Being Mindful of Mindlessness
An Overview of Contemplative Education Programs for Secular Settings

by

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Abstract

      This literature-based research project on Contemplative Education Programs provides a broad overview of this emerging field, which seeks to emphasize religious ways of learning in secular and pluralistic environments. The literature is found to define what "contemplative" programs are generally, offer insights into both the teacher as a contemplative practitioner and students as contemplative learners, and clarify what it means to cultivate a contemplative classroom. While these programs offer a well-rounded introduction to contemplative/mindful ways of life, however, they also neglect some of the potential dangers of attempting to transfer such approaches from religious to secular settings. This paper is therefore an attempt to offer Religious Educators with an introduction to these kinds of programs so that they may better understand some of the ways that religious approaches to learning are being transferred into secular and public schools in our increasingly global and pluralistic world.

Introduction

      It has been stated that the current U.S. school system is one that fosters more "mindlessness" than deep learning,[1] more competitiveness than compassion,[2] and one that favors the head over the heart.[3] In addition to this, students are experiencing increasing amounts of stress that impedes their abilities to learn,[4] while teachers are being burdened with increasing expectations and decreasing support.[5] In light of these growing challenges, public educators are seeking alternatives to the traditional ways of approaching education.[6] One such alternative, which religious educators should be aware of, is known as Contemplative Education.

      In this essay, I will review the literature concerning the use of contemplative approaches to secular and public school education, ranging from elementary school to college. This literature provides a broad understanding of this emerging field in terms of defining it generally, offering insights into both the teacher as a contemplative practitioner and students as contemplative learners, and clarifying much of what it means to cultivate a contemplative classroom. However, this literature is lacking in terms of understanding the dangers of attempting to transfer these practices from religious traditions to secular settings. Below, I will discuss each one of these areas as a separate section in hopes of offering religious educators with an overview of these emerging programs that may in turn offer possible future directions for our field.

Defining 'Contemplative' Education

      The literature asserts that there are two primary elements to contemplative education. For the first element, contemplative education is asserted to foster a state of complete awareness, openness, and receptivity to each moment and whatever arises therein.[7] Ellen Langer and Mary O'Reilley assert that it should nurture the ability of being aware of one or more perspectives simultaneously.[8] The literature also claims that one must work to release their desires for personal control, suspend their judgments, and empty themselves even in the midst of apparent contradictions and differences.[9] These mindfulness and contemplative approaches are therefore beneficial for education because they encourage a reflective and intentional interaction between the individual and their environment.[10]

The second element that the literature highlights in defining contemplative education is that these aspects of openness and receptivity then allow the contemplative practitioner to engage their surroundings in novel ways. Contemplative education therefore has the purposes of helping students to see old things in new ways,[11] blend action and reflection,[12] increase creativity and insight,[13] and to differentiate one's self more fully from others.[14] These approaches, the literature asserts, should also lead to greater levels of peace,[15] deeper intimacy in relationships,[16] and an emerging oneness with ever widening circles of life.[17] These mindfulness and contemplative approaches are also seen as being beneficial for adolescent development because they encourage a reflective and intentional interaction between the students and their environment.[18] 'Contemplative' education programs are therefore understood as having the primary goals of both deepening and broadening one's relationship with themselves, others, and the subjects that are being studied through its intentional mindfulness practices.

The Teacher as a Contemplative Practitioner

As it relates to viewing the teacher as a Contemplative Practitioner, the literature addresses three broad areas: the purpose of being a contemplative teacher; the practices of a contemplative teacher; and obstacles to being a contemplative teacher. The literature asserts that the teacher, as a contemplative practitioner, has the purpose of nurturing a compassion that fosters a deeper connection to one's self and others.[19] This is asserted to happen through an awakened clarity that empowers the teacher to be more responsive and transformational in the lives of their students.[20] These practices also highlight the importance and role of the teacher in the formation of student's lives.[21] Also, since these practices emphasize such deep attentiveness and listening,[22] they place the contemplative teacher in a better position to have a positive impact on the development of their students. Hence, the contemplative teacher's primary purpose is related to compassion and nurture as much as it is to the transfer of knowledge.

Practices that nurture the contemplative teacher, according to the literature, include the deliberate and daily application of these practices to their classrooms and personal lives.[23] It also includes being open to the differences and new perspectives that students bring,[24] as well as being present to and integrative of the "sacredness" of each day.[25] Such attentive and mindful methods for teaching make possible the kinds of student-centered approaches[26] that are asserted as being necessary by Piagetians for cognitive development.[27] These contemplative practices for the teacher are conducive to such development and learning due to their emphasis on daily reflection and responsiveness to the happenings of the classroom and what students are and are not learning.[28] In short, the literature encourages contemplative teachers to apply their daily practices directly to their classrooms thereby fostering enhanced student learning and development.

