

Spirituality, progressive education, and Philosophy for Children

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Abstract

In this self-study (Samaras & Freese 2006), two authors explore the intersection of spirituality, progressive education, and Philosophy for Children (P4C). Researchers ask, 'How does cultivating spirituality in a classroom deepen the aims of progressive education and P4C?' A review of the literature makes important distinctions between spirituality and religion in educational settings (Peabody 2022), connecting 'spiritual development as an integrated purpose of schooling' (Moulin-Stozek 2020, p. 1) to the aims of progressive educators (e.g. Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Pratt & Parker) and P4C practitioners in Hawai'i (e.g. Jackson, Lukey, Makaiau, Miller, & Yos). Main sources of data include: professional records, personal reflections, and classroom observations collected for five months in a kindergarten classroom located at a large independent school in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Applied self-study research methods (Samaras 2011) are used to analyse the data. Three primary findings emerge: 1) rituals and reverence support the development of philosophical communities of inquiry; 2) spiritual dispositions of wonder and awe, and intellectually safe spaces, are mutually supportive; and 3) a teacher's personal spirituality acts as a resource in their role as a progressive educator and P4C practitioner. At the article's conclusion, the authors reflect on the intersections of spirituality, progressive education, and P4C by connecting John Dewey's (1908) philosophical insights on 'Religion and Our Schools' to educational and societal issues facing the modern era.

Key words

Philosophy for Children, progressive education, self-study, spirituality and spiritual development

Introduction

SOCRATES: I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher; for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. (Plato *Theaetetus* 155c-d)

When she was a young child, the first author of this paper remembers wondering about herself and the world around her, what Plato (1961/155d) describes as ‘the feeling of a philosopher’. In quiet moments, like time spent looking out the car window, she recalls pondering her existence. Her philosophical questions were fueled by deep curiosity and characteristic of what John Dewey—the American philosopher and progressive educator—referred to as the ‘religious dimension of experience’ (Knight 1998, p. 71). She wondered: Where do the souls of babies come from? Is there life after death? What is happiness? What is the purpose of being human? Can all people become like Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi? Are there other forms of life in the universe? Now, as an elementary teacher and Philosophy for Children (P4C) practitioner at a small progressive education school in Hawai’i, she keeps these questions close to her, especially as she nurtures in her own students in what Deborah Schein (2018) refers to as childhood spiritual development.

In this article, the two authors make the argument that the development of spirituality in children deepens the aims of progressive education and P4C. To do this, they present a self-study (Samaras & Freese 2006) that was conducted by the first author and supported by the second author (her professor and Master’s thesis advisor). Together, they organise the article by beginning with a description of the unique context where the study took place. Next, a review of the literature is presented. This overview of scholarship and research makes important distinctions between spirituality and religion in educational settings (Peabody 2022), introduces the concept of ‘spiritual development as an integrated purpose of schooling’ (Moulin-Stozek 2020, p. 1), and makes connections to the philosophies of a number of progressive educators (e.g. Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Pratt & Mitchell), and P4C practitioners in Hawai’i (e.g. Jackson, Lukey, Makaiau, Miller & Yos). Methods used to conduct the study are then outlined, including the main sources of data and the self-study approach applied to collect and analyse data (Samaras 2011). Subsequently, the study’s findings are reported using three emergent themes: 1) rituals and reverence support the development of philosophical communities of inquiry; 2) spiritual dispositions of wonder and awe, and intellectually safe spaces, are mutually

supportive; and 3) a teacher's personal spirituality acts as a resource in their role as a progressive educator and P4C practitioner. At the article's conclusion, the two authors reflect on the intersection of spirituality, progressive education, and P4C by connecting John Dewey's (1908) philosophical insights on 'Religion and Our Schools' to educational and societal issues facing the modern era.

Context of the study

From 2021 to 2022, the first author was a graduate student in a brand new master's program launched at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), College of Education (COE). The Master's of Education in Curriculum Studies (MEd-CS), Progressive Philosophy and Pedagogy is designed for educators and scholars from diverse disciplines and contexts who are interested in building our collective capacity for creating a better future society (Dewey 1916) for today's children. Successful completion of the program requires completing a portfolio, including a scholarly research paper that documents progress made on a professional line of inquiry (Makaiau 2022). Inspired by the childhood questions described at the beginning of this paper, and her ongoing quest to use P4C as an educational approach for pursuing the 'flourishing life' (Yos 2012, pp. 52-53)--the first author chose to explore how spirituality and P4C might deepen a progressive educator's practice and enhance the experience of children in schools.

As a part of her journey in the program, the first author worked to construct a theory of spirituality (see James 1902/1970) to help deepen the aims of her progressive education practice. Along the way, she discovered Schein's (2018) three-part 'System of Spiritual Development' (p. 38) for early childhood educators: 1) Love, connection, and a positive sense of self, 2) Basic dispositions and spiritual moments: Feelings of wonder, awe, joy, and inner peace, and 3) Complex dispositions: Acts of caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence. To pursue her professional line of inquiry and explore the connections between Schein's systems and progressive education pedagogy she conducted a self-study in the kindergarten classroom she was teaching in at Punahou School.

