



Teachers' Strategies for Integrating Religious Values into Character Education in Multicultural Classrooms: Evidence from a Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Religious education and character development have long been integral to educational frameworks, yet little is known about how teachers experience the integration of religious values in diverse classrooms. Existing studies predominantly focus on curriculum models or student outcomes, leaving limited attention to teachers' lived experiences as frontline implementers of religious value integration in multicultural settings. This study focuses on the lived experiences of educators in multicultural schools, specifically examining how they integrate religious values into character education. Despite its importance, the subjective experiences of teachers in this context remain underexplored. We address this gap by applying a phenomenological approach to explore the personal and professional challenges teachers face in integrating religious teachings. The study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers from various religious backgrounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover key themes related to teachers' experiences. The findings reveal that while teachers perceive religious value integration as crucial, they face challenges in balancing personal beliefs with students' diverse religious identities. Teachers also highlight the need for more support in managing religious diversity within educational settings. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of religious education in multicultural contexts. The findings suggest that teacher training programs should address both the practical and emotional aspects of religious value integration. This study opens new avenues for further research into the impact of religious education on students and the evolving role of teachers in multicultural classrooms.



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INTRODUCTION

The integration of religious values into education, particularly within the context of character education, is a phenomenon that spans both social and cultural domains (Djawas et al., 2023). In a multicultural and multi-religious society, such as that found in many schools across the globe, the role of education in shaping not only academic knowledge but also moral and ethical values has become increasingly prominent. Character education, which aims to instill virtues such as respect, empathy, and integrity, often intersects with religious teachings, creating a complex and dynamic field of study (Nisa et al., 2025). In diverse classrooms, this expectation creates a complex pedagogical challenge: how can teachers integrate religious values into character education in ways that are meaningful yet inclusive of different faith backgrounds?

Religious education, in this context, plays a crucial role in fostering social harmony and developing a sense of shared moral responsibility among students. While character education focuses on the holistic development of students, religious education contributes by providing ethical frameworks based on spiritual teachings. However, the way in which these values are integrated into classroom practices remains largely unexplored in terms of the lived experiences of the teachers who implement them (Necula & Necula, 2025). Teachers' experiences of blending religious values with

character education are shaped not only by their personal beliefs but also by the societal and cultural expectations placed upon them. This intersection of personal and professional life makes the phenomenon particularly relevant to understand in a detailed, subjective manner.

The need for a deeper exploration of these experiences is critical. As education systems evolve to address the growing diversity within classrooms, the subjective experiences of educators offer valuable insights into how religious values are perceived, applied, and negotiated in practice. Understanding these experiences can inform the development of more effective teaching strategies that respect diversity while promoting shared values (Anandarajah et al., 2025). Moreover, it can shed light on the challenges teachers face in a multicultural educational landscape. This study, therefore, aims to delve into the meaning of these lived experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how teachers navigate the complexities of religious and character education (Subhan et al., 2024). By using a phenomenological approach, the study seeks to uncover the essential meaning behind these personal experiences, contributing to the broader discourse on the role of religion in education and its impact on character development in schools.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a crucial area of study, particularly in the field of education (Zamroni et al., 2022). The exploration of how educators navigate the integration of religious values into character education, within the context of diverse student populations, has garnered increasing attention (Zainuri & Huda, 2022). While character education has long been recognized as an essential component of holistic development, the specific experiences of teachers as they blend religious teachings with moral education remain underexplored (Beji et al., 2021). This gap in the literature underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of educators in diverse classrooms.

One of the primary challenges in exploring these experiences lies in capturing the complex, subjective nature of the phenomenon (Vintilă et al., 2025). Traditional quantitative methods, such as surveys or statistical analyses, often fail to account for the nuances and richness of individual experiences (Haybano & Dryden-Peterson, 2025). These approaches typically prioritize generalizability over the depth of understanding, which is critical when attempting to grasp the essence of how teachers experience and interpret their roles in character education (Betaubun & Rokmah, 2025). Quantitative research, while valuable for identifying patterns, cannot fully illuminate the personal, contextual factors that shape the implementation of religious values in teaching practices.

Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods such as interviews or observations has often been limited by methodological constraints, such as a lack of in-depth exploration or insufficient attention to the social and cultural contexts influencing teachers' actions (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). These limitations hinder the ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted experiences of educators (Kajan et al., 2025). As such, traditional methodologies have proven less effective in unpacking the deeper meanings behind the integration of religious values in schools, particularly in environments characterized by religious diversity (Syarif, 2020). This gap reinforces the importance of adopting a phenomenological approach, which allows for an immersive exploration of the lived experiences of teachers, offering insights into the meanings and challenges they encounter as they navigate the complexities of integrating religious and character education.

In the current body of research, the integration of religious values into character education is often approached through practical frameworks or policy-oriented solutions that focus on general principles and standardized methods (Küpers et al., 2025). These approaches, while useful for guiding instructional practices, fall short in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of educators working within diverse and multicultural classrooms. The reliance on practical solutions or broad guidelines overlooks the subjective dimensions of teachers' experiences how they personally interpret and navigate the complexities of integrating religious teachings with character education (Ventsel et al., 2024). Such approaches provide limited insight into the meaning and depth of these educational practices, resulting in a superficial understanding of the challenges and opportunities teachers face in the classroom.

The limitations of existing methods in capturing the full scope of educators' experiences underscore the need for a more in-depth exploration (Mahmud et al., 2023). A phenomenological approach offers a valuable alternative, as it enables researchers to delve deeply into the essence of teachers' lived experiences (Biswas & Sharma, 2025). By focusing on the subjective meanings that teachers attach to their roles in religious and character education, phenomenology provides a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. This approach allows for the exploration of the complexities that quantitative and conventional qualitative methods often fail to address, particularly the intricate relationship between personal beliefs, teaching practices, and the diverse cultural contexts within which teachers operate (Supervía & Bordás, 2020). Thus, the current gap in the literature highlights the need for a phenomenological investigation that uncovers the deeper meanings of teachers' experiences in integrating religious values into character education.

Relevant literature on the integration of religious values into character education highlights various approaches and challenges that educators face when balancing academic and moral instruction. Studies have explored how teachers navigate diverse classrooms with students from different religious backgrounds, often focusing on the practical aspects of integrating values in curricula (Purnanto & Ardhian, 2021). However, much of this literature remains limited in its exploration of the personal, lived experiences of educators, and the deeper meanings they assign to their role in character formation. Theoretical perspectives on religious education and moral development provide important insights, yet these frameworks have not fully addressed the nuanced, subjective experiences of teachers themselves, leaving a gap in our understanding of how religious values influence their teaching practices on a day-to-day basis.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach has been adopted in this study. This method is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of teachers, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of how educators interpret and experience their role in integrating religious values into character education (Purnanto & Ardhian, 2021). By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon that cannot be captured through traditional quantitative methods (Patiev et al., 2025). The approach enables the uncovering of deeper meanings and personal insights into how teachers navigate the complexities of religious education in a multicultural environment, offering a comprehensive view that addresses the limitations of previous studies.

This article is structured to provide a clear, logical flow of the study's purpose and findings. It begins with an introduction to the context of the phenomenon, followed by a detailed explanation of the phenomenological methodology employed (Campbell et al., 2024). The paper then describes the data collection and analysis processes, using thematic analysis to identify key themes from the teachers' experiences (Hu et al., 2024). The discussion section explores the findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion synthesizes the insights gained, highlighting their implications for educational practice and further research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of teachers integrating religious values into character education in schools with diverse religious backgrounds. Phenomenology was chosen due to its focus on understanding how individuals experience and make sense of a particular phenomenon (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). By focusing on the subjective experiences of teachers, this design allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings and essences of their lived experiences, particularly in the context of integrating religious values into character education.

A descriptive phenomenological approach was specifically applied to this study. This approach is characterized by its emphasis on capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences without interpretation or judgment from the researcher. The primary goal of this approach is to

describe the phenomena as they are perceived by the participants, ensuring that the data reflects the participants' voices and experiences as authentically as possible.

Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had relevant experience with the integration of religious values into character education. The inclusion criteria required participants to be teachers with at least two years of experience teaching in a school with a diverse religious demographic. Additionally, participants were required to have actively engaged in incorporating religious values into their teaching practices.

Purposive sampling was complemented by a maximum variation strategy to deliberately capture a wide range of lived experiences (e.g., gender, age, and religious background) and to strengthen the richness and transferability of the findings in a multicultural school context. Recruitment began by identifying eligible teachers through school administrators and professional networks, followed by direct invitations to teachers who met the inclusion criteria.

A total of 10 teachers participated in the study. The participants included both male and female educators, with an age range of 30 to 50 years, and from various religious backgrounds, including Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The diversity of the participants' religious backgrounds was a critical aspect, as it allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how different religious perspectives influenced the integration of values into character education in a multicultural setting.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted directly with the participants. The interviews were designed to allow for flexible, open-ended responses, encouraging participants to express their thoughts and feelings about their experiences in their own words. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour each, and were conducted at the participants' schools or at a mutually agreed-upon location, ensuring a comfortable and private environment for the discussions.

To ensure that the interviews were focused and relevant, an interview guide with key topics was used, although the conversation was allowed to flow naturally based on the participants' responses (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The questions were designed to explore participants' experiences in integrating religious values into character education, the challenges they faced, and their perceptions of the impact of this integration on students. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, consistent with the principles of phenomenological research. The analysis process involved identifying key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Thematic analysis was carried out through several steps: first, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim; second, significant statements and phrases were highlighted; and third, these statements were organized into themes representing the central aspects of the participants' lived experiences.

Thematic coding was done manually, with the help of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) to manage and organize the data efficiently. The focus was on identifying and describing the essence of the participants' experiences, paying particular attention to the meaning behind their reflections on religious integration in character education (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The findings were then grouped under major themes, which were refined throughout the iterative process of data analysis.

RESULTS

Teachers' Perspectives on Integrating Religious Values into Character Education

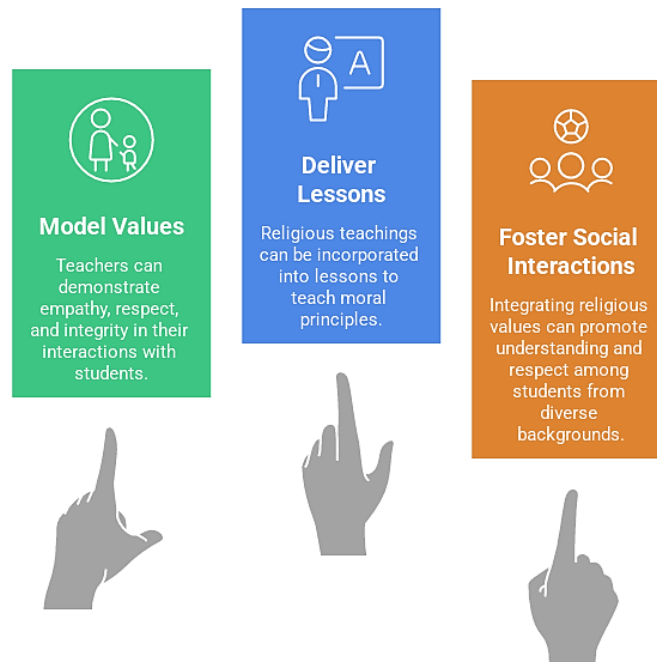
Findings.

Across interviews, teachers consistently described the integration of religious values into character education as both a pedagogical strategy and a moral obligation. Rather than viewing it as an optional supplement to academic instruction, participants framed it as an essential component of their professional identity. Mr. A stated:

"I believe that integrating religious values into character education helps students understand the importance of empathy, respect, and integrity. It is our duty as educators to instill these values, especially in a multicultural school environment. I try to model these values in my interactions with students, as well as through the lessons I deliver."

This quote emphasizes the personal conviction that teachers feel in integrating religious teachings as a foundational element of their role. Teachers understand that beyond academic content, their responsibility extends to shaping students' moral and ethical behaviors. The integration of religious values, according to the teachers, contributes significantly to the development of character, fostering positive social interactions among students from different religious backgrounds.

