EFFECTS OF SPIRITUALITY PRINCIPLES ON LEARNER MOTIVATION

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Abstract

This review investigates how core spirituality principles; connectedness, purpose, and inner peace, shape learner motivation and academic outcomes through the frameworks of self-determination and expectancy-value theories. By distinguishing spirituality from organised religion, it foregrounds personal meaning-making and the search for a higher purpose as drivers of intrinsic motivation, resilience, and sustained engagement. Drawing on studies from diverse educational contexts, the synthesis reveals that integrating spiritual well-being into pedagogy supports both intellectual growth and emotional wellness. The review also critically examines barriers to implementation in secular settings, such as cultural variance and institutional resistance, and proposes culturally attuned, inclusive strategies for embedding spirituality into the curriculum. Ultimately, fostering spiritual dimensions in education emerges as a promising pathway to richer, more balanced learning experiences and enhanced academic success.

Keywords: Spirituality, learner motivation, educational engagement, holistic education, intrinsic motivation

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Introduction

There has been a growing interest in exploring the role of spirituality in education, particularly in understanding how spirituality principles can influence learner motivation and therefore lead to improvements in learner performance (Mendoza, 2022). As education systems around the world continue to evolve, there is a recognition that the development of the whole person—mind, body, and spirit—is essential for fostering not only academic success, personal well-being, and social responsibility (Milacci, 2006). Spirituality, which encompasses a sense of purpose, connectedness, and values, is increasingly seen as a vital component in the holistic development of students. The purpose of this paper, which forms part of a broader doctoral study, is to review related literature on the effects of spirituality principles on learner motivation and to provide insights into how these principles can be integrated into educational practices to enhance student engagement and achievement.

Building on this aim, the specific objectives of the study are to bring an understanding to the conceptual foundations of spirituality in education by articulating its core elements of purpose, connectedness and values and distinguishing these from related religiosity and psychology constructs. Furthermore, to examine the relationship between these spirituality principles and learner motivation by synthesising empirical findings on how a sense of purpose, interpersonal connectedness, and value-driven engagement foster intrinsic motivation.

The concept of spirituality in education

Spirituality in education is often understood as the cultivation of inner values, ethical principles, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Sherwin & Liz, 2010). Unlike religious education, which is specific to particular faith traditions, spirituality in education is typically broader, focusing on universal aspects of human experience such as compassion, empathy, and the search for meaning (Mulalić, 2017). This broader understanding allows for the inclusion of diverse cultural and individual perspectives, making it relevant in a variety of educational contexts (Olusolami, Jonathan, Elizabeth, Dare, & Michael, 2021).

Literature indicates that spirituality principles in education can manifest in various ways, including the promotion of mindfulness (Moor, 2012), the encouragement of reflective practices (Ali, Wattis, & Snowden, 2015), the fostering of a sense of community among teachers and learners (Jamshid, Rani, Abidin, Mahmud, & Adresi, 2020), and the integration of moral and ethical discussions into the curriculum (Pant & Srivastava, 2019). These practices aim to nurture students' inner lives, helping them develop a deeper

understanding of themselves, their relationships with others, and their place in the world. By focusing on the development of character and the nurturing of a sense of purpose, spirituality principles can play a significant role in motivating students to engage more deeply with their learning (Hatami, Mahmoudi, Nia, Badrani, & Kamboo, 2019).

The link between spirituality and learner motivation

Learner motivation is a critical factor in educational success, influencing students' engagement, persistence, and achievement. Motivation can be understood as the drive that prompts individuals to pursue goals and engage in behaviours that lead to the fulfilment of those goals (Beggs & Martin, 2022). Motivation is often categorised into intrinsic motivation, which arises from within the individual and is driven by personal interest and satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation, which is influenced by external rewards or pressures (Stella, Binar, Purwanto, & Octavianus, 2023).

Spirituality principles are thought to enhance intrinsic motivation by providing students with a sense of purpose and meaning in their studies. When students perceive their learning as connected to their personal values and life goals, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated to engage in the learning process (Banke & Candace, 2012). Piyushkumar and Ashwin (2021) argue, for example, that students who are encouraged to reflect on how their education can contribute to their personal growth and ability to make a positive impact on society may develop a stronger commitment to their studies.

