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Spiritual Education: Ignatian Inspirations (pp.11–28)

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Abstract

Research objectives and problems: The holistic, integral approach to education requires the inclusion of the spiritual dimension in the educational process. While theoretical discussions in pedagogy often reference spirituality, it is typically absent or only marginally present in educational practice. The aim of this article is to highlight the necessity of incorporating spiritual education into the entire educational process for all participants. The analysis conducted here leads to the following questions: What potential does Ignatian pedagogy have in supporting the spiritual development of young people? What role does the teacher play in this process when utilizing such pedagogy?

Research methods: The methods used include document analysis (source texts and studies) across various scientific disciplines (e.g., psychology, theology, pedagogy), focusing on spirituality, spiritual education as a practice of supporting spiritual development, and Ignatian pedagogy.

Structure of the article: The article begins with an introduction to the concepts of spirituality and spiritual development based on existing literature. It then outlines the general principles of spiritual education through the lens of Ignatian pedagogy.

Research findings and their influence on the development of pedagogical science: Ignatian pedagogy, which grew out of the spirituality of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, can effectively stimulate the spiritual development of all participants of education. This pedagogy, based on the philosophy of *cura personalis* (care for the person in all dimensions), the practice of Ignatian spirituality-oriented education promotes the fulfilment of humanity in both individual and social aspects. It promotes the education of individuals who are free, creative, self-reflective, and committed to serving others.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: Spiritual education is crucial in nurturing a mature, independent, and thoughtful individual with a meaningful life anchored in axiological, social, and cultural commitments. This process requires cultivating attentiveness and reflectiveness from an early age, which can be instilled in students by well-prepared teachers. Therefore, teacher training programs should ensure that future educators develop these competencies.

Keywords: spirituality, spiritual development, spiritual education, teacher, Ignatian pedagogy

Introduction

The increasing existential problems of young people, resulting in rising rates of suicide attempts, depression, and a pervasive sense of loneliness in a hyper-connected world, prompt us to ponder the condition of contemporary education. On the one hand, there is a call for a multidimensional educational approach to personal development, while on the other, the effectiveness of educational initiatives appears to be lacking. This raises questions about the feasibility and role of spiritual education as an integrating factor in the educational process. However, there are challenges in implementing spiritual education. While the value of spiritual education in fostering spiritual development is widely acknowledged in principle, with the literature on the subject providing insights on the education of the “whole person” including cognitive, emotional and

moral or spiritual dimensions, the reality differs in practice (Znanięcka, 2016b, p. 12). Hanan A. Alexander and David Carr argue that today's schools overly prioritize rational and vocational aspects of the modern market economy, thus neglecting or even dismissing the spiritual and ethical growth of young people (Alexander, Carr 2006). René Barbier sounded the alarm at the beginning of the 21st century, highlighting the great absence of inner or spiritual life in contemporary education (Barbier, 2001, p. 10).

Marta Znanięcka presents an insightful diagnosis of this situation based on American research, which may be of a universal relevance. One reason for the marginalization of spirituality in educational practice is its perception as a private, individual aspect of life. Additionally, positivist and scientific worldviews have notably shaped socially valued ideals emphasizing individual achievement, competition, materialism, and objective knowledge, thus displacing self-reflection, and open dialogue as something that is less tangible and less quantifiable. This trend was further reinforced by the neo-liberal model of education, which emerged in the second half of the 20th century, focusing on productivity and profitability. This led to a devaluation of the humanities and a retreat from a holistic, integral approach to education and upbringing (Znanięcka, 2016a, p. 207). The result of such approach has been a lack of engagement by teachers in fostering the spiritual development of pupils/students. This state of affairs is compounded by the difficulty of clearly defining the concept of spirituality (Znanięcka, 2016a, p. 208).

The concept of spirituality

Although the concept of spirituality is not easy to define, the literature on the subject offers numerous definitions and explanations of the term. According to Maj (2019), "Spirituality is a category describing the nature and existence of a person; encapsulating their profound understanding of life and guiding principles, implying a totality of attitudes and actions. It is a subject of interest to many disciplines, including theology, philosophy,

psychology, sociology, and pedagogy, especially in its anthropological aspect. Once associated or even solely identified only with religious practices (and this trend still persists), it owes its widespread interest today to its interpretation through a naturalistic lens and its intrinsic connection with the human condition in general, including both psychological and physical well-being” (Maj, 2019, p. 49). Spirituality serves as an anthropological category, indicating a specific aspect of human nature – the experience of transcendence. It involves transcending one’s own person and momentary experience, and moving beyond the material, corporeal, and transient. Thus, spirituality represents a multidimensional human experience acquired across different stages of education (Iwanicki, 2014, p. 106). In this context, the spiritual dimension denotes “the pinnacle of human development, of the natural human drive to actualize innate potentialities, to be a creator of culture, a being who is more than a body, more than the sum of their experiences, or the ‘resultant’ of external influences” (Uchnast, 2001, p. 87). An individual’s spirituality is “a set or shape of attitudes towards what is objectively or subjectively regarded as a value” (Chmielewski, 2002, p. 229).

