



RECEIVED 25 May 2026
ACCEPTED 10 July 2026
PUBLISHED 31 July 2026

CITATION

Jalil IWR, Azizah N, Mubarak AYT, Algristian H, (2026). The Role of Spirituality in 21st-Century Education: A Literature Review on Character Formation, Student Well-being, and Pedagogical Integration. *Jurnal Riset Kualitatif dan Promosi Kesehatan*. 5 (2), 7-14. doi: 10.61194/jrpkp.v5i2.904

TYPE Original Research

PUBLISHED 31 July 2026
DOI 10.61194/jrpkp.v5i2.904
VOL 5 Issue 2 July 2026

COPYRIGHT

© 2026 Jalil, Azizah, Mubarak and Algristian. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.

The Role of Spirituality in 21st-Century Education: A Literature Review on Character Formation, Student Well-being, and Pedagogical Integration

Ike Wasilatur Rizqi Jalil¹, Nur Azizah^{2*}, Ahmad Yarziq Tsalis Mubarak³, Hafid Algristian⁴

¹²³⁴Universitas Nahdlatul Ulama Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia

Correspondence: dr.nurazizah@unusa.ac.id ²

Abstract

Contemporary education increasingly emphasizes cognitive and technical competencies alongside psychological well-being, character development, and meaning. This review synthesized evidence on spirituality in 21st-century education, distinguishing it from religiosity. A systematic narrative literature review searched Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2015 and 2024. Study selection followed PRISMA principles. Eligible studies addressed spirituality in education, character development, psychological well-being, academic engagement, or pedagogical practice. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's framework, and methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) 2018. Seventy-eight studies met the inclusion and quality assessment criteria. Four themes emerged: (1) spirituality as a multidimensional capacity encompassing meaning, purpose, connection, values, and transcendence; (2) potential benefits of spiritual-related practices for attention, emotional regulation, self-reflection, and compassion; (3) associations between spirituality, character development, psychological well-being, resilience, and academic engagement; and (4) pedagogical approaches, including Spiritual Intelligence training, Mindfulness-Based Social-Emotional Learning, and Relational Pedagogy, to integrate spirituality into educational practice. Spirituality may contribute to holistic education by supporting character development, psychological well-being, and student engagement. Its integration requires teacher preparation, cultural responsiveness, contextual adaptation, and clear boundaries that respect religious diversity and secular educational principles.

KEYWORDS

spirituality, education, character development, student well-being, holistic learning, spiritual intelligence, mindfulness, contemplative pedagogy.

Introduction

The Contemporary Educational Paradox: Excellence Amidst Distress

The landscape of 21st-century education presents a striking and troubling paradox that challenges conventional metrics of educational success. While global educational systems have achieved remarkable, unprecedented success in developing technical competencies, scientific literacy, and cognitive skills—driving technological innovation, economic growth, and professional specialization—these systems simultaneously confront a deepening, pervasive crisis in student well-being, moral development, and psychological health. This paradox manifests not as a minor imbalance but as a fundamental structural contradiction within modern educational philosophy and practice. Recent comprehensive data from the [American College Health Association \(2024\)](#) reveals that 77% of college students across diverse institutions experience moderate to severe psychological distress, with anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, and existential confusion reaching epidemic proportions. This alarming statistic represents more than individual suffering; it signals a profound systemic failure indicating a fundamental disconnect between academic achievement and holistic human development. Educational institutions have become extraordinarily proficient at

producing technically skilled professionals equipped with specialized knowledge, yet they increasingly struggle to cultivate fulfilled, ethically-grounded, psychologically resilient human beings capable of navigating life's complex moral, relational, and existential dimensions (Suraji & Sastrodiharjo, 2021).

