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Spirituality in Teacher Education for Effective Teaching-Learning Praxis

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Abstract

The world today is torn apart by violence, intolerance and unhealthy competition. Students who are the future of our nation are also increasingly being inducted into the mechanical system of unhealthy competition, a sick urge to beat others for a material success in life and this are indirectly being rendered mechanical combatants divested of morality, ethical considerations and upright characters. The teachers have a vital role to play in this regard. It is the cardinal duty of the teachers to inculcate values in the developing minds in tandem with the realization necessary for meaningful application of the knowledge they acquire in the classroom for a greater cause and all round development if the society at large. It is however intriguing to note that in the present education system the teachers are trained in the pedagogy of various subjects and much stress is put upon psychological development of the child's mind, but practically nothing is taught about how to develop a sense of ethical considerations in the students through the various pedagogic subjects being taught in the class. This paper remains a humble attempt at exploring the significance of spirituality in the teaching and learning process and the reason behind the importance of spirituality in education, especially in the teacher education programs in the present scenario.

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INTRODUCTION

The world today is torn apart by violence, intolerance and unhealthy competition. Students who are the future of our nation are also increasingly being inducted into the mechanical system of unhealthy competition, a sick urge to beat others for a material success in life and this are indirectly being rendered mechanical combatants divested of morality, ethical considerations and upright characters. The future of the nation is thus indirectly put at stake. The teachers have a vital role to play in this regard. It is the cardinal duty of the teachers to inculcate values in the developing minds in tandem with the realization necessary for meaningful application of the knowledge they acquire in the classroom for a greater cause and all round development if the society at large. It is however intriguing to note that in the present education system the teachers are trained in the pedagogy of various subjects and much stress is put upon psychological development of the child's mind, but practically nothing is taught about how to develop a sense of ethical considerations in the students through the various pedagogic subjects being taught in the class. The role of spirituality, an ancient concept deeply ingrained in the Indian culture, emerges as significant in this context. Spirituality is not necessarily associated with narrow sectarianism or idol worship of any kind but a deeper sense of harmony and peace attained through systematic control and training of the mind. Teacher education programs all over the nation should include the systematic training of the human resources in development of spirituality among the young learners who are the torch bearers of the future.

Spirituality recognizes the presence of the supreme life force in all things of the world and establishes a connection between the inner words of the human heart with the absolute words of the supreme life force manifest in all forms and phenomenon of the world. It is a clarion call for the righteous deeds and profound realization of the true goals of life. It tantamounts to "dharma" that is not equivalent to spiritual fanaticism but the modality of making

one's life meaningful and effective on one hand and raise one's consciousness to a higher and more comprehensive understanding of the universe on the other. The Atharva Veda had rightly pointed out that- "Prithibhimdharmanadhritam", that is, the whole world is held together by "dharma". Spirituality is thus not confined to any region, custom or religion, but emerges as an all pervasive comprehensive phenomenon. The importance of spirituality in human life could be understood from evolution of the word itself and from its macroscopic approach with a sustained insistence upon a distinct ethical code of conduct an integral part of human life in general.

SrimadBhagbad Gita, a distinctive ancient Vedic treatise connects spirituality with "karma" or work. Selfless service without lust for gains or desire for results, rendered without attachment to material things, insists only the welfare of the human race and nation and prepares one for great sacrifices for the benefit of all. Individuality is emphasized but at the same time the individual is taught to rise in righteousness to accord growth, prosperity and harmony in the nation. Such spirituality purges one's soul of narrow vision, self-interest and blinding vanity. Such spirituality leads one to realize one's inner strength. It purifies the heart and tends to give a proper direction to one's life. The following sloka from the Gita reflects the true nature of spirituality –

Nirmaanaamohajitasangaadosha

AadhyaatmannityaaViinivrittakaamaah

DwandvaairvimuktaahSukhaduhkhasanyer

GachchhantyanuudhdaahPadamavyayam Tat

[one who is free from illusion, hollow prestige and hollow association, one who understands the eternal, who is done with material lust and is freed from the duality of joy and distress, and one who knows how to surrender to the Supreme life force can attain the eternal kingdom].

