

Enacting the Spiritual Dimension in Physical Education

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Abstract

Spirituality is a fundamental, everyday life process involving a joy of living, sacrifice and love for others, and a connection to self, others, nature, and to a larger meaning or purpose. Distinct from moral or religious beliefs, spirituality engages interactively with the psyche, body, and sociocultural setting to influence human functioning, holistic health, and moral outcomes like altruism and well-being. In this paper, we consider that spiritual health has been overshadowed in physical education due to an emphasis that is intent on transforming the body without giving full consideration to the whole person. We propose that the spirit could be more clearly and openly developed through physical education and suggest ways to reorient existing physical education curricula and pedagogy to better integrate culturally novel movement orientations, explicitly promote a balanced and mindful disposition, and provide experiences that provoke students to become more spiritually aware.

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In physical education, the dispositions of students' naturally vary. Yet, physical educators may have encountered individuals who, despite often challenging circumstances, manifest joy, compassion, grace, caring, perseverance, hope, and integrity while others do not. In this paper we explore spirituality in terms of its meaning, its role in health and physical education, and provide suggestions for fostering spiritual awareness in students. To begin, we distinguish spirituality from morality or being religious. Whilst spiritu-

ality may be an integral component of moral or religious beliefs, we view spirituality through the lens theorized by Scandurra (1999) who considers it to be linked with mindfulness and a core foundation of wellness inextricably bound to an individual's health. We offer a description of spirituality and its role in health and well-being as it functions interactively with mind and body to bring about life satisfaction (Morrison & Severino, 2007; Thoreson, 1999). We, however, observe that spirituality is a subverted dimension of learning in physical and health education and thereby examine possibilities for clearly and openly developing a more holistically-oriented curricula and pedagogy. Building on the potential of spiritual awareness and enactment to enhance quality of life, we suggest ways to foster spirituality through physical education.

Understanding Spirituality

Spirituality is a "journey of the heart" or "way of being" that enables one to become more enlightened, aware, and harmoniously intimate (holistic) or united (monistic) with body, psyche, nature, and others. Noted scholars (e.g., William James and Abraham Maslow) have highlighted the importance of the spirit and its integrative and regulatory function on the psyche (e.g., mind, will, and emotions) and body in understanding and valuing human existence (Daly, 2004). For example, James (1997) observes that the spirit functions subconsciously and interactively with the psyche and the body to perceive the "reality" upon which behavior is channeled. Hence, what is perceived by the mind may have implications on the will, emotions, body, and spirit (and vice versa). If someone encounters mental stress, the

consequences may be evident via anxiety, a diminished will, and a more vulnerable self-esteem. Spirituality is embodied in the wholeness of self and is called upon in complex and far-reaching life experiences.

Being spiritual also involves striving to know and understand the source of and reason for one's existence that can lead to inner change and more complete fulfillment. This spiritual quest is often confused with religion since both involve personal quests for understanding about life and its meaning (Koenig, 2005). Religion, however, tends to be more institutionalized (i.e., adherence to formal doctrines or rituals), theological (i.e., in relation to a higher power or God), and sociological (e.g., community or church-based). Spirituality emphasizes the psychological (e.g., focused inclusion of the mind, will, and emotions) and can be a more subjective (i.e., and individually expressed with or without a belief in a transcendent being; Koenig, 2005; Morrison & Severino, 2007). Thus, the spirit encompasses diverse views of transcendence yet has commonalities with elements of many subcultures, religions, and perspectives (Gallanter, 2005). In other words, it is possible to experience a range of spirituality and personal growth within and/or exclusive of organized religion (Hill & Pargament, 2003).

In physical education, several constructs relate theoretically to spirituality. For example, character and life skills (Danish, Petitpas & Hale, 1993), martial spirit (Lu, 2006), ecological awareness (Kentel & Karrow, 2007), personal and social responsibility (Hellison & Templin, 1991), fun (Kretchmar, 2005), and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) are affective or behavioral qualities with noted importance in physical education that could also be associated with spirituality. While these constructs may comprise part of the spiritual dimension, limiting spiritual understanding and awareness to such paradigms might lead to the false assumption that spirituality is nothing more than moral, emotional, interpersonal, and/or cultural development, which

educators have typically pursued in physical education (McGuire, Cooper & Park, 2006). Heintzman (2003) reports that spirituality is more than moral goodness. Spirituality, derived from the Latin, *spiritus*, meaning "breath of life" can be encountered from a broad range of experiences both individually and in partnership with others. Daly (2004) summarizes spirituality as

