowledgement of a transcendent dimension. This refers to one believing in and being aware of the existence of something much greater than what can be seen. This does not necessarily mean believing in God, but rather believing that personal strength can be drawn from maintaining a sense of harmony with the transcendent dimension, i.e. by experiencing an integration of mind (including intuition), body (and the physical) and spirit (Arnetz et al., 2013; Elkins et al., 1988; Corry, Lewis & Mallet, 2014). Abstractly, spirituality means appreciating that just as we are strong, powerful and knowledgeable, we are fragile, dependent and vulnerable in the broader context of existence. The thought that something far greater exists is

the very thought that grounds and humbles us, causing us to enjoy the experience of being human.

2.6.2 The Existentialist

From an existential perspective however, spirituality is defined as a way of finding hope, purpose and meaning in our lives. This involves making sense of what we encounter through being connected with one's complete self, the universe or a higher power - something or someone greater than ourselves (Arnetz et al., 2013; Bauer-Wu & Farran, 2005). Shafranske and Gorsuch (1984) conceptualised spirituality as "a transcendent dimension within human experience . . . discovered in moments in which the individual questions the meaning of personal existence and attempts to place the self within a broader ontological context" (p. 231). In other words, spirituality here refers to a very personal sense of being in-tune with oneself and in balance with the world around you.

A succinct summary of an array of conceptualisations is provided by Zinnbauer and his colleagues (1999) who established four core cues of existential spirituality. These cues include:

- *personal/existential meaning (the degree to which one seeks meaning in one's life, insight into oneself, or understanding about the world)*
- *spiritual experiences (the degree to which one feels close to God and feels God's presence in one's life)*
- *sacred connection (the frequency one feels a sense of interconnectedness with the world and all living things)*
- *spiritual disciplines (the frequency of participation in activities intended to promote spiritual growth such as meditation or yoga)* (Zinnbauer, Pargament & Scott, 1999, p. 895).

With consideration, each school of thought provides merit of its own, but do not necessarily have to be considered as mutually exclusive. From a humanist point of view people are considered as inherently good and desire to do good in the world around them. The existentialist, however, would say that the only thing that one can be sure of, is that one exists – furthermore, one exists in the absence of any inherent qualities. As such, existential spirituality involves a conscious decision to become a better person and gain these good qualities through the life-long journey of finding meaning. The beauty of both perspectives,

however, is that both assume personal responsibility and the act of free will. They acknowledge the individual's own choices to lead their own lives and spiritual journeys.

The autonomous quality of both perspectives is of particular value for this study in capturing the inevitably socially and personally constructed spiritual understandings of teachers at Primary School X. In effort to remain alive to such contextual influences, it was also of importance to consider the influence that religion may have on teachers' own experiences and conception of spirituality.

2.6.3 Religiousness versus Spirituality

The multidimensional concept of spirituality has caused much scholarly debate including the question of religiousness versus spirituality. As the concept of spirituality has grown increasingly popular, it has evolved to describe a dynamic process (a verb), while adversely, *religion* has increasingly been understood as more static (Corry et al., 2014; Pargament, 1999). Spirituality is typically defined as being highly individualised and independent of the close adherence to a structured system of beliefs (Webb, Toussaint & Dula, 2014). Religiousness, however, is closely associated with organised system of faith, worship and the sacred (Maharaj, 2006; Webb et al., 2014). For a few scholars (Arnetz et al., 2013; Fick, 2010; Maharaj, 2006; Webb et al., 2014), spirituality breaks beyond the organised systems, dogma or rituals of religion to include broader concepts of human existence (existential understanding) in pursuit of self-transcendence. An example of an individual who is spiritual but not religious would be someone who has taken a self-identified stance on life, to pursue an interior synergy of mind, body and spirit without being restricted by any organisational or communal expectations of what that should look like.

Arguably however, in the explicit absence of religion, spirituality is defined too loosely, stripping it of meaning and usefulness (Garner, 2002). Without the substantive core of religion, the functionalities of spirituality become unduly broad and insipid (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). Rather than polarize the two concepts, religion is able to add depth of meaning to spirituality when placed at its core (Fick, 2010; Pargament, 1999; Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

Furthermore, to see spirituality as a purely individualistic phenomenon is to assume that the experience and expression of spirituality occurs within a social vacuum. Yet, the cultural context through which spirituality emerges becomes an important influence (Corry et al., 2014; Zinnbauer et al., 1999). One should carefully consider that what is documented as 'spirituality', is the fruit of a broadly Eurocentric discourse, that favours individualism and rejects

conventional authority (Berger, 1967). Therefore, despite the anti-institutional rhetoric that surrounds the construct, the rise of spirituality has been accompanied by the establishment of numerous spiritual groups and organisations (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). This is an argument that should also be duly considered in the narratives of this case study. The South African culture is broadly conventional and collectivist, even evident in the national virtue of uBuntu, and therefore it can be assumed that even discourse around personal spirituality would also consider an element of social communion.

Evidently, to understand spirituality is to contemplate a multi-faceted approach. Therefore, to expand on this understanding, a multidimensional approach to spirituality is addressed in the next section.

2.6.4 Multidimensional Spirituality

Webb and his colleagues (2014) have tactfully established a multidimensional spirituality model, focussing on three interrelated sub-constructs, in effort to functionally conceptualise spirituality. These three subconstructs include *religious spirituality*, *theistic spirituality* and *existential spirituality* (Webb, Toussaint & Dula, 2014). *Religious spirituality* encompasses structured practices and behaviours/rituals, while having a strong connection to deity, for example, praying before one begins their day. *Theistic spirituality* too recognises a divine yet has a non-structured connection with deity. This allows for spirituality to be experienced or expressed with little to no association with an organised religion (Webb et al., 2014). Finally, *existential spirituality* comprises a non-theistic or secular pursuit of purpose and meaning in life, without pertaining to an actual religious belief.

The tri-dimensional model developed by Webb et al. (2014) is particularly useful in establishing an operational understanding of spirituality that not only accounts for the interrelation of religiousness and spirituality but also allows spirituality to be understood in the exclusion of deity.

2.6.5 Workplace Spirituality

The idea that individuals are holistic beings, possessing a spiritual dimension, is a pragmatic assumption that should be taken into consideration when looking at employees and their personal self-image within the world of work. As employees' lives are increasingly centred around work, they are seeking a sense of self-actualization in their professional lives (Naidoo, 2014). Within this process, self-actualization is obtained through employees' actions, through

“a sense of sacredness and purpose through their work that allows them to feel more genuine and authentic” (Naidoo, 2014, p. 2). Through a spiritual attitude, the nature of how work is experienced is altered from merely a means of earning a living, to a vocation through which employees are able to become more personally fulfilled (Naidoo, 2014).

However, the notion of ‘work as a calling’ is one that, for quite some time, seems too idealistic, particularly within the South African context. In general, it has been assumed that the seemingly obvious way to avoid a life of poor living standard would be through paid employment. However, over the past couple of decades, the experience of employed poverty is not farfetched in South Africa (Feder & Yu, 2019). It would appear that South Africa is so swarmed with the dire need to eradicate poverty and unemployment, that the country is ill-equipped to adequately consider the endless cycle of poverty emanated from low-wage employment. Extreme unemployment, increasingly low-wage employment, scarcity of job availability and a deeply vulnerable South African economy have collectively rendered employment to a source of survival rather than contributing to one’s sense of personal spirituality (Penceliah, 2009). Teaching, like many other occupations, once considered as honourable and of virtue have lost their grandeur.

An unfortunate reality is that working in South Africa has broadly been drained of passion, conviction of the heart or spirit, and is held as a means to an end. However, spirituality could provide the positive narrative desperately needed to transform the South African workplace.

Spirituality in the workplace has the potential to create a holistic framework of personal, organisational and cultural values (Pablo, 2014). Numerous resources support that various positive work outcomes stem from spirituality. Some of these positive associations include strengthened work commitment and job involvement (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Robertson & Cooper, 2010; Sledge et al., 2011), job satisfaction (Van der Walt & De Klerk, 2014), employee performance, creativity and organisational effectiveness (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Karakas, 2010), leadership (Phipps, 2012) and employee adaptability (Sony & Makoth, 2017).

In their study of workplace spirituality and job satisfaction, Van Der Walt and De Klerk (2014) posit that if South African organisations are to survive and thrive in the 21st century they have to be spiritually based. They believe that this will lead to employees being more satisfied with a more holistic experience of the workplace. When the working environment is coherent with and encourages the spiritual values of its people, it is assumed that greater productivity and fluidity in achieving goals is often achieved.

Works like that of Fahri Karakas also provide a broad perspective on how spirituality can impact overall performance. In her extensive review of 140 articles about spirituality at work, Karakas (2010) was able to contribute an integrated stance, stemming from three surfacing perspectives. These perspectives included, first, a human resources perspective whereby spirituality enhances one's well-being and quality of life. Second is a philosophical perspective, where a sense of purpose and meaning can be gained from work and finally, an interpersonal perspective where employees are provided with a sense of community and interconnectedness.

If allowed, spirituality has the potential to positively transform the lived experiences and realities of many teachers. Through a more positive process of appraisal and interpretation and a healthy alternative perspective, teachers like those at Primary School X may find meaning and opportunity in certain challenges. While spirituality also feeds into a greater sense of community teachers may perceive themselves as more capable when confronted with stressful events as a result of feeling supported. Therefore, the following section on the theoretical framework of this study further discusses how advantageous spirituality can be in the face of life's vicissitudes.

2.7 CONCLUSION

Spirituality in the workplace is a topic that remains growing in scientific investigation. After being neglected for many years, spirituality in the South African workplace is an area of exploration that is still in infancy.

While gaining momentum, research in the field has already established relationships between spirituality and a range of positive work-related and personal outcomes. By assuming support of the employee, holistically, spirituality has aided in creating a positive work-related attitude that includes being more satisfied at work, being more involved and connected to the work community and ultimately driving positive work performance and productivity (Roothman 2010). Moreover, spiritual persons are likely to display a sense of work commitment, even when faced with various challenges (Chawla & Guda, 2010; Sony & Makoth, 2017).

In the turbulent South African economy and, more specifically, challenging environment of South African public schools, spirituality provides a valuable means of support for teachers, their pupils and ultimately their schools. Embracing spirituality where possible could mean improved quality of working life for teachers, a deepening of interconnectedness and providing

a sense of personal strength and opportunity. By no means should spirituality be assumed as a ‘quick fix’ to solve the very real challenges faced by teachers. Rather spirituality should be applied authentically, to enhance a South African educational system that values its teachers.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As an adaptation to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) well known Transactional Model of Stress and Coping, Gall and her colleagues (2005) introduced the Spiritual Framework of Coping. This framework explains how spirituality can majorly influence how an individual interprets, and therefore reacts, to life events. Because spirituality is so dynamic and subjective in its nature, it becomes compatibility with the tenets of Lazarus and Folkman's model. This framework is seen to be equally dynamic and relational. Here, spirituality operates at any given level of each of the framework's structural components. These include *spiritual appraisal*, *person factors*, *spiritual coping behaviours*, *spiritual connections* and *meaning making*.

For the purpose of this study, not only does this framework provide conceptual considerations of spirituality as a coping strategy, but also begins to unpack an operational understanding of how teachers would interpret and experience their constructed realities within the workplace, based on their spiritual beliefs. Thus, the following will explore the effectual process of person-environment interaction through spiritual appraisal, spiritual person factors, spiritual coping behaviours, spiritual connections and finally, meaning making.

3.2 SPIRITUAL APPRAISAL

Gall et al., (2005) posit that the causal attributions that one assigns, serve a crucial role in how challenging events are dealt with. The situation is subjected to varying interpretations, depending on the relational representation of the self, others, fate (destiny or luck), God and the devil (Pargament, Ano & Wachholtz, 2005). In other words, in attempt to successfully manage the situation, one's own spirituality becomes the lens through which the circumstance is understood. No longer are life events acknowledged at a surface value, but a more purposeful and spiritual understanding is reviewed. Spiritual appraisals operate as a factor of mediation through the process of coping. Much like the palliative strategies discussed by Arokium (2010), earlier in the literature review, spiritual appraisals function as a form of positive reframing that helps persons gain a better sense of control even in an uncontrollable situation. For example, numerous studies have shown that patients suffering with severe illness and injury frequently

endorse spiritual causal attributions (Arafat et al., 2018; Beuscher & Beck, 2008; Cabaco et al., 2018; Seybold & Hill, 2001).

3.3 SPIRITUAL PERSON FACTORS

Within the framework, spiritual person factors fundamentally behave as the context through which an individual orients his/her explanation, understanding and response to life experiences. Person factors, namely one's *religious orientation*, *problem-solving style* and their sense of *hope*, collectively aid the individual in the search for purpose in difficulty and support a more positive outlook.

3.3.1 Religious Orientation

Understandably, one's religious orientation also navigates one's situational analysis. It is considered that people develop a religious/spiritual orientation that is either intrinsically or extrinsically founded. A person with an extrinsic religious orientation must often first be prompted by an external sense of pressure – such as obligation, guilt or anxiety – rather than being driven by one's own faith. Alternatively, an intrinsic orientation mirrors the deeply personal stance taken by the earlier-discussed humanist and existential views of spirituality.

