

Exploring the Impact of Spiritual Formation on Students' Well-being: A Literature Review

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ABSTRAC

The integration of spiritual formation within academic disciplines is increasingly acknowledged as crucial for the holistic development of students. This perspective is supported by various theorists who advocates for contemporary concepts such as meaning-making and the pursuit of life's purpose. Incorporating spiritual formation into academic frameworks is essential for fostering well-rounded individuals who are academically proficient, spiritually grounded, and possess a healthy sense of well-being. As educational institutions face pressure to assess the comprehensiveness of their academic programs, it is equally important to evaluate the spiritual formation experienced by students to understand the effectiveness and outcomes of these programs. This literature review employs a qualitative method to highlight key findings from evaluation studies assessing spiritual formation programs in educational institutions. Additionally, it seeks to determine whether targeted interventions are necessary to ultimately develop formation programs that results to a healthier approach to life.

Keywords: Spirituality, Spiritual Formation, Healthy Well-Being, Integration, Students' experience

INTRODUCTION

Christian spirituality as defined by Schneiders (2016) means the lived experience of Christian faith. By this definition, spirituality would include historical and cultural context, its theological framework, and the hermeneutics of the experience, (Pocta, 2022). Conversely, Cox (2011) articulates spirituality as fundamentally linked to an individual's personal relationship with God. This relationship is characterized by intimacy and transformation.

As cited by Clemmons (2004), since the 1950s spirituality has become very popular frequently replacing terms such as "devotion," or "piety." This is not surprising, as St. Augustine, during the Middle Ages, encouraged teachers to recognize the individuality of their students and to personalize experiential education (Prevost, 2001).

Spirituality increasingly became linked to practices such as seeking spiritual direction, establishing relationships with spiritual mentors, and engaging in meditative and contemplative disciplines. Over time, many individuals began exploring Eastern meditation techniques as part of their spiritual journey (Birkett, 2019).

On the other hand, the perspective of Parks (2000) is quite interesting. She equates spirituality with the pursuit of meaning and purpose in life while Mendoza (2022) emphasizes the distinction between being religious and being spiritual. All these highlight the notion that spirituality involves active participation in one's faith journey rather than passive adherence to religious practices.

In addition, spirituality is increasingly acknowledged as a significant factor in public health, often referred to as spiritual determinants of health (Levin, 2003), where greater interest is focused on the well-being than on mere diseases or disorders (Bhullar et al., 2014). These spiritual or religious aspects of a person's life are recognized for their role in promoting health and well-being. Despite some historical separation between spirituality and public health, there is a growing recognition of their interconnectedness.

Moreover, spiritual formation refers to the process of forming the human self in a way that it becomes the inner being of Christ himself (Reiss, 2002). Ma (2010) also defines spiritual formation as a journey towards spiritual

maturity, which manifests through one's relationships with God, oneself, and others.

The understanding of spiritual formation or Christian formation (Rios, 2020) for some can bring forward a glimpse on the life of the early Christians. To the church in Galatia, Paul was expressing his frustration with the church' loss of focus as these words say: "My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). Moreover, Paul writes to the Romans, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). These attest that Paul is eager for the communities to return to the proper track of Christian or spiritual formation and is seriously encouraging them.

According to Birkett (2019) spiritual formation is explicitly mentioned in a manual for seminarians published by Cardinal Bourne in 1926, called *Ecclesiastical Training: Being a Short Treatise on the Spiritual Formation of Aspirants to the Priesthood*. As clearly noted, this formation was designed for those preparing to become priests. Later on, the Decree *Optatam Totius* (1965) described the kind of renewal they sought in training priests. It is strongly oriented towards the practice of piety, faithful meditation on God's Word, active participation in the sacred mysteries of the Church, especially in the Eucharist, and service to the communities. This approach to spiritual formation has continued on as evident in the Church of England during the 1960s and 1970s. (Groom (2017).

As the term "spiritual formation" gained recognition, Christian education increasingly embraced developmental psychology as a framework for understanding human growth and development. Influential thinkers such as Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Erik Erikson, and James Fowler played key roles in shaping this perspective. Fowler's faith development theories, which emphasized long-term growth, provided fertile ground for spiritual formation to thrive, integrating psychological insights with theological principles to foster holistic spiritual growth (Setran & Wilhoit, 2005).

