Teaching for Wisdom: An Approach to a Flourishing Life

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Abstract: *The ancient construct of Wisdom has been found to contribute to optimal human development across various researches in the past decade. Our education system has overemphasized constructs like intelligence and logical reasoning. Fortunately, the focus on emotional intelligence has begun recently, as can be seen in a flood of research articles emphasizing the need for E.Q. This article attempts to provide a rationale for why educating for wisdom is as important as I.Q and E.Q in schools. Secondly, based on the review of literature, the article identifies common elements of wisdom across various definitions, which can be extracted and implemented through wisdom programmes in schools. Thirdly, it suggests certain procedures through which wisdom can be imbibed in children. Development of wisdom is expected to have a worthwhile effect on the mental well being of children and the future growth of society.*

Keywords: *Wisdom, Schools, Teaching, Optimal development*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is important to study, inculcate and acknowledge wisdom for several preventive, prospective and beneficial reasons. As we know, prevention is better than cure. Carl Jung pointed out that most who enter analysis after their mid life crisis do so because of neglected spiritual issues during the first half of life. Second of all, he emphasized the importance of training parents for wisdom by saying that "Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent" (Jung 1857-1961, *Paracelsus*). Inferring from the above mentioned texts of Jung, it seems apparent why schools should train students for wisdom.

There seems to be a great deal of hate in today's world (Sternberg, 2003). Being one of the main pioneers of wisdom research, Robert J. Sternberg proposed wisdom education in schools (Sternberg, 2001). This proposition inspired some researchers and educational psychologists across the globe and stimulated a few criticisms (Sternberg, 2010). In his paper entitled *"How Wise is it to teach for Wisdom? A Reply to Five Critiques,"* Sternberg says, "children not only should, but must be taught to think wisely. If they do not start thinking, as children, about others and about society and not just about themselves, if they do not think about the long-term as well as short-term as children, then they, and we as a society, are doomed. By the time these children become adolescents, it will be too late."

Caroline Bassett proposed the Emergent Model of Wisdom, which can be practically used in wisdom education (see Bassett, 2005). According to her, it is important to transform students through wisdom education by teaching them to "discern what is important; to take with compassion the perspective of people (creatures) different from ourselves; to know clearly towards what ends our actions are directed, for what reason, and whose interests they serve, and to realize that we are simply parts of a larger whole…" (Bassett, 2005).

II. DEFINING WISDOM

Wisdom is defined as the application of intelligence, creativity and knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good through a balance among a) intrapersonal, b) interpersonal, and c) extrapersonal interests, over the a) short and b) long terms, in order to achieve a balance among a) adaptation to existing environments, b) shaping of existing environments, and c) selection of new environments (Sternberg, 2001). Meacham (1990) defines wisdom as an "awareness of the fallibility of knowing and is a striving for a balance between knowing and doubting."

Review of various definitions reveals the following common characteristics which belong to a wise personality: requires rich knowledge about life, acceptance of uncertainty (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), self transcendence (Erikson, 1959), balance of one's emotions, cognition and compassion for others (Orwoll & Perlmutter,1990; Kramer, 1990; Ardelt, 2000), committed action for the common good (Bassett, 2005; Sternberg, 2010) openness to new experiences (Webster, 2003), acceptance of limitations (Meacham, 1990; Kitchener & Brenner, 1990), and reflection and wise judgment (Arlin,1990;Webster, 2003, 2007).

III. ACTIVITIES FOR WISDOM EDUCATION

A few procedures are mentioned here to embrace the venture of bringing about transformation in the students and society as a whole.

- **Make the students read and discuss books/ articles/ stories that involve the *Principle of Dialectics***

Rationale: dialectical thinking involves the ability to see issues form multiple perspectives.

Purpose: to facilitate five functions of wisdom- solving problems in one's own life, advising others, management of social institutions, life review, and spiritual introspection (Kramer, 1990) *Ways to achieve:*

1. Through the recognition of one's needs and priorities and distinguish them from other's needs while advising them. *Benefit-* practicing reflection; overcoming projection, not indulging in blame games

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2. By taking into account the context of the story. Regard the maturity level, developmental differences, cultural background, circumstances and opportunities offered to the person in the story before coming up with any one sided conclusion. *Benefit-* acceptance of plurality of choices for oneself and for others; tolerance of individual and cultural differences

3. Cooperative and empathetic interactions with others which neither involve submission or suppression of feelings, nor involve coercion or escalation of conflict. Give an example to the students of *Absolute Thinking, Relativistic Thinking* and *Dialectical Thinking.* Absolute thinkers look at things from one perspective and identify the cause of conflict/issues in one person (which could be the self or the other). It is not associated with wisdom. Relativistic thinkers are more of laissez faire in their attitude towards resolution of issues. This strategy limits the possibility for growth and change. Dialectical thinkers accept conflicts as challenges. Through these challenges, they learn to accept contradiction through cooperation and reason out issues from opposing perspectives. This thinking style can help students guide others and themselves in a better way.