An intrinsic orientation is described as a profound and selfless pursuit of meaning and purpose. This internalized sense of spirituality is nurtured through the quest to understand the interaction of faith, hope, the transcendent, others and the self. A person like this would recognise a potentially challenging situation as an opportunity for personal growth and spiritual development.

3.3.2 Spiritual Problem-solving Styles

In addition to one's religious orientation, one's problem-solving style also provides an explanation of the predisposed patterns of coping that one may employ. Gall et al. (2005) argue that most spiritual problem-solving styles are exhibited in roughly three ways: a self-directing style, a deferring style or a collaborative style.

As self-directed problem solver assumes independent responsibility to actively deal with the situation. Here, it is assumed that God offers man space and opportunity to direct his own life (Alma, Pieper & van Uden, 2002). This form of problem solving rarely makes use of a religious

frame of reference, being more loosely connected to religious tradition in comparison to the other two styles.

Alternatively, one who has a deferring style functions in a passive position, waiting for God to resolve the difficulty. Studies conducted by Pargament et al. show that a deferring style of problem-solving is associated with an extrinsic religious orientation. Here, the individual looks for external rules, convictions and authorities to satisfy their own personal needs.

Finally, a collaborative style adopts the notion that God helps those who help themselves – this person will take responsibility for what they are able to control or resolve and trust that God will intervene where the situation exceeds their own ability. This style of problem solving is closely accompanied by an intrinsically orientated sense of religion where a personal relationship with God acts as a paramount and motivating life force (Alma et al., 2002).

According to Pargament et al. (2005), a collaborative problem-solver commonly appears to uphold a sense of empowerment, even in the face of adversity. Instead, one who defers is left with a reduced sense of competence in dealing with the situation.

In the dynamic and demanding work environment of a teacher, it would be safe to assume that such a context would not easily lend itself to a passive approach. An act of self-surrender may precede extreme instances; however, a self-directed or collaborative problem-solving style would appear most preferable. It may appear however, that teachers with a collaborative approach would have an experience of reduced negative emotion as result of their trust in something or someone greater and a hope for the better.

3.3.3 Hope

The final person factor discussed in the framework is hope. Hope is one of the core factors that have the potential to influence various structural components of the framework. Hope is described as the perceived capability to follow a particular pathway in order to reach the desired outcome(s). Here, hope drives an individual to think beyond the present difficulty or stress. It bolsters a more positive cognitive appraisal, enabling one to successfully envision the desired outcome and enact certain goal-directed behaviours (Cheavens et al., 2019). Research has shown that persons with high levels of hope tend to find meaning and are able to make the most of difficult events (Hullman, 2014). In her study, Maria Ojala (2015) discovered that a constructive sense of hope was positively associated with pupil-teacher engagement. Pupils perceived their teachers as respecting their own negative emotions about the issues that affected

them, but more so, viewed their teachers as being positive and solution oriented. Overall, having a sense of hope not only succours teachers in their own experience of distress but also recognized by pupils, can positively reinforce teacher-pupil connections.

In addition to influencing the ways in which a situation is cognitively appraised, these spiritual person factors educate one's patterns of spiritual coping behaviour.

3.4 SPIRITUAL COPING BEHAVIOUR

Spiritual coping behaviour is a multidimensional construct consisting of different categories of behaviour. Spiritual coping behaviours are categorized as organisational religious behaviours, private religious or spiritual practices, and non-traditional spiritual practices.

As suggested by the name, *organisational religious behaviour* assumes an individual's formal involvement with a religious institution and involves practices such as attending services, assembled worship and volunteer work. As suggested by Pargament et al. (2005), one of the most important resources available to persons of a religious organisation would be the close sense of belonging and connection to a community that also operates as a system of support during life's vicissitudes. On the other hand, *private practices* are non-institutional behaviours such as prayer, reading and study of the sacred scripture and private time of worship. Private practices of religion or spirituality act as fundamental alone time for persons. This time presents an opportunity to connect with oneself and strengthen one's personal connection with God. Finally, *non-traditional practices* are those behaviours that allow one to express their spirituality outside of the boundaries of traditional articulations of religiosity. The non-traditional spiritual practices include introspection, meditation, random acts of kindness and helping others. These non-traditional practices also function as a way of finding meaning and a sense of harmony with oneself, others, and the world around us.

A common thread across all spiritual coping styles and behaviours is the desire to find meaning and to gain a sense of connection. Perhaps through an innate desire to remain in control, people attempt to remain connected to others and their surroundings to feel 'grounded' and avoid feeling overwhelmed by their circumstances. As a fundamental factor of spiritual coping, these spiritual connections are discussed below.

3.5 SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

3.5.1 Nature

As discussed earlier in the literature review, in contrast to religiousness, spirituality is more often linked to a sense of sacred connection to the natural world and all living things. Some recent studies conducted with cancer patients (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2015; Sand et al., 2009) as well as several other exploratory studies have supported the positive influence resulting from one's connection with nature. During interviews with men and women from Native American communities, Rivkin et al. (2019) found that the concept of spirituality was frequently linked to their connection with nature. A sense of calmness, hope, purpose and cultural tradition was derived from their interaction with nature (e.g. fishing, berry picking, etc.). Rita Berto (2014) also suggested that exposure to the natural environment showed a strong relation with the recovery from physiological stress and mental fatigue. Thus, a connection to the natural world may afford very real benefits such as an increased sense of emotional well-being, processes of healing and reduced stress. In some instances, a connection with the natural environment also breeds a deeper appreciation for others around us.

3.5.2 Others

As fundamentally social beings, it is no surprise that religious/spiritual communities function as an important source of care and support when facing challenges. A source of comfort and strength is gained in acknowledging that one does not have to face difficulties alone but can share the burden with or help carry the burdens of others. Whether this be as practical as asking for advice or requesting the prayer of a friend, being supported in this sense helps ease the strain of a difficult situation.

3.5.3 Transcendent Other

The final spiritual connection that Gall et al. (2005) look at is the connection one builds with the transcendent other. Research supports that having a relationship with the transcendent or God plays a significant role in the coping process (Arafat et al., 2018; Cabaco et al., 2018). Having a connection with God has been associated with numerous positive outcomes, including a sense of comfort and belonging, social support, a source of inner strength and empowerment, acceptance and relief from emotional distress. Studies conducted with stroke patients (Arafat et al., 2018) endorsed a strong dependence on their connection with God to feel comforted and at peace even in their suffering.

3.6 MEANING MAKING

Several studies have supported that religion and/or spirituality play an important role in finding meaning in a stressful event (Lysne & Wachholtz, 2011; Pargament et al., 2005). The construction of the meaning of a situation can include more fair attributions, the realisation of potential growth and opportunity, or even concluding that an event is less central to one's life than initially perceived. In other words, the challenging situation may be reframed and viewed as a window for spiritual gain and insight about life. Spirituality functions as an aid in plotting an event within the context of the "bigger picture". With a fresh perspective and reinterpretation that recognises a deeper purpose than was first acknowledged, the situation can be seen with new meaning.

3.7 CONCLUSION

From the initial phase of situational appraisal to the point at which an individual assigns meaning to it, a deeply interactive process occurs. This spiritual framework attempts to capture the complexity of this field of research and set out a comprehensive roadmap of the effectual relationships between spiritual coping, personal and spiritual resources, adaptiveness and well-being. For the purpose of the current study, this framework can aptly be applied to the teacher's conceptual considerations of spirituality as a coping strategy. Looking through the lens of teacher's spiritual beliefs, a working understanding of how teachers would interpret and experience their constructed realities within the workplace can be gained.

In the culturally rich South African context, and more specific context of Primary School X, this framework is not culture-specific and therefore holds much promise for cross-cultural application. As a result, regardless of the numerous spiritual backgrounds of the teachers, each experience is able to be effectively and genuinely explored.

Overall, when spirituality is embraced it has the potential to positively transform the lived experiences and realities of teachers. An alternative perspective is created through positive appraisal and a more hopeful interpretation. Rather than being overwhelmed by the environmental demands of the workplace, teachers are equipped with a healthier means of working through challenging events while still maintaining a sense personal strength and harmony with one's environment and those around them.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative research is a form of social action that delves into ‘how’ and ‘why’ social phenomena are constituted, in real time within a particular context (Mohajan, 2018). It is about social practices, as much as about social experiences and the ways that people interpret and understand their social reality (Mack, 2005) hence, this approach was determined fruitful for the purpose of this case study.

Adopting a qualitative approach allowed a process flexible enough to dig beyond the surface of participants’ narratives and uncover an authentic understanding of their lived experiences and ways of being. Qualitative methods also effectively elicit more complex or interpretative factors, quite like spirituality, that are not always readily apparent (Mohajan, 2018). Therefore, this approach allowed for a rich reservoir of knowledge to be accumulated.

Further flexibility also rests on the inductive nature of this case study. Embracing inductive methods implies that alongside the chosen theoretical framework, theory may be developed during the process of data collection (Neuman, 2014). When data collection and theorizing are interspersed like this, theory is developed by drawing connections from specific observations to broader concepts that filter the observational data and establish principles or themes that link the concepts (Neuman, 2014). This in turn establishes strong data-theory linkages. Although effective in many ways, building inductively can also become a weakness if neglected. Linking concepts and principles across various settings may become difficult and hinder the advancement of concepts that build toward creating general, abstract knowledge. For this reason, the researcher made use of a theoretical framework and chose to become familiarised with concepts and theories used in other studies to apply shared concepts where fitting and note any commonalities and/or discrepancies.

For the purpose of this study, understanding teachers’ lived experiences in relation to their daily encounters and how they may practice spirituality in their workplace was of fundamental focus. As such, the researcher chose to employ a case study method. Case study research often holds value in that it is able to incorporate a particular situation and the multiple perspectives within it (Neuman, 2014). It was hoped that by using this method, the researcher could delve

into more detailed information about a few participants, where their individual perspectives could be considered in a single, shared context.

This mostly required the detailed consideration of the context of Primary School X, its pupils and of course its teachers, even as explained in the *Literature Review* and the *Research Setting* later in this chapter. In the absence of the social context, the social significance of teachers' spirituality (as a social action) is lost (Neuman, 2014). Therefore, having a clear contextual understanding of this case study supported a more authentic process of observation and interpretation of teachers' perceptions.

First-order interpretation was provided by the teachers themselves, as they began to share their points of view, their ways of seeing and defining their contextual world. From an outside perspective, the researcher then reconstructed these discoveries in effort to assign meaning to them. In a final step of interpretation, greater theoretical significance is offered through the data by drawing upon appropriate frameworks and building toward a broader, more generally applicable body of knowledge (Neuman, 2014). A more detailed account of the process of data collection and analysis will be provided later in this chapter.

4.2 RESEARCH SETTING

The study was conducted at a local primary school in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. For the purpose of this study, the school was given the pseudonym of Primary School X. Primary School X is a public primary school (grades R to 7) that was established in 1975. For almost 45 years to date, this co-ed primary school has serviced thousands of children from as far as areas like Kwamashu, Umlazi, Durban central and closer into the Sherwood, Sydenham, Bonela and Mayville areas of KwaZulu-Natal. Historically, the larger communities such as KwaMashu, Umlazi and their surrounding areas were established as a result of the Apartheid Group Areas Act during the 1950's. Thousands of Africans, Coloureds and Indian people were forcibly evacuated from 'slums', segregated and relocated away from the White population (South African History Online, 2020). From post-Apartheid to the present, not a great deal has changed in these townships. Children, their parents and often grandparents live in overcrowded, underserviced and gravely neglected living conditions.

As expressed in the Literature Review of Chapter Two, the contextual reality of many of Primary School X's pupils, its teachers and its community play a fundamental role in the

various challenges faced in the school environment. However, holding their school motto, 'Learn to serve', Primary School X strive to be a model school while achieving excellence in teaching, in learning and the instilling of core values.

4.3 SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

For the purpose of this study, a purposive sampling method was used to select participants. Purposive sampling is a method of non-probability sampling. This infers that out of the entire target population, not every unit had the opportunity to be chosen. Rather participants are chosen from a specific area of interest with a particular purpose in mind (Neuman, 2014).

Out of the total number of 43 teachers at Primary School X, only 14 teachers indicated an interest in participating in the study. This study aspired to filter through this population and choose at least 8 teachers to participate in one-on-one interviews. The criterion for this selection was based on the scores that teachers attained on the *Spirituality Self-Rating Scale*. Further detail on this scale is provided below in **section 4.4**, while further detail on this process of selection is also provided in **section 4.5.2**.

A total of 14 teachers out of a population of 43 indicated an interest to participate in this study. The teachers were drawn from all grades of the Primary School X (i.e. grades R to 7, including L-SEN classes - Learners with Special Education Needs). For the purpose of this study, an attempt was made to include at least 8 of the most spiritual teachers out of the 14 interested. Therefore, the SSRS questionnaire was administered to all 14 of the interested teachers. The criterion for further selection was based on teachers' results on the SSRS questionnaire. However, of the 14, only 12 participants successfully completed their questionnaire, where 2 participants had decided not to participate any further. Therefore, of the 12 remaining participants, a final 6 of the highest scoring teachers (scores ranging from 86% - 100%) agreed to participate further.

