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To cite this article: Amy L. Chapman, Lauren Foley, Jenifer Halliday & Lisa Miller (2021) Relational spirituality in K-12 education: a multi-case study, *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 26:3, 133-157, DOI: [10.1080/1364436X.2021.1898345](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2021.1898345)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2021.1898345>



Published online: 11 Mar 2021.



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## Relational spirituality in K-12 education: a multi-case study

Amy L. Chapman<sup>a</sup>, Lauren Foley<sup>a</sup>, Jenifer Halliday<sup>b</sup> and Lisa Miller<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Spirituality Mind Body Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University and The Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, New York, NY, USA; <sup>b</sup>The Collaborative for Spirituality in Education and Friends Academy, New York, NY, USA

### ABSTRACT

Relational spirituality describes ways in which people are connected to each other on a deeply spiritual level. This article presents a qualitative case study of three schools which shows how relational spirituality impacts education. At each of these schools, relational spirituality is a central driver of the school's mission and purpose. Relational spirituality is life-changing for students at these schools; they were seen, known, and valued for themselves and built meaningful relationships with faculty and staff. Through these relationships, students are able to transcend diverse challenging circumstances and flourish.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 May 2020  
Accepted 27 February 2021

### KEYWORDS

Spirituality; K-12 education;  
school culture; qualitative

## Introduction

In recent decades, scholars exploring the nature and impact of spirituality in youth have emphasised relational dimensions (Hall 2004; Shults and Sandage 2006; Hill and Pargament 2008). *Relational spirituality* identifies the relational bond itself as sacred, and indicates a way of relating with the sacred, understood as ultimate truth, ultimate reality, or a transcendent being or object (Shults and Sandage 2006, 161). Relational spirituality widely extends beyond only humans to include a sense of sacred presence in and through our relationships with fellow living beings (Tomlinson et al. 2016; Tucker and Swimme 2011). Within an educational context, relational spirituality has the power to foster deep interconnectedness among each member of a school's community.

In this qualitative field study, we investigated the incorporation of relational spirituality in the deliberate design of school culture by examining successful case examples of spiritually supportive K-12 schools. Specifically, in this paper, we focus on the cultivation of relational spirituality across three culturally, economically, and religiously distinct schools. Through qualitative field research, our research team explored an independent, secular school which serves a wide

range of learners; a public charter school which serves a majority African American population in a marginalised neighbourhood; and a private, religiously affiliated school whose students experience considerable isolation and elevated rates of suffering from competition.

While the nuances of relational spirituality by definition vary across scholars, the common ground of these definitions is the reverence and ultimate significance given to fellow human beings. Although some definitions of relational spirituality explicitly highlight G-d or transcendence, in other definitions, relationality between human beings is understood as sacred or of ultimate concern onto itself. For interpretation and implementation across all schools, public and private, we focus on a well-known formulation of relational spirituality that holds relationship and fellow human beings to be of ultimate, infinite worth: that of Martin Buber; still, within any given school there may be a shared awareness of G-d, spirit, or a form of ultimate transcendence in and through relationships.

### ***Martin Buber***

The work of the philosopher Martin Buber has been central in the field of relational spirituality (Lahood 2010). Buber observed that relationships were often experienced as functional. Each person in a relationship treated the other as an object and thus presented a partial, guarded, and compartmentalised version of herself (Buber 1970). In contrast, Buber argued that a relationship which focused on the reciprocity between two human beings, what he called the *I-Thou* relationship, was an engaged encounter in which both persons were fully attentive, empathetic, and present. The *I-Thou* relationship allowed each person in the relationship to view the other party as an end in himself or herself, which recognised and supported each person's wholeness (Buber 1970).

### ***Relational spirituality***

Buber's conceptualisation of the *I-Thou* relationship provides a wide and inclusive theoretical understanding of relational spirituality. Here, spirituality exists in the relationships between people which operate at the level of each person's full humanity (Buber 1970; Lahood 2010; Faver 2004). Each aspect of the construct of relational spirituality is built on such a relationship: that between the person and the sacred; between the person and others; and in the person's own development (Tomlinson et al. 2016). Scholars have also noted the importance of community contexts, such as schools, which provide environments which allow people to develop these types of relationships (Faver 2004; King, Carr, and Boitor 2011). For instance, King, Carr, and Boitor (2011) showed that places

which were grounded in relational spirituality affirmed 'the inherent value of the self' and cultivated belonging and connectedness to others and life itself.

### ***Relational consciousness***

For researchers Hay and Nye, relational consciousness is the extent to which people feel connectedness across four dimensions: I-self; I-other; I-world; and I-transcendent (Hay and Nye 2006). In an in-depth study of 38 school children, the researchers found an augmented awareness in children across all four domains, which positively impacted daily life, to include greater cooperation with peers; a deep, felt sense of calm, oneness, and clarity; the ability to imagine or describe the experience of an encounter with the transcendent; and the ability to see and appreciate another's point of view (Hay and Nye 2006). The four dimensions of relational spirituality in children were replicated in subsequent studies and further indicated associated processes, including children's mental representations and internalisation of spiritual knowing (Reimer and Furrow 2001); and the reciprocal impact of identity formation and spiritual development on each other (Johnson 2006; Moriarty 2011).

### ***Spirituality in education***

An over-emphasis on achievement culture in schools has resulted in considerable scholarship and advocacy work to attend to the more relational aspects of education (Osterman 2000). Some of those doing this work have begun to see human flourishing as the purpose of education (Wolbert, De Ruyter, and Schinkel 2015). Human flourishing is the ability of each person to reach their full potential in every aspect of their life (Wolbert, De Ruyter, and Schinkel 2015), a state which cannot be achieved independently; rather, it is the result of human development that occurs in connection with others (Annas 1993; Haybron 2008; Osterman 2000). Research has further shown that developing a sense of connection or belongingness in schools has been positively correlated to intrapersonal (Battistich et al. 1995; Bishop and Inderbitzen 1995; Ryan, Stiller, and Lynch 1994; Ryan 1995; Solomon et al. 1996); interpersonal (Baumeister and Leary 1995); and academic outcomes (Allen 1995; Connell and Wellborn 1991; Freese 1999; Newmann 1992). Relational spirituality, by emphasising the sacredness within those connections, presents a way for schools to cultivate belongingness.

