

**Developing Spirituality in Adolescents:
Research-informed Practice and Practice-Inspired Research**

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Abstract

There is a crisis of confidence among social workers when it comes to engaging the spiritual experience of young people. Using emergent theory on spiritual development in adolescence from the current international research at the *Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* to support the distinction between spiritual development and religiosity, this paper identifies the importance of attending to spiritual development in the lives of adolescents, and proposes an ethical, culturally competent model for preparing youth/social workers to nurture spirituality in their professional practice.

Biography

Elisabeth “Lisa” Kimball, Ph.D., M.Ed. serves on the faculty of the Youth Studies program in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota, and coordinates a Masters of Education program in Youth Development Leadership. For over twenty years Lisa worked with and on behalf of young people in the Episcopal Church at local, regional and national levels. Her current research is focused on the lived experience of spirituality and spiritual development in adolescence and the role of spirituality and religion in healthy youth development. She is a member of the research team at the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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Let me begin with a confession. I am not a social worker. I am however on the Youth Studies faculty in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota so I can say with confidence that my philosophy of youth development and professional code of ethics are utterly congruent with what I have come to understand as the foundations of social work theory and practice. Jane Addams and the settlement movement were strong influences on my Ph.D. program in the history and philosophy of education. Social justice, culturally sensitive practice, and group work have been particular hallmarks of my 25 plus years in community youth work. This, I hope, will explain not only my being here at this conference, but also my tendency to use the terms social work and youth work somewhat interchangeably throughout this paper.

While this conference is an encouraging testament to the growing awareness of the importance of spirituality in social work practice, there is yet very little or inconsistent evidence of its application in work with youth. The issue, I believe, is not technical. It is not *how* to develop adolescent spirituality in work with youth. It is *whether* we have the resolve to do so. I believe we are thwarted by our own lack of confidence as professionals more than by the limitations of our abilities. Once we are convinced that attentiveness to spiritual development has the potential to enrich and improve social work practice with young people, equipping workers with the necessary sensitivity, capacity and skill will be straightforward. This paper is about shoring up our confidence.

The growing research on adolescent spiritual development (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Crawford, M., & Rossiter, G., 2006; Hay, D., & Nye, R., 1998/2006; Yust, K.M., Johnson, A.N., Sasso, S.E., & Roehlkepartain, 2006), new forms and complexities of religious pluralism (Eck, 2001), and evidence of growing interest in spirituality in popular culture (Forbes & Mahan, 2005) make compelling reasons to re-examine assumptions that maintained clear distinctions between “religious” and “secular” youth work in the late 20th century.

For too long, spiritual development has been conflated with religious formation thus relegating “all things spiritual” to the domain of faith-based practice and significantly inhibiting spirituality-sensitive social work. In the United States, doctrinal distinctions between “secular” and “sacred” were reinforced by (mis)interpretations of the First Amendment religion clauses, exacerbating fearful avoidance of all things religious or spiritual in other than faith-based human service delivery. Then the rise of evangelical Christianity in the 1980s, with its powerful, political infrastructure and its passion for youth ministry, reinforced many workers’ fears – equating spirituality in youth work with proselytizing. Today, residual fear is regularly aggravated by news of growing global fundamentalism in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity heightening professional youth and social workers’ reluctance to engage in a potentially volatile arena for which they have little or no training. Yet, as Tacey (2004), an Australian philosopher-theologian-post-modernist scholar puts it, “the spiritual life is no longer a specialist concern, confined to the interests of a religious group.” His claim is strongly supported by regular Gallup polls that find at least 85% of American teenagers say they “believe in God” and as many as 61% of those who seldom or never attend church are nevertheless convinced that God exists. The idea that spirituality is a dimension of human experience different from and more expansive than religion or religious observance is also emerging as a strong theme in the international grounded

theory study we are currently conducting at the Center for Spiritual Development in Minnesota. We are analyzing focus group data from 500 young people, parents and youth workers in 13 countries on six continents who were asked to discuss spirituality and spiritual development in adolescence. It has become clear that the focus groups themselves offered a type of active intervention on the subject of spirituality – a place for the participants to become aware and then integrate holistically otherwise segmented or taken-for-granted dimensions of personal experience. For most, the experience of participating in the focus groups proved beneficial, triggering an awareness of spirituality as worthy of attention in its own right

“I wasn’t interested in this topic before [the focus group] but now I actually am.” (Youth, NW, India)

“I would like to talk about this spiritual thing with all my friends, but when?” (Youth, Pune, India)

“As we started to talk, I began to understand it. I think we need to understand it because not a lot of people know about it ... It’s very important, especially in the Arab community. Because in our community, if you are different they start to blame you or if they are young, they blame the parents.” (Youth, Israel)

“I would like to talk about it a lot more ... but the people I know are not really focused on talking about spiritual things. They’re so busy ripping and running and trying to get their lives back together.” (Youth, New Orleans, U.S.A.)