4.4 MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

For the purpose of this study, a rating scale as well as a semi-structured interview schedule was used. These are discussed fully, below:

4.4.1 The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale (SSRS)

As mentioned above, this study made use of the *Spirituality Self-Rating Scale (SSRS)*. The SSRS questionnaire was not used as a tool for primary data collection. Rather, in this study, the SSRS was used to aid the selection process – to ensure that the final sample of teachers selected to be interviewed indeed considered themselves spiritual individual. Therefore, protecting against the occurrence of any redundant interviews.

The SSRS was developed by Galanter and colleagues in 2007. This self-fulfilling scale considers the individual's orientation toward spirituality (Lucchetti, Lucchetti & Vallada, 2013). Said differently, the scale reflects on whether persons consider the questions pertaining to spiritual/religious dimension to be significant, and how they apply or experience this in daily living (Gonçalves & Pillon, 2009). The scale consists of 6 items that appear as six separate statements. Each statement/item – for example, item one “*It is important for me to spend time in private spiritual thought and meditation*” – requires a Likert-type response ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’.

In order to score the questionnaire, the numerical responses for each of the six items are summed to yield a total score for spiritual orientation. With a total score range from 6-30, the higher the total is, the higher the level of spiritual orientation.

Similar to other spirituality scales such as the Spirituality and Spiritual Care Rating Scale (SSCRS), the Spiritual Transcendence Index and the Spirituality and Religious Attitude Practice Scale, the SSRS has been used in other studies with medical and other postgraduate students, health care professionals and therapeutic communities (Galanter et al., 2006; Gonçalves & Pillon, 2009; Lucchetti et al., 2013; Maharaj, 2006).

Choosing the SSRS for this study provided a few advantages. First, the scale takes approximately 10-15 minutes to complete – this was particularly useful as the Vice Principal of Primary School X did advise that should the process take up too much time, teachers would grow despondent.

The SSRS also reflects on an intrinsic or existential orientation to spirituality which freed teachers to explore their spirituality without necessarily being pulled into a religious pattern of thought. As supported by the Literature Review in chapter 2, it was essential for this study to allow the teachers to express their understanding of spiritual as freely as they possibly could - whether within or without religion.

4.4.2 Semi-Structured Interviews: Interview Schedule

One of the optimal means of collecting qualitative data is through the use of in-depth interviews. For this purpose, the primary measuring instrument employed for this study was a semi-structured interview schedule (**Appendix F**). This interview schedule consisted of ten questions that were informed by reading of the literature in the area as well as other related studies. Given the qualitative nature of the study the researcher also considered how these questions would evoke meaningful and culturally salient information, while delving into socially constructed understandings of the participants.

The interview schedule consisted of all mandatory questions asked within the interview, apart from the impromptu questions that the interviewer may have asked while exploring interesting responses and themes that surfaced during the interview. An advantage of the exploratory nature of the interview is that the researcher was able to ask further questions or “probes” to encourage the participant to elaborate upon initial answers given.

Therefore, the structure of the research schedule included a main body of questions that provided the scaffolding needed for the conversational interview but also refrained from hindering participants’ responses. The value of this flexibility was evident in the often unanticipated and rich answers provided by the participants. For this the participants were duly thanked as the interview was brought to closure.

4.5 PROCEDURE

4.5.1 Ethical Considerations

Before commencing the study, official permission was requested from the Department of Education. The reply was in favour of the research and permission to conduct the study at Primary School X was granted, with reference number: 2/4/8/1486 (refer to **Appendix A** attached). Permission was granted under the provision that teaching and learning may not be interrupted at schools during data collection.

Thereafter, ethical clearance was applied for, and approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with protocol reference number: HSS/0403/018M (refer to **Appendix B**).

After obtaining the necessary ethical clearance from both the Department of Education and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the researcher proceeded to contact the vice principal of Primary School X to obtain their permission and support of the study. The researcher met with the vice principal to present the aim of the study and provide them with an official letter requesting permission to conduct the study at Primary School X. Permission was granted.

With permission to conduct the research obtained, other ethical issues such as the anonymity, confidentiality and autonomy of the participants had to be assured. The identities of the participants were assured by providing each of them with a pseudonym. The name of the school at which these participants taught was also not disclosed in this study.

Participants were assured that all information disclosed within the interviews would be treated in the strictest confidence and solely used for the purpose of the study. Participants were also reminded that they were by no means bound to the research process and were able to withdraw from the study at any given point.

4.5.1.1 Informed Consent

Before conducting one-on-one interviews, each participant was given an informed consent (**Appendix D**). This study followed appropriate procedures and adhered to the general research ethical principles when informed consent was obtained.

The informed consent form included the purpose of the research, procedures it involved, all (if any) foreseeable risks as well as measures put into place. Participants were assured that their dignity will be protected, and identities/names kept anonymous throughout the study. It was also made clear that participation in this study was purely on a voluntary basis, freeing participants to withdraw from the study at any stage. On request, all data they had contributed would be deleted or erased in their presence.

Participants were provided with the contact details of the researcher as well as the research supervisor, Dr S. Reuben, should they have had any inquiries, uncertainties, comments or complaints.

4.5.2. Conducting the study

4.5.2.1 Initial contact with Primary school X

For this study, an initial one-on-one meeting was held with the vice principal of Primary School X, briefing her about the study and requesting permission to conduct the research with her

teachers. Vice Principal M agreed for the study to take place at Primary School X but also advised that teachers were at a particularly busy time of term and I should therefore be mindful of such while moving forward.

4.5.2.2 The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale Questionnaires (SSRS)

Thereafter, a short notice from Vice Principal M was placed in every teachers' daily notices, requesting the participation of any teachers who would be interested in being a part of the study. A list of the interested teachers was compiled by Vice Principal M consisting of fourteen teachers' names. After being contacted by the vice principal, the researcher paid a second visit to Primary School X, where Vice Principal M was presented with 14 individual SSRS questionnaires. The researcher explained that these questionnaires were for each of the interested teachers; that each questionnaire is fairly straight forward and should only take ten to fifteen minutes to complete. It was also expressed that each teachers' questionnaire be kept as confidential and that the researcher was readily available to be contacted, should any teacher have any concern. Of the fourteen questionnaires distributed, only thirteen were returned, as one teacher had been on an extended period of sick leave. Of the thirteen returned and completed questionnaires, one teacher had failed to fill in their personal contact details, leaving only twelve eligible questionnaires to be scored.

4.5.2.3 Scoring the SSRS

Each of the twelve questionnaires were scored according to methods explained in the third paragraph of section 4.4.1. The results are captured in the table below.

Table 1

Spirituality Self-Rating Scale Questionnaire Scores

SSRS SCORE	NUMBER OF TEACHERS
30	4
29	1
28	1
27	1
26	2
24	2
22	1
Total: 12	

Considering these scores, the first seven of the highest scoring teachers (score range 27 - 30) were contacted via email and a week later by phone call. Of these seven teachers, only four agreed to move on to the interviews. Thereafter, the remaining five teachers (with scores of 26 and below) were contacted, where a final two more teachers agreed to participate further. Therefore, the total number of teachers that were to be interviewed was six.

4.5.2.4 Data Collection

This study made use of semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection. In general, semi-structured interviews act as a form of middle ground between that of a more unyielding, structured interview and a casual/informal interview. During the semi-structured interviews, the researcher made use of a set of prescribed questions that were mandatory to be asked, as mentioned in **section 4.4.2**.

Employing a semi-structured interview enabled the interviewing process to be supported by the pre-determined questions of the interview schedule, yet still allowed the interviewer the freedom to explore particular themes or responses that arose within the interview session which warranted added attention. This degree of flexibility became advantageous as it allowed for a greater deal of authentic interaction between researcher and participant, where adaptation was welcomed. This also infers that the researcher had the opportunity to respond immediately to what was being said, and subsequently adapt the successive questions. Therefore, making use of interviews will encourage the discovery of a depth of descriptive knowledge needed to render this study successful.

As a result of having individual one-on-one interviews, participants were able to voice their beliefs, ideas, attitudes and perceptions without the fear of being judged, being distracted, overpowered or influenced by others. These are perhaps some of the difficulties that would arise using alternative methods such as focus groups (Bell, 2016; Palmerino, 2006). The exploratory essence of the qualitative interviews brought about a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences and ways of coping in the context of their working lives.

With the informed consent of the participants, all interview content was audio recorded and later transcribed. The interviews elicited explanatory, experiential and personally valuable information that was treated as such. Therefore, all forms of data have been kept secure in a locked environment.

4.6 DATA ANALYSIS

After the interviews were conducted, the audio-recorded data was transcribed. Thereafter, the interview transcriptions were analysed by means of a thematic analysis.

Conducting a thematic analysis meant getting in touch with the data in order to offer meaningful insights. In effort to achieve this, patterns of information were systematically identified and organised across the entire data set to derive an understanding of participants' shared experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Therefore, a six-phase approach to thematic analysis – developed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) – was employed for this case study. Each phase is described as follows:

Phase one: Familiarizing yourself with the data

The opening phase of the analysis was to become engrossed within the data through actively reading (and re-reading) textual data, i.e. the interview schedules, as well as listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. At this stage, short-handed notes were made to capture any initial thoughts and ideas that surfaced whilst listening to/reading the data.

Phase two: Generating initial codes

At the second phase, the analysis began to take on a more systematic nature through creating *codes* within the data. These codes became the so-called 'building blocks' of the analysis, where each code provided a snapshot of a portion of the data. Some of the codes came about quite obviously when sticking closely to the participants' responses, yet other codes were more interpretative where the researcher attempted to go beyond what was merely said. In this manner, some codes reflected the language of the participants, while the supplementary made reference to appropriate conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

Phase three: Searching for themes

In this phase, the analysis began to take form as the researcher moved from generating codes, to building *themes*.

Each theme was developed in order to capture something significant about the data in relation to the research question and spoke to a recurring response within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Themes were purposefully generated to each provide a coherent message by collapsing together the codes which carried a similar message.

Phase four: Reviewing potential themes

The fourth phase was essentially a step to ensure the quality of the previously generated themes. This was an opportunity to review the themes in relation to the coded data and the holistic data set. The researcher thought attentively about whether themes were in fact better off as just codes, whether particular codes should be done away with, or whether the boundaries of themes should be broadened to convey their message more compellingly.

Phase five: Defining and naming themes

Defining themes required being able to clearly state what made each theme unique. In doing so, this also ensured that themes were cohesive yet not repetitive.

At this point, the analysis underwent a process of fine-tuning and shaping into what would eventually be the final write-up. Extracts of data were also added to assist in the representation of each theme, while illustrating the analytical arguments made.

Phase six: Producing the report

The final step of the analysis was to provide a comprehensive narrative about the data. The researcher aimed to present a clear, coherent and compelling story, supported by other scholarly bodies of knowledge.

4.7 REFLEXIVITY

When considering the nature of this study, the researcher inevitably carried a presence in the research process. Not only did the researcher act as a tool of investigation, but as an equally experiencing human being, attempting to meaningfully learn about the reality of her participants.

During this study, the researcher became aware of how her social identity may have had a few advantageous influences. As a young, coloured female, it is possible that the researcher may have been granted an initial sense of social acceptance and trust by the vice principal of Primary School X. First, as a South African coloured, requesting to conduct a study at a school in the heart of a coloured community. Second, as a young female, taking an interest in the lived experiences of a group of teachers that inadvertently consisted of more women.

Such a social identity also appeared to positively influence the atmosphere of the interviewing process. The researcher gained the sense that teachers were unthreatened by her and as a result, were quite comfortable and open during their individual interviews.

Being a Christian, the researcher was mindful of a few things. Entering this research process, the researcher remained cognizant of her own set of values, beliefs and experiences, and how they may influence her interpretation of the experiences of the participants. For the researcher, spirituality was a personal source of strength and provided meaning through various challenges and life experiences of her own. Baring this in mind however, the researcher was careful not to assume that this would/should be the shared experience of the participants. The researcher always tried to remain open to the different and even conflicting views of the participants. Doing so not only allowed depth in the interviews but broadened the space of interpretation in a deeply satisfying way.

In addition, the researcher was aware of some of the less positive rhetoric around the Christian faith, for example, sometimes Christians are seen as being more close-minded or judgmental to members of other faiths. This is by no means a true reflection of the researcher and therefore, for the purpose of this study, she chose not to disclose her faith to participants, unless asked. It was of utmost importance that participants felt safe enough to speak unhindered, especially not by any unfortunate assumptions that may have preceded any association with the Christian faith. Interestingly, none of the participants had asked the researcher about her own spirituality or faith and rather safely assumed that by pursuing a study in such an area meant that she was somewhat spiritual.

Overall, the nature and purpose of the study itself seemed to strike genuine interest and excitement within the participants. Participants willingly shared their stories and experiences with the researcher, allowing her to step into their own world. Not only was the researcher incredibly grateful for the passion of her participants but was truly humbled by the experience.

4.8 LIMITATIONS

While conducting this study, fortunately, there were not many limitations. Initially, the vice principal of Primary School X had minor concerns this study, as a few weeks prior, another academic scholar had shown intention to conduct her own study at Primary School X yet had abandoned her research process completely. As such, the researcher of the current study had to

reassure the vice principal of her sound intentions of research. In addition, the researcher chose to act promptly and personally in effort to build the vice principal's confidence in the research process. This involved personally delivering the teacher's SRSS questionnaires and collecting completed questionnaires. This necessitated more time and effort to travel.

