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BEYOND TEACHING: SPIRITUALITY AS A TOOL FOR GROWTH IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

ALÉM DO ENSINO: A ESPIRITUALIDADE COMO FERRAMENTA DE CRESCIMENTO NO PROCESSO EDUCACIONAL

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA ENSEÑANZA: LA ESPIRITUALIDAD COMO INSTRUMENTO DE CRECIMIENTO EN EL PROCESO EDUCATIVO

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ABSTRACT: The theme of spirituality as an educational component reveals a broad field for research, highlighting the urgent need for deeper studies on its impact on students' development in Brazil. The objective of this study was to analyze the influence of spirituality in the educational process, spanning from the 6th grade of Elementary School to the 3rd year of High School in a private school network. The Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI) was applied in schools in the state of São Paulo with 3,572 students. The results of this research highlight the depth and complexity of the influence of spirituality in the educational process. The collected data revealed that the perception of God's unconditional love and a sense of divine purpose are strongly present in the results, but other aspects, such as involvement in community service activities and the promotion of social justice, showed lower levels of engagement.

KEYWORDS: Spiritual Growth. Integral Development. Students.

RESUMO: O tema espiritualidade como componente educacional revela um campo amplo para pesquisa, evidenciando a necessidade urgente de estudos mais aprofundados sobre seu impacto no desenvolvimento dos alunos no Brasil. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar a influência da espiritualidade no processo educacional, abrangendo desde o 6º ano do Ensino Fundamental até o 3º ano do Ensino Médio de uma rede particular de ensino. Foi realizada a aplicação do Inventário de Crescimento de Discípulos (GDI) em escolas no Estado de São Paulo com 3.572 alunos. Os resultados da presente pesquisa destacam a profundidade e a complexidade da influência da espiritualidade no processo educacional. Os dados coletados revelaram que a percepção do amor incondicional de Deus e o sentido de propósito divino estão fortemente presentes nos resultados, mas outros aspectos, como o envolvimento em atividades de serviço comunitário e a promoção de justiça social, apresentaram níveis de engajamento mais baixo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Crescimento Espiritual. Desenvolvimento Integral. Estudantes.

RESUMEN: El tema de la espiritualidad como componente educativo revela un amplio campo de investigación, evidenciando la necesidad urgente de estudios más profundos sobre su impacto en el desarrollo de los alumnos en Brasil. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar la influencia de la espiritualidad en el proceso educativo, abarcando desde el 6º grado de la Enseñanza Fundamental hasta el 3º año de la Enseñanza Media en una red de enseñanza privada. Se aplicó el Inventario de Crecimiento de Discípulos (GDI) en escuelas del estado de São Paulo con 3.572 alumnos. Los resultados de la presente investigación destacan la profundidad y complejidad de la influencia de la espiritualidad en el proceso educativo. Los datos recopilados revelaron que la percepción del amor incondicional de Dios y el sentido de propósito divino están fuertemente presentes en los resultados, pero otros aspectos, como la participación en actividades de servicio comunitario y la promoción de la justicia social, mostraron niveles más bajos de compromiso.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Crecimiento Espiritual. Desarrollo Integral. Estudiantes.

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INTRODUCTION

The perception of spirituality as an essential aspect of human experience has significantly expanded over the years. Traditionally associated with religious beliefs and practices, spirituality is now understood in a broader and more inclusive manner. This concept encompasses a set of deep personal feelings and convictions that transcend the material and tangible dimensions of existence. These spiritual experiences challenge the full understanding of life's mysteries and encourage reflection on fundamental questions, such as the purpose and meaning of existence.

Spirituality awakens deep emotions and involves immaterial convictions, leading individuals to believe in the presence of something beyond human comprehension. This dimension of human experience is related to reflections on the meaning of life and goes beyond institutionalized religious practices. Recognizing its relevance to overall well-being, the World Health Organization considers spirituality one of the essential factors for promoting health throughout life.

As a broad and multifaceted concept, spirituality transcends conventional religious manifestations and is embedded in the deepest layers of individual experience. In the contemporary world, it is often perceived as a means of understanding the purpose of life, addressing dimensions that go beyond the physical and material realm.