The applicability of relational spirituality to education is seen more clearly by examining its dynamic component processes of spiritual dwelling and spiritual seeking or spiritual questing (Tomlinson et al. 2016; Hyde 2008). Spiritual dwelling describes a state of being wherein one's relationship with the sacred is established as anchored, often within a spiritual or religious tradition. Spiritual seeking is the process through which people ponder existential questions and explore new ways of practicing or understanding spirituality (Tomlinson et al.

2016). Shifts between these two states often occur during developmental transitions, indicating that school would be a likely place where the dynamic tension between spiritual dwelling and spiritual seeking are likely to occur.

Theoretical and empirical work has been done in support of the inclusion of spirituality in mainstream K-12 education. Wills (2012) explored what Hay and Nye (2006) 'relational consciousness' meant for education from a philosophical lens guided by Buber and Hegel. She concluded that the processes of learning – namely, 'experience and thought' – allow one's inner spirit to be brought into the outer world (Wills 2012, 58). Further, this occurs through consciousness and in the sacred space between the self and others (Wills 2012). Plater (2017) argued that the return of spirituality, understood as encompassing both the spirit and the body, to education would be beneficial for students, schools, and society.

Empirical work in spirituality in education has examined particular experiences of teachers and students with spirituality in education. For instance, Keating (2017) studied the effects of meditation on the development of children's spirituality in Irish schools. Other studies have examined the perceptions and practices of incorporating spirituality in education have been studied in early childhood teachers and teacher candidates (Mata 2012; Mata 2014). In this direction of inquiry, the current article extends this work by examining the ways in which spirituality is incorporated throughout three schools.

Spiritual seeking has been empirically examined in educational contexts by Hyde (2008). Through phenomenological research, Hyde (2008) found that students were spiritual seekers who were actively looking to connect in meaningful ways with the world. Part of these students' experience was looking for meaning and purpose through the exploration of the experiences of another; Hyde termed this process of exploring the experiences of another for the purpose of finding meaning and purpose 'spiritual questing,' (2008, 32). Spiritual questing is 'a genuine searching for authentic ways of being in the world' and was a way students developed their identities as well as their relationships with others, the world, and God (Hyde 2008, 44). Hyde argued that education needed to be a 'responsible partner' in supporting the spiritual questing of students, supporting them in authentically putting their stories into dialogue with the story of their community (2008, 44). As a responsible partner, schools would need to create a culture which encouraged students' spiritual questing; how this may be done is explored through our three case studies below.

## Method

The theoretical underpinning of this study is relational spirituality, and the rich qualitative data will be analysed by putting it into dialogue with Hay and Nye (2006) dimensions of relational consciousness.

This study used ethnographic field research to understand the influence of relational spirituality in schools. We chose ethnography because we were

interested to see if school culture played a role in the cultivation of spirituality within schools; in order to best understand this, we needed to join the school culture (Wolcott 2008). Ethnography allows the researcher to explore and make sense of 'shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group' (Creswell 2013, 90). We joined the school culture and were present throughout the school day in a variety of settings in which the culture of the school could be observed, including classes, dining halls, athletic fields, community-wide meetings, and sacred spaces. In each space within a school we visited, we observed how people interacted with each other. Additionally, we were attentive to how spirituality or spiritual practices were integrated into the school day, such as daily chapel services where parents were encouraged to attend or regular and required classes which focused on deep reflections on spiritual topics. In addition to these observations, we interviewed a variety of members of each school's community, including the school's leader, counsellors, student life coordinators, classroom teachers, and coaches.

Data was collected through observations and interviews, though the primary data source was semi-structured interviews with various members of the faculty, staff, and administration from each school. Semi-structured interviews use a list of prepared questions which are used as a guide rather than a script; the order in which the questions are asked varies as the emphasis is on creating a connection with the person being interviewed (Smith and Osborn 2008). Semi-structured interviews follow the areas of interest of the researcher, which encourages respondents to speak about ideas which the researcher had not planned to discuss (Smith and Osborn 2008). Our interview questions are included as [Appendix A](#). Interviews were recorded with participants' permission. Students were interviewed with the consent of their parents, their own assent, and with the full knowledge and permission of the school.

Data were analysed by identifying themes and patterns which emerged from our interviews and observations (Wolcott 1994). This was done in three parts: 1) identifying and describing the culture of each school; 2) seeking out patterns in the data, and 3) interpreting the data towards concept building (Wolcott 1994). We first thoroughly told the story of what it was to be part of the culture of each of the schools in our study. Next, through inductive coding of the interview data, we identified patterns in the data (Wolcott 1994). Finally, we made sense of the data, both for each individual school and across the cases through an inductive process, with iterated rounds of refinement as a collaborative research team (Wolcott 1994).

We have chosen to present our findings as case studies because a case study methodology enables in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon in the context in which it occurs (Yin 2014). In the case of this research, the differences among the schools serve to highlight the commonalities in the findings. The case studies presented here, which are described in greater detail

below, were three robust examples out of our sample of twenty schools which were part of the study. All names, including those of the schools, have been replaced by pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

## Findings

### *Campion Academy*

Located in the Western United States, Campion Academy is a private, Episcopal co-educational school for about 1100 students in grades K-12. The mission of Campion Academy is grounded in a commitment to both academic success and the development of spiritual human beings. In order to accomplish this mission, the head of school has grounded the culture of Campion Academy in relational spirituality, which he sees as essential to the identity and mission of the school. In a community that is religiously diverse and in which materialism and secularism are common, Campion Academy's head has created an environment in which all gather and feel welcomed, wanted, and included.

