Secular Spirituality in Schools

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Abstract

While it is appropriate that secular education be free of religion, it need not be free of spirituality. Public-secular school boards are charged with teaching students of all religions and no religion. Yet some of the most pointed crises in our schools—mental health challenges, loneliness, bullying, inequities for racialized students, and others—could be addressed by meeting students' spiritual needs. Furthermore, many pressing social problems, including white supremacy and gender-based violence, are interconnected with spiritual crises. This article explores and synthesizes critical pedagogy and spirituality to construct a vision for secular spirituality in schools.

Keywords: *religion, spirituality, well-being, pedagogy, teacher education*

Over the last several decades, public education has become increasingly secular, including the removal of prayer and religious teaching and iconography. While this indeed ensures that a dominant religious ideology cannot subsume the minority religions in public education, it is not a perfect solution. This article combines the theories of critical pedagogy, intersectionality, and religion/spirituality to construct a vision of how we might foster a secular spirituality in schools that honours freedom of religion and from religion while tending to the spiritual needs of students and school communities.

In education, we are seeing a societal upswing in attention paid to wellness and holistic education (O'Brien, 2016). We are rightly devoting teaching time to mindfulness/meditation practices (Tisdell & Riley, 2019), community-building exercises (Reeves, 2019), restorative justice approaches (Miller-Jones & Marks Rubin, 2020), and holistic teaching that considers the mental, emotional, and physical needs of children (Miller, 2019). Many of these approaches, under the guise of 'well-being,' come from spiritual or religious foundations. For example, meditation is rooted in Buddhist and Hindu teachings (Kohn, 2008). Indigenous systems of spirituality prioritize holistic and global pedagogies that do not seek to divorce students' minds from their bodies, emotions, or spiritualities (Morcom, 2017). And most religions focus on

identity construction, community-mindedness, and participation as cornerstones of how they operate.

Because schools are secular spaces, however, we understandably avoid the spiritual dimensions of the very practices we are teaching. At best, we excise some of their power (Wright, 2000, p. 81). At worst, we appropriate traditions like smudging, sharing circles, and yoga without proper context or understanding. Moreover, we often do these things in a haphazard way (Dewhirst et al., 2014) without fully considering the spiritual needs of students and how we could be meeting them in the school setting. Still, though, we are beginning to learn how detrimental it is to the well-being of our students to ignore the spiritual dimension. Through the important work of Dr. Lisa Miller and her team at the Spirituality Mind Body Institute at Teachers College Columbia University, we are learning more and more how inherently interwoven spiritual needs and self-regulation, well-being, and opportunities for flourishing are (Miller, L., 2016; 2021).

While there has been much theorizing on the need for spirituality in schools (e.g., Oldenski & Carlson, 2002; Wright, 2000), there is a need for further analysis about the possibilities for secular spirituality in schools currently. Previous work on spirituality and education pre-dates the rampant rise of what scholars call "conspirituality" (Ward & Voas, 2011), a blend of spirituality and conspiracy theory/misinformation. The well-being industry itself has fallen prey to "conspiratorial" thinking, thus impeding how educators may meaningfully approach well-being in education, particularly when attempting to enjoin it with the depth that spiritual approaches may provide (Burton, 2020). Both the rise of "conspirituality" and the decolonizing and anti-racist possibilities of intersectionality as a framework to think through spirituality in education (Boyd, 2021) inspire new directions in how spirituality in schools may be taught, embodied, and enacted.

This paper addresses two main research questions. First, is there a need for spirituality in schools, and if so, what are the problems that spirituality might help address for students and educators? Second, how can we bring spirituality into secular schools in a way that balances meaning and respect for pluralism? The analysis begins from the premise that it is right that schools be secular. While there is a place for religious education, public education where people of any, all, and no religion come together is considered essential to maintaining diverse societies. Secular schools are necessary; however, they need not be free of spirituality, and, in fact, secular spirituality may help tackle problems overwhelming schools and society today.

Positioning Myself

This interrogative process traverses not just the range of my work but also my life, thus highlighting how much our learning is tied to identity and community**.** My teaching is rooted in anti-racist education and in Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP). This methodology goes beyond multiculturalism to recognize that we need to undo the hegemony of our largely white-created and white-representing curriculum and ensure that each student sees their whole self reflected in their school environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). My teaching falls broadly within the field of social justice education, prioritizing equity and diversity as deeply embedded in pedagogical approaches.

I am a teacher of teachers and also a rabbi. In unifying these different aspects of my work and self I have arrived at the concept of secular spirituality. I have never imposed Jewish teachings on my students, but those teachings ground and centre me; nor do I expect the kindergarten to 12

teachers I help train to teach about and from religion per se. But they very well may use the lessons of their faith or culture in creating opportunities for communal connection and well-being with their students. Most faiths/cultures are centered on principles of justice and goodness, and most offer rituals, communities, and practices designed to better the lives of adherents with a view of bettering the world.

It has become clear to me that the needs of my students can be met through a spiritual approach—but this need not be based in religion, nor indeed should it be. Most of the congregants I serve identify as secular or *spiritual but not religious*. Many of the students with whom I work struggle with stress and anxiety, loneliness, depression, and feelings of being overwhelmed. The tools of secular spirituality can address their needs. I see it in my congregants, my students, and myself.

