The Spiritual Lives of Teachers

By June Hetzel and David Costillo

Do you seek to have a classroom led by the Holy Spirit? Do you long to walk in the Spirit even in the busyness of the day? Whether one considers Moses, David, or Daniel in the Old Testament; Jesus, Peter, or Paul in the New Testament; or writings of Berding (2011), Blackaby and Blackaby (2006), Foster (1992), or Packer (2005), one truth is clear—the central aspect of living the Spirit-led life is one’s relationship and dependence on God through prayer.

In May 2013, 1,509 ACSI teachers in 38 countries participated in a study titled “The Spiritual Lives of Christian Teachers.” The central question of the survey was, “What does the spiritual life of a Christian teacher look like?” Themes that emerged were the centrality of one’s relationship and dependence on God in teaching, dispositions of the Spirit, and relational harmony reflective of life in the Spirit. When teachers were vulnerable to the enemy, the attacks came through internal struggles, relational discord, and pride and independence from God. Respondents indicated prayer and God’s Word as the primary defense against these attacks.

The Population Studied

The survey was partially or fully completed by 1,509 teachers living in 38 countries. Seventy-three percent of these teachers were from the United States, and 27 percent resided in 37 other countries. Seventy-two percent were female, and 28 percent were male. The mean age was 44 with an age range of 21 to 76. The mean number of years teaching was 16 with a range of 1 to 52 years of experience. Respondents’ primary teaching responsibilities were pre-K–16, with the majority of respondents teaching K–12.

Most teachers reported that they taught at a private school (88 percent), followed by international schools (13 percent), mission schools (7 percent), and public schools (2 percent). Teachers reported worshipping in dozens of different denominations, with nondenominational (33 percent) and Baptist (31 percent) being the highest denominations represented in this study.*
Methodology

The survey was electronically posted in May 2013. Dr. Derek Keenan, ACSI vice president of Academic Affairs, endorsed the survey, electronically sending the link to 3,390 ACSI administrators in the United States and 200 ACSI administrators in English-speaking schools outside the United States. School administrators chose whether to send the survey to their teachers. Teachers then elected to voluntarily complete the survey. Quantitative data was electronically summarized for central tendency, and qualitative items were analyzed following Creswell’s qualitative procedures (Creswell 2003).

The Survey Instrument

Teachers, administrators, and professors assisted in the development of the 45-item survey, including professors of education, Christian education, Old Testament, New Testament, theology, and spiritual formation. Responses were collected through an online tool, and each narrative response was analyzed for themes by two to three researchers. Themes were then coded for reporting purposes.

The Findings

We will briefly report data on how teachers self-describe the Spirit-led classroom, followed by obstacles to the Spirit-led classroom and frequency of spiritual disciplines.

The Spirit-Led Teacher and Classroom

The survey items analyzed to date that most significantly provide insight into the Spirit-led lives of classroom teachers—teachers’ dependency on God, the presence of the Spirit in their lives, and relational issues—are listed below.

How has your prayer life changed as a result of becoming a teacher?

- 39% responded that their prayer life had changed because of the specificity of what they prayed for (that is, primarily students and families).
- 21% responded that the change related to the consistency and frequency of prayer.
- 14% indicated their heightened awareness of the gravity of their teaching responsibility and their need for dependence on God.

How has your character changed as a result of becoming a teacher?

- 29% of respondents indicated growth in Spirit-led dispositions, such as patience, flexibility, gentleness, self-control, compassion, joy, and lovingness.
- 24% reported a keener awareness of setting an example and being a public role model.
- 15% reported increased understanding of people, their backgrounds, and culture and acceptance of individual differences.

How does the Holy Spirit impact your classroom?

- 34% of teachers described classroom atmosphere—such as community—and attitudes that exhibited the fruits of the Spirit, respect for one another, and compassion.
- 29% of teachers described ongoing openness and flexibility in the teacher in accord with the Spirit’s leading.
- 27% of teachers described prayer, dependency on the Spirit.
- 20% of teachers described biblical integration and Scriptures brought to mind by the Spirit.
- 16% of teachers described special insights into teaching in which they were given guidance by the Spirit in what they should say while teaching.
What has been the most important spiritual lesson that you have learned thus far in your journey as an educator?

