
Hall, E (2018) 'Considering the Soul in Education,' in Learning for Well-being Magazine, Issue 6, published by the Learning for Well-being Foundation.

Viewpoint 3

Considering the Soul in Education

By Ellen Hall

Introduction

For this viewpoint I draw on decades of teaching and administering, from preschool through high school. I am committed to bringing the soul more into focus in education after witnessing the dramatic results for teachers when they shift their perspective to include the soul. When I refer to 'soul', I am referring to that which infuses our lives with compassion, inner-knowing and purpose; it also affirms the child's inherent uniqueness and destiny. It is a secular approach to the soul, not a sectarian or religious one.

What do we mean by soul in education?

Each of us has an inner and an outer life. Children are no exception and they arrive at school whole: body, mind, heart and soul. We are asking, 'How can schools nurture children's hearts and souls as well as their minds?' *A bold new vision for our schools is needed – one that reclaims them as soulful places of learning where the spiritual dimension is welcomed.... teaching the whole child can include welcoming the wisdom of a child's soul into our classrooms.* (Lantieri, 2001)

As Lantieri says, the vision needs to be 'reclaimed.' Soul-Inspired education **is nothing new**. Plato's theory of education was that truth and ideas are present within our minds. It recognized that people possessed a soul, prior to their incarnation, which knew what always is. Learning was essentially a rediscovery of truth. *(In Plato's theory) 'the emphasis was not upon an authority figure coercing students toward the truth on a topic, but on one's personal use of reason and questioning to uncover the truth of one's self. ...Soul was seen as something within each person that was sacred.'* (Peterson, 1999)

Based on more than a decade of scientific research, Dr. Lisa Miller, a professor of Psychology and Education and the Director of the Clinical Psychology Program at Columbia University, Teachers College, concludes that the child, whose spiritual life is supported, is more likely to thrive in every aspect of life, including higher levels of academic success.

'Our children have an inborn spirituality that is the greatest source of resilience they have as human beings, ...natural spirituality in fact appears to be the single most significant factor in children's health and their ability to thrive.' (Miller, 2015). The result of her research proposes that an 'inner spiritual compass' is an innate, concrete faculty, which has a biological basis. According to Dr. Miller the evidence is 'hard, indisputable and rigorously scientific.'

Bringing a sense of purpose

Soul-inspired education means discerning the intention of each child and letting that guide their education. Of course, each child also needs the skills to respond to their soul's calling so that basic literacy and numeracy are essential and assumed as foundational to any education.

My own experience over many decades is that children know what their purpose is for coming to earth. I began asking children the question, 'Why did you come here to earth?' over 45 years ago. Having worked with many hundreds of children since, I have asked it whenever I could. In most cases, children can quickly answer, especially the younger ones. They will tell us either in words or through our careful observation of their interests.

One doctor friend told me that his son, one of twins, was lying on his chest at around three years old and said, 'Dad, I'm an artist.' That child is now in his teens and spends all the time he can in the art room at school, is taking a pottery class after school and is an accomplished violinist. His twin brother shares none of those interests. Another example – is a child who responded to her teacher about this quote from Albert Schweitzer 'The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others,' the eighth-grader responded to the quote by frankly stating 'I believe I was made to entertain, inspire creativity and guide others – having a strong passion for art and Broadway plays.' Her confidence in her own 'passion,' and her self-knowledge about what she was 'made to' do, is clearly evident. These two examples demonstrate how the knowing about life's purpose comes from within, from children's inner life, from their self-knowledge. Based on his acorn theory, James Hillman simply states, 'each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived,' just like an acorn, which has the entire blueprint of a magnificent oak inside. (Hillman 1996)

The tragedy of education

The tragedy of education is that the soul, the inner life is not addressed. As children enter the system they clearly get the message that, 'This is a material world. You must learn about it with all of your attention. Focus on your instruction and your tasks. You are not to daydream, look out the window, doodle, or miss your mom. You must focus your mind and

still your body.’ Most children believe us and do their best to comply. Others are restless and can become disruptive.

The content delivered and the tasks given to children are standardized largely by age and grade level, not by interest or skill level. Frustration at not being able to **keep up** or at being **held back** to the speed of the class is a common result. It is well established that by around 3rd grade, creativity, enthusiasm for learning and for school drop significantly. With every individual on earth being a unique creature, why are we so determined to create standardized education?

