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Spiritual Development and Education: A Sequential Mixed-Methods Approach

RUSSELL YOCUM

Building upon autoethnographically generated data and Maslow’s writings, a Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework was constructed and subsequently validated via a sequential mixed-methods research design. A Likert-type survey instrument was developed and distributed to 139 undergraduate student respondents to quantitatively describe the relationships between the components of the framework. Respondents whose survey answers indicated that spirituality played a role in their lives were then invited to participate in one-on-one and focus group interviews to further clarify the relationships of the framework components and help develop a more phenomenological understanding of spirituality and its intersection with education.

KEYWORDS mixed-methods, religion, spiritual illiteracy, spiritual self-actualization, spirituality

With approximately 70% of incoming college freshman proclaiming that religion and spirituality are an important aspect of their lives,¹ it is imperative that educators develop a deeper understanding of religion and spirituality, and how those phenomena might enrich the lives and academic success of their students.

A truly holistic approach to education is one that inarguably meets the intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs of students and encompasses a wide array of research-based pedagogies that can be used in classrooms at all levels. Although educators would almost invariably accept the preceding statement as factual, there is an increasing disconnect between that belief and actual classroom teaching when it comes to meeting students’ spiritual needs.

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Fearful of violating the religious freedom clause of the First Amendment, teachers have begun avoiding even the educational mention of anything relating to religion. Although a holistic approach to education can be a vehicle for meeting students’ spiritual needs sans any kind of proselytizing, this self-same fear has also caused educators to similarly reject any mention of spirituality in classrooms. As the current research shows, this has produced students who are well-educated and who feel that religion and spirituality are important in their lives, but who lack the religious and spiritual vocabulary to consistently differentiate between these two phenomena and fail to see how either has a place in education.

Research Questions

Because my own spiritual life journey was a catalyst for my academic successes, I began to ponder how spirituality might affect other students’ educational achievements. To better understand this intersection between spirituality and education, some specific research questions surfaced. What is the difference between religion and spirituality? Regardless of religious preferences, what spiritual commonalities exist that could help describe an individual’s spiritual development? What is the nature of the relationship between those commonalities? What kinds of pedagogical approaches are helpful toward a student’s spiritual development? What are students’ perceptions of religion and spirituality? What educational role do students ascribe to religion and spirituality?

Obviously, the answers to some of these research questions are impossible to quantify, so a sequential mixed-methods approach was undertaken that included autoethnography, textual analysis of relevant literature, distribution of a Likert-type survey instrument, and phenomenologically approached one-on-one and focus group interviews. Following, I will outline the research and describe the formation and validation of a Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework, the identification of spiritually nourishing pedagogies, as well as participants’ perceptions of the interaction of religion, spirituality and education.

Religion and Spirituality

There are nearly as many definitions of religion and spirituality as there are people. Therefore, it is important to operationally define what is meant by these terms, for the purposes of the present study.

Spirituality is a phenomenon whereby individuals seek to find answers to life’s questions, to discover their own identity, to find a sense of purpose in life, to understand the difference between good and bad. In this light, spirituality can be highly individualized and helps inform a person’s belief system. People often seem to grasp these aspects of spirituality through
moments of epiphany akin to what Maslow describes as “transcendent” or “peak experiences.”

Whereas spirituality is the result of a personal search for answers, religion is a more corporate experience. Although one individually and spiritually arrives at a belief system, religion provides an opportunity to practice that belief system with those who are like-minded. As such, religion seeks to codify the commonalities between beliefs and is more doctrinal, ecclesiastical, and ritualistic.

These operational definitions are deliberately presented as almost polar opposites, for the purpose of clearly distinguishing between the two phenomena. However, it should not be inferred that areas of overlap are nonexistent. A very spiritual person may obtain fulfillment of spiritual needs by participating in religion and vice versa. Someone can be spiritual without ever stepping foot into a church and likewise, a religious person may take great comfort from traditions and rituals without having a true spiritual relationship with others or with any higher power.