   Benefit: helps the students identify their own styles of thinking and gain insight into the nature of immature thinking patterns; teaches them to reach the *common good.*

- **Encourage interaction with teachers which involve the narration of one's *foolish stories***

Rationale: to know what is wise we must know what is foolish. Wisdom comes by learning from one's stupidities.

Purpose: to make the students aware of their unrealistic and irrational beliefs.

Ways to achieve:

1. Identify foolish ways of thinking and behaving in the narratives and discuss amongst the classmates and teachers without any inhibitions.

2. Identify moments when one has been high on unrealistic optimism, egocentricism, omniscience, omnipotence and invulnerability fallacy (Sternberg, 2005). Write down the costs that one had to pay thereafter.

3. Think about foolish choices that were made in the past and discuss how to take decisions in a better way.

4. Apart from foolish decisions (cognitive), further discuss foolish display of emotions (affective), such as, lack of emotional regulation, hostility and other such emotions which had poor consequences for oneself as well as for others.

   Benefits: it is a fun way to make children go through reflection/reminiscence sessions; reduces the ego; enables them to take better decisions in future by distancing themselves from the self (Kross & Grossman, 2011); and enhances problem solving abilities.

- **Inculcate the art of problem finding and openness to change**

Rationale: According to Arlin (1990), wisdom is found more in the questions that are posed than in the solutions.

The interrogation makes the individual wiser by enabling him/her to think deeper about unknown issues. Supreme efficiency in making wise decisions and judgments involves the art of problem finding as well as problem resolution.

Purpose: to become good at asking relevant questions in important life matters

Ways to achieve: the model of problem finding lays emphasis on inculcating the following:

1. Openness to change- wisdom arises when one is willing to accept and learn from new experiences that challenge one's beliefs and assumptions (Arlin, 1990)

2. Teach the students to be open to asking questions that include multiple perspectives. This exercise may enable them to get out of rigid mind set which seeks to solely find a solution to a problem and not ask deeper questions. Questioning further and deeper is a very good exercise to broaden the mind set of students.

Benefits: reduces cognitive rigidities such as all-or-none thinking and framing; inculcates patience and lowers down impulsivity to resolve problems

- **Train the students for life situations that call for quick decision making**

Rationale: Certain situations in life don't allow time for deeper introspection and reflective judgment. In such kind of situations, it's wise for the individual to learn how to cope actively. Wise individuals understand that it is foolish to rely on external events for happiness (Ardelt, 2005).

Purpose: to encourage emotional strength; active coping; wise decisions in the face of uncertain life dilemmas

Ways to achieve:

1. Teach the students that negative events in life might eventually lead to psychological growth as well as a natural emergence of transcendental self.

2. It is wise to be always prepared for uncertainty and practice mindfulness on a regular basis so that one doesn't get knocked down by life events suddenly.

3. Have thoughts of gratitude whenever something worse happens in life. Wisdom has been related to gratitude in a recent study conducted by Konig and Gluck (2014). Acknowledging that things could have been worse is a very practical and useful way of looking at things when life is uncontrollable.

IV. CONCLUSION

Some of the procedures mentioned here have been found to be reinforced in moral science lessons in some schools. However, it's been felt that an active/practical usage of these lessons is required through special activity classes. More or less the above stated activities convey to the students the concept of what wisdom is and what wisdom is not (foolishness). For school going children, use of the available resources, such as literature, stories, narrations and discussions are a feasible option; else they might be reluctant to participate in class. The most imperative element is to keep the sessions active and engaging so that the student gains interest in them. The purpose is to also make the student a psychologist of his/her own self who can look within one's

emotions, thinking process and behaviors with a deeper lens of reflection. I hope this article invites further research in the area of wisdom and how it should be applied in education. Training the students at a younger age is indeed a wise thing to do.

V. REFERENCES

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