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Mindfulness Activities in Teacher Spiritual Preparation

An Action Research Report
By Suzette Quirós

MINDFULNESS IN TEACHER SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

Mindfulness Activities in Teacher Spiritual Preparation

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Abstract

This action research project examined the effects of mindfulness activities on teacher spirituality. It was conducted during a two-month Early Childhood Montessori teacher training course with eight female teachers between the ages of 25 and 50. Data was collected with the use of attitude scales, self-reflection journals, field notes and conversations. Conclusions showed participants perceived an increase in spirituality and gained inner peace, patience, kindness, humility, self-respect. They also showed they gained the ability to let go of negative energy, achieving calmness and positivism. Further research could be conducted to see the effects of teacher spirituality on the classroom environment and learning outcomes of students.

Keywords: Montessori, education, teacher training, Mindfulness, spiritual preparation

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What are the most essential components of a Montessori classroom? Is it the materials? Is it the curriculum? Is it the uninterrupted daily work periods of 3-hours? Is it perhaps something else?

Visits to different Montessori Public Schools have led me to contemplate one of the most important components of a Montessori classroom, the adult. During two years of visiting Montessori schools I have seen several classrooms that even though they do not have all the materials they effectively help children develop to their full potential. Also, I have observed classrooms that even though they do have all the materials they are far away from providing children with a prepared environment that can develop their intellectual, social and spiritual needs in Montessori education.

When sharing my observations with the teachers I was observing I could see a direct relation between the teacher, her sense of purpose and attitude and education and her classroom. The classrooms where children seemed happier, more independent and connected to the curriculum had teachers who strived to give an excellent education despite not having all the prepared environment elements. Teacher's exhibited a form of spirituality, defined by Wolf (2010) as a call to the highest human virtues, such as love, affection, and generosity, responsibility for our own actions, forgiveness, compassion and openness to one another. Spirituality directs us to share instead of accumulate, to cooperate instead of compete, and to create peace instead of violence. Therefore, I find it is not the presence or absence of materials but that of the spirituality of the teacher which determines the success of a Montessori classroom.

Montessori encouraged teachers to prepare themselves spiritually to effectively serve the child. She wrote,

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The vision of the teacher should be at once precise like that of the scientist, and spiritual like that of the saint. The preparation for science and the preparation for sanctity should form a new soul, for the attitude of the teacher should be at once positive, scientific and spiritual. (Montessori, 1917, p.68)

The relationship formed in a Montessori classroom between the adult, the environment and the child is essential and greatly influenced by teacher spirituality. Each child holds a direct relationship with the prepared setting and the prepared adult. According to Huxel (2013), “the teacher is that crucial piece providing the foundation for the other essential elements to unfold organically and naturally in an authentic Montessori environment” (p.33).

Based on my observations, I feel this idea of spirituality has been missing therefore research on increasing and supporting the development of a teacher’s spirituality is greatly needed. According to Wolf (2010) the best preparation for teaching, is an evaluation of one’s self. The study of one’s values, beliefs, strengths, weaknesses, habits and omissions is essential in order to accept guidance and become effective teachers. For this research project, I chose to learn more about how teacher training programs can promote and nurture teacher’s spiritual preparation. The meaning of spirituality that will be used in this study reflects a non-religious approach. Based on Haskins (2009) and Smith’s (2013) theories spirituality is non-religious nor material, physical, or temporal. Basic spirituality is the basic human qualities of goodness, kindness, compassion, and caring. His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1999) viewed this kind of spirituality as essential for human beings and their quest for happiness and fulfillment.

