



An Outline of Spiritual Practices in the Classroom

By Keara Saunders

I. Introduction

Through my visual essay, I plan to research and examine the value of integrating spiritual practices into art education. Firstly, I want to emphasize the difference between

spirituality and religious education. To cite the article *“Holistic Art Education: A Transformative Approach to Teaching Art”* by Lauren H. Campbell: “According to most contemporary holistic theorists, *spirituality* is distinguished from religion and viewed as an interconnectedness of everyone and everything. This awareness is presented as a route toward personal transformation and an impetus for social change.” She further states, “Psychologists and sociologists have increasingly recognized the importance of developing empathy, the sense of interpersonal connectedness.”

The term “spirituality” may elicit controversy or adverse reactions due to its conflation with Christianity. To cite the book *Against the Flow: Education, the Art, and Postmodern Culture* by Peter Abbs, he emphasizes the need to expound on the idea of spirituality by separating it “from its many historic Christian associations and

reconvene it as a definitive element of human nature and human potentiality, an abiding expression of our predicament and creative response to it” (p. 30).

In this visual essay, I want to examine practical ways to implement spiritual concepts into art education and if there is a tangible benefit to practicing them. By tangible, I mean direct results of lowered stress, improved positive outlook, and things of that nature in students. For example, Campbell later provides examples of what “holistic” education can foster, specifically when spirituality is paired with a critical inquiry:

- Openness, trust, acceptance
- Ethical and caring relationships with each other and the natural world
- Social responsibility and democratic principles
- Collaboration rather than competition
- Seeking connection rather than alienation/independence

My interest in promoting values like this through holistic education comes from my experience of being educated in a post-technology world, where personal ventures and independent success have become the primary goal for most students and educators. There is an alarming lack of connection and community in our modern institutions, particularly public high schools. Peter Abbs (2003) likens the present state of our schools to "corporations run by managers for. the collective standardization of

life" (p.24). Please see the final section of this essay for the personal motivation behind this research.

Simple spiritual practices such as **meditation, reflection, and other mindful activities** could be a tool to help counter this dilemma. For instance, in the article *An Integral Approach to Spiritual Wellness in School Counseling Settings* by R. Elliott Ingersoll and Ann L. Bauer, it is stated that “Personal Growth takes place in the context of community, and healthy individual development is essential for a healthy community. Development in general and spiritual development, in particular, tend to progress away from a preoccupation with the self (narcissism) toward care for others.” I will outline and explain how to integrate these practices in the following sections. As



stated above,
healthy individual
development is
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healthy
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Through these
tools and

Meditation in the Classroom Helps Center Students

exercises, I hope to provide simple and achievable methods for students to foster connectedness and personal development and, in turn, use this transformation to benefit the communities of their schools and homes.



Mindfulness Meditation Moves into the Classroom

II. Meditation

Spirituality is defined as “the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things, i.e., "the shift in priorities allows us to embrace our spirituality in a more profound way." In this section, I would like to outline three simple spiritual practices that could be integrated into the classroom and

also express their benefits – those practices being meditation, reflection, and community building.

The first practice I would like to introduce is **meditation**. In the article “*Mindfulness in the Classroom*,” a simple mindfulness meditation practice is introduced and integrated into the classroom by setting aside 3 minutes at the beginning of class for students to participate in guided mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness is “a state of focused attention on the experience of the present moment, whereby the events that arise are observed in a non-reactive and non-judgmental manner” (Kabat-Zin, 2005). The article emphasizes that the meditation used is secular to “encourage participation from students of any faith or philosophy” (p. 113). It is also noted that an audio or video guide is used so students new to meditation will not feel lost or confused in practice.

The response from the students in this article was overwhelmingly positive. One student stated that meditation “did wonders to relieve my stress so that I could concentrate and absorb the lecture” (p. 113). Another student reflected that they appreciated that the professor “looks not just at our intellectual needs, but she treats us as people with emotions that have to be addressed if we are to have a balanced and successful school/life” (p. 114). Taking this brief pause at the beginning of class provides an opportunity for students to reorganize their thoughts to bring clarity and peace to the present moment.

