

Action Research in the Classroom: A Process that Feeds the Spirit of the Adolescent

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Abstract: *Through action research the question “What nourishes the spirit of the adolescent in the classroom” was subjected to an inventive strategy. The inquiry centered around student-driven questions inserted into a holistic intrapersonal curriculum. Recognition of the penury of literature in adolescent self and spirituality led the researcher to formulate the question, to organize and implement sessions with engaged students in a fluid way, to create an appropriate environment, to collect the data, and to analyze the data along thematic lines. Ultimately, the concept that interconnected components such as competence, encouragement, confidence, and self-esteem allow holistic teaching to flourish when creativity, choice, imagination, and constructivism nourish the adolescent spirit in the classroom. A theory clearly rises from the research. Teaching from a holistic perspective, a teacher can offset the solely outcome-based curriculum directives. The teacher and the adolescents committed to learning can continue to regard outcomes while focusing our commitment to process. To nourish the spirit is key. It is an ongoing process of infinite proportions capable of unleashing the energies of all stakeholders in education: teachers, students, parents, officials. The process, if pursued in a determined and mindful way, will witness the establishment of a civil society, one that endures in a renewable way at all levels: home, school, and community.*

Keywords: *spirituality, self-esteem, adolescence, action research*

Citation Information:

Brown, H. (2004). Action research in the classroom: A process that feeds the spirit of the adolescent. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1). Article 3. Retrieved [INSERT DATE] from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/brown.pdf

Prologue

As I sit at my desk staring out the window gazing at the forest that is situated beside the elementary school where I teach, I am thinking hard about what it is that I can do as a teacher to reach the inside space of the adolescent students whom I teach. I want to provide a learning atmosphere that is meaningful for them, one that would allow them to feel good about themselves and that would perhaps carry over into other aspects of their lives: home, school and community. I am concerned with today's outcome-based curriculum directive permeating every aspect of the teaching profession. There is little time left to reach that inner space, what I call the spirit of the adolescent. I want my research to reflect an attempt to reach that nascent space of the adolescent, hoping that it will allow for the unlocking of the gateways to his/her soul.

Persistent ponderings, such as the one above, formed the basis of my research study. How do I teach to reach the whole person? I facilitate a Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and TAG (Teacher Advisor Group) program for my homeroom class. Fortunately, I work for an administrator who schedules blocks of time necessary to deliver an integrated program. Since I have the luxury of teaching 30 students for a good portion of any given school day, this affords me the time necessary to attempt to create a community of learners within my homeroom class. This teaching and learning atmosphere lends itself to a Participatory Action Research study. In this article, I describe the journey that led me to unveil a hopeful process that potentially allows for the gateways of the soul to be opened and the spirit of the adolescent to be nourished.

The journey

As a committed teacher of 13- and 14-year-old students for the past 13 years, early in my career I recognized the importance of this age as a developmental milestone in an adolescent's life. I began to believe that through my role as a teacher I had been given a gift. My gift emerged through creatively applying, in a meaningful way, strategies that made room for the shaping and reshaping of an adolescent's perception of self. Over the years, I formulated a teaching and

learning atmosphere that attempted to allow for the spirit of the adolescent to be nourished within a classroom setting. In this environment I was able to facilitate the development of the self-systems. The sense of self-worth for some students was strengthened and allowed the cultivation of a positive self-esteem. Armed with a healthy self-esteem, I believe, adolescents are more ready to enter the world and potentially overcome any obstacle that comes between them and their goal. My action research attempted to “go deeper in” to search for the gateways that nourish the spirit of the adolescents whom I teach. What is it that sustains them and nourishes their spirit in the classroom? An answer to this question, I believe, would allow me to “serve my students well” (Palmer, 1998, p. 2).

The mention of the term spirituality makes most educators uncomfortable. From the outset, I make it clear that in this context nourishing the spirit is not related to organized or formal religion. The inner life of a student with its immaterial, intelligent, sentient characteristics can be defined as that unique attitude or frame of mind specific to each individual. “Spirituality is an attitude or a way of life that recognizes something we might call spirit...it does not require an institutional connection” (Halford, 1998, p. 28) when differentiating spirituality from religion. In my study, I encouraged adolescents to explore their “inner landscape” as Palmer (1998, p. 4) aptly calls it. I hoped to reach out to the whole person and, in doing so, provide an opportunity for the students to reach their potential by developing their spirit in the classroom.

Throughout this article I have interjected the voices of my student participants who unselfishly committed themselves to this process. It is through their voices that real meaning about what nourishes their spirit in the classroom can be understood.

The prevailing assumptions about schooling and acquisition of knowledge in society today stress that the purpose of schooling is for the transmission of information and the preservation of cultural standards where schools impose social conformity and train productive workers (Koegal, 2003; Miller, 1997). In this type of teaching environment, the “experts” teach from the front of the room lecturing using a top-down, outside-in approach. They impart knowledge to students who are waiting to receive information. Learning in this type of classroom offers neither discussion, nor debate, nor dialogue surrounding the curriculum that is being imparted. In this “banking concept” of education students are “receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). Embedded within the core assumptions about knowledge is the notion that a holistic teaching practice with its bottom-up, inside-out approach to knowledge and its tenet of “drawing out” and “leading forth” the students’ hidden gifts does not prepare students for standardized testing. Unfortunately, the prevailing tendency is that holistic educators are not concerned about furthering a student’s intellectual capacity (Koegal).