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Previous research has demonstrated that spiritual preparation of teachers can have beneficial effects on teachers' well-being (Smith, 2013), their student's academic achievement (Rice, 2003), and student-teacher relationships (Im, 2010). Research results from these authors invited teachers to undergo spiritual preparation to improve their practice and gain a new vision of the child, the youth, themselves and life in general. Smith (2013) believed there are specific ways to achieve spiritual values and spiritual preparation. He enumerates some of the qualities necessary for spiritual preparation: calmness, clarity, courage, compassion, wonder, joy, creativity, connection, and playfulness. "The most fundamental spiritual practice is learning to be more present until achieving present awareness also referred to as mindfulness" (Smith, 2013, p. 48).

For this study three types of mindfulness activity interventions were implemented: quiet time where participants used to find their spiritual center, deep breathing exercises where they intentionally control breath lengths in order to breathe in a conscious level, and moments to practice reflection, were used. Participants started every morning in their two-month course with a short community meeting centering activity, closed every Friday with a short contemplative group evaluation practice and participated in one yoga class. Data was collected with four types of instruments: attitude scale, participant self-reflection journals, field notes and conversations. These activities were implemented to answer the question: what effects would mindfulness activities in a Montessori teacher training course have on teacher spirituality.

Review of Literature

Defining spirituality

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Some authors such as Haskins (2009) and Smith (2013) clarified spirituality is non-religious nor material, physical, or temporal. When defining spirituality Smith (2013) pointed out out:

It is not something found only in some people. Spirituality flows from the individual, forms and defines our relationships with those around us, binds all humans on the planet with a common thread, and connects us with the natural world of which we are an integral part. It is also expanding creativity, wisdom, and gratitude and a place of inner peace. (p.28)

Others defined basic spirituality as the basic human qualities of goodness, kindness, compassion, and caring. According to the Dalai Lama (1999), this kind of spirituality is essential:

All of us need these fundamental spiritual values. Without these, human existence remains hard and very dry. Thus, none of us can be a happy person, our whole family will suffer, and then, eventually, society will be more troubled. So, it becomes clear that cultivating these kinds of basic spiritual values becomes crucial. (p. 258)

Smith (2013) emphasized the importance of spiritual preparation in the teacher training process. “Who we are and how we embody spiritual qualities like patience, courage, and self-respect are essential elements of our work. We need to prepare ourselves just as we prepare other integral aspects of the child’s environment” (pp. 46-47). Educators must cultivate their spiritual preparation by practicing mindfulness activities which increase spirituality, inner peace, patience, kindness, humility and self-respect.

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Spirituality and Montessori education

One element that separates Montessori education from mainstream teaching is its holistic approach. Smith (2013) suggested that Montessori education does not exclusively focus on academic learning but also aspires to nurture children for their best selves to arise. Montessori education works to nurture children and youths entire being.

When comparing the teacher's role to that of other professions Duffy and Duffy (2012) explained that in Montessori education:

What makes our science different from the science of an astronomer who studies the stars, a geologist who studies rock formations, or a biologist who studies living organisms is that we are not separate from the object of our study: the emerging spirit of a human being like ourselves. This creates a truly spiritual element to our role. (p.19)

Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of teacher spiritual preparation during teacher training to achieve a holistic approach in education. Montessori (1969) stated “the preparation for education is a study of oneself; and the preparation of a teacher who is to help life is more than a mere intellectual preparation, it is a preparation of character, a spiritual preparation” (p.95).

Describing the spiritual preparation that those training to become Montessori teachers should acquire, Montessori (1917) expressed teachers have to acquire the power of silence, observation, and humility. Smith (2013) also agreed spiritual preparation is key in meaningful teaching practices. He defined spiritual preparation as the act of stepping into the best parts of oneself and learning to engage with the world in a positive and meaningful way (p. 47).

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Importance of Spiritual Preparation in Education

Research showed spiritual preparation has benefits for the child, the adult, and their relationship. Spiritual preparation of teachers is essential for the absorbent mind of the child. Recognizing children's ability to absorb the behavior of everyone and everything around them Smith (2013) emphasized the importance of spiritual preparation of the teacher in classrooms from ages 3 to 6. According to Smith (2013) "as a teacher, your way of speaking, your subtle beliefs, and your behavior are all being absorbed by the children in your charge. We must embody our highest selves when we are with small children" (p. 47).