Spirituality can be understood as a complex facet of human existence, rooted in the innermost being, transcending everyday understanding and covering essential aspects of life. This notion suggests that spirituality goes beyond material concerns, involving the search for meaning, purpose, connection with something greater, and fundamental values (Piergentile & Viana, 2024).

Spirituality is associated with a dimension that involves inner matters, interpersonal relationships, ethics, respect, maturity, character formation, common sense, justice, and peace. Furthermore, spirituality is considered an essential component of self-development, assisting in building skills focused on self-care and care for others, as well as promoting personal transcendence (Illenseer, 2022).

Often, spirituality is seen as a fundamental element for quality of life, being deeply connected to different aspects of human existence. Both contemporary investigations and historical studies on human behavior demonstrate the relevance of spirituality. This concept encompasses an inner search for meaning and purpose, often expressed through a connection to something greater than the individual himself.

The research instrument used was the Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI) questionnaire (Bradfield, 2014), previously validated in Brazil and applied to students from a network of faith-based schools in the state of São Paulo. The questionnaire was administered in person

during Religious Education classes, with the participation of 3,572 students, becoming a crucial element for data collection.

The topic of spirituality in the educational environment raises complex questions about students' full development and the factors that influence their personal/academic background. The key question is: "How does spirituality influence the educational process?" The study seeks to identify the spiritual elements that contribute to the formation of values, attitudes, and behaviors in the school environment, analyzing which aspects of spirituality can foster an integral education.

Therefore, the main objective of this research was to examine the influence of spirituality on the educational process, covering students from 6th grade of Elementary School to 3rd year of High School in a private school network that includes Religious Education classes in its curriculum. To achieve this goal, the following specific objectives were established: research students' perceptions of spirituality; understanding their beliefs, perspectives, and experiences in this context; identifying the determining factors of students' spirituality; and recognizing elements that may influence their understanding and spiritual experience throughout their school years.

This research was approved by the ethics committee of the Adventist University Center of São Paulo (UNASP), under the protocol number CAAE 75474123.7.0000.5377 and opinion number 6.499.176 in 2023. A Free and Informed Consent Form was sent to parents, detailing the research objectives and procedures, while students received the Free and Informed Assent Form.

Methodological procedures

With the objective of exploring the experience of spirituality among students from the 6th to 9th grade of Elementary School and High School, the Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI) questionnaire was administered in person during Religious Education classes. Participants accessed the QR code linking to the survey or received the link to complete the form on their mobile devices via messaging apps or email, after a face-to-face explanation of the completion process. Upon opening the form, an introductory section of the survey included an acknowledgment and consent item, a mandatory condition for beginning the questionnaire.

To ensure the integrity of the process, participation of students under 18 years of age required authorization from their legal guardians. Students voluntarily participated in the survey, which was conducted via Jetform—an online survey form, which proved to be a valuable and interactive tool for collecting data. The online form provided efficient and convenient data collection, offering valuable insights for this study and its future analysis. The user-friendly interface of the web form proved to be intuitive and easy to navigate, with clearly marked

fields and instructions for respondents. It is important to highlight the extensive customization options used to tailor the questionnaire while respecting user privacy and security, as student identification was not required for participation.

On the designated survey day, during Religious Education classes, students who had received parental consent had the opportunity to participate. A total of 3,572 students completed the questionnaire, representing a participation rate of 73.76%. This difference reflects students' presence on the survey day and their willingness to participate voluntarily. The Free and Informed Assent Form was explained and completed by students before beginning the questionnaire. Students had access to their responses upon clicking the final button of Jetform, which automatically sent their answers to their email accounts. Likewise, they received a copy of both consent forms, signed either by themselves or by their legal guardians.

Sample characteristics

The data presented in Tables 1 and 2 reflect a sample aligned with both global and Brazilian population proportions. According to data and global statistics from Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2004), the distribution between men and women worldwide is approximately 51.5% women and 48.5% men. This proportion remains consistent in the Brazilian context, where women make up about 51.5% of the population and men 48.5%. This similarity is also reflected in the study results, where women represent 51.82% and men 48.18% of the sample.