Another example of the benefits of meditation in the classroom comes from Rainbow Community school in Asheville, North Carolina, where students K-8 begin each day with meditation.



Rainbow Community School Class Meditation

Curriculum Director and Development Coordinator West Willmore (2019) stated, "The main reason why we hold it [meditation] so sacred in this school is so that we can help children develop a greater purpose, as well as a deep inner reflection on how they show up in the world, and how they show up for others in their community." This statement emphasizes what I find the most important about spiritual education: connecting on a deeper level with your peers and community. An 8th-grade student at the school, Catherine Lutkowski (2019), also noted, "Instead of just coming to school

and going right to math, we kind of center ourselves first to, like, be more relaxed.” I believe that meditation has a direct positive effect on the mental well-being of students, as explored in the previous study.

The aforementioned school dedicates 30 minutes a day for students to meditate. Though a relatively short amount of time, it may only be attainable for some schools. Therefore, I would like to introduce other activities that can be forms of meditation that may be more easily integrated into the classroom. These exercises may also be more accessible to students with attention deficits who would have difficulty sitting in silence for a prolonged period.

These activities include:

- Journaling
- Grounding Techniques
- Setting positive intentions
- Affirmations
- Stretching and yoga



Another image from Rainbow Community School

III. Reflection

These activities tie into another facet of spiritual practice I would like to introduce, as it is closely related to meditation, which is **reflection**. Through engaging in activities like mindfulness meditation, students can take the time to not only make

space for a moment of peace in the classroom but also use this time as an opportunity to contemplate their school work and emotional state. A course taught by Professor David Levy (2017) at the University of Washington, Information and Contemplation, “allows students to observe and critique their information practice and the emotional responses accompanying it” (p. 113).

Levy introduces the idea of self-examination through critiquing information practice and emotional response. Though somewhat abstract, students can achieve this concept through the above methods. In the following paragraphs, I will summarize each activity and share my experience practicing it.



a. **Journaling** - The American

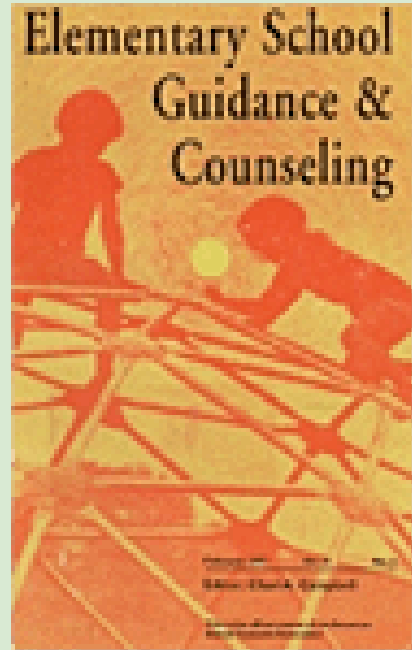
Heritage Dictionary (2011) defines journaling as “a personal record of occurrences, experiences, and reflections kept on a regular basis.” In my own experience, daily journaling has allowed me to recenter myself in times of stress and, as mentioned above, reflect on my own state of well-being. Dedicating time for students to journal before or after class could be considered a

meditative practice, particularly when the journaling is paired with

critical inquiry using prompts that encourage students to reflect on their emotional or mental state. Examples of such prompts could be:

1. Name the top 3 emotions you are feeling at this moment.
2. What are your biggest strengths?
3. What are you currently struggling with?
4. What does happiness mean to you? What does it look like?
5. What does success mean to you? What does it look like?
6. What is your biggest challenge in life right now?
7. What are you most proud of, big or small?
8. What are you grateful for today?
9. List the ways you are too hard on yourself.
10. What are your values? How do you stay true to them?
11. How can I support myself when feeling down?
12. Who do I admire or look up to?
13. What do I have in common with the people I admire?
14. What is a hobby you currently love? How could you do more of it?
15. How do you feel in this present moment?
16. What do you need to get off your chest?
17. If you were to describe yourself, what would you say?
18. What are my goals for next month?

