

An Action Research Approach towards Development of Spirituality among Thai University Students

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Spirituality and ethics are desirable characteristics reflecting a person's quality, especially for university students who could become the driving force for social development in future. This research studied and developed a new approach for spiritual and ethical development in the context of Thai university students, and put this into an experiment for assessing its effectiveness in improving spirituality and ethics. The method employed was action research and the participants were 33 university students and 9 experts in spiritual development. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The overall period taken was 18 months and a program on spiritual and ethical development (SEDP) was produced after three cyclical processes and reflection. The SEDP comprised of four modules of spiritual and ethical characteristics which students needed to develop: self-esteem and esteem for others; relationship with others; responsibility towards self, others and the environment; and planning of spiritual and ethical development and monitoring. After the trial program implementation, the participating students' spirituality increased significantly in terms of self-esteem, esteem for others, relationships with others, responsibility to self, others, and environment, and spiritual health. The findings from the qualitative data revealed 4 emerging themes which showed that students had profound experience of spiritual development through: (1) an inner experience of spirituality, (2) an impact on connecting to oneself, (3) connecting with others, and (4) connecting to the environment. Implications for behavioral interventions and policy development were discussed.

Keywords: spirituality, ethics, action research, student development

At present, all organizations and institutions in society need people who are able to adapt, change, develop, and utilize their potential to the fullest. They need human resources with talents, character strength, virtue and ethics, and spirituality, or overall, to be in good spiritual health (Geh & Tan, 2009). People with these attributes could have a significant role in changing and developing society towards sustainable development. Policies in Thailand have placed emphasis on developing human resources to be good, competent, and happy in their lives, through an application of their knowledge, morality, and perseverance (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2012).

Educational institutions and universities with their main mission to produce and develop human resources at intermediate and higher levels, have an important role as change agents or as institutions driving social change and moving the country towards a desirable society (Tongroj, 2006). These institutions not only have important role in producing students for the labor market, but also in producing good quality world citizens with responsibilities and good ethical standards (Office of the Higher Education Commission Thailand, 2009). Therefore, if universities can create experiences and develop students in terms of both professional skills and self-development in spirituality and ethics, this would help the students

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to be complete and integrated graduates with skills, knowledge, and the readiness to contribute to the development of their organizations, communities, societies, and countries.

Spirituality has been receiving a great deal of attention from academics in many areas such as psychology, social science, philosophy, education, and theology. These academics view humans as being different to machines in that a human being has a body, mind, heart, and spirituality. They have a view towards spirituality as something that concerns inner life, where a person is seeking values and their ultimate highest goal in their lives (Dhingra, Manhas, & Thakur, 2005). In addition, they are recognizing the values of others, the willingness to have good relationships with others, and a sense of belonging of groups or communities (Robbins & Judge, 2009). A research about spiritual health in students found that spirituality was statistically significantly associated with academic performance (Chantrawiro, Kongmanus, Boonyawong, Kongkai, & Churdchomjan, 2014). Moreover, there are influential factors in other aspects of behaviors such as having relevancy to emotional intelligence (Dhingra, Manhas, & Thakur, 2005), recognizing their own self-worth (Young, 2010), leadership (Perkins, Wellman, & Wellman, 2009), and empowerment (Lee, 1991).

Currently, institutions are aware of the significance of promoting spiritual development or spiritual health so that individuals can develop themselves fully and can utilize their potentials to the fullest, which would be beneficial for themselves and to society. Both academics and practitioners have agreed that there are many ways to achieve spirituality development or spiritual health in students, such as meditation and self-reflection (Astin, Astin, & Lindham, 2011), spiritual mentoring, dialogues and sharing about spirituality (Lindholm, Millora, Schwartz, & Spinosa, 2011), and especially a contemplative learning process (Moral Promotion Center, 2008). Vokey (2015) mentioned that practices in contemplative learning plays a significant role in spiritual development among students in higher education. By using this learning method, the students can promote spirituality in terms of well-being of self and others. It also has advantages over traditional training methods in term of placing on that the students can experience both internal and outer world connection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Moreover, spiritual and ethical development have been developed through many ways with relevance to the specific contexts of the target population. One kind of research that the researcher can design the development process in accordance with the contexts of desirable behaviors and society is the action research. With this research method, a process whereby key stakeholders can participate in the process of program development, taking actions, giving feedback, employing and adapting theories in order to create the desirable development or to address specific points of interests (Reason & Bradbury, 2011). Therefore, in order to design a program for spiritual and ethical development for university students, the authors decided to employ the action research process that could create new knowledge in directions for spiritual development, and could establish a program and manuals for student spiritual development. Rawson (2010) suggested that an action research can be combined with contemplative learning for the purpose of student development in higher education context.

From the reasons above, this research attempted to answer the three research questions: "What are the needs for spiritual and ethical development among Thai university students?"; "How can we achieve a program to develop spirituality of Thai university students

through contemplative learning and action research?” and “Will the program be effective with the university students?”

