

CHAPTER

# 11

**DISCOVERING HAITIAN YOUTH'S SPIRITUAL  
EPISTEMOLOGY THROUGH A CULTURALLY BASED  
SUMMER PROGRAM IN FLORIDA**

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## RÉSUMÉ

Ce chapitre, *Discovering Haitian Youth's Spiritual Epistemology through a Culturally Based Summer Program in Florida* [Mettre en évidence l'épistémologie spirituelle des jeunes Haïtiens à travers un programme d'été culturellement adapté], analyse les résultats de recherches menées sur l'épistémologie spirituelle des jeunes d'ascendance haïtienne vivant aux États-Unis. L'épistémologie spirituelle désigne la manière dont les individus reconnaissent la transcendance et comment ils utilisent et diffusent cette connaissance dans leur vie quotidienne et auprès de leur communauté. Ce chapitre étudie un programme éducatif tenant compte des réalités socio-culturelles (Sociocultural Responsive Education – SCR) destiné à des jeunes d'origine haïtienne à Miami, en Floride, met en perspective religion et spiritualité, souligne la spiritualité des adolescents et des jeunes Haïtiens et présente les résultats de la recherche sur l'épistémologie spirituelle.

Le projet Émancipation des Haïtiens pour l'alphabétisation (Haitian Empowerment for Literacy Project [HELP]) a été conçu comme un programme d'été fondé sur la culture et les arts et ayant une composante spirituelle, dans le but d'améliorer l'alphabétisation des jeunes du niveau intermédiaire (lycée) d'origine haïtienne. L'étude de cas instrumentale à sujet unique a été menée au cours de l'été 2014. Soixante-six jeunes ont rédigé les énoncés d'objectifs et 22 autres ont participé à des groupes de discussion. En analysant les données de façon à la fois déductive et inductive, nous les avons organisées et encodées. L'étude a mis en évidence quatre thèmes liés à l'épistémologie spirituelle des jeunes : a) la spiritualité commence avec Dieu ; b) la spiritualité doit s'incarner dans une pratique ; c) la spiritualité s'exprime intellectuellement et artistiquement ; et d) la spiritualité a pour objectif d'améliorer la vie de ceux qui la pratiquent.

L'épistémologie spirituelle des jeunes d'origine haïtienne a été mise en évidence dans des espaces individuels (avec en premier lieu Dieu et son incarnation), des espaces interpersonnels (l'expression de Dieu à travers l'art et l'intellect) et, enfin, dans les espaces collectifs (par des efforts pour améliorer la vie des communautés et en Haïti). Les jeunes ont intégré le modèle SCR d'émancipation par l'éducation, comme le montrent les énoncés d'objectifs dans lesquels ils parlent d'eux-mêmes en termes non négatifs (c'est-à-dire les capacités, les talents, etc.), et ils ont défini le type de communauté dans lequel ils veulent vivre, où les gens vulnérables sont pris en charge et où les relations entre tous sont marquées par l'esprit de justice. Le processus d'inclusion intentionnelle d'activités spirituelles et le fait de soutenir de façon explicite la jeunesse d'ascendance haïtienne les a aidés à développer une identité positive, à reconnaître leurs talents et à envisager un avenir fait de service à la communauté et de bien-être.

[I] was put on the earth for a specific reason—to help make the world a better place, to guide my peers to successful lives and to change the world.  
Eighth grade female participant

[I] exist to heal, encourage and console others through the power of my poetic skills. [I] exist to be the one who listens to others' thoughts, feelings and problems so that [I] make a positive difference in one's life.  
Seventh grade female participant

Adolescence is a time when individuals begin to integrate various aspects of the self, such as one's philosophy of life, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation and career options, to develop one's identity (Schwartz et al., 2013). Identity development in adolescence is connected to the adolescent's cultural identity or association with their ethnic or racial group (French et al., 2006) and spirituality, as their critical thinking capacity may result in questioning beliefs and knowledge (Doka, 2011). Identity, including cultural identity, is shaped through the informal education of parents, family, peers and spiritual leaders (Stepick et al., 2003).

Twenty-first century life poses unique challenges for youth of Haitian descent in the US. As the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, Haiti continues to be depicted in the media with negative and disparaging images (Collins, 2013). Haitian youth continue to see their cultural reflection as among the least desirable in the West (see Chapter 7 in this volume). If youth fail to secure a strong sense of self, they will experience role confusion, which can lead to risky behavior and poor outcomes (Erikson, 1968). Haitians, in middle and high school in the diaspora, are inclined to succumb to peer pressure and engage in the repudiation of their heritage (Stepick et al., 2003).

Haitian and other Caribbean immigrants often distance themselves from African Americans to achieve economic and social mobility on their own terms and access the American dream (Waters, 1999). For many Haitian Americans, Haiti's recognition as the first independent Black republic in the western hemisphere has been the source of much nationalistic pride (Désir, 2011). Nonetheless Stepick et al. (2003) conducted one of the first longitudinal studies on Haitian youth in Miami and found that "the combined prejudices from the broader American society and those specifically within the high school urge Miami Haitian adolescents to assimilate rapidly and to simultaneously engage in ethnic suicide, to cover up their Haitian origins" (p. 121).

This chapter will incorporate and include an understanding of the challenging integration of cultural identity and spirituality in youth of Haitian descent utilizing a socioculturally responsive education (SCR).