When referring to older children Smith also recommended spiritual preparation of the teacher. Smith (2013) pointed out "the example we give has a huge influence in older children as well. Modeling a healthy spiritual life and general goodness affects students of all ages" (p.47). Smith (2013) agreed the best way to teach compassion, wonder, joy and connection is when the teacher embodies these things herself.

According to Huxel (2013), the teacher is that crucial piece that provides the foundation for other essential elements to unfold organically in an authentic Montessori environment. Teacher-student relationships and teacher effectiveness significantly influence student achievement (Rice, 2003). Schneider (2013) believed "when we speak about why we act, why we believe, and what our purpose is, we are more likely to inspire others in a way that will influence them profoundly" (p. 7).

Research has shown that emotionally intelligent leaders possess these qualities: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management (Goleman, Boyatzes & McKee 2002) and self-management (Glasø & Einarsen, 2008). Because of this they are

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better able to empathize with others (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002), display sensitivity to others needs (Cherniss, 2010), successfully mediate conflicts (Zaccaro, 2002) and embrace cultural diversity (Offerman & Phan, 2002), enabling them to effectively lead others to meet goals (Friedman, 2014).

According to Friedman (2014), these findings have direct implications for the teaching profession. “Effective classroom leaders require many of these same traits to empathetically and efficiently guide their students toward fulfilling social and academic goals” (p. 12).

Spiritual preparation improves student-teacher relationships. Furthermore, research proves teachers acquired a raised awareness of the interconnected relationship between themselves and their students and the importance of teacher’s consciousness about student learning (Im, 2010).

Hargreaves (1998) asserted that teaching is an emotional practice in which emotions play an integral role in teacher-student interactions. Miller (1994) proved that teachers who were involved in contemplative practices came to overcome the sense of separateness from their students and developed authentic teaching from inner self.

Spiritual preparation in teacher training programs

Recognizing the benefits of spiritual preparation in the educational scenario lead teacher training programs to recognize and encourage teachers to develop their abilities to perceive, use, understand and manage their emotions and thus establish and produce positive classroom outcomes (Friedman, 2014). Trumbower’s (2015) findings supported the use of mindfulness-based practices as positive benefits to teachers’ well-being. The

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study acknowledged that when one's personal well-being is improved; this can directly impact professional practice.

Some Montessori elementary classrooms and teacher training programs begin the day with a mindfulness centering activity. Duffy and Duffy (2012) explained this is a group quiet time for to focus as a preparation for immersion in work. "They are invited to sit quietly, find their center in an almost physical way, practice deep breathing on a conscious level, and/or spend some quality time in reflection" (p. 57).

Explaining the benefits of these types of exercise Duffy and Duffy (2012) stated:

These activities are designed to calm the inner spirit and help them focus in preparation for the work of the day. It has the effect of preparing students for several hours of maximum concentration and self-discipline. (p. 58)

In her research Im (2010) found contemplative practices allowed the teachers to perceive each moment more clearly rather than being caught up in past experiences or established patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. "It seemed that the activity of letting go of judgment and negative emotions and becoming calm gives rise to clear understanding of other people from which a compassionate attitude towards them emerges spontaneously" (p. 199).

As stated in Im (2010), Shapiro and Brown (2008) found that mindfulness practices develop spiritual characteristics such as sympathy and compassion, alternative approaches to problem solving and self-growth. Other general changes include trust in inner wisdom, humbleness, letting go, an increase in acceptance and an open mind (Im, 2010, pp. 212-213).

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Schneider (2013) highlighted the importance of integrating spiritual preparation in teacher training programs. “Our Montessori philosophy is predicated on a new and well-defined role for the adult, so we must turn our attention toward the development of these dispositions in our teacher education courses” (p.7).