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: (1) to study knowledge of spirituality that should be developed in the context of Thai university students; (2) to create a new program in spirituality development through the action research process; and (3) to experiment with this program and evaluate its effectiveness among Thai university students.

Spirituality and its Development

Spirituality is a process concerning inner life where a person seeks to find the ultimate meaning and values of their life and to live according to that meaning and values (Dhingra, Manhas, & Thakur, 2005). Apart from this, it also involves recognizing the values of others, to have the willingness to create good relationships, and to have a sense of belonging to society and community (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Spirituality is a word defined differently according to culture, religion, language, and history. It has been something of interest all through human history and has been presented together with a set of principles and guidelines of practices in each religion. Even though they use the term spirituality differently, the academic area concerning theology refers to spirituality as an aspect of a greater life that goes beyond the limitations of material importance (Chuengsatiansup, Tongsinsat, & Krikaiwan, 2002). Spirituality is an intangible force which can be developed and is the same as educational philosophy. The root of spirituality requires people not only to think of themselves but also to be concerned with others. Altaf and Awan (2011) defined spirituality as the feeling of connectedness and involvement, understanding of fulfillment, and of giving respect to others and to themselves. Furthermore, Snyder and Lopez (2002) viewed spirituality in terms of values which included optimism, hope, compassion, humility, forgiveness, love, gratitude, altruism, empathy, toughness, and meaningfulness.

Chuengsatiansup, Tongsinsat, and Krikaiwan (2002) suggested that the most important factor in spiritual development in all religions is the practice, which usually involves an ethical aspect concerning a way of living in peace and harmony in the society, a meditation practice as a form of prayers to a god or meditation for mindfulness, and an aspect concerning wisdom that is the attempt to understand the ultimate truth of nature. Spiritual development is an intricate process that needs to be a continuous process and requires a long time. Individuals need to have life experiences and believe in themselves. A significant factor that supports spiritual growth (some refer to it as contemplative education development) for personal spiritual advancement is an experiential process. Mongkonittivej, Chailangkarn, & Pothiban (2009) summarized the techniques available to develop spirituality, such as practicing self-reflection, practicing emotional control by being mindful to things that happen, doing activities that help with relaxation, supporting and encouraging each other, doing activities that create inspiration for oneself such as listening to music, reading poetry, going into nature, studying the dharma, practicing meditation or any particular religious teaching.

In order to develop a spirituality among the university students, the authors incorporated contemplative learning as a core technique that included the development program. This type of learning process intended to promote learner's positive emotion,

thoughts, and belief through activities such as self-reflection, group reflection, dialogue, deep listening, and artistic work (Poolpatarachewin, 2009). Grossenbacher and Parkin (2006) stated that spirituality and contemplative learning are related in term of spirituality experience. They proposed four phases of contemplative learning model which aim to facilitate the open awareness of personal development of spirituality in education context as follows:

1. The first phase of contemplative learning is study. It involves exposure to and storing knowledge by reading or receiving an information from the facilitator. The learner is given the materials needed to introduce and to understand the topic of spirituality.

2. The second phase is contemplation. It concerns leading the learner to integrate the previous knowledge received from the first phase. This can be done by helping learner to take perspective among different point of view and to take a rational analysis. This phase aims to achieve greater conceptual understanding about spirituality and making a relationship with topics in spirituality.

3. The third phase is meditation. It involves heightening awareness of the topics in spirituality. By practice of meditation and other relaxation techniques, the learner becomes to be attentive with the topics of spirituality and being with selfless awareness.

4. The last phase is community-based action or service learning. It involves bringing the learner into real contact with outer world such as community, team, or society. This phase aims to help the learner know more and interconnect with the topics of spirituality by actively doing what he/she has learned from the learning process in the real situation.

Moreover, an action research was conducted as a means to engage students directly to their own experience of spiritual development. Therefore the modules or activities designed to develop a spirituality were not initially determined at the beginning of this research, however literature review concerning the concept of spirituality was conducted broadly. Moreover, after the development need analysis was conducted, more detailed literatures in spiritual development through the contemplative learning were discussed and proposed from the experts in this field as shown in the results of this study.

