

# Becoming a Person: Young People's Spiritual Development and the Implications for Education

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## Rationale

Schools in England and Wales have a statutory duty to promote the spiritual development of pupils within the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural (SMSC) curriculum. However, spiritual development has been an area that schools have had historic difficulty in addressing, as it refers to an aspect of an individual's 'inner life' (McCreery, 2000; Priestly, 2005). As research indicates significant relationships between spirituality and positive mental health (e.g., Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005; Kelley & Miller, 2007; Wills, Yaeger, & Sandy, 2003), this educational concept offers an opportunity through which to support students' well-being, especially as *The Transforming Children's and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper* (Department of Health & Department for Education, 2017) now places greater responsibilities on schools to support the mental health of young people. Despite its prominence in major psychological theories of adolescence, the processes and stages of young people's spiritual development have been overlooked. This research attempted to bridge this gap, and, using grounded theory methodology, sought to gain clarity on this developmental process to provide a framework by which spiritual development could be more clearly understood and utilised, i.e., through adaptation to curriculum, policy and staff training. This was considered especially important as contemporary research indicates that spiritual development is often addressed superficially and erroneously, for instance, through the teaching of 'British Values' (Moulin-Stozek, 2020). Hence, current provision equates spiritual development with conformity to social agenda rather than personal development - a subversion of its original intent.

## Research Questions

- 1) what are the processes and outcomes that constitute the spiritual development of young people from London and the South East of England?
- 2) what are young people's views on how spiritual development can be best supported in schools?

## Method

A Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) was employed to address RQ1. Semi-structured interviews comprised the data collection method. A purposive and heterogeneous sample (theists, agnostics, atheists) of seven young people aged 16 – 19, representing four schools, took part in the research. Theoretical codes and core category emerged after initial, focused and axial coding. Theoretical saturation was attained after interview six. For RQ2, thematic analysis was used: transcribing data and generating initial codes; collating of codes into potential themes; and reviewing themes and checking whether these were valid to the coded extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

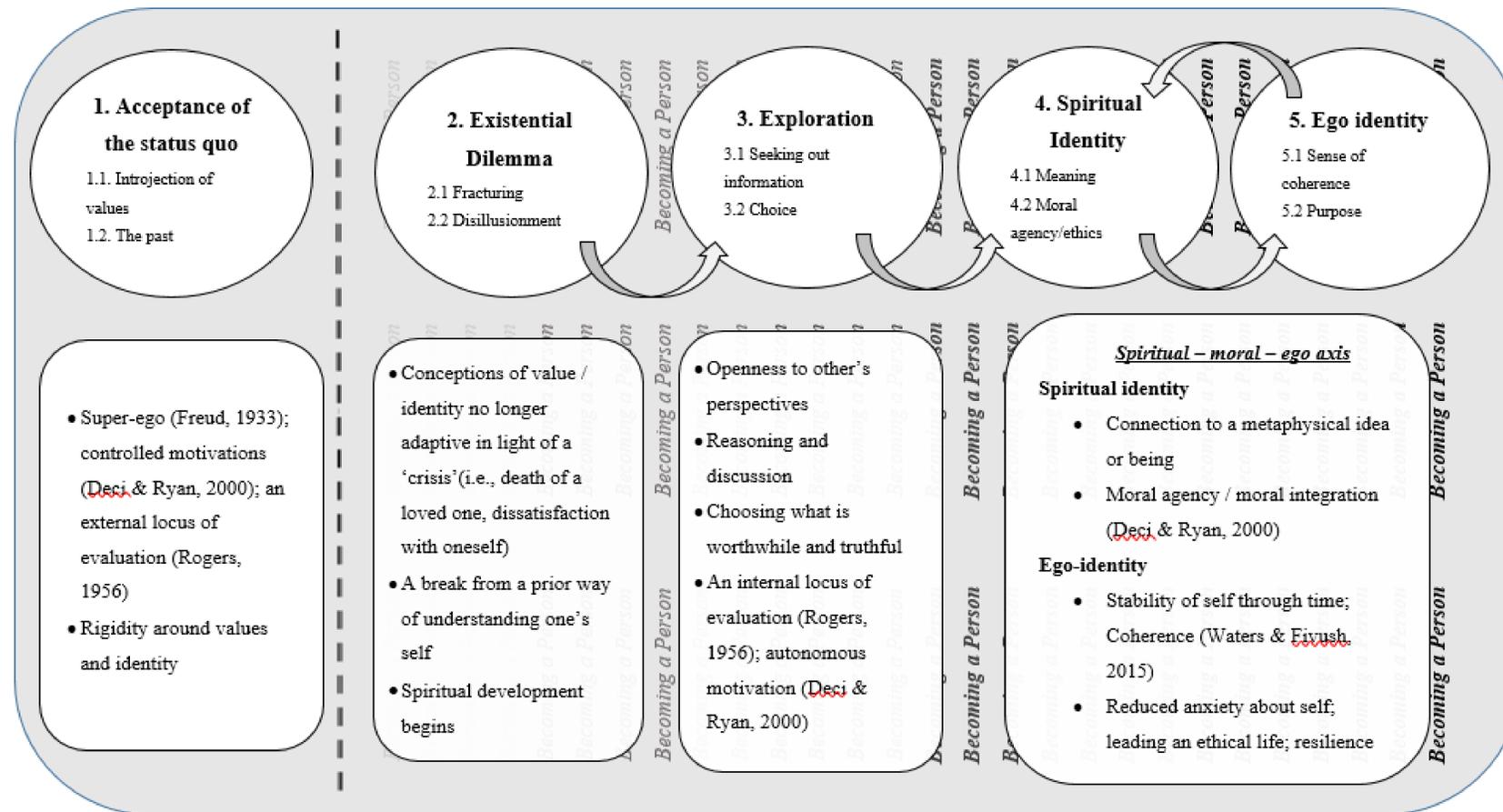
Credibility and reliability of the data was tested through member checking, memo-writing, and auditing (conditional relationship guide and reflective coding matrix)