Campion Academy is a rich example of a school which centres its daily life on relational spirituality. 'Spirituality' is a word the school uses freely and overtly, and spirituality is a clearly articulated virtue at Campion Academy: campus fences are painted with spiritual words. Relational spirituality can be seen in the interconnectedness between students; the care and respect shown by students and teachers to each other; the way in which the school has created a spiritual culture which draws families into the community; and the ways in which members of the community connect with and are inspired by the natural world. Campion Academy understands spirituality as seeing and treating each student as a 'child of God,' one who is sacred and must be 'respected, kept, and nurtured.' Relational spirituality is also shown in the care and reverence that each member of the school community has for each other; as the head of school said, 'Our goal is for each student to find their voice through the encouragement of the teacher.' By honouring and supporting each student to be who they truly are, and putting a spiritual stake in the ground, Campion Academy seeks to draw out the deep spiritual core of every child.

### *Student-student relationships*

Relationships between students at Campion Academy present a powerful image of relational spirituality within a school setting. Even in the midst of school activities and typical academic, social, and behavioural issues which arise, students interact with each other in ways which uphold the dignity of the other person. An example of this was shared by one of the teachers, who described the experience of students choosing roommates for an overnight field trip:

We also see our mission statement lived out in the way in which students care for one another and show love, especially during times of need. For example, each year the

10th grade class travels on their experiential education trip. Prior to the trip, each student lists five other students with whom she or he would like to share a two-person tent during the trip, but sometimes a student is left without anyone requesting them as roommates. The adult leadership team asks students to help with the situation and 99 percent of the time they graciously accept and will often offer to help before they are asked. This type of kindness and compassion is nurtured throughout the life of the school from the athletic teams to the classroom. One teacher summarizes this philosophy as "I am a team member, not an individual."

This exemplifies how students at Champion Academy care for each other on a deep level. The kindness and compassion they show to their peers is not given reluctantly; rather, students respond with thoughtfulness, ready to consider the needs of others as important and equal to their own. This can also be seen in the following example of students praying with and for each other:

And [a student] said, "I saw a bunch of boys and they were at lunch and they were praying." And my boys were in there and I was like what! And he said, "I think what happened was somebody was having difficulty with something, and they said let's pray about it. And then some kids were walking out by saying 'what are you guys doing?' and they said, "we're praying, you know." It was just a quick little prayer about whatever it was going on in this kid's life, and he said he was standing there like "oh my G-d! What is happening right now?" These are kids that don't pray at home. And I asked my boys about it, and they said once in a while if somebody has something that they're dealing with we pray about it and just on their own but it's just crazy.

The students' approach to being in relationship with each other is grounded in relational spirituality, which is fostered through the school's culture. Commingled with the everyday work of a school is an emphasis on relational spirituality, which has supported students' building of relationships with each other which are based on deeply knowing and valuing each person.

### *Teacher-student relationships*

Relational spirituality is also the source and summit of relationships between students and adults at Champion Academy. Relationships between teachers and students are grounded in respect and compassion, and their interactions indicate a deep and shared appreciation for the humanity of the other person. The opportunity for faculty, staff, and students to connect in a variety of ways cultivates relationships between students and adults which are grounded in each being seen as a whole person, by which we mean knowing and seeing a person as an integration of mind, body, and spirit. Because of this focus, interactions between teachers and students also look different inside the classroom. Teacher and student interactions are not transactional, nor are they focused on either grades or content acquisition. Rather, classrooms are also spaces built on relational spirituality. For instance, as one administrator has described:

Teachers are more concerned with actually connecting students to the material, and getting them to learn, and not just pass a test. That, to me, is the difference between an



adequate teacher and a really good teacher, someone who is not just concerned with keeping the test scores high enough to look good on their evaluation, but someone who's actually invested in unlocking that interest that the kids can have with a subject. Because to me, everything is interesting inherently. It's just a matter of whether a teacher can unlock it for a student. Teachers aren't always successful, and certainly not with every student, but as far as I can tell most of them really want to do that, and they try, and they put in a lot of extra time and effort to do that.

Teachers at Champion Academy are interested in sparking each child's innate curiosity as a way of connecting to his or her deep, inner core. Students are aware and appreciative of teachers' concern for their spiritual development, as one student reported to us: '[Teachers] really strive to not pressure us into just focusing on academics. Obviously, they want us to succeed and they're really committed to our education, but they don't want that at the price of our spiritual nature.' By asking 'big questions' and 'reawakening a sense of wonder in students,' teachers are able to help students make connections between themselves, others, and the transcendent.

In order to do this, teachers must know and value each student, which requires being in a deep and meaningful relationship with each one. As one of the leaders of the school told us, 'When I taught in Juvenile Hall, I think the number one thing that you learn is it's about connections. There's nothing else that matters.' These type of connections are found throughout Champion Academy, as can be seen from the example shared here by one of the teachers:

So Mrs. Morris, the science teacher, elementary, tells the story of Javier, who in kindergarten was holding up a test tube, and was talking about there was air in the test tube and some different things happening, and Mrs. Morris said to Javier, "What's in there?" And some kids would say air. Some would say liquids. And he said, "God." But she talks about how her thing is our students help us as adults see the world, and that's how she approaches the classroom.

This approach can extend beyond just interest in a subject or content area to interest in sharing the experience of life itself:

Every 7th grader takes a human development course in 7th grade. This class has plenty of opportunities for students to share their thoughts and feelings about a wide range of topics as the teacher facilitates a conversation. Open session is a structure for classmates to respond to student generated issues through an intentional, supportive exchange of listening and ideas. Students can offer clarification, support and encouragement, or advice to provide multiple perspectives and feedback to problems. During an open council session in the 7th grade human development course, one of the students anonymously shared with her classmates that her parents were getting a divorce. She said she felt scared and did not know how to handle the situation. Another student who had gone through a family divorce said, "I need you to know that it is not your fault." At the end of the session, the girl whose parents were going through the divorce and who was anonymous said, "It was me and now I do not feel alone." The teacher never spoke during the session but created the context or the container for the students to feel safe as they shared their feelings.

