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## The Place of Spirituality and Its Manifestation in Higher Education Literacy Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

So much variation in the meaning of spirituality has contributed to the difficulty in pinpointing how spiritual beliefs and values manifest themselves in the classroom. Thus, this study aimed to bridge the gap by exploring the views of faculty members on spirituality and how it manifests in the classroom using the qualitative phenomenological research tradition. In-depth interview data from twelve (12) educators and their selected students were analyzed using the conventional content analysis approach. The key findings of this study were that spirituality is something deep, personal, and relational. It serves as their guiding principle—a value system that is practical in life. It influences the values that teachers emphasize in class, the choice of materials to be used, topics and issues to be discussed, and the level of care and support they give to the students. While spirituality is covert and implemented in subtle and indirect ways in the classroom, both teachers and students agree that spirituality must not be ignored; rather, it must have a place in academia, serving as a powerful source of motivation for both teachers and students. This is an area that should be further explored in the academic context.

### INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the consideration of spirituality has gained prominence as an essential facet of holistic learning experiences. Spirituality, often perceived as a deeply personal and subjective aspect of human existence, encompasses a range of beliefs, values, and practices contributing to individuals' sense of meaning and purpose. Pitcher (2018) emphasized that “understanding teachers’ spirituality and its eventual influences on their pedagogical practices may be essential to the increased success of literacy teaching and learning at higher levels”.

While research on literacy teaching continues to grow, spirituality in its intersection with educational practices remains underexplored (Canete & Pandey, 2020; Wong, 2018). Only a few scholars have delved into the importance of integrating spirituality to create a safe and inclusive classroom space, examining its potential influence on students’ holistic development, engagement, and sense of purpose in literacy learning.

A prior study by Huitt (2017) contends that spirituality is positively associated with outcomes of physical, emotional, social, and mental well-being in learners. Researchers like Hyland (2017) and Goldstein (2016) also assert its integral role in healthy identity and sexuality development when students’ spiritual needs are met. Thus, research deepening the understanding of pedagogical practices allowing teachers to positively engage in literacy events is currently significantly valuable. Campbell (2008) argues that teaching is fraught with complex and varied issues, and teachers, intentionally or unintentionally, wield substantial influence over their students' perspectives, beliefs, and actions in life. These influences require reflection and research to be incorporated as vital dimensions of professionalism. Therefore, it becomes essential to explore how the spiritual and/or religious positioning of teachers shapes their learning and pedagogical practices in the classroom, particularly in the selection and implementation of curricula (Fenyi & Morrison, 2022; White, 2014).

Despite the mentioned studies, the influence and importance of spirituality as a pedagogical resource remain acutely underexplored in the Philippine setting, an odd gap considering the religiosity and religious traditions of 73% of Filipinos (Social Weather Stations Survey, November 2020). This study explores how spirituality intersects with educational practices, delving into questions about the integration of spirituality within the academic setting and its potential impact on students' holistic development, engagement, and sense of purpose in literacy learning. The findings of this study can contribute to creating a safe and inclusive classroom environment that respects diverse spiritual beliefs, providing opportunities for reflection, mindfulness, gratitude, or other practices promoting spiritual growth and well-being.

## **METHODS**

This study employed the qualitative method. Twelve (12) tertiary educators were purposefully chosen as a sample based on specific criteria. The research utilized the data saturation technique to ensure the inclusion of the maximum number of participants. An interview guide with questions was prepared, evaluated, and validated by four (4) experts in the field to ensure the elicitation of necessary data during the interview process. All interviews lasted not less than thirty minutes for each informant, identified by pseudonyms.

Before data analysis, the researcher acknowledged her preconceived biases and assumptions about spirituality. In the data analysis phase, the conventional content analysis approach was employed. After transcribing the interview transcripts verbatim, each word, phrase, and sentence was thoroughly examined to capture the essence of meaning as expressed in verbal communication. Initial "line-by-line coding" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2014) was performed, assigning labels or titles to each segment. Subsequently, emergent themes were identified and noted. Common titles were then grouped into main categories for data analysis, and relevant quotes from the text were connected to each theme. Finally, all listed clusters were reviewed to determine if there was a central theme expressing the "essence of the cluster". A validity

check was then conducted to ensure the rigor of the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Place of Spirituality in Pedagogical Context**

Two (2) major themes were derived from the interviews with the participants regarding the place of spirituality in a pedagogical context: a) Integral Part in the Pedagogical Context, and b) A Neglected Aspect by the Students.

