

**Spiritual Intelligence (SQ):  
A Tool for Meaning and Hope**

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## Spiritual Intelligence: A Tool for Meaning and Hope

### Introduction: A Crisis of Meaning

Of all the gifts a teacher has the potential of giving a student, perhaps the most vital and significant is to empower the student with the ability to create a meaning and a vision for her life.

Yet how do we as humans create meaning for our lives? This is a philosophical, even theological, question well beyond the scope of simple assertions. Yet if we narrow our scope to explore what teachers can do within the classroom to help students develop the capacity to create meaning, we can indeed gain a little ground. Brain-based learning expert Eric Jensen (2000) asserts that our brains are designed to seek out meaning, and that unless teachers are able to provide students with opportunities to discover meaning, “we will continue to produce robots and underachievers” (p. 279). Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1984) holds an even stronger belief that the “will to meaning” is the primary motivation of our existence.

With the search for meaning being such a basic part of our makeup, it would seem that a teacher’s job in this regard would be relatively straightforward—we simply push along, or guide, our students in their natural, spontaneous quest for meaningful contexts. But what if the educational system itself is sabotaging this natural, healthy quest for meaning, and in fact depriving students of opportunities and contexts for the healthy development of meaningful lives? The very fact that standardized tests have become the guidepost around which all curriculum seems to revolve, and so much teacher energy is devoted, is a sad indication that this deprivation is occurring. Educational philosopher William Ayers (1993) believes that “standardized tests push well-intentioned teachers and school leaders in the wrong direction; they constrain teachers’ energies and minds,

dictating a disastrously narrow range of activities and experiences” (p. 118). Many other roadblocks to meaning will be discussed in later sections.

Unless we as teachers want to propagate our future with the robots that Jensen has warned us about, we must quickly and skillfully remedy, or at least counteract, the narrowing effects of the current educational system. Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall (2000) have given us a wonderful framework through which to do just that. They have developed the concept of “spiritual intelligence (SQ).” In their book, Spiritual Intelligence, The Ultimate Intelligence they outline the basis and technique for engendering the overarching intelligence in human consciousness that enables our capacity for meaning, vision, and value.

This paper will argue that teachers should engender this holistic form of intelligence in order to serve our students the most profound gift we can: enabling them with the ability to create vision and meaning in their lives. I will assert that teachers must acknowledge, understand, engender, and promote this deeper “holistic intelligence.” I will argue that it is the unifying quality of this deeper form of intelligence that provides individuals with a sense and context of meaning on which to base their qualitative life decisions. Only by embracing and developing this spiritual intelligence (to be referred to as “SQ” throughout this paper) can teachers begin to counteract the constrictive forces of the current educational environment.

### **What is Intelligence?**

Despite uncertainty about this very question, the current educational environment regards the nebulous idea of intelligence with a certain holy deference. “IQ” scores are used to determine student eligibility in Gifted and Talented programs, or to determine whether a struggling child belongs in a “Special Education” program. Across the country, state-developed standardized tests are used to gauge student achievement and even

rank schools into categories. However, research is increasingly demonstrating that our traditional definition of intelligence is an extremely narrow view and does not acknowledge a vast spectrum of human abilities and insights.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) posit that there are three kinds of intelligence we can recognize based on observation of neural organization and processes, as well as human behavior. The first is a linear, serial intelligence that one might associate with logic. We can consider this rule-bound thinking. Neural tracts in the brain are hard-wired to follow specific rules in accordance with formal logic. These are the neural tracts we access to perform highly logical tasks, such as learning the times tables, or grammatically diagramming a sentence. This is the kind of thinking that is measured on traditional IQ tests as developed by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon in 1905 (Wigglesworth, 2002). No one would argue against the usefulness of this kind of intelligence, but unfortunately, argue Zohar and Marshall, this kind of intelligence does not provide us with our sense of meaning. It simply processes information but cannot make any qualitative assessment of it. After all, computers can have a high “IQ” in the context of this type of thinking, but we would never ask a computer to make a qualitative decision for us, such as what shirt we should wear to work, or even who we should marry.