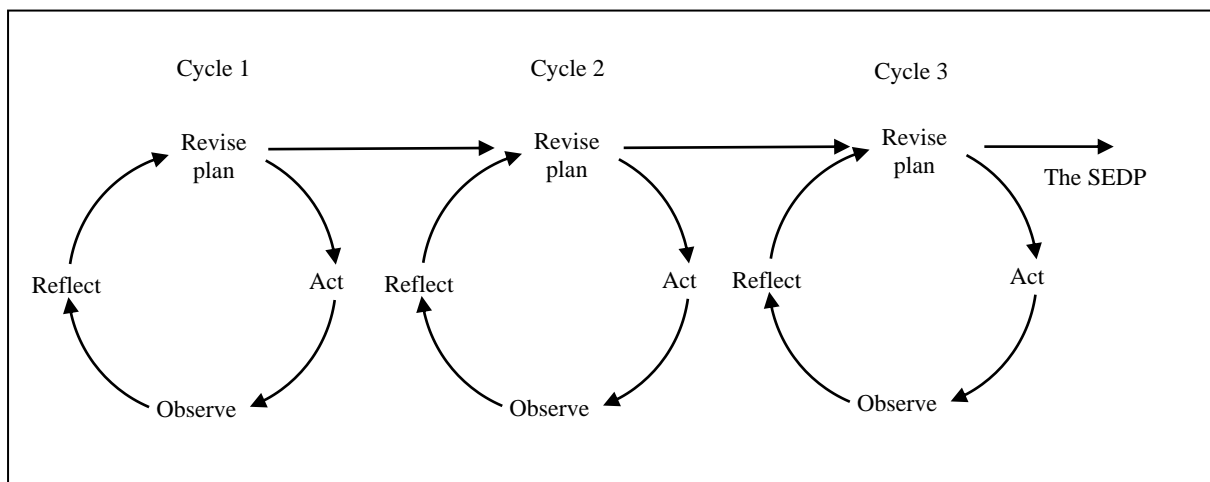


Figure 1. Sequences of Action-Reflection Cycles for the SEDP in this study

Method

The authors implemented an action research method with the aim of establishing a new development program called “the Spiritual and Ethical Development Program (SEDP)” which is specifically suited to Thai university students. This method was cyclical and began with analyzing the needs and problems concerning spirituality, taking actions, and stakeholder participation in reflection and feedback to use in improving the program’s efficiency.

Table 1

Action research process for the SEDP

Cycle	Action Research Process	Activities	Duration/Period
1	Plan	1. Literature review involving documents and research relating to spiritual and ethical development	1 month
		2. Conducting a needs analysis with the stakeholders including students and experts in spiritual development	2 weeks
		3. Finalizing a model for spiritual and ethical development for university students	2 weeks
	Act	4. Creating overall project and modules for the SEDP	2 months
		5. Evaluation of the preliminary quality of the program by a group of experts	2 weeks
		6. Using the evaluation feedback and the recommendations from experts to improve the program before its first module implementation	2 weeks
		7. Conducting pretest	First day of module 1
	Observe	8. Implementing the SEDP for the first cycle (module 1)	3 days
		9. Evaluation on module 1	Final day of module 1
		10. Reviewing and reflecting the first action	1 month after module 1
2	Plan	11. Action planning on module 2	1 month
	Act	12. Implementing the SEDP for the second cycle (module 2)	3 days
	Observe	13. Evaluation on module 2	Final day of module 2
	Reflect	14. Reviewing and reflecting the second action	1 month after module 2
3	Plan	15. Action planning on module 3	1 month
	Act	16. Implementing the SEDP for the third cycle (module 3)	3 days
	Observe	17. Evaluation on module 3	Final day of module 3

Table 1 (*Continued*)

Cycle	Action Research Process	Activities	Duration/Period
	Reflect	18. Conducting posttest	Final day of module 3
		19. Module 4 Planning of spiritual and ethical development, Follow-up, reflect, and overall program evaluation	6 months
		20. Improving and finalizing the SEDP by using information gathered from the key stakeholders consisting of the students, facilitators, and the researchers.	1 months

The action research process for the SEDP was adapted from McNiff and Whitehead (2002) and was conducted on three cycles that could be separated into 20 sequential activities (see Figure 1 and Table 1). The duration of the research was 1 year and 6 months.

Participants

Participants in this action research were: (1) thirty-three students from public universities participating in the process of training and development needs analysis, being the learners in the program, and giving feedback and suggestions for SEDP improvement. This group mostly comprised females (58.1 %). During the development, most students were in their third-year (70.9 %) and 80 percent were from universities located in the Bangkok area. Research project was approved by the Thailand Research Fund committee. Objectives were present and consent form were obtained from the students at the beginning of needs analysis session. (2) Two groups of experts in spiritual and ethical development, with the first being five experts working as the SEDP developers and facilitators, taking a role in observing the learning behaviors of the students, and providing feedback for further improvement in the action research cycle. The second group consisted of four experts working on the overall evaluation of the finalized SEDP.

Research Instruments

1. Instruments for training and development need analysis consisted of: (a) a questionnaire surveying the spiritual and ethical issues of the students which needed to be developed, (b) a questionnaire for the experts to suggest the direction of spiritual and ethical development suited for the context of university students.

2. Instruments for evaluating the quality of the SEDP consisted of a questionnaire for the experts to review and evaluate the content validity of the modules, learning process, and overall quality of the SEDP.

3. Instruments for evaluating the effectiveness of the SEDP, contained:

3.1 A knowledge evaluation form completed before and after attending the SEDP that covered the overall SEDP evaluation, reaction and evaluation of the SEDP.

