The divine dreams of a sample of South African children: the gateway to their spirituality

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As part of a research project on religion, spirituality and education, the authors attended to the role that children’s divine dreams could play in religious education (RE). They contend that such dreams can indeed be used by RE teachers as the gateway to understanding the spirituality of their learners. They defend their claim by firstly developing a conceptual-theoretical framework with respect to religion, spirituality and children’s divine dreams, and then presenting the results of an explorative quantitative-qualitative investigation in three schools. They find their claim to have been vindicated, and suggest that although RE teachers should not necessarily teach divine dreams per se, they should, nevertheless, explore the possibility that (at least some of) the contents of children’s divine dreams may be useful for the purpose of teaching them RE from religion itself, rather than teaching them only about religion.

Keywords: spirituality; dreams; children’s dreams; education; religion; religious education

Orientation

The work of Jones (1987) and, more recently, of Kate Adams (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008) are among the first to demonstrate that scholarly discussion about children’s dreams in religious education (RE) learning programmes can be a valuable way of stimulating learners to learn from each other’s religious feelings, ideas and experiences. Although Jones (1987) was one of the few authors (at the time) who demonstrated that children’s dreams may be valuable for learning not only about religion, but also from religion (in a RE context), others, like Hunt (1989) and Bulkeley (1994) – in a sense – pioneered this kind of thinking by arguing that dreams should be afforded a place in the curriculum (although they themselves never used the terms ‘learning about’ and ‘learning from’ religion, per se).1 Other authors who also made pioneering contributions in this regard include Tamm (1996), whose research focuses primarily on how children picture God, as well as Coles (1990), who writes about children’s dreams although he does not link them directly to the curriculum. Finally: even though the research of Husser (1999) does not focus on children’s dreams per se, the fact that he nevertheless writes about scriptural dreams, made us decide that his name should, perhaps, also be mentioned when we talk about how children’s dreams can help to facilitate both learning about religion, as well as learning from religion.

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Defining ‘divine dreams’

As part of a research project on religion/spirituality and education, we attended to the phenomenon of children’s divine dreams as a possible expression of their spirituality. In our attempts to define the term ‘divine dreams’, we were reminded of the words of the twentieth century psychologist, Carl Jung, who said:

We have forgotten the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions. (Quoted in ‘Quotes on dreams,’ Oneira 2002a)

In this regard, the American president, Abraham Lincoln, was reported to have said:

There are, I think some sixteen chapters in the Old Testament and four or five in the New in which dreams are mentioned, and there are many other passages scattered throughout the book which refer to visions. If we believe the Bible, we must accept the fact that, in the old days, God and his angels came to humans in their sleep and made themselves known in dreams. (Quoted in Oneira 2002a)

Adding to the words of Abraham Lincoln, the well-known psychic, Edgar Cayce, is also reported to have said:

From the spiritual or divine there may come dreams or visions that show that God, heavenly forces or higher forces are in association, or desirous of warning or aiding individuals in their activities. (Quoted in ‘Quotes on dreams and dream interpretation,’ Oneira 2002b)

We ultimately decided, for purposes of this specific research project, to define ‘divine dreams’ circumspectly as ‘any dream in which God was believed to have appeared/spoken to the dreaming child’.

After the study, we concluded that such dreams can indeed be utilised as the gateway to understanding children’s spirituality, which in turn can be fruitfully used in RE to help learners understand one another’s deepest spiritual feelings, ideas and experiences.

We intend defending this claim by following three strategies. Firstly, we offer a conceptual and theoretical framework in which we argue that children’s dreams can indeed be regarded as the gateway for understanding their spirituality (spiritual feelings, ideas and experiences). Secondly and thirdly, we report on how we tested the gist of our theoretical argument in explorative, quantitative-qualitative studies. We conclude by considering the validity of the conclusion that we offered above, and make a few recommendations.