Also, over the years, as cited by Tang (2008) spiritual formation became associated with the training of men and women for full time church ministry (Sheldrake, 2005). The curriculum was programmed to offer courses on scripture, theology, philosophy, and liturgy. It has also been suggested that there is a connection between the church and the academic arena. For instance, Otto and Harrington (2016) explained that the important place to begin the discussion of spiritual formation in the university is the beginning of university itself. The faith aspects are seen as having integrated into the student's curriculum, structures, and experiences which is reflective of the mission and core values of an academic institution (Woodward, 2020).

In other words, spirituality situates individuals in the presence of God, while spiritual formation involves an active process of transformation and is seen as enhancing the well-being of a person. Exploring these different perspectives can enhance discussions about spirituality and its impact on the desired holistic growth and well-being of students.

Conversely, a survey of recent literature in the field reveals no real consensus regarding the definition for this process or its objectives. Within the discipline of spiritual formation, an interesting assertion is brought into the open claiming that there is no real agreement as to the nature, scope, the means and ends of the spiritual formation program (Rios, 2020).

Hence, this review seeks to highlight key findings from evaluation studies on the spiritual formation of students and explore how the results can be effectively utilized by program managers and owners according to the diverse needs of each institution. The work encompasses a broad range of academic levels from K-12 to students taking doctoral programs.

Furthermore, the sources for this review were chosen due to its catholic and Christian perspectives. The results are articulated and common themes are identified with the hope of identifying gaps and providing insights to organizers and stakeholders of spiritual formation programs in an academic institution. This is guided by the following questions: *How do students define and understand their spiritual formation experiences and what are the identified activities that creates an impact on them? What effects does the Spiritual Formation Program have on students' holistic growth, well-being, and social functioning? What are the perceived roles of the program organizers and other key informants involved in the process?*

METHODOLOGY

This work represents a stand alone endeavor aimed at articulating valuable insights derived from various evaluation studies focused on the spiritual formation of students. It employs a qualitative methodology, systematically listing key results to identify common themes and insights from the researches published both in the Philippines and internationally.

Utilizing an evidence table, as recommended by Susan Hempel (2020) in *Conducting Your Literature Review*, this approach offers an overview of the relevant studies and their findings.

The evidence table serves to facilitate analysis and interpretation especially in determining the outcomes of the spiritual formation program as articulated in the research works.

Body of the Review

The reviewed studies highlight that spiritual formation is a complex and multifaceted process, significantly shaped by diverse educational practices and environments. In the Philippine setting for example, a study conducted by Trinidad (2018) using outcomes evaluation and involving students from a Filipino Catholic University demonstrated that participation in spiritual recollection programs notably enhances the likelihood of students benefiting from such experiences.

This increase in benefit is attributed to the power of prayer and the students' willingness to engage in prayerful practices (cf. Melnick et al. 2001). Participants reported engaging significantly during these spiritual formation programs, which contributed to their overall experience.

However, the study found that involvement in the multi-faith group, or identifying as non-Catholic, decreases the likelihood of agreeing with the outcome variable. This effect may be attributed to the presence of atheists or agnostics within the group, or it could be that this particular demographic of participants is not effectively engaged during the recollection process.

Moreover, a study conducted by Madrigal et al. (2020) using descriptive-comparative and correlational research design for students in a rural Catholic school in the Philippines showed a significant relationship between spiritual well-being and religiosity. This means that the spiritual beliefs and practices of the research participants are found to have a close link to their spiritual well-being. The author further asserted that the more students adhere to and observe the Catholic beliefs and practices, the more they grow and mature in their personal experience of God and others. This was confirmed in a study conducted by Bufford (1984) about the correlation between spiritual well-being and maturity.

In addition, the evaluation studies conducted internationally presented some interesting findings. For instance, Topliss (2024), who conducted a quantitative and qualitative study on the perception of students participating in the In Altum- (a formation program of students in Australia) claims that 70% of the participants said that they longed for the existence of a vibrant community life and asserted its importance for other people who are also interested in developing their faith. In finding the common themes, the study revealed a lack of understanding of the general population regarding common Catholic terminologies such as faith, charity, and cult. In general, students noted that the program assisted in their spiritual growth 'substantially', with particular reference to the value of mentoring, community, and retreat opportunities, as well as personal and communal prayer.