Defining Terms

This paper relies on the following terms: *critical pedagogy* (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007), *critical spirituality* (Gardner, 2017), and *well-being* (O'Brien, 2016). Each of these terms has multiple definitions, depending on the perspectives of the scholars engaging with them. For the purposes of this paper, critical pedagogy refers to theories of education, including teacher education, which aim to challenge the status quo in order to foster more holistic and equitable classrooms, schools, and systems. The reflective quality that enables theorists and education practitioners to engage in critical pedagogy is also required in an approach to critical spirituality. According to Gardner (2017), critical spirituality means:

> Seeing people holistically, seeking to understand where they are 'coming from' and what matters to them at a fundamental level; the level that is part of the everyday but which also transcends it. This framework can be used to argue for the integration of the critical, the reflective and the spiritual into a coherent approach to practice that is holistic, inclusive and addresses issues of social justice. (p. 9)

I agree with this framework, and I am deliberately terming this "secular spirituality." As this paper will explore, spirituality is nebulous because it touches on so many aspects of what is crucial and most meaningful in our lives. One potential pitfall is grounding a sense of the spiritual in any one, or even a combination, of religious traditions. In Rachael Kessler's *The Soul of Education* (2000) two students share their feelings of encountering discussions of faith in class, with students who do not have belief in a higher power being affirmed as much as those who do (p. 35). Wrestling and reckoning with these questions can have a place in school. However, in my conception of secular spirituality, spirituality is not connected to religion or faith traditions. Secular spirituality is finding and fostering what matters, on the level of the human/earth-based experience. It includes meaning, joy, purpose, creativity, connection, and love. It is for all students, all people, to develop the sacred sense of who they are, independent of, or in addition to, any faith tradition they may come from. Gardner's (2017) definition is useful in that it bridges the self and other; the everyday and the transcendental (put in religious terms, the sacred and the profane); and, crucially, focusing on "what matters" most to people in their pursuit of self-identity and their social role.

While well-being is a term that is used commonly in schools today (White, 2011), it is rarely defined or adequately understood. This paper considers well-being to encompass physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental health, at the level of the individual and the community. It refers to a sense of wholeness and the ability for people to flourish and thrive. We need an intersectional approach to consider critical pedagogy, critical spirituality, and

well-being because without such a lens each of these runs the risk of further marginalizing, rather than empowering, equity-deserving groups.

Holistic Education

The field of holistic education has made excellent inroads into fostering secular spirituality in schools. Rachael Kessler's *The Soul of Education* (2000), Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1998), Jack Miller's *The Holistic Curriculum* (2019), and many other important works such as Lingley's conception of "spirituality responsive pedagogy" (2016), help educators conceive of ways to connect what goes on in the classroom to what really matters in building a meaningful life. This includes care, compassion, creativity, critical thinking, community, and courage. Despite this excellent work, schools are still struggling with how to bring in concepts of spirituality, soulful education, or putting into practice strategies we know can help students develop into their best selves. Why? One reason is that there are legitimate concerns over religious dogma entering the classroom. Another is a concern over cultural appropriation of techniques that emerge from discrete spiritual traditions (e.g., yoga and meditation). Naming and claiming secular spirituality, outlining what it can look like and feel like for educators and students, can help bridge the divide between the good work happening in holistic education settings and more mainstream educative contexts. One way this can happen is by focusing on inclusion in intersectional terms, so that issues of representation and culturally relevant pedagogies are intentionally made part of the holistic education sphere.

Pedagogies of the Intersectionally Oppressed

For several decades, teacher education programs have featured Paulo Freire as the patriarch of power politics in schools. We teach his ideas in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972) as the model of how to avoid being a frontal, authoritarian, top-down teacher and instead encourage a democratized classroom. I usually pair Freire with John Dewey's pedagogy, including and especially his work on democracy and education (Dewey, 1916). Dewey reminds us that we need to teach and reach the whole person, seeing them not just as a student or learner but as an individual, and our classrooms as communities, where the vital work of education for citizenship and community betterment takes place. Important pieces in the Deweyan journal *Democracy & Education* argue for a merging between education for democracy and education that is spiritually infused, for example in the concepts of spiritually responsive pedagogy (Lingley, 2016), wholeness (Masterson & Gatti, 2022), and mindfulness (Hyde & LaPrad, 2015).

The influence of Freire and Dewey is undeniable, but their theories need updating by using an intersectional lens. Both came from patriarchal, male-dominated societies, and their theories are consequently centred on the male experience (Gayman, 2011; Weiler, 2001). While Freire's students were Brazilian and largely working class or poor, his ideas get mapped onto contexts where there are many privileged students. We still must create democratized classrooms, but today, in North America, when we speak about pedagogies of the oppressed, who are the oppressed?

