

December 1998/January 1999

December 1998/January 1999 | Volume **56** | Number **4**

The Spirit of Education Pages 49-52

Nourishing Students in Secular Schools

The quest by adolescents for answers to profound questions about the meaning of life can be supported by encouraging spirituality in classrooms.

Rachael Kessler

How do educators make a place for soul in the classroom? What characterizes a classroom in which soul is vital to the enterprise of education? What experiences nourish the spiritual development of adolescents? Why should secular schools even address these questions?

The Passages program is a curriculum for adolescents that integrates heart, spirit, and community with strong academics. This curriculum of the heart is a response to the "mysteries" of teenagers: Their usually unspoken questions and concerns are at its center.¹

Like other comprehensive health, social, and emotional learning programs, Passages deals with a broad range of issues: friendship, communication skills, stress management, diversity, study skills, problem solving, health, and personal and social responsibility. But unlike most programs, it also addresses spiritual development.

Addressing the Spirit

Despite more than a decade of headlines about "a generation at risk," the void of spiritual guidance and opportunity in the lives of teenagers is still a rarely noticed factor contributing to self-destructive and violent behavior. Drugs, sex, gang violence, and even suicide may be both a search for connection and meaning and an escape from the pain of not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfillment.

The exquisite opening to spirit at the heart of the adolescent experience also inspired Passages. During adolescence, energies awaken with a force that many dismiss as "hormones." The larger questions of meaning and purpose, about ultimate beginnings and endings, begin to press with urgency and loneliness.

In the first years of using this approach, I could not explain how our classes invited soul into the room. We were not practicing or even talking about religion. Yet the students recognized that there was

something "spiritual" about our classes. What could *spiritual* or *soul* mean outside a religious context?

A Soul-Welcoming Classroom

Most high school students grapple with the profound questions of love, loss, and letting go. Meaning, purpose, and service. Self-reliance and community. Choice and surrender. When students work together to become an authentic community, they can meet any challenge with grace, love, and power. This is the soul of education.

When soul is present in education, we listen with great care not only to what is spoken but also to the messages between the words—tones, gestures, the flicker of feeling across the face. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. The yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students become central to the curriculum. Questions become as important as answers.

When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and the talents they feared would provoke jealousy. They risk exposing the pain or the shame that might be judged as weakness. Seeing deeply into the perspective of others, accepting what they thought unworthy in themselves, students discover compassion and begin to learn about forgiveness.

How Teachers Invite Soul

To achieve the safety and openness required for a meaningful exploration of spiritual development, students and I work together carefully for months. We create ground rules—conditions that students name as essential for speaking about what matters most to them. Games help students focus, relax, and become a team through laughter and cooperation. Symbols that students create or bring to class allow them to speak indirectly about feelings and thoughts that are awkward to address head on. And we work with a highly structured form of discourse called council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1997).

With everyone sitting in a circle where all can see and be seen, the council process allows each person to speak without interruption or immediate response. Students learn to listen deeply and to discover what it feels like to be truly heard. Silence becomes a comfortable ally when we pause to digest one story and wait for the next to form, when the teacher calls for a moment of reflection, or when the room fills with feeling at the end of class.

In this climate of respect, stories emerge about what matters most, what has moved students deeply, what has nourished their spirits. After listening for years, I saw a pattern emerge—a map to the territory of soul.

Experiences That Nourish Spiritual Development

From students' stories and questions, I have mapped spiritual development in adolescents who may or may not have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the true nature of spirituality. This mapping comprises six interrelated yearnings, needs, or hungers. Just as the child's body grows when the hunger for food and air is met and the child's emotional life grows when the hunger for love and guidance is met, meeting these spiritual yearnings supports, strengthens, and fosters the spirit of a young person.

The search for meaning and purpose concerns the existential questions that burst forth in adolescence. "Why am I here?" "Does my life have a purpose? How do I find out what it is?" "What is my destiny?" "Is there life after death?" "Is there a God?" I've read these questions time and again when students write anonymously about their personal "mysteries"—their wonders, worries, and excitement.