Punahou School is an elite independent K-12 college preparatory day school located in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

It was founded in 1841 by Protestant missionaries on lands given to them by Hawaiian chiefs. The beneficiary of these two traditions, and the home of a diverse community from around the world, Punahou is

now the largest independent school on a single campus in the United States, serving approximately 3,770 students. (Punahou School 2025)

Ethnically, Punahou School students report being: 24% Native Hawaiian ancestry, 2% Samoan, 1% Guamanian, 1% American Indian, 3% Black, 45% Chinese, 19% Filipino, 57% Japanese, 18% Korean, 1% South Asian, 2% Other Asian, 9% Hispanic, and 54% White. Economically, the majority of Punahou School students come from upper class families, while approximately 22% qualify for financial assistance. Geographically, students who attend Punahou School come from across the Hawaiian island of Oahu.

As an assistant teacher, the first author had 25 students in her Punahou School kindergarten classroom at the time this study was conducted. Their ages ranged from five to six. Twelve of the students identified as male and thirteen female. They were representative of the school's demographics described above. For five months of the 2021-2022 school year the first author collected professional records, personal reflections, and made classroom observations to help her explore the question: *How does cultivating spirituality in a classroom deepen the aims of a progressive education and P4C?* To follow is the review of the literature that underpinned her research.

Literature review

The literature review begins by making distinctions between spirituality and religion in educational settings (Peabody 2022). Next, the concept of 'spiritual development as an integrated purpose of schooling' (Moulin-Stozek 2020, p. 1) is connected to progressive education philosophy and pedagogy (Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Pratt & Parker). Finally, links between spirituality and Philosophy for Children (P4C), and specifically practitioners in Hawai'i (Jackson, Lukey, Makaiau, Miller & Yos), are made in an effort to illustrate why a progressive education practice like philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI) might be considered an approach to fostering spiritual development (Moulin-Stozek 2020) in schools.

Distinguishing spirituality and religion in education

In the context of education and schooling, distinctions have been made between spirituality and religion. For example, to inform current international debates about educating for wholeness and purpose, Moulin-Stozek (2020) examined historical texts to understand how spiritual development evolved as a goal in mainstream education systems in England and Wales. The researcher found that 'spiritual development as an integrated purpose of schooling is not to be equated with religion', concluding that

‘spiritual development as an educational goal has been readily distinguished from religion by educationalists and religionists alike’ (Moulin-Stozek 2020, p. 1). Additional educational philosophers, scholars and researchers have reached similar determinations.

In his 1902 work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James argues that *true* religion is rooted in deeply personal, subjective spiritual feelings rather than in organised institutions or theological doctrines. He wrote: ‘religion is a belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto’ (James 1902/1970, p. 40). However, contemporary educators, philosophers and scholars, such as Gschwandtner (2021) have challenged these notions asserting ‘that activity, ritual, and practices (often on public communal levels rather than merely private individual ones) are much more broadly representative of religion’ (p. 2). And when comparing religion to spirituality, they explain:

despite the vagueness of the term and the fluidity of definition, there is some consensus among scholars of spirituality that it is a broader term than that of religion and need not be associated with affiliation to a particular tradition, but instead concerns issues of personal meaning, fulfillment, and transformation. (Gschwandtner 2021, pp. 2-3)

In sum, both spirituality and religion explore the human experience of the sacred and the search for meaning, but religion in many contemporary mainstream societies (whether it is true or not as pointed out by Schneiders 2003) is more often associated with a structured system of beliefs and practices involving public institutions, and spirituality is a more personal and individualised exploration of one's connection to the divine or the universe.

For centuries, the influence of religion on teaching and learning has been well-documented. This includes systems of education controlled by the church, parochial schools, teachers observing and practicing religious holidays with students, world religions coursework and curriculum, and the list goes on (Hackett et al. 2016). This relationship between religion and education is not the focal point of this study. Instead, the authors are more focused on recent scholarship and research (e.g. Moulin-Stozek 2020), which examines the concept of spiritual development and the ways in which it has taken the place of religion in non-religious school settings. For example, Schein's (2018) *Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children* presents a system for understanding and fostering spiritual development, emphasising the importance of nurturing a child's innate spirituality through loving relationships, spiritual moments,

and fostering empathy and kindness. Schein (2014) concludes that early childhood programs, which apply elements of spiritual development to school experiences, have the potential to positively impact students' current and future growth. As Moulin-Stozek (2020) points out, spiritual development in schools, as opposed to religious education, allows students to 'experience, create, inquire, and enjoy things beneficial to life's meaning and purpose' (p. 507).

Spiritual development and the American progressive education movement

The central aims of the American progressive education movement are also rooted in 'the freest and fullest development of the individual, based upon the scientific study of his physical, mental, spiritual, and social characteristics and needs' (Graham 1967, pp. 28-29). Bruce and Eryaman (2015) describe this as 'the progressive impulse in education', which 'is defined in different ways, but generally it aims to develop self-actualizing individuals who can take charge of their own lives and participate fully in the creation of a greater public good' (p. 1). Many of these ideas, as Little and Ellison (2015) point out, are rooted in the thoughts of European philosophers such as Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel.

Both Pestalozzi and Froebel were interested in education for the purpose of 'human flourishing ... a process that develops naturally but that can be cultivated with sensitive support' (Bruce & Eryaman 2015, p. 13). They introduced concepts such as 'child-centred' or 'educating the whole-child' in an attempt to shift education from a teacher-centred model to one that utilised a students' interests and developmental needs to foster one's innate drive and intrinsic motivation to learn. Pestalozzi created schools dedicated to learning by 'heart, head, and hand' (Little & Ellison 2015, p. 34) and Froebel established kindergartens or 'garden[s] of children' (p. 34) that nurtured students' spiritual as well as academic development.

