

# *The Thorns and Roses of Contemplative Curriculum: Exploring Undergraduates' Journeys with Self-Awareness*

Jennifer Schneider, Jo Flory, John Smythe

E-mail: [jenschn@okstate.edu](mailto:jenschn@okstate.edu), [jo.flory@okstate.edu](mailto:jo.flory@okstate.edu), [jon.smythe@okstate.edu](mailto:jon.smythe@okstate.edu),

Received September 2023

Accepted for publication September 2023

Published November 2023

## **Abstract**

In this paper, we offer a glimpse into qualitative research that explores the living nature of contemplative curriculum through the experiences of an educator and students at a university in the central United States. While the process of generating data for the project is ongoing, we share findings based on a sliver of the data, namely, what emerged through our collaborative analysis of 11 students' writings produced during an undergraduate course dedicated to contemplative inquiry. Our analysis revealed that students' journeys with the curriculum stimulated a heightened awareness of selfhood that enfolded tensions, epiphanies, and self-acceptances. Their writings provide insights into the potential for contemplative curriculum to nurture self-awareness and personal growth within learners. Students' experiences also reveal how such inquiry invites the self to be sensed more fully and how beliefs constructed about selfhood can become problematized.

**Keywords:** contemplative education, higher education, curriculum studies, curriculum design, students' experiences, self-awareness

---

## **Seeing Together: Higher Education, Curriculum Studies, and Contemplative Studies**

In contemporary contemplative literature there is a clear understanding that teaching and learning are interconnected, and ample discussions are unfolding related to contemplative pedagogies and pedagogical methods. Sanders' (2013) edited collection illuminates various practices to use with learners, as did Gunnlaugson et al. (2014) with, for

example, Baugher's (2014) use of an eye gazing exercise and a loving kindness meditation in a sociology course on death and dying. Learning experiences in classrooms have also been underscored through the work of Grace (2011), who explored contemplative pedagogy in religious studies classrooms, and Fritzsche (2022), who used contemplative practices in higher education geography courses with the aim of promoting anti-oppressive pedagogy. It is also not

uncommon to encounter commentary on how teaching contemplative inquiry and practices can lead to positive outcomes on measures of psychological and physiological well-being related to levels of anxiety, stress, depression, the quality of rest and sleep, having self-confidence and regulating one's thoughts, emotions, and actions (Owen-Smith, 2018; Rodgers, 2016). Yet, Komjathy (2018) cautions educators to not ignore and/or remove contemplative studies from spiritual and religious dimensions for solely scientific justifications of value, which can be a tendency given scientism's influence on research and the reproduction of knowledge. While discussions about pedagogy contribute significantly to contemplative literature, it is imperative in holistic education to acknowledge that pedagogy and learning are also inseparable from curriculum.

Although there is an abundance of discourse on pedagogy, explicit deliberations on the nature of curriculum, curriculum design, and curriculum studies, appear to be far more limited in the existing contemplative literature, but hints do exist. Assessment and evaluation, which are part of curriculum, have been explored by Owen-Smith (2018) and Mah y Busch (2014). Some scholars have also hinted at curricular purposes or aims. Ergas (2017a), for example, emphasized an approach aimed at reclamations of self within teacher education. Similarly, Zajonc (2014) underscored the importance of pedagogy to foster learners' "reflective, contemplative, affective, and ethical capabilities" (p. 1742). Adding to the conversation are those who speak about contemplative programs and developing them as evidenced by works such as Dufon's (2013) advocacy for mindfulness groups for faculty and students, and Owen-Smith's (2018) suggestion that contemplative educators grow their pedagogical awareness through professional

development and practice. Along these lines, Bai, Morgan, Scott, and Cohen (2019), suggest that because "healing" is a central concern of holistic-contemplative pedagogy, teacher education programs should engage teachers with contemplative practices. Engaged practice can help teachers recognize contemplative experiences are ways of knowing that nourish "metacognition, intersubjective awareness, empathy, and values" as well as educate them on the "physiological, psychological, philosophical, and religious foundations" (p. 111). Collectively, these scholars —and certainly others— are addressing aspects of curriculum, but in the literature, many still refrain from explicitly establishing connections with curriculum studies and identifying how their work is integral to curriculum as envisioned, designed, planned, and lived.

