

Fostering the Learner Spirituality of Students: A Teaching Narrative

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to articulate, via a personal teaching narrative, the successes and challenges I experienced while attempting to foster the learner spirituality of students within a middle school classroom environment. I provide a definition of the term learner spirituality, as well as its related phrases. I present a literature review about how to foster learner spirituality within the classroom. Then I present a personnel narrative that depicts my experience while trying to promote the learner spirituality of a grade 7 classroom, and, in line with narrative inquiry, I discuss the past, present, and future features of this personal experience. An implication of this study is that in order for teachers to influence the learning spirituality of students, teachers need to cogitate on their own learner spirituality.

Keywords: learner spirituality, narrative inquiry

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Introduction

Upon reading this article's title, I speculate that the word *spirituality* may be both stark and ambiguous for some readers; for that reason, at the onset of this document, explication of the term is provided. By default, some people may automatically link spirituality to religion. Indeed, religion is one way to potentially strengthen and reinforce a realm of spirituality; however, I write this article under the ontological opinion that one does not need to be religious to be spiritual learner. As referred to herein, learner spirituality is not confined within doctrines of a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple, for example, nor is it accessed through such things as pilgrimages, inspirational journeys, or esoteric experiences. The type of learner spirituality to which I refer within this paper is not embellished via healing crystals, traditional forms of meditation, or past life regression, for instance. Instead, herein, reference to the term learner spirituality is meant to be engendered within prekindergarten to grade 12 classrooms of public and private education. More specifically, this spirituality co-resides within student and the teacher and fostered through the words, actions, and attitudes of everyone present within a classroom.

Another descriptive boundary I apply to this article is clarification of the term learner spirituality and its associated expressions. What are the differences (if any) between the terms: *learner spirituality*, *learning spirituality*, *learning spirit*, *spiritual learner*, *spiritual learning*? Broadly speaking, for me, these expressions all relate to a common definition—the constructive act of gaining awareness, knowledge, comprehension, proficiency, and wisdom from an experience, conditioned from non-physical abilities including feelings, attitudes, emotions, and intuition. The effect and residue of this process is the establishment of learning that originates from the heart and extends outward, thereby, positively affecting one's quality of life and having the ability to influence (whether consciously or unconsciously) the physical and spiritual demeanor of others. Although I believe this blanket description of learning spirituality pertains to all its lexical phrases, indication of the subtle, semantic differences between the individual phrases may also be useful. In turn, *learner spiritually* implies the spirituality of the learner, while *learning spirituality* implies the spirituality involved during the process of learning. *Learning spirit* is the spirit of learning, a *spiritual learner* is a learner who is spiritual, and *spiritual learning* is a process of learning that is spiritual. In what follows, depending on my sentence structure, I use variations of the term learner spirituality; nonetheless, each term refers to the aforementioned general definition of learner spirituality.

With the definitional boundaries of learner spirituality stated, it is important to note why this topic is important. Perhaps due to the somewhat elusive features of learner spirituality, authors who write on the theme of learning spirituality note that the topic is vastly neglected within the practical realms of modern education (e.g., Berry, 1999; Daly, 2004; Moore, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2005; O'Sullivan & Taylor, 2004; Palmer, 1998; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010). As a result, Moore (2005), Miller (1999), and Palmer (1998) recognized an urgent need for teachers to educate by connecting with the spirit of their students. Although such authors speak to the importance of educators implementing curricula and pedagogy that provide youth with an inspiring vision of how to associate with the eminent goodness of the universe, what appears to be lacking within the literature are stories that exemplify practical means of how teachers are to accomplish such a feat. That is, what can teachers do to nurture the learner spirituality of their students?

The purpose of this paper is to articulate, via a personal narrative, the successes and challenges I faced while attempting to foster the learning spirituality of students within a middle school classroom environment. Through a literature review, I review how teachers attempt to foster learner spirituality within the classroom. Then I present a personnel narrative that depicts my experience while trying to promote learner spirituality within a grade 7 classroom. In line with narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I discuss the past, present, and future features of this teaching story. I conclude by accentuating the importance of teachers performing regular self-assessments of their own spirituality in an effort to bolster the learning spirituality of their students.