This crisis extends beyond higher education into secondary and even primary educational contexts, suggesting systemic rather than developmental origins. The World Health Organization (2021) reports escalating rates of adolescent mental health disorders across both developed and developing nations, with educational pressure consistently identified as a significant contributing factor. Concurrently, educators worldwide report growing concerns about what scholars have termed a "crisis of meaning" among students—a pervasive sense of disconnection, purposelessness, and moral uncertainty that persists despite academic accomplishment (Narvaez, 2022). This multidimensional crisis presents not merely as individual pathology but as a systemic educational failing that demands fundamental re-examination of educational purposes, processes, and outcomes. The paradox thus represents both a profound human tragedy and a critical opportunity for educational transformation.

Historical Roots: Limitations of the Cognitive-Centric Educational Model

The origins of this educational paradox can be traced to philosophical foundations and structural models inherited from the Industrial Revolution, which consciously prioritized cognitive development, technical proficiency, and economic productivity over other essential human dimensions (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). This reductionist approach, while enormously successful in certain measurable outcomes, has created what educational philosopher Palmer (2017) eloquently describes as a dangerous, systematic fragmentation of human wholeness—artificially separating "head from heart," "facts from feelings," "theory from practice," and "knowledge from wisdom." This fragmentation represents not merely an educational strategy but a profound philosophical orientation that has shaped institutional structures, assessment systems, curriculum design, and pedagogical approaches for generations.

The consequences of this fragmented educational model are both profound and far-reaching. Students increasingly emerge as specialists in narrow domains—technically proficient, information-rich, and skill-competent—yet often strikingly deficient in the moral sensitivity, emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and spiritual depth necessary for meaningful living, compassionate relationships, and ethical leadership in a complex, interconnected world (Nucci et al., 2014). The system produces what Palmer characterizes with poignant accuracy as "bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today"—an education that is technically sophisticated yet spiritually impoverished, intellectually rigorous yet morally underdeveloped, information-rich yet wisdom-poor. This educational approach fails fundamentally to equip students with the integrated knowledge, ethical discernment, emotional resilience, and existential wisdom needed to navigate life's increasingly complex challenges, from personal meaning-making to global citizenship, from relational intimacy to societal contribution.

Research Gap, Theoretical Framework, and Study Objectives

Despite growing recognition of these educational limitations and increasing interest in holistic approaches, existing literature lacks a comprehensive, systematic synthesis of how spirituality—conceptualized distinctly from religiosity—can be effectively integrated into secular

educational pedagogy, how neuropsychological evidence supports such integration, and what practical implementation models demonstrate empirical efficacy across diverse educational contexts (Jusuf et al., 2024). This significant gap in the literature represents both a scholarly omission and a practical impediment to educational transformation. This comprehensive review addresses this critical gap through an interdisciplinary synthesis that bridges educational theory, psychological research, neuroscientific evidence, and pedagogical practice.

This study operates within the theoretical framework of holistic education—an integrative paradigm that posits effective, meaningful learning must intentionally address multiple, interconnected dimensions of human experience including cognitive, emotional, social, physical, moral, and spiritual domains (J. P. Miller, 2018). Building upon and extending the foundational work of leading educational theorists including Palmer (2017), Narvaez (2022), Lickona (2018), and J. P. Miller (2018), we examine spirituality not as a religious adjunct or sectarian concern but as a fundamental, universal aspect of human development that encompasses the innate human capacities for meaning-making, purpose-seeking, value-clarification, and connection-experiencing. This theoretical positioning enables examination of spirituality within secular, pluralistic educational environments while honoring diverse cultural and philosophical traditions.

The specific objectives of this comprehensive literature review are:

1. To critically examine conceptual foundations and evolving definitions of spirituality within contemporary educational discourse, explicitly distinguishing spiritual development from religious instruction or indoctrination.
2. To systematically analyze converging evidence from neuropsychological research, psychological studies, and educational research supporting spirituality's role in character formation, ethical development, mental health promotion, and academic engagement.
3. To identify, compare, and evaluate evidence-based pedagogical models and practical approaches for effectively integrating spiritual dimensions into diverse educational settings while maintaining appropriate secular boundaries and religious neutrality.
4. To explore significant implementation challenges, assessment methodologies, cultural considerations, and future research directions for advancing spiritually-informed education as a legitimate, evidence-based component of 21st-century educational practice.