We include women and girls, people who are queer, trans and non-binary, Black and Indigenous people, those living with disabilities, and many others. Freire's pedagogy was built out of his commitment to liberation theology—religious teachings that help empower the oppressed and dispossessed rooted in a sense of everyone's divine worth (Kirylo & Boyd, 2017). This liberation theology can become meaningfully embedded in critical spirituality in a broader frame (Boyd, 2021;

Boyd, 2012, p. 759; Gardner, 2017, p. 34; Oldenski & Carlson, 2002, p. 133). In the North American context, liberation theology is also at the centre of much anti-racist theory and activism. Black scholars in particular offer theories that are rooted in religious tradition. Black theorists like Cornel West ([1993] 2017) and bell hooks (1994), and other intersectionality-minded theorists, share a deeply rooted sense of spirituality.

For Cornel West and bell hooks, liberation theology compels a sense of love. West says, "that justice is what love looks like in public" (2011) and hooks, particularly in her *All About Love* (2000), discusses that relationality is central to meaningful community and democratic engagement. For both, oppression is not only about inequitable policy; it is also about a failure of love and empathy. These problems require holistic and spiritual responses. Like Freire, both West and hooks base their social theories on church teachings. One of the most radical spiritual lessons is that we are compelled to love not just our neighbour, but the stranger. While the church teachings themselves are not appropriate to share in secular schools, the lessons about love are foundational. We often shy away from expressing emotions like love in school, but an ethic of love as tied to freedom is necessary for meaningful inclusion and equity. Students need to feel a sense of belonging, rooted in a deep sense of care, in order to thrive.

Educators have argued over decades for Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy (CRRP), as first defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995a), as a way of fostering inclusion via meaningful approaches to representation in curriculum. True, we need to diversify our texts, images, and approaches in curriculum, but CRRP, anti-racism, and intersectional approaches to inclusion cannot work when we excise them from their spiritual roots and teachings; this presents a challenge. The above theorists all come from a spiritual framework rooted in Christianity, but our schools need to offer a sense of belonging across religious lines. How can we engage the spiritual teachings about love, rooted in liberation theology, in schools that need to de-centre themselves from a Christian worldview? When we consider caring classrooms, places where students can flourish and be their whole selves, we find that secular spirituality may be crucial to their creation.

We live in a world in which some people *are* taught that they matter while others are not. When Ladson-Billings speaks about CRRP, she notes that it is not enough to draw on the "cultural competencies" of students; we must teach students to be "critically conscious" of the "cultural norms, values, mores and institutions that create and maintain social inequities" (1995b, p. 162). A reductionist view of CRRP is that it simply brings food, festivals, folklore, and fashion (Meyer & Rhoades, 2006) into the classroom. Done well, though, CRRP creates and holds space for complex and nuanced understandings of power. CRRP is necessary because our curriculum and educational institutional structures have been predicated on a white, male, and Protestant experience (Morgan, 2018). The good news is that we can fix this by changing our metrics of success (for the educator and the student) so that we can consider happiness and well-being part of how we understand the quality of education we provide (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015).

So, what can it look like to enjoin CRRP and intersectional approaches to education with the ethic of liberation theology for our students? When we approach teaching from a spiritual standpoint, we encourage students to find their true meaning and purpose. In both the content and pedagogical approaches, we take in our teaching, we can loosen the strictures of traditional education so that every person can find, share, and feel proud of their

inherent worth and gifts. This can look like differentiated instruction and assessment. This can take the shape of sharing circles and writing/art prompts that allow for a range of experiences and expressions. It can also ask students to investigate their personal identities and histories through classroom projects that make explicitly curricular the value that each of them belongs.

Care, Spirituality, and Flourishing

All of the above strategies are only possible in contexts of caring classroom communities set up to foster human flourishing. Nel Noddings (2005) takes up Dewey's ideas on democracy in her work on the purpose and function of education, related to her ample writing on the duty of care for education, how education can produce happiness (2003), and education for a democratic society (2011, 2013). Noddings encourages educators to foster holistic environments in which students get outside, ask big questions, and follow their interests. She resists the idea of education as merely job training and envisions its broader, fuller, and deeper purpose. We know from the realms of both education and religion that people need to be in relationships with others, to experience a connection with the natural world, to ask big and deep questions, and that we are more than what we do for a living and can produce, for all of us have intrinsic value. Noddings herself considers these pursuits spiritual and suggests we foster spiritual and religious literacies and dialogues in school.

Some of Noddings' lesser-known work refers to Dewey's also little-known book *A Common Faith,* in which he argues that schools should be a place for discovering awe and meaning in life in a spiritual sense. Despite agreeing with his premise, Noddings says *A Common Faith* is one of Dewey's "least effective books" (2009a, p. 12). She takes issue with Dewey's idea of a common faith being completely divorced from religion, yet she understands that schools need to be places for people of any and no religion to be able to be their whole selves. Noddings points out that there is a large segment of people in today's society who call themselves "spiritual but not religious" (2009a, p. 12) and she explores which spiritual concerns schools might address. Here and in many other works, Noddings advocates for *religious literacy* (students should learn about religion) and something I call *spiritual literacy*—that students should understand the big questions and debates common to many religions: What is our purpose and what is life's meaning?

