Spirituality and Language Education:
An Introduction

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Abstract

In this paper, I endeavor to introduce and justify my dissertation research into possible connections between spirituality and language education. I begin by asserting that spirituality, however defined, is basic to our identities as language teachers, and that ignoring it is detrimental to teachers and learners alike. I then demonstrate that there is a yawning gap in the Second Language Education (SLE) literature vis-à-vis spirituality and language teaching. My purpose in penning this study was not only to begin to fill this gap, but to hold that my inquiry could be significant for future SLE research and practice. I close by outlining what I view to be important differences between spirituality and organized religion.

Keywords: spirituality, pedagogy, language, caring, connection, religion

If we omit spiritual realities from human behavior, it won't matter how much we keep in, because we will have omitted the most fundamental aspect of human behavior (Bergin, 1997, p. xi).

Overview

If we in a caring profession such as teaching neglect the world of the spirit, we forsake a foundational aspect of our charges and ourselves. That a well-known psychologist such as Bergin, quoted above, has recognized this should give language educators pause. I am one of those educators who has long wondered why there has not been more discussion in the field of second and foreign language education about the connections between spirituality and the lives and practices of language teachers. Hence, in this paper, I introduce and justify my dissertation research (Bradley, 2011) into such connections by arguing that it is important to explore narratives of language teachers' spiritual journeys not only because of the paucity of such research in TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Applied Linguistics circles, but also because educators have long realized that spirituality plays a key role in teachers' identity formation and in the pedagogical process itself (e.g., Nash, 2001, 2002; Noddings, 2002).

I begin this article with some brief background information about this study (including some cautionary notes on proselytizing). I then outline a statement of the problem: that is to say, a lack of studies on teacher spirituality in second language (L2) education. This leads to an explanation

the purpose of my dissertation, which is to address this research deficit with an in-depth look at the spiritual narratives of some language educators. Next, I outline the significance of my research for both research and practice. I then discuss and differentiate between spirituality and religion.

Background of the Issue

The bulk of the world's population is engaged in some form of spiritual or religious practice. Moreover, the services of language teachers are often called upon in countries and among cultures where such traditions permeate all levels of society. Thus, it would seem natural that second language education (SLE) researchers give some attention to exploring, understanding, and researching possible relationships between spirituality and various aspects of pedagogy. This is hardly the case, however, and is all the more surprising given thatsuch research is prominent in other academic fields.

Linking spirituality and education can, however, be a dangerous and misunderstood venture. Vietnam-born Buddhist monk and social activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) strongly warned against the coercive indoctrination of others into a given theological mindset. Indeed, he held that such pressure could only result in suffering. In the spirit of Hanh's teachings, then, let me begin this section of the article by stating categorically my conviction that research into possible links between spirituality and SLE must never be used as a pretext for proselytizing. I contend, though, that the word" spirituality" need not automatically conjure up images of firebrand ultra-orthodoxy (or even of religion in general).

Statement of the Problem

As Glazer (1999) has pointed out, fears of religious proselytizing have led some to question whether or not any explorations of spirituality in education are warranted. However, he and many others (e.g., Dalai Lama, 1999a; Nash, 2001, 2002; Noddings, 2002) have persuasively argued that such endeavors are essential for examining all dimensions of teaching and learning, particularly those having to do with identity formation, caring, and the well-being of students and teachers.

Though authors of data based studies in general education (e.g., Cranton & Carusetta, 2004; Pajak & Blase, 1989; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003) have explored the central role played by many forms of spirituality in the development of teachers' identities and classroom practices, such research has been wanting in second language education. The only study conducted in SLE on any form of teachers' spirituality or religion of which I am aware has been limited to interviews with language educators of only one religious persuasion: evangelical Christianity (Varghese & Johnston, 2007). Moreover, rather than addressing a broad range of spiritual views, an edited volume of position papers with a sprinkling of pilot studies (Wong & Canagarajah, 2009) dealt almost exclusively with an important but rather narrowly focused debate between evangelical Christian educators (e.g., Griffith, 2004; Purgason, 2004) and second language researchers criticizing the use of English language teaching (ELT) as a means to spread the message of Christian-

ity (e.g., Edge, 2003, 2004; Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003; Pennycook & Makoni, 2005). Indeed the primary purpose of the aforementioned study by Varghese and Johnston was to address this very controversy rather than to examine how various forms of spirituality could potentially contribute to deeper understandings of second language (L2) teacher development.