Table 1 – Grade levels of students who responded to the survey

| Grade Level | Total Schools | Participants |
|------------------------|---------------|--------------|
| 6th Grade - Elementary | 910 | 680 |
| 7th Grade - Elementary | 879 | 636 |
| 8th Grade - Elementary | 792 | 533 |
| 9th Grade - Elementary | 792 | 676 |
| 1st Year - High School | 494 | 417 |
| 2nd Year - High School | 531 | 426 |
| 3rd Year - High School | 448 | 204 |
| Total | 4,846 | 3,572 |

Source: Research data.

Table 2 – Students gender

| Gender | N | % |
|--------------|-------|--------|
| Female | 1,851 | 51.82 |
| Male | 1,721 | 48.18 |
| Total | 3,572 | 100.00 |

Source: Research data.

Regarding discussions on spirituality within families, 2,707 students reported that their parents talk to them about spirituality, indicating an open dialogue on such matters in many households. In the school environment, 2,996 students considered receiving spiritual guidance in school important and necessary, and 3,021 participated in spiritual guidance activities promoted by the educational institution. These numbers reflect a positive receptivity to integrating spirituality into the school curriculum.

However, when asked whether school-led spiritual guidance activities contributed to their spiritual development, the number of affirmative responses dropped to 2,524, while 1,048 responded negatively. This suggests that although students recognize the importance of spiritual guidance, its effectiveness may vary in terms of the perceived impact on their lives.

These findings provide an important basis for discussions on how spirituality is approached in both family and school environments, highlighting the need to assess the quality and impact of spiritual interventions in schools to ensure they are meaningful and constructive for students.

Data also showed that in the choice of students' religious affiliation, parents were the primary influencers, with 2,880 mentions. This pattern underscores the significant role that family plays in transmitting religious beliefs, as discussed by Smith and Denton (2005) in their work on adolescent spirituality. While teenagers may be influenced by external sources such as friends and educational institutions, their home environment and interactions with family have the most profound effect on shaping their religious and spiritual convictions. Religion often has a "stickiness" greater than commonly assumed, and the family is the place where beliefs are most firmly "attached" to young individuals. This occurs due to parental relationships and the example parents set, which in turn creates a reference framework for young people that often override other influences. Thus, while teachers and peers can play a role, the home environment remains central to the consolidation and reinforcement of religious beliefs, emphasizing the need to understand family dynamics when studying youth religiosity.

The distribution of student church attendance data indicates that a large majority, 2,049 students, regularly attend church, while 940 report attending occasionally, and 583 state that do not attend any church. This scenario can be contextualized through Ammerman's (2013) research, which highlights how religious practices are integrated into individuals' daily lives. Ammerman suggests that church attendance is deeply influenced by family and community contexts, with participation in religious communities often reflecting social and familial networks that reinforce religious practice. Ammerman also examines the role of "religion lived" in daily practices, indicating that variations in church attendance reflect both personal and social influences. Those who attend regularly may be more deeply rooted in communities that value and encourage this practice, while those who attend occasionally or not at all may reflect more individualized positions or responses to environments less centered on organized religion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 presents the results of the responses from the 3,572 participants, considering a maximum score of 5.0 for each item. Next to each question, the columns “Valid” indicate the number of valid responses received, while “Unanswered” represents the questions left unanswered. The last column presents the average responses, reflecting the mean score obtained for each question.

It is crucial to highlight those extreme values in response averages, both highly elevated above 4.0 and significantly low below 2.5, are especially notable. These extremes serve as important indicators that may require further analysis to understand the reasons behind such evaluations.

Among the 34 objective questions in the applied questionnaire, three reached scores above 4.0, while seven recorded scores below 2.5. These results stand out significantly compared to the other 24 questions, whose averages remained between 2.5 and 4.0.

Some questions with extreme scores will be subject to detailed analysis, as they stand out due to their particularly high or low results. This scoring pattern provides an opportunity to investigate the factors contributing to such extreme evaluations. Educational and religious leaders, as well as parents, can use this information as an alert and as a starting point for further study and intervention.

Additionally, these extreme responses may serve as fertile ground for further scientific research, enabling a deeper understanding of the dynamics and perceptions shaping such assessments. By exploring these areas with special attention, it becomes possible to identify and address students’ specific needs, fostering a more responsive and enriching educational and community environment.

Table 4 indicates that 74 individuals, or 2% of the total sample, reported never considering that God has a purpose for their lives, while another 80 students (2.25%) rarely contemplate this idea. These observations suggest that 154 young people, 4.34% of participants, are distant from any perception of existential purpose based on spirituality.

