Participant Perceptions of the Influence of Spiritual and Human Values Education on their Behaviour, Character and Leadership Potential- A Qualitative Research Study

Nanduri Venkata Satyanarayana
Ph.D. Scholar, AMET University, Chennai, India
B. Madhavan
Professor, AMET Business School, AMET University, Chennai, India

Abstract

This study explores the relevance of spiritual and moral education in promoting human excellence which includes academic achievements as well as moral and spiritual perceptions enabling character development for good leadership. This qualitative research approach was designed and conducted to elicit the participant perceptions on the influence of a system of spiritual and human values education (SSE) for children. The findings showed that the participants gained clarity of career and life goals, improvements in character such as discipline, calming mind and concentration, values in life, self-less service to community, relation building, self- control, self-regulation , better interpersonal relations, and good leadership qualities, as a result of their SSE training. The findings were observed to be in line with findings in similar studies conducted elsewhere contributing to the body of knowledge.

1. Introduction

The twentieth century and the beginnings of the current millennium have been characterised by tremendous advances in the fields of science, technology and material well-being, yet accompanied by negative trends in the social environment everywhere. Mazumdar (2000) states that our search for bringing deeper meaning into the education of the young persons takes us to explore the relevance of spiritual and moral education in promoting human excellence which includes academic achievements as well as moral and spiritual perceptions as quality leaders and managers. Crajczonek (2015) affirms that children's identity, sense of belonging and sense of meaning, as well as purpose in life are all linked to, and affected by, their spirituality and the ways through which that spirituality might be nurtured.

The concepts of spirituality and spiritual development from both secular and religious perspectives have evoked considerable research interest and scholarly writing (Crajczonek, 2015). A greater portion of this research and literature has been concerned with adults and adolescents, but more recently focused attention has been given to young children's spirituality and spiritual development. Indeed, young children's spiritual development is increasingly recognised as foundational and acknowledged to be an equally important aspect of their wellbeing, as are their personal, physical, intellectual, social, and emotional developments(Crompton, 1998).

What is spirituality?

There is a lack of consensus on one universally acceptable definition of the word spirituality. In the review of literature, Crajczonek (2015) states that one way of perceiving the many diverse descriptions and definitions for spirituality is to place them between two ends of a continuum. At one end, spirituality is described within humanist or secular phenomena that do not include a religious aspect, such as belief in God or an Ultimate. At the other end, spirituality is more closely aligned with, or wholly described within religion.

The subject of spiritual and moral education and its place in the curriculum is an area of considerable debate in recent years (Mazumdar, 2000). And there has been an increase in the importance given to developing the spiritual dimension of study school children by nurturing their inner spirit in an inspiring school environment that combines with worldly education. Since one way that people make meaning of their lives is through their spirituality, it is important for educators to understand how spirituality influences their students in the learning process (McClain, 2008). It has been observed that there are several systems of spiritual and moral education for children in societies round the world. For purpose of this study, one of such spiritual and human values education (SSE) programmes is chosen to study its influence on children who had undergone this programme.

Spirituality is one of the latest phenomena to enter the realm of management debate (Kakabadse, 2002). An ideal leader is one who possesses purity of heart, individual character, courage and spirit of adventure, patience, determination, sacrifice and valour. If all these traits are present in a human being, he will be able to achieve success in various fields and also set an example to others, and be an ideal for others (Baba, 1987). Ideal leaders are expected to emerge from values derived from spiritual and human values education and training. Scientific investigations on effects of spiritual practices such as Yoga (Kirkwood et al., 2005), Meditation(Sciencedaily, 2010) and prayers (Newburg, 2012) have shown that there is evidence of health and psychological benefits derived from those spiritual practices.

2. Literature review

A review of existing literature on this topic showed that there were very few published research papers, and the following are some noteworthy in the available literature.

At CMS (City Montessori School, 2013), daily prayer-assemblies are well planned to be spiritually nourishing and values are taught in a non-intrusive way to a religiously diverse student body from the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Baha´i, Parsi and other faiths.

In a study by Roesner et al. (2006) on how one can operationalise a multidimensional view of spiritual identity during adolescence, their conclusions were; (1) Spirituality can be conceptualized in relation to self/identity (I and me), (2) Spiritual identities are like other forms of identity in adolescence - they are educable and develop in social contexts over time. (3) Schools, through historically-conditioned ideologies, daily practices and related social interactions in-form students' I- and me-selves. I-self education may be an important non-sectarian form of spiritual education that has manifold benefits for individuals and society.