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Research with regard to children’s divine dreams is still in its infancy. As a result, there is a dearth of literature on children’s divine dreams in South Africa. Using the search phrases ‘children + dreams + divine’, ‘children’s dreams’, ‘divine dreams’ and ‘children’s divine dreams’, a survey of the databases SABINET, NEXUS, EBSCO-host and UCTD (theses and dissertations at South African universities) produced a total of only 21 dream-related publications in South Africa since 1993. Of these, only five were judged to have relevance for our study, albeit that none of them focuses specifically on children’s divine dreams, or on children’s dreams from an exclusively
Our focus in this study was on spirituality in religious/RE context, and not on psychological aspects. We have not yet encountered a full-blown theory on children’s divine dreams that would sufficiently explain how South African children understand some of their dreams to have a divine connection. Having redesigned our concept map several times, we concluded that the following concepts were key to our study:

- Spirituality, which we define along with De Muynck (2008) as ‘the manner in which one – by orienting [sic.] oneself on [sic.] sources – relates beliefs and experiences of inspiration and/or transcendence, more or less methodically to the actual practice of life’. (In other words, spirituality reflects four dimensions: transcendence, inspiration, personal search and rapport with everyday life. This is the semantic range in which we use the term ‘spirituality’ in this paper) (see also Abdool et al. 2007);
- Learning about religion;
- Learning from religion; and
- Divine dreams.


Adams (2008) indicates that although scientific research into dreams can be traced back to the 1950s, when psychologists carried out experiments in sleep laboratories, dreams had captured the human imagination centuries before that. This imagination had often been expressed in religious contexts. Examples include dream incubation temples, seeking divine answers to questions or to receive healing and religious scriptures of various religions detailing how God/Allah sends messages to people through dreams.

Just as in Adams’ (2008) case, our project does not make any claims or assumptions about the possibility that God can send dreams. We rather resorted to a quantitative-qualitative exploration of how children understand some dreams to have a divine connection.

**Learning about religion: the place and role of children’s divine dreams**

Prominent scholars (Roux and Steenkamp 1995; Roux 1996; Steyn 1998; Bangstad 2004; Hull 2005; Kumar 2006; Steyn 2006) emphasise that RE should be learner centred and not content centred and that RE should not merely be about ‘… [dispensed] information that must be swallowed and regurgitated “correctly”’ (Clasquin et al. 2002). An analysis of the contents and outcomes of such learning programmes confirms, however, the persistent presence of a ‘learning-about-religion’ approach and an almost mechanistic preoccupation with information rubrics such as the history of a particular religion, religious rites, rituals, teachings, scriptures / holy books, symbols, calendars/days, principles of faith, lifestyles, etc.

One of the challenges in the RE class is for teachers to make learning about religion relevant and interesting. The work of authors like Faraday (1972), Jones (1987), Grimmitt et al. (1991) and Adams (2008) shows that the topic of dreams can contribute to those aspects of the curriculum that relate to factual and conceptual aspects of
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religion in ways that are relevant to children. In this regard, Adams (2001) argues that scriptural dream narratives may have an immediate relevance to children’s lives. She concludes that teaching children about these is not only pedagogically fitting, but also pedagogically significant. Children can all relate to the experience of dreaming, and some have dreams which they assign a divine connection to, and which bear broad similarities to dreams in scripture.

In Adams’ opinion, ample opportunities also exist in the classroom where learners may be accompanied to reflect critically upon dreams and their sources. These ideas can stimulate reflective discussion about the possible sources and functions of dreams. One example is religious symbolism. As religions are rich in symbolism, children need to understand this concept in order to understand aspects of religion such as rituals, stories and artefacts. They need to understand how symbols have many layers of meaning which can be different for different people, influenced by personal associations and personal response.

Because religion uses symbolism, particularly in parables, teachers can use dreams in RE to teach children about the concept of symbolism (Adams 2008). Teachers can introduce the idea that dreams may be symbolic through dreams reported in the Bible or the Qur’an; they should, however, present the idea as a matter of opinion which the learners can debate. It is also important for learners to understand that dreams can be meaningful without being symbolic. Examples include auditory message dreams in which the dreamer hears a voice that s/he believes is conveying a literal message. These are also found in the Bible. Any discussion about the alleged symbolic nature of dreams needs to be balanced by reference to these more literal understandings of dreams in order to avoid the misconception that all dreams have symbolic meaning.