3.2 Seven psychological measures of spirituality and ethics which were needed to be developed by the student participants with the SEDP were: (a) self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; 10 items; $\alpha = .92$), (b) esteem for others was measured using a four items from the GRAT-short form (Thomas & Watkins,

2003; $\alpha = .72$), (c) positive relation with others was measured using seven items from the Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale (Abbott, Ploubidis, Huppert, Kuh, & Croudace, 2010; $\alpha = .83$), (d) forgiveness was measured using six items from the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Yamhure-Thompson & Snyder, 2003; $\alpha = .77$), (e) responsibility to self was measured using seven items from the Personal and Social Responsibility Questionnaire (Li, Wright, Rukavina, & Pickering, 2008; $\alpha = .77$), (f) responsibility to others and the environment was measured using 10 items from the Philanthropy Scale (Schuyt, Bekkers, & Smit, 2010; $\alpha = .69$), and (g) spiritual health was measured using 23 items from the Spiritual Health Scale (Chongvisal et al., 2010; $\alpha = .86$). All Measures except the Spiritual Health Scale were translated into Thai by English-Thai translators and experts in psychology.

3.3 Diary of the journey- a journal for individual reflection for student's self-development.

3.4 In-depth interview guide to provide qualitative data on individual's development from the SEDP.

3.5 Interview guide for the focus group to evaluate the learning outcomes and effectiveness of the SEDP.

Data Analyses

1. Quantitative data analysis described the preliminary details of the participants, to summarize the suggestions concerning the content of SEDP and to evaluate the effectiveness of the SEDP, including descriptive statistics that used to describe the personal characteristics of participants and dependent t-test that was performed to test the differences of spiritual and ethical scores, pretest and posttest. It was expected that the scores on spirituality and ethics would be increased after completing the SEDP. Moreover, Cohen's *d* was also calculated to determine the effect size representing the standardized differences, both pretest and posttest (Cohen, 1988).

2. For the qualitative data, content analysis was performed on the data derived from interviews, focus groups and discussion, and the diaries of journey journal which allows the student participants reflected and wrote their inner experiences of spiritual development. The aim was to identify and describe the effectiveness of the SEDP on participants' spiritual and ethical development.

Results

Needs Analysis and Problem Identification

The authors conducted needs analysis and identified the issues for spiritual and ethical development with regard to the university students. This was done by collecting information from the needs analysis survey and three focus groups among the students who shared their thoughts on the issues they were interested in and came to conclusions that their needs concerning spiritual and ethical development were: (a) to recognize esteem towards oneself and for others, for example self-acceptance and recognizing individual differences, empathy, and the sense of one's own value, (b) to having good relationships with others and to be able to forgive, for example giving, listening to other's problems, and (c) to have responsibilities for oneself, society, and the environment. After obtaining these conclusions, the authors held

another consultation with three experts in spiritual development and contemplative education in order to incorporate these developmental needs into the SEDP which would be carried out with the university students.

These experts identified problems that were consistent with what was suggested by the students. They also suggested that self-worth would also lead to the ability to connect to their own positive internal resources resulting in the individual's acceptance of oneself. Furthermore, to be able to esteem for others would require being able to be aware of other's feeling and to have the actual experience of working in a team. Having a positive relationship with others involves peaceful communication, building trust, forgiveness and self-acceptance, understanding the roots of conflicts, and not taking advantage of each other. With the issues of responsibilities, one should focus on being responsible for their own life purpose and being responsible for society and the environment, especially in connecting self-responsibilities and responsibilities towards the environment they live in.

The findings from need analysis about the key dimensions of spirituality needed to be developed among the students were noted, and confirmed by the experts, and were consistent with the definitions from Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball, & King (2008). They steered an international panel of 120 experts in youth and adolescent spirituality development across cultural and religious differences and achieved a framework on spirituality development which represents three core dimensions: (a) connecting and belonging, through experiencing significance in relationships to oneself, others, and the world, (b) becoming aware of self and life, through becoming aware of oneself, others, and their environment in order to improve identity and meaning of life, and (c) developing a way of living, which involves expressing value and passion through practices and activities that build interconnection with oneself, others, and their environment.

In addition, the experts also suggested development pathways from their own personal experiences that spiritual development of university students should focus on the learning process, led by the facilitators who guided the students by helping them to contemplate and to understand their own experiences from various activities such as self-reflection, deep listening, life experience sharing, mindfulness practices, art work, role play, dialogue, team activities, self-reflection, and non-violent communication.

Development and Experimentation of the SEDP

After identifying the needs and issues for spiritual and ethical development, the SEDP was developed and initially tested with a group of university students. There were four modules: (a) Module 1- Development of self-esteem and esteem for others, (2) Module 2- Development of relationship with others, (3) Module 3- Development of responsibility towards self, others, and the environment, and (4) Module 4- Planning of spiritual and ethical development and monitoring. For the first three modules, one was scheduled within the period of 3 days and 2 nights. In each module, there was a process for observation and evaluation to reflect on further action and improvement of the next module. For example, feedback from the first module would be used to improve the activities in the second module, and the results from the second module would be used to improve the third module. At the end of the third module, the fourth module of planning and monitoring for individual development would be

implemented. This would also include a plans for personal development which would be evaluated afterwards.

