

## Promoting the Psychological and Spiritual Development of Teachers

Scott Coleman, Draft: October 15, 2007

### Introduction

These are difficult times in teacher education. Faced with increasing numbers of teachers leaving the field and seemingly endless legislative mandates that continue to erode teachers' ability to truly educate, there is a definite need consider new possibilities in the preparation and continuing education of teachers. One possibility for rejuvenation is that a major focus of the professional development of classroom teachers be to help them become more conscious of their own inner lives – in other words, that teacher education begin to include a significant emphasis on teachers' psychological and spiritual development.

The idea that the inner life of the teacher is preeminently important has been suggested by writers outside and within the field of teacher education (Firman & Gila 1997, Mayes, 2003, Palmer 2003, Rogers, 1995). Their compelling observation is that if we would apply our growing understanding of psychological and spiritual healing to teachers, we would immensely benefit their students. In Rogers words, "The excitement comes from the fact that these findings justify an even broader hypothesis regarding all human relationships.... to the extent that the teacher creates such a relationship with his class, the student will become a self-initiated learner, more original, more self-disciplined, less anxious and other directed (1995, p.37)."

In a more personal vein, my belief about where teachers should best invest their professional development effort has evolved considerably during my thirty years as an educator. During my first years of teaching I accepted the still prevalent notion that what was most important was that teachers know more content. As the years went by and it became abundantly clear to me that my knowing more content was not the key to helping my students receive a better education, I came to believe that more systematic teaching: more careful planning based on the best learning principles and instructional strategies, had the power to revolutionize education. My interest in learning how to do this and to help other teachers do the same led me back to graduate school and then to my current profession of teaching teachers. Now, sixteen years later, I have come to realize that there is something more fundamental to teaching than either knowing content or knowing how to teach. I see that the often subtle, mostly invisible phenomena of self-understanding is what lies at the root of good teaching and that a lack of teacher self-understanding lies at the root of many difficult classroom concerns, ranging from classroom management to social justice issues. In experiencing teacher education as a classroom teacher, teacher educator, and teacher education program administrator over the past decades I now understand more fully the wisdom in the saying "teachers teach who they are". This point has been expressed in various ways over the centuries and now is supported by the growing scientific understanding of human growth and learning emerging from the fields of psychology and neurobiology – perhaps the time is right to find a way to act on it.

In the next few pages I will define more fully what I mean by "psychological and spiritual development" and will then elaborate further on why such development is important for teachers. Next, I will discuss two difficult and very contemporary education problems to further make the point that inner teacher development is crucial in today's classrooms. The last section of this paper describes six strategies for promoting teacher psychological and spiritual growth and then

outlines some specific activities. Although no comprehensive plan for integrating psychological and spiritual growth into the teacher education curriculum is provided, it is hoped that the ideas shared here may in time lead to such plans being designed and implemented.

### **The Meaning of Psychological and Spiritual Development**

In their article "Development as the Aim of Education", Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) make the point that neither the transmission of information nor the natural unfolding of the child's potentials can serve logically as the end of education, but rather that "development" is uniquely suited to being the ultimate end of education. Kohlberg defines development, in accordance with John Dewey and Jean Piaget, as a process aimed at "the eventual attainment of a higher level or stage (p.128)." Development as this movement towards a higher level, is the sense in which the term "development" is used here.

Development has many aspects. The varied demands of teaching make it essential that teachers strive for development in its many forms. Though my emphasis in this paper is on psychological and spiritual development, two areas that have been relatively neglected, what is most important is teacher's all-around development, which includes intellectual and academic development, physical development, and moral and religious development. These myriad other forms of development support and are supported by psychological and spiritual development.

The phrase "psychological and spiritual development" is akin to the ancient and eternal ideal of self-understanding, and includes emotional health, mental harmony and spiritual unfoldment. The phrase "Psychological and spiritual development" is used synonymously with "inner growth", "self-awareness", and similar terms. Psychological and spiritual development is the preferred terminology because it more precisely communicates the point that I am considering inner growth that includes aspects that fall under umbrellas of both "psychological" and "spiritual".

Discussion about the psychological and spiritual development of teachers is relatively uncommon in the educational literature. It has, however, been discussed in recent years by prominent educators such as Nel Noddings and Parker Palmer. As an example, Parker writes: "Who is the self that teaches?" is the question at the heart of my own vocation. I believe it is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach – for the sake of learning and those who learn. By addressing it openly and honestly, alone and together, we can serve our students more faithfully, enhance our own well being, make common cause with our colleagues, and help education bring more light and life into the world (Parker, 1998, p. 7).

The teacher educator Fred Korthagen has written about the importance of teacher inner growth, incorporating ideas from both the spiritual and psychotherapeutic domains to develop a sophisticated model of teacher reflection. Korthagen suggests that the deepest levels of teacher reflection are inner-oriented – asking such questions as "what is at the root of my personal inspiration? ... with which larger entity do I feel connected?" (Korthagen, 2004, circa page 80).

