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The Meaning and Engagement of Spirituality for Positive Youth Development in Social Work

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ABSTRACT

Spirituality is becoming recognized as an important source of strength within social work and the positive youth development field. However, social work innovations related to spirituality have mainly focused on adults. In order to increase focus on youth, this article integrates insights about spirituality from the positive youth development field and social work. First, it provides a conceptualization of spirituality in relation to youth. Second, the article explains the importance of spirituality for strengths-based social work that can enhance youth development by attending to issues of meaning and identity, development toward adulthood, risk factors, and personal and environmental religious and spiritual resources. It highlights spirituality-based helping practices that may be applicable to working with youth.

Implications for Practice

- Researchers and theorists suggest that spirituality is an important aspect of child and adolescent development.
- Strengths-based practice can contribute to youths' forming identity, thriving in adversity, preventing risk factors, and accessing religious and spiritual resources.

The past 15 years have seen a rapidly growing interest in spirituality within social work, counseling psychology, medicine, and allied helping professions (Canda & Furman, 2010; Derezotes, 2006; Faiver, Ingersoll, O'Brien, & McNally, 2001; Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2005). However, child and youth spirituality has been neglected in social work and related youth serving professions, especially when compared to adults and older adults (see Boyatzis, 2005; Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, 2007; Yust, Johnson, Sasso, & Roehlkepartain, 2006). Most inquiry has been devoted to the sustaining effects of spirituality and religious practices in adulthood and to guidelines for professional practice that focuses on adults (Yust et al., 2006). Very few social work studies have been conducted on the spiritual concerns of young people or on relevant spiritually sensitive practices (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crompton, 1998; Derezotes, 2006; Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007). Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude's (2003) analysis of social science literature databases found that less than 1% of the articles on children and adolescents addressed spirituality or religion. In a comprehensive bibliography on spirituality in social work, only 20 publications out of about 770 had an explicit focus on children and youth (Canda, Nakashima, Burgess, Russel, & Barfield, 2003). Kvarfordt and Sheridan's more recent review of social work literature confirmed this lacuna and noted its inconsistency with empirical studies that show that involvement in religion and spirituality may reduce risk factors for youth, such as psychological stress, premature sexual activity, psychoactive substance abuse, poor educational attainment, and delinquency.

Fortunately, research attention to spiritual and religious development of youth has been rising since the mid-1990s, particularly within the study of child development and positive youth development (Boyatsis, 2005; Lerner, Roeser, & Phelps, 2008). Researchers and theorists have suggested that spirituality is an important aspect of child and adolescent development and overall life experience for the formation of identity and sense of life meaning (Benson, 1997; Coles, 1995; Hay & Nye, 1998; King, 2003; Wilson, 2004). In the only social work text on spirituality and children, spirituality is recognized as a critical component of understanding children's and youth's developmental process, creativity, family ties, cultural identity and affiliations, and issues of oppression and empowerment (Crompton, 1998). Indeed, Crompton points out that United Kingdom child welfare policy requires that a child's religious background be considered in making foster and adoptive placements within the context of antiracist practice.

The term *positive youth development* connotes a focus on supporting or promoting the positive developmental processes that advance the health and well-being of youths as well as the capacity of youths to make contributions to benefit family and society as they grow into adulthood (Lerner et al., 2008). Positive youth development emphasizes the normal growth process and optimal developmental potential as well as challenging issues of troubled youth (Delgado, 2002; Larson, 2000). In addition, as a field of practice, positive youth development aims at promoting young people's positive emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and intellectual development and strengthening their capacity for productive personal and social relationships. The positive youth development field encompasses many disciplines, such as counseling

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psychology, developmental psychology, education, counseling, and social work. Its value base and orientation toward practice is highly consistent with the strengths perspective in social work and positive psychology (Amodeo & Collins, 2007).

Although social workers simultaneously "focus on solving problems in living while supporting optimal human functioning and quality of life" (Sheridan, 2003, p. 256), social work as a profession has in the past tended to focus on problems, deficits, and diagnoses rather than strengths and resources. In the context of child welfare and family services, social work theory and practice have emphasized troubled youths and the services they require. This is reflected in child welfare studies of the 1980s and early 1990s that focused on issues of religiously based child abuse and neglect and its existential aspects (see Brown, 1980; Clifford, 1994). Positive youth development has been emphasized less than treatment and therapeutic interventions. However, recently there have been efforts to incorporate youth development principles into social work practice with children and youth in a variety of settings (see Amodeo & Collins, 2007; Delgado, 2002). In particular, the strengths perspective has laid a foundation on which the positive youth development approach can be built within social work (Cheon, 2008; Saleebey, 2005). The strengths perspective views people as "having untapped, undetermined reservoirs of mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual abilities" (Amodeo & Collins, 2007, p. 77).

