

An Exploratory Look Into Social Workers and Spirituality: Integration Into Education and Practice

**Shannon Cousineau
Sarah Nightingale**

Abstract: *Spirituality and religion are important aspects of social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. However, previous research shows that spirituality has not been well integrated into social work education or practice by many social work professionals. This exploratory study examines the integration of spirituality into social work education and practice. Results from a national survey of social workers found that many social workers do feel their social work education prepared them for integration of spirituality into their practice, and that many of them are integrating it. Implications for social work education and practice are discussed. The argument is made that spirituality is an important topic within social work education, just as trauma, social justice issues, financial challenges, and other difficult topics that are a part of the social work curriculum. Additionally, we review the need for more continuing education training on spirituality to be offered by educators and practitioners who are confident in their integration of spirituality into their work.*

Keywords: *Spirituality, social work education, social work practice*

The importance of cultural competence for social workers is clearly outlined in the 2021 Code of Ethics published by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS). Each official document includes religion and/or spirituality as components of cultural considerations (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021) indicating that religion and/or spirituality are important to social work practice. The NASW (2015) Code of Ethics states, “diversity, more than race and ethnicity includes the sociocultural experiences of people inclusive of but not limited to...the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of clients” (p. 9). NASW (2015) goes on to highlight that cultural competence is about how individuals, families, communities, and organizations are exceptional in their own right, requiring social workers to use, not only a person-in-environment perspective, but intersectionality, self-examination, cultural humility, and lifelong learning. Additionally, the NASW Code of Ethics has values and principles providing the expectations for social workers to conduct themselves in a manner free from coercion, and ensuring those receiving assistance can make informed decisions about the manner in which the helping process develops (Canda, 2021).

While the terms religion and spirituality have often been used as one and the same (Ranz, 2021), other literature has highlighted the difference between the two (Hodge, 2018). The distinction is even more important now as society recognizes that people do not have to follow a formal religion to identify as spiritual, but can find similar personal principles through multiple ideologies, meditation, yoga, or other practices and

Shannon Cousineau, MSW, DSW, LCSW, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Pembroke, Pembroke, NC. Sarah Nightingale, MSW, PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Criminology and Social Work, Eastern Connecticut State University, Hartford, CT.

Copyright © Authors, Vol. 26 No. 1 (Spring), 109-125, DOI: 10.18060/28828



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

philosophies (Canda, 2021). Koenig (2008) in part defines religion as a community sharing beliefs and values, having rituals, and providing the expectations of moral behavior. In contrast, the term spirituality has a more ambiguous definition as it is seen as more abstract and personal. There has not been a standard conclusion to the meaning of spirituality (Crisp, 2020; Parada, 2022). For the purposes of the current study, the authors have defined spirituality as a personal, individualized journey that helps make meaning of our life and experiences. Spirituality brings contentment and peace, especially during difficult times, defines who we are at our core, and is a living, ever evolving journey.

This distinction is important in understanding the role religion and spirituality play in social work practice, which is defined as the professional application of the profession's values and methods to provide resources, therapy, community support, and legislative advocacy (NASW, n.d.). Social work practitioners at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels should recognize that those served may consider themselves spiritual but not religious, or both spiritual and religious. Additionally, organizations may have a religious affiliation, but those employed by them may not share religious beliefs. Likewise, communities may have several religious denominations within their boundaries, but not all the residents subscribe to those beliefs, or they are interested in other spiritual practices. As social workers we need to be aware of such distinctions, just as we would be aware of the varying presentations of people experiencing psychosis or depression, or other biopsychosocial challenges. We are expected to use the lens of person-in-environment in all interactions, and the distinctions of religion and spirituality are just as individualized.

Literature Review

Spirituality in Social Work Education

The CSWE (2022) EPAS sets the standards for accredited bachelor of social work (BSW) and master of social work (MSW) programs with doctoral programs to be added in the future. The EPAS standard of Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) includes religion and spirituality as one of many dimensions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These standards hold accredited social work educational programs to a standard of competence for graduates (CSWE, 2022). Additionally, the NASW (2021) Code of Ethics outlines standards for social work that include cultural competence, identifying that social workers must engage in educational opportunities to learn about various cultural aspects, including spirituality. However, in one study with a representative sample of social work programs, social worker educators have reported that currently there are no courses related to religion/spirituality being offered in the graduate programs at their colleges or universities, nor are such courses being considered at this time (Moffatt et al., 2021). While this shows the lack of inclusion of religion and spirituality into some MSW programs, there are some that not only offer courses in religion and spirituality but also have joint master's programs in theology or divinity (Bowles et al., 2017). Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) social work programs have long ago found space in their curriculum for spirituality and religion and have continued that integration (Bowles et al., 2017). This inclusion into the curriculum is rooted in the foundation of the early HBCUs by various

religious organizations, creating a culture of integration mirrored in the ideology of the founders (Bowles et al., 2016).

