

**Education Department Research Seminar  
Dec 7, 2022**

**Spirituality in Education: The North Star  
by Jennifer Mata-McMahon, EdD**

**SLIDE 1:** I'm here to talk with you about Spirituality in Education: The North Star. I am Jennifer Mata-McMahon.

**SLIDE 2:** Today, I bring you a story and an invitation.

We begin with the story, in which I will share the trajectory of my scholarship in children's spirituality and how the research I've conducted in this field has led me to believe that the paradigm shift we need in our educational system can begin in higher education. I make a call for us to rethink and redesign the ways in which we teach teachers how to teach. Focusing on preparing educators to develop a reflective approach to their practice by first doing inner/personal work and then embracing the invitation to teach from the soul, prioritizing their students' spirit in the ways they teach.

Because this is a research series, I begin with a disclosure. I am a qualitative researcher. I sometimes venture into mixed methods and when doing so, usually collaborate with more experienced quantitative researchers to help me crunch the numbers, because I am more of a people-oriented researcher. I go to the main source by conducting surveys, interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations, to immerse myself in the participants' worlds and words. I talk with and listen to what people have to say about the questions I am exploring, instead of diving into designing statistical models to best understand what large sets of quantitative data and number trends might be telling us. Although I recognize the value those studies also have.

But let's get back to the story. When I first began my research in the field of spirituality back in the early 2000s, I would preface my work by highlighting the atrocities we had suffered and inflicted upon other fellow human beings in the name of our core values and beliefs. Values and beliefs often express themselves through our spiritual and religious practices. In the name of religion, we have undergone significant loss such as what we endured as a country on September 11, 2001. For which it was easy to point fingers at the culprit and find solace in othering the issue. The problem wasn't us; the problem was them. Others. Religious zealots to the point of killing thousands of innocent people because of their beliefs. Well, we have continued to inflict harm onto others, but now, and this has been heightened during COVID-19 times, the atrocities being committed in our country are by our own kind. We are producing and inflicting upon ourselves mass murderers, school shooters, police brutality, hate crimes, overturning laws providing freedoms and rights to minoritized groups, and perpetuating exclusion, segregation, and otherness. Now we cannot claim the problem is external and the culprit is the other, now

it is evident, the problem is internal, the problem is us. All of us. And it's begging the question, what are we going to do about it?

I began by disclaiming my role as a researcher and the type of research I conduct. But I am also a teacher educator, and I started my career in the field of education as an early childhood teacher, working directly with children between the ages of zero and eight. Thus, when I began researching the field of spirituality and began to think about how we can address these social-cultural issues, I began by seeking to understand what it meant for children and for teachers.

I started my research journey in spirituality by asking (question 1): Does spirituality belong in the classroom? And if so, I also wanted to know (question 2), what do teachers understand spirituality to be? To answer these questions, I reviewed the literature on spirituality in education and interviewed in-service and pre-service early childhood educators. I will share a summary of those findings with you shortly. After this, I decided I needed to find out firsthand, how children were experiencing and expressing themselves spirituality in the classroom (question 3). Thus, I conducted a phenomenological grounded theory study with kindergarteners in a secular school in NYC. I will also share those findings and other experiences collected directly from children, shortly. (spoiler alert) I found that children do indeed experience and express themselves spiritually in the secular classroom, thus, I asked myself (question 4), How can spirituality be supported in the classroom? Is it being supported currently? And if so, what are the teachers doing to nurture it? I paired up with two colleagues, Michael Haslip from Drexel University and Deborah Schein, from Champlain College, and developed a survey that we then validated into an instrument to gauge both teachers' understanding of spirituality and how they were nurturing it in early childhood secular educational settings. I will also share those findings with you. Lastly, in my role as a teacher educator, I began asking myself, what am I doing to prepare teachers in supporting and nurturing children spiritually? Thus, I posed (question 5) How can we teach teachers how to teach spiritually? From this, I developed a series of strategies I will share with you as I also present to you the invitation to embrace this challenge in your role as teacher educator.