Today young people all over the world form identities, make meaning and discern life’s purpose in towns, neighborhoods, schools, parks, prisons, malls, work places, on buses and social networking websites, all filled with diverse religious views and spiritual practices. Young people know intuitively that spiritual development can not be tidily or naïvely confined to the

family and religious institutions, and professional youth and social workers can ill afford to ignore its rich presence in their lives,

“Spirituality is experienced in your own being. Most of religion is forced. Being spiritual means standing on a mountain with the wind blowing through your hair, and the feeling of being free.” (Youth, Durban, S. Africa)

“I think spirituality is the way you look at something: the way you look at pictures, the way you look at nature, the way you read books, what kind of movies you like to look at.” (Youth, Israel)

“If you are not spiritual, then you don’t ever struggle with things, you don’t make a choice or ask, ‘why did this happen to me?’ If you are not spiritual you will never learn anything ... goes together with wisdom ... you have to reflect on what’s happening to you.” (Youth, Durbanville, S. Africa)

So as CSD enters into its third year of work and begins to synthesize findings from the multi-method studies within its research agenda, a framework for understanding spiritual development in childhood and adolescence is emerging – a framework that can move our intuition about spirituality toward professional confidence. This framework suggests that spiritual development is a constant, dynamic, and sometimes difficult interplay between at least three core developmental processes:

a. Awareness or awakening—Being or becoming aware of or awakening to one’s self, others, and the universe (which may be understood as including the sacred or divine) in ways that cultivate identity, meaning, and purpose.

b. Interconnecting and belonging—Seeking, accepting, or experiencing significance in relationships to and interdependence with others, the world, or one’s sense of the transcendent

(often including an understanding of God or a higher power); and linking to narratives, beliefs, and traditions that give meaning to human experience across time.

c. A way of living—Authentically expressing one’s identity, passions, values, and creativity through relationships, activities, and/or practices that shape bonds with oneself, family, community, humanity, the world, and/or that which one believes to be transcendent or sacred.