In her writings on care, happiness, and democracy, Noddings is concerned that we do a disservice if we extricate religion and spirituality from schools, as these are fundamental to our lives as individuals as well as to the constructions, texts, institutions, and central narratives of our society. In terms of how we foster happiness—something that Noddings (2003) writes about specifically, but which undergirds so much of her work—she argues that students long for the sacred in their schooling. We tell students they are *off task* when gazing out the window (2009b, p. 28), neglect to discuss whether they have seen a beautiful sunrise and teach poetry by hacking it apart instead of interrogating the feelings of awe it might provoke. We need to understand human beings as essentially spiritual and that our relative happiness depends on those spiritual elements being integrated into our experiences in school and beyond. For Noddings (2003), happiness is tied to democracy. People who are whole are better citizens, and the people who have the skills and capacity to work for a flourishing society are often people who flourish themselves.

Noddings suggests that in limiting education to a program of college preparation, conceiving schools as job training centres, "we risk losing the vision of

democracy that respects every form of honest work and cultivates a deep appreciation of interdependence" (2011, p. 1). Human beings have intrinsic value, but our schools teach that our value comes from our ability to be productive. bell hooks' (2000) framework on love is a challenge to what she often terms the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal class structure" (p. 19), teaching us that we cannot reduce human beings to their value in terms of what they can produce, how they can support an economy that is built on oppression, but rather that everyone is deserving of love; love is radically unconditional, not contingent on what one does but based on what and who one is. The idea that each human being is valuable and, one might say, holy, is a religious idea; nevertheless, that idea has an important and necessary role to play in schools. Students need to understand that they are inherently worthy regardless of their grades, test scores, or other achievements.

Even more than when hooks and Noddings originally wrote these words, we are at a crucial moment. Our democracies are, indeed, under threat, from misinformation and deep, deep division. We need to show our students meaningful care, empower them to care for one another, and help heal societal disenfranchisement, disengagement, and division by promoting love in our classrooms and schools.

This can look like restorative justice practices when people cause harm. It can include helping students learn about and access tools for self-care and community care, such as mindfulness, meditation, sharing and witnessing each other's stories. It can include breathwork and sit spots. It also must recentre the whole being of the student, not simply their academic selves. So much of the messaging of care and caring has to do with simply acknowledging our humanity, including our flaws and missteps, and feeling affirmed anyway.

Martin Seligman, one of the most important voices in positive psychology, tells us that one of the keys to authentic happiness and well-being is to spend much of one's life in a state he calls "flourishing" (2011, p. 26). As educators, we want our students to flourish, except we often assume flourishing means to excel in the world of work. Seligman demonstrates that flourishing includes but is not limited to one's career. Those who flourish have healthier relationships, lives that feel more purposeful and fulfilling, experience lower rates of depression and anxiety, and are happier.

Seligman makes a passionate case that we can and should teach the tools of well-being in school and that doing so will create skills and attitudes necessary for our students to flourish throughout their lives. We can teach and embody what he calls "positive education" (2011, p. 89), a merging of pedagogy and positive psychology that puts the goal of flourishing at the centre of the project and purpose of teaching. Seligman and many others affiliated with the movement of positive psychology believe that religion and spirituality are necessary components for happiness and for flourishing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Tal Ben-Shahar (2007), another positive psychologist, notes that well-being is fostered through living lives of purpose and meaning. There is a correlation in the research between those who are spiritual and those who are happier. He says there is a "link between spirituality and significance; a person who finds her activities significant, or meaningful, is more likely to experience spirituality and, therefore, happiness" (p. 176). Like Seligman, Ben-Shahar believes that the tools of happiness can and should be taught in schools. Positive psychology research clearly indicates that happiness and flourishing are created in the lives of people who strive to build meaning and purpose into their lives.

Examples of practices that can be taught in schools include gratitude journaling, practicing saying thank you and sharing appreciations for oneself and others, spending time in nature, opening ourselves up to awe, and more. Much of this could happen during a typical school day. For example, in physical education we can have a moment to be grateful for our bodies; in science class we can have a *wow* moment noticing the intricate patterning of cells in plants; we can go outdoors and focus on our sensory experiences; we can read something in literature and marvel at the cleverness of word play or the evocativeness of poetic or prosaic description.

Dr. Lisa Miller, a student of Seligman's, brings together positive psychology and education research at the Spirituality Mind Body Institute (SMBI) at Columbia University's Teachers College. Her work on neuroscience and the spiritual dimension is opening up new ways of understanding how inherently connected spirituality and learning, self-regulation, and well-being truly are. One of the supporters of her work is Steven C. Rockefeller, who is also a contributor to research that synthesizes Miller's work and John Dewey's interest in both democracy and spirituality. Rockefeller argues that the key to a thriving democracy is spiritually well individuals, beginning with their whole child education (2022). Miller's work, along with that of the SMBI more broadly, is showing us what we already know: there are concrete and measurable impacts to practice spirituality in the context of schools.

In my own context of Judaism, it is the mission of one of the communities I lead that "Judaism fosters two-directional goodness" (Handlarski, n.d.) and will enrich our lives so that we can become better agents of change and justice in the world. This intention is our particular mission, but the idea is not exclusive to any one community or culture/religion. I believe that the heart of any religion or spirituality is exactly this two-directional goodness. Religion and spirituality offer meaning and purpose. One does not need to be religious in order to ask and begin to answer questions about our place in the world. Questions like, "What am I here to do?" drive both success in school and overall well-being that schools can help cultivate. We need to take the focus off achievement in the ways we tend to think of it, instead encouraging students to pursue paths of purpose that will lead to a life of meaning. I truly believe that students are not meaningfully motivated by grades and test scores (Foley et al., 2008). I believe they are motivated if they are taught, and if they come to believe that their lives matter and that they owe the world their contribution because they have something meaningful to offer.