## Results

RQ1: The final grounded model (fig.1 above) established '*Becoming a Person*' (Rogers, 1956) as the core category for spiritual development, with spiritual identity facilitating the development of ego-identity (Erikson, 1963). Spiritual development was found to be a process, initiated through an *existential dilemma*, that challenged young people's existing socio-cultural identities (introjected values), and which resulted in an identity status that was self-governing and related to the meanings that they attributed to their lives (i.e. their spirituality). The model adds to Erikson's theory the notion of a prior state of acceptance of the 'status quo', the importance of a precipitating dilemma as pre-condition of identity development, and spiritual values as foundational to moral agency and integration (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The model also advocates for the concept of 'connectedness' rather than commitment to a specific ideology as constitutive of ego-identity, in line with Rogers (1956) conceptualisation of 'personhood'.

RQ2: Themes regarding best practice in schools were '*interactions with teachers who embody spiritual values*' and being '*attuned to students' needs*'. Barriers for spiritual development were a '*commodity culture*' in schools and '*spiritual development as an individual journey*'.

Figure 1. Grounded Theory Model: Young people's spiritual development



## Implications

Schools: The relation between spirituality and ego-identity suggests that supporting young people's spiritual development may be an effective way in which to address well-being in schools. Some ways in which this could be facilitated is through:

- 1) A sincere focus on young people's personal development through adaptations to the curriculum, such as the teaching of philosophy to support critical thinking and reasoning around values and beliefs, not conformity. Relates to supporting the *Exploration* stage and Erikson's views on the importance of *structured moratoria* in adolescence (Côté, 2006).
- 2) Teacher training in learner-centred not teacher- or school-centred pedagogy, and 'relational depth' - a psychotherapeutic approach to working with others
- 3) A focus on the well-being of teachers, e.g., through 'mindful teaching' (Hoyt, 2016)

Educational Psychology: Much of the work of EPs could be considered spiritual. Further developments could entail:

- 1) Engaging with young people's spiritual values as a way to transcend negative introjected values.
- 2) Supporting young people to develop a sense of coherence, e.g., through the use of narrative techniques.