Another teacher educator, Mayes, has written extensively about teacher inner development, applying ideas from psychotherapy and Buddhist spirituality. For example, Mayes (2001) wrote

“ As a transpersonally grounded 'Self', we can view our many 'teaching selves' from a strategic spiritual distance – and most importantly, learn how not to project those selves and their issues onto our students. We become more observant, more responsive, more authentically caring – in short, more nurturing to our students. (p. 490)”

Inside as well as outside the field of education, "psychological" and "spiritual" each have a wide variety of meanings, some of which are overlapping. Psychological development is usually associated in some way with "emotion". The challenge and importance of emotional development is conveyed in the following statement by John Welwood: “Emotions are often problematic because they are our most common experience of being taken over by forces seemingly beyond our control. Usually we regard them as a threat, imagining that if we really let ourselves feel our anger or depression they would totally overwhelm us. Maybe we would be unable to function or go berserk! (2000, p.181).”

The realm of "spiritual" includes the poetic and philosophic, as well as the religious. Perhaps this is why arriving at a commonly accepted definition of spiritual is particularly challenging (Speck, 2005). As it will be used here, spiritual means that which goes beyond the individual to something greater. Ralph Waldo Emerson poetically captures this in the following words: "When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water ...and this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul." (Emerson, Oversoul, near beginning)."

In the field of psychotherapy, several models have been developed in recent years that include both psychological and spiritual elements of development, blending the two into a coherent whole. One such model is Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, developed by Richard Schwartz (1995). IFS theory holds that at the core of each individual is a wise self. Each individual is also made up of numerous sub-personalities, or parts, that are in relation to each other and to the self. In the psychologically healthy individual the self takes on its natural leadership role, and the various parts live in harmony. On the other hand, in most individuals, all is not in harmony. Parts may be in conflict with each other or the self may have fallen from its leadership role, much as might happen in a dysfunctional family or organization. The goal of IFS is to re-establish a proper inner relationship between the parts and the self. Of particular importance in the IFS model is the notion of self, which Schwartz talks about in these words: “We all know about those luminous moments of clarity and balance, in our own lives and in those of our clients, which come briefly now and again. However we get there, we suddenly encounter a feeling of inner plenitude and open heartedness to the world that wasn't there a moment before. The incessant nasty chatter inside our heads ceases, we have a sense of calm spaciousness, as if our minds and hearts and souls had expanded and brightened. Sometimes, these evanescent experiences come in a bright glow of peaceful certainty that everything in the universe is truly okay, and that includes us – you and me in our struggling, imperfect humanity. At other times, we may experience a wave of joyful connection with others that washes away

irritation, distrust, and boredom. We feel that, for once, we truly are ourselves, our real selves, free of the inner cacophony that usually assaults us. (Schwartz, 2004)".

### **The Importance of Psychological and Spiritual Growth in Teacher Education**

If it is true that teacher education should include an emphasis on psychological and spiritual growth, one has to wonder at its absence. One possible argument against putting more focus on spiritual and psychological growth in teacher education is that there would thereby be other, possibly more important professional development topics that would need to be given less attention. Or perhaps it is because self-development seems out-of-place in the current "cult of efficiency movement sweeping the field of education. We seem to have forgotten that the quality of life for the student is directly tied to the quality of life of the teacher" Lipka & Brinthaupt, 1999, p.1).

Or perhaps the reason for the lack of attention to inner growth is a societal unwillingness to have self-actualized teachers in the schools, as might be suggested by James Baldwin (1963) in his essay "A Talk to Teachers":

"The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society."

Another possible reason for the lack of concern about inner development in teacher education is simply that we have yet to realize that we keep looking in the same wrong places for solutions to difficult problems. We have yet to fully believe that greater teacher content knowledge, better lesson plans, and stronger classroom management techniques will not eventually make things right in the schools. A passage from Schon's classic *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* gives some insight on this:

"In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution. The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large, however great their technical interest may be, while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern (1987, p.3).

Whatever the reasons for which psychological and spiritual growth have been thus far minimized or excluded in teacher educations, it is not hard to make the case for its inclusion. Recognizing that human beings are largely psychological and spiritual beings, it seems almost absurd to not pay close attention to those central, though invisible realms of a teacher's existence. To have more than a surface understanding of what is happening in the minds and hearts of students, and to be more than minimally effective as an educator, it is necessary to look beneath the waves of appearances to the psychological and spiritual well-springs of thought and action. Simply put,

teachers who understand their own inner lives and are sensitive to the importance of the inner lives of their students are more fully awake to themselves their students and almost certain to be more effective than those who are not.

One teacher reflects on her own understanding of this in these words: "I was witnessing what Bandura had proclaimed years before, that children learn by modeling. They learn by absorbing who you are to them, not by memorizing what you say. They will become you, like it or not.... It would be necessary, therefore, to reflect deeply upon who I was and who, as a result, my students would be learning to become. The first responsibility of a teacher, I surmised, was to work consciously and diligently toward reaching self-actualization; that is, to aspire to become the highest potential me. (Karen J. Agne, p. 166.)