This article integrates insights about spirituality and youth from both the interdisciplinary positive youth development field and social work to familiarize social workers with the current trends of knowledge and practice. It first provides a conceptualization of spirituality for positive youth development. Secondly, the article explains the significance of spirituality for strengths-based social work practice that can enhance youth development by attending to such issues as formation of meaning and identity, thriving in adversity, prevention of risk factors, accessing religious and spiritual resources, and engaging in spirituality-based helping practices.

The Meaning of Spirituality for Youth Development

Spirituality is somewhat challenging to define in that the term is commonly used imprecisely and may encompass anything from an inner personal journey without involvement in a religion, to a relationship with God, to participation in formal religious communities. In the literature of professional helping (including social work, nursing, medicine, pastoral counseling, counseling psychology, and allied fields), there have been inconsistent uses of the terms "spirituality" and "religion," and related terms such as "religiousness" or "religiosity" (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Hill et al., 2000; Koenig, 2007). Although there is not a consensus on definitions, many authors are calling for a distinction between the concepts of spirituality and religion (Faiver et al., 2001; Hill et al., 2000; Koenig, 2007; Lerner et al., 2008; Oser, Scarlett, & Bucher, 2006). It is common to view spirituality and religion as distinct but related concepts in the contemporary North American social work literature as well as in the recently emerging international movement for spiritually sensitive social work (Canda, 2008; Canda & Furman, 2010). This distinction is especially useful for working with youth, as will be explained below. The following definitions of spirituality and religion summarize the most common themes from the interdisciplinary and international scholarship in social work and allied helping professions, including positive youth development. For a more detailed presentation of operational and holistic conceptual models of spirituality, see Canda and Furman (2010).

Spirituality refers to the human search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and morality in the context of relationships with self, others, the universe, and ultimate reality and may be associated with world views based on theism, atheism, polytheism, animism, and other possibilities (Canda, 2008; Canda & Furman, 2010; Lerner et al., 2008; Sheridan, 2003). Spirituality orients individuals' and communities' most significant concerns, primary motivations, developmental goals, moral standards, ideas about well-being and justice, and ways of making connection between self, other people, the larger world, and universe. It often includes experiences of transcending the limits of one's personal body and ego through expanded consciousness, intimacy with other people and nature, and relationship with the sacred (Carroll, 1998; Roeser, Isaac, Abo-Zena, Brittian, & Peck, 2008). Spirituality provides a developmental thrust toward a sense of wholeness, integrity, meaningfulness, connectedness, and concern for others' well-being.

Religion is commonly defined as a formal and organized system of values, beliefs, and behaviors related to spirituality that is organized and shared within a community and is transmitted over time (Canda & Furman, 2010). Religions include a wide range of spiritual world views, such as animism and harmony with the earth among many Indigenous peoples, theism (such as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and nontheistic nondualism (as in Neo-Confucianism, Buddhism, and Vedantic-Huinduism). Given this distinction, everyone has spirituality (in the same sense that everyone has physicality and sociality), but not everyone affiliates with a religion or believes in a supernatural realm. Individuals may express their spirituality within or outside of formal religious contexts. Most people in highly religious countries, such as the United States, express spirituality at least in part through religious forms or do not make a distinction between spirituality and religion. In more secular countries, such as the United Kingdom and Norway, religion is not the most common vehicle for spiritual expression (Canda & Furman, 2010; Zahl, Furman, Benson, & Canda, 2007). In any case, as Canda and Furman emphasize, professional definitions are meant to assist communication and measurement in practice and research, but they should not be imposed on clients. The meanings, relevance, and preferred terms regarding spirituality and religion for clients must first be assessed, and then helping professionals can proceed accordingly (Nelson-Becker et al., 2007).