Literature Backdrop: Teachers, Students, and the Spiritual Learner

In addition to supporting the intellectual capacities of students, many authors note a need for teachers to employ instructional pedagogy that garners the students' spiritual and social development (e.g., Brendtro & Brokenleg, 2001; Doige, 2003; Miller, 2002). In particular, Kessler (2004) provided a number of practical ideas she used to generate a classroom atmosphere, which focuses on the development of learner spirituality. Kessler believed that streamlining her teaching pedagogy to encompass social interaction promotes learner spirituality, and she regularly employed classroom games both to assist students in becoming fully focused and relaxed and to embed components of fun, laughter, and cooperation into the classroom environment. In her teaching, Kessler used a variety of student and classroom discussion techniques. For example, she frequently asked students to bring a sentimental object into the classroom and instructed the students to use the item as physical support when sharing personal thoughts and feelings about difficult issues. As well, she used the discussion circle: students sat in a circle and, one by one, experienced the opportunity to speak without interruption. For this activity, students experienced what it is like to share with others and to be heard by fellow students. Throughout these activities, Kessler created an environment of mutual respect, empathy, sympathy, and personal safety.

Campbell (2010) described learner spirituality as "an individual and collective evolutionary process that consists of the progress realization of the individual's true Self or being" (p. 12). In such a manner, the concept of learner spirituality is not only about the individual learner, but also about teachers and students co-exhibiting knowledge and co-extending constructive energy, both of which are grounded from personal experiences. On a similar note, Ball and Pence (2006) believed fostering the learning spirit of students involves teachers and students learning together as partners in learner-focused activities. Practical examples of such learner-focused, collaborative activities include the sharing of personal narratives, group work, classroom and group demonstrations, large and small-group discussions, peer tutoring, talking circles, and hands-on experiences (Gorman, 1999; Hardes, 2006). These instructional methods emphatically align with the concept of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), a student-centered educational theory, which promotes the notion that "to learn anything, each [student] must construct his or her own understanding by tying new information to prior experiences" (Henson, 2003, p. 13). Shulman and Sherin (2004) indicated that constructivist pedagogy is "learning-centered, oriented toward the development of higher-order understanding and skills and [emphasizes] collaborative efforts by students in learning communities engaging in complex 'authentic' tasks through 'distributing their expertise'" (p. 136). Most notably, the concept of constructivism promotes the strengths and experiences of the individual learner, while

simultaneously acknowledging the need for social interaction between learners, because learning and development is an innately social, collaborative activity (Wells, 2000).

In addition to encouraging collective engagement during learning, Dei (2002) noted that features of curriculum and pedagogy should be used to promote spiritual learning within the classroom. He explained that the teacher must invoke a sense of history, place, and culture into the student's learning, because such an action cultivates a sense of life purpose and personal meaning for individual students. Similarly, the teacher should acknowledge learner heterogeneity in terms of race, class, gender, language, culture, and religion. Dei drew attention toward the importance of the teacher promoting student-relevant knowledge, the teacher participating in collaborative teaching with other teachers and community members, and the teacher promoting critical thinking about social justice issues.

Other authors believe that in order for teachers to promote student learner spirituality, teachers must have the support of their colleagues. Boyd and Myers (as cite in Imel, 1998) and Kessler (2004) noted that it is important for teachers to nurture their own spiritual development via collaborative efforts with other teachers. During this process, teachers need to communicate the joys and challenges they experienced while attempting to foster learner spirituality of students. Cranton (1994) emphasized the importance of the teacher being a role model for willingness to change and learn. These authors claim that there is an intimate connection between teachers promoting their own learner spirituality while simultaneously fostering it within their students.