Conclusion

In conclusion, research on teacher’s spiritual characteristics support spiritual preparation is a fundamental part of the wellbeing of their relationship with their students. Reviewed research calls teacher training programs to incorporate activities and strategies to help educators think about their practices and the steps necessary to develop emotional understanding towards students and to reflect on the why rather than the how and what of their practice since this is the real outcomes they should seek.

Methodology

After establishing my research question I began to research mindfulness interventions. I researched about what mindfulness interventions would look like, how they would be carried out during the teacher training program and what kind of data I would be using to collect information in order to test my hypothesis. The goal of sharing my research is to help other teachers and teacher trainers who are wish to cultivate spiritual preparation in themselves and others.

The implementation of mindfulness activities for my action research project took place over a course of a two month period, starting in June and ending in July 2016. The process began immediately the first day of a Primary Montessori teacher training course. After explaining the action research project to the enrolled teachers, they all agreed to participate.

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To conduct my study, I developed three different interventions based on mindfulness activities. I facilitated daily a 15-minute morning community meeting with centering activities, weekly 15-minute contemplative group evaluation practices and one 50-minute session yoga class.

I measured the effects mindfulness activities had on teacher spiritual preparation in the Montessori teacher training course. Data collection procedures were done before, during and after the intervention period using the following instruments: (1) pre and post attitude scales, (2) pre and post semi structured interviews, (3) bi monthly self-reflection journals and (4) bi monthly field notes. Data was collected in Spanish and translated into English for this report.

During orientation day of the teacher training program each participant was asked to complete a pre attitude scale. The last day of the teacher training course they were also asked to complete the post attitude scale. The attitude scale used was the Spirituality Scale (see Appendix A) which was created and validated by Dr. Colleen Delany RN, PhD, AHN-BC Associate Professor from the University of Connecticut. This instrument provided information on how effective the interventions were in developing a sense of spirituality in participants. On those same dates, I conducted semi structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were guided by prompts to gain knowledge and compare participant's views on spirituality (see Appendix B). This information served as comparative data to determine ways in which interventions affected attitude.

During the teacher training program, participants were asked to use prompt guided self-reflection journals (see Appendix C), to write down their thoughts on their experience after the first and last community meeting of every month and after the yoga

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class session. This information showed how effective the intervention was at developing spiritual qualities in the participants. Spiritual qualities in participant's reflections were identified in the answers they provided in the reflexive journals. Participants wrote they acquired self-reflection, a feeling of centering, humility, wisdom, gratitude, inner peace and a gaining of kindness, compassion, patience, courage and self-respect.

I also used field notes to record participants' actions and interactions during the first and last community meetings of the teacher training course. This information presented data about the implementation of the intervention, participant responses and surprising events.

Analysis of Data

The data collected during the action research project consisted of information gathered from eight teachers enrolled in a Primary Montessori teacher training course in June 2016. Before beginning my action research, it was important for me to get a baseline of each participant's level of spirituality. To do this, participants completed a Spirituality Scale instrument (see Appendix A) during the orientation of the program. At the end of the research project participants completed the same scale to determine if there was any increase in spirituality levels after the interventions.