... an inner life of feelings (awe, appreciation, respect, and delight) and encompasses a sense of the infinite and of powers and forces beyond human experience or control and gives life a meaning and purpose ... It means having a proper balance between one's outer and inner world and is a search for quality and unity in life. (p. 215)

The Role of Spirituality

Ordinary living is neither purely spiritual nor non-spiritual yet a person's spirit can be relatively active or inactive (Kessler, 2005). As illustrated in Table 1, a person with a more inactive or "slumbering" spirit tends to respond to the demands of life more for immediate physical or emotional gratification (e.g., pleasure), is distracted from and inclined to escape from natural reality (e.g., solitude, fear, stress) through addictive behaviors (e.g., substances, images), and devalues awareness, self-discovery, and authentic community (Galanter, 2005). Persons who knowingly or not detach from their spirits may be more prone to being emotionally-charged (e.g. lack of self-control, anxious), isolated, and dependent (Morrison & Severino, 2005; Thoreson, 1999).

In contrast, those with "active" spirits are on a spiritual journey seeking progress towards greater awareness, altruism, connecting to reality, enlightenment, self-discovery, and holistic harmony of the spirit, psyche and body (Daly, 2004; Thoreson, 1999). Such an active spirituality can enable greater connection to nature, others, and one's awareness of self; a deeper sense of peace, joy, altruism, and contentment; and, increasing liberation from the anxiety, pace, addictions, and performance-based self-worth inherent in many

Table 1
Characteristics of the Inactive and Active Spirit

| Inactive Spirit | Active Spirit |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Performance/Emotion Based | Spirit Based |
| Detachment/Escapism | In Reality |
| Ignorance | Enlightenment |
| Isolation | Community |
| Stress | Silence/Meditation |
| Fragmented | Holistic harmony |
| Addictions/Dependency | Purity/Cleansing |
| Fear/Self-Centeredness | Altruism/Generosity |
| In-authenticity | Authenticity |
| Temporal Happiness | Quest for Shen/Joy |
| Bitterness/Anger | Contentment/Peace |

mainstream lifestyles (Daly, 2004). For example, spiritually healthy people intentionally integrate positive moral and ethical practices (e.g., integrity, honesty, and trust) into their relationships with others, tend to be unconditionally loving and foster the same in others, and are more likely to be mentally balanced (e.g., lower rates of depression, suicide, divorce, substance abuse and higher rates of marital satisfaction, well-being, and life satisfaction; Thoreson, 1999). Such persons also tend to be more physically healthy (e.g., reduced coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke) (Morrison & Severino, 2005), live for longer periods of time, and are likely to be more motivated for living (Hill & Pargament, 2003). These research findings exist across many cultures or religions (Thoresen, 1999) and have led to the adoption of psycho-spiritual approaches in psychiatric therapy (Galanter, 2005; Mijares & Khalsa, 2005). Given the range of evidence supporting a positive relationship between spirituality and overall

health we envisage that a more fruitful learning environment and increased quality of life for students might be possible through curricular and pedagogical emphasis on spiritual awareness in physical education.

Fostering Spiritual Awareness through Physical Education

In the following sections, we theorize about how physical education curriculum development and pedagogical practice might stimulate spiritual development through physical education. Akin to Anderson's (2007) admission: "We do not profess to having found any absolute meanings of spirituality and what it means to live a spiritual life, rather, what is presented here are some of the signposts for a journey we might venture to; understanding more about spirituality as an integral part of the teaching and learning process" (p. 14). With this intent, we offer the following suggestions.

Assist Students in Distinguishing Spirituality from Religious and Moral Beliefs

Adolescents face numerous interrelated spiritual yearnings or needs. Kessler (2005) identifies these as the: (1) Search for meaning and purpose, (2) Longing for silence and solitude, (3) Urge for transcendence, (4) Hunger for joy and delight, (5) Creative drive (infused with depth, meaning, mystery...), (6) Call for initiation, and (7) Deep connection. Unfortunately, since global conflicts fueled by religious zealots are common, students may be prone to ignoring personal spirituality to avoid religious extremism. It is important therefore, for teachers to clarify how universal spirituality relates to, yet is different from, institutionalized religion. Daly (2004) elaborates that the human spirit needs

... language, rituals, nurturance, a community and its underlying principle and centre is, and must be, love. Spirituality is about being integrated as opposed to falling apart, it is about being in community versus being lonely, about being in harmony with the earth versus being alienated from it... acting in ways that leave us either, unhealthy or healthy, bitter or loving, alienated or in community—what shapes us is our spirituality. (p. 218)

With this understanding, students may come to realize the inherent restorative potential of contributing to others and self by being spiritually active within community. It may be possible to foster this understanding by exploring provocative existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life and provide them with practical opportunities (e.g., goal-setting, discussions, decision-making activities) to discern their beliefs and values related to those questions. It would also be useful to link with and foster reflection about the merits and hazards of certain influential elements of youth culture like subtle media messages (e.g., advertizing, televised sports) about the role of one's body relative to the mind, spirit, and others.