b. **Grounding Techniques** - In the journal article *“Using Relaxation Methods with First-Grade Boys”* from *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling* (1978), a relaxation exercise using breathing and muscle contraction is presented with two goals in mind “First, it was a means to counter condition the anxiety associated with the stressful environment” (p. 146)) and second “that the self-management skill of relaxing oneself will have a spinoff effect. The goal that the child gains confidence in the ability to become calm, uses relaxation techniques in the classroom, gains approval from persons there, improves attention span, is less distractible, and learns more” (p. 147).



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These practices are perfect examples of grounding techniques, a methodology that focuses on where they are in the present moment and the sensations they are experiencing, similar to mindfulness activities. This practice ties into the benefits of implementing spiritual exercises by reducing student stress and allowing them to use these skills for further personal growth. The exercise this article introduces goes as follows (p.149):

1. Head

- a. Try to make your eyebrows touch your hair.

- b. Squeeze your eyes shut.
- c. Wrinkle up your nose.
- d. Press your lips together.
- e. Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth.

2. Shoulders and back

- a. Lift your shoulders and try to touch your ears.
- b. Bring your shoulders back as far as they will go

3. Hands and Arms

- a. Make your fists as tight as you can.
- b. Show me your arm muscles.

4. Stomach

- a. Make your stomach as hard as possible
and pull it in

5. Upper legs

- a. Lift your legs and feet off the floor.
- b. Press your knees together.

6. Lower legs and feet

- a. Press your ankles together.
- b. Press your feet together against the

floor



The results were that the student, over time, was able to achieve a state of relaxation faster after several sessions, indicated by his eyes being closed and relaxed slow breathing. These exercises were intended to help alleviate the hyperactivity in 1st-grade boys, so this practice is another good alternative to traditional meditation, which involves a certain degree of focus.

A second technique is also outlined, described as the “Release Only Phase” (p. 150). This practice aligns even more with the goals related to this visual essay as it is closer to a meditative practice. It goes as follows:

“Think about (name muscle group) and just let go. Feel the muscles becoming soft and relaxed.’ It is possible to use the release-only method and relax the muscles in the six muscle groups identified above in the first five minutes of the session. The purpose of developing slow, deep breathing is to relax the muscles further. This is accomplished through imagery. Instructions involving imagery included, "Just imagine you are lying on your back on soft green grass . . . you are so comfortable as you look up through the branches and leaves of a shade tree at the deep blue sky you can see soft white puffy clouds floating by.

Further instructions to focus on the pleasant feelings of relaxation would then follow. [...] While Johnny listened to the tape, the tutor observed him for signs of muscle relaxation. When it was noted that he was sitting with eyes closed, there

was little body movement, and he was breathing slowly and deeply, it was assumed that he was experiencing deep muscle relaxation.”

Practices like these would be beneficial in times of high stress (finals, midterms, etc.), where students may not be checking in with their mental state. In my own experience, grounding techniques have helped me mitigate panic attacks and can be integrated into daily practices in smaller doses. For example, the first practice takes the student through their entire bodily sensations, but even just taking a moment to acknowledge how your back feels in the chair or your feet on the floor can be grounding.