Difficulty was also faced in scheduling the interviews of some teachers. Some teachers had to be contacted a few times via email and mobile phone before committing to a date and time. This necessitated more time towards the data collection stage of the study.

4.9 CONCLUSION

In summary, this chapter has highlighted how the various aspects of this study were planned and implemented. This chapter also delves into the reasoning behind the chosen research design, sample, methods of data collection and data analysis, and how these are fitting to the purpose of the study. In effort to ensure quality of research, the researcher also reflected on some of the covert influences as well as a few limitations faced during the research process. While remaining cognizant of this all, the following chapter will provide the analysis of the data.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The current case study was designed to gain insights into the unique experiences of South African Teachers at a local primary school, under the pseudonym of Primary School X. In particular, the study aimed to explore the ways in which teachers both understand spirituality and practice it their everyday work practices and experiences.

5.1.1 Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

The following table (**Table 2**) presents a summary of the themes and sub-themes that the researcher had formulated during the research analysis. These themes and sub-themes will be explored in greater detail, further in this chapter.

Table 2*Summary of Themes and Sub-themes*

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	EXTRACT EXAMPLES
Challenges with Overcrowded Classrooms	Classroom Management	Miss Gilbert: "Sometimes it's a bit overwhelming because we have lots in the class. We have over forty in our class. So, maybe like this class, I have forty-eight... when teachers are absent it's even worse... We can be sitting with fifty-something in a class a day, so it's a bit hard... that becomes a bit too much and too draining."
	Misbehaviour	Miss Nelson: "We've got too many [learners]... They've each got their own story and too many struggles that when they come to school, they just want to like take a breath... And even with behaviour, at some point they just switch off. The numbers I think just affected the school all around."
	Didactical Neglect	Mrs Goliath: "[pupils] would manage in mainstream classes if teachers were more prepared to help but then teachers have numbers of over forty. So, they don't have time now to reread a question or come stand next to you to explain something in detail... and often, that's all that's needed for the children to be able to perform."
Coping with Overcrowded Classrooms	Direct Action strategies	Mrs Goliath: "...also with years of experience, you learn to handle it". Miss Ali: "I try to prioritise what needs to be done". Miss Nelson: "we have to work as a team".
Challenges with CAPS	Lack of time	Miss Peters: "I must be honest, this CAPS education is very full. There is no time to even have little talks with the learners... There is very little time to reflect. Very little time to say to the children 'alright, let's do revision', 'let's go over this work', because there's no going over time. There's no repair time."
	Volume of work	Mr Farooq: "All teachers would tell you, the number one stress is marking... because of the sheer volume of students per class and the amount of assessments that we have and the amount of paperwork. We tend to be burdened with paperwork... with CAPS it's very... its very assessment based. You've gotta be testing all the time. And the testing requires marking... Constantly there's assignments and projects and investigations and sometimes, what happens is that the assessment level becomes so hard and fast that before you actually teach something, you're required to actually test on it."
Learner-related Challenges	Socio-economic status & Domestic realities	Miss Ali: "a lot of issues brought to the classroom emanate from the domestic circumstances". Mrs Goliath: "if kids have a problem outside, at home, or if they've come [to school] with something disturbing them, it impacts them on their schoolwork".
Spirituality	Teachers conceptual understanding	Mrs Goliath: "it's just deeper, something so deep within you". Various: "something greater within you", "inner peace", "guidance"
	Spiritual practice in the workplace i.e functional understanding	Miss Gilbert: "You just have to pray... we face a lot of challenges in our school... These children are coming from their own background and their own situations and going through their own thing. So, every day, we just pray before you come to school – to have a good day, to get you through the day, pray for them [the pupils], for strength for them... just prayer, prayer, prayer."
Spiritual coping	Connection with the transcendent other	Miss Nelson: "knowing that God is going to see me through, helps me. But you know when you talk about a peace that surpasses all human understanding, even when things are going wrong. Even when there's chaos. You just have to go through the day and keep going no matter what".
	Connections with others	Miss Gilbert: "[it's] very motivating to know that they have their God to support them and go through it with them and the community are there for them and go through it with them".
	Meaning making	Mr Farooq: "good spirituality can put you in a better place in terms of clearing your thinking, overcoming stresses and also understanding what those stresses are and how to overcome them... it puts you in a better mindset to deal with situations that may arise".

Considering the themes and sub-themes, the rest of the chapter will express the findings of the data analysis while critically engaging with the literature to reach a synthesis of discussion.

5.2 OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS – “It’s a bit overwhelming”

Across all interviews, the teachers at Primary School X expressed that the sheer number of learners within the classroom is a daily challenge. Overcrowded classrooms present a challenge in its own right, yet also manifests at the nucleus of a few other challenges as will be discussed later in this chapter.

The teachers expressed a shared experience where just a few years ago they would have typically taught 20-25 learners in a single class. However, the present and often more stressful reality involves teaching 35-50 learners per subject class. Below, some of the teachers express their concern.

Mr. Farooq stated:

“One of the major major stresses that comes with us teaching in South Africa, compared to what it was a few years ago, our classes were a maximum of thirty and now, we’ve got numbers like forty plus. Forty-five is not unheard of, fifty is not unheard of...what happens is that with the number of learners, that can be a stress.”

Miss Nelson stated:

“I find that the classes are big...We have forty-five in a class as opposed to when we started teaching thirty-two years ago...now we have forty-five, sometimes we start the year with forty-seven, forty-eight... To me, it’s overcrowded...very noisy...there’s just too many of them.”

Miss Gilbert stated:

“Sometimes it’s a bit overwhelming because we have lots in the class. We have over forty in our class. So, maybe like this class, I have forty eight...when teachers are absent it’s even worse...We can be sitting with fifty-something in a class a day, so it’s a bit hard...that becomes a bit too much and too draining.”

In the extracts above, Mr. Farooq and Miss Nelson are two seasoned teachers, both with over three decades of teaching experience. Miss Gilbert on the other hand is a teacher of a younger generation yet all these teachers express equal difficulty with the large number of learners. It

was therefore noted that the issues extending from overcrowded classrooms were experienced across the spectrum of teaching experience. It is therefore not a challenge only felt as a result of inexperience but rather a battle with the educational system itself.

According to a generous body of literature, the experience of increased numbers of pupils in public schools appears to be a nationwide trend. In her academic study of teachers' experiences in overcrowded mainstream schools, Muthusamy (2015) took on a similar position to the premise of this study. As mentioned in Chapter two, the South African schooling institution is an inevitable product of the country's historical context. Muthusamy (2015) and other studies (Marais, 2016; Matsepe, Maluleke & Cross, 2019; Spaull, 2013) all echo the sentiment of Primary School X's teachers – that even after twenty-four years of democracy, the inequalities experienced by previously disadvantaged, non-white schools continue to lurk.

The literature indicates that these issues are systemically planted, making the task of eradicating such challenges considerably difficult. The Department of Basic Education appears to have developed an unfortunate pattern whereby legislation holds value in theory yet, in practice, seldomly brings about lasting change. West and Meier (2020) make mention of a fitting example. Recently, the DBE had anticipated the spending of 51.4% (R40.4bn) of their budget on the provision of sufficient basic education infrastructure in effort to alleviate overcrowding (DBE, 2019). Despite this anticipation, it appears that the DBE's strategic planning and overall management capacity is lacking, as various schools across the country are yet to receive infrastructural improvement and development (West & Meier, 2020).

Policies to relieve overcrowding only pacify government bodies while the heavy reality is still experienced in the classroom. In actuality, having so many learners in a class has led to particular challenges around *classroom management*, *misbehaviour* and the occurrence of *didactical neglect*.

5.2.1 Classroom management

In agreement with some of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, one of the foremost challenges with overcrowded classrooms is the overall management of the classroom. The placement of more learners in a class allows for multiplied opportunity for disruption. During her interview, Miss Ali expressed that very often, "*in the classroom...the children lose their concentration very very, they're easily distracted...*". With so many classmates, even the slightest distraction can derail a lesson, leaving teachers battling to redirect learners' focus and deliver the lesson as productively as possible (Van Wyk, 2008).

Again, other research only further confirms these results. In a study conducted by West and Meier (2020), the South African teachers interviewed expressed that constructive interaction in the classroom is growing increasingly difficult with such large numbers. Interviews explain that at times when teachers have attempted to interact more meaningfully, chaos breaks out of what was intended to be a time of critical conversation and creative learning (Marais & Meier, 2010; West & Meier, 2020).

The overall understanding gained from the teachers of Primary School X and many other studies, is that the larger the number pupils, the greater the challenge to maintain classroom management, leading to the sensible expectation that classroom *misbehaviour* would also be a point of difficulty.

5.2.2 Misbehaviour

In addition to concerns with noise and disruption, the teachers' stories indicate the experience of difficulty with the behaviour of some learners. Interestingly, the teachers of Primary School X empathize with their pupils, dismissing that a lack of discipline is at the heart of misbehaviour. Rather, the teachers feel that learners find themselves overwhelmed in both their social and school environments and are unable to constructively express that.

During her interview, Deputy Principal Ali convincingly expressed that discipline at the school is *"not a problem...generally [the] kids are very very well behaved. I don't see it as a problem. I see it as kids are frustrated"*. Here Miss Ali touches on a point that later Miss Nelson also confirmed when being interviewed.

Miss Nelson stated:

"We've got too many [learners]...They've each got their own story and too many struggles that when they come to school, they just want to like take a breath...And even with behaviour, at some point they just switch off. The numbers I think just affected the school all around."

Both teachers raise an opinion that the way learners conduct themselves cannot be looked at superficially but rather as an expression of something deeper.

The mesosystem of the average pupil at Primary School X is often characterized by varying social instability or *"struggles"*. For many of the learners at Primary School X, the school environment is a place of safety and escape. However, learners are unable to experience the undisturbed environment nor the attention they desire when surrounded by such a large number

of fellow pupils. Teachers believe that circumstances at school as well as at home leave learners “frustrated” and are often at the heart of ill-behaviour, however a more detailed discussion around these social/domestic challenges will follow later in this chapter.

Various studies support that misbehaviour in the form of boredom and disruption (Marais, 2016), disregard for authority (Matsepe et al., 2019), even fighting and vandalism (West & Meier, 2020) are indeed recurring obstacles faced by South African public teachers. A study conducted by West and Meier (2020) particularly showed how teachers strongly associated learners’ problematic behaviour with overcrowded classrooms, and consequently began to experience their work environment as increasingly negative. However, it is worth noting that teachers experience negative ramifications beyond just the behaviour of their pupils. Teachers faced with the challenges of overcrowded classes are also impacted directly by the sheer number of pupils. That is to say that even if teachers had classrooms overcrowded with the ideal pupil – well behaved, respectful, easily taught – teachers would still experience the stretch of giving every student their due attention, keeping up with their questions and ultimately the workload. Though it may sound monotonous, the flaws of the educational system only become more obvious.

Unfortunately, the ideal of teaching smaller classes is a reality that the teachers at Primary School X recognize as improbable, for the time being, and therefore have not expressed any lasting disillusionment. However, teachers have expressed a deep concern for the repercussions on learning progression and development.

5.2.3 Didactical Neglect

Beyond the point of frustration for both teacher and learner, the most alarming issue with overcrowded classes is something that Cortes, Moussa and Weinstein (2012) referred to as *didactical neglect*. Simply termed, ‘didactical neglect’ refers to a teacher’s inability to pay enough attention to the educational needs of each learner. According to the Department of Basic Education, as of March 2018, the national average LER (Learner-Educator Ratio) for government primary schools was one teacher to every 35.2 students. However, KwaZulu-Natal currently has a concerning average of 39:1 (West & Meier, 2020).

With grossly unbalanced learner-educator ratios, crucial one-on-one interaction sometimes appears impossible for the teachers at Primary School X.

Miss Nelson stated:

“I try to keep up with each individual child...[if] each teacher [were to] stay and teach their own class and teach everything...I know that we’d have more control of the children and we’d get to know each one. Now sometimes you’re in the classroom, you have to say, ‘that one behind Carlo’ or ‘that one’ because you don’t really remember all the names because there’s too many.”

Above, Miss Nelson shares how the struggle to strengthen learner-teacher interaction is deepened by the rotation of several different classes per subject taught. A danger with the inability to build these constructive relationships is that differentiated learning is weakened. This implies that teachers are less able to differentiate between stronger and weaker candidates in the classroom, and as such, have to assume a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the learning process. This unfortunate lack of individual attention is one of the most common factors for obstructed learner academic progression and development (Cortes et al., 2012; Marais, 2016; Van Wyk, 2008; West & Meier, 2020). In fact, Mrs Goliath, a teacher from the LSEN (Learners with Special Needs) class echoed the very same concern.

Mrs Goliath maintained that many of the LSEN pupils *“would manage in mainstream classes if teachers were more prepared to help but then teachers have numbers of over forty. So, they don’t have time now to reread a question or come stand next to you to explain something in detail...and often, that’s all that’s needed for the children to be able to perform.”*

It becomes clear that for many LSEN referrals, some extra time and meaningful attention is all that is needed to catalyst academic improvement. However, because there are so many in a class, attempting to give weaker learners extra attention often leads to the loss of already sparse time, while disorder breaks out in other parts of the classroom. For this reason, a pattern of learning deficiency has been perpetuated within many South African public schools (West & Meier, 2020).