John Dewey, one of the founders of the American Progressive Education movement built upon the philosophies of Pestalozzi and Froebel to develop a 'Deweyan approach to religious education' (Knight 1998, p. 78) that creates the conditions for a 'child to appreciate the truly religious aspects of his own growing life, not one of inoculating him externally with beliefs and emotions which adults happen to have found serviceable to themselves' (Dewey 1903/1974, p. 7). As Knight (1998) explains:

Thus the Deweyan religious educator, as opposed to the educator about religions, is someone who will draw upon experiences and practices that are 'religious' in the religions—for example, a sense of wonder and

wholeness, of identity and belonging, a faith in life, through both its achievements and failures, and the role of narrative and imagination in the holding of values and ideals—and then enable pupils to reflect upon their own experience of these things in their everyday life. (p. 77)

Dewey (1903/1974) summed this up as the ‘religious dimension of experience’, which he framed as the ‘sense of awe and wonder, dependence, peace and joy that come with a mystical appreciation of oneself and one’s community as integrated within the whole that constitutes the universe’ (p. 71).

Today, philosophers such as Anders Schinkel (2022) who theorise about the role of ‘contemplative wonder’ in education bolster Dewey’s original assertions. Schinkel proposes that an education, which stimulates awe and wonder, has the potential to open up teachers and students to deep learning—exploring questions concerning life’s meaning, values, and morals in philosophical terms, rather than religious. Dacher Keltner (2023), a psychologist and contemporary of Schinkel who studies the science of happiness, explains why this type of spiritual development—one that invites wonder and awe as an integrated purpose of schooling—is so critical in the modern world:

One of the most alarming trends in the lives of children today is the disappearance of awe. We are not giving them enough opportunities to discover and experience the wonders of life. Art and music classes do not make the school budget. The free-form play of recess and lunchtime is being replaced with drills to boost scores on tests that have only modest relation to how well kids do in school. Teachers must teach to those tests rather than engage students in open-ended questioning and discovery, where the unknown is the centerpiece of the lesson. Every minute is scheduled. And the natural world children are experiencing is undergoing mass extinctions. It’s no wonder that stress, anxiety, depression, shame, eating disorders, and self-harm are on the rise for young people. They are awe-deprived. (p. 230)

He concludes, ‘in our studies, people who find more everyday awe show evidence of living with wonder. They are more open to new ideas. To what is unknown. To what language can’t describe. To the absurd. To seeking new knowledge. They feel more comfortable with mysteries, with that which cannot be explained’ (p. 39).

Over time, progressive educators have carried forward Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Dewey's original interests in the spiritual elements of progressive philosophy and pedagogy, alongside modern-day scientific contributions like Keltner's science of wonder and awe through the concept of *eudaimonia* (a flourishing life). Introduced by Aristotle as a key element of a good life, *eudaimonia* emphasises growth, meaning, and authenticity. Closely intertwined with the philosophical through line that helps to define the overall aims of the American progressive education movement, Bruce and Eryaman (2015) explain:

Human flourishing ... the Greek term *eudaimonia* ... refers to an objective state characterizing the well-lived life, not simply a transient or subjective feeling of pleasure. According to Aristotle, it is the proper goal of human life ... *eudaimonia* directly links the individual and social aspects of progressivism ... it connects the 'uniqueness and singleness which distinguishes each individual' to consciousness of their responsibility to others, and ultimately to the meaning of existence ... Good lives for students, for teachers, and for citizens in society at large are all deeply interdependent. (pp. 13-15)

Rockefeller (1991) built off these ideas adding, 'confident in their faith in human nature, the objective of the progressives was to free and stimulate the inner springs of intellectual interest, moral goodness, and creativity that are fundamental to real learning and harmonious social progress' (p. 227). Dewey, as well as other progressive education leaders, believed that teachers were essential to the accomplishment of these aims. Grounded in their own search of the flourishing life, educators have the power to develop intellectual curiosity, cultural awareness, a healthy philosophical outlook, emotional balance, social fitness, sensitivity to social problems, and a strong moral character in their students (Bruce & Eryaman 2015).

Caroline Pratt, another giant in the American progressive education movement, shared this conviction about the role of the teacher in spiritual development. She positions teachers as 'guides to the children's learning' and asserts that 'finding the right teachers [is] crucial to the children's learning and the school's success' (Turley 2014, p. 272). More specifically, Pratt believed in teacher wisdom as an important mechanism for supporting a child's meaningful pursuit of inquiry and spoke of cultivating a child's intuitive thinking to develop their wholeness (Pratt 1948/2014, p. 190). Parker Palmer, who founded the Center for Courage & Renewal, built on Pratt's

(1948/2014) progressive education ideas, highlighting the role of a teacher's 'inner sources' in fostering spiritual development in schools:

Spirituality wants to open us to truth—whatever truth may be, wherever truth may take us. Such a spirituality does not dictate where we must go, but trusts that any path walked with integrity will take us to a place of knowledge. Such a spirituality encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox. By this understanding, the spirituality of education is not about dictating ends. It is about examining and clarifying the inner sources of teaching and learning, ridding us of the toxins that poison our hearts and minds. (1983, p. xi)

In agreement with Palmer, the scholar bel hooks (2010) concluded: 'spirituality belongs in the classroom because it is the seemingly magical force that allows for the radical openness that is needed for genuine academic and/or intellectual growth' (p. 150).