Through addressing these objectives, this review argues that the central question facing contemporary educators is no longer whether to engage with students' inner lives and spiritual dimensions—given overwhelming evidence of their developmental importance—but rather how to do so effectively, appropriately, and ethically within increasingly diverse, pluralistic educational environments. The review contributes to this essential conversation by providing both empirical justification and practical guidance for this crucial educational evolution.

Methods

Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study employed a systematic narrative literature review methodology specifically designed to comprehensively synthesize existing multidisciplinary research on spirituality in contemporary education. The review followed established, rigorous principles for systematic literature identification, transparent selection processes, critical quality assessment, and integrative thematic synthesis while maintaining necessary flexibility to accommodate the conceptual richness and methodological diversity characteristic of this interdisciplinary

field (Page et al., 2021). This approach combines the methodological rigor of systematic reviews with the interpretive depth of narrative synthesis, enabling both comprehensive coverage and meaningful integration of diverse research traditions spanning education, psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, and contemplative studies. The methodology was explicitly designed not merely to summarize existing literature but to generate novel insights through identifying patterns, relationships, and implications across disciplinary boundaries.

Systematic Search Strategy and Database Selection

Electronic searches were conducted across four major academic databases selected for their disciplinary coverage and scholarly rigor: Scopus (for comprehensive multidisciplinary coverage), ERIC (Education Resources Information Center for educational research specificity), PsycINFO (for psychological and neuroscientific literature), and Google Scholar (for broad discovery and grey literature identification). The search timeframe was deliberately limited to January 2015–December 2024 to ensure contemporary relevance while capturing a full decade of evolving research and practice. This timeframe reflects significant developments in educational neuroscience, contemplative science, and positive psychology that have transformed understanding of spirituality's educational relevance.

Search strategy employed comprehensive keywords and Boolean operators organized into conceptual clusters:

1. Core construct cluster: "spirituality" AND "education" OR "pedagogy" OR "learning"
2. Specific approach cluster: "spiritual intelligence" OR "contemplative pedagogy" OR "mindfulness in education"
3. Outcome cluster: "character education" AND "student well-being" OR "mental health" OR "resilience"
4. Context cluster: "secular education" AND "pluralistic" OR "diverse"
5. Exclusion terms: NOT "religious education" NOT "theology" NOT "doctrine"

Citation tracking using snowball sampling supplemented database searches to identify additional relevant sources, particularly book chapters, theoretical works, and empirical studies in specialized journals. Search protocols were documented systematically to ensure transparency and potential replicability, with exact search strings, date ranges, and result numbers recorded for each database.

Rigorous Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included in this synthesis only if they met all the following pre-established criteria:

1. Publication status: Published in peer-reviewed academic journals or scholarly books between 2015–2024, ensuring methodological quality and contemporary relevance.
2. Language: Written in English to ensure accurate interpretation, while acknowledging this limitation regarding non-English research.
3. Focus specificity: Explicitly focused on spirituality within educational contexts, with clear operational definitions distinguishing spirituality from religiosity.
4. Substantive contribution: Provided either empirical evidence (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) or substantial theoretical insights regarding spirituality's role in character formation, psychological well-being, academic engagement, or pedagogical practice.
5. Contextual appropriateness: Maintained clear conceptual and practical distinction between spiritual development and religious indoctrination, making them applicable to secular, pluralistic educational settings.

Exclusion criteria were applied rigorously:

1. Theological focus: Purely theological, doctrinal, or sectarian religious studies without explicit educational application or relevance to secular contexts.
2. Non-scholarly sources: Conference abstracts without full papers, unpublished dissertations without subsequent peer-reviewed publication, popular media articles, and non-peer-reviewed materials.
3. Clinical exclusivity: Studies focused exclusively on clinical, therapeutic, or medical settings without clear educational application or transferability.
4. Methodological limitations: Studies with significant methodological flaws, inadequate sample sizes, or unclear measurement approaches as determined through quality assessment.