But another piece of the puzzle is filled in by a second type of intelligence based on a different type of neural wiring we all possess. Neural networks, as opposed to linear neural tracts, are associative in nature, and provide us with our “associative, habit-bound, pattern-recognizing, emotive thinking” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). This associative thinking allows us to literally associate objects in our environment, and thus make connections. In its simplest sense, this represents conditioned response, and the most classical example would be the scenario of Pavlov’s salivating dogs. However, the important difference between associative thinking and IQ is that associative neural networks are not hardwired, rule-bound tracts; rather, they “have the ability to rewire

themselves in dialogue with experience” (p. 52). Because this is the type of thinking that allows us to make links between our emotions and our feelings, events, people, etc, it is often referred to as “emotional intelligence” (EQ). In fact it is this type of neurological processing Daniel Goleman popularized with the phrase “emotional intelligence” in 1995 (Wigglesworth, 2002). Jensen (2000) also puts great emphasis on the importance of emotions in learning. Because emotions trigger the release of crucial neurotransmitters which signal to the brain the importance of what is being learned, there is no way to separate emotions from other cognitive processes.

So IQ and EQ form a sort of neurological tag-team in our learning process. This is not a unique claim of Zohar and Marshall; it is simply a summary of current consensus. What Zohar and Marshall’s unique contribution is that these two alone are not enough to explain the human capacity for creating value and meaning from experience. There is a third, most crucial intelligence which transcends these first two, and this third intelligence, though it does seem to possess transcendent qualities, does indeed have a neurological basis.

### **The Basis for Spiritual Intelligence**

Both IQ and EQ represent kinds of thinking that can be replicated by computers—serial and associative. Yet as humans we possess a certain awareness, and even an awareness of that awareness, that we know intuitively no machine or computer is capable of. This third dimension of intelligence is what allows us to think creatively, to make rules, and, of course, to break rules. A computer must simply follow its rule-bound and associate programs when given a command. A human being, on the other hand, has the ability to question the command, or even refuse to do it! This is a direct reflection of this third, unitive intelligence.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) take an extensive look at the most recent neurological research and find striking support for a neurological basis of this unitive intelligence. Because the purpose of this paper is more practical, and aims to support teachers in applying these concepts to benefit students, this paper will only briefly summarize the supporting research.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) describe how recent research has shown there are oscillations of varying frequencies that occur in the brain. You might almost think of them as “waves” or frequencies that vibrate throughout different parts of the brain. Scientists have been able to associate these oscillations of different frequencies with specific levels of mental activity and alertness. In essence, these oscillations seem to be another way for the brain to communicate with itself. For example, upon perceiving a specific object, different areas of the brain might oscillate simultaneously. Of particular significance, however, are neural oscillations at the frequency of 40 Hz. These 40 Hz oscillations occur throughout the whole cortex, occur whether one is awake or sleeping, and seem to “transcend the ability of any single neurone or localized group of neurons” (p. 74) in that they integrate processing across the whole brain. In other words, these 40 Hz oscillations are such a crucial, indispensable piece of the puzzle because they seem to allow the brain to “see itself” in a wider context than a single neural tract or neural network. This neurological process translates into allowing us to reframe our knowledge and experience in a wider context of meaning. For this reason, these holistic oscillations are what Zohar and Marshall cite as the neurological basis for SQ.

The discoveries of the role of these 40 Hz brain oscillations in unifying consciousness obviously open the floodgates for a whole new wave of questions. What is consciousness? What is mind, and where does it come from? Zohar and Marshall do passionately delve into these questions, and in the end rest in a position that recognizes a self-transcendent quality of consciousness: “We conscious human beings have our

roots at the origin of the universe itself. Our spiritual intelligence grounds us in the wider cosmos, and life has purpose and meaning within the larger context of cosmic evolutionary processes” (p. 88).