So what does spiritual development look like in progressive education schools today? Zakrzewski (2013) contends that it takes the form of educators and students questioning 'how we live in the world and how we relate to self and others' (p. 150). It can also look like learner-centred inquiry, 'a conscious choice' characterised by the desire to engage in individual and communal quests for truth in the form of 'answers about the self, universe, and meaning of life' (Zakrzewski 2013, para. 5). Aligned with the goals of progressive education in the past, spiritual growth in the context of schooling today 'develop[s] patience, tolerance, compassion, a sense of oneness, and other spiritual qualities in children ... help[ing] them nurture these qualities as they grow to adulthood' (Haberlin n.d., para. 5). In essence, '[if] we want our children to be gracious and grateful. [If] we want them to have courage in difficult times. [If] we want them to have a sense of joy and purpose. That's what it means to nurture their spiritual lives' (Tippet 2019) in the modern world.

In the final section of the literature review to follow, the two authors present philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI) as a possible progressive education approach for translating theory to practice—a philosopher's pedagogy (Makaiau & Miller 2012) for fostering spiritual development (Moulin-Stozek 2020) in today's schools.

Philosophy for Children and spiritual development

With roots reaching deeply into American Pragmatism and the thought of philosophers such as James and Dewey, Philosophy for Children (P4C) is a widely respected international movement in education. It was started around 1969 when Matthew Lipman, a Columbia University philosophy professor, observed that children did not think as well as they could or should in a democratic society. To address these issues Lipman created a curriculum that resonated with Dewey's (1916) progressive philosophy of education, and aimed to improve students' thinking by incorporating the skills of logic and reasoning into the practice of philosophy in the K-12 setting. Ann Margaret Sharp, a contemporary of Lipman and a key figure in the P4C movement, played a crucial role in its global spread.

In addition to collaborating with Lipman on the development of P4C curriculum, Sharp also helped to expand the important role of P4C's Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI) in nurturing the 'whole child' (Little & Ellison 2015, p. 59). The CPI, explained Sharp (in Sharp & Bornstein 2012), creates conditions for spiritual development in schools, cultivating and nurturing 'the ability to perceive, to think, to reason, to reason with others, to create stories that illuminate and render wisdom and insight' (p. 4). Furthermore, she observed CPIs generating a 'sense of spirituality, a sense of belonging to the pervasive mystery of nature' (Sharp & Bornstein 2012, p. 7). Based on her many years practicing, researching, and writing about P4C, she shared:

Nature as mystery, and humans as part of nature generates wonder, and such wonder generates awe ... As we allow ourselves to experience cosmic mystery, we might be able to join the mystics in their experience of what they called the divine, and what we might call the spiritual dimension of living. (p. 6)

Sharp was instrumental in establishing P4C as an effective progressive education practice for integrating spiritual development into the daily lives of school children.

Philosophy for Children Hawai'i

In an effort to extend Lipman and Sharp's original curriculum and vision to a variety of geo-cultural contexts, a number of P4C centres have been established worldwide. The Uehiro Academy for Philosophy and Ethics in Education (Uehiro Academy) at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM) is the home of philosophy for children Hawai'i (p4cHI). p4cHI is Thomas Jackson's (2001) culturally responsive offshoot of

Lipman's original approach. The goal of p4cHI is to move school culture from a top-down model to a community-based, participatory model grounded in sound pedagogy and effective educational philosophy. To accomplish this goal, p4cHI practitioners convert traditional classrooms into intellectually safe communities of inquiry where students and teachers develop their abilities to think for themselves in responsible ways.

Jackson believes that wonder, and hence the origin of philosophy, begins at birth (Jackson & Makaiau 2021). This is the special, powerful form of wonder he refers to as primal wonder. Primal (from the Latin *primus*, 'first') wonder is pre-language, pre-thought, pre-culture, and pre-beliefs. It embodies what Zen Buddhists refer to as *shoshin* or a beginner's mind. The original state of mind we were born with—a beginner's mind—is free of bias and prejudice and has great capacity for playfulness and joy. As Suzuki (1970) explains,

Original mind includes everything within itself. It is always rich and sufficient within itself. You should not lose your self-sufficient state of mind. This does not mean a closed mind, but actually an empty mind and a ready mind. If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few. (p. 2)

Jackson shares that primal wonder can be cultivated when traditional classrooms are transformed into 'intellectually safe communities of inquiry' (Jackson & Makaiau 2021, para. 3) where children are provided time and space to 'develop their ability to think for themselves in responsible ways by engaging in inquiries that arise from their interests, experiences, and learning contexts' (Jackson & Makaiau 2021, para 3).

Makaiau and Miller (2012), also key players in the p4cHI movement, explain that effective p4cHI practitioners adopt a 'philosopher's pedagogy' (p. 9). Referring to this pedagogy they share, 'quite often philosophy has been characterised and stereotyped as an activity of the mind. However, due to its connection to our lived experiences and emotions, it is also an activity of the heart' (p. 10). In the context of this paper, p4cHI and the philosopher's pedagogy is a progressive education approach for integrating Dewey's (1908) take on spiritual education into the schooling experience:

When we recognize that there is a philosopher inherent in every child, we can come to see schooling as an opportunity to make the most out of children's natural tendencies to question, engage in inquiry, and think

deeply about themselves and the world around them. Through the recognition of primal wonder in children, educators also have the chance to recover it in themselves. Ultimately, a strong belief in primal wonder helps teachers and students develop: passion for this gift of life they have been granted, understanding and acceptance of uncertainty, comfort in the place of “not knowing,” and recognition that we are not alone as we travel through this mystery of life together. (Jackson & Makaiau 2021, para 8)

p4cHI and the philosopher’s pedagogy were key elements of the first author’s progressive education practice that helped her integrate Schein’s (2018) three-part ‘System of Spiritual Development’ (p. 38) into her kindergarten classroom. Tools for translating theory to practice, strategies associated with p4cHI, and the philosopher’s pedagogy helped her cultivate spirituality in herself and in her students, living out Dewey’s ‘religious dimension of experience ... the sense of awe and wonder, dependence, peace and joy that come with a mystical appreciation of oneself and one’s community as integrated within the whole that constitutes the universe’ (Knight 1998, p. 71)

