

Nourishing The Inner Life In Schools

by Rachael Kessler

- How do educators make a place for soul in the classroom without violating the separation of church and state or the deeply held beliefs of families and teachers?
- What characterizes a classroom in which the inner life is essential to education?
- What experiences nourish spiritual development of adolescents?
- And why should secular schools even consider addressing these issues?

For so many years, the dialogue among educators about these vital questions has been taboo. Many school communities have been paralyzed – and polarized — by culture wars which bred fear and disrespect. But in the last few years, a door has opened. Precisely at a time when the pressures to meet academic standards seem to signal even less time and value for soul in classrooms, there is a growing awareness among mainstream educators of the essential role of caring for the inner life in engaging students in genuine learning and healthy development.

When ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), the largest organization of mainstream educa-

tors in the US, committed an entire issue of their journal in 1998 to the subject of “spirit in education,” they signaled both the importance of and a renewed credibility for this critical dimension of education. With the decision to publish a book with “soul” in its title and distribute it to over 110,000 members, they took another step in opening the door even further for dialogue on these issues. Through that door are emerging educators, parents, and policy makers who are seeking for the deeper roots of low motivation among students and of youth violence to the self and others.

Why address spiritual development in schools?

My own search to address these questions emerged from two directions. One was my deep concern for the suffering of teenagers: decades of watching an entire generation succumb to self-destructive and violent behavior. Working closely with adolescents, their teachers and parents, I saw that for some teenagers, drugs, sex, gang violence, and even suicide may be both a search for connection, mystery and meaning and an escape from the pain of not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfillment.

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But it is not only the violence of youth culture which called me to examine how I could help adolescents touch and develop their inner lives. The exquisite opening to spirit at the heart of the adolescent experience also inspired my search for a pedagogy which safely and appropriately nurtured soul in teaching and learning. During adolescence, energies and powerful yearnings awaken with a force that many dismiss as “hormones.” The larger questions of meaning and purpose and about ultimate beginnings and endings begin to press with urgency and loneliness.

Aside from protecting the safety of our youth and our immediate communities, our schools have a responsibility to help students — our future leaders and citizens — cultivate the inner life in a time when our scientific reach is in danger of exceeding the moral grasp needed to direct that power. Martin Luther King named this danger eloquently and ominously nearly four decades ago when he wrote in *Strength to Love* that “we have come to see that science can give us only physical power, which, if not controlled by spiritual power, will lead inevitably to cosmic doom....”(1963).

But how do we nurture the inner life without violating the separation of church and state? As I collaborated with colleagues to create the conditions in which our classrooms could become places where the student’s inner life could flourish and grow, I began to discover what “spiritual” or “soul” could mean outside of a religious context.

Classrooms that welcome soul

Most high school students grapple with the profound questions of loss, love, and letting go. Meaning, purpose, service. Self-reliance and community. Choice and surrender. When students work together to become an authentic community, they can meet any challenge with grace, with love, and with power — even wrenching conflict, prejudice, profound gratitude, or death. This is the soul of education.

When soul is present in education, attention shifts. We listen with great care not only to what is spoken but to the messages between the words — tones, gestures, the flicker of feeling across the face. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. The yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students become central to the curriculum. Questions become as important as answers.

When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and talents they have feared would provoke jealousy in even their best friends. They risk exposing the pain or shame which might be judged as weakness. Seeing deeply into the perspective of others, accepting what has felt unworthy in themselves, students discover compassion and begin to learn about forgiveness.

How can classroom teachers invite soul?

To achieve the safety and openness required for meaningful exploration of the inner life, students and I work together carefully for weeks and months. We create ground rules — conditions that students name as essential safety measures, ensuring that they can speak freely about that which matters most to them.¹ Games help students focus, relax, and become a team through laughter and cooperation. Symbols that students create or bring from home into class allow teenagers to speak indirectly about feelings and thoughts that they find awkward to address head on. And we work with a highly structured form of discourse called “council.”

With everyone sitting in a circle where all can see and be seen, the council process allows each person to speak without interruption or immediate response. Students learn to listen deeply and discover what it feels like to be truly heard. Silence becomes a comfortable ally as we pause to digest one story and wait for the other to form, when teachers call for moments of reflection or when the room fills with feeling at the end of a class.

Since “we teach who we are,” teachers who invite heart and soul into the classroom also find it essential to nurture their own spiritual development. This may mean their engaging in personal practices meant to help them cultivate awareness, serenity, and compassion, as well as collaborative efforts with other teachers for the purpose of giving and receiving support for the challenges and joys of entering this terrain with their students. In addition, relevant staff development sessions can help us learn how to increase our capacity to open our hearts while also providing students with firm guidance and cogent problem-solving skills that we can use to help protect our students from disrespect.²

When we can co-create with our students this climate of honor and respect, stories emerge about what matters most to young people, what has moved them deeply, what has nourished their spirits. After listening to these stories for years, I saw a pattern emerge — a map of the territory of soul.