This is an example of the learning that is possible through teaching that is grounded in relational spirituality. By creating a classroom environment in which the students feel safe and respected, the teacher has allowed them to access and share the deepest parts of themselves, which, in turn, has fostered deep connections between the students.

### *Relational spirituality and school culture*

The importance of the learning environment extends beyond any individual classroom, and the teacher mentioned above created her classroom environment in the context of a spiritually supportive school culture. Champion Academy deliberately designed its school culture in order to promote relational spirituality in all members of the school community. This can be seen in the above example of the individual teacher's classroom, in the physical design of the campus, and in the quote below, which describes a way in which relational spirituality extends to the entire school community, best shown by the school's voluntary program of family support:

That's a programme that's fairly new and it has been set up to sort of help the community care for one another. So if somebody had a broken arm in second grade, or a parent might be going through an illness, or somebody's lost a grandparent. Anything that has affected their family, [the programme] reaches out in privacy, being respectful, asking if they need rides, play dates, meals. And then a designated group where people have volunteered who want to be part of a committee, is contacted so that they can sign up to help in whatever ways the family might need.

The culture of Champion Academy is designed around relational spirituality. From interactions between students to what happens in and out of classrooms, to the strategic planning of the school, the members of Champion Academy community exist and interact in an environment which encourages them to see, know, and value one another as human beings.

### *Compass Charter*

Compass Charter is a public charter school in a large city on the East Coast of the US, serving approximately 750 students in grades 7–12. The mission of Compass Charter is to academically and socially prepare students for lifetime success. Spirituality at Compass Charter is seen as recognising and valuing each other's full humanity, which is not always the experience of Black and brown people in the United States. Therefore, social awareness and social justice, which promote wholeness and authentic relationships, are critical aspects of relational spirituality for Compass Charter. As 95% of the students and about half of the adults at Compass Charter are African-American, the school works from a freedom school model – whose key tenets are identity, community, and purpose – to accomplish their mission by acknowledging and combating racism. The head of

school described this as creating a 'school culture [that] works to hold the complexities of a racist system without colluding with that system.' The school focuses on teaching students academic and personal skills they will need to be community leaders, and they succeed: 100% of students apply to and are accepted to college, and after graduation, 80% of students either matriculate, are gainfully employed, or join the military. About 15% of the students are in individual or group therapy provided by the school, to 'heal from trauma that they are disproportionately exposed to.' Relational spirituality can be seen in Compass Charter in the considerable ways that the school seeks to help students heal and become whole. The first step in this school's approach to healing trauma is to ensure that the school is a safe space for students. The second step is that they create space for students to share the story of their trauma, which allows students to be known deeply, even in the midst of their suffering. This approach to healing creates an environment in which students are seen, known, and valued, which has been formative in the lives of its students.

### *'The struggle for liberation'*

Compass Charter believes that 'education is the civil rights issue of our time,' particularly for students who are marginalised. The school is deeply informed by the Black Panther Movement, which viewed loving African-American children as revolutionary compared to their experience of the world and that each person is responsible not only for themselves but for the community. Compass Charter understands the need for the education of African-American students to be affirming, supportive, and of the highest quality; in particular, the school teaches students that living up to their responsibility of leading and serving their community requires them to develop skills such as literacy, public speaking, and coalition-building. This is the essence of relational spirituality at Compass Charter: that the lives of each member of the community are intricately tied to each other and to the liberation of the entire community.

Compass Charter understands the importance of the environment on student learning, and has worked to create a deeply interconnected culture which emphasises safety, health, positive relationships, and an affirmation of racial and cultural experiences. This interconnectedness is fostered in a school culture which helps students to 'navigate a world in which their humanity may not be valued or acknowledged.' As one of Compass Charter's teachers said, 'if you see that your destinies are linked, then you're going to do whatever you can to make that child successful, not just to pass a test, but in life.' This approach means that each student is seen as sacred and a critical part of a change-making system.

This consistent cultural affirmation students experience at Compass Charter are a vibrant example of relational spirituality. In contrast to the messaging that many people of colour see in their schools or communities, students at Compass Charter report feeling 'supported, motivated, confident, culturally affirmed, and safe.' The school's focus on interconnectedness and care for the community also dismisses

a common message heard by students who grow up in impoverished areas: succeed so you can leave. At Compass Charter, the opposite is true; as students are encouraged to 'lift as you climb' and by imagining their future careers as ways they might serve their community. This is another way in which Compass Charter communicates to students that they are an essential part of a community.

One of the ways in which students are given an example of such community leadership is by the example set for them by their teachers. Approximately 40% of the teachers at Compass Charter are African-American, which helps the school to emphasise 'the importance of centring one's racial identity, knowing one's history, being a part of a community, and having a purpose.' As the head of school shared,

It's easy to underestimate what it means for some Black students to enter an educational setting and be welcomed, accepted, understood, and affirmed, which eliminates their fears and doubts and how all of it influences their ability to learn something new, grasp difficult concepts, think critically, i.e., perform academically.