Spirituality can be linked to a wide spectrum of human experience, and especially to facets such as imagination, creativity, and ingenuity, as well as interpersonal connections – whether with oneself, others, or a transcendent reality, which may be nameless or identified as the Divine, God, or the Spirit. Spirituality is also associated with a sense of awe and festivity, with adoration, and devotion, while also providing solace during times of adversity and suffering (King, 2008, p. 3).

Paweł Socha, a pioneer in the field of spiritual psychology in Poland, points to many areas of human functioning that demonstrate spirituality. These include a) consciousness and self-consciousness; b) reason and wisdom; c) feelings; d) sensitivity (rational, emotional, perceptual); e) creativity: the capacity for transgression and imagination; f) aesthetic sensibility; g) morality; h), religiousness; i), worldview; j), and faith (Socha, 2000, pp. 16–33). Socha contends that the spiritual dimension, also known as the noetic dimension, is not reducible to the psychological, let alone the biological aspects of human existence. It represents the highest form

of psychic activity for each individual, significantly influencing their quality of life. Since spirituality encompasses a wide range of practices and belief systems it eludes a single, comprehensive definition, making the term itself one of the most ambiguous in scientific discourse.

In his examination of various psychological perspectives on spirituality, Socha identifies five interpretations of the term. These include: (a) an innate "essential" attribute bestowed upon humanity by God, nature, or another supernatural power; (b) a natural, biological property of the *Homo sapiens* species; (c) the domain of spirits, i. e. the extrasensory dimension of reality; (d) the realm of practices aimed at attaining spiritual enlightenment or coming into direct contact with the supernatural realm; and, finally, (e) a process or integrated series of mental processes triggered by an adaptive response of each individual to the awareness of their own existence and condition (Socha, 2014, pp. 24–28).

Closely associated with the latter aspect of spirituality is another significant element: the sense of the meaning of life. This notion is illuminated by Viktor Frankl in his concept of logotherapy. The perception of life's meaning is intricately tied to the axiological, social, and cultural involvement of individuals, as well as to a unique way of life and personal existence (Popielski, 2004). In other words, spirituality entails a person's endeavour to discover their own identity and to follow a distinct, individual path of growth" (Sękałski, 2008, p. 4).

Paweł Socha notes that spirituality can be seen as the *differentia specifica* of humanity, which is essential for its fulfilment. He posits that spiritual life is the driving force behind culture, implying that culture cannot exist without spirituality. Through spiritual development, individuals not only enrich their humanity and personal growth but also contribute to the formation of culture (Socha, 2000, p. 18). Spirituality is the key to understanding culture; it is deeply intertwined with social and cultural contexts (Wargacki, 2016, p. 41). Hence, spirituality emerges as a permanent feature of humanity's culture-shaping, reflecting its universal and supra-religious character. It embodies a person's quest for personal and social development (through a shift in circumstances or awareness), guided by higher values, whether religious, ethical, or aesthetic, that transcend religious

boundaries (Skowronek and Pasek, 2013, pp. 18–19). This journey of growth involves the entirety of human existence, both physical and psychological dimension. The path of transcending one's condition is the path of self-development (Pasek, 2008, p. 128). Spirituality that develops by transcending oneself in all spheres of psychological life, through the pursuit of higher values, serves as the stimulus for constructing and defending one's own subjectivity. However, if spirituality veers away from these values, as noted by Katarzyna Olbrycht, it becomes a transgression only towards and in the name of the freedom of actualizing one's self, a freedom detached from other guiding principles, thus losing its clear purpose in shaping personal identity (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 85).

Spiritual education

Regardless of whether we view spirituality from a confessional or supra-religious perspective, it can still evolve. This fact alone broadens the scope for pedagogy as a scholarly examination of upbringing and education, as well as for educational practice itself. Spiritual development can result from spiritual education, which involves regular interaction with individuals through appropriate methods and techniques. Spirituality is a capacity and potentiality that can be further deepened through the educational process (Iwanicki, 2014, p. 97). However, it is important to acknowledge that, similar to the development of other spheres of human personality, spiritual growth also involves the development of individuals aimed at their subjective functioning and constructive participation in social life (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 84).