Finally, the literature claims that obstacles for the contemplative teacher may include personal, cultural, or time related issues. First, personal issues may include the fact that the teacher may only favor one aspect of their own intellectual or emotional life to the neglect of others.[29] The effects of this can be that the teacher therefore does not have the adequate tools that are needed in order to deal with the intellectual or emotional lives of their students.[30] Secondly, systemic and/or cultural obstacles may include unrealistic expectations from administrators[31] as well as negative views of the educational system as a whole by society.[32] Such systemic

influences can become very constricting, overwhelming, and unsupportive for the teacher.[33] Relating more specifically to the contemplative teacher, another systemic obstacle includes common misperceptions of what contemplative education really is and how to go about it.[34] Without adequate training and support, being a contemplative teacher can be very difficult. Finally, time related obstacles include the fact that contemplative approaches must be practiced for an extended period of time before significant and sustainable effects emerge in the contemplative teacher's life and their classrooms.[35] Patience and persistence are therefore seen to be a necessary part of a contemplative teacher's development. Despite these obstacles, however, the literature asserts that these approaches are primarily intended to nurture the teacher's own personal and continuing growth as well as their students.[36]

Students as Contemplative Learners

Continuing with our brief overview, in seeking to nurture students as contemplative learners, a diverse range of programs are presented in the literature. These programs, as well as their practices, are broad in terms of their effects on the well-being and performance of the students. Additionally, some of the research offers suggestions for why these programs work and discusses some of the obstacles they have encountered in using them. The programs presented in the literature ranged in duration from 5 weeks to one full school year.[37] The populations they engaged ranged in grade level from kindergarten to 2nd year medical school students.[38] The practices that these programs used included common religious approaches to contemplation such as yoga, Tai Chi, and various meditation techniques.[39] However, they also utilized a wide range of other approaches such as self-reflection approaches, encouraging students to be more attentive to their environments, and intentional empathy enhancing practices.[40] We can therefore find the kinds of programs being offered, the populations being engaged, and the practices that were used to be very broad and diverse.

The effects of these and other contemplative education programs described in the literature were numerous. These effects included increased physiological and psychological well being[41] as well as decreased disciplinary problems.[42] They also included an increased curiosity and perceptiveness of students in learning.[43] These practices are also asserted to foster both greater self-awareness as well as better interpersonal relationships, decreased stress, and an increased awareness of one's surroundings.[44] These approaches also have been reported to yield such results as increased GPAs, greater self-confidence, and increased concentration and focus.[45] By supporting the development of identity through its approaches, contemplative education also appears to support optimal psychological functioning as well.[46] Additionally, as seen in such theories as William Perry's developmental model of college students in their movement from dualistic thinking towards greater commitment in the face of relativism,[47] mindfulness educators such as Ellen Langer assert that one of the key purposes and effects of these contemplative approaches is to help students to be more open to exceptions in everything that they learn.[48] It is such openness to learning that therefore makes these approaches so helpful for a student's growth according to developmental models such as Perry's. Hence, the effects that are being observed as a result of these contemplative programs therefore seem to positively support not only a student's learning potentials, but also their social, emotional, and developmental needs as well.

Finally, researchers assert that these educational approaches are effective in the lives of students because of the coping skills and self-regulating mechanisms that they appear to foster.[49] These skills and mechanisms are important for students because of such systemic obstacles to learning as the current U.S. TV/videogame culture and the "mindlessness" that it and other societal factors are asserted to nurture.[50] As already noted, these approaches seem to counter these influences through intentional mindfulness practices.[51] Other obstacles noted by the literature included the negative effects of stress in the lives of students which impedes their abilities to learn.[52] As was noted above, lowering stress and decreasing its effects on students is one of the primary effects of contemplative education approaches.[53] So, in light of the obstacles that students face in both their learning and development, the literature asserts that contemplative education is a powerful way to overcome and counteract each of these obstacles.

Cultivating a Contemplative Classroom

Lastly, the literature broadly discusses some of the aspects and activities of a contemplative classroom. They also address systemic educational problems and the solutions that contemplative programs offer, as well as the issues relating to the separation of church and state in public school settings. The literature asserts that a contemplative environment can be fostered through the intentional use of such activities as: play,[54] rituals and ceremonies,[55] attentiveness to nuances, distractions, and obstacles,[56] and using the larger social environment as a source of educational insight and personal transformation.[57] The purpose of these practices is to foster a setting in which contemplative learning and development occurs.[58] Such a contemplative classroom is one that nurtures a sense of openness, sharing, and exploration.[59] Such views of the classroom are important because positive environmental influences such as these have been cited as being central for youth development and education.[60] The contemplative classroom is also viewed as being one that is radically attentive to and inclusive of context and diversity.[61] Its emphasis on including voices that are not usually heard[62] is especially important for the education and development of women, ethnic minorities, and alienated youth.[63] Additionally, the literature asserts that a contemplative classroom is one that nurtures an atmosphere of hospitality and mutual transformation.[64] Such a positive classroom environment is therefore one that seems to naturally lend itself to positive student education and development.