Unintentionally overlooking explicit connections to curriculum and curriculum studies is unsurprising, especially since higher education tends to position curriculum as both a thing and a largely unquestioned aspect of education. Across educational institutions, from primary grades to universities, a predominant interpretation of curriculum and its design reigns supreme, so much so that it could be characterized as a paradigm. Its influence is so profound that educators and students may not fully realize the extent to which it shapes their experiences, beliefs, and assumptions in the educational landscape. The paradigm's philosophical underpinnings —which were deeply influenced by the thinking of early curriculum scholars like Franklin Bobbitt (1918, 1924) and later his student Ralph Tyler (1949)— have been referred to as technical rationality (Marshall, et al., 2007; Pinar, 2019), systematic tradition (Null, 2023), professional management (Ylimaki, 2011), and as standardized-management

consciousness (Henderson, Castner, & Schneider, 2018). In the paradigm, rationalism is harnessed in shaping and reinforcing habits of thinking and acting when it comes to curriculum and teaching. Although rationalism is not wrong in being helpful in certain situations and circumstances, how it trickles into curriculum aims, experiences, and designs should give pause to educators with a vested interest in contemplative-holistic education.

When curriculum gets anchored in/with rationalism, it's particularly ill-suited for inner transformation through self-inquiry and self-cultivation as well as ambiguity, questions, uncertainty, creativity, imagination, and so on. Eisner (2001) beautifully articulated some of the glaring consequences of rationalism in curriculum including desires: to control and predict, to compare; contrast, rank, sort, and make hierarchies; to create linearity and have objectivity; to demand clear, specific outcomes; and to use predetermined measurements to evaluate performance. Rationalism puts emphasis on creating a predefined subject matter from existing disciplines. Students are then expected to master that content knowledge because it has been deemed worthwhile to know by an external authority. What this does, consequently, is position curriculum as a noun, or as a *thing* that is external-to-the-self (Pinar, 2019). Extrinsic motivations and future-oriented gains also significantly shape curriculum and thus educational experiences. These in turn do not anchor meaning in/for the present, rather, it gets deferred to a someday, "toward the future [and] the perceived rewards that the imagined future will bring" (hooks, 2003, p. 165). The tendency towards rationalism either intentionally or unwittingly in curriculum design and experiences in higher education is cause for concern, especially

given a longitudinal study by the Higher Education Research Institute that found students often desire to "cultivate their inner selves" but do not encounter opportunities for to do so in curriculum (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011, p. 4).

Although a comprehensive account of contemporary contemplative literature exceeds the scope of our article, we sense there is much potential for conferring meaningful intersections between contemplative-holistic education and curriculum studies because both are deeply concerned with narrowing that can occur around educational purposes and experiences (see Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Ergas, 2019 & 2017b; Mah y Busch, 2014). Seeing curriculum studies and contemplative-holistic education together could provide great potential for cultivating cultural and personal transformation towards rehumanizing ways of knowing, being, and relating in the world through education. A significant shift in the study of curriculum, which began in the 1960s and 70s, was marked by scholars questioning long-standing perspectives on curriculum, including ways Bobbitt and Tyler influenced thinking on curriculum development, design, evaluation, and teaching approaches. The momentum generated around this was called the "reconceptualization" of curriculum studies. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman's (1995) captured this era by highlighting how curriculum became a "complicated conversation," one that is always "intensely historical, political, racial, gendered, phenomenological, autobiographical, aesthetic, theological, and international" (p. 874). Reconceptualist and post-reconceptualist thinkers emphasize the need to thoroughly reconsider curriculum, advocating for broader and more nuanced explorations and understandings. The field of curriculum studies has much to offer contemplative-holistic education in terms of

support for growing awareness on and creating critical distance from the problematic underpinnings of the rationalistic paradigm that dominates curriculum design, problem-solving, and decision-making. Emphasizing curriculum studies as part of the contemplative conversations also presents a chance to foster not only comprehension of pedagogy but also learning and how both are interconnected with curriculum. Exploring curriculum since the reconceptualization (Marshall, et al., 2007; Pinar, 1975) and more recently conversations around its post-reconceptualization (Malewski, 2010) can expand discussions towards more interdisciplinary exchanges on holistic education and research.

### **Situating the Study: Curriculum is Alive**

An ongoing qualitative study informs this article, and that study is being done at a large university in the central United States where Professor H, a pseudonym, has been teaching contemplative inquiry to generations of students. He is well-studied in wisdom traditions (e.g., Ancient Greek, Christian, Buddhism, Hinduism) and has been doing contemplative practices for much of his life, long before he became a professor. Given his personal dedication to contemplative work and the fact that he has created and sustained curriculum for contemplative inquiry for over 20 years, this presents a unique case for understanding contemplative curriculum and pedagogy through the lives of those who experience it, including the professor, as well as students who have taken his courses and/or are taking his courses currently. The study seeks to explore curriculum not as a static object but, rather, as a verb (Pinar, 2019), as “curriculum-as-lived” (Aoki, 1996/2005). Curriculum is alive and always in-the-making because individuals’ lived experiences are in

constant flux, never fixed nor finished. When understood as such, curriculum is dynamic, continuously evolving, and intimately connected to individuals’ experiences and meaning making. By exploring the living nature of contemplative curriculum, the study emphasizes the significance of embodied learning and personal, transformative growth in higher education.

