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Research Application Summary

Assessment of the relevance of Palmer Parker's views on good and bad teachers

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Abstract

Parker is an American educator, religious and sociologist who is best known for his ways of effective teachings as a university teacher, community organizer and religious teacher. He is also recognized by his opinions on Good teachers and bad teachers. Thus, he was honored with an award in region education. This article identifies and examines Parker's educational viewpoints which offer most important contribution to understanding educational practices and discusses their relevance to education and development of our societies in terms of capacity building. These ideas includes that bad teachers distance themselves from the topic they are teaching and from their students. On the other hand, good teachers join self, the topic and the students in the stuff of life. Also, good teachers have a capacity for connectedness among themselves, their subjects and their students so that students can learn to knit a world for themselves. These good teachers use widely variant methods and teach with their hearts to achieve teaching effectively. The examination of these ideas/ opinions shows that they give a good direction to good/effective teachers and teachings for the development of our societies in opposition to bad teachers and teachings.

Keys words: Palmer Parker, relevance, teachers/teachings, societies, students/leaners

Résumé

Parker est un éducateur, religieux et sociologue américain, reconnu pour ses méthodes d'enseignement efficaces en tant que professeur d'université, organisateur communautaire et professeur de religion. IL est également reconnu par ses opinions sur les bons et les mauvais enseignants. Ainsi, il a été honoré d'un prix pour l'éducation régionale. Cet article identifie et examine les points de vue pédagogiques de Parker qui apportent une contribution essentielle à la compréhension des pratiques éducatives et examine leur pertinence pour l'éducation et le développement de nos sociétés en termes de renforcement des capacités. Ces idées incluent que les mauvais enseignants se distancent du sujet qu'ils enseignent et de leurs élèves. D'un autre côté, de bons enseignants se joignent à eux-mêmes, au sujet et aux étudiants dans les affaires de la vie. En outre, les bons enseignants sont capables de créer des liens entre eux-mêmes, leurs matières et leurs élèves, afin que ceux-ci puissent apprendre à créer un monde pour eux-mêmes. Ces

bons enseignants utilisent des méthodes très diverses et enseignent avec leurs cœurs pour atteindre un enseignement effectif. L'examen de ces idées / opinions montre qu'elles donnent une bonne orientation aux bons/effectifs enseignants et enseignements pour le développement de nos sociétés, en opposition aux mauvais enseignants et enseignements.

Mots clés: Palmer Parker, Pertinence, enseignants / enseignements, sociétés, étudiants / apprenants

Background

Palmer J. Parker (born on 28th February 1939) is a religious educator who brought his own faith promises into play with educational discourses related to public schooling, higher education, nursing education, American political service, and leadership studies. He emphasized on creating a more just, compassionate and healthy world by cultivating personal and professional integrity and the courage to act on it. He grew up in a family of five people. In his memories, Palmer considered his father and mother as bringing order and chaotic energy to his life that served him well in his career due to the inspirations and lessons he learnt from them (REA-APPRRE, 2010b; Palmer, 2014a). His experiences with youth groups made him believe that his own career's focus on creating spaces for people to be honest and reflective (Palmer, 2014a). After his doctoral studies, Palmer decided to turn away from a life in the academy proper because he felt like he needed to "bring his sociology to the streets and he therefore became a community organizer (Palmer, 2000). He did this shift for the reason that he wanted to save his city as he wrote : "my heart wanted to keep teaching, but my ethics fastened freely with ego told me I was supposed to save the city" (Palmer, 2000). Later, Palmer was proposed to mix teaching with the organization of the community work by Georgetown University and he accepted. Thus he could be half at campus and the rest of his time, get students involved in the community (Palmer, 2000). However, apart from community organization and university teachings, Palmer Parker contributed to Christian Education (CE) but mainly indirectly (Foster *et al.*, 1994). His support to CE come about mostly over his sustained reflection on the nature of knowledge, a spiritually-grounded practice of teaching, and the role of community in public life. These contributions are certainly relevant although they are not directly related to Christian Education. According to Foster *et al.*, (1994), Palmer is a good model for the ways in which the religious educator may join public dialogue about an issue from his or her own religious perspective without at the same time imposing those expectations on others as they seek out to clarify community meanings and actions. Palmer's work has, therefore, influenced the thinking of people in both religious and public education and for this reason, he received an award in region education (REA-APPRRE, 2010b). Apart from this influence in religious and public education, Palmer has also influenced largely the thinking of many scholars in higher education or university teachings by giving his views or opinions on what should be good teachers comparing to bad ones as well as what should be good teaching in opposition to bad teaching in our schools and societies (Palmer, 1998). Therefore, the relevance of these views will be assessed in this paper.

