Reconciling Critical Theory and Spirituality in Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This paper focuses on spirituality and critical consciousness as two guiding forces for meaningful leadership. It further looks for the reconciliation of spirituality and criticality so as to deconstruct deep-seated leadership myths. Reconciling spirituality with critical perspective inspires individuals to have a critical and holistic understanding of engaged spirituality and leadership theorizing critical spirituality as an ontological and epistemic praxis to connect the inner world to the outer social reality and materiality. Adherence to spirituality through critical engagement helps to create a meaningful educational leadership space, fostering a sense of optimism and utopian envisioning by challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions and embracing diversity.

Keywords: Critical spirituality, materiality, critical consciousness, reconciliation, educational leadership

Background

This article explores how educational leaders lead in reconciling spirituality and criticality, connecting the threads of experience as a school leader struggling on the verge of being and becoming. Critical perspectives in educational leadership embrace dimensions of educational leadership discourse, acknowledging and illuminating tensions, limitations, and contradictions of the field to have a better understanding of phenomena (Niesche &Gowlett, 2019). To this end, critical perspectives challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions, thereby opening avenues for a deeper understanding of educational leadership praxis. The paper further attempts to explore how criticality and spirituality can be reconciled, as criticality is the indicative of materiality, whereas spirituality appears antithetical to it. The reconciliation of spirituality and materiality appears to be pertinent to establish its relevance to education leadership or education in the modern world so as to create a meaningful space at school to address the issues of social justice, inclusion, and equity.

Spirituality Landscape

Piercy (2013) defines spirituality "as the quest for life meaning and self-awareness for a higher purpose demonstrated through efforts to the common good for all" (p.30). Muller (2005) views spirituality as a defining aspect of holistic education that incorporates a sense of connection to the cosmos. In a similar vein, Houston (2008) mentions that spirituality allows leadership to blossom fully and helps individuals to step toward an uncertain future with a stronger sense of connectedness to one another. Sokolow and Houston (2008) state that spirituality connects us to our deepest selves and helps us to be effective leaders. Hence, spirituality is perceived as the foundation of inner peace and compassion.

Considering spiritual capital as wealth, a vision and a model we live by, Zohar and Marshall (2004) mention that "it reflects our shared values, shared visions, and fundamental purposes in life. Spiritual capital is reflected in what an organization believes, what it exists for, what it aspires to, and what it takes responsibility for" (p. 3). It helps us to ponder deeper dimensions, values, and the meaning of our life and instils in us the feelings of care, compassion, truth, beauty, and goodness. Living through the values and virtues of truth, beauty, and goodness, a trio of luminous realities, helps to bridge the void created by spiritual emptiness and materialism (Wattles, 2006). As these values indicate a philosophy of living, it appears pertinent to have discourse and be mindful of these living realities of thinking, feeling, and doing while being engaged in everyday activities.

My perspectival understanding is that spirituality embraces the essence of being human. As Lambert (2016) maintains, it seems to support a school leader to foster leadership capacity to engage in and solve the problems of a school for meaningful.

I further explore the dimensions of spiritual ecology to create a positive school culture with the intent of transforming leadership praxis. In this connection, I present a vignette of mine that illustrates my efforts at leading a school during quite difficult circumstances:

Sometimes despite my efforts, things do not go well as anticipated. Some of the team members at school remain engaged in trivial matters and even seem eager to pinpoint my shortcomings with the intention of discouraging me. At times, out of disappointment, I get caught in a huge dilemma as how to cope with disempowering forces. I feel that a storm is brewing despite making efforts for the greater good of the school. To convince myself to persevere, I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and ponder the consequences of every happening. At this juncture, I come across a glimmer of hope and optimism to pursue my leadership journey with greater patience, overcoming possible clashes and confrontations.

Taking an integral standpoint on spirituality, Wilber (2006) argues that as we advance spiritually, we try to be as comprehensive and inclusive as possible, shifting our identity from egocentric to ethnocentric to world-centric, thereby exploring ways of being paving a pathway for our spiritual journeys. I am trying to develop tolerance and an inclusive vision possibly through my engagement in spiritual practices with transformative intent.