The head of the school shared with us that students say they appreciate even small gestures of cultural affirmation, such as the way one teacher addresses students in her class: 'Oh, the brother in the back has a question,' or 'Oh, sister right here in the front has a question.' Students also mentioned how this teacher shared cultural experiences to create a welcoming classroom: 'One time she was playing Lauryn Hill, and another time she was playing Drake. One time she was playing Fela Kuti.' They valued her displays of cultural history, such as wearing African fabrics. One student described her as an "inspiration to Black people everywhere. By having abundant examples of members of their community who are lifted up as leaders, Compass Charter has developed an interpersonal relational system where students can see themselves as whole, wanted, and loved. One 10th grader described the meaning of having African-American teachers in this way:

The reassurance our teachers give us means so much to me personally. Some days, coming from where I come from, I'm going to school whether I'm in good spirits mentally or not, and the fact that my teachers can so easily sense that without me having to say it. It makes me feel like I'm at my second home. Like I'm at my grandfather or uncle's house watching the game, just doing assignments.

In order to connect on a deep level, the members of the Compass Charter community must ground their teaching and learning in the racial and cultural reality of their students. To disregard race and the shared history, oppression, and culture of African-Americans would have negated the possibility of forming deep and interconnected relationships at the school. Instead, Compass Charter's approach to race is a key component of their relational spirituality.

### *Interconnected relationships*

Relational spirituality is the bedrock of relationships at Compass Charter. Despite the high prevalence of traumatic experiences among them, the students at Compass Charter relate to each other on a deep level. The school is centred around deep and meaningful relationships, which allows students and teachers to connect with each other holistically. For instance, a 7th grade student shared that the students 'see this school as a community, not just peers and teachers teaching us what we're going to need when we grow up. We see this school as a community because whenever we need them, they're there.' Relational spirituality at Compass Charter intentionally focuses on cultural understanding and connection between adults and students; because of the marginalisation experienced outside of the school, Compass Charter's commitment to developing relationships which recognise the innate goodness in each student is counter-cultural. In particular, the opportunity for students to see people who look like them in leadership positions is powerful, as one teacher explained here:

They cite a "deep connection," the ability to relate to them in "deep ways that you don't even know about." They discuss the importance of having someone they can go to who they feel will understand them. And students who "might not be on the right path" can see someone like them at the front of the classroom and say, "Oh, I can be like them, and I'm still being myself."

Students are grateful for the opportunity to connect with people who understand their culture on a deeper level. Teachers who are not African-American also form deep connections with their students, because they are grounded in the school's approach to teaching, learning, and healing:

The teachers who don't share racial or cultural experiences with the students must still be able to be accountable for carrying out the freedom school legacy of building confident Black students who are empowered to influence change. They too must know their racial identity, value the surrounding community, understand how history influences today's reality, believe in social justice, and champion an alternative narrative to that which Black and Brown students hear so often outside the school.

These deep connections between students and teachers ground the process of helping students to deal with trauma at Compass Charter. In order to foster healing, the adults in the school had to connect with each student on a deep level. Both the challenges that students faced as well as the ways the school worked with each student to promote healing and wholeness can be seen in this example:

Anthony came to us in 8th grade. He was deeply dysregulated and cursed at teachers and adults. He had been removed from his mother's care at age ten after she left him and his half-sister alone for several days. He could not sit through a class period or go a couple days at a time without doing something worthy of suspension. He connected with therapy in school. We recognized attachment challenges and worked to form

a healthy attachment with him. This involved tolerating his anger, where for weeks at a time he would come visit daily to express hatred and anger and refuse to cooperate. He has strong creative talent and joined the school sewing club. We got a sewing machine in the therapy office and brought in extra fabric so he could sew in his free time. He watched YouTube videos and taught himself how to work the sewing machine. About three times a year he would tell stories about the neglect, physical and verbal abuse he received from his mother. After three years of building a caring relationship we began to talk about how trauma impacts the brain, body and development. I taught him about attachment styles and we studied together what attachment style matched him.

To continuously respond to a student whose actions are often 'worthy of suspension' with love and understanding helps the student to reach their own inner core. The success of this student is only possible because he was deeply known and loved by the community at Compass Charter, and the school upholds the process of relationship building to be the key to this.

The school sees 'education as an opportunity for liberation,' and they communicate that to members of their community by lifting up students' potential and humanity. Relational spirituality is what allows Compass Charter to do this: because each member of the community deeply knows and cares for each other, the healing, growth, and success of any one member of the community is connected to that of others. The school recognised the inherent worth this student had, and by deeply connecting with him over time, worked to convince the student of his own worth. The members of the school related to each other in deep and meaningful ways, which allowed them to use difficult behaviour and challenging situations as moments to connect with each other.

### ***Riverpark***

Riverpark School is a co-educational boarding school located in a suburb on the East Coast of the U.S. The school has approximately 300 students in grades 9–12. Riverpark's mission is to prepare students for ethical lives of purpose. Spirituality at Riverpark, which is 'the core across the curriculum, across our relationships with each other, with kids' is understood as seeing that 'there's a goodness in there in every single child.' Relational spirituality at Riverpark is seen in the ways the adults at the school create an environment in which each student is known and needed for the overall thriving of the community. At Riverpark, to be needed is to be fully seen, deeply understood, and uniquely valued for the gifts and way of being each individual brings to the collective. This affords students the opportunity not only to be seen for who they are, but to be seen as who they can become. Relational spirituality is vibrantly seen at Riverpark in the relationships between faculty and students as well as through the community service program.

### *Teacher-student relationships*

Relationships between teachers and students at Riverpark are grounded in relational spirituality. At Riverpark, there is a 'look' that teachers have for students, which members of the Riverpark community described as an act of 'beholding' students. This was described to us as: 'The faculty beholds the student with this affirmative, joyful [look] ... it comes off as a belief in my worth, a belief in what I'm about to share with you, belief in my being.' Another member of the faculty explained this beholding in this way:

Uniformly, there's a way that students are beheld, here. There's like a Riverpark faculty look, which is deeply affirming. It's a spiritual look. It's deeply affirming, it looks deep and well past how I've done today or yesterday, one way or another.

