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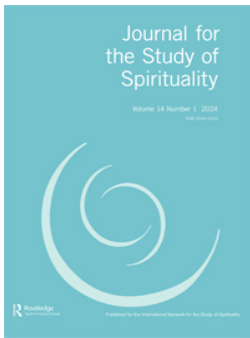
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Consciousness education: Why an enquiry into consciousness is an educational and spiritual imperative

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present a case for including consciousness studies within the educational curriculum from early years through to postcompulsory education. We contend that its current exclusion is due to the deep embeddedness in society of the materialist assumption that the brain produces consciousness. Hence, as a subject of study, consciousness is considered only of relevance to neuroscientists. Informed by this same assumption, notions of spirituality are also seen to be the product of neuronal interactions, and are ultimately illusory, rather than indicating the existence of a different kind of reality. However, there is no incontrovertible evidence to support this assumption, which is increasingly being questioned by leading-edge scientists, spiritual thinkers, and philosophers. Supported by findings from quantum physics, and from the wisdom of indigenous knowledges, there is a growing interest in alternative theories, such as the idea that consciousness may be primary, and matter may be an emergent property of consciousness. We examine arguments for these radically different perspectives, and how they inform, and are informed by, different worldviews. We argue that young people need to be made aware of those alternative worldviews so that they can make informed choices about who they are as spiritual beings.


KEYWORDS

Consciousness education; consciousness; spirituality; materialism; interconnected relationality; Newtonian science

Introduction

Our species will live or die on the back of the effectiveness of education. I think it is probably the most important human activity today. We will crash and burn or we will thrive depending on how we go about education. (Bernardo Kastrup – philosopher, computer scientist and executive director of Essentia Foundation – webinar interview)

Our aim in this article is to argue for the inclusion of consciousness education, defined as explorations of perspectives on the source and nature of consciousness and their

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implications for ways of being, knowing, teaching, and learning, in formal schooling at all levels. We imagine approaches that invite students and educators to explore their own experiences of consciousness and to share those experiences, thus creating spaces where the relationship between new ideas about consciousness and intimations of spiritual dimensions to life can be freely discussed. To build this argument, we begin by sharing stories of our own experiences of a spiritual dimension to consciousness that we feel presents a challenge to the prevailing view in academia of scientific materialism. We do this to demonstrate that personal, inner experiences are valid ways of knowing and are essential to engage with when exploring perspectives on consciousness. We then analyse the experiences from different theoretical perspectives – production theories, filter theories, and participatory theories – revealing that how we interpret these experiences changes depending on the ontological assumptions we hold. Following the theoretical analysis of our experiences, we share some preliminary ideas about what consciousness education implies in terms of curricular and pedagogical approaches. Rather than prescribe specific content and practices, which will vary by context, we invite the reader to participate in a living, dynamic inquiry. In the spirit of the participatory paradigm, we ask the reader to co-create consciousness education with us.

We, Laurel and Joan, have arrived at a similar place in relation to our sense of the need to explore diverse perceptions of spirituality and relate these to understandings of consciousness that go beyond the material, but we come from different places. Laurel is a Canadian millennial born and raised in Toronto as an ultra-reform Jew, daughter of a lawyer and college professor. She was thoroughly educated according to the secular worldview of scientific materialism and did not think to question it until her mid-thirties when the sudden death of her spouse incited her interest in consciousness studies. Joan is British, a baby boomer, and lived the first four years of her life in Africa where she was born to Church of Scotland missionaries. As a child, she was immersed in Christian doctrine, which she did not question until she walked out of confirmation classes at the age of 16. It was at that point she realised that she could not commit to the belief system in the way that was expected of her.

Despite these differences, we met in 2022, drawn into dialogue through this shared interest in consciousness. Perhaps most significantly, though, we both have a passion for the power and potential of education.

We begin by each of us providing examples from our own experiences, which have made us consider that there may be more to life than the current Western worldview would have us believe. Following these personal narratives, we analyse them from both a materialist and a postmaterialist theoretical perspective. We show how the prevailing worldview is grounded in classical Newtonian science, which sees the universe as essentially random accidental interactions of matter in three-dimensional space, with mechanistic laws that determine the behaviour of all matter. In this paradigm, consciousness – our awareness, ideas, intuitions, and feelings – has evolved through the material evolution of species, hence reducible to brain activity, and when the brain stops functioning, it ceases to exist. In this paradigm, spirituality is not believed to be ‘real’, since inner experiences are illusory (Dennett 1991).