In this approach, fostering spiritual development requires educational support which, according to Katarzyna Olbrycht, comprises two dimensions. The first dimension involves preparing individuals to develop their own spirituality while also acknowledging the spirituality of others. Within this dimension, we should focus on such aspects as

helping students to acquire knowledge about spirituality, its components and the essence of spiritual life; teaching cognitive and emotional skills that foster the development of spirituality: such as reflectiveness, concentration, creative thinking, empathy, and care. Furthermore, it entails guiding individuals to become orientated towards one's own spirituality and towards the spirituality they discover in others (searching for one's own identity, meanings and goals, noticing one's own spiritual needs, and searching for ways to fulfil them). Discovering these spheres of spirituality in various domains of culture, e.g. in religion, art, philosophy, traditions, ethics, and language is also pivotal. Moreover, this approach entails instilling sensitivity to spiritual life as a realm of upholding absolute and normative values (commonly recognised as valid in one's own and other cultures), which includes the defence of human dignity (physical freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, justice, and peace) and values ensuring subjective, constructive participation in social life (community, solidarity, service, and dialogue). (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 87)

To sum up, in this first dimension, the emphasis is on the individual, his or her individuality and subjectivity.

The second dimension of educational support for spiritual development emphasizes the social nature of human functioning, underscoring relationships with others and with the Other. Here, the focus is on acquiring skills necessary for building social relations and bonds. In this social context, educational support for spiritual growth involves several components. These include "helping individuals learn about the spiritual practices across various cultures, as well as seek and discover general human values in different cultural settings, and raise awareness where it is scarce. Additionally, it involves cultivating sensitivity to the role and significance of higher values, their presence, and to how they are understood and experienced in one's own culture and others" (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 87).

Christian spirituality

It seems that one of the avenues or contexts conducive to nurturing spiritual development, which unfolds in both individual and social dimensions, is Christianity and the Christian spirituality built on its foundation. The wellspring of Christian spirituality lies in the revelation of God found in the Holy Scriptures, which is actualized and made real especially in liturgical practices and within the community of the Church. Christian spiritual life encompasses both a natural dimension because it involves the faculties of reason, will, and emotions, and a supernatural dimension, as it is intimately connected to the Triune God and His grace, imparted through the sacraments. The spiritual life of Christians is marked by a universal vocation to holiness, i.e. a call to participate in the life of God Himself by striving towards moral perfection expressed in genuine love, i.e. being a selfless gift of one's self. Since there are different paths toward holiness, a plurality of spiritual practices and traditions is possible.

The Christian tradition of spiritual guidance, or more aptly termed spiritual accompaniment, offers a model of education in which the interpersonal relationship is a fundamental value. The centrality of interpersonal connection as the cornerstone for spiritual advancement can be traced back to the teachings of the Desert Fathers, as well as other spiritual luminaries, such as St. Ignatius of Loyola (Filliot, 2020).

Ignatian spirituality

One of the forms of Christian spirituality is Ignatian spirituality built precisely on the foundation of the personal religious experience of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. He chronicled this experience in a small book entitled *The Spiritual Exercises*. The idea of writing the Exercises was born during Ignatius' stay in Manresa (1522–1523). The text, translated into Latin and endorsed by Pope Paul III, was published in 1548 (*Encyclopedia* 2004). Over centuries, the *Spiritual Exercises* have been esteemed as an effective method for the holistic development of

a person; a form of guidance towards self-improvement or self-education (Augustyn, 2010, p. 17). *Spiritual Exercises* underpin Ignatian pedagogy.

The goal of spiritual formation in Ignatian pedagogy is closely linked to the overarching goal of the entire *Spiritual Exercises*, which is to “overcome oneself and to order one’s life” (CD 21). This overarching aim is subordinate to intermediate aims that correspond to different stages in the spiritual journey revealed in specific weeks of the *Exercises*. These stages can be compared to the three classical spiritual paths: the path of purification, enlightenment, and union (Królikowski, 1998, p. 14). Following these paths leads to a perfect balance between what we say and what we do; between who we are and who we want to appear to be. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in the 16th century, proposed the *Spiritual Exercises* as a method to achieve this profound balance.