Agne then elaborates: "Ultimately, to be the teacher, we must first be healthy, this is, not functioning in constant states of fears. For that upon which we obsess comes out in our behavior and is then modeled to our students. If one is full of fear, one's teaching reflects that fear. Additionally, it is generally well known among medical professionals today that the degree of happiness, joy, and laughter in an individual's life has direct positive relationship to the condition of his overall physical health. A stable personality is essential for expert teaching to occur. (Agne, p. 184)."

The case for teacher inner growth is also supported by fact that learner's brains are literally shaped by social interactions, which in a classroom setting are under the influence of the teacher. Louis Cozolino (2006), in discussing findings from the emerging field of interpersonal neurobiology, says "we greatly underestimate the degree of information we are communicating to those around us, especially to the children for whom we care. We also underestimate how much our unconscious processes, while invisible to us, are often apparent to others. The receiver need not be conscious of the messages they are receiving and what they are learning (p.112)".

A compelling reason to prioritize psychological and spiritual growth in teacher education is its potential to help solve educational problems that now seem nearly unsolvable. Two of these problems are discussed in the next chapter.

## **Two Problems that Could be Helped Through Teacher Psychological and Spiritual Development**

To help support the case for the importance teachers psychological and spiritual growth we will now look at two "problem areas" in education that could potentially be helped significantly through teacher psychological and spiritual growth: teaching learners with math anxiety and teaching children who are victims of abuse.

### Math Anxiety

Math anxiety is a negative emotional reaction that some people experience when placed in situations that require the use of math (Ashcraft, Krause, Hopko, 2007). The experience of math anxiety can range from apprehension to genuine dread. Brady and Bowd, in reviewing the literature on math anxiety, noted that math anxiety includes being uncomfortable when doing math, avoiding it whenever possible, poor performance on math tests and lack of improvement

even with significant remedial instruction (2005). The phenomenon of math anxiety suggests the importance of student feelings: their very significant, often unnoticed, role in learning.

Math anxiety is common among students and in the general populace. One conservative estimate is that approximately one-fifth of the population can be considered highly math anxious (Ashcroft, Krause, Hopko, 2007). And math anxiety has some unexpected features. It appears that the feelings of uncertainty, dread, and helplessness that signify the presence of math anxiety are of an origin that is not directly related to intelligence or mathematics knowledge (Hembree, 1990). Adding some complexity to the issue of math anxiety is the obvious overlap between math anxiety and math achievement; as Ashcraft (2002) points out: "An obvious but unfortunate consequence of the avoidance tendency is that compared with people who do not have math anxiety, highly math anxious individuals end up with lower math competence and achievement. They are exposed to less math in school and apparently learn less of what they are exposed to (p.182)"

Somewhat surprisingly, little is known about the onset of math anxiety, and even less is known about factors that either predispose one toward or cause math anxiety (Ashcraft, et. al., p. 341). Mathematics anxiety is related to test anxiety, but has a more pervasive impact in that it affects not only test performance, but also "appears to comprise a general fear of contact with mathematics, including classes, homework, and tests (Hembree, 1990, p.45)".

In recent studies of math anxiety it was found that math anxiety has only slight effects on very simple math computations, such as adding single digit numbers, but substantial effects on arithmetic problems with larger numbers, such as two-digit addition requiring carrying (Ashcroft,). Based on this research, Ashcroft hypothesizes that in the math anxious individual, the working memory needed for more than the most rudimentary mathematics is not available. Ashcroft explains:

"General anxiety is hypothesized to disrupt ongoing working memory processes because anxious individuals devote attention to their intrusive thoughts and worries, rather than the task at hand. In the case of math anxiety, such thoughts probably involve preoccupation with one's dislike or fear of math, one's low self-confidence and the like. Math anxiety lowers math performance because paying attention to these intrusive thoughts acts like a secondary task, distracting attention from the math task. It follows that cognitive performance is disrupted to the degree that the math task depends on working memory (183-184)."

Similarly, Beilock, Rydell, McConnell (2007) in a series of studies on women and math anxiety, found that performance on math problems that require use of working memory was significantly affected by the activating of thoughts and feelings (such as doubts about performance) associated with the stereotype that women are not good at mathematics.

Very importantly, Hembree found that treatments for math anxiety that focused on improving students' mathematics achievement were not effective. In his review of the literature Hembree found that the only type of strategy that seemed at all effective was systematic desensitization, which treated math anxiety as though it were a strictly psychological phenomena, like a phobia.

Jackson and Leffingwell investigated the conjecture that instructors may be a cause of math anxiety. In this study they found that anxieties and negative memories resulting from a single math classroom experience could be so profound so as to persist for 20 years or more. Instructor behaviors that produced anxiety responses in students could be overt or covert – in either case, the anxiety seemed to interfere with the sequential thinking skills needed for success in mathematics. Examples of overt actions that could lead to student math anxiety included comments such as "you should know this", and behaviors such as refusing to answer student questions or avoiding proximity to the student. Covert actions included sighing in a demeaning manner or avoiding eye contact with students.