Spirituality might also be more distinguishable from religion when the value of active spirituality like awareness, caring, serenity, and tolerance (see Table 1) is appropriately cultivated in physical education settings. Physical educators can model inclusive lessons (e.g., accounting for various abilities, cultures, body sizes, and genders) and structure physically and emotionally safe settings in which students can be authentic, function within a caring community, and speak openly about what matters to them. Additionally, interacting with (e.g., chatlines, field trips), learning about (e.g., websites) and participating in activities with individuals from other countries, cultures, and ethnic groups can help to promote a spiritual outlook that understands the universal elements of human nature that is more broad than one's own (Mijares & Khalsa, 2005).

Increase the Emphasis on Spiritual Development in Physical Education Curricula

Infusing more holism into the physical education curricula could help students recognize the whole person and fuse the boundaries of mind, body, and spirit. For example in the educational systems of England, Wales, and New Zealand physical educators are mandated to teach prescribed spiritual elements in the national curriculum such as self awareness, the search for meaning and purpose, and to assist in developing qualities and attitudes necessary for inner well-being (McGuire et al., 2006; Robertson, 2000). Yet, it appears that little if any reference to spirituality has been made in the vast majority of other physical education curricula. The subjective, personal, and mistakenly controversial connection of spirituality to religion might render it threatening, difficult to define and assess, which may prompt educators to be more reluctant to develop a methodology and curriculum that directly addresses it (Kessler, 2005). Having measurable outcomes or attempting to assess pupils' spiritual status or progress, therefore is not recommended, since spirituality is too abstract, procedural, and

personal to enable students to articulate it or have educators validly evaluate it (McGuire, Cooper & Park, 2006).

We question whether underemphasizing the spiritual dimension provokes spiritual atrophy in students. Physical education has the potential to provide experiences that can allow students to understand ways that thinking, willing, feeling, and responding can stem from and be tools for bringing about meaningful existence and balanced living. Hence, we encourage the continuation of existing spiritually related ideals that pursue cognitive, affective, and psychomotor outcomes in physical education such as character, personal and social responsibility, critical thinking, enjoyment, cooperation, life skills, movement understanding, wellness values, motor competency, self-esteem, motivation, and community service (NASPE, 2005). Encouraging physical educators to activate students' spiritual development so they connect to what is meaningful and sacred in their lives, understand why, and become more holistically united, intimate, and enlightened about their purpose in life may address the curricular void in relation to the spiritual domain.

Promote Active Spirituality Jointly through School Health and Physical Education

While acknowledging the role of the whole curriculum in supporting the aim of fostering spiritual growth in students, we propose that a comprehensive program housing both health and physical education offers the most optimal space where inactive spirits can be liberated in ordinary living. The etymology of "health" derives from the Old English *hæle* meaning "wholeness; a being whole, sound or well". Related terms from the Old English *halig* Old Norse *helge* meaning "holy, sacred" speak to the spirituality inherent in health. Another Old English term *hælan* means "to heal". Since personal health comprises the spiritual, emotional, physical, and psychological as dimensions of the whole self (AAHE, 2005), we surmise that any move towards a reconceptualized or "new" physical education

must not merely be an education of the body per se but of the whole person. Integrated efforts by health and physical education programs can highlight the importance of spiritual concepts like critical awareness, contemplation, purposeful living, nature, acceptance, transparency, awareness, tolerance, resiliency, experience, community, and the critical role of the body, mind, and spirit to holistic health. For example, using a figure of the body with its main organs, pupils could label each organ with a corresponding quality that helps groups (e.g., schools) to function well. This could be a way for students to learn the integrative nature of human functioning but also to foster the notion that spirituality is about the whole person and has a direct influence on the spirit of others and the school (McGuire et al., 2006).

Strive to Foster Wonder and Delight

There is a need to invoke a greater sense of wonder, awe and unfathomable mystery of life and the important role of the spirit in addition to the body (e.g., human movement), mind, will, and emotions in one's holistic well-being. As an example, Kretchmar (2005) distinguishes between fostering fun and delight which is a more elusive and deeply spiritual manifestation or awakening that cannot be summoned willfully and depends in part on disciplined preparation, focus, and effort. Delight appears conceptually similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of subjective flow. In this there is an ideal balance between challenge and ability for completing a task, a blending of action and awareness, clearly understood goals, and a deep experience that goes beyond enjoyment in which the participant is fully engaged and loses track of time and self. However, delight is likely closer to McInman and Grove's (1991) conceptualization of peak experience. They posit that this is more intensely mystical than flow because it goes beyond intrinsic reward or superior functioning into intensely spontaneous and transpersonal sense of joy (or even ecstasy), unity, peak power, and loss of self.