Within literature on youth development and social work with youth, this conceptual distinction and emphasis on client centeredness is also becoming common (King, 2003). For example, Coles (1995) considers the quest for meaning and purpose to be the essence of children's spirituality. Lerner, Dowling, and Anderson (2003) view spirituality as an orientation to self and one's context that entails both transcending oneself and inspiring a commitment to contributing to others beyond the self in time and place. Oser et al. (2006) define religion in terms of organized faith communities and religiosity as the degree to which people engage in these communities. Yust et al. (2006) define spirituality as the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence and participation in a sense of the sacred as something greater than oneself: "It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility" (p. 8). They point out that spirituality is related to religion and faith but is not necessarily restricted to religious expressions and institutions.

In particular, youth spirituality is regarded as young people's developmental search engine for connectedness, meaning, and being in touch with what is most vital to one's life; it opens youth to an adult life of personal meaningfulness and social responsibility (Lerner et al., 2008). As Elkins and his colleagues (1988) point out, developing spirituality can add meaning to the practice of religion, and conversely, the practice

of religion can deepen spirituality. Contemporary young people in the West seem to have little difficulty with this distinction. Smithline (2000) found in a study of protective factors against substance abuse that teenagers conceptualized spirituality as being distinct from religion. Based on a focus group study with 459 participants from 20 different high school classrooms in Michigan, Steen, Kachorek, and Peterson (2003) found that the vast majority of high school students considered themselves to be spiritual: "A number of students stated that a belief in a Christian God was part of their own spirituality," but just as many expressed that "although they were quite spiritual, they were not religious" (p. 12).

According to Wilson (2002), "Adolescents would be more likely to become interested in secular spiritual activities—those activities unconnected to any institutionalized system of belief that teenagers might associate with authority" (p. 9). Although youth spirituality is currently an interesting and important social phenomenon, "much of it has been invisible to mainstream adult society, because our society has not known how to look for it, and therefore has not known how to respond to it" (Tacey, 2001, p. 88). Therefore, it is critical for social workers to increase their awareness of their young clients' spirituality and whether it is relevant to practice goals in child welfare, school social work, family services, and other youth-serving contexts.

Positive Youth Development and Spirituality

Spirituality is a very significant aspect of positive youth development. In general, childhood and youth are important times for young people to explore and practice spirituality and to make decisions about how to relate to their religious or secular upbringings. Adolescence is a particularly intense period of ideological hunger, a striving for meaning and purpose, and desire for relationships and connectedness. Spirituality plays a central role in the perception and construction of meaning in the lives of young people (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996). Further, childhood and adolescence are important periods for maturation and remodeling of the brain to support regulation of emotions, cognitive sophistication, and prosocial awareness and behavior, all of which are related to spiritual development (Lerner et al., 2008).

Some studies find that spirituality is related to more positive development and less risk-taking among adolescents. For example, Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (2002) found that a positive youth development program is considered to foster spirituality if it promotes inner reflection or meditation and supports adolescents in exploring a sense of spiritual identity, meaning, practice, or the development of beliefs in a higher power. Benson et al. (2003) define spiritual development as "the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity of self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred" (p. 205). In this definition, spirituality was described as both a human trait and a process that develops that trait over time. This definition also focuses on the person as actively constructing a view of the self-in-context (Roehlkepartain et al., 2005).

Fowler (1981) contended that spirituality (i.e., faith, in his terminology) is a component of the healthy development of individuals. Fowler proposed six stages of faith development as a spiraling upward movement. It becomes increasingly wider, which represents the expansion of understanding of the complexity of one's self, others, the world, and the universe around us (Fowler & Dell, 2005). For example, conceptions of God tend to move in childhood from relatively anthropomorphic and concrete styles—as shaped by familial, religious, and cultural norms—toward more self-reflective, critical, complex, and contextual styles in adolescence and young adulthood. Some researchers view children's spirituality as being strongly influenced by unrealistic magical thinking and conformism. However, Boyatzis (2005) points out that other research shows both that children may have more subtle thinking than many adults presume and that many adults persist in concrete and magical thinking. Others have pointed out that children tend to have more creative imagination, sensory acuity, here and now focus, and occasions of absorbed joy than many adults, and hence may have a more enlivened sense of spirituality (Derezotes, 2006; Frame, 2003).

Further, some children are spiritually precocious, demonstrating an unusually keen interest in questions of spirituality, the meaning of life, and the nature of death (Erikson, 1968; Frame, 2003). If they raise unexpected questions and challenges to adults, they risk being ignored and stymied. In adolescence, questions that challenge the world views, values, and religions of parents and society at large are more likely to emerge as youth try to sort out how to relate to their upbringing as they shift toward adult roles and sense of identity.