In an investigation of the math anxiety of elementary school math teachers, anxiety and confidence in teaching math was found to be related to participant's experiences with math teachers in elementary and secondary school (Brady and Bowd, 2005). Teachers whose mathematics experiences were less than favorable reported higher levels of math anxiety. "Respondents spoke of instructors that proceeded at a pace that was beyond their capacity to cope with, being made to feel inadequate by their teachers when they expressed difficulty in comprehending course material. (page 43)."

Another investigator found that: "our subjects remark that math anxiety started to be a problem when they were asked to do math in front of the class, such as solving a problem on the blackboard (Ashcraft, 2007, p. 341)."

Although most teachers are well aware of the negative impact of fear and anxiety in the classroom, few may be aware of just how pervasive and long lasting the effects of a momentary surrender to an impulse motivated by impatience or irritation can be to their students. Additionally, teachers may have their own learning anxieties to contend with in teaching mathematics, increasing the challenges of their preventing or helping their students deal with math anxiety.

The anxiety that impairs learning in mathematics is almost certainly a factor learning outside the math classroom. Students' sense of self-worth and dignity, while perhaps more at risk in the math class than elsewhere, is crucial to learning. As the results from one study show:

"For some students, protecting self-worth is of paramount importance. In the academic context, students' self-worth is most threatened when they fail to perform successfully at a given task and there is the risk that they may be seen to have low ability. According to the self-worth theory of motivation, ability is closely tied to self-worth and so when there is doubt as to individuals' ability, there is doubt as to their worth (Martin, Marsh, Williamson, Debus, 2003, p. 617)."

And in the math classroom or elsewhere, efforts to preserve self-worth may not be immediately obvious. Self-handicapping may be one of the unusual ways math anxiety manifests:

"Self-handicapping involves the choice of an impediment or obstacle to successful performance that enables individuals to deflect the cause of poor performance away from their competence and on to the acquired impediment. In doing so, self-handicappers avoid disconfirmation of a desired self-conception. Examples of self-handicapping strategies include the strategic reduction

of effort, procrastination, ingestion of drugs or alcohol, or the choice of performance-debilitating circumstances. In the event of failure, individuals have a ready excuse for it. For example, the lack of effort is seen as the cause and not their lack of ability. (Martin, Marsh, Williamson, Debus, 2003, p. 618)."

Perhaps an even more debilitating student response to anxiety in learning math (or anything) is the tendency to avoid feedback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) make this point succinctly: "Many students do not seek help because of perceived threats to self-esteem or social embarrassment (p. 96)." When the risk to one's self-esteem in interaction with a teacher is high, students are unlikely to seek feedback. The risk of losing face with the teacher for asking the question or of some negative interaction that may come about once the question is asked often keeps students from seeking feedback. "Typically, students respond only when they are fairly sure that they can respond correctly, which often indicates that they have already learned the answer to the question being asked. Errors, and learning from them, are rarely welcomed (Hattie and Timperley, 2007, p. 101)."

So what is the significance of anxiety in the math classroom and elsewhere in relation to teachers' psychological and spiritual health? Given the prevalence of anxiety in the classroom, its devastating impact on learning, and the place of the teacher in causing, preventing, or possibly healing anxiety, the significance is high. Teachers who are not conversant with their own anxieties and the parts of themselves likely to become irritated at their students' inability to learn, pay attention, or disrupt the class are at high risk for increasing the level of anxiety in their students. And the teacher who has tapped into the calmness, compassion, and creativity of their higher self is much more likely to create a classroom environment in which students with pre-existing learning anxieties can possibly begin to heal.

### The Effect of Abuse on Learning

The impact of anxiety and fear on the function and structure of the brain are becoming better known through studies in neurobiology. These types of studies may provide additional insights into math anxiety. Studies of the brain are already providing helpful information in relation to the second of our education problem areas, which we will discuss next: the effects of childhood sexual abuse on learning. As one example that may have relevance for both math anxiety and the effects of child abuse, neuroscientists are now aware of the importance of the limbic brain, and in particular the amygdala, in fear – and in particular in fear reactions that appear in response to seemingly innocuous events:

"The amygdala is quick to learn and slow to forget. Learned fears are tenacious and tend to return when we are under stress. Fear is not easily forgotten, whereas learning *not* to fear is fragile and often dissipates over time. We don't even have to be conscious of a stimulus, either in the environment or within us, in order for it to become a conditioned cue for fear.... In other words, our amygdala is attending to things around us to which we are completely oblivious, guiding our thoughts and behaviors accordingly; it teaches us to fear without us even being aware of what is happening. Because the amygdala can respond in under 100 milliseconds, our fear networks can move through several processing cycles before a frightening stimulus even enters conscious awareness (Cozolino, p. 318).

