

# Chapter 5

## Threshold Concepts and Practices to Nurture the Inner Life: A Holistic and Transformative Approach to Spirituality in Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter will develop three categories of relationship concepts, and other key ideas and practices as threshold concepts in a holistic and spiritual pedagogy used in a master's program in holistic and integrative education. These understandings will be situated within a context of a post-formal perspective (Gidley) and research in socio-neurobiology, describing various practices and narratives that proved successful, and led to this program being featured in the Journal for Transformative Learning as a model of transformative education. The chapter will conclude with a discussion on spiritual activism, especially building upon the use of the international earth charter.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

*(Note: As this chapter unfolds, the reader will notice that I no longer write, or do research, in the third person. I am a full participant in the process of inquiry and draw from primary and secondary experiences as a form of narrative inquiry. The questions, descriptions, bridge ideas, external resources, and conclusions are informed, but subjective. The contexts, narrative, and resources that inform the narrative weave their own tapestry and become markers for the reader to engage in their own analysis and consideration.)*

Over twenty years ago, about fifteen of us sat in a circle at a wilderness mountain retreat in a remote part of southern California discussing the role of spirituality in education. We came from a variety of

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spiritual backgrounds and practices, some attached to formal traditions and others who were more eclectic seekers. We were professors, teachers, monks, school directors, and other interested participants.

All of us in this group were spiritual practitioners with a strong commitment to teaching and education. Each of us was actively trying to integrate a holistic perspective into our lives and work. We were deeply troubled by the mechanistic and fragmented approaches to education and the resistance to acknowledge what we considered a spiritual core in each human being. Our group wondered if an education could be constructed that nourished the inner lives of students without being tied to religious categories, specific forms of god-language, or indoctrination.

What would an education look like that perceived students as whole persons, attuned to the interconnections among all on earth and the mysterious awe of the universe that is part of us all? Could a spiritual pedagogy co-exist with secular expectations and mechanistic curricula?

Holistic educators try to see and acknowledge the whole child. They see learning as involving much more than just information processing; it includes opportunities to experience and explore the world and ask questions about our place in it. Learning includes developing attributes of kindness, altruism, and service. This form of learning also includes a creative approach to life, using the arts to express a deeply felt humanity and establish an intimate relationship with nature. Holistic educators also seek to invite students to discover meaning and purpose in their lives and in the world, to become emotionally resilient, to learn how to accept all forms of diversity, and to feel a sense of compassion and responsibility as an advocate for the various communities of nature and society.

There is an implicit 'spiritual' quality in this larger holistic perspective of learning, but what it is, and how to address it, was an open question for this group. So, these questions and perspectives guided the work-related conversations and led to an on-going commitment to bring this deep and more relational vision of education into the world. Over the years, progressive conferences, professional Special Interest Groups (SIGs) yielded dialogue and writing with educational experts across related professions. As founder of a master's degree program in Holistic and Integrative Education, I, along with my colleagues, Bob London, and David Reid-Marr, deliberately sought to create a spiritual pedagogy within a public university that spoke to the needs of public-school teachers.

What encouraged all involved, as the program made headway over a couple of semesters, was how eager students were for this kind of educational experience, how it transformed their lives personally and professionally, and surprisingly, how it not only enhanced their teaching but led to increased student achievement and effectiveness using traditional measures of assessment. In ten cohorts, this program produced six recognized *Teacher of the Year Award* winners in their schools and districts.

This story will serve as the backdrop for the development of this chapter, and may serve to legitimize much of the work the reader may be doing in their work with children and youth as well as be a catalyst to spawn new possibilities in educational programs. While further research and applications are needed to move this work forward, this author can say with confidence that 'spirituality' in education is possible, and is very necessary for the world today.

These understandings around spirituality are significant and are gently entering the culture and language of the present time. Notably, the sciences related to the field of education are gradually providing a language for spirituality, that while not tied to religious understandings, nevertheless, informs these emerging understandings (Ratchord, Ming, & Schnitker, 2023; Miller, 2015, 2021). The research in psychology, mental health, sociology, and education provide evidence that demonstrates how the mental, emotional, social, physical, environmental, and spiritual aspects of our humanity are interrelated and cannot be considered separately from who we are as humans.

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