Social work historically has a religious foundation, as seen in the Charity Organization Society (COS) and friendly home visitors (Bowles et al., 2017). However, as social work developed into a profession, a secular ideology ensured that religion would not be a factor for those seeking assistance, nor for those providing it (Luquet & McAllister, 2020). This shift also reflected broader societal movements away from religious and spiritual influences as sources of moral guidance and toward scientific explanations and theories derived from psychology and sociology (Darrell & Rich, 2017). The omission of religion and spirituality in social work was found both in practice and in social work education, specifically in the teaching of both theory and practice (Bowles et al., 2017). Today, some of the incomplete incorporation of spirituality into social work education could be due to the lack of resources surrounding pedagogical approaches and curricula, as well as faculty members' doubts about their expertise in the areas of religion and spirituality in order to incorporate it into the curriculum (Adedoyin et al., 2021; Kvarfordt et al., 2018). This begs the question as to why educators may feel this way, given, as Canda (2005) noted 20 years ago, there is a great deal of information on the topic of spirituality and religion in journals, books, and conference presentations that discuss theories, research, and practice knowledge, and there has not been a decrease in the interest of spirituality and religion in social work.

Another challenge may be the lack of conceptual clarity regarding faith integration or spirituality. This ambiguity can make it difficult to develop a conceptual framework to guide the creation of educational resources (Adedoyin et al., 2021). There are also concerns by educators related to their or students' own biases being posed (Kvarfordt et al., 2018). Alternatively, students may not disclose their beliefs in the classroom or online learning environment as they may perceive a conflict between their views and that of social work, they may not see the connection between spirituality and social work, or they may be wary of proselytization by others of faith (Ranz, 2021). But as the topic continues to gain momentum due to a renewed interest (Moffatt & Oxhandler, 2018), these challenges could potentially be alleviated.

Regardless of the challenges related to integrating religion or spirituality into the social work curriculum, the importance of students having competence in this area remains. Social work programs could stifle students' abilities to provide services to clients. Many clients are seeking not only practical interventions, but also are attempting to make meaning, are searching for something larger or potentially a higher power (Boamah et al., 2022) or are balancing morality in policy issues (Roberson et al., 2021). The idea of integrating spirituality into the social work curriculum presents an opportunity for social work educators to assist students in their own journey to self-awareness, ethical practice, and reconciling their personal views with that of the social work profession (Oxhandler et al., 2021a). As Ranz (2021) found, students were able to explore their personal beliefs and professional persona through an elective course. Field practicum and supervision also assist in the self-awareness needed to integrate spirituality into social work practice by offering opportunities to reflect, understand the difference between spirituality and religion, and provide feedback that can develop competent social workers in this area of diversity (Street

& Moyle, 2019). Irrespective of the methods used, the environment for students to learn must be intentional in its approach to providing a safe space for critical conversations where students are challenged in a non-threatening manner (Roberson et al., 2021), as some social work practitioners have identified that their social work programs did not offer this type of environment (Pomeroy et al., 2021).

Spirituality in Social Work Practice

The amount of education on religion and/or spirituality that social work students receive may have an impact on the integration of these aspects into their practice. Having the necessary knowledge and skills to serve the people at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels is the goal of social work higher education. A lack of education around spirituality could lead to barriers such as graduates finding it difficult to initiate discussions, feeling discomfort around the topic or believing they are not adequately prepared or competent to engage in the helping process using spirituality (Richardson, 2014). These barriers need to be dismantled given the wide scope of social work practice and its ethical principle regarding the importance of human relationships (NASW, 2021). One way these human relationships are built is through biopsychosocial assessments and use of the Person-In-Environment framework, the primary theory base of social workers working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. If the approach to identifying and addressing the needs of those served is to use a comprehensive outlook, spirituality should be discussed to gain better insight into the problem and possible solutions (Parada, 2022). In addition to the traditional methods of assessment, social workers could incorporate the use of spiritual lifemaps, spiritual ecomaps, spiritual genograms, and/or spiritual histories as described by Hodge (2003). Social workers could include implicit and explicit questions in their assessment such as asking “Where do you find peace?” or “What has helped nurture your spirituality?” (Pargament, 2011). The lack of integrating spiritual assessment into the biopsychosocial framework used can create a gap in identifying sources to empower clients, but also can cause the assessment to miss crucial information related to pain, suffering, oppression, or loss of relationships (Parada, 2022).

In relation to social work practice, the integration of spirituality into treatment has been shown to be a desire of individuals participating in mental health services (Oxhandler et al., 2021b). Another area of social work practice where the integration of spirituality can be important is in grief and loss, whether it be hospice and palliative care, or post-death/dying support for loved ones. As Richardson (2014) discusses, culture is an important aspect of caring for this population and includes spirituality as people make sense of their illness or look for meaning. The identification of religious or spiritual coping that can bring comfort for patients and families is a key aspect of the care provided for those at the end of life (Richardson, 2014). Social workers in other settings can learn from those practicing in palliative/hospice or medical social work, given social workers practicing in these areas are able to integrate spirituality into their care.