Childhood abuse, and in particular childhood sexual abuse is a serious problem in our society. Teachers are keenly aware of this problem with regards to their reporting responsibilities, but perhaps much less aware of how abuse impacts learning in their classrooms. First, let us look at what is known about the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse. Estimates vary widely, to a large part due to differences in the definition of abuse and the tendency for abuse to not be reported. A typical estimate is that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before age 18 and that 39 million survivors of childhood sexual abuse exist in American today (Darkness to Light, [darknesstolight.org](http://darknesstolight.org)). It is also estimated that 30% of victims never disclose their experience to anyone and that young victims may not recognize their victimization as sexual abuse.

The seriousness of the effects of childhood abuse has become more widely recognized in recent years (Herman,1992 ) The APA public affairs website summarizes the effects of childhood sexual abuse as follows:

Children and adolescents who have been sexually abused can suffer a range of psychological and behavioral problems, from mild to severe, in both the short and long term. These problems typically include depression, anxiety, guilt, fear, sexual dysfunction, withdrawal, and acting out....The initial or short-term effects of abuse usually occur within 2 years of the termination of the abuse. These effects vary depending upon the circumstances of the abuse and the child's developmental stage but may include regressive behaviors [such as a return to thumb-sucking or bed-wetting], sleep disturbances, eating problems, behavior and/or performance problems at school, and nonparticipation in school and social activities....In short, the ill effects of child sexual abuse are wide ranging. There is no one set of symptoms or outcomes that victim's experience. Some children even report little or no psychological distress from the abuse, but these children may be either afraid to express their true emotions or may be denying their feelings as a coping mechanism. Other children may have what is called "sleeper effects." They may experience no harm in the short run, but suffer serious problems later in life.

<http://www.apa.org/releases/sexabuse/effects.html>

Research has provided new insights into the effects of childhood abuse on brain development. Parts of the brain impacted by childhood sexual abuse include the hippocampus, amygdala, corpus callosum, cerebellar vermis, and cerebral cortex. Summarizing this in a review of the literature on this topic, Teicher wrote "overall, these studies suggest that the developing human neocortex may be rather vulnerable to the effects of abuse and maltreatment (Teicher, p. 36).

Teicher et al hypothesized that this impact on brain development is the body's way of adapting to stress, preparing for a life where intense fight or flight responses will be needed for survival. "early stress signals the nascent brain to develop along an alternative pathway adapting itself to survive and reproduce in a malevolent stress-filled world (Teicher, 2003, p.34). Unfortunately, such adaptations are likely to be quite harmful in relation to the types of learning that occur in schools.

Oehlberg, (2006) concurs in saying that the experience of abuse at any age, and particularly in the first years of life, deeply affects development. Anxiety, which is easily triggered in abused children, interferes with the ability to access the neocortex, the part of the brain involved in higher level thinking and learning. Abused children may be prone to lack of concentration, hyperactivity, or aggression in the classroom ( p.13-14). The effects of abuse may be more

subtle in students who have developed coping mechanisms that allow them to hide all or most outward signs from being manifested in the classroom – perhaps even under the guise of consistently striving to please the teacher or striving diligently for academic perfectionism, strategies which may result in apparent success at school while greatly hampering growth into emotionally healthy adults (Schwarz, Mosaic Mind). No matter how it manifests outwardly, unnoticed by the teacher such students may be experiencing significant levels of anxiety from conscious or unconscious memories triggered in the classroom environment. The prominent expert on childhood sexual abuse Judith Herman captures this in these words:

The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. Unable to care for or protect herself, she must compensate for the failures of adult care and protection with the only means at her disposal, an immature system of psychological defenses. The pathological environment of childhood abuse forces the development of extraordinary capacities, both creative and destructive. It forces the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold (Herman, 1992, p. 96).

Herman continues in these words,

All of the abused child's psychological adaptations serve the fundamental purpose of preserving her primary attachment to her parents in the face of daily evidence of their malice, helplessness, or indifference. To accomplish this purpose, the child resorts to a wide array of psychological defenses. By virtue of these defenses, the abuse is either walled off from conscious awareness and memory, so that it did not really happen, or are minimalized, rationalized, and excused so that whatever did happen was not really abuse. Unable to escape the unalterable reality in fact, the child alters it in her mind (Herman, p. 102).

So what can a classroom teacher do to help the children in her room who may be carrying the immense impacts of sexually abuse? How can a teacher help these children to learn and develop in the face of the psychological wounds they have suffered? It is important to look at the difficult and important position teachers of sexually abused children are placed in. Herman points out the natural tendency of people to want to deny or ignore the terrible event of childhood abuse whose presence forces us to “come face to face with both human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature.” (Herman, 1992, basic books, p.7). This underlines that teachers, given their predilection to do good, may be among the few adults willing and able to help in some way.

I suggest that one focus be on making common sense accommodations that are likely to be helpful to children of abuse – such as taking special care to make the classroom a safe place, promoting respect for and among all students, nurturing relationships among members of the classroom community, providing opportunities for children to succeed and develop a sense of control. But given the enormity of the problem and the teacher's limited capacity to accommodate each child's needs, I suggest that promoting the teacher's own psychological and spiritual health is the most effective way for teacher to help learners who have suffered abuse.