This domain of meaning and purpose not only is crucial to motivation and learning for students but also is paradoxically simple and uncomfortable for teachers to deal with. Purpose is primarily taught in the curriculum through goal setting and decision making—often with strictly rational techniques. But if the spiritual dimension is omitted or if the inner life of adolescents is not cultivated as part of the search for goals or careers, they will most likely base their decisions on external pressures—from peers, parents, and teachers. A student writes,

So many of my friends are so clueless. They don't know what they want to do, they know what they're supposed to do. They don't know how they feel, they know how they're supposed to feel. And here I find myself in a group of people going through all my same stuff, and although I don't have the answers to all questions, I find myself feeling like everything is perfect and right. . . . I have this "community" that gives me a home base and sense of security.

Throughout the curriculum, teachers can create a safe environment where students can explore these existential questions. Because our profession predicates most authority on an ability to "know" or to have the "right answer," many teachers are profoundly uncomfortable with questions that appear to have no answers.

Yet educators can provide experiences that honor the questions and allow students to give their gifts to the world through school and community service, creative expression, or academic or athletic achievement. In the way we teach, we can help students see and create patterns that connect learning to their lives.

The longing for silence and solitude can lead to identity formation and goal setting, to learning readiness and inner peace. For adolescents, this domain is often ambivalent and fraught with fear and urgent need. As a respite from the tyranny of busyness and noise that afflicts even our young children, silence may be a realm of reflection, calm, or fertile chaos—an avenue of stillness and rest for some, prayer or contemplation for others. Another student writes,

I like to take time to go within myself sometimes. And when I do that, I try to take an emptiness inside there. I think that everyone struggles to find their own way with their spirit and it's in the struggle that our spirit comes forth.

The urge for transcendence describes the desire of young people to go beyond their perceived limits. It includes not only the mystical realm, but also secular experiences of the extraordinary in the arts, athletics, academics, or human relations. By naming this human need that spans all cultures, educators can help students constructively channel this urge and challenge themselves to reach this peak experience.

The hunger for joy and delight can be satisfied through experiences of great simplicity, such as play, celebration, or gratitude. Educators can help students express the exaltation they feel when encountering beauty, power, grace, brilliance, love, or the sheer joy of being alive.

The creative drive is perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit of students in secular schools. In acts of creation, students often encounter a process infused with depth, meaning, and mystery:

Something happens to me in pottery class—I lose myself in the feeling of wet clay rolling smoothly under my hands as the wheel spins. . . . No matter how difficult the day was, pottery makes every day a good day. It's almost magical—to feel so good, so serene.

The need for initiation refers to a hunger the ancients met through rites of passage for their young. As educators, we can create programs that guide adolescents to become conscious about the irrevocable transition from childhood to adulthood, give them tools for making transitions and separations, challenge them to discover the capacities for their next step, and create ceremonies that acknowledge and welcome them into the community of adults.

Deep Connection: The Common Thread

As my students told stories about each domain, I heard a common thread: the experience of deep connection. Ron Miller, the historian of holistic education, observes that

spirituality is nourished, not through formal rituals that students practice in school, but by the *quality of relationship* that is developed between person and world. We can, and must, cultivate an attitude of caring, respect, and contemplation to replace the narrow modernist view that the world is a resource to be exploited. (1995–96, p. 5)

Whether students are describing a deep connection to themselves, to others, to nature, or to a higher power, they evoke a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring and resonant with meaning and that involves feelings of belonging and of being truly seen or known. *Through deep connection to the self*, students encounter a strength and richness within that is the basis for developing the autonomy central to the adolescent journey, for discovering purpose, and for unlocking creativity. As teachers, we can nourish this connection by giving students time for solitary reflection. Classroom exercises that encourage reflection and expression through writing or art also allow a student access to the inner self while in the midst of other people. Their total engrossment in such creative activities encourages students to discover and express their own feelings, values, and beliefs.