In order to actualize our duty to care as educators, which I teach as being the cornerstone of everything we do, we need to accept and respect that religion and spirituality are part of our students' lives, and we need to engage them at the appropriate point. It is inappropriate to teach from the perspective of any one religion in secular schools. However, we can foster conversations that transcend religious tenets and teachings, asking students to confront their spiritual sides. Theorist Brené Brown (2017), attempting to provide a definition of spirituality that transcends any religion, ultimately defines spirituality as:

> [R]ecognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives. (p. 34)

Crucially, this definition is connected to her research on belonging. We cannot adequately fulfill the duty to care for students if we do not create classrooms and communities in which each individual deeply understands their own sense of belonging. From an intersectional perspective, when people experience oppression, they experience a profound sense of otherness (Ideland & Malmberg, 2014), the antithesis of a sense of belonging. If spirituality grounds us in a sense of our connectedness to one another and to something larger, a power greater than all of us that can be understood as secular (nature, justice) or as supernatural (deities or a supreme force), we can tap into the spiritual to create meaningful care and belonging in schools.

Many schools have already done tremendous work on anti-bullying and inclusion. The sense of belonging is further strengthened when there are an array of clubs and groups students can join. Some of the most important work can be done by teachers who create structures to promote belonging in their classes. This can range from meaningfully greeting students at the door with a high five, handshake, hug, or smile (note, consent is needed). It includes affirming the contributions students make in class verbally, by displaying art, and by having students teach each other. Even insightful seating plans, buddy systems, and helping students foster their leadership capacities can go a long way in promoting belonging. In the secondary school classroom, it also includes being sure to discuss social issues, community, and culture so that students see themselves reflected in their world and can begin to analyze and affirm their place in it.

In the religious/spiritual sector, belonging is one of our central foci now. Indeed, one of the most impactful facets of religious communities is giving people a sense that they belong somewhere. We can meet this important need in schools. We can also borrow from religious and spiritual tenets to improve the well-being of our students without upholding one religion as supreme or central. While every religion is spiritual in nature, not all spirituality is religious in nature. What tools and technologies that religion provides can be brought into a secular environment?

What Kind of Spirituality?

Until very recently, most educational theorists have argued the question whether religion should be taught in schools while framing religion in ways that are traditionally understood. This paper is in conversation with those theorists. I do believe that we need to teach about world religions and faith systems, like Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Indigenous spiritual traditions; however, spirituality as it is understood and practised today both encompasses and greatly diverges from these traditional forms.

Educational theorists who picked up Dewey's ideas of a common faith (1962) have tended to argue about how much faith is acceptable in school (and they generally mean Christian faith). Some argue for more (Bevan, 2011; Setran, 2012) and some for less (Hickman, 2016; Watras, 2011), but the debates often centre around issues like school prayer, the evolution/intelligent design debate, public funding of religious groups on university campuses, and religious themes in school-taught literature (Jones & Sheffield, 2010). There have been legal challenges and lengthy arguments in the academy and public spaces about issues such as the use of prayer in opening exercises (Stephenson, 1991), religious influence in the moral development of students—which today is often called *character education*, the funding of minority religious education (White, 2003), and all the many attendant and related battles about just how salient the separation of church and state is or should be.

Today, however, we must acknowledge that whatever we might call spiritual goes well beyond the church (Miller, 2019). This is freeing from the standpoint of fostering a secular spirituality in schools, since so much of the spiritual has already been critiqued in our society. Still, the critique brings its own set of challenges, and it is these challenges that I believe are pressing enough to move us from the traditional conversations about spirituality in school so that we may tackle emerging social problems.

In my rabbinic professional development, one of the most transformative resources has been *How We Gather* (2016) by Angie Thurston, Casper ter Kuile, and Rev. Sue Phillips, creators of the Sacred Design Lab out of the Harvard Divinity School. In this guide, ter Kuile, Thurston, and Phillips argue that religion is being "unbundled" and "remixed" (p. 7). What people used to find in religious communities—things like belonging, community, values, support, meaning, purpose, and ideology—are now being found in secular spiritual communities including meditation apps, Afro-Flow yoga classes, and Instagram social justice hashtags.

These online and secular gatherings are often well-established in youth culture. The unbundling and remixing of spiritual practices outside of religion and into a secular frame compel us to consider gathering, community, ritual, meaning, and belonging anew. Schools are the primary institutions in which young people of all backgrounds gather. Reflecting unique school cultures through the unbundling and remixing of spirituality can establish new pathways to connection and empathy.