However, although this paradigm emerged in the seventeenth century and has become dominant in secular education and academia, there is a growing awareness that the evidence to support scientific materialism is limited (Beauregard et al. 2014). Having critically analysed theories from the materialist worldview, we move on to consider what

alternative perceptions have been investigated. This includes the idea that consciousness, far from being a by-product of the brain, may in fact be fundamental and universal (McGilchrist 2021). Many philosophical perspectives derive from this premise, including cosmopsychism (Goff 2017), panpsychism (Seager 2020), panspiritism (Taylor 2020), and idealism (Kastrup 2019). It is not our intention in this short paper to argue the merits of each of these philosophical approaches, but rather to say that a wider audience deserves to be aware of these ideas. As our reflections on our experiences show, what we believe about the nature of reality influences our understanding of what it means to be human and our ways of being in the world. We are proposing, then, that children from the youngest age should be introduced to the idea that their own experience of consciousness could connect them to a spiritual reality, and be encouraged to reflect on the implications of that sense of interconnectedness for how they live their lives.

Laurel's narrative

This narrative is an account of a time when I had an experience during meditation that precipitated unusually strong feelings of bliss, awe, love, and compassion for others. The experience was so powerful that it reinforced my view that interpretations grounded in a materialist worldview were inadequate in providing a reasonable explanation.

The pigeons and the cement truck

During my doctoral coursework, I took three courses under the umbrella of 'holistic education' back-to-back that required daily meditation as part of the course credit. This was the first time in my life that I was able to discipline myself to meditate almost daily for a year. Usually, my meditation sessions involved me sitting with my eyes closed for forty minutes listening to a guided meditation, focusing on my breath, and trying hard not to think. Some days I was better at it than others, but after meditating, I often felt more calm, patient, and grateful than before I sat.

But on one winter day, I had a different experience. As I focused on my breath and progressively relaxed my body, I felt my mind 'pop' into a different space. The best way to describe the space is a bright white room with no walls and with faint oval-shaped fractals all around. I had left my body behind, but I was still me, completely aware yet above my thoughts somehow. I suddenly understood that I was not my body, because here I was without my body. And I felt an intense rush of love and bliss pouring in through the top of my head. An involuntary smile stretched across my face. I suddenly understood. This is what mystics have been teaching about for millennia!. I had always thought that the idea that we are love and light was metaphorical. Now I realised that those are simply the most accurate words to describe this sensation.

The recorded meditation ended. With some reluctance, I returned to my day, still smiling and filled with bliss. I strapped my baby into the stroller and left for our daily afternoon walk to pick up my seven- and nine-year-olds from school. On the streets, everything looked more vibrant than usual. We passed a flock of pigeons pecking at breadcrumbs. Their necks shimmered with iridescence and their beauty overwhelmed me. One flew a few feet and I felt awestruck by its flight. As I passed people on the busy sidewalk, I looked at their faces and the thought *I love you* repeated in my head. And with every

thought of *I love you*, the blissful feeling intensified. I felt light beaming from my heart and my smile grew. I tried to straighten my smile, but my face wouldn't budge. One person sitting on a bench cocked his head and said to me, 'You look really, really happy'.

The next day, I still felt affected, though thankfully my intense smile had relaxed a little. A lot of snow had fallen during the night, so the afternoon walk to the school with the stroller required more physical exertion than usual, especially when people had not shovelled their sidewalks. Often this frustrates me; it's a hazard and an accessibility issue. But this time, when I encountered a snowy block of sidewalk, without any negative feelings, I decided to turn around and walk a different way. My newly chosen path was a narrow residential street where a condominium tower was under construction. A cement mixer truck had backed out onto the road but was struggling to complete its turn because of the narrow street, parked cars, and snowbanks. The truck blocked the entire road and both sidewalks, leaving no path to pass by. Usually, I would feel irritated at this truck blocking my way. But surprisingly, the thought that came to my mind was, 'It must be hard to drive a truck that size in this city right now, with all the snow. That is a difficult job'. And I waited for the truck to make its 20-point turn, feeling only compassion for the driver.

