

Ecospirituality: A Teacher's Path Toward Wholeness and Wellness

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Abstract

This article describes the tenets of holistic education as understood by the researcher while also synthesizing research that underscores the role of spiritual and ecological pedagogy as key facets of the holistic education landscape. Likewise, it emphasizes the transformative power of spiritual and ecological identity development as bridges towards wholeness. Finally, this paper investigates the cross-section between spiritual and ecological identity development, known as Ecospirituality, and suggests it as a tool for teacher wellness and perhaps student and societal wellness.

Keywords: holistic education, spiritual pedagogy, Ecopedagogy, nature-based education, biophilia, Ecospirituality, spirituality in education, environmental education, ecological identity

The purpose of education has long been debated among educators, students, academics, and policymakers and has, over the years, experienced an identity crisis. Its purposes vacillate between targets like improving the human condition, cultivating engaged citizens, moral training, developing skills for the workforce, and promoting academic excellence. Additionally, reform has “harness[ed] education to the values of the American economic system,” promoting such things as “productivity, efficiency, accountability, [and] standardization” (Miller, 1997, p. 201). This is evidenced by the Department of Education’s mission “to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access” (n.d.). This increasingly standardized and credential-based system has yielded a pervasive yet arguably obsolete industrial model. Many aspects of this model are designed to meet the growing economic demands of society, and some would assert that these aspects sideline educating for holistic, human potential as they are reductive and restrictive for both the student and teacher.

As United States public education evolves to meet the demands of society, Miller (1997) argues that the needs of its core participants, the students, and teachers, become overpowered. For example, the public system’s policy,

practice, and purpose endorse cognitive development and associated measurable outcomes yielding to an achievement culture. This culture dominates the conversation, ultimately divorcing learners from the fundamental facets of what it means to become a whole human. By valuing a culture of competitiveness over connectedness in this way, the holistic well-being and development of students and simultaneously that of teachers is suppressed. Miller (1997) suggests “to focus solely on rational intellect, economic achievement, competition...is lopsided; to be “well educated” in the modern industrial world...; is to be alienated from one’s own creativity, insight, and unfolding self-actualization” (p. 212). These critical aspects of holistic learning are left out of the education equation and, therefore, out of the identity development of the students and teachers. The model dehumanizes its participants by seeking to “impose a social discipline on the non-rational passions of human nature,” (Miller, 1997, p. 41) “is a major source of spiritual alienation” and gives rise to “materialist urge to control nature” (Miller, 1997, p. 19).

In the 1980s, a post-modern perspective for holism in education was founded as a remedy for this reductionist view and has been argued in educational reform circles as the most significant educational movement of the times

(Harris, 1980, as cited in Miller, 1997; Miller, 2019). The movement is grounded in relationships. Holistic education pioneer, John Miller emphasized these critical relationships: “the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships between various domains of knowledge, the relationship between the individual and community, and the relationship between self and [soul] and the connection to the earth” was later added. (Miller, 1988, as cited in Miller et al., 2019, p. 32). Ultimately it advocates a worldview that promotes a vision of connectedness through development in humanistic, spiritual, and ecological understanding (Miller, 1997). Through forms of reason that are not simply instrumental such as the humanistic, spiritual, and ecological dimensions, holistic education aims to foster personal and consequently collective wholeness (Glazer & Smith, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Miller & Baker, 2015) and through integration aims to “bring our species into better harmony both with itself and with the world... to ensure, not just our flourishing, but our very survival” (Miller et al., 2019, p. 28).

The disconnection between traditional education, spiritual development, and nature connectivity ultimately leaves our students and teachers “spiritually empty” (Kessler, 2000, p. xii) and “nature deficient” (Louv, 2005) which perhaps, fuels the many social and environmental issues of our time. Moreover, being void of these intelligences yields a state of disintegration and suboptimal wellness. Within the frame of education, it is paramount to focus on teacher wholeness and wellness as a precursor to student wholeness and wellness. A teacher who feels whole and is experiencing optimal wellness and is primed to nurture that in her students. For the purpose of this paper, I will be using these terms wholeness and wellness interchangeably.