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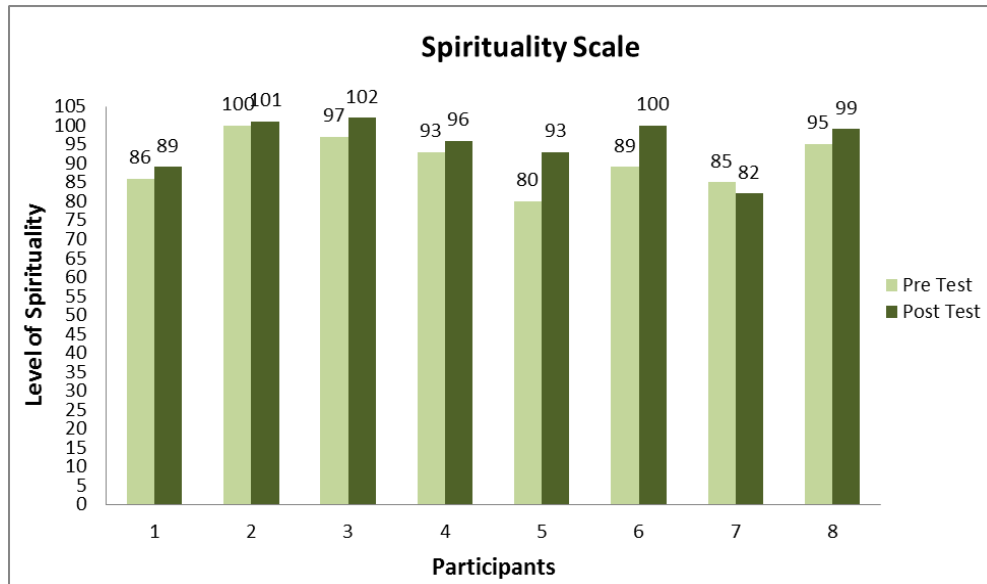


Figure 1. Spirituality Scale.

Figure 1 shows the difference between levels in spirituality of each participant before and after the interventions. Even though the changes were not statistically significant, 90% of participants showed an increase in spirituality levels after completing the teacher training program. Results also indicate all participants showed an increase in 11% or more of the premises of the Spirituality Scale. Eighty percent of participants showed an increase in them finding meaning in life experiences.

100% of participants showed an increase when agreeing to the following premises:

1. I find meaning in my life experiences.
2. I am happy about the person I have become.
3. I see the sacredness in everyday life.
4. I meditate to gain access to my inner spirit.
5. I live in harmony with nature.
6. I believe there is a connection between all things that I cannot see but can sense.
7. I believe that all living creatures deserve respect.
8. I value maintaining and nurturing my relationships with others.
9. I use silence to get in touch with myself.
10. I believe that nature should be respected.
11. My spirituality gives me inner peace.
12. I respect the diversity of people.
13. I use mindfulness practices as an integral part of my spiritual nature.

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14. At times, I feel at one with the universe.

15. I often take time to assess my life choices as a way of living my spirituality.

After completing the teacher training course more than 50% of participants showed an increase in level of agreement regarding the following premises: 87.50% of participants showed they found greater meaning in life experiences, 75% of participants showed they used more mindfulness practices as an integral part of their spiritual nature and 62% of participants showed they more often feel one with the universe and that they feel more strongly about taking time to assess their life choices as a way of living their spirituality.

Seven of eight participants also shared their views on spirituality during semi structured conversations with the researcher (see Appendix B) before and after their partaking in interventions. One of the participants only participated in the post interview questions therefore her answers were not considered in these findings. Of the remaining participants 90% considered they were spiritual persons because they possessed a habit of self-reflection, had a connection with a higher power and had a need to feel peace. After the interventions participants also shared they thought their spirituality was important in education because it directly reflected in the wellbeing of their students.

Pre and post semi structured conversations show that after the interventions participants were able to focus on qualities related to mindfulness when asked what they thought made them a spiritual person. They identified a habit of self-reflection, self-respect, humility, inner peace, kindness and compassion as qualities they possessed that made them spiritual persons. Participants also expressed that after the interventions, meditation and breathing exercises were the activities they thought most helped them access their inner spirit.

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Immediately after every intervention participants recorded their thoughts and experiences in their Self Reflection Journals (See Appendix C). In their notes participants reported they enjoyed the mindfulness activities because they felt relaxed, humbled, calm, focused, positive, grateful and in peace. Participants reported they sense these emotions help them become more patient, eliminate stress, be in the moment, fill themselves with peace and become better human beings and better Montessori guides.