Kretchmar (2005) asserts that physical educators tend to underplay the subjective, personal, idiosyncratic and private by merely settling for fun and satisfying experiences in physical education that are relatively superficial, common, and ordinary. In other words, physical educators may be prone to emphasizing content like the healthy benefits of activity while overlooking the greater significance of movement to human functioning such as meaning, fulfillment, spontaneity, delight, and play. He adds that delight is more likely to be experienced when educators lead students through valuable movement journeys that, for example, “lead from mechanically correct to expressive movement, from acting to being, from repetitive, effective movement to inventive (clever, unique) movement . . . and, from movement as aesthetically distasteful to movement as beautiful” (p. 206).

Consciously Foster Spiritual Development through Physical Activities

Spiritual development can be more overtly fostered by having students participate in activities (e.g., dance, games, and gymnastics) that are intentionally structured to help them become more focused, relaxed, and interpersonally connected through laughter, cooperation, exploration, creativity, play and a flow-like state. Certain “teachable moments” arise during movement-oriented activities in physical education through which the teacher can prompt students to question the source of their motives, goals, emotions, thoughts, and quest for meaning in life. Physical educators might also stimulate safe avenues for spiritual diagnosis and expression such as through completing and discussing short surveys like the ten-item self-report *Meaning in Life Questionnaire* (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006) or through response or reflective journals in which students share their insights, feelings, and/or opinions on various experiences encountered during activities in physical education that impacted them or others.

Provide a Variety of Play Opportunities

Participating in a wide variety of cooperative (e.g., Omnikin), informal or developmental (e.g., tag), and formal or more institutionalized games (e.g., football and tennis) during physical education can serve as a platform through which students learn to better understand how game participation can influence personal and communal spirits. For example, students can learn how experiencing flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or resolving conflicts during game play requires them to personally activate their spirit by acknowledging and valuing the need for restoration rather than retribution and for demonstrating spiritual qualities like cooperation, humility, tolerance, patience, authenticity, grace, empathy, and love. Further, participation in more novel (e.g., golf, surfing) and multi-cultural games (e.g., Tjoukball) could be coupled with discussions on how these can enhance (e.g., enjoyment, awe, nature, passion, etiquette, self-discipline) and/or dampen (e.g., time, cost, injury, cheating, addiction, need to win) personal and communal spirituality. Educators could explain how an activity may nurture their spirit by activating feelings of pleasure and perceived competence or by developing courage, honor, creativity, honesty, wisdom and justice with positive ramifications on their sense of meaning and fulfillment (Corlett, 1996).

Integrate Artistic and Aesthetic Activities into Physical Education

Human nature and ways of knowing that nature are complex, take many forms (e.g., mind, will, emotions, body, spirit), and are socially and experientially based. Consequently, to accommodate these factors and to fulfill its aim of “using movement to change people, to help them realize their full potential as human beings,” physical education could include movement orientations such as those that focus on what is aesthetically beautiful such as gymnastics, diving, figure skating, and dance (Estes & Mechikoff, 1999, p.

11). To illustrate, in addition to fostering physical and perceptual skills, Brinson (1991) argues for the educational value of dance through its positive influence on the development of broad human intelligence, creativity, feelings, values, sensibilities, and cultural discernment. Music, drama, and visual art could also be more meaningfully integrated into physical education activities and tasks to enable students to learn more about reality, themselves, and others through the creation and expression of personal meanings (Buck, 2006). For example, Moss (2006) describes the ways in which puppets can be held and dramatized by children within the dance curricula. Students in physical education could learn the cultural or spiritual significance of the country from which a particular folk dance originated, create a form of visual art that represents it, and perform the dance with that renewed awareness. Physical educators could also encourage students to attend and support school events having an aesthetic and/or artistic nature (e.g., concerts, theatre, galleries, and sports). Finally, playing a wide variety of music in physical education can help students to appreciate the range of music genres and how each might figure into the spiritual dimension. By exposing students to more aesthetics and art forms, physical education can provide diverse experiences so students learn to understand cultures and ways of knowing, feelings like joy and shame, motives like power and pleasure, and ideas like beauty, flow, and release; and then learn how to creatively express those in a more holistic, liberated, and embodied way.

