The Role of Spirituality and Spiritual Practices in Technical Education

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Abstract: *Though academics and educators often ignore, discount or discredit spiritual aspects of learning, spirituality and spiritual practices can influence learning and well-being positively. This paper explores the role spirituality and spiritual practices can have in technical education to help students develop their full capacities. Five key practices found in the major faith traditions are presented as aids to effective education: prayer, meditation, service, reading and integrity. How to develop each of these spiritual practices and integrate spiritual capabilities, values and processes into education is discussed.*

1. Introduction

Spirituality is defined as the quality or condition of being spiritual, and spiritual is defined as "1. relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material things; and 2. relating to religious or sacred things rather than worldly things" (Encarta Dictionary). Spiritual practices are those actions that lead to spirituality. It is possible to identify universal values, principles and practices by examining those that are common to most of the world's cultures, traditions and religions, though some disagreement will remain (Brown, 2004; Kinnier, Kernes & Dautheribes, 2000).

Traditions and religions have played an important role in human history and have been influential in shaping present day cultures (Wilber, 1995). Our significant traditions, including our spiritual practices, can generally be traced back to a religious origin. These traditions have evolved and been perpetuated as they have been seen to advance the well-being of individuals and society. Yet certain limitations, biases and misunderstandings of these traditions and religions permeate the modern world (Beauregard & O'Leary, 2007). In Western society, spirituality and religiosity have become associated with bigotry, fanaticism, superstition, fundamentalism, narrow-mindedness and other negative ideas, largely because of many of the bad examples from their practice in history.

In view of the growing lack of morality in business and public affairs that has brought the United States and the world to the brink of possible economic and environmental collapse, there is an increasing sense that we must seek to balance today's dominant materialistic worldviews with more spiritual and moral ones. What values, beliefs and actions are needed to guide communities and institutions in these difficult times? What role can spirituality and spiritual practices play in addressing the dysfunction, distress and disillusionment with current models of thought and action and how can they be included in education?

The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to happiness, joy, rapture, comfort, and ecstasy, rather than be entitled to these feelings by the exercise of personal strengths and virtues, leads to legions of people who in the middle of great wealth are starving spiritually. Positive emotion alienated from the exercise of character leads to emptiness, to in authenticity, to depression, and as we age, to the gnawing realization that we are fidgeting until we die.

The positive feeling that arises from the exercise of strengths and virtues, rather than from the shortcuts, is authentic. (Seligman, 2002, p. 8)

In the search for success, happiness and meaning, many think the answer lies in acquiring ever more money, possessions, fame, power or other worldly achievements. As their effort and achievement intensify, their bewilderment and despair deepens. Though humanity has achieved ever greater material well being, they are more empty and unhappy (Seligman, 2002). People have increasing material prosperity yet experience growing spiritual aridity unaware that their materialistic values and endeavours undermine their attempts to find happiness.

Spirituality and spiritual practices can act as a leaven to affect positively the character of our culture, communities and institutions, but their presence and influence is limited in much of civil society. Spirituality and spiritual practices in the public schools are problematic in a society that identifies them exclusively with religion and believes that religion should not be taught in schools. In the United States, as the more overtly Christian influences in the schools were being banned because of First Amendment challenges, most schools have banned identifiable spiritual discourse and practice. In their place, many have turned to more spiritual-free approaches, such as values clarification and character education.

This paper will attempt to provide arguments and evidence for the efficacy of spirituality and spiritual practices to facilitate and support a more holistic approach to education, thereby enriching individuals, communities and institutions (Clarken 2006; 2005/2006). Creating, supporting and encouraging such spirituality and spiritual practices will require addressing the superstitions and dogmas that have become attached to them before they will be acceptable and able to address the present-day concerns.

2. Spiritual and Moral Intelligence in Education

Spirituality and spiritual practices can be viewed as aspects of spiritual and moral intelligences and they can all be considered as components of moral education. As emotional and social intelligence have expanded our view of human intelligence, spiritual and moral intelligence add important and needed components to our holistic view of human intelligence. They have great potential to improve our understanding of learning and behavior (Coles, 1997; Hass, 1998; Emmons, 2000; Borba, 2001). Educators have a responsibility to offer students a balanced opportunity to develop their full capacities (Clarken 2007a; 2007b).