Learning from religion: the place and role of children’s divine dreams

In South Africa, in particular, none of the existing RE learning programmes seems to consider seriously the possibility of a learning-from-religion approach to RE as a method of exploring, for example, children’s own spiritual and religious feelings, ideas and experiences. The work of Jones (1987) and, more recently, that of Kate Adams (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008) show, however, that it is with the learning from religion elements of the syllabi (referred to as ‘Personal Search’ in Scotland) that dreams can offer the most valuable learning opportunities in the RE classes (Adams 2008). Adams argues that the topic of dreams may offer children opportunities to explore the nature of God’s communication with humans, asking questions such as: ‘Can God/Allah communicate through dreams? If so, why should God/Allah communicate in this way and not in others? If God/Allah wanted to send a message in a dream, why not send an auditory dream, which the dreamer can understand immediately?’ (Adams 2008). Such questions can stimulate imagination and debate in the RE class.

The specific value of divine dreams for RE lies in the realm of some of the children’s experiences (Adams 2008) and the pedagogic harvesting of these experiences, which can enhance the effectiveness of the RE teaching. Not only can all children relate to dreaming, but some children also have divine dreams. As Hay (1985) observes, teachers should strive to root RE in the children’s own life experiences (‘personal search’) that some people interpret as religious or spiritual, for without doing this, children will be unable to comprehend the nature of religion or spirituality (Adams 2008). For those children who have had a divine dream, classroom work on
the subject may prove to be emotionally, spiritually as well as cognitively significant (Adams 2008).

**RE in South Africa**

The SA government’s official *National Policy on Religion and Education* (DESA 2003) offers an inclusive approach in that it seeks to expose learners to the diversity of religious beliefs in South Africa’s culturally diverse society. The Policy projects a tri-fold emphasis on RE: (a) the programme should be educationally justified, (b) explore diversity and (c) stress common values of equity, tolerance, multilingualism, openness, accountability and social honour.

Despite this tri-fold emphasis, the Policy relies on a rationale which predominantly relates to moral and values education. It endorses the view that cognitive awareness of various religions is useful insofar as it enables a variety of moral codes and practices to be recognised, understood and tolerated, and insofar as it enables members of civil society to be aware of what those who are of a religious persuasion, may find religiously persuasive. The Policy does not, however, attempt to engage with any pistic (i.e. faith-related ‘pure’ or ‘genuine’) issues that arise either from an understanding of religion, or from profound spiritual convictions that may develop as a result of religious upbringing or devotion to particular religious beliefs and customs. Moreover, in confining itself to the cognitively knowable, the Policy reveals a subliminal leaning towards an evidently mechanical didactic approach which the majority of informed commentators believe to be pedagogically inappropriate (Indaba of Christian Leaders 2002; SACC [Parliamentary Office] 2003).

This proclivity is echoed in the *Revised National Curriculum Statement Grades 10–12 (General): Life Orientation* (DESA 2003) where the Department of Education explains that RE, in their view, should have a civic rather than a religious function and that it should be promoting civic rights and responsibilities. It even goes so far as to claim that ‘knowledge of diverse religions will contribute to the development of responsible citizenship and social justice’. In this regard it is noteworthy that after five years of this Policy being in place, educators continue to have serious doubts whether a mere ‘learning-about-religion’ approach will ever be able to cultivate (in learners of school-going age) an attitude of respect and religious tolerance (personal communication, I.J. Oosthuizen, 2007, Potchefstroom, South Africa, with regard to the relationship between learner discipline and moral values).

Religion displays a distinct transcendental quality which no RE learning programme can adequately address (Roothaan 2007). The fact that no educational research with regard to children’s divine dreams could be traced in South Africa does, perhaps, help to explain the total curricular silence about the place and role of children’s divine dreams in RE learning programmes in South Africa.

Our theoretical exposition above of a possible role that children’s dreams (as the gateway to their spirituality) can play in RE, as well as the quantitative and qualitative research that we report on in the following two sections were intended to fill this hiatus – at least partially.