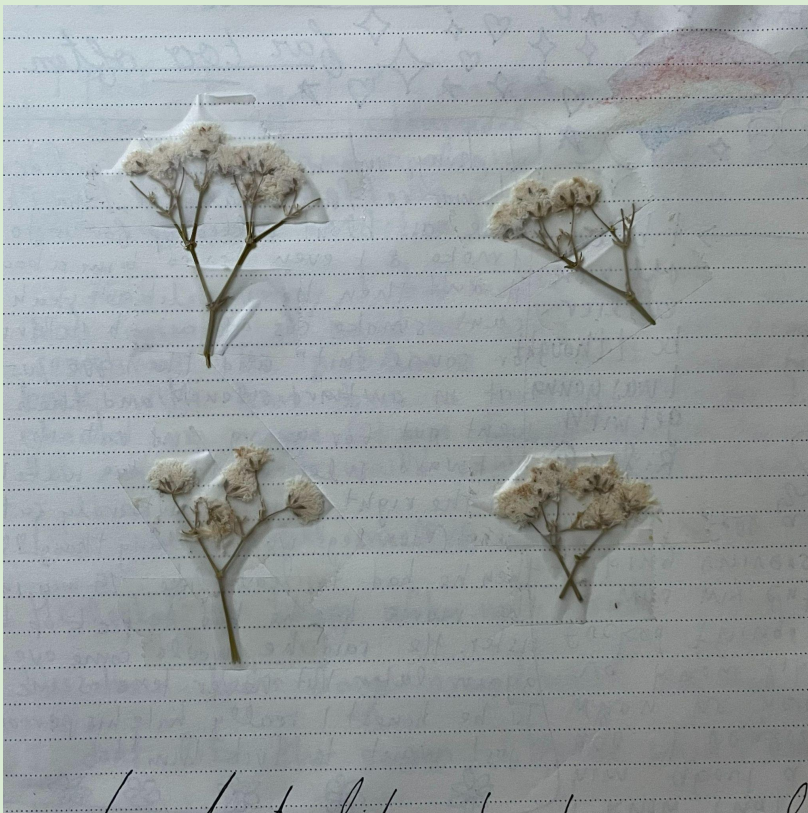
C. Setting Positive Intentions and Affirmations - Another simple way to integrate mindfulness in the classroom is to encourage students to set positive intentions for their day or the class ahead. Students and teachers can accomplish this activity by taking a brief moment of silence at the start of class and asking students to think about what they would like to achieve that day and how they can achieve it. For example, “I would like to stay present in class today; I can do that by not checking my phone.” Setting small goals allows students to pay attention to the present moment and feel a sense of aspiration and accomplishment.

Similar to intention is the practice of positive affirmations or a statement repeated to yourself. Repeating affirmations is another practice that students can do in just a few minutes by repeating a phrase to make them feel good. An exercise like this would be beneficial to students of all ages. Examples of positive affirmations are:

1. I *am* capable
2. I *can* ask for help
3. I *am* well-equipped to face challenges
4. I *am* not alone in my struggles

To return to sentiments expressed at the beginning of this visual essay; I want to underline the importance of emphasizing connection in all of these practices. By completing activities like this as a group, students can foster more open and caring relationships with each other. That brings me to my final section of this visual essay which is the personal connection I have with these practices and why I am a proponent of practicing them.

IV. Personal Connection



Practices such as journaling and meditation have helped me immensely over the years. I believe these tools would benefit students of all ages, particularly in dealing with grief and trauma.