Spiritual intelligence addresses meaning, motivation, vision and value. Zohar and Marshall (2001) identify twelve qualities or principles of spiritual intelligence: self-awareness, spontaneity, being vision and value led, holism, compassion, celebration of diversity, field independence, humility, tendency to ask why, ability to reframe, positive use of adversity and sense of vocation. Emmons (2000) identifies the capacity for transcendence, heightened consciousness, sanctification, spiritual problem-solving and virtuous behavior as aspects of spiritual intelligence.

Spiritual intelligence shares several characteristics with moral intelligence. Moral intelligence refers to the ability to apply ethical principles to goals, values and actions. It is the ability to know right from wrong and behave ethically, the capacity to know and apply ethical values, goals, and actions (Lennick & Kiel, 2005). Lennick and Kiel identify four competencies of moral intelligence: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness and compassion. These include the capacities of acting consistently with principles, values and beliefs; telling the truth; standing up for what is right; keeping promises; taking personal responsibility; admitting mistakes and failures; embracing responsibility for serving others; letting go of one's mistakes; letting go of others' mistakes and actively caring about others.

Education is a moral endeavor (Goodlad, 1990; Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990) and the classroom is saturated with moral meaning (Hansen, 1995). Teachers can create a just and caring environment (Tom, 1984), and, along with parents, be models of morality and spirituality, exemplifying the virtues they seek to inspire in their students (Lickona,1983). Educational leaders and administrators can also practice these same behaviors with the faculty, staff, students, parents and others. Such moral behavior is highly associated with leadership effectiveness (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Lennick & Kiel, 2005).

The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Panel on Moral Education defines a moral person as one who respects human dignity, cares about the welfare of others, integrates individual interests and social responsibilities, demonstrates integrity, reflects on moral choices and seeks peaceful resolution of conflict. They stated schools should define and teach the universal moral values and their sources, including religion and that moral education should be a powerful unifying and energizing force in the curriculum. They encourage educators to create social and cultural contexts to support the development of morally mature persons. Moral education needs to include socialization of appropriate conduct, critical thinking and decision -making and educators should ensure that school climate and policies contribute to moral growth. As school establish and convey clear expectations about their roles as moral educators, educators can give more attention to moral education (1988).

Borba's definition of moral intelligence as the capacity to understand right from wrong, to have strong ethical convictions and to act on them to behave in the right and honorable way (2001) is associated with spirituality. She identifies seven virtues children need to develop related to moral intelligence—empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness. Her plan for teaching children moral intelligence can easily be adapted to the schools and classrooms.

To teach children empathy--the ability to identify with and feel other 's concerns--she suggests fostering awareness and an emotional vocabulary, enhancing sensitivity to the feelings of others and developing empathy for another 's point of view. To help students develop conscience--to know the right and decent way to act and to act in that way--teachers can create the context for moral growth, teach virtues to strengthen conscience and guide behavior and foster moral discipline to learn right from wrong. Self - control is the ability to regulate your thoughts and actions to stop pressures from within or without and act the way you know and feel is right. Teachers can model and prioritize self-control and encourage students to self-motivate, deal with temptations and think before acting.

Educators and educational leaders show respect by modeling how they value others by treating them in a courteous and considerate way. They can teach respect, enhance respect for authority and emphasize good manners and courtesy in the classroom. Kindness is taught by demonstrating concern about the welfare and feelings of others through teaching its meaning and value, establishing a zero tolerance for meanness and encouraging and pointing out its positive effect. By teaching students to respect the dignity and rights of all persons, even those whose beliefs and behaviors we may disagree with, we teach tolerance. We engender it by instilling an appreciation for diversity, countering stereotypes and not tolerating prejudice. We can teach fairness by treating others fairly, helping them learn to behave fairly and to stand up against unfairness and injustice.

3. Some Scientific Evidence

As research methodologies and technologies become more sophisticated, it is expected that more scientific evidence for the benefits of spirituality and spiritual practice will be forthcoming. Psychologists are documenting the spiritual component to mental health and general well-being (Seligman, 2002; Vitz, 2002), and a new school of psychology, positive psychology, is gaining influence, prestige and acceptance. Positive psychology draws on science, philosophy and religion to identify positive

emotions, six core virtues, and twenty-four signature strengths (Seligman, 2002).