Exploring professor and student experiences is valuable because literature on contemplative pedagogy in higher education has explored both, but at times it has focused more on professors’ perspectives than students’ experiences within transformative classrooms (Duerr, Zajonc, & Dana, 2003; Owen-Smith, 2018). The findings presented in this article respond to the call for greater exploration of students’ experiences by highlighting the self-awareness that emerged for students who took Professor H’s course. During the summer of 2022, 11 students were in his course; seven were international students from Middle Eastern nations who had Muslim backgrounds, while four were in-state students from Christian backgrounds. All of them were traditional students in their late teens or early twenties. They came to this course in part because it was an elective that fulfilled their general education requirements. The students’ academic years ranged from first-year students to seniors, and they were pursuing a variety of academic fields, such as engineering, English, and agriculture. Observations made during the first weeks of the course, coupled with casual conversations with the professor, made it clear that contemplative inquiry was a new subject of exploration for all students in the course.

Professor H’s course was not designed around the accumulation of predetermined content knowledge, but instead he invited students into a

transformative journey of self-exploration, underscoring the interconnectedness of humanity, while acknowledging the distinct paths each individual walks. This existential aim of his curriculum and pedagogy was beautifully captured in the syllabus' course description.

I cannot teach you who and what you are, for that would only be my—or others—word for it. Only you, only each one of us, can take the journey within and experience this, for it is not only knowledge of self that is needed but a deeply felt experience (Professor H, 2022, p. 1).

At the core of the professor's course is an attempt to honor the spiritual and religious contexts for contemplative work, a tether to the existential and phenomenological dimensions of human existence. Active participation was vital to the course, as it blended discussion-based learning with intermittent lectures. Through exploring philosophical and spiritual materials (e.g., Gorman & Graham, 2015; Hesse, 1922; Krishnamurti, 1969; Tolle, 2003) and utilizing practices (e.g., Tingsha chimes, guided meditation, breathing), the course's aim, as articulated in the syllabus, was to delve beyond ordinary notions of identity "towards transformative insights into the question of who and what we really are so that we might enjoy a life of peace, love and joy" (Professor H, 2022, p. 1). In addition to doing readings for each class, students wrote weekly reflective essays connecting class interactions and materials to their personal ideas, memories, lives, and emotions. A culminating essay was completed as a final project, to prompt each student to synthesize their experiences and reflections throughout the course, thus creating a snapshot of their journeys.

### Generating and Analyzing Data

In the on-going qualitative study several methods are being used to generate data, including interviews with the professor and observations of his teaching, interviews with current and former students from his courses, and curriculum artifacts (e.g., syllabi, textbooks, handouts, projects). These methods are generating data that reflects complex, diverse experiences and meanings that arise through a contemplative classroom and beyond. While a range of data is being generated for the study, this paper focuses on themes that emerged from our analysis of students' final reflective essays written in the summer 2022 course. Drawing on Leavy's (2015) insights, our analysis of the students' writings involved cycles of immersion and reflection over a semester. We did not start with predetermined methods for analysis but allowed the process to emerge and evolve organically and fluidly, with one phase leading into the next. The hermeneutic and interpretive subtexts (Rosiek, 2013) that informed our analysis allowed us to uncover complexities and nuances in the students' reflections and make meaning of their experiences with contemplative curriculum.

As a team of three, we continuously engaged in triangulation throughout our process of reading, re-reading, and sharing what we noticed (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). We began analysis by individually reading the written documents to familiarize ourselves with students' reflections and followed this up by sharing our general impressions. We then proceeded to do a second round of reading, but that time we each kept notes and highlighted sentences and words that stood out. We also annotated what we noticed about these areas in each student's essay. We met to discuss what we perceived and compiled all our

annotations into one document. Each of us then reviewed that document, making edits and additions we felt were overlooked. Our final meeting centered on discussion of the revised, compiled document in which we settled upon the multi-dimensional theme of self-awareness.

Also worth noting is that the symbolism of thorns and roses materialized during our discussions of students' reflections, and the metaphor served as inspiration for the title of our paper. We frequently referred to the tensions that students experienced as part of their contemplative journeys as "thorns;" meanwhile, the "roses" were examples of the self-appreciation students developed through experiencing contemplative curriculum. We also identified instances in students' writings that exemplified "shifts" in their thinking as part of their growing self-awareness which we have termed "epiphanies." Journeys with self-awareness can involve both inner discomfort, pain, fear, and resistance, as well as inner beauty, peace, joy, and love. Correlatives such as these seem to be a reality in students' experiences with contemplative curriculum.