**The quantitative research project**

*Research design*

We used an *ex post facto* empirical survey.
**Purpose of the survey**

The purpose of the survey was to discover which of the respondents in the population actually believed in (a) God and which of them had actually experienced a dream of (a) God.

**The subjects: population and sampling**

The empirical survey was restricted to the central business district of the City of Polokwane, the capital city of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Three schools were purposively selected in this area to form a convenience sample. All the learners in grades 6 and 7 (aged 12–13 years) in the schools formed the research population \( n = 260; 92, 87 \) and 81 from the schools, respectively). The entire population responded to the questionnaire, after which all the responses that betrayed efforts to fabricate responses to please the researchers were discarded in consultation with the class teachers. This left a research sample of \( n = 49 \) (18.84% of the research population).

Since this sample was not representative of all grade 6s/7s (12/13-year-olds) in South Africa, the findings of this survey can not be generalised to all children in these grades and of these ages. However, there is a distinct possibility they can be substantively generalised, because the survey met all the criteria as laid down by Jaeger (1988). In other words, there is a strong possibility that the findings might apply to other grades 6s and 7s aged 12–13 years, but this has to be corroborated.

**The research instrument**

We used a self-constructed questionnaire in view of the expected large number of respondents in the research population and because of the cost implications of, for instance, interviews with all the respondents. We formulated a set of three items based on our conceptual-theoretical framework and which we surmised would extract from the participants the desired information. The questions were as follows:

- Do you believe in (a) God? (‘yes’ or ‘no’)
- Have you ever had a dream of (a) God the details of which you can remember? (‘yes’ or ‘no’) Those who responded in the affirmative were subsequently requested to write a one-page report on the particular dream or to draw a picture of the dream.
- Do you belong to any particular religion? (If ‘yes’, please specify)

The questionnaires were administered by the researchers themselves in the presence of the classroom teachers. This ensured a 100% return of responses \( n = 260 \) from which the research sample \( n = 49 \) was drawn.

**Ethical aspects**

Without the purpose of the exercise being divulged, the participants were informed that the researchers wished them to supply certain information and that they were to be totally honest in their responses. They were also reassured that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any point if they felt uncomfortable with anything. None of the participants withdrew.
The project was also approved by the Ethics Committee of the researchers’ faculty, the Department of Education of the Limpopo Province, the principals of the three schools and the teachers involved.

Validity and reliability

We subjected the instrument to the critical scrutiny of all the researchers as well as of the principals and the teachers in the schools. The researchers, in particular, were requested to focus on the content validity of the items, i.e. to relate the items to the conceptual and theoretical framework that had been developed. We also subjected the responses of the 260 participants in the research population to a screening process involving the respondents’ classroom teachers. The purpose of this was to ensure that we were left with only responses and reports about authentic dreams, i.e. dreams actually experienced. To pre-empt the problem of peer pressure (Adams 2001), we treated the responses to the questionnaire as well as the reports as confidential.

All the respondents who responded with a ‘not sure’ to the second item were interviewed before they were either requested to furnish further particulars about their dreams, or excluded from the final sample. The validity of the quantitative data was corroborated by conducting interviews with learner focus groups (see the section, ‘Research design’, under ‘Qualitative research project’).

There were several threats to the validity of the research which can be ascribed to the explorative and pioneering nature of the project. Firstly, the sample of three schools was not representative of schools in South Africa but used because the researchers had already built up a certain rapport with the principals, the staff and the learners during other projects. The researchers were also familiar with the ethnic and racial composition as well as with the language medium of the schools. Secondly, all the respondents in the research sample did not belong to the same race group, but we decided not to involve race as an independent variable. The respondents were culturally similar, including fluency in the language medium of the school and socioeconomic status. In our opinion, this made race irrelevant. Thirdly, we noted that the research sample was relatively small (only 18.84% of the research population). We were satisfied with this sample size, because it was based on the expert opinion of the respondents’ classroom teachers who knew the respondents well, and because the sample compared well with Adams’ (2001) of 21%. Fourthly, we were aware of the fact that, despite all our precautions, some of the responses and reports that should have been in the group might have slipped through, and vice versa. Fifthly, we were aware of the possibility that some of the respondents would experience difficulty in remembering all the details of their dreams. Some of them might therefore have imaginatively fabricated some of the details (Adams 2001) or merely omitted them. And finally, although we took every measure to correctly apply Altheide and Johnson’s (1994) guidelines for content analysis, subjectivity remains a potential problem.

