

## **Transpersonal Education: An evaluation of the current context from an international perspective.**

Scott Buckler

University of Worcester

[s.buckler@worc.ac.uk](mailto:s.buckler@worc.ac.uk)

### **Abstract**

The field of transpersonal education was originally discussed in the mid-1970s, aiming to unite the various domains of human experience (i.e. cognitive, affective, psychomotor) through a series of principles and practices (Moore, 1975; Roberts and Clark, 1976). There has been a paucity of research in the area, furthermore the field has become strongly associated with postgraduate courses (e.g. Rowe and Braud, 2013), opposed to investigating how transpersonal education may be applied to the early years and compulsory schooling sector. Recently, there have been attempts to redefine transpersonal education to provide a balanced focus within compulsory schooling (Buckler, 2011; Buckler, 2013), with initial research suggesting that the field has cross-cultural interest. This paper extends research into the concept through analysing current publications in the field, while also deriving international perspectives from participants. To conclude, a discussion of the UK context is provided where an opportunity is highlighted for transpersonal psychologists to lead future development.

### **Introduction**

While the definition of transpersonal psychology continues to evolve, a core assumption relates to the transformation of the individual who similarly assists in transforming others (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). Such transformation of others has been developed through counselling, psychotherapy, coaching, and so forth, however transpersonal education has had a limited focus since originally posited in the mid-1970s (Buckler, 2013). Although several authors have suggested that transpersonal education should be a significant area for future research (Cunningham, 2006; Rothberg, 2005), engagement to date has been limited. Indeed, Rothberg (2005, p.89) advocated that education “is one of the most significant areas of future inquiry and exploration in the transpersonal field”.

While literature exists which explores spiritual development in childhood (e.g. Adams, Hyde, & Woolley, 2008; Hart, 2003; Hart, 2014; Jenkins, 2008; Nye, 2009), there have been few attempts to explore transpersonal education. Rowe and Braud (2013, p.671) aim to define transpersonal education through a literature review which encompasses transformative education, spiritual education, and transpersonal education, defining the latter as “a holistic, expansive, growthful, transformative process”. They provide a list of related components including conventional academic skills combined with experiential learning to cultivate embodied values, qualities and practices. Despite providing case studies, their work tends to focus on postgraduate programmes.

Most recently, frameworks for educational development have been discussed through integrating various domains of being (Ferrer, 2018; Hart, 2009). Hart’s approach integrates the layers of information, knowledge, intelligence, understanding, wisdom, and transformation (Hart, 2009), while Ferrer’s concept of integral education uses a metaphor of the four seasons (autumn and action, winter and germination, spring and blooming, summer and harvest) integrated with the

feminine and masculine (Ferrer, 2017). Both models are perfect examples of how education can, and should, be challenged to evolve a more holistic approach, yet as with defining the term 'transpersonal psychology', similar definitional crises may be applied to 'transpersonal education'. Consequently an hermeneutic approach was adopted to outline the original concepts from the mid-1970s, while offering an accessible interpretation for educators who may confuse terms 'spiritual education' with their unique projections of meaning. Such an hermeneutic approach compares interpretations from the past with the present, through recovering and reconstructing the intentions of others through the analysis of meaning (Braud and Anderson, 1998; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Fielding, 2010; Kincheloe and Berry, 2004).

From analysing the literature, a series of specific and general principles relating to the original concept of transpersonal education may be ascertained. These are explored through Ralph Tyler's principle of curriculum design, which despite being dated, is central to educational development. Tyler's (1949) approach consists of three related constructs: the policy whereby the educational purposes of the curriculum are established, the practices where educational experiences are provided to attain the initial purposes, the principles which details how the educational experiences are organised. Finally, the product assess whether the purposes have been attained. For example, an objective could relate to students engaging in a mindfulness programme (the policy), the experience is where the students participate and keep a reflective diary (the practice), the experience is structured in some way, for example through a teacher providing guidance of several different approaches (the practices), finally the teacher assesses the extent to which students have developed (the product).

Through adopting Tyler's principles of curriculum design while applying an hermeneutic lens to the original texts on transpersonal education, the policy, principles, practices, and product are analysed.

### Policy

Perhaps the earliest attempt to define transpersonal education is proposed by Clark (1974, p.1) who asserts that 'transpersonal education, like science, is concerned with knowledge and discovery of truth...It is also addressed to questions of value, meaning and purpose'. From this definition Clark (1974) further discusses that transpersonal education is the process of discovery and self-transcendence based on spiritual practice and subjective experience. Consequently children should derive a set of values through intrinsic learning, a lifelong approach concerned with the discovery of identity and the discovery of vocation (Maslow, 1971).