### **A Discussion of Self-Awareness**

In this section, we highlight self-awareness, which was an overarching theme in all the students' essays about their experiences with contemplative curriculum. In the context of the course, Professor H encouraged self-awareness by inviting students to question the depths of their personal, constructed identities, and in doing so to go beyond ordinary notions about being somebody, thus honoring how each student is on their own journey of understanding. He also made a point to regularly share moments from his life where he experienced shifts in his awareness of self. What we highlight are aspects of self-awareness that

emerged for students. Specifically, we discuss resistances and tensions, epiphanies, and self-appreciation and self-acceptance that emerged through our analysis of students' writings. These were three distinct, yet at times interwoven, dimensions of self-awareness. This theme of self-awareness adds to the motif of self-exploration in research on contemplative inquiry in higher education (see Baugher, 2014; DuFon & Christian, 2013; Owen-Smith, 2018; Ergas, 2017a, 2017b; Sable, 2014; Gunnlaugson et al., 2022). What we add are insights into what can arise when students are invited to engage in self-exploration. Worth mentioning as well is that although we offer insights on students' journeys with self-awareness through their reflections on their experiences, none of the students' experiences with the contemplative curriculum were the same. Given their unique lived experiences, in our discussion we try to honor the individuality and polyphonic nature of the data in our representation of students' experiences.

### **Dimension One: Resistances and Tensions**

While there have been studies of the tensions and uncertainty that emerge when students engage in contemplative practices (e.g., Baugher, 2014), there has been little study of resistance as a phenomenon that can manifest when students are asked to engage in such self-exploration. Such grappling with the self often involves engaging paradoxical tensions and uncertainty (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Baugher, 2014; Zajonc, 2014; Fritzsche, 2022). In terms of our exploration of students' writings about their experiences with contemplative curriculum, there was a dimension of self-awareness that emerged around *resistances* and *tensions* that several students in the class described experiencing. This dimension was present in places where students' writing

reflected a sense of unease, or of feeling unsettled, or they described feelings of discomfort because of their encounters with contemplative curriculum.

One way these resistances and tensions manifested for several students was when their experiences with the curriculum came into tension with their religious beliefs or cultural backgrounds. For some students, it was triggered by resistance to any encounter with ideas they perceived to be related to religion or spirituality. For example, one student wrote of their resistance to individuals who have had spiritual experiences, the reason “I was having such a strong reaction, was that many of the ideas taught were fears of mine that I was desperately crawling against.” In other instances, resistances and tensions manifested when the ideas students encountered came into tension with their existing religious beliefs, resulting in students pushing back against the professor and the ideas they encountered in the class. One such student who wrote of their Muslim faith, which they believed was in opposition to the ideas related in the class, reflected,

*In first week, I was focusing in how to make the professor wrong in the way of how he thinks about the religious. I definitely against what the professor, but from his point of view he was right about what he was talking about. However, still I against because I feel happy in whenever I do to make God love me.*

This student described feelings of resistance that initially emerged as they struggled with the professor’s perspective, framing this resistance in terms of tension between their religion and the philosophical ideas they encountered.

In other instances, students described tensions and resistances as they grappled with other aspects of selfhood while reflecting on the philosophical ideas presented in the class. For example, one student described tensions that emerged as they wrestled with certain ways attachments were part of their life and sense of self,

*If you become attached to someone it is like you don’t even control yourself anymore. Anything that they would do, and their actions will start to affect you and you will react based on that. I want to be free from attachment as much as possible, but I feel like I cannot be free from that even though it would be nice...*

This student’s awareness of self was tied to an awareness of tensions inherent in a paradoxical situation. Another student encountered internal resistance with the notion of a relative self, which pointed to how we, as humans, construct a sense of self through differentiating ourselves from others and how we often fail to grasp that our lives are built on this useful yet fictional self, an illusion of the I/me that is separate from others and is somehow permanent. The student wrote that this was “the concept that poked me the most,” and they went on to describe how, “I always have struggled and suffered because of the way I viewed my identity.” This student further said that they hold onto “much stigma” and “a lot of self-judgment” about their emotions. Students’ grappling with the self reflects the “personal resonance and meaning making” that Owen-Smith (2018) names as “the distinguishing feature of contemplative practices” (p. 57). In both cases, the tensions and resistances students described experiencing as they encountered ideas embedded in contemplative curriculum led to increased self-awareness, possibly functioning as

“essential bridges to transformational learning” that emerged as the result of necessary engagement with uncomfortable emotions (Baugher, 2014, p. 235).