Children who have been abused come to school with personalities organized around survival and for that reason are more likely than other children to trigger strong emotional reactions in teachers. Such students can contribute significantly to teachers burning out and leaving the field (Oehlberg). The emotional responses teachers can have to disruptive or seemingly unteachable children can endanger the quality of the teacher's work life. Essentially, the scope and nature of the problem is such that the only reasonable solution open to the teacher may be increase in self-understanding – a greater understanding of the inner psychological origins of their own responses and the capacity to more abundantly tap into their inner source of compassion, caring, and curiosity.

## **Six Strategies for Promoting Psychological and Spiritual Development**

General strategies for promoting teacher psychological and spiritual development are introduced in this section. In the subsequent section several illustrative activities are described in sufficient detail to be used. The six strategies are: inspirational reading and writing, guided inner explorations, small group interactions, meditations, affirmations, and classroom strategies.

### Inspirational Reading and Writing

"Inspiration" and "spiritual" are closely related words. Tuning into the profoundly inspiring thoughts of others and reliving your own inspiring moments as a teacher and learner is food for the soul – and nourishment for the psychological and spiritual growth. Inspiration – reading inspirational words that resonate with one's deepest sense of why you teach and writing down thoughts that come from your life or your heart related to teaching. Including reflecting on your own learning experiences, inspiring teachers you have had, recalling successes you have had in your teaching. Reading can be from teachers, poets, philosophers, all those who lift us above the daily din of classroom battle.

A guiding principle that is particularly important in developing inspirational reading and writing strategies is that "modeling". This principle recognizes that while ultimately each learner must grow in his or her own way, we do benefit from and often need to make contact with the experience of others who have already had some success in reaching the places we would like to reach. In reading the inspirational words of those who express psychological and spiritual health, and striving to expressing our own deepest understanding of our inner worlds in words, we are seeing and moving towards the goal of inner development.

### Guided Inner Explorations

The processes used in psychoanalysis to explore our inner selves is stereotypically used to help people "with problems". Given that we all have problems, none of us need be excluded from guided and intensive inner exploration. More seriously, the psychoanalytic approaches can be beneficial for anyone. One example that such processes need not be restricted is that therapists themselves make frequent use of psychoanalysis to further their own growth. Guided inner exploration can most beneficially be led by a person with experience and competence in working in a therapeutic context, though it is possible for any person with experience using these to serve as leader. The number of explorers can vary from one to many.

The principle of "caring", is particularly important in designing strategies in the category of guided inner explorations. The idea here is that when one person can empathetically reach beyond the confines of their own life to help another with the same enthusiasm with which they would help themselves, they create an environment for significant growth. In the case of guided inner explorations, a leader compassionately and caringly provides a structure that allows others to make their own inner investigations.

### Small Group Interactions

Small group strategies are those meant to be used by small groups, ranging in size from two to five teachers. All these strategies are dependent on careful listening and mutual respect, as in the case in any group work.

The principle of "feedback" is particularly relevant in designing strategies that involve small group activities. Small groups provide good environments for giving and receiving quality feedback and the small group activities described here depend for their success on the ingredients that go into effective feedback, good listening, consideration, and courageous openness in hearing others' perceptions of us.

### Meditations

Meditation strategies are a means to help teachers go beyond their parts and the emotions those parts carry to the self. Meditation is concentration on the higher self – in one of the many forms the self can be experienced. In his book Integral Yoga, the Indian philosopher Haridas Chaudhuri shares several approaches to meditation and explains the need and purpose for meditation. Haridas' ideas about why meditation is important, though written in 1965, seem precisely matched to the needs of today's teachers. Chaudhuri explain that people's lack of connection to themselves is the root problem of existence, a condition which is worsened by the pace, mechanization, and competition of our modern world. Meditation is a way of reconnecting with the ground of one's being through intensifying inward consciousness.

The principle of effort is important to keep in mind in designing meditation strategies, recognizing that the meditator's own efforts, invisible though they may be, are necessary for inner growth.

### Affirmations

The principle behind affirmation is that the higher aspects of our being can be called upon to heal ourselves of inharmonies and to promote physical, mental and spritual growth.. A 20<sup>th</sup> century proponent of healing affirmations is Paramahansa Yogananda, whose book Scientific Healing Affirmations explains the principles of affirmation and provides several examples of affirmations that can be used for psychological and spiritual development. Yogananda writes: "Words saturated with sincerity, conviction, faith and intuition are like highly explosive vibration bombs, which, when set off, shatter the rocks of difficulty and create the change desired (p. 15)."

In Scientific Healing Affirmations Yogananda provides guidelines for using affirmations effectively, which are summarized below:

Before starting, free the mind from worries and restlessness.

Focus the attention on the affirmation, bringing the mind back like a truant child should it wander off.

Affirmations should be spoken understandingly, with feeling and confidence, throwing out all doubt.

Practice affirmations with eyes closed and the body relaxed.