A SEQUENTIAL MIXED-METHODS DESIGN

For the present research, I used “a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with participant selection” (as used by Thogersen-Ntoumani and Fox, as cited by Clark and Creswell). As my own life’s journey revealed the importance of religion and spirituality in providing a sense of purpose, it seemed to me that it would be a waste of a wealth of autoethnographic data to ignore observations accrued through nearly 15 years of church-related experiences. During these 15 years, I not only attended corporate worship services, but also served in a variety of ministry and teaching functions at churches, and witnessed countless conversion experiences, as well as observed how individuals relied upon their spirituality to overcome life stressors. Although my experiences draw upon an admittedly Christian perspective, I began to notice patterns related to spiritual development that I intuited would have a more universal application regardless of religious preference.

The next phase of the design was conducting a hermeneutic textual analysis of relevant literature. I selected texts pertaining to religion, spirituality, the psychology of religion and spirituality, and holistic education. The intent of this textual analysis of the literature was to help me frame the Christian life-experiences of the autoethnographic data in a way that was applicable to spirituality in general and to inform the construction of a spiritual development model. In addition, the literature review served to aid in the identification of widely accepted teaching strategies that were both non-controversial and spiritually nourishing to students.

With these steps completed, I posited the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework which is intended to describe spiritual development. I
developed, piloted, and distributed a Likert-type survey instrument, the 2009 Undergraduate Spiritual Expression Survey (USES), whose questions were clustered in groups of variables intended to represent the components of the framework. The survey was completed by 139 undergraduate students at the University of West Florida and collected data regarding their spiritual practices, the roles of educational and personal influences on their spiritual motivation, and their perceptions regarding the degree to which they attributed spirituality with meeting their needs and generating feelings of success.

After analyzing the survey data, purposeful sampling was used to extend invitations to take part in one-on-one and focus group interviews. Although I was not searching for respondents who might agree with my views on spirituality, I felt it important to identify participants whose responses indicated that spirituality played some role in their lives. Using this purposeful sampling, I invited upwards of 20 respondents to participate in one-on-one interviews. Of these, 11 participated. Finally, each of the one-on-one interviewees was invited to join in a focus group interview, but only three were eventually able to attend. Upon completing the interviews, I transcribed the sessions and applied phenomenological reduction to identify common themes. Each of these steps in the sequential design, and the results obtained at each step, are presented more fully in sections which follow.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In its simplest terms, autoethnography is an autobiographical form of ethnography. Via autoethnography, a researcher pulls meaningful qualitative data through personal lived experiences. During 15 years of participation at church, I repeatedly observed data points that I would later come to realize were descriptive of not only Christianity but spiritual development. These data would be instrumental in the formation of my Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework.

By the time I was 4 or 5 years of age, an abusive alcoholic stepfather had become a part of my family. Enduring physical, mental, and emotional abuse at home, I eventually learned to excel at school. If it was impossible to gain love and acceptance in an unsafe home from my stepfather, it seemed natural to do so in the safer environment at school. In just this single paragraph, one can see an example of each component of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework (see Figure 1) below. The need to obtain love and acceptance is represented by spiritual connectedness in the spiritual needs category. Abuse is a life stressor which can act as a spiritual motivation (in this case, the abuse motivated me to both seek fulfillment of my needs at school and to excel academically to fulfill those needs). Finally, the academic effort that I exerted to impress my teachers is representative of an act of personal expression in the spiritual volition category.
The upward pointed arrows for both the spiritual volition and spiritual motivation category are not intended to imply that these categories have any kind of hierarchical structure, rather the arrows depict the nature of the relationship between the three components, such that as the level of spiritual motivation increases, the frequency of acts of spiritual volition increase and so too does the likelihood of obtaining fulfillment of spiritual needs.

**Spiritual Needs**

When I was in the fifth grade, my public school had a voluntary “moral training” partnership with participating local churches. If a student’s parents elected for their child to enroll, the student would be bused after lunch to the participating church designated by the parents. Although I have no idea what the students did who stayed at school, or what participants at other churches experienced, I know that for me this program introduced me to the world of spirituality and religion.

