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The Experiences and Practice of Adult Educators in Addressing Spirituality within the Workplace: An Empirical Study

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Abstract: This paper reports on life history research with 5 adult educators who work in a variety of workplace contexts. This research examined the experience and practice of these adult educators, as they were involved in the growing phenomenon of addressing spirituality within their workplace settings.

Introduction

Adult education theory has always emphasized that we teach the whole person; attending to the emotional, cognitive and physical needs of our learners. As a teacher of adults in various school and workplace settings, I have always tried to create and maintain learning situations that address these needs so my learners can flourish. As well as being an adult educator, I have always considered myself as a spiritual person; connecting with God and the universe around me through nature, retreats, attending church and private contemplation. For most of my life these two roles, adult educator and spiritual person, had run side by side on parallel tracks. I never anticipated that these two parallel tracks would begin to intersect and become one track that challenged me to incorporate my spirituality into my practice as an adult educator, especially in a workplace setting. However, several critical events in my life as well as my workplace context caused my thinking and my practice to shift. As I began to reflect on my journey as an adult educator and how my spirituality and my workplace have impacted my practice, I wondered if other adult educators were experiencing a similar change in their perspective and practice.

This paper reports on a study that examined the experience and practice of adult educators who are involved in the growing phenomenon of addressing spirituality within their workplace settings. The majority of the research that explores spirituality within the workplace has only occurred within the past decade and even though the field of adult education has begun to explore spirituality (Hunt, 1998; Westrup, 1998; English and Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 1999 and Dirkx, 1997), we have only just commenced making connections to the workplace setting. In addition concern has been expressed as to whether it is appropriate to address the spiritual dimensions of learners in this setting (Fenwick and Lange, 1999). Like English and Gillen (2000), I believe that a spirituality that contributes to the common good, both within the workplace and in the larger community is a worthy endeavor.

The purpose of this inquiry was to listen to the voices of adult educators who are incorporating spirituality into their practice within their various workplace settings. Adult educators who work within this context are usually known as trainers, organizational and/or community developers and human resource consultants. More specifically this research explored a) how their spirituality impacted them in their roles as adult educators within their workplaces and b) how their workplaces' commitment and ability to address the spiritual dimensions of the organization impacted their roles.

Method

The research was qualitative in nature and employed a life history approach (Goodson, 1992; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Measor & Sikes, 1992). This approach was well suited to this study because it made it possible to explore the personal and unique context of each adult educator's spirituality, how they bring their spirituality into their work and their understanding and view of spirituality within their workplaces. In-depth interviews were conducted with five adult educators who work in five different settings. Three work within

large corporate settings, one works within an educational setting that has a religious affiliation and one adult educator works within a non-profit setting. As well as ensuring a diversity of workplace settings, the participants had to be current adult educators who had at least 5 years experience within the adult education field and at least 3 years adult education experience within their respective workplace settings. In addition, they had to believe that their practice and their workplace had evolved to incorporate spiritual dimensions and were interested in exploring the impact of this evolution.

In addition, in order to broaden my understanding of the experiences of my participants within their respective workplace settings, I also gathered data from two or three of the participants' co-workers and colleagues. Each participant was asked to provide me with a list of names of individuals who represented a cross section of people within their workplace. These colleagues had an opportunity to reflect upon changes within the organization and how they felt the spiritual dimensions were being addressed within the organization as a whole and through the adult learning opportunities.

Findings

The findings of this inquiry left me with two underlying impressions. First of all, the themes that emerged, particularly within the participants' spiritual journeys, mirrored my story and pushed my understanding of my spirituality to new horizons. Secondly, addressing the spiritual dimensions within a workplace reach beyond prescriptive techniques and processes and is a more complex and comprehensive undertaking as demonstrated by the stories of the participants and their workplaces colleagues. The analysis for this study concentrated on three areas: an exploration of the participants' spirituality, what their spirituality means to them in their practice as adult educators within their respective organizations and finally, how they and their colleagues view their respective organizations within a spiritual context.