Data analysis

Quantitative analysis provided nominal data about the respondents’ religious affiliation, belief in God (or not), having had a dream (or not), the number who wrote the report on the dream (or not), and the themes of the dreams. (For content analysis of item 2, see ‘Qualitative research project’, below.)
Findings

(1) The 18.84% research sample compared well with the 21% sample that Adams (2001) worked with. All the members of the research sample (n = 49) were fluent in Afrikaans, the school’s medium of instruction, and came from middle-income family homes. 87.7% of the respondents were white (of European origin) and the rest of either traditional African or Oriental origin.

(2) All 260 participants indicated that they believed in the God of the Christian faith. Of these, the abovementioned 49 (18.84%) reported having had a dream about God and 37 (14.2%) were unsure (and their participation discontinued after brief interviews with them and their teachers).

(3) Of the 49 participants who reported having had a dream about God, 32 submitted one-page written reports about their dreams. Seven submitted pictures only, while the remaining ten submitted written reports augmented with drawings. All the drawings included figures who shared the same anthropomorphic characteristics: God, Jesus and the angels were all pictured wearing long, flowing robes and halos; God was drawn wearing a long white beard; in the three drawings portraying Jesus, he was drawn with arms outstretched.

The qualitative research project
Research design
Use was made of the one-page reports and drawings of respondents about their dreams (see ‘The research instrument’, above). This was augmented with personal interviews conducted with various (groups of) individuals.

Purpose of the survey
We wanted to discover the content of the respondents’ dreams, particularly the respondents’ own understanding of their dreams and why they attributed a divine connection to the dreams. We used the dream reports and drawings to understand the spirituality of the respondents. (A secondary purpose of the survey was to see to what extent the findings dovetailed with those of other researchers.) The purpose of the interviews with the classroom teachers was to eliminate those responses of the participants in the quantitative survey that were suspected of responding in ways intended to please the researchers. The purpose of the interviews with the learner respondents who responded with ‘I am not sure’ was to assess the probability that they indeed had had a dream about God. The purpose of the interviews with the learner focus groups was to corroborate the findings based on the quantitative research. The purpose of the interviews with the principals was to ascertain whether the subject of children’s divine dreams ever came up in RE classes as part of the learning material.

The subjects: population and sampling
The one-page reports and drawings of 49 respondents were available for content analysis. Thirty-seven (14.2%) of the learners were briefly interviewed with respect to the authenticity of their responses. Three learner focus groups were interviewed, each
consisting of four respondents, randomly selected from the research sample. Three classroom teachers were interviewed as well as the principals of the three schools.

**The research instrument**

(a) One-page reports and drawings.

(b) The interviews with the learners and with the classroom teachers were shared among the three researchers.

(c) The interviews with the learner respondent focus groups were conducted by the same senior researcher.

(d) Those with the principals were conducted by another experienced researcher. The interviewers made use of an interview schedule which standardised the questions. In the case of learners and teachers, notes were made regarding the desirability of retaining a particular learner response or not. In the case of the learner focus groups and the principals, protocols were drafted.

**Ethical aspects**

The reports and drawings were treated with the utmost confidentiality. The interviewers informed the interviewees that they could opt out whenever they felt uncomfortable with proceedings. None of the interviewees withdrew, however.

**Validity and reliability**

The contents of the final 49 responses and reports were independently analysed by the three researchers (according to Altheide and Johnson’s (1994) guidelines for content analysis), and then compared and reconciled. The use of schedules ensured that the same set of questions would be addressed at each particular group of interviewees. The results of the interviews were used to reinforce the validity and reliability of the quantitative research (see section ‘Quantitative research project’).