Spiritual practices such as contemplative prayer and meditation involve an increase in activity in a number of frontal brain regions, including the prefrontal cortex (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999). As tools and techniques advance, they are increasingly being associated

with neurobiological events (Newberg & d'Aquili, 2001). They are now seen as intrinsic part of human experience (Kendler, Gardner, & Prescott, 1997).

Spirituality is positively associated with long-term survival, lower levels of stress hormones, more optimism, and commitment to helping others in HIV-infected men and women. General physiological and emotional resilience is also associated with spirituality (Ironson et al, 2002).

Neuroscience is providing increasing evidence of brain-based correlates to spiritual, moral and transcendent experiences (Beauregard & O'Leary, 2007). A lack of connections with youths' spiritual natures and other people leads to superficial relationships, a poverty of feeling for others, limited emotional responses, deceitfulness, theft and inability to concentrate in school (Karen, 2002). Morality and spirituality affect the ability to effectively attach to others, regulate emotion and moods, cognitively process and act responsibly (Stillwell, 2002).

The prefrontal cortex undergoes rapid developmental growth during adolescence, which may intensify adolescents' search for meaning (d'Aquili & Newberg, 1999). Even children with non or low-religious parents seek ultimate meaning similar to other children (Miller, 2001). Denying or ignoring the spiritual nature of youth may create a void leading to depression or other problems, such as drinking, consumerism, crime, sexuality or violence. A search for spirituality may be a natural development in youth (Miller, 2002). Youth can be helped to discover their ideal self that transcends limited conceptions of self (Gutmann, 1998).

Spiritual practices change our perception of reality and of cause and effect relations.

They provide the power to initiate and sustain action to develop other virtues.

Existing research is highly suggestive. For adults, religious faith and practice appear to have a sizable and consistent relationship with improved health and longevity, including less hypertension and depression, a lower risk of suicide, less criminal activity, and less use and abuse of drugs and alcohol. (Johnson, 2002, p. 19)

The same study found higher levels of reported personal happiness, hope and optimism and the sense that one's life has purpose and meaning for these adults. Religiosity in youth is significantly associated with less likelihood of both unintentional and intentional injury (Wallace, 2002), juvenile delinquency or adult criminality (Baier & Wright, 2001), substance abuse (Johnson, 2002), endorsing high-risk

conduct, enjoying danger, risk-taking behavior and feelings of loneliness (Natal, 1986).

The great majority of U.S. social institutions focusing on civic engagement, such as political and service clubs, community and neighborhood groups and houses of worship, have declined significantly in influence in recent decades, as has social capital, (Putnam, 2000). Self-reported anxiety and depression among U.S. youth increased as connections to their inner selves and others have decreased (Twenge, 2000). Increasingly we are leaving children and youth to discover spirituality and morality on their own. With the aggressive, alluring and anti-spiritual influences of an excessively materialistic consumer culture, the options are limited.

4. Spirituality and Spiritual Growth

Spirituality and spiritual practices have the ability to transform individual lives and help eliminate the evils we find in the communities, institutions and world in which we live. This transformation process can begin immediately, but, like any organic growth process, will necessarily take time and go through several stages as it moves toward fruition. Like the physical growth of a plant or person, change may not be noticeable from moment to moment. Sometimes growth happens more quickly or dramatically, but always occurs one cell and one step at a time.

Spiritual growth requires effort and patience. Some may feel the energy and see the progress that comes from these practices right away while others may have to work harder and longer to see or feel progress. Like any physical endeavor for health, determination and discipline are needed. Pursuing the path toward true spiritual growth requires a complex of qualities and tests one's will power and motives. Each person begins at their own level and gradually develops the spiritual muscle power needed to meet the challenges in their life and world. Perseverance is necessary to experience real growth.

5. Five Spiritual Practices

Below we will briefly consider five daily practices for spiritual development 1) Prayer, 2) Reading, 3) Integrity, 4) Service and 5) Meditation (PRISM). Prayer, reading and meditation feed the spirit, and integrity and service exercise and develop its strength and capacities. Together they constitute the injunctions one is to follow to develop spiritually. They range from primarily private, internal acts to public, external acts.

These injunctions when taken to extremes can be harmful, as can eating or exercising. Moderation in all things is a universal teaching and principle that applies as much to spirituality as to the other realms of reality. Many of these practices have become empty rituals and forms devoid of the power needed to bring about the spirituality and transformation desired. These spiritual practices depend upon purity of heart and qualities of spirit to be effective.