An Exploration of the Participant's Spirituality

The participants, as they looked back on their own spiritual stories, began their exploration of this topic in the same way I did. They first reflected upon their childhood religion and considered the events that caused them to move away from this view of spirituality. Like myself, they retrieved and reclaimed positive aspects of their childhood faith, particularly the rituals and community of their faith. However, their view of spirituality was not just equated with religion, but moved beyond this equation to subsume religion under the broader context of spirituality. Erin described what this meant to her:

They do intersect, religion and spirituality, but I see spirituality as being the umbrella area and religion falling under that. So in other words, my spirituality is my core relationship, my core beliefs, my meaning I bring to my life, my relationships with self, with others, with my God and religion would be how, in a formal way, I express that. So one, in other words, is more fundamental than the other. One is not better; they are just different concepts in my mind, the way they play out in my life. So I think that's why it has been freeing for me.

When they elaborated about what the umbrella of spirituality meant to them, they described a connection to a higher presence, acknowledging the mysterious and unexplainable and being on an evolving and ongoing journey. They were able to be in touch with their spirituality in several ways. First of all, they emphasized the importance of listening to their inner voice. This voice provided direction and support and guided them in their future paths and decisions. Secondly, they attended to their spirit and soul by spending time in nature, by meditating and reflecting and by also exploring their creativity through poetry, writing and drawing. Third, their spirituality was also cultivated by having a community of friends and family that nourished this aspect of their being. In exploring the value of the community, they explained that part of

their spirituality was about realizing that we are all interconnected. Being part of a community that was open, inclusive and generous fed a spiritual need.

Finally, the participants dwelt on times of crisis in their lives and made connections to their spirituality. The need for a community, the importance of listening to their inner voice and acknowledging inexplicable and mysterious forces within their lives became even more important during life's challenges.

Their Role as Adult Educators: Spiritual Grounding

The next component of the findings considers how the participants saw their spirituality impacting them in their roles as workplace adult educators. As Holly stated:

This catches me by surprise because one of my pictures of spirituality is that it's a quiet, meditating, peaceful place. I suppose I have two poles around spirituality, one is that and I certainly need that replenishment for my own serenity and peace but then the other pole is this outreach, this proactive attempting to make the world a better place.

When they spoke about how their spiritual grounding impacted them as adult educators, their responses were much broader than I had imagined, and only partially focused on adult education processes they used within learning situations. Without exception, they stated that support of individual and group development was the central way they connected their spirituality to their work. In this supportive role, they spoke about using facilitative and non-directive processes and being a guide who provided a safe context so people could freely explore their stories and the path they needed to take. Stephanie called herself a nurturer in this role "because I want to help people learn, I want to help facilitate. I suppose if you're a good teacher or a good professor or a good corporate facilitator, you embody those things because you want each individual to be successful and not just complete your curriculum". Ultimately, Stephanie saw this work within the context of being a "spiritual advisor" as she and her colleague "look for opportunities to influence people at an individual level, and also influence departments".

For Danielle, the development of the individual was empowering them to take responsibility for their own community: the housing co-op. "Your role is to have them actually voice and use their democracy. Democracy is a nice model but it also needs responsibilities of voice and actively participating". Like Stephanie, she also saw herself doing this role in a facilitative and non-directive way, so that people could take responsibility for their direction.