Table 3 – GDI Mean and Standard Deviation

| Questions | Valid | NR | Mean |
|---|-------|----|--------------|
| I know God has a special purpose for my life. | 3.547 | 25 | 4.268 |
| The study of the Bible is one of the ways I like to learn about God. | 3.529 | 43 | 3.398 |
| I feel closer to God when I am in contact with nature or studying His creation. | 3.533 | 39 | 3.400 |
| I show love for my family by helping at home even without being asked. | 3.529 | 43 | 3.343 |
| I like to worship God with the people in my church. | 3.523 | 49 | 3.307 |
| By God’s grace, I can forgive the people who hurt me. | 3.532 | 40 | 3.311 |
| I am sure that I can accomplish all that God asks of me, with His power | 3.526 | 46 | 3.485 |
| I notice that my best friends love God as much or more than I do. | 3.518 | 54 | 2.775 |

| | | | |
|---|-------|-----|--------------|
| I am kind to my neighbors, regardless of age, culture, or religion. | 3.517 | 55 | 4.317 |
| I like to talk about spiritual matters with one or more friends. | 3.514 | 58 | 2.825 |
| Spending time with Jesus helps me understand who I am and why I am here. | 3.514 | 58 | 3.748 |
| When I shop or do work, I demonstrate to people that honesty is important. | 3.513 | 59 | 3.960 |
| I pray for people who do not yet know God. | 3.505 | 67 | 2.939 |
| I have helped one or more friends understand who God is. | 3.508 | 64 | 2.475 |
| When I hear about how God is acting somewhere, I like to tell friends about it. | 3.511 | 61 | 2.628 |
| I help my friends with their religious struggles or questions. | 3.508 | 64 | 3.056 |
| I volunteer for social services in my community. | 3.499 | 73 | 1.760 |
| I encourage friends to practice with me what the Bible teaches, wherever we are. | 3.508 | 64 | 2.320 |
| When I perceive God to act in the life of a friend, I share what I observe to strengthen their faith. | 3.500 | 72 | 2.901 |
| With humility, I enjoy my daily activities of doing my best for God. | 3.495 | 77 | 3.517 |
| I pray for the people I love, asking God to help them grow spiritually. | 3.490 | 82 | 3.898 |
| What I see or hear demonstrates to others that God is important to me. | 3.479 | 93 | 3.278 |
| I invite my friends to go to church or religious activities with me. | 3.478 | 94 | 2.185 |
| I participate in activities that promote social justice or respect for unjustly treated people. | 3.481 | 91 | 2.249 |
| I uphold what is right even when my friends do not. | 3.476 | 96 | 3.804 |
| I follow from my heart what I learn from the Bible's study, even if it is difficult. | 3.477 | 95 | 3.144 |
| I feel comfortable explaining what I believe in when asked. | 3.472 | 100 | 3.825 |
| My faith in God defines what is important to me. | 3.469 | 103 | 3.964 |
| God loves me and does everything to save me, even if I do not choose to follow Jesus. | 3.464 | 108 | 4.295 |
| The things I do reflect my daily commitment to living for Jesus. | 3.471 | 101 | 3.462 |
| How often do you feel God's presence or help in your life? | 3.466 | 106 | 3.573 |
| How often do you invite friends to talk about Christ and His teachings? | 3.464 | 108 | 2.057 |
| How often have you seen your prayers answered? | 3.467 | 105 | 3.233 |
| How often does your family help you follow Jesus? | 3.468 | 104 | 3.986 |

Source: Survey data.

Table 4 – Results for question 1

| I know God has a special purpose for my life | Frequency | Percentage | Percent Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| 0 – Never | 74 | 2,072 | 2,086 | 2,086 |
| 1 – Rarely | 80 | 2,240 | 2,255 | 4,342 |
| 2 – Sometimes | 260 | 7,279 | 7,330 | 11,672 |
| 3 – Generally | 350 | 9,798 | 9,867 | 21,539 |
| 4 – Almost always | 426 | 11,926 | 12,010 | 33,549 |
| 5 – Always | 2.357 | 65,985 | 66,451 | 100,000 |
| Unanswered | 25 | 0,700 | | |

Source: Survey data.