In my experience, there is a lot of unspoken trauma in many

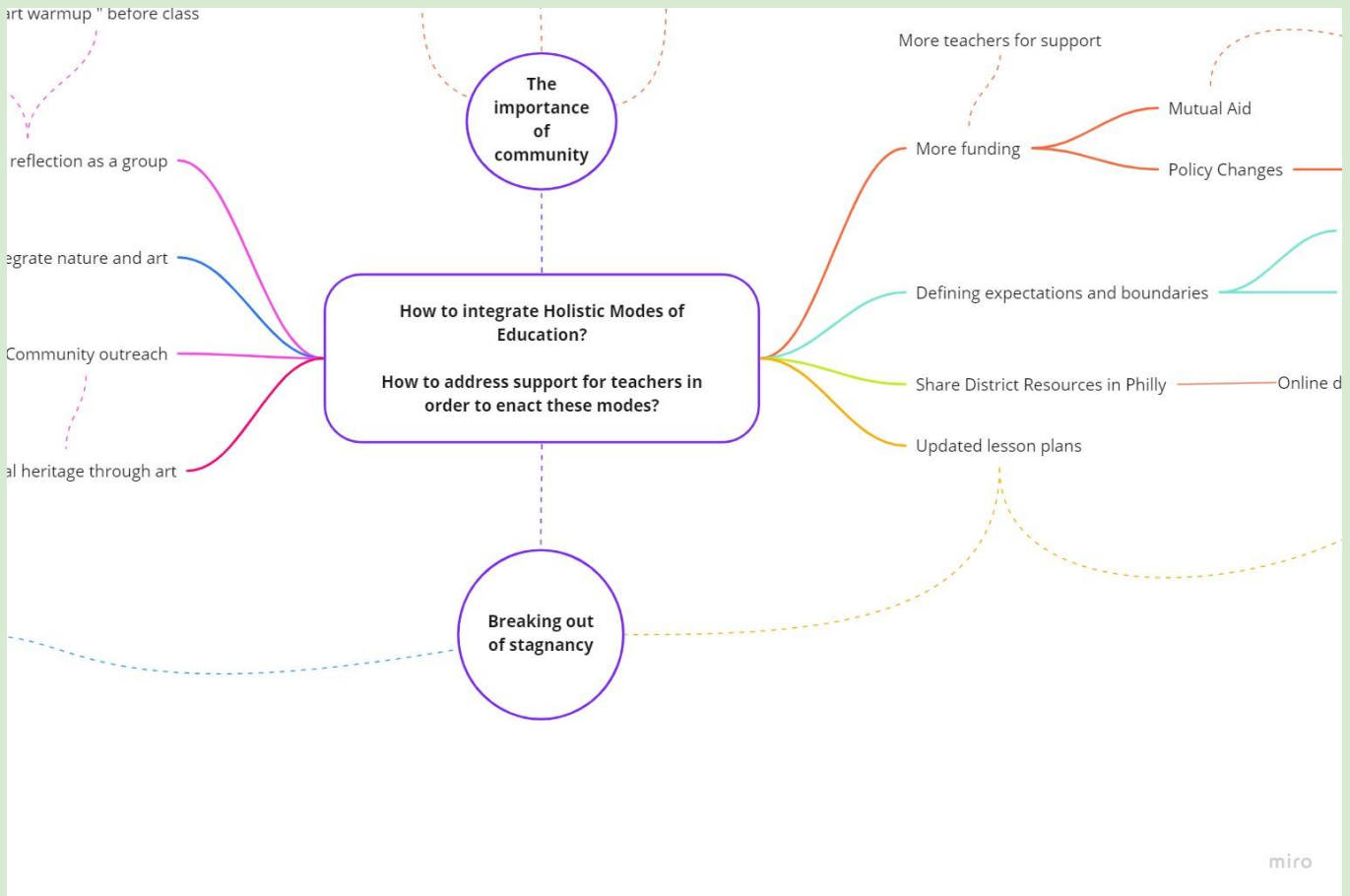
students' lives. Whether it be issues with family, friends, death, trauma, mental illness, or the like, which is why having the outlets outlined in this visual essay could be helpful. Mainly because they do not require the student to divulge personal information or put themselves on the spot in front of their peers, these practices require self-searching and introspection that need not be broadcasted.

My primary interest in these things stems from the fact that journaling became extremely important to me in high school and experiencing depression. Pictured above is an excerpt from my high school journal. Intentional writing is a practice I have carried into my adult life and remains extremely important to me. Spirituality does not have to be something religious, abstract, or intangible. It can simply be about establishing a better relationship with yourself and the world around you through routine and ritual connection. After losing a close friend this summer, meditation and reflection became the primary ways I worked through the grief. I want to share this experience in the hope it can be beneficial to students and younger members of our community.

