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EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT: A MIXED-METHODS STUDY

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Education and Spiritual Development: A Mixed-Methods Study

ABSTRACT

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The present study replicates and expands upon previous research by the lead author to further validate the spiritual development model based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs proposed by the lead author. The spiritual development model is validated quantitatively by a Likert-scale type survey that correlates spiritual needs, spiritual motivation, and spiritual volition with participants' academic performance. Additional validation of the model is provided by semi-structured, open-ended interviews with participants to develop a deeper, more phenomenological understanding of the components of spiritual development and their opinions on the proper roles of religion and spirituality in education. Data collection for this study included 162 quantitative survey respondents and 10 qualitative interviewees at the University of West Florida and 177 survey respondents and 10 qualitative interviewees at the University of North Carolina, Pembroke (for a total quantitative n of 339, and a qualitative n of 20). Thus far, only 6 of the 20 interviews have been transcribed, but an initial analysis of those interview data are contained herein. The quantitative data analysis consisted of clustering questions that represented the components of the spiritual development model and comparing them to questions representing respondents' academic success using a *Pearson's R* for multiple regression to show the significance and directionality of any relationships between those variables. Qualitatively, open-coding using phenomenological reductionism is applied to bracket commonalities between the participants' responses given during recorded, transcribed interviews. Previous research in this area by the lead author indicated that the components of the spiritual development model were positively and significantly correlated, but not significantly correlated to academic performance. A revised survey instrument used during this study hopes to shed further light on this finding.

Purpose

Despite long-standing acknowledgement of the soundness of the holistic education goal of teaching the whole student, (Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, and Kates, 2005), many schools and teachers have practically abandoned even legitimate, educative attention to religion and spirituality in the classroom due to fear of violating the First Amendment (Miller, et. al., 2005; Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy, 2004). Whether teachers find themselves in school environments that embrace constitutionally appropriate, educative attention to religion and spirituality or not; it behooves wise teachers to understand that their students are spiritual beings (Pelletier and McCall as cited in Hoppe and Speck, 2005), with spiritual needs. The current study is a replication of, and improvement upon, research that sought to propose and validate an educationally useful model of spiritual development, the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework (See Figure 1; Yocum, 2010).

The primary objective of this research then, is to inform educators' practice regarding their knowledge of students' spiritual development and their use of instructional strategies that help meet students' spiritual needs. To these ends, spiritually nourishing, research-based, non-controversial educational strategies identified by the previous research will be briefly summarized here to give educators a model for identifying and using similar pedagogies. The Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework will be explained in terms that help educators understand their students' spiritual development and spiritual needs. Quantitative and qualitative research results will be presented and implications of those results discussed.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the phenomena of religion and spirituality are informed by Maslow's works and are defined as follows: Religion is a corporate, doctrinally-based worship system with ecclesiastical rules, traditions, and customs (Maslow, 1964). Spirituality is a set of individual morals, values, and beliefs, informed by each person's particular lived-experiences, whereby each individual finds answers to questions about identity, purpose, and self-worth (Maslow, 1964).

Theoretical Framework

As is commonly known, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is used to describe individuals' psychological motivation to engage in acts that lead toward the fulfillment of their needs (Maslow, 1968). These needs are physical in nature at the lowest tier of the hierarchy (water, food, shelter, etc.), then progress to social needs (love, relationships, feelings of acceptance from and connection with others) and reach the topmost need of "self-actualization" (whereby, having met lower tiered needs, an individual can focus on self-improvement; Maslow, 1971, p. 366). Although these needs are hierarchical in their progress, one should understand that achievement of these needs in both Maslow's Hierarchy and the posited Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework should not be construed as a one-way, one-time journey. Depending upon temporary conditions, a person may feel more or less fulfillment of needs throughout the hierarchy at times, or may feel more or less satiated in one level of the hierarchy as opposed to another. For example, one can have achieved a sense of self-actualization, but then be temporarily faced with having to meet needs on lower tiers of the hierarchy, as when struggling to meet basic needs after a natural catastrophe or seeking love and acceptance after a divorce.

The Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework is informed by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and is further validated by the current research. The framework seeks to describe an individual's motivation to engage in spiritual acts in order to obtain fulfillment of his or her spiritual needs (Figure 1). The needs, motivators, and acts of volition depicted in the figure below are intended to be representative, not all inclusive. Also, as previously explained, progression through the hierarchical levels of the framework may happen in different orders at different times, may happen more than once, or be skipped altogether, depending on individual conditions.

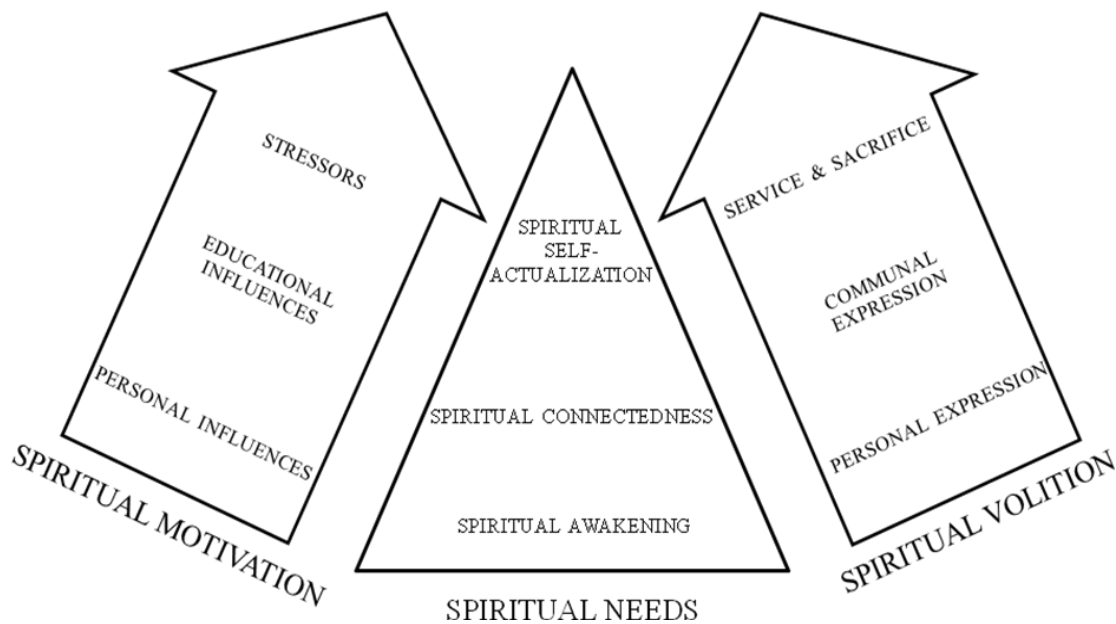


Figure 1. The Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework (Yocum, 2010, p. 149).

Methods

The present study is a replication of and improvement upon previous sequential explanatory mixed-methods research with participant selection (as described by Clark and Creswell, 2008) by the lead author which proposed and initially validated the Spiritual

Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework (Yocum, 2010). The current study builds upon the foundation of the previous study and commenced with quantitative data collection via the Undergraduate Spiritual Expression Survey (USES) v.2 (you may contact the lead author for a copy of the survey). The Likert-scale USES v.2 was distributed to a conveniently available sample of undergraduate student participants at both the University of West Florida (quantitative $n = 177$) and the University of North Carolina, Pembroke (quantitative $n = 162$) for a combined sample size of 339. Upon collection of the survey data, an initial data analysis was conducted to identify potential interviewees who had both indicated a willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, and whose survey responses indicated that spirituality played some role of importance in their lives.

At this point, purposive/criteria based sampling was used to recruit interview participants. Semi-structured, open-ended, one-on-one recorded interviews (you may contact the lead author for the interview questions) were conducted with students from the University of West Florida (qualitative $n = 10$) and the University of North Carolina, Pembroke (qualitative $n = 10$), to obtain their perspectives about, and gain a deeper, richer, phenomenological understanding of spirituality, religion, and the roles of spirituality and religion in their lives and in their educational experiences.

Upon completion of the quantitative and qualitative data collection phase (including the initial quantitative data analysis for qualitative sampling purposes), the quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) software by conducting a *Pearson's R* multiple regression between the clustered sets of questions that represented components of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework and academic success.