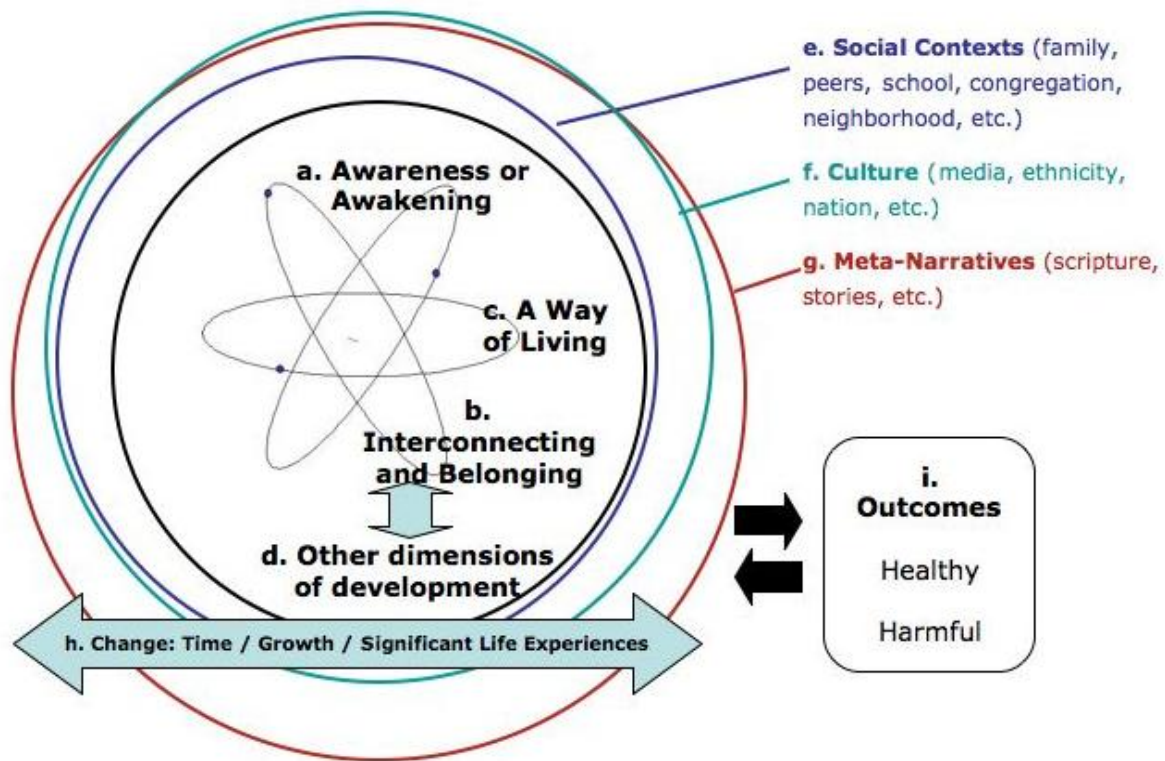


Figure 1 A Preliminary Framework for Child and Adolescent Spiritual Development

As the model suggests, the three processes are embedded in and interact with:

- Other dimensions of development (physical, social, cognitive, emotional, moral, etc.);
- Personal, family, and community beliefs, values, and practices;
- Culture (language, customs, norms, symbols) and socio-political realities;
- Meta-narratives, traditions, myths, and interpretive frameworks; and

- Other significant life events, experiences, and changes.

It is important to note that all spiritual development is not positive. It may result in healthy to harmful outcomes, a risk too often exacerbated by ill-prepared, even if well-meaning, religious and human service professionals.

The framework suggests that spiritual development is a core developmental process that occurs for all persons, regardless of age, religious or philosophical beliefs or worldview – as illustrated by these quotes from the focus group study:

“You don’t need an age to be a spiritual person.” (Youth, Peru)

“I think spirituality is important to everyone. Maybe there’s a section of people that doesn’t realize they are following that path, but they are spiritual. And I think everyone has that kind of adaptability in themselves to go into that kind of path to being spiritual. Maybe the word ‘spiritual’ is more important in some people’s lives, but the whole definition and the concept I think it’s there in everyone.” (Youth, Pune, India)

“It’s hard—because every age is so vital for [spiritual] development... And so even though you might see some verbal indications of that as they are able to see outside themselves, is that more important than the very beginning stages?” (Susan, Youth worker, Canada)

“I think [spirituality] is important to everyone. There are only those who have not unleashed it.” (ZSL, Youth worker, China)

“I don’t think you would find your way through this world without being spiritual. I don’t think you would succeed.” (Youth, Israel)

It was also clear from the international focus groups that young people engage in these processes (awareness, interconnecting, and a way of living) in many different and non-linear

ways with varying emphasis and levels of intensity, from highly engaged and visible to private or passive.

“A person can, he is spiritual, by sitting down and meditating and goes in certain type of meditation. While another person can feel he is spiritual by doing good only. Another person feels that praying every day and building a relationship with God, another by not eating meat...Everyone has their own ways how to feel spiritual. Now to say that he is right, mine is right or wrong.. is a bit difficult.” (Youth, Malta)

“Spirituality is... personal awareness of who they are other than the physical... Just that heightened awareness of what it means to be alive or a part of life.” (Earnest, Youth worker, Australia)

“I know lots of people in my life are deeply spiritual, but I feel like that’s something that’s private almost – and I don’t see that side of them.” (Youth, Minnetonka, United States)

“I have three children, three levels of spirituality.” (Parent, Malta)

Many young people associate being spiritual (their experience of the interplay of the three processes) with having made an intentional choice,

“If one wants to become spiritual it will depend on the will of that person. If he wants to he can.” (Youth, Syria)

“I used to think being spiritual meant having a rule to obey, but now I know I have to make a choice.” (Youth, Kenya)

What, to date, has been consistent across continents and populations is the apparent positive influence of adults who are intentional about nurturing the natural spiritual development

of young people on the capacity of those young people to recognize and value spirituality as an integral dimension of their lives.