Relevance of Palmer Parker's views on good and bad teachers. According to Palmer Parker (1998), "bad teachers distance themselves from the subject (course) they are

teaching; and in the process, from their students”. Good teachers join self, the subject and students in the fabric of life. Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers (teachers) vary widely: lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving and creative chaos. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods, but in their hearts (place where intellect, emotions and spirit will converge in the human self). “We totally agree with Palmer Parker because to be able to understand and to teach a subject one must be able to be part of it, i.e., he/she must be capable to put the subject in his/her own language and use the latter to be able to communicate easily and relate the subject to his/her personal experiences or live/conditions by giving his/her own or real life examples for the students/learners to be attentive, understand and practice very well his teaching or the message he/she is trying to share with them”. In addition to the teacher being close to his/her subject, he/she must also be close to his/her students and try to understand them so that he can be able to know what their needs are, problems, priorities, potentials/ levels (talents, background, strengths and weaknesses), cultures, beliefs/ values, histories etc. And then, integrate them in his/her teaching or subject and adapt or relate his/her teaching/subject to them, as well as to his/her. This will help the teacher to get his/her students involved or participating in his/her teaching or subject as well as meeting his/her student’s needs, addressing their real lives and everyday problems and improving their societies (Giroux, 1998), treating them fairly and equally ensure that no one is discriminated against, left behind or unsatisfied and make them feel comfortable or part of the subject to be motivated to learn deeply because their contextual aspects or realities are considered and integrated into the subject/teaching. This type of teaching relate to liberating education or problem posing education which according to Freire (1970) is based on the realities of learners and their life situations for them to transform their lives and societies. Moreover, when the teacher is also close to the learners, they can both interact or dialogue and give one another (teacher and learner) the opportunity to express him/herself, i.e., give his/her ideas or opinion, share his/her knowledge or experiences/ talents and to be corrected if necessary or mistaken, and therefore, to be improved while learning from each other and improving each other as well as their societies. This view is emphasized by Socrates’s statement that: “am the wisest person for I know that I know nothing”. He wanted to say that no one can say that he/she can know the truth because what surrounds us is so big that we can only know a little of it, and therefore we need others’ knowledge to improve ours. This is also aligned with what Palmer (1998) said that the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial. Understanding the above statements, we can say that the learners who are taught have their own knowledge (indigenous or scientific) before being taught by teachers and that teachers do not know everything. Therefore, a good teacher must give learners the opportunity to share their knowledge and consider that the latter only need improvement of what they already have because they are not empty recipients as Freire criticizes in the pedagogy of the oppressed (1970). Freire (1970) argued that learners should not be considered as objects who are learning everything from the teacher as if he/she is the only one knowing, but instead, be considered as subjects who also have knowledge to share and be improved. Also, learners/students have hidden talents that a good teacher needs to help them develop. This is related to what Parker (1999) said again: “The longer I teach, the more I am convinced that good teaching is oftentimes just getting out of the students’ way and letting them explore and reveal their own brilliance. Every person comes to class with his/her own set of experiences and talents and I worry that schools and how

we try so hard to fit our knowing in checklists and boxes eventually and inevitably lead our students to keep their best thoughts, their most creative and profound work- suppressed and underground. Everybody has knowing. The knowledge and the talent is already there. It is in the cells of their body, if we can just coax and honor and cajole what is already there, then magic happens. My favorite part of being a teacher is watching this happen. It allows us to witness and learn from each other's transformations and renders us cheerleaders" (Parker, 1999). Freire (1998) concluded by saying that dialogism is the base of good teaching or education in that it is one means of actively involving students in their own education. The use and practice of dialogue limits teacher talk and encourages learner voice (Shor, 1992). Freire (1998) also adds that without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education. Dialogue also helps to avoid teachers who talk but do not listen and students who listen but do not talk (Palmer 1998).