**Data analysis**

Content analysis of the reports and drawings was done independently by the three researchers according to the guidelines provided by Altheide and Johnson (1994). Their findings were brought together, compared and reconciled. The interviews with the respondents and their classroom teachers resulted in the rejection of the responses of 37 participants. The contents of the protocols of the interviews with the learner focus groups and the principals were independently analysed by the three researchers, and their findings subsequently compared and reconciled.

**Findings**

1. With respect to the *content analysis* of the one-page reports and the drawings
1.1 The analysis revealed the following nine dream themes, presented in Table 1 in their order of incidence.
1.2 Each of these nine dream themes presented in a number of sub-themes.
1.2.1 The theme of reassurance, for example, presented in the following five sub-themes: (a) assurance of the existence of God (and the heavenly angels) (b) assurance of predestination (being ‘chosen’ by God as one of his children), (c) assurance of a heavenly afterlife, (d) assurance of a Godly presence (either Jesus himself, Jesus and the angels, or just the angels alone) during bad times and (e) assurance that deceased loved ones were alive and well.

1.2.2 The theme of insecurity and protection presented the three sub-themes of feeling extremely unsafe and being protected against (a) civil war (specifically Black on White violence) involving the armed forces, (b) racial hatred and cultural intolerance and (c) violent crimes such as rape, armed robbery and physical assault. Two participants also reported dreams in which God sent his angels to help the military protect their parents’ farms from being seized by the government. In all nine dreams, Jesus and the angels featured strongly as members of the ‘Heaven’s Armed Response Unit’ (as one of the participants referred to them).

1.2.3 The theme of Judgment Day and fear of God’s wrath which, together with the theme of redemption and salvation, with the third highest incidence, presented in two sub-themes. Three participants reported that they had dreamt of having arrived at heaven’s door and being summoned by an angel to appear before God’s throne to be judged for the sinful deeds they had committed on earth. All three these participants recounted an almost pathological fear (not respect or reverence) of God, and of being found unworthy to enter into heaven. Two other participants reported dreams in which they witnessed Judgment Day: how people screamed and cried when they were judged by God and how that terrified them; how they remembered feeling disillusioned (in their dreams) with their parents and teachers telling them that God was a loving, caring God, only to have witnessed exactly the opposite for themselves on Judgment Day.

Two of the dream themes, namely reassurance and instruction/missionary, represented an overlap with the theme of redemption and salvation, as well as with the theme of admonition / caution to repent, change behaviour/habits: the participants reported God or his messenger(s) (Jesus and/or the angels) informing them that they had nothing to fear of Judgment Day and that they could be assured of personal salvation, just as long as they paid attention to God’s admonitions and refrained from any bad habits and behaviour.
1.2.4 With respect to the theme desire to be in heaven, four participants reported, in one form or another, how they found themselves either in heaven (one participant) or in the Garden of Eden (three participants) and how they pleaded with God (two participants) or Jesus (two participants) – who were accompanying them at the time – not to return them to earth. All of them indicated that they had tried to persuade God/Jesus that the earth was a very bad place and how they desired – more than anything else – to remain with God/Jesus in heaven.

1.2.5 The two dreams that shared the theme of fear of an eternity without God and fear of the ‘Devil’ also shared the sub-theme of the dreamers being threatened by God/Jesus with the ‘reality’ of spending an eternity in hell if they persisted with their current behaviour. These two dreams seem to reveal evidence of the participants’ belief that God was – perhaps – not a God of love, forgiveness and comfort but, instead, an omnipotent, omniscient and intimidating other-worldly threat against whom they (as mere mortals) did not stand a chance.

1.2.6 The two dreams that shared the theme of premonition firstly shared a desperate and almost apocalyptic vision of the annihilation of the Afrikaner people in South Africa. Secondly, these particular dreams of forewarning seemed to suggest an ill-omened sub-theme of despondency and trepidation as far as the future was concerned.