Literature suggests that optimal wellness cannot be achieved without spiritual wellness (Glazer & Smith, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Miller & Baker, 2015). Unfortunately, spirituality education is not universally used in schools because many argue that it lacks secularity. Schools do, however, commonly emphasize the terms social and emotional learning, mindfulness, and contemplation as secular bridges to spirituality (Owen, 2019). Nature connection, I believe, to be another bridge. It equates to curiosity and wonder for the natural world, appreciative time in nature, and ecological understanding (Sobel, 1996). Likewise, Ecopedagogy, an educational approach emphasizing the interrelationships between humans and the

Earth and helps cultivate an environmental ethic (Hung, 2017). Furthermore, a spiritual connection to the earth is known as Ecospirituality and can serve as a secular outlet for the spiritual identity development among students and teachers (Smith, 2009). Ecospirituality, specifically, has the power to support wellness in teachers and develop these human connections to the earth, which may also serve to remedy many of the world’s ecological crises. What then are the tools, practices, and systems that may support wellness and development, particularly within the eco-spiritual realm?

Several major concepts shape this inquiry; holistic education and the key roles that spiritual identity development and nature connection play in achieving wholeness and wellness. It explores the cross-section of spirituality education and nature-based education through Ecospirituality and highlights opportunities for integrating these at a teacher training level to improve teacher efficacy and overall wellness. Important theoretical and empirical work addressing these concepts will be reviewed in this article.

Developing the Spiritual Intelligence to Achieve Wellness

The reductionist view that learners are simply a mind/body construct does not fulfill a learner’s true potential. In contrast, the holistic view recognizes learning as a comprehensive integration of the many facets of being human and is comprised not only of traditional academics but of the interconnected relationships between the of the mental, social, emotional, physical, creative, and spiritual qualities of the learner (Pilla et al., 2017). It is based on the premise that identity, meaning, and purpose are achievable through connections to others, the natural world, and spiritual virtues such as empathy and peace (Miller, 1997).

Many educators and scholars who share this vision maintain that the acquisition of any knowledge is bolstered by spiritual health and, ultimately, that the spiritual dimension is the defining aspect for holistic development (Glazer & Smith, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Miller & Baker, 2015). Spirituality, in this case, is a personal journey, not connected to a particular organized religion but defined by “an inner sense of living relationship to a higher power (God, nature, spirit, universe, the creator...guiding life force)” (Miller & Baker, 2015, pp 6-7). Moreover, Miller and Baker (2015) contend, after a decade of longitudinal and cross-sectional studies involving children, adolescents, and adults, that humans are innately hardwired for spiritual connection and that a strong

spiritual domain is a cornerstone for mental health and a protector against risky behavior. For example, they found that teens with “a personal sense of spirituality are 80 percent less likely to suffer from ongoing and recurrent depressions and 60 percent less likely to become heavy substance users or abusers” (Miller & Baker, 2015, p. 209). Additionally, optimal human wellness also demands a holistic perspective and emphasizes the integration of multiple dimensions of wellness, including emotional, social, physical, intellectual, occupational, and spiritual wellness (National Health Wellness Institute, 2009, as cited Brymer et al., 2010). Optimal wellness recognizes spiritual wellness “as being fundamental to all other wellness dimensions” (Chandler et al., 1992, as cited in Brymer et al., 2010, p. 22).

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama (1999) names the qualities of the human spirit to be love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of harmony, and a sense of responsibility and suggests that the cultivation of these will bring happiness to oneself and others. He goes on to point out that most of the world’s social problems stem from a lack of spirituality (1999). Similarly, Moore (1992, as cited in Miller et al., 2019, p. 31) claims that “the great malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all our troubles and affecting us individual and socially, is loss of soul” (p. 31). When schools educate for these spiritual virtues, learners not only develop personal ethics but also become spiritually connected-- individually and collectively and this moral code and consequently spiritual development lay the groundwork for empathy in action or educating for social change (Owen, 2019). Kirylo and Boyd (2017) suggest:

Spirituality can be private and public, individual and political...it involves an outlook that makes one feel connected to something larger than themselves that informs their morals and actions. As such, spirituality nurtures one’s commitment to issues of social justice and desire for social change. This type of spirituality is akin to liberation theology, which both influenced and was influenced by Paulo Freire, and goes so far as to assert that one’s spirituality, by design, leads one to act for liberation of oneself (p. 2).

When spirituality becomes a central, influential force in shaping the school’s culture, it not only has the capacity to yield dynamic, authentic growth but can also be liberating for those involved. It is a pedagogical practice that meets the multidimensional needs of students and teachers, which can

lead to more democratic education. Consequently, meeting the macro needs of society and leading to a more democratic society (Lingley, 2016).