Experiences that nourish spiritual development

Based on students’ stories and questions, I have mapped spiritual development in adolescents who may or may not have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the true nature of spirituality. This mapping comprises seven interrelated yearnings, needs or hungers. Just as the child’s body grows when the hunger for fuel and air is fed, and the child’s emotional life grows when the hunger for love and guidance is met, so a young person’s spirit grows when we meet these spiritual yearnings.

The search for meaning and purpose concerns the exploration of existential questions that burst forth in adolescence, as we see in the following verbatim questions from students: “Why am I here?” “Does my life have a purpose? How do I find out what it is?” “Is there a meaning to life?” “Why should I live?” “What is life for?” “What does my future hold?” “What is my destiny?” “Is there life after death?” “Is there a God?” I’ve read these questions time and again when students write anonymously about their personal “mysteries” — their wonder, worries, curiosity, fear, and excitement.

This domain of meaning and purpose is crucial to motivation and learning for students. Purpose is primarily taught in the curriculum through goal setting and decision-making — often with strictly rational techniques. But if this spiritual dimension is omitted or if the inner life of the adolescent is not cultivated as part of the search for goals or careers, he will most likely base his decisions on external pressures — from peers, parents, teachers. One student, who has had an opportunity to connect deeply to herself in the midst of a community of peers, writes about beginning to glimpse her own answers:

So many of my friends are so clueless. They don’t know what they want to do, they know what they’re supposed to do. They don’t know how they feel, they know how they’re supposed to feel. And here I find myself in a group of people going through all my same stuff, and although I don’t have the answers to all questions, I find myself feeling like everything is perfect and right...I have this “community” that gives me a home base and a sense of security.

Throughout the curriculum, teachers can create a safe environment where students can reveal and explore these existential questions. However, since our profession predicates most authority on our ability to “know,” or to have the “right answer,” many teachers are profoundly uncomfortable with questions that appear to have no answers.

Yet educators can provide experiences that honor the questions. They can also allow students to give their gifts to the world through school and community service, through creative expression, or through academic or athletic achievement. And, in the way we teach, we can help students see and create patterns that connect learning to their personal lives.³

The longing for silence and solitude can lead to identity formation and goal setting, to learning readiness, and inner peace. For adolescents, this domain is often ambivalent — fraught with both fear and urgent need. As a respite from the tyranny of busyness and noise that afflicts even our young children, silence may be a realm of reflection, calm or fertile chaos — an avenue of stillness and rest for some, prayer or contemplation for others. As another student writes:

I like to take time to go within myself sometimes. And when I do that, I try to take an emptiness inside there. I think that everyone struggles to find their own way with their spirit and it’s in the struggle that our spirit comes forth.

The urge for transcendence describes the desire of young people to go beyond their perceived limits. It includes not only the mystical realm, but secular experiences of the extraordinary in the arts, athletics, academics or human relations. By naming this human need that spans all cultures, educators can help students constructively channel this urge and challenge themselves in ways that reach for this peak experience.

The hunger for joy and delight can be satisfied through experiences of great simplicity, such as play, celebration or gratitude. Educators can also help students express the exaltation they feel when encountering beauty, power, grace, brilliance, love or the sheer joy of being alive.

The creative drive is perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit of students in secular schools. In opportunities for acts of creation, people often feel their participation in a process infused with depth, meaning, and mystery:

There is something that happens to me in pottery class — I lose myself in the feeling of wet clay rolling smoothly under my hands as the wheel spins. I have it last period, so no matter how difficult the day was, pottery makes every day a good day. It’s almost magical — to feel so good, so serene.

The call for initiation refers to a hunger the ancients met by providing rites of passage for their young. As educators, we can create programs that guide adolescents to become conscious about the irrevocable transition from childhood to adulthood, give them tools for making transitions and separations, challenge them to discover the capacities for their next step, and create ceremonies with parents and faculty that acknowledge and welcome them into the community of adults.

Deep connection: The common thread

As my students told stories about each of these domains, I heard a common theme: the experience of deep connection. Ron Miller, a historian of holistic education, observes that

spirituality is nourished, not through formal rituals that students practice in school, but by the *quality of relationship* that is developed between person and world.

³ This piece was first published in shortened form in *Educational Leadership* (Winter 1998/1999).

We can, and must cultivate an attitude of caring, respect, and contemplation to replace the narrow modernist view that the world is a resource to be exploited.⁴

Whether students are describing deep connection to themselves, to others, to nature or to a higher power, this seventh domain describes a quality of relationship resonant with meaning, which is profoundly caring, and which involves feelings of belonging and of being truly seen or known.