V. Execution and Difficulties

As someone new to teaching, it may be challenging to integrate the above practices without running into certain limitations. Through an in-class exercise, my classmates and I examined these difficulties and their relation to each other in a visual mind map exercise. Please see the attached PDF for the full version. This mind map

explores the relationship between community, spiritual practices, bureaucracy, and tools that would be useful for educators.



Annotated Bibliography

Abbs, P. (2003). *Against the Flow: Education, the Art, and Postmodern Culture* (1st ed., pp. 24–30) Routledge.

Summary: This book emphasizes the power of creativity in contemporary education and examines the need to move away from the narrow productivity-based model of post-modern education. He introduces the need for a spiritual and aesthetic approach to education.

Assessment: Peter Abbs argues that contemporary education ignores the importance of aesthetics, artistic practices, and ethical education due to being influenced by forces such as capitalism and bureaucracy. He states that the present education system damages creativity and authentic learning and instead only focuses on tangible and measurable results.

Campbell, L. H. (2011). Holistic Art Education: A Transformative Approach to Teaching Art. *Art Education*, 64(2), 18–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2011.11519116>

Summary: Campbell introduces the idea of “holistic” education through practicing principles such as spirituality. She defines spirituality as an “awareness of the interconnectedness of everyone and everything.” She examines the controversy around implementing the spiritual practice, curricula, and modes of holistic education.

Assessment: Campbell argues that holistic education is beneficial through its promotion of learning empathy for others, promoting a sense of purpose, valuing connection, and learning responsibility for the well-being of others and yourself. She concludes that these practices address post-modern educational needs, such as diversity and multiculturalism, and promote positive transformation in individual students.

Dill, L. J. (2017). “Wearing My Spiritual Jacket”: The Role of Spirituality as a Coping Mechanism Among African American Youth. *Health Education & Behavior*, 44(5), 696–704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198117729398>

Summary: In this article, Dill examines the importance of religious and spiritual practices in people’s lives, particularly the importance and prevalence of these practices for African American youth. The author collected data through interviews

with 20 African American young people ages 12–20 and found that many of them had multi-faceted spiritual practices, which included prayer and belief in a higher power.

Assessment: The findings of this study emphasize the importance of researching such spiritual principles and examining their practical application when promoting wellness for young people. The participants in this research used spiritual practices to cope with things like death, school problems, and other overwhelming circumstances.

Hartel, J., Nguyen, A. T., & Guzik, E. (2017). Mindfulness Meditation in the Classroom. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 58(2), 112–115. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90015286>

Ingersoll, R. E., & Bauer, A. L. (2004). An Integral Approach to Spiritual Wellness in School Counseling Settings. *Professional School Counseling SPECIAL ISSUE: SPIRITUALITY and SCHOOL COUNSELING*, 7(5), 301–308. JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42732598?read-now=1&seq=1#page_scan_tab

Summary: This article introduces the topic of spiritual wellness and its use in promoting individual growth and emphasizing the importance of community. The authors present Wilber’s (1955) integral model, dedicated to integrating the body, mind, soul, and spirit in self, culture, and nature, as a method to promote students' spiritual wellness.

Assessment: Ingersoll and Bauer argue that by implementing Wilber’s integral model, counselors can address issues of hope, forgiveness, meaning, passion, and purpose. This practice can encourage growth and development along psychological, cultural, and social dimensions.

Journaling. (n.d.) American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition. (2011). Retrieved December 4, 2022, from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Journaling>

Summary: Definition of journaling for context

McBrien, R. J. (1978). using relaxation methods with first-grade boys. *Elementary School Guidance & Counseling*, 12(3), 146–152. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42868559>

Summary: This article outlines a relaxation practice to help aid in the hyperactive symptoms of first-grade boys.

Image Sources:

[Only On WLOS.com | Meditation in the classroom helps to center students | WLOS](#)
[Mindfulness meditation moves into the school | CBC Radio](#)