Narrative Inquiry and Data Description

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stipulated that for teachers, the articulation of a classroom story is not only a medium used to reflect upon a professional experience, a personal narrative is veritable research. Personal narratives give rise to new and deeper insight about the complexity of professional practices, while offering lived solutions to an array of personal and professional challenges (Clandinin, 2006; Riley & Hawe, 2004). Goodson (2003) believed narratives are soundly suited for research that is particularly aimed at understanding the life and work of a teacher. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) argued that within teacher education, the narrative process promotes reflection, reinterpretation, and revision. Similarly, as perceived by Clandinin and Connelly (1998), narrative research has potential to provoke dialogue, debate, and change within the realm of education. Characterized through narrative inquiry, the subjective features of the storyteller and the narrative experience itself are a salient part of the research process. In other words, the storyteller, his/her knowledge and values, and the story are the epistemological and ontological groundings upon which the research flourishes. The articulation of my personal narrative within this article attends to all of these rich features of research.

Butt, Raymond, McCue, and Yamagishi (1992) believed studying a teacher's experiences means studying a relationship between past, present, and future. They explained that every experience has a history (the past), is in the process of changing (the present), and is potentially going somewhere (the future). Therefore, studying an experience means including knowledge as it has been, as it is being, and as it will be. Similarly, as stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "Experiences grow out of experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences" (p. 2). As a result, when researchers are studying an experience they need to look at the continuity and wholeness of that scenario (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dewey, 1938). For the remainder of the article, I follow this advice. I explain my past experience through a story; I use my current

knowledge and abilities to assess the experience (the present), and I decipher the future relevance of my story.

The following narrative is created from a time in my teaching career when I had completed seven years of teaching within public and private school systems. The events of my story happened about 10 years ago while teaching in an international school located in the Middle East. The data embodied within the following narrative is based solely on my memory of being the grade 7 English teacher during one specific school year. Due to the time lapse of the data and the fact that the story is created from memory, I acknowledge that the validity of this research may be questionable to some readers; in reaction to this position, I candidly state that it is not my intent to pursue data validity. It is my intent, however, to document the subjectivity of data and embellish my professional growth (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Furthermore, due to the asset of elapsed time, prior to writing this article, for many years I have reflected upon the data documented herein. Part of this reflection involved deciphering and attempting to replicate the successes I enjoyed during the teaching year. Additionally, some of the details threaded throughout this teaching story were obtained from sporadic emails that I received and still receive from some of my students who reminiscence about that school year.

Data Results: My Teaching Story

I divide the following story into a number of sections. In these sections, I introduce the setting of the story, and I provide a general description of a scenario I faced in one of my classes. I discuss the effect that my teaching had on one specific student. I provide a number of ways in which I attempted to foster learner spirituality in my class, and I end with articulating some of the realizations I have garnered from the teaching experience.

Take a Deep Breath: That's the Spirit

It was the beginning of September; this school year primarily entailed teaching middle school English to four separate classes, each comprising of approximately 20 students. Similar to the start of every school year, I was eager, yet anxious, to meet my new students to whom I would largely devote the next 10 month of my life. The underlying cause of my zealous and yet apprehensive demeanour was the fact that so much was at stake. Every year it was the same; teaching nourished and consumed me in mind, body, and soul. Success in the classroom was akin to stoking a type of inner, fervent fire that emotionally and spiritually burned within me; in contrast, experiencing teaching failures (like witnessing my students struggle unnecessarily) devastated me and left me feeling dull and hollow.

The nine o'clock bell rang. Although I was yet unable to connect a name to a learning passion, I acknowledged each student who entered the classroom. After the students settled in their seats, we shared introductions accompanied by a personal summer ditty. I went on to describe the fundamental content of the course via my multi-drafted, perfected syllabus. From experience, I paid particular attention to explicating the roles of both the students and me. For the next couple of classes, we would discuss how we would engender a class culture permeated with respect, responsibilities, relationships, and rewards. My relatively flawless lesson plan was repeated for the next two classes. Then in sauntered the notorious fourth class, and things began to go askew.