The Upanishads, Puranas, the Smritis and the other Ancient Indian Vedic texts emphasise the central significance of spirituality in human life. It is quite similar to the Western vision as well. Spirituality can generally be defined as the search for and expression of that which is life-giving and connects with the larger whole. This definition emerges from reflection upon the work of writers such as Parker Palmer, James Fowler, John J. Shea, and Una Agnew. Spirituality starts as the search for authentic self and moves out to connect with what is larger than the self. Our spirituality shapes our relationship with ourselves, with other people, and with whatever transcendent or higher power we conceive of. Spirituality is intimate to each of us. It reflects our deepest values and what we hold dear. To some degree, we bring our spirituality into our personal and professional lives, including our work as teachers. It is expressed in the just and loving ways we live. It is directed toward what we value as real and true – when I connect with my real self I find a depth within which does not belong to me but to which I belong – a depth theologians call the Spirit dwelling within me. Whatever its focus may be, and whether it is religious or not, spirituality is not something 'other than' the human, or 'transcending' the human; it is not tacked on to the human condition, like the tail wagging the dog. Spirituality is an integral part of our human development because the need for meaning and to be part of a larger whole is inherently human. Further, spirituality calls us to live into the wholeness of who we are even as it invites us to relate to some meaningful larger whole or larger reality.

Scholars have addressed the issue over the years. "To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world," writes Parker J. Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* (2012). He defines spirituality as "the diverse ways to answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life." He defines spirituality to create a deeper vision about teaching as a spiritual practice and emphasizes the following as essential features associated with the development of spirituality among teachers.

These are significant and may be taken into cognizance in teacher education courses:

- i. Connections: Teachers encourage us to cultivate the art of making connections.
- ii. Enthusiasm: Many of them are energized: they do not hold anything back.
- iii. Hospitality: they welcome alien and different thoughts and ideas.
- iv. Imagination: Teachers spur us on to express ourselves and to be creative.
- v. Listening: They make it clear that all things in the world want to be heard.
- vi. Meaning: They are meaning-makers par excellence.
- vii. Nurturing: They help us learn how to take better care of ourselves and others.
- viii. Openness: Teachers model empathy and a love of diversity and pluralism.
- ix. Questing: They savor questions and the thrill of the journey.
- x. Transformation: They are catalysts of change and seekers of wholeness.
- xi. Unity: They want us to see the commonalities that tie us to others and to respect differences as well.
- xii. Wonder: They hope that we will become more curious.

Parker J. Palmer emphasizes identity and integrity over technique, honours the sanctity of students and their yearning for knowledge, and realizes afresh the community of truth and "grace of great things." Palmer tackles some of the major challenges facing educators who have lost heart. He suggests ways to reclaim selfhood, overcome fear, and deal with paradox. He believes that teachers must jettison the armor of self-protective professional autonomy and cherish the conversation of colleagues. *The Courage to Teach* brims over with spiritual insights into the mystery and the magnificence of knowing, teaching, and learning. Palmer connects spirituality with teachers and their vocation in various ways, especially addressing issues of diversity and the following quotations from his book reflect some modalities of the same:

- i. "Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish-and challenge-the human heart that is the source of good teaching."
- ii. "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living requires."
- iii. "Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn."
- iv. "If we embrace the promise of diversity, of creative conflict, and of 'losing' in order to 'win,' we still face one final fear-the fear that a live encounter with otherness will challenge or even compel us to change our lives. This is not paranoia: the world is really out to get us. Otherness, taken seriously, always invites transformation, calling us not only to new facts and values but also to new ways of living our lives-and that is the most daunting threat of all."

Parker Palmer warns that when we give something we do not possess, it is a false and dangerous gift. To live full, authentic lives, we must learn to embrace opposites, to live in a creative tension between our limitations and our potentials. Otherwise, high demands can quickly exhaust our resources. Intentional spirituality can help to build up and replenish these resources, particularly by helping teachers discern if, through teaching, they have found a place where the talent and joy of their deepest selves meets the world's great need for education. There is a resounding ring of truth to the statement that the quality of a school is only as good as the quality of its teachers. But what keeps teachers alive and enthusiastic within the profession? What keeps good teachers in the classroom? It was Plato's contention that people will care for, and do well at, work they love. Tapping into the spiritual root of teaching can keep teachers enthusiastic and fresh in practice, even after many years. Once we realize that teaching is a spiritual activity, we recognize that our starting point must be the teacher in the classroom. Rather than teaching subjects or students, we primarily teach who we are – from within – from the standpoint of our own integrity and identity. Spirituality can help address the question "Who am I?" which leads inevitably to the equally important question "Whose am I?" for there is no selfhood outside of relationship. In order to teach in a manner that is energizing and enlivening it is important to understand that the outcome does not depend solely on the teacher. Teaching and learning are part of ongoing everyday living – a continuous cycle of growth and regrowth, different for every individual on the journey we call life.