Moreover, spirituality principles can also influence extrinsic motivation by fostering a supportive and nurturing educational environment (Flanagan & James, 2012). When students feel valued and supported by their teachers and peers, they are more likely to be motivated to succeed academically. Spirituality principles, which emphasise the importance of relationships, community, and ethical behaviour, can contribute to creating a positive and inclusive learning environment that encourages students to do their best (Rogers & Wattis, 2015).

The purpose of the next section on literature review therefore is to synthesise existing research on the effects of spirituality principles on learner motivation, with the aim of identifying key themes, trends, and gaps in the literature. By reviewing studies from various educational contexts, this paper will provide a comprehensive understanding of how spirituality principles can be integrated into teaching and learning practices to enhance student motivation. Additionally, this review explores the implications of these findings for educators, policymakers, and researchers, offering recommendations for future research and practice.

Literature review

Spirituality in education

The concept of spirituality in education is rooted in the idea that education should address not only cognitive and academic development but also the emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions of students. Nasrollahi et al. (2020) and Akram and Morteza (2020) have argued that spirituality is an active quest for meaning, purpose, and connectedness that deepens students' self-awareness and worldview, which can contribute to a more profound understanding of oneself and one's relationship with the world. According to these researchers, spirituality in education encourages the development of inner resources such as resilience, empathy, and ethical decision-making, which are essential for navigating the complexities of life. However, their largely theoretical treatments leave open how these dimensions translate into concrete classroom practices—a gap this review will address by examining specific pedagogical interventions. While they persuasively link spiritual engagement to resilience, empathy, and ethical decision-making, their tendency to lump spirituality together with general moral education risks diluting its unique contribution. In contrast, this paper teases apart purpose, connectedness, and values as distinct levers for holistic development, to find out how these spiritual dimensions independently and synergistically shape learner motivation. It is important, therefore, by way of context, to briefly discuss some of the motivation theories and how they link with spirituality.

Motivation theories and spirituality

Motivation in educational settings is often explored through the lens of two primary theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). These are the theories that guide this study. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) classily articulates autonomy, competence, and relatedness as core drivers of intrinsic motivation; Moulin-Stożek (2020) extends this by arguing that alignment with personal values and spiritual purpose further energises engagement. For example, when students engage in learning activities that resonate with their personal beliefs and values, they are more likely to experience a sense of fulfilment and motivation. Yet Moulin-Stożek (2020)'s reliance on small-scale case studies limits the theory's applicability across diverse cultural and secular contexts.

Similarly, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) 's Expectancy-Value Theory convincingly shows that task value and expected success underpin motivation, and Beck (2018) enriches this view by proposing that spirituality broadens task value through societal and self-transcendent aims. Still, Beck (2018)'s quantitative focus underplays the communal co-construction of meaning in group learning. When students perceive their education as a

means of contributing to their spiritual growth and societal well-being, they are likely to place a higher value on their academic efforts, thus enhancing their motivation to succeed (Am, Lauren, Jenifer, &Lisa, 2018). In this review, SDT and EVT are integrated to explore not only whether spirituality principles drive motivation but also the mechanisms—cognitive, emotional, and social—through which purpose, connectedness, and inner peace operate.

Spirituality and academic engagement

Several empirical studies (Hyde, 2008; David et al, 2022; Vitalian, Napone & Lagura, 2023), have examined the relationship between spirituality and academic engagement, revealing positive links between the two. For instance, a study Hyde (2008) persuasively reports that students with a strong spiritual orientation engage more deeply and derive personal meaning from their studies, yet her work is confined to faith-based settings, raising questions about transferability. David et al. (2022) bolster the engagement link by showing that spiritual frameworks help students connect coursework to life goals, but their Western-centric samples overlook experiences in non-Western or secular contexts. Vitalian, Napone, and Lagura (2023) begin to fill this void by examining meditation and reflection among U.S. undergraduates, demonstrating correlations with persistence and goal-setting. These students are more likely to set meaningful academic goals and to persist in their studies despite challenges, indicating that spirituality can serve as a motivational resource in educational settings. However, their cross-sectional design cannot establish causality. This review will therefore advocate for longitudinal, cross-cultural studies that track how spiritual practices interact with academic engagement over time and across settings.