How could that experience during meditation affect my perceptions, emotions, and thoughts so dramatically? I felt a sense of interconnectedness and love for everyone and everything that I had not felt to that degree before, or since.

Joan's narrative

The feeling of having an expanded sense of connection and compassion to the wider cosmos in the way that Laurel speaks of is one I can relate to and which has increased in frequency and intensity over the years. In this account, I try to track the major influences in this evolving journey.

Music and meditation

Music was my first introduction to an experience that led me to feel there was so much more to the universe than I was taught to believe in my daily life. Studying music at school, and attending classical concerts from an early age, I have been in love with music for as long as I can remember. With my first pay cheque, I bought Beethoven's nine symphonies with Daniel Barenboim as conductor, followed by Mozart, Bach, and many other well-known classical composers. But it was not just the classics that I responded to. I was a teenager at the time of the Beatles and other pop 'idols', and I revelled in that music also. In fact, throughout my life, my taste in music has been eclectic, especially when experiencing it live. Music has the capacity to move me into a different state of consciousness, with the best of it transporting me into a magical place of awe and wonder. It has often drawn me into a place where I am certain there must be dimensions of existence that exist beyond the material and are qualitatively different and more sublime than daily embodied living.

The feelings I often have when listening to music are similar to those I can experience when out in nature. Frequently, when I have been hiking in the hills or on coastal walks by the sea, I have been enveloped by a powerful sensation of being connected to the wider, most wonderful cosmos. One occasion was particularly significant. I was on a meditation retreat, staying in the beautiful mountains of Snowdonia in North Wales UK. One

morning, I had climbed to the top of a nearby peak, and was entranced yet again by the wonder of the view and a deep sense of belonging to a reality much greater than me. It was a reality that was essentially loving and caring, calling out to me to live creatively, in the best way that I could, and in relationship with others, as valued co-contributors to the evolution of this extraordinary universe. I felt joyful, and in love with the universe, or with the divine being responsible for it – I couldn't quite separate out the two in my mind.

Later that day, I was sitting with a group in a guided meditation. The meditation facilitator led us through beautiful mental images and visualisations, finally taking us to a place where he invited us to feel a connection to the infinite and eternal. And as he spoke, I realised I was already there. As I sat, I recognised that without being consciously aware of it, I had come to a place in my life where I felt I was embedded in, and an expression of, an infinite and eternal universe that was essentially loving and creative. And I wondered why, as a species, we have difficulty accepting the possibility that such a universe is real and not just a figment of our imaginations.

Laurel reflected afterwards:

How and why did my brain suddenly produce this experience during a period of meditation? And why would the effects produce positive emotions of bliss, awe, love, and compassion that lasted for days? It's not as though I'm a naturally enlightened personality. Caitlin, my best friend of 25 years agreed that normally I would react with irritation to a truck blocking my path, so to not do so was unusual for me. So, what accounts for the sudden change in perspective? Why should an experience during meditation shift my reactive thoughts from being centred on myself to being more considerate of someone else's experience? And why did dirty urban pigeons suddenly appear to be so beautiful to me?

Joan, over 20 years older than Laurel and having deliberately entered into altered states of consciousness through depth psychology techniques since her early twenties, was more used to entering the kinds of domains that Laurel experienced. Reflecting on this, Joan wrote:

My journey seems to have been a slower, more extended one, involving smaller shifts in consciousness that have not included an exceptional experience like Laurel's, where she entered into a transformed, blissful state that lasted days. Nevertheless, over time, whatever has happened, I reached a point where I had become used to feeling integrated within the eternal and infinite but didn't realise it until the guided meditation. How did that come to be, and how come I wasn't aware of it till then?

Our respective experiences were clearly different in their details and were triggered by different events. However, what they each had in common was a profound experience of an expanded reality, which was characterised by extended positive feelings including love, awe and connection. They were inner-world spiritual happenings, directly accessible to no one other than the experienter.