The significance in finding this innate human physiological basis for SQ is that we can acknowledge it as the birthright of all human beings, and not simply the special aptitude of a few “blessed” individuals. Whether consciously or not, we are all creating meaning, and we all have the potential to increase our capacity for value and meaningfulness by developing this innate intelligence.

Obviously, this view makes spiritual intelligence absolutely crucial in the quest for creating meaning and purpose. In fact, this third, unitive kind of intelligence that allows one to create a meaningful context seems to be exactly what Adlerian psychologists Mosak and Dreikurs (2000) are referring to when they say: “If social embeddedness is the key to a person’s feeling at home on Earth, then cosmic embeddedness is its counterpart in the existential realm” (p. 263). So it seems no coincidence that SQ is directly linked to Adler’s foundational principle of “social interest.” Like social interest, SQ is the pathway by which one creates meaning and moves toward a state of self-realization.

One useful and crucial quality of the concept of SQ is that it doesn’t, in fact, rely on any particular religious platform. It is simply an acknowledgment that human beings create meaning and value through a holistic, unitive form of intelligence. For some, this may indeed find its resonance in a traditional religious tradition. However, Zohar and Marshall emphasize the fact that even an atheist can have very high spiritual intelligence, and an extremely devout religious fundamentalist can have very low spiritual intelligence. Which leads us to the next important question: What does spiritual intelligence look like?

### **What Are the Qualities of Spiritual Intelligence?**

Though it may be difficult to articulate, teachers have an intuitive understanding of SQ as the ultimate form of intelligence. At least, we all understand that IQ and EQ alone are not enough to explain a student's state of "intelligence" or well-being, or value. For example, we've all met students who are recognized as highly "gifted" (high IQ), but have no social skills and act out with self-destructive behavior. This scenario alone, repeated year after year in schools across the country (and world) is proof that IQ is not a valid measure of the potential for a successful, meaningful life. Such a student obviously has a gap in which EQ is not developed, but the self-destructive behavior suggests a more crucial gap. There are many other scenarios in which the variables change, such as the highly charismatic, socially fluent student (high EQ) who is failing math. These all prove the same thing—namely that teachers need to recognize a third, more crucial variable of intelligence—SQ. What, however, are the qualities of a person with highly developed SQ?

Cindy Wigglesworth (2002), president of Conscious Pursuits, Inc.—a company which trains organizations in developing spiritual intelligence—has adapted Zohar and Marshall's descriptions of SQ into a list of nine qualities of a spiritually intelligent person:

1. She is self-aware.
2. She is led by vision and values.
3. She has a capacity to face and use adversity.
4. She sees the world holistically.
5. She thrives in and celebrates diversity.
6. She possesses courage, or field independence.
7. She has a tendency to ask "why?"
8. She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning.
9. She possesses a spontaneity that allows her to be responsive to the world.

It is clear from this list that these are natural human qualities independent of any religious or particular spiritual doctrine, and yet at the same time they are qualities we might easily identify in those people we consider to be highly spiritual, of whatever religion. It is also easy to see how each of these qualities, without exception, would assist a student in creating a meaningful context in which to develop. This makes spiritual intelligence a particularly useful and effective way to discuss the higher order development of students without treading into dangerous discussions of religion.

### **What Are the Roadblocks to Spiritual Intelligence?**

The sole purpose of developing SQ in teachers and students is for them to lead healthy, whole, and connected lives. There is no need here to discuss the abounding evidence that young people today are, for the most part, not leading this sort of life. One could examine statistics on dropout rates, gang and other school violence, drug use and so on and quickly eliminate “healthy,” “whole,” and “connected” from their descriptions of many students. Spiritual sickness, Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue, occurs when we are cutoff from the nurturing spiritually intelligent centers of ourselves through “fragmentation, one-sidedness, pain or distraction”. As an entire culture we are sick, they argue, due to an “alienation from meaning, value, purpose and vision, alienation from the roots of and reasons for our humanity” (p. 170-1). Frankl (1984) blames the “existential vacuum”—a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness—as a root cause of depression, aggression, and addiction. Though Frankl didn’t say it as such, this void certainly equates to the same alienation from SQ that Zohar and Marshall describe.