What we are learning is that there is a secular spirituality being fostered outside of schools, in places that touch the lives of students, and to a rapidly increasing frequency and degree. On the surface, this is a positive outcome. It is great that anyone of any or no religion can find spiritual meaning in a variety of locations. The unbundling and remixing of religion is a win for those seeking the separation of church and state. However, there are some pitfalls. In *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World*, Burton (2020) profiles those who identify as Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR). The Nones (because when asked on surveys and censuses what their religion is, they check *none*) are the same group Noddings (2003, 2005, 2009a, 2009b) writes about in her work on spirituality and care in education. In North America, people are beginning to refer to the rise of the Nones based on data from the PEW Research Center that articulated the growth in the numbers of people who identify as SBNR, and noting especially that the younger a person is, the more likely they are to identify as a *none* or SBNR (Lipka & Gecewitz, 2017). Note that these are identities largely formed in opposition to something—people beginning to identify more strongly with what they do not believe (in the God of the Judeo-Christian Bible and so on) than with what they do. Not surprisingly, these identities seek expression in other avenues: Burton (2020) covers many contemporary modes, such as performance theatre, groups forming around sexual experimentation and non-traditional ways of viewing sexuality, and the wellness industry. These are all positive, affirming, and beautiful modes of creating culture and community. However, she writes that her book is also about:

> …charlatans. It's about capitalism and corporations and the new, cutthroat Silicon Valley of spirituality. It's about people who want to sell us meaning, brand our purpose, custom-produce community, tailor-make rituals, and commodify our very humanity. (p. 13)

This is where Dewey's early ideas on the confluence between democracy and a common faith (1962) become salient, especially as

democracies face challenges from largely white and Christian supremacist factions that seek to undo the very institutions and mores that hold society together (Burton, 2020). As the Pew Research Center's surveys (Lipka & Gecewitz, 2017) show, people are moving away from traditional religion. While it may be a leap to suggest that this void has, as pedagogue Parker Palmer suggests, created a spiritual crisis (2003, p. 377) in our education systems, there is room in these circumstances to foster spiritual development in pluralistic and healthy ways, even for most non-religious/atheistic students (Van Moer, 2020, p. 281). It may be helpful to view schools as public squares in miniature, where people across great diversity and differences gather. Schools thus provide a venue where we can revive civic ideals and foster a strong and sturdy spiritual identity, encouraging youngsters to flourish and engage with their world in meaningful ways.

For this reason, it is important that educators have deep discussions with students at various age-appropriate levels about their ideas, needs, and desires, helping sow the seeds of affirmation and belonging while at school. Indeed, students are being led by charlatans, often online, including the deeply troubling movements led by Q Anon, Andrew Tate, and others, who would seek to strengthen the values, tools, and expressions of racism, patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia. We know students are often attracted to both influencers and conspiracy theories because they are being tasked with navigating a very tense and complex world, often without the tools of self-awareness, critical thinking, discernment, and a sense of hope. By teaching from the stance of understanding spiritual crises, including loneliness, the impact of misinformation, a cynical political environment, and climate crisis, we can help students navigate the incredibly complex backdrop to their lives. In addition to the above suggestions for spiritual practices, I believe a spiritual practice can simply be giving students an opportunity to write, create art, or verbally share the concerns and challenges they have. This, too, is a spiritual practice in that it values the whole person and acknowledges that part of the human experience is navigating fear, loss, loneliness, sadness, and anger. If we make space for the full range of emotion, and we allow space for people to support one another, we can create communities of connection, microcosms of how we can hear each other and support each other even across differences in our broader world.

Teacher Education and Secular Spirituality

As a teacher-educator, I am interested not just with the theory of a secular spirituality in schools, but what it might look like in practice. Although not everyone is a teacher or teacher educator, many of us are educators in myriad ways. It is my intention that the explorations in this section are useful to those in my particular field and beyond.

How can I and others train teachers to foster secular spirituality? Like many things in education, it appears that this will be easier than perhaps we'd think: the answer is to stop resisting and repressing what is already before us in our classrooms. First, many people who join teacher education programs like the one in which I instruct come with their own religious backgrounds. We ask them, in some ways, to leave their religion at the door in order to foster pluralistic spaces (Mohanty, 2019). In the public education stream at my institution, for example, religious values are rarely discussed. However, the religious values of our Teacher Candidates obviously inform both their desire to teach and the ways they envision teaching. By avoiding a discussion of religion during teacher education, we do not give future teachers the tools to be able to differentiate between being a prophetic teacher as Freire (1972) and later Stenberg (2006) would describe—a teacher who is

able to democratize their classroom and offer students hope—and being a proselytizing teacher who uses their students as a captive congregation and aims to instill religious belief. For me, this is not merely an academic problem.

As a rabbi, I deliver sermons to groups. As a teacher, I try to instruct, motivate, and inspire. There are times when the words I use are almost identical, even as I am aware of the great differences between my audiences and of what is acceptable in each context. West and Ritz (2010) describe this process as teaching over preaching but similarly note the connection between the two (p. 251). I am always aware that proselytizing is unacceptable and, as a person of religious minority I feel especially sensitive to it. Still, it has been my experience in teacher education that some Christian teacher candidates do wonder about how to meaningfully use the values inspired by their faith while avoiding this pitfall. It is necessary to address religion in teacher education so that teachers can strike this balance and effectively make a transition to a secular spirituality.

