

# OTHER - THAN - EGO CONSCIOUSNESS :

## Approaching the “Spiritual” in Secular Art Education

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### Introduction: Alternative Worldviews

The education systems of today greatly influence the world and values of tomorrow. On the one hand, this means that education is a key vehicle for creating a more compassionate and sustainable future.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, an increasing number of scholars question whether the value system currently underpinning education will be successful in reconciling the world of tomorrow (Brantmeier, Lin, & Miller, 2010; Bussey, Inayatullah, & Milojević, 2008; Hart, 2009; Miller, 2006; Milojević, 2005; Slaughter, 2004; de Souza, Francis, O'Higgins-Norman, & Scott, 2009). This article sheds light on a spiritual approach to art education as a catalyst for transforming individual and collective consciousness toward fostering a more peaceful global future.

A changing world produces and requires changing conceptions of education. Within a rapidly changing world and unprecedented “civilizational challenges” (Slaughter, 2004), a serious engagement with alternative frameworks seems a matter of urgency and necessity. Ultimately, ideas about education are driven by the philosophical question of what it means to be human. Different answers to this question imply different conceptions about the aims of education and about preferred types of pedagogies. Consequently, an interplay exists between and among a worldview<sup>2</sup>, values, educational goals and purposes, learning theory, and educational practice as applied in a specific setting of learning and teaching. Put differently, a worldview—that is, innermost beliefs about our humanness—has direct ramifications for ideas of education, both philosophically and pedagogically.

A number of scholars, such as Forbes (2003) and Miller (1998, 2000), highlighted this interrelatedness, stressing that educational ideas and practices are ultimately, if not distinctly, informed by different images of human nature. Hence, it is significant to recognize that alternative world views bring forth alternative visions of education. Depicting the principle of layered relationship, Figure 1 shows how educational thinking and practice is embedded within, and thus inseparable from, philosophical views of what it means to be human. Acknowledging this interplay, it is worthwhile giving attention to alternative world views that already do, and some that might, generate more diverse educational thinking.

<sup>1</sup> Because “the future” is always uncertain, multiple, and contested, the plural version “futures,” as established within futures studies, is more adequate. However, to increase the readability, I use the singular form “future,” meaning to acknowledge openness and diversity.

<sup>2</sup>With “worldview” I refer to a person’s or group’s deep-seated culturally and experientially informed ground for interpreting and evaluating life, that is, a specific set of cosmological, ontological, and epistemological beliefs. I adapted the latter trio from Australian Torres Strait Islander and scholar Martin Nakata (2007), who uses these three categories to speak about the fundamental differences between an Indigenous knowledge system and a Western scientific knowledge system.

This article concentrates on visual art as a subject at high school. I demonstrate that visual art presents a secular environment well suited for incorporating an alternative worldview that engages teenagers with spiritual questions. I first comment on growing discussions of spirituality in education discourse generally before turning to the field of art education. Through five concepts, I propose a contemporary interpretation of spirituality that seems compatible with secular systems. Each concept is first approached through broader educational discussions, followed by implications for high school art education specifically.



**Figure 1. The Embeddedness of Educational Thinking and Practice.**

This schema of nested layers demonstrates that underpinning philosophical views and assumptions about human nature shape a preference for certain educational ideas and behaviors.

### Growing Interest in Spirituality in Education

The last decade in particular has generated a growing engagement with spirituality in both popular culture and different academic discourses, including education. Specifically, there has been a significant rise in scholarly interest regarding the role of spirituality within secular education contexts (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011; Brantmeier et al., 2010; Bussey et al., 2008; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Hart, 2009; Miller, 2006; Miller & Nakagawa, 2002). These scholars observe the emergence of a discursive shift whereby alternative and spiritual views are beginning to be taken seriously within current educational discussions. A trend toward growing systematic engagement with spiritual frameworks seems to be confirmed through new academic conferences, scholarly publications, and journals, as well as professional organizations and networks dedicated to spirituality in education.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> An example for an established organization dealing with spirituality in education is The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society. The Center's website lists a number of useful links to campus initiatives in North American universities, including programs, resources, and databases that reflect the increasing scholarly engagement with spirituality in education (<http://www.contemplativemind.org>).