Action Plan

My data shows teachers' spiritual preparation in a Montessori teacher training program is increased with contemplative practices and centering activities. Participants showed an increase in spirituality, gaining mindfulness, patience, kindness, humility, self-respect and inner peace.

My findings also showed teachers benefit from contemplative practices and centering activities during their teacher training program as they reported reaching inner peace and gaining the ability to let go of negative energy, achieving calmness and positivism.

Results will influence the planning and importance that is given to spiritual preparation activities in the next year courses of the researcher's teacher training program. The teacher training program staff will analyze these findings to emphasize to teacher trainers the importance of adding centering activities to the courses daily routine. This will increase teachers access to tools and methods to increase their spirituality in future programs.

The results of this action research can benefit participants' first year of practice as Montessori guides greatly. Participants will have acquired experiences in mindfulness

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activities, self-reflection and a gain in spiritual qualities that will possibly nurture their spirituality helping them become more centered and stress free.

This research and possible future research on the topic can positively influence other Montessori teacher training programs. It is my hope that teacher training programs around the world begin emphasizing spiritual preparation techniques and activities during their courses.

Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of teacher spiritual preparation during teacher training to achieve a holistic approach in education. Therefore, I find it would be interesting to study in a deeper depth how this increase in teacher spirituality affects classroom environment, children and their learning. Further research could be conducted in the Montessori classrooms of the participants of this research to measure the impact of their spiritual preparation in the effectiveness of their teaching.

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Appendix A

Spirituality Scale

Please indicate your level of agreement to the following statements by circling the appropriate number that corresponds with the answer key.

Key:

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Disagree
3. Mostly disagree
4. Mostly agree
5. Agree
6. Strongly Agree

1. I find meaning in my life experiences.	1 2 3 4 5 6
2 I have a sense of purpose.	1 2 3 4 5 6
3. I am happy about the person I have become.	1 2 3 4 5 6
4. I see the sacredness in everyday life.	1 2 3 4 5 6
5. I meditate to gain access to my inner spirit	1 2 3 4 5 6
6. I live in harmony with nature.	1 2 3 4 5 6
7. I believe there is a connection between all things that I cannot see but can sense.	1 2 3 4 5 6
8. I believe that all living creatures deserve respect.	1 2 3 4 5 6
9. I value maintaining and nurturing my relationships with others.	1 2 3 4 5 6
10. I use silence to get in touch with myself.	1 2 3 4 5 6
11. I believe that nature should be respected.	1 2 3 4 5 6
12. My spirituality gives me inner peace.	1 2 3 4 5 6

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13. I consider humility an important aspect of my spirituality.	1 2 3 4 5 6
14. I respect the diversity of people.	1 2 3 4 5 6
15. I use mindfulness practices as an integral part of my spiritual nature.	1 2 3 4 5 6
16. At times, I feel at one with the universe.	1 2 3 4 5 6
17. I often take time to assess my life choices as a way of living my spirituality.	1 2 3 4 5 6

* This scale was created and validated by Dr. Colleen Delany RN, PhD, AHN-BC Associate Professor from the University of Connecticut. The scale was adjusted slightly to fit the needs of this Action Research Project.

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Appendix B

Semi Structured Conversation Questions

Before the course:

1. Do you consider yourself as a spiritual person? Why?
2. What qualities do you consider make you a spiritual person? Why?
3. What practices do you consider you do to access your inner spirit?
4. Do you consider spirituality to be important in education?

After the course:

1. Do you consider yourself as a spiritual person? Why?
2. What qualities do you consider make someone a spiritual person?
3. Do you consider spirituality to be important in education?

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Appendix C

Self-Reflection Journal

1. Did you enjoy the session? What was your favorite part? Explain why or why not.
2. Did you experience a feeling of humility, wisdom, gratitude and/or inner peace? Explain why or why not.
3. Can you say you gained any of the following spiritual qualities: kindness, compassion, patience, courage and/or self-respect? Explain why or why not.