Marshall (2009) argues that bringing in discussions of religion to teacher education is "describing the elephant" (p. 25) in the room. She draws on several important thinkers who have sought to blend spirituality and education. Lantieri (2001) envisions "schools with spirit"—that is, schools that instil a spirituality in education that includes "belonging and connectedness, meaning and purpose" (p. 25). Mayes (2001) strongly urges us to cultivate "spiritual reflexivity in teachers" (p. 5). Palmer, hugely influential in my own work as both a rabbi and a teacher, writes in *The Courage to Teach* (1998) that spirituality is "the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching" (p. 3). Many teachers describe their vocation as a "calling" (Mayes, 2001, p. 7), language that comes from a religious context in which clergy describe being called (implicitly by a higher power) to do their work. In my view, most teachers describe their calling in a secular sense; there is something intrinsic and inherent to who they are that wants to be a guide, a changemaker, a truth-teller, a mentor, a creator of spaces of meaning and connection. Those are secular ideals. Palmer (1998), who is a Quaker, is informed by religion but is also very careful to ensure his messaging around how to infuse education with spiritual meaning is widely applicable and available. He articulates that his yearning for spirituality in education "respects both cultural diversity and the separation of church and state" (p. 376). Palmer defines spirituality as "the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos" and advocates for teaching educators to teach with "heart and soul" (1998, p. 337), not just facts and figures. He argues that widespread spiritual crisis that can only be remedied by educators who infuse spirituality into their work, by teachers who, he passionately claims, can learn to teach this way. Like Noddings, Palmer is suggesting that we educate for belief and non-belief but, crucially, that the fundamentals of spirituality—meaning, purpose, goodness, connection, community, bettering ourselves—be part of the educative process as well.

As it is, much of what we are doing in teacher education is somewhat spiritual. Where is the line between the many reflection papers that teacher candidates write and the spiritual reflection that relies on deep introspection? As Mayes (2001) reminds us:

> By shying away from frank discussion and development of spirituality in our intending teachers (discussions that in some students will inevitably center around quite specific commitments to particular religious figures and doctrines), we do not fully serve those students

> and seriously compromise the depth and effectiveness of their reflectivity. (p. 10)

Relatedly, Dantley (2005) suggests that we need critical spirituality in teacher education, and that *critical self-reflection* is a key part of it (p. 503). We ask teacher candidates for these reflections constantly (Danielson & McGreal, 2000), but do not necessarily empower them to ask their future students for the same. Merging the idea of critical thinking/critical pedagogy with spirituality, Dantley articulates how critical spirituality can be a force for transformative action (2005, p. 503). This transformative action is about meaning-making and world-making—how individuals and communities become mutually sustaining and supportive. Critical spirituality as outlined by Gardner (2017) is inherently about interconnectedness and social justice. It is taking seriously our interconnectedness, exploding the boundaries between self and other (Bussey, 2006), not to elide difference but rather to remind ourselves that our collective well-being supports our individual well-being and vice versa. We are educating students in an increasingly complex and even bleak world. The challenges of climate change, inequality, white supremacy, gender discrimination, and the lack of ability to even speak to others across difference are colouring the experiences of young people in schools. I agree with Palmer that we must educate for this moment of spiritual crisis. A secular spirituality in schools has become necessary and urgent (Moulin-Stożek, 2020).

In schools we can have pluralistic discussions of religious and spiritual belief and practices. This can happen in religion class, but also in social studies, history, literature, and other classes. We can also tie our teaching to big picture questions around meaning, purpose, impact, and goodness. For example, we can create projects designed to solve real-world problems, we can help students work meaningfully in teams where they share their strengths and teach each other new skills, and we can help foster deep questioning and meaning-making in our students as habits of mind and practices that get nurtured throughout their educational journeys.

Secular Spirituality and Well-being

Why the focus on spirituality? Because so many of us, students, teachers, citizens, are profoundly unwell. Drawing on Gardner's (2017) and Dantley's (2005) notions of critical spirituality, several scholars have been connecting the need for a secular spirituality in education to well-being movements in education. Lee (2020) discusses the need for spiritual development as part of how we understand human development in teaching. Moulin-Stożek (2020) discusses spiritual development as a crucial goal for education. Walach (2014, 2017) advocates for the need to transcend spirituality as taboo and discusses how spiritual approaches and scientific approaches can coalesce. Hufford (2015) notes that secular spirituality already exists: it is inherent in how students view their core selves and their central purpose; and the emerging work of Owen (2019) examines how teachers and students are already enacting a "secular spiritual pedagogy" via "mindfulness" (p. 158), authenticity (p. 209), and meaning and purpose (p. 258). The confluences of this research and the above theories reminds us that we have in fact been pursuing spiritual goals in schools for a long time, but in disparate forms. I experience a similar dynamic at work with the focus on well-being in schools, which has a spiritual component, but which is not always identified as such (Fisher, 2011). Due to this reticence to discuss soulfulness or other components of spirit/spirituality, the well-being work can be appropriative of the spiritual and cultural practices it draws on. It also can be shallow and sometimes frustrate its own aims; without rootedness in depth and meaning these

practices can become another thing to check off in a busy day as opposed to powerful tools for connecting with self, other, and world.