The flaw in this thinking about knowledge acquisition ignores that the practice of caring about what goes on “within” a child is important. When students experience knowledge in a deep place, it is hard to believe that they would remain uncaring about it. Yet in society’s drive to produce higher test scores and greater technological expertise, the question of absorbing the knowledge and caring about it rarely comes up (Dodson, 2003). However, there is compelling evidence that a progressive holistic education is at least as effective as traditional education in promoting academic achievement and often is more so (Kohn, 1999).

I had a fun experience in this session; it made me look deep inside myself. I mean anyone can do addition, subtraction or anything like that but only I can look

inside myself. That is much more harder. I believe that I will develop through this program into a better person with new skills. (Mickey, journal entry, February 2002)

Why is a holistic pedagogy not adopted on a wider basis even though our world today clearly reveals that it is needed? Why is a traditional approach to teaching permeating our schools? The question remains, how can I address this issue in my own classroom?

The literature

As I began reading the literature surrounding adolescence and spirituality, the necessity for a holistic teaching practice revealed itself to me. According to Miller (2000), holism is the notion “that everything exists in relationship, in a context of connection and meaning” (p. 21). Holism maintains that nothing can be learned in isolation. This view challenges the fragmentation of modernism and its inherent compartmentalization and standardization of knowledge that pervades society today. As a holistic educator, I attempt to ground my teaching pedagogy in an ethical framework that goes beyond the individual curriculum outcomes to promote an integrated wholeness. In this type of teaching and learning environment, the intellect and spirit are integral parts of one another (O’Sullivan, 1999). Therefore, in order to achieve an atmosphere where connection and meaning can flourish within a classroom setting, teaching from a holistic position is necessary.

In school there is so much telling, why not experiencing? Encouragement and inspiration are things you need in the valleys of life (and even in the hills). These things will help the journey no matter the path. The teacher must get in touch with them self then not tell or give direction but show us the way and let us experience it for ourselves. (Irene, journal entry, February 2002)

Adolescence emerged as a complex developmental stage. The self-concept literature surrounding early and middle adolescence was especially important to my research, with four

important milestones needing to be highlighted within this developmental period. First, during early adolescence there are multiple selves that vary as a function of social context (Harter, 1998), meaning that the adolescents describe themselves differently according to whom they are with. I observe this frequently as a classroom teacher. For example, how my students interact with their friends at recess is usually in direct contrast to their conduct with me in the classroom or their behaviour when they are around their parents. Their multiple selves change according to the context. Second, feelings of self-worth or self-esteem are judged across the relational contexts. According to Harter, Waters, and Whitesell (1998), adolescents experienced a higher self-worth when around friends and lower self-worth was experienced around parents. During this phase, the adolescents' friends become the most important people in their lives and often are considered the "experts" when it comes to advice about all issues. This can be a frightening proposition when it comes to sex or drug education. Third, adolescents demonstrated a heightened concern with the reflected appraisal of others (Harter, 1990; Rosenberg, 1986), which may lead to variability in the self-concept across the relations. They are hypersensitive to any type of criticism, even if it is constructive criticism. Finally, adolescents become preoccupied with what others think of them (Harter, 1999). "Fitting in" is the adolescents' sole focus and means everything to them. Through this developmental stage the adolescents are likely to experience conflict, confusion, and distress that could lead to lowered self-worth. This explains why such unpredictable behaviour, changing self-evaluations, and mood swings are observed in many adolescents during this stage of development. Adolescence is a developmental milestone that requires an intrapersonal curriculum that can offset this tumultuous time in a person's life.

Two friends of mine, I don't want to say names, almost always leave me out. They'll ask to be each other's partner right in front of me. It doesn't make me feel good inside. I really feel bad for people who are excluded. Especially "the cool people" group and "the not cool people." What makes you "cool" then? What

makes you in the “inner” circle and not in the “outer” circle? It doesn’t cost anything to be nice. (Susan, journal entry, February 2002)

The literature regarding social and emotional learning has emerged from new understandings of the nature of intelligence, learning, and success. Gardner (1983) introduced the concept of multiple intelligences, a proposal that there are seven intelligences crucial for life success. The personal intelligences, interpersonal and intrapersonal, provided the appropriate lens for my study. Intrapersonal intelligence is the development of the internal aspects of a person. Simply, intrapersonal (emotional) intelligence is the key to self-knowledge. It is the intelligence that provides the adolescent with the ability of self-understanding. Interpersonal (social) intelligence, on the other hand, turns outward to other individuals. Simply, interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand others.

Well I liked all of [the sessions] because they were pretty eye opening because I wouldn’t even think to look inside myself to see what I feel like. (Mickey, interview, February 2002)

I liked the trust [session] because everyone sort of opened up a lot more and like said what they actually really feel about people and stuff. (Jack, interview, February 2002)

During adolescence, maturation of knowledge of one’s own person as well as knowledge of other persons is cultivated. As Gardner (1983) explains, “adolescence turns out to be that period of life in which individuals must bring together these two forms of personal knowledge into a larger and more organized sense, a sense of identity or a sense of self” (p.251). So many emotions are present during adolescence, such as coming to terms with one’s own personal feelings, motivations, and desires-including sexual ones-which are a result of going through puberty. The pressure with which adolescents must contend makes this a stressful period in the life cycle. How they deal with these pressures is a “process” and a “project” of great importance.

