



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Spiritual-Based Learning in Religious Education

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a crucial role in shaping students' spiritual and personal development. While previous studies have explored the impact of religious education on students, few have examined the subjective, transformative experiences that students undergo through spiritual-based learning. The existing literature fails to fully capture the depth of these personal transformations, particularly in terms of how students make meaning of their spiritual experiences. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how spiritual-based learning in religious education influences students' personal growth and belief systems. We employ a phenomenological approach specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore the lived experiences of students in this context. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 participants, revealing that spiritual learning led to significant personal transformation, emotional growth, and a deeper connection to faith. Students reported enhanced self-awareness, a stronger sense of purpose, and greater spiritual reflection, all of which contributed to their personal and academic development. These findings provide a richer understanding of the role of spiritual education in religious learning and highlight the need for more reflective, integrative approaches in curriculum design. However, the study is limited by its small sample size and the specific context of the participants, which may not be generalizable to all educational settings. The implications of this study suggest that spiritual-based education can have a profound impact on students' holistic development, offering insights for future educational research and practice in religious education, particularly in terms of integrating spiritual learning into broader educational curricula.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious education has long been a significant component of educational systems worldwide, influencing not only the intellectual development of individuals but also their moral and spiritual growth. In recent decades, there has been an increasing focus on integrating spiritual learning into religious education, acknowledging the profound impact such practices can have on students' personal development (Tupan dkk., 2022). Spiritual-based learning refers to educational methods that encourage reflection on personal beliefs, values, and connections to a higher power, offering students opportunities to explore not only religious doctrines but also their spiritual selves.

The relevance of spiritual-based learning in religious education is heightened in today's context, where globalized societies are experiencing increased cultural and religious diversity. As societies become more pluralistic, the need for educational approaches that foster deeper understanding, tolerance, and spiritual awareness becomes critical. Religious education, particularly in higher education settings, plays an essential role in shaping students' worldviews, especially those engaged in programs that emphasize the development of spiritual understanding alongside academic learning (Nagel, 2021). The personal experiences of students undergoing spiritual-based learning are

multifaceted, involving emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions that cannot be fully understood through conventional academic approaches alone.

Understanding the subjective experiences of students within this context is crucial, as these experiences are deeply embedded in personal and social meanings that shape their sense of self, faith, and worldview. Phenomenology offers a valuable framework to explore these lived experiences, emphasizing the need to understand how students make sense of their spiritual learning and the ways in which such learning influences their daily lives. By exploring the lived experiences of students engaged in spiritual-based learning, this study seeks to uncover the meanings they attach to their experiences, providing a richer understanding of the impact of religious education on their personal and spiritual growth.

This exploration of the subjective experiences of students is necessary for comprehending the complex dynamics of spiritual-based learning and its role in shaping students' perceptions of themselves and the world around them. The approach of phenomenology is particularly suited for such an exploration, as it allows for a detailed and empathetic understanding of personal experiences within their specific cultural and social contexts.

The exploration of subjective experiences within specific phenomena has become an increasingly important area of research, particularly in the field of religious education. Understanding how individuals experience and interpret their spiritual learning is essential for grasping the deeper meanings that these experiences hold (Khalilzada, 2024). This is especially pertinent in religious education, where the personal and transformative nature of learning is central to its practice. Previous studies have indicated that students engaged in spiritual-based learning often undergo profound personal changes, but these changes are deeply personal and not easily captured through traditional quantitative measures. As a result, qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenology, are vital in revealing the underlying meanings that students assign to their spiritual experiences.

However, one of the major challenges in studying these experiences lies in capturing their depth and complexity. While quantitative methods may provide broad overviews or measurable outcomes, they fail to capture the nuances and subjective dimensions of personal transformation. Traditional research methods tend to focus on observable behaviors or generalizable data, leaving a significant gap in understanding the personal, lived experiences of individuals. In the case of spiritual learning, the internal shifts in belief, emotional responses, and personal reflections are often overlooked or inadequately explored through non-qualitative methods. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experience and interpretation, addresses this challenge by offering a more nuanced and empathetic approach to data collection and analysis.

The limitations of previous methodologies, particularly those that fail to address the subjective nature of spiritual experiences, underscore the need for a phenomenological approach. Through in-depth, qualitative methods, phenomenology enables researchers to explore the essence of experiences in a way that conventional approaches cannot (Walton, 2021). This makes it particularly suitable for understanding the complexities of spiritual learning in religious education, as it allows for a more holistic and personal exploration of the meanings and transformations that students experience.