To this point, Miss Gilbert, a grade two teacher shared that learners are *“not on the same level, they’ve come up and they have not grasped concepts from grade one...they do not grasp concepts in grade two and then they fail, or with the number that we’re having, only a certain amount can fail and a certain amount can’t. so, unfortunately, sometimes those that are not making it go to grade three anyway.”*

Evidently, the occurrence of ‘didactical neglect’ is a pressing threat to the overall quality of education and calibre of student at Primary School X, however, by no means is this an exclusive occurrence for the local school. Researchers such as Cortes et al. (2012), Marais (2016) as well as Marais and Meier (2010) have argued that didactical neglect, resulting from overcrowded classrooms, has had a detrimental impact on the academic growth and success of learners across the country.

Teachers have found themselves stretched between their many learners while having to maintain a disciplined yet interactive classroom space. According to participants of this study and other research (Marais, 2016; Muthusamy, 2015; West & Meier, 2020) teachers feel as though their hands are tied and are just unable to successfully reach every single pupil. Negative feelings appear across the literature including teachers feeling restricted and unable to fully deliver a quality of education that they strive for. These teachers commonly experienced decreased self-confidence, demotivation, frustration and uncertainty of the self and profession (Muthusamy, 2015). Despite the challenges discussed above, teachers have had to find ways to manage their overcrowded classrooms and cope with the contextual reality of their workplace. For most of the participants this translates into a practical approach as will be discussed in the next section.

5.3 COPING WITH OVERCROWDED CLASSROOMS

When considering the strategies employed to teach overcrowded classes, the overarching finding is that teachers of Primary School X have chosen to make do with the current circumstance for the sake of their learners.

Referring to Chris Kyriacou’s (2000), strategies of coping (as mentioned in Chapter Two of this study) this implies that the teachers have employed some form of *direct-action strategy* when coping with the challenge of large numbers of pupils. In particular, the teachers of Primary School X have employed three of five direct-action strategies, namely i) a *direct attack*, ii) *adapting to the situation* or iii) *seeking help from colleagues*.

When referring to a *direct attack strategy*, here it has been surmised that through the numerous years of teaching experience, a few of the participants have accumulated an invaluable set of skills and abilities that allow them to, for the most part, successfully manage their crowded classroom environment. Miss Ali for example shared that one has to “*try to prioritise what*

needs to be done". However, by no means should this be assumed as easy. As clearly voiced by the teachers, the challenge of creating a controlled learning environment is left to the individual's responsibility. Regardless of inadequate systemic support, teachers are expected to do whatever is necessary to make the situation work.

Unfortunately, this appears to be a longstanding reality which leads many teachers to a second coping strategy of merely *adapting to the situation*. Mrs Goliath expressed that "*you learn to handle it*". Once more the individual is forced to assume accountability to adapt their own experience of a stressful situation that has not been self-inflicted.

Finally, all the participants made mention of *seeking help from colleagues* and "*working as a team*" (Miss Nelson). Whether having a peer to complain to, seeking advice or seeking assistance with a load of tasks, the teachers expressed that having a shared experience of the same challenge did at times brings a superficial sense of release.

The preliminary feelings gained from the themes above are quite clear. Overcrowded classrooms present undeniable challenges for the teachers at Primary School X as well as many other educators across the South African nation. The outstanding issues include weakened classroom management, pupil misbehaviour and didactical neglect. Collectively these issues fashion a workplace experience that is often brushed with negative feelings of stress, frustration and being overwhelmed.

Unfortunately, overcrowded classrooms are not the only challenge that pervade the daily experience of our teachers. In the themes to follow, the study explores some of the resistance the participants felt towards the introduction of the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS).

5.4 CURRICULUM ASSESSMENT POLICY STATEMENT (CAPS)

As discussed in literature review, the South African school curriculum underwent numerous reformations following the abolishment of the Apartheid regulation. From the year 2012, the CAPS syllabus was gradually introduced into public South African schools and presently remains the Department of Basic Education's national policy for school curricula.

According to Chapter Two, the current study acknowledged that teachers would have to acquire a sense of adaptability and working knowledge when dealing with the various changes in

curriculum (Arokium, 2010). Teachers are expected to effectively implement new ways of teaching, recording, reporting and assessing. Ordinarily, such a process is deemed stressful. However, the extent of disruption experienced by teachers as a result of CAPS was not entirely anticipated.

One of the foremost aims of CAPS was to alleviate some of the strain placed on teachers by providing a clear guide on what was expected to be covered in the classroom. The intention was to eradicate any wavering of how the syllabus would be delivered, while ensuring consistency when teaching (Department of Basic Education, 2019). However, the good intentions of the CAPS implementation may have been overshadowed by a few adverse effects. In trying to create uniformity and standardisation, it seems that teachers have been robbed of a measure of flexibility that was once appreciated. The content-heavy nature of CAPS coupled with a stringently detailed schedule has appeared to have trapped teachers and their pupils in a world-wide of assessments and deadlines.

Therefore, the following themes speak to the difficulties experienced by the participants as a result of the fundamental changes brought about by CAPS. Overall, the teachers at Primary School X expressed concern with the general nature of the curriculum but also shared particular challenges around an alarming *lack of time* and the seemingly unrealistic *volume of work* required of CAPS.

5.4.1 Lack of Time – “It’s like a race. It’s a race for time.”

One of the major points of grief for teachers at Primary School X, and South Africa in general (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015; Maharajh, Nkosi & Mkhize, 2016), is the pace at which the CAPS syllabus requires teachers to progress at. For a syllabus that was introduced to simplify the teacher’s working world (Department of Basic Education, 2019), CAPS has appeared to produce a more stressful experience for both teachers and learners. During the interviews, it became clear that the teachers were experiencing a great deal of pressure. This flustered feeling came across particularly clearly when Mr Farooq shared the following:

“The syllabus itself requires you to go at breakneck speed because you’ve got the next thing and then the next thing and then testing. So, what happens is that with the numbers [of learners], you don’t have that opportunity to revisit. You don’t have that opportunity to go back. And the learner who doesn’t understand it at all is even afraid to pick up their hand and say ‘sir’, you know, ‘I don’t get it’. Because obviously, the learner is actually looking at the pace you’re travelling...we have to keep on moving.”

Similarly, Miss Peters expressed her own anxiety, saying:

“I must be honest; this CAPS education is very full. There is no time to even have little talks with the learners... There is very little time to reflect. Very little time to say to the children ‘alright, let’s do revision’, ‘let’s go over this work’, because there’s no going over time. There’s no repair time.”

When considering the quotes above, it becomes clearer as to why the teachers are so troubled by the curriculum. One gets the impression that CAPS has narrowly considered time allocation to the act of teaching and the assessment of the content taught. Yet, the process of teaching and learning is so much more than just that. In general, the act of teaching involves three broad components including firstly *preparation* (which includes the planning of lessons, what is intended to be taught and suitable activities). Secondly, and probably the most dynamic phase of teaching includes *execution*, whereby the teacher actively communicates the lesson(s) planned. Finally, *evaluation* occurs which includes assessing the effectiveness of lessons, through tests, projects, quizzes, etc (Dorgu, 2016).

If this simple framework is considered, it is possible to argue that CAPS has placed value on the first phase, through developing a deeply detailed plan and schedule of the syllabus, and the evaluation phase where teachers must frequently assess their pupils. However, it is possible that there has been inadequate consideration of the allocation of time for the execution of teaching.

The teachers at Primary School X displayed an awareness that true learning does not occur by the passive transmission of knowledge. Rather, in agreement with constructivist literature, the experience of learning is enhanced when learners are allowed the space to actively participate and influence the learning process (Fernando & Marikar, 2017).

However, it would seem that the structure of CAPS has indirectly denied opportunity for pupils to have an input on how they learn while also leaving little room for teachers to creatively modify the syllabus in ways that would arguably be more contextually-fitting to the learning needs and interests of their learners.

The deepest point of concern for the teachers is that rather than being able to facilitate meaningful learning, learners may be gaining a rather superficial corpus of knowledge amid the race for time. Here again, teachers are deprived of the freedom to slow down the pace and

take time to recap and perform valuable revision. The content-heavy curriculum dictates a fast-paced movement that has weakened the consolidation of lasting knowledge.

Overall, the rigidity of the tightly scheduled curriculum has often left teachers feeling robbed of their professional initiative. In her article about, Goetze (2016) confirms that much like the teachers at Primary School X, many South African educators feel as though they are barely managing to keep up with its incredibly fast pace. Moreover, there seems to be a common sense of frustration, among South African educators, with the curriculum's reliance on content rather than developing a generation of critical thinkers (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015; Maharajh et al., 2016; Goetze, 2016).

The collection of the above-mentioned difficulties with CAPS has sometimes left teachers feeling as though they are unable to holistically fulfil their role as a teacher. In the literature, teachers have often felt as though their learners deserve more, and that the education system has failed them (Goetze, 2016; Mukwamu, 2019). This is one of the recurring reasons for a loss in teachers' motivation and a growing national trend of teacher absenteeism (Maharajh et al., 2016; Van Tilburg, 2019).

The unfortunate reality that has emerged from this study and similar research is that teachers' working conditions are not always the most conducive to an enjoyable work experience (Tapala, van Niekerk & Mentz, 2020; Vester, 2018). Beyond large class numbers and a seemingly ineffective curriculum, South African teachers are, at large, overworked (Tapala et al., 2020; West & Meier, 2020; Vester, 2018). Therefore, the following theme delves into the demanding workload experienced by the teachers at Primary School X.

5.4.2 Volume of Work – “It’s a big load.”

In addition to the unquestionable race against the clock, it would appear that CAPS has brought about another overarching issue. Admittedly, the DBE had intent to lighten the administrative burden placed on teachers through the systematic approach of the curriculum, however, a few adverse effects have again been observed. In the following few paragraphs, this study explores the ways teachers have experienced their workload as more demanding as a result of the curriculum.

In her interview, Miss Nelson openly shared her opinion of CAPS, stating:

“It’s a big load and the new curriculum is like overpacked with things we learnt in high school, these children are learning now in their Maths, [in] primary school... I don’t know. The country

is trying to improve ... But they're doing it the wrong way by overpacking the syllabus and the curriculum."

Above, Miss Nelson's statement represents a typical example of the DBE's good intent versus the shortcomings of its implementation. One can see that the intent of the CAPS syllabus is for the improvement of South African education and ultimately the betterment of the future generation (DBE, 2016). However, it is arguable that CAPS was established as the product of a 'knee-jerk' reaction. It appears that what is seen to be theoretically sound on paper, is not experienced practically.

A few years ago, reports published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranked the quality of South Africa's mathematics and science education last out of 148 countries (du Plessis & Marias, 2015). Perhaps the amendment of the South African curriculum was brushed with a desperate need to dramatically improve statistical trends without thorough consideration of possible ramifications. To echo Miss Nelson and many other South African primary school educators (Du Plessis & Marais, 2015; Goetze, 2016; Maharajh et al., 2016), overloading the syllabus is by no means the best way to nurture the critical thinking required of successful maths and science education. In fact, a syllabus that is too content heavy may have detrimental effects to the learning process and the development of pupils.

During her interview, Miss Ali implored that there is *"just not enough time in a day [for] the volume of work expected [and] the coverage. There's a lot of content we're expected to cover. But with the calibre of child that we're dealing with, who's home language is not English, it takes three-four times the time that is expected."*

Once more, it can be seen how very important contextual issues may have slipped the consideration of the DBE when establishing the curriculum. Above, Miss Ali touches on a very important point. Teachers are ordinarily under immense pressure delivering the content of the syllabus to English- first language speakers. However, this pressure is multiplied in the context of a school much like Primary School X, where many of the pupils actually Zulu-first language speakers. Not only are teachers required to facilitate incredible amounts of information but must also overcome the difficulties of a language barrier. To quote Mr Farooq, a Grade 7 Mathematics teacher at Primary School X, the language barrier becomes a significant *"learning barrier"*. Often learners *"get lost in the understanding"* of concepts because they require a more sophisticated command of the English language. Ironically, this occurs more often in Mathematics and Science subjects, the very two areas that the DBE had hoped to achieve the

most improvement. Perhaps this too is indicative of deficient investigation by the DBE into the root cause of a particular issue. It may be possible that South Africa's grim Maths and Science rating (according to the WEF) may have been as a result of long-standing linguistic barriers to communication in English.

At Primary School X, the teachers have attempted to take on a proactive approach to managing this issue. Some of their efforts include hosting reading mornings to help improve pupils' English language skills. Unfortunately, the results have shown that teachers routinely have to establish their own solutions for systemic issues that should be at the forefront of the DBE's concern and this example is no different. Ultimately, teachers end up feeling further overwhelmed by adding to their already tight schedules.

There is no question that teachers' time, energy and resources have been thinly spread. Moreover, this sometimes-overwhelming experience is further intensified by another labour-intensive task required of CAPS. Teachers are required to assess their pupils so often that it appears incessant. Consequently, this translates into an incredible amount of administrative work for teachers.

Below, Mr Farooq and Miss Nelson generously shared their experience of being overwhelmed by the load of work resulting from assessments.