This Riverpark 'look' exemplifies the relational spirituality that is the foundation for interactions at the school. Seeing, knowing, and valuing each student, in deep and profound ways, is such a regular practice at Riverpark that all members of the community understand what the look means. The faculty have taken the time to get to know each student's whole being well, and from that knowing comes appreciation for each student's humanity and affirmation of their worth. Consequently, the 'look' supports both individual spiritual development and a school culture which is built on *I-Thou* relationships.

This beholding is life-giving for students. Because students see frequent, tangible reminders of being deeply known and affirmed by each adult in the school, this beholding changes students, as a teacher shared here:

That deeper way of beholding the student, I feel like they're seen into existence. We've seen the profile pre-Riverpark and we've seen the profile once you look at them that way, right? There's a Buddhist idea that you can listen someone into existence, and I feel like they're seen into existence here.

The adults at Riverpark have made the connection between that knowing and valuing who someone is, completely and without reservation, is the act which allows that person to become who they are. In the process of recognising and affirming one's humanity, one becomes his or her fullest and best self. It is an affirmation of each student's innate goodness and a way of relating to the sacred, both in the individual and in the collective community.

The effects of this relational spirituality are profound, and can be seen in the ways in which students are comfortable being vulnerable. This vulnerability, seen as an opportunity for growth, is described by the school's chaplain here:

It feels good, like, "Wow, I've got some adults who care and they're on me and holding me accountable and asking questions, even though it's uncomfortable, that knowing, at times, it feels good." It actually points to the Chapel Talk program, too, that they become comfortable in being known to share some really deep personal experiences. They're comfortable enough to talk about deep, their deep personal journey to the whole school, and to be broadcast online.

The chaplain attributes the students' willingness to be vulnerable in sharing their stories to the relational spirituality that exists between all members of the school's community. This interconnectedness is so profound that students are able to share deeply personal talks in person to the school community and virtually with the broader community online.

Another way in which the effects of relational spirituality are seen at Riverpark is through the way in which the school approaches disciplinary issues. Because the school knows and values each member of its community, there are no 'bad kids.' In seeing each person's humanity, there is room to acknowledge that people make mistakes. This is the perspective which grounds Riverpark's approach to behavioural issues, as the head of school explained here:

You can make a pretty serious mistake here and not get dismissed. That, again, believing in the goodness of students and the power of growth and redemption, we have a system designed around that. Now, you can get dismissed for certain things. If you harm the community in a broad way you'll get dismissed. But that's the exception, not the rule.

Recognising and valuing the whole person means seeing each person beyond the choices that they make. When a student makes a mistake, it is seen as another opportunity for that student to be recognised as innately good. The consistent emphasis at Riverpark is on beholding, and this happens whether the student is succeeding or struggling.

### *In service of community: care for creation as relational spirituality*

There are several ways in which relational spirituality is practiced, one of which is through Riverpark's community service program, which requires students to see the maintenance of the school as part of their responsibility as members of the community. In addition to seeing community service as part of one's responsibilities, the school sees the program as a way for students to do 'meaningful work.' The director of the community service program told us the goal of having meaningful work is because 'if it is meaningful, they buy into it more, it means more to them, they do a better job with it.' It is easy to see this work as meaningful because community service is critical to the life of the Riverpark community: each member of the school works for the benefit of all the others. In turn, this contributes to the interpersonal relational systems at the school.

Community service is seen and understood at Riverpark as relational and necessary, as one of the school's faculty members described here:

The cool part of the community service program, and I think the idea of "we," like being a part of something, so if we don't show up, you're throwing someone else under the bus essentially. They have to do your work.

In other words, community service at Riverpark is grounded in knowing that the community as a whole benefits from each student's participation and care. As



one teacher told us, 'if there's a job to be done and it can be done involving students, it's part of the community service program,' each of which is seen as vital to the maintenance of the community.

The relational spirituality at Riverpark transcends humans alone. It truly cultivates a culture that holds all life sacred and recognises our stewardship for and with each other as part of the living fabric of the universe. Riverpark's community service opportunities often include the natural world, such as the school's recycling program, its garden, or walking the dogs who live on campus. Perhaps the most striking example of the school's community service program offering students the chance to do meaningful work is in their capacity as curators of the school's zoo. Students serve as caretakers for the many animals who inhabit the zoo, work that is easy to see as meaningful: as one teacher put it, 'if the students don't go, the animals don't get fed.' Students must be responsible stewards of the zoo, as the health and comfort of the zoo animals is in their hands. By becoming these stewards, however, students are invited to another way in which to connect to that which is sacred.

Because each student is needed, and because the work is meaningful, the community service program is an opportunity for students to see the entire community as interconnected, which includes other living creatures like animals in the zoo. The work done through the community service program allows students to have 'authentic, meaningful experiences' which foster relational spirituality. From developing relationships with faculty members' families to caring for the natural environment, the community service program at Riverpark cultivates deep and meaningful relationships for students.

### *Relational spirituality and school culture*

Both the Riverpark 'look' of beholding students and the school's approach to community service show the importance of relational spirituality to the culture of the school. This was captured by a teacher, who responded to a prompt about how he connected with students by saying, 'it's not what I'm doing, I'm just being with the kids. Just being with them.' The process of being with students, as well as the deep connection communicated through the Riverpark look, surrounds students with affirmation of their humanity. As another of the teachers described it,

We know you have that ability. We know that it's in there. You may not, and, in fact, you may even fight us a little bit about it. But, we're gonna yang it out of you everywhere we can. We're gonna hug you, we're gonna praise you, we're gonna applaud you, we're gonna kick you in the pants, we're going to listen to you, we're gonna push you, we're gonna do everything we can to help you develop your best self.

Riverpark's focus on knowing and needing each student permeates the school's culture. The school excels at creating a feeling of belonging for each student, which connects them as part of a whole that is larger than themselves.