Spiritual integration can also be important in corporate social work. Dale (2024) discusses the rise of corporate social work, where practitioners are working with for-profit

organizations and companies. Examples of these are technology and financial corporations. Corporate social workers can work in a variety of areas, such as human resources, corporate climate, corporate social responsibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and more (Dale, 2024). Otaeye-Ebede and colleagues (2019) have emphasized that workplace spirituality is an important aspect of corporate climate, DEI, service performance and helping behavior, as well as building a sense of community. Workplace spirituality is “a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promotes employees’ experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy” (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 91).

Macro social workers are not exempt from these same standards and principles related to cultural competence and dignity and worth, just as those practicing micro social work are not excused from understanding policy or research surrounding spirituality, especially as it relates to social, spiritual, and religious justice. Many social justice issues present not as existential challenges, but those involving concrete suffering such as hunger, homelessness, and poverty have, across history, been addressed through spirituality and religion (Powell, 2024, Ch. 8). Movements such as the civil rights movement promote nonviolence which is a primary mantra of many spiritual and religious practices, including Hinduism and Buddhism (Gutierrez, 2021), and the desire to fight any injustice comes from the internal existence of a connection with something greater than oneself (Hodge, 2012). There are also the interfaith and intergroup challenges that have brought about social change. Throughout American history, persecution, segregation, seclusion, oppression, and rhetoric against certain religious or spiritual groups have required advocacy and social change. Using a cultural diversity lens some populations have deep-rooted spiritual and/or religious traditions that deserve respect from the social workers advocating on their behalf (Canda et al., 2010).

Purpose and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which social workers believe spirituality was integrated into their education. Additionally, the study explores the participants’ incorporation of spirituality in their work at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, using various techniques. The following hypotheses will be investigated:

- 1) Social work practitioners do not believe spirituality was integrated into their social work education.
- 2) Social work practitioners do believe that integrating spirituality into their practice is important.

Method

Sample

Researchers recruited a convenience sample of social workers from across the United States. Social workers were recruited by obtaining a NASW member listserv through InFocus Marketing. The list yielded over 6,565 potential participants. Additional

recruitment was completed using paid advertisements on social media websites. Criteria for inclusion in the study were to have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social work (BSW), but those with a master's degree in social work (MSW), and Doctoral degrees in social work (DSW or PhD) were acceptable, regardless of their undergraduate focus. Participants were also required to be located within the United States (U.S.). Included were participants who indicated they are not currently practicing social work but met the above criteria. A total of 311 respondents took the survey and 95% (n=295) met the necessary criteria.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n≈295)*

Demographic Characteristic	n (%)
Gender (n=292)	
Female	252 (86.3%)
Male	36 (12.3%)
Other	4 (1.4%)
Geographic Region (n=293)	
East Central	95 (32.4%)
Mountain	12 (4.1%)
Northeast	109 (37.2%)
Pacific	13 (4.4%)
South Atlantic	22 (7.5%)
West Central	42 (14.3%)
Level of Education Completed (n=294)	
BSW	26 (8.8%)
MSW	247 (84.0%)
PhD/DSW	21 (7.1%)
Licensure (n=287)	
Bachelor's level (supervision required)	16 (5.6%)
Independent license (no supervision required)	150 (52.3%)
Post-master's provisional license (supervision required)	82 (28.6%)
None	39 (13.6%)
Years of Experience (n=294)	
0-2	46 (15.6%)
3-5	51 (17.3%)
6-10	38 (12.9%)
+10	159 (54.1%)
Type of Social Work (n=294)	
Administration/management	25 (8.5%)
Healthcare/medical	36 (12.2%)
Mental health	129 (43.9%)
School social work	24 (8.2%)
Other	35 (13.6%)
Setting (n=294)	
Case management	41 (13.9%)
Outpatient	116 (39.5%)
Schools	28 (9.5%)
Other	64 (21.8%)

The majority of participants in this sample identified as women ($n=252$, 86.3%), followed by men ($n=36$, 12.3%) and a small group of individuals who identified as another gender identity ($n=4$, 1.3%). Participants were located across the U.S. More than a third worked in the Northeast ($n=109$, 37.2%). About a third work in the East Central region ($n=95$, 32.4%). Over a tenth worked in the West Central region ($n=42$, 14.3%). Less than a tenth worked in the South Atlantic ($n=22$, 7.5%), Pacific ($n=13$, 4.4%), or Mountain ($n=12$, 4.1%) regions. Over four-fifths of participants indicated that their highest social work degree was an MSW ($n=247$, 84%). Less than a tenth indicated a BSW ($n=26$, 8.8%), or a Ph.D./DSW ($n=21$, 7.1%) with as their highest degree. Nearly seven-eighths of participants held full social work licensure, with over half holding an independent license (no supervision required) ($n=150$, 51.1%), less than a third a post-master's provisional license (supervision required) ($n=82$, 27.9%) and over 5% a bachelor's level license with supervision required ($n=16$, 5.4%) holding. Over a tenth did not currently have a social work license total of ($n=39$, 13.3%).