Mr Farooq stated:

"All teachers would tell you; the number one stress is marking...because of the sheer volume of students per class and the amount of assessments that we have and the amount of paperwork. We tend to be burdened with paperwork...with CAPS it's very...its very assessment based. You've gotta be testing all the time. And the testing requires marking...Constantly there's assignments and projects and investigations and sometimes, what happens is that the assessment level becomes so hard and fast that before you actually teach something, you're required to actually test on it."

In her own interview, Miss Nelson shared:

"Sometimes we have to do external papers, we have to do the cluster paper, the paper comes [and] it will have sixteen pages, twelve pages for each child. Now there's forty-five [and] there's four classes...Marking! The marking of the assessment is the stress. And there's always deadlines. That's, for me, one of the main stresses and when it comes to exam time, I just become stressed because...there's no way I can do all that marking at school and be done on

time. I've got to sit up late in the night and do some of it to keep on track to have it done on time."

Indeed, the pressure of the assessment process is an inevitable aspect of being an educator. However, the frequency of assessments multiplied by the large number of pupils has resulted in an apparently on-going spiral of stress.

For the teachers of Primary School X and many other South African educators (du Plessis & Marais; Maharajh et al., 2016; Goetze, 2016; West & Meier, 2020), the aspirations of CAPS are far too idealistic and hold unrealistic expectations that create an incredibly challenging teaching environment for both teachers and learners. This issue echoes the importance of contextual appreciation. Perhaps a more effective way of implementing CAPS is through an approach that acknowledges the inescapable influences of any given socio-cultural context. Conceivably, having a more flexible approach – whereby teachers are permitted professional freedom to make use of their own resources and judgement and experience – to shape the core principals of CAPS in a more contextually appropriate fashion may lead to greater success.

In theory, CAPS indeed is a good policy. However, one may gain the sense that the DBE has treated CAPS like any other *policy*, and not taken into account the intricacies of its practical use as a curriculum. The implementation of CAPS appears to be very top-down, meaning that there was an evident lack of teachers' involvement in the planning of the system. It is possible that this is where the bulk of the difficulty is rooted. Teachers interviewed in a study by Maharajh et al. (2016), shared that they felt a lack of ownership of the CAPS curriculum as they were excluded during the policy's developmental phases. Unfortunately, this appears to be a common occurrence in South African public schools. In general, a large proportion of teachers will only find out about fundamental changes once policy has been finalised and are usually not consulted by union members either. As a result, changes in curriculum often do not resonate with teachers (Arokium, 2010; Du Plessis & Marais, 2015; West & Meier, 2020).

It is possible that the teachers at Primary School X share a similar sentiment – the teachers do not appear to have bought into the system nor believe in its efficiency. It would be easy to believe that teachers would harbour a sense of powerlessness. Having the practical knowledge and experience to recognise what changes are needed yet being denied the freedom to do so can only be understood as frustrating and disheartening. Again, this demonstrates the inescapable issues that emanate from a lack of inclusion of the individuals 'on the ground' during planning and developing. Unfortunately, teachers have developed a sense of acceptance that the system

will not change in the near future, nor will any change be radical. Instead, teachers have chosen to focus their energy on doing the best they can in their current reality for the best interest of their pupils.

For the teachers at Primary School X, there was an evident attitude of service, professional and personal investment toward their pupils, which alludes to the following section. In the next few themes, this study will explore how the teachers' pupils inevitably influence and sometimes add strain to their experience of the teaching environment. Rather than habitually dealing with systemic shortcomings, the following sections will reveal how teachers chose to lean on methods of spiritual coping when dealing with challenges relating to their pupils. These themes will begin to unfold how teachers lean on their spirituality in realising the weight of the purpose they play in their pupils lives and their sense of responsibility to help every pupil to the best of their ability.

5.5 LEARNER-RELATED CHALLENGES

Up until this point, the chapter has discussed the various experiences teachers shared around challenges that can be recognized as more systemically routed. However, the following set of themes/sub-themes will discuss the various challenges that have stemmed from the learner, with particular attention on the social and domestic spheres of the learner. These are the types of issues that teachers expressed as being more emotionally taxing and therefore necessitating spiritual coping.

Below, the researcher has delved into the teachers' experiences of their learners' social realities, how they emanate in the classroom, and ultimately, how this influences the working world of the teachers.

5.5.1 Learners' domestic and socio-economic realities

As discussed in Chapter Two, many of the learners at Primary School X are up against a socioeconomic situation that is far from affluent. Like almost two-thirds of the public primary school population (Fadiji & Reddy, 2020), many of the learners come from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. The common narrative includes living in public housing, being raised in a single-income home or a home where parents are unemployed or even absent, leaving grandparents as guardians. An online article about Primary School X revealed that many parents/guardians can barely afford to put food on the table every day, often leaving school

fees in arrears (Masuku, 2018). Recognising its community's poverty, Primary School X has attempted to assist its learners in other ways.

During her interview, Miss Ali shared one of the initiatives she had been working on at the time. Miss Ali stated:

“Right now, I’m dealing with a list, a record of indigent learners because I’ve got some really good donors in the area who are bringing in food stuff almost daily. So, it’s difficult to identify out of one-thousand-four hundred...uhm I know that I’ve got sixty who are really really poor...But it’s difficult now to pinpoint now exactly who they are, where they are.”

As the deputy principal, Miss Ali, continued her interview it became evident that the domestic reality of many students is bleak. Their homes are overcrowded, pupils often do not have enough to eat, do not have adequate time nor attention to complete homework effectively and are often subject to domestic abuse.

For the purpose of the study, this became significant as the researcher became aware of how the home environment and classroom environment interact interdependently as two core pillars of the learner's own social mesosystem (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw & Eklund, 2015; Perron, 2017). This implies that the experiences of the learner's domestic reality almost always manifest within the classroom (Potgieter-Groot, Visser & Lubbe-de Beer, 2012). As a result, where the domestic life of a pupil is troublesome, it is often emanated as disruption, distraction or disengagement in the classroom (Martens et al., 2014) – an ultimately stressful experience for teachers. Unable to escape this socio-systemic interaction, a few of the teachers at Primary School X feel the burden of their pupils and grow increasingly concerned.

Miss Ali shared that in her years of experience teaching, *“a lot of issues brought to the classroom emanate from the domestic circumstances”*. In another interview, Mrs Goliath also explained that *“if kids have a problem outside, at home, or if they’ve come [to school] with something disturbing them, it impacts them on their schoolwork”*. These observations are in agreement with a generous amount of literature (Martens et al., 2014; Perron, 2017; Poygieter-Groot et al., 2012), that explores how, almost inevitably, the domestic and learning spheres of their learners interact. Evidently, when this exchange has a negative impact on both teaching and learning, it becomes a sore point of concern.

Earlier scholars such as Metstry and colleagues (2007) took note of similar trends that began to form in South African mainstream schools. Many South African learners were presenting

emotional and behavioural barriers that disproportionately stemmed from dysfunctional environmental and family factors, such as growing up in an abusive home or a child-headed home. Such emotional and behavioural barriers lead to disruptive behaviours in learners, including the challenging of authority, disorganised schoolwork and attention seeking behaviours (Potgieter-Groot et al., 2012). Unfortunately, these are all behaviours that repeatedly show up at Primary School X. Below, a couple teachers share some fitting scenarios.

In her interview, Miss Nelson shared the following:

“In the staffroom today...we were discussing like the one child jumped over the gate and went [left the school property]. And even Mr H was talking to him, the principal. He looked at Mr H, didn’t listen and jumped...and we’re talking about like the way children don’t even fear, you know, authority.”

On a separate occasion, Miss Ali explained the following:

“I had two children in the last half hour...One...she’s so badly behaved...she sort of challenged the teacher...and it turned into a whole crying session where she comes down playing the victim, now I know the child, I have a history with her, I’ve taught her. So, I exactly know the pattern of behaviour...Then I had another child soon after...child hasn’t been well, teacher is trying to make up the work...child is rude and challenges the teacher in front of the class. You know, it’s that kind of rude disregard. That’s scary.”

Trying to achieve order in classes of 40 and over, especially when it would appear that many learners may be experiencing varying emotional/learning barriers, results in an accumulated experience of stress for many of the teachers. One of the teachers explained that the situation becomes “*emotionally stressful*” because teachers “*want to do so much for [their pupils] to perform because [you] can see the good in them*” (Mrs Goliath). Despite their efforts, teachers expressed feeling as though they were still letting themselves and learners down. Miss Ali explained that “*at school [as teachers] we’re failing, we feel like we’re failing because you cannot get the child to focus. You can’t get the child to stay on top of things*”.

In a similar study performed by Potgieter-Groot and colleagues (2012), a few teachers also felt withdrawn and at times incompetent when trying to deal with some of the behavioural or learning issues emanating from domestic turbulence. In the same study (Potgieter-Groot et al, 2012) almost all the teachers interviewed had felt that training was the best way of dealing with the challenges around such sensitive issues – that if they were equipped with some basic

counselling skills, they would be able to better deal with their learners. Interestingly, however, the teachers at Primary School X did not mention something as direct as training but veered toward their personal journey of spirituality as a source of insight, compassion and strength.

Within this study, the teachers began to organically reveal their experiences and practices of spirituality at this point. When examining the tension of learners' domestic-school environment, the teachers shifted focus from systemic frustrations to acknowledging their pupils and selves as emotional, spiritual beings who could benefit from equally spiritual intervention.

Therefore, the following sections will delve into the teachers' personal and operational understandings of spirituality and how they make use of spiritual coping in the experience of the workplace.

5.6 SPIRITUALITY

5.6.1 Teachers' Conceptual Understandings

Before exploring the depth of its operational value to the teachers, it was important to establish their basic conceptual understanding of spirituality. Every teacher interviewed recognised themselves as being spiritual which allowed them to authentically share their views and opinions.

When aiming to understand the multidimensionality of spirituality, this study made use of Webb and colleagues' (2014) triad model of *religious spirituality*, *theistic spirituality* and *existential spirituality*. When referring to this model, *religious spirituality* encompasses structured practices and behaviours/rituals, while having a strong connection to deity, for example, praying before one begins their day. *Theistic spirituality* too recognises a divine yet has a non-structured connection with deity. This allows for spirituality to be experienced or expressed with little to no association with an organised religion (Webb et al., 2014). Finally, *existential spirituality* comprises a non-theistic or secular pursuit of purpose and meaning in life, without pertaining to an actual religious belief.

Although all the teachers admittedly belong to some form of religion (Christian, Catholic or Muslim), it was interesting to note that half of the teachers conceptually understood and appreciated spirituality from an *existential* perspective. For these teachers, spirituality extended

the boundaries of religion. Teachers repeatedly referred to spirituality as ‘something’ much deeper, more personal and more relational than an ethos. *“It’s not essentially because I’m a Christian,”* explained Mrs Goliath, *“it’s just deeper, something so deep within you”*.

Other teachers echoed Mrs Goliath’s point of view, saying that *“it doesn’t matter what religion you are”* (Miss Gilbert), spirituality is about acknowledging that you are not only a physical but a spiritual being, and as such, knowing that there is ‘something’ beyond what can be seen and something *“greater within”*. For these teachers, spirituality becomes deeply personal in its pursuit of *“inner peace”* while searching inward for purpose, guidance of *“wrong and right”* and *“instruction to follow the right path”*.

Alternatively, the remaining half of the teachers identified spirituality as something more intricately linked to their varying religions. Like the religious spirituality Webb et al. (2014) explained, these teachers recognised spirituality as synonymous to their connection to God. For example, Miss Nelson plainly defined spirituality as *“believing in the God that I serve and that He takes me through everything”*. Similarly, Miss Peters understood that *“there is a higher power and I choose to call Him God Jehovah God. I choose to worship Him through the Lord Jesus Christ”*. For the teachers with a more religious view, to grow spiritually meant to actively pursue a closer connection with God.

When considering the teachers’ points of view, it may become tempting to compare the two groups, especially considering how the discourse created around religiousness has often equated it with a sense of restriction, whereas spirituality is fashioned with a liberal flair. Words like ‘formal’, ‘structured practice’, ‘rituals’ and ‘organised systems’ often show up when conceptualising religiousness (Correy et al., 2014; Tiggemann & Hage, 2019; Watts, 2017; Webb et al., 2014). In fact, in Chapter Two of this study it was considered that an individual who is spiritual but not religious would be someone who has taken a self-identified stance on life, to pursue an interior synergy of mind, body and spirit without being restricted by any organisational or communal expectations of what that should look like.

As much as this premise stands true for the teachers who hold an existential view, it should not be assumed that religious spirituality would undermine the other teachers’ individual experience of spiritual self-exploration. It was found that every one of the teachers experienced not just similar, but equally beneficial outcomes of their spirituality, despite their differences in its conceptualisation. Moreover, the entire group of teachers also shared remarkably similar spiritual practices. Therefore, the following section will explore some of the ways in which the

teachers practice spirituality in the work context as well as the benefits they experienced through their spirituality.