Objectives

The study presented in this paper explores the intersection between spirituality, progressive education, and P4C. It draws on the scholarly research described above to explore the question: *How does cultivating spirituality in a classroom deepen the aims of progressive education and P4C?* To investigate this question, the researchers employed qualitative (Creswell & Poth 2018) self-study (Samaras & Freese 2006) methods over a five-month period in a kindergarten classroom at Punahou School. Applied self-study research methods (Samaras 2011) were used to analyse the data.

Methods

The participants in this study included the two authors and 25 children who were the first author’s students in the kindergarten class that she taught at Punahou School during the 2021-2022 school year. Contextual details about the participants were described in a previous section of this paper. Additional background information relevant to the classroom context includes: the 25 kindergarten students met with their classroom teachers five days a week from 8:00 am to 3:00 pm; art, music, and philosophy were integrated into students’ lessons in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies; philosophy for children Hawai’i strategies (Jackson 2001; Makaiau

& Miller 2012) such as intellectual safety, the community ball, and the Good Thinker's Tool Kit were introduced to students to facilitate philosophical inquiry; and finally, elements of Hawaiian Culture-Based Education (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward & Malone 2017) and Place-Based Education (Gruenewald 2003) grounded in Hawai'i were essential elements of the classroom curriculum and culture.

Data for this self-study came from classroom observations, the first author's personal reflections (e.g. researcher journals and memos), student work, and professional records collected for five months in the first author's kindergarten classroom. The methods for collecting data included:

1. Taking rigorous notes (observational notes, reflective journals, and analytics memos) throughout the school day to record classroom observations and personal insights. This included documenting empirical outcomes of each lesson and examples of Schein's (2018) 'System of Spiritual Development' (p. 38) in action. Field notes were recorded daily for five months.
2. Collecting and storing artifacts of student work (completed assignments, artwork, photographs, and written recollections of class discussions of class discussions and one-on-one conversations between students and teachers). This occurred organically over the five-month span that the study was conducted.
3. Systematically documenting and storing professional records (e.g. unit plans, lesson plans, and other curricular documents) that were implemented over the course of the study.

Applied self-study research methods (Samaras 2011) were used to analyse the data in three distinct phases. In phase one, the two authors analysed the data separately. The first author engaged in a rigorous and systematic process of cataloging all of the data, pulling together all of the records of lessons, classroom activities, student observations and self-reflections. She then read and re-read the text contained in the notes, artifacts of student work and professional records and developed initial open codes. In phase two, to decrease researcher bias, the two authors came together and served as critical friends (Miles & Huberman 1994). They reviewed the initial open codes and engaged in dialogue. This process was cyclical rather than linear. They revisited the data and literature time and again in order to illuminate the emerging links between spirituality, progressive education, and P4C. They also drew from the methods of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss 1967), 'taking information from data collection

and comparing it to emerging categories' (Creswell 2007, p. 64). As a part of this process, they worked together to develop theoretical codes and analytic themes. In phase three, they wrote up their findings. In this final stage of the analytic process they collaborated further to revise their thinking and refine the themes developed.

Findings

The analysis of the data revealed three themes that highlighted emergent relationships between spirituality, the aims of progressive education, and P4C. They are: 1) rituals and reverence support the development of philosophical communities of inquiry; 2) spiritual dispositions of wonder, awe, and intellectually safe spaces are mutually supportive and 3) a teacher's personal spirituality acts as a resource in their role as a progressive educator and P4C (in this case, p4cHI) practitioner.

Rituals and reverence support the development of Philosophical Communities of Inquiry

The first central theme to emerge from the analysis of the data demonstrates how spiritual rituals and attitudes of reverence support progressive educators in fostering and strengthening what Sharp (2010) referred to as school and classroom Communities of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI). Ritual was observed as 'an indispensable element for an authentic [CPIs] because in it we come together to name and celebrate, to lament, grieve and let go and to create and recreate our common task' (Fox 1988, p. 262). And reverence within CPIs was observed as the 'ability to experience amazement and respect' (Schein 2018, p. 123). Data from the study revealed how ritual and reverence—or spiritual moments during both structured CPI activities and transitional periods throughout the school day—increased feelings of shared connection and close relationships.

A specific example was the ritual of 'oli' (in Hawaiian, the act of chanting, which is not necessarily a religious practice, but more of a sacred way to communicate with the divine, honour ancestors, preserve spiritual teachings, and connect with nature—an act that is practiced in many schools across the Hawaiian Islands). In the kindergarten classroom observed for this study, the students and teachers would collectively say a sacred Hawaiian oli together to mark the beginning of each school day. In the first author's personal journal she wrote this about the daily oli, describing how students and teachers: 'felt-sense of cohesive natural calm and mutual care among the group ... Children embraced each other and their teachers in the holding of hands, hugs, and in their joyful facial expressions' (First author journal entry). Through this practice of

ritual and reverence, the researchers observed children demonstrating strengthened connections to one another and their place of learning as foundational to the classroom culture.