In the context of religious education, existing research on spiritual-based learning primarily utilizes traditional, practical approaches to assess outcomes. These approaches often rely on quantitative data, focusing on measurable aspects such as academic performance, attendance, or general attitudes toward religious education. While these studies offer useful insights into the broader impacts of religious education, they tend to overlook the deep, personal, and transformative experiences that students undergo in spiritual learning environments. The limitation of such approaches is that they fail to capture the richness and complexity of individual experiences, which are crucial to understanding how spiritual learning affects students' beliefs, emotions, and personal growth.

The use of practical and quantitative methods often leads to a superficial understanding of the phenomenon, missing the nuanced and subjective dimensions of the students' spiritual journeys. This

gap in the literature highlights the need for a more holistic and interpretive approach to studying spiritual education (Gaspersz, 2023). Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experiences, offers a valuable alternative to these traditional methods. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the current study aims to explore the essence of students' experiences with spiritual-based learning, uncovering the meanings and personal insights that are often overlooked by more conventional research methods. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of learning, providing a more comprehensive view of the transformative power of spiritual education in religious studies.

Numerous studies have explored the subjective experiences of students in religious education, particularly within the context of spiritual learning. Previous research has highlighted the importance of spiritual reflection in shaping students' personal beliefs and values, often emphasizing the role of educators in guiding these transformative experiences. However, these studies tend to focus on general outcomes or rely on quantitative measures, missing the depth of individual experiences. Theories of transformative learning and the role of spirituality in education (Malović & Vujica, 2021) suggest that spiritual learning involves deep, personal changes that cannot be fully captured by traditional research methods. This body of literature, while insightful, reveals a gap in understanding the lived experiences of students engaged in spiritual-based education, particularly in terms of how they interpret and make meaning of these experiences.

To address this gap, this study adopts a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore the personal and transformative experiences of students in spiritual-based learning. Phenomenology, with its focus on understanding lived experiences from the participant's perspective, provides a powerful method for capturing the richness and complexity of spiritual learning. By using IPA, this study seeks to interpret how students make sense of their spiritual journeys, offering insights into their emotional, cognitive, and spiritual transformations. This approach addresses the limitations of previous research, offering a more holistic and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that cannot be achieved through quantitative or surface-level analysis.

The article is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of the research. It begins with an introduction that outlines the significance of spiritual-based learning in religious education. The methodology section details the phenomenological approach and how it was applied to capture students' lived experiences (Pangalila & Rumbay, 2024). Following this, the data collection and analysis processes are explained, focusing on how themes emerged from the interviews. The discussion section interprets these findings in the context of existing literature, followed by conclusions that highlight the implications of the study for future research and practice in religious education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students engaged in spiritual-based learning within religious education. Phenomenology was selected for its ability to uncover and understand the deep meanings and subjective experiences of individuals, which is essential for addressing the research question (Campdepadrós-Cullell dkk., 2021). The core focus of phenomenology is to capture and interpret participants' lived experiences from their own perspectives, ensuring that the phenomena under study are understood in the context of those who experience them. By emphasizing the participants' perceptions, this approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how spiritual learning influences their personal growth and engagement with religious education.

For this study, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was utilized, which is particularly suitable for examining how individuals make sense of their experiences. IPA emphasizes both the participant's perspective and the researcher's interpretation of these experiences, making it

ideal for understanding the interplay between personal meaning and the social context of spiritual education.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. The selection criteria focused on students enrolled in religious education programs that incorporate spiritual learning practices into their curriculum. Participants were required to be between the ages of 18 and 25, ensuring that they had enough academic and personal experience to reflect meaningfully on their spiritual education. A total of 12 participants, 7 female and 5 male, were included in the study (Gunawan dkk., 2024). The average age of the participants was 21. All participants were enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate-level programs in religious studies or religious education, with at least one semester of experience in courses that integrated spiritual reflection into the learning process.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face, allowing for in-depth exploration of the participants' personal experiences with spiritual-based learning. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in a private, comfortable setting to ensure a conducive environment for open conversation. The interview guide included open-ended questions aimed at eliciting rich descriptions of the participants' experiences, emotions, and reflections regarding their spiritual learning process (Shtofer dkk., 2020). Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with an overview of the study and were asked to give their informed consent. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. All interviews were conducted in English to ensure clarity and understanding.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Umam & Barmawi, 2023). IPA was chosen because it allows for a detailed examination of how participants make sense of their personal experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. The analysis process involved several steps:

1. Initial Reading and Familiarization: Each interview transcript was read multiple times to become familiar with the data and to identify initial impressions.
2. Identification of Meaning Units: Meaning units were extracted from the transcripts, focusing on significant statements or phrases that revealed participants' subjective experiences.
3. Development of Themes: These meaning units were then grouped into themes, reflecting core aspects of the participants' experiences.
4. Interpretation and Refinement: Themes were further refined through an interpretative process, considering both the participants' perspectives and the researcher's interpretive insights.