The qualitative interview data is still in the process of transcription, after which, the qualitative data will be hand-coded and analyzed using Schutz’s phenomenological reductionism, whereby commonalities across multiple interviewees’ responses and lived-experiences are bracketed as being most meaningful (Schutz, 1970). The first 6 University of West Florida interviews have been transcribed and subjected to an initial analysis, but obviously, the qualitative findings may change as the other 14 interviews from the University of West Florida and the University of North Carolina, Pembroke are transcribed and analyzed.

Participants

The data sources include 339 surveyed undergraduate students (Tables 1-3) and 20 one-on-one interviews (6 of which have been transcribed and are offered herein; Tables 4-6).

Table 1

Survey Respondents’ Ethnicity Frequency Table

Ethnicity	Frequency
African-American	74
American Indian or Alaskan Native	31
Asian	10
Caucasian	179
Hispanic or Latino	26
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1
Other	17
Undesignated	1
<i>n</i>	339

Table 2

Survey Respondents' Marital Status Frequency Table

Marital Status	Frequency
Single	289
Married	32
Widowed	0
Divorced	5
Separated	0
Domestic Partnership	4
Undesignated	7
<i>n</i>	339

Table 3

Survey Respondents' Religious Preference Frequency Table

Religious Preference	Frequency
Baptist	126
Buddhist	4
Catholic	48
Islam	2
Jewish	0
Methodist	19
Other	91
None	46
Undesignated	3
<i>n</i>	339

Table 4

Initial One-on-One Interviewees' Ethnicity Frequency Table

Ethnicity	Frequency
African-American	2
Caucasian	3
Hispanic or Latino	1
<i>n</i>	6

Table 5

Survey Respondents' Marital Status Frequency Table

Marital Status	Frequency
Single	6
<i>n</i>	6

Table 6

Survey Respondents' Religious Preference Frequency Table

Religious Preference	Frequency
Baptist	1
Catholic	1
Other	1
None	3
<i>n</i>	339

Results

A hermeneutic phenomenological (Schwandt, 2001) review of the literature was used to inform the construction of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, along with the operational definitions of religion and spirituality, and led to the identification of spiritually nourishing instructional strategies.

These non-controversial, research-based instructional strategies are sound, commonly used, and provide educators with the means to meet students' spiritual needs by providing learning activities that allow students to engage in self-expression and develop appropriate, meaningful relationships with themselves, teachers, and peers. The identified strategies are: *Moral education* and *aesthetic education* (Greene, 2001; Nash, Bradley and Chickering, 2008; Newman, 2006), *transformative education* and *holistic education* (Miller as cited in Miller et al., 2005), *partnership education* (Eisler as cited in Miller et al., 2005, p. 48), and *service-learning* (Speck as cited in Speck and Hoppe, 2007). Because these pedagogical schools of thought are well-known and self-explanatory to most educators, they are not individually defined here.

Suffice it to say that the important traits to keep in mind for educators who seek to meet students' spiritual needs are to provide opportunities for expression and building relationships.

The quantitative data collected through the USES v.2 continue to support and validate the Spiritual Needs/ Motivation/Volition Framework. The clusters of questions that represent components of the framework are all positively and significantly correlated to one another, but are not typically significantly correlated to students' self-reported grade histories.

Spiritual volition is correlated to the other components of the framework and grades as indicated.

- With educational influences on spiritual motivation (*Pearson's R* = 0.383, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With personal influences on spiritual motivation (*Pearson's R* = 0.643, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With perception of personal feelings of success (*Pearson's R* = 0.240, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality
(*Pearson's R* = 0.651, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With students' self-reported grade history (*Pearson's R* = 0.131, $p = 0.017$)

Educational influences on spiritual motivation:

- With personal influences on spiritual motivation (*Pearson's R* = 0.421, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With perception of personal feelings of success (*Pearson's R* = 0.171, $p = 0.003$)
- With perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality
(*Pearson's R* = 0.333, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With students' self-reported grade history (*Pearson's R* = 0.116, $p = 0.031$)

Personal influences on spiritual motivation

- With perception of personal feelings of success (*Pearson's R* = 0.338, $p \leq 0.001$)

- With perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality
(*Pearson's R* = 0.782, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With students' self-reported grade history (*Pearson's R* = 0.100, $p = 0.053$)