### Dimension Two: Epiphanies

Another dimension within self-awareness we identified in students’ writings centered around epiphanies. These revelations, although surprising and unexpected, were not expressed by students as discomfort or resistance but, rather, as realizations and insights into aspects of themselves. The epiphanies, in other words, interrupted students’ everyday “nonreflective” (Ryan, 2011) experiences, particularly related to what they thought they knew about who they thought they were. This aligns with what Barbezat and Bush (2014) argue is a significant aim of contemplative practice, to deepen one’s understanding of the self and mind. Numerous students resonated with the topic of the *thinking, reactive mind* introduced by the professor. This concept refers to becoming aware of the mind not as a noun, but as a verb that encapsulates how humans are continuously reacting to the present moment to interpret and judge it, mostly unconsciously, and, when doing this, overlaying past experiences, projections, and conditioning onto what is happening. Many students expressed that they had never given much thought, if any, to what their minds did all day, and were beginning to observe their thinking, reactive mind in a new way.

Becoming aware of the thinking-reactive mind’s tendency to focus not on the present and the amount in which this occurs was a revelation for several students. One student wrote that, “I was always thinking about the future or about money or school that I felt nothing in life is beautiful and

that all we do is suffer, but this class enlightened my view on things.” Another student echoed this sentiment, becoming aware of their mind helped to change how they viewed their life. The student knew they had anxiety and “struggled with the ‘what ifs’ in the world,” but through the course they became aware of how their anxiety made them “live a very future-oriented life, as well as a past-oriented life.” They repeatedly revisited past situations, wishing they had unfolded differently, but the course brought about their realization of how much they were “overall being lost in my head.” While the word epiphany often suggests a sudden and instantaneous recognition of something, other times they are not limited to a sudden, one-time happening. Rather, epiphanies can also emerge from insights that develop gradually over time, building upon previous experiences, thoughts, questions, and even prior epiphanies.

Some students’ epiphanies were ones that linked the thinking, reactive mind to how *conditioning* from society and various social groups affects what we think is real and who we think we are. One student described such an epiphany as “the wake-up call” they needed. Their insight was birthed through reading Krishnamurti’s (1969) ideas coupled with the Buddha’s wisdom on how our minds shape our lives and who we become.

*I never knew how much suffering is caused by being unaware of conditioning. ... I was afraid of accepting my reactions, so I put the blame on others. There were factors in my environment growing up that shaped my conditioning but in the end I am the one that created that self-judgment. ... Learning that we are more than our thoughts and reactions has brought the most peace of mind in my life.*



Another student came to realizations about how place and religion conditioned them. This student lives in the same place they grew up and has not traveled outside of the United States, which made them believe “the Western paradigm was truly the only productive way to live.” This student also wrote about how Christianity had conditioned them and how the “notion of original sin” shaped how they saw themselves as innately flawed but believed that God could save them from their sin. These align with Sable’s (2014) findings that contemplative practices as part of holistic education can positively affect students’ disposition for critical thinking and self-understanding and guide students to an awareness of their own behavior.

Among students’ reflections, there were also epiphanies that illuminated shifting perceptions in terms of relationships with others, i.e., people and things. One of the international students described their realization as, “listen[ing] to others with an open mind” while also striving to “not be fueled by our ideals.” In another example, a student shared how the class made them reconsider attachments and joy in life.

*‘Suffer now, enjoy later’ was something I truly believed in, and I viewed the present as an obstacle. I lived my life attaching my happiness to extrinsic values. ... Fulfillment for me was always some far-away goal. ...I’ve come to learn how important it is just to enjoy what you are doing now.*

Such growing self-awareness related to deepening connections with others harmonizes with another one of Barbezat and Bush’s (2014) suggested aims of contemplative practice, specifically the ways in which contemplative work can support deeper awareness of and connections to others that may

foster the moral and/or spiritual dimensions within partitioners.

### **Dimension Three: Self-Appreciation and Acceptance**

Developing greater self-awareness also created a path to deepening self-appreciation and self-acceptance, described here as trusting oneself, finding value in oneself, letting go of the fear of self, and rejecting the negative judgments imposed by other people. In this sense, contemplative curriculum holds the possibility for healing the damage wrought by deficit-based curriculum, which is a common belief fostered by a rationalist paradigm in education. A deficit-based view is informed by the notion that students have weaknesses, shortcomings, or limitations that need to be remedied for academic success. Contemplative curriculum holds the potential to counteract the depersonalization of educational experiences and curriculum that encourages self-denial. Such denial ends up being helped in various ways such as prompting conformity, seeking homogeneity in students’ learning outcomes, prioritizing rote memorization and regurgitation of information over critical thinking and self-reflection, and denying or suppressing students’ beliefs, emotions, and values in favor of those deemed more important by the curriculum. Curriculum and pedagogy are never neutral acts, values and beliefs always underpin them.