Moreover, the culture at Riverpark teaches its students how to be in community with each other. The school cultivates this in a variety of ways, as explained by one of the administrators:

That there is a sense of accountability and listening to each other. That building a sense of community within the classroom by the way in which inquiry is made, by the way in which research is done, the kinds of projects and curriculum that builds a sense of connection to the outside world. How to create empathic listening. Yeah, building community in the classroom can definitely happen. I think, too, the chapel program that [the chaplain has] really developed. When we talk about this, we gather as a community a lot, here. The entire place, together.

That the school's culture is based on relational spirituality means that each member of the Riverpark community sees each other's whole being. This is true of one artistic student who had initially struggled to adjust to the school. Knowing that he was an artist and a builder, the school worked to create a way in which he could feel at home there. As the head of school shared:

He was horribly homesick when he got here. At that time we didn't have the Arts Center. And so, we created a little workshop for him in the basement of Claver Hall so he could build a kayak, which is what he really wanted to do. And once that happened, it all turned around, and he settled in.

By seeing this student's whole being, Riverpark was able to identify what would help the student both to thrive and to be a flourishing member of the school community. This is an example of, as a member of the faculty said of Riverpark, 'here, there's a real goodness. There's this love and respect and they listen, and the way you behold them, they behold each other.' Students respond to the affirmation of their inherent worth by valuing each member of the community.

## Discussion

In very different ways, all three schools faced a common problem: students initially were not aware of their foundational innate goodness nor of the possibility for connection between a sense of inherent goodness and holistic learning. On day one, students arrived without a strong sense of worthiness and lacking a tendency to see such inherent value in each other, together constituting an overall threadbare relational fabric. Contemporary schools, of course, are not at fault. Society has shifted the relational ground undergirding schools.

Seeing this shift in relationality in the current student body, these schools responded by rebuilding or building anew a relational fabric, a small-scale civil society. Each school has developed a deliberate and dynamic culture, based on the school's mission and values, which promoted and upheld relational spirituality. This deliberate school culture, based upon relational spirituality, shifts the overall purpose of school from a narrow focus on the learning of content to a place where learning includes gaining awareness of each students' inherent

worth. From this stance of connectivity, a relational understanding of the ensuant course material emerges.

In designing this relational school culture, each of the schools in this study needed to develop a way of talking about that culture; all members of the school community needed to use a common language around relational spirituality. Both *Campion Academy* and *Riverpark* used overtly spiritual language, because it was comfortable and mission-aligned to do so. Although *Compass Charter* did not use the word 'spirituality,' when we asked members of the school community about how spirituality is supported in their school, they had no difficulty in providing us with the rich examples seen here. They recognised that their approaches to healing trauma, or their behaviour management strategies that emphasised reconciliation and restoration of relationships, were part of a larger connective tissue that grounded their school. To foster connections between people, the language that each school used around relational spirituality had to be germane to its culture and mission. However, future work should be done to explore how schools can encourage students to recognise and name spirituality explicitly.

Collectively, these schools were attentive to each dimension of Hay and Nye (2006) framework of relational consciousness. These schools created environments in which students could develop connections within themselves. *Compass Charter* intentionally designed their school experience to affirm students' racial identities. These same environments fostered interconnectedness between people – the I-other dimension of relational consciousness – at the schools. This was seen in the way students at *Campion Academy* were eager to ensure that their classmates had roommates on field trips and in the way that the teachers at *Compass Charter* nurtured a sense of belonging through art, music, and language that reflected and therefore cherished students' identities.

There were also examples in this data of schools cultivated I-world and I-transcendent relationships. When *Compass Charter* taught students that their destinies and liberation were bound up with those of others in their community, the school was cultivating an I-world dimension of relational consciousness. Similarly, the zoo at *Riverpark* provided ample opportunities for students to develop a sense of connectedness with the natural world by developing meaningful relationships with animals who depended on their care. Similarly, *Campion Academy's* understanding of their students as sacred and their fostering of a sense of mystery-oriented students to the G-d. The *Riverpark* 'look' reflected back to students their ultimate worth in a way that transcended human connection.

Finally, these cases indicate that these four dimensions are themselves interconnected. Students at *Compass Charter* who were deeply concerned about the liberation of other members of their communities (I-world) also understood and were connected to their own identity (I-self) within in the community. Students at *Campion Academy* who were engaged in the family volunteer program

(I-world) had to have a sense of belongingness with others (I-other) in need in their community to see that service as more than a task. Students who were 'seen into existence' through the Riverpark 'look' simultaneously felt a connection with themselves, with another, and with the transcendent.

Each of the schools in this study presents a vivid example of relational spirituality as experienced both in each person's spiritual development and the formation of interpersonal relational systems (Tomlinson et al. 2016). Whether students are isolated because of intense competition, as at Champion Academy; living in vulnerable communities and marginalised by racial and cultural injustice, as at Compass Charter; or trying to navigate the world in the midst of diverse learning needs, as at Riverpark, relational spirituality allowed these schools to mitigate their challenges to promote student flourishing. Each school created an environment in which learning was tied to students' inner core, and consequently, students at each of these schools thrived.

This success was due to the ability of relational spirituality to cultivate deep interconnectedness between members of each school's community. When fostered within a school community, relational spirituality affects all relationships: those between students, teachers, parents, staff, and the natural world. Because relationships are grounded in knowing the other person holistically, the school culture becomes an environment for them which recognised the situation, valued the students, and worked to care for them on every level of their being. The deep connection and affirmation that each faculty member had for each student created an environment in classes which allowed students a great deal of freedom. This type of relationship is directly tied to learning: students are able to develop and grow in profound ways because the adults in their school are spiritually connected to them. Relational spirituality is the primary driver of the school's culture.

We emphasise that student awareness of the surrounding community and demographically-linked culture throughout a K-12 schools is enriched in a relational spiritually driven school. The specific cultural and community language, practices, and values of a K-12 school are foundational and integrated into the formation of a more relational culture. In this way, this model of pedagogical culture carries cultural sensitivity and specificity by empowering the educators themselves, within a given school, to develop the practices and pathways to support relational spirituality as a pedagogical imperative.