Connecting deeply to another person or to a meaningful group, students discover the balm of belonging that soothes the alienation that fractures the identity of our youth and prevents them from contributing to our communities. To feel a sense of belonging at school, students must be part of the authentic community in the classroom. Many teachers regularly create this opportunity through morning meetings, weekly councils, or sharing circles offered in a context of ground rules that make vulnerability feel safe. The teacher must continue to support the autonomy and the uniqueness of the individual while fostering a sense of union with the group. The more that young people are encouraged to strengthen their own boundaries and to develop their own identity, the more capable they are of bonding to a group in healthy and enduring ways.

Connecting deeply to nature, to their lineage, or to a higher power, students participate in a larger, ongoing source of meaning, a joy that gives them perspective, wisdom, and faith. "Is there life after death?" "How did life start?" "Is there a God?" "What makes people evil?" "What is the meaning of life?"

When students know that they will have time in school to voice the great comfort and joy that they find in their relationship to God or to nature, this freedom of expression itself nourishes their spirit. The First Amendment actually protects students' freedom of expression of religious beliefs. (How-ever, we must be careful in sharing our religious beliefs, because given the power of our role, some students

may experience this sharing as proselytizing.) But in our fear and confusion about violating the law, we have actually suppressed students' freedom and the rich exchange that comes from acknowledging and respecting this important part of their lives. My students express their appreciation for this freedom in many ways:

When I get depressed, I go to this park near my house where there is an absolutely enormous tree. I go and sit down with it because it feels so strong to me.

It was my science teacher who awakened my spirit. He conveyed a sense of awe about the natural world that would change me forever.

I try to practice being present—that's what Buddhism has given to me that I really cherish. It's really the most important thing to me now.

I became a Christian a few years back. It's been the most wonderful thing in my life. I can't tell you what it feels like to know that I'm loved like that. Always loved and guided. By Jesus. And it's brought my family much closer.

Students who feel deeply connected don't need danger to feel fully alive. They don't need guns to feel powerful. They don't want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grows compassion and passion—passion for people, for students' goals and dreams, for life itself.

Educating for Spiritual Development

Defining the "moral meaning" of democracy, John Dewey wrote that "the supreme task of all political institutions . . . shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society" (1957). If we are educating for wholeness, citizenship, and leadership in a democracy, spiritual development belongs in schools. But because we have concerns about the separation of church and state, because we confuse spiritual development with religion, and because we fear reprisal from "the other side" in a decade of culture wars, educators have been reluctant to develop a methodology and a curriculum to directly address this aspect of human growth. In a pluralistic society, educators can give students a glimpse of the rich array of experiences that feed the soul by respecting the ways in which individual students nourish their spirits and by supporting activities that allow them to experience deep connection. Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor the quest of each student to find what gives a life meaning and integrity and what allows

each of them to feel connected to what is most precious. In the search itself, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gifts to nourish the world.

Endnote

1 The Passages program has three roots: (1) The Mysteries program at Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences in Santa Monica, California, where core methods for high school seniors originated by Jack Zimmerman were developed into a curriculum for grades 7–12 by a team of teachers I led as chair of the school's department of human development; (2) teacher-training programs that I have offered over the last decade through the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning; and (3) collaboration through CASEL with colleagues from a broad range of approaches to social and emotional learning.

References

Dewey, J. (1957). *Reconstruction in philosophy*. New York: Beacon.
Miller, R. (1995-1996, Winter). The renewal of education and culture: A multifaceted task. *Great Ideas in Education*, 7, 5.
Zimmerman, J., & Coyle, V. (1997). *The way of council*. Las Vegas, NV: Bramble Books.

Rachael Kessler is the Founder and Director of the PassageWays Institute, 2355 Canyon Blvd. #104, Boulder CO 80302

Copyright © 1998 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

[Customer Service](#) • [Contact Us](#) • [Join Us](#)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

1703 N. Beauregard Street, Alexandria, VA 22311 USA • 1-800-933-2723 • 1-703-578-9600

[Copyright © ASCD, All Rights Reserved](#) • [Privacy Statement](#)