The staff and volunteers at the church provided us with instruction about morality. Along the way, we learned that there was something more to life that we couldn’t see; something spiritual. We learned to ponder our own behavior and the motivations behind that behavior, to wonder at our purpose in life, and to question the eternal disposition of our souls. When someone begins asking these kinds of spiritual life-questions, that person is well on the way toward a spiritual awakening. A spiritual awakening is similar to what Maslow calls a “peak experience.” Someone can tell you what they believe, read to you from their own preferred sacred text, or proselytize to you day and night, but until you have asked yourself these kinds
of spiritual life-questions you will not be developmentally prepared to experience a spiritual awakening.

It should be noted here that the tiered triangle graphic is meant to depict a hierarchical sense of these spiritual needs but is not intended to imply that fulfillment of these needs is a one-way, one-time journey. Just as Maslow indicates that peak experiences can and do happen multiple times, one can have multiple spiritual awakenings or “reawakenings.” These reiterations of spiritual awakening can occur when one loses his or her faith, strays, and then rededicates his or her life to a previous belief system or converts to a new one.

The spiritual awakening category is the lowest tier in the Spiritual Needs component of the framework, because it represents a very egocentric stage in development, in that at this category one is concerned with questions such as “What is my purpose in life?,” “What does it mean when bad things happen to me?,” and “What happens when I die?” When the spiritual awakening answers these questions, the individual is free to become concerned with spiritual relationships with others, which introduces us to spiritual connectedness.

Autoethnographically speaking, spiritual connectedness was easily observable. After I had begun attending the school-church moral training program, I experienced a spiritual awakening and realized that there was another place that I could feel loved and accepted besides school. I began begging my mother to take me to the church where I had moral training for Wednesday night and Sunday services. Once we become aware that we are spiritual beings, we have a longing to congregate with others who are like-minded. The religious comfort of ritualism and tradition through corporate worship experiences aside, the benefits of associating with like-minded spiritual people include the aforementioned feelings of love and acceptance, having an audience for spiritual expression, and being able to rely on an accountability partner for spiritual support.

When needs for spiritual awakening and spiritual connectedness are fulfilled one is empowered to begin to achieve what I call spiritual self-actualization. This is the point where one is confident enough in his or her spiritual identity and purpose and has fulfilling spiritual relationships with others to the extent that they now have the freedom to devote time to self-improvement. When one has had his or her basic spiritual needs met, he or she can ask “How can I be a more spiritual person?,” “How can my spirituality help me succeed in other aspects of life?,” and “How can I help others to grow spiritually?”

In my own experiences, I obtained a degree of spiritual self-actualization by relying on my spirituality to pursue academic success. Where I was initially a good student as I tried to impress my teachers for love and acceptance, after experiencing spiritual awakening and spiritual connectedness, I became an excellent student just for the sake of desiring
to learn and because I felt that academic success was the morally right thing to aspire to.

Having set the stage for an understanding of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework with the preceding explanation of spiritual needs via autoethnographic examples, the remaining components of the framework can be explained with much less space.

**Spiritual Motivation**

*Spiritual motivation* encompasses a representative sampling of extrinsic motivators upon spiritual development. It should be noted that disequilibrium is also a motivator. Further, I concede that there is a place for intrinsic motivation as well, as when a person operates in spiritual self-actualization and seeks self-improvement. However, teachers can apply extrinsic motivation for their students but have no control over students’ intrinsic motivators. So, for the sake of focus and utility for practitioners, the framework is concerned only with those outside influences that motivate one toward seeking fulfillment of spiritual needs and engaging in acts of spiritual volition.

My autoethnographic experiences have led me to identify three broad categories of spiritual motivation. These are personal influences, educational influences, and life stressors.

Without question, personal influences can be a source of motivation in spiritual development. These personal influences can be in the form of role-modeling by family and/or friends, family history, traditions, and culture. It is fairly easy to demonstrate how these kinds of personal influences can serve as spiritual motivation. I grew up with a mom who loved and believed in God and in a small, rural area of Kentucky where the culture and traditions of Christianity were quite dominant. Growing up with a Christian mom in a Christian community no doubt motivated and prepared me for a spiritual awakening when the opportunity presented itself.