#### *Theme 1: Integral part in the pedagogical context*

All participants firmly believed that spirituality is important and an integral part of the academic context. Teacher Shee expressed this clearly: "I strongly agree. Our curriculum is so rich with all information but without giving importance to spirituality, I think it is nothing as well. We cannot produce a holistic person if not all are involved. We need to produce students who empathize, servant-leaders at that. If spiritual education is absent, then their foundation is not that strong".

Teacher Rosalie's responses also expressed a similar answer. She likened spirituality to the core, the beating heart of the academe "Yes, of course, and it should always have! It is like the beating heart of the academe. Without the heart, it will be useless, so I consider it as the overarching purpose of education".

Likewise, teacher Cecille focused on the value of a human person and embedding spirituality in whatever subject the teacher handles, may it be Mathematics, Accountancy, or other subjects: "There should always be a place in the academe because we are dealing with human beings. Spirituality and morality specifically, should always be embedded in the curriculum. Whatever religious denominations we have, at the end of the day, we believe in a God".

In like manner, teacher Maricel is also straightforward in her responses about the place of spirituality in the academe as it has advantaged students in their life's quest for meaning and purpose. "Yes. Spirituality has and will always have a place in the academe. As a teacher, I can see clearly that students need guidance and wisdom by connecting them to the One who made them. So let us not set aside God in our educational system".

Furthermore, it is striking to highlight the responses of Teacher Richard, who, himself admitted that he does not integrate spirituality, yet

also believed that spirituality has a place in the academe, and it is never complete without it. “It has. You can never be complete without it. After all, Education is preparing somebody for the real world. We want them to relate it to real-life scenarios so that when they go to the real arena, they know what to do as a person and of course as a believer in God”.

The data from this section suggest that for all teacher participants, spirituality is more than an add-on topic in the classroom but remains apparent and relevant as a foundational and enduring aspect of education. The literature suggests that universities and colleges preparing people for professions in education should devote time in their programs to understanding and promoting spirituality (Groen, 2012). Spirituality concerns all facets of life, and some measure of success in actualizing one’s spiritual potential is necessary for our individual and collective well-being (Vokey, 2005a). According to this view, teaching and practices that foster spiritual realization should be an integral part of educational initiatives across the lifespan, inside as well as outside formal institutions such as schools. Today, more than ever, we must understand and promote spiritual maturity to address life’s existential ill that is partly responsible for the ecological, economic, political, and social breakdowns that are reaching crisis proportions across the globe (Groen, 2012). The positive impact of spirituality on relationships, classroom culture, and the creation of a sense of community are topics that have been widely discussed in the literature. Spirituality can thus be seen as a component of education that can potentially help make the school experience more personal for students (Wartenweller, 2020).

*Theme 2: A neglected aspect by the students*

While most teacher participants believed in the importance of spirituality in teaching and how integral it is to be embedded in the curriculum, they also alleged that spirituality is an aspect of life that is neglected and ignored by many students, particularly at the tertiary level. According to teacher Shee, she observed that spirituality has become “irrelevant” now among her students. “Of course, for me spirituality talks about our connection with God. Something that I think, is not common, I don’t know, but I find it irrelevant among my students in higher education”.

As for teacher Maricel, she associated the rise of depression, disrespect, and immorality in our present time because students do not see the relevance of spiritual matters in their lives. She believed that spirituality must be comfortably talked about in classes because according to her, students nowadays are looking for a purpose in life. “I believe that depression, disrespect, and immorality among our youths are on the rise nowadays because spirituality is not put in the picture by many of the students. The young people are always looking for purpose. That is why spiritual matters must not be neglected at school”.

Teacher Rowel’s account affirmed that of teacher Maricel’s about “depression among youths’ because spirituality is not given importance among youths nowadays. “I believe that students nowadays cannot control their emotions better. They easily get depressed, so they need guidance and strength coming from spiritual talks at school. They don’t usually get that need at home”.

In all the accounts, what is interesting to note is that teachers associate students’ well-being with spirituality, and they deem it beneficial for the students. According to Tisdell (2016), the prior silence on the topic of spirituality in areas of academic and professional practice is due not only to the difficulty of defining spirituality but also to the ambivalence of many who work in an academic world that has emphasized rationality and the scientific method.