Koenig's (2012) studies have consistently demonstrated that spirituality and religious practice are associated with better mental health outcomes. Koenig highlights that religiosity and spirituality can help individuals remain resilient in the face of life's adversities, providing a sense of hope, purpose, and meaning. This aspect is particularly relevant to the young population studied, as they are at a crucial stage of identity and values formation.

Additionally, the work of Damon et al. (2003) provides a crucial insight on how adolescence is a fundamental period for developing a sense of purpose in life, an aspect that deeply resonates with spirituality. They point out that the development of a purpose during adolescence is deeply intertwined with psychological well-being, positively influencing the motivation, mental health and future orientation of young people. The data regarding some students' disconnection from the notion of divine purpose presents a valuable opportunity for schools to intervene in a strategic and meaningful way.

The second key finding in the study concerns principles and values: "I am kind to my neighbors, not caring about age, culture, or religion." Most respondents (68.55%) indicate that they are always kind to their neighbors, demonstrating a high level of cordiality regardless of differences such as age, culture, or religion. This result suggests that most students consistently value and practice kindness.

According to Kohlberg (1981), moral development progresses through various stages as children grow. Adolescents who reach higher levels of moral reasoning are more likely to show altruistic behaviors, such as kindness, as they begin to see moral actions in terms of universal principles of justice and human rights. Social behaviors are learned through observation and imitation of behavioral models within the individual's social environment, including parents, teachers, and peers. Bandura (1995), in his writings on social learning theory, highlights the importance of positive role models and social reinforcement in promoting kindness among adolescents. Learning occurs in a social context, involving a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between the person, environment, and behavior.

Meanwhile, the analysis of research data related to community volunteerism reveals that respondents' involvement in this activity is relatively low. The average score for this question is the lowest among all, with a mean value of 1.760 (see Table 3), indicating a lower level of engagement compared to other areas of social action.

Examining data on respondents' participation in volunteer activities highlights that a significant percentage do not actively engage in community service. By summing the percentages of responses for "Never" (33.61%) and "Rarely" (18.69%), we observe that 52.30% of respondents indicate little or no involvement in volunteer activities. This finding suggests that more than half of the sample does not regularly engage in volunteer actions, possibly due to a lack of interest, opportunities, or awareness of the importance of such activities.

This finding aligns with literature exploring the implications and benefits of community involvement for young people. For example, Schmidt et al. (2007) highlight that engagement in community service is associated with more positive academic, behavioral, and civic outcomes. Adolescents who worked directly with underprivileged individuals demonstrated better academic adjustment, while those working for organizations showed stronger civic engagement compared to peers engaged in other types of service. The findings are discussed in terms of their relevance to adolescent development, educational policy, and the use of large national datasets to examine participation in volunteer services.

Additionally, Kenny and Gallagher (2003) argue in their book that volunteering contributes to social responsibility and leadership skills among adolescents. These studies suggest that strengthening youth participation in volunteer activities can be a valuable strategy for promoting their holistic and civic development, highlighting a significant gap that needs to be addressed through educational and community policies.

Table 5 highlights the average survey result of 2,320, which reveals a below-average tendency for students to encourage their friends to practice Bible teachings with a frequency ranging from “Sometimes” and “Usually.”

Table 5 – Results for question 18

| I encourage friends to practice with me what the Bible teaches, wherever we are | Frequency | Percentage | Percent Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| 0 – Never | 599 | 16,769 | 17,075 | 17,075 |
| 1 – Rarely | 654 | 18,309 | 18,643 | 35,718 |
| 2 – Sometimes | 732 | 20,493 | 20,867 | 56,585 |
| 3 – Generally | 586 | 16,405 | 16,705 | 73,290 |
| 4 – Almost always | 421 | 11,786 | 12,001 | 85,291 |
| 5 – Always | 516 | 14,446 | 14,709 | 100,000 |

Source: Survey data.

This finding is crucial as it indicates a moderate level of student engagement with biblical spiritual practices. The data show that students are neither completely disengaged nor overly proactive but rather tend to integrate these practices occasionally to regularly, even within a faith-based institution where Religious Education classes and systematic biblical reflections take place.