**SLIDE 3:** Let's look at findings for question 1: Does spirituality belong in the classroom?

**SLIDE 4:** I conducted two small studies with in-service and pre-service teachers.

- One in 2012, with 6 in-service teachers, all female, ages 23-54; 1 Asian-American, 1 Latinx/Hispanic, 1 Middle Eastern, 3 white. Five teachers shared in their interview that they thought spirituality belonged in the classroom.
  - Helen explained, "Within the classroom, we are looking at children to ponder those still unanswered questions, those deep thoughts that really linger and raise right or wrong answers [...] we work on getting them to really ponder those unanswered questions, getting them to have those

dialogues and make them consider alternate views of thinking about the world, your place in the world, your role in the world and all those interconnected relationships.” (Mata, 2012, p. 242)

- The second study was conducted in 2014 with 11 pre-service teachers; all female; ages 20-50; 3 Black, 5 Latinx, 3 white; 3 non-native English speakers. Ten teacher candidates responded, “yes, spirituality definitely belongs in the classroom, and offered examples of how they would incorporate and support it”.
  - Roberta shared, “I do believe spirituality can be achieved in the classroom through a brief daily moment of silence/reflection. By giving special attention to one’s own self, breathing pattern, and/or thoughts, children can subconsciously connect with their inner being.” (Mata, 2014, p. 118)
- Yet, there was hesitation and concern that kept coming up from the teachers regarding the separation of church and state in the US, and how supporting spirituality in the classroom would be received by parents.

**SLIDE 5:** To which I now explain, with an excerpt from my upcoming book, “I believe there is a misunderstanding of the establishment and the free exercise clauses presented in the constitution. The first amendment to the United States Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion **or** prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (National Archives, 2018), encompassing both what is known as the *establishment clause* and the *free exercise clause*. The common understanding of this portion of the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution referred to as the separation of church and state, is limited to the establishment clause, by which proselytizing is not permitted in public settings funded by federal and/or state funds, such as public schools. Yet, if comprehensively understood including the free exercise clause, the separation of church and state alerts that prohibiting the free exercise of religious beliefs, and by direct association, of spiritual beliefs, should also not be enacted. Carpenter (2003) reminds us, “we should remember that not only do the courts forbid any action by government schools not prompted by a ‘secular primary purpose’ or which would ‘principally and primarily’ aid religion; **they also forbid** any that would *inhibit* it” (p. 44). A more comprehensive interpretation of these clauses opens the possibility to not only entertain different religious faiths and spiritual beliefs in public school classrooms but to also understand spirituality as a broader phenomenon, different than one confined by a specific religion.” (Mata-McMahon and Escarfuller, submitted, chapter 6)

**SLIDE 6:** Which leads us to the next question: What do we understand spirituality to be?

**SLIDE 7:** Both in the literature, particularly the literature on Religious Education, and in peoples’ sociocultural experiences, religion and spirituality are often used indistinctively. Thus, the first step we need to take in trying to nurture spirituality in the secular classroom is to differentiate spirituality from religiosity or religion. Here I share a definition of religion as: a set of beliefs and practices generally held by a human community, involving adherence to codified beliefs and rituals (Oxford Dictionary,

2005). Versus a definition of spirituality as: an innate human characteristic that allows us to relate and connect with the transcendent or higher power, beyond our minds and emotions, in order to feel part of something greater than ourselves (Bosacki, 2001; Hart, 2003; Lantieri, 2001; Miller, 2000; Myers & Myers, 1999). In this image, also from my upcoming book, Religion is shown as a container through which spirituality can be lived and experienced as long as we stay within that provided structure. Spirituality is illustrated as the essence in which we live our lives as souls, or consciousness, in a human body. In this image the goldfish represent humans, the water represents spirituality, and the fishbowl represents religion. Note how the fishbowl is open and both fish can choose to experience spirituality from within or outside of the fishbowl, regardless, the bowl will always exist, as well as the water, and the fish. Ultimately, it is up to human beings to decide how they want to experience and express spirituality.