As this group of teens bowled toward my classroom, their boisterous voices reverberated throughout the hallway. From day one, it was obvious this fourth class (scheduled for the last period of the day) was a rambunctious group. Upon entering the classroom, their dynamic presence, a cacophony of boundless energy, supersaturated the dimensional capacity of the room. During this class and subsequent classes, their excessively garrulous nature and preoccupied dispositions depleted the energy that nurtured the good teacher in me. Whether it was the time of the day, personal struggles they faced, the challenges of early adolescence, and/or something else, it was extremely difficult to engage this group in any type of learning.

I cannot even remember where I got the idea, but about a month into the year, I decided to do something a bit radical—well, radical for me, the curriculum-focused, organized teacher I prided myself to be. I decided to discard the curriculum for a small portion of the class and attend to the unconstructive energy that seemed to dominate the demeanor of these students. To achieve this aim, I would ask students to stop ... and breathe. With this intent ensconced in my mind (but not formally acknowledged in my lesson plan), I attempted to feed my ebbing confidence as the noisy, impulsive group neared the classroom door.

Once in their seats, I looked blankly at the students, said nothing, and waited for silence. When all was quiet, I told the students that, starting today, we were going to embark on a new experience by beginning every class with a short breathing exercise. I explained that through this practice, I hoped to calm ourselves, by first claiming and then empowering our learning spirit. I said that when we breathe deeply, we veritably infuse energy to every cell within our bodies. I continued by articulating the rest of my researched explanation. Through deep inhales and exhales, we remove energy toxins, oxygenate our body, and calm our nervous system, which, in turn, has great potential to release the drama and confusion that easily influences our words, actions, emotions, and attitudes. I explained that slow, deep breathing, helps to create a healthy distance between a person and any negativity that might surround that person. In contrast, short, quick, shallow breathes continue to house any stress and drama an individual may be experiencing.

I asked them to sit tall and close their eyes. Then I instructed them to breathe in through the nose and exhale through the mouth. They needed to inhale fully so their lungs were filled with revitalizing air, and they could see their abdomen expand. We took a few practice turns, and many students burst into laughter as they exhaled. We tried a few more breathes, but this time I requested that while they inhaled, they think about good things and when they exhaled, they release everything bad. After a couple of days of performing our breathing exercise, the loud outbursts of laughter started to dispel. At this point, I extended the length of the activity, just a bit. After each inhalation, I asked them to hold on to the positive, nourishing air for about 4–5 seconds, and then, just as before, to extract everything negative from their bodies and send it away with the extinguished breath. After some weeks had passed, I pleasantly witnessed that their boisterous entrance into the classroom was less severe, and it took them less time to settle into their desks.

One day during the breathing routine, I had an inspirational idea. I was standing in front of 20 potential breathing experts; they could lead this activity just as well as I could. I asked for a volunteer. At first, our peer-coerced volunteer was noticeably uncomfortable as she assumed breathing leadership, but after a couple of days, her confidence grew. Each week, I asked for a new student volunteer. Soon my presence became redundant: the students entered the classroom, quieted themselves, and allowed their fellow peer to lead them through their breathing exercise. Indeed, I was proud of my students and the progress we were experiencing.

Success Followed by Failure

A couple of months into this routine, I was emotionally sideswiped by the words of one of my students enrolled in my last period of class. (I will call this student Ariel.) Ariel approached me one day after school; she was obviously distraught and asked me if we could talk in private. Behind the safety of the closed classroom door, she told me that her mother and father were fighting incessantly, and, during these loud arguments, she tried to dissipate the noise by putting her head under a pillow. In an effort to make the bad energy go away, she locked her bedroom door and regularly engaged in our breathing exercises. Ariel explained that she felt intense sorrow because the breathing exercises had proven ineffective—her mother and father were getting a divorce. As I peered into her watery eyes and watched the tears roll down her cheeks, she told me she believed in me, and she basked in the new peace that now spilled into her last class of the day. Between her incontrollable sobs and with her head hung low, she humbly choked out her final statement: “Outside the classroom, it doesn’t work. Why did you trick me into believing in something that is useless? Why did you let me down, Mrs. Preston?”