While the above literature suggests spiritual alternatives are being taken seriously within education discourse, some scholars proclaim that despiritualized paradigms continue to underpin contemporary models of education. With “despiritualized” I refer to the discursive, epistemic, or institutional absence or exclusion of spirituality. Accordingly, some sources diagnose a cultural inclination toward scientific–materialistic worldviews and methodologies in disciplines related to education (Anthony, 2008; Apffel-Marglin, 2005; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991; Wilber, 2000). As a consequence, some theorists see a continuation of analytical–rationalist, industrialist, and despiritualized frameworks dominating models of learning and teaching within mainstream education (Anthony, 2008; Bussey et al., 2008; Hart, 2009; Miller, 1988, 2000; Slaughter, 2004).

The two seemingly opposing readings of recent developments of spirituality in education are not contradictory per se: A continued bias toward materialist frameworks (e.g., Anthony, 2008; Wilber, 2000) can coexist with a paradigm shift toward greater scholarly recognition of spiritual worldviews (e.g., Astin et al., 2011; Brantmeier et al., 2010). Specifically, it appears that emerging alternative discourses begin to successfully challenge the dominant epistemic climate. Surprisingly too, the two different interpretations agree in one point: Both are convinced that a radically new paradigm of profound interconnectedness is necessary to develop an “education of inner significance” (Hart, 2009). These advocates now hope for a new paradigm that will contribute to an evolution of consciousness beyond the conventional narratives of materialism and competitiveness arguably driving most education systems.

Because this article focuses on visual art at high school, it is imperative to comment on the role of spirituality within secular education contexts. Essentially, as a social, political, and philosophical theory, secularism designates a separation between the church and the state. In the literature, there are different standpoints regarding the relation between spirituality and secularism. For example, Anthony (2008) views the two as irreconcilable, whereas Miller (2000) sees them as a false dichotomy. Significantly, the secular ideal postulates a separation between *church* and state, but not necessarily between *spirituality* and state. For this reason, a conceptual distinction, if not divergence, between spirituality and religion heralds a constructive way forward in the discussion (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). Put differently, secularism refers to the separation between institutionalized power structures, addressing organized religions and not spirituality as such. As a consequence, nonreligious conceptions of spirituality appear justified and pertinent for current secular democracies and thus compatible with secular education settings, such as high school visual art.

### Art Education and the Spiritual

While notions of the spiritual have gained increased attention over the recent years in various domains of education, applying spirituality to the field of art education appears particularly feasible. The following three aspects of art education make it a conducive environment for integrating a spiritual approach.

First, themes of religion, spirituality, and the sacred have been essential elements for the production of artworks throughout time and culture (Brennan, 2010; Koppman, 2002; Lander, 2014; London, 2007). Second, these and other scholars believe that an engagement with artworks is especially relevant for exploring reflective and existential, if not spiritual, questions (Baas & Jacob, 2004; Campbell, 2006; Campbell & Simmons III, 2012; Gall, 2008; Irwin, 2007; Rosch, 2004). Third, many official art education documents include the term “spiritual.” For example, the visual art syllabus for the High School Certificate in New South Wales, Australia declares:

Visual Arts provides a school context to foster students’ physical and spiritual development . . . . The bringing together of ideas and materials invested with meaning

may lead to spiritual significance in the art produced, and for the student. The study of artworks in historical and contemporary cultures reflects an ongoing interest in representations of the spiritual. (Board of Studies, 2009, p. 6)