2. Findings with respect to the various sets of interviews

2.1 The participants in all three focus group interviews with learners indicated that they believed in the existence of God and that they trusted God to assist them in making (and executing) the right decisions in life. They also indicated that they were convinced that they had been chosen by God (predestination) even before they were born. These findings corroborated the findings based on our analysis of the participants’ written reports of their divine dreams.

It is interesting to note that all the participants admitted that they had had their divine dreams during taxing times in their lives. For fear of being ridiculed or misunderstood, though, they said they couldn’t inform their peers either of the particular difficulty they were facing, or about the divine dream they had had as a result of the dilemma:

I am captain of the first Netball team. Can you imagine what the parents of my friends would say if they knew? ‘How can someone who claims to have had a dream in which angels had appeared to her be allowed to lead the School’s Netball team?’ (Female participant, focus group 3)

They felt they also couldn’t tell their parents:

If I told my mum I had met Jesus in a dream and that he showed me that the Afrikaners were going to disappear from South Africa within the next few years, what do you think she’s going to do to me? She’ll probably take me straight to the doctor! (Male participant, focus group 1)

The participants were unanimous in their conviction that God’s reassuring message for today’s teenagers in South Africa had been that he would never abandon them – whatever the source of their fear or whatever the circumstances. This finding backs up our earlier finding that the dream theme that had the highest incidence was reassurance.
The majority of the participants struggled with the concept of forgiveness. In this regard it needs to be recorded that all three focus groups linked their understanding of forgiveness to their and their families’ experiences of what had happened to them after the new Government came to power in South Africa in 1994. What makes this finding interesting is that most of the participants felt guilty for struggling to forgive people who had wronged them or their family as a result of affirmative action and social transformation – because God had reassured them in their dreams that he would never desert them. They felt that if they could not forgive those who had done them injustice, they were somehow betraying God.

2.2 All three school principals indicated that the RE teachers in their schools did not address the theme of children’s divine dreams in their RE classes. This finding confirms Adams’ finding (2001) that none of the RE teachers she had questioned used dreams in their pedagogical planning. Besides the fact that the principals were visibly uncomfortable when the interviewer mentioned the use of this particular theme in their RE classes, they were quick to point out that they felt that this theme was perhaps too controversial to introduce at senior primary school level. They were not sure whether the children were emotionally and intellectually ready to deal responsibly with classroom discussions around divine dreams and spirituality. Two of the principals also voiced their concern that a small percentage of the parents who subscribed to fundamentalist Christian convictions might deliberately misconstrue the best pedagogical intentions of the school to allow classroom discussions of children’s divine dreams in their RE classes at senior primary school level and that they might consider taking legal action against the school – something their schools would much rather do without.

The principals formulated their doubts as follows:

Trying to give effect to the laudable intentions of RE in this country is like trying to slap mortar on an oiled wall – it just doesn’t stick; yet we have to keep going at it, because all we have is mortar and an oiled wall… (principal, School 1)

I know they [the Department of Education] mean well, but the best we can hope for in our classes, is that the learners may eventually learn one or two useful facts about another religion. (principal, School 2)

While most religions teach tolerance for one’s fellow human (sic), they tend not to teach tolerance for other religious faiths, as such. Surely you can’t expect my educators to teach our learners such tolerance? How can they learn tolerance if they are only confronted with a few facts about other religions? I tell you, to most learners in this country, RE is painfully boring. There’s very little they and their peers can relate to. (principal, School 3)

Discussion

The figures not only show that not all the respondents had divine dreams; they also seem to compare favourably with those quoted by Adams. In her research (2001), 21.2% of her participants reported having had a dream about God, while 9.1% were unsure.

All the drawings of figures sharing the same anthropomorphic characteristics, and the picturing of God, Jesus and/or the angels wearing long, flowing robes and halos,
God/Jesus with his arms outstretched, confirm the findings of Tamm (1996, passim) and Adams (2001).

Two of the dream themes, reassurance and instruction/missionary, are the same as those identified by Adams (2005). The work of Olivier (1994) and Maree (1999) also validates this particular finding. Dreams filled with emotion, where the dreamers feel upset or annoyed, are well recorded (Maree 1999).