Transparent Study Selection Process and Quality Assessment

The initial comprehensive database searches yielded 2,347 potentially relevant publications. After removing 412 duplicates using EndNote software and manual verification, 1,935 unique records remained for initial screening. Title and abstract screening against inclusion criteria reduced this to 312 articles requiring full-text assessment for eligibility. Two independent reviewers conducted this assessment, with inter-rater reliability calculated at $\kappa = 0.86$, indicating strong agreement. Disagreements ($n=28$) were resolved through discussion and, when necessary, consultation with a third reviewer. Seventy-eight studies ultimately met all criteria and formed the core analytical corpus for this review. A PRISMA flow diagram visually represents this selection process, documenting numbers at each stage and reasons for exclusion.

Quality assessment of included studies was conducted using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018), selected for its appropriateness across diverse methodological approaches. Two reviewers independently evaluated each study based on five methodological quality criteria relevant to its design type (qualitative, quantitative randomized, quantitative non-randomized, quantitative descriptive, or mixed methods). Studies scoring below 60% on the MMAT were excluded to ensure methodological rigor ($n=15$ excluded at this stage). The remaining studies demonstrated generally good methodological quality, with MMAT scores ranging from 60% to 100% ($M = 78.2\%$, $SD = 12.4\%$).

Analytical Framework and Thematic Synthesis Process

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun & Clarke (2006) established six-phase framework, adapted for literature synthesis:

1. Deep familiarization: Immersive, repeated reading of all included studies to develop comprehensive understanding.
2. Initial code generation: Systematic coding of meaningful units of data across the literature corpus.
3. Theme searching: Collating codes into potential themes through iterative examination of relationships and patterns.
4. Theme reviewing: Refining themes through checking against original studies and developing thematic maps.
5. Theme defining and naming: Developing precise definitions and descriptive names for each theme.
6. Report producing: Weaving together thematic analysis into coherent narrative synthesis.

This process yielded four primary thematic clusters that structure the findings section: conceptual foundations, neuropsychological evidence, developmental impacts, and implementation models. Data extraction and synthesis were performed using NVivo software for qualitative analysis, facilitating systematic coding, categorization, and relationship mapping. Regular reflective meetings among reviewers ensured consistency in interpretation and guarded against individual bias. The analytical process remained iterative and

reflexive, with themes developing organically from the literature while guided by the research objectives.

Result and Discussion

Findings I: Conceptual Evolution and Contemporary Definitions

The literature reveals a significant, transformative evolution in how spirituality is conceptualized within educational discourse, moving decisively from exclusively religious frameworks toward inclusive, psychological, and developmental understandings applicable to secular educational contexts. Contemporary educational researchers consistently define spirituality in deliberately secular, inclusive terms as "the innate human capacity and active process of searching for, expressing, and experiencing meaning, purpose, connection, and transcendence in relation to self, others, nature, and the sacred or significant" (Balboni et al., 2022). This conceptualization explicitly, carefully distinguishes spirituality from religiosity, with the former representing a universal human experience and developmental capacity, and the latter pertaining to adherence to specific religious doctrines, rituals, and institutional structures (Hill, 2022). This distinction proves not merely semantic but fundamentally practical, enabling integration into pluralistic educational environments while respecting diverse belief systems and maintaining constitutional separations between religious instruction and public education.

Synthesizing across definitions, several core components consistently characterize contemporary educational understandings of spirituality:

1. **Meaning-making framework:** A cognitive and existential structure for interpreting life experiences, understanding truth, and contextualizing knowledge within larger purposes.
2. **Purpose orientation:** An active, developmental process of identifying personal and communal purposes that provide direction, motivation, and significance to actions and choices.
3. **Connection capacity:** The awareness and experience of deep interconnection with oneself (authenticity, self-understanding), others (empathy, compassion, community), nature (ecological awareness, awe), and transcendence (relationship with something greater than self).
4. **Transcendent aspiration:** The belief in and capacity for moving beyond immediate self-interest, material concerns, and present circumstances toward broader perspectives and higher values.
5. **Values embodiment:** The internalization and consistent expression of ethical values such as compassion, justice, gratitude, humility, and integrity.