Educational influences exert spiritual motivation in a variety of ways. Overtly, these educational influences are parochial in nature, such as with the moral training program I attended and later through lessons that were taught to me at church services. In addition, however, these influences can be more covert, such as when educators use instructional strategies that nourish students’ spirits.

Finally, stressors can provide a drive for spiritual development. Such is the case as with my previously discussed childhood abuse, but not all stressors are negative or nearly as dramatic. Positive events such as getting married or preparing for a new job can apply stress to life. Negative stressors include near-death experiences, divorce, coping with substance abuse, losing a loved one, and so on. Less profound than either positive or negative life stressors are the stresses we find in the tedium and routine of our daily lives.
Spiritual Volition

I have separated the spiritual volition component of the framework into three very broad categories: personal expression, communal expression, and service and sacrifice. These categories are intentionally broad as they are meant to include a wide variety of spiritual acts. These acts of spiritual volition are not intended to be hierarchical; they can occur at any time during spiritual development and there are acts of spiritual volition that may be classified into overlapping categories. That having been said, this particular component of the framework does lend itself to a natural progression such that as one experiences spiritual growth he or she may be more likely to transition from practicing his or her spirituality in isolation, then with a group, and finally to be more inclined to serve others some measure of spiritual self-actualization is realized.

Personal acts of spiritual expression include those which one would typically associate with spirituality, such as engaging in prayer, reading sacred texts, meditation, and so on. This category also includes spiritual activities that might be less overtly associated with spirituality, as with artistic expression such as journaling, poetry, fine arts, musical expression, drama, and cooking. Throughout my spiritual journey, I have enjoyed many of these types of expression, but one of my favorites has been drawing abstract pastels of Bible stories and characters. When I relate to a particular Bible passage in a meaningful way, the tactile and kinesthetic process of creating art based on that story somehow makes the story more real for me.

Communal acts of spiritual expression include virtually all of the personally spiritually expressive acts, with the simple twist that they are either engaged in as a group activity or are performed for the enjoyment of others. Acts of spiritual expression in a community setting include engaging in corporate worship, volunteering, or performing for an audience. Engaging in such communal acts of expression is a way to fulfill needs for connectedness. After I became comfortable with my spirituality and my role as part of a church family, I enjoyed singing in choir and volunteering to teach Bible classes. I also continued to enjoy creating art, turning it into a communal act of expression by gifting the art to friends from church.

The service and sacrifice category is really self-explanatory. Acts of spiritual volition in this category include making charitable contributions of money, time, and/or services. Volunteer efforts also fall naturally into this category. Sacrifice can be any act of service to others but is taken to an extreme of placing others’ needs above one’s own. Although I was a full-time public school teacher and a full-time doctoral candidate, I still took great joy teaching in children’s ministries at church as well as participating in choir and helping with set-up and clean-up chores for church functions. These acts of spiritual volition were not only a service to others in my church, but also constituted a sacrifice of leisure time.
HERMENEUTIC TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE

Although a traditional literature review provides a foundation of historical context and relevance for current research, hermeneutics involves a qualitative interpretation of applicable texts to derive meaning and generate data. In the case of the present study, the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework did not spring forth in my mind fully formed. I perused tomes on psychology, religion, spirituality, and education to generate data that would both support the autoethnographic data and help to frame it in a meaningful, presentable way.

As references that support the autoethnography have already been noted where applicable, this section will be devoted to sharing the spiritually nourishing pedagogies that I identified with the hermeneutic textual analysis and a brief interpretation of these pedagogies in light of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework. Because the pedagogical strategies showcased are both research based and likely to be well known by readers, I will list them and provide a very basic definition before casting the entire set of strategies in an interpretive light.

An aesthetic education approach is one that does not merely expose students to the world of arts or encourage creativity, but also seeks to impart to students the vocabulary necessary to connect with and find meaning in the arts, and in turn, themselves, others and the world. Similarly, holistic education “attempt[s] to nurture the development of the whole person... intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual.”

A moral education is one that equips students to think critically about right and wrong toward the development of a personal code of ethics that enables them to treat others fairly while simultaneously imparting a pluralistic appreciation of and tolerance for the views of others. A transformative education empowers students to examine their own views alongside competing views in a critical way toward a potential shifting of previously held paradigms.

