

TEACHING TO
DIVERSITY

ENSOULING OUR SCHOOLS

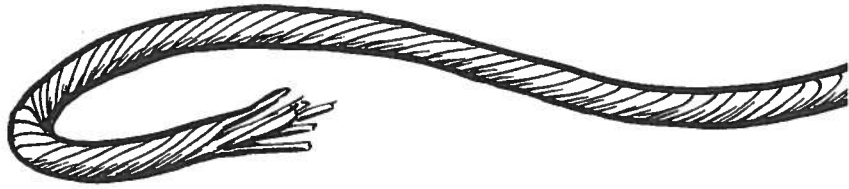
A UNIVERSALLY DESIGNED FRAMEWORK FOR
MENTAL HEALTH, WELL-BEING, AND RECONCILIATION



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Chapter 1

Spirit and Soul in Education

What Do We Mean by Soul/Spirit?

Experts in spiritual education generally agree that the spiritual dimension can be situated within the context of religion or within a secular context. In this book, we address spirituality through a humanistic, secular lens, but without dismissing the individual and communal values that may be associated with a transcendent faith. Spiritual education, whether taught through religion or in a secular context, is recognized as having multiple pathways to the same goal – that living a life of meaning and purpose can be supported through secular and/or religious values.

Our soul is the core of who we are, our humanity, our essence. Soulful education is about self-actualization – discovering who we are, where our passions lie, and what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

An ensouled school recognizes the needs of all human beings for connection, appreciation, respect, and meaning. Staff and students alike become more engaged when they feel valued for who they are, are given the opportunity to learn and grow, and feel they have an impact on their world. Leaders in such schools recognize these needs as paramount to their role, and find ways to nurture both staff and students in their spiritual education journey. As such, leaders play both a visionary and a service role. They keep the big picture in mind while making decisions about what matters and is worth investing in, and they know how to provide the supports staff, students, and families need to achieve their goals.

Spiritual education embodies a holistic vision of children and youth – a belief that schools need to consider the heart, mind, body, and spirit. Modern medicine is beginning to focus more and more on the approach taken by holistic and ancient medicines – what affects the heart, affects the mind, body, and spirit. They are all connected.

So what does this mean for educators and education?

Before we define a holistic vision for ensouled schools, let's look at some of the theoretical/historical frameworks that may apply.

The History

Communities of Care

The concept of care as both a means and a goal for education is both ancient and modern. Aristotle spoke of *eudaimonia* as well-doing, and well-being as “living

flourishingly,” and a goal for every individual. Feminist teachings emphasized an ethic of care as being integral to education. In care ethics, relation is the core principle of education, and the caring relation is ethically basic to teachers. Nel Noddings’ work on caring education had tremendous impact on the evolution of social and emotional learning in schools. She demonstrated the significance of caring and relationship both as an educational goal, and as a fundamental aspect of education. Noddings’ 1984 work, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, is considered seminal for those wanting to emphasize the ethical and moral foundations of spiritual education.

The opposite of feeling cared for is feeling rejected, alienated, and unwelcome. Research has long shown that when youth feel their lives are not worthwhile, or if they become disconnected from their community or society, the experience of alienation that often follows can promote mental and emotional instability. Alienation can be social or academic. Socially, alienation results from a feeling of not “fitting in,” of being different in a negative way that results in rejection and being unwelcome. Academically, alienation results from varying degrees of student estrangement from the learning process. When students have little power over their learning, when learning has little relevance to their lives and aspirations, or when they are devalued or marginalized, they are likely to engage in acts of resistance the system often terms as “oppositional.” Or they may withdraw their assent for schooling altogether. Research shows that before leaving school (dropping out), students often disengage gradually, resulting in truancy, school failure, and disinterest in school-related activities. In such cases, dropping out represents the mismatch between student needs and expectations and school demands and benefits. Academic alienation occurs when students lack meaningful connection to their studies, when they see little relevance in the course content, and often, when they are effectively disconnected from other students through highly individualized forms of instruction that either require them to do a different activity than their peers, thus removing the opportunity to collaborate and participate, or remove them from the classroom altogether. Unsafe classrooms are therefore those that exclude students from social and academic success.



Figure 1.1 Stages of School Dropout

From the perspective of care ethics, a teacher's primary role is as "carer," responding to the needs of their students. At times, teachers will have to wrestle with the dilemma of a student's expressed need, and that of the curriculum, school, or class. In their role as carer, teachers are interested in students' expressed needs, not simply the institutional needs of the school and the prescribed curriculum. Relation becomes the critical lens – that which will maintain the relation determines the course of action. When teachers work very hard to help their students succeed, we often give them moral credit for caring. They seem to know what their students need and act faithfully on those beliefs. However, teachers have assumed these needs; the student has not expressed them. These teachers, therefore, have not established caring relations because they have imposed upon, rather than responded to, the needs of the student. For instance, a teacher who assumes a student is struggling to read a particular text and steps in to scaffold removes the right of the student to persevere through the text independently, seek out a peer to support them, or select another text. Such students may feel humiliated by the teacher's "support," or resent the inference that they are not capable of solving the challenge themselves, or on their own terms. At times, these teachers end up frustrated and stressed, because they believe they are doing everything they can to support their students and some students respond with negative behaviour. Care ethics, therefore, emphasizes the difference between assumed needs and expressed needs. From this perspective, it is important not to confuse the cared-for wants with those the teacher thinks students should want. Noddings counsels teachers to listen, not just "tell," and to not assume they know what the student needs.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is one aspect of spiritual education that, at its simplest, focuses on developing emotional and social competence. In its more complex iteration, SEL expands to consider meaning and purpose in the context of self-actualization, peace education, and social justice.

SEL and the Individual

The theoretical framework of SEL synthesizes the work of a variety of scholars within the fields of medicine, psychology, and education. Salovey and Mayer (1990) coined the term *emotional intelligence* and defined it as "a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action." Based on Salovey and Mayer's work, perhaps the more well-known theory of social and emotional learning was then put forward by Daniel Goleman and his colleagues at the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). According to CASEL (Zins and Elias 2006, 1), SEL is defined as:

...the process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions, developing caring and concern for others, making responsible decisions, establishing positive relationships, and handling challenging situations capably.