Quantitative Evaluation of Effectiveness of the SEDP

Table 2 illustrates the results of mean comparisons of spiritual and ethical scores between pretest and posttest. The authors hypothesized that after completing the SEDP, the students would have higher mean scores for seven psychological measures of spirituality and ethics. The analysis was applied to students who had completely participated in all the SEDP modules and were able to provide full information on the scales, which was the case for 26 participants. The data were analyzed using dependent t-test and Cohen's *d* which calculated by mean difference divided by the standard deviation of the difference in score, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Mean comparisons for the pretest and posttest scores of seven psychological measures of spirituality and ethics

Measures on spirituality and ethics	Mean difference (Posttest - Pretest)	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
1. Self-esteem	7.81	7.11	5.60**	1.09
2. Esteem for others	1.39	3.32	2.12*	.41
3. Relationships with others	2.12	5.43	1.99*	.39
4. Forgiveness	.31	5.46	.29	.05
5. Responsibility to self	4.39	3.63	6.15**	1.20
6. Responsibility to others and the environment	12.65	7.32	8.81**	1.72
7. Spiritual health	6.11	9.92	3.14**	.61

** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

The authors compared the significant differences of the scores from the seven measures of spirituality and ethics between pretest and posttest using the Dependent t-test. Moreover, Cohen's *d* effect size (Cohen, 1988) was also provided showing the standardized mean differences and the increase from pretest to posttest. Participants in the SEDP showed a significant increase in self-esteem at the posttest ($t(25) = 5.59, p < .01$; Cohen's $d = 1.09$). Esteem for others also significantly increased after participation in the SEDP ($t(25) = 2.12, p < .05$; Cohen's $d = .41$). Furthermore, the participants reported a significant increase in relationship with others ($t(25) = 1.98, p < .05$; Cohen's $d = .39$), increased responsibility to self ($t(25) = 6.15, p < .01$; Cohen's $d = 1.20$), increased responsibility to others and the environment ($t(25) = 8.81, p < .01$; Cohen's $d = 1.72$), and increased spiritual health ($t(25) = 3.14, p < .01$; Cohen's $d = .61$). However, the differences between pretest and posttest scores on forgiveness were not statistically significant ($t(25) = .28, ns$) with a small effect size (Cohen's $d = .05$).

Qualitative Evaluation of Effectiveness of the SEDP

Through the cycle of action research for the development of the SEDP, qualitative data were collected to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the SEDP modules and on observation of the changes in behavior of the participants after completely participating in all

four modules. These qualitative data were gathered as suggested by Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon (2014) that bringing different types and sources of evidence could help the researchers to triangulate the results. The researchers used the focus groups, in-depth interviews, and the diaries of participant's journey journal to collect accounts of inner experience of spiritual development from the participants. Elliot (1991) stated that these methods provided a variety of perspectives and they could be compared and be contrasted. Through using various sources of data in action research, triangulation of the evidence of effectiveness of the SEDP on the action research could provide.

The data were coded and four themes on spiritual and ethical development emerged: (1) spiritual development is an inner experience, (2) impact on connecting to oneself, (3) connecting to others, and (4) connecting to the environment. All of these can be clarified as follows.

1. Spiritual development is an inner experience. A significant factor in spiritual and ethical development is creating experiences where the student participants can reflect on their thoughts and feelings through the processes led by the facilitators. Spiritual connection is not achieved by passing on knowledge from facilitators, which is an outside factor, but rather it comes from a spiritual experience created by the students themselves through their own self-reflection and interpretation. One student said, "Everything we encountered in life is meaningful no matter if we notice it or not." This is also consistent with a conclusion by a participant in a focus group that "At first I wanted to know what spirituality is. Now I know that spirituality is something that cannot be passed on but needs to be experienced by myself." These inner experiences subsequently enabled a deeper connection with others or opened-mindedness, as one member of the focus group said, "Spiritual development created experiences that help me to have the courage to step out of my comfort zone to do the things that I would like to do and to meet new people and new experiences. "The effectiveness of the SEDP should be evaluated through information about students' inner experiences, which is in line with the concept of spiritual development mentioned by Dhingra et al. (2005) that development of human spirituality needs to be studied through the phenomenon of personal inner life experiences, reflecting on their own values and life meanings.

2. Impact on connecting to oneself. An important theme showing the results of participating in the SEDP that could be observed and identified in both the students and the facilitators refers to the word "connections". This theme focuses on the activities allowing students to experience connecting with themselves and to recognize the benefits of the SEDP as a process of connections with their own inner self. The authors found important subthemes as follows.

