

Fall 2014

Toward a Spiritan Pedagogy: Connecting the Spiritan Charism to Spiritually-Based Education and Educational Theory

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Recommended Citation

Margolis, J., Durbin, R., & Martin, J. (2014). Toward a Spiritan Pedagogy: Connecting the Spiritan Charism to Spiritually-Based Education and Educational Theory. *Spiritan Horizons*, 9 (9). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol9/iss9/18>

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TOWARD A SPIRITAN PEDAGOGY: CONNECTING THE SPIRITAN CHARISM TO SPIRITUALLY-BASED EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL THEORY

Introduction

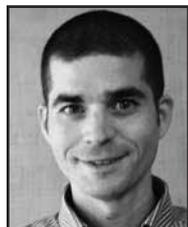
The topic of Spiritan educational pedagogy has been of interest to Spiritan educational institutions and leaders for some time now. In the current educational climate, many search for meaning in education and this gives more relevance to an investigation into Spiritan education. The purpose of this article is to discuss the key foundations of Spiritan educational commitments, their ties to spiritual educational pedagogies, and how these connections bring educational theory into practice. The idea of defining a concrete Spiritan pedagogy is not the goal; however, common themes can be found throughout the literature that connect Spiritan educational commitments to many other spiritual educational approaches. These commonalities also align with well-established theories and current movements in the field of education. These relationships will be explored as a platform for educators to make connections between Spiritan pedagogical ideas and well-researched educational theory in order to inspire their teaching practice.

Spiritans Pedagogical Themes

Spiritans education philosophy and ideas of pedagogy encompass a variety of values that originate from the *Spiritans Rule of Life*, the guiding principles of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. Several purposes, goals, and values resonate through many of the educational documents and commitments of the Spiritans, although a “pedagogy” is not rigidly defined. These themes are present regardless of setting, type of education, or level of educational study.

The way in which Spiritan education is delivered varies greatly and is dependent upon the community being served. The *Spiritans Rule of Life* has many recurring themes, including: service to those in need or poverty; openness to spirit; teaching for evangelization; commitment to service; high academic standards; community; relationships; and respect for ones’ individuality.¹ In terms of educational delivery, a focus on lifting

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Education as a means of empowerment is a main focus in Spiritan education.

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up those in need is a top priority for Spiritan educators. Duaime et al (2013) describe this concern for the poor and insist that education is “a potent means” for translating that concern into action.² In *Spiritans in Education*,³ Nwamara (p. 47) explains that education leads a person to become wise and in turn able to overcome difficulties, such as poverty, that they previously faced. Education as a means of empowerment is a main focus in Spiritan education.

Another area of importance is the idea of openness to the Spirit. This involves the idea of being open to one's true calling or vocation by paying particular attention to what profession best suits an individual's personality. It is through this profession that Spiritans believe they are serving God's will. Openness to the Spirit also includes being adaptable to change and having a respect for each person's unique characteristics.⁴

In connection with this, respect for one's culture and community is also important in Spiritan educational commitments. Duaime et al (pp. 103-104) discuss how the idea of respecting cultural differences needs to be accounted for when educating people. They state:

[Missionaries] must carefully avoid disturbing these customs (unless against God's law) and modifying them in a European fashion. They will simply try to make (the people) more perfect in their own way of life in accord with their own custom.

Similarly, Fr. Thomas Farrelly believed in achieving peace and harmony among different cultures by fostering respect for people of cultures other than one's own and by offering opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue.⁵

Building a sense of community is also important throughout Spiritan education and is also seen in other spiritually-based educational domains. In a review of the contributions in the 2011 Education Conference, the participants stated that educational works should focus on “forming people as citizens to build a better society.”⁶

Spiritans believe that education is not just imparting knowledge to a person, but building a relationship to walk with the person as they learn and grow. An ongoing dialogue between teacher and student is important to learning for Spiritan educators, within a mentor-mentee relationship that is reciprocal (Duaime et al). Thompson-Uberuaga⁷ also describe this relationship further: “[Teachers'] knowledge of their students is something

of a knowledge from within rather than from without.” Similar ideas are seen in other spiritually based educational philosophies, as explored in the next section.

Explorations of Spiritually-Based Approaches to Education

The values that the Spiritans have infused into their educational commitments are not isolated in the world of spiritual education. Globally, other spiritually based approaches have similar themes and ideals. These themes include: social justice manifested by uplifting those with the greatest need; educating as a means for positive participation in ones’ community; relevant methods and content embedded in ones’ own cultural setting; and an emphasis on building student-teacher relationships.

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The idea of social justice was a common thread in the examination of several spiritually based approaches. Raising up those who are the greatest in need and empowering them to make a better life was a central idea in the review of Spiritan education (Nwamara; Duaimé et al). This is also evident in writings by Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher, who explained that education is not only what is learned in the content areas, but also about life and therefore should prepare students to survive in a multifaceted community.⁸ The Quaker writings of Parker Palmer also contain references to social justice education. Palmer describes education as “...teaching in ways that enhance the human condition and advance social justice.”⁹ Buddhist education also has a focus on social justice, as described by Jain¹⁰ in its focus on a way of life that would end human suffering.