This is where the emerging identity of adolescents occurs. How they manage to work their way through this developmental time will determine whether they can function effectively within the social context in which they have chosen to live. Ultimately, how adolescents develop and bring together their intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences will determine their sense of self.

Linking this with the spiritual question, “What nourishes an adolescent’s spirit in the classroom?” enables me to hope that my research may offer a richer view into adolescents’ self-concept. This in turn may determine how successful they will be in life.

Wow that [session] was really deep. All people our age seem to be having the same thoughts and questions. It seemed like everyone is wondering, curious or worried about the future. Of course I am too but just from hearing all those questions kind of makes me want to live one day at a time. (Jessica, journal entry, February 2002)

When I was doing my background reading, spirituality in adolescence and the role that I play as a teacher in the teaching and learning process also needed to be addressed. Bosacki (2001) believes that a sense of self and spiritual awareness are one and the same. Since adolescence is a pivotal time for self-concept formation, a holistic approach to exploring the links between self and the development of spirituality is necessary. Therefore, adolescents’ self-view may offer us a lens into their spiritual nature. The notion of spirituality was finally getting to the core of what I wanted to know. What did the literature on spirituality uncover?

When looking specifically at the adolescent and spirituality, three themes emerged: first, that the educational system lacks a curriculum that nourishes the spiritual self (Bosacki, 2001; Hart, 2001; Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2000; Noddings & Shore, 1998); second, the benefits of developing the spiritual self within students, especially during adolescence (Bosacki; Kessler) and third, that the teacher is the most important agent in this process (Kessler; Palmer, 1998; Suhor, 1994).

Therefore, by utilizing a classroom curriculum that addresses spirituality, I may in fact be able to reach an adolescent in the deep spaces where the self is being mapped out and assist him/her not only while he/she is at school, but outside the classroom as well. If the research turns out the way I think it will, then I have nothing to lose. Why wouldn't any teacher want to reach the deep spaces of the adolescents whom they teach and guide them along the way?

I'm glad to know I'm not the only one who questions life. People ask, "How do you know there is a God?" Well, what I simply say is how can you believe in love or hate when you have never seen it. It's what you feel inside. (Jessica, journal entry, February 2002)

In today's educational climate, with the drive toward productivity, efficiency, and the assembly of economically productive workers (Koegal, 2003; Mayes, 2003; Miller, 1997), reaching the deep spaces where the inner child resides is often ignored. Education should provide adolescents with opportunities to develop an inner life, and by attempting to teach with the spiritual self in mind, a deeper sense of purpose and meaning is introduced into the classroom (Miller, 2000).

The adolescents who are in the middle of their self-portrait or self-theory during this pivotal time may require a spiritual curriculum to honour their needs. Therefore, the importance of a balanced approach to learning that sees the children's intellectual development in balance with their social, emotional, physical and spiritual development is imperative.

What nourishes the adolescent in the classroom? I think that encouragement and inspiration are key things. Trust is also a large factor. A teacher or elder must learn to be a complete person or someone that is in touch with their inner self. The other three things will follow and the teacher/elder must show the way or direction but not find the person's inner self for them. (Irene, journal entry, February 2002)

Palmer (1998) believes that the human self and education are at their best when the teacher's intellectual, emotional, and spiritual paths are interwoven, dependent on one another for creating

wholeness. Their “inward teacher” or authentic self is at work. Therefore, as a teacher, I must bring my authentic self into the classroom and offer an empathetic and compassionate perspective toward my students if their spirit is to be nourished. I must be cultivating an internal life of my own in order to teach from the soul. Teaching, therefore, from a place of wholeness is necessary when attempting to nourish the spirit of the adolescents whom I teach.

Mrs. Brown nourishes and encourages my spirit. She always says the right things at the right time. When she writes things in my response log, it brightens my spirit. I think your soul is your inner self. I believe that’s what goes with you into another life. People encourage me and nourish me. I like hearing people’s opinions. It lets me know I’m not alone. Making people happy always nourishes me. I’m happy with what I’ve written and the way I’ve been thinking. I’ve discovered a lot about myself that I didn’t know before. (Susan, journal entry, February 2002)

A home where the students and I have established a potentially transformational environment resulting in the coconstruction of the curriculum (Bosacki, 1997) is an environment for which I strive. Building a safe, caring learning environment, one that fosters a holistic pedagogy, allows me to become a cocreator of the curriculum alongside my students. In this environment, “the students – no longer docile listeners – are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). I knew that the teaching and learning environment which I had to create for my students and myself would potentially provide us with an enriching and deep learning experience.