The Sathya Sai Education in Human Values programme, abbreviated SSEHV (SSSWF, 2007) is one focusing on young children throughout the world through self-development activities. Founded by India's Sri Sathya Sai Baba in the year 1969, it aims to bring out the innate goodness of the child by developing the basic universal values of: *Truth, Love, Peace, Right Conduct, and Non - violence.* The teaching components used in the programme are: Yoga, *silent sitting, Meditation, stories, group devotional singing and group activities*. Sai centres globally conduct these programmes on a standardised format as Sunday Schools. A full time Sathya Sai School in Ndola, Zambia, integrates Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) programme in its curriculum. The School's aims are: Character excellence, Academic excellence and Spiritual and Moral Excellence. The programme aims to develop the following qualities in pupils: Integrity, wisdom, common sense, creativity, and discrimination (TRUTH)**;**Respect for parents, respect for teachers, honesty, good manners, good behaviour, and regard for duty (RIGHT CONDUCT); Humility, simplicity, equanimity, tolerance, patience, satisfaction (PEACE);Gentleness, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, kindness,

caring for others, friendliness (LOVE); Concern for environment, unity, harmony, social awareness, respects for all religions (NON - VIOLENCE).

Dr. Manchishi (Mazumdar, 2000) conducted an impact study of the SSEHV Programme of the Ndola Sai School. The main finding of the study is that the SSEHV programme had a positive impact on the pupils, teachers, and parents. The pupils at the school have developed more positive personalities in terms of respect for parents, teachers, and authorities. The pupils have developed attitudes of tolerance, caring, law abiding and willingness to offer service. These achievements have to be placed alongside the excellent academic results. The teachers have expanded their learning horizon displayed in their greater professional competence and in becoming value-oriented. Similarly, parents as a group have benefited too from the positive developments of their children. All the people interviewed agreed that the SSEHV Programme should be extended to other schools in Zambia.

It is observed that the SSEHV and SSE are two programmes conducted by the same organisation where SSEHV is structured as integral education with its own study school, whereas SSE programme is conducted on a weekly basis during weekends to impart spiritual education for children who study usual secular education in study schools elsewhere.

A study by Kakabadse et al. (2002) on linking Spirituality with leadership found positive influence of spiritual practices on quality of leadership.

2. Background to the study

This study was conducted in Botswana, a southern African country, where a Sai Centre operates in Gaborone City and conducts a SSE (Sai Spiritual Education) programme for children on Sundays since 1980s. At the time of conducting this study during 2013, there were over 80 children in the age range of 6 to 15 years enrolled. Classes are

conducted from January to November and on Sundays only between 9-30 and 11 am. The programmes offered are in a wide range consisting of spiritual practices such as Yoga, silent sitting, Light meditation, chanting holy hymns (mantras), singing devotional songs, value based games, skill activities such as essay writing, elocution, moral and motivational storytelling. This programme is not oriented to any particular religion, but incorporates unity of faiths principle with understanding and respecting the similarities and differences between various religious faiths.

3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to find the effects of the SSE programme conducted to children at the Sai Centre of Gaborone, with a view to finding its strengths and whether it influences them in later years shaping up their work-life as good future leaders and managers.

Research question

We needed to ask questions to better understand how the students make meaning of their learning from spiritual education. Therefore, the research question was:

What are the perceptions of the participants of spiritual and human values education (SSE) programme on its role in influencing their behaviour, character and leadership potential?

4. Methodology

A basic qualitative research approach was designed to know (1) how adolescents and young persons interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Associates, 2002). The purpose of this study was to understand how student learners perceive the influence of learning of spirituality in practical life. Specifically, the questions in the questionnaire guided the study to extract descriptions of their learning experiences from different angles of life.

Sample Selection:

According to Merriam and Simpson (2000), a sample is a strategically and systematically identified group of people or events that meet the criterion of representativeness for a particular study. Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases which are selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of the phenomenon in-depth (Patton, 2002). Criterion sampling is another way of determining participants for a study (Patton, 2002).Criterion sampling was used in this study. The sample for the study was selected from the population of former students of SSE programmes of Sai Centre of Gaborone. The criteria used to select participants in the study were: (1) the participant was a former student who attended and completed one or more years of SSE study courses; (2) It is estimated that some 35 to 4o children in the age group 6 to 15 received spiritual and human values education between 1998 and 2013. Many of them moved outside Botswana for higher education or careers.

Out of this population, a purposeful sample of 12 former SSE students was selected. They had undergone SSE education at different years, not in one batch, that offers randomness of sampling. For purpose of comparison, two former SSE students from neighbouring South Africa were also identified as additional sample.

