

What does Spirituality have to do with Public Schools?

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Introduction

Recent movements in the field of education acknowledge understanding spirituality as a critical component of human development (whether in the stage of children or adults) and well-being and a way to human connectedness, but spirituality is still a topic that is *often neglected in schools*.

While we are justifiably proud of our “outer” development, a look at our educational system shows that the main focus of school attention is devoted to exterior aspects, and just like today’s culture, our public education tends to judge itself in materialistic terms.

As observed by many psychologists and educators, rarely is attention given to an education that includes an emphasis on spiritual dimension [1]. The inner development of our children and youth has been neglected. We invest a great deal of our pedagogical effort in developing cognitive skills; we give relatively little attention to spiritual development.

So what is spirituality all about? First of all, spirituality is not about religion, though it does include religion. Spirituality is about our sense of who we are and our beliefs about why we are here, the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life, and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. It deals with the sphere of values and beliefs, things that we put first and let go last.

Along the same vein, students’ spiritual development refers to an internal process of identity development involving a greater connectedness to self, others and nature, leading to meaning, purpose, and direction in one’s life. *Therefore*, a holistic education that focuses on students’ spiritual development fosters a sense of connection with the self, others and nature, and is a pathway “to a more human, meaningful, and intellectually rigorous learning environment” [2].

But how spiritually inclined are today’s young people? In the USA, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life’s recent survey Religion among the Millennials offers some interesting findings about young people ages 18 to 29. According to Pew, although these Millennials are considerably less religious than older Americans, among the peer group in general, they believe in God at rates similar to those seen among Gen Xers a decade ago.

For those of us who have worked with young people long enough, we know that today’s youths often find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives more whole. Let us take girls and young women as an example. Girls and young women’s struggles in the formation their body image, a sense of self, relationship building, and connection with the world often reflect an underlying personal quest to achieve a stable positive self-identity, a larger purpose in life, and a sustained connectedness with others—all the necessary conditions for one’s spiritual development [3].

As the cultural emphasis on the external/physical appearance increase, concerns about body image and dangerous sexualities are getting stronger, affecting young women substantially more than young men. But of course, we can’t blame our cultures for all the problems our youths have. In fact, research has shown that it is one’s religious/spiritual orientation may foster healthy or pathological behavioral patterns [4]. This is a serious implication that needs to be taken into account when educators and other professionals make decisions for education and services for young people and their families.

Teachers and other professionals need to help today’s young people to create a healthy inner-personal life: mind, soul and spirit. As we help them to define and understand who they are as unique human beings, we also want them to recognize that we live in a culture that tells us many things about ourselves—some are true but many are not. These cultural messages have a profound effect on us whether we know it or not. Today’s children and youths, just like adults, need to form their own authentic vision and values in the face of cultural messages, especially harmful ones. This is why spirituality deserves a central place in our schools.

Foxworth [5] explains that “there is no way to educate without including the whole person. Yet there is no ‘whole person’ without the spirituality.” An education for the whole child requires that teachers attend to all developmental domains including the social, emotional, physical, and spiritual [6,7]. On the other hand, an education that neglects the spiritual dimension fosters disconnection; when authentic relationships and union with community are absent, a sense of fragmentation and isolation is unavoidable. In addition to the above, putting (and keeping) spirituality in public schools serves to strengthen our sense of identity and connectedness with others (whether the Divine or human) and the world. The well-being of our spiritual life not only goes a long way toward overcoming the sense of fragmentation and alienation that so many of our students feel, but will also help our next generation lead more meaningful lives as responsible citizens, committed parents, and caring neighbors.

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