**SLIDE 8:** I found that in the literature, spirituality is defined as Human Nature, Internal and Innate; as Unifying with Something Other outside ourselves; as a combination of Humanness and Otherness, and as Essence, Consciousness, and a Direct Sensory Experience. This is another image from my upcoming book.

**SLIDE 9:** To differentiate the term spirituality even further, secular spirituality defined as connecting to spirit beyond religious confines is an acknowledgment that, even though most of us are part of societies with strong religious roots embedded in our cultures and daily practices (where even language seems to be very much colored with religious innuendoes), there are other paths and venues in which to nurture the soul and connect to Spirit beyond the ones offered to us by religion.

Secular spirituality is the adherence to a spiritual philosophy (made evident through spiritual practices) without adherence to a religion. Secular spirituality emphasizes the personal growth and inner peace of the individual, rather than a (sole focus on a) relationship with the divine.

Secular spirituality is composed of the search for meaning (and purpose) outside of a religious institution; it considers one's relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers to be the ultimate. Often, the goal of secular spirituality is living happily and/or helping others, (since it is very relational).

**SLIDE 10:** My definition of spirituality, the one I use to guide my research, is ever changing. Yet currently, I defined spirituality as **an innate human potential or ability to be fully present in order to connect with ourselves, with others, and with the greater *Other* intangible beyond us, which some call the transcendent or the divine, and others refer to as energy or Spirit. This connection affords us the possibility to relate or be in relation with the spiritual realm, and move toward finding meaning and direction in life, rediscovering our purpose as human beings** (Mata, 2015).

**SLIDE 11:** And finally, from a survey study my colleagues, Michael Haslip, Deborah Schein, and I conducted with 33 early childhood educators in the US, we found that when asked What do you understand children's spirituality to be? Their answers reflected a multilayered understanding of children's spirituality. Early childhood educators most commonly believe children's spirituality includes building connections, practicing virtues, and making-meaning. And, to a lesser degree educators also mentioned God and religion, self-awareness, mindfulness and presence, humanness, and inner-feelings when describing children's spirituality. (Mata-McMahon et al., 2020)

**SLIDE 12:** Now focusing on answering the question: How children experience and express spirituality?

**SLIDE 13:** I conducted a phenomenological study informed by Hay and Nye's (2006) grounded theory research, interviewing 38 children ages 6 to 11, looking into defining children's spirituality, arriving at the notion of three types of spiritual sensitivity (i.e., awareness-sensing, mystery-sensing, and value-sensing) leading into the proposed construct of spirituality as relational consciousness.

**SLIDE 14:** And also informed by the work of Tobin Hart (2003), who interviewed adults retrospectively about their experiences as children, and found five distinct spiritual components to children's spirituality: Wisdom, Wonder, Connections, Wondering: Big Questions and the Relation to the Invisible. As well as the work of David Elkins (1998) with adolescents, who found that there are eight paths through which we can experience and develop spiritually: The Feminine, The Arts, The Body, Nature, Psychology, Mythology, Relationships, and The Dark Nights of the Soul.

**SLIDE 15:** What I found after studying four kindergarteners, 2 boys, 2 girls, 1 African American, 1 Asian, 1 white, and 1 mixed race (white and Asian) children. Was four easily distinguishable ways in which children's spirituality is manifested in secular kindergarten classrooms: (1) joy, (2) compassion and kindness, (3) a sense of relating to other, and/or (4) the creative and imaginative self. Through these four paths, these children openly expressed their spirituality, comprising both expressions and channels through which their spiritual selves shown through. Interestingly, even though for the children observed these were their preferred paths, allowing for them to be distinctively identified as such, it did not mean that for a child with a preferred path, the other paths were inaccessible. The fact that Mark, for example, preferred and thrived through the path of joy, did not take away from his ability to express himself spiritually through being creative or imaginative. In fact, I found that creativity and imagination were his second most common way of experiencing and expressing himself spiritually. This is why in this figure we can observe an overlap between the identified paths, as well as dashed borders, that allow for fluid interconnection between, and navigation among, paths. (Mata-McMahon, 2019b, p. 227)

**SLIDE 16:** Now that we know spirituality is actually experienced and expressed in the secular classroom by children: How can it be supported and nurtured by teachers?