In several instances, students discussed how the course helped them face their negative self-images and inspired greater freedom and happiness as they learned to trust and believe in themselves more than before. For example, one student drew on the example of Siddhartha—a required book for the course—as a way of facing

the self and seeing the self as “good enough”. They wrote,

*I'll be directed and inspired in my thinking if I avoid having the same fear of myself or my thoughts as Siddhartha had. Instead of avoiding my thoughts, I will confront them and, hopefully, come to terms with them...it's good to be positive about ourselves and believe we are good enough to do what is right. My motivating factor from today is that I will keep on working hard knowing that [I] am good enough.*

As this student moves from fearing and avoiding the self to seeing *I* as “good enough,” one might ask what societal and educational beliefs encourage negative self-images and how curriculum might help students unlearn or reinforce negative images of self. As Bai, Morgan, Scott, and Cohen (2019) point out, contemplative work can be understood as an “integral part of holistic education” and can serve as a way of “integrating the healing methodology” in curriculum and teaching (p. 108).

In another example, one student described overcoming their self-doubt in terms of moving beyond notions of “objective” reality to “trust” themselves and their own “intuition.” While this student did not signal a need to reject objectivity and logic, they implied that trusting one’s intuition was something that they had learned to ignore at some point in their life, but it was something they were reconnecting with because of the course. This student also suggested that connecting to their intuition had educational value, especially for them, in terms of coming to a greater understanding of who they thought they were. This observation suggests the need to rethink traditional curriculum that places greater, if not

singular value solely on what is considered “logical.”

A third student discussed how coming to recognize the ways in which social/cultural conditioning harmfully shaped their beliefs and actions led them to a sense of inner freedom and healing. They note,

*Becoming aware of my conditioning has altered the way I view my reactions. Taking a step back and understanding how many problems humans create for ourselves has given me a sense of freedom. It is futile to think about how reality “ought” to be... From simply realizing how confined I was in my mind I've been able to see a change in my reactions. I've been able to change [myself] physically as well. I never knew how much tension I carried and how that affected my mental state.*

While it may seem obvious that contemplative curriculum is concerned with mental, emotional, and spiritual growth, it is less obvious that it can play a role in physical healing as well (Bai, Morgan, Scott, & Cohen, 2019; Owen-Smith, 2018). While there is a growing collection of research around how mindfulness-based practices (e.g., relaxation techniques and meditation) can improve physiological and psychological wellbeing (see Barzebat & Bush, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2018; Prazak et al., 2012; Rodgers, 2016), it is also important to consider what this has to offer future research on contemplative inquiry and pedagogy as well as on conceptualizing curriculum design and development.

### **When Dimensions Entwine**

A significant observation we made, and discussed frequently during our analysis of students' writing, was that the three dimensions of self-awareness were not always clear cut. In some instances, the dimensions were entwined with each other because of the students' intricate, complex webs of experiences and the meanings they were making. Therefore, we want to briefly touch upon and illustrate the co-existence of multiple dimensions. There were occasions when epiphanies around selfhood intermingled with self-appreciation and self-acceptance. An example of this emerged when one student was writing about realizing their egoic mind, of which they said, "I will be forever grateful for this experience." This student wrote about how they never noticed nor thought about the nature of their mind before but came to realize "the thinking mind is a great tool, but it doesn't have to dictate your life." This student reflected on their realizations that their thinking mind created a feeling of confinement through the stories, thoughts, and narratives it generated. They came to an acceptance of it as a part of what their mind does but also acknowledged that they now know they do not have to be confined by it.

Another collection of co-mingling dimensions occurred between epiphanies with resistances and tensions. One student reflected on how asking the seemingly simple question of, "Who really am I?" brought up resistance, because they had never asked themselves this before the class. They wrote, "I thought that I did not need to. The first thought before the class was 'I know who I am, why do I need somebody to tell me who actually I am', and their writing expressed that they "learned that the identity is not a solid thing that can not be change. On the contrary, identity can change all the way around." Another student

conveyed some of their self-awareness as moving from tensions to epiphanies and self-acceptance. They described lingering self-doubt, which they were working to overcome, and how this self-doubt gave rise to feelings of anxiety and self-judgment. In reflecting on observing their mind but doing so nonjudgmentally, this student wrote,

*I found myself observing my actions without judgment shortly after class got out. At that moment, I was able to better understand what the philosophers mean by the silence of stillness, or getting out of your mind. In those few moments of nonjudgmental observation, I recognized how blissfully peaceful it was. I found it really does take so much energy to resist that peace throughout our everyday lives, and in that, it opened my mind up to the possibility that such peace was an option.*

The co-existence of dimensions (i.e., resistance and tensions, epiphanies, and self-appreciation and self-acceptance) within the students' writing illuminates how the notion of self-awareness is not a static construct, but rather a fluid, dynamic phenomenon that is continuously evolving through experiences, perceptions, and interactions with the world. This is an example of how the self can be connected to holistic understandings through engaging multiple "lines of development", in this case through the interconnection of physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects (Bai, Morgan, Scott, & Cohen, 2019, p. 114).