5.6.2 Spiritual Practice in the Work Context

Across all of the interviews performed for this study, one of the resounding ways in which all the teachers enacted their spirituality was through prayer. Each teacher exhorted the importance of prayer for oneself and others. Throughout the interviews it became clear that prayer was the primary means of connection between teachers and their deity. Prayer was seen as a time of self-renewal, meditation and reflection, but primarily, an opportunity to submit to God the things that challenged teachers beyond their own ability. Prayer was an opportunity for teachers to ask God for His help regarding matters beyond control.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the challenges emanating from domestic and socio-economic reality of learners became a real point of hurt for many of the teachers, particularly when these issues escape the boundaries of teachers' aid. Even as mentioned by Miss Ali, *"it's that family breakdown that is, for me, what I pray about"*. Like Miss Ali, many of the teachers used the act of prayer as a means of trying to intercede for their pupils, having faith that God will intervene in the areas where they were unable to. In situations where teachers were able to intervene, they prayed for patience and strength to help their pupils in any way. Below, a couple of teachers expressed their devotion to prayer.

Miss Peters stated:

"I actually do pray for my children [i.e. learners], I remember the ones with major problems, I pray for them...I pray for myself; I also pray that I might be patient and understanding."

Miss Gilbert stated:

"You just have to pray...we face a lot of challenges in our school...These children are coming from their own background and their own situations and going through their own thing. So, every day, we just pray before you come to school – to have a good day, to get you through the day, pray for them [the pupils], for strength for them...just prayer, prayer, prayer."

From their various interviews, the teachers supported that prayer resulted in a unique spiritual experience that allowed them to gain focus, feel comforted and strengthened from within. In fact, teachers said that in the absence of prayer and time dedicated to connecting with God,

they felt “*frustrated*”, “*a whole lot more stressed*”, unable to “*calm [oneself] down*” and lacking their “*sense of inner peace*”.

When considering the theoretical framework of this study (as in Chapter Three), it can be seen that the teachers have all adopted a *spiritual problem-solving* style that is *collaborative*. This implies that each teacher would endeavour to resolve the issue as far as their best ability would allow, while trusting that God will intervene in areas beyond their control. As posited in Chapter Three, this spiritual problem-solving style is testament to the teachers’ *intrinsically* oriented sense of religion. In other words, it is their personal relationship with God that becomes the impetus of individual strength even in the face of adversity.

According to Pargament et al. (2005), a collaborative problem-solver commonly appears to uphold a sense of empowerment. This was yet another premise confirmed by the teachers at Primary School X, even as said by Miss Ali, that no matter what, being connected to God allows her to feel that “*yes! I can get through this*”. Similarly, Mrs Goliath exhorted that “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!*”. Overall, the teachers have an experience of reduced negative emotion in believing that because they are able to depend on someone/something greater than themselves, no situation can be deemed impossibly difficult or challenging. There is always hope for the better and to overcome. This idea echoes the objectives of two other concepts the Spiritual Framework of Coping, namely hope and spiritual appraisal.

According to the framework, hope is the substance that drives individuals to think beyond the present challenge and take hold of the positive possibilities of the desired outcome (Cheavens et al., 2019; Gall et al., 2005). This enables a process of positive cognitive appraisal. This means that almost like an alternative lens, the same difficult reality can be seen and understood in a more positive and constructive light. Research has shown that because of this positive appraisal, persons with high levels of hope tend to find meaning and purpose in difficult situations, enabling them to remain encouraged and cope more successfully (Hullman, 2014). For the teachers at Primary School X, this proposition was also validated. During this study, it was accepted that the teachers’ sense of hope and spiritual appraisal allowed them to interpret difficult situations as constructive opportunities for personal and spiritual growth. Moreover, because of the nature of their profession, it seems that teachers also interpreted trials and tribulation as an opportunity to pass on positive life lessons to their pupils. In fact, it would appear that the teachers even drew closer to their pupils.

When considering all the challenges previously mentioned in this chapter – overcrowded classrooms, multifaceted difficulties with CAPS as well as the various social/domestic challenges of their pupils – the teachers expressed a concern for the repercussions on their learners throughout. In their spiritual pursuit of strength and support, the teachers never seized to acknowledge their learners too. They acknowledged that their learners are equally subjected to the challenges of the classroom and as such would equally benefit from the welfare of spirituality.

In this manner, a few of the teachers interviewed felt that their teaching profession was an extension of their spiritual purpose. These teachers viewed teaching as “*the perfect place to touch young lives*” (Mrs Goliath), and to “*share the message and inculcate*” (Miss Ali), the importance of spirituality, prayer and hope. In a similar study, Maria Ojala (2015) discovered that a sense hope was positively associated with pupil-teacher engagement. Pupils perceived their teachers as respecting their own negative emotions about the issues that affected them, but more so, viewed their teachers as being positive and solution oriented. Overall, it would appear that having a sense of hope not only succours teachers in their own experience of distress but can also positively reinforce teacher-pupil connections.

Despite the presence of overcrowded classrooms, perhaps the teachers at Primary School X were still able to harness a sense of connection with their pupils through creating an environment that encourages their holistic development, including spiritual appreciation. One of the teachers summed this sentiment in her interview saying, “*I do believe in being here for a purpose and so when I teach, at the end of the year...the children have a sense that they were part of a bigger purpose. Not so much about me teaching them but also me preparing them for life*” (Miss Peters).

Consideration of the above as well as the teachers’ interviews indicate that connections were of great value to the teachers. Connections with colleagues, learners, religious communities and most importantly God. According to this study’s theoretical framework, it is these connections that play a pivotal role in the spiritual coping behaviours of the individual; an assumption that holds firm in the context of the current research. Therefore, while paying close reference to the framework of spiritual coping, the following section will explore how the teachers at Primary School X developed various spiritual connections as one of their primary behaviours of spiritual coping.

5.7 SPIRITUAL COPING

5.7.1 Spiritual Connection with the Transcendent Other

According to the framework of spiritual coping by Gall et al. (2005), one of the most impactful spiritual connections one may develop, is with the ‘transcendent other’ – being a higher power or religious deity. Research supports that having a relationship with the transcendent or God plays a significant role in the coping process (Arafat et al., 2018; Cabaco et al., 2018). Having a connection with God has been associated with numerous positive outcomes, including a sense of comfort and belonging, social support, a source of inner strength and empowerment, acceptance and relief from emotional distress. Regarding the current study, all of the above were unanimously supported.

One of the resonant findings was that through having a spiritual relationship with God, the teachers were assured of His helping hand, support and protection. Miss Nelson expressed the deep peace she experienced in *“knowing that God is going to see me through, helps me. But you know when you talk about a peace that surpasses all human understanding, even when things are going wrong. Even when there’s chaos. You just have to go through the day and keep going no matter what”*. In agreement, Mrs Goliath also shared that *“God is help. Without God’s help, we won’t succeed. Just to depend on God... ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me’”*.

Evident in the two examples above, the teachers felt a strong conviction about their relationship with God. This spiritual connection goes beyond just strength but is a lifeline that has proven to help them throughout their various life experiences. What is interesting is that the teachers acknowledged that this connecting does not equate an escape from many challenges but assures a place of comfort in the midst of them. Being connected to God *“is almost like finding a hiding place. Not hiding away from, but almost like an umbrella in the rain. Storms do come but I’ll find that I’m able to overcome”* (Miss Peters).

Here again, it can be seen how one’s spiritual connections influence the appraisal of the present situation and ultimately how the reality is fabricated. Spiritual appraisals operate as a factor of mediation through the process of coping. Much like the palliative strategies discussed by Arokium (2010), in the literature review, spiritual appraisals function as a form of positive reframing that helps persons gain a better sense of control even in an uncontrollable situation (Arafat et al., 2018; Beuscher & Beck, 2008; Cabaco et al., 2018; Seybold & Hill, 2001).

5.7.2 Spiritual Connection with Others

In addition to having spiritual connections with God, another behaviour of spiritual coping is spiritual connections with others. As fundamentally social beings, it would not be unthinkable that religious/spiritual communities function as an important source of care and support when one is facing challenges. Likewise, for the teachers at Primary School X, a source of comfort and support is gained in acknowledging that one does not have to face difficulties alone, but can share the burden with or help carry the burdens of others. Miss Gilbert added that when people share *“their experiences, [it’s] very motivating to know that they have their God to support them and go through it with them and the community are there for them and go through it with them”*.

Spiritual connection with the transcendent as well as other people immediately creates a sense of comfort. Knowing that one does not exist in a social silo but has other people to lean on, provides a feeling of being supported throughout life’s dealings. This comfort in itself may ease the strain to better cope with various challenges, however, having these connections may also positively influence the way meaning is assigned to those experiences.

5.7.3 Meaning Making

Through the connections one holds with God and others, through communication and sharing of experiences, it is possible that the way in which a situation is interpreted begins to shift. When one’s perspective is broadened, the construction of the meaning of a situation can include more fair attributions, the realisation of potential growth and opportunity, or even concluding that an event is less central to one’s life than initially perceived. Mr Farooq explained that *“good spirituality can put you in a better place in terms of clearing your thinking, overcoming stresses and also understanding what those stresses are and how to overcome them...it puts you in a better mindset to deal with situations that may arise”*. In other words, through spirituality, the challenging situation may be reframed and made significantly clearer. Admittedly, *“bad things do happen, but ...when something happens you can make the decision to feel sorry for yourself or you can maybe [turn] the situation into something good”* (Miss Gilbert). For the teachers interviewed, spirituality functions as an aid in plotting an event within the context of the “bigger picture”. With a fresh perspective and reinterpretation that recognises a deeper purpose than was first acknowledged, the situation can be seen with new meaning.

5.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the results and in-depth discussion of the experiences and opinions shared by the teachers at Primary School X.

When exploring these interviews, it became clear that to a large extent, public school teachers experience their work environment as mostly stressful. Their daily routine is draped in challenges of many kinds. In a manner that is almost characteristic of a South African public school, Primary School X mirrors the difficulties experienced in many other local public schools. Overcrowded classrooms, behavioural difficulties, and the insufficiencies of the CAPS framework are all recurring issues. Despite a system that fails to support its teachers in delivering the best quality education, teachers strive on, being as proactive and resourceful as possible in this seemingly unchanging reality. However, challenges around the socio-economic and domestic realities of their pupils has been a reality that teachers cannot stomach to accept.

As a sphere out of their professional control, teachers drew upon their spirituality to help influence their pupils and teaching environment in a way that encouraged hope and a sense of peace. The teachers exhorted the criticality of prayer and actively seeking a connection with God in the good times and definitely in times of trial and tribulation. The teachers urged that in the absence of their spirituality their sense of inner peace and motivation would be stripped away. For the teachers at Primary School X their spiritual practices and connections were not only means of spiritual coping, but also formed a part of who they were as individuals and certainly as educators. Overall, the teachers supported that their spirituality formed the core of how they teach, interact with peers and colleagues, deal and manage various challenges and cope with life's unfortunate handouts.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This case study provided a qualitative snapshot of the lived experiences of six South African teachers in a typical public school in KwaZulu-Natal. The research purposed to produce findings that could be useful to many current and prospective teachers at Primary School X and South African schools at large.

This study noted that despite the efforts to improve South Africa's education system, the journey of reformation is far from over. As an entire nation, South Africa is still in a place of development and healing from the detriment of its unjust past. The South African education system is no exception. National schooling policies and regulation have undergone various forms of reframing since the country's democratization; however, characteristic challenges of previously disadvantaged schools continue to propagate in the present-day public school environment. Preceding literature has consistently noted challenges with overcrowded classrooms, lack of resources, a hefty workload and other socio-economic difficulties as the typical reality within public schooling (Boshoff et al., 2018; du Plessis & Marais, 2015; West & Meier, 2020). For this reason, South Africa's public schooling sector is under tremendous strain. Studies have progressively shown an increase in the experience of teacher stress (Hawkins & Theado, 2019), lowered motivation and productivity (Evans & Yuan, 2018), as well as growing absenteeism (Fouché et al., 2017), among other negative impacts. Thus, this study exhorted that there is a great demand for South African teachers to be equipped with effective means of coping and managing the challenges of the workplace.

In response to this, the current study shed light on some of the pressing issues that fashion a more stressful experience of the teachers' work environments. Moreover, this study took interest in how teachers managed environmental demands with particular focus on spirituality and spiritual coping.

For the last few years, spirituality has been of worldwide academic interest. Although still in its formative stages, a call for spirituality continues to emerge in the workplace, where international studies have shown it to provide a sense of meaning at work, increase well-being and resilience in the stresses of the teaching profession (Gibson, 2014; Mata, 2014; Mogra, 2010). Therefore, this study prompted that perhaps there is a need for an ideological shift that

will help improve the experiences of South African teachers like those at Primary School X. As such, this case study purposed to explore the ways in which teachers at Primary School X, understand and practice the concept of ‘spirituality’ in relation to their experiences in their work context.

6.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section presents a summary of the findings that were explored through the analysis of the qualitative data this study generated. Recommendations in relation to these findings will also be made. The study summarises the following:

6.2.1 Overcrowded Classrooms

One of the most evident findings that surfaced during this study was that the teachers at Primary School X experienced shared difficulties with overcrowded classrooms across the entire school. Just a few years ago teachers would teach twenty to twenty-five learners per class, however, the new normal involves teaching numbers anywhere from thirty-five to fifty learners per class. According to a generous body of literature, the experience of increased numbers of pupils in public schools appears to be a nationwide trend. The sheer number of pupils in one classroom proved to be overwhelming for the teachers, however other consequential challenges presented themselves. Teachers found it rather difficult to manage the classroom environment, manage pupils’ behaviour and unfortunately were not able to provide the fair amount of attention to the learning needs of each pupil.