First repeat the affirmation in a loud voice, then repeat it more quietly and slowly, and the affirm it mentally only, without moving the tongue or lips.

In repeating affirmations in a group setting, the leader should lead the affirmations rhythmically and the audience should repeat the words with the same intonation, taking care, as a group, to repeat the affirmation in an even tone and even state of mind.

Repeat the affirmations deeply and often, ignoring utterly any unchanged conditions.

The principle of "focus" is particularly important to keep in mind in the considering affirmation strategies. In affirmation, the teacher places his or her mind on one thought for an extended time -- thereby using the power of the focused mind to promote beneficial inner changes.

### Classroom Strategies

In bringing activities that promote psychological and spiritual health into the classroom the teacher is not only directly helping her/his students, but also indirectly benefiting as well in many ways – including the help that comes from delving deeply into the activity during preparation and the help that may later come by being part of a classroom community with a greater degree of psychological and spiritual health. Some of the strategies described in the other sections could easily be adapted for classroom use. The ones in this section are specifically targeted towards students in the context of the school.

The principle of "sharing" is conspicuously applied in classroom strategies, where teachers directly promote the psychological and spiritual health of their students.

### **Illustrative Activities**

Activities that implement each of the six strategies just described are given next. The reader is invited to try these activities – either exactly as written or with whatever modifications seem necessary or desirable.

#### Inspirational Strategy Example: Profound Ideas As a Door to Reflection

This consciousness raising strategy involves to reading an inspiring passage and then using the passage to connect in a particular way to one's own inspiring, though perhaps nearly forgotten, experiences as a teacher or learner. In this example I have selected some words of Carl Rogers from the book, *On Becoming a Person*.

:

First, the leader should project or pass out copies of the following:

If I can create a relationship characterized on my part:

by a genuineness and transparency, in which I am my real feelings;

by a warm acceptance and prizing of the other person as a separate individual;

by a sensitive ability to see his world and himself as he sees them;

Then the other individual in the relationship:  
will experience and understand aspects of himself which previously he has repressed.  
will find himself becoming better integrated, more able to function effectively.  
will become more similar to the person he would like to be;  
will be more self-directing and self-confident;  
will become more of a person, more unique and more self-expressive;  
will be more understanding, more accepting of others;  
will be able to cope with the problems of life more adequately and more comfortably.  
(Rogers, 1995)

Teachers should then be asked to recollect a teacher they have known, a teacher with whom they had a relationship that in some way connects with what Rogers is expressing. Ask them to take a few minutes to write down one (or more) of their memories about their relationship with this teacher and what it meant to them. Then ask teachers to share what they have written in pairs or triads..

#### Guided Inner Exploration Example: A Journey With One's Parts

This exploration is based on the Internal Family Systems Model where each person is seen to have an extensive inner family, consisting of discrete members each with its own role, needs, and interests. This example is given as a somewhat detailed script, but the leader would likely modify it based on the time available the familiarity of teachers participating with this kind of exploration. It could be used for any number of teachers, from one up to a large group.

First, let's get centered. Notice your feet on the ground, connected to the earth. Breathe in slowly, hold, exhale. Notice the sense of spaciousness above your head, and feel connected to the sky. Continue to breathe in slowly, hold, and exhale slowly. Now, recall a teaching experience last year that was somewhat troubling – maybe slightly, maybe very troubling. Perhaps it was something that you quickly pushed aside, or something you could not get out of your mind, or maybe it was something that kept you from sleeping well, or maybe something that sent you towards your favorite diversion. In any case, try and bring the experience to mind in as much detail as you can. What did it look like, sound like, and especially, what did it feel like?

Now, just let yourself have that feeling, accepting it. Let the feeling the experience evoked just expand in you to become as big as it wants to be. If the feeling starts to get too strong, exhale to dampen it. If you feel OK encouraging it to grow stronger, inhale slowly and give it more space. Or you might want to recall that you are there, connected to the earth and sky.

Then try this: take that feeling into a room, a nice room, with a window and a door – something cheerful and comfortable, and leave the part in the room, reassure it that it does not have to feel and different, you are just going to leave for a few minutes. Walk outside of the room and look at it through the window. What is it doing in there? How is it acting? Now as you are looking at it, how do you feel toward it? If you find yourself feeling anything except those “self” words, caring, compassionate, etc. then just take that part to another room, a different room down the hall. Then come back, walk into the hallway -- and make a choice about which part you want to talk about. Notice again how you feel toward the part you have chosen as you look at it through

the window. If you feel you are feeling something other than self qualities, find another room for that part; but if you are feeling compassionate, curious or caring, walk into the room and just stand in the doorway. From the doorway, just convey your compassion, curiosity, whatever you are feeling to the part. Take a few moments to do this. Just convey.

Check in, can the part tell you are there? If so, you can talk to the part about its experience -- otherwise, you may need to convey more compassion or caring or you may have another part up. Now, ask the feeling, the part, about its experience in that moment. Just listen, without any preconceived notions. Get a sense of what it is concerned about, when it came about in your life, any questions that come to you naturally. And just receive the answer, in whatever form it might come.