29% of the respondents cited relational growth. For example, teachers were learning to slow their responses and not prejudge and to forgive, show grace, value students as more important than lessons, and consider each child’s uniqueness.

22% of the teachers cited dependency on God as their greatest spiritual lesson. They learned to walk in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25), allowing the Holy Spirit to guide.

21% of the teachers cited their own character change, such as growth in compassion, mercy, love, patience, humility, and teachability.

21% were learning more about the character of God, primarily His sovereignty, and that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate teacher.

14% cited spiritual disciplines, primarily prayer and personal Bible study.

14% also said that their most important learning related to understanding their teaching as a vocation and that teaching is not just a profession but a ministry.

As a teacher, have you ever experienced something supernatural and you undoubtedly knew that God had intervened for the good?

26% of respondents indicated supernatural insight was given (for example, the right words to say midstream in a lesson, a difficult situation, or special knowledge about a student).

22% of respondents indicated they had seen God provide in special ways for students, parents, and families or had witnessed physical healing.

20% mentioned seeing changed lives, such as behavioral or emotional healing and intervention of the Spirit.

In at least 15% of the respondents’ narratives, prayer was mentioned in the context of supernatural intervention.

Was there a specific teacher in your life that modeled for you what it meant to be Spirit-led?

44% of respondents cited a teacher from their own schooling experience.

14% of respondents cited a coworker.

Obstacles to the Spirit-Led Classroom

The following are survey items that most significantly provide insight into obstacles to the Spirit-led lives of classroom teachers.

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A Spirit-led classroom is one guided by the Holy Spirit in all aspects of learning, day by day.”

—preschool teacher, Brazil

What do you struggle with most, from a spiritual perspective, in your educational role?

- **Personal struggles** entailed time issues, balance, and fatigue; character issues such as patience, anger, self-control, and forgiveness; living as a model of Christ; and making time for personal Bible study and prayer.

- **Teaching struggles** primarily involved integration challenges and how to get students to know God, not just learn about God; taskmaster versus shepherd; academics versus character; grace-based teaching and balance between discipline and grace.
**What temptations do you experience in your work as an educator?**

**Character temptations** included the temptation of laziness or "winging it" (23 percent); pride or self-sufficiency (19 percent); the tongue—harshness, inappropriate words, gossiping (16 percent); negativity, being critical, judging (14 percent); and impatience (7 percent).

**Internal struggles** included frustration and discouragement (14 percent) and feeling inadequate for the job and comparing oneself to others (5 percent). Another theme that emerged was neglecting time with God (8 percent).

"[I have] less time to [pray]. But, when I do take time to [pray] on behalf of students, the depth of intercession is often seemingly involuntarily profound."  
—teacher of grades 7–8, South Korea

**As a teacher, have you ever encountered spiritual warfare?**

- 46% cited relational discord and lack of unity.
- 16% cited demonic oppression.
- 16% cited student misbehavior, such as disrespect and rebellion.
- 15% cited emotional disequilibrium of the teacher, such as negativity, discouragement, and confusion.

49% of respondents mentioned prayer as the method to counter spiritual warfare.

11% of respondents mentioned Scripture as the method to counter spiritual warfare.

**Where do you experience spiritual vulnerability?**

- 19% expressed spiritual vulnerability during attacks or criticism received from parents, administrators, or colleagues.
- 19% cited concerns regarding their ability to do the job, such as not feeling prepared or equipped or worrying about what others think of them.
- 15% indicated that they felt spiritually vulnerable when they neglected their personal quiet time, such as prayer and reading of Scriptures.

**When do you experience spiritual vulnerability?**

- 12% of the respondents indicated that they feel spiritually vulnerable when they are fatigued or burned out.
- 11% indicated that they feel spiritually vulnerable when they are too busy.

When researchers clustered these themes and subtracted the overlap of respondents, 21 percent indicated that they were spiritually vulnerable when they are too fatigued, burned out, or busy, which turns out to be the highest theme for spiritual vulnerability.

**Negative behaviors described in the context of feeling spiritually vulnerable, in rank order, are listed below:**

- 10% described anger, losing temper, and impatience.
- 10% described fear and anxiety.
- 8% described pride and self-sufficiency.
- 5% described discouragement, negativity, and depression.
- 5% described impure thought life.