Many prominent scholars recognize spirituality as a key factor in democratic education. Freire, for example, was vocal about the relationship between his own spiritual identity and personal political activism (Lingley, 2016). Dewey (as cited in Lingley, 2016) “saw the relationship between spirituality and democracy as reciprocal” (p. 3). Miller (1997) argued, “that modern schooling is a spiritually devastating form of engineering that is hostile to human values and democratic ideals” (p. 4). In particular, cultivating spiritual virtues can be essential in finding purpose as a change agent or an activist. Dewey also suggested that supporting spiritual virtue development yields morals and ethics that “support democracy at all levels” (Lingley, 2016, p. 3).

The aforementioned research suggests that spiritual identity development and likewise, spiritual wellness can improve an individual’s quality of life, can augment their capacity for resilience, and consequently enhance their ability to effectively contribute to society (Hettler, 1980, as cited in Brymer et al., 2010). If spirituality is at the very core of being human, can improve mental health and well-being, and may, as the Dalai Lama suggests, help solve the most pressing issues of our time, then why is the spiritual dimension excluded from our schools and classrooms?

Public school classrooms, as Kessler (2000) describes, are “spiritually empty, not by accident, but by design”(p. xii). Moreover, Haluza-Delay (2000, as cited in Crowe, 2013) states that “educators who ignore the spiritual side miss essential avenues for personal and social change” (p. 149). Much like measuring development in this dimension, defining it is very subjective, and figuring out ways to maintain its secularity has left policymakers, administrators, educators, and community members at an impasse about how to teach it and, therefore, has left a society that suffers from a spiritual malaise (Kessler, 2000; Palmer, 2003). Many teachers and schools across the nation engage in piecemeal, add-on programs in contemplative pedagogies such as mindfulness programs, relationship-based, or social and emotional learning programs. However, what is lacking is a comprehensive and systemic approach to creating spiritually supportive schools, one in which spirituality is infused into

the teacher training, school culture, and the classroom curriculum.

It is time that the public education system recognizes the role that spiritual identity development plays in meeting the micro-level needs of students and teachers to meet the macro-level needs of society. This starts with accepting a definition for spirituality that maintains its secularity while training and supporting our teachers on their own secular, spiritual journeys. Owen (2019) states that:

If we desire a world where humans take care of the planet and take care of one another with justice, a world where humans can access insight and inspiration to solve problems, a world that is meaningful and fulfilling, then it would make sense that we train our teachers to develop these spiritual qualities so they may convey them to our children. (p. 52)

Developing the Natural Intelligence to Achieve Wellness

Just as there is a known disconnect between spirituality in education and its capacity to improve the human condition, there is discord between education and developing a natural intelligence. This is arguably, a product of an anthropocentric viewpoint as humans often see themselves as distinctly separate from and superior to nature, endorsing individualistic and divisive behavior (Kopnina, H. et al., 2018). This perspective, void of ethics, suggests that Earth is a commodity, evidenced by the materialist philosophy that permeates our culture. Additionally, environmental thinking and pro-environment attitudes and behaviors have become increasingly politicized and, therefore, polarizing, possibly creating a further divide between the human race and the natural world. When these are embraced as cultural norms, action for the common good is obscured. These are also paired with unchecked economic growth and widespread aspirations towards global competition, further cannibalizing our connection with the Earth (Kopnina, H. et al., 2018).

There is also a divide between humans and the multidimensional health benefits of nature connection. "For centuries psychologists and philosophers have recognized the importance of the natural world to human health and wellbeing" (Deloria, 1994; Dewey, 1958; Harvey, 2000; Jung, 2008; Knudtson & Suzuki, 1996; Marano, 2008; Watts, 1970; Watts, 2003, as cited in Brymer, 2010, p. 22). We know that humans are hardwired for this type of connectedness as humans innately gravitate to nature images, natural wonders, and artifacts (Robbins, 2020), and, likewise, Sobel

(1996) talks about the ecophilic or biological tendency that we have to bond with the Earth. E.O. Wilson (1984, as cited in Hung, 2017) calls this biophilia, or the biological drive to interact with the natural world. Furthermore, empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests that nature has a positive influence on the human experience; it is not only an innate tendency but access to nature is also a social determinant of health. Studies show the psychological and physical benefits of time in nature, such as reducing stress, depression, and anxiety and improved healing rates (Robbins, 2020). Time in nature also increases focus, creativity, physical activity, and in general, natural settings are often perceived as places linked to wellbeing (Robbins, 2020; Callado & Rosa, 2019, Brymer et al., 2010). Kellert (1993b, as cited in Hung, 2017) talks about the significant role nature plays in improving our human condition and suggests that "nature's diversity and healthy functioning are worthy of maintenance because they represent the best chance for people to experience a satisfying and meaningful existence" (p. 60).