Other examples of ritual and reverence catalogued in professional documents and recorded in class photographs included: *Peace Rose Ceremonies* to resolve conflict, *Sun Ceremonies* to honour birthdays, and *Gratitude Circles* to express appreciation and acknowledgement. In each practice, the first author noted the teachers ‘act[ing] as experienced guides, co-learners, and brokers of community resources and learning possibilities. Their expertise [was] not so much in their stored knowledge – although this is important – as in their capacity to help students acquire the skills and dispositions of effective learners [and meaning makers] (Smith 2002, p. 593)’ (First author journal entry). Examples like these illustrate educators purposefully designing, guiding, and co-constructing progressive practices that provide students with opportunities to reflect on ritual and reverence throughout the school day, ultimately supporting students’ spiritual development.

A final example of ritual and reverence to emerge from the data was the *Safe Space Agreements* mantra that the students and teachers collectively stated aloud to mark the beginning of p4cHI-style inquiry sessions: ‘1) We are safe with our words; 2) We share the ball; 3) We are safe with our bodies; 4) We can say, ‘I need more time’; 5) We raise our hands to show we want to share our thinking; 6) Our eyes and ears are on the speaker.’ In the first author’s personal journal she wrote about the effects of implementing the *Safe Space Agreements* mantra to begin philosophical dialogue with her kindergarten students observed in the study:

Once the children sit in a circle, knee to knee and facing each other, the residual busyness from outdoor play soon dissipates, as children posture themselves to chorally say our *Safe Space Agreements* together as one voice. The children speak our agreements aloud, proudly and respectfully, committing promises to their community of inquiry to open up heart and mind, to accept all thinking and differences of opinion, to honor the opportunity for sacred collaboration, and to bring forth their true selves. (Classroom observation notes, 1 March, 2022)

The first author reflected in her professional notes about the power of rituals and reverence in a CPI, supporting individuals in developing a ‘true self’ (Palmer 2004, p. 32). In exercising these practices, individuals of the community strengthen trust and integrity, allowing the ‘self [to] exercise and fulfill its nature: giving and taking,

listening and speaking, being and doing' (Palmer 2004, p. 39). The first author concluded, through practices of ritual and reverence, 'the nature of the space is primed to cultivate dispositions of honest dialogue and inquiry' (Teacher reflection, 1 March, 2022).

Spiritual dispositions of wonder and awe, and cultivating intellectually safe spaces, are mutually supportive

The second major finding to emerge from the analysis of the data showed that there is an inextricable link between philosophical inquiry and spiritual dispositions of wonderment and awe. Awe, often experienced as 'respect and wonder sometimes mixed with a little fear' (Schein 2018, p. 80), was observed unfolding within the intellectually safe spaces created for cooperative inquiry, including p4cHI class discussions. The professional records collected (e.g. unit plans, lesson plans, and other curricular documents) demonstrated this. For example, one lesson plan outlined the following flow of events and pedagogical notes for the teachers:

(a) Explore concepts of intellectual and emotional safety as well as intellectual and emotional bravery through direct instruction and collaborative dialogue. Explain how safety helps us to make sure that all questions and ideas are accepted as long as we are respectful of everyone in our community. Discuss how bravery helps us to create and protect a space where truths can be told, truths can evolve, and thinking can change.

(b) Reinforce ideas of safety and bravery by explicitly teaching the *Safe Space Agreement* mantra and having the class say it out loud each time the class engages in a p4cHI-style inquiry and generates questions.

1. We are safe with our words
2. We share the ball
3. We are safe with our bodies
4. We can say 'I need more time'
5. We raise our hands to show we want to share our thinking
6. Our eyes and ears are on the speaker

(c) Create a community ball to mediate turn taking. Explain how the community ball helps us to give all voices in the circle opportunity for expression and to be heard by members of the inquiry.

(d) Introduce the difference between questions and statements. Model asking questions throughout the school day and point out when students are asking questions about themselves and the world around them. Respond to student questions by modeling wonderment and awe.

(e) Use questions as a launching point for dialogue and inquiry. This can be done in a circle during p4cHI time or at any spontaneous moment throughout the school day. In p4cHI circles students are taught how to vote on the question that they want to talk about with their peers.

(f) Reflect with students after dialogue and inquiry. How is our intellectual safety? How is our participation? Are we listening? Are our questions interesting? Do we challenge our thinking? Did we learn something new?

Through these progressive education p4cHI practices, an intellectually safe CPI was observed developing over the five months that the study was conducted. As a result, the students were observed asking deep spiritual questions of themselves and one another.

One example of a spiritual question included in a teacher observation, and which was voted on by the students as a topic for their p4cHI inquiry was: *How are humans like trees?* The students' responses and remarks, recorded by teachers during the p4cHI dialogue about the question, reflected awe about the trees they observed on campus:

Some people walk by trees and don't even know they are alive, but they are ... Humans are similar to trees because they start off small and then they grow big like us ... Humans are like trees because when they are by themselves they are not as strong as when they are with 14 other trees ... just like when humans are in teams because teams are stronger. (Classroom observation notes, 14 February 2022)

The first author reflected on the capacity for contemplation of these very young children as they listened deeply to the stories and thinking of their peers. In her journal she wrote:

I could see their worldviews were opening up. It was as if thought bubbles were appearing above their heads stating, 'Just like me and a tree, everything is connected' ... The collective temperament of the community was contemplative ... I could sense hearts and minds connecting. (Teacher reflection, 14 February 2022)

Student-generated questions like this were observed as the spark that launched meaning-making (the co-construction of knowledge with peers and teachers), and interconnection, flowing naturally and fruitfully in the students' and teacher's time together.