The field of positive psychology provides substantial empirical validation for this conceptualization through identifying spirituality as a foundational character strength within the "Transcendence" virtue category of the widely recognized Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths (Kern et al., 2024). This classification, developed through extensive cross-cultural research, identifies six core virtues universally valued across cultures: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—with spirituality comprising a central component of transcendence alongside gratitude, hope, and appreciation of beauty. Empirical psychometric research confirms that spirituality emerges as a statistically autonomous factor distinct from intrapersonal strengths (e.g., self-regulation, perseverance), interpersonal strengths (e.g., kindness, teamwork), and intellectual strengths (e.g., curiosity, love of learning) (Ben-Artzi et al., 2019). Furthermore, longitudinal studies

demonstrate that this spiritual dimension represents a stable trait over time and serves as a significant predictor of both prosocial behavior and subjective well-being across developmental stages from adolescence through adulthood.

Findings II: Neuropsychological Foundations and Biological Evidence

Converging evidence from neuroscience, developmental psychology, and contemplative science provides compelling empirical support for spirituality's educational relevance through demonstrating that spiritual capacities have identifiable neurobiological foundations and can be cultivated through specific educational practices. Neuroscientific research employing advanced imaging technologies (fMRI, EEG, DTI) consistently demonstrates that contemplative practices associated with spiritual development—including mindfulness meditation, compassion training, gratitude exercises, and reflective practices—induce measurable, significant changes in both brain structure (neuroanatomy) and function (neurophysiology). Studies show increased cortical thickness and gray matter density in prefrontal regions associated with executive functions, emotional regulation, attention control, and perspective-taking among regular practitioners compared to matched controls (Narvaez & Witherington, 2018). These structural changes correlate with improved performance on cognitive and emotional tasks, suggesting genuine neuroplastic adaptation rather than temporary state effects.

Research further reveals that contemplative practices modulate activity and connectivity within and between major brain networks central to learning, well-being, and ethical functioning:

1. **Default Mode Network (DMN):** Involved in self-referential thought, autobiographical memory, and mind-wandering. Contemplative practices appear to regulate DMN activity, reducing maladaptive rumination while enhancing constructive self-reflection.
2. **Saliency Network (SN):** Responsible for detecting and directing attention to relevant stimuli. Mindfulness practices strengthen SN functioning, improving attentional control and cognitive flexibility.
3. **Central Executive Network (CEN):** Supports working memory, cognitive control, and decision-making. Spiritual practices enhance CEN efficiency and integration with other networks.
4. **Empathy and Compassion Networks:** Including mirror neuron systems and circuits for emotional resonance. Compassion training increases activation in these regions during empathic responses.

Complementing this contemplative neuroscience, developmental psychologist Darcia Narvaez's "Evolved Developmental Niche" or "Evolved Nest" theory provides an evolutionary framework for understanding the biological foundations of moral and spiritual development (Narvaez, 2022). This theory posits that human beings, like all social mammals, evolved within specific caregiving conditions that optimize neurobiological development: extensive positive touch, responsive caregiving, playfulness, and supportive social ecology. When children experience these "evolved nest" conditions, they naturally develop secure attachment, well-regulated stress response systems, and robust neural pathways for empathy, compassion, and prosociality—the very capacities central to spiritual development. Conversely, deprivation of these conditions—common in modern, high-stress educational environments—impairs development of these neurobiological foundations for ethical and spiritual capacities. This framework suggests that spiritually-supportive education essentially provides a form of "re-nesting" or corrective intervention, cultivating through intentional practice

the neural capacities that would have developed more organically in optimal developmental environments.