Perception of personal feelings of success

- With perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality
(*Pearson's R* = 0.479, $p \leq 0.001$)
- With students' self-reported grade history (*Pearson's R* = 0.205, $p \leq 0.001$)

Perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality

- With students' self-reported grade history (*Pearson's R* = 0.036, $p = 0.282$)

While all the correlations between components of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework were positive and significant, only two were particularly strong: Spiritual volition with personal influences on spiritual motivation (*Pearson's R* = 0.643, $p \leq 0.001$) and personal influences on spiritual motivation with perception of personal feelings of success attributable to spirituality (*Pearson's R* = 0.782, $p \leq 0.001$). This implies that when an individual has strong, personal spiritual role-models, he or she is more inclined to engage in spiritual activities and attribute more of his or her personal success to his or her spiritual life. Although the correlations between students' self-reported grade histories and components of the framework were positive, none were very strong and none were significant except "perceptions of personal feelings of success" (*Pearson's R* = 0.205, $p \leq 0.001$). This implies that, while a student's feelings of success and self-worth are an important and valid part of his or her spiritual development, this may, at best, have an indirect effect on the student's academic success.

The hand-coding and phenomenological reductionism used on the 6 transcribed surveys allowed for the identification of several noteworthy themes. Interviewees' responses supported

the operational *definitions* of religion and spirituality, which is a promising departure from the results of the previous research. Previously, participants would use spirituality and religion interchangeably, even if they had earlier properly noted the difference between the two. This comingling of the terms then resulted in their inability to articulate how teachers could encourage their students' *spirituality*, as they believed it was inappropriate for teachers to endorse *religion*. The fact that this initial group of 6 (with one outlying exception) is able to differentiate between the two phenomena makes me feel better about their level of spiritual literacy.

The second theme was related to the *benefits* of spirituality. The participants believed that their spirituality helped them to cope with life stressors and obtain success in various areas of their lives because of the benefits they ascribe to their spirituality. These benefits included the ability to engage in stress-relieving activities, the sense of belonging that comes from associating with like-minded spiritual people, and how spirituality breeds positive attitude traits such as confidence, maturity, and work ethic. Half of the 6 interviewees discussed that the idea of spiritual predestination (as one put it, "everything happens for a reason") helps them to develop a positive outlook even during trying circumstances. Similarly, another mentioned how a negative event (his mother's death) resulted in something good (forcing his dad to move to a place where he was able to subsequently obtain a better education).

The final theme identified reveals that *teachers' attitudes* play a large role in the spiritual health of students. Nearly all of the participants indicated that they performed better academically and felt spiritually encouraged by teachers who were available, approachable, and willing to build appropriate, meaningful relationships with students by being "involved" with their students' lives (both in and out of the classroom) and "investing" in their students. As Mary put it, ". . . [I]f your teacher is willing to actually get involved with you, and you know,

how do you say this? . . . Interact more with you, you're more willing to answer questions, therefore, you'll do better in class than if you don't answer questions and you're intimidated by your teacher.” The importance of teachers' attitudes toward spirituality can also be more overt, as when participants report that they didn't perform as well for teachers who were afraid to mention spiritual matters in the classroom, or worse, who would “blatantly” ridicule students who mentioned spiritual or religious beliefs. As John stated, “Like, I've seen teachers, like almost say ‘God,’ or ‘Jesus’ and it's like you can see the gears in their head going, ‘Oh crap, I can't say that.’”

Scholarly Significance

Educators must be aware that their students are spiritual beings, with spiritual needs, and that attending to those students' spiritual needs is the right thing to do. Even when the components of spiritual development are not statistically correlated to students' academic success, students that place an importance on the role of spirituality in their lives *feel* that they do better and *feel* that they work harder and *feel* that they are more academically successful when teachers take the time to build meaningful relationships with them. Educators should be more aware of not only their responsibilities, but also their rights under the First Amendment. When teachers engage in the legitimate, educative address of religion and spirituality in the classroom and respect their students' religious freedoms, those students have a better attitude about their teachers and their own academic performance. Students with such teachers will also undoubtedly develop higher levels of spiritual literacy that will help them to tolerate those of different beliefs (Moore, 2007).

Additionally, the statistical means employed to validate the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/

Volition Framework could prove methodologically useful in quantifying other similar psychological constructs, a similar instrument could be used, for example, to quantify Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or other developmental models.

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