Spirituality is the search for meaning, transcendence and life's purpose via cognitions and practices, including meditation and service (Kim and Esquivel, 2011; Wuthnow, 1998). We put forth that spiritual epistemology is how individuals know the transcendent and how they use and disseminate this knowledge in their lives and communities. Spiritual development is how spirituality and spiritual epistemology evolve over time (Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude, 2003). SCR education incorporates students' experiences and local, home-based knowledge to inform pedagogy, curriculum and relationships (Lee and Quijada Cerecer, 2010).

Spirituality is a protective factor during adolescence, and its development is vital, particularly for at-risk students (Quinn, 2008). The evolution of adolescents' spiritual knowledge and knowing (epistemology) is a component of healthy development in adolescence; it enhances the ability to cope and leads to positive outcomes in psychological well-being and academic learning (Boynton, 2011; Kim and Esquivel, 2011). Though spiritual development is deemed an integral part of the human condition (Benson et al., 2003) and a natural aspect of human development that is connected to students' family systems and worldviews (Kimbel and Schellenberg, 2013), it is often neglected in secular educational settings due to the misguided association between spirituality and religion (Petersen, 2008).

While being aware of the role that spirituality plays within one's culture, SCR education aims to integrate students' cultural knowledge and experiences to inform curriculum design and content (Lee and Quijada Cerecer, 2010). Lee and Quijada Cerecer (2010) assert that SCR education is necessary to respond to educational inequities that negatively affect low-income youth as well as youth of color. SCR education incorporates students' lived experiences, home-based knowledge, and cultural backgrounds into the classroom and teaching (Lee and Quijada Cerecer, 2010). Adding an explicit spiritual component to the SCR curriculum has been advocated to promote well-being, healing, social growth and student resilience (Kimbel and Schellenberg, 2013).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine research findings on the spiritual epistemology of youth of Haitian descent who live in the US. These youth participated in a culturally based summer literacy program that incorporated SCR practices that explicitly promoted spiritual epistemology and development. A subgroup of the students in the program participated in a research study to explore Haitian adolescent spiritual epistemology during the 2013 seven-week summer program. The study explored the youth's descriptions, expressions, and embodiment of spirituality. This chapter will explain the context of the study, an SCR summer program in Miami, Florida; demarcate religion and spirituality; delineate the relationship between spirituality and adolescence and examine the spirituality of

Haitian American youth. Also, the chapter will discuss findings and implications of the study for enhancing the spiritual epistemology of youth of Haitian descent and their positive identity development.

### 11.1. THE HAITIAN EMPOWERMENT LITERACY PROJECT (HELP)

The socio-economic success of low-income and minority youth can be supported by valuing their identity and culture and providing opportunities for these children to discover and explore cultural connections (Kitson and Bowes, 2010). Schools provide an academic context where students themselves become the teachers of their own social and cultural integration (Désir, 2006). Haitian churches can also provide contexts for cultural and religious integration (Stepick, Rey and Mahler, 2009). However, neither schools nor churches offer the full range of relevant academic, cultural and spiritual resources that are needed to effectively support the development of these children.

In response to these needs, two of the authors, Charlene Désir and Pamela Hall, created the Haitian Empowerment Literacy Project (HELP) to mentor Haitian youth along the path to college. The first cohort of the culturally based program began in the summer after the 2010 earthquake as the needs of Haitian American children and those migrating after the earthquake overwhelmed local schools in the Miami area. There was a need for more consistent support for Haitian children, which the HELP Summer Institute sought to provide through relevant cultural, academic and social skills development.

The HELP Summer Institute was a seven-week culturally based program that supported the development of cultural identity, literacy, and social skills. The program was designed specifically for middle school students in grades six through eight residing in the Miami-Dade County area, predominately in North Miami, Little Haiti, North Miami Beach and Miami Shores, where there are large populations of Haitians and Haitian Americans. HELP was developed with careful consideration given to the unique needs of Haitian and Haitian American middle school students aged 11 to 13 years.

The HELP curriculum offered a holistic education to nurture Haitian youths' intellectual, emotional, social, physical, creative and spiritual growth. HELP promoted cultural awareness through diverse arts activities (e.g., poetry/spoken word, visual arts, photography, dance and drama). Students' self-esteem and self-efficacy were developed through social skills training, public speaking activities and group problem-solving activities. The program aimed to instill good decision-making, problem-solving and

critical thinking skills in the students. More importantly, the focus on making students aware of their culture, past and present, was designed to create leaders who will be a positive influence in their school, home and community.

### 11.1.1. HELP Program Activities and Curriculum

Each summer an overarching theme was created for the HELP program to engage Haitian youth in their academic, cultural, socioemotional, and spiritual understandings. The following were the themes for the first four years: Year 1—2010—You are a Dream Actualized; Year 2—2011—The Roots are Deep: Decolonizing the Imagination; Year 3—2012—Manifestation of God's Love; Year 4—2013—Spiritual Consciousness Connects us to the Divine Mind. The founders and teachers worked together to create a dynamic emergent curriculum for Haitian youth utilizing yearly themes as a framework for the curriculum and building on curricula from the previous year curriculum and activities that would foster the Haitian youths' understanding of self from the individual, interpersonal interactions, and within their community. The specificity of activities and curricula were influenced by longitudinal research on Haitian youth by co-founder Charlene Désir—a school psychologist with a doctorate in Learning and Teaching. Additionally, in 2009 a pilot study of Haitian middle school students in Miami provided insight on Haitian youths' social and academic needs. Responses from the participants indicated wanting a summer program to learn more about Haiti and the ability to learn from Haitian mentors that would support their social and cultural integration in the US.