2.1 Self-acceptance. Activities in module 1 focused on allowing the students to understand the process leading to the awareness of one self-esteem. Activities, such as the River of Life, the Four Directions of Personality, and Appreciative Inquiry allowed the students to reflect and accept their real needs. One student reflected that:

"Participating in this activity helped me to reflect on things that have happened in my life, reflect on my feelings from that experience and to be able to see my feelings clearer and to learn to understand and accept those feelings."

From one focus group after participating in the activities in module 1, a member commented that “This enabled me to be mindful, turn back to myself, and listen to my inner calling. I felt I had the power to do something about it.” These quotes represent the benefits of self-acceptance which is a foundation for participants recognizing their own worth and esteem in the conduct of life.

2.2 Understanding oneself. When the students are open to reflect on themselves, this leads to the state of self-awareness which is a starting point for understanding their own needs, thoughts and feelings, including their own strengths and weaknesses. As a student explained, “Before I would see myself very shallowly and see myself in a negative way. When I spend more time with myself, I’m able to have more perspectives on myself [in a positive way].” Furthermore, the students in the SEDP also said that, after completing the program, they found they could be more mindful of their feelings that they had experienced and they were able to not to let those feelings disturb their life. For example, one student said: “I understand my feelings and others’ feelings more. Previously, I always used my feelings to judge things too much or too soon.”

Many students suggested that activity from the Four Directions of Personality could allow the participants to identify their own type of personality which would help them to see their own strengths and weaknesses. As one student said: “This activity helps me to develop myself as I can see more of my strengths and weaknesses and know what I need to be developed or changed.” This sort of response was evidence that activities that are tangible, for example the Four Directions of Personality, could help the students to understand themselves more clearly and to understand their strength and weaknesses. It is also a basic pathway towards self-acceptance and recognizing how to deal with problems which may come from their traits.

2.3 Self-worth. This is the characteristic of a person which represents the sense of one’s own intrinsic value. It is related to a meaningful life and a sense of ownership. The SEDP focuses on a way of enabling the students to have integrity and authenticity towards themselves. One participant in the SEDP said after participating in the activities in module 1: “I was authentic with myself in both my thoughts and feelings.” Another student described her progress in the SEDP: “This journey [participating in the SEDP] helps me to learn and I think the knowledge I derived is valuable, and this value makes me human.” Another student wrote in her diary that: “The meaning of my life is to live a meaningful life.”

2.4 Vigor. This is a life energy and mental resilience expressed through an individual’s ability to function in more activities and tasks. In the SEDP, students were able to reflect on their lives and empower themselves through activities, such as Where I Came From and Writing a Letter Back to Your Young Self. As one student said, “These activities helped me to reflect back on my life. It took me back to view my childhood. It made me felt stronger... I feel that I need to have hope to live in this world.” Moreover, one student mentioned in a focused group for follow-up 2 months after completing the 3rd module that: “I have more courage to get out of my comfort zone, to face the risk that it takes to learn more about life.”

3. Impact on connecting with others. Not only did the SEDP help the students to connect more deeply with themselves, after being able to connect with and understand their own needs, feelings and values, this can also expand into a positive feeling towards others.

Creating positive relationships with others is an essential element of spiritual connection. According to Meunier and Baker (2012), the nature of relationship is built by practicing the skill on empathic attunement, by having an individual experience to understand the thoughts, feelings, and respond to other's need. Subsequently, a relationship would be strong. When a person feels that they are part of an experience of a meaningful positive relationship, they will have a goal in life and a spiritual connection is possible. The authors found the significant subthemes which represent the effectiveness of the SEDP on a relationship with others were as follows.

3.1 Openness to others. This involved listening to other's voices. A person who can connect to the experiences of others needs to deeply listen to others with an openheartedness, and with a goodwill to learn from other's experiences. Listening and being open to understanding the situations and the needs of others without judgement and bias are important factors driving a spiritual connection between people (Kastel, 2012). This is consistent with what one student shared during a follow-up session:

“Deep listening activity provides a space for sharing the story of happiness in life. And when we listen to other deeply and peacefully, I feels like if I turn off the voices in my mind and attend to other's voice, I can get into their worlds and their stories. These help me to learn from new experiences as well as their stories.”

3.2 Other's acceptance. This refers to an ability to understand others whether it's for good or a limitation, without judging the person as good or bad. A person who can accept others will not judge with his/her personal bias, instead he/she will accept others' conditions and honor them. From the SEDP activities in module 2, there were some changes to the students. In a focused group, one student shared her experience about accepting others that “Everyone has both good and bad sides. I try to tune in with them... if we are open to new things, seeing people deeply, with an open-heartedness, we can open up to more connections with others.”

One student shared that an inner experience after participating in the activity which he had to close his eyes and let his friends help him to walk through a field of board pins. He said:

“At first, I felt unsafe. I didn't want to participate in this activity. But when I saw my friends doing and enjoying it, it helped me find the courage [trust others]. From this activity, I saw sacrifice, caring from a friend that I've just met. I saw a different point of view which was different from my own [bias], through which I can accept and understand them.”