### Parting Thoughts

In a quest for higher education, 25 million students across the United States embarked on academic journeys during 2020-2021, as reported by the United States Department of Education (2022). Amidst their pursuit, many of those students likely had little or even no exposure to contemplative inquiry and practice, let alone holistic education. The students in Professor H's class we speculate are likely representative of the broader student population who have not had opportunities to explore contemplative work, in part because of the stronghold rationalism has in conversations on curriculum and its design in higher education. Both contemplative inquiry and contemplative practices present compelling avenues for reimagining and reconceptualizing educational purposes and experiences within higher education. This is because together they radically reposition self-understanding as worthwhile knowledge to explore and cultivate in educational settings. The self is a subject matter worthy of study and can encourage educational aims for positive self and social transformations. Moreover, holistic-contemplative education has the potential to challenge the dominant paradigm of curriculum that is so pervasive, feeding dehumanization and disconnection in educational institutions as well as fear, conformity, anxiety, insecurity, and domination (Kumar, 2013).

Based on our exploration of undergraduates' reflections on their experiences with contemplative curriculum, as well as insights from the larger study not discussed in this paper, we believe contemplative work is a holistic form of education. A vision of human wholeness is central to holistic education, and Miller (2019) furthers this by reminding us that holistic education is rooted in comprehending reality as interconnected and dynamic. Furthermore, such education embraces intra/inter-relationality and

wholeness as a way of countering fragmentation and division in education's curricula, practices, and institutions and more broadly in contemporary life. Contemplative inquiry, as seen through 11 students' experiences, can offer potentialities for educational experiences that foster growth beyond the traditional higher education curriculum that govern much of teaching and learning through inviting inwardly transformative educational experiences for students and even educators. Although subtle changes in personal experience are difficult to quantify, and we did not attempt to do so in our analysis, our examination of students' reflections on their own experiences illuminate how embodied and experiential growth are encouraged with contemplative inquiry. Such growth engenders a deeper comprehension of how a person relates to their sense of self, as well as how the self exists in relationship with human beings, other beings, material reality, and the universe.

## References

- Aoki, T. T. (1996/2005). Spinning inspirited images in the midst of planned and live(d) curricula. In W. F. Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.). *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp. 413-423). Erlbaum.
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. (2011). *Cultivating the spirit: How college can enhance students' inner lives*. Jossey-Bass.
- Bai, H., Morgan, P., Scott, C., & Cohen, A. (2019). *Holistic-contemplative pedagogy for*

- twenty-first century teacher education: Education as healing. In Miller, J. P., Nigh, K., Binder, M. J., Novak, B. & Crowell, S. (Eds). International Handbook of Holistic Education, (pp. 108-117). Taylor & Francis.
- Barzebat, D., & Bush, M. (2014). *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Baughner, J. E. (2014). *Contemplating uncomfortable emotions: Creating transformative spaces for learning in higher education*. In O. Gunnlaugson, et al. (Eds). *Contemplative learning, and inquiry across disciplines*, (pp. 15-29). State University of New York Press.
- Bobbitt, F. (1918). *The curriculum*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Bobbitt, F. (1924). *How to make a curriculum*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Duerr, M., Zajonc, A., & Dana, D. (2003). *Survey of transformative and spiritual dimensions of higher education*. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(3), 177-211.
- Dufon, M. A., & Christian, J. (2013). *The formation and development of the mindful campus*. In Sanders, L. A. (Eds). *Contemplative studies in higher education* (pp. 65-72). Jossey-Bass.
- Eisner, E. W. (2001). *The educational imagination: On the design and evaluation of school programs* (3rd ed.). Pearson.
- Ergas, O. (2019). *A contemplative turn in education: Charting a curricular-pedagogical countermovement*. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 27(2), 251-270.
- Ergas, O. (2017a). *Reclaiming "self" in teachers' images of "education" through mindfulness as contemplative inquiry*. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 14(3), 218-235.
- Ergas, O. (2017b). *Reclaiming ethics through "self": A conceptual model of teaching practice*. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 68. 252–261.
- Fritzsche, L. (2022). *Integrating contemplative pedagogy and anti-oppressive pedagogy in geography higher education classrooms*. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 46(2), 167-184.
- Gorman, S. (Producer), & Graham, L. (Director). (2015). *Be here now* [Documentary]. Impact Partners.
- Grace, F. (2011). *Learning as a path, not a goal: Contemplative pedagogy - it's principles and practices*. *Teaching, Theology and Religion*, 14(2), 99–124.
- Gunnlaugson, O., Sarath, E. W., Scott, C., & Bai, H. (Eds). (2014). *Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines*. State University of New York Press.
- Gunnlaugson, O., Cueto de Souza, R., Zhao, S., Yee, A., Scott, C., & Bai, H. (2022).