Partnership education emphasizes the importance of developing caring relationships between students and their peers as well as between students and teachers; this type of educational approach is typified by cooperative-learning activities that teach students to make connections with others, while imparting a sense of responsibility and problem-solving skills. Finally, service-learning provides students with project-based learning opportunities that culminate in meeting the needs of others.

Although these educational approaches are obviously not all-inclusive of those which might serve to fulfill students’ spiritual needs, they do constitute a representative sampling of over-arching pedagogies that can be used to spiritually nourish students. A multitude of specific classroom strategies are easily aligned with these pedagogical approaches, such as reflective journaling, story-telling, and performance arts, to name but a few.
Rather than listing individual instructional strategies ad infinitum, it is more useful to share the hermeneutic interpretation that was applied in the identification of these strategies so that educators can identify their own best practices. When viewed as a whole, these pedagogical approaches have some important aspects in common; the approaches foster the development of critical thinking skills, they afford students the opportunity to express themselves, and they allow students to form relationships with teachers, students, and those who are in need. Educators should be able to apply the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework in similar ways to identify existing instructional strategies (or develop new ones of their own) that will serve to spiritually motivate students, meet students’ spiritual needs, and/or provide students with the means to engage in spiritual volition.

QUANTITATIVE METHODS

2009 USES

Once the autoethnography and hermeneutic textual analysis provided the data for the construction of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework, my next step was to develop a survey instrument to quantitatively validate the framework. The result was my 2009 USES. The 2009 USES captured standard demographic data, along with respondents’ religious preferences, and their estimate of their current semester grades. The targeted data for the survey was in the form of groups of Likert-scale questions which, when clustered, would represent a component of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework. These clusters of questions would then be treated as variables for a multiple regression analysis to determine the nature and strength of the relationship between the components (contact the author for a copy of the 2009 USES or the newly revised 2011 USES).

Nine questions clustered together to represent spiritual volition asked respondents to rate their frequency of engagement in a variety of spiritually expressive activities. Twenty-six “Educational Influences on Spiritual Motivation” questions represented the corresponding category in the framework and solicited participants to rate their level of agreement concerning the types of spiritually nourishing instructional strategies that their teachers may have used throughout their education. “Personal Influences on Spiritual Motivation” consisted of 6 questions intended to represent the same category of the framework. Finally, 5 questions relating to students’ perceptions of “Personal Success Attributable to Spirituality” were meant to represent the highest tier of the spiritual needs component of the framework, spiritual self-actualization.

The 2009 USES was piloted to 16 graduate students and colleagues (11 females, 5 males) for the calculation of a Cronbach’s alpha to test its reliability. The entire survey returned a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.84. Although
this was satisfactory, I also calculated a separate Cronbach’s alpha for each cluster of questions. “Expressions of Spiritual Volition” = 0.82, “Educational Influences on Spiritual Motivation” = 0.74, “Personal Influences on Spiritual Motivation” = 0.76, and “Personal Success Attributable to Spirituality” = 0.74.

Survey Respondents

The survey was distributed to 139 undergraduate students (99 females, 40 males) in several disciplines (education, math education, pre-law, and business) at the University of West Florida. The demographic breakdown of the participants is depicted in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Quantitative Results

After the survey was completed by the 139 respondents, the data were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Each of the clusters of questions previously identified was treated as a variable and a Pearson’s $R$ correlation coefficient was calculated to compare the four question clusters against each other as well as against students’

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FIGURE 2 Spiritual volition and personal influences on spiritual motivation scatterplot (Pearson’s $R = 0.680$, $p \leq 0.001$).