I’m glad we had this discussion because I found out a lot of people are like me. We’re practically all the same. We all have the same worries and thoughts. I guess that’s why it’s so easy to “spill your guts” to your friends and people that are close to you. (Jessica, journal entry, February 2002)

The Study

I grounded the program in a participatory action research (PAR) design (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998) in hopes of improving the quality of our classroom community. That is, I aimed to

describe and understand adolescents' ways of interpreting a subjective experience, spirituality, and the meanings these individuals attach to the construct (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In order to encourage this type of teaching and learning environment, for my study I integrated Kessler's (2000) Passages Program into my classroom. The "Passages Program" is a human development curriculum for adolescents. Students are asked to anonymously write their "mysteries" about themselves, others, and nature. Kessler explains:

Please write about what you wonder about when you cannot sleep at night or when you're walking home alone. What do you worry about? or feel curious about? or feel afraid or excited about? What are your questions about yourselves, about others, about life itself? (p. 11)

A third party, who would not be able to identify the student's handwriting, typed up the questions. She then shredded the hand written questions to insure complete anonymity. I received a typed copy of the questions. Only when the process was completely anonymous did the students feel safe. I will discuss this further in the Context section.

We all got to like share our feelings and stuff, and nobody made fun of anybody else or anything like that. (Grant, interview, February 2002)

It is this student-centered process that refines the Passages curriculum to suit the needs of each particular group. The asking and the witnessing of these questions are at least as important as the answers. Passages returns to the original meaning of education: "to draw forth" by creating a safe container for the wonder, worry, joy, and wisdom within each child to emerge and engage in the learning process. The young adolescent is supported through the transition from childhood into adolescence and is provided with the information, ethical framework, and decision-making skills to face the many risks of the teenage years.

We all shared our secret questions anonymously. I liked how we did that because it lets everybody ask questions they've never asked before. (Grant, journal entry, February 2002)

The questions I asked seem kind of dumb to me and I never thought anyone would care what I wonder. (Jessica, journal entry, February 2002)

The method

After gaining ethics approval from my school board and the Brock University Senate Research Ethics Board for conducting research with human participants, I invited all the students in my homeroom class to participate in a research journey. Even though all 30 students would take an active role in the sessions themselves, I could only use the journals and interview the students whose parents had signed consent forms. Twenty-one students showed interest and 16 followed through with the signing of the parental consent forms. The participants were either 13 or 14 years old, and consisted of 7 girls and 9 boys. Utilizing a PAR design provided a framework for following Kessler's (2000) Passages Program in the classroom research procedure. A 50-minute TAG (Teacher Advisor Group) time was used to implement the research procedure. The 6-week study only touched the surface of Kessler's program.

After I read the "mystery questions" to the whole class in session two, the council, consisting of all the students in my homeroom class and myself, had our first council meeting. A few rituals were observed at each session. To begin the council meeting I made a dedication at the opening of the first meeting with an invitation for students to provide future dedications at each successive council meeting.

Two dedications were made today. The first one was made to the poor people who are starving, and the second one was to Jessica's dad's health. He had been in intensive care at the beginning of the week and was now out of intensive care but still in the hospital. A fellow classmate reached out, after the dedication was made, and put her hand on Jessica's shoulder offering Jessica her sympathy. This event was one that I was hoping would happen; however, I wasn't sure six sessions would be long enough for this type of gesture to occur. The dedication alone shows a transformation in the group, a move away from the "me." But the

gesture of reaching out to someone who is hurting shows a sign of caring, compassion, and empathy. It brings into our classroom a sense of community and a feeling of belonging. We have shared our innermost thoughts and have grown as a result of this openness (Brown, 2002, p. 95-96).

A stone was passed to designate who had the right to speak. Students practiced “deep listening,” which was central to the council process. Listening with complete attention, unimpeded by quick judgments and reaction, and hearing the speaker’s feelings and intentions (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996) as well as the words is central to the process. These ground rules promoted a safe, inclusive environment for the whole class. It gave every class member a voice. All participants wrote a journal entry at the end of each council meeting. Even the students who were not in the study, I’ll call them *non-research participants*, completed a response in their Reading Response Log. Many of the non-research participants wrote insightful responses as a result of their experiences during the council process, however, I could not use the data in my research. The participants commented on the questions themselves and offered further questions or comments.

I found it very interesting how many of us shared the same questions even though our individuality is developed. I like the atmosphere of the session it was not uncomfortable and no rude comments about the questions of others. (Irene, journal entry, February 2002)

The only difference between the participants and the non-research participants was that the latter group was not interviewed at the end of the 6 sessions. Since the one-on-one interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time, such as recess or the lunch hour, the non-research participants were not aware that interviews were even being conducted. Overall, the whole class participated in the sessions together as one group with no divisions. The non-research participants may have been aware that I was collecting the participant’s journals on a weekly basis, but I also collected their Reading Response Logs after each session and wrote responses to

them as well. Throughout the council meeting process, I was present, the students were present and the atmosphere was filled with communal energy. We were one community together on a journey.

Themes were provided at the next four council meetings that allowed the students to find out more about one another and about themselves. The topics for discussion were: trust, a precious moment from childhood, exclusion, and the final session was a willingness on the part of the participants to share a story about a time when their own spirit was nourished.

After each session, the whole class wrote a response about their circle sharing experience in a journal. As mentioned above, only the 16 participants' journals were kept for data collection. I collected the journals on the day of each session and read through them. I transcribed them and I made notes regarding themes or specific comments made by the participants that were of particular interest to the study. The journals were returned to the participants prior to the next session.

I also kept a reflection journal for the duration of the research that provided a more in-depth, richer view from which the experience evolved. Reflections on each session were documented in my journal along with questions I had. I completed my entries at the same time as the participants, during and after each session. On completion of the six sessions, a post interview (one on one) was conducted.