Over the five months of the study, additional student questions characterised by wonderment and awe were recorded by the teachers. They included: *Who made the first baby? What is God? Does everything die?* The first author continued to reflect on the felt sense of awe observed in her students:

Children were really wanting to hear what their peers had to say about these spiritual wonderings. They seemed satisfied to contemplate such deeply meaningful topics. Heads were turning and eyes were wide-eyed and attentive. I felt good about providing a space for the children to dialogue about meaningful topics that perhaps hurried life doesn't provide time for. The awe I observed in them had me thinking if the children had been craving this type of discussion all along. (Teacher reflection, 6 April 2022)

As the data above illustrates, the progressive pedagogical practices established by p4cHI created opportunities for students and teachers to grow their sense of awe, cultivating spiritual habits of mind, and springboards for engaging in deep and meaningful philosophical inquiry.

A teacher's personal spirituality acts as a resource in their role as a progressive educator and p4cHI practitioner

The final theme to emerge from the analysis of the data related to the ongoing development of the first author's spirituality, and how this positively impacted her work as progressive educator and p4cHI practitioner. As she reviewed the pages of introspective reflections, recorded throughout the study, she was found nurturing her own spirituality through practices like meditation, contemplation, and prayer. She also noticed how these practices empowered and strengthened her progressive philosophy and pedagogy in two ways.

First, the wisdom and intuitive thinking cultivated through personal spiritual practices, enabled her to serve as a guide to her students versus a teacher who merely transmits knowledge. For example, this journal entry demonstrates how she

relinquished control, allowing students' real thinking and feelings to lead their classroom experiences and learning:

On the way back to the classroom from oli, Noah and Connor took a detour around the garden and discovered a fallen nest and baby bird. It was clear that all of the children were invested in this occurrence. There were many emotions flowing. As a result, I made a decision to follow the interests and feelings of the children. We proceeded with an inquiry, in wonderment, about how the nest had fallen. Together, we reasoned that the windy weather had blown the nest and baby bird out of the tree. In awe, we wondered if the mother bird was worried about her baby and of the baby bird's destiny. (Teacher reflection, 29 March 2022)

Mindful and acutely aware of the children's yearning to investigate their own truths and meanings of spontaneous happenings, she created space for these authentic experiences to emerge and develop from the students themselves.

Second, the data illustrated how the first author's personal spiritual development proved to be a moral compass from which she could enact a values-based education 'giving learners access to ethical vocabulary [and practices] based on human values, such as respect, justice, integrity, harmony, trust, and honesty' (Teacher reflection, 29 March 2022). A specific example of this was illustrated in the students' work samples. In one assignment, students were asked to respond to a piece of literature they experienced during a read aloud titled *The Story of AND: The Little Word that Changed the World*, written by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso.

Unsurprisingly, the children took to this story without doubt or hesitation as universal themes of interconnection, strength in diversity, and compassion ring true to children's inner knowing. I was touched by their artistic and poetic responses to the story which helped me understand what specifically they took away from the book. Following the story read aloud, I tasked the children to illustrate what the story meant to them with a one word poem and to demonstrate how they saw themselves in the story. Children sketched and colored whimsical portraits of their families, friends, and neighbors, holding hands, collaborating, helping, and, essentially loving each other. Excerpts from their one word poems included: 'together', 'safe', 'share', 'beautiful', 'love', 'helping', 'I love joy'. (Teacher reflection, 28 March 2022)

Additional reflections recorded in the first author's personal memos documented her realisation that much of the direct instruction she did about morals, virtues, and values was grounded in the fact that she was open to dedicating time and attention to her students' budding curiosity about the spiritual dimensions of being human. This openness was a product of her own spiritual consciousness and practice.

Discussion

In this study researchers asked, *How does cultivating spirituality in a classroom deepen the aims of a progressive education and P4C?* Aligned to the distinctions made by Gschwandtner, (2021) and contemporary mainstream sentiments concerning the differences between spirituality and religion (see Schneiders 2003, p. 3) the study focused on spirituality—rather than religion—in schools because of an underlying belief that a students' spiritual development (rather than a specific or dogmatic religious education) uniquely has the ability to foster the habits of mind needed in the modern world. More specifically, today's students require an education that can simultaneously value and teach the knowledge and dispositions needed for scientific inquiry, life in a diverse democracy, and the 'religious dimensions' of the human experience (Dewey 1903/1974, p. 71). The study's findings confirmed these presuppositions, bolstering many of the arguments made by prominent educational philosopher and progressive educator, John Dewey.

In the opening paragraphs of Dewey's 1908 essay titled 'Religion and Our Schools', he writes: the 'learned and self-conscious generation' of the progressive era has both 'fittingly discovered religion to be a universal tendency of human nature' (p. 796) and, in light of scientific advancements and the overall openness to diversity and pluralism that accompanies the rights to religious freedom in American democracy, is now wondering whether we should teach 'religion' in schools or approach education in another way? He asks, '[W]hat shall knowledge of religion as an outcome of instruction mean today? Shall it mean the conversion of character into spirituality? Shall it mean the accumulation of information *about* religion' (Dewey 1908, p. 803). Grounded in the concerns of progressive educators at the time, Dewey wanted to make sure that the 'habits of mind' cultivated through religious education not be 'at war with democracy and science' (p. 800).