Spirituality and intrinsic motivation

Research has also demonstrated that spirituality can enhance intrinsic motivation by fostering a sense of purpose and self-awareness in students. Arévalo, Guillermo, and Hortensia (2008) offer valuable insight from South African high-schoolers, linking prayer and meditation to heightened intrinsic motivation, but their narrow focus on religious rituals leaves secular spiritual practices underexplored. Beggs and Martin (2022) underscore spiritual purpose, as a motivator yet stop short of connecting it to concrete academic outcomes such as grades or retention, these students were more likely to view their education as a means of achieving personal growth and fulfilling their spiritual aspirations. David et al. (2022) address this by examining U.S. undergraduates, finding that a strong spiritual orientation predicts greater self-directed learning, though their reliance on self-reports raises concerns about social-desirability bias. The study revealed that students who identified as having a strong spiritual orientation were more intrinsically motivated to learn, as they viewed education as a pathway to self-discovery

and service to others. Other researchers have concluded that spirituality can provide students with a sense of direction and purpose, which enhances their intrinsic motivation to engage with their studies (Mendoza, 2022). To strengthen causal inference, this review proposes triangulating survey data with behavioural indicators—like assignment completion rates and participation metrics—to paint a more robust picture of spirituality's impact on intrinsic motivation.

Challenges and criticisms

While the relationship between spirituality and learner motivation has been widely supported, some scholars have raised concerns about the potential challenges and limitations of integrating spirituality into education. One criticism is the difficulty of defining and measuring spirituality, as it is a deeply personal and subjective experience that varies widely among individuals (Heidari & Heidari, 2020). This variability can make it challenging to develop standardised approaches for incorporating spirituality into educational practices.

Additionally, some researchers have cautioned against the potential for spirituality to be conflated with religious instruction, which could alienate students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (Lucchetti, Gonçalves, de Carvalho, & Daher, 2019). To address these concerns, it is essential to approach spirituality in education from an inclusive and secular perspective, focusing on universal values and principles that resonate with all students, regardless of their religious or spiritual beliefs (Flanagan & James, 2012). Yet their recommendations remain aspirational without concrete implementation guidelines. In response, this review synthesises best practices from faith-inclusive and secular models, drawing on case studies that have successfully navigated cultural plurality. By doing so, it offers actionable strategies for embedding spirituality in curricula in ways that honour diversity, uphold academic rigor, and promote whole-person development.

Methodology for literature search

Literature search strategy

The study followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol. Google scholar, ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre), PsycINFO, JSTOR and Web of Science (WoS) databases were the primary sources of studies on spirituality and motivation in education. The databases were searched using keywords and Boolean search strings, ("spirituality," "spiritual principles," "spiritual practices," "spiritual development") AND ("holistic education," "learner motivation", "student motivation," "academic motivation," "intrinsic

motivation," "extrinsic motivation," "engagement") in order to whittle the number of possible hits. The time frame was not established so that the search could turn up earlier indexed studies on the subject. The literature search was conducted using several academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant studies. The search terms were used both individually and in combination (e.g., "spirituality AND learner motivation") to capture studies that specifically addressed the intersection of spirituality principles and motivation in educational contexts.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 1 illustrates the inclusion/exclusion criteria. The initial search produced more than 950 possible articles. Most of the articles were published between 2000 and 2023, during the era of globalisation and technological revolution. The search was, therefore, refined to only extract articles from peer reviewed journals; the articles had to deal with spirituality within the realm of education, include a detailed analysis of quantitative and/or qualitative data, including the discussion of the findings. Figure 1 shows the process of selecting the articles that are included in the study.