**SLIDE 17:** From the same study mentioned before, my colleagues Michael Haslip, Deborah Schein, and I surveyed 33 early childhood educators in the US, asking them what they did to support spirituality as activities in the curriculum, as incorporated into the environment and classroom schedule, and as interactions and experiences in and around the school community. Teachers shared that they believed opportunities for creative expression and free play, engagement with nature, contemplative practices such as mindfulness, relationship building, and moral and character development were all ways in which they supported children spiritually. They also shared that treating colleagues and children **well** and intentionally providing a good example for children, using contemplative practices themselves, and offering children opportunities to connect with nature were also very important when nurturing spirituality. (Mata-McMahon et al., 2018)

**SLIDE 18:** Here I share with you some photos from Ms. Escarfuller's classroom. Patricia Escarfuller is a Montessori-certified early childhood educator and my co-author of our upcoming book. She teaches at Lakeland and holds the spirit of the child at the core of her pedagogy. You see here her Montessori materials, The Talking Piece and Bell/Chimes, The Peace Area, and the Peace Rose, that she and her student use in her classroom.

**SLIDE 19:** Other ways to support spirituality in the classroom is through curricula designed to directly nurture children's spirit. For example, we have Spirituality For Kids (SFK) an international nonprofit program designed for 8-12-year-olds to develop emotional and spiritual intelligence; or the Calm Classroom, a mindfulness program implemented in Illinois within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) with Prek-12 students. Or the Holistic Life Foundation (HLF), here in Baltimore, providing yoga and mindfulness for youth in schools, recreation center, group homes, the Baltimore Juvenile Detention Center, and other venues.

**SLIDE 20:** Or through opening the conversation through children's books. These are some I recommend to my students.

**SLIDE 21:** But the best way to ensure spirituality is being supported in the classroom is by working directly with the teachers. Which brings us to the last question: How can we teach teachers how to teach spiritually?

**SLIDE 22:** Inspired by Parker Palmer's Courage To Teach (CTT) program, I redesigned the ECE Seminar as I taught it in person in 2019 and online in 2020. The purpose was to spiritually support teacher candidates and the young children they teach. With two objectives which were: to encourage my students to learn and practice weekly meditation

techniques in order to promote mindfulness within themselves and ask my students to implement a Meditation Project with their students for two weeks to promote mindfulness in them. To accomplish the first objective, I introduced a meditation technique a week, both in f2f and [online](#) sessions (in my online Spirit Lab, I shared: breath meditation, tension release, anchoring technique, bubble of light, unguided meditation with music, setting an intention, active/walking meditation, body scan, caring for yourself, mindful breathing, connecting with nature). To accomplish the second objective, I asked my students to complete an assignment I titled the Meditation Project, with their students at their internship site, for two weeks. I also asked them to answer a pre and post-survey to collect data on the impact this might be having on them and their students. The results of this study are in preparation for submission.

**SLIDE 23:** What I'm sharing with you here is one of the first class-activities I did with my student to support them spiritually. The purpose was to help them define spirituality and share with others what spirituality meant to them. I brought materials for them to use and gave them 30 mins to complete the activity, and then asked them to share it with the whole class.

**SLIDE 24:** These are the results from Cohort I in the fall of 2019, before COVID-19. You can see here they define spirituality as community, as happiness, and positivity, as relationships, as new beginnings, peace, patience, and calm, among others.

**SLIDE 25:** These are the results from Cohort II in the fall of 2020, during COVID-19 and online teaching. You see here, my students defined spirituality as connecting to others, as an expression of faith, as a relation to nature, and as a state of calm, peace, and relaxation. This activity gave my students the space to think about what spirituality meant to them, its importance, and its value in their lives. And it also provided the opportunity to share this with others while also learning different meanings and ways in which spirituality contributes to others' lives.

**SLIDES 26-29:** These are some of my relevant publications in case you are interested in where all these studies have been published.