[The discussion that made an impression on me was] the reading of the questions and like how some questions were alike so I know some people are like kinda in the same position. It felt pretty good to know that I wasn't alone really, which

builds our like self-esteem or it makes us feel better about ourselves. (Norm, interview, February 2002)

The context

The confining four walls of a classroom can be transformed into a place of mystery with a bit of creativity and imagination on the part of the teacher. Such was the case with the six sessions that were going to define my research into what nourishes the adolescent spirit in the classroom. The desks were pushed back against three walls, opening up a wide expanse of hard, tiled flooring. The throwing of blankets, small rugs, and pillows around the perimeter of the open space softened the area. The curtains were drawn and the lights were turned off, creating a mysterious atmosphere of wonder. The class of 30 students was ushered in. Without instruction, they immediately took off their shoes as they nervously chatted to one another while they found their spot in the circle. There was an uncertainty that one feels only when something unequalled is about to occur. You could taste the excitement in the air. Some students were sitting, some were lying down with their hands cradling their chins, and others were stretched out resting their heads on their folded arms, anticipating what was to come next. I lit the candle housed in the clear glass holder and placed it in the middle of the floor. This called the council meeting to order without any words, just a symbol of light. I held a piece of soapstone in my hands, which let the group know that it was their turn to listen and listen deeply to each other. I dedicated the council meeting to honesty and the friendships that come when we tell the truth. As I slowly started to read their questions aloud, I could feel the intensity of 30 pairs of eyes gazing in my direction, even though my own pair were focused on the page in front of me. And so began the opening of the gateway to our spirit.

[I enjoyed] the set-up of it [the sessions] with everybody in a circle, the candle, the speaking rock. In a circle it feels like you can open yourself up, and since it's a circle and it's closed nothing will get out. (Pete, interview, February 2002)

The questions

After the “mystery questions” were typed out by a third party, the first council meeting took place where I ceremoniously read the unedited questions one by one as the students sat in a circle. Even the questions that were duplicated were kept on the list. This would allow the students to recognize that they were not the only ones asking these questions. As I mulled over the student’s questions by reading and rereading them, I began to see a pattern emerge in their queries. I then sorted their questions into categories as the themes emerged: self, social (peers), social (family), cultural/world, metaphysical/ existential, and tangential/small talk. Some examples of the types of questions the students asked are indicated under each heading. The themes that emerged from the questions were consistent with Harter’s (1990; 1998; 1999) work on adolescence.

1. ***Self.*** Am I a mistake? Will I get married? What will high school be like? What do people think of me? Will I have enough money to survive? What will I be?
2. ***Social (peers).*** Why are people cool and not cool? Will I be together with my friends at high school? What do other people think of me? Will I meet my old friends again?
3. ***Social (family).*** Why is my brother such a menace? Why are my parents always mad at me? What do my parents think of me? Is my family safe? What will happen to my family? I worry about my family.
4. ***Cultural/world.*** Why does racism still exist? Why does colour still matter? Will there be world peace? Why are there so many bad guys out there? Why is there war? What will the world be like in the next decade? Why have people been made to cause problems? What has money done for us and what has it not done for us?
5. ***Metaphysical/existential.*** Why am I here? When will I die? What will it feel like? Is there life after death? How did the universe become what it is? How was the earth created? What is the meaning of life? What if there was no God? Is there a hell or do we live in it now? What will life be like in the future?

6. ***Tangential/small talk.*** What book will I choose to read next? What do I have for homework? What would it be like to be a teacher? Will I get my writing done? What should I wear tomorrow?

I liked what we did today. As Mrs. Brown read the questions I looked around at everyone's faces and I could tell everyone was thinking about the questions. I tried to answer each question about me. Then maybe I would know more about myself and who I really am, and what is important in my life. (Janice, journal entry, February 2002)

I worry about the future sometimes, but I didn't think everyone did. Asking these questions just proved that kids may act like fools, but when we are alone we may have many unanswered questions. Like we act younger than we are. It seems that a lot of people asked the same sorts of questions. Listening to those questions was hard stuff to do. It makes you think of all the worries and troubles we have. It kind of seemed scary about all of the questions about death. It scares me to think of death because I don't want to die any time soon. (Jessica, journal entry, February 2002)

Data processing and analysis

I used an inductive interpretation and analysis of data starting with minute details and working up into big themes (Creswell, 2002). In other words, after reading all the data that had been collected, I identified the details such as issues, factors, themes, and items that came up repeatedly that emerged from the data. I will describe the process I went through as I read, absorbed, thought, sifted, and thought some more as I struggled to make sense of the adolescents' experience.

I thoroughly read through of all the data many times to obtain a general sense of the content. Describing and developing themes was my primary objective at this point of the analysis. Next I coded the text and development of themes and/or descriptions from the common elements. By adapting Creswell's (2002) qualitative stages to my study, I was able to unearth the big themes in a vast amount of data.

The initial stage of the data analysis required the organization of the data. After each of the six sessions, I transcribed the participant journals and read them over to ensure clarity. The session entries provided interesting information for each of the topics discussed in each session.