Based on what is explained in the above sentences, Palmer advocates that a good teacher must avoid teacher- centered and create students-centered classroom. The former considers the teacher as an expert and students are expected to listen and learn. Therefore, they memorize and recite teacher's opinions, perceptions and conclusions. The latter, is powered by active learning methodology, i.e., group work with students. Both described two methods are threat to learning: expert claims to precisely know all the answers and the answers depend solely on one's own personal opinion. Palmer (1998) proposes a subject centered classroom instead of the previous two where there is no authority and no pure knowing because nothing like knowledge is linear, static and hierarchical: the truth is always changing; there is no permanent conclusion which exist on a subject matter and no one's interpretation represents the exclusive truth. Therefore, always dialogue with students to get new ideas, conclusions and changes in old conclusions to test old conclusions and come up with new ones. Teachers and students are "knowers, teachers, and learners". These ideas held in the subject centered classroom approach are aligned with what other authors call " Teacher-Student Interactive Method " which applies the strategies used by both teacher-centered and student-centered approaches. Thus, the subject information produced by the learners is remembered better than the same information presented to the learners by the lecturer (Jacoby, 1978; McDaniel *et al.*, 1978). This method encourages the students to search for relevant knowledge rather than the lecturer monopolizing the transmission of information to the learners. As such, research evidence on teaching approaches maintains that this teaching method is effective in improving students' academic performance (Damodharan and Rengarajan, 1999). Palmer's views advocate that good teachers must be able to make connections between themselves, their subjects and their students so that students can be able to drive the world themselves. This kind of teaching via connectedness relate again to liberating education as described by Freire (1970) as stated earlier. As Giroux (1998) suggests, education or teaching should occur in an environment connected to everyday life encouraging discussions conducted within the language and knowledge of the students (Foley, 2007). It should not be disconnected to the context of both teachers and students but it should be related to the social context in which it is embedded (Aliakbarii and Faraji, 2011). In this view, good teaching will not also be limited to transmitting or sharing knowledge but being able to impact or transform positively the society (Giroux, 1997). Therefore,

good teaching should empower students to be self-drivers of their lives. Finally, Palmer's views (1998) conclude that these connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods, but in their hearts as Parker said again "We teach who we are" and for that, the teaching needs to be the reflection of our own soul as teachers because knowing my students and subjects depend heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well". I need to remember who I am, a decent person, a passionate person, someone who feels deeply about people and ideas, and do not keep teaching on intellectual level only. But, always combine intellectual with emotion and spirit of both learners and teachers. Thus, a teacher must have the courage to be himself/herself in the classroom despite his/her weaknesses, fears, doubts, etc. for him/her to be effective and teach well. In consequence, a good teacher should not only use a specific or one method for his/her teaching. He/she must be creative and adaptive for his/her teaching methodology to be effective (White, 2009; Duarte, 2013; Samples and Copeland, 2013). This is aligned with Palmer's ideas that relate good teaching to the ability to understand the complexities of the subjects and students taught, as well as the teacher's understanding of self and for that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique as we stated before but comes from the ability of the teacher to connect with the students and connect them with the subject (Palmer, 1997).

In summary, the methods used by good teachers or in good teaching vary broadly and include lectures, Socratic dialogues, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving and creative chaos. Despite the method chosen by a good teacher for his/her good and effective teaching, he/she must always find a way to encourage creative paradoxical tensions when designing a teaching and learning space that can hold a classroom session. These tensions include that the space should be bounded and open, the space should be hospitable and charged, the space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group, the space should honor the "little" stories of the students and the big stories of the disciplines and tradition, the space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community, and that the space should welcome both silence and speech (Palmer, 1998).

Conclusion

Palmer Parker has made a lot of contributions to different types of education (Christian education, public education and higher education). His work has influenced the thinking of a lot of people/teachers/scholars in these diverse forms of education and can be used to help them to teach very well as well as to make their teaching effective. Similarly, Parker provided good advises or guidelines and show good practices or approaches for good/effective teaching during his profession as religious teacher and community organizer as opposed to bad teaching which should always be avoided by teachers/scholars. Thus, his views on bad and good teacher are very relevant in higher education process since they give direction for effective and good teaching. These views enable us to know what are bad teachers and why and how to avoid being one of them while showing us what are good teachers and what to do to be or to become a good teacher. Specifically, Palmer's views reveal the importance of dialogue/interaction, connectedness and heart (of the teacher) as key in effective and good teaching.

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