Theoretical interpretations

A materialist explanation: Production models of consciousness

According to the worldview of scientific materialism, any inner-world experiences are generated by brain activity, influenced by perceptions obtained through the body's five sense organs. Matter is the basis of reality; the brain is the basis of consciousness. These

assumptions underpin ‘the conventional *production* models of brain/mind relations, according to which everything in mind and consciousness is generated by physiological events and processes in the brain’ (Marshall, Crabtree, and Kelly 2015, 493). This assumption of brain-based consciousness is so deeply entrenched as the ontological foundation of the modern Western scientific worldview that most of us do not think to question it. Nor do we realise that these production models of brain/mind relations are only theories. As Sheldrake writes, ‘It is just an assumption. It is a theory that hasn’t been properly tested because it has not been questioned’ (2003, 1). No one can explain *how* the brain produces consciousness, which David Chalmers famously labelled the ‘hard problem’ (1995). There are several competing production theories of consciousness, which indicates that the hard problem has not yet been solved (Seth and Bayne 2022; Wahbeh et al. 2022). Yet neuroscientists exploring consciousness adhere to the assumption that consciousness is brain-based. In a 2022 article in *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, Kitchener and Hales write, ‘There is no consensus about how [consciousness] is generated, or how best to approach the question, but all investigations start with the incontrovertible premise that consciousness comes about from the action of the brain’ (2022, 2).

How would a production model of consciousness explain our experiences? Was Laurel’s sensation of leaving her body imagined? Had she been influenced by other people’s stories of extraordinary experiences during meditation (Woollacott and Lorimer 2022), and reports of out-of-body experiences (OBEs) (van Lommel 2021; Woollacott and Peyton 2021)? That the meditation elicited certain chemicals to release in her brain, which manifested as intense and sustained feelings of bliss, awe, love, and compassion? It is theoretically possible. Perhaps a brain scan taken during the experience would reveal changes in brain activity and brain chemistry, but this would prove a correlation, not necessarily causation. When examining the ‘hard problem’, Chalmers (1995) describes the difficulties experienced in explaining the relationship between observed brain activity, and the qualitative, subjective experiences of humans and other living creatures. In 1998, neuroscientist Christof Koch placed a bet with philosopher David Chalmers, that by 2023, researchers would have learned how the brain produces consciousness. But at the annual meeting of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC) held in June 2023, Koch admitted publicly that he had lost the bet. Scientists are still unclear on how the brain creates any conscious experiences, let alone expanded ones.

Beyond materialism: What alternative explanations can be offered?

We both feel the need to explore diverse perceptions of spirituality and its relationship to consciousness, despite our contrasting backgrounds and cultures, because we reached an impasse in finding materialist explanations for our most profound experiences. Perhaps more significantly, when considering alternative explanations, we have come to realise the volume of evidence supporting a reality beyond the material (Beauregard et al. 2021; Bilimoria 2022; Kelly, Crabtree, and Marshall 2015; Mishlove 2021; Radin 2018). Theories that proclaim consciousness to be an epiphenomenon of the brain cannot explain several experiences of consciousness well-documented in consciousness studies research literature (for a thorough evaluation of such data from psychological research, see Kelly et al. 2007). Here we present two theoretical perspectives that could account for the data: filter theories of consciousness and the participatory paradigm.

Filter theories of consciousness

Drawing on the concept of non-local consciousness that exists beyond the brain, many theories view the brain as a transceiver that receives or filters consciousness from a non-material source (James 1985; van Lommel 2021; Wahbeh et al. 2022). A radio or TV offers an analogy. The device receives information by picking up an external signal; the radio or TV set itself does not produce the content.

Several neuroimaging studies of people during altered states of consciousness seem to support filter theories of consciousness. Researchers have observed through studies using EEG and MRI brain scanning technology that activity in the Default Mode Network (DMN) appears to *decrease* while participants report profound experiences of awareness and enhanced perception. Brain scans of advanced meditators during peak meditation experiences, of research participants during psilocybin-induced experiences, and of people's brains during near-death experiences show similar patterns of a decrease in DMN activity. In Near-Death Experiences in particular,

EEG data show that during these moments the entire cortex, including the DMN, is completely deactivated (van Lommel et al. 2001). Individuals have reported that during this period of zero brain activity they experienced profound unity awareness (Greyson 2021), and very often return to waking consciousness with the profound conviction that they have a connection to a much greater infinite consciousness. (Williams and Woollacott 2021, 12)

Production theories of consciousness would predict an increase in brain activity during states of enhanced perception. That brain activity appears to decrease during moments of vivid inner experiences supports the idea that the brain, especially the DMN, may act as a filter or reducer of a non-local source of consciousness. Likewise, reports of 'profound unity awareness' during periods of no measurable brain activity support the idea that there may be conscious experience beyond the brain.