Participants also had a high level of experience in social work practice. Over half of the participants had more than 10 years of experience in the field ($n=159$, 54.1%). Over a sixth had 3-5 years ($n=51$, 17.3%), less than a sixth had 0-2 years ($n=46$, 15.6%) of practice experience, and a little over an eighth had 6-10 years of experience, ($n=38$, 12.9%). Regarding social work practice setting, participants worked in a variety of areas. However, the most frequently identified included outpatient setting ($n=116$, 39.5%), case management ($n=41$, 13.9%), and schools ($n=28$, 9.5%). Participants also practiced many different types of social work. The most frequently reported were mental health ($n=129$, 43.9%), healthcare/medical social work ($n=36$, 12.2%), administration/management ($n=25$, 8.5%) and school social work ($n=24$, 8.2%). See Table 1 for further details on the practice setting and type of social work practice reported by participants.

Measures

The principal investigator chose to create their own items for this research. The scales available, while reliable and valid, did not include some of the key aspects of interest to the principal investigator, such as the specific ways spirituality can be incorporated into social work education and practice. The main questions of the survey designed by the principal investigator were created after careful review of existing measures, consideration of the constructs to be measured, and were, after creation, statistically analyzed. The questions asked participants about the incorporation of spirituality into their social work education at any point and how it was incorporated. For example, participants were asked if there was an entire course dedicated to religion and spirituality in social work, or if there was integration in other courses through readings, discussions, lectures or assignments. Social workers were also asked if they felt their social work education prepared them to include spirituality into their practice through assessment or other means. Participants were also asked about their assessment or other incorporation of spirituality into their practice with clients at the micro, mezzo, and/or macro level. Additional questions regarding the social workers' current beliefs about the importance of incorporating spirituality and whether they believe their client base would like spirituality to be included in their work.

Integration of Spirituality Items. These five items were developed by the principal investigator for the purpose of this study, to assess whether practitioners actually integrate spirituality into different dimensions of their practice. In a singular question participants were asked to check a box if they had integrated spirituality into a particular aspect of practice. Each of the five items were then re-coded into “yes” if they checked the box and “no” if they did not and summed into a single score.

Do you integrate spirituality into your social work practice through...

- ☐ treatment planning?
- ☐ assessment?
- ☐ discussion in sessions with your clients?
- ☐ discharge planning?
- ☐ coordinating with members of a treatment team with a background in spiritual integration?

Perception of Spirituality Items. These three items were developed by the principal investigator for this study and consisted of three questions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1=“Never” to 5=“Always”/“All the time”. The items included “I believe incorporating spirituality is an important aspect of behavioral health treatment”, “I believe my clients would like to integrate spirituality into their treatment”, and “I feel comfortable discussing spirituality with clients

Social Work Program Preparation. To assess perceptions of how their social work education prepared them to integrate spirituality into social work practice, a single item asked respondents to rate: “My social work program prepared me to assess & integrate spirituality into my practice.” Responses ranged from 1 (*not prepared at all*) to 5 (*very prepared*).

Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Anna Maria College. The research method for this study was an exploratory quantitative cross-sectional survey using Google Forms due to the lack of access to other possible survey tools. The 18-question survey with a link to the Google Form was emailed to potential participants. Participants were encouraged to share the link with others. In addition, participants were recruited by posting the link to the survey in paid advertisements and groups with a focus on social work through Facebook. Data were collected from Facebook advertisements and posting in Facebook social work groups, such as the Social Work Research Group, during the Fall of 2020 and Spring of 2021. Participants on the listserv received initial emails with the survey information and link in November 2020, additional reminder emails were sent in January, February, and March of 2021. The survey closed for all parties and data collection ended in May 2021. The survey was expected to take no more than 20 minutes to complete.

No identifying information was gathered in the survey, but demographic information was collected to include identified gender and the participants’ location by region of the United States. Additional social work-related information was also queried to include the

level of education, licensure status, type of social work practice, practice setting, age group of focus for practice if applicable, and years of experience as a social worker.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, the data were reviewed to ensure only those respondents meeting the necessary criteria were included, removing those participants who did not have any formal social work training at the BSW, MSW, or DSW/PhD levels, and those living outside of the United States. This review resulted in 16 participants' responses being removed from the data. Nominal data was coded in preparation. Data were uploaded to and analyzed using SPSS 26, where descriptive statistics were calculated to include frequencies and measures of central tendency. Bivariate analysis and multivariate analysis were also conducted.