While Clark (1974, p.7) suggests that the objective of transpersonal education is 'the realisation and maintenance of higher states of consciousness in which intrapersonal and interpersonal actualisation is subsumed', Moore (1975) provides a different perspective, that the objective for transpersonal education is to combine the various domains of 'being', such as the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Moore's interpretation however negates the transpersonal, which Rothberg (2005) suggests may loosely be deemed the spiritual domain. Indeed, the concept of 'spiritual intelligence' has been discussed by various authors (e.g. Draper, 2009; Zohar and Marshall, 2000). Such integration of domains resonates with Maslow's assertion that purpose of education is for a child to become a healthy, self-actualised or self-transcended adult (Maslow, 1971; Maslow, 1987).

## Principles

Several principles advocated through transpersonal education are apparent in mainstream education literature as models of effective practice. For example, the principle that learning should be joyful has been advocated by Maslow (1971) and Moore (1975), although is commonly expressed in mainstream educational texts (e.g. Kingdon and Gourd, 2017). In addition, the principles that learning should encourage intrinsic learning (Rogers, 1961), a sense autonomy (Kirchschenbaum, 1975), that it should be a process of self-discovery (Maslow, 1970) resonate with self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2013; Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, & Ryan, 2017). Furthermore, the role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning (Kirchschenbaum, 1975; Maslow, 1971; Moore, 1975) similarly reflects current practice (e.g. Ha, 2014). While these principles now appear common in education, specific principles in relation to the transpersonal are evident from the original literature. One example is that transpersonal education should enable the discover of the inner depths and essential nature of the individual (Maslow, 1970). Furthermore, through facilitating an appreciation of awe and beauty, in relation to the connectedness of all things is an aspect which Maslow (1970) termed as the 'unitive experience'. Such unitive experience can be achieved through a sense of openness and through linking theory to practice (Rogers, 1961).

## Practices

The practices defined to promote the transpersonal were somewhat limited in the original literature, predominantly to relaxation and meditation (Roberts and Clark, 1976), however this has been extended through succeeding years, such as those advocated by Walsh (1999). Such practices Walsh advocates are redirecting motivation, transforming emotions, ethical living, developing concentration, refining awareness to see the connectedness of all things, cultivating wisdom, and practising service and generosity. Such practises are indicative and not an exhaustive list.

## **Validation of transpersonal education**

Through an hermeneutical examination of the original literature on transpersonal education and integrating through Tyler's principles of curriculum design, a model for transpersonal education has been developed. Initial research to investigate the validity of the construct sought to ascertain whether educators confirmed the theoretical definition of the policy, principles and practises, also to identify further potential properties for the model. This was achieved through a '360° mixed methodological' approach (Buckler, 2011). Within this approach, the theoretical focus was examined through a quantitative exploratory phase to ascertain whether the focus had relevance for additional investigation. From this, a qualitative explanatory phase (which attempted to explain the reasons for the results) provided a depth of discussion. The results from the explanatory phase were subsequently compared to the original theoretical focus to either confirm the model, or to provide suggestions for enhancement. Despite the 360° approach being similar to action research (Lewin, 1946), while action research aims to improve practice, the 360° approach aims to corroborate or refute a proposed theory.

Through the initial research into the validity of transpersonal education (Buckler, 2013), a purposive, convenience sample of international educators ( $n=101$ ) were approached through a conference and invited to participate with a questionnaire with a 37% response rate ( $n=37$ ). The sample represented twelve countries across five continents with varying levels of educational experience

(ranging from 3 to 45 years,  $M=21.24$ ,  $SD=10.64$ ). Concurrently, a national (UK) sample of educators were approached to complete the same questionnaire ( $n=81$ ) with a 26% response rate ( $n=21$ ), of which the level of educational experience ranged from 5 to 44 years ( $M=23.81$ ,  $SD=11.25$ ).

From the results of this study, 91% of respondents reported that their education systems should aim to unite the various domains of human experience (cognitive, affective, psychomotor, 'spiritual'), opposed to the predominant cognitive domain which is prevalent internationally. In relation to principles, again the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, that they should provide a foundation from which to develop an educational system, specifically a sense of autonomy (98%), self-discovery (97%), theory to practice (93%), relate to the environment (93%), experiential (93%), relate to others (91%), and being joyful (91%). The principle, that education should be 'value-free' was problematic with only 60% of respondents agreeing. An explanation for this provided by one respondent stated, 'all educators bring with them their own values which inevitably subconsciously or consciously influence'.

