

SERVICE LEARNING AND SPIRITUALITY: ANALYSIS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PURPOSE IN LIFE

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ABSTRACT:

Spirituality is an area of education that is vital to human overall well-being (Astin & Astin, 2004), although less studied, namely in higher education. Service learning (SL) as a field of research is characterized by being a complex and multifaceted one, and therefore it is recommended to use a holistic approach when studying it (Chong, 2014). Literature has shown the importance of understanding the interior and subjective life of university students, finding ways of helping students to deal with questions about the meaning and purpose of life (Astin, & Astin, 2009; Lindholm, & Astin, 2006).

The current study aims to present the preliminary results of university students' purpose in life, in the context of service-learning experiences developed in Universidade Católica Portuguesa (UCP).

Pre-test and post-test questionnaires were administered to students involved in 15 SL pilot experiences at UCP and included an open-ended question, string variable, about their life purpose. Analysis of the string variable was made through qualitative content analysis with NVivo ®. Students who reported their life purpose were 184 in the pre-test questionnaire and 113 in the post-test. The post-test questionnaire also included two follow-up questions about students' life purpose to understand student's perceptions of change in their life purpose arising from the SL experiences: "To what extent has your life purpose changed as a result of the service-learning experience?"; and "To what extent is the service you performed related to your life purpose?". These two questions were answered in a Likert-type scale with 5 points (nothing; a little; moderately; a lot; totally).



Descriptive quantitative analysis using IBM SPSS 27® was made to analyse the answers to the two questions.

The participant students who reported their life purpose in the pre-test questionnaire (N = 184), were 133 female and 51 males, with ages ranged from 18 to 62 years old, being the mode 21 years old. They were attending 17 different academic programmes of graduation (N = 122), master (N = 55) and post-graduation (N = 7).

In the post-test questionnaire, 113 students have reported their life purpose (82 female and 31 males), with ages ranged from 18 to 51 years old, being the mode 21 years old. They were attending 15 different academic programmes of graduation (N = 75) and master (N = 38).

Preliminary qualitative results indicate that students' life purposes range from having success either personal or professional, being wealthy, having a family, being happy; making others happy; helping or caring for others; being inspirational; building a better world. When asked about if their life purpose has changed due to the participation in SL, results point to a moderate self-reported impact ($M = 3,03$; $SD = .995$). The answers to the question about if the SL experience was related to students' life purpose are a little more positive ($M = 3,58$; $SD = .998$). The results are discussed in the light of the literature, identifying implications for the development of service-learning experiences in higher education.

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