Next, a post-interview was conducted. When the member checks were completed and verified as correct, I read the transcripts over many times. I analyzed the individual sessions and interviews through the coding and the labeling of the text. Common themes began to emerge and take shape. During this stage of data analysis I labeled as many as 45 text segments or codes throughout the data. In successive readings I tabulated how many times each code occurred throughout the entire data collection. In subsequent analysis, the codes were collapsed to six to seven major and minor themes through the process of eliminating repeated codes, codes that occurred only a couple of times, and finally codes that could not be categorized. Multiple perspectives were used to corroborate each theme. In other words, evidence for each theme was based on several viewpoints from different individuals. Triangulation among different data sources was also used to corroborate evidence from different individuals; in this study between the individual participants and the teacher and the method of data collection, journals, and interview transcriptions, were also used to corroborate each theme.

Finally, as themes emerged so did their relationships. In order to visualize the connections between the themes, I generated a visual diagram or web to illustrate the links that interrelate the emergent themes. This helped me to take in how the themes interrelated and illustrate the complexity and yet the simplicity of how an adolescent spirit can be nourished within the classroom. It will be discussed further in the Findings section.

Last, the reflection journal that I kept during the duration of the study was reread. Data were highlighted that provided the study with any information that could be viable, such as observations of nonverbal responses made by the participants, personal and professional thoughts, ideas, assessments about the session, feelings, reactions to the session, and any positive connections that could be made between the participants and me.

Utilizing multiple perspectives, for example, student-to-student, student-to-teacher and self-reports, as evidence for the themes generated from the data was essential when conveying the complexity of the phenomenon being studied. Interconnecting the themes or layering the analysis brought a sophistication and complexity into the participatory action research design.

Action research has been described as peeling away layers of an onion. Removing one layer usually reveals another layer that prompts further explanation...this peeling away can help you move toward more complete understanding of the specific educational phenomena you are studying. (Sagor, 1992, p. 54)

After coding the data I started to analyze them. I chose to analyze each of the sessions individually because the topic for each session was so vastly different from one another. I didn't want to lose the essence of each discussion by analyzing them all together. In addition, I didn't want to lose the voice of the adolescent within the realm of each discussion. I felt that it was important to view the build up to the interview. The post interview was analyzed separately from the sessions because the interview specifically asked the research question and questions about the sessions themselves. I analyzed both the sessions and the interview for descriptive elements and themes and layered and interconnected themes. Each element, the context, the

sessions, the interview and the voice of the adolescent, are inextricably connected to the big themes that were uncovered in this study.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the three methods of data collection – the journals from the sessions, the post-interviews, and my own journal entries – corroborate the themes that emerged from both the sessions and the interviews. By identifying themes that weaved their way through the data, an interconnected system began to emerge, allowing for a system that, when working efficiently, provides the necessary stimulus to successfully nourish the spirit of the adolescent in the classroom. As shown in Figure 1, when adolescents are provided with encouragement, their spirit gets nourished and they have an increased feeling of competency that may lead to an increase in their confidence.

When I'm being praised for doing something good. I feel happy and that's I think part of your spirit too being nourished. (Jessica, interview, February 2002)

When this occurs, their self-esteem increases, and that may help to nourish their spirit in the classroom. In turn, as the students' self-esteem increases, this may lead to an increase in their feeling of competency. All four components: encouragement, competency, confidence, and self-esteem work in a dynamic fashion.

When I'm in the classroom if I get good on a test or my report card is good, I get good grades, then it goes up because spirit goes along with self-esteem and if your self-esteem goes up your spirit will be high. (Pete, interview, February 2002)

The findings also reveal that more girls felt that encouragement nourishes their spirit as compared to boys, who felt that being competent nourishes their spirit. When asked “What nourishes or feeds your spirit while you are in the classroom?”, all seven of the girls mentioned