To frame it another way, we might say that spiritual sickness occurs in students when their “will to meaning” is obscured and they begin to shut down their connections with the world and beings around them, one by one. In this state of hopelessness students might

react in one of two equally unproductive ways. First, they may emotionally withdraw in order to isolate themselves in an attempt to reduce their pain. Second, they might attempt to overcome their hopelessness through control and intimidation of others and their environment (Beaves & Kaslow, 1981). By helping students develop the “tools” of SQ, teachers can prevent both of these extreme reactions to students’ struggle for meaning.

As teachers, are we propagating this spiritual disease of alienation by neglecting our students’ greatest tool for creating value and healing themselves? If teachers had the ability to engender the nine qualities of SQ described above, how many fragmented, disconnected young people would be able to reframe their embattled lives with a wider, transcendent view of self that might actually bring healing and new hope? SQ can serve as what Zohar and Marshall call our “compass at the edge.”

### **How Can Teachers Engender Spiritual Intelligence in Students?**

Though SQ is a quality that has been present in humanity for millennia, it is a relatively new conceptualization that has not yet achieved wide acceptance. Since it is such a young concept, still in its establishment and validation stage, its direct application into specific fields is very undeveloped. Even Zohar and Marshall make minimal references to how SQ might be applied in the field of Education, even while acknowledging the natural SQ qualities that manifest in children, who in many ways are more in touch with their spiritually intelligent centers than adults who have had many more years and opportunities to become fragmented and disillusioned.

So the role of this paper, to a modest, minimal degree, is to take those first steps at integrating the concept of SQ into the hearts and worlds of teachers in the hopes that wider knowledge and development of the concept will soon create a more fertile ground for these ideas to be tested and discussed further.

Here are eight ways I believe teachers can directly and indirectly engender SQ in their classrooms, thus laying before students tools with which they can create meaningful lives. Within the description of each I have included which of the nine qualities of SQ described by Wigglesworth I believe it encompasses.

**1. Embody SQ as teachers:**

By whatever means is most appropriate to their own lives, teachers should continue to evolve and develop their own connections to their spiritually intelligent center. Cynthia Wigglesworth defines SQ in a way that I think is extremely appropriate for teachers: “the ability to behave with Compassion and Wisdom while maintaining inner and outer peace (equanimity) regardless of the circumstances” (Wigglesworth, 2002-2004). Modeling these qualities as a teacher creates the framework through which students can begin to conceptualize their own spiritually intelligent selves.

**2. Engage in creative insubordination (*She is led by vision and values*):**

Curriculum and teachers today are enmeshed in a world of standardized testing in which measurable results drive all else. Because this situation is not naturally friendly to the development of SQ, teachers must engage in what William Ayers (1993) has called “creative insubordination”. He tells the story of how he once stood on a chair to unscrew and disconnect his classroom loudspeaker after his students’ learning time and space had been interrupted several times in a single morning. These harmless acts don’t hinder student learning, which is what makes them justifiable, according to Ayers. In the context of SQ teachers may need to occasionally close their curriculum books and open their hearts. They will need to take risks in their lessons and their classrooms that stimulate the very

centers of students, rather than simply rustle them out of their naps long enough to answer a few multiple choice questions. When we as spiritually intelligent teachers are led by a vision of social interest, in which our purpose is truly to benefit students and not simply further our careers, then the wide, inclusive framework within which we create our classrooms and encounter students will empower us to take skillful actions that benefit students, regardless of whether or not they harmonize with robotic beaurocracy.

3. **Dwell on the Synthesis and Evaluation level of Bloom’s Taxonomy** (*She has a tendency to ask “why?; She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning*):

Most teachers are quite familiar with Bloom’s taxonomy, especially in relation to levels of questioning. The taxonomy has six tiers: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. The higher the tier you work from as a teacher the more higher-order thinking you are requiring from students. The Knowledge and Comprehension tiers, for instance, require little more than recall of facts and basic ideas. These are certainly important building blocks for developing knowledge and thinking skills, but in the context of SQ these are skills deeply embedded within linear thinking (IQ) and will not help a student build value and meaning.