- Revisiting the nature of transformative learning experiences in contemplative higher education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 21(1), 1-18.
- Henderson, J. G., Castner, D. J., & Schneider, J. L. (2018). *Democratic curriculum leadership: Critical awareness to pragmatic artistry*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hesse, H. (1922). *Siddhartha*. Hachette Books.
- hooks, b. (2013). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2018). *Meditation is not what you think: Mindfulness and why it is so important*. HarperCollins.
- Kumar, A. (2013). *Curriculum as meditative inquiry*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Leavy, P. (2015). *Methods meets art: Arts-based research practice (2nd ed.)*. Guilford Press.
- Mah y Busch, J. (2014). *A pedagogical heartbeat: The integration of critical and contemplative pedagogies for transformative education*. *The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*, 1(1), 121-142.
- Malewski, E. (Ed.). (2010). *Curriculum studies handbook: The next moment*. Routledge.
- Marshall, D. J., Sears, J. T., Allen, L. A., Roberts, P. A., & Schubert, W. H. (2007). *Turning points in curriculum: A contemporary American memoir (2nd ed.)*. Merrill/Prentice Hall.
- Merriam, S. B., & Grenier, R. S. (2019). *Assessing and evaluating qualitative research*. In S. B. Merriam & R. S. Grenier (Eds.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 19–32). Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, J. P. (2019). *The holistic curriculum (3rd ed.)*. Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Null, W. (2023). *Curriculum: From theory to practice (3rd ed.)*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Owen-Smith, P. (2018). *The contemplative mind in the scholarship of teaching and learning*. Indiana University Press.
- Prazak, M., Critelli, J., Martin, L., Miranda, V., Purdum M., & Powers, C. (2011). *Mindfulness and its role in physical and psychological health*. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, 4(1). 91-105. doi: 10.1111/j.1758-0854.2011.01063
- Professor, H. (2022, Summer). [Syllabus] [Unpublished raw data].
- Pinar, W. F. (Ed.). (1975). *Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists*. McCutchan Publishing.
- Pinar, W. F. (2019). *What is curriculum theory? (3rd ed.)*. Routledge.
- Rodgers, H. B. (2016). *The mindful twenty-something: Life skills to handle stress...and everything else*. New Harbinger Publications
- Rosiek, J. L. (2013). *Pragmatism and post-qualitative futures*. *International Journal of*

Qualitative Studies in Education, 26(6), 692–705.  
doi: 10.1080/09518398.2013.788758

Ryan, F. X. (2011). Seeing together: Mind, matter and the experimental outlook of John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley. The American Institute for Economic Research.

Sanders, L. A. (Eds). Contemplative studies in higher education. Jossey-Bass.

Sable, D. (2014). Reason in the service of the heart: The impacts of contemplative practices on critical thinking. The Journal of Contemplative Inquiry, 1, 1–22.

Tolle, E. (2003). Stillness speaks: A guide to spiritual enlightenment. United Kingdom: Yellow Kite Books.

Tyler, R. (1949). Basic principles of curriculum and instruction. University of Chicago Press.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Trend generator. Retrieved from Student Enrollment - How many students enroll in postsecondary institutions annually? (ed.gov)

Ylimaki, R. (2011). Critical curriculum leadership: A framework for progressive education. New York, NY: Routledge.

Zajonc, A. (2014). Contemplative pedagogy in higher education: Toward a more reflective academy. In O. Gunnlaugson, et al. (Eds). Contemplative learning and inquiry across disciplines (pp. 15–29). State University of New York Press.

### Author Bio

**Jennifer Schneider** is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies at Oklahoma State University and deeply influenced by her studies in the arts and humanities. Her work seeks to challenge longstanding reductionistic propensities within curriculum and teaching while seeking regenerative possibilities. Her scholarly and creative pursuits emphasize the 'art of living,' foregrounding holistic education through experiential, aesthetic, ecological, and contemplative exploration.

**Jo Flory** is a doctoral candidate and graduate research assistant in curriculum studies at Oklahoma State University and a high school English teacher. She is currently participating in a collaborative action research project, "Teaching and Practicing Mindfulness in the Secondary Classroom", alongside Dr. Hongyu Wang and fellow secondary teachers. Recent publications include an article on secondary curriculum in the Oklahoma English Journal and a co-authored article, "Curriculum in a Third Space", with Dr. Wang. Jo's research interests include the intersection of popular culture texts and political discussion in the secondary English classroom and the nexus of mindfulness and currere writing.

**Jon L. Smythe** began his educational career as an English teacher in a rural part of Cameroon, Africa. Being enfolded in the beauty of nature, spirituality, creativity, multiplicity, and interrelatedness continues to inspire his work in the fields of aesthetics, arts-based curriculum, and the internationalization of curriculum studies.