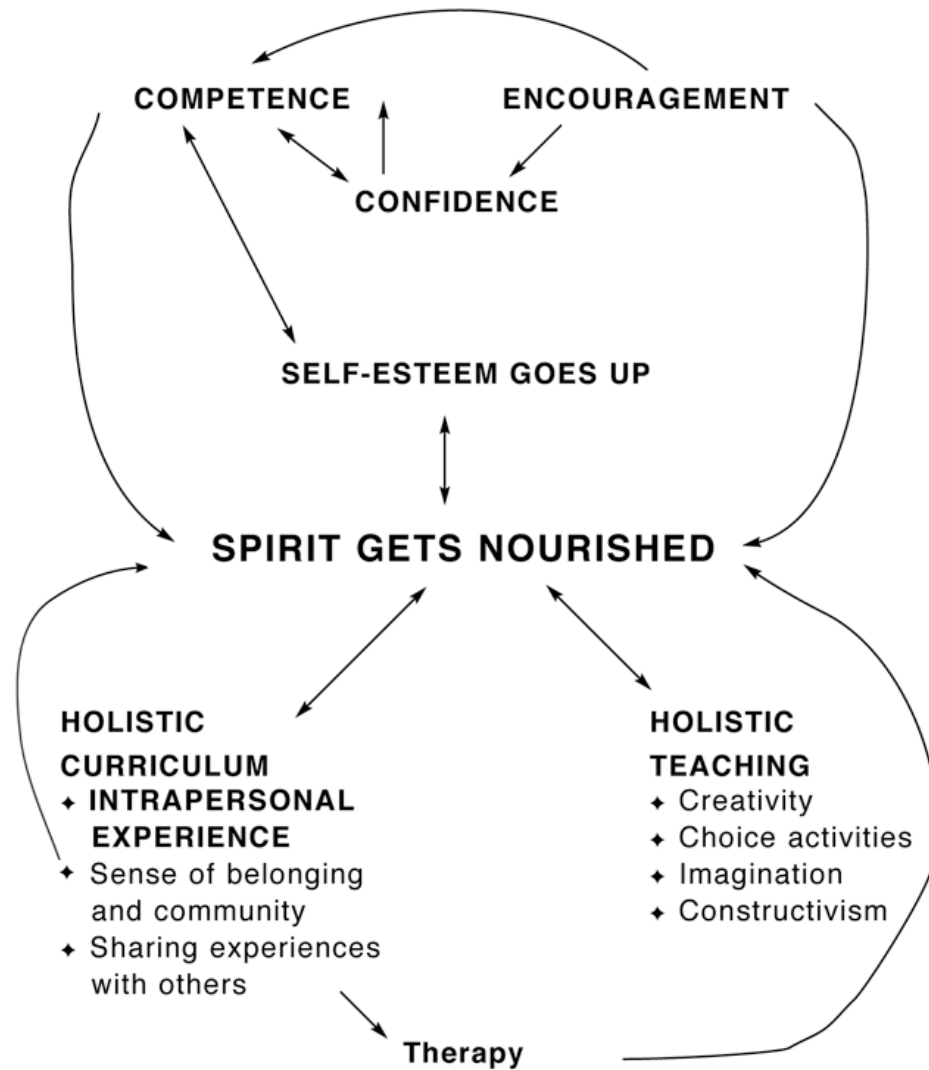


FIGURE 1. Thematic representation of the interconnected components that nourish the adolescent spirit in the classroom.

encouragement as essential to feeding their spirit, whereas only 2 boys mentioned encouragement as essential. Feeling competent was another source of stimulation of the spirit. Five of the 9 boys mentioned competency as essential to feeding their spirit, compared to 1 girl who mentioned it in terms of understanding.

When I'm in the classroom if I get good on a test or my report card is good, I get good grades, then it goes up because spirit goes along with self-esteem and if your self-esteem goes up your spirit will be high. (Pete, interview)

Yah, when I'm building machines I want to build to the best ability I can and in math I want to try to get every question right. (Daniel, interview)

If someone is saying I'm doing a good job it makes me feel good. (Susan, interview)

Providing a holistic teaching practice and curriculum also nourishes the spirit of the adolescent in the classroom. When teaching from a holistic stance, the teacher allows choice, creativity, and the use of the imagination to drive their program, and this nourishes the spirit of the adolescent.

Like when I get to create my own things like the country that we're doing because I already have a plan. I like creating things and writing up all my own stuff. I enjoyed writing the story that I got really good on and I enjoy creating things. (Jeff, interview, February, 2002)

Therapy is a collaborative concern showing mutual respect between persons present (Combs and Freedman, 1996). My stance as a teacher/researcher during the council sessions was non-judgmental in nature. I asked questions from a not-knowing position that provided space that encouraged the personal agency of the students. By using an intrapersonal curriculum, such as the council process, I helped to generate a sense of belonging and community into the classroom. Both the telling and the hearing of the student's stories are important ingredients of the community process. Being heard can be validating (Parry, 1991). That is, for some students being heard provided the venue for the sharing of their experiences with others and it became a type of therapy for them. Overall, the teacher plays a vital role in every aspect of this interconnected system.

Discussion

In today's educational climate, an outcome-based approach to teaching and learning is prescribed. This approach lacks a curriculum that nourishes the spiritual self (Bosacki, 2001;

Hart, 2001; Kessler, 2000; Miller, 2000; Noddings & Shore, 1998). The curriculum does not encourage an emotional, spiritual, or an intrapersonal approach in order to develop the inner life of an adolescent. The present challenge is for teachers to provide a learning environment where students can nourish their spirit within the confines of an outcome-based curriculum content. That is, teachers need to create a place that enables students to develop the courage and confidence required to try new things, to explore, and to create in spite of today's outcome-based direction. This type of quality classroom is essential if nourishing the spirit of students is to be unleashed.

Kessler (2000) believes that by providing opportunities for spiritual development within the educational system, the inner life of the adolescents is nourished and his/her longing for something more than the ordinary, material, and fragmented existence which they are living would be met. She believes that this curriculum “would address the root causes of suffering in a generation at risk” (p. xiii) and provide a preventative measure against “persistent violent and self-destructive behaviours of our teenagers” (p. xii). This study responds to Kessler's declaration by inviting adolescents, through her “Passages Program,” to share their stories and to practice deep listening in the hope that by attending to nourishing students' souls, rather than focusing so much attention on outcome-based directive, we may lead today's adolescents into the establishment of a more civil society.

The questions that propelled my study are 1) what nourishes the adolescent spirit in the classroom?; and 2) Does the nourishment of the spirit of adolescents in the classroom improve their self-concept? Self-esteem centers around the way individuals feel about themselves, and

self-concept is how individuals see themselves. If adolescents are experiencing an elevated self-esteem and feel good about themselves, then they will see themselves as capable, which will improve their self-concept. When adolescents enter the world feeling good about themselves, it is my hope that the decisions he/she makes in life will reflect his/her positive self-concept and that he/she will forgo the senseless acts of violence that permeate our society today and pursue a more kinder, loving, caring way of life.