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Prior to conducting the initial analysis, data were screened for multicollinearity, normality and outliers. The correlation matrix was reviewed, and the highest correlation was 0.492. Additionally, the VIF values were between 1.072 to 1.538 and Tolerance values were between 0.650 and 0.933, further ensuring that multicollinearity was not an issue. The Normal P-P Plot was in a reasonably straight diagonal line and the Scatterplot of the standardized residuals was roughly rectangularly distributed. The Mahalanobis distance was examined, and three cases slightly exceeded the critical value. However, the maximum of the Cook's Distance was 0.064, indicating that these cases are not having an undue influence on the results of the model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	n	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Integration of Spirituality Items ^a	290	1.9 (1.40)	-				
2. Perception of Spirituality Items ^b	296	11.5 (2.59)	.49**	-			
3. SWK Prepare ^c	296	2.7 (1.30)	.18**	.16**	-		
4. Years of SWK Practice ^d	294	3.1 (1.15)	.13**	.13**	-.16**	-	
5. Highest SWK Degree ^e	294	2.0 (0.40)	-.04	.02	.12*	-.38**	-
6. Level of SWK License ^f	294	1.9 (1.14)	-.26**	-.17**	.03	-.52**	.32**

**p<.01, *p<.05, SWK=Social Work

^a 5 questions about spiritual dimension integrated, 1=Yes/0=No, possible range 0-5

^b 3 questions, 5-point Likert scale, 1=Never to 5=Always/All the Time, possible range 3-15

^c 1 question, 1=not prepared at all to 5=very prepared

^d 1=0-2 years, 2= 3-5 years, 3=6-10 years, 4= +10 years

^e 1=BSW, 2=MSW, 3=PhD/DSW

^f 0=None, 1=bachelor's level (supervision required), 2=Independent license (no supervision required), 3=Post-master's provisional license (supervision required)

Descriptive Statistics

Participants were asked how well their social work program prepared them to integrate spirituality in their practice. On average, participants felt their programs somewhat prepared them ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.30$). Participants also reported whether or not they

integrated spirituality into different dimensions of social work practice. On average, they integrated 2 of the 4 spirituality dimensions asked about ($M = 1.9$, $SD = 1.40$). See Table 2 for additional descriptive statistics.

Multivariate Analysis

Multiple regression was used to assess the ability of two independent variables (Perceptions of Spirituality and Social Work Program Preparation) to predict the degree to which practitioners integrate spirituality into different dimensions of the practice (Integration of Spirituality Items) after controlling for the level of licensure, years of practice and level of education held by participants. The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 28.9%, $F(5, 284) = 23.08$, $p < .001$. Both independent variables, Perceptions of Spirituality ($\beta = .44$, $p < .001$) and How Well Social Work Program Prepared ($\beta = .119$, $p = .022$) significantly contributed to the model. A single control variable, Level of Licensure, also significantly contributed to the variance in the model ($\beta = -.119$, $p = .002$). See Table 3 for further details on the regression analysis.

Table 3. *Multiple Regression for Integration of Spirituality Items*

Variable	Estimate	SE	95% CI for <i>B</i>		<i>p</i>
			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Constant		.615	-1.88	.531	.271
Perception of Spirituality Scale	.440**	.028	.183	.294	.001
SWK Prepare	.119*	.056	.019	.239	.022
Level of SWK Licensure	-.119**	.074	-.383	.090	.002
Highest SWK Degree	-.009	.196	-4.15	3.51	.869
Years of SWK Practice	-.003	.075	-.153	.144	.956

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, SWK=Social Work

Discussion and Implications

The results of the study show that social work practitioners do feel somewhat prepared (2.7 on a 5-point scale) to integrate spirituality into their practice after their social work education, which is in contrast to what the investigators hypothesized. This finding adds to the discussion on religion and spirituality in social work education. Moffatt et al. (2021) reported that many social work education programs do not integrate spirituality into their curriculum. Additionally, social work programs are having challenges with instructors believing they are inadequate to teach the subject or are concerned about student bias infiltrating the discussions (Adedoyin et al., 2021; Kvarfordt et al., 2018). It is unclear whether practitioners are graduating with the feeling that they have a strong foundation in this area. It is possible that these students are using other resources outside of social work schools to prepare themselves to practice in this realm. Social workers may also believe they are prepared because of the emphasis on client centered models within the curriculum.

The results of this study show that practitioners believe it is important to integrate spirituality into practice, which is in line with the investigators' hypothesis. This mirrors other research that indicates that those being aided by social workers want spirituality

included in their services (Oxhandler et al., 2021b). Additionally, this reinforces the relevance of the criteria outlined by NASW and CSWE for social work practice.