**Pedagogical Practices of the Teachers about Spirituality**

Three (3) major themes were derived from the interviews with the participants regarding the pedagogical practices of the teachers about spirituality: a) Indirect Manifestation, b) Complete Avoidance, and c) Intentional Expression.

*Theme 1: Indirect manifestation through teaching values, showing kindness, consideration, and respect to students*

Teachers manifest their spirituality in indirect or covert ways. Teachers do not directly talk or show off their spirituality through spiritual exercises or ritual performances; rather, they manifest it through subtle ways, like respecting all students as valuable human beings. Teachers desire to see the best in every student by treating them accordingly as the whole person and by teaching them also the importance of respect in humanity.

The teacher-informants often linked this kind of respect with their sense of spirituality.

The words of teacher Claribelle aptly described this theme “Respect is a very good way of manifesting spirituality because you can show respect to humans themselves. Many conflicts arise even with our students when we do not know how to respect them”.

Respect for persons was frequently emphasized during the discussion of the literature as a very important part of her teaching. Teacher Cecille emphasized, “Respect is the main value that I could instill in my students. In culture, we have cultural differences, even in the language itself in Bicol. I always emphasize in our discussions that language is part of our society and culture. That is why we need to accept and respect others with different languages and cultures”.

On the same note, Teacher Jam always ensures that she regards and respects spiritual differences among her students. She emphasized that everyone can speak from their personal experiences just like she does, and she would want students to feel that they are being listened to by others. “I always remind my students that I am sharing my own experiences in class. I also give them the opportunity and encourage them often to share their own experience as well”.

Finally, this kind of classroom dynamic led teacher Clarry to explicitly embrace a philanthropy-making role. In her class, she would always emphasize the power of choice—choosing good over evil when situations call for it. “As a literature teacher, I always articulate clearly that incidents about a particular character should be explained very well that is why as a Catholic I still have to remind them about doing good and being kind, helpful, and respectful”.

Finally, several participants reported that their interactions with students were more meaningful when they had the same spiritual/religious beliefs. As Teacher Maricel stated, “I think that there is undeniably a closeness with my students particularly with those who have the same beliefs as me. We sometimes studied the Bible together and prayed with them. At these times we can relate as a spiritual family, not as teachers and students”.

The words of teacher Gina aptly described this theme in how she relates well with her students and co-workers by being patient and considerate.

Spirituality, she said, is something that we carry with us wherever we go. “I think spirituality can be brought anywhere, even at your workplace. Because of your spirituality, you get to be more patient and kinder to others. Even to your students, you give so much consideration to them because you might not know what they are going through in life”.

Showing kindness is also a testament to the spirituality of teacher Ellen in this “cruel world.” In her words, she is the “kindness in this cruel world.” She also conveyed a sense of meaning and wholeness in her work which encompasses caring for the students. She elaborated that as a teacher, she wants to be considerate, generous, and kind to her students not only regarding their knowledge of the contents but regarding their well-being in a wider sense: “I go the extra mile in giving them kindness and consideration. C’mon, we are living in a cruel world, and we can’t be cruel as well to our students. We should be kind to this cruel world”.

The narratives of the informants above show that all participants felt that it is appropriate to integrate or manifest spirituality in the teaching practices through values and emphasizing spiritual values. Teaching values is a covert way of integrating spirituality which is less in tension and believed to be universal and acceptable by many individuals.

Classroom routines are not without the inclination of the teachers toward their sense of spirituality or religiosity. Teachers may not notice it but they do bring their spirituality into the classroom through their pedagogical practices. One of the consistent routines cited by all participants is the recitation of prayers before the start of classes, particularly in the morning. Prayer seems to be a very real and practical way teachers utilize it to promote spirituality. It is also a facilitative way to offer support to students.

The participants, even though some consider this as “*Nakasayanan*” or tradition, still see the importance of having a morning prayer before the start of the classes. Teacher Anne said that her spirituality is highly visible not only to her students but also to her colleagues, simply in the way she starts her classes, which is often through prayer. “My students see my spirituality and how I express my belief, like in simply how I start my class. I do not want to start my class without asking for God’s blessings”.

Teacher Maricel also does the same routine, “My spirituality shows up in classroom routines like starting the class with a prayer, especially in the first class in the morning. I also use Bible verses and quotations as motivational activities to perk up the day before I start the discussion. I usually spend the first five (5) minutes of my class sharing [with] them the verse or word of the day”.