The following provides a snap shot of the overall summer program as the staff linked activities to the yearly theme. The day began with breakfast and a morning meeting that included prayer, meditation, and reflection. Each day the students engaged in two hours of literacy. They also spent two hours a day engaged in art activities facilitated by a local Haitian artist that highlighted the yearly theme. Additionally, the students had fitness classes and computer classes weekly, and twice a week they took part in therapeutic social skills groups with clinical psychology interns. The program also included field trips, volunteer service activities and Haitian guest lectures.

Over a seven-week period, students in the first two weeks focused on self. They engaged in literacy activities and exercises on the interconnected history of Africa, Haiti, and the U.S. As they read materials, they also engaged in complementary art activities of their learning through drawing flags and personal duality self-portraits of their being Haitian and American. Another art activity included taking part in spoken word

workshops with a Haitian artist to create their own spoken word interpretations of Haitian history. In the third and fourth week, students begin to engage in interpersonal activities as they reflected on influences on their identity. They continued to read text relevant to their emerging ethnic and racial identity development such as *Behind the Mountains* by Edwidge Danticat (2002) and Sharon G. Flake's (1998) *The Skin I'm In*. During these two weeks, artists also supported these ideas as they facilitated students working together to create masks. Students used cloth and molded a mask on their partners' face, and vice versa. They began to understand the significance of interacting with the other and literally developing depictions of the other. Students read poems such as "We were the Mask" by Paul Dunbar to examine the social masks that they often wear and what others wear. The staff also engaged students in conversation about code switching as the highest form of intelligence whereby students were taught how to change social context quickly and adapt quickly.

During the last three weeks of the program, students engaged in activities related to community and identity. Students began to reflect on the various communities they took part in (e.g., school, church, family, and neighborhoods) and engaged in activities that examined the ways in which these communities were connected. In addition, students listened to presentation from community members and then reflected as a group on significant points. Speakers included Haitian lawyers, acupuncturists, financial planners, Protestant pastors, Catholic missionaries, Vodou practitioners, spiritualists who channel angles, college students, and activists. During these last weeks, art activities included Haitian folklore, martial artists, capoeira, liturgical, and hip-hop dance. The artists who facilitated these activities helped the students develop choreography together as a group activity having them work on negotiation and creativity as a community. During this time all the students worked in various subgroups toward the final performance to showcase all they have learned during the summer.

### 11.1.2. Spirituality and HELP

The framework of spirituality was integrated throughout all of the activities within the HELP program. Baumgartner and Buchanan (2010) believe that there are three essential elements of a spiritual education: a) sense of self and belonging; b) respect for oneself and others; and c) awareness and appreciation of the unknown. In HELP, adolescents were afforded the opportunity to connect with their spiritual self through literacy and the arts, socioemotional awareness as well as fitness (e.g., dance, martial arts and sports). Since the program was not affiliated with the school system, the developers had the liberty to address spirituality in the curriculum.



The HELP curriculum contained many activities that addressed the components Baumgartner and Buchanan (2010) suggest are important to spiritual education. Each day of the program, there was a morning meeting in which all staff and students gathered for an hour. Two key activities that took place during the morning meetings were the opening ritual and open discussions. The morning ritual helped create a sense of self and respect for oneself and others by using positive affirmations. The affirmation stated, "I invest in myself because I invest in who I am. I invest in myself because I must invest in my fellow man. I invest in myself because I am an intricate part of life. Without me, my dreams cannot take flight." Open discussions contributed to spiritual knowing by allowing adolescents to express themselves freely (Alcott as cited in Miller, 2010). In addition to open discussions during the morning meetings, HELP students engaged in daily journal writing. The students ended the day with a closing ritual that they recited at the end of each day. The closing ritual stated, "I eat from the hands of the past; I drink from lessons of today with every day. My dreams can be brought to life and take flight." The environment of the program was designed to increase the youth's knowledge related to personal, interpersonal, and community identity using a cultural and spiritual lens.

The data for this study was taken from the 2013 summer program from a subgroup of student participants. The theme was, "spiritual consciousness connects us to the divine mind," to intentionally engage students' understanding of their spiritual epistemology or how they expressed their spirituality. This theme encouraged students to actively and consciously reflect on the intersections of their identities—self, cultural and spiritual. For example, students took part in small group discussions on spirituality and engaged in reflective exercises. The HELP program incorporated a spiritual curriculum and pedagogy as part of the SCR approach with the youth of Haitian descent and provided the context for the study of their spiritual epistemology.

## 11.2. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

This section distinguishes between religion and spirituality to inform the framework for the research on the spiritual epistemology of youth of Haitian descent. Many in the helping professions (e.g., education, psychology, and social work) have shied away from religion and spirituality because of the difficulties in defining and quantifying these areas in empirical research and their association with religious institutions (Bert, 2011; Ruddock and Cameron, 2010). Both religion and spirituality relate to the sacred, a transcendent realm of experience (Exline, 2007). This

connection with a larger reality gives one's life meaning and can be experienced through a religious tradition or individually, directly through meditation, nature, or art (Peteet and Balboni, 2013). Both religion and spirituality have developmental aspects and involve a search for meaning (Hill et al., 2000). While sharing commonalities, we distinguish the focus and role of religion and spirituality in the lives of youth of Haitian descent.