“If they’ve been driven and fostered in a nurturing environment... then they have a sense of purpose and a positive influence, and they have a direction in life.” (Rahim, Youth worker, Canada)

“I’ve seen [spirituality] go both ways: to develop or strengthen, or to dissipate. And I most often see it in the difference in whether it’s being encouraged or discouraged by the influential people in their lives.” (Darlene, Youth worker, Canada)

“Sometimes if that isn’t positive, if the parents aren’t sort of supporting the young person and growing them to ask questions, sometimes it never happens.” (Lauren, Youth worker, Australia)

“In order for our kids to have spirituality they need trust and friendship and guidance because sometimes they want to do things and we must explain why they are not good, why they can’t do them. Communication is crucial.” (Parent, Peru)

“The question for us as a parent is how to open it and to let it grow... We think we can put...directions to open kind of doors so they can choose the kind of spirituality that they can use....” (Parent, Israel)

Even with sound data and an emerging theoretical framework to convince the field of social work that attentiveness to adolescent spiritual development matters, it will still take courage for the leadership of a youth-serving agency or program to claim spirituality as a natural and vital dimension of youth development, distinct from religiosity. Once they demonstrate such resolve it is vital that they be supported and equipped with capacity for critical spirituality (which Bagwell (2003) defines as awareness of and attentiveness to diverse experiences of

spirituality). The process of preparing professionals who work with youth to incorporate healthy spiritual development into their practice naturally builds on culturally sensitive skills many social workers already demonstrate, but it must be facilitated with care to avoid re-entering the fear-based, lack of confidence, resistance zone, and to avoid the risk Michael Sheridan's research (2008) demonstrates of over or under utilizing spiritual interventions without establishing sound ethical foundations.

One proven model for such equipping and preparation comes from a popular course, "Young People's Spirituality and Youth Work" that I have taught for five years at the University of Minnesota to graduate and undergraduate students.

1. Begin with a self-selected group. Do not impose conversation about spirituality. Look for opportunities to cultivate organic interest.
2. Provide a safe, structured environment for youth workers to reflect on and articulate their own spiritual autobiographies, however they define them.
3. Share the autobiographies. Notice the vocabulary people use. Notice the diversity between lived experiences. Identify common domains/moments of spiritual experience (e.g. crisis or death of a loved one, experiences of nature).
4. Build a common lexicon. Establish working definitions of words that are imbedded in the group members' spiritual and religious landscapes.
5. Wrestle with the relationship between religion and spirituality as they understand it. Do not force consensus, invite expanded awareness. Review relevant legal protections such as the First Amendment in the United States.ⁱ

6. Introduce available discipline or profession-specific literature on spirituality.ⁱⁱ Integrate personal experience with literature to establish context-appropriate definition(s) of spirituality.
7. Review human development theory and locate the youth workers' definition(s) of spirituality as a dimension of potential and related development.
8. Prepare to put theory into practice. As a group discuss the following:
 - If healthy spiritual development, as now defined, is important in the lives of young people, what can youth workers do to enhance and facilitate such awareness and growth?
 - How can they establish a climate and practices that respect and nurture spiritual development across diverse cultures and contexts?
 - What resources do they need?
 - What explicit ethical boundaries should they maintain?
 - What resistance do they anticipate?

Social work as a field with its long-standing commitment to social justice and cultural competence is well positioned to contribute to adolescent spiritual development in a world of religious pluralism. To get there, the field needs workers with youth who are competent, ethical practitioners in the domain of spiritual development, and that process must begin with practitioners' own experiences of spirituality and religion. The capacity to recognize and nurture the spiritual development of others grows with critical attentiveness to one's own spiritual journey.

Once introduced with confidence, spiritual development in youth worker preparation is an ongoing reflexive process. It simultaneously equips individuals to be more attentive to and

confident about spiritual dimensions of everyday life and professional practice, while it transforms the environment in which their work is conducted. Lerner (2000) calls this emancipatory spirituality with the power to construct healthy communities – and it is in healthy communities that adolescent spirituality (indeed all spiritualities) are most apt to flourish. Spiritual development “training” cannot be formulaic, except to the extent that it is or is not addressed. It will always require moral vigilance – acknowledgment of the cultural, political and linguistic contexts in which it is taking place, and deep respect for each person’s story. It is ultimately about creating space in which mystery and human potential meet.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Recommended resource: The First Amendment Center, www.firstamendmentcenter.org

ⁱⁱ For example, in social work see Canda, E. R., Nakashima, M., Burgess, V., Russel, R. & Barfield, S. T. (2003). *Spiritual diversity and social work: A comprehensive bibliography with annotations*, second edition. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education. (Also available in electronic searchable form at www.cswe.org.) In the field of education see Crawford, M., & Rossiter, G. (2006). *Reasons for living: Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality. A handbook*. Camberwell, Victoria, Australia: ACER Press. And, Lantieri, L. (Ed.). (2001). *Schools with Spirit*.