Just like with our breathing exercises, at that moment, everything stopped. In addition to Ariel misery, I felt utterly inadequate as a teacher, counsellor, mentor, and all the other things a good teacher is supposed to be. In the midst of a classroom filled with the pain of two shattered hearts, for a while, Ariel and I remained silent.

Fostering Learning Spirituality: More than Just Breathing

While reflecting upon Ariel’s question, “Why did you let me down, Mrs. Preston?” it became obvious to me that infusing positive energy onto my students would take more than simple breathing exercises. For the rest of that year, I decided I would do more than just teach (and breathe); I would attempt to connect with the learning spirit of my students in all my classes. My attempts to accomplish this feat were sometimes planned and accountable actions; other times, my attempts to foster learner spirituality were intangible thoughts and feelings engendered through my simple belief that students need, at all times, to be given the same level of respect that teachers ideally give adults.

With regard to my pre-mediated plans, I made many changes to the dynamics of my teaching. For example, I made it a habit that every time I assessed student assignments, I wrote at least three positive points on each paper. After modeling this feedback, I asked students to assess each other’s work. I asked them to first identify positive features of each paper they read and then insert corrections and provide additional constructive feedback. I asked my students to keep an in-class diary; at the end of every class, I requested that they write down one good thing that happened in class or during their day. Every week, I set aside extended periods of quiet, individual work time, played soft, relaxing music, and attempted to work one-on-one with students. During such time, I interviewed each student and then worked with him/her, addressing individual academic needs. Throughout the year, I witnessed much student success, and my students and I rewarded each other via the creation of a *Wow Wall*—a dedicated area in our classroom where the students’ achievements were posted publically. In addition to regularly

talking about and celebrating accomplishments, we made time to talk about our challenges. Once a month, I set aside time for a talking circle, where every student got an opportunity to communicate whatever he/she was feeling. As an integral part of teaching students how to handle challenging situations, I handed out a list of inspirational books; I read chapters aloud from these books, using them as a springboard for class discussion. I advocated that students read these books in their spare time. I made a concerted effort to wear brightly colored clothes to school, steering away from traditionally professional black or dark-colored attire. During class activities, I often used a drum and tambourine; I added chants and other musical activities into my teaching pedagogy. I regularly incorporated games and group activities into my lesson plans. I also decided to move my teaching beyond the walls of the classroom, by organizing two extracurricular, after-school activities: a line dancing class and a cooking class. I was pleasantly surprised that many of my students signed up for these classes. It was during these after-school events that I was able to laugh with my students; therein, I became familiar with other dimensions of their spirits.

I also endorsed learner spirituality through a more elusive, subtle approach—by promoting the concept of respect and goodness. For example, as each student entered the classroom, I smiled and/or greeted him/her. At the beginning of every class, I thanked the students for coming to class and then proceeded to take attendance. My attendance ritual, however, was not intended to be a symbol of teacher authoritarianism. Rather, I used the practice of taking attendance as an excuse to utter each student's name at least once in every class and as a medium to transmit good thoughts his/her way. As much as possible, during and outside class time, I reminded students of the individual gifts they possessed, whether that strength was his/her innate kindness, intellectual aptitude, athletic skills, the gift of humor, strong listening skills, or leadership abilities, for example. When problems did arise with individual students, I spoke to these students privately about the issue. Whether talking to an individual student or a group of students, I was vigilant never to make a derogatory remark about them or their friends. I regularly told my students, both during and after class time how proud I was of their accomplishments, and how lucky I was to be their teacher.

My Learning and Growth

Reflecting on this story, it was not until Ariel's confession that I made a determined effort to augment the breathing exercises by changing aspects of my pedagogy and by incorporating, what I viewed as, deliberate spiritual comportments into my teaching style. Upon doing so, learning became fun for me and appeared to become fun for the students. Without a doubt, this was the best year of teaching I have ever experienced. In the past, I have often shared these nostalgic memories with undergraduate students I have taught, but it was not until writing this article that I actually made time to ponder upon what made this year so spectacular. Through this reflective writing, I acknowledge that the *spirit* of the class was responsible for my teaching success. It has been many years since I taught that grade 7 class, but through some of the emails and odd phone calls I get from some of those students (who are now adults), they talk about their grade 7 experience, rehashing the "good times," as they call it. I believe what my past students are really telling me is that, during our time together, we collectively tapped into the transformational potential of learner spirituality.