The dream themes of fear of an eternity without God and fear of the ‘Devil’ seem to reveal evidence of the participants’ belief that God is – perhaps – not a God of love, forgiveness and comfort but, instead, an omnipotent, omniscient and intimidating other-worldly threat.

The research of Hosking (2005) suggests that dreams – in one way or another – comment on a particular society and in doing so, they convey truths about that society or culture. The fact that a combined total of 25 out of the 49 divine dreams (51%) that were analysed (spanning across the following themes: (a) insecurity and protection, (b) Judgment Day and fear of God’s wrath, (c) desire to be in heaven, (d) admonition/caution to repent, change behaviour/habits, (e) fear of an eternity without God and fear of the ‘Devil’ and (f) premonition) revealed evidence of intrinsically negative, depressing and upsetting messages is, in light of Hosking’s research, educationally significant. Events in the post-1994 South Africa are clearly impacting upon the lives of prepubescent participants.

Not only do the dreams of the participants reflect their own spirituality (cf. Adams 2001), their occurrence also suggests the existence of a numinous hub in children where cognitive, knowable facts about a particular religion are allowed to converge with their personalised, internalised appreciation of spirituality to help give effect to the ‘reality’ of a distinct transcendental beyondness that provides direction and meaning to their lives. This not only supersedes most – if not all – of the content in current RE learning programmes; it also suggests a different way of looking at the place and role of children’s spirituality in RE.

The participants’ divine dreams reveal an authentic honesty. Our content analysis of their dreams suggested that the participants’ conscious knowledge of their own religion (in this case, Christianity), combined with their internalised appreciation of spirituality as a kind of transcendent beyondness, embodied certain guidelines according to which they should be living their lives, such as: to seek the reassurance and protection of God; to embrace the good and the Godly, live a life so that entry might be gained to heaven upon earthly death, patiently await God’s instructions, gracefully accept Divine cautions and reprimands, and fear the wrath of the Almighty.

Children’s knowledge of their own religion, the place and role of their own lived spirituality in their own and their peers’ lives and the role that God (and not religion) plays in this lived spirituality, suggest that RE teachers could learn much from their children’s (divine) dreams.

In South Africa, RE teachers are so busy teaching about religion and they are so concerned with ensuring that they do, above all, observe the implied instruction in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (DESA 2003) that ‘knowledge of diverse religions (should) contribute to the development of responsible citizenship and social justice’ that ‘the divine’ in confessional or sectarian terms has been relegated out of the RE curriculum. What the participants’ dreams demonstrated, however, was how important it is to take note of Hosking’s (2005) thesis that children’s dreams comment on the society they live in and in doing so, they convey truths about that particular society or culture.
Conclusion and recommendations

Having now presented the three strategies and their results, we are of the opinion that our conclusion stated in the first section of this article has been vindicated, namely that children’s dreams can indeed be utilised as the gateway to understanding their spirituality, which in turn can be fruitfully used in RE to help learners understand their own, and others’ deepest spiritual feelings, ideas and experiences. Although follow-up research is still needed, our own findings suggest that corrective pedagogical intervention may be needed.

Because children’s dreams are, as Adams (2001) explained, an expression of their inner, spiritual dimension, RE teachers could help transform current RE learning programmes so as to include more learning from children’s spirituality, and less learning about religion, per se.

As far as the SA government’s official National Policy on Religion and Education (DESA 2003) is concerned, the findings of our research suggest that education policymakers and curriculum designers may, perhaps, have been missing the point somewhat with the prominence that they afford to the exploration of cultural diversity and fundamental values in our RE learning programmes. Not only did the dreams of the participants in this project reflect their own spirituality, they also suggested the existence of a spiritual focal point in children where cognitive, knowable facts about a particular religion converged with their personalised, internalised appreciation of spirituality to help give effect to the ‘reality’ of a distinct transcendental beyondness that provided direction and meaning to their lives. This not only superseded most – if not all – of the content in current RE learning programmes; it also suggested a different way of looking at the place and role of children’s spirituality in RE.

Note
1. We thank one of our anonymous peer reviewers for pointing this out.

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References