Acceptance and not judging other who have a different condition allowed the students to develop relationships with their friends in a propitious way. When they needed to work together as a team, they could adapt to each other.

3.3 Positive relationships. This is a feeling of being supported by others, having a sincere connection, and being safe in the relationship (Seligman, 2011). Positive relationships happen when individuals have experiences of receiving open-heartedness, integrity, and respect from others. It is reciprocal phenomenon by the balance of giving and receiving. One student said after participating in the activities in module 1 that:

“In a risky activity [walking on a field of board pins], we needed to talk and make plans together. Once it started, I felt that I could trust my friends, because I knew that they would not let me get hurt for sure. And at the same time, I must not let my friends get hurt as well. I needed to take good care of them and achieve this goal together. I feel that what I received from this activity was very special.”

In an in-depth interview after completing the modules of the SEDP, one student shared: “participating in all three modules, I found new friends and we became much closer with each other. I get to see new perspectives from my friends and this program made me felt very warm.”

Moreover, the students reflected that as a result of joining the SEDP they were able to see others in a more positive way. One student shared that when she got back to her life, she could make more close friends: “I see people in a more positive way. I have a more positive attitude towards things around me, because I understand people more from listening to their experiences and I can trust my friends.”

4. Impact on connecting to environment. Aspects of spirituality are not only connecting with the inner self and others but also involves connections with both social and non-human environments. In spiritual development, one needs to contemplate on one’s life and to be aware of the impact that an individual can have on the social and natural environments. The SEDP gave the students a chance to get in touch with nature. The students participating in module 3 explained the changes in their own behaviors as follows.

4.1 Openness to the environment. In daily life, especially as teenagers in urban areas, the students have very limited opportunity to gain intimacy with the natural world. Activities in this program provided opportunities for the students to get in touch with nature and to sense their surroundings without having filters. To be mindful with the nature around them helped the students to connect better with themselves and the natural environment. As an example, one student who shared her feeling when the facilitators asked her to spend time in nature for a while that: “I could hear my own voices through this activity which made my confusions calm down and stop all thoughts. I realized that nature is amazing, full of mystery and charming. Nature is all around us but we overlook it.” Another student said: “To open my heart to nature and being without the role of a tourist helped to reduce my expectation towards this place. It helped me to see the surrounding things more, to notice things in nature more.”

4.2 Concern for the environment. Through this, the students could open themselves up mindfully to what was in their natural environment. This allowed them to realize the impacts of their way of life on changes to the environment. They were aware of their role and how it relates to the environment where they are living. One student reflected after completion of the activities in module 3:

“This activity made be able to reflect on my relationship with nature, my way of life and how it impacted on nature. We can design and manage the way that we live harmoniously with nature, without being too much burden on ourselves.”

In summary, the authors found that the students, as the participants in the SEDP, could observe and explain their own changes. Participating in the SEDP helped them to connect

with themselves, others, and the environment. Therefore, the SEDP helped the students to have a positive approach and to have compassion towards themselves and others outside themselves.

Revised SEDP Resulting from Action Research

After initially experimenting with the SEDP on a group of university students through a cycle of action research, the authors took the results from both the quantitative and qualitative effectiveness evaluation during the period of full SEDP implementation into consideration in revising the SEDP. This program was subsequently evaluated by a group of experts to judge the final quality of the SEDP. The revised SEDP comprised four modules, whose objectives and sample activities in the SEDP are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Summary of the revised SEDP

Modules	Objectives	Sample Activities
Module 1: Development of self-esteem and esteem for others	Able to appreciate, accept, and respect to themselves. Seeing the positive qualities of themselves, and able to expand their perspective to recognize other-worth. Able to be mindful when judging others.	Building up Friendship; Duck Hunting for a Space; The River of Life; The Four Directions of Personality; Poisonous River; Intuitive Writing; Appreciative Inquiry; The Blind Walking; The Rocking Dolls.
Module 2: Development of relationship with others	Able to build a positive relationship with themselves and others. Being responsible towards others. Able to create a relational power and happiness for others.	The Paired Drawing; Dialogue; Overcoming the Suffering; The Six-Sensations; Team Work; The Empathy Cards; I Came From; Lighting Candles; Writing a Letter to Your Young Self.
Module 3: Development of responsibility towards self, others, and the environment	Able to use discretion for making decisions and accept their own outcomes. Being conscientious and having the courage to be responsible towards others and society. Be aware of inequalities in society and to use their creativity to solve those problems. Able to connect with their responsibilities towards the environment.	Equilateral Triangle; Connecting to Nature; Hugging Nature; The Universe Pathway; Bonding Your Meal; The Different Steps; Auction Lines; Watching Inspirational Movie; Coming Home.
Module 4: Planning of spiritual and ethical development and monitoring	Able to summarize their detailed plan for personal development. Able to develop themselves, evaluate themselves, and share with their friends and the facilitators.	Reviewing Personal Development Plan; Report Progress and Obstacles, Discussions, and Making Suggestions on Improvements in a Peer Group.