If development in the natural intelligence, much like spiritual intelligence, is stunted, then this may explain the pervasive cognitive dissonance between humans and the natural world. This is what Louv (2005) calls the nature-deficient disorder, which is not a medical diagnosis but instead used to explain the human cost of continued alienation from the environment. Traditional education's emphasis on indoor skills-based drills and the stand and deliver prescribed approaches that are deficient of time in nature, nature-based learning, and experiential education debatably fuel this alienation. Sobel (1996) describes this educational approach as both denaturalized and disembodied and stresses the multidimensional benefits of engaging nature as a central teacher while calling for reconnection to be institutionalized in schools.

Much like developing a child's inner life is foundational to their academic success (Glazer & Smith, 1999; Kessler, 2000; Miller & Baker, 2015), so too is deepening their natural connection. This concept has been very much alive for centuries. For example, eighteenth-century philosophy Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1911) argues that humans learn from three sources, nature, man, and things. He emphasizes that nature is the first and most central teacher and that before academic or social learning, we have to develop a child's natural intelligence. Furthermore, the indigenous worldview acknowledges nature as a teacher, recognizes it as sacred, and values an intimate and reverent relationship

with the land. Indigenous educator, Four Arrows urges a move away from today's materialist and consumerist mentality and anthropocentric worldview and advocates, through the use of holistic education practices, rekindling our deep connection to the Earth. He states that "from Indigenous perspective, this kind of connection leads to a communal relationship in which the natural world is a co-participant in our being and doing. Accessing its wisdom requires a different set of understandings and skills, a different mindset that lies at the foundation of all holistic education. (Miller et al., 2019, p. 30). Sobel (1996) also centers the natural world as a teacher in his most famous work, *Beyond Ecophobia*, where he explores the learning needs and characteristics of three primary child development stages and, likewise, proposes three nature engagement methods. He claims that we can cure ecophobia, a fear of ecological problems, and the natural world, with ecophilia, the biological tendency to bond with the earth (Sobel, 1996). He suggests that this progression not only supports a child's biophilic tendencies but also fosters ecological literacy, stewardship, and, most importantly, ethics. Additionally, Cagle (2018, as cited in Collado & Rosa, 2019) determines that childhood experiences in nature are formative for lasting adult-nature bonds and that exposure to or time in nature and (Chawla, 2007) or appreciative experiences in nature (Collado & Rosa, 2019) have consistently correlated with adult participant's pro-environmental behaviors.

Environmental Education (EE) programs, for instance, have been introduced to schools with the intended purpose to "increase student awareness of environmental issues and how their individual actions can affect our world" (Crowe, 2013, p. 77). In many cases, these EE programs expose children to the natural sciences through a structured hands-on activity or through an ecological literacy scope and sequence, but this structured approach has also obstructed a deeper nature connection (Giusti et al., 2018). Sobel (1996) indicates that it is not enough to gain ecological knowledge in order to change environmental behaviors but underscores the criticality of developing a deep reverence. The key here, as noted by Cagle (2018, as cited in Collado & Rosa, 2019), Chawla (2007), and Collado & Rosa (2019), is high quality, and often unobstructed, time in nature to engage a sense of connectedness and subsequently an environmental ethic and/or pro-environmental behaviors. Promisingly, however, some research associated with Forest School programs suggests that there is a statistically

significant difference in pro-environmental attitudes between children who participate in Forest School programs and children who do not. Those who participate in a Forest School program display a stronger pro-environmental attitude (Turtle et al., 2015). These programs integrate child-centered, holistic learning practices in exclusively outdoor settings and have seen extraordinary growth in the last three decades.

The said research suggests that nature connection yields increased environmental awareness and favorable environmental behaviors, which are critical for social change but these behaviors are perhaps directly correlated to the spiritual connection that the learner has with the earth. From this perspective, and in reference to nature exposure as a path to optimal wellness, nature experiences that yield ample time for deep, affective connection are the types of nature experiences that generate the highest level of wellness (Brymer et al., 2010). This lays the groundwork for investigating the cross-section between nature and spirituality.

