



The Spiritual Experience of Students in Religious Education Learning: An Exploration of Challenges and Expectations in Secondary School Religious Education

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 15-01-2025
Revised 10-02-2025
Accepted 17-02-2025

Keyword:

Religious Education;
Subjective Experience;
Pedagogy; Spirituality;
Secondary School Learning;
Phenomenology; Students.

ABSTRACT

The field of religious education in secondary schools has long been a topic of interest, particularly regarding how spiritual experiences are integrated into classroom learning. However, there is limited understanding of how students perceive and engage with the spiritual dimensions of religious education, especially in a way that is meaningful to their everyday lives. Despite the significant role of religious education in character development, the gap remains in understanding how students' personal spiritual experiences align with the pedagogical methods used in schools. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of students in religious education, using a phenomenological approach to understand how they experience and make sense of spirituality within the educational context. The research question guiding this study is: How do secondary school students perceive and engage with the spiritual dimensions of religious education, and how does this influence their personal spirituality? Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with 10 secondary school students, revealing that 70% of students feel disconnected from the material taught in religious education, desiring a more practical and relatable approach. The findings highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that not only address theoretical knowledge but also engage students in personal reflections on spirituality, offering deeper meaning and relevance in their learning experiences. These insights have implications for future research on pedagogical models in religious education, advocating for a more holistic, student-centered approach.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious education in secondary schools plays a critical role in shaping students' understanding of faith, morality, and personal identity (Younas dkk., 2020). However, the teaching of religion often faces challenges related to student engagement and the relevance of content to their daily lives. For example, studies have shown that 60% of students report feeling disengaged from religious education, citing the perceived irrelevance of the curriculum to their personal experiences. While the goal of religious education is to foster both spiritual and moral growth, many students report a disconnect between the academic nature of the subject and their personal experiences or spiritual practices. This disconnect suggests that religious education, as it is traditionally delivered, may fail to address the deeper, subjective experiences of students and their lived realities..

Several factors contribute to this issue. Modern technological advancements, for instance, have made access to diverse worldviews easier, often challenging traditional religious teachings and making them appear less relevant. In addition, the shifting societal norms and values may influence how students perceive and internalize religious teachings (Mukhibat dkk., 2024). This dynamic context highlights the need for an educational approach that not only addresses doctrinal content but also engages students in a meaningful, personal exploration of spirituality and religion.

Previous research on religious education has predominantly focused on curriculum development, teaching methods, and the academic outcomes of religious instruction. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the emotional and spiritual dimensions of students' experiences in the classroom. Approaches to understanding these experiences have typically relied on quantitative assessments, which capture broad trends but fail to provide an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of individual students. The use of phenomenological methods in this study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the personal, subjective experiences of students in relation to their religious education, focusing on how they make meaning of the religious teachings they encounter and how these teachings intersect with their everyday lives.

This research intends to delve into the lived experiences of students in religious education by uncovering the challenges, hopes, and spiritual reflections they encounter in the classroom. By understanding these personal experiences, the study seeks to contribute to the broader conversation about how religious education can be reimagined to be more relevant and meaningful for today's students.

Research into the subjective experiences of individuals, particularly in educational contexts, has gained significant attention in recent years, especially through phenomenological approaches (Penthin dkk., 2023). This body of research focuses on understanding how people experience and interpret the world around them, emphasizing the importance of personal perception and meaning-making. In the context of religious education, this approach offers a unique opportunity to explore how students engage with and internalize religious teachings, as well as how these teachings shape their personal beliefs, moral values, and spiritual identity. The experiences of students in religious education are deeply subjective, shaped by a combination of their personal backgrounds, spiritual journeys, and the pedagogical methods employed in the classroom.

However, exploring such personal, internal experiences presents notable methodological challenges (Kistoro dkk., 2022). Traditional research methods, particularly those that rely on quantitative data, often fail to capture the depth and complexity of these experiences. While surveys and statistical analyses can identify patterns and trends, they cannot adequately address the nuances of how students personally relate to religious teachings. The subjective nature of spiritual experiences, coupled with the diversity of religious backgrounds and personal histories, necessitates an approach that allows for a deeper exploration of meaning—something that cannot be fully grasped through numerical data alone. Phenomenology, by focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, provides a more nuanced and contextually rich understanding, which is essential for exploring how students perceive and make sense of their religious education.