Description of Participants:

Table 1 shows the list of 12 participants by pseudonym, age, years of SSE training and status. Participants were from Indian expatriate families. The majority of the participants are school or college students, with the exception of one house wife. Seven participants are female and four are male. The ages ranged from 13 to 23 years, and the number of years of SSE training ranged from 1 to 12 years.

For ethical conduct in this research, consent from each participant and also the SSE coordinator in the Sai Centre was obtained prior to data collection.

Data collection methods:

In this study an elaborate semi structured questionnaire with open-ended questions was used for personal interviews of participants. The areas of focus for these questions were: the students' experiences of spiritually based human values programmes they participated; what they liked and enjoyed most, how they feel about their usefulness in life.

A secondary source of data collected for triangulation consisted of short interviews of the

Table 1: Participant s   Profile

S.No	Participant	Age	No. of Years SSE Training	Status
1	ASK	19	8	Student
2	SS	21	1	,,
3	SG	14	4	,,
4	AK	21	12	,,
5	AM	21	5	,,
6	KM	15	7	,,
7	DM	20	7	,,
8	AS	13	9	,,
9	KK	20	4	,,
10	RM	23	7	Housewife
11	XX	16	1	Student
12	GB	15	2	,,

SSE coordinator on her observations of behaviour of each participant.

Data Analysis:

The constant-comparative method was used to analyze the data in this study (Merriam & Associates, 2002) through which the units of data which were deemed meaningful by the researcher were compared with each other in order to generate tentative categories. By constantly comparing the data, categories emerged and similar categories were reduced into a smaller number of highly conceptual categories. The analysis of findings was put together and further refined.

A peer was approached to review this process and help further adjustments and more refinements were made. Once adjustments were made, no further refinements were considered necessary which resulted in the final set of findings.

Validity and Credibility:

Multiple source method was used in this case, sourcing from Botswana and South Africa. A second strategy for ensuring internal validity is the peer review (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Creswell, 2002). A peer review "helps keep the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings" (Creswell, 2002).

Strategies used to ensure credibility were triangulation, peer examination, and statement of investigator's position (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Triangulation, peer examination, and investigator's position are also important in internal validity as discussed earlier (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Peer examination, and investigator's position were the methods used in this study.

External validity is the extent to which findings can be generalized to other situations (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). External validity is also called generalisability in qualitative research (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In qualitative research the best way to think of generalisability is in terms of the extent to which findings from an investigation can be applied to other situations determined by people in those situations (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

One major strategy to ensure external validity or generalisability for qualitative research is in providing rich, thick description (Merriam & Associates, 2002). By providing rich, thick description, the researcher enables the reader to determine how closely the reader's situations match and whether findings can be transferred (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Creswell, 2002).

This study incorporated peer review, statement of researcher position and un-bias, and submersion in the research to ensure internal validity.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions:

Qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from a participant's perspective (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In qualitative analysis, reality assumes that there are multiple, changing realities and that each individual has his or her own construction of reality. Reality is the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interpretations or understandings of the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, it is assumed that the researcher will have certain biases entering the study and that those biases may influence the interpretations of the data collected.

The researchers conducted this study with an open mind. The researchers' experience in this setting helped to understand and interpret the results of this study without any bias. Peer review and comparative impact analysis helped further to minimize any researcher biases and assumptions.

5. Findings

As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to understand how teen age and young adult

learners perceive the influence of spirituality on their learning in practical life. There were 23 semi-structured interview questions, used to determine the results. The findings of this study showed that there were three categories of programmes and five themes arising from participant perceptions.

Categories of programmes:

The following table (Table 2) shows the programmes that interested the respondents and mostly participated.

The following themes emerged from this study on how SSE influenced the participants.

Theme 1:Clarity in setting Life and career goals

Most participants stated that they gained clarity on career goals, such as accountant, doctor or engineer as a result of the ability to think with undisturbed mind through SSE practices. This theme relates also to their leadership and executive potential

Theme 2:Personal character improvement

Most participants stated that the key learning from SSE training was personal character improvement with: discipline, calming the mind, values, service, meditation, relation building, self- control and character.