...a pedagogy that honors the integrity of every soul.

The idea of educating with the spirit in mind is also evident in some of the cross-spiritual educational approaches. The Spiritans believe that being open to the spirit means being open to ones’ true calling and vocation as a manifestation of personality (Duaimé et al). Parker Palmer (p. 382) describes this as “a pedagogy that honors the integrity of every soul.”

For Spiritan educators, the idea of educating with a person’s culture and social climate in mind can mean travelling to different areas that are in need and teaching in a way that blends within that sociocultural context.¹¹ In Buddhist education, this relates to the idea of *silla sikkha*, which is grounded in the idea of a peaceful existence within a person’s own environment and society.¹² Similarly, Parker Palmer explains that students are often asked to leave their cultural and spiritual identity at the door when entering educational institutions and describes this as a barrier to learning.

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An educational focus on the importance of community can also translate into helping a person develop within their community. This idea connects well with the way in which Spiritan educators believe that education is intended to help learners become better members of their own community (Duaime et al). Similarly, Krishnamurti emphasized the idea that learning was more than content, but also a contribution to ones' own life as well as others (Thapan, 2001).

Relationships between teachers and students are also seen as a critical piece of Spiritan education, including forming a reciprocal relationship with students. This educational relationship is described further by Thompson-Uberuaga (p. 82) as knowing a student from within – not just externally. Reagan¹³ explains this emphasis in the Buddhist tradition as well. He describes the student-teacher relationship as being “close” and “intimate,” encouraging educators to create a relationship with a substantial amount of responsibility between both parties. The relationship between teacher, students, and learning itself, according to Krishnamurti, is as a “sharing together rather than the giving or receiving of something” (Thapan, p. 256). Parker Palmer (p. 380) also describes the need for a “deeply human” relationship between teacher and student for learning to take place. He adds that a main aspect of this connection is creating for students “a space where the soul feels welcome to show up” (Ibid., 384).

Cognition and its Spiritan Connection

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Cognitive theory and spiritual educational philosophy share several connections in terms of teaching theory and pedagogies. We may first consider the ways in which Spiritan education is supported by the cognitive theories of Jean Piaget, described as “a constructivist one, in which cognitive development is viewed as a process during which children construct meaning and new understandings through their life experiences and interactions.”¹⁴ This connects well with Spiritan education and its focus on serving people where they live and engaging in life experiences with them. Spiritan texts also provide examples that suggest teachers should build on experiences that students bring to the classroom. These experiences should not be something that is left at the door when they enter a school or university due to barriers such as content delivery or class size. Ignoring the existing “schemas,” as Piaget would call them, could lead to gross misunderstandings that need to be clarified in many content areas. The learner's existing view of the world and disciplinary knowledge need to exist in synergy for meaningful learning to occur.

The ideas in Lev Vygotsky's cognitive theories connect with Piaget's notion of existing schema. Slavin (p. 236) explains Vygotsky's notion that learning is mediated by culture and becomes internalized as "psychological tools." Although Vygotsky was a cognitive theorist, his theories were based on social interactions. These ideas connect well with the Spiritan approach in that it honors the learner and their lived experiences.

Cognitive theories and spirituality are further connected through discussions of whether the mind, soul, and spirit derive from the same or different entity.¹⁵ Richert and Harris¹⁶ found that cognitive functions (i.e., thinking, memory, and problem solving) were linked to the mind while one's soul was responsible for one's personality. We can think of this idea as being related to the Spiritan tradition of being open to the Spirit, an important aspect of empowering students to find their true professional calling.

Sociocultural Theory and the Spiritan Approach

Well-known socio-cultural theorist Vygotsky believed that learning was socially constructed. Slavin (p. 42) explains this as the notion that "...intellectual development can be understood only in terms of historical and cultural contexts children experience." Vygotsky also emphasized the value of social interaction between students, peers, and teachers. The idea of scaffolding was critical to his socio-cognitive learning theory. Scaffolding involves building supports for students at the level of learning they are at, to support them to the next level of understandings. Vygotsky believed that higher mental functioning is brought about by conversation and collaboration between learners before it is internalized in an individual.¹⁷ This idea of students and teachers having a reciprocal role in learning, requiring ongoing interaction, is evident in the Spiritan and other spiritually based pedagogies we have examined. The Spiritans encourage students and teachers to experience learning together in a mentor/mentee relationship. The exchange and interaction between the mentor and mentee is the ground on which learning takes place. In so doing, the content is alive in interactive dialogue, not just delivered for a student to digest.

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...Spiritans view educators as being personally responsible for (and teaching students to invest in) the care and well-being of others.

The Spiritan approach is also supported by sociocultural learning theory through a "funds of knowledge" approach to teaching, which emphasizes community and family involvement in a student's education.¹⁸ This idea is further supported by Wolk¹⁹ who speaks of teaching for "social responsibility," which directly correlates with how the Spiritans view educators as being personally responsible for (and teaching students to invest in) the care and well-being of others.