Overall, overcrowded classrooms raise a serious threat to the quality of South African education. This study exhorts that South African teachers like those at Primary School X find themselves repeatedly stretched between their many learners while having to maintain a disciplined yet interactive classroom space. It comes as no surprise that teachers feel trapped and unable to successfully reach their learners (Marais, 2016; Muthusamy, 2015; West & Meier, 2020). Negative feelings appear across the literature including teachers commonly expressing decreased self-belief, demotivation, frustration and uncertainty of the self and profession (Muthusamy, 2015).

Unfortunately, the ideal of teaching smaller classes is a reality that the teachers at Primary School X recognize as improbable. Teachers are aware that despite the lack of systemic

support, they are still expected to do whatever is necessary to make the best of the situation, for the safety of their professions and the betterment of their pupils.

It was this unfortunate reality that the researcher found concerning. When considering the national predicament of overcrowded classes, and how many years this issue has been perpetuated, one may argue that the Department of Basic Education has not paid this issue its due attention. It would be unfair and exploitative to expect South African teachers to continue to manage this reality by their own means. No matter how effective their strategic or spiritual coping may be, teachers remain in dire need of systemic support.

As one of the most impactful factors associated with the nation's poor academic performance and grade reputation, this study recommends that overcrowded classrooms should be paid more close and active attention from the DBE.

In order to uphold fine quality of South African education and a bright future for the country it may be useful for the DBE to reconsider their strategic planning in a way more proactive and solution oriented.

It is of great importance for the DBE to recognize the weight of their commitment to improving the country's schooling infrastructure, while providing the assistance needed by teachers during the lengthy process of development.

6.2.2 Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)

The findings of the study indicated that in addition to overcrowded classrooms, teachers daily experience of the workplace was greatly influenced by the national Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). It was discovered that in theory, CAPS appeared to be an exemplary piece of legislation, however, in its practical implementation, its faults began to surface.

From its conception, CAPS purposed to alleviate some of the administrative strain placed on teachers by providing a clear guide on what was expected to be covered in the classroom. The intention was to eradicate any wavering of how the syllabus would be delivered, while ensuring consistency when teaching (Department of Basic Education, 2019). However, according to this study and similar research, these good intentions have broadly been overshadowed by a few adverse effects. In trying to create uniformity and standardisation, it seems that teachers have been robbed of a measure of flexibility that was once appreciated. In addition, the content-heavy nature of CAPS coupled with a stringently detailed schedule has appeared to have trapped teachers and their pupils in a world-wind of assessments and deadlines.

As such, two of the most outstanding findings regarding the CAPS syllabus was that teachers at Primary School X and nationally experienced a perpetual race for time and an increase workload. In summary, teachers found themselves in a whirlwind of teaching multiple topics a week, assessing pupils and shovelling through paperwork before repeating the process.

Teachers felt that more time was spent performing assessments than actually teaching, which raised feelings of anxiety. Teachers felt that the prescriptive nature of the syllabus stripped away the enjoyment of professional initiative while slimming the already scarce opportunity to constructively connect with pupils during lessons. Despite their reservations, teachers aimed to manage these difficulties by remaining as proactive as possible. In translation this included teachers taking work home, seeing struggling pupils before the start of the school day and avoiding any form of leave. As a result, even in trying to proactively cope with the pressure relating to CAPS, the teachers would still find themselves overwhelmed.

Therefore, this study permits that perhaps one of the most effective ways to tailor the CAPS system is through the inclusion of the teachers ‘on the ground’. As mentioned prior, CAPS may be theoretically sound, yet teachers may have had some useful insight to add during phases of development and planning. Through the engagement of teachers, CAPS could gain the contextual suitability that it currently appears to lack.

Through the better involvement of teachers during the development of policy, it may be safe to assume that a greater degree of ownership and confidence in the system may also be achieved. Teachers would begin to believe that the DBE value their working insight and expertise, perhaps boosting the overall morale of the South African teaching force.

Again, the work environment of the country’s teachers cannot be made more fruitful without ensuring that the education system in which these teachers function is confirmed as a supportive and innovative one.

Despite the evident areas for systemic growth, the teachers at Primary School X displayed an honourable attitude of service and investment toward their pupils, which alludes to the following summary.

6.2.3 Learner related challenges

When considering the results of the study, there was an interesting emergence when teachers began to share their stories around the challenges relating to the socio-economic/domestic realities of their pupils. Superficially it may appear that this may have no relevance to the experiences of the teacher, however, with deeper consideration, these learner related challenges proved significant.

Supported by other literature (O'Malley, Voight, Renshaw & Eklund, 2015; Perron, 2017), it became clear that the experiences of the learner's domestic reality almost always manifest within the classroom. As a result, where the domestic life of a pupil is troublesome, it is often emanated as disruption, distraction or disengagement in the classroom (Martens et al., 2014). With Primary School X being no exception to the domestic-school interaction, teachers found themselves feeling burdened for their pupils. Notably, the socio-economic and domestic environment is an impactful 'out-of-school' factor that holds felt influence in the teaching environment (West & Meier, 2020). However, being out of teachers' locus of control, teachers turned to spiritual intervention to manage these situations.

6.2.4 Spiritual Coping

In the personal and professional lives of the teachers, it became clear that spirituality provided a unique impetus for daily life. Teachers felt so strongly about their spirituality that life without it was something unimaginable.

For the purpose of this study, the value of spirituality and spiritual coping emerged clearly. Beyond getting through the challenges of the mundane, spirituality showed real positive influence in more testing times.

By purposefully pursuing a relationship or connection with the transcendent, i.e. God, the teachers appeared to maintain a sense of positivity throughout their challenging experiences. A 'sense of peace' may be connected to the relief that teachers feel in believing that there is a greater plan instore, that present difficulties are only temporary and that it not their position to be constantly in control. This release helped to allow more calmer thinking and processing of difficult or stressful experiences.

As such perhaps the most powerful tool endorsed by spirituality is an alternative source for meaning making. The study showed that through the connections one holds with God and others, through communication and sharing of experiences, it is possible that the way in which

a situation is interpreted begins to shift. When one's perspective is broadened, the construction of the meaning of a situation can include more fair attributions, the realisation of potential growth and opportunity, or even concluding that an event is less central to one's life than initially perceived.

As recommended by other studies (Haydon et al., 2019; Ramberg et al., 2019), spirituality has marked its unique contribution, both personally and professionally. Perhaps it really is time for South African schools to explore its seemingly untapped potential. Therefore, this study puts forward that perhaps teachers would benefit from intervention that appreciates holistic growth and well-being – physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and spiritually. Even in times when spirituality may be considered too unorthodox, its core values still prove constructive. These include the importance of community and connection with others, positive self-affirmation, having hope, trusting the process and having a healthy understanding of one's locus of control. If nurtured, these principles may result in the positive reinterpretation of the typical South African teaching experience.

6.3 CONCLUSION

South Africa is a developing nation and so too is its education system. Challenges in the education system abound. It is true that efforts and resources need to be channelled into the restructuring of the education system. However, while systemic improvements must be strived for, teachers, along with their challenging lived experienced cannot be neglected in the process.

Therefore, this study has aspired to spark an interest that would prompt councils and other decision makers to consider the ways in which the working lives of teachers can be improved. By providing insight into spirituality, the study hoped to inspire deeper conversations and interest on the concept of spirituality as an alternative means of coping with stress, enhancing well-being, and in ultimately encouraging a more positive work experience.

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APPENDIX A

Ethical Clearance from the Department of Basic Education



education

Department:
Education
PROVINCE OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Tel: 033 392 1063

Ref.:2/4/8/1486

Miss L.L. Martin

47 Michan Road
Sydenham
Durban
4091

Dear Miss Martin

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"SPIRITUALITY AS A COPING STRATEGY: A CASE STUDY OF TEACHERS IN A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN KWAZULU- NATAL"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 20 March 2018 to 09 July 2020.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers below.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

Charles Hugo Primary School



Dr. EV Nzama
Head of Department: Education
Date: 20 March 2018

KWAZULU-NATAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Postal Address: Private Bag X9137 • Pietermaritzburg • 3200 • Republic of South Africa

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Facebook: KZNDOE....Twitter: @DBE_KZN....Instagram: kzn_education....Youtube: kzndoe

..Championing Quality Education - Creating and Securing a Brighter Future

APPENDIX B

Ethical Clearance from the Research Ethics Committee



20 June 2018

Ms Loren Lisa Martin (214535453)
School of Applied Human Sciences – Psychology
Howard College Campus

Dear Ms Martin,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0403/018M

Project Title: Spirituality as a coping strategy: A case study of teachers in a public school in KwaZulu-Natal

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

In response to your application received 03 May 2018, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Shenuka Singh (Chair)

/ms

Cc Supervisor: Dr Shanya Reuben
Cc Academic Leader Research: Dr Maud Mthembu
Cc School Administrator: Ms Ayanda Ntuli

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Professor Shenuka Singh (Chair)

Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000

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Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

APPENDIX C

Request Letter to Principal

125 Waterfall Rd

Sydenham

Durban

4091

The Principal

Re: Participation in research study entitled: Spirituality as a coping strategy: A case study of teachers in a public school in KwaZulu-Natal.

I, Loren Martin, am a Masters student in Industrial Psychology at UKZN: Howard, currently researching the above topic. I seek permission in this regard to conduct research at your school. This entails administering questionnaires to teachers as well as conducting one-on-one interviews.

The teachers valued participation in this research study is completely voluntary and all information supplied will be treated as strictly confidential.

Thank you

Yours Faithfully

Loren Martin (researcher)

University of KwaZulu-Natal: Howard College

APPENDIX D

Informed Consent Form

Dear Sir/Madame

My name is Loren Martin, a Masters student from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, school of Applied Human Science, Psychology discipline, contact: 214535453@stu.ukzn.ac.za

I hereby request you to be a part of the study I am conducting under the supervision of Dr Shanya Reuben, a lecturer at UKZN in the school of Applied Human Sciences. The study will be conducted amongst teachers at Charles Hugo Primary School, looking at the perceptions of teachers regarding spirituality as a strategy of coping with occupational stress. The study intends to enrol 8-10 teachers who will be interviewed.

The study does not ask for harmful questions or information that might evoke depressing emotions or discomfort.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact my supervisor at (031 266 2861 or reuben@ukzn.ac.za) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this study is voluntary, your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained at all times. You will be allowed without any discrimination or prejudice to withdraw from the study at any given time should you so wish or feel uncomfortable to continue.

The information given (by you) will be stored in locked cupboard in my supervisor's office in the discipline of psychology for the period not less than five years before disposal.

The study does not carry any costs, incentives or reimbursements for participation.

--

CONSENT (Edit as required)

I (Name)..... have been informed about the study entitled (Spirituality as a coping strategy: A case study of teachers in a public school in KwaZulu-Natal) by (researcher/fieldworker name).....

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at (provide details).

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview

YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX E

The Spirituality Self-Rating Scale (SSRS)

Below is a list of statements. Using the following rating scale, indicate the number that best indicates your agreement with the statement.

Strongly Strongly
Agree 5 —4—3—2—1 Disagree

1. It is important for me to spend time in private spiritual thought and meditation. (___)
2. I try hard to live my life according to my religious beliefs. (___)
3. The prayers or spiritual thoughts that I say when I am alone are as important to me as those said by me during services or spiritual gatherings. (___)
4. I enjoy reading about my spirituality and/or my religion. (___)
5. Spirituality helps to keep my life balanced and steady in the same ways as my citizenship, friendships, and other memberships do. (___)
6. My whole approach to life is based on my spirituality. (___)

Thank you.

APPENDIX F

Interview Schedule

- ❖ Please describe a typical working day for me
- ❖ As a teacher, what are some of the work-related challenges that you encounter? (Probe further depending on answers given)
- ❖ Can you tell me about some of the ways in which you deal with such issues?
- ❖ What do you understand by the concept 'spiritual' or 'spirituality'?
- ❖ Would you consider yourself to be a spiritual person? (If yes, probe)
- ❖ Please describe your spiritual disciplines or practices if you have any.
- ❖ Would you say that spiritual practices offer you a sense of personal strength and support personally and professionally? (Probe further depending on the answer given)
- ❖ What role might your spirituality play in easing some of your daily work challenges?
- ❖ Do you think that your work life would be experienced differently if you were not spiritual?
- ❖ What things do you believe in that give meaning to your life?

APPENDIX G

Turn It in Originality Report

12/3/2020

Turnitin

Turnitin Originality Report Processed on: 03-Dec-2020 8:16 AM CAT ID: 1463288336 Word Count: 31285 Submitted: 1	
Similarity Index 9%	Similarity by Source Internet Sources: 7% Publications: 3% Student Papers: 9%
Thesis By Loren M	

1% match (student papers from 15-Aug-2017) Submitted to University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2017-08-15
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1% match (Internet from 18-Jul-2020) http://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10413/5614/Arakham_John_2010.pdf?sequence=1
1% match (Internet from 06-Aug-2012) http://statechaplaincyboard.com/files/Understanding%20the%20Nature%20and%20Role%20of%20Spirituality%20in%20Religion%20to%20
< 1% match (Internet from 16-Apr-2020) http://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10413/17680/Naidoo_Urisha_2018.pdf?isAllowed=v&sequence=1
< 1% match (student papers from 25-Sep-2009) Submitted to University of Liverpool on 2009-09-25
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