Specifically, religion refers to the institutional forms of the sacred search, including religious belief and religious behavior, that are associated with an organized entity or tradition such as a church, Jewish community or Hindu temple (Good and Willoughby, 2006). "Religion is a multidimensional construct that includes beliefs, behaviors, rituals, and ceremonies that may be held or practiced in private or public settings, but is in some way derived from established traditions that developed over time within a community" (Koenig, 2012, p. 3). Students in the HELP program were recruited from Haitian Catholic and Protestant churches and Vodou Botanicas, where many practitioners purchase religious supplies. The youth of Haitian descent in the study participated in at least one of these three religions at some point, and these religions had informed their spiritual epistemology. The focus and role of religion for youth is to teach them the traditional beliefs, behaviors and rituals to participate in and perpetuate the institution and religious community. Religion is the organized and institutional components of faith traditions, while spirituality pertains to one's relationship with and search for the sacred that involves self-transcendence (Pargament and Lomax, 2013).

Smoker and Groff (1996) offered a useful metaphor for distinguishing religion and spirituality: religion is a map, and spirituality is the territory. "Individuals and groups often confuse the map (their socially-learned version of reality or culture or religion) with the territory (or ultimate reality)" (Smoker and Groff, 1996, p. 2). Spirituality refers to the individual experience and expression of the sacred search, one that may or may not involve organized religion (Exline, 2007). While spirituality draws on religion and religion builds on spirituality, an individual's spirituality may not fully coincide with their religious institution's teachings (Warner, 2014). Boynton (2011) defined spirituality as "the search for meaning, purpose, and connection with self, others, the universe and ultimate reality, however one understands it, which may or may not be expressed through religious forms or institutions" (p. 116). Spirituality can also be viewed as meaning-making, where individuals try to make sense of their world and find their place in it (Sink and Devlin, 2011). Wuthnow (1998) believed that spirituality entails intentionally engaging in practices to strengthen one's relationship with the sacred, including prayer, a re-visioning of self, service, rituals, and storytelling. For this study, spirituality

was defined as both the search for meaning and life's purpose and the practices that deepen one's experience of transcendence, regardless of one's participation in a specific religion (Jim et al., 2015; Kim and Esquivel, 2011; Wuthnow, 1998).

### 11.3. SPIRITUALITY AND ADOLESCENCE

Individual spirituality begins to emerge during adolescence (Benson et al., 2003; Kim and Esquivel, 2011). Youth spirituality scholars (King, 2013; Ruddock and Cameron, 2010) employ holistic theoretical constructs that frame spirituality as "a medium through which meaning is sought; [where] it may possess both personal [unobservable] and religious aspects, as well as more overtly social features, like compassion and emotional, social and intellectual connectivity to other people" (Ruddock and Cameron, 2010, p. 28). Spirituality in young people is an expanding, empowering, and connecting awareness and consciousness that involves searching for the meaning of life, feeling connected to the earth and one's community, and "seeing experiences in a larger context, having a greater vision by relating more widely and responding more effectively" (King, 2013, p. 7). Spirituality develops intuitive strengths such as an inner authority, a single-minded focus, and elaborated spiritual ideal (Ruddock and Cameron, 2010). Youth spirituality and meaning-making draw upon cultural traditions but are also untethered from organized religious practices and beliefs (Boynton, 2011). Spirituality supports adolescents' development and self-understanding and contributes to their overall health by providing coping and resilience mechanisms that ameliorate delinquency and psychopathology (Boynton, 2011).

While little has been written about youth spiritual epistemology, youth spiritual development has been identified as an important aspect of personal and social well-being (Benson et al., 2003). Spirituality as an ongoing growth process has been connected to youth development, mental health and well-being (Boynton, 2011; Moriarty, 2011). Spiritual development is generally defined as the process of growing toward self-transcendence (for example, feeling oneself to be an integral part of the universe), which includes a search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution (Benson et al., 2003). Spiritual development is an intrinsic human capacity and an impulse that triggers a search for meaning, purpose and the sacred (Benson et al., 2003). Most often, it also leads to embedding one's identity within a tradition, community or practice tradition. Spiritual development is viewed as a process that focuses on spiritual change, transformation, growth, and maturation where individuals are active agents in shaping their spiritual growth (Benson et al., 2003). Spiritual development entails weaving together over time the specific and

sequential ways that an individual knows and utilizes the transcendent. Due to the limited timeframe for this inquiry, only seven weeks, spiritual epistemology served as the focus of this study. The spiritual epistemology or specific ways that middle school youth of Haitian descent spiritually know is explored in this chapter.

### 11.4. YOUTH OF HAITIAN DESCENT AND SPIRITUALITY

Youth of Haitian descent in the US struggle with the task of developing an identity, and even more their spirituality, due to their complex experiences of Blackness, immigration status, language and religion. This section examines experiences relevant to youth of Haitian descent in the US and their intersection with spirituality, including Black consciousness/ethnicity, migration, and religion.

