Spirituality and Identity

A crucial developmental milestone for a young person is achievement of identity. This importance stems from enabling youth to make positive contributions to society, as well as combating identity despair and diffusion. In the research study “Religion and Positive Youth Development: Identity, Meaning, and Prosocial Concerns” conducted by Furrow, King, and White (2004), they examined the relationship of religious identification or identity in positive youth development with the promotion of personal meaning and prosocial concerns in adolescence. The recruited participant sample included 801 public high school students ranging from grades 9-12 with 52% being female. The results of the test used in this model suggested endorsement of self-descriptors indicative of a religious identity that made them more likely to report having a meaningful framework offering direction and fulfillment in life. Prosocial concerns were also noted as more likely endorsed by these youth. This study signified how religion may foster a spiritual sensibility, which is positively associated with concern and compassion for others. Therefore, the role of spirituality in successful development is supported by this study.

The premise of identity and the role of spirituality was further studied by the Stanford Center on Adolescence. Their position statement is that the goal of establishing identity and purpose with youth is the ensure they have stable and long-term goals relative to how they can contribute to the world and gives meaning to one’s self (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Based on this working definition, it is estimated that only 20% of youth between 12 and 22 declare a clear sense of purpose. Tirri and Quinn (2010) assessed the role of spirituality and religion in providing a clear purpose for youth in adolescence. Their findings concluded that religion and
spirituality is overlapping, however spirituality being the moderator of defining one’s authentic self (Tirri & Quinn, 2010).

Ebstyne King and Furrow (2008) conducted a study to gain further insight into the developmental benefits that are related to religion for adolescents and the dynamics of this relationship. The basis of their study was framed on social capital theory which holds that positive outcomes are based on the social context through which interpersonal, associational, and cultural ties are made. Their contentions were that religion served as a mediating relationship for youth. Social capital theory and its three dimensional model present how social interaction, trust, and shared vision allow youth to build social networks that draw upon religion and influence moral behavior. The subjects used in this study were 735 urban youths who were evaluated based on religiousness effects on morality. Their findings were able to substantiate their contentions that religiousness contributes to morality. This outcome suggests that faith based youth development organizations can serve an instrumental role in positive youth development.

**Purpose of Spirituality based Youth Programming**

Spirituality is related oftentimes with resilient life outcomes. If youth workers seek to direct youth towards answering their own spiritually-based questions, it can enable them to develop a better self-understanding and drive an adoption of life goals (Ponds, 2014). Extensive research in positive psychology offers greater insight to the relevance to spirituality and preparing youth to be more able to deal with crisis and loss and consider more deeply the meaning of one’s life (Ponds, 2014).

Ponds (2014) offers that spirituality, while it means something different to each person, shares a common framework in that one acknowledges that they are a part of something larger
than one’s self. While spirituality is not a religion, religion can provide the mechanism and structure for one to find himself. Koltko-Rivera (2006) articulate that this was supported in the adaptation of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Motivational Model where he added another level of attainment above self-actualization with self-transcendence where one commits to the cause beyond one’s self. When a youth believes there is lack of clarity and direction with respect to one’s life, he or she experiences a spiritual crisis. Based on work with the Michigan Chaplain’s Association for Youth at Risk (MCAYR) Ponds (2014) suggests that youth need to have answers to the following questions:

1. What is the purpose of my life? Why am I here?
2. Why is there such evil in the world? Is there any way to overcome it?
3. Why do we suffer, especially innocent suffering?
4. Why do we so often do self-defeating, irrational things?
5. What happens when we die?
6. What responsibility do we have to our fellow human beings?
7. Is there a larger, alternative reality beyond this world?
8. What is really important in life?
9. Why do bad things, such as injustice, unfairness, happen to good people?
10. Is happiness, wholeness or peace, possible and how do we secure it? (Ponds, 2014, p.59)

Some of the aforementioned inquiries emerge as more important to some youth as compared to others, however, it remains essential to provide youth a mechanism to explore these concerns in the context of safe, trusting relationships (Ponds, 2014).

**Role of Social Service Agencies**

Pittman, Garza, Yobalem, and Artman (2008) maintain youth development professionals are committed to helping youth with social, physical, and civic development. While the most common regarded venues to realize such outcomes tend to be clubs, camps, troops, sports team,
after-school programs or community-service projects, these youth workers see as the common core of their work an emphasis on spiritual and moral development. The Commission on Children at Risk in Hardwired to Connect argues that there are three components for youth development: 1) a clear road map, 2) engaged champions, and 3) readiness assessments and engagement strategies. There is a clear difference between community workers and faith-based workers view of their role and working with youth to find their spirituality. Only 14% of community workers believe spiritual programming is part of their responsibilities compared to 77% of faith-based workers. Creating opportunities for engaged youth workers to share cross-sector and cross-discipline applications for spiritually-based youth development can also offer greater chances for a timely and passionate approach to implementing such programs. This takes the full complement and collaboration of the youth development “star” of advocates to include: 1) faith-based institutions, 2) youth employment programs, 3) youth organizing programs and volunteer centers, 4) social service agencies, 5) sports leagues, parks, and recreation, and 6) schools (Pittman, Garza, Yobalem, & Artman, 2008).

Wilson and Nicholson (2008) analyzed the impact of social service agencies that work with marginalized youth and examined the effects of utilizing spiritual activities as a therapeutic intervention. This research suggests that such marginalized youth, who were in either foster care, homeless, in family crisis, in the juvenile justice system, or in treatment for mild to moderate mental or behavioral health issues, can benefit from spiritual development where they can find belonging, sense of community, forgiveness, meaning and purpose of life, and realization of a moral and ethical code. One 2002 study that examined 191 social service providers and the types of spiritually oriented activities embedded in their programming. They concluded that more than half used spiritual focused practices. However, there were differences
between religious versus secular organizations. In secular organizations, the most popular were mediation, yoga, and guided visualization that is believed to drive a sense of calm, connectedness and transcendence. Such activities are generally performed in group settings. By comparison, in religious based settings, focused a great deal on cross-generational connections, building leadership skills, developing cultural capital, used religious education classes, pastoral counseling, worship services, and faith-motivated service projects.

One of the greatest obstacles to spiritual programming for youth is gaining a universal definition and legal implications of using spiritual based activities in youth development programming. In 2005, The National Resource Center for Youth Services developed a training curriculum titled, “Integrating Spirituality with Youth Work”. The program allows social service workers to realize spirituality as a critical link in the healing process for marginalized youth.

Dissenting Views on Spiritual Programming

Benson and Roehlkepartain (2008) argue that spiritual development for youth has been associated with public stigmatism. While some public views are dissenting, they argue that it is an integral part of youth development as it is part of being human, has importance with young people and have significant impact on a young person’s well-being. Despite these contentions, Petermen, LaBelle, and Steinburg (2014) maintain spirituality is to be blamed for anxiety in youth. They conducted a study to examine specific religious variables, such as religious attendance and views on the importance of faith, and their relationship to anxiety. The study utilized a subsample of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study on Early Child Care adolescence (ages 11-12), mid-adolescence (age 15) on religiosity and parental measures of religiosity by youth in mid-adolescence in 5th grade (ages
10-11). The findings of this study concluded that when youth participated in religious activities as mid-adolescence had greater levels of anxiety and should be avoided.
Resources


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