This study has implications for both research and practice. Although qualitative research is not intended to be generalised to all settings (Hoyt and Bhati 2007), the inherent cultural sensitivity of applying relational spirituality to school culture make this work more broadly applicable. However, further research should be conducted in settings outside of the United States to determine to what extent this is so. Additionally, future research should be conducted to examine whether schools which want to create a spiritually supportive school culture can do so by designing their cultures around

relational spirituality. If successful, this research would then provide a way of proceeding for educators and school leaders to intentionally design their school cultures around relational spirituality.

These three cases also offer direction and opportunity to the field of K-12 education: the cultivation and encouragement of the spiritual core has collective implications for the integrated formation of the child, moral and ethically driven learning, and the renewal of civil society. In each of these schools, everyone—students, teachers, staff, and parents—contributes to the wellbeing of the whole. Both the individual and the community are seen as sacred, interconnected, and of inherent worth; each person is known and needed by the community and the community is a source of connection for each member of it. When each person's well-being is important to the school community, students are seen, known, and valued for who they are. In this way, the cultivation of relational spirituality created a culture in each of these schools where students thrived. This school culture, built upon relational spirituality, provided students with the greatest opportunity for learning by focusing on the development of their whole being.

### Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Funding

This work was supported by the The Fetzer Institute and Rockefeller Philanthropy Associates .

### Notes on contributors

**Amy L. Chapman, Ph.D.** is a Fellow at Teachers College, Columbia University, and the Associate Director for the Collaborative for Spirituality. Her research interests lie at the intersection of social media, social studies, and social justice. This research has focused on the development of spirituality in educational settings and the ways in which social media can be used within educational contexts to promote equity and inclusion. Projects have included examining a social justice curriculum for the development of religious identities in adolescents, evaluating a Facebook application for its usefulness for first-generation college students, and an exploration of high school teachers' use of Twitter for civic education. A former public school teacher, Amy holds three degrees from Boston College, in secondary education and history; developmental and educational psychology; and religious education, and a doctorate in educational psychology and educational technology from Michigan State University.

**Lauren Foley, M.A.**, is a fifth-year doctoral student in clinical psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. She received her M.A. in psychology from Teachers College, Columbia University's Spirituality Mind Body Institute and her B.A. in political science from Villanova University. Her research interests are in spirituality, education and women's development.

She formerly worked as the Research and School Engagement Coordinator for the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education (CSE).

**Jenifer Halliday, M.A.**, serves Friends Academy as Assistant Head of School and Director of Academic Affairs. Jen brings extensive experience in many areas of independent school leadership. She started her professional career teaching high school social studies, and has served in many roles, including teaching, admissions, student life, special projects, and administration, and has taught graduate level education courses at John Carroll University. Jen has served on several committees and panels, including serving as Board Chair for the Flora Stone Mather Center for Women at Case Western Reserve University. In addition, Jen continues to work with Columbia University Teachers College Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, where she contributes to a research and program development team working to partner with pre-k-12 schools to give them a Spiritually Supportive Pedagogy by providing the guidelines, tools, and training they need to nurture the spirituality of their students. Jen holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and Education and Master of Arts in Education Administration from John Carroll University.

**Dr. Lisa Miller, Ph.D.** is Professor and Director of Clinical Psychology, as well as the Director of the Spirituality & Mind Body Institute. She is Editor of the *Oxford University Press Handbook of Psychology & Spirituality* and Editor-in-Chief of *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* (APA Journal). She is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and has been awarded the Virginia Sexton Mentoring Award from APA. Dr. Miller obtained her B.A. from Yale University and her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania, where she studied under Dr. Martin Seligman. Her research and scholarly interests are in spirituality and mind-body pathways to wellness, basic science at multiple levels of analysis on spirituality development, and prevention and treatment interventions for children and adolescents in poverty, increased access to treatment among low SES populations, intergenerational transmission of risk and resilience factors, and development of spirituality in children and adolescents.

## Human subjects research

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Teachers College, Columbia University, study number 19-025.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol Culture

- What does the school environment look like? Feel like? Sounds like? Does the environment contribute to the spiritual life of the class?
- What words and/or actions set the cultural norms in the classroom? What conveys and/or promotes spiritual openness?
- How do the students interact within the culture? How do they engage? What is their experience?
- What interactions exist between and among the living beings in the class? How can/do they contribute to the spiritual health of the students and the school?

### Spiritual Pedagogical Practices

- How does the learning environment highlight/detract from/contribute to pedagogy?
- What strategies are used by the teacher to convey and/or promote spiritual openness, dialogue, and reflection?
- Describe the role of the students in the classroom. How do they engage with the practices introduced by the teacher?
- To what extent do pedagogical practices promote interactions between and among living creatures? What do those look like?

### Instructional Content

- In what ways does the learning environment highlight and strengthen instructional content?
- What topics/themes/activities does the teacher focus on? How are these framed to infuse spirituality?
- How do students speak to, grapple with, and offer opinions concerning content that is spiritual in nature?
- Describe interactions – discussions, debates, comments, nonverbal interactions between and among living creatures as they relate to instructional content.

### Work/Activities/Tasks/Assessments

- How does the learning environment contribute to the work/activities, tasks, and assessments of the classroom?
- What words and actions do the teachers use to infuse spirituality into time before, during, and after classroom work?
- Describe the level of and ways in which students engage around work and classroom activities.
- When students are 'busy' in the classroom, how and when do they interact with other living creatures in the room?

### Opportunities for Introspection/Reflection/Internal Connection

- Describe ways in which the learning environment provides for deep internal spiritual work?

- How does the teacher's words and/or actions promote internal spiritual work?
- Describe times when students appear to be doing internal spiritual work.
- Is there evidence of students sharing their reflections/internal spiritual work with others in the class?