Include Eastern Movement Disciplines

For centuries, spirituality has been an essential component in Eastern movement disciplines—martial arts (e.g., judo, karate, kung fu, taekwondo, tai ji quan) and meditation practices (e.g., qi gong, yoga)—within which the oneness of human, nature, and the universe is the highest realm (Lu, 2006). Martial arts are generally practiced as a way of developing self-discipline,

self-actualization, virtues, enlightenment, introspection, and meeting spiritual goals (Back & Kim, 1984). Schmidt (1986) explains that “introspection allows critical examination of one’s innermost self, one’s emotions and beliefs, one’s center or kokoro (heart) as it is known in Japanese, for the purpose of bringing about a harmonious ordering ...” (p. 70). Thus, having students learn a martial art such as tai ji quan can facilitate their experiential appreciation of being, sensing, growing, and understanding meaning in life. Xu (1996) explains that the forms and skills can be taught; yet, the artistic conception, the spirit, and the essence or the true meaning of the Dao (the way to truth) in Eastern movement disciplines can only be felt or comprehended rather than simply described. So it is the internal personalized substance (“jing”), energy (“qi”), and spirit (“shen”), rather than one’s external elements (e.g., physical strength and skills) that substantially distinguish participants and enable unification of “inner” (e.g., morals, mind, and spirit) and “outer” (e.g., physical strength, skills, and strategies).

A potential way of activating students’ spirituality through such Eastern movement forms is to provide them with regular interludes of silence, rest, and solitude. For example, the cool-down phase of a lesson might be an ideal time to lead students through some light yoga, brief meditation, and relaxation exercises. Providing individual mats in a dimly lit gymnasium while listening to serene music at a low volume could assist introspectiveness. Teachers might also remind students of how they are engaging their spirits through this activity and encourage them to value, find pleasure in, and seek ways to attune their spirits through being silent and alone in the midst of their busy and noisy lives.

Provide Physically Exerting Service Learning Opportunities

There are numerous physically demanding service-oriented activities within physical education that can benefit the spirit of both the

participant and the recipient. For example, consider participating as a class in service projects like voluntarily moving boxes of food and clothing for the local food bank, cleaning up the grounds in the neighborhood surrounding the school, or raking leaves, cleaning windows, and visiting with residents at a low-income nursing home. When individuals serve others they are often enriched spiritually through the feelings of joy and pride they experience in serving others and contributing to the “common good.” These sorts of activities, however, are more meaningful if the students identify and develop the projects themselves.

Enable Students to Encounter Meaningful Ecological and Adventurous Experiences

Within certain physical education settings, spirituality has been referred to in the context of values, beliefs, the meaning and purpose of living (McGuire et al., 2006). Heintzman (2003) suggests that nature-oriented activities which include appropriate time for solitude and social interactions during the activities, tend to be more highly associated with spirituality through self-reflective experience away from one’s regular constraints and responsibilities. Such activities also promote contemplative and emotional connections to the beauty and power of nature. He adds that fostering meaningful community experiences are those which, among other things, “encourage people to explore nature and develop a relationship with it... and use tools such as journal writing, meditation, inspirational readings, solo or group discussions to facilitate spiritual expression within a comfort zone” (p. 8). Adventure education is an experiential learning program striving to provide innovative and progressively sequenced adventurous physical tasks (often in the wilderness) that require and foster cooperation (e.g., interdependence, communication, trust), leadership, problem-solving, and guided reflection. The general aim is to teach individuals to holistically reach their personal potential, become effective citizens in society,

and to nurture a sense of delight in moving and in being with others. Several of these initiatives have demonstrated success in promoting person-centered learning, gender equity, social interaction skills, motor and fitness ability, environmental awareness, and personal qualities (Brown, 2006). Therefore, we suggest that physical educators could increase opportunities for students to participate in outdoor adventurous activities whether that is on the outside playing fields or out in the wilderness.

Summary

In this paper, we have examined the potential difficulties when spiritual health is overshadowed by a focus in physical education that is intent on transforming the body without giving full consideration to the whole person. We contend that addressing the spirit in physical education pedagogy and curricula could increase holistic awareness and provide a means for students to be wholly well. Through understanding the meaning and significance of spirituality, its role in health and physical education, and possibilities for fostering this awareness in students, educators can disrupt the current tendency to overlook an integral component of being. Cultivating openness to reorienting existing physical education programs to explicitly include more integrated, culturally novel, adventurous, aesthetic, service, and delightful movement experiences and lessons will create opportunities for students to activate their spiritual dimension enabling them to encounter more meaningful existence and purposeful living.

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