A similar wording regarding visual art's "spiritual significance" or its potential impact on students' "spiritual development" can be found in numerous art education policies internationally, including North America. Significantly, in most cases—like the above-cited syllabus—educational documents use the term "spiritual" in a generic way, without further explaining, discussing, or contextualizing it (Webster, 2009). In this regard, it is important to underline that due to the secular intention of most visual art syllabi, the use of "spiritual" cannot be equated with "religious." Rather, the two would need to be actively distinguished. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that a nonreligious framework is required to adequately interpret notions of the spiritual in secular art education policies.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned intrinsic link between art education and the spiritual, it is surprising that contemporary art education discourse has given relatively little systematic attention to the role of spirituality in teaching art. Indeed, the following valuable resources confirm a paradigmatic marginalization of spiritual worldviews within art educational discussions: the *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler, 2007) that dedicates its final section to "spirituality" (chap. 95-103); a recent anthology titled *The Heart of Art Education: Holistic Approaches to Creativity, Integration, and Transformation* (Campbell & Simmons III, 2012); as well as the well-argued book *Spiritual Art and Art Education* (Lander, 2014). For instance, Campbell (2012) states that while spirituality in education receives growing scholarly recognition in various educational contexts, the field of art education has not yet participated in the larger trend toward negotiating holistic approaches. Especially constructive is Lander's (2014) work that defines spirituality through first-person sciences of consciousness. She calls for a deliberate break with traditional concepts of spirituality as confined through religious systems. Lander and other scholars in the above publications have significantly contributed toward filling the discursive gap, helping to ignite credible and productive discussions about the spiritual in contemporary, secular art education.

### Approaching the Spiritual in Art Teaching

Notions of the "spiritual" and "spirituality" are inherently complex, ambiguous, elusive, controversial and, ultimately, mysterious. In other words, any definition of the spiritual must be either partial or paradoxical in nature. This point was addressed by the late-20th-century Indian mystic Osho (1994) who warned of attempts to explain any ultimate reality—such as the spiritual—stating provocatively that, "if you explain it you will be explaining it away" (p. 134).

Different conceptions of spirituality are determined by a person's worldview, where a worldview is understood as an interpretive context shaped by culture, tradition, assumptions, life experiences, and so forth. In addition to different religious perspectives, ideas of the spiritual and spirituality may be informed, among other things, by nonreligious, secular, humanist, or therapeutic frameworks. Specifically, evolving notions of spirituality now encompass areas such as medicine, healing, mental health, sport, patient care, the work place, and popular culture (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Lander, 2014; de Souza et al., 2009; Webster, 2009).

Keeping in mind this complexity and ambiguity regarding the spiritual and spirituality, it is not my intention to generate a conclusive definition of spirituality, or one that is characterized by one particular framework. Rather, I aim to present an inclusive view that recognizes the existing diversity of spiritual worldviews. Further, I intend to provide an approach that has

tangible, productive implications for art education theory and practice. Specifically, I propose that the following five concepts offer a constructive path forward in current discussions on spirituality in secular art education. I first describe each concept from a general, art-independent point of view to acknowledge discussions in wider education discourse. I then comment on each concept’s implications for art education. To provide concrete examples, a high school year-10 cohort of teenagers (aged 14 to 15) serves as the specific community of learners. This said, the proposed implications for learning and teaching are not restricted to this age group but may be transferable to other ages at high school level or to alternative art education environments.

### 1. Spirituality versus religion.

A first helpful approach is to clarify the relation between spirituality and religion in recent educational thinking. A growing number of scholars not only differentiate between spirituality and religion but further advocate spirituality as explicitly noninstitutional, if not nondenominational. Despite the increasing delineation between spirituality and religion, there are varying interpretations and subtle differences regarding this distinction. For example, some scholars (e.g., Adams, 2006; Bussey, 2008; Lander, 2014) prefer a strong categorical distinction between spirituality and religion. Others (e.g., Crawford & Rossiter, 2006; Miller, 2000; Webster, 2009) propose an inclusive conception of spirituality that acknowledges religion as *one* possible context in which spiritual experiences can occur.

Overall, the majority of educational theorists agree insofar as they conceive of religion as a culturally constructed and institutionalized set of prescriptive beliefs, rituals, and practices that ideally assist an individual’s spirituality. In contrast, the same theorists suggest that spirituality is distinct from religion and refers to a person’s unique inner journey of spiritual growth that deals with existential, transcendental, and “ultimate” questions about the meaning of life.<sup>4</sup> Put differently, unlike organized religions that are concerned with a set of *external* structures, spirituality relates to an *internal* development. “Internal” refers to a person’s interior reality and processes as the total sum of first-person experiences covering physical, emotional, and mental impressions, as well as mysterious or spiritual aspects of experience.