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Critical Theory and Spiritan Pedagogy

The main belief of critical theorists involves the challenge of adapting to those in power and educating for social conformity. Widdersheim²⁰ explains, "...education should enable learners to become active, democratically-oriented, non-complacent citizens who are sensitive to human suffering." Darder et al²¹ similarly argue that "critical pedagogy seeks to address the concept of cultural politics by both legitimizing and challenging students' experiences and perceptions." This idea of empowering students is a very Spiritan notion in its focus on social justice, and utilizing education as a means for empowering people and liberating them from injustice (Duaine et al). This spiritual theme of social justice connects well with the mission of many critical theorists and educators.

Spiritual Education and Third Space: How the Spiritan Educational Ethos Connects with Third Space Theory

There are many themes that connect a spiritual approach to education and third space theory. In an article discussing third space and blended learning, it is noted that "third space" merges the "first space" of people's home, community, and peer networks with the "second space" of the discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as school."²² This is where a '*funds of knowledge*' (FoK) approach to teaching and learning can serve the creation of a third space and decidedly Spiritan pedagogies. González et al²³ defined FoK as the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being." This can be thought of as drawing from the experiences from the "first" and "second" spaces in the lives of students and blending them into the learning taking place in a "third" space that is dynamic, synergistic, and shared.

Third Space can be thought of as a "zone of transformation" that is generated when teachers and students socialize together in and through language, integrating every day and academic knowledge. Third space theory includes teachers providing an environment in which students are able to merge content with their cultural experiences through open discussion and textual analysis. For example, a 6th grade science teacher may teach important concepts through having students examine water and soil quality in their own neighborhoods; or a 9th grade Math teacher may teach fractions through the analysis of traditional family meal-preparation recipes. This exemplifies the idea of respecting ones' personhood in the educational process, which is a hallmark of many Spiritan texts. Similarly, the notion

of openness to the Spirit connects with third space theory by encouraging teachers to form a relationship with students. This can inspire and complicate the view of students' learning and literacy to create new ways of articulating the relational spaces of teacher-student, official-unofficial language, singular authority-pluralistic power, and server-served (Hallman, 2012).

Conclusions and Future Directions

It is important to explore the ideas we have presented in terms of how teachers approach education at the K-12 and at the university level. In this article, we have discussed what a Spiritan pedagogy and charism has the potential to include. Common themes include serving those in need, openness to the Spirit, creating a learning community, fostering a more intimate relationship between teachers and students, and acceptance of ones' unique personhood and cultural background. Spiritual education, including those of the Buddhist and other religious educational philosophies, value similar practices in educating students at all levels. Additionally, well-established educational and child development theories also show support for these practices in educational settings. More recent theories, such as those related to creating a third space and drawing from students' funds of knowledge, provide additional evidence that these and like pedagogies should be included in the education of students. In order to achieve incorporation of these ideas, barriers to this form of educating need to be considered and creative ideas need to be explored to realistically manifest Spiritan approaches within the current educational climate.

There are a variety of barriers to a Spiritan pedagogy according to James Okoye, C.S.Sp., the director of the Center for Spiritan Studies, at Duquesne University. In an interview about Spiritan pedagogy, he explains that prejudice, politics, and society itself can be barriers to Spiritan educational endeavors. He also suggested that the learner can impede the teacher-student relationship if they do not feel what you are teaching them is relevant to their own personal goals.

Similarly, Dr. Darlene Weaver, the Director for the Center of Catholic Intellectual Tradition (CCIT) and faculty member in the Theology Department at Duquesne University (personal interview) also spoke to barriers to the notion of a Spiritan approach in higher education. Specifically, these include the physical and intellectual division between disciplines and departments within the university setting as well as the "standards" used for faculty promotion and tenure which may hinder instructors from creating a rich learning environment that considers each student individually.

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In the current climate of public K-12 education, there are also barriers to pedagogies we might consider consistent with the Spirititan tradition. For example, standardized testing and the recent widespread adoption of the Common Core mandate teachers focusing on delivering pre-determined content, regardless of the students in front of them, which may impede openness to the Spirit. Teachers are under enormous pressure to deliver and “make students learn” specific tested material, as their performance evaluations often include how their students perform on standardized tests. Such current educational realities may lead to a more colonizing, than Spirititan, approach to education at the K-12 level – leaving little room for educators to build upon the cultural background and life-interests that students bring to the classroom. Additionally, the sheer size of many classes, at both the K-12 and university levels, may serve as a significant barrier to the forming of student-teacher relationships.

Yet despite these obstacles, pedagogies rooted in respect for the learner and a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student are essential. As illustrated in this article, they are justified on both a spiritual and scientific basis. These approaches are well-established and developed in multiple types of settings where teaching and learning take place, and they continue to evolve. Such an educational path forward, rooted in individual and communal meaning-making, can be guided by the Spirititans while also open to new approaches that reinforce these ever-present ideals.

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Endnotes

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