Theme 3: Improvement in behaviour to maintain good interpersonal relations

Table 2: Programme Categories

1 Programmes most liked	Response factor	2 Programmes that helped you at study school	Response Factor	3 Programmes that helped you at home , pleased parents	Response factor	Programmes not enjoyed or not comfortable with
Devotional singing (Bhajan)	9/10	Elocution	5/8	Devotional singing Vedic chanting	7/11	nil
Participation in Cultural activities- play, drama	8/10	Meditation	5/8	Silent sitting Meditation	3/11	nil
Vedic chanting	5/10	Quiz ,Vedic chanting Cultural	3/8	Daily prayer Seva (Service)	2/11	nil
Light Meditation Value based games	5/10	Essay writing Seva (service)	2/8	Value based games Storytelling Competition Values Suryanamaskaram	1/11	nil
Silent sitting Storytelling Seva (Service)	3/10	Art	1/8			nil
Suryanamaskaram	2/10					nil
Competitions	1/10					nil

Interestingly, all participants stated that SSE training helped them in maintaining good interpersonal relations. This is a very valuable outcome of teaching human values to children, and is an important component of Quality Leadership

Theme 4: Understanding spirituality with empathy and respect for all religions

Most participants stated that they generally have an appreciation of all religions, which seems to be the direct result of the unity of faiths principle of the SSE programme. Some participants stated that they prefer the religion of humanity, which is an ideal.

Regarding a comparison between religion and Spirituality, most participants stated that they were aware of clear difference between religion and spirituality. This indicates that they grasped the concept of spirituality from SSE programme.

Theme 5:Good leadership qualities

As an important factor, leadership roles performed, such as serving as office bearer or volunteer in any organisation were enquired from participants.

It was revealed that many of them demonstrated leadership qualities, serving as service volunteers and office bearers and enjoyed their roles.

A summary of the participant perceptions:
Verbatim Quotes as examples of participant perceptions are reproduced below:

"Bal Vikas (SSE)) helps to gain self- confidence and independent thinking;

"guides to choose right path of life"

"teaches many things for entire life in many ways"

"helps to become a complete person spiritually and academically"

"thankful for joining me in this programme"

"Bal Vikas (SSE) is an amazing organisation; teaches you to be a good person inside"

"helps to deal with failures and successes of life"

"great experience"
"inculcating human values; discipline"

"helps to know about holy scriptures; inner peace"

"really enjoyed; and very helpful to all"

An additional finding:

The following classification of two types of SSE programmes emerged in this study :

1. Programmes that influenced spiritual and character development.

2. Programmes that helped skills development, and to do well at school and in life, such as essay writing and elocution.

Overall, the participants experienced both spiritual and worldly training balancing their learning, which showed positive influence of the programmes being both beneficial and enjoyable.

Comparison with the sample from South Africa:

When compared with the two former SSE students of South Africa, aged 19 and 20, the responses highlighted that meditation and selfless service to the needy were their highly beneficial learning experiences. They are also highly appreciative of the human values learning that helped them at home and at study school to maintain good relations with all. Their learning included good behaviour and they wanted to set good examples to others. This shows the applicability of SSE programmes to other regions also.

Summary:

The findings of this study have provided insights to understand how children learn and perceive the influence of spiritual and human values training on their learning. Participants provided answers to questions specifically designed to obtain the information which answered the research questions. In line with the stated objective, this research finds that spiritual and human values education and training has very positive influence on children to gain self- confidence, character, discipline and Independent thinking, guidance to choose right path of life, teaches many things beneficial for entire life in many ways. It helps to become a complete person spiritually and academically. They learn to be grateful to the divine for joining in a programme such as SSE which is an amazing organisation. It teaches children to be good person inside, helps to deal with failures and successes of life inculcating human values. Overall, the participants felt it to be a valuable experience.

6. Conclusion

This research supports the research findings of Dr. Manchishi (Mazumdar, 2000) impact study in Sathya Sai School in Zambia, which stated- *"Three things came up clearly in the findings, especially from the interviews – character excellence, academic excellence, and spiritual and moral excellence.* SSEHV programme had a positive impact on the pupils as well as teachers, and parents."

Also these findings are in line with several observational Research and Studies by Independent Evaluators (SSSWF, 2007)and similar reports made by inspectors and other external bodies from other countries globally, such as Canada, UK, Australia, Latin America, Thailand, Fiji, Kenya and South Africa stating very positive influence of spiritual based human values programmes instrumental in pupils developing confidence and in raising their self-esteem. Pupils

are valued as responsible citizens. They learn to be confident leaders serving the society.

The findings are also expected to help the SSE programme educators and trainers in making programmes further effective.

7. Recommendations

Further studies may be conducted at different geographical locations and other types of spiritual and values based education and training for purposes of comparison and knowing similarity and differences in the patterns of participant perceptions, as there is not much research conducted in this field.

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