Relevant for secular art education, the literature demonstrates that the trend to differentiate between spirituality and religion is not confined to scholarly discourse, but increasingly governs public opinion as well. Interestingly, studies show that young people in particular prefer the term “spiritual” over “religious,” seeing the former as the more important and more inclusive construct (Astin et al., 2011; Crawford & Rossiter, 2006). This tendency places high school art education in an exciting position to address the spiritual within a nonreligious and nondogmatic environment.

In art education, students have access to a rich pool of artworks throughout art history negotiating themes of spirituality, transcendence, and the sacred. One example would be Casper David Friedrich’s Romantic, awe-evoking paintings of the majestic natural world. Specifically since modernity, many artworks convey spiritual themes but no longer use traditional religious iconography. Consequently, modern and contemporary artworks may provide meaningful sources to engaging students in a dialogue about the shifting relation between spirituality and religion in the early 21st century.

With regard to a year-10 class, many teenagers have a desire to explore their innermost, personal philosophies about the value and meaning of life. The art classroom offers an

<sup>4</sup> For “stereotypical distinctions and polarities” between the spiritual and the religious see Crawford and Rossiter’s (2006, p. 183) insightful table.

environment for young people to reflect on ultimate questions and perhaps to use them as driving forces in the production of their artworks. Especially through art practice, teenagers may explore and express spiritual themes through a visual language that is distinct from established religious imagery. Through the work of Mark Rothko, for instance, students learn that abstraction—rather than religious symbols—can be a vehicle for expressing transcendence.

## 2. Awareness of interconnectedness.

The idea of a profound and mysterious interconnectedness of all life seems to be shared by all spiritual traditions as a principal cosmological and ontological belief. Shedding light on the concept of “interconnectedness,” which has become part of vernacular language, is useful for a contemporary interpretation of spirituality in art education contexts.

What might help with understanding this interconnectedness is the philosophy of “holism.” According to holism, the universe and especially living matter is seen in terms of unified or interacting wholes that are greater than the sum of their seemingly separate parts. Hence, holism implies a proposition of human existence and experience as embedded within a larger reality, or “unity,” beyond human scope and reason. An “awareness of interconnectedness” refers to a recognition of the interrelatedness and mutual dependency of all life on this planet, covering humans, animals, and plants alike. Significantly, the type of “interconnectedness” addressed here is not of a mere economical or ecological nature. Rather, it is inspired by a spiritual worldview of the sacredness and existential interdependence of all life. Accordingly, the notion of “interconnectedness” serves as a useful and nonsectarian approach to spirituality concerned with one’s connections with self, others, nature, and the transcendent (de Souza, Francis, O’Higgins-Norman, & Scott, 2009).

Many scholars are convinced that an experiential understanding of the profound interconnectedness of all life necessarily leads to more compassionate human beings who care deeply about cocreating a peaceful and sustainable future (Adams, 2006; Anthony, 2008; Bussey et al., 2008; Collins, 2010; Hart, 2009; Miller, 1988, 2000, 2006). This argument maintains that by realizing oneself as part of a larger unity, a person automatically develops a heightened sense of humility, compassion, and an ethic of caring through a “commitment to the whole” (Anthony, 2008, p. 220).

If we accept that a spiritual worldview of the profound interconnectedness of all life does have a positive effect on an individual’s valuing of caring, then this argument offers an interesting new perspective on education in the 21st century. If the value of mutual caring is taken seriously as an educational outcome, a worldview of interconnectedness presents a meaningful, alternative narrative to scientific and competition-based ideologies.

Within an art education setting, students can learn about the principle of interconnectedness in various ways. For instance, in a year-10 art classroom teenagers begin to engage with the hermeneutic rule: that the interpretation of an artwork depends on the interpretive perspective, and that the “context” may change an artwork’s meaning. Since about the 1970’s literary and aesthetic theory has elevated the viewer to a constitutive role in the process of meaning making. Subjective experience and interpretation of an artwork is generally taken into account as one dimension in reading artworks. Perhaps at around the age of 14, learners encounter the idea that the viewer is not “separate” but “inseparable” from an artwork. They learn about an interconnectedness between artwork, artist, viewer, and varying contexts. Specifically, learners may begin to grasp that an artwork is not a singular entity, but more correctly behaves like a chameleon interrelated with its environment: continuously changing its meaning with the changing surroundings.