Based on my analysis of the taxonomy, I propose that only when teachers can consistently question and hold discussions from the top two tiers are we developing and honing SQ. In Synthesis it is said the student “Brings together parts (elements, compounds) of knowledge to form a whole and build relationships for new situations” (Lujan, 2003). Only in Synthesis does the student begin to reframe knowledge and experience into a larger context—a

hallmark of SQ. And yet we can extend student thinking (intelligence) even further with Evaluation, in which the student “Makes informed judgments about the value of ideas or materials. Uses standards and criteria to support opinions and views” (Lujan, 2003). In Evaluation students finally arrive at the stage of assigning *value* to knowledge and experience—an ability which I’ve argued in this paper is possible not through the limited neurological systems of IQ and EQ, but only through the transcendent capacity of SQ.

Again it is no coincidence that this ability, highly linked with SQ, is at the top of Bloom’s taxonomy. Yet how often as teachers and schools are we evaluating students from the lower tiers of development? In our rush and frenzy to prepare students to pass standardized tests, which only rarely enter the higher tiers of the taxonomy, how many opportunities to develop SQ are we losing?

**4. Create mindmaps and give students the opportunity to create them** (*She sees the world holistically; She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning*):

Creating mindmaps is a tested technique for drawing connections between words, ideas, concepts and entire worlds. The connections that mindmaps uncover help develop a sense of the natural interdependence of objects and ideas. One of the first and most widely known proponents of mindmapping, Tony Buzan (1993), says that mindmaps develop the mind’s “radiant thinking” capabilities, which empower the individual to see connections and make decisions beyond the normally limited state and become a “mentally literate human.” A mentally literate human, he says, is “capable of turning on the radiant synergetic thinking engines, and creating conceptual frameworks and new paradigms of possibility” (p. 287). One skill of a spiritually intelligent person is

that she is able to reframe concepts into larger contexts and therefore create “new paradigms.” So it seems the use of mindmaps would be a naturally effective way of engendering this aspect of a student’s SQ.

**5. Create an Appreciation of Deep Diversity** (*She thrives in and celebrates diversity*)

The phrase “deep diversity” is simply my own way of suggesting that we need to go beyond tokenism in the classroom and give students the chance to encounter diversity on a deeper level. As teachers we don’t always have control over the students that end up on our roster, but we do control many of the interactions our students will have throughout the year. A teacher might create opportunities for his students to interact with classrooms of students of a different age, race, ability, ethnicity, or even language. A teacher whose class is predominantly white, for example, might create meaningful encounters for them with ESL, Bilingual, or Special Ed students on the same campus. These encounters should personally engage students and not be mere superficial presentations of holidays and customs (which are great in some contexts). I believe that appreciating diversity in the context of SQ means seeing oneself in the “other”, regardless of how far removed they seem from one’s cultural context. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to develop this aspect of students’ SQ by giving them meaningful encounters with diversity.

**6. Help students create their own visions and goals** (*She is led by vision and values*):

Teachers should openly model and discuss their own goal-setting strategies and the visions that propel them. When students see examples of how intention can

bring about fruition, they may begin to develop faith in the goal-setting process. Also, journal exercises and discussions which force students to confront their own beliefs and articulate them (at whatever level they are capable) will lead students toward to a deeper understanding of their own value. In an ideal scenario, the teacher could help students create an evolving “mission statement” that reflects their own vision and values. The teacher could possibly hold the students accountable to their statement as a sort of “vision contract.” A vision that is grounded in SQ will help a student transcend the vicissitudes of life’s daily struggles and develop a capacity for resilience.

**7. Provide opportunities to journal and reflect (*She is self-aware*):**

Students should have a venue to explore themselves at all three levels of intelligence—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—that is non-judgmental and supportive. Journals are the perfect outlet for this type of reflective exploration if they are understood to be confidential AND the teacher is able to provide regular constructive feedback. It is up to the skillfulness of the teacher to guide students’ journaling towards a deeper self-awareness.