In addition, although important research on identity has been carried out in second language education (Norton, 2000), spirituality has not been considered as a possible factor in the development of identities. As implied in the citation from Bergin (1997) at the beginning of this paper, researchers of human behavior who have not factored spirituality into the overall picture of identity formation have failed to take into account a key element in explaining this complex process. The obvious problem in second language education, then, which I have begun to address in my research, is a lack of inquiry into the various forms of language teachers' spirituality, as well as the crucial impact of their spirituality on their identity formation and classroom practices.

Purpose of My Research

The primary purpose of my dissertation research was to explore possible links between spirituality and second language pedagogy. I carried out such an inquiry by interviewing nine teachers who viewed spirituality in various ways. In addition to analyzing their interview transcripts in order to discover common narrative themes among the stories of the participants, I examined other sources of data, such as, where feasible and appropriate, these educators' lesson plans, syllabuses and academic publications. A less formal, but no less important, source of data came from my many casual encounters and conversations with the participants over many years. In carrying out this study, not only did I start to fill a yawning gap in TESOL and Applied Linguistics research but more important, I hope I began to address questions relating to teachers' identities and journeys towards wholeness, and hence, toward effective and satisfying careers as language educators (Palmer, 1998).

Significance of This Project

Significance for Research

I felt that my dissertation research was important because I could potentially contribute to the few existing discussions of religion and spirituality within the scholarly literature in second language education. In describing above the background and purpose of my study, I argued that research into the spiritual views of language teaching professionals is timely not only because of the lack of inquiry as compared with that of general education and other fields, but also because spirituality (whether or not teachers define themselves using this concept) is an integral part of many teachers' identities, and thus, it plays a vital role in their pedagogical practices (hooks, 1994; Nash, 2001, 2002; Noddings, 2002). Hence, such research can potentially be beneficial to a wide range of researchers, including students in TESOL graduate programs. That is to say, I hope that researchers will be inspired by my research not only to explore their evolving spirituality, but also to carry out their own studies into the spiritual journeys of second language educators, as well as how this important aspect of their identity formation impacts their classrooms.

Significance for Practice: Caring

In addition to adding to the scholarly literature in SLE, my research also has the potential to contribute to language teaching practice, particularly the theme of caring. The importance of caring has been little discussed in SLE or Applied Linguistics literature. However, the primacy of nurturing in language education has been strongly recognized by Johnston (2003), who, acknowledging Noddings's (2002) prior work on this topic in general education, asserted that there were spiritual aspects to caring. Hence, he held that spirituality needed to be studied empirically in second language education. Johnston, however, has thus far limited his own enquiry into spirituality to interviews of ten evangelical Christians (Varghese & Johnston, 2007). Moreover, he and his co-author did not examine the thoughts of these budding language educators onthe importance of caring for their learners, although to be fair, this was not the primary purpose of their inquiry. One limitation of their study, I feel, was that the authors investigated young language teachers' identities and pedagogical philosophies within only one organized religion, rather than undertaking a deeper exploration of a variety of spiritual views of a number of language teachers. Again, a primary goal in my project was to begin to address the lack of research on teachers espousing diverse spiritual beliefs. As I explain in the body of the dissertation itself, the results of my study indicated that despite the wide divergence in the spiritual and religious views held by my informants, they all insisted in their own ways that caring was indispensable to their teaching.