Learning and teaching through art provides a fertile ground for aesthetically examining the ever-changing relationships and interrelationships students experience—on a personal, local, national, and planetary level. For example, the art classroom may offer a conducive space for teenagers to explore timely issues of global interconnectedness. Having grown up with the Internet, most teenagers today have an unprecedented understanding about the interdependency of all life around the planet. Today’s tenth graders have vast access to online information that help them acknowledge the law of a profound interconnectedness on a finite planet: Whether global climate warming, the depletion of natural resources, or the global production cycle of “stuff,” much of this information comes to students through “images” of diverse formats. Often, images capture complex and multilayered relationships and are particularly powerful in engaging teenagers in issues beyond their immediate life worlds. By integrating material from visual culture or by using contemporary artists who address current global issues, art education encourages teenagers to look deeply at complicated global trends through a visual lens. Students may understand how both popular images and artworks can serve as visual representations of the complex nature of an increasingly interrelated world. Ideally, and possible in year 10, students would realize that they themselves are an interdependent part of the evolving planet as a whole. Further explored in their art practice, this insight can motivate students to develop a growing sense of shared responsibility beyond ethical, religious, national, or geographic identities.

### 3. Other-than-ego consciousness.

“Other-than-ego consciousness” is a significant notion for contemporary approaches to spirituality. It may also prove useful for addressing the spiritual in 21st century art education. Current spiritual authors, such as Tolle (2005), have contributed to popularizing the term “ego,” which has arguably become part of the mainstream. The ego in a spiritual context pertains to a sense of “self” or “I” as a separate and distinct identity or entity. This separate identity results from an identification with physical, mental, and emotional experiences, leading to the conviction of “I” as confined to body, mind, and emotions. However, according to a spiritual understanding, the ego represents just *one* facet of the human and not the whole human being. Hence, an egocentric conception of self describes a construction and experience of self and world exclusively based on the “ego,” without recognizing any extrasensory or transpersonal information, such as mystical experiences. An egocentric conception of self also maintains a separation from—rather than interdependence with—that which is not *my* body, not *my* mind, not *my* feelings.

Transcending egocentric conceptions of self refers (a) to a recognition of the existence of an ego, and (b) to a letting go of one’s current self-structure. This entails an overcoming of one’s cultural conditionings, beliefs, and ideas of self. The concept of an other-than-ego consciousness therefore invites a shift in individual consciousness from egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism toward increased planetary awareness of interconnectedness. Similar to the previous argument, a number of scholars believe that the development of an other-than-ego consciousness leads to less self-centred but more compassionate individuals (Anthony, 2008; Bussey et al., 2008; Hart, 2009; Miller, 1988). As Feuerstein (1998) points out in the context of yoga,<sup>5</sup> and Varela et al. (1991) for Buddhism, this view of dissolving experiences of egocentric identities aligns with all genuine spiritual traditions. Accordingly, spiritual traditions are not only underpinned by ethics of love and caring, but also significantly concerned with the higher aim of developing a person’s increased sense of selflessness and egolessness. This is what I refer to as an “other-than-ego

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “karma yoga,” understood as self-less service for others, was a founding principle in ancient Indian yogic texts; whereas “yoga” in contemporary Western societies has become virtually synonymous with one or another version of body-based “hatha yoga.”

consciousness:” less ego but more consciousness. The need for an other-than-ego consciousness in the 21st century receives growing credible recognition in business, society, and education. For example, MIT academics Scharmer and Kaufer’s (2013) innovative book proposes a shift *From Ego-System to Eco-System Economics*.

Art education delivers a meaningful context for students to imaginatively investigate questions of their identity and sense of self. Most art education policies articulate this learning outcome. For instance, the New South Wales Visual Arts Syllabus for the years 7–10 (Board of Studies, 2003) mentions art as a means to build “social identity,” “cultural identity,” “community identity,” and “national identity.” These terms indicate that the concept of “identity” is complex and exceeds an egoic understanding of self. Furthermore, postmodern theories—and arguably many artists since modernity—have shown that “self” is no longer confined to traditional, fixed notions of a singular “I.” Rather, “I” is increasingly viewed as multiple, fragmented, contested, ungraspable, and ever changing. For year-10 students, a stereotypical but convincing example from art history would be Cubist portraits that depict “fragmented” persons—capturing the simultaneity of diversity. Cindy Sherman or Sophie Calle would be exciting contemporary artists who address issue of identity and a diversified self.