Similarly, Jackson et al. (2022) evaluated the climate and student spiritual formation in a Christian private school in Kentucky, USA. The students as well as their parents and teachers participated in the study and the researchers answered all the research questions using a qualitative phenomenological research design. The results presented, in identifying the students' perceptions of the school climate, were described as positive, with an emphasis on the family atmosphere and the common values among students, teachers, and parents. Also, there were three themes discovered that assisted the students in their spiritual formation. The themes were Bible focused curriculum, teacher influence and growth, and a unified message and understanding.

The research work of Jeong (2019) explores the impact of a private retreat offered to South Korean students

enrolled in a North American Seminary. There were twelve (12) students ages 19-26 who agreed to take a pre-test before the retreat is experienced and a post test after the retreat. The study employs a mixed method with eighteen (18) questions using a Likert response scale of 1-7 and six (6) qualitative questions. An interesting observation from this study is that, despite initial apprehension about attending a silent retreat—stemming from a culture where busyness is deeply ingrained—the participants expressed a heightened interest in participating in another retreat. Additionally, the study highlighted that Koreans often harbor a fear of solitude. However, the silent retreat offered a unique opportunity for participants to share their stories which provided various insights into the nature of young Korean's fears of solitude and silence.

Another study in 2019 by Wang assesses the impact of the Christian spiritual formation program on Chinese students at a North American Seminary. The study involved eighteen (18) participants and utilized a constructivist grounded theory approach, a qualitative research design. The researcher maintained an open stance, carefully observing, listening, and interpreting the participants' experiences to uncover meaningful insights. The findings suggest that the spiritual formation program fostered transformative learning by encouraging participants to re-examine their upbringing, critically reflect on their assumptions, and explore alternative perspectives on meaning.

On the other hand, Barkley (2017) conducted a study on the impact of the integration of courses and spiritual formation programs on adult students in Christian colleges. These students are characterized as non-traditional students who were delayed in enrollment, or worked part time or full time while enrolled. A mixed method was utilized to provide exploratory data thus suggesting directions for a future, more expansive study. This research showed a mean score of 4.02 when rating the retreat experience which was considered one of the lowest in terms of importance. But with the most positive impact on their spiritual lives in the area of reflection and meditation (5.44) and spiritual accountability (5.37). The study also identified the "sense of meaning and purpose in something bigger than oneself" as one of the outcomes with a mean score of 5.47.

There is also a study conducted by Horan (2017) in the United States private schools with ACSI membership. This is the largest worldwide non-denominational protestant organization with approximately 5.5 million students (ACSI, 2016). It utilized convenience sampling to collect data from the respondents, descriptive surveys, quantitative data related to demographics and spiritual formation programs, and perceived program effectiveness as rated on a Likert-type scale.

The study revealed that more than half of the responses emphasized that schools primarily evaluate program effectiveness through faculty observations, reviews of student journals, and informal post-program surveys. Quantitative pre- and post-program assessments were rarely, if ever, employed. The most commonly implemented programs identified were chapel services, Bible classes, and spiritual formation courses.

In 2013, a study conducted by L. Fisk et al. on the Spiritual Formation among Doctoral Psychology Students in Explicitly Christian Programs seeks to answer the question: How does attending an explicitly Christian doctoral program affect the spiritual development of students? The research utilized various measures: Levenson's (1974) Multidimensional Locus of Control Scale - a 20 item self-report scale. Surrender scale is also used - a 12 item measure of religious coping.

Another is spiritual assessment inventory and a religious problem-solving scale. In the Locus of Control, this study reported an increase of internal control between the beginning and end of the academic year. While, in the Surrender Scale, the first year students reported greater experience of surrender than students in the subsequent years. The Awareness Scale which is designed to measure the individual's ability to recognize God's communication to self and through self, the first year students reported more awareness than the subsequent students.

Lastly, the first year students reported more collaborative religious problem solving than second year students. Another notable study on Spiritual Development as a component of holistic development in higher education was conducted by Marie Claire Gilder in 2011. The study uses qualitative methods in collecting data done through open-ended questions and accomplished through personal interviews rather than statistical measures.