The fact that students’ participation in encouraging biblical practices is moderate suggests fertile ground for further research into how spirituality is integrated into education and its impact on youth. Fowler (1995) identifies that during adolescence, young people begin to shape their spiritual identity, which is influenced by social interactions and the environment in which they are immersed.

Fowler (1995) outlined a series of stages in faith development that evolve from childhood to adulthood, providing a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals interpret and integrate their religious and spiritual beliefs throughout life. Specifically, Stages 3 and 4, known as “Synthetic-Conventional Faith” and “Individual-Reflective Faith,” are particularly relevant to adolescents, who constitute the respondents in this study.

In Stage 3, faith is typically conformist, shaped by the influences and expectations of the community and authority figures, without deep personal examination of beliefs. This stage reflects the reality of many students who are still exploring their identity and may rely heavily on social contexts to guide their spiritual practices. Stage 4 marks a transition toward a more personalized and questioning faith, where individuals begin to critically assess received traditions and teachings, forming a more autonomous and individualized understanding of spirituality. This stage is common among older adolescents, who encounter more complex challenges and questions regarding the meaning of life and their role in the world.

These stages are crucial for understanding how students in this age group can vary widely in their engagement with spiritual practices, depending on how they are transitioning from a more inherited faith to a more reflective and personalized faith.

The statement “I participate in activities that promote social justice or respect for unjustly treated and mistreated people” scored an average of 2.249, indicating an engagement level ranging between “Never” and “Rarely.” This question is significant as it reflects students’ practical involvement with social and ethical values.

Flanagan and Levine (2010) highlight the importance of engaging in activities that promote social justice and respect for unjustified/mistreated individuals, such involvement as essential for developing a robust social consciousness. Actively participating in initiatives aimed at fighting injustice and defending the rights of marginalized people not only contributes to the formation of a more inclusive and supportive community but also promotes core values of equity and respect. In addition, engagement in such actions is crucial to developing empathy, compassion, and a strong sense of social responsibility among young people.

Watts and Flanagan (2007) discuss the importance of involving youth in activities that promote social justice, respect for human rights, and activism for meaningful change. They emphasize the need to create spaces of opportunity where the youth and adults can share responsibilities and power, establishing authentic partnerships to foster actions in defense of human equity and dignity. These authors stress that youth engagement in initiatives promoting inclusion and rights is essential for their civic development and for active and conscious participation in society.

Low student involvement in social justice activities and respect for unjustified and marginalized people presents a crucial opportunity for schools aiming to shape socially and spiritually committed citizens. Integrating these moral values and principles into curricula and

extracurricular programs allows educational institutions to play an active role in fostering a deeper social and spiritual awareness. By creating spaces where students can participate in projects focused on equity, inclusion, human rights, and respect for others, schools not only educate students about the importance of these values but also encourage the development of essential skills such as empathy, leadership, and critical thinking based on spiritual principles. This is an opportunity for educational institutions to equip their students with the knowledge, experiences, and tools necessary to build more just, compassionate communities aligned with spiritual values that promote the common good.

The statement “God loves me and does everything to save me, even if I do not choose to follow Jesus” received a high average score of 4.295, indicating that most students strongly agree with this assertion, with a large proportion selecting “Always” (73.499%). This reflects a deeply rooted belief in the unconditional nature of divine love and grace among students.

Good and Willoughby (2008) discuss adolescence as a phase of special openness to spiritual influence, as the normative traits of adolescent development—such as identity search, questioning adult beliefs, and forming a personal moral conscience—make young people particularly receptive to new experiences and lasting spiritual commitments. Given that this study revealed strong student engagement with the belief in God’s unconditional love, independent of formal adherence to religious practices, Good and Willoughby’s (2008) conclusions reinforce the idea that spirituality can be a crucial element in structuring identity and values during this critical life stage.

King and Boyatzis (2015) explore the complexity of religious and spiritual development during childhood and adolescence, emphasizing the profound influence of bidirectional relationships between young people and their social/familial contexts. They argue that interactions within these relationships are crucial for shaping and evolving religious and spiritual beliefs. This perspective is fundamental for understanding how environments and close relationships shape young people’s spiritual perceptions, allowing for a deeper understanding of how spirituality develops and manifests in adolescence. This valuable insight into the psychological and social mechanisms that can both enrich and challenge young people’s spiritual growth is relevant for both the school context and fostering an educational environment that not only recognizes but also cultivates spiritual inspiration as an integral part of adolescent development.

