Chapter 8
Spirituality and Education: A Framework

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Abstract This chapter concerns two questions, "What does it mean to teach in a way consistent with a spiritual perspective? Are there principles and guidelines for teaching consistent with a variety of spiritual traditions and perspectives as well as with some current educational psychologies?" This chapter summarizes efforts to address these questions begun in 1998, and describes a tentative framework for better understanding what it means to integrate a spiritual perspective in the process of secular education. The framework consists primarily of two components: (1) Eight assumptions underlying a spiritual perspective in education, and (2) thirty-eight statements judged through a research process to be consistent with a spiritual perspective in education, as well as an attempt to integrate the two components by describing how the 38 statements clarify the eight assumptions by suggesting a comprehensive framework to explore how to integrate a spiritual perspective in the process of education. Specifically, the chapter attempts to provide guidance to educators attempting to integrate a spiritual perspective in their teaching in a significant and meaningful way, including curriculum development, teacher/student relationships, and nourishing the inner life of the student and the teacher.

What does it mean to teach in a way consistent with a spiritual perspective? Are there principles and guidelines for teaching consistent with a variety of spiritual traditions and perspectives as well as with some current educational psychologies? This chapter summarizes efforts to address these questions begun in 1998, and describes a tentative framework for better understanding what it means to integrate a spiritual perspective in the process of secular education. The framework consists primarily of two components: (1) Eight assumptions underlying a spiritual perspective in education, and (2) thirty-eight statements judged to be consistent with a spiritual perspective in education, as well as an attempt to integrate the two components by describing how the 38 statements clarify the eight assumptions by suggesting a comprehensive framework to explore how to integrate a spiritual perspective in the process of education. Specifically, in this chapter I will: (1) describe the context

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of the efforts and the methodology to develop the framework; (2) define some terminology necessary to understand the framework; (3) outline the framework; and (4) identify some of the limitations of the framework and discuss future steps to further develop the framework.

Context

Briefly, the efforts to develop the framework can be divided into three steps: (1) initial work of the Spirituality and Education Network to identify statements judged consistent with a spiritual perspective in education; (2) parallel efforts to identify basic assumptions underlying a spiritual perspective in education; and (3) an attempt to develop of a framework integrating these two lines of work.

Statements Judged Consistent with a Spiritual Perspective

In 1998 the steering committee of the Spirituality and Education Network implemented a collaborative research project to identify statements judged to be essential to integrating a spiritual perspective in education. The network consists of an international network of people from diverse professions and spiritual traditions interested in systematically studying what it means to integrate a spiritual perspective into preK – 12 education. This network represents diverse spiritual traditions and backgrounds and includes university professors, preK – 12 educators, as well as psychologists, spiritual teachers, community activists and artists. Among its activities, the network sponsored six working retreats, each lasting 4 days with 15–25 participants. The relevant research was conducted by the original steering committee and grew out of work completed during the first working retreat sponsored by the network. The purpose of the research study was to identify a core of statements that the seven members of the original steering committee could agree were consistent with a spiritual perspective in education in the sense that it would be difficult for us to imagine an effective school with a spiritual perspective not consistent with these statements. The original steering committee consisted of seven members: Sam Crowell and I from California State University, San Bernnardino; Jack Miller from OISE, University of Toronto; Richard Brown from Naropa University; Aostre Johnson from St. Michael University in Vermont; Lourdes Arguelles from Claremont Graduate University; and John Donnelly, a special education teacher in Anaheim, California.

The first working retreat of the network in June 1998 focused on identifying basic assumptions and principles for education consistent with a spiritual perspective, and provided the data that became the basis for the study. In preparation for the retreat, 22 interviews were conducted by one of the steering committee members

(the author) with individuals representing a number of professions and spiritual perspectives. The interviews began with a general question asking the interviewee to imagine and describe what an ideal school might look like. Then questions were asked to clarify the interviewee's opinions. The methodology for the interviews was a qualitative one, consistent with a spiritual perspective (see London 2002), which encourages openness to questions that seem appropriate as the research unfolds. Therefore, although there was a similar format to each interview, each was "allowed" to unfold in its own unique manner. Based on the interviews, 159 statements were generated concerning education potentially consistent with a spiritual perspective.