Ellie was a student at a school where I was the principal. She could not spell and was failing the weekly 20-word spelling test. She was bright in many ways, but due to a medical mishap had some brain challenges with literacy. The teacher spoke with her privately and asked her how many words did she think she could spell accurately on the test. Ellie said ‘probably three,’ so they agreed to start with three. Ellie worked hard to pass the tests for a few weeks and felt her confidence and joy steadily increase. The teacher then asked her if she thought she could add a few more words. Ellie agreed and continued to spell them all correctly. The process continued until she aced her first 20-word test. The teacher called her home to congratulate her, delighting her parents and an overjoyed Ellie. Ellie had academic interests that she wanted to pursue which motivated her to struggle with her challenge. Ellie is now studying for a Masters degree in finance.

If we understand that we are teaching an individual child with inherent intelligence and a unique gift to give the world, we approach each respectfully and with curiosity. What are this child’s gifts and how might I help him/her to be prepared to give them? What does this child need? Soul-inspired education is clearly counter to delivering a set, standard of information into a child’s brain at a predetermined time in their life.

As an illustration, please watch this five-minute film of teacher, Timothy Hall, called ‘Meeting Students Soul to Soul.’ It is about a student, Ian, who was disengaged from school and how through the soul qualities of trust, compassion, respect, honesty and faith in each other, Ian could begin on his road back to academic learning.

<https://vimeo.com/album/5497999>

A soul-inspired classroom – What does it look like?

A soul-inspired classroom can succeed in any educational setting because it is dependent wholly on the consciousness held by the teacher. It does not need a different curriculum or new educational materials. It can be brought into any learning environment and make a huge difference. If a teacher has the perspective that the children present in the class are developing bodies and minds with tender hearts and wise souls, the children will relax into a more joyful, safe learning environment. Here are two examples:

Thirty minutes a day for the souls of thirty children

In the early days of his career in education, Lawrence Williams, the founder and president of Oak Meadow School (www.oakmeadow.com) writes about a teaching job where he was given a difficult and challenging class at a Waldorf school. His description of the class was 'as interesting as the Mongol hordes.' For months he tried different strategies to settle the class to no avail.

His wise Director offered 'It sounds like you're seeing them as little personalities. You need to see them as souls. If you want to reach them, you have to speak to who they really are, not who they appear to be.' And then he offered the following exercise. Lawrence spent one minute a day on each child before leaving for school, seeing that child as a soul, seeing the beautiful essence of each. For him, some children were quite easy to visualize, for others not so much. 'After several weeks I noticed the class begin to settle and deepen and an inner stillness began to pervade the class.' (Williams, 2014)

You might observe that this was in a Waldorf school, where working with the soul was to be expected. What about a teacher in a public school? What if you knew the children in your class came with unique gifts and talents to share with the world? Would you listen more and instruct less? Could you see the gifts beyond the behaviour?

Rocky on my side:

Tim Hall had a 38-year bilingual teaching career, where he taught in public and private schools, in the barrio in East Los Angeles as well as the bucolic suburbs. Tim tells one of the many stories that demonstrate the transformative power of seeing the essential nature of his students.

'I was warned about the bully and troublemaker, Rocky, who threw a lot of "attitude" my way at first. The school had a hard time trying to control him. The other students looked up to Rocky and followed his lead. Instead of trying to shut him down, I saw the charismatic natural leader in Rocky. I addressed him respectfully and lovingly and asked him to help me lead the class. He stepped right up to the role, keeping order in the large class and was my 'amigo' visiting me for years to come.'

(from a recorded conversation with the teacher)

Essentially a shift in our perspective on children, a shift to seeing their inherent intelligence and unique gifts, brings out their soul qualities of wisdom, kindness, and joy. In Rocky's case, he was a natural leader who switched from the dark side to light through a teacher's love and recognition of his gift. A soul-inspired classroom is a safe place, free from fear, ridicule, bullying and coercion. The classroom needs to be safe for the maximum learning to take place – if a classroom is not safe, the result is that the soul withdraws.