"The daily grind and constant preparation associated with being a teacher has increased my need for prayer to persevere."  
—prechool teacher, United States
Spiritual Disciplines

Spiritual Disciplines Practiced Most Regularly

- Prayer (88%)
- Corporate worship (88%)
- Fellowship (80%)

Spiritual Disciplines Practiced Least Regularly

- Fasting (4%)
- Retreat (7%)

Identify the first most important spiritual disciplines that support your ministry as a Christian educator.

From a list of 22 disciplines, the top-ranking disciplines were as follows:

- Prayer (56%)
- Bible Study (16%)
- Other (23%)
- Fellowship (5%)

Retreat
Sometimes practiced by 65%
Never practiced by 26%

Rest
Regularly practiced by 32%
Sometimes practiced by 62%
Never practiced by 6%

Sabbath
Regularly practiced by 50%
Sometimes practiced by 36%
Never practiced by 14%

“[The Holy Spirit] is my guide, my inspiration, my source.”
—high school teacher, Nepal

Attacks on Spirit-Led Teachers

Spirit-Led Teacher

Dependency on God

Neglect of the Spiritual Disciplines

Fatigue

Improper Use of the Tongue

Criticism

Relational Discord

Relational Harmony

Dispositions of the Spirit

Self-doubt

Frustration

Discouragement

Busyness

Pride
Analysis of Findings

Spirit-Led Teachers

Spirit-led teachers’ dispositions include moment-by-moment, prayerful dependence on God with a deep recognition of God’s sovereignty. Spirit-led teachers’ dispositions reflect the fruit of the Spirit in how they comport themselves inwardly and outwardly. Spirit-led teachers’ interactions with others reflect relational harmony, grace, and mercy. Spirit-led teachers have hearts of compassion, are growing in their understanding of others, and receive insight from the Spirit during their teaching.

Attacks on Spirit-Led Teachers

Spiritual attacks on teachers come in three primary areas: dependency on God, dispositions of the Spirit, and relational harmony. Dependency on God is attacked through the temptations of pride, busyness, fatigue, and neglect of the spiritual disciplines. Dispositions of the Spirit are attacked through internal struggles, such as discouragement, frustration, and self-doubt. Relational harmony is attacked through improper use of the tongue, criticism, and relational discord.

Conclusion

Teachers are on the front lines of ministry, and like Daniel, they must rely on the Holy Spirit in a posture of moment-by-moment prayer (Daniel 2:17–18), because it is God who reveals mysteries and gives discernment (Daniel 2:28–30). When teachers rely on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God gives gifts for the work, such as knowledge and intelligence (Daniel 1:17), infuses the fruits of the Spirit into the lives of the teachers (Galatians 5:22–23), and strengthens relational harmony (Daniel 1:9).

Teachers are spiritually vulnerable when they are overly busy and highly fatigued (Psalm 46:10). Erosion of spiritual lives is seen when they attempt to do the work on their own (that is, pride and independence from God; Proverbs 11:2). Common symptoms of internal struggles include discouragement, frustration, and self-doubt (Psalm 42). Common symptoms of relational discord include improper use of the tongue, impatience, and criticism (Proverbs 11:9).

Teachers need to assess the countenance of their soul (that is, fruit of the Spirit-led life) in vertical and horizontal relationships, remaining aware of the symptoms of spiritual attacks on the Spirit-led life. “The Spiritual Lives of Christian Teachers” survey indicates prayer and dependency on God as the central ingredients of the Spirit-led teacher, both for teaching ministry and for defense against spiritual attacks. Further research related to the correspondence of teacher busyness and fatigue, spiritual disciplines (for example, rest, Sabbath, and retreat), and the Spirit-led life may be warranted.

References


*Some percentages may reflect multiple answers and may add up to more than 100 percent.

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David Costillo earned an MA at Talbot School of Theology. He serves as both recruiting and community relations coordinator for Biola University’s School of Education and as a spiritual director with The Leadership Institute, a ministry that develops Christian leaders for the next generation who listen and respond to God’s voice, embody His character, and extend His kingdom. David Costillo and his wife, Jennifer, both graduates of ACSI schools in Southern California, came to the Lord because of their ACSI teachers.