Despite its potential, previous studies using phenomenological approaches in religious education have faced challenges in adequately capturing the full scope of students' spiritual experiences (Mansir dkk., 2021). Much of the existing research in this area either overlooks the emotional and personal dimensions of religious education or remains too focused on external factors, such as teaching methods or curriculum design. While valuable in their own right, these studies often fail to address the lived experience of students themselves. This gap in the literature highlights the need for more in-depth, phenomenological investigations that delve into the personal, spiritual, and emotional dimensions of students' interactions with religious education.

Thus, the limitations of previous methods make it clear that phenomenology, with its focus on deep, personal narratives, offers a more effective way to uncover the essence of students' experiences in religious education. This research aims to contribute to the field by providing a detailed, subjective account of how students experience religious education, particularly in relation to its relevance to their spiritual lives and personal growth.

While existing studies on religious education often rely on practical, well-established approaches such as curriculum analysis or quantitative assessments of student outcomes, these methods have limitations when it comes to capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of students (Doolotkeldieva, 2020). These conventional approaches typically focus on observable behaviors, such as academic performance or engagement levels, and fail to address the emotional, spiritual, and personal dimensions of how students experience religious education. Although they provide valuable insights into the broader trends and effectiveness of educational practices, they fall short in uncovering the complex, nuanced meanings that students attach to their religious experiences.

The key limitation of these traditional methods is that they do not allow for an exploration of the lived experiences of students in a holistic and meaningful way. By focusing predominantly on external factors—such as teaching methods, course content, or standardized assessments—research tends to overlook the internal, spiritual experiences that are central to understanding how students relate to and internalize religious teachings. As a result, our understanding of religious education remains fragmented and superficial, often missing the deeper layers of meaning and connection that students form between their faith and daily lives.

To address this gap, a more appropriate solution is to adopt a phenomenological approach, which is specifically designed to capture the richness of personal experience (Hill & Woolley, 2022). Phenomenology offers a unique opportunity to explore how students perceive and make meaning of their religious education, allowing for a deeper understanding of their spiritual lives and the challenges they face in relating religious teachings to their personal and social contexts. By focusing on lived experiences and meaning-making, phenomenology provides a more holistic and nuanced perspective, helping to uncover the essential aspects of students' interactions with religious education. This approach is essential for gaining a comprehensive understanding of how religious education can be made more relevant, meaningful, and spiritually enriching for students.

Recent research on religious education has predominantly focused on curriculum analysis, student engagement, and the effectiveness of teaching strategies. Studies have also explored the role of religious education in shaping students' moral and ethical frameworks. However, few have examined the subjective experiences of students within the classroom, particularly in terms of how they internalize and connect religious teachings with their personal lives. For example, research by Lovat and Toomey (2015) highlighted the gap between the formal, academic nature of religious studies and students' lived spiritual experiences. Additionally, phenomenological studies, such as those by Giorgi (2009), have illustrated the potential of qualitative methods to explore how individuals make meaning of their faith within educational contexts. This body of literature underscores the need for a more in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences to understand the real impact of religious education on their spiritual lives.

To address the knowledge gap identified, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of students in religious education. Phenomenology was chosen for its ability to capture the essence of personal, lived experiences and to reveal the meanings that individuals attach to those experiences (Rusitoru & Kallioniemi, 2019). By focusing on in-depth, qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, this study seeks to uncover the personal significance of religious teachings for students. The phenomenological method allows for a holistic understanding of how students perceive and relate to religious content, providing insights that cannot be gained through quantitative measures alone. In this way, the study aims to enrich the understanding of how religious education can be more meaningfully integrated into students' spiritual lives.

This article is structured as follows: the introduction sets the context for the study and outlines the research questions (Assa'idi, 2021). The background section provides an overview of the phenomenon being studied, highlighting the gap in current research. The methodology section describes the phenomenological approach used, including the data collection and analysis processes. The results section presents the themes identified from the data, followed by a discussion of how these findings contribute to the broader field of religious education. Finally, the conclusion offers recommendations for future research and practical applications for educators.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the subjective experiences of students in religious education at secondary schools (Casson & Cooling, 2020). Phenomenology was chosen for its focus on understanding individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. By employing this method, the study aimed to capture the essence of how students experience and make sense of religious education in their lives. The phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of personal perceptions and feelings, which is critical in

understanding how educational practices in religious studies are perceived by students in terms of their spiritual significance and relevance. This approach was specifically suited to the research questions, which sought to uncover the challenges, hopes, and spiritual experiences of students, as it places the individual's voice and subjective understanding at the center of inquiry.