Classroom management is generally considered to be about how to 'manage' or control the disruptive or misbehaving children in the classroom. In a soul-inspired classroom, it is about how to facilitate learning a life lesson for the disruptive child, this incoming soul. Loving the child or the children motivates us to help them learn from every situation.

Here is an example of school vandalism that demonstrates the classroom management issue and the two approaches: rewards and punishments (Kohn, 1999.) and a soul-inspired approach.

It was reported to a teacher that two girls carved words into the bathroom walls. The teacher, after confirming the action, could have had them punished, shamed in front of classmates, perhaps even expelled or sent home. What would they have learned? Instead, the teacher understood what a life lesson this event presented about making mistakes. The teacher from a soul-Inspired classroom asked them, privately, to write the full definition of 'vandalism' and also an exact description of what they had done and how they thought the best way to 'balance' the act of defacing the wall.

For 'balancing,' the two girls asked their fathers to help them sand, fill and paint the wall on the weekend which made them feel a great relief.

So, what were the results of this event? The girls learned how to correct a mistake. Their relationship with their teacher became more trusting and affectionate. Their families were grateful for the experience and the learning. They were not humiliated or punished. Through writing their definitions the students came to understand 'vandalism', which they said they had known nothing about before.

It must be recognized here that the teacher was committed to what was best for the girls, what would serve their soul, their inner life. It was a lot of extra time and energy for her. She could have just sent them to the principal's office or ignored the whole thing. After all, she was very busy.

Teaching and learning – making it happen

Children learn by absorbing everything in their environment. They pick up every nuance, every subtle emotion, every hidden prejudice, every deep resentment, every wave of fear as well as every appreciation of beauty, every delight in the poetry of words, every joy in nature, and every affection of the adults in their world – including the influence of parents, teachers, relatives, neighbours and friends. All children are naturally keen learners and absorb these lessons with clarity and speed. Children are eager to learn how to live on this planet from the adults in their lives.

Traditionally we have trained teachers how to impart the acquired knowledge of our civilization – yet the children are learning how civilized the teacher is by their every nuanced move. Teachers have been trained to get information into the child's brain, often ignoring the whole child. But the whole child is getting the whole picture every minute.

'The right kind of education begins with the educator, who must understand himself and be free from established patterns of thought; for what he is, that he imparts' (Krishnamurti, 1953). Ideally teacher preparation should include an opportunity for teachers to explore their own essential nature, their own soul qualities. In this way, teachers can communicate with their students soul to soul. To this end, a group of seasoned educators and I are creating a graduate school that offers a Masters Degree in Soul-Inspired Education. At the

moment [Alma Education International](#) offers six online courses for teacher enrichment, which will develop into a teachers college. Other programmes exist as well.

‘Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.’ (Parker Palmer, 1998)

Responding to the needs of our children’s souls in education is accomplished through supporting the inner lives of teachers. It is through soul-inspired teachers in a soul-inspired classroom that we ‘make it happen.’

Author

Ellen Hall draws on decades of teaching, from preschool through high school. She also served as an administrator in schools and as the principal of Oak Grove School of the Krishnamurti Foundation of America in Ojai, CA. Always seeking innovation to improve children’s school experience, she co-founded four schools and co-authored the book, *High Schools in Crisis: what every parent should know*, Westport, Praeger Publishers 2004.

References

- Hillman J. (1996). *The Soul’s Code: In search of character and calling*. New York: Random House.
- Kohn, A (1999). *Punished by Rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise and other bribes*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Krishnamurti, J. (1953). *Education & the Significance of Life*. San Francisco: Harper.
- Lantieri, L. (ed.) 2001. ‘Schools with Spirit’ Boston, Massachusetts.
- Miller, J.P. (2000). *Education and the Soul: Toward a Spiritual Curriculum*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Miller, L. (2015). *The Spiritual Child: The new science of parenting for health and lifelong thriving*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Palmer, P (1998). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*. San Francisco: Josey-Bass.
- Peterson, T. (1999). from ‘Examining Loss of Soul in Education’ *Education and Culture*, Winter, Vol XV, Nov.1–2, pp. 9–115.
- Williams, L. (2014). *The Heart of Learning*. Vermont: Oak Meadow, Inc.