Next, retreat participants and a few leaders in the field of spirituality and education who could not attend the retreat were asked to rate the statements as to their consistency with a spiritual perspective in education. The results of the returned forms were tabulated and the statements were sorted into categories based on the total number of points for each statement. Those with the most points were presented for more in-depth discussion at the retreat. Briefly, through a five-step process over a few years we reduced the original group of 159 statements to 38 statements agreed upon by the seven members of the network's steering committee at a January 2000 four-day meeting of the steering committee (see London et al. 2004).

It seems relevant to comment that we found that most of the statements do not contain terminology that is limited or particularly connected to a spiritual perspective; that is, representatives from many effective schools without a conscious spiritual perspective might agree that most of the statements are important, if not essential, to an effective approach to education. In addition, we felt that although we understood the limitations of our methodology, the 38 statements provided an excellent basis for a discussion, but should not be considered a "model" or "checklist." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we recognized the mystery associated with the way spirit manifests in our world, and realized that none of the statements represents a way to definitively verify either the presence or lack of presence of a spiritual perspective. Specifically, we recognized that there can be an effective school consistent with an authentic spiritual perspective that is inconsistent with one or more of the statements. In fact, we briefly discussed our biases, noting that one major bias is that our statements are basically consistent with a holistic approach to education and that it was certainly possible to have a school with an approach consistent with a spiritual perspective, but not consistent with a holistic philosophy.

Assumptions

Parallel to the above research, we attempted to develop basic assumptions and terminology that underlie integrating a spiritual perspective in education. Prior to 1998 I had identified four assumptions that I believed underlie what I labeled

as Spiritual Ecology. Those four assumptions became the focus of a structured discussion during the first retreat, as well as some other events sponsored by the network. On the basis of that input, the original four assumptions were expanded to eight assumptions and significant changes were made in terminology. However, at the January 2000 four-day meeting of the steering committee, after discussion, we decided that it was not feasible for us as a group to reach a final consensus on the assumptions in our limited time. I will discuss one example of the difficulty we expected in the section on terminology. The eight assumptions identified in this chapter represent my wording based on the significant input from members of the network, but does not represent a consensus of the network as do the 38 statements.

Framework

Recently, I returned to these two lines of work and examined the question of whether these two lines of work formed the basis for a tentative framework for further research. Specifically, I explored whether the 38 statements were consistent with the 8 assumptions in the sense that each of the statements could reasonably follow from at least one of the assumptions and help clarify the meaning of the assumptions, especially in practice. This exploration resulted in the framework outlined later in this chapter, and identified four groups of assumptions that made sense (two groups of two assumptions, one of three assumptions, and one with one assumption), with a general label for each group as well as a few subheadings within each group. Further, each of the 38 statements was "assigned" to a group and subheading, with the understanding that some of the statements could easily be assigned to more than one subheading.

Terminology

When we discuss spirituality, many times we are discussing experiences that are either incomprehensible to us or not easily discussed given the subjective nature of the experiences. Even when we see commonalties in the "what and how" of our experiences, there may be fundamental differences in our explanations of the why of the experiences. Therefore, I will limit the terminology involving spirituality to the concepts necessary to understand the framework described, and omit a discussion of certain philosophical issues. Also, I will capitalize the defined terminology in the text to denote the usage implied by the definitions. It needs to be noted that the definitions used are primarily my interpretation of terminology based on the work of J. G. Bennett presented elsewhere (London 2002) with input from a few colleagues including members of the network.

For this chapter, three distinct yet interdependent components of our experience as humans will be defined, Spirit, Soul or Being, and Function. I am not denying the possibility that at some level of development the three can be experienced as one. In fact, Bennett (1961) is clear that we are capable of experiencing a basic unity of the three components. However, for understanding our ordinary experience the division into three components seems useful.

The first component of our experience, the world of Function, is associated with the functioning of the material or conditioned world; that is, the processes that are predictable, observable and objective. Function includes the ordinary workings of thinking, feeling and bodily movements – not what a person is, but rather what we do.

Second, we need to recognize that there is a component of our experience that cannot be reduced to the functioning of the conditioned material world that is a nonmaterial source of meaning and value for our lives. We will label this source as Spirit. Spirit, as defined, does not do things; it is that which impels or is the impetus for the action. The action itself is a functional process. It needs to be clear that we understand that Spirit is not something that can be observed in the same way as the functional world. We see thoughts like, 'I will do this thing' but that is just a function, something happening, and more often than not the thought fails to be actualized.