The various forms of practise provided a greater differentiation: cultivating wisdom (95%), self-transcendence (91%), living ethically (90%), and refining awareness (88%) scored higher, while transforming emotions (85%), service and generosity (81%), redirecting motivation (66%) and developing concentration (60%) scored lower. An interpretation of the synonymous nature of 'developing concentration' and 'refining awareness' was suggested in the analysis.

Respondents were encouraged to suggest other practises for transpersonal education which included yoga, meditation, the martial arts, choral recitation, self-reflection, the Malaysian 'Adab' (or 'personal refinement'), the Maori 'Mauri Ora' (or 'holistic wellbeing'), through to the Japanese 'Shinrin-yoku' (or 'forest walking/bathing'). In addition, respondents were encouraged to suggest how transpersonal education could be developed within their education system. The predominant response related to incorporating transpersonal practises as an additional subject, opposed to integrating such practises into existing subjects, or restructuring the curriculum. Such explanations for developing transpersonal practises separately consisted of views that specialist teachers would need to be appointed given that the current teaching workforce may lack experience, furthermore that unless there is an assessed component, such a subject would not be included (given the standardisation culture prevalent in education). Consequently, the policies and principles for transpersonal education appear a robust construct, although the practises will vary depending on cultural factors and the educator's experience.

### **Evaluation of transpersonal education**

Despite the research into the validity of transpersonal education, indicating that this is an area educators perceive of being worthy for additional research, development has been constrained. However, since 2014 English schools have been required to promote Spiritual, Moral, Social, and Cultural development (SMSC). The UK's Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), provide a justification for promoting SMSC, stating that it 'equips them to be thoughtful, caring and active citizens in school and in wider society' (Ofsted, 2015, p.57). Ofsted grade schools from outstanding to inadequate depending on whether SMSC is promoted widely to promote pupils' development, through to whether there is serious weakness in promotion of SMSC (Ofsted, 2017). Specifically, the promotion of SMSC is demonstrated through pupils'

'Ability to be reflective about their own beliefs, religious or otherwise, that inform their perspective on life and their interest in and respect for different people's faiths, feelings and

values; sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them; use of imagination and creativity in their learning; willingness to reflect on their experiences.’ (Ofsted, 2017, p.14)

There is however no set curriculum for SMSC: schools are free to promote and embed activities depending on their specific contexts, however they need to adhere to promoting ‘British Values’, defined by Ofsted as ‘democracy; the rule of law; individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs and for those without faith’ (Ofsted, 2017, p.42). Additionally a further value is included, that ‘they develop and demonstrate skills and attitudes that will allow them to participate fully in and contribute positively to life in modern Britain’ (Ofsted, 2017, 40). Despite being termed ‘British Values’, with the devolved educational administration in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, such values only apply to English schools. Further criticism has been levelled against insisting on the promotion of such values, specifically the irony of assessing schools on promoting ‘individual liberty’: individual teachers should therefore be free to refuse to teach British Values, asserting their individual liberty (Easton, 2014).

An additional criticism relates to how ‘spiritual’ education can be assessed given the assertion of one respondent who commented that without an element of assessment, such transpersonal practises will not be embedded. Measures have however been developed to measure spiritual intelligence (e.g. Emmons, 2000; King and DeCicco, 2009; Vaughan, 2002; Zohar, 2000) specifically the ‘Scale for Spiritual Intelligence’ which assesses adolescents’ spiritual intelligence (Kumar and Mehta, 2011).

### **Future directions**

While this discussion has centred on the UK context, while the intentions to promote SMSC appear commendable and broadly in line with transpersonal education, such UK policy may explain why only 60% of respondents agreeing that education should be ‘value-free’, despite the original concept deriving from Clark (1974) that children should develop their own set of values derived on experience. A question may this be raised as to whether children should be inculcated to any specific set of values, of whether they should be allowed to discover their own.

In conclusion, analysis of ‘transpersonal education’ from an hermeneutic perspective indicates that the original definition still has validity as an area to research as the results have indicated. Additionally, broad themes in promoting children’s spiritual education have been adopted within the UK education system (specifically in England). However there appears a disconnect as to why transpersonal psychologists are not at the forefront of a national drive to promote such policies, principles and practises. Consequently, with transpersonal education gaining momentum through the work of Hart (2009) and Ferrer (2018), there should be a renewed discussion between transpersonal psychologists and mainstream educators.

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