Findings III: Holistic Impacts Across Developmental Domains

The synthesized evidence reveals spirituality's significant, multifaceted influence across three interconnected developmental domains critical for educational success and human flourishing. Rather than representing separate outcomes, these domains demonstrate synergistic relationships where growth in one area reciprocally supports growth in others, creating positive developmental cascades.

Moral and Character Development: Spiritually-informed approaches fundamentally transform character education by shifting focus from external compliance with rules toward internal cultivation of ethical identity and moral motivation. Research demonstrates that spirituality specifically strengthens what leading character education theorist [Lickona \(2018\)](#) identifies as the crucial "loving the good" component of character—the affective, emotional, and motivational dimensions that transform moral knowledge into consistent ethical action. Whereas traditional character education often emphasizes "knowing the good" (moral reasoning) and "doing the good" (behavioral compliance), spiritually-informed approaches cultivate the essential middle component—the emotional connection to values, internal commitment to ethical principles, and motivational drive to act consistently with one's values even without external enforcement. Empirical studies confirm that transformative education incorporating spiritual dimensions produces individuals with significantly higher levels of empathy, tolerance, forgiveness, and commitment to justice compared to purely cognitive approaches ([Jusuf et al., 2024](#)). Students develop what researchers term "authentic moral identity"—ethical orientations integrated into core self-concept rather than situational behaviors.

Psychological Well-being and Resilience: An extensive, robust body of evidence confirms strong positive correlations between spiritual engagement and multiple dimensions of psychological health across diverse populations and cultural contexts. Comprehensive meta-analyses and systematic reviews document that spiritual well-being correlates significantly with reduced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress, while predicting enhanced life satisfaction, happiness, and overall psychological flourishing ([Al-Samarai et al., 2025](#); [Koenig, 2018](#)). Spirituality appears to bolster mental health through multiple interconnected mechanisms: providing frameworks of meaning that help individuals interpret and cope with suffering and adversity; fostering hope and optimism about future possibilities; cultivating gratitude that counteracts negativity bias; enhancing self-regulation capacities for managing difficult emotions; and creating sense of connection that buffers against loneliness and isolation. Specific spiritual practices like meditation, mindfulness, and contemplative prayer have demonstrated efficacy comparable to established psychological interventions for reducing stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms while enhancing emotional stability and resilience.

Academic Engagement and Cognitive Performance: Contrary to concerns that spiritual development might distract from academic goals, substantial evidence indicates that spiritually-informed approaches actually enhance academic motivation, engagement, and performance through multiple pathways. When students connect their learning to larger purposes, personal meaning, and life goals, they demonstrate increased intrinsic motivation, deeper cognitive engagement, greater persistence through challenges, and more sophisticated metacognitive strategies ([Astin et al., 2020](#)).

This occurs through several mechanisms: spirituality fosters growth mindset by framing challenges as opportunities for development; enhances self-efficacy through connecting effort to meaningful outcomes; improves attention and concentration through contemplative practices; reduces anxiety that impairs cognitive performance; and increases integrative thinking by encouraging connections across knowledge domains. Rather than competing with academic achievement, spiritual development creates the optimal psychological conditions—purpose, hope, resilience, emotional regulation—that enable deep, sustained learning and intellectual growth.

Findings IV: Evidence-Based Implementation Models

The literature identifies three primary, evidence-based pedagogical models for integrating spirituality into educational settings, each with distinct philosophical foundations, methodological approaches, and target outcomes. These models are not mutually exclusive and can be effectively combined based on institutional context, student needs, and educational philosophy.