The spirituality of teaching and learning can be fostered by various college/school-based experiences. These might include the experience of leaving home, even temporarily -perhaps for a retreat or school/college exchange, and encounter with a perspective radically different to one's own. Reaching out to those in need, what the early Jesuits as well as ancient Indian texts called 'helping souls', is another foundational block of spirituality. The social implications are vast and appeal across religious and cultural boundaries. For instance, service programs that build on our natural human self-sacrificing impulses can enlarge our horizons and awaken our spiritual impulses. Such experiences can lead to critical reflection on how one's own values and beliefs are formed and changed. Such a type of experience provokes examinations of self, background and values. Community formation is a central task in constructing an intentionally spiritual environment so that people can still seek a relationship with God and affirm the transcendent dimension of humanity even if they are distant from or distrust the institutional religions. Another factor that can contribute to lifting up the spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning is a positive encounter with a guide, mentor or wisdom figure. Therefore, spiritual mentoring is an important element in schools/colleges. Conversation that engages memory,

imagination and critical reason allows us to pay attention to the conditions in which we find ourselves, assess how we came to be where we are, and reflect on the possible paths ahead. This is one way of creating a compass to guide us as we move into the future. We need to create time to pause, reflect, and assess and we need to learn the value of silence. Silence, paradoxically can be busy or peaceful. Busy silence is the silence that surrounds us as we study, write, mark papers or prepare classes. However inner silence, the type of silence we intentionally seek out for our inner selves helps us to tune into the ebb and flow, the longing and loneliness of the restless spirit. It opens us to our heart's deepest desires. Development and practice of a consciousness of connection is another important element. Contemporary society steepens us in the virtues of individualism, making us vulnerable to assuming we have autonomy and control, when we do not. This may involve asking 'why' questions, as well as those of 'what' and 'how'. Finally, we can attend to the character and use of language, by choosing images and language that uncover and name, rather than obscure and manipulate, the realities of the day to day life and world around.

In recent years, scholars have turned their attention to defining and providing a theoretical model for spirituality in order to create a common framework for further enquiry. Shapiro, Carlson, Astin & Freedman (2006) propose three core axioms involved in promoting a spiritual mind set are- Intention, Attention and Attitude. The axioms are not sequential, but rather are engaged simultaneously in the process. Kabat-Zinn's (1994) often cited a broad view of a spiritual mindset as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally," that embodies these three axioms (Shapiro et al., 2006). Intention or an individual's vision is seen as an integral first step in a development of spirituality. Attention, refers to paying attention in the moment to one's internal and external experience. It involves suspending judgement and observing the changing field of thoughts, feelings and sensations as they occur in the mind-body. Attention needs to be regulated and sustained. An individual while engaging in such practices will not be worrying about the future or living in the past but concentrated on the present. This comes quite close to *Gita*'s insistence on "karma" or work at the present moment without contemplation of future rewards. It could mean an individual observing their life with a cold and distant attitude or paying attention from a state of innate stability, where compassion, open-heartedness and peace for others and self are dominant. Scholars posit that individuals can attend to their own internal and external experiences without evaluation or interpretation whilst also being in a mindset of loving kindness – even if what is occurring is contrary to deeply held wishes or expectations. This state of being compassionate and loving to oneself and others in the face of unexpected and unwelcome life events is also crucial in the definition of spirituality and must be inculcated in teacher education programs to prepare a better and more equipped cadre of teachers to combat the current crisis of lack of harmony, discord and erosion of ethical values in human civilization. Teacher education programs may reconsider and reframe the pedagogy in a way conducive to develop these elements of spirituality in the teachers who in their turn would ignite thousands of developing minds.

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