In the *Spiritual Exercises*, an important role is assigned to the spiritual director, whose primary task is to accompany the exercitant. The exercitant, in turn, should apply the exercises to their own life and strive to translate words into actions. The Exercises entail a holistic engagement of all senses (sight, hearing, feeling...) (Filliot, 2020). It is no accident that St. Ignatius called his booklet the *Exercises*. In *Ratio Studiorum*,¹ the term “to exercise” appears twice as often as “to learn.” Therefore, the repetition, expression, and communication of what has been learnt, foster a metareflection that leads to personal unity and integration. In this educational dynamic between the exercitant and the spiritual director, “the spiritual experience takes precedence” (Giuliani, 1990, p. 32). Ignatian spirituality emerges as a suggestion for a way of life characterized by a reflective attitude to everyday life, a respectful attitude to the world, and the hope of finding God fully (immortality) (Fleming, 2013, p. 6).

Growing out of Ignatian spirituality, Ignatian pedagogy endeavours to assist individuals in achieving harmony between different aspects of

¹ The Jesuit school law issued by the Order’s Superior General, Claudius Aquaviva, in 1599, applicable to all Jesuit schools until the 19th century. A new version was promulgated in 1832 by the Superior General John Roothaan. In 1980, new *Normae Generales de Studiis* were introduced, taking greater account of the needs of the various regions of the world in which the Order operates.

human life: the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. While the spiritual realm encompasses the “lower” levels of human experience, namely the psychological and somatic aspects, these cannot be disregarded. Any attempts to diminish their role or pit different dimensions of human life against each other result in internal turmoil and disintegration.

In the realm of spiritual reflection, it is worth noting the key aspects of Ignatian pedagogy, as they offer valuable insights for all participants in the educational process. Ignatian pedagogy champions freedom and personal creativity, with the relationship between the exercise director and the retreat participant serving as a model for teacher-student relationship. Just like the spiritual director, the teacher should avoid exerting pressure on the student. In Ignatian pedagogy, the role of the teacher is not to impart knowledge but to encourage the self-education of young people, fostering their growth in freedom, awareness, and responsibility for their own lives. Central to Ignatian education is the appreciation of the individual psychological and spiritual support provided to each student. Furthermore, teachers who themselves benefit from spiritual guidance develop a sensitivity to support others in their educational journey.

An Ignatian teacher should have the ability of psychological, existential, moral, and spiritual discernment. Each of these types of discernment is important because, as Józef Augustyn argues, at the root of frustration, discouragement, and even depression experienced by many young people lie not only psychological issues but also religious, moral, and spiritual problems. In order to help young people, the teacher should be able to identify the sources and nature of these problems.

Ignatian pedagogy emphasizes the importance of using appropriate language in the educational process, considering both the students’ needs and the values that should be promoted in the educational process. Teachers adhering to Ignatian principles should engage in spiritual exercises themselves to undergo personal spiritual growth. Through these exercises, teachers can develop a more communicative language that resonates with young people (Augustyn, 2010, pp. 20–22).

The comprehensive nature of educational influence within Ignatian pedagogy is underscored by documents originating from the Jesuit

tradition, which seek to redefine and reinterpret the principles of Ignatian pedagogy outlined in *Ratio Studiorum*. According to these documents, “Ignatian pedagogy prioritizes the formation of the whole person – heart, mind, and will – not just intellect. It encourages students to discern the meaning of what they are learning through reflection rather than by burdening the memory” (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006).

In Ignatian pedagogy, the educational process begins with experience, which is then subjected to reflection, ultimately leading to action. These three pillars of Jesuit education – experience, reflection, and action – are now commonly referred to as learning by refraction² (Atienza, & Go, 2023). Experience initiates the learning process, while, without reflection on experience, the student will not make progress. Moreover, experience alone does not necessarily translate into action and the Ignatian model of learning should culminate in action – in commitment to others and to the world.

In Jesuit educational institutions, the cultivation of the whole person is fostered within a nurturing school environment marked by care, respect, and trust. This supportive atmosphere enables individuals to confront (sometimes) painful challenges facilitating their growth into individuals who are deeply engaged living among others and for others (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006). The fruit of this formative process is reflectiveness, a cornerstone of spiritual development.

The spirituality of the teacher

The characteristics of Ignatian pedagogy outlined above assign specific tasks to the teacher. If a teacher inspired by this pedagogy wants to promote the holistic development of students, including their spiritual growth, they must take responsibility for own spiritual development.

² A word made up of two English words: reflection and action.

This was well understood by the great Jesuit educators before the Order's suppression, such as Francesco Sacchini, Juan Bonifacio, and Stefan Sczaniecki. They emphasized that a good teacher is characterised by three attitudes: he is gentle in interactions with students, upholds high moral standards, and is thoroughly educated. They also underscored the importance of maintaining harmony between professional expertise and moral integrity. Teachers were expected to be both righteous and learned. This is the bedrock of Christian education (Vergara Ciordia, 2012, p. 88). The Jesuit educational model thrived on this balance of knowledge and virtue within the teacher, who served as a personal role model (Królikowska, 2019, p. 206).