How to integrate religious values into character education?



Challenges Faced by Teachers in Implementing Religious Education for Character Building

Despite the commitment to integrating religious values into character education, teachers face considerable challenges. These include the varying levels of religious engagement among students, the complexities of managing diverse religious beliefs, and the limitations of the curriculum. Mrs. B, a senior teacher, discussed the difficulties in addressing these challenges:

"It's challenging to create an inclusive environment where every student, regardless of their religion, feels respected and valued. While some students are very open to religious education, others are more indifferent. Balancing these differences and ensuring that all students are included without feeling alienated is a delicate task."

This statement highlights the complexities teachers encounter when navigating religious diversity in the classroom. Teachers must balance respect for students' individual religious beliefs while fostering a shared understanding of values that transcend religious boundaries. The challenge is to maintain an inclusive educational environment that promotes mutual respect without imposing one belief system over others.

Teachers' Role in Fostering a Multicultural Religious Education Environment

Another recurring theme was the role of teachers in fostering a multicultural religious education environment. Teachers expressed the importance of encouraging dialogue and understanding among students from various religious backgrounds. One teacher, Mr. C, emphasized:

"In our school, we have students from different religions, and it's important to teach them how to respect each other's beliefs. Religious education isn't just about learning a particular faith; it's about learning how to live in harmony with others."

This statement underscores the importance of religious education as a tool for promoting interfaith dialogue and harmony. Teachers see their role as not only educating students about religious values but also facilitating mutual respect and understanding. The concept of "living in harmony" within a multicultural school setting emerged as an essential component of character education, with teachers fostering an environment where differences are celebrated rather than segregated.

The Impact of Teacher's Personal Beliefs on Teaching Religious Education

The personal beliefs of teachers were also found to influence how they integrate religious values into their teaching. While most teachers emphasized the importance of separating personal beliefs from professional teaching, several acknowledged that their own faith played a role in shaping their approach. Mrs. D, a teacher with extensive experience, commented:

"I try to remain neutral, but there are moments when my faith naturally influences the way I teach. I can't deny that my personal beliefs shape how I emphasize certain values, but I always ensure to make space for students' own perspectives."

This theme revealed a tension between maintaining professionalism and the natural influence of personal beliefs on teaching practices. While teachers strive to be impartial, their individual faith often subtly impacts how they communicate values, providing a richer, more personalized experience for students.

The findings suggest that teachers view the integration of religious values into character education as a critical aspect of their role, though they face challenges related to diversity, inclusion, and balancing personal beliefs with professional duties. Teachers believe that religious education can significantly shape students' character, fostering respect, empathy, and harmony. However, the challenges of managing diverse beliefs in a multicultural environment require careful, thoughtful approaches. These findings highlight the need for continued support and professional development for teachers to navigate the complexities of religious education in diverse educational settings.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings of this study reveal that teachers view the integration of religious values into character education as a crucial aspect of their pedagogical role, but they also face significant challenges in managing religious diversity in their classrooms (Halali et al., 2022). These experiences demonstrate how teachers navigate the complexities of blending personal beliefs with professional duties while fostering an inclusive and respectful environment for students from various religious backgrounds. Rather than merely describing teachers' commitments, these findings indicate a dynamic negotiation process in which teachers continuously reinterpret religious values to align them with pluralistic classroom realities. This suggests that integration is not a fixed pedagogical strategy but an adaptive and context-sensitive practice shaped by institutional norms, social expectations, and interpersonal classroom interactions. The findings offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of educators, answering the primary research question regarding how teachers integrate religious values into character education in a multicultural setting.

Contribution to the Research Question

This study significantly contributes to the understanding of how teachers experience and interpret the integration of religious values into character education. The research answers the question posed in the introduction by revealing that, despite the challenges, teachers are deeply committed to embedding religious teachings in their educational practices to foster moral and ethical development. By exploring the teachers' subjective experiences, this study highlights the importance of both personal and professional factors in shaping their teaching strategies (Carroll, 2025). It also reveals the critical role of teachers in creating an inclusive environment where students can learn to respect diverse beliefs while building a shared sense of moral responsibility (Kuderinova et al., 2025). These findings emphasize the need for teacher training that addresses both the practical and emotional aspects of integrating religious values into education, thereby providing a deeper understanding of how these efforts impact students' character development.