In contrast to this gentle and facilitative role, the participants also spoke about the need to support people within their setting by moving against the tide of their workplace or the larger community. In this social advocacy role they lobbied their organization or the larger community to provide workplace places that allow people bring to their creativity and passions to their work and to tend to the social fabric of workplace setting by providing effective supports such as training and leadership programs. They also reminded their organizations of their obligations to the local and global community in ensuring environmental practices and ethical decision making procedures were in place. As they undertook the role of social advocacy, their style became less facilitative and more assertive. They asked questions, they told the truth when others remained silent and directly confronted and worked through conflicts within their settings. Several of the participants mentioned the personal toll this exacted from them as they challenged the assumptions of their organizations. Mick said, "I mean I look at my own life, my situation and I question if this is the right life for me and maybe it's not. Maybe adult education is the right fit for me and maybe the corporate world it not. Maybe there are too many things I want and I can't wait any longer for them in a corporate world to accept".

The role of social advocate, for each participant, was directly related to their workplace's desire and ability address its spiritual dimensions. As the workplace's ability and desire to address its spiritual

dimensions increased, the role of social advocacy decreased and conversely, the role of social advocacy increased if the adult educators felt the workplace did not honour the spiritual dimensions of the workplace.

As mentioned previously, the participants viewed the incorporation of spirituality within the workplace as being much broader than specific techniques and processes connected with learning situations. However, all the participants did recollect specific times when they felt that they were in a “spiritual space”. With the exception of Erin who works in an overtly religious setting, they did not enter into a workshop or seminar intentionally thinking that they would create a “spiritual experience”. However, as they looked back on these moments, there were certain times and processes that seemed to cultivate these times. Activities associated with change management, leadership development and the identification of organizational values were samples of events that demanded the deep reflection and full engagement of individuals and groups. As the participants guided these events, they cited the importance of establishing a trusting atmosphere, asking open-ended questions and using the processes of storytelling and open and honest dialogue.

When “spiritual moments” happened in these contexts, participants used the following phrases to describe what happened. “There is a breakthrough, meaning that the mask slips a little and people are more authentic”. “People are personally transformed and they see the world differently”. “There is a deeper sense of community and connectedness within the group”. “People feel they can voice their fears, they can be open and the truth comes out”.

The Soul and Spirit of Each Workplace: The Views of Participants and Their Colleagues

The final component of the analysis puts the spiritual journeys and the work of the participants within the framework of their various organizations. It was important to have this broader view because, while the participants’ personal spiritual experiences impacted how they viewed and implemented their role as adult educators, it was only part of the picture. The ability and challenges these adult educators faced as they tried to address the spiritual dimensions of their workplace were also informed by the mandate of their workplaces and its desire and willingness to be “spiritually” infused. In reviewing the responses of the participants and their colleagues as they described what spirituality within the workplace consists of it became apparent that their descriptions impacted all aspects of the organization.

They all emphasized how important it is to have a sense of vocation and passion about their work. Ideally this passion would be fully expressed in a workplace culture that encouraged creativity and risk taking. Supports that would be in place so that people could be effective would include various training and wellness programs such as leadership programs, board development training, and career development programs. In addition the workplace would demonstrate that it values balance between work and home by having supports and programs in place that foster outside volunteer commitments and the other roles in people’s lives. The underlying assumption about providing these supports is that the organization values people and also has base line wages and benefits in place that demonstrate that they are willing to invest in their people.

Spirituality within the workplace also recognizes the importance of a sense of community both within and beyond the workplace. While the participants and their colleagues all appreciated the informal relationships and community they had at work, several indicated that they felt that their organizations were not as intentional as they could be in cultivating community. The challenges of a fast-paced work environment with high demands make this difficult. A sense of community beyond the workplace was described as participation in community charities and in environmental policies and decision-making practices that go beyond looking at the profit margin to considering the impact on the larger community.

Finally, all the participants and their colleagues understood that the transfer of their organization’s values into day to day practice was probably pivotal in being able demonstrate that spirituality had been infused into the workplace. While all the organizations in this inquiry had undergone the process of

articulating values that foster many of the qualities already listed above, the implementation of these values was inconsistent.