Spirituality in Leadership

Highlighting spirituality as a crucial component of leadership, Sokolow and Houston (2008) mention that spirituality connects us to our deepest selves and helps us to be effective leaders. It helps me as a leader to create a cohesive and harmonious team at school. I believe that spiritual engagement might support a school leader to organize, collaborate with, and mobilize a team to achieve the goals of an organization aligning with its vision and mission. Sometimes I find myself desperate amid chaos and deep-seated status quo at school, and then I gather courage through spiritual awareness to pursue my leadership journey ahead, braving the uncertainties.

Pertaining to how the spiritual dimensions of leadership might be fostered to ensure personal growth in the workplace, Metzger (2008) expresses that it is important to cultivate inner dimensions to cope with stresses and crises in the workplace, paying attention to physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. In connection to the issue of maintaining a harmonious blend of spirituality in leadership to ensure and/or create an engaging and collegial learning space at school, Bonner (2008) states that "spiritually oriented leadership embraces the whole student and sees the grave danger of overemphasizing cost-efficient thinking in education" (p. 132). "When we integrate spirituality into everyday life, it is transformed into *sattvic* life" (Kumar, 2010, p. 68). Exploring the issue of spirituality pertaining to the sustainability of a workplace, Samul (2020) argues that spirituality in leadership appears to be a holistic concept embracing "the universal values such as honesty, integrity, love, compassion, gratefulness that have impact on a leader's traits, behaviors, attitudes, and abilities" (p. 12).

Burke et al. (1999) argue that in many instances spirituality is perceived through structured and organized faith and beliefs. So, in order to come out of the structured box, it appears quite relevant to explore the dimensions of critical spirituality, as it aims at social transformation through social justice, inclusion, and equity. In other words, spirituality seeks personal transformation, whereas critical spirituality explores the issues of social justice and equity so as to upset stagnation and challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions and religious orthodoxy transcending the notion of spirituality as withdrawal from materiality So, there appears to be a need for taking spirituality critically so as to connect the inner work of spirituality to the outer work of social action, as Keating (2005) maintains. Pertaining to becoming a holistic leader, Dhiman (2017) argues that "we need holistic leaders and holistic systems that are able to integrate the spiritual and the material perspectives in a dialectical manner" (p. 1). The following section illuminates how critical spirituality leads toward spiritual praxis embracing materiality.

Critical Spirituality

The inclusion of critical spirituality offers a space for educational leadership to bring about school reforms (Dantley, 2005). Pertaining to the need for critical spirituality to challenge deep-seated myths and metaphors, Bussey (2006) argues that critical spirituality "integrates the concerns of critical theory for social justice, gender equity, and process of legitimation" (p. 42). In this regard, a deepening human experience and awareness might be critical to question, critique, and upset status quos, existing beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions. Critical thinking questions and challenges status quos, critiques taken-for-granted assumptions, and seeks liberation with transformative intent (Bonner, 2008). "Critical spirituality brings together the critical insights of critical theory central to critical pedagogy and popular education" (Boyd,

2012, p. 761), thereby supporting the reconciliation of the authentic self and leadership endeavors. Critical theory embraces the notions of conscientization or critical awareness, humanization, utopian imagination, and optimism. These critical lenses help to critique and challenge deep-seated beliefs and status quos, thereby making school leaders mindful of personal strength and resilience so as to create a transformative space at their institutions. According to Dantley (2010), critical spirituality embraces four elements: critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity, and transformative action. Out of these four components, the first two components, critical self-reflection and deconstructive interpretation, deal with personal efficacy, whereas the last two components deal with communal efficacy. Critical self-understanding seems pertinent to a leader to carry out their responsibilities being mindful of personal values and belief systems. Dantley (2010) mentions that "critical self-reflection is the process whereby practicing and prospective educational leaders come to an understanding of themselves" (p. 216). In a similar vein, Brown (2004) argues that critical self-reflection encompasses a deeper exploration of moral and ethical dimensions and the consequences of such practices for students.