The literature also highlights and seeks to address three broad systemic educational problems through contemplative methods. The first systemic problem noted in the literature included the heavy focus on rationalistic and objective knowing that many educational approaches focus on.[65] The major problem that is asserted for such "3rd person" approaches to learning is that they are not holistic enough,[66] and other aspects of the student must be nurtured such their character, relational connectedness, and their democratic and ecological life-styles.[67] The second systemic problem noted were the repetitive and rote memorization approaches that are commonly used in schools.[68] Such approaches are asserted to foster a "mindlessness" that closes students off to future learning.[69] Since contemplative education "decries" the rote memorization approaches of many modern educational systems,[70] it may be in a better position to nurture the burgeoning minds of adolescents who are more inclined towards possibility than the present reality, according to some research.[71] Finally, the third problem the literature highlighted is the current fragmented and consumerist emphases in school curriculum.[72] The literature asserts that a contemplative educational approach can rectify these problems through its

mindfulness and compassion-based approaches.[73] The contemplative education literature therefore seeks to directly identify and address some of these current systemic problems through its approaches.

Finally, the literature asserts four ways to avoid the potential conflict relating to the separation of church and state for these programs in public school and state university settings. First, implementing a contemplative education program in such a setting can avoid church/state issues when it is done, according to the literature, for epistemological reasons.[74] The assertion here, according to Tobin Hart, is that contemplative approaches cultivate deeper and more "inner" kinds of knowing that are completely devoid of any religious doctrine or heritage. As such, Hart asserts that these approaches should be utilized to nurture these deeper ways of knowing. Secondly, church/state issues can also be avoided when contemplative programs are instituted for purely psycho-physiological benefits.[75] The justification given by Ed Sarath is that these contemplative approaches foster general well-being and should therefore be utilized in all classrooms. Sarath goes on to assert that contemplative practices seem to have a common heritage among many religious traditions and should therefore be viewed as being "trans-traditional."

Also, contemplative practices and philosophies may be introduced from a historical perspective, thereby avoiding questions of the violation of the church and state.[76] Hill, Herndon, & Karpinska propose an approach to implementing contemplative education from a historical view that does not seek evangelization but rather learning and development through exposure. Finally, if a contemplative program uses non-offensive or neutral terminology and language, such church/state issues can be avoided altogether according to two authors.[77] Maria Lichtmann proposes that the contemplative teacher look for "various disguises prayer can take,"[78] while O'Reilley prefers that the teacher intentionally choose terminology that is religiously neutral for their students. Both of these authors therefore focus on the appropriate use of language in order to skirt the church/state issues altogether. The literature therefore generally advises an avoidance of church/state issues through a range of alternatives. The purpose in using these alternatives is to allow its aims to be achieved without inducing resistance stemming from church/state issues.

Concerns and Challenges

Given this very brief literature review of contemplative education programs, there are two areas of concern that I have and that religious educators should be aware of. The first has to do with separating these contemplative practices from the religious traditions in which many of them have been developed. Doing this raises questions for me such as: Do they have the same intended effects when we "secularize" them? Is a "secular" contemplative practice truly "non/trans-religious" as Sarath has asserted? Can an inexperienced teacher/school adequately provide the support that is needed when these approaches are implemented? I ask these questions partly because of the assertions that Sarath raised in his further reflections on this issue. Sarath asserts that contemplative programs can be done in conjunction with experienced practitioners and religious institutions.[79] It seems that more research is needed in this area around these questions before contemplative programs are implemented on a broad scale in public school settings. While the outcomes of these programs appear to be positive in the short-term,

unforeseen long-term problems may arise if we totally remove these contemplative approaches from the religious and cultural traditions they were cultivated within.

The second concern that I have has to do with the holistic development of students that some of the literature asserted above. Is presenting these contemplative practices in secular ways not somehow contradictory? In other words, if our educational system is too narrowly focused on developing only a narrower side of our students, namely the rationalistic and secular side, then isn't trying to implement these practices in "non-religious" ways somehow defeating the purpose of holistic development as some of this literature has asserted?[80] Is not religion, in its various forms a part of such holistic development? Given these concerns, however, contemplative education programs do seem to offer a promising future for both the secular school and the field of Religious Education.

Closing Reflections

This overview of contemplative education literature, it is hoped, will offer religious educators additional insights into how our field might be further expanded and engaged in our increasingly global and pluralistic world. These contemplative programs are being successfully implemented in public school and state university settings in ways that have, reportedly, positive effects on both the education and development of its students. In light of this, we might be lead to ask whether or not the field of Religious Education might not also seek to pursue such wider public programs in the wake of this emerging secular movement? Might we also be able to share some of the fruits of our spiritual and religious practices and heritages in secular settings, such as public schools, somehow? Does part of the future of our field lay in these kinds of directions, especially if globalization and pluralism continue to grow? It is questions such as these that I believe religious educators will have to increasingly wrestle with both now and in the future, and these contemplative education programs might very well provide some of the answers.

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