Having explained how I fostered learner spirituality within my classroom and the positive influences of such actions, it would be negligent of me not to return to Ariel's despair and my

related shortcomings. At the time of Ariel's confession, I did what I could to console her. I let her cry that day, and I advised her to go to the school counsellor. During the weeks and months that followed, I regularly gave her inspirational notes, conveying that I cared for her, while also reminding her of her strengths, abilities, and the positive aspects of life. However, through time and reflection, I realize that part of fostering learner spirituality must involve teaching students how to deal with heartache, failure, mistakes, and setbacks. Although I occasionally invited the students to engage in class dialogue where they were encouraged to talk about any personal difficulties they might be experiencing, this scheduled class period was the extent of my efforts to teach the student how to deal with the difficult, frustrating, and painful events destined to occur in every person's life. I did not formally explain that high levels of spiritual growth are often premised on personal mistakes and other emotionally upsetting experiences. I neglected to tell them that the only people whom they could formally influence were themselves; I should have explained that they did not possess the ability, nor should they want to possess the ability, to make another person act in a certain way. Every person is experiencing his/her individualized life-learning journey, and an important spiritual lesson I should have presented to my students is that we need to respect all people and the choices they make.

Consequently, Ariel's despair could have been mitigated through better preparation and planning on my part. More specifically, I should have shown her how to use her learner spirituality to support her emotional wellbeing while she grieved the separation of her parents. In addition, I should have done a better job at educating my entire class on how to face life's challenges. I could have threaded spiritual lessons and themes into the literature I chose for the course. I could have invited guest speakers who, through personal experience, would eloquently and passionately articulate these life lessons. I could have better educated myself by enrolling in professional development and/or counselling courses addressing spiritual themes. This realization was a lesson I learned later in my teaching career, but, unfortunately, during Ariel's grief, I did not yet possess that understanding of teacher-learner spirituality.

Discussion of Results: Past and Present

When comparing, what the literature says about fostering the learning spirits of students and the details of my story, similarities, and differences arise. First, in analyzing the ways in which my story and the literature on learner spirituality aligned, several points surfaced. Although this story took place during a time in my career when I was ignorant of the theory of social constructivism, in reflecting on what I did in the classroom in an attempt to touch the souls of my students, concepts of social constructivism become apparent. For example, utilizing student talking circles and peer assessment as ways of promoting learner-focused experiences and social interaction between learners is closely positioned with the concept social constructivism. In addition, the literature highlights that promoting learner spirituality means promoting mutual respect among students (Kessler, 2004). Although at the time of my story, I did not know the merits of this literature, the concept of engendering respect between teacher and students and students and students was a means to creating an emotionally-safe classroom atmosphere, thereby fostering a more fecund, salubrious learning environment for students. Kessler's (2004) views of promoting an environment of respect, sympathy, and personal safety appear to be ideally juxtaposed to fostering the learning spirituality of students, and, in many ways, I followed her suggestions.

There are aspects of my story that I have not seen within the published topics of teachers fostering learner spirituality within the classroom. Perhaps, the most blatant omission I see

between the literature and this teaching narrative is connections to the breathing exercise. I do not believe the breathing exercise, in and of itself, was responsible for fostering high levels of learner spirituality. Instead, I view the breathing exercises as the catalyst that instigated my students and me to explore an untapped learning dimension within their classroom—their learner spirituality. When initially participating in the breathing exercise, each student opened him/herself up to possible ridicule from fellow students. With the guidance of fellow students and me, this ridicule did not surface, and, in turn, nascent trust developed between everyone in the class. In turn, perhaps one of the first steps toward fostering learner spirituality within the classroom is the creation of trust between/among students and the teacher.