As he contemplated these questions, Dewey (1908) was well aware that some educators would remain committed to 'conscious and explicit religious instruction ... [associated with the] special dogmas of religion which are the monopoly of special ecclesiastic institutions' (p. 797) and others, in effort to protect students from the

development of ‘false bias’ (p. 797) or preference for one religion over another (pp. 802-803), would advocate for no religious education in schools. However, in line with the authors of this paper, Dewey contends that there is another pathway forward. He stated:

those who believe that human nature without special divine assistance is lost, who believe that they have in their charge the special channels through which the needed assistance is conveyed, must, naturally, be strenuous in keeping open these channels to the minds of men ...[they] must safeguard it lest it disappear; that since religion is the consciousness of spiritual import of experience, we must find mechanical appliances for developing it. (Dewey 1908, p. 797)

The results of this study illustrate how modern progressive education practices, including p4cHI, have the potential for addressing Dewey’s (1908) concerns about religious education by cultivating and nurturing opportunities for authentic spiritual development (Schein 2018) instead. More specifically, data from this study demonstrate how progressive philosophy and pedagogies like p4cHI can encourage the practices of ritual, reverence, wonderment and awe into 21st century classroom spaces.

In response to the changing world of today

Given this moment of profound change in American culture and politics, including direct actions to dismantle contemporary DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives (Helig 2025) and mandate conservative Christian teachings in public schools, Dewey’s call to replace or substitute religious education with a more progressive approach to education is prescient and perhaps more relevant now than it was at the time he penned the 1908 paper. This is echoed in Knight’s (1998) explanation of what Dewey saw as the problematic relationship between teaching religion and a democratic education:

One reason why Dewey held this view rests upon America’s traditional opposition to the teaching of religion in schools. This arose from the fear of giving proselytising advantage to a particular denomination but, for Dewey, centred on a concern to promote a flourishing state consciousness of a whole nation of diverse peoples over that of the competing sectarian claims of the many. Another reason for holding this view is the incompatibility Dewey saw between the interests of a

religion and the aims of education. Dewey pointed out that there is no such thing as an abstract essence called 'religion'. Religion, he argued, will always mean 'some religion'. The problem then becomes which religion? And which version of this religion? To teach each child in its own faith and in its own version of that faith risks the social harmony and tolerance at which education aims. There is, Dewey notes, 'something self-contradictory in speaking of education in religion in the same sense in which we speak of education in topics where the method of free inquiry has made its way.' Until it is reconstructed, freed from the spirit of dogmatism, open and 'thoroughly naturalised in the hearts and minds of men, religion should not be taught in schools (Dewey 1908, 805-806)'. (Knight 1998, p. 70)

The ultimate remedy to these issues, declared by Dewey (1916) in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, is to promote philosophy as 'the general theory of education' (p. 328).

As it was seen in the findings of this study, philosophy as the general theory of education conceptualises school as a place where human beings, who have diverse thoughts, feelings, cultures, and experiences, come to engage in personally meaningful learning that also honours the entire community's collective well-being. The person, not the 'content' (in this case religious teachings or dogma) forms the core of the school experience and, as the results of this study illustrate, those experiences need not be devoid of spirituality. In fact, the integration of progressive education practices that foster spiritual dispositions like ritual, reverence, wonderment, and awe may be exactly what American democracy needs in the current moment as state legislatures (e.g. Acharya & Downen 2025) propose dismantling religious freedoms, a core foundation of the US constitution. Bruce and Eryaman (2015) summarise it well:

Building a better society was seen by progressives as requiring the development of aware, engaged, and responsible actors, who become so through individualized, self-directed learning. At the same time, enabling individuals to 'participate effectively in the affairs of their community' establishes the environment for their own learning and the 'aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural growth' [needed for a fully functioning and thriving democracy]. (p. 7)

As the study presented in this paper illustrates, the first author's development of spirituality in children deepened the aims of progressive education and P4C described

above, not only helping to foster each students' individual growth, but also promoting the greater good of the community and possibly the future of our democracy in the modern world.

Final reflections and conclusion

Ann Margret Sharp (2010) concluded: 'Yes, there is an empowering spiritual dimension to philosophy for children. This dimension is embedded in the procedures, practices, and everyday behavior of the community as they struggle to understand themselves and others ...' (p. 9). In a time period characterised by extreme and visible examples of a divided society, large-scale moral uncertainty, unprecedented questions about the nature of truth, resistance to evidence and science-based policy making, growing climate consciousness and destruction, massive income inequality, increased questions about technology and artificial intelligence, conflict over DEI, radical changes in immigration policy, voter suppression and increased activism, renewed interest in the arts, and a growing call to ensure the future of our deliberative democracy—American schools must provide students and teachers with the opportunity to better understand themselves and others. Whether it is educational, philosophical or spiritual in nature, it is clear that we all need to continue questioning, both as individuals and in community, 'how we live in the world and how we relate to self and others' (Zakrzewski 2002, p. 150).

In conclusion, the self-study presented in this paper reveals a possible critical role that schools can play in providing the educational, philosophical and spiritual intersection necessary for questioning and making sense of the current moment. More specifically, it demonstrates how the development of spirituality in children deepens the aims of the American progressive education movement and P4C. It uses the voices of the first author and her students to illustrate how wonder and awe, or the 'feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy' (Plato 1961/155c-d) can be an excellent resource for making sure that 'spiritual development' and the 'religious dimension of experience' (Knight 1998, p. 71) is 'an integrated purpose of schooling' (Moulin-Stozek 2020, p. 1) for all children. Contextualised within the growing onslaught of educational and societal issues facing the modern era, the two authors and the participants in this study offer the hope of possibility and a rare window into the important role that education can play in cultivating and nurturing the inner wisdom and external resources necessary for students to grow and maintain a flourishing life, as well as a better future society.

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