How can we, as teachers and mentors, apply these insights to our practice? Mental health crises among students are occurring with greater frequency and severity than ever (Storrie et al., 2010), and schools are of necessity increasingly focused on student well-being. Schools and teacher education programs are now called upon to boost student well-being (Ministry of Education, 2017). Recent research shows that attending to the spiritual needs of students can offer a measurable boost in well-being (Kor et al., 2019). As we have seen, so much of what is happening in the wider world around self-care and well-being is informed by sexism, capitalism, and heteronormativity (Kim & Schalk, 2021). By activating an intersectional approach, we understand that true well-being must occur beyond these oppressive forms and structures, affirming who students are, where they are positioned in the world, and what is meaningful in their lives. In my view, schools cannot foster well-being if they ignore the spiritual dimension. A secular spirituality in schools has never been more necessary.

An intersectional approach allows us to focus on the roots of the problem: for instance, consider bullying. Usually bullying is connected to an issue like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, or class. Often the person doing the bullying is also hurting. Pain begets pain—but we often do not know how to fix it. Fostering secular spirituality in schools is one way to tackle these issues. Students need outlets; they need meaning and support in their journey to becoming who they are; they need to be trusted to handle big ideas and controversial topics because, as we will show them, they are agents of their own lives and of change in the world.

I argue that we must actively teach that each individual matters. By using this framing, we not only can achieve the typical benchmarks of student success, but better learn and understand the underpinnings of bullying, loneliness, mental health challenges and social inequities seen in schools. In Judaism, we say that humans are created in the divine image. For secular Jews, I often say that whether you believe that or not, we should treat others as though it is true. Instead of stating our anti-bullying views, our mission might be more effective if we show students throughout their education that they are sacred, beautiful, and, if you like, divine, regardless of how or what they achieve. In this way we would be fulfilling our duty to care.

I lead the well-being program at my School of Education and while we incorporate programs and strategies to help Teacher Candidates develop healthy practices around movement, mindfulness, experiencing nature, nutrition (without diet culture), and interpersonal relationships, so much of what gets in the way is that our students, students on their way to being teachers, have never been taught that these are valuable foci for one's education. They are worried about their papers, deadlines, practice teaching, etc., and do not often leave space to take good care of themselves. This has all been exacerbated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising climate anxiety. After busy terms with all of this as backdrop, we send them into schools. Then, wrung out and exhausted, they are asked to teach their students about mental health and wellness. Students can always tell when we are preaching something we are not practicing. It is incumbent on us to shift well-being from the margin to the centre in our schools. We need to remind ourselves and our students constantly that we will learn, create, produce, and grow better when we are supported in our entire being. Teaching through a spiritual lens helps centre and recentre this tenet.

In schools, practices towards secular spirituality can include reflection exercises, restorative justice circles, journalling about life's questions and quagmires, learning to meditate and sit still, being in nature, cultivating reverence and awe for nature and for human ingenuity and creativity, and learning to work meaningfully with others. Throughout this article I have made suggestions for activities that many teachers are already doing but perhaps can be deepened or strengthened by viewing them through a spiritual frame.

Conclusions

In closing, I offer my vision for what a secular spirituality in schools could look like, drawing on my work as an educator and a spiritual leader. I believe this is the moment when a secular spirituality in schools is both necessary and, crucially, possible. We are, as educators, now more open than ever to finding solutions for the crisis in student well-being, which is demonstrably a crisis of spirituality:

1. Schools can open a discussion about what religious and cultural values are being taught at home, including both children and caregivers, so that we value the whole child/student without asking them to divorce their spiritual lives from their student selves.
2. Schools can explore religion and spirituality much earlier (this is typically done only at the secondary level in most jurisdictions), but rather than focusing on the food, festivals, and fashion of various peoples, we can examine the ingrained cultural values inherent in their multiple expressions. This would complicate for students the idea of what religion and culture are and open up understandings of difference with depth. It would also highlight the multiplicity within, as well as across, any single community.
3. Students and teachers can then talk about values as being both rooted in and superseding religious teachings, offering nuance when conversations about critical subjects come up. From this place, we can have brave and loving conversations about gender identity, sexuality, anti-bullying, and the value of all people regardless of race or religion. And from here we can engage in genuine work around anti-racist education because we will have shown the beauty and brilliance of multiple individuals and communities.
4. Teachers can articulate the ways in which intersectionality and anti-racism are embedded in secular spirituality; we make both our lives and the world better when we work toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion.
5. Finally, schools can affirm that each person has value—that is, each student, regardless of identity, has worth. This needs to be heard in particular by those who experience marginalization and oppression, but also by those who are spiritually lost, lonely, living without purpose, and, in some cases, inflicting harm on others to fill the void.

Secular spirituality in schools may sound radical. However, its roots are in the tried and tested philosophies and pedagogies of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, bell hooks, Cornel West, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Nel Noddings, and many contemporary thinkers and pedagogues who understand how intersectional approaches create diverse and inclusive classrooms where whole learners are seen and celebrated. Given the threats to individuals and to the very fabric of democracy, the time has come for a secular spirituality in schools that fosters meaning, purpose, and well-being.

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