Teacher Jam’s responses are like Teacher Anne’s narratives. “I see to it that when I enter the room, we pray, and then before we end our class we pray also. I try not to impose prayers on my students. I tell them to prepare their prayers, a spontaneous prayer, or a prepared prayer in class”.

Based on the extracts above, it is implied that teachers consider prayer as one of the most apparent ways of manifestation of spirituality in the classroom. Teachers consider prayer as a very important classroom routine before the start of any academic activities. They do not find anything wrong with starting and/or ending the classes with a prayer because it has become a tradition.

The succeeding narratives of the informant reveal another manifestation of spirituality among the teachers which is the use of literary texts as powerful triggers to foster and integrate values and spirituality into the students as hinted by the lessons during class discussion. Teacher Cecille mentioned the power of literature to move students: “So, in literature, I can inject somehow an aspect of spirituality, whenever we come across literary works that would need an explanation about why certain acts are not good and correct”.

When asked if these are part of the lesson, she responded: “They just come out spontaneously during the discussion because I need to elaborate on the events of the story”. It is also worth the mention that the reading materials used by the teachers to emphasize spiritual values and awareness are not necessarily listed on their syllabus as they plan their teaching-learning activities. “No. They are not listed on my syllabus. But in our university, our syllabus has a template for guiding values that we need to emphasize, and these become my basis as to why I usually inject some spiritual and moral values that the students need to know and learn”.

Teacher Cecille’s narratives indicate that teachers’ strong moral convictions in life serve as role models for living and influencing young people to lead moral lives. The importance of moral

convictions among teachers is partly responsible for the moral behavior of their students.

Part of the reasons the teachers for not being explicit and avoiding spirituality in the classroom may assume that spirituality is thought of as a private matter and placed within the realm of personal rather than professional discourse (Gillespie, 2021). The teachers felt the demands to remain ‘neutral’ and unbiased to avoid misunderstanding and even criticisms from the students, or perhaps from colleagues and school administrators. The teachers, as much as possible, would want to adhere to professional standards rather than strive to be authentic in their true selves. The weight of troubles and inconvenience is too much to bear than showing who they are.

This finding is in concurrence with the studies of Wartenweiler (2020), Zembylas (2005), Varghese (2007), and Charter (2016). Teachers would suppress and silence articulating their spirituality to uphold appropriate or traditional professional philosophy, practices, behavior, and discourse in the institution. However, Palmer (2003) and White (2014) called out this kind of hiding a part of a teacher's identity. According to them, silencing themselves in matters of spirituality is one of the reasons why spirituality in the educational context receives very little attention and is continuously put on the sidelines in scholarships and explorations. Crenshaw (2013) and Mata (2014) argue that no one can and will remain ‘neutral’ and that teachers may not realize it, but they do bring their spirituality into the classroom even without calling it spirituality. Korthagen (2004) sees that holding back for the sake of peace is a big price to pay because teachers cannot teach to the fullest; while Mayes (2001) calls it a “moral violence” by ‘bracketing off’ an aspect of lives as if it were intellectually irrelevant.

#### *Theme 2: Deliberate avoidance*

Another prevalent theme that emerged in the interviews with the teachers is the “deliberate avoidance or restraint” in making spirituality apparent inside the classroom. For the participants, there is a compartmentalization of spirituality as a private matter and in a professional context. They believed that spirituality is important, yet it must not be apparent in the implementation of it in the school. The narratives below of the teachers testified to this theme.

For Dr. Clarry, spirituality is something that she is 'careful and hesitant to show', mainly out of self-protection from 'negative criticisms' not from students but from her colleagues as she is part of the administration. "Well, I am a graduate of a catholic school. But in my university, I am very careful about showing my spirituality because I just do not want to hear criticisms from the university. I do not like to be talked about, especially in the administration".

Similarly, for Teacher Richard spirituality is not his focus because he gives more emphasis on the subject matter or contents of the lesson. "Yes, I am comfortable talking about spirituality. But I don't include much about it since I am more on focused about the subject matter than injecting about spirituality".

Teacher Gina believed that spirituality is personal. She tries to avoid as much as possible talking about spirituality or religion. She did not want to be misunderstood as introducing or promoting a certain belief system or religion. As her way of showing her spirituality, she tries to be patient and considerate towards the students. "I chose not to discuss that in class. I might be misunderstood, or worse I might be talked about behind my back".