If it feels right, let that part know you heard it and appreciate its willingness to share that with you. And then ask the part what it needs from you. Ask it if it is aware of anything you could do that would help it. And just try and listen to its answer. If there is something you want to say back to the part after you have listened to it, go ahead and do that. And, as we complete this activity, ask it if there is anything it would especially like you to do for it or remember. Try and make an authentic commitment to do what you agree to do. Promise what you feel you can sincerely agree to follow through with.

#### Small Group Example: Why do I teach?

This example uses a group of two to deeply explore an important question – giving teachers the opportunity to go beyond a simple or standard answer to reveal the complex and even unexpected facets that might otherwise escape conscious awareness.

In pairs, one person asks, why do you teach? The other person answers briefly. The first person writes it down and says, thank you, and then asks again, why do you teach? Continuing for a full 10 minutes. [this allows many parts, and the self, to answer the question, opening up awareness of the rich complexity within us and giving food for thought for future activities]. First have a pair model this, to show what this looks like. Afterwards, have a full group debriefing about what this brought anything to mind that was fully conscious before.

#### Meditation Example: Concentrating on the breath and then one idea

This example has two parts: first, the teachers are asked to pay attention to their breathing. After a few minutes, during which time their minds should become calmer, they are asked to place their now more focused minds on one idea.

Sit comfortably with the spine straight – either in a chair or on the floor

Calmly inhale to a count of about 10 --

Hold the breath for the same count

Exhale for the same count

Continue this for about 5 minutes, letting your attention stay solely on the breath.

When you are done, continue to calmly watch the breath as it flows in and out on its own pace, as though watching someone else breathing.

Now, continuing to sit comfortably, and keeping your eyes closed or half open, lift your gaze slightly, as though looking through the point between your eyebrows.

Keeping the eyes focused at this imaginary point, bring to mind a word or very short phrase that has a deep and special meaning to you – such as "peace", or "love", or "beauty", or "God", or "Christ", anything that helps draws your interest and attention within and towards something bigger than yourself. If it is easier for you, you can visualize a face or an object that comes to mind as you repeat your word. .

Repeat the word or phrase, silently and deeply, over and over again.

If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the word or phrase.

Continue for 5 minutes.

At the end of 5 minutes, continue to sit with your eyes closed for another minute, holding on to the sense of expansion or whatever other state of consciousness you are experiencing.

#### Affirmation Example: Affirmation for Psychological Success

This example is taken from Paramahansa Yogananda's *Scientific Healing Affirmations* (p.63).

Affirmations go deeper and deeper into the consciousness as they are repeated, repeated first in a loud voice, then in a normal voice, then in a whisper and then silently.

For this affirmation, it is recommended that the affirmation be repeated three times at each level – with the leader saying it aloud, then the rest of the group following.

I am brave, I am strong.

Perfume of success thoughts

blows in me, blows in me.

I am cool, I am calm,

I am sweet, I am kind,

I am love and sympathy,

I am charming and magnetic,

I am pleased with all;

I wipe away all tears and fears.

I have no enemy.

I am the friend of all.

#### Classroom Strategy Example: Creative Writing

Barbara Oehlberg (2006) published a book, *Strategies for Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms*, that has several creative ideas for promoting the psychological health of students who may be experiencing the effects of abuse in ways that staying within the academic norms of the classroom. One of Oehlberg's strategies is to use a form of creative writing based on prompts that allow students to do important inner work. (p. 25-40). Oehlberg believes that this kind of creative writing exercise can give students the opportunity to consciously contact and then transform memories of fear, sadness, or helplessness – thereby addressing issues that may be blocking their engagement in the learning process, while at the same time giving them practice developing writing skills.

It is important to give students some choice about their prompts, so several possibilities are given below that students can select from to serve their unique needs. These prompts are given as a

starting point, and the teacher is encouraged to modify these prompts or add ones prompts in keeping with the students' ages and needs.

### Suggested Writing Prompts

Write a letter as though you were from another planet, but with a human face that always smiles . Imagine that you are miserable, but no one realizes it, that you are lonely and homesick, without friends and unable to find the food you need.

Write a story about a prince who never listens to his subjects or pays attention to their requests. How do his subjects feel about the prince? What do they do to try and get his attention? What does he do?

Imagine that there is a house that can tell the story of what it has seen and what it wished could be different. Write the story.

Imagine that you found a magical band-aid that can heal any hurt. Where would the band-aid be applied and what would happen after it did its magic? Tell the story.

Imagine a mask that can change to become whatever identity the person wearing it needs. Write a story about someone who finds the mask and puts it on. Why did they need the mask? What happened after they put it on?

Tell the story of a person who travels into space and discovers a new inhabitable planet but empty planet. How would they set it up? What would life be like for them then?

Or, have students write a private letter to their hurts, their broken hearts. Encourage illustrations . These are to be sealed and kept confidential.

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