A more philosophical defence of filter theories of consciousness comes from Iain McGilchrist, a neuroscience researcher, psychiatrist, and philosopher. He equates consciousness with the experiential. Everything that we know is derived from consciousness, from our experience. We have no evidence to support the theory that there exists a non-experiential concrete reality (McGilchrist 2021).

Further to this, three neuroscientists, Schwartz, Stapp and Beauregard have written, 'Theoretical restriction is motivated primarily by ideas about the natural world that have been known to be fundamentally incorrect for more than three-quarters of a century' (2005, 1309). In their paper, Schwartz et al. demonstrate how nearly all attempts to understand brain functioning have been based on principles of classical physics that were falsified in the early part of the twentieth century. As the celebrated philosopher Sir Karl Popper and Nobel neurophysiologist Sir John Eccles write, '[in] thus *explaining matter* and its properties modern physics transcended the original programme of materialism.' (1977, 5–8, italics in original.)

The participatory paradigm

Coming from a different perspective, but also seeing reality as extending beyond the material, was John Heron (1928–2022), who initiated the first university-based centre for humanistic and transpersonal psychology and education in Europe in 1970. Heron

created cooperative inquiry as an original participatory research method with which to design inquiries into any aspect of the human condition, including the spiritual and the subtle (Heron 1996, 1998). Informing his research methodology is a participatory ontological view of the world. He understands reality to be infinite, divine, and intelligent, where:

All manifestation is included in divine being. It is divine temporal process, divine becoming. The divine also indwells, is immanent in, all manifestation as spiritual life; and transcends it as spiritual consciousness. (1998, 246)

The story of humanity, then, is the story of the divine manifesting itself in distinct expressions of being and becoming. Heron articulates a dynamic participatory worldview, in which the world as we experience it is:

co-created by persons in participative relation with *what there is*: the sensory human shapes and is shaped by the given cosmos in a process of reciprocal encounter. This co-creating relation is the source and foundation of human languages, which may either reveal or obscure it. And within this prelinguistic relation, *what there is* manifests as presences in communion with other presences in a great field of mutual participation. (Heron 2006,10, italics in original)

Heron draws on the quantum revolution as support for his concept of the participatory worldview. For example, in the famous ‘double-slit’ experiment, it has been repeatedly shown that the act of observation alone, with no physical interference from the researcher, changes the behaviour of photons. Max Planck (1858–1947), Nobel Prize Winner, and the originator of quantum theory, said in an interview for *The Observer*:

I regard consciousness as fundamental. I regard matter as derivative from consciousness. We cannot get behind consciousness. Everything that we talk about, everything that we regard as existing, postulates consciousness. (Sullivan 1931, 17)

These recent theories of a fundamental, participatory consciousness emerging from Western science align with ancient wisdom from Indigenous Knowledges. Biologist Bruce Lipton writes:

Every physical object manifests its own unique, invisible force. While an atom appears as a physical particle, we now know that it is comprised of evanescent units of energy called quarks, which are themselves made up of smaller quanta of energy. Rocks, air, water, and humans are all fields of energy that wear the cloak of matter, which makes the old Cartesian notion that the mind (energy) and body (matter) are separate an antiquated anachronism. Such scientific discoveries return us to our aboriginal roots and a worldview that emphasizes our oneness with nature. (in Arrows 2016, xv)

Many Indigenous scholars write about an understanding of consciousness that exists and extends beyond the brain, originates from a spiritual source, infuses all of nature, survives bodily death, provides learning, guidance, and wisdom, and connects all living things (Arrows 2016; Kovach 2018; Little Bear 2000; Sabzalian 2018; Sheridan 2014). It seems to us that Western scientific research is offering empirical evidence to substantiate what Indigenous people have understood about consciousness since time immemorial. We view this as further support of the idea of a universal, nonlocal consciousness. From this perspective, the stories of experience we shared above can be interpreted as moments when we connected with universal consciousness.