**SLIDE 30:** And these are my submitted and under review, relevant publications including the validation study of the ECE-SPC, which is the survey converted into a spiritual practices instrument, for which I'm currently in conversations with a Professor from the Czech Republic and another visiting Professor at Drexel University from China, to translate and adapt the instrument to their contexts. Also here is my upcoming book with Patricia Escarfuller, this is our book cover illustration.

**SLIDE 31:** Now for the invitation.

Going back to the sociocultural crisis we are currently living, it seems to me, and hopefully to you too, like a prime time for a change. Thus, enter my invitation: let's change the educational system from the inside out, from the bottom up. Instead of waiting for legislation to change, let us take on the challenge of propelling the change forward, from our classrooms. Let's change the focus of teacher preparation and center it around nurturing the teachers' souls.

In 2018, when I first interviewed for the ECE associate professor position and research faculty for the Sherman Center, after I presented my research, I remember I was asked "what will it take to make this change?" I responded then what I still believe to be true today: it will require a paradigm change and that paradigm change will require something BIG to happen in this country socially, and culturally, to propel us into that paradigm shift. Two years later, the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, and we had our BIG change. So now, the follow-up question you might be asking is, "now that the event occurred, how do we pivot to redesign education to include spirituality?" And my answer is, we start at home, right here, in higher education. We redesign our teacher preparation programs to include modeling of nurturing the pre-service teacher's soul, so they in turn can do the same for their students.

My invitation to you is to ponder spirituality as the North Star. The caveat though is that spiritual work must always be an invitation that is accepted, never an imposition.

The invitation is to rethink how and why we teach, not necessarily what, but how.

If you accept the invitation, you might be thinking, "ok, so what's next?" A redesign of HOW we teach based on a clear focus, a North Star, centered around WHY we teach. And, in order to do this, I'm going to invite you to a meditation experience, a visualization, to promote a state of mindfulness, priming the body and the mind to embrace the soul and to imagine the possibilities. Are you game?

### **SLIDE 32: Guided Meditation/Visualization**

Find a comfortable seated position, try not to cross your legs or arms. And when you are ready close your eyes. We will begin by taking 3 deep breaths. We will count them together to help us center our minds around the breath. Try to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

Inhale, hold, exhale, one.

Inhale, hold, exhale, two.

Inhale, hold, exhale, three.



Now, we will do a second set of three breaths, but a bit slower this time. Focus on each step as you complete it.

Inhale... hold... exhale, one.

Inhale... hold... exhale, two.

Inhale... hold... exhale, three.

Now, you should be a bit more relaxed and calmer than when we began. Keep focusing on your breath. In, hold, out. Slowly, deeply, intentionally.

In this state of calmness now envision yourself teaching a class, but not just any class, your favorite class, the topic you are most passionate about. That class you can't wait to teach your students because you know you're going to rock it, and they're going to love it. Now look around, what does the classroom look like? What does it feel like? How does it smell? What can you hear? How does the energy in the room feel? How do you feel entering this room and preparing to teach this class? Hold that feeling, that scent, that image. That is what it feels like to you when you teach from your soul.

Now, look at your students. How do your students look? Are they excited? Are they expectant? What do you see in their eyes? Can you read their expectations? Are they ready to learn from their souls? Perhaps. What can you do to ensure your teaching reaches them fully? How can you support them in their learning with and through you? Hold that word, that phrase, that feeling, or notion. That is what you can do to support them in learning with their soul.

Keep and store those images. And know you can access them at any time. They are yours, your soul's knowledge to inform your teaching of this class and any class you teach.

Now, let's focus on the breath again, and take three last slow, deep breaths.

Inhale, hold, exhale, one.

Inhale, hold, exhale, two.

Inhale, hold, exhale, three.

You are now going to slowly start wiggling your fingers and your toes, swaying side to side, awakening your body, and when you are ready open your eyes and incorporate yourself back into the room.

**SLIDE 33:** Thank you! For listening to my story and welcoming my invitation.

Spirit Lab - a nod to the many labs in a science-based academic program in which hypotheses are tested and theories are uncovered. In my spirit lab, we try out and share ways in which we can support the mind, the body, and the student's spirit and soul.  
(<https://www.drjenmata.com/spirit-lab>)