Brendtro, Brokenleg, and van Bockern (1990) established four foundations for positive youth development—belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity—which are related to spiritual development. Regarding youth who link spirituality to religious participation, King (2003) identified three ways in which a religious tradition might foster positive development in adolescents: (a) religious beliefs might affirm and celebrate the uniqueness of an individual; (b) religious practices can connect youth to the "past, present and future body of believers or practitioners;" and (c) a religious tradition gives a sense of being part of something greater than themselves, such as part of a naturally created order.

Spirituality can be a helpful source of identity formation and development (King, 2003). Youth development results from the accumulation of the everyday experiences with people, places, and possibilities; it sets the foundation for a healthy sense of identity, social roles, and life meaning for adult life (Larson, 2000). The task of the adolescent is to resolve the tensions of identity formation and confusions, and a central part of this process involves "trying on" adult roles (Erikson, 1968). Spirituality is a key means of discovering significance and meaning in life. Spirituality can help adolescents meet their developmental tasks and transition successfully into adulthood in this natural developmental process (Wilson, 2004). Larson (1996) suggested five virtues that may emerge in adolescence: trust, power, purpose, mastery, and self-sacrifice. Wilson (2004) explores four developmental tasks of adolescence associated with spirituality: questioning of authority, meaning-making, identity formation, and search for connectedness or belonging. Studies indicated that participation in secular spiritual activities and religious organizations may help youth and children develop a positive sense of identity (Marcia, 2002). Lerner et al. (2003) explain that in the youth development field, spirituality is tied specifically to thriving even in the midst of adversity. Spirituality is at the heart of the thriving process because it motivates young people to contribute to something greater than themselves. Thriving is a process that develops over time through a relationship between an individual and the environment. Thriving youth exhibit not only the absence of negative behaviors but also indicators of positive development. Lerner and his colleagues (2003) observed that spirituality's relationship with thriving was distinct from that of religiosity in that spirituality was most related to having an orientation to help others and inversely related to participation in activities of self-interest, such as dating. Similarly, Engebretson (2002) found that belief in moral values was one of the factors that helped to prevent self-destructive and antisocial behavior among young people.

Spiritual development of youth heightens awareness of self in relationship and connection to a community of fellow believers, the wider

community and world, nature, the larger universe, and the transcendent or sacred (King, 2003; Lerner et al., 2008; Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, 2001). Youth who are positively engaged in religious and spiritual activities may become more fully invested in their community and committed to provide direction, insight, energy, and efforts around problem-solving for the community. Hay and Nye (1998) explored the core construct of children's spirituality to be a "relational consciousness," that is, a child's awareness of being in a relationship with something or someone. In this regard, it is important to note that the relationships between youth participants and adult staff of youth-serving organizations have been shown to be an important protective factor for positive youth development. The relationships that form between youth and staff professionals can facilitate personal support and monitoring (Perkins et al., 2001).

Regnerus and Elder (2003) and Dowd (1997) suggest that at-risk youth who are in danger of negative behaviors, including such things as alcohol use, dropping out of school, and teenage pregnancy, differ from more stable peers both in lower maturity of spiritual beliefs and in lower involvement in religious activities. Benson (1997) identified significant differences in beliefs and values by showing such results including less indication of a belief in life after death, less maturity in faith, and less concern for world hunger. Some at-risk youth may not be grounded in a spirituality that gives them a positive sense of connectedness with God or a higher being, or a sense of responsibility for their fellow humans (Dowd, 1997). For example, spirituality has been described as an important support for youthful offenders (Larson, 1996).

Despite the generally salutary effects of spiritual growth and religious participation for youth, it is important to consider the possible deleterious effects. Most research about this has focused on religious forms of spirituality (Crompton, 1998; Derezotes, 2006; Frame, 2003). Areas of concern include religiously rationalized abuse and neglect of children and youth; religious strictures that may violate a youth's human rights, such as ritually induced physical injury, enforced marriage, or forced religious conversion; discrimination, oppression, and persecution of youth within religious minorities or of nonreligious youth within strongly religious societies; using religious teachings of a harshly judgmental and punishing God to enforce conformism through shame, guilt, and fear; teaching youth to hate or discriminate against others based on their differentness from religious dictates; and sexual exploitation of children and youth by clergy or other spiritual mentors. Social work can promote positive youth development by seeking to prevent, ameliorate, and redress these concerns while focusing on youths' spiritual aspirations, strengths, and resources.