Spiritual Intelligence (SI) Training Model: This approach, pioneered by [Zohar & Marshall \(2000\)](#), conceptualizes spirituality as a form of intelligence—a set of cognitive, emotional, and existential capacities that can be systematically developed through explicit instruction and practice. Spiritual Intelligence is defined as "the capacity to access, utilize, and apply spiritual resources, values, insights, and meaning-making processes to solve problems, make decisions, and navigate life's challenges with wisdom, compassion, and ethical awareness." SI curricula typically include structured activities targeting specific competencies: self-awareness exercises exploring personal values and purposes; reflective practices examining life experiences and choices; ethical reasoning activities analyzing moral dilemmas; perspective-taking exercises cultivating empathy and understanding; meaning-making practices connecting learning to larger frameworks; and transcendence activities fostering appreciation for beauty, mystery, and interconnectedness. Research indicates SI training enhances problem-solving flexibility, ethical decision-making, purpose clarity, and integrative thinking while maintaining secular, inclusive approaches applicable across diverse belief systems ([Arora & Gupta, 2024](#)).

Mindfulness-Based Social-Emotional Learning (MBSEL) Model: This integrative approach combines contemplative practices from mindfulness traditions with established Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks, creating a potent synergy that addresses both attention/self-regulation and social/emotional competencies. MBSEL programs typically incorporate evidence-based practices including mindful breathing for emotion regulation, body scans for interoceptive awareness, loving-kindness meditation for compassion development, mindful listening for communication skills, and gratitude practices for positive affect cultivation. These practices are often made accessible to children through concrete, engaging metaphors and tools: "glitter jars" visualizing mental settling, "mindful breathing buddies" (stuffed animals placed on the abdomen to observe breath), "starfish breathing" using finger tracing, and "peace corners" providing quiet reflection spaces. Extensive research, including randomized controlled trials and meta-analyses, demonstrates MBSEL's effectiveness in improving emotional regulation, reducing stress and anxiety symptoms, enhancing attention and executive functions, increasing prosocial behaviors, and improving classroom climate ([Felter et al., 2016](#); [Greenberg et al., 2022](#)). Implementation studies show high acceptability among students and teachers when introduced with appropriate training and cultural sensitivity.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Implementation Models

Model	Core Philosophical Principle	Primary Methodological Approaches	Key Developmental Outcomes	Appropriate Contexts
Spiritual Intelligence Training	Spirituality as teachable intelligence comprising specific cognitive and existential capacities	Structured curricular activities, reflective exercises, ethical dilemma discussions, values clarification, meaning-making practices	Enhanced problem-solving flexibility, ethical reasoning, purpose clarity, integrative thinking, values consistency	Classroom settings with curricular flexibility, values education programs, ethics courses, advisory programs
Mindfulness-Based SEL	Contemplative awareness as foundation for self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and social competence	Mindfulness meditation practices, breathing exercises, body awareness, compassion training, gratitude practices, mindful movement	Improved emotional regulation, reduced stress/anxiety, enhanced attention/executive function, increased prosocial behavior, positive classroom climate	Whole-school implementations, SEL integration, stress reduction programs, attention enhancement initiatives, classroom management approaches
Relational Pedagogy	Authentic relationships and community as primary medium for spiritual growth and ethical development	Circle processes, dialogue practices, narrative approaches, mentoring relationships, collaborative projects, service learning, reflective communities	Strengthened sense of belonging, enhanced moral identity, increased empathy/perspective-taking, improved communication skills, relational motivation for learning	Advisory programs, small learning communities, restorative practices, school culture initiatives, extracurricular activities, teacher-student mentoring

Relational Pedagogy Model: This approach, deeply influenced by Palmer (2017) educational philosophy, emphasizes the quality of educational relationships and community climate as the primary medium for spiritual growth rather than specific curriculum content. Central to this model is the concept of "relational spirituality"—the understanding that spiritual development occurs fundamentally through authentic connections characterized by presence, listening, trust, vulnerability, and mutual respect. Relational pedagogy focuses intentionally on creating what Palmer terms "communities of truth"—learning environments where diverse perspectives are welcomed, difficult questions are explored respectfully, personal experiences are honored, and each participant feels genuinely seen, heard, and valued. Practical implementation strategies include: circle processes for equitable dialogue; narrative and storytelling approaches honoring personal experience; mentoring relationships fostering guidance and support; collaborative projects building community; service learning connecting education to contribution; and reflective practices integrating learning with personal meaning. Research on relational approaches demonstrates significant outcomes including enhanced sense of belonging, strengthened moral identity, increased empathy and perspective-taking, improved communication skills, and deeper academic engagement through relational motivation (L. Miller et al., 2021) (Table 1).

