

Chapter 3

Nurturing Spirituality in Diverse Public School Settings: An Inclusive Approach

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ABSTRACT

The chapter helps educators understand an important distinction between the terms, “Spirituality” and “Religion” by drawing upon findings from past and present scholars and from current scientific breakthroughs. Based on the author’s long-term study involving participants from religious and non-religious backgrounds, various forms of spirituality are presented and labelled to facilitate discourse. The findings are further classified and presented as a framework of Seven Spiritual Identities. Structure, vocabulary, and contexts are provided to help educators understand this difficult topic and offers ideas to nurture spirituality in diverse public and secular school settings.

INTRODUCTION

Every human being is inherently spiritual. One of the pioneers of early childhood education, Maria Montessori (1907, in Laren, 2017, p. 33) viewed that all children have the capacity for spirituality and in fact, experience it from a young age. According to Montessori, spirituality is innate in the sense that there is an inner, spiritual force that drives a young child’s development. While children have the developmental ability to crawl, walk, and run from a young age, so, too, they have a natural capacity for spiritual growth. And like other human capacities such as reading, writing, and speech can be nurtured, so, can spiritual capacity be nurtured. Recognition of spirituality both in children and in youth, has also been recognized by thinkers such as Dewey (1997), Carr (1995), Coles (1990), Gardner (1983), Miller (2015, 2021), and educators, for some time now, have recognized the importance of the development of the whole child. This includes physical, cognitive, social, and the spiritual dimension. According to Easton (2007), the child needs to be engaged fully through “head, heart, and hands” for a more complete education.

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Scientific research for over a quarter of a decade now provides evidence that having a strong spiritual core has health benefits as well as shields individuals from mental health issues (Wu, Wang, & Jia, 2015). There is also ground-breaking and concrete evidence from MRI & fMRI studies of the brain to reveal the surprising science of spirituality (Miller, 2021, p. 199). Children with positive active relationships with spirituality are 40 percent less likely as teenagers to use and abuse drugs, 60 percent less likely to fall into depression, and 80 percent less likely to engage in risky behaviors such as violence and irresponsible sex. (Miller, 2015, p. 43). In fact, spiritual nurturing is more likely to have positive markers for thriving and high levels of academic success for both children and youth. Miller also warns that if spiritual development is not attended to at a child's young age their spirituality can be stunted.

The benefits of nurturing spirituality are compelling, but with a narrow understanding of its term by educators, the responsibility of spiritual education has over time, fallen mainly on families. Homes and houses of worship have traditionally been viewed as the only places for the child to receive their spiritual instruction. The problem though is that many children are being deprived of this traditional pathway of spiritual nurturing because a commitment to conventional religious practices in countries like the United States, parts of Europe, and the western world has declined since the 1960s and 1970s, and a generation has been raised without explicit or implicit awareness of spirituality, or the relationship between spirituality and well-being, (Brandner, 2020, Miller, 2015).

As pointed out earlier, there are many advantages of spiritual development for children and youth. However, this fact will not be enough to shift the thinking of many educators to successfully integrate spirituality into classroom spaces, particularly in public/secular (government funded) schools. This is because of two lingering problems. First, the resistance from educators/teachers/administrators working in societies that favor separation of church and state and who often see spirituality as synonymous with religion. These educators view public/secular schools as having no business in addressing the spiritual development of their students. Secondly, for those educators who do see the importance of the development of the whole child, still view spirituality mainly through the religious lens, and therefore, find it to be a daunting task to incorporate spirituality in schools, particularly with religiously and culturally diverse student populations. As long as there is a lack of proper understanding of the term "spirituality," it will remain a constant barrier to introducing it in public/secular schools.

The foremost task, therefore, is to clarify the meaning of spirituality for educators so that it is viewed within a much broader context and not confused with religion. And the second task is to provide teachers with some guidance on how to integrate spirituality in their classrooms so that it is nurtured positively to meet the needs of all students regardless of their religious and non-religious backgrounds.

This chapter explores the concept of spirituality as a human disposition that crosses religious, secular, and cultural boundaries (Hardy, 1965; Hay, 2000; Kirmani, 2013). It puts forth that spirituality has a language one uses to express feelings/beliefs/values/wonderings attached to one's personal experiences. It shares and analyzes the results of a long-term investigation on the language and the approach to spiritual nurturing and proposes a *Seven Spiritual Identities* framework (Kirmani & Kirmani, 2009, 2013) to make spirituality more accessible for educators, particularly in public/secular schools with religious, non-religious, and with cultural diversity.

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