When faced with the volume of evidence that suggests consciousness is not produced by, nor limited to, the brain, our question is – why are the beliefs of more people not transformed in the way that ours have been? Why are more people not willing to read the evidence, or if they do, express cynicism as to its validity, regardless of the rigorous nature of the research and its findings? (Dawkins 2016). Why has it transpired that a materialist worldview is so deeply embedded in secular education that it has created this major block in ideas beyond materialism being accepted?

When reflecting on why there is resistance to accepting the evidence that consciousness exists beyond the brain, we suggest cognitive dissonance may play a role. Social psychologist Leon Festinger (1957) introduced cognitive dissonance as a psychological state that occurs when evidence that is incompatible with a currently held belief is produced. Cognitive dissonance theory states that when dissonance occurs, the situation can be resolved by either discarding the new evidence or discarding the old belief. According to Aronson (1969), the amount of dissonance a person can experience is directly proportional to the effort they have invested in their behaviour. So, if a person has been committed throughout their lives to a belief that the brain generates consciousness, and the primacy of the material appears self-evident when any of the five senses are used, then imagining that a reality may exist beyond the material does not seem to make sense.

But if you are willing to go further, consider the data that supports the hypothesis that there is a reality beyond that which we can perceive with our five senses; that there may be more to existence than that which is observable and measurable; and that our most profound feelings of love, awe, and wonder may be authentic experiences of a true spiritual reality, not just delusions created by the neurones firing in our brains. Now consider, how might your ways of being and knowing change if this hypothesis had been part of your education?

Implications for education

As co-authors, we have so far identified what we feel are different ways of knowing that need to inform both the content and the process of education. When we talk about education, we are referring to it in its broadest meaning. Because we argue that materialist assumptions underly secular approaches to education from early education through to higher education, if we are to displace the hegemony of materialism and explore ideas beyond materialism, we need an approach to education that includes different ideas, like the ideas we have introduced in this paper.

This is a living dynamic inquiry. We do not pretend to have the answers as to how to *do* consciousness education. But in dialogue together, based on our research and experiences, we have articulated some ideas about how we imagine this ontology, this understanding of a Universal Consciousness, could affect ways of being, knowing, teaching, and learning in classrooms. We share these ideas as a list of themes. Following this list, we have an invitation for you, the reader, to participate in our inquiry.

1. Inviting stories of ‘anomalous’ or ‘spiritual’ experiences into the classroom through reflective, contemplative, and creative practice and providing opportunities for story sharing.

This theme has implications for both curriculum and pedagogy. In terms of curriculum, in our experience, we have found that personal stories hold transformative power for both the storyteller and the listener. The act of reflecting deeply upon our own experiences affects how we interpret and integrate the meaning of those experiences (Waterman 2022). We suggest that this applies to teachers and learners in classrooms and beyond. Welcoming stories of lived ‘anomalous’ or ‘spiritual’ experiences as curricula in formal learning may offer validation of inner, personal experiences of knowing. Sharing these stories in classrooms may inspire curiosity, imagination, and open-mindedness about the nature of reality and consciousness for those who have not yet had their own experiences. Sometimes just hearing stories of others’ experiences can trigger transformative learning in the listener. Near-death experience researcher Kenneth Ring found that some people experienced a transformation in their spiritual beliefs from hearing stories of others’ Near-Death Experiences (Ring 1998). Sharing a belief in the power of story, holistic education theorist John P. Miller devotes a chapter in *The Contemplative Practitioner* to the biographies of famous contemplatives, such as Buddha, Saint Teresa of Avila, Emerson, Gandhi, and Black Elk (2014, 62–99). Through meditation, dreams, and visions, they report a sense of connection to a universal source of wisdom and love. These biographies challenge the materialist paradigm, since it does not consider mystical visions and dreams as sources of expanded consciousness. Such stories may offer starting points for classroom conversations about ontology, spirituality, and consciousness.