Prayer is supplication to or communion and conversation with a higher power or object of worship. Prayers can acted,

silent, intoned, chanted, sung or spoken to help cultivate a sense of spirituality and association with a transcendent force. Prayer is practiced widely, though it takes many forms and is offered for many reasons, such as asking for help, offering thanks, seeking forgiveness, giving praise, looking for answers, invoking protection and calling to the beloved. In most religions, it is considered indispensable to inner spiritual development as it cultivates purity, humility and detachment. Conservative and fundamentalist Christians who would like to permit prayer in schools, but liberal and sectarian citizens oppose it.

Meditation has received different emphases in the great spiritual traditions with some involving demanding practice and discipline and others taking the form of simple reflection and contemplation. Many techniques are given for meditation, all with the intention of leading a person to higher levels of being and consciousness. If prayer is considered as speaking to a higher power, meditation would be listening. Many forms of mediation using breath control or relaxation are currently used in schools, but are not generally labeled mediation as some segments of society, generally conservative and fundamentalist Christians, are opposed to it on religious grounds.

The holy word or word of God is invested with transforming power as evidenced by the influence it has exerted over people and civilizations. These scriptures are regarded as truth in its highest form. They have creative energies to recreate or spiritualize a person and society.

Like other spiritual practices, study of the Word has lead to abuse and misinterpretations. Daily reading of the sacred scriptures combined with the other spiritual practices it enjoins, is one of the most potent avenues to spiritual development. Exploring the various holy writings can be done is schools as an academic activity in either literature or social sciences, but most teachers are hesitant to do so for fear of negative repercussions.

Besides prayer, meditation and reading sacred scripture to develop spirituality, we are to live a life of integrity if we wish to develop fully. Every religion has laws, ordinances and teachings about how we should live in this world. They promote many virtues including truth, love, justice, unity, trustworthiness, detachment, selflessness, wisdom, courage and temperance. Living with integrity and according to virtues is a central part of school. Teachers teach it and society expects it. Problems arise when the virtues are identified with a religion or are seen as promoting some belief that is not generally held by that society.

Some imagine withdrawal from the material world as the path to the spirituality, which renders them of little service to themselves or others. The injunction to serve can be found in all of the faith traditions in various forms, one being variations of the golden rule. Service is a necessary adjunct to the more private acts of prayer, meditation and reading, and is part of living a life of integrity. Service moves from egocentric to ethnocentric to higher motivations leading to serving the highest good and ideals. Service is an integral part of education, as teaching is one of greatest service one can provide another. Having students serve is a powerful way of learning.

6. Conclusion

Spirituality and spiritual practices have fallen out of favor with modern-day conceptions of progress and rationality, and a materialistic perspective dominates education. Though spirituality has had negative connotations in the modern scientific and scholarly communities, it is gradually gaining credence, partly influenced by shifts in the scientific community, resulting from new technologies and discoveries such as improved computing capabilities and quantum mechanics. Though spiritual principles and practices have historically been instrumental for effectively working with individuals, communities and institutions, they are currently discounted (Beauregard & O'Leary, 2007). The essential and fundamental crisis and challenge of the age is to develop the spiritual qualities needed to move humanity out of its morass.

Much of the popular wisdom and practice of the day runs counter to the wisdom of the ages. The modern day promotion of greed, pride, fame, conspicuous consumption and individual expression are contrary to the traditional virtues of humility, generosity, sharing, self-restraint and discipline (Seligman, 2002). One of the great laws of life also contradicts current fashion: the more we search for ourselves and attempt to be at peace with ourselves, especially through worldly means, the less likely we are to find peace and know ourselves. Only as we search for higher meaning and purpose through some higher power and seek to live in accord with the great spiritual principles that have been reiterated in every major faith tradition can we find ourselves and the inner peace we seek (Effendi in Hornby, 1995).

Developing a spiritual practice should enable a person to better transcend selfishness and self-centeredness. By focusing on higher purposes and capabilities, the ability to take initiative in a creative and a disciplined way, sustain effort in the face of obstacles and behave responsibly should be enhanced. Prayer, meditation, reading spiritual literature, service and living a life of integrity are key practices to developing a healthy and happy life. These practices have been endorsed in all of the great holy books and been validated by experience over many centuries.

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