FIGURE 3 Spiritual volition and spiritual self-actualization scatterplot (Pearson’s $R = 0.724$, $p \leq 0.001$).
FIGURE 4 Spiritual self-actualization and personal influences on spiritual motivation scatter-plot (Pearson’s $R = 0.831, p \leq 0.001$).\(^{37}\)

FIGURE 5 Spiritual volition, educational and personal influences on motivation, and spiritual self-actualization aggregated participant responses (arranged in ascending numerical order).\(^{38}\)
self-reported current semester grades. Although each of the clusters of questions that represented components of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework were positively and significantly correlated with one another, none were significantly correlated to grades. I have included the statistical results of the three strongest relationships between the variable clusters in Figures 2–4 below. Figure 5 depicts an aggregated frequency response of each of the variable clusters in one graph. Pearson’s R, p values, and scatterplots of all of the other variable cluster combination relationships are available upon request from the author. The implications of the results will be further detailed in the Discussion section.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Subsequent to the statistical analysis of the survey data, I used a purposeful sampling, inviting more than 20 survey respondents (whose answers indicated that they assigned some importance to the role of spirituality in their lives) to participate in one-on-one interviews. All of the one-on-one interview participants were also invited to join in a focus group interview.

The one-on-one interviews were approximately 15 minutes each and the focus group interview lasted about 30 minutes. Permission to record the interviews was obtained from each participant and I made the recordings using the voice recorder application of my iPhone with a Sony digital voice recorder as a back-up.

The one-on-one interviews were semistructured, in that I referred to a scripted list of questions but entered into a more conversational dialogue with the interviewees to allow for relevant, off-the-cuff, and follow-up questions. Similarly, the focus group interview was semi-structured. The focus group interview was intended to be a freely flowing discussion between the participants, but I had a list of discussion prompts to interject in the event of conversational lulls (2009 interview scripts and subsequent revisions are available upon request from the author).

The general aim of the questions was to capture students’ perceptions of spirituality and religion, and the place of spirituality and religion in education. I sought to understand the kinds of acts of spiritual volition in which these participants typically engaged, students’ feelings on how the university and their instructors might hinder or facilitate their spiritual fulfillment, and students’ perceptions of how their spirituality may have contributed to their ability to overcome obstacles in life, and how their sense of spirituality affected their academic success.

Interview Participants

As previously indicated, all of those invited to interview had previously completed the 2009 USES and had answers that indicated that spirituality had
some significant role in their lives. For the one-on-one survey there were 11 participants. Of these, five were females, six were males; one was African American, one was Asian, seven were Caucasian, and one was Hispanic/Latino; three were Baptist, one was Catholic, two were Methodist, four identified themselves as having an “Other” religious preference, and one claimed no religious preference. These 11 were invited to participate in the focus group interview, but after scheduling conflicts, cancellations, and no-shows, the focus group consisted of three participants (one female, two males). One of the focus group participants identified herself as Asian, the others were Caucasian. Their religious preferences were Baptist, Methodist, and Other.

Qualitative Results

After transcribing the interviews, I applied phenomenological reduction\textsuperscript{39} to bracket commonalities between responses and then hand-coded them into major themes. The themes identified are presented here while implications for the interview findings are detailed further in the Discussion section.

Supporting the autoethnographic and quantitative data, was the theme of spiritual connectedness. The interviewees’ responses highlighted their spiritual need for love and acceptance from family, teachers, and peers. These needs for connection were given voice through interviewees’ mention of the importance of their participation in religious organizations, as well as through non-religious organizations such as sports and Reserved Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

Also aligned with the previously generated data was the interviewees’ responses related to acts of spiritual volition. The participants’ answers confirmed participation in typical acts of spiritual expression such as those tracked by the 2009 USES, the interviewees engaged in meditation, prayer, daily reading of sacred texts, and regularly attended religious services. A majority of the interviewees also emphasized the satisfaction that they receive from serving others, some by volunteering to help with various ministries at church and others through their planned choice of vocation. One of the respondents, a student in a teacher education program, aspires to be an educator because he sees that as a calling from God and views teaching as a service to others. Another future teacher feels led to pursue a profession in education so that she can go on overseas mission trips to serve the poor during her summer vacations.

Another theme was related to spiritual motivation. Interviewees recounted relying upon their spirituality to overcome major life crises such as enduring sexual abuse during childhood, the divorce of parents, major illnesses, and loss of loved ones. The participants also allowed for how their spirituality helped them to cope with everyday life stressors: conflict at work, praying before tests, and interacting with unpleasant roommates. One
participant mentioned how her faith and spirituality served as a guide for navigating the newness of a positive life stressor, her recent marriage.