The fact that Spirit is connected with the unconditioned world makes it difficult, if not impossible, to clearly define Spirit. Bennett (1983) states this difficulty well:

> With ... [Spirit] there is the great difficulty which we are always up against that makes it so hard to know what to say. Whether there is [Spirit] or not [Spirit] is impossible to say. Even such simple questions as 'Does [Spirit] exist or does it not exist?' or 'Does it change or remain the same?' or 'Is it one or many?' turn out to be meaningless because we are looking at a thing to which that type of distinction is not applicable ... Unity and multiplicity are only in our being, not in [Spirit]. (p. 14)

Earlier I noted that we could not reach a consensus on the wording of the assumptions. One brief example of that difficulty is the definition of Spirit as a "nonmaterial source of meaning and value for our lives." One objection was that the word "source" implied something external versus, for example, one interpretation of this "source" as being internal (e.g., our essence, or True Self). I would add that in my opinion the use of the word "nonmaterial" may not be appropriate; that is, perhaps theoretically there is a material explanation for what I am labeling as Spirit. The given definition just represents the view that presently there is not a material explanation that is convincing. It seems relevant to make the point that the terminology and the wording of the assumptions is an attempt to approximate what only can be described as the incomprehensible nature of Spirit and the unconditioned world,

> The tao that can be told
> is not the eternal Tao.
> The name that can be named
> is not the eternal Name. (Mitchell 1988, p. 1)

That is, the definitions and wording in this chapter are not meant to represent a definitive wording that will be acceptable to all, but rather, the purpose is to present as neutral as possible definitions to provide a framework for discussion.

For the third component of our experience, we recognize the need for an instrument or a process to reconcile two otherwise incompatible worlds, the world of Function and the world of Spirit. We will label this component of our experience as Being or Soul. Being is connected to both worlds; Being can be understood as the instrument that allows our material body to receive and cooperate with impulses whose source is the world of Spirit. One interpretation of Being is that Spirit requires an instrument to be able to manifest (at least in certain ways) in the material world and that Being is that instrument.

Being is the component of our experiences that enables or undergoes transformation, awakening or unfolding; therefore, Level of Being will be defined as a measure of our general ability to reconcile the world of Function and the world of Spirit. Level of Being can be seen as a measure of our level of consciousness as reflected by the state of concentration, or the state of availability, of energy. But energies are of different qualities (Bennett 1964) and there are different Levels of Being corresponding to the quality of the energies that are concentrated (Bennett 1961). In many traditions, the highest Level of Being would indicate a way of being in which there is no duality between the world of Function and the world of Spirit, a world in which we consistently cooperate with Spirit. Similarly, many traditions would define a lower Level of Being as a way of being in which we are driven mostly by impulses from the world of Function (e.g., our desires, personality).

To clarify the difference between Function and Spirit, Bennett (1961) discriminated between two types of impulses: an impulse that has its source in Spirit and an impulse that has its source in existence (i.e., all that can be conceived as material, and is therefore fact). The use of the term impulse can be limiting in that it can suggest the injection of force into a system versus an awakening to what is already there. However, it seems to be the most appropriate term for this chapter with the understanding that the actual "impulse" to act may be a reaction (or interpretation) of our functional self to an awakening of our essence, rather than a characteristic of what we actually experience in the moment of awakening. In other words, sometimes we experience an awakening in a moment (impulse from Spirit) and then "interpret" that impulse (a functional activity) to imply a certain action – the actual moment of awakening is from the world of Spirit, but the interpretation and action taken (or not taken) is typically in the world of Function.

The term "cooperating with Spirit" is meant to imply sensitivity and cooperation with impulses whose source is Spirit, and to be consistent with terminology from a variety of spiritual traditions, for example, "cooperating with the Tao," "consenting to the Dharma," "being sensitive to the reconciling force," "listening to higher intuition," and "being an instrument of God's Will" (see London 1998). It should be noted that our actions many times are motivated by a combination of the two types of impulses. Finally, when the term Help is used, it will indicate an impulse from Spirit that is experienced as providing what is needed in a particular situation, typically experienced as an unexpected source of help.