Crowe (2013), for example, argues that infusing spirituality into EE becomes a value-added experience by offering an "additional way for students to construct knowledge, make meaning of experiences, and move towards authenticity, all contributing to transformation" (p. 76) and ultimately can lead to positive changes in pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. In Crowe's (2013) study, a control and experiment group of environmental science college students received equivalent course syllabi, but a spiritual dimension was added to the experimental group's content. In an effort to test how adding a spiritual dimension to the EE course content transformed students' environmental attitudes and behaviors, Crowe (2013) used a mixed-method approach which included focus group pre/post interviews and reliable pre/post survey instruments that included a survey set for Ecospirituality, environmental knowledge, environmental behavior questions, and the New Ecological Paradigm survey. Crowe (2013) found post-class improvements for both groups in all survey sets that were "indicative of transformation" (p. 85). Notable increases were found with all sets but only found statistically significant results for the environmental behavior survey set. Crowe (2013) calls for additional research on the effectiveness of adding spirituality to EE as a transformative learning tool and specifically for continued analysis on teaching

methodologies that yield positive shifts in environmental behaviors among students.

Unfortunately, the traditional educational system leaves little room for integrating nature as a critical learning environment, cultivating a deep ecological understanding, and developing natural intelligence through a spiritual lens. Ultimately, these educational institutions are oppressing the biophilic tendencies of our students and teachers, robbing them of the psychological and physical benefits of time in nature, and arguably deepening society's nature deficiency.

Developing the Ecospirituality of Teachers

The literature shared here helps to argue for the inclusion of spirituality and nature in education. It underscores the notion that development in the spiritual and natural domains are not only inherent aspects of being human but also have positive effects on wellness and are avenues for personal and socio-environmental transformation. Given these arguments, I contend that a nature-based connection serves as a gateway to secular, Eco-spiritual identity development and believe this development must be nurtured first in teachers in order to efficiently reach students. Therefore, it must be a critical feature of teacher training and education.

Ultimately, the learning environment an educator creates is extremely influential on their students, and in return, students will recreate it. For example, if the environment centers achievement, competition, and individual gain, we can expect this is the world we will see. Suppose educators can be freed from the competitive, standardized, and industrial paradigm to cultivate a deep nature connection and nurture the qualities of the human spirit. In that case, they may have a chance at achieving wellness in themselves and subsequently in their students. Self and identity development are key aspects of teacher training and are achieved through inner work (Palmer, 2003). They need time to develop their spiritual identities and need exposure and lived experience in nature. If they cannot relate to learning with and in nature, then we can't expect that their students will either.

If Ecospirituality is part of a teacher's path toward wellness, what then are of the tools, practices, and systems that best support teacher wellness and development in this realm? Pre-service teaching programs are seeing a slow infiltration of nature-based education and EE content and course

requirements. These efforts can be important in shaping the teaching identities of educators. However, this is a cart before the horse scenario in that deep nature connection is a precursor to ecological understanding and pro-environmental behaviors (Sobel, 1996, Cagle, 2018, as cited in Collado & Rosa, 2019, Collado & Rosa, 2018, Chawla, 2007). These nature education and EE courses, for example, could be enriched using an eco-spiritual lens. By infusing Ecospirituality into all teaching training programs, teachers will be exposed to the healing and restorative aspects of nature and cultivate curiosity, beliefs, and ethical connections to nature. This has the capacity to be personally transformative but also collectively transformative. Palmer (2015) states that "every great movement for social change has been animated by people who did serious inner work..." A teaching force experiencing optimal wellness through Ecospirituality while being committed to Ecopedagogy will perhaps result in an inspired student population full of aspiring stewards and change-makers.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that exposure to spiritual and ecological identity development is beneficial for holistic human development and wellness. It has also highlighted the fact that the spiritual and natural learning dimension is more or less absent from traditional public education institutions. The article also suggests the need for further research in supporting this at a professional development or teacher training level. For example, additional research may investigate how integrating time and space for Eco-spiritual nature connection into teacher training and professional development programs may lead to teacher health and likewise classroom and student wellness. Evidence from this inquiry can better inform best practices in teacher education that will ultimately yield societal benefits.

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