Three (3) common themes emerged from the study: spirituality as modeling the way - a modeling by example, spirituality as a personal realm which mentions reflection, alone time, and prayer are the ways they reconnect or replenish their spirituality, and discomfort in discussing spirituality on campus. If discussed, only to individuals that they felt safe and shared similar viewpoints.

Meanwhile, a study conducted by Radecke (2007) on Service Learning and Faith Formation was done with 44 student participants from Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania, USA. It investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of the impact of a short-term international service-learning course on their spiritual lives and faith formation. The students were part of the program popularly referred to as SU CASA for "Susquehanna University Central America Service Adventure" - a religion course bearing 2 academic credits. This course allowed students to live and work among the poor, engaging in what might be called service-learning's "trinity" of Service, Academic Study, and Reflection.

In this study, the papers, journals, and interview transcripts were analyzed using the NVivo software (version 1.1.127) for qualitative research and analysis. The participants reported about the hospitality of their Central American hosts and friends which humbles them and allays their own fears. There was also a perceived idea that the Christian faith is lived out in a more active, dynamic manner among the people whom they come in contact with. Moreover, some participants reported to have deepened their faith in some way after the SU CASA experience, perceived as God's calling them through the experience, and claimed to have a change of perspective about Jesus because he now becomes more vivid and profoundly real to them.

Some 21 students in the study conducted by Block (2006) shared their reaction to the retreat for any perceived changes in their attitudes that occurred after the retreat.

Two (2) questions were asked on reaction and learning based on the Kirkpatrick's Evaluation Model of 1987. The responses were broken into dimensions based on the Lee and Pershing Taxonomy. The questions were administered using the open-ended questions and common themes were gathered.

According to the study, the participants in the retreat felt strongly that faculty were knowledgeable, responded to students' needs, and engaged the participants when presenting and leading the discussions. Similarly, the students felt strongly that they learned something new and gained a better understanding of the community. They also identified as important, the time spent with others, reflection time, and interactive activities.

DISCUSSIONS

Despite the complexities that the reviewed studies presented, some intriguing perspectives on the impact of spiritual formation programs are worth noting. The findings will be organized around the previously identified questions.

1) On the student's definition and understanding of their spiritual formation experiences and the activities that made an impact

In the study conducted by Jeong (2019), the silent retreat had a significant impact on participants who were unaccustomed to being alone. Through proper orientation and engaging in meaningful activities—such as focusing on breathing and listening to God's message through scripture reading—the participants expressed a strong willingness to join future silent retreats.

On the other hand, Wang (2019) emphasized the significance of transformative learning, highlighting spiritual formation as a key factor contributing to its realization.

The same is true with the study conducted by Barkley (2017), participants expressed appreciation for the spiritual component of their education, assigning it a significant level of importance. They demonstrated willingness to continue participating in the existing spiritual formation programs and are open to new initiatives. This sentiment is echoed in Jackson's work (2022), which found that participants identified themselves as spiritual individuals. As cited, students took pride in being knowledgeable about the bible and felt a sense of responsibility of memorizing scriptures and supporting their peers in their faith journey.

Meanwhile, this was supported by another study showing that the retreat appeared to be a very positive experience for the students. It was reported further that the participants gained knowledge from the retreat, enjoyed time spent with fellow students, and experienced an increased understanding of community life.

Additionally, Fisk (2013) reported that while students have gained greater control over their spiritual well-being, there has been a decline in the perceived importance of religion, awareness of God's presence, and church attendance. Traditional activities such as chapel services, prayer, Bible classes, and reflection have shown that participants are increasingly likely to engage positively with spiritual formation activities using other approaches as highlighted by Gilder (2011) and Horan (2017):

- Modeling through Service Learning: Engaging in service learning courses and community involvement.
- Leadership Participation: Taking part in leadership activities that allow students to express their spirituality meaningfully.
- Career Fulfillment: Making career choices that provide joy and opportunities to serve optimally.
- Personal Relationships: Cultivating meaningful personal connections.
- Mentoring: Engaging in mentoring relationships.

While these methods are perceived as the most effective ways to support spiritual formation, Horan (2017) noted that they are often underutilized due to the additional time and resources required for implementation.