#### 11.4.1. Black Consciousness/Ethnicity

Youth of Haitian descent in the US live in a nation where Black people have experienced slavery, Jim Crow segregation and/or ongoing discrimination. "Black consciousness is the Black community focusing on its blackness in order for Black people to know not only why they are oppressed, but also what they must do about that oppression ... It can be said that Black consciousness is as old as Black slavery ..." (Cone, 1970, p. 49). While Black consciousness for Haitian-descended youth is somewhat informed by the Haitian national experience of victory over slavery, these youth must also contend with their experiences of discrimination and oppression in the US. Spirituality aids in making sense of oppressive circumstances or other stressful life events (Curry, 2010) and plays a prominent role in improving academics for Black students (Jeynes, 2010). Black students who integrate their spiritual beliefs into their lives believe that their academic success will enhance their socioeconomic status, self-perception and social relationships (Fife, Bond and Byars-Winston, 2011). Academic institutions can ameliorate the academic achievement gap and reduce the number of Black students dropping out of school by incorporating culturally relevant leadership and self-development that includes spirituality (McCray, Grant and Beachum, 2010). Fife et al. (2011) note that spirituality alters an individual's perception of life circumstances and influences how students see themselves as cultural beings.

Ethnic identity is how an individual identifies with their ethnic group or subgroup within the larger society (Phinney, 1990). Ethnicity is used in reference to groups that are characterized in terms of a common nationality, culture or language (Betancourt and Lopez, 1993). Youth of Haitian descent differ from African American youth, given their distinct

history, language, and religious denomination, as African Americans are more likely to be Baptists (Taylor and Chatters, 2010) and Haitians are predominantly Catholic (Nicolas et al., 2007). The youth of Haitian descent in this study, while sharing an ethnic identity, were heterogeneous in many ways, including speaking English and/or Haitian Creole, being born in Haiti or the US, and occupying various socioeconomic strata. The identity task of youth of Haitian descent is to develop a sense of self that incorporates US Black consciousness, their Haitian ethnicity, and experiences of acculturation.

#### 11.4.2. Migration

Haitian migration has been a consistent reality for those living in Haiti and abroad. In some cases, migration allows for more financial, social and academic opportunities, while some Haitian immigrants do not experience a better life or improved financial status (Désir, 2011). Migration often results in a fragmented and at times contradictory sense of self, having to navigate social circumstances that did not exist in Haiti (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 2009). Youth of Haitian descent in the US are subject to confusing and unrealistic expectations from their family that make it difficult to meet with "success" (McGoldrick, Giordano and Garcia-Preto, 2005). When Haitian children enter US schools, they are faced with norms and values that are incongruent with those of their parents. The families' primary tools are Haitian culture and religion, which are often seen as irrelevant or actively disrespected in US public schools (Mitchell and Bryan, 2007). Bilingual and immersion programs do not address the cultural integration and transitions that these children must navigate (Doucet and Suárez-Orozco, 2006). Nonetheless, Haitian parents expect that their children will succeed at school and attend college. In many cases, the children themselves must become their own experts in this transition, yet they struggle with the process of forming identity in the complex contexts of US schools. Often, parents seek the support of their churches in this process.

#### 11.4.3. Religion

Religion has been the primary space where Haitian families seek support, guidance and a means to make meaning of their successes and challenges (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). Religion is a complex phenomenon in the Haitian tradition because in one family there may be members who observe one or more of the three most commonly practiced religions in Haiti: Catholicism, Protestantism, and *Vodou*. The three religions provide

service to invisible spirits and pneumatic spiritual embodiment to give Haitian immigrants a sense of worthiness and salvation goods for their health and well-being (Rey and Stepick, 2013). Catholicism and *Vodou* enjoy a syncretic relationship, sharing saints, rituals, and union with the sacred (Maranise, 2012). Protestantism, which tends to be intolerant of the other two faiths, creates conflict in families where some members practice *Vodou* or Catholicism (Alcide Saint-Lo, 2003). In developing a Haitian-based cultural literacy program on identity and culture, we could not ignore the religious influence on our students' identity. We integrated the history of *Vodou*, Catholic and Protestant faiths in Haiti as we taught the lessons on Haitian history and encouraged discussions and journal reflections on the role religion plays in Haitian identity development. This component was not included to teach differences in religious practices but as tools to explore cognitive development, spiritual understandings, and critical thinking using the SCR framework. Despite the differences between these religions, the HELP program promoted a sense of unity, fulfillment, and self-worth by respecting all traditions. The spirituality focus of the program provided a reflective lens for self-examination and understanding of students' views regarding life's purpose (Benson et al., 2003; Sifers, Warren and Jackson, 2012). No research has been found on Haitian youth spirituality in the diaspora, and the research presented in this chapter begins to address this gap.

### 11.5. YOUTH OF HAITIAN DESCENT SPIRITUALITY STUDY

The study explored Haitian adolescent spiritual epistemology in a seven-week program during the summer of 2013. Due to the time constraints associated with this study, this inquiry explored the spiritual epistemology rather than the spiritual development of youth of Haitian descent. All students were invited to take part in the study, 22 students were purposefully sampled to represent subgroups of students in all of the four classes based on their initial interest to take part in the study and parental consent obtained during the two-week recruitment period.

#### 11.5.1. Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer the following overarching research question: What is the spiritual epistemology of middle school youth of Haitian descent who participated in a culturally-relevant summer program? To answer this question, the following sub-questions were posed: How do youth describe their spiritual epistemology within the context of their culture? How do youth express themselves spiritually?