2. Attention and Intention

Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are increasingly practised in schools, and present what is arguably among the ‘most radical educational innovations of our times’ (Sarath 2013, 351). However, while we believe that some contemplative and mindfulness training (Hart 2004) is better than none, without a deeper understanding of perspectives on consciousness beyond materialism, the effects may be limited. We suggest that consciousness education would add context, depth, and motivation for MBIs. Mindfulness training would move beyond the surface benefits of stress management, relaxation, and goal-oriented focus, and become more of a means of quieting the mind to allow for connection to a greater source of Universal Consciousness. Experiencing and understanding this connection as a potential source of healing, inspiration, intuition, creativity, and manifestation may help students access potential and abilities beyond what they believe themselves to be capable of.

3. Working with ‘learning fields’

In his book *The Living Classroom* (2008), Christopher Bache, a professor of religious studies, develops a theory of a ‘group mind’ at play in his university classes (44). He noticed that ‘synchronistic resonances’ were occurring regularly in his classes. Drawing on scientific data from quantum physics, reincarnation research, and studies that provide evidence for Rupert Sheldrake’s biological theory of ‘morphic resonance’ (2009), Bache develops a theory of learning fields to explain these powerful synchronicities. The theory assumes individual minds to be porous, open, and able to form connections with other minds to form larger wholes, or ‘group fields’ (Bache 2008, 98). Bache

proposes strategies for working with these fields as a ‘conscious pedagogy’, using attention and intention through meditation, visualisation, and ritual before, during, and after a course to foster greater, deeper, interconnected learning (99).

4. Understanding our interconnectedness

Indigenous feminist scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, part of the Quandamooka Nation in Queensland Australia, writes about how her spiritual ontology leads to a deep and broad sense of interconnected relationality:

As an Indigenous woman my ontological relation to country informs my epistemology. My coming to know and knowing is constituted through what I have termed relationality. One is connected by descent, country, place and shared experiences where one experiences the self as part of others and that others are part of the self; this is learnt through reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences, co-existence, co-operation and social memory (Moreton-Robinson 2000, 16). This is the anti-thesis of being a knower within the patriarchal confines of the academy, which privileges disconnection and the individualist pursuit of knowledge. There are elements of my Indigenous epistemology which I particularly draw on within the academy: I am worth no more or no less than other living things; the world I inhabit has been created by ancestral creator beings and it is organic and alive with spirits and signs which inform my way of knowing. (2013, 341)

Although we were raised with dramatically different ontologies from Moreton-Robinson, the understanding of Universal Consciousness that we have arrived at has echoes of the spiritual understanding of consciousness and reality that Moreton-Robinson describes. This sense of interconnected relationality transcends the apparent self-other divide and reminds her that she is ‘worth no more or no less than other living things’. This is a radical concept in the context of Western education and culture, where competition, hierarchy, and anthropocentrism are the norm. Could an ontology of a universal, participatory consciousness shift teachers and learners toward this sense of interconnected relationality which has a spiritual significance?

A participatory invitation

This article began by sharing our experiences, before discussing theoretical perspectives that led us to adopt an ontology that includes a spiritual, Universal Consciousness. We have argued for a project of consciousness education and we have suggested some initial themes from our research and experiences. Now in the spirit of a participatory paradigm, we invite you, the reader, to share stories of your experiences and your ideas about consciousness education with us. We intend to progress this article into the writing of an edited book, and we welcome contributions to it.

So in that spirit, we pose a few questions for you to consider:

- What assumptions do you hold about consciousness, its relationship to spirituality, and the nature of reality? Can you identify how and why you formed those assumptions?
- What experiences have you had that confirm or challenge your assumptions? How did you react to those experiences?

- Have you ever experienced a sense of connectedness to something beyond yourself? What was the nature of this experience? What do you think precipitated it? How did it make you feel and how do you interpret its meaning?
- Do you have any ideas to share about consciousness education and the implications of this for developing a spiritual worldview? Has anything relevant occurred for you as a teacher or as a learner that may contribute insights to this participatory project?

We invite you to co-create consciousness education with us with the aim of finding ways of being, knowing, teaching, and learning that connect with and inform our true spiritual nature.

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