There is still work to be done in order to further prepare students of social work to be competent social work practitioners to use spirituality in their work. Social work educators must continue to consider how to integrate spirituality into the curriculum. In social work education, students must recognize the difference between religion and spirituality in order to understand those they will be serving, but also to increase their own self-awareness and biases related to the two. The CSWE and NASW both include religion and/or spirituality as a part of cultural competence (CSWE, 2022; NASW, 2021) showing the need for its inclusion into social work education and practice. In this study, social workers felt somewhat prepared (2.7 on a 5-point scale) by their education to integrate spirituality into their practice showing that there may be some level of incorporation of spirituality in social work education. Where Moffatt et al. (2021) found there was little offering of courses related to religion and spirituality, one of the integration items indicated that integration was often done through other means such as readings, class discussions, and assignments in other courses that were not specific to spirituality itself. This means that courses related only to spirituality may not be necessary for social workers to feel prepared for integration into their practice. However, in order to ensure this confidence, the authors support the idea that the topic of spirituality can, and should, be its own module in the required diversity classes. Doing so can ensure that the topic can be explored at a deeper level, as it would be the only focus for that time period. This can assist students in self-exploration and self-awareness, as discussed in the spiritual competencies (Vieten et al., 2015), thereby linking the importance of spirituality back to the EPAS competencies as it relates to diversity, professionalism, research, assessment, engagement, intervention and evaluation of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Additionally, the inclusion of spirituality in courses reinforces students' overall health, emotional regulation, and resilience (Rocha Leite, et al, 2026).

In addition to classroom instruction, social work students are required to complete direct practice hours through field education internship placements. As the signature pedagogy of social work education, field placements can use spiritually based sites, or spiritually competent supervisors to assist students in gaining a better understanding of how to use spirituality in their chosen area of social work. Ideally students would have dedicated courses related to spirituality as well as spiritually-oriented field experience, but as this is not always possible one or the other can assist students in having even more confidence in their ability to integrate spirituality into their practice after graduation.

The authors assert that faculty should feel confident in their own ability to incorporate spirituality into the curriculum at a deeper level. Despite many faculty believing they do not have the expertise to include spirituality into the curriculum (Adedoyin et al., 2021; Kvarfordt et al., 2018), in this study a number of respondents perceived that when they were students, they were getting the information, whether that is from their professors and courses alone, or they were seeking the information on their own. Educators may need to change the way they view spirituality as it relates to social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. The authors would like to see spirituality included as an important topic just as trauma, social justice issues, financial challenges, and other difficult

topics that are discussed in courses. The inclusion of spirituality into the teaching of biopsychosocial, family, organizational, and community assessments is another area that can assist students in gaining more knowledge about how to use spirituality into their own practice.

While some would argue that macro practice would not include spirituality, spirituality and justice are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are following the same path, as seen in historical events such as the civil rights movement (Gutierrez, 2021). It is important to recognize that for some populations, the spiritual or religious leaders are the people who have had in the past and continue to have the most knowledge of what the challenges are facing their community. Social workers need to utilize cultural humility and sensitivity, as well as their knowledge of spiritual practices to work collaboratively within and on behalf of these communities (Canda et al., 2010). With this understanding of how spirituality and macro practice are intertwined, social work educators can include modules, readings, and discussions into the curriculum related to social justice issues.

In relation to their work, the social work practitioners participating in the study report integrating spirituality at a low level. However, this does show that social work practitioners are likely, to some extent, providing person-centered spiritually-based services since individuals receiving assistance have reported they want spirituality to be a part of their treatment (Oxhandler et al., 2021b).

Social workers who are not integrating spirituality into their practice may be missing out on potential protective or risk factors that could help or hinder progress towards the goals of those with whom they are working. Individuals and families may find comfort and contentment in their spiritual practices, or, in contrast, be distressed because of exposure to spiritual or religious trauma. This is also true for groups, organizations, and communities. Spiritual or religious organizations could be sources of information, resources, and advocacy for the people they serve or the communities around them, or potentially the cause of oppression, trauma, or social injustice. Social workers focused on macro practice can consider spiritual justice issues and principles for creating policy and making changes at systemic levels. However, even with this information it is crucial that social workers remember that the integration of spirituality and/or religion into their practice must be in line with the desire of the client(s) and not driven by the social workers' own beliefs or biases (Canda, 2021).

In order to ensure social workers meet their ethical obligations for cultural competency and understanding regarding spirituality, social work educators and practitioners may require more training and workshops on ways to incorporate spirituality into their courses and other educational endeavors. While the results of this study show that some social workers feel prepared by their education and are at some level integrating spirituality into their practice, social workers are supposed to be lifelong learners. Therefore, the authors recommend that practitioners seek the Spiritual & Religious Competencies, information regarding spiritual assessment, outlined by Vieten et al. (2015), as well as other types of spirituality guidelines into their practice.