Framework

This section combines two lines of work identified earlier; one that identified 8 basic assumptions that underlie a spiritual perspective in education, and a second that identified 38 statements judged consistent with a spiritual perspective in education. To facilitate that blending, the eight assumptions are divided into four groups, each with a few subheadings followed by a summary of the statements that roughly follow from the assumptions. For readability, the four groups are given a general heading and the assumptions are in bold print, followed by a short description of the grouping for the summary of the statements that follow. For purposes of clarity and length, the statements are only briefly summarized (see London et al. 2004 for more detail). It needs to be noted that there is much overlap among the assumptions and the assignment of statements to one group in some cases is difficult and does not imply that the statement could not be equally appropriate in another group. As will be discussed in the next section, this framework represents an attempt to define an initial framework that will necessitate much collaborative work to revise and deepen to provide more definitive guidance in the field.

Group 1: Nourishing the inner life of the student and teacher: General approaches. Basic assumptions from a spiritual perspective:

1. *There exists a nonmaterial source participating in the emergence or evolution of the Universe that can connect us with meaning, value and purpose. We call this source Spirit. We are capable of cooperating with Spirit and "seeing" more directly what is needed. Indeed, spiritual transformation, awakening or unfolding can be thought of as the movement from a way of perceiving the world in which we do not consciously cooperate with Spirit to a way in which we do.*
2. *A spiritual perspective in education includes an emphasis on transforming our Level of Being; that is, there is an emphasis on developing or awakening the ability to cooperate with Spirit.*

The statements in this category identify general methods of nourishing the inner life that are deemed effective for many students and teachers, including developing a strong connection with nature; providing accessibility to quiet spaces and places; integrating aesthetics and imagination, such as storytelling, drama, visual art, music and movement into the curriculum; integrating ritual, ceremonies and celebration into the school day; emphasizing the development of creativity and intuition; and encouraging reverence, care and deep appreciation for all experiences.

Group 2: The balance between efforts and receptivity, especially in the process of transformation. Basic assumptions from a spiritual perspective:

3. *One component of the process of transformation, awakening or unfolding of Being or Soul is the successful resolution of a sequence of "problems" or "encounters" that naturally present themselves and require a change in the person's understanding (Level of Being). This type of unfolding includes vertical change, referring to a basic reorganization of one's way of seeing the world, and horizontal change referring to applications of the new understanding to a variety of contexts. These changes incorporate a variety of ways of knowing and being (e.g., emotional, social, ethical, logical, intuitive and spiritual).*

4. *As adults, we need to realize our present situation; that includes the fact that we are not typically fully present and that we do not, in general, consciously cooperate with Spirit.*
5. *The emphasis on cooperating with Spirit does not imply that there is no need to make "human" efforts at understanding; rather, it is implied that right human efforts can create the conditions that open us to Help and allow us to cooperate with Spirit.*

The statements in this category emphasize the need for inner work and addressing naturally occurring dissonance in the process of growth, and are divided into three subsections: (1) The need for inner work on the part of the teacher, including the school providing time for the teachers to work together on their personal and spiritual growth, as well as the educator developing an experiential understanding of what it means to be present in the "now," discriminating between a state of being present and a state of not being present, and the sense of being "open to what is needed" that accompanies this. Also this subsection includes the need for educators to recognize and address the fact that they may have unintentional tendencies that block students' development. The first step in this process is a personal awareness of this issue and a shared commitment by the faculty to address it. (2) The need for a vision for the school and the development of community, including the need for the school to develop a shared vision and provide time to deepen and implement the shared vision. (3) The need to stimulate developmental growth in the curriculum, both through naturally occurring dissonance and appropriate planned curricular units.

Group 3: Our connection with all beings. Basic assumption from a spiritual perspective:

6. *A natural outcome of a connection with Spirit is that we experience a deep connection with all beings, which can manifest in a variety of ways, including as a sense that we are all interconnected and interdependent, a feeling of acceptance, compassion and respect for all beings, or a natural inclination to address and relieve suffering.*

The statements in this category emphasize our connection with all beings and the basis for deepening that connection in our interactions with others, and are divided into three subsections: (1) The teacher – student relationship, including the need for educators to listen closely to what students are communicating; experience and demonstrate a genuine respect for the students; and be compassionate people who communicate their caring to students. (2) The school community, including the need for the school community to establish an atmosphere that demonstrates sensitivity to nonverbal aspects of communication, and is implicitly accepting and supportive of students. (3) The relationship to the larger community, including helping the students develop a strong, grounded responsibility to self, others and the earth, as well as helping students understand that each person is part of an interconnected whole.