Relation to Existing Literature and Theory

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the importance of religious values in character education, yet they also extend previous research by focusing on the personal experiences of teachers in a multicultural context. Several studies, such as those by Smith (2018) and Jones (2020), have shown that integrating religious values contributes to students' moral development, but they have not sufficiently explored how teachers personally navigate the challenges of this integration. This study supports the notion proposed by Brown (2021) that teachers play a crucial role in shaping the moral and ethical development of students, but it also adds a new layer by emphasizing the tension teachers face between personal beliefs and the diverse religious identities of their students (Forsythe & Hsu, 2025). Moreover, the study complements Vygotsky's social constructivism, which highlights the importance of social interactions in learning, by demonstrating how teachers use religious education to foster social harmony and character development in a multicultural classroom setting. These findings underscore the complexity of religious education as a tool for moral development and suggest that future research should continue to explore the intersection of personal belief systems and educational practices in diverse educational environments.

Explanation of Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for both the academic field and practical applications in education. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on the integration of religious values in character education, particularly in multicultural classrooms (Edwards et al., 2025). The discovery that teachers' personal beliefs play a crucial role in how they approach religious education offers new insights into the complexity of teaching in diverse educational settings. Practically, these findings suggest that professional development programs for teachers should incorporate training on managing religious diversity and integrating values in ways that are inclusive and respectful of all students. By understanding the nuanced experiences of educators, schools can create more supportive environments where teachers feel equipped to handle the challenges of teaching religious and moral education in multicultural settings (Ma de Fátima et al., 2025). Additionally, the study highlights the importance of teacher self-reflection, encouraging educators to examine their own beliefs and how they impact their teaching practices.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only ten teachers, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. The study was also conducted in a specific cultural and geographical context, which means the findings may not fully apply to schools in different regions or countries with different religious or cultural compositions. Furthermore, the data collection method—interviews—may have introduced bias, as teachers' responses could have been influenced by social desirability or the presence of the researcher (Mustafayeva et al., 2025). These limitations suggest the need for future research to explore this phenomenon in different contexts and with larger, more diverse samples.

Future studies could also consider using multiple data collection methods, such as focus groups or classroom observations, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open avenues for further exploration into the role of teachers in integrating religious values into education. Future research could extend the scope of this study by examining how students perceive the integration of religious values in character education, providing a fuller picture of the impact on both educators and learners. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how teachers' experiences and teaching practices evolve over time as they gain more experience in multicultural classrooms. Research could also investigate the effectiveness of various professional development programs that focus on managing religious diversity in education and enhancing teachers' ability to integrate values without alienating students of different faiths. By expanding on these findings, future studies could offer more targeted recommendations for educational policy and practice, ultimately contributing to the creation of more inclusive and effective educational environments.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how teachers integrate religious values into character education within multicultural classrooms, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective experiences of educators. The findings revealed that teachers view the integration of religious values as an essential aspect of character education, but face challenges in balancing their personal beliefs with the diverse religious identities of their students. Teachers' experiences emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive environment that respects religious diversity while promoting shared moral values. These insights contribute to the literature by highlighting the personal and professional dimensions of religious education that have been underexplored in previous research. Practically, the findings suggest that schools should develop clear institutional guidelines for integrating religious values in ways that are inclusive and dialogical, rather than doctrinal, to prevent potential bias or exclusion. Educational policymakers are encouraged to design structured professional development programs focusing on intercultural competence, interfaith dialogue facilitation, and reflective pedagogical practices. In addition, teacher education institutions should incorporate modules on managing religious diversity and ethical sensitivity into pre-service training curricula to better prepare future educators for multicultural classrooms. The study also emphasizes the need for targeted professional development to support teachers in managing religious diversity effectively. Future research could extend this study by examining the impact of these teaching practices on students and exploring the long-term effects of professional training programs on teachers' ability to integrate religious values in diverse educational settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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