NVivo software was used to assist in the organization and management of the data, although the analysis remained focused on the thematic and interpretative process rather than on statistical techniques.

Ethics

The study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study (Alemany-Arrebola dkk., 2024). They were assured of their right to confidentiality and the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Anonymity was maintained throughout the research process by using pseudonyms for all participants. All data collected, including audio recordings and transcriptions, were stored securely and accessed only by the research team. The study complied with international ethical standards for qualitative research, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality.

RESULTS

The analysis of the interview data from participants revealed several key themes related to their experiences in spiritual-based learning within religious education. These themes reflect the complex and deeply personal nature of the participants' subjective experiences, providing insights into how they perceive and engage with spiritual learning in the context of their academic journey.

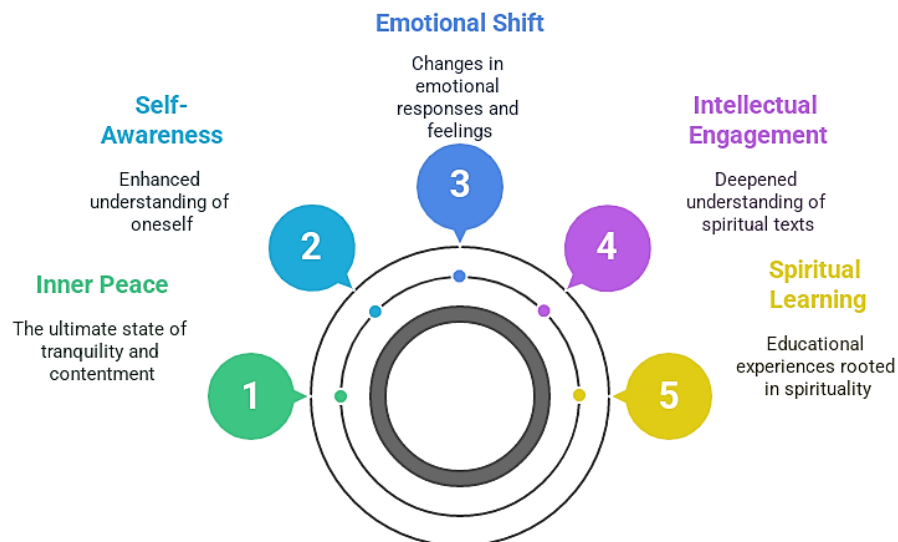
Personal Transformation through Spiritual Learning

The participants shared transformative experiences as they navigated through spiritual-based education. Many described a shift in their personal beliefs and values, often attributing this change to the spiritual practices embedded within the educational framework. One participant, a student from a religious education program, remarked:

"I never really thought much about the deeper meanings of the texts before, but when we started reflecting on them spiritually, I could feel a shift inside of me. It was like I was seeing everything from a new perspective, something beyond just the academic side of religion."

This transformation was not only intellectual but also emotional. Participants emphasized how their spiritual learning led to greater self-awareness and a sense of inner peace. The spiritual exercises and reflective practices integrated into their coursework allowed them to connect more deeply with their faith, which in turn impacted their outlook on life.

Personal Transformation through Spiritual Learning



The Role of Teachers in Facilitating Spiritual Growth

Another key theme that emerged was the critical role that educators played in facilitating spiritual development. Many participants spoke about how their teachers not only imparted knowledge but also guided them through spiritual exercises that encouraged introspection. One participant described their teacher's influence:

"My teacher didn't just teach us about religious texts. She encouraged us to look at how those teachings apply to our lives. She would often ask us to reflect on our own spiritual journeys, which made me realize that learning isn't just about memorizing facts, but about connecting deeply with the material."

This theme highlights the importance of the teacher's role as a spiritual guide, demonstrating how the educator's personal approach to teaching can deeply influence students' experiences in religious education.

Challenges in Integrating Spiritual Practices in Academic Settings

Despite the positive transformations reported, several participants acknowledged challenges in integrating spiritual practices within the academic context. Some found it difficult to reconcile the spiritual and academic aspects of their education. One student noted:

"At first, it was hard for me to accept that spiritual reflection was part of the curriculum. I was used to just focusing on what was in the textbooks. But gradually, I saw that this integration helped me understand things on a much deeper level."

These challenges were particularly pronounced among students who initially struggled to balance the demands of spiritual reflection with their academic responsibilities. However, as they continued in the program, many participants reported a gradual shift towards seeing the value in this integrated approach.

Community and Shared Spiritual Experiences

The sense of community fostered through shared spiritual experiences was another important theme that emerged. Participants described how their collective engagement in spiritual practices helped build a sense of unity and support among them. One participant expressed:

"It felt like we were all on a shared journey. We would often discuss our experiences, and hearing others' insights made me feel less alone in my own struggles. It was a community effort, not just a personal one."