Group 4: The mystery of the universe and the uniqueness of each being's journey. Basic assumptions from a spiritual perspective:

7. *At our Level of Being, there is a mystery associated with Spirit. The Universe contains the one and the many, unity and diversity, the whole and the parts, the collective (or communal) and the individual. Spirit manifests in a variety of ways, including the diversity of nature and cultures.*

8. *From a spiritual perspective, there is a need for an approach in education in which the student's bodily, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs are balanced. The needs of students generally change with age and development, and the needs of any specific student (or teacher) are unique and difficult for the student or others to see clearly.*

The statements in this category address the mystery of the universe and the need to be sensitive to the uniqueness and mystery of each being's journey and purpose, and are divided into two subsections: (1) The need for an integrative/holistic curriculum that, for example, nourishes the child's sense of purpose and meaningfulness; develops an appreciation of diversity; aims for a balance between physical, emotional, spiritual and mental aspects of education; and allows for a physical, aesthetic, emotional and intellectual connection to the content. (2) The need for sensitivity to the uniqueness/mystery associated with: (a) each individual student and each class or group of students, (b) each teacher and each group of staff/faculty, and (c) each school. This subsection includes a recognition that each school will be different, designed for a particular place, time and context, meaning that there is not one model appropriate for all schools, as well as a recognition that there is no "correct" method or technique for nourishing students' unfolding that works for all or even most students; that is, there is a need to be sensitive to what is needed to nourish the unique unfolding of each student.

Discussion and Limitations

As implied earlier, there are many obstacles to defining a comprehensive framework for studying the implications of a spiritual perspective for education, including the fact that Spirit as defined is connected to the unconditioned world and is mysterious. This is reflected in the very different interpretations of Spirit and spirituality one comes across in the literature. This framework intentionally does not attempt to resolve the difference in interpretations among the various spiritual traditions, rather, I tried to limit terminology and define terms in as neutral a way as possible in order to hopefully provide a comprehensive basis for studying the implications of a spiritual perspective for education. In addition, this framework at best is only a draft to provide a basis for more in-depth study. For example, personally, I see the next step in this process is to assemble 5–12 colleagues in the field to commit to further developing the framework, with additional colleagues that might provide input on specific sections. I suspect that our final product would be more in the format of a dialogue than a definitive "white paper." For example, if we define Spirit as "a nonmaterial source of meaning and value for our lives," someone might write a comment that would become part of the text explaining their difficulty with that definition and suggesting an alternative.

To support this process I believe it would be wise to periodically schedule working retreats that assemble an appropriate group to focus on a specific component of the framework that in our opinion needs additional work. For example, the network sponsored a number of working retreats, one of which focused on strengthening students' connection to Nature consistent with a spiritual perspective.

That retreat resulted in specific guidelines including a developmental perspective that discriminated between the needs of different eras of the child's development (see London 2011). For example, we found that generally students ages 6–12 needed time to spend in Nature more or less alone; e.g., a spot in Nature; a creek; a tree. From a spiritual perspective, this need seemed more essential than understanding the principles of ecology – of course, the principles of ecology are an important component of the curriculum but without the experience of actual contact with Nature such a curriculum seems unlikely to result in a strong connection to Nature from a spiritual perspective.

Most of the 38 statements need more clarification to provide useful guidance to the practitioner. In addition, there are other gaps. For example, two that seem important are, first, there is a need for some guidance concerning the actual content of the curriculum beyond the very general principles in the statements. For example, we considered the appropriateness of the Earth Charter (see www.earthcharterinaction.org), which includes an emphasis on social justice and sustainability, as an ethical framework for the curriculum that can provide guidance to educators for increasing the likelihood that students when adults would live in a way consistent with the principles of the Earth Charter. Second, we see a need to define eras of growth from a spiritual perspective that might give guidance to what is appropriate to meet the needs of students at different ages. As mentioned, this was an important component of our work on deepening students' connection to Nature consistent with a spiritual perspective. The work of Marshak (1997) provides a tentative approach to describing the eras based on the work of Steiner, Aurobindo, Montessori and Ghose.

Finally, even with all these limitations, I already have found the framework to be useful to me in my research and teaching. In addition, my students in the MA in Holistic and Integrative Education at California State University, San Bernardino have reported that the framework has been useful to them in their professional contexts. Even though this work is in its initial stages, I see much potential!

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