### 11.5.2. Data Collection

Data were collected during the summer of 2013 to examine how the students understood their spirituality. This case study used two data sources to explore the spiritual epistemology of student participants (Yin, 2013). Each subject participated in one focus group interview (for a total of four focus groups with five to seven participants each) and wrote an individual purpose statement. The interviewers asked specific questions that elicited the participants' beliefs, emotions, and experiences related to their spirituality. The questions focused on defining spirituality, describing spiritual people, and expressing one's spirituality. Students taking part in the study wrote purpose statements to foster deeper inner reflection. Throughout the seven weeks, all students participated in various activities that encouraged them to reflect on their purpose. For the purposes of the research, study participants' purpose statements were documented and analyzed for data collection objectives. The prompt that the students were given was, "(Student's name) exists to ..." It allowed students to think about their strengths, talents and potential contributions.

### 11.5.3. Data Analysis

The analytic approach incorporated both deductive and inductive procedures. Using spiritual epistemology as a conceptual framework, data were analyzed deductively: it was anticipated that the data would address the following literature-derived categories: connectedness, purpose, and contribution (Benson et al., 2003). Data analysis occurred in two stages. The first entailed organizing and coding the data. The authors read and reread transcripts from the focus group interviews and the students' purpose statements. During this stage, preset codes were compared with transcriptions and emergent codes were also developed. The participants for the study consisted of 35% male and 65% female participants. NVIVO 8 (computer software to support qualitative research) was used to assist in handling and identifying patterns within the data. The second stage of analysis included generating final themes from the data and selecting representative quotes and examples (Marshall and Rossman, 2011).

## 11.6. FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Three major themes emerged from exploring the spiritual epistemology of middle school students of Haitian descent: a) spirituality is connecting with God and knowing God as a change agent; b) spirituality is embodied in practice; and c) spirituality is expressed intellectually and artistically.

### 11.6.1. Spirituality is Connecting with God and Knowing God as a Change Agent

Participants articulated two facets of their spiritual epistemology by defining being spiritual as being connected to God and by knowing God as an active agent in their lives. For example, one male seventh grader mentioned, "To be a spiritual person, it's like, a person who knows that they are a child of God and won't let anything break that chain." When expounding on their understanding of spirituality, one female sixth grader stated, "I think a spiritual person, is someone who can like really connect with God." One female seventh grader stated, "Being spiritual, that's when you take God inside your life." A male eighth grader proclaimed, "When you talk about spirituality, it's basically showing its connecting the mind and the heart to God."

Participants articulated that "spiritual" individuals are connected to God and based on that connection, God mediated or influenced their actions and ways of thinking. One sixth-grade female participant noted, "My mom is a spiritual. She gives devotions to God every single day." Students recognized God as a transforming agent. A seventh-grade male said, "Lord I give you the most praise because of [sic] you give me a chance to change our lives for the better." Another seventh-grade male student added, "If you let God inside your life, and let Him take over life ... you'll be a better person." This understanding of connecting with God and the role God plays in their lives marks an important facet of their spiritual epistemology.

### 11.6.2. Spirituality is Embodied in Practice

Participants explained that prayer, meditation, a bodily experience, or being silent were ways of communicating with and being connected to God. A male eighth grader explained, "A prayer is powerful. 'Cuz you tell God what you are thinking, what you want ... and praying is like winning a billion zillion jillion dollars because God listens to prayers. He will never stop listening to your prayers." Another female eighth-grade participant mentioned, "So like, it's like, you know your body is a temple of God, so [you use] your mind when you meditate. It's like you're connecting with God, and he's telling you and speaking to you and then you just listen." In response, another eighth-grade male student added, "Yeah, spiritual consciousness, it's like spiritual ... when you do spiritual things like meditate, prayer."

One female seventh-grade participant explained the connection as a bodily experience. She stated, "Spirituality is like connecting everything in our body, like how we have our mental, emotional and our physical body .... You have to connect with God physically." She also expressed that the heart can serve as one way to connect to God. Another seventh-grade female participant provided an example by stating, "spirituality, it's basically connecting the mind and the heart to God. And you have to take it, and don't let



*your mind [have] control over your heart. Cause your mind is going to tell you a lot. You have to let your heart speak. Let God speak through your heart, so your mind can understand."*

Participants noted the importance of enacting silence and seeking voluntary solitude when expressing spirituality. One female seventh-grade student disclosed expressing her "way with God" in public and states, "it's my own secret thing, like, I can't be talking with God right there and then somebody else is there." Other participants expressed similar sentiments regarding being alone with God "because there is something only Him and you should know about" (sixth-grade male) or that connecting with God requires "a little silence" (sixth-grade female) and "you just be quiet" (seventh-grade male). Solitude was not only framed as a requirement for spirituality by these students but also as a rewarding experience, "[in silence] you have time to yourself and time with God" (eighth-grade female).

### 11.6.3. Spirituality is Expressed Intellectually and Artistically

The participating Haitian adolescents offered insightful interpretations of how spirituality exists in complex articulations. Spirituality was expressed and embodied through intellectual ability and artistic attributes. They described it as a kind of knowledge base, where spiritual people possess a particular kind of intellect that others may not have.

One female eighth-grade participant stated,

*A spiritual person to me is a person who is wise. Wise cause a person who is spiritual needs knowledge not just about spiritual things but about their surroundings. And [knowledge of] their personalities and other people's personalities, so he or she will know the right thing to say [and do] at the right time and the right moment.*

Participants in this study had the tendency to operationalize their artistic talents in ways that would bring others to an awareness of spirituality. They described this process as an embodiment of spirituality for the purpose of edifying others. For example, a female seventh-grade participant shared that she used her vocal talents to "attract people to come to church." Talking about his role as a musician in the church, a seventh-grade male participant described the importance of music as a spiritual exercise. He shared, "I feel like when you play music, it gives an enjoyment to people and makes them happy. It makes them feel more spiritual."