The Spiritual & Religious Competencies (Vieten et al., 2015) created benchmarks and practical steps that assist practitioners in becoming knowledgeable and self-aware by

creating a space for social workers to explore the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to incorporate religion and spirituality. While specific to the clinical practitioner, the competencies could be applied to those working in non-clinical or macro settings just as easily. These competencies include demonstrating empathy and respect for clients' diverse backgrounds, recognizing spirituality and religious experiences change over the course of one's life, and understanding the ethical and legal issues surrounding spirituality and religion (Vieten et al., 2015). As society changes, so should a social worker's knowledge and understanding as culturally sensitive practitioners. Having a guide to create capable and skilled social work practitioners who integrate religion and spirituality at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels is aligned with the ethics and values of the social work profession. Additionally, as Oxhandler et al. (2024) indicate, competency-based guidelines for integrating spirituality and religion into practice can foster social work practitioners' development of both personal self-awareness and professional cultural humility.

There are several other ways for social workers to increase their knowledge and competence in spirituality, such as receiving training from some of the religious and spiritual organizations specific to social workers, reviewing recent literature, and even obtaining certification from social work programs regarding spirituality in practice. An example of one certification is offered by the New York University Silver School of Social Work. More continuing education training related specifically to spirituality can be offered by educators and practitioners who are confident in their integration of spirituality into their work.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research project, there are limitations to this study. First, the cross-sectional design of the survey limits the ability to generalize results to the broader population of social work practitioners. The results are only indicative of the perceptions of participants at one point in time. The sample is a small percentage of available respondents, and thus cannot be said to be representative. Additionally, there are limitations to the sampling strategy. It is possible that practitioners who have an interest in spirituality may have been more likely to participate. Also, the researcher did not collect demographic data on race and/or ethnicity, so it is unknown how diverse the sample is and whether or not it is reflective of the social work profession. Another limitation of the research is that participants were not asked if their social work degrees were conferred at secular or non-secular institutions, which could impact whether they had courses in religion or spirituality during their academic programming. A limitation of the survey design is the use of a double-barreled question. This makes it unclear to which question the respondent is answering. Double barreled questions can produce inaccurate or ambiguous data, which can reduce the validity and reliability of the research findings. Lastly, it is notable that the data collection took place during the time of a global pandemic. Given the circumstances, this could have had an impact on the number of participants (more or less) and the way participants responded because it is possible that the pandemic influenced their own spiritual journey and that of the people they serve.

However, this exploratory study does provide insight for future research. The field would benefit from studies with a larger sample size and better response rate, that measures key demographic areas. Future studies on how spirituality is integrated into social work education should also consider the experience of current MSW students as well as social work faculty. In order to better understand the nuanced ways that social workers integrate spirituality into practice, a qualitative study of practitioners that engage in such work at a high level may yield important insights. This future research could engage practitioners in a rich discussion of their understanding of integrating spirituality into practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, the ethical considerations, and ways this integration is taking place.

Conclusion

The present research has shown some good beginning insight into the integration of spirituality in social work, education and practice. There seems to be an understanding that spirituality and religion are important aspects of working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Regardless of how spirituality is integrated into the social work curriculum and practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, the current study provides some evidence that to some extent this is already happening. The charge now is making it the standard rather than an exception.

References

- Adedoyin, A. C. A., Moore, S. E., Copeland, R., & Folaranmi, O. O. (2021). [Integration of faith and spirituality in social work education: A systematic review of evidence in the last 35 years](#). *Social Work & Christianity*, 48(3), 288-307.
- Boamah, D. A., Jones-Eversley, S. D., Harmon, D. K., Adedoyin, A. C., Burton, K. L., Sanders, S., Jones, C. A., Nwachuku, B. J., & Moore, S. E. (2022). [Dismantling structural racism and white supremacy through course assignments that integrate faith and learning in social work curriculum](#). *Social Work & Christianity*, 49(1), 26-47.
- Bowles, D., Clayton, O., & Hopps, J. G. (2017). [Spirituality and social work practice at historically Black colleges and universities](#). *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 27(5), 424-437.
- Bowles, D. D., Hopps, J. G., & Clayton, O. (2016). [The impact and influence of HBCUs on the social work profession](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(1), 118-132.
- Canda, E. R. (2005). [The future of spirituality in social work: The farther reaches of human nurture](#). *Advances in Social Work*, 6(1), 97-108.
- Canda, E. R. (2021). [Addressing spiritual diversity in professional social work practice: Principles and ethical guidelines with examples](#). The Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Initiative.
- Canda, E. R., Furman, L. D., & Canda, H. (2019). *Spiritual diversity in social work practice: The heart of helping* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