Overall, through its imaginative and creative processes, the art classroom appears to stimulate rethinking individual self. By encouraging learners to engage with novel perspectives, the art classroom potentially challenges—rather than affirms—learners’ existing ideas of self. Most year-10 students are in a period of intense personal change and growth, with much of their mental, emotional, and embodied energy dedicated toward (re)creating themselves. For this reason, incorporating ideas of “other-than-ego consciousness” into the visual art classroom may indeed inspire teenagers to playfully explore the boundaries of their selves.

#### 4. Ultimacy.

Related to the previous notion of other-than-ego consciousness, “Ultimacy” represents another useful concept for a contemporary interpretation of spirituality and its integration into art education. Originally coined by existentialist philosopher and theologian Tillich in the mid-20th century, “Ultimacy,” in this context, refers to the fullest possible human development, both in terms of the highest individual achievement and in terms of engaging with and serving the highest purpose as a human. Hence, Ultimacy—both as a process and end-point—designates a conception of ultimate individual and collective well-being in a spiritual-psychological-ethical sense, promoting an innate human drive toward goodness.

Analysing the ideas and nature of *Holistic Education*, Forbes (2003) identifies Ultimacy as a principal characteristic of different nonreligious spiritual approaches to education. Although Ultimacy can be interpreted differently depending on context, the *idea* of Ultimacy represents a distinct philosophy and approach that highlights the centrality given to ultimate, existential, and spiritual concerns. The development of an other-than-ego consciousness is a repeated concept regarding a person’s ultimate potential. Further, visions of ultimate well-being through education frequently emphasize core human values such as love, caring, and humility (Brantmeier et al., 2010; Bussey et al., 2008; Forbes, 2003; Slaughter, 2004).

Ultimacy as a guiding principle in education may be seen as fundamentally different from most forms of education that are, in Forbes’ (2003) view, generally concerned with either enculturation or preparation for work. A concrete example of Ultimacy in education is Miller’s (2006, 2010) slogan of “educating for wisdom.” Another educationally useful position is Hart’s (2009) model of six interrelated layers, each increasing in depth, covering (a) information, (b) knowledge, (c) intelligence, (d) understanding, (e) wisdom, and (f)

transformation. For Hart, transformation as “the push and pulse that drives self-organization and self-transcendence” (p. 12) describes the ultimate goal of education and is “inherently a spiritual endeavor” (p. 176).

The concept of Ultimacy serves as a compelling philosophical framework to incorporate the spiritual into art education. Most visual art syllabi embrace a somewhat humanistic ideal by aiming to assist the development of the “whole learner.” Many education documents name, among others, students’ social, cultural, academic, moral, creative, and emotional development, ideally culminating in students’ development of “positive self-concepts” (Board of Studies, 2002, p. 5). Interestingly, some art education policies also mention visual art as a context to foster students’ “spiritual development” (Board of Studies, 2009, p. 6).

“Ultimacy” becomes a useful concept insofar as it broadens the notion of the whole learner through a spiritual or mystical dimension. Within an art education setting, Ultimacy would concentrate on how to nurture a student’s highest potential through art. For example, a perennial topic in art classes throughout schooling is the self-portrait. Within a year-10 class, students may create their “ultimate” self-images, helping them to design positive self-concepts. The creation of an ultimate self-image through visual language may include a future projection of oneself in five (or fifty) years’ time. Students may not only focus on their most preferred qualities but may also find ways to re-invent their undesired shadow aspects.