### 11.7. FINDINGS FROM PURPOSE STATEMENTS

One major theme emerged from exploring the spiritual epistemology of middle school students of Haitian descent: 1) spirituality seeks to improve lives.

The overall desire to improve the well-being of proximal others, people in the community and global populations (particularly in Haiti) was the most prominent feature in the students' spirituality. Students were open in sharing that their purpose was to provide love, care and guidance to others. Students desired to be role models to encourage better decision-making in the lives of their peers, families and communities. They expressed their desire for the world to be changed for the better and to contribute to that vision. Participants stated, "I pray for the world so it could be a better place" (male seventh grader); "For my family and community to work better and to be stronger to make a difference" (female sixth grade); "Less wars, like more peace ... less people fighting against each other, more countries coming together" (male seventh grader) and "To help others to change their actions" (female eighth grader).

The participants described their purpose as helping others physically, mentally and spiritually. People who needed help included other children being bullied; poor people; the infirmed; people experiencing "trials and tribulations"; those without food, water, and shelter and people living in Haiti. The students explained their intentions and commitments to help others by stopping bullying, "giving them consolation," providing homework assistance and "helping others change their actions to have a wonderful life." Several participants explained their purpose as bringing joy, freedom and healing to others. An eighth-grade male participant's purpose was "to bring joy to people through books and writing and to spread a message to touch people's hearts." And one seventh-grade female participant shared, "[I] exist to love the poor or rich, nice and mean, and the beauty or ugly." Others wanted to have fun, make people smile and laugh, bring peace and perform music for everyone. A seventh-grade female participant expressed, "[I] exist to heal, encourage and console others through the power of [my] poetic skills."

Some participants highlighted wanting to improve their community or the world in their purpose statements. One female eighth grader wrote that she "exists to be the person who makes a real change for Black people ... so our future can be great." Other students said they wanted to "send school supplies to people in other countries that do not have any" (sixth-grade female), finish college (seventh grade female) and be "a second-generation Haitian genius" (sixth-grade male). An eighth-grade female elaborated that she "exists to make the world a more united place and to help my country [Haiti] to rise from the dark shadow it is in now and help it reach the golden years it used to have." Another eighth-grade female participant explained that she exists to "create something that ignites all of our collective hopes, energies and dreams." She continued by adding that she wants to "bring freedom from civil commotion and violence" and wants to "bring public order and freedom."

## 11.8. DISCUSSION

Spiritual epistemology is how individuals know the transcendent and how they use and disseminate this knowledge in their lives and communities. The above four themes are discussed below in relationship to the multiple spaces and uses of youth of Haitian descent's spiritual epistemology and the interplay between spiritual epistemology, positive youth identity development and SCR education.

### 11.8.1. The Many Spaces and Uses of Spiritual Epistemology of Haitian Youth

The spirituality of youth of Haitian descent was evident in individual spaces (connecting with God as a change agent and the embodiment of God), interpersonal spaces (the expression of God through art and intellect), and ultimately, communal spaces (seeking to improve lives in their community and Haiti). Participants' understanding of God space was reflected in the students' experience of connecting with God and God as a transforming actor in their individual lives. Their responses suggested an understanding of a sacred connection with God by allowing God to be in control of their thoughts and actions. One seventh-grade male participant articulated, "It [spirituality] does involve God, but not mainly. You can, like express your spirituality by showing someone how you are inside." When students communicated about spirituality in an interpersonal space, they talked about expressing their intellectual and artistic gifts to others. Spirituality was important because it was a way to connect to their friends and families by sharing their gifts and visions. The participants described the space of community as where their life purpose and their gifts were used to improve the well-being of Black people, friends, families, Haiti and people needing help (i.e., the poor, sick, disadvantaged, and vulnerable). Participants expressed an internal connection with and belief about God to an interpersonal or communal space where spirituality mediated or influenced one's actions and ways of thinking.

The spaces of spiritual epistemology may inform the youth spiritual development literature as well. Development connotes chronological stages, or a continuum, whereas spaces imply overlapping opportunities and configurations within which to know, embody and serve God. Older models of development (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1971) suggest that individuals go through distinct stages of development. Other theorists believe that development is a continuous, rather than stage or discontinuous, process (Fowler, 1995; Osler, 1991). In this study of a middle school population, the experience of spirituality appeared in overlapping spaces and places. Students' spiritual knowing was concentric and overlapped in individual,

interpersonal and community spaces. In addition to noting the spatial dimensions of spiritual knowing, the study's findings present several insights into how youth of Haitian descent use spiritual knowledge.

The HELP program encouraged students to engage multiple forms of literacy, including art, music, drama and spirituality, providing an expanded means to express and integrate their understanding. In essence, literacy was a tool to facilitate the students' spiritual expression. The HELP program provides a pedagogical model for engaging in spiritual work with young people by providing opportunities for youth to express their spiritual knowing intellectually and artistically. An academic program that only focuses on cognitive development misses the opportunity to empower youth to maximize their gifts and talents and to connect to the well-being of all in the community. Through developing a vision of their life purpose in the spirituality component of the HELP curriculum, the youth expressed their desires to guide their current and future behaviors. Spirituality was embraced and became part of the youths' identity.