Students’ perceptions of their own spiritual self-actualization constituted another major theme. All of the respondents considered themselves successful either in their studies, at work, in their personal lives, or some combination thereof. They attributed their feelings of success in part due to their spirituality. An example of what I mean here is when one of the interviewees partially attributed her success at work due to the fact that her spirituality imbued her with a sense of morals and responsibility.

The most surprising, and most frustrating, theme identified was how participants seemed to be unconsciously equate religion and spirituality. Even though almost every interviewee described spirituality and religion separately and in a way consistent with the operational definitions set forth herein, when I would ask them later questions about how universities or instructors could address students’ spiritual needs they would almost invariably resort to a paradigm that equated the two phenomena. They would say words to the effect of, “You can’t do that in school, it would be against the law.” These responses indicated that they were confusing religion with spirituality. I would offer up rephrased follow-up questions to try to tease out more useful responses, asking them how instructors might meet students’ spiritual needs without talking about or endorsing any particular religion.

With these follow-up questions I was able to identify the final major theme, spirituality and education. When I would clarify what I meant by facilitating students’ spirituality in an educational setting, the participants’ responses were still quite reserved. It was easily discernible that they were still laboring under the conception that spirituality was as forbidden in schools as proselytizing. However, they would eventually, grudgingly offer that teachers could help students feel accepted and cared for, and that schools should allow students to freely exercise their beliefs. Finally, when I asked how their spirituality might help them succeed as students, the consensus was that because their spirituality helped them to develop a more heightened sense of morality, this in turn helped them to be more responsible when it came to class attendance, studying, and submitting assignments.

LIMITATIONS

A major limitation was the homogeneity of the sample. Although the sample was fairly representative of the population on campus, being a relatively small, southern university, that sample was hardly representative of the general population. I have recently obtained approval to replicate the study (with revised questions) at a much more diverse institute of higher education.
In addition, I would very much like to conduct such studies in various countries around the globe.

Another limitation is with the 2009 USES. Although the survey was reliable and statistically validated the construction of the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework, it could be a better survey. Specifically, I would like to have achieved more balance between the number of questions in each cluster. In addition, along with the questions pertaining to feelings of success attributable to spirituality, I would also like to include survey questions about perceptions of success not attributable to spirituality as a form of control. Finally, in light of previous studies that have shown a statistical relationship between spirituality and academic success, I was surprised that the components of the framework were not significantly correlated to students’ grades. This may be due in part to the fact that the clustered questions representing framework components encouraged a more historic answer from respondents, although the question about grades captured only the briefest of snapshots (self-reported current semester grade average). I believe that adding additional questions pertaining to grades, such as asking students their approximate averages at milestones throughout their academic career, might also encourage a more longitudinal response to this question that might better correlate to the components of the framework.

DISCUSSION

Implications

The implications for educations from the autoethnographic and hermeneutic textual analysis sections of this work should be abundantly clear through reading the applicable sections above. In summary, we are spiritual beings and the nature of the relationship between spiritual motivation, spiritual volition, and spiritual needs are positive and significant. Educators can apply this knowledge to use instructional delivery strategies that help meet learners’ needs to connect with others in a caring way by providing them with opportunities to express themselves, work in groups, and help others. Teachers that spiritually motivate their students in such ways are not only giving their students the means to engage in spiritually expressive acts, but are also facilitating the meeting of their students’ spiritual needs. Meeting students’ spiritual needs ultimately helps them progress toward spiritual self-actualization, at which point they will be have self-confident perceptions regarding life successes. Although the current study does not quantitatively support that this would result in statistically significant gains in grades, the qualitative data do indicate that, at the very least, there is an indirect effect on grades. Students who feel spiritually nourished and who are more likely to believe that spirituality is an important part of their lives acknowledge that
their spirituality helps them to be successful students through better morals and responsibility when it comes to academic work.