Encouragement provided by the teacher, parents, or fellow students, or in some cases self-encouragement and the feeling of competency were revealed as factors that foster a positive self-concept and nourish the adolescents' spirit in the classroom. Encouragement and a feeling of competency work in a reciprocal fashion. As one increases so does the other, and so forth. When encouragement and competency are promoting each other, this results in a boost in confidence, which in turn increases the adolescent's self-esteem. As self-esteem goes up, the adolescents feel that their spirit is being nourished. As the adolescents' self-esteem increases, they feel that their spirit is being nourished, and when they feel their spirit is being nourished their self-esteem goes up. Harter (1999) found the same result: When particular levels of "competence" were achieved, students' self-esteem was enhanced.

More girls felt that encouragement nourishes their spirit as compared to boys, who felt that being competent nourishes their spirit. This is the first finding that showed a strong gender difference. It is an important finding for teachers who teach pre-adolescent students so they can recognize that alternative ways of approaching learning situations for boys and girls are needed in order to move them forward and still make them feel good about themselves regardless of their abilities.

Throughout the sessions, the council meeting itself promotes a deep sense of belonging and community for the adolescents and provides some students, the ones who need it, with an opportunity for a therapeutic release of anger, sadness, and frustrations. As mentioned earlier in this paper, both the telling and the hearing of the student's stories are important ingredients of the community process. The students are encouraged to remember a story about a time they were excluded, for example, and in doing so, space is opened up so that they can widen the landscape of their consciousness in regards to their remembered experience (Combs and Freedman, 1996). Being heard and having a voice for some students was a type of therapy for them.

The role of teacher, ensuring that this interconnected system is being carried out, permeates every aspect of the findings. The teacher decides how he/she is going to teach and in doing so sets the tone and atmosphere for learning in the classroom. Miller (2000) notes that a teacher must bring his/her authentic presence to the classroom and must possess an empathetic stance toward his/her students if the students' souls are to be cared for. The teacher must be cultivating an inner life of her/his own in order to teach from the soul. The findings reveal that a teacher using a holistic approach to teaching, that is, using holistic teaching strategies and a holistic curriculum, nourishes the spirit of adolescents in the classroom. When adolescents are exposed to a holistic curriculum, such as the council meetings where the students engage in an intrapersonal experience, they indicate that their spirit is nourished.

When a teacher utilizes holistic teaching strategies where students are allowed to choose their own activities, to create, and to use their imagination, the participants indicate that their spirit is nourished under those conditions as well. Harter (1999) states that teaching holistically challenges the students' self-concept in a positive way. Because holistic curriculum works from the child's experiences on four levels: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual, the child constructs what he/she has experienced and readjusts his/her sense of self. When this readjustment occurs, this may generate a transformation. The findings reveal that with some participants a transformation is experienced. As Bosacki (1997) explains, this type of transformational procedure promotes the "integration of both personal growth and social change where equal focus is placed on the individual as well as the social community" (p. 35).

Overall, the findings consistently reveal that adolescents can articulate what nourishes their spirit in the classroom when a holistic curriculum such as Kessler's (2000) "Passages Program" is implemented. If more schools responded to a holistic approach to teaching and learning and inserted it into their practice, the proliferation of this rhizomic action may direct young people away from their own anger, frustrations, and sadness and offer a more thoughtful, kinder, and caring attitude toward life. As a result, a civil society, one without senseless acts of violence may be the desired outcome. We need to attend to nourishing students' souls, rather than focusing so much on outcome-based curriculum directives where the desired outcome is the training of productive workers. In that positive environment, reaching the whole person, mind, body, and spirit can be made the preferred goal.

Epilogue: Reflective summary

As indicated at the outset of this article, I intended to examine an inventive teaching strategy within the confines of an outcome-based curriculum directive with the hope of reaching the inner space of the adolescent students whom I teach. In doing so, I believe a heightened interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness among the members of our whole class was experienced. The whole person, mind, body, and spirit were reached in unison and not as separate, disparate parts. A community of teachers and learners was created.

Since completing this study in 2002, I have guided three groups of students through this program for extended periods of time. I have experienced and witnessed similar results in comparison to my original study. The students often request additional sessions in order to share their stories, concerns and their mysteries. They listen intently to each other and by doing so share in each other's experiences. Ultimately, the sessions bring the class together through this community building process. No one is invisible.

The questions that have no answers have always challenged my spirit and guided my inquisitive life. But what surprised me the most is that these mysterious questions that leave one pondering late at night also challenge the adolescents whom I teach. When one becomes aware of another's curiosities, it brings the community closer together. The teaching and learning environments become one, and this I believe has allowed me "to serve my students well."

It is my hope that the contributions of this study will assist teachers to create a holistic learning environment where the lines between teaching and learning are one and the same and the

gateways to the souls for students and teachers are opened. It is an ongoing process of infinite proportions, capable of unleashing the energies of all participants in the educational process: teachers, students, parents, and officials. I believe that if the process is pursued in a determined and mindful way, we may witness the establishment of a civil society, one that endures in a renewable way at all levels: home, school, workplace, and community.

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