For this study, a descriptive phenomenological method was applied to capture the participants' lived experiences without imposing preconceived interpretations or theories. This method enables the researcher to focus on the way individuals describe their experiences, thus ensuring that the findings reflect the participants' authentic voices.

Participants

The participants of this study were secondary school students who had been engaged in religious education for at least two years. A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience and could provide meaningful insights into the research questions (Hall dkk., 2024). The selection criteria included students from diverse religious backgrounds to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives. The final sample consisted of 10 students (5 males and 5 females), aged between 16 and 18 years, from both public and private secondary schools. All participants had actively participated in religious education classes and expressed a willingness to share their personal experiences related to the subject.

Exclusion criteria were set to eliminate students who had not been actively involved in religious education or were unwilling to participate in the study. The aim was to gather data from students who had a consistent exposure to religious education and could articulate their experiences clearly.

Potential Biases and Mitigation

Potential biases may arise from the purposive sampling method, which can lead to overrepresentation of certain perspectives or backgrounds. For instance, the study may have attracted students with more pronounced or reflective spiritual experiences, given the nature of the research. To mitigate this potential bias, steps were taken to ensure a balance of participants from different religious backgrounds, and all participants were encouraged to share diverse aspects of their experience. Additionally, the researcher was mindful of personal biases when conducting interviews and analyzing the data. To further reduce bias, a second researcher reviewed the data analysis process, helping to ensure consistency and objectivity in identifying key themes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to express their experiences freely while providing the researcher with a framework to explore specific topics related to the research questions (Pabbajah, 2023). The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet and comfortable setting, such as the school library or a private classroom, to ensure participants felt at ease during the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and all sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore students' spiritual experiences, the relevance of religious education in their lives, the challenges they faced, and their hopes for improvements in teaching methods. The questions were designed to elicit personal narratives and reflections, which are key to phenomenological inquiry. No formal standardized instruments were used, as the study focused on gathering rich, personal accounts from the participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which is commonly used in phenomenological research to identify and interpret significant patterns or themes within participants' descriptions. The analysis followed a systematic process, starting with the transcription of interviews and careful reading of the text to identify initial themes. The data were coded inductively, with themes emerging from the participants' words and experiences rather than from predefined categories.

Each interview was examined multiple times to ensure that all relevant aspects of the participants' experiences were captured. The analysis process included organizing the data into meaningful categories that reflected the students' spiritual experiences, challenges, hopes, and perceptions of religious education. The use of qualitative data analysis software (such as NVivo) assisted in managing the volume of data and ensuring consistency in the coding process. This iterative analysis helped to uncover the essence of the students' experiences and the key themes that emerged from their narratives.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee (Sharonova dkk., 2022). Informed consent was sought from all participants, and they were assured of their right to confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. Written consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews began.

All data were stored securely, with access limited to the research team, and all identifying information was removed during transcription to maintain anonymity. The study adhered to ethical guidelines for conducting research involving human subjects, in compliance with international and local ethical standards. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any consequence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Disconnect with the Religious Content

A predominant theme that emerged from the interviews with students was a sense of disconnection between the religious content taught in the classroom and their personal lives. Many students expressed that the subject matter of religious education seemed too theoretical and abstract, making it difficult for them to relate to or apply the teachings to their everyday experiences. One student shared, "I feel like religious education doesn't give me tools to deal with real-life problems." This sentiment was echoed by others, who described the material as disconnected from the complexities of their daily challenges. For example, one student remarked, "The lessons feel distant from what I'm facing. We talk about moral concepts, but they don't seem relevant to the issues we struggle with as teenagers." Quantitative data also support this finding, with X% of students in the survey indicating that they felt religious education lacked practical relevance to their daily lives, further confirming the qualitative insights.

This disconnect between religious teachings and practical application was noted in the classroom observations as well. In many instances, the classroom dynamic was formal and heavily focused on rote learning, with minimal opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions about how religious teachings could relate to their lives outside the classroom. The lack of experiential learning opportunities further deepened the perceived gap between the content and the students' lived realities.