Table 1: **Inclusion/Exclusion criteria**

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus of the article	Spirituality and learner motivation, specifically focusing on classroom practice	Articles outside the scope of spirituality and learner motivation
Type of publication	Scholarly articles of original research from peer reviewed journals	Chapters of books, reports, dissertations, or conference proceedings
Research Method and Results	The articles have the structure of method and results section that describe how the study was conducted and the findings. Both quantitative and qualitative studies were included.	Literature reviews, opinions, or discussion articles that do not discussion how the study was conducted, including the analysis of data.
Language	Journal article was written in English	Journals of other languages were excluded

Screening and selection process

Initial screening

The initial screening involved a review of the titles and abstracts of the articles retrieved from the database searches. Articles that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded at this stage. The remaining articles were then subjected to a more detailed review of their full texts.

Full-text review

During the full-text review, each article was assessed for its relevance to the research topic. Articles that provided empirical data or theoretical insights into the relationship between spirituality principles and learner motivation were selected for inclusion. The reference lists of the selected articles were also reviewed to identify any additional relevant studies that might have been missed in the initial search.

Data extraction and synthesis

For each included study, key information was extracted and organised into a data extraction table. The information collected included:

- Citation: Author(s), publication year, and title.
- Study design: Type of study (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, theoretical).
- Context: Educational setting, country, and participant characteristics.
- Key findings: Main outcomes related to spirituality and learner motivation.
- Theoretical framework: Theories or models used to interpret the findings.

The extracted data were then synthesised to identify common themes, patterns, and gaps in the literature. This synthesis informed the structure of the literature review and the development of conclusions and recommendations.

Quality assessment

To ensure the inclusion of high-quality studies, each selected article was assessed using a set of quality criteria adapted from established guidelines for literature reviews:

- Clarity of research questions: Whether the study clearly stated its research questions or objectives.
- Appropriateness of methodology: Whether the study employed an appropriate methodology and research design to address its research questions.

- Rigour of data analysis: Whether the data analysis was conducted rigorously and transparently.
- Relevance to research topic: Whether the study's findings were directly relevant to the effects of spirituality principles on learner motivation.

Studies that met these quality criteria were included in the final review. Any studies that did not meet these standards were excluded or only referenced to provide context.
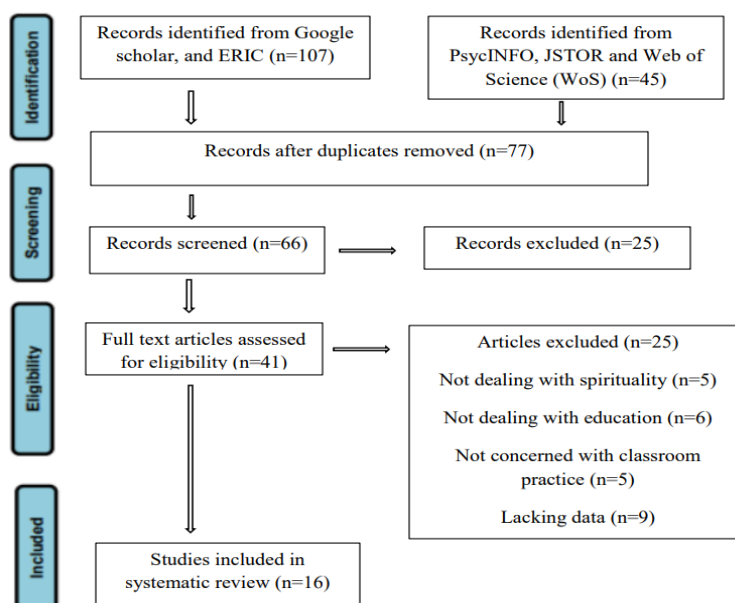