This finding agrees with Sikkink (2010), Pirner (2013), and White (2014) who found that teacher's spirituality is manifested in their pedagogical practices mainly in areas of the "hidden or indirect curriculum," like fostering community, emphasizing moral values, and treating others in kind ways. Teachers desire to see the best in every student by treating them accordingly as whole people and by teaching them also the importance of respect in humanity.

### *Theme 3: Intentional expression*

Although there was a general hesitation and holding back of belief systems from the teachers in showing their true selves, there is another prevalent theme found in the interviews, which is the intentional and spontaneous manifestation of spirituality in the classroom. This theme is nicely expounded by the following interviewees.

Teacher Cecilla believes that there is a unique and distinct role carried with being a teacher. Aside from teaching the contents or lessons so that students would learn the necessary skills they need to survive and thrive, teachers also act as second

parents, especially nowadays that students are 'less guided at home due to varied reasons. So, for teacher Cecilla, her sense of spirituality is not filtered, but it just comes out naturally. "During the discussion, my spirituality comes out naturally and spontaneously".

Teacher Rowel carried a similar view about manifesting his spirituality. He equated this as a "lifestyle" that whatever he does, even in teaching he integrates spirituality intentionally. "As a Christian, it has always been my goal and priority to integrate spirituality into my teaching. I do not feel awkward talking about it because I know it is my gain".

Intentionality and finding ways are the names of the games for teacher Anne. She said that she would always 'tweak' the lessons and inject as much as possible an aspect of spirituality. "I always find ways to integrate spirituality into my lessons even though it is not part of the topic. I tweaked my lessons and gave some more examples that could somehow be related to the English lessons".

In a similar vein, teacher Rosalie's strategy of teaching comes with integrating concepts on spirituality in an intentional way to nourish the second dimension of a person, which is our spirit and soul. "I always do, especially in Literature. I manifest it by praying before starting the class. Another is I ensure that I deepen the lesson, whatever it is, by integrating concepts on spirituality, and concepts on how we can nourish our spirit and soul".

As for Dr. Maricel, her sense of spirituality is highly visible at school. The way she talks and even in handling her classes. "It is highly visible in me at school. My students see my spirituality in how I express vocally my belief system and simply in how I start my class, I always pray. I feel satisfied if I inject an aspect of spirituality and not just pure content or knowledge".

The various accounts above make it evident that spirituality holds a special place in the lives of teachers, and it has a profound influence on who they are as teachers and what they do in the classroom. While some teachers struggled to live out their spirituality, the above-mentioned teachers found ways to integrate spirituality into their literacy practices.

This finding aligns with Grootenbroer (2004), Sikkink (2010), and Nelson-Brown's (2006)

findings that prayer is one of the most frequent and overt ways in which teachers would bring their spirituality into the classroom as part of pedagogical practices. Pirner (2013) observed that all teachers, spiritual or not, often pray for their classes, students, or colleagues.

Another salient manifestation of the teachers' spirituality in a subtle way is the selection of reading materials, particularly stories, and examples, to teach and bring about the ways that students think and feel. Teachers use reading materials as triggers to emphasize a point, to share good values, or to develop a particular value focus for the day as listed in the syllabus and as hinted by the lessons in the course of class discussion. This theme provided a parallel finding with Stonehouse's (2009) study that aside from integrating prayers in the classroom activity to promote spirituality and awareness in the classroom, some teachers also included the reading of biblical or secular texts or stories about genuine forgiveness and being considerate and kind to those in need.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, spirituality is personal and difficult to define and may mean differently to each student and teacher. It also functions differently and is manifested in different ways in the pedagogical practices of educators. Teachers' reflection helps them understand the valuable ways in which spirituality manifests in their pedagogical practices. They see it impossible to set aside their spirituality from their teaching. They often bring their spirituality into the classroom through different indirect and covert means.

It is recommended that higher education institutions spearhead measures of strengthening the spiritual literacy of the students and teachers by developing and offering program/s such as short modules or short course/s about certain spiritual identities (overt and marginalized/hidden identities, professionalism) and about what is permissible as far as literacy and pedagogy is concerned. These measures will enable teachers and students to make informed decisions about the spiritual area of their lives and be tolerant of those who are perceived as different.

It is also recommended that higher education institutions foster safe spaces to strengthen spirituality in a non-sectarian context where

everyone regardless of their religious orientation interacts, discusses, and reflects together on what are the rules or expectations the school has set about certain spiritual identities. This could help lessen if not eliminate the sense of stigma against the manifestation of spiritual identities at school.

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