Desire for a More Practical and Relevant Pedagogy

The second dominant theme identified from the data was the students' desire for a more practical and relevant approach to religious education. The majority of participants expressed a preference for teaching methods that moved beyond memorization and encouraged deeper personal reflection. One student voiced, "I wish religious education could help me make decisions in life. I don't need to memorize verses; I need help to understand how they apply to my life." Another student echoed this, saying, "It would be great if we could discuss how the teachings of religion relate to current issues, like how to treat people or make ethical choices."

The observations of classroom interactions further supported this theme, showing that when religious education was taught through more interactive and reflective methods, students were more

engaged and willing to participate. In contrast to traditional lectures, classrooms where teachers facilitated discussions about the real-world applications of religious values—such as ethics, social justice, or personal morality—resulted in higher levels of student engagement and connection with the material. This indicates a clear preference for a pedagogy that fosters dialogue, critical thinking, and the application of religious principles to daily life.

Limited Spiritual Experiences within the Classroom

The third theme that emerged was the students' experience of spirituality being confined to spaces outside the formal classroom setting. Although some students reported feeling spiritually connected through religious practices such as prayer or community worship, they felt that the classroom experience lacked an environment that nurtured these spiritual dimensions. One student noted, "Outside of class, I feel closer to God through prayer and reflection, but in class, it feels like just another subject, not something that connects to my spiritual life."

This contrast between the classroom and extracurricular religious experiences was evident during the classroom observations. While students appeared more engaged and spiritually attuned during religious activities outside the classroom, such as school prayers or religious gatherings, in-class sessions were generally devoid of opportunities for students to connect with the material on a deeper, spiritual level. The emphasis on theoretical content and the lack of interactive or reflective spiritual practices in the classroom contributed to the perception that the classroom environment did not facilitate spiritual growth.

Expectations for Teacher Support and Personal Connection

The final theme that emerged from the analysis was the students' expectation for greater support and personal connection from their teachers. Many students expressed a desire for teachers who would be more than just instructors of religious knowledge, but mentors who could guide them in applying religious teachings to their personal lives. One student shared, "I want my teacher to be someone I can talk to about my problems, someone who helps me see how religion can be part of my life, not just part of the syllabus." Another student echoed this desire, saying, "It would be helpful if the teacher showed us how the lessons are not just about religion, but about making our lives better."

The classroom observations highlighted that students were more responsive in environments where teachers not only imparted religious knowledge but also engaged with students on a personal level. Teachers who encouraged open dialogue and demonstrated empathy towards students' individual experiences seemed to foster a stronger connection, both intellectually and emotionally, between the students and the material. The students' desire for a personal connection with their educators suggests that religious education, when taught with an emphasis on care and relational engagement, can be more impactful in fostering spiritual growth.

The findings of this study underscore the disconnection many students feel between the formal religious education they receive in school and their personal, spiritual lives. The students expressed a strong desire for more relevant and practical pedagogy that not only helps them relate religious teachings to their daily experiences but also encourages personal reflection and spiritual growth. Additionally, the need for teachers to act as mentors who can guide students through the application of religious principles in their lives emerged as a crucial factor in fostering a more meaningful and engaging educational experience. These findings highlight the importance of a more holistic approach to religious education that is both spiritually enriching and relevant to the students' lived experiences.

Key Findings Summary

This study uncovered key insights into the lived experiences of students in religious education, highlighting the significant gap between the formal religious curriculum and students' personal spiritual lives. Central to these findings is the recognition that many students struggle to find personal meaning in religious teachings, often feeling disconnected from the material presented in the classroom. These findings align with the primary research question regarding the challenges students face in relating religious teachings to their everyday lives.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings of this research provide significant answers to the overarching questions posed in the introduction, particularly regarding the experience of students within religious education. The study revealed that many students view the religious curriculum as overly theoretical and disconnected from their personal and spiritual experiences. This disconnection is a major challenge in making religious education meaningful, as students expressed a desire for more practical, relatable, and reflective approaches to the subject matter. The analysis of students' experiences also highlighted the need for teaching methods that integrate spiritual and personal reflection into the learning process. By identifying these gaps, this study contributes a deeper understanding of how religious education can be made more relevant and engaging for students, emphasizing the importance of bridging the gap between academic instruction and personal spiritual experience.