### 11.8.2. Spiritual Epistemology, Positive Youth Identity Development and SCR Education

For the majority of Haitian youth in the HELP program, the summer program was the first time that they were able to engage in activities that supported their critical understanding and beliefs about themselves using aspects of their cultural heritage. Often, identity development for youth is compartmentalized and not fully integrated (Syed, 2010). Haitian youth who are exposed constantly to negative images of their ethnic group through media have limited opportunities to reflect and integrate their self-knowing as it pertains to cultural beliefs as they attempt to develop a positive self-identity (Wong, 2013). Adolescence involves the creation of a philosophy of life (Schwartz et al., 2013). The SCR context of the summer program provided a critical process for Haitian youth to counter negative identity images and embrace, imagine, and integrate positive images of themselves as they became cognizant of their spirituality epistemology.

Positive youth identity development in the HELP program was elicited when the young people had the opportunity to talk about themselves in non-deficient terms and to identify their gifts, talents and life purpose. Having students view themselves in the present, and future tense through purpose statements invited them to expand their knowing of self, others, and community. They voiced how they could be assets and public servants to their community and described situations where vulnerable people are taken care of and relationships are just between all people.

Youth expressed multiple ways to positively influence others and articulated their own purpose to improve the lives of others. This reflected the youth exercising agency and mirrored the aim of the SCR summer program to go from self to interpersonal to community well-being. Instead of youth of Haitian descent in the US identifying with oppressive aspects of race and ethnicity (Joseph and Hunter, 2010), the HELP students expressed their desire to uplift Black people, help people living in Haiti by sending supplies and be good role models for other Haitian youth. Spiritual epistemology informs "the intellect through increased choice [and] through a broader perspective" (Gallagher, Rocco and Landorf, 2007, p. 471), and the HELP students expressed empowered compassion (*i.e.*, desire to help others).

As a complement to SCR education's goal of weaving cultural knowledge into the curriculum (Lee and Quijada Cerecer, 2010), the HELP program wove in spirituality to strengthen positive youth identity for youth of Haitian descent in the US. The purpose statements and focus groups revealed a wide array of the students' gifts and talents, including musical ability, sense of humor, wisdom, compassion, and desire for a better and more just world. The SCR empowerment model of learning seeks to redress educational inequities experienced by youth of color (Lee and Quijada Cerecer, 2010) and emphasizes spiritual knowing as another strategy to strengthen students' positive characteristics. SCR education is an example of holistic learning theory, which delineates how spirituality expresses, informs, changes, and guides what we know and how we know (Gallagher et al., 2007). The youth of Haitian descent in the HELP program articulated an expanded spiritual epistemology in multiple spaces, with a variety of uses through an enhanced SCR program design.

### 11.9. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Youth of Haitian descent face the complex task of navigating their Haitian and American identities in the US. Much of the literature focuses on their academic, social and potential economic adjustments from one generation to the next (Patel, 2012). Understanding of the Haitian experience is often clouded by preconceived ideas of history, culture, and religion that are held by researchers and research participants alike. With support, young Haitians have shown they are able to discern and integrate the deepest aspects of Haitian identity as they reach toward a fuller sense of self "across waters" that is quite different from that of their Haitian-born parents. The HELP program provided opportunities and ways of creating a self-identity that allowed participants to expand ideas of personal growth, self-understanding, and awareness toward an integration of their multiple identities. One aspect of this process was the intentional inclusion of spiritual activities in the curriculum.

Spiritual activities included honoring the youth and their family traditions and practices as a starting point. These activities were complemented by providing the youth with opportunities to discover their life purposes. When encouraged to search for meaning and purpose in their lives—an advanced expression of spiritual epistemology—students wrote reflective purpose statements. They included their relationship with God as purposeful, while others expanded on the idea of purpose as including occupations, personal relationships, and changing the world. The findings suggest that explicitly supporting youth of Haitian descent to develop their spiritual epistemology in individual, interpersonal, and community spaces helps them develop a positive self-identity.

In adolescence, there is a need for connectedness and belonging, and it is in community that young people are able to find their individual purpose and contribution to the world. The HELP spiritual curriculum and activities invited the students to consciously reflect on their relationships with self, friends, family, community, and Haiti. Adolescence is a time in which it is imperative to gain awareness of the process of self-development and the significance of one's own thoughts, feelings, and understanding to create a future that will benefit both self and community. The paradigm for Haitian "success" that has been created in the US limits the full expansion of self-development, as depictions of Haiti in both mass media and families are often fraught with negative stereotypes, leading to an implicit or explicit desire to distance oneself from such painful or stigmatized origins. Spirituality provides an expanded understanding of self and can be an important cultural lens for entry into adolescents' thought processes. As youth consider themselves part of the larger universe, spirituality becomes more expansive and liberating.

One of the purposes of creating HELP was to improve Haitian adolescents' academic and socioemotional outcomes. The 2013 program went a step further, introducing activities to support their spiritual growth. Youth programs need to include opportunities to reflect, provide examples of spirituality and spiritual lives, empower youth to envision their future and recognize the gifts of young people. The activities of the HELP program and the results of this qualitative study may provide a model for others who work with minority, immigrant or at-risk populations. Future studies could utilize a quantitative approach to examine the effect of spirituality on the psychological well-being of middle school adolescents, high school youth and emerging adults of Haitian descent to demonstrate the benefits of integrating SCR interventions to enhance youth spiritual epistemology.



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