## 5. Contemplative practices.

Especially over the past ten years, “contemplative practices” have gained growing popularity within diverse education settings. They provide a fifth concept constructive for approaching the spiritual in secular art education. “Contemplative practices” serves as an umbrella term for internally directed techniques that aim to relax, focus, and still a practitioner’s mind, generally as a preparation for developing higher states of consciousness. Various contemplative practices—such as yoga, tai chi, or meditative dance—developed within different cultural contexts, may be seen as first-person explorations of consciousness. Proponents of these various practices claim they lead to increased inner awareness or sensitiveness of subtle changes (mental, emotional, physical, or energetic) (Lander, 2014). Importantly, although contemplative practices often evolved within religious or spiritual systems, any specific metaphysical beliefs are optional to the individual practitioner. This optionality—albeit occasionally misunderstood—is significant for secular education environments.

Since around the turn of the 21st century, there has been an amplified scientific engagement with contemplative practices. Both quantitative and qualitative studies have generated growing evidence of the widespread benefits of contemplative practices for psychological, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social development. With reference to such findings, a number of educational theorists advocate the inclusion of contemplative approaches into education (Astin et al., 2011; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Hart, 2004, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Lander, 2014; Lau, 2009; Levy, 2007; Miller, 1988, 2000, 2006, 2010).

Contemplative education or contemplative pedagogies refer to the integration of contemplative practices into diverse educational contexts. Contemplative education covers a variety of experiential techniques, such as visualization, meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and breathing exercises. Evidence is accumulating on the wide reaching benefits of contemplative practices in education, such as teachers and students being more present, peaceful, empathetic, and efficient while being less stressed. Especially the latter is associated with positive effects on cognitive and academic performance, stress management, and increased

self-awareness (Astin et al., 2011; Flook et al., 2013; Johnson, 2009; Kees, 2010; Solloway, 1999).

A growing number of scholars are convinced that contemplative education practices are particularly crucial for children and adolescents growing up in current high-speed societies that seem to have side-lined the value of attentiveness and deep-thought (Levy, 2007). In addition to increased mental health and academic performance, some studies further suggest a link between contemplative practices and a heightened social responsibility. For instance, a longitudinal, large-scale study conducted among college students in North America revealed that those engaged in self-reflection, contemplation, and meditation demonstrated the highest development in empathy, global understanding, and caring throughout their tertiary education (Astin et al., 2011, pp. 63-69).

Among the various contemplative approaches, the Buddhist meditation technique of mindfulness has attracted most attention within educational and psychological discussions (Flook et al., 2013; Kees, 2010; Lau, 2009; Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013; Solloway, 1999). Lau (2009) describes mindfulness as “the cultivation of a mental state with moment-to-moment attention and awareness of an object in mind and body without judgment” (p. 719), which “includes all experiences, covering bodily sensations, feelings, perceptions, emotions, thoughts, images, and memories” (p. 721). As a systematic method for the development of presence, awareness, and sensitivity, mindfulness can be variously adapted for an experimental approach to viewing and creating art within a high school setting.

Significantly, mindfulness and other contemplative methods shift art engagement from an abstract-theoretical to a decisively experiential-embodied process. For example, a contemplative viewing of artworks—whether reproduced in a book, projected on a wall, or originals during fieldtrips—gives students a tool to concentrate on the act of seeing as a whole-person experience. Prior to any intellectual interpretation of an artwork, a contemplative approach provides a unique access to a conscious, subjective art experience in the present moment. Year-10 art students may explore the following instructions: “Silently view an artwork for five minutes, then close your eyes for another five minutes: How vividly can you see it with your inner eye?” “Imaginatively ‘breathe’ the different colors of an artwork: What do you notice?” “You have eyes all over body: Where in your body do you feel the artwork?”

All contemplative practices are first-person methodologies that can help students develop complementary visual skills: an awareness of “inner” imagery and visualizations, of the intuitive mind, and of one’s own body as experienced from within. An increased inner awareness may enable teenagers to become more conscious of a subtle inner visual world underneath repetitive imagery and mental chatter.

Further, contemplative methods may also inspire experimental approaches to art practice. Mindfulness and meditation have been a creative theme in art history over at least the past fifty years: for example, John Cage’s sound innovations, Marina Abramović’s endurance performances, or Allan Kaprow’s instructions to carry wet stones along a river till dry. Integrating contemplative methods into the art classroom provides tools for students to investigate processes of perception and creation through increased inner awareness, embodiment, curiosity, and presence. Therefore, an art-inspired adaptation of contemplative practices may widen the spectrum of techniques and resources available to teenagers in their artistic processes.