The participants and their colleagues were very similar in their views of what a spiritually infused organization was, but there was some variance in each organization's willingness to implement the spiritual dimensions described above. As mentioned previously, this impacted the amount of time and energy each participant spent in the role of social advocacy.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

At the conclusion of this inquiry I realize that there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, a place where answers are tidy and complete. Spirituality and how adult educators address the spiritual dimensions of the workplace are elusive concepts, where definitive answers are not readily available. However, I have discovered some guideposts that have impacted both my own spiritual journey and how my spirituality informs my practice within a variety of workplace settings.

Specifically, this study has revealed the following characteristics that enhance the adult educator's ability to impact the spiritual dimensions of their workplace in a positive and inclusive manner. The adult educator who has an open, evolving and inclusive perspective about their own and others' spirituality, rather than a perspective that is limited to specific religious view, helps create a culture of spirituality that is more humane and inclusive within their workplace. In addition, the adult educator also understands that their spirituality is not only limited to their personal rituals and time, but realizes that their spirituality is something that impacts all aspects of their life including their work life. When they consider how their spirituality impacts their vocation, they bring a sense of social justice to their work as they ensure that their workplace is a place that supports individuals and groups and also operates in a just and ethical manner.

I have come to realize that this open and inclusive perspective of spirituality evolves and is something that is acquired throughout our life journey. While the fit isn't perfect, this broadening view of our spirituality can be associated with movement into mid-life. I now understand that part of my motivation in doing this study is connected to my own mid-life journey in exploring my spirituality. As I listened to the participants in this study I found a great resonance with the stories and the questions they were asking. Their ages were similar to mine and it appeared they were on the same journey as I. Fowler (1981) and Weisbust and Thomas (1994) all make connections to our mid-life journey, stating that "transforming spiritual development appears to be age-related but not age-determined. That is, it appears more frequently in older persons, but can be found in younger people" (Weisbust and Thomas, p. 132). In addition to the loose correlation with middle age, this type of spiritual journey requires an ongoing ability to be self-reflective and self-aware, qualities I found in all my participants. They were all doing the work that Fenwick and English (2001) recommend. "One place to start is by examining our own biography. For many of us it is important to acknowledge and perhaps reconcile the influence of our religious upbringing on our current spiritual preferences and resistances" (p.7). Ideally, if we are open to an evolving and inclusive spirituality, we will then bring a spirituality into our workplaces that is inviting and nurturing toward individuals and groups, but is also challenging and assertive in ensuring that our workplaces model a holistic spirituality.

While the adult educator needs explore their motivations for addressing the spiritual dimensions of the workplace, we also need to understand the motivations of our workplaces as we move into this area. Just as our own view of spirituality greatly informs and impacts our practice, our workplace context informs and impacts how we address the spiritual dimensions of our workplaces. When I consider the workplace context, I would want to know why the workplace is addressing its spiritual dimensions. If an organization sees spirituality as the latest trend or bandwagon or as another way to boost its profits, I would get very nervous. Mitroff and Denton (1999) caution organizations about their motivations for "getting into spirituality" by stating that those who practice spirituality in order to achieve better corporate results undermine both its

practice and its ultimate benefits. To reap the positive benefits of spirituality, it must be practiced for its own sake” (p. xviii). Spirituality is not just a technique, and if it is taken on authentically, it will address all aspects of an organization. As I interviewed the participants and their workplace colleagues I was struck by their all encompassing view as they moved from individual vocation to the importance of community, workplace balance and ethical and environmental practices.

Assuming adult educators bring a holistic and broad view of spirituality into the workplace, they will be greatly impacted by their organization’s perspective of spirituality and its level of commitment to addressing its spiritual dimensions. This is particularly true if we as adult educators realize that our role in addressing the spiritual dimensions of our workplaces is not just limited to times when we are facilitating and leading groups. It is also about advocating and challenging organizations to assume a holistic practice in addressing its spiritual dimensions, from treating colleagues as authentic and multi-dimensional people, to ensuring that their workplace has ethical and environmental practices in place.

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