Adolescence is a sensitive and crucial period for spiritual development, marked by intense ideological explorations and identity formation. Teenagers are particularly open to spiritual experiences, which are deeply influenced by their social interactions and cultural contexts. These interactions not only shape adolescents’ personal understanding of spirituality but also allow them to actively influence their environment through their spiritual journeys (Benson et al., 2003; Good & Willoughby, 2008; King & Boyatzis, 2015). The reciprocal influence between spirituality and social context is a central theme, emphasizing that

spiritual development is a dynamic and interactive process that can lead to both positive and negative outcomes during adolescence.

The analysis of the answers to the question “Which SINGLE statement best describes what you believe in today?” reveals an interesting distribution among the options, with two predominant beliefs standing out. The statement “God, our Heavenly Father, still cares for all whom He created on Earth and in the universe” was the most selected, with 1,469 responses, reflecting a strong belief in divine protection and care. The second most selected statement, “The church is God’s family on Earth, a faith community where many members, all equal in Jesus, gather to worship, teach, and serve,” received 1,121 responses, demonstrating a significant appreciation for the sense of community and belonging among respondents. In contrast, the last two options, “Before creating the Earth, God planned how to rescue people if they chose to sin” and “God planned marriage and family to help us understand His love,” received much lower adherence, with 400 and 367 responses, respectively. Additionally, 215 participants left this question unanswered, possibly indicating uncertainty or lack of engagement with the presented options.

Renowned Christian authors, including Ellen White, defend belief in God, as do Lewis (2017), who argues for the existence of a Creator as the logical and moral foundation of the universe. He views God as the source of order and purpose in the cosmos, grounding Christian faith in the idea that the universe has an intelligent and intentional Creator. Scott (2005), an Anglican theologian and pastor, sees creation as a revelation of God, advocating that the created world reflects the Creator’s glory, wisdom, and power. McGrath (2016), a theologian and scientist, argues that Christian theology and science are not contradictory and that faith in God as Creator is compatible with a scientific view of the world. He defends theistic creationism, where God is the originator of the universe and works through natural laws.

Among other influential authors, Piper (2011), in his works and sermons, advocates the view of God as Creator, Sustainer, and the center of all things. He emphasizes that all creation exists to glorify God, and that humanity must recognize and celebrate Him as the sovereign Creator. Keller (2009) defends belief in a Creator as the best explanation for the order, complexity, and morality observed in the universe. He argues that the existence of God as Creator provides a rational foundation for faith and morality. Schaeffer (1972) supports the idea that God created the world with purpose and intentionality. Grudem (2022) reinforces the Christian understanding of God as Creator, explaining the significance of creation within the context of divine sovereignty and purpose. He sees creation as an extension of God’s character and a revelation of His glory.

Bart D. Ehrman, in *God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer?*, examines the problem of evil and suffering, questioning the idea of an intervening God. Ehrman (2009) argues that the presence of suffering, tragedies, and

injustices in the world is incompatible with the view of a God who actively cares for every aspect of human life. He presents a critique based on the observation of human pain and suffering, considering that this reality does not align with the idea of a compassionate God who constantly watches over humanity. From this perspective, the widespread existence of suffering challenges the belief in an involved and protective God, proposing a more critical view of traditional divinity.

Similarly, Harold Kushner, in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, questions constant divine intervention by arguing that God grants human beings freedom, allowing natural laws to operate independently. For Kushner (2002), God does not intervene in every detail of human life but permits tragic events to occur due to the natural course of the world, even when they result in pain and suffering. Spong (1998) reinforces this view by defending a non-literalist and symbolic approach to God, suggesting that religion and faith should adapt to modern understanding without expecting direct divine responses to daily needs. From an atheist perspective, Dawkins (2007) critiques the belief in an interventionist God, arguing that there is no scientific basis for such an idea and treating this view as a cultural construct. These authors, each with a unique perspective, challenge the idea of an interventionist God, highlighting the need to rethink the role of divinity in human understanding of suffering and purpose.