- Council on Social Work Education. (2022). [2022 EPAS: Educational policy and accreditation standards](#). Author.
- Crisp, B. R. (2020). [Charting the development of spirituality in social work in the second decade of the 21st Century: A critical commentary](#). *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(3), 961-978.
- Dale, M. (2024, Winter). [The rise of corporate social work](#). *Social Work Advocates*.
- Darrell, L., & Rich, T. (2017). [Faith and field: The ethical inclusion of spirituality within the pedagogy of social work](#). *Field Educator*, 7(1), 1-11.
- Giachalone, R. A., & Jurkiewicz, C. L. (2003). [Right from wrong: The influence of spirituality on perceptions of unethical business activities](#). *Journal of Business Ethics*, 46(1), 85-97.
- Gutierrez, D. (2021). [What just is isn't always justice: Toward a spiritual view of justice](#) [Editorial]. *Counseling and Values*, 66(2), 114-116.
- Hodge, D. R. (2003). [Spiritual assessment: Handbook for helping professionals](#). North American Association of Christians in Social Work.
- Hodge, D. R. (2012). [The conceptual and empirical relationship between spirituality and social justice: Exemplars from diverse faith traditions](#). *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 31(1), 32-50.
- Hodge, D. R. (2018). [The evolution of spirituality and religion in international social work discourse: Strengths and limitations of the contemporary understanding](#). *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 37(1), 3-23.
- Kvarfordt, C. L., Sheridan, M. J., & Taylor, O. (2018). [Religion and spirituality in social work curriculum: A survey of Canadian educators](#). *British Journal of Social Work*, 48, 1469-1487.
- Koenig, H. G. (2008). *Medicine, religion, and health: Where science and spirituality meet*. Templeton Foundation Press.
- Luquet, W., & McAllister, D. (2020). [Widening the historic circle: The contribution of women religious to the development of social work](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56(2), 354-368.
- Moffatt, K. M., & Oxandler, H. K. (2018). [Religion and spirituality in master of social work education: Past, present, and future considerations](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 54(3), 543-553.
- Moffatt, K. M., Oxandler, H. K., & Ellor, J. W. (2021). [Religion and spirituality in graduate social work education: A national survey](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(2), 287-298.
- National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2015). [Standards and indicators for cultural competence in social work practice](#). Author.
- NASW. (2021). [NASW code of ethics](#). Author.

NASW. (n.d.). [*Practice*](#). Author.

Otaye-Ebede, L., Shaffakat, S., & Foster, S. (2019). [A multilevel model examining the relationships between workplace spirituality, ethical climate, and outcomes: A social cognitive theory perspective](#). *Journal of Business Ethics*, 166(1), 611-626.

Oxhandler, H. K., Chamiec-Case, R., Wolfer, T., & Marraccino, J. (2021a). [Integrating social workers' Christian faith in social work: A national survey](#). *Social Work & Christianity*, 48(1), 52-74.

Oxhandler, H. K., Pargament, K. I., Pearce, M. J., Vieten, C., & Moffatt, K. M. (2021b). [Current mental health clients' attitudes regarding religion and spirituality in treatment: A national survey](#). *Religions*, 12, 371-386.

Oxhandler, H. K., Canda, E. R., Polson, E. C., Husain, A., Parrish, D. E., Currier, J. M., & Plante, T. G. (2024). [Promoting religious and spiritual competencies in clinical social work: Considerations, potential barriers, and supports](#). *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*, 11(4), 372-381.

Parada, M. L. (2022). [Integrating religion/spirituality into professional social work practice](#). *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 41(4), 351-368.

Pargament, K. I. (2011). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. The Guildford Press

Pomeroy, E. C., Hang Hai, A., & Cole Jr., A. H. (2021). [Social work practitioners' educational needs in developing spiritual competency in end-of-life care and grief](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 57(2), 264-286.

Powell, J. A. (2024). *Racing to Justice Transforming Our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society* (2nd ed.) Indiana University Press.

Ranz, R. (2021). [Developing social work students' awareness of their spiritual/religious identity and integrating it into their professional identity: Evaluation of a pilot course](#). *British Journal of Social Work*, 51, 1392-1407.

Richardson, P. (2014). [Spirituality, religion and palliative care](#). *Annals of Palliative Medicine*, 3(3), 150-159.

Roberson, C. J., Hagues, R., & Copeland, R. (2021). [Addressing spirituality: Reflections on curriculum integration in a Christian university](#). *Social Work & Christianity*, 48(3), 275-287.

Rocha Leite, E. M., Albuquerque Frota, M., Medeiros da Costa Daniele, T., Costa Vieira Cardoso, M., Garcia, D. (2026). [The contribution of spirituality to university students' meaning in life](#). *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 28(3), 347-372.

Street, L. A., & Moyle, T. L. (2019). [Supervision strategies for social work students: Managing faith and spirituality in addictions practice](#). *Social Work & Christianity*, 46(3), 87-109.

Tabachnick, B. G., & Fidell, L. S. (2013). *Using multivariate statistics* (6th ed.). Allyn & Bacon/Pearson Education.

Vieten, C., & Scammell, S. (2015). *Spiritual and religious competencies in clinical practice: Guidelines for psychotherapists and mental health professionals*. New Harbinger.

Author note: Address correspondence to Shannon Cousineau, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Email: shannon.cousineau@uncp.edu

ORCID

Shannon Cousineau  [0000-0002-6939-4365](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6939-4365) Sarah Nightingale  [0000-0003-2695-7372](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2695-7372)