In addition, there is also an emphasis on the importance of clearly determining the goals and objectives of the program (Block, 2006; Trinidad, 2018).

2) On the effects does the Spiritual Formation Program have on students' well-being and social functioning

It is noteworthy that Catholic students who are actively engaged in a religious organization—participating in activities such as Mass, ministry involvement, and the practice of their faith—experience significant growth and maturity in their personal relationship with God. This engagement also enhances their sense of life satisfaction and purpose (Madrigal, 2020). However, the study asserted that the students have demonstrated religiosity to a very great extent but only moderately in their spiritual well-being.

Topliss (2024) seemed to have seen differing views denoting that students informally reported significant assistance in their spiritual growth from the program. They highlighted the importance of mentoring, community, and retreat opportunities, along with the value of both personal and communal prayer. The students are also able to articulate an understanding of the missionary discipleship and feel more comfortable in the activities of evangelization through participation in the program.

Furthermore, it is often observed that spiritual programs are condensed, which may limit the opportunity to establish meaningful connections (Barkley, 2017). However, the aspects they identify as activities that truly made an impact to their spiritual formation—such as service learning experiences, leadership opportunities, and being empowered to make future career decisions—are also the same factors that contribute to their ability to achieve healthy social functioning and holistic growth.

As emphasized by Radecke (2007), students' experiences lead to a transformation of perspective, involving the dissolution and recomposition of meaning or prior standpoints, which are fundamental elements of faith formation.

3) On the perceived roles of the program organizers and other stakeholders involved in the process

From the reviewed studies, Block (2006) has more to say about the perceived roles of the program organizers and other stakeholders. The study showed that the faculty were identified as knowledgeable, prepared, able to respond to the students' needs, and actively engaged the students in the discussions.

Also, the students, teachers, and parents placed a high level of importance on having a strong Christian-influenced environment. The teachers were also pointed out as dedicated to serving as Christian mentors, and as the constant resource of information about the basics of the faith (Trinidad, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS

The integration of spiritual formation within the academic parlance is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering holistic student growth and well-being. This perspective is supported by Block (2006), who emphasized the necessity of evaluating the relevance and effectiveness of such programs. Trinidad (2018) further corroborates this view, arguing that while educational systems often assess various programs' impacts, the same rigorous evaluation should extend to spiritual recollection practices, as highlighted by Hatch et al. (1998) and asserted by Sweet (2012). This can be viewed as a strong correlation between spirituality and education. It is during these years that many individuals are moving towards a stronger sense of independence and self-authorship (Magolda, 2021).

However, Block (2006) noted that despite the recognized need for evaluation, significant gaps exist in the available literature concerning the assessment of spiritual formation programs. This indicates that systematic collection of data on various experiences may not be occurring as frequently as one might hope. Trinidad (2018) further argues that evaluating spiritual recollections poses challenges due to the intangible nature of spiritual growth. There is also the issue of conducting the assessment on a limited period of time and having only a number of participants (Gilder, 2011) as well as the lack of existing data to use for comparison and the inability to independently verify the survey responses (Barkley, 2017).

Despite these limitations, the evaluation process offers organizers valuable insights to articulate the significance of spiritual formation programs. Expanding assessments of such programs can provide deeper understanding and impact. There are methodologies presented that could substantially address the impact of the spiritual formation programs among students such as the use of mixed methods and employing the peer-review as an important strategy for assessing spiritual formation (Sweet, 2022). It just needs a determined effort from all the stakeholders of the program.

The attempt to explore the impact of spiritual formation especially in the overall well being of students through a survey of literature presented significant findings. Previously designed for those aspiring for priesthood, the spiritual formation program is now widely recognized as a vital tool for achieving holistic growth among students. This growth enables them to lead healthy lifestyles, ultimately contributing to a healthier and more productive society. The literature reveals a shift from mere devotions and piety to a broader range of strategies acknowledged as spiritual formation techniques. These include mentoring, community life, social engagements, exposure to leadership roles, and finding meaning in life's experiences. Traditional practices such as retreats, prayer gatherings, sacramental opportunities, and moments of silence and meditation are also honored. Together, these strategies aim to foster the overall well-being of students.

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