Quantitatively speaking, the strength of the relationships between the components of the framework bears this out. The strongest of the relationships between the clusters of questions is that of “Personal Influences on Spiritual Motivation” and “Expressions of Spiritual Volition,” whereas the weakest relationships (excluding the relationships to grades) are those between “Educational Influences on Spiritual Motivation” and the other question clusters. This is also consistent with the qualitative data. Essentially, this implies that the influences and role-modeling provided by family, friends, and clergy are more likely to motivate us to engage in acts of spiritual expressiveness than are the influences of our teachers. However, this may have serious ramifications for those students who do not receive much spiritual motivation outside of school. Just as teachers are increasingly called upon to be counselors, social workers, nutritionists, and etiquette coaches, educators also need to provide spiritual nourishment in those cases where it is not provided at home.

This certainly serves to reiterate the most significant implication from the qualitative portion of the study. It is alarming that well-educated and academically successful college undergraduates do not possess the vocabulary to consistently differentiate between religion and spirituality, nor to be able to see the legitimate educational benefits of spirituality. We are doing a disservice to our students, and to society, when students cannot see the difference between religion and spirituality, especially in regards to what is and is not legal in public schools.

We teach our students about government and politics, we impart to them the vocabularies to appreciate music and the arts; however we have left them to flounder in a state of religious illiteracy in our schools.41 This has an impact far beyond students growing up without the vocabulary to talk intelligently about religion. In the post 9/11 world it has become increasingly obvious that we must address religious illiteracy in schools so that our students will be able to develop an understanding and tolerance of a pluralism of religious views.42

In light of the results of the present study, I would contend that our schools are rife with not only religious illiteracy, but also spiritual illiteracy. Educators need to tackle these problems simultaneously. We must take the time to talk about different religions in the classroom (without proselytizing) to provide our students with a vocabulary for understanding different religions, introduce them to religious plurality, and empower them with the skills to think critically about and make their own informed decisions regarding religion. At the same time, we need to teach our students that spirituality is a more personal belief system that is distinctly different from corporate religious organizations and experiences. When we teach our students how to express themselves, how to meet their spiritual needs for connecting with
others, for feeling loved, accepted, and successful then they will have the
attitudes for self-worth and caring that will combine with their knowledge
about religious pluralism to give birth to tolerance and peace.

NOTES

1. R. Nash, D. Bradley, and A. Chickering, How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus from
Kates (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); J. Nelson, S. Palonsky, & M. McCarthy, Critical
4. Ibid., 20.
5. Ibid., ix.
6. Ibid.
8. Ingersoll and Siebert as cited in B. Speck and S. Hoppe, Searching for Spirituality in Higher
Education (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
9. Eberhardt, Dalton, and Ostrander as cited in B. Speck and S. Hoppe, Searching for Spirituality in
Higher Education (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).
Volition Framework for Educators” (Doctoral Dissertation, Pensacola, FL: University of West Florida,
2010), 140.
12. Ibid., ix.
14. The “Spiritual Self-Actualization” category and the Spiritual Needs/Motivation/Volition Framework
are informed by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as described in: A. Maslow, The Farther Reaches of
15. J. Banks and C. Banks, Multicultural Education Issues and Perspectives, 5th ed. (Hoboken, NJ:
John Wiley and Sons, 2004); M. Greene, Variations on a Blue Guitar (New York: Teachers College Press,
2001); and E. Tisdell, Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education (San Francisco:
16. B. Speck and S. Hoppe, Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education.
17. E. Tisdell, Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education (San Francisco:
18. D. Denton and W. Ashton, Spirituality, Action and Pedagogy—Teaching From the Heart
(New York: Peter Lang, 2004); M. Greene, Variations on a Blue Guitar.
19. B. Speck and S. Hoppe, Searching for Spirituality in Higher Education (New York: Peter Lang,
2007).
20. Kates and Schiller as cited in Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education.
23. M. Greene, Variations on a Blue Guitar.
26. R. Nash, D. Bradley, and A. Chickering, How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus from Polarization
27. O’Sullivan as cited in Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education.
28. Eisler as cited in Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education.
29. S. Hoppe and B. Speck, Spirituality in Higher Education.
32. M. Greene, *Variations on a Blue Guitar*.
34. Ibid., 73.
35. Ibid., 77.
36. Ibid., 80.
37. Ibid., 81.
38. Ibid., 82.