Conceptual Framework

Spirituality and Religion

As discussed earlier, through my research, I hope to make a significant contribution to discussions in the second language education field on topics concerning spirituality. In order to help dispel possible notions by readers that spirituality is inevitably linked with religious extremism, however, I feel it important to distinguish here between spirituality and religion, and in so doing, to define these terms clearly. Hence, although I recognize that there are as many definitions of spirituality and religion as there are people, I have, for the purposes of my research, adopted teacher educator Parker Palmer's (2003) definition of spirituality:" the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" (p.377). If one takes this definition at face value, it is unnecessary to follow a prescriptive faith or even to believe in a divine being or other supernatural force in order to be a spiritual person. Sagan (1996), for his part, when underlining spirituality as one's connection to the cosmos, contended," Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word' spiritual' that we are talking of anything other than matter" (p.29). He added:

> When we recognize our place in an immensity of light years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. (p.29)

However, in choosing Palmer's definition, I wish to state categorically that spirituality is more than a mere fleeting connection with something beyond oneself. Palmer acknowledged cer-

tain limitations of his elucidation of" spirituality" by noting," People can and do get connected with things that are death-dealing rather than life giving, as witness the Third Reich" (p.377). Nonetheless, my dissertation was a qualitative case study that was interpretive and exploratory in nature. As such, I argue that to try to pin down the nature of spirituality too precisely would be to do an injustice to the term itself, as well as to my participants, who viewed the concept in rather differing ways. Thus, as Palmer observed regarding his interpretation of spirituality," ...it performs a key function of any good definition by giving us a place from which to launch an exploration" (p.377).

Notwithstanding, in order to ensure that the definition is not so broad as to be meaningless, it is useful here to contextualize it. Offering an interesting prelude to his definition, Palmer cited the writer James Baldwin (1985), who recalled a time when, as a public school student, his mathematics teacher, Mr. Porter, recognized and accepted Baldwin's limited talent as a math student. The educator, instead of foisting a potentially irrelevant and painful curricular requirement upon his young charge, instead appeared to aid greatly in Baldwin's development as a writer by directing him towards a demanding research project for the school newspaper, at which Baldwin proved successful. As Palmer observed, in underlining how simple it would have been for Mr. Baldwin" to do no more than teach math" (p.377):

> So we have much to learn from Mr. Porter, whose spirituality connected him to that largeness called the life of a child a convention that may well have pitted him against ego-seducing educational and social conventions of all sorts. (p.377)

Palmer, though categorically rejecting" the imposition of any form of religion in public education" (p.380), including mandatory school prayer in American public schools, nevertheless called for the full exploration of" the spiritual dimensions of teaching, learning, and living." He elaborated as follows on what he felt was the essence of such an endeavor:

> It is the ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger than our egos with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of nature and history and literature, with the obligations, opportunities, and mysteries of being alive on the face of the earth. (p.380)

Given the theological connotations of the word" eternal," some readers might be uncomfortable with the use of this term in Palmer's definition of spirituality as" the eternal human yearning" (p.377) that individuals have to be linked with something that is beyond the ego. However, the words" ancient and abiding," cited above, could easily be substituted for this term (likewise, there is no reason why the phrase" inner lives" couldn't replace the word" souls" in the longer citation above).

More important, perhaps, Palmer, though associating" connectedness" (p.380) with a number of factors, began his article with the narrative of Mr. Porter's successful attempts to connect meaningfully with his student, James Baldwin, particularly his penchant for writing. In so doing, it appears to me that Palmer emphasized the personal, relational aspect of connectedness more than any of the other facets of connection to which he referred. Mr. Porter, after all, reached beyond himself (his ego) in resisting the" pressure to conform to the expectations that came from

his training, his role, his employer, his community, or from policies governing schooling in his place and time" (p.377). He did so by eschewing the temptation to force a number-based curriculum upon the mathematically challenged Baldwin, instead encouraging him to develop his nascent writing skills.

Palmer noted that the centrality of relationships to his views on spirituality was based upon both personal experience and research. As to the former, when describing the success of spiritual retreats he held across the country to foster inner teacher development, he asserted, "If you educate teachers' hearts and souls, they deepen their relations with students, restore community with colleagues, embrace new leadership roles on behalf of authentic educational reform, and renew their sense of vocation instead of dropping out" (p.384). He pointed, as well, to a longitudinal study by Bryk and Schneider (2002, as cited in Palmer, p.384), who demonstrated that public schools in the Chicago area in which there were high levels of trust among teachers, administrators, and students at the beginning of curricular reforms displayed a one in two chance of showing overall improvements to students' math and reading, whereas those schools where such trust was lacking had only a one in seven chance of such gains taking place. As Palmer contended, in critiquing a U.S. educational system obsessed with high technology and high-stakes testing, "the powers of the human heart" (p.385) in education are often ignored because the aforementioned external variables can easily be measured, but we "are largely ignorant about how to explore the subtle world of the soul" (p.385).