**Figure 2. Implications of a Spiritual Worldview for Education.**

This layered schema depicts the principle of how a spiritual worldview of interconnectedness serves as the philosophical foundation for conceptualizing educational goals, theory, and practice.

In summary, following on from the principle of layered relationships depicted in Figure 1, Figure 2 illustrates the educational implications of the discussed five concepts for a contemporary understanding of spirituality. The figure highlights the foundational role of a worldview within this schema. It demonstrates how a spiritual worldview underpins and informs a particular set of core values, the formulation of educational goals, as well as a preference for a certain learning theory and approach to educational practice. Hence, integrating “spirituality” into art education cannot be reduced to the level of “practice” but is interlinked with underlying philosophical thoughts. The five concepts proposed in this article clarify underlying theory but also connect it with concrete practice in the classroom. Figure 3 lists, in no evaluative order, why the visual art classroom presents an environment notably suitable for engaging teenagers with the spiritual.

## Art Education

- stimulates an engagement with existential and ultimate questions through art history, art theory, and art practice
- draws on rich examples of spirituality, transcendence, and the sacred as essential themes throughout art history
- provides a nondogmatic and nonreligious context for exploring the spiritual
- responds to the use of “spiritual” in some art education documents
- invites students to imaginatively investigate and recreate their identity
- promotes learners’ self-reflection and development of positive self-images
- acknowledges learners’ “inner” worlds and provides tools to visually communicate them
- may embrace contemplative methods (e.g., mindfulness or meditation) to increase students’ inner awareness of perception, vision, and embodiment
- offers tools for students to visually engage with the complex interplay between themselves and the planet as an evolving whole
- facilitates visual language to investigate the spiritual distinct from established religious imagery

### **Figure 3. Engaging with the Spiritual in Art Education.**

This table shows some characteristics of art education that designate it as a subject well suited to integrating notions of the spiritual.

## Summary and Conclusions

This article set out on the premise that different worldviews not only imply different images of human nature, but also have direct ramifications for ideas of education, both philosophically and pedagogically. Because notions of the spiritual in education are increasingly discussed in popular and academic contexts, a contemporary interpretation of spirituality in current secular societies is paramount. Specifically, because a number of art education documents use the term “spiritual,”—however, generally without unpacking its meaning—an engagement with this term emerges as significant in art education discourse. Aiming to contribute toward greater plurality in art educational thinking, this article proposed five timely concepts to renegotiate the spiritual in secular contexts, such as visual art at high school.

The interpretation of spirituality in this article complies with a recent growing popular and scholarly (1) “distinction between spirituality and religion.” I further proposed (2) an “awareness of the profound interconnectedness of all life (humans, animals, and plants alike),” (3) “other-than-ego consciousness,” (4) “Ultimacy,” and (5) “contemplative practices.”

A nonreligious and nonsectarian approach to spirituality grounded in consciousness studies and experiential, first-person methodologies seems to be well compatible with the secular idea. Further, a nonreligious approach to spirituality appears particularly conducive for the field of art education in which learners frequently engage with reflective and existential questions.

In conclusion, a spiritual worldview offers a philosophical alternative view that inspires a fresh discussion on the purpose and goals of education in the 21st century. Art education may play a significant role in actualizing spiritual ideas within formal secular environments. High school visual art offers a unique nondogmatic and nonreligious space for teenagers to creatively explore deep questions of self and world, inviting spiritual inquiry through art. Therefore, it is advisable for art educators to actively engage with contemporary approaches to spirituality. Participating in current discussions on spirituality may generate novel and timely teaching models and practices. Specifically, the integration of contemplative practices into various art education settings emerges as an innovative and compelling path forward. The adaptation of contemplative methods has the potential to encourage a new type of experiential, embodied learning and complementary way of knowing. Contemplative methods may serve as a vital resource for creatively facilitating art experience and art practice. Finally, the integration of spiritual principles and practices into art education can deepen students' inner awareness of the sacredness and mystery of all life.

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