Deconstructive interpretation makes an individual aware of their positioning and poses tough questions (Dantley, 2010). As it is the process of making a person mindful of their situatedness, deconstructive interpretation helps educational leaders begin to "deconstruct established attitudes, values, and actions that foster inequity" (Beachum et al., 2007, p. 271). This process helps to unmask the root cause of any issue or problem of an organization, deconstructing leadership myths and stereotypes. Aligning with the philosophy of deconstruction as decentering, critical spirituality intends to get to the roots of issues and problems and rebuild better organizational structure and culture (McCray & Beachum, 2006). Niesche (2014) writes that "deconstruction works in identifying the contradictions of logic within a text, exploring those assumptions that are often taken for granted, or go unnoticed in more traditional readings" (p. 17). In other words, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction tries to upset the hierarchies of binaries and challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions in educational leadership discourses.

Performative creativity emphasizes "the development of pedagogical and leadership practices that move the school and the learning community from maintaining status quo to envisioning a more democratic culture and a space where the legitimation of voices of difference can take place" (Dantley, 2010, p. 217). This component of critical spirituality seeks to encourage "the school leaders to promote progressive curricular innovations, active classroom engagement, and radically restructure the school-community relationship to enhance student learning" (p. 104).

The notion of transformative action embraces "how leaders walk the talk of social change in their school and communities" (McCray, 2012, p. 105). A spiritual leader with critical sensibility adheres to the ethos of transformative action so as "to manage the many ways in which communities foster undemocratic practices and injustice and literally causes those issues to become matters of academic inquiry and exploration" (Dantley, 2010, p. 217).

Relational Self

I find the statement I came across elsewhere, "Either co-existence or no existence," is quite meaningful to my ebb and flow of leadership. A leader is not alone to perform a task, as

leadership is a collaborative venture. Rapport building with stakeholders appears to be a crucial aspect of leadership. In this connection, Vaai (2017) argues that relational understanding is a crucial component of being a human, so it appears pertinent to decolonize self by deconstructing the non-relational understanding of self. In a similar vein, Gergen (2009) states that as a relational being, an individual needs to be mindful of relational responsibility to foster the spirit of coexistence and community collaboration. I am mindful of my relational and embodied self as I am connected to the sociocultural landscape of my context.

Caveats of Critical Spirituality

Critical spirituality embraces a postmodern valuing of individual spiritual experience with critical perspective, thereby envisioning a just, diverse, and inclusive society (Gardner, 2016). In a similar vein, Wright (2000) argues that the rhetoric of critical spirituality as a postmodern philosophy embraces the perspectives of secularism and pluralism, thereby helping to transcend the spiritual boundaries and celebrate spiritual diversity. So it appears that critical spirituality values differences. It suggests integrating spiritual concerns in professional life, which requires knowing the process for critiquing one's own spiritual practice. Gardner further points out that critical spirituality requires rigorous debate and discourse to bring it into the professional context as an essential component for professional transformation. Dantley (2010) argues that critical spirituality as a new approach to act and to reform challenges educational leaders to serve as organic intellectuals and agents of change aligning with criticality.

Conclusion and Discussion

Spirituality embraces feelings of care, compassion, gratitude, and humility, among others. It entails the notion of connectedness and helps to transcend ego. Walach (2015) contends that spiritual practice and motivation depend on the context of experience, motivation, and action. Spirituality is considered an essential element of leadership. Chordon (2009) mentions that we all have the natural ability to interrupt old habits and drop our grudges. We can have a feeling of healing and possibly a transformative experience through love, kindness, care, and compassion. I consider the leadership journey as my life's dance of being and becoming through critical awareness adhering to my precept that "I am spiritual, but not religious."

Embracing a critical spiritual perspective might help educational leaders to have a deeper understanding and meaning of the phenomenon of educational leadership with heightened critical awareness embracing inclusivity and spiritual diversity. Critical consciousness challenges hegemonic discourse and taken-for-granted assumptions in the educational leadership domain so as to envision a transformative praxis of educational leadership taking critical spirituality and critical perspective into account. Hence, reconciling criticality with spirituality appears to be pertinent to exploring the issues and contradictions of educational leadership so as to empower educational leaders to serve as agents of change valuing the differences in an organization. In this way, educational leaders can find a meaningful space at school at the intersection of spirituality and critical consciousness so as to create an environment of effective and meaningful leadership.

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