These contrasting views on divine intervention and God's role in caring for humanity offer a broad foundation for reflection and debate. On one side, there is a strong belief in a personal, loving, and protective God who accompanies humanity and actively works within His creation, as supported by many Christian authors. On the other side, critiques and interpretations emerge that question constant divine intervention, proposing more symbolic or even atheistic perspectives. This counterpoint illustrates the complexity of spirituality and religious belief in a world shaped by diverse experiences of faith, suffering, and the search for meaning. The variety of approaches demonstrates how the question of God as Creator and caretaker transcends religious domains, involving philosophical, cultural, and existential aspects that challenge and enrich human understanding of life's purpose and dynamics.

The data collected from the research conducted with 3,572 students from the 6th grade of Elementary School to High School reveal that spirituality plays a positive and significant role in the lives of the participating youth. Most respondents demonstrated a strong belief in the presence of a caring God, reinforcing the importance of spiritual values as a source of guidance and comfort. This aspect of faith serves as emotional and psychological support, promoting well-being, resilience, and a broader life perspective. By integrating spiritual beliefs with daily school life, students appear to gain an additional foundation that strengthens their self-esteem, empathy, and sense of belonging—crucial aspects for holistic development and overcoming the common adversities of adolescence. These results indicate that spirituality, when approached inclusively and reflectively in the educational environment, can significantly

contribute to students' personal and social maturity, preparing them for a life guided by values and a positive vision of themselves and the world around them.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main objective of this study was to analyze the influence of spirituality in the educational process, encompassing students from the 6th grade of Elementary School to the 3rd year of High School within a faith-based education context. To achieve this goal, three specific objectives were outlined: to investigate students' perception of spirituality, understanding their views, ideas, and experiences; to analyze the determining aspects of students' spiritual experiences, identifying factors that shape their understanding and practice of spirituality throughout their schooling; and to contribute to the understanding of the role of spirituality in the lives of adolescents and young people, offering relevant insights for educators and administrators.

The results obtained throughout the study demonstrate that, although most students express a belief in God and have a clear perception of their spiritual purpose, there is variability in their practical engagement with spirituality. Faith and spiritual understanding are evident but their application in daily practices, such as social justice and sharing faith with peers, remains moderate. This pattern reveals that while students value spirituality, there is a need for greater encouragement to translate these beliefs into concrete social actions and interpersonal interactions through practical initiatives.

Analysis of the responses also suggests that the school environment represents a significant opportunity for the promotion of spiritual values and practices that support the development of an active spirituality oriented toward serving others. Particularly, Faith-based schools can play a vital role by integrating principles of justice, empathy, and social responsibility into their curriculum and extracurricular activities. This approach strengthens students' holistic development and reinforces the importance of spirituality as an educational dimension that contributes to the formation of conscious and committed citizens.

Spirituality, as observed in various studies, provides a protective influence for students and adolescents, contributing to their emotional, social, and moral well-being. It acts as an emotional support system, helping adolescents develop resilience in the face of psychosocial challenges such as family conflicts and academic stress. By fostering a sense of purpose and a value system based on ethics and respect for others, spirituality protects against risk behaviors such as substance abuse and violence. This spiritual foundation also promotes healthy behaviors, encouraging a positive and constructive outlook on life while contributing to the creation of a safe and welcoming school environment. The relevance of spirituality in school and

family settings stands out as an essential support for adolescent development. In the educational context, it provides young people with a deeper understanding of values, ethics, and moral conduct, promoting holistic growth that extends beyond academics, touching on emotional and social aspects. Moreover, by cultivating spirituality, schools reinforce essential skills such as empathy, resilience, and respect, contributing to a safe and inclusive learning environment. For families, spirituality serves as an emotional support framework, strengthening dialogue and bonds between parents and children, offering a nurturing context for dealing with the challenges of adolescence. This integrated approach between school and family thus acts as a lever that aids in shaping individuals committed to virtuous values and the construction of a more ethical and compassionate society.

In summary, the present study confirms the relevance of spirituality in basic education, not only as a personal aspect but as a factor that influences students' moral and social development. The findings provide a useful foundation for future reflections on pedagogical practice and for the improvement of educational programs aimed at fostering students' spiritual growth and social commitment. This study, therefore, concludes with an invitation to educators and administrators to integrate spirituality more deeply into educational processes, seeking to shape individuals committed to contributing positively to society and living out a faith that manifests in concrete actions in daily life.

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