In addition to promoting trust, fostering a healthy learning spirit within students was also done via the promotion and accentuation of positive energy of the students and the classroom atmosphere, in general. Appreciative inquiry is a popular organizational theory that predominantly focuses on accentuating the best in people [the students], their organizations [the classroom], and the world around them [the students' lives] (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Although it is not my intent to delve into the details of appreciative inquiry, in the context of my story, an applicable feature of appreciative inquiry involved the teacher upholding and promoting the assumption that every student has positive features upon which learning thrives. In the teaching narrative, examples of articulating the positive abound from the *Wow Wall* to the laughter experienced during participation in the extracurricular activities. In this context, fostering of learning spirituality was closely linked to creating a classroom environment where students were regularly reminded of their capabilities and accomplishments and, in turn, were empowered with greater self-confidence.

A teacher who encourages learner spirituality delivers a style of education infused with respect, relationship, reciprocity, and rewards. Fostering learner spirituality means endorsing a communal, reciprocated learning culture, which is a unifying process, sparking group rapport and learner kinship within the classroom. Such classroom connectedness creates an emotionally- and spiritually-vibrant atmosphere where everyone is releasing and receiving each other's positive energy. Within this symbiotic learning environment, each student feels a sense of belonging and knows that all students are cared for by each other, as well as by the teacher. I believe student possession of this type of healthy learning spirit is a predetermining factor for a student's overall success and wellbeing in the classroom, because such an environment creates fecund conditions for individual and communal learning.

Implications for the Future

Canada's public education system does plenty to generate the cognitive development of students but, in general, does little to enhance the spiritual realms of the student. North American's hegemonic emphasis on acquiring and hoarding material possessions and refining one's physical appearance to some elite standard has led to a host of physical, emotional, and spiritual problems (O'Sullivan, 2005). Too many children in Canada and worldwide are experiencing lack of self-confidence, isolation, stress, high levels of pressure, fear, poverty, and other ills that deter their learning and growth in schools. Kessler (2004) noted, "It has been considered dangerous for educators to address the question of spiritual development in schools," (p. 101). With that said, Kessler believed this shortcoming is a contributing factor to the self-destructive behaviors of youth as illustrated through the above harmful examples and through additional examples such as youth suicide and drugs/illicit activities. As threaded throughout this article, it is my belief and

the belief of other authors (Kessler, 2000; Miller, 1999, 2002; Palmer, 1998) that an ideal way to address the challenging issues faced by much of today's youth is through delivering a style of education that ameliorates the learner spirituality of students.

For me, fostering the learner spirituality of students started with teaching students to breathe and then extended toward reflecting on how my thoughts, words, and actions affected each student and the learning energy of the entire class. Regardless of background, all students intrinsically need more from their teachers than the knowledge of ABCs and 1-2-3s. In order to address abstract, ethereal (and yet eminent) needs of students and to genuinely empower the learning spirit of students, teachers must first acknowledge and accept that a student's learning spirit actually exists and that every student is inspired (both positively and negative) by this intrinsic energy. This first step is imperative in fostering healthy individual learning spirits, which organically feed the positive essence of the classroom, while embellishing the learning dynamics of the entire group.

As a final point, in order for teachers to influence the learning spirituality of students, teachers need to cogitate on their own learner spirituality. Parker Palmer (1998) speaks to this point in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, where he shared many of his own teaching stories. He beckoned educators to teach from the heart in an effort to engage students in high-level learning. Following Palmer's advice, herein, I attempted to explain how I taught from the heart and how such an experience had a transformational effect on both my students and me. At times, teachers need to stop and decipher their past in an effort to plot the future. By reflecting on past classroom experiences, teachers give themselves time to unravel their fundamental beliefs about teaching. In turn, once teachers can articulate their beliefs, they become empowered with recognizing choice and creating confident, informed decisions for the future. Through this article, it is my hope that readers may be inspired to reflect on their own experiences, unravel or solidify their fundamental teaching beliefs, and therein find additional support to emancipate the learning spirituality that is housed within each student.

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