This communal aspect of spiritual learning reinforced the participants' sense of belonging and mutual growth, emphasizing the importance of group-based spiritual practices in fostering a supportive learning environment.

In summary, the results of this study reveal that the participants' experiences in spiritual-based learning were transformative, both intellectually and emotionally. The themes identified—personal transformation, the role of teachers, challenges in integrating spiritual practices, and the sense of community—highlight the profound impact that spiritual education can have on students. These experiences demonstrate how spiritual learning can be a powerful tool in religious education, fostering deep personal growth and reflection, though challenges remain in fully integrating spirituality into academic settings.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of students engaged in spiritual-based learning within religious education. The main findings revealed that spiritual learning led to significant personal transformation, emphasizing emotional and cognitive shifts, as well as a deepening of spiritual beliefs (Khan, 2024). Students reported feeling more connected to their faith and experienced greater self-awareness, which aligns with the primary research question regarding the impact of spiritual-based education on personal growth and belief systems.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The findings contribute valuable insights into how spiritual-based learning influences students' personal and spiritual development. By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study was able to capture the depth and complexity of students' subjective experiences, highlighting the transformative power of spiritual education. The research demonstrates that spiritual reflection in educational settings not only shapes students' understanding of religious texts but also influences their broader worldview, fostering a deeper connection to their faith. This aligns with the study's aim of understanding how students make meaning of their spiritual experiences, answering the research question by uncovering the personal significance and transformation resulting from this form of learning.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory

The results of this study are consistent with prior research on the transformative power of spiritual learning in educational settings. Like previous studies, the participants in this research reported deep personal changes resulting from spiritual reflection and guidance from educators. However, this study builds upon the work of scholars like Adon (2021), who have emphasized the role of the teacher in facilitating such transformation. Unlike quantitative studies that focus on measurable outcomes, this research adds a layer of understanding by exploring the internal, lived experiences of students through a phenomenological lens. Moreover, the study's findings resonate with the theories of transformative learning, which suggest that deeply reflective experiences lead to shifts in perception and identity. The personal transformation observed in this study supports the argument that spiritual-based education can serve as a critical tool for personal and spiritual growth, complementing and expanding upon existing theoretical frameworks.

Explanation of Findings' Implications

The findings from this study carry significant implications both academically and practically. The personal transformation experienced by students through spiritual-based learning underscores the importance of integrating spiritual reflection into religious education programs. Educators and curriculum developers could utilize these insights to design more effective educational frameworks that foster not only intellectual development but also emotional and spiritual growth. Socially and culturally, the deepening of students' faith and self-awareness observed in this study could contribute to creating more empathetic and reflective individuals, which is essential in today's diverse and pluralistic societies. Moreover, this research highlights the potential for religious education to serve as a tool for social cohesion, promoting tolerance and understanding through spiritual learning.

Study Limitations

While the findings of this study offer valuable insights, there are several limitations that should be considered. The study's sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 12 participants from a specific religious education program. This limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific cultural and educational context, which may not be representative of all religious education settings. The use of qualitative methods, while providing in-depth insights, also introduces the potential for researcher bias in the interpretation of the data. Future research could address these limitations by exploring spiritual-based learning in different educational contexts and with larger, more diverse samples to enhance the applicability of the findings.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

The findings of this study open the door for further exploration of spiritual-based learning in various educational settings. Future research could expand the scope of this study by examining how different cultural and religious contexts influence the experiences of students in spiritual education (Moffic, 2021). Additionally, researchers could explore how spiritual learning impacts other aspects of students' lives, such as their social relationships, professional development, or community involvement. By broadening the scope and incorporating longitudinal data, future studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of spiritual education. The current study's insights into the personal transformation of students serve as a foundation for deeper inquiry into the role of spiritual reflection in shaping individual and collective identities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of students engaged in spiritual-based learning within religious education, addressing the gap in understanding how spiritual reflection impacts personal and spiritual growth. The findings revealed that students experienced significant personal transformation, including deeper self-awareness and a stronger connection to their faith, thus offering valuable insights into the transformative power of spiritual education. By using phenomenology, this research has provided a deeper understanding of the subjective and personal dimensions of spiritual learning, overcoming the limitations of previous quantitative studies. These findings contribute to the broader

field of religious education by emphasizing the importance of incorporating spiritual reflection into curricula for holistic student development. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring diverse cultural and educational settings, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how spiritual education affects students in different contexts. This study opens the door for further exploration of spiritual learning and its long-term effects on individuals' personal and professional lives.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research or the publication of this article. All findings and interpretations are solely the result of the research process and do not reflect any external influence or bias.

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