Spirituality and Education: A Spiritual Wellness Approach

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The billion dollar self-help industry of Western societies suggests that many persons are experiencing a void in their lives. This industry hinges, in part, on psycho-spiritual and metaphysical concepts aimed at people of all ages. While a review of the holistic movement is beyond the scope of this paper, advocates for holistic education, which includes spirituality, must consider this burgeoning self-help industry. Although Vokey (2001) discussed the merits and demerits of including spirituality in education, the implementation of spirituality in the classroom is still being explored. The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the spiritual aspect of The National Wellness Institute's (2008) model, as one approach to implementing spirituality in education. The paper makes the connection between spirituality and its possible positive influences in the classroom, and provides suggestions for its implementation.

While spirituality is not a solution for all the ills of education, its absence in the public schools results in growing numbers of students becoming depressed or demotivated, having suicidal ideations, succumbing to eating disorders, engaging in substance abuse, or dropping out of school (Kessler, 2000). The absence of spirituality in the school system also contributes to the malaise felt among both students and teachers (Vokey, 2001). In fact, students' "…indifference towards a fragmented curriculum, their rampant materialism and random vandalism … and their appalling apathy in the face of impending environmental catastrophe…" (Vokey, p.2 8) all point to a lack of spirituality.

Among its many perspectives, spirituality is being touted as "…the opium of the affluent middle class" (Dunne, 2003, p. 104). As such, finding a definition of spirituality that will appease all stakeholders in education may be an insurmountable task. Over the past two decades, however, common themes among multi-disciplinary definitions were identified to formulate a working definition. Within this definition, spirituality is described as "…a universal and fundamental human quality involving the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, well-being, and profoundly in relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality, however understood" (Canda & Furman, 2010, p. 69). Even though it is recognized that the definition will be evolving, spiritual interventions are evident in cases of "…terminal illness, substance abuse, grief, sexual abuse, partner violence, foster parenting, adoptive parenting, and difficult family relations" (Canda & Furman, 2010, p. 8). Emanating from spirituality is spiritual wellness, which refers to a life process through which a person engages in a:

… search for meaning and purpose in human existence. It includes the development of a deep appreciation for the depth and expanse of life and natural forces that exist in the universe. Your search will be characterized by a peaceful harmony between internal personal feelings and emotions and the rough and rugged stretches of your path…you may experience many feelings of doubt, despair, fear, disappointment and dislocation, as well as feelings of pleasure, joy, happiness and discovery. These [feelings and emotions]… will be displayed in the value system you will adapt to bring meaning to your existence. You'll know you're becoming spiritually well when your actions become more consistent with your beliefs and values, resulting in a "world view" (National Wellness Institute, 2008, para.1).

Based on the process of spiritual wellness, aspects of spirituality may already be present in some classrooms because whenever a lesson in any subject area drifts beyond content to questions about the meaning and purpose of life, that lesson has become spiritual (see Wright, 2000). Spiritual wellness may also be present in the classroom if the ethos of the school is one of caring (see Noddings, 2010). This ethos of caring may encourage both teachers and students to transcend themselves in order to contemplate the meaning and purpose of their respective lives, and also the lives of others. Similarly, if a school adopts the common dictum of all major religions – "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (see Armstrong, 2008) – as its *raison d'etre*, then the members of that school may find congruence between their internal and external worlds. Finally, metaphors can be used to question the metaphysical, the mysteries, and meaning of life (see Halstead, 2003, p. 84), thereby allowing persons to explore life events and experiences that are difficult to understand.

If education is to transform, then including spirituality in the transformational process is critical, because "…incorporating spirituality in public schools will help students not only find meaning and excitement in the regular curriculum, but also learn to accept themselves and feel compassion for others" (Vokey, 2001, p. 27). This connectivity and compassion that could be engendered through spirituality is perhaps the greatest legacy that spirituality in education can give to further generations.

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