It is also crucial to examine spiritual development issues and perspectives that vary based on various forms of diversity among youth, including immigrant experiences, ethnic identity, national and cultural context, gender, sexual orientation, religious or nonreligious affiliation and style, disability, minority or majority status, and socioeconomic class (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crompton, 1998; Lerner et al., 2008).

Spirituality-Based Helping Practices With Youth

Since spirituality is often relevant for positive youth development, it is important to consider the range of spirituality-based helping practices that might be applied in youth work. At this point, there is very little empirical research and systematic clinical reports about the process and outcomes of these practices with youth, even though the empirical literature does support the salutary effects of spiritual growth and religious participation in general. Therefore, this discussion is not an endorsement of specific practices. Rather, it presents the range of helping activities addressed in the literature in order to encourage carefully monitored spiritually sensitive applications as well as further study.

In a 2008 national replication survey of practitioner members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; Canda & Furman, 2010), more than half of respondents indicated that it is appropriate to raise the topic of spirituality in work with foster parenting (67%), adoption (65%), sexual abuse (65%), and difficult child or adolescent development (55%). Lower percentages indicated it is appropriate to raise the topic of religion (foster parenting = 57%; adoption = 58%; sexual abuse = 47%; difficult youth development = 37%), likely reflecting concerns about inappropriate imposition of religious ideas. This pattern was similar to findings from the original survey conducted in 1997 (Canda & Furman, 1999). Wilson (2002) found increased interest in spirituality among youth-serving agencies. In the most extensive national survey focused on clinical social workers who practice with children and youth (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007), most practitioners reported that they sometimes or often encountered spiritual abuse or neglect, the four most common types being misuse of frightening religious teachings; deleterious spiritual effects of materialistic modern culture; spiritual distress by witnessing violence; and spiritual abuse interwoven with physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. More than half reported using religious or spirituality-derived interventions sometimes or often, including reflecting on loss, recommending participation in altruistic activities, gathering information about religious or spiritual background, attending to spiritual experiences, assessing ways that their familial religious or spiritual beliefs are helpful, encouraging caregivers to support spiritual development or religious participation, and other types of assessment and referral for religious or spiritual counseling. Only 6% of respondents said that religion or spirituality is not an important issue.

Although these studies show that many social workers serving youth may be open to addressing spirituality and religion, this is by no means standard practice. Indeed, 83% of respondents in the Kvarfordt and Sheridan (2007) study indicated that they rarely or never received content on religion or spirituality in their training. Given the potential of spirituality for youth development and thriving, together with the frequency of clinicians encountering related issues in practice, this dearth of educational preparation raises serious concerns about how social workers can meet their professional ethical obligation to practice on the basis of established knowledge and competence.

Various studies on spirituality-based helping activities suggest their efficacy and that they merit more detailed examination. For example, the practice of substance abuse recovery has a long history of using spiritual interventions, including with youth (Crompton, 1998; Smithline, 2000). Shuler, Gelberg, and Brown (1994) describe how spiritual beliefs among homeless women and their children can help youth develop a sense of connectedness to self and others. Many studies have found the salience of spirituality for youth in a wide range of areas, including physical health, resilience and coping, suicide, termination of pregnancy, psychological distress, and child abuse or maltreatment (Crompton, 1998; Koenig, 2007). Spiritual sense of meaning and purpose and religious participation have also been associated with reduced depression, contact with crime, violence, delinquency, and delayed voluntary sexual activity (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007). Many spiritual growth-promoting activities are correlated with positive outcomes among adolescents. These activities include yoga, meditation, guided visualization, and martial arts (Wilson, 2004). Wilderness therapy has long been an intervention in the field of child and youth care. Wilderness therapy is typically designed to reveal and address problem behaviors, foster

personal and social responsibility, and enhance the emotional growth of clients through social bonding and a profound sense of connection with nature (Harper, Russell, Cooley, & Cupples, 2007).

Crompton (1998), Derezotes (2006), and Frame (2003) recommend additional practices to support the spiritual well-being of children and youth. These include helping children to emotionally process fear of death and confusing or frightening spiritual experiences or dreams; cooperating with religion-based rites of passage through the life cycle that may help children and adolescents to experience affirmation and changes of role and identity; supporting voluntary participation in celebrations of personal, familial, and community events such as festivals, fasts, and feasts; respecting and engaging in spiritual practices that foster a sense of life meaning, connectedness with others, self-awareness, and a positive relationship with the sacred, such as worship, prayer, meditation, and nature excursions; utilizing symbols, stories, and role models that represent resilience, thriving, and virtue within the spiritual perspective of the youth and her or his family and community; and play, art, and music therapies with children to help them express their spiritual understandings and experiences.