Through **deep connection to the self**, students encounter a strength and richness within, that is the basis for their developing the autonomy central to the adolescent journey, to discovering purpose, and to unlocking creativity. As teachers, we can nourish this form of deep connection by giving our students time for solitary reflection. Classroom exercises that encourage reflection and expression through writing or art can also allow a student access to the inner self while she is in the midst of other people. Totally engrossed in such creative activities, she is encouraged to discover and express her own feelings, values, and beliefs.

Connecting deeply to one other person or to a meaningful group, students discover the balm of belonging that helps them to overcome their feelings of profound alienation, a separation that fractures the identity of our youth and prevents them from contributing to our communities. To feel a sense of belonging at school, students must be part of an authentic community in the classroom — a community in which they feel seen and heard for who they really are. Many teachers create this opportunity through “morning meetings,” weekly councils or sharing circles offered in a context of ground rules that make it safe for students to be vulnerable. The teacher must continue to support the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual while fostering the individual’s sense of belonging to a unified group. The more that young people are encouraged to strengthen their own boundaries and develop their own identities, the more capable they are of bonding to a group in a healthy, enduring way and thus of contributing to the health and strength of the group and themselves.

Connecting deeply to nature, to their lineage or to a higher power, students participate in a larger, ongoing source of meaning, a joy that provides them with perspective, wisdom, and faith. “Is there life after death?” “How did life start?” “Is there a God?” “What makes people evil?” “What is the meaning of life?” These are some of the questions students ask that point us to their quest for this level of connection.

Occurring during a time in school life when students are allowed openly to give voice to the great comfort and joy they find in their relationship to God or to nature, this freedom of expression itself nourishes students’ spirits. The First Amendment, of course, protects students’ freedom of expression of religious beliefs. (However, we must be careful as educators to not share our religious beliefs because, given the power of our role, students may experience a teacher’s sharing as proselytizing.)

In our fear and confusion about violating the law, educators have actually suppressed students’ freedom and thereby prohibited the rich exchange that comes when such an important part of their lives is being acknowledged and respected. My students have expressed themselves through this freedom in many ways:

“When I get depressed,” revealed Keisha to her “family group” members in a school in Manhattan, “I go to this park near my house where there is an absolutely enormous tree. I go and sit down with it because it feels so strong to me.”

“It was my science teacher who awakened my spirit,” said a teacher looking back on his high school days in Massachusetts. “He conveyed a sense of awe about the natural world that would change me forever.”

“I try to practice being present — that’s what Buddhism has given to me that I really cherish. It’s really the most important thing to me now.”

“I became a Christian a few years back. It’s been the most wonderful thing in my life. I can’t tell you what it feels like to know that I’m loved like that. Always loved and guided. By Jesus. And it’s brought our family much closer.”

Students who feel deeply connected don’t need danger to feel fully alive. They don’t need guns to feel powerful. They don’t want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grows compassion and passion — passion for people, for students’ goals and dreams, for life itself.

Conclusion

Defining the “moral meaning” of democracy, John Dewey wrote that “the supreme task of all political institutions... shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society” (1957). If we are educating for wholeness, for citizenship and leadership in a democracy, spiritual development belongs in schools. But because we have concerns about separation of church and state, because we often confuse spiritual development with religion, and because we fear reprisal from “the other side” in a decade of “culture wars,” educators have been reluctant to develop a methodology and curriculum to directly address this aspect of human growth.

In a pluralistic society, educators can give students a glimpse of the rich array of experiences that feed the soul. We can provide a forum which honors the ways individual students nourish their spirits. We can offer activities which allow them to experience deep connection.

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor the quest of each student to find what gives their life meaning and integrity,

and what allows them to feel connected to what is most precious to them. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gift to nourish the world.

Notes

¹See *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* by Elias et al., ASCD, 1997.

²I have written more extensively about the question of how teachers cultivate their own capacities for teaching safely in this arena in an article called "The Teaching Presence", *The Virginia Journal of Education*, November 2000.

³See writers on recent brain research such as Sywester, or Caine and Caine; also see Parker Palmer, *The Courage To Teach*.

⁴Miller, R. The Renewal of Education and Culture: A Multifaceted Task, *Great Ideas in Education*, 1995-96, Winter, 7, 5.

For a book for in progress for parents called The Soul of Parenting, Rachael Kessler invites readers to submit stories and questions about how parents and others have encountered the seven gateways described in this article in raising or mentoring children. Please send them to <passagewaysrk@aol.com>.

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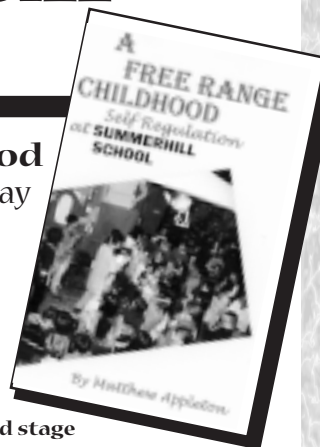
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