**8. Study and discuss biographies of spiritually intelligent people (*She has a capacity to face and use adversity; She possesses courage, or field independence*):**

Students arrive with a variety of life experiences. At a young age some have already encountered great adversity that has tested their spiritual fabric and courage. In these cases teachers should have the courage to recognize and help the student use that adversity to grow their SQ and develop their own courage. In other cases, students have had relatively sheltered lives and little opportunity to

encounter and learn from adversity. Yet we know that as human beings they certainly will encounter adversity.

In both cases students need good models and frameworks through which to encounter and learn from adversity. Whenever possible the teacher himself should model this SQ skill. He should be open to discussing how he overcame and learned from difficult situations in his own life. He should be able to discuss times in his own life when he had courage, and times when he didn't. This modeling can be broadened by studying the lives of those we might recognize as very spiritually intelligent. There are some obvious examples, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, but it would be easy to find examples that might relate to particular students or groups of students. How about Helen Keller for students with some form of disability? How about Jim Abbot, the pro baseball pitcher with one arm, for students with a connection to athletics? This list would be easy to extend, but it would be most appropriate for the teacher to use his own understanding of his students to provide them with good models of courage in the face of adversity.

### **Conclusion: A Path to Hope**

A key facet of creating hope is to “develop or rediscover beliefs in values beyond one’s own being and one’s family, a relatedness to the larger universe and a feeling of harmony with (at least part of) it” (Beavers and Kaslow, 1981, p. 122). Engendering SQ will indeed give students a vision beyond their own being and develop their sense of connectedness with the universe. In this sense, SQ is an incomparable guide to hope. In fact, as Zohar and Marshall suggest, we are neurologically developed to experience the world in a way that transcends our limited selves, which reinforces that as teachers we

are simply guiding students to the state of meaning, value, and harmony that is a student's birthright.

Numerous obstacles stand before the teacher whose heart is in the highest interest of his students. Some of these are externally relevant—standardized testing requirements, curriculum restrictions, financial limitations. Yet many other of these obstacles are the result of his own internal limitations. Frankly, we teachers, as much as the students themselves, become alienated and fragmented in the storm of what's expected of us in our occupation. Perhaps the problem is, as Dreikurs (19??) suggests, that we lack the “courage to be imperfect.” In fact it is two qualities of SQ—courage and spontaneity—that Dreikurs suggest we most need as teachers in order to transcend our own self-interest and instead skillfully encounter the needs of the situation. Only then, he argues, can we achieve a state of “inner freedom” and in turn impart a healthy philosophy of life to our students. This resonates strongly with the concept SQ. In short, it suggests that only spiritually intelligent teachers can produce spiritually intelligent students.

In the generous and invigorating spirit of social interest, we must become worthy as vehicles of temporary transference onto which students can project their hopes and gradually develop their own SQ. By temporarily “borrowing hope” from teachers in a way that Beavers and Kaslow describe (1981) for therapeutic situations, students can “develop or recapture a sense of basic trust and its corollary, an optimistic belief that life has value and meaning” (p. 121).

If developing SQ were simple, campuses and classrooms would be happier, healthier places in which the values of harmony, vision, and values thrived. Yet these kinds of classrooms are rare. Spiritually intelligent schools require spiritually intelligent teachers, and these certainly constitute a minority. A teacher might become hopeless or discouraged about ever transforming so many minds in a sea of spiritual sickness. Yet that would deepen the very existential vacuum we are trying to fill, or overcome. Instead,

we can, as Frankl (1984) proposes, accept the “challenge to join the minority. For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless everyone does his best” (p. 179).

Armed with an awareness of our own innate capacity to develop the spontaneous and healing qualities of SQ, we should enter classrooms and schools with the boundless, selfless courage of a warrior, emboldened by the vigor of a cosmic social interest.

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