Bartkowski (2007) points out that surveys of American teenagers have shown a relatively consistent trend over the past few decades that religion is an important vehicle for spiritual life for many. About 85% of teens claim a religious denominational affiliation (about 50% Protestant and about 25% Catholic) and most say religion is important or very important in their lives. Religious communities offer a wide range of rituals, spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, meditation, and reflective retreats), inspirational sacred texts, religious education, social activities, and support systems for children and adolescents (Yust et al., 2006). Social workers in youth-serving agencies should become familiar with any religious or nonreligious spiritual beliefs, support systems, and activities that their youth clients and guardians may identify as important individual, familial, and community sources of strength and resources. When relevant to clients' goals and beliefs, social workers can refer to and collaborate with these religious and spiritual support systems.

Conclusion

Despite the increased attention to spirituality in social work and other helping professions, little attention has been given to children and adolescents. This article has pulled together insights about spirituality and positive youth development from social work and other youth-serving fields in order to make the information more widely accessible to social workers and to increase their attention to spirituality (in both religious and nonreligious forms) as a source of strength and resources.

The importance of spirituality for positive youth development needs to be more emphasized in social work with children and adolescents. Research has shown that the spiritual search for meaning, purpose, morality, and transcendence is important in order for children and youth to move successfully into adulthood. It has also shown that religious participation is an important part of many youth's lives and that it tends to be associated with salutary effects. Further, the possible negative impacts of religion or spiritual fears and confusions also deserve attention for problem prevention and growth promotion.

Moving toward greater awareness, knowledge, respect, and skill regarding youth spirituality will require that social work education programs include content on spirituality, including content for children and adolescents. Canda and Furman (2010) point out that the standards of the NASW, the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) all recognize the importance of addressing religious diversity and spirituality. In particular, CSWE curriculum guidelines mention spiritual development as a needed topic of education. For example, human behavior courses could include development theories concerning youthful formation of faith, morality, and transpersonal awareness (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Courses on human diversity could examine how religious communities in the region might serve as sources of support for their youth members. Social policy courses can examine the implications of faith-based service policies regarding families and youth. Direct practice courses could examine the range of spiritually relevant practices mentioned in this article and help students to sort out the ethical and clinical issues of their use. Students who have field internships in youth-serving agencies can include learning about application of such practices with the help of agency-based supervision and classroom discussion.

All of these recommendations call for a major increase of research to further explore all of the conceptual and empirical issues mentioned in this article, since the role of spirituality in positive youth development is relatively little developed in comparison with adults, and even that is still an emerging area of inquiry (Canda & Furman, 2010). In particular, practitioners need more information about the process and outcomes of particular ways to address spirituality in practice, especially in relation to issues of youth diversity. The recommendations presuppose that social workers who apply spirituality in work with youthful clients will adhere to ethical guidelines for spiritually sensitive practice, such as respect for spiritual diversity; restraint from inappropriate proselytizing; assuring clients' and guardians' interest, readiness, and comfort; communicating with empathy and rapport; and establishing professional competency regarding any particular practices that are followed (Canda & Furman, 2010; Canda, Nakashima, & Furman, 2004). Canda and Furman's ethical guidelines for spiritually sensitive and culturally appropriate practice are relevant to social work with youth (Kvarfordt & Sheridan, 2007). However, more work is needed to tailor their principles for ethical decision-making to issues and settings specific to practice with youth. For example, school social workers should be cognizant of dilemmas about respecting students' freedom of religious expression versus imposition of religious or nonreligious agendas, especially given separation of church and state in public schools. In child protection and in health care settings, social workers may become involved in conflicts over parents' religious objections to certain medical interventions for a child's health (such as blood transfusion for Jehovah's Witnesses).

Given social work's long historic commitment to serving youth and its more recent embracing of the strengths perspective, spiritually sensitive social work with children and youth can gain much from a deepened connection with the interdisciplinary field of positive youth development.

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Manuscript received: November 7, 2008
Revised: September 3, 2009
Accepted: September 9, 2009