Discussion

This research was conducted through an action research process from the key stakeholders including, students, facilitators, experts, and the authors to initiate the SEDP for the target of students in Thailand. A significant process was the attempt to manage the situation of learning where the students could gain experience on connecting with their self, others, and the environment. The process of planning, action, observing, and reflecting the results in an action research cycle helped the authors to develop and deliver an SEDP that is

suitable for Thai university students. Action research helped to identify the participants' need and to connect the designed activities with real world practices. That is, the proposed program was developed, tested, and adapted using the target participants. The findings showed that action research of the SEDP could ensure that the activities corresponded with the issues and needs raised by the participants. It is consistent with previous studies on spiritual development in other countries such as the Spiritual Development Program for Teenagers in the Classrooms (Brown, 2004), the Spiritual and Cultural Education Process for Nursing Students (Narayanasamy, 2006).

The results showed that the experiences from participants in SEDP could increase self-esteem. Activities such as the Intuitive Writing and Appreciative Inquiry represent a learning process to reflect mindfully on their previous life experiences especially in contemplating their own limitations and weaknesses in the past that might establish their negative self-concept. Sharing their experiences with others helped the participants to increase their self-worth through a process of self-affirmation. This finding is consistent with Coholic (2005) that the spiritual development program can benefit individuals who have problems of low self-esteem resulting from drug abuse. The activities in this study were mindfulness practice, mindfulness writing, and artwork, which aimed to develop self-awareness and improve self-esteem. Moreover, esteem for others is considered as a significant spiritual value in living with others. It is consistent with Kouzes and Posner (1999) who mentioned that individuals who practice accepting and appreciate others as part of group success can implement a technique called Encouraging the Heart, by focusing on the process of caring and acceptance on others. This technique is consistent with several activities used in the SEDP focus on allowing the participants to care for each other, communicating in a supportive and accepting way, and recognizing other-worth, such as Appreciative Inquiry, The River of Life, and Deep Listening.

Furthermore, building a positive relationship with others is another essential element of spiritual development. The findings in this study identified activities that focus on connecting participants' experiences with each other through contemplative education techniques; for example, Paired Drawing, Appreciative Inquiry, and the Empathy Cards that could develop a better relationship among the participants. These techniques are consistent with Hanley, Warner, and Garland (2015) who found that participants who regularly develop themselves and are following the practice of contemplative education had increased relationships with others compared with participants who did not practice this. This study also found that the participants in the SEDP could connect with themselves, others, and the environment. The observed data revealed that their responsibilities towards themselves, society, and the environment were increased after participating in the SEDP. These results are consistent with Fredrickson and Anderson (1999), who studied wilderness experience and spiritual inspiration among women who like to travel for the benefit of contemplative experience but not for physical fitness. They found that travelling and living among serene natural surroundings could increase spiritual inspiration in terms of improving relationships with others, for example creating trust and emotional support, sharing their life changes, and being in a non-competitive atmosphere. Moreover, it also contributed to improving their abilities to connect to natural environment. This is consistent with Mayer and Frantz (2004), who found that connectedness to nature was positively associated with behaviors related to responsibility towards nature.

Recommendations

Those interested in behavioral interventions could deliver the SEDP for individual's spiritual and ethical development in Thai university students or even in youths. The SEDP can be applied by selecting the activities in each module to suit a group of interest. However, the SEDP is made up of specific activities which require trainers or facilitators with specialized knowledge, skills, and experiences in spiritual development and contemplative education. Previous experience in spiritual development is essential to implement the SEDP effectively, for example in meditation, mindfulness practice, self-reflection, facilitation skills, or certified train-the-trainer in spiritual development.

For further research, it is recommended that those interested in this spiritual and ethical development research can replicate the results of this research in developing university students by designing an experiment which proposes a program in spiritual and ethical development that can affect changes in individual's outcomes, such as academic adjustment, well-being, or flourishing. Moreover, in this research, the authors used several methods for collecting the evidence of the effectiveness in the SEDP (psychological measures, in-depth interviews, and diary of journey journals). However, those interested can implement other methods for evaluation of changes in behaviors with regards to ethics and morals of the interested participants, for example using storytelling by selecting a success case method to determine the participants who have clearly shown improvement.

For policy recommendations, involved institutions (university, faculty, and program) should support student development by providing training and practically implementing the SEDP. Including spiritual and ethical development into an institute's policy can be a way of encouraging the students to recognize their own and others values, having a good relationship among peers, and having good ethics, especially being responsible. Moreover, there should be policy to support and promote a facilitator training program in spiritual and ethical development for leaders, managers, and those who work in various organizations. The authors also suggest setting up a "Spiritual and Ethical Development Center" to be responsible for training and organizing developmental activities, and offering consultation for spiritual and ethical development for participants and trainers or other interested parties. Such a center could support educational institutions, organizations, the social sector, government institutions, and the private sector to be alert in implementing knowledge in spiritual and ethical development in various settings and contexts.

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