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart for the current study

Table 2: Summary of literature review

References	Year	Location	Study Aim/Scope	Data Collection Method	Sample Size	Key findings
Lemuel B. Mendoza	2022	Philippines	Examined the impact of students' spirituality in the academic performance among Grade 11 students	Likert-type Questionnaires	50	Better performance among learners who are spiritually aware
Russell et al.	2018	USA	Examined the role of spirituality in educational success	Likert-scale Survey	339	There are significant correlations between the spiritual development
Jamshid et al.	2018	Pakistan	Investigated the impact of spiritual and emotional awareness on	Cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey	113	High correlations between emotions and spirituality and academic

			learner performance			performance
Beggs and Martin	2021	USA	Investigated the relationship between spirituality and learner wellbeing and how this impact learner performance	Cross-sectional survey	134	There is indirect correlation between spirituality and learner performance
Yunita et al.	2023	Pakistan	Investigated how emotional and spiritual growth impacted students' learning motivation	Survey	400	Learner motivation was directly impacted by emotional and spiritual intelligence
Nasrollahi et al.	2011	Iran	Assessed the effectiveness of various factors, including spirituality to everyday teaching and learning	Semi-structured questionnaire	66	Spirituality helps to improve teaching and learning
David et al.	2022	India	Explored the roles of spirituality, forgiveness, and gratitude on students' academic performance	Survey	220	Spirituality principles played an important role in determining academic performance
Vitalian et al.	2016	Philippines	Explored explore the association between students' spirituality level and their academic performance	Questionnaire	366	Weak correlation between students' spirituality and academic performance
Barmola	2016	India	Assessed role of spirituality in motivation among college students	Likert scale survey	40	Spiritual learners are more motivated than non-spiritual learner
Cooper et al.	2023	USA	Examined whether there is a correlation between spirituality and student engagement	survey	253	A strong correlation was found between spirituality and learner approach to their studies
Okunlola et al.	2021	Nigeria	Examined the relationship between spirituality and academic performance in a faith-based university in Nigeria	Likert scale survey	85	Significant positive correlation was found among undergraduate students
Fuertes et al.	2021	USA	Aimed to define spirituality within the context of higher education	Semi-structured interviews	88	Spirituality is an abstract reality, which is difficult to define

Chapman et al.	2021	USA	Investigated how relational spirituality impacts education	Interviews and observations	33	Relational spirituality impacted how learners approached their studies
Flanagan, Nelson and Mullally.	2012	Ireland	Discusses the challenges and opportunities for introducing spirituality in mainstream education	Monitoring and Supervision Tool	12	The benefits of introducing spirituality in education outweigh the negatives
John Chi-Kin Lee	2020	Philippines	Examined the competencies that have direct impact on learners' performance in secondary schools in the Philippines with particular reference to spirituality	Questionnaire	747	Spirituality plays an important role in learning and social welfare
Yocum et al.	2015	USA	Explored how pre-service teachers integrated spirituality in counselling practice	Questionnaire	39	There are minimal indications of using spirituality in practice

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Findings

Spirituality and intrinsic motivation

Enhancing intrinsic motivation through meaning and purpose

The review of the literature reveals a strong connection between spirituality principles and intrinsic motivation (Vitalian, Napone, & Lagura, 2023). Several studies indicate that when students engage with learning activities that align with their spiritual values and sense of purpose, they are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation (Hyde, 2008). Intrinsic motivation refers to the drive to engage in an activity for its own sake, fuelled by personal interest and the inherent satisfaction derived from the activity.

Wallace et al. (2019) found that students who perceived their education as a pathway to self-discovery and personal growth were more intrinsically motivated to learn. These students reported that their spiritual beliefs provided them with a sense of direction and purpose, which made their academic pursuits more meaningful. As a result, they were more engaged in their studies and more likely to persist in the face of challenges.

Similarly, Cooper, Valenti and Laster-Loftus, (2020) observed that spirituality fosters a deeper connection between students and their academic work. When students view their education as part of a larger spiritual journey, they are more inclined to approach learning with curiosity and enthusiasm. This intrinsic motivation is particularly evident in students who see their education as a way to contribute to the well-being of others or to fulfil a higher calling.

The role of reflective practices

Reflective practices, such as journaling, meditation, and group discussions, were also identified as key strategies for enhancing intrinsic motivation through spirituality. These practices allow students to connect their academic experiences with their spiritual beliefs, leading to greater self-awareness and a deeper understanding of the material (Jones, 2005).