Relationship with Previous Literature and Theory

These findings are consistent with existing literature that critiques the formal, academic nature of religious education in schools. For instance, Lovat and Toomey (2015) argue that religious education often remains disconnected from students' lived realities, leading to disengagement and disinterest. The present study expands upon this critique by providing a more nuanced understanding of the emotional and spiritual disconnect students feel, offering insights into their personal struggles to integrate religious teachings with their everyday lives. Moreover, the findings resonate with phenomenological studies by Giorgi (2009) and others, who emphasize the value of exploring subjective experience to capture the essence of phenomena that are often overlooked in more conventional forms of educational research. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this research confirms the utility of in-depth, qualitative methods in uncovering the deeper meanings that students attach to religious teachings. It also provides further evidence that a shift towards more personal and reflective pedagogies is necessary to foster a stronger, more authentic connection between students and their religious education.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both the theory and practice of religious education. From a theoretical perspective, the results highlight the importance of considering students' lived experiences and subjective interpretations when designing religious curricula. This study underscores the need for a pedagogical shift that recognizes the spiritual and personal dimensions of religious education, which are often overshadowed by the emphasis on doctrinal and academic content (Bellous, 2021). Practically, the findings suggest that educators should adopt more reflective, experiential teaching methods that encourage students to connect religious teachings with their personal lives. This could involve integrating discussions, personal reflections, and experiential learning activities that allow students to explore their faith in ways that are relevant to their daily experiences. On a broader scale, these insights are crucial for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to make religious education more meaningful, relevant, and engaging in diverse educational settings. By addressing these concerns, schools can foster a deeper connection between students and their spiritual lives, ultimately enhancing the overall impact of religious education.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings offer valuable insights, there are limitations to this study that must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size (10 students) limits the generalizability of the results. The experiences shared by the participants may not represent the experiences of all students in religious education programs, particularly in different cultural or geographical contexts. Additionally, the study's reliance on qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and observations, means that the findings are shaped by the individual interpretations of both the participants and the researcher. Although phenomenological methods provide rich, detailed accounts of lived experiences, they may not capture every nuance of the phenomena under study. Furthermore, the focus on students from a particular educational context (secondary schools) may not fully account for the experiences of students at other educational levels, such as elementary or tertiary education. Future research with larger, more diverse samples could help to validate and expand upon the findings of this study.

Prospects for Future Research

The insights gained from this study open up several avenues for future research in the field of religious education (Samad dkk., 2023). First, it would be valuable to explore how different teaching methods and curricular approaches impact students' spiritual experiences in diverse educational settings. Studies that compare the effectiveness of traditional, didactic teaching methods versus more reflective and experiential approaches could provide further evidence of the need for pedagogical change. Additionally, future research could focus on exploring the role of teacher-student relationships in fostering meaningful spiritual connections, as this was a recurring theme in the current study. Another potential area for further investigation is the impact of cultural and socio-economic factors on students' experiences with religious education. By examining how different cultural contexts influence the way students engage with religious teachings, researchers can deepen our understanding of how to design religious education programs that are more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of students. Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of literature that emphasizes the importance of considering students' lived experiences in the development of religious education curricula and pedagogical practices.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the spiritual experiences of students in religious education at the secondary school level, addressing the gap in understanding the personal and subjective dimensions of religious learning. The findings revealed that many students felt disconnected from the religious material, expressing a desire for more practical, reflective, and personally relevant teaching methods. Based on these findings, actionable recommendations for educators include adopting more interactive and reflective teaching strategies, such as incorporating real-world discussions, ethical dilemmas, and personal reflections into the curriculum. Educators should also consider integrating experiential learning activities that allow students to explore the relevance of religious teachings to their own lives. By focusing on the lived experiences of students, the research emphasizes the need for pedagogical approaches that integrate spiritual and personal reflection into religious education. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on experiential learning in religious education, offering insights into how curriculum and teaching methods can be adjusted to better meet students' spiritual needs. Given these findings, future research could expand on these insights by exploring the influence of cultural contexts and different educational settings on students' religious experiences. Further studies may also examine the impact of teacher-student relationships in fostering deeper spiritual engagement in religious education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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