Contemporary Ignatian pedagogy fits into this historical tradition. According to the document "Characteristics of Jesuit Education," teachers and administrative staff, whether Jesuit or lay, are viewed as more than mere instructors in matters of learning. They are personally involved in the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth of each student, nurturing a sense of dignity and worth in each individual and fostering responsible citizenship within the community (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006, p. 26). In this context, the teacher's role extends to being a member of a learning community where everyone is encouraged to develop. Since intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth is a lifelong pursuit, adult members of the learning community are also encouraged to continue their growth in these areas (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006: 27).

Maturing and gaining independence, inherent in growing in freedom, rely more on active participation than on passive reception. This process involves personal study, seeking opportunities for self-discovery, and the development of one's creativity and a reflective attitude. The teacher's task is to help each student become an autonomous learner and take responsibility for their own education and development (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006, p. 27).

In the Jesuit order, teaching has always been considered a service. *Servicio*, the service that defines the work of teachers and educators in the Ignatian tradition, must retain its mystical dimension; without it, teaching

becomes merely the function of a well-organized and efficient institution (Decloux, 1991, pp. 27, 33). This approach fails to address the deepest needs of individuals and undermines the practice of Ignatian pedagogy, which views education as a communication between people – sharing not just knowledge, but also experience (Decloux, 1990, p. 128).

Therefore, the teacher should first and foremost, adopt an attitude of service towards students (*Ratio Studiorum*, p. 90). Similarly, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, the spiritual director's role is to merely accompany the retreat participant on their personal path of spiritual growth: not to direct or impose, but to provide support. This is a principle that modern Ignatian pedagogy calls *cura personalis*, or concern for the person.

Conclusions

Spirituality is connected to values, purpose, and the meaning of life. Therefore, spiritual education requires the involvement of all aspects of the personal "I": the cognitive, emotional, and active dimensions.

Recognizing spirituality as a developmental category implies a process of supporting its growth and becomes one of the most important, even fundamental, goals of education. It must be emphasized that spiritual development and its support is not a means to increase the effectiveness of education, especially education with neoliberal or authoritarian policies (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 87). It is an autonomous value because it affects the development of humanity, which should never be used as a means to other ends (Kant, 1984, p. 62).

It should be noted that this concerns the development of humanity in all participants of education: both the student and the teacher, and perhaps, above all, the teacher. A teacher who does not nurture their own spiritual development will not effectively assist their students in this endeavour. Georges Gusdorf's assertion that "we educate by who we are" has not lost its relevance. This principle encourages teachers to focus on developing their own personality and humanity, which – apart from disciplinary knowledge and teaching methods – is considered crucial in spiritual education.

The inner transformation of the teacher is, therefore, the first condition for effective teaching and education. Then, education becomes an opportunity for “spiritual exercise” and a place for “working on oneself” (Gusdorf, 1963, p. 65).

Christian spirituality, and, therefore, Ignatian spirituality, seeks to cultivate a new sensitivity to oneself and to the world, moving towards constant attention to God’s presence. Attention, or attentiveness (*nepsis* in Greek), is described as “key to the Christian concept of education” (Weil, 1966, p. 85). However, this crucial skill is waning in today’s hyper-connected societies, making it more necessary than ever. Therefore, according to Filliot, it is essential to reinvent the ecology of attention. This approach is what we need in order to practice a true pedagogy of the inner self, often neglected in modern schooling, which allows us to feel and relish things inwardly and dwell in them (Filliot, 2020). Ultimately, it is not the abundance of knowledge but the inward feeling and tasting of things that satisfies and satiates the soul (*Spiritual Exercises*, 2002, point 2).

The ecology of attention, or mindfulness, has become a primary educational challenge today. According to Katarzyna Olbrycht, personal development should focus on consciously cultivating one’s own spirituality. This leads to increased reflectiveness, a stronger sense of subjectivity and agency, as well as finding one’s way to one’s identity and deeper bonds with others (Olbrycht, 2018, p. 80). This is compliant with the fundamental aim of Ignatian education: to discover and explore the meaning of human life and to foster the full, holistic development of each student (*Podstawy edukacji ignacjańskiej* [Fundamentals of Ignatian Education], 2006, p. 20).

Ignatian pedagogy, which grew out of Ignatian spirituality, aims to strengthen young people’s inner resources, self-awareness, and self-understanding, helping them navigate the prevailing insecurity of the modern world (Znanięcka, 2016a, p. 208).

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