Dewey (1916/2009), for his part, in contrast to proponents of the perennial philosophy of education, who advocated a hierarchical imparting of knowledge from teacher to learner (see also Freire, 1970, on the "banking" model of education), felt that the primary purpose of education was to foster democratic, egalitarian societies. As such, the relational trust spoken of by Bryk and Schneider could well be seen as key to the development of such populations. Hence, Palmer's view that spiritually inclined teachers tend to encourage connections beyond the ego seems to fit well with Dewey's progressive paradigm of educational philosophy.

In sum, I am comfortable with Palmer's view that spirituality entails connections beyond the self, for as I hope I have shown in my aforementioned contextualization of the definition, the author, citing research, narrative accounts, and his own extensive experience in teacher training, has explicitly linked the concept with the power that human relationships (particularly those between teachers and students) have to bring about personal and societal change. Moreover, time and again, the participants in my dissertation research asserted how important it has been for them to foster nurturing relationships with their learners, even when the informants did not overtly invoke the concept of spirituality. Hence, I have, with few reservations, adopted Palmer's definition for the purposes of my research.

As I argue below, I view spirituality and religion as quite distinct, though not mutually exclusive, concepts, and I believe that TESOL researchers and educators can benefit (in terms of inquiry, personal growth and reflection on pedagogical practices) from considering, if not participating in, considerations of these two important topics. However, in my dissertation, I examined spirituality, as defined above, rather than organized religion, on which I elucidate briefly below.

Campbell (1991) held that "Religion begins with a sense of wonder and awe and the attempt

to tell stories that will connect us to God. Then it becomes a set of theological works in which everything is reduced to a code, to a creed" (pp.173-174). Given how Palmer (2003) has defined spirituality, it could conceivably be argued that Campbell described spirituality in the first sentence of this quote, while delineating the essence of religion in the second. Campbell was perhaps the world's foremost authority on mythology. As such, he outlined the common archetypes among many religions, ancient and modern. Having spent a lifetime examining the mythologies and religions of the world, he concluded that it was ultimately unproductive to dwell upon the superficial differences in doctrines between religions. Rather, he held, people should ponder the core messages common to all faiths.

I realize, however, that there are a myriad of conceptualizations of " spirituality" and " religion," and that these terms are not always contradictory. After all, the word " religion" comes from the Latin root *religere:* " to tie [back] together" (Compton, 2003, p.113). The verb " tie" also evokes the connective aspect of spirituality alluded to by Palmer (2003) above. Moreover, psychologists Hill and Pargament (2003) held that the overly simplistic separation of religion into public, institutional domains and spirituality into private spheres could be problematic. They asserted, for instance, that many people have had deeply spiritual experiences within the context of organized religions. They warned, too, that dichotomizing the terms " spirituality" and " religion" could inadvertently create a hierarchy, wherein persons perceiving themselves to belong to the former camp could look down upon those they view to comprise the latter. To some extent, therefore, I believe that although spirituality and religion are qualitatively different, there is an overlap in terms of sentiments and practices.

Nonetheless, according to O'Sullivan (2003), " Spirituality, in our times, has been seriously compromised by its identification with institutional religions" (p.10). For this reason, among others, I primarily address in this study spirituality as humanity's search for connections beyond the ego, as outlined by Palmer (2003) above. Hence, I argue that a spiritual journey is easily distinguishable from the codes and creeds of institutionalized religions and as such, it is spirituality, rather than religion, that I have explored in this study. Moreover, I have found Palmer's definition useful in explaining aspects of my own spiritual quest. However, at the same time, I gave the nine participants in my dissertation research the autonomy to define " spirituality" and " religion" as they saw fit.

Conclusion

I have written in this paper how I feel that research into language teaching spirituality (however one defines the term) is justified. Space limitations prevented me from discussing the results of my research. However, I hope I have in this brief article provided readers some sense as to the importance of my inquiry.

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