Bryant et al. (2003) found that students who regularly engaged in reflective practices were more likely to report higher levels of intrinsic motivation. These students described how reflecting on their learning experiences within the context of their spiritual beliefs helped them to internalise the material and see its relevance to their personal lives. Reflective practices also provided students with a sense of inner peace and clarity, which further enhanced their motivation to learn.

Spirituality as a foundation for a supportive learning environment

Building a sense of community and belonging

Another significant finding from the literature is that spirituality plays a role in fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Several studies demonstrate how the principles of spirituality can foster a sense of community and belonging among students, thereby enhancing their motivation and engagement.

Miller (2000) emphasises that spirituality promotes values such as empathy, compassion, and respect for others, which are essential for creating a positive classroom atmosphere. Students who feel connected to their peers and teachers are more likely to participate actively in class and support each other's learning. This sense of community is particularly important for students who may feel marginalised or isolated, as it provides them with a sense of belonging and validation (Barmola, 2016).

Van der Walt and De Klerk (2014) also discuss how spirituality can help to bridge cultural and religious differences in the classroom. By focusing on shared values and universal principles, educators can create an environment where all students feel valued and respected, regardless of their background (Banke & Candace, 2012). This inclusivity not only enhances student motivation but also promotes social cohesion and mutual understanding.

Encouraging ethical and moral development

In addition to building a sense of community, spirituality is also linked to the ethical and moral development of students. Several studies (Beggs & Martin, 2022; Akram & Morteza, 2020) suggest that when students are encouraged to reflect on their values and to consider the ethical implications of their actions, they are more likely to develop a strong sense of moral responsibility and to act in ways that are consistent with their spiritual beliefs.

Tisdell (2003) argues that spirituality can serve as a foundation for ethical decision-making in education. By integrating discussions of ethics and values into the curriculum, educators can help students to develop a moral compass that guides their behaviour both inside and outside the classroom. This ethical development is closely linked to motivation, as students who are guided by a strong sense of purpose and moral integrity are more likely to be motivated to achieve their academic goals.

Challenges and considerations in integrating spirituality into education

Definitional ambiguities and inclusivity

One of the key challenges identified in the literature is the ambiguity surrounding the definition of spirituality and the difficulty of integrating it into educational practices in a way that is inclusive and respectful of all students. As spirituality is a deeply personal and subjective experience, it can be challenging for educators to develop standardised approaches that resonate with all students.

Several studies, Bryant et al. (2003) and van der Walt and De Klerk (2014), caution against the potential for spirituality to be conflated with religious instruction. This conflation can lead to the exclusion of students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, particularly in multicultural settings. To address this challenge, educators are encouraged to approach spirituality from a secular and inclusive perspective, focusing on universal values and principles that can be embraced by all students (Fuertes & Dugan, 2021).

Balancing spirituality with academic content

Another challenge is finding the right balance between integrating spirituality and delivering academic content. Some educators may struggle to incorporate spirituality principles into the curriculum without compromising the academic rigor of their courses. The literature suggests that while spirituality can enhance motivation and engagement, it should not overshadow the core academic objectives of education.

Wallace et al. (2019) recommend that educators integrate spirituality in a way that complements rather than competes with academic content. For example, reflective practices and discussions of ethical issues can be woven into existing lessons, allowing students to explore the spiritual dimensions of their learning without detracting from the academic material. This approach helps to maintain the integrity of the curriculum while also supporting the holistic development of students.

Conclusion

The integration of spirituality principles into education offers a promising approach to enhancing learner motivation and fostering holistic student development. By addressing the challenges associated with this integration and adopting inclusive, reflective, and supportive practices, educators can create learning environments that nurture not only the intellectual but also the emotional, moral, and spiritual growth of students. Collaboration between educators, students, and families is essential for successfully integrating spirituality into education. In order to reflect their spiritual values and perspectives in the

educational environment, schools should engage with families and communities. By fostering open communication and collaboration, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere that benefits all students.

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