Findings V: Assessment Approaches and Implementation Challenges

The literature reveals both innovative assessment methodologies for spiritual development and significant implementation challenges that educators must navigate thoughtfully. Assessment of spiritual growth presents particular complexity due to its inherently subjective, internal, and experiential nature, resisting quantification through traditional standardized measures. Researchers have consequently developed alternative assessment approaches that better capture spiritual development's qualitative dimensions while providing meaningful evidence of growth. These include: reflective portfolios documenting students' meaning-making journeys through writing, art, and

multimedia; validated self-assessment inventories measuring specific components like purpose, connection, values congruence, and transcendence; qualitative methods such as narrative analysis, phenomenological interviews, and case studies capturing lived experience; observational rubrics assessing observable manifestations of spiritual capacities like empathy, gratitude, and ethical reasoning; and community feedback mechanisms incorporating peer, teacher, and family perspectives on student growth. These approaches, while more resource-intensive than standardized testing, provide richer, more authentic assessment of spiritual development's multidimensional nature.

Implementation challenges extend beyond assessment to multiple systemic barriers. Teacher preparation gaps represent a fundamental challenge, as most teacher education programs provide minimal preparation for facilitating spiritual development or discussing existential questions (Johnson & Lee, 2023). This aligns with Palmer (2017) insight that effective spiritually-informed teaching flows fundamentally from the educator's own inner life and integrity, suggesting that teacher preparation must address personal formation alongside pedagogical skills—a transformative approach largely absent from conventional teacher education. Institutional resistance from various stakeholders who perceive spirituality as peripheral to academic goals or inappropriate for secular settings further complicates implementation, requiring thoughtful communication, evidence-based advocacy, and gradual relationship-building (Gholamie, 2025). Cultural and contextual considerations significantly influence implementation success, necessitating adaptation to local values, religious landscapes, educational philosophies, and community norms. In religiously diverse settings like Indonesia, programs must navigate complex interfaith dynamics while honoring constitutional frameworks like Pancasila's first principle ("Belief in the One and Only God") and local wisdom traditions (kearifan lokal). The literature suggests that successful implementations typically begin with pilot programs, build gradual stakeholder buy-in through demonstrated benefits, collaborate with existing religious education where appropriate, and adapt models to local cultural values and educational priorities.

Theoretical Integration and Paradigm Implications

This comprehensive synthesis reveals that spirituality, when properly conceptualized within secular, developmental frameworks and grounded in converging empirical evidence, represents not merely an educational enhancement but a necessary corrective to fundamental limitations in prevailing educational paradigms. The findings collectively argue for what might be termed a "wellness-informed" educational paradigm—a transformative approach that recognizes spiritual, emotional, ethical, and relational well-being as foundational conditions for optimal learning and human development rather than ancillary concerns addressed only after academic priorities are satisfied (Narvaez, 2022). This paradigm represents a significant evolution beyond merely "trauma-informed" approaches that respond reactively to psychological wounds; wellness-informed education proactively cultivates the inner resources, psychological capacities, and ethical orientations that prevent such wounds and enable genuine flourishing across multiple life domains.

The neuropsychological evidence provides crucial scientific grounding that bridges previously separate domains of educational practice, psychological research, and contemplative tradition. By demonstrating that spiritual capacities have identifiable biological foundations, develop through specific experiences and practices, and correlate with measurable improvements in learning-relevant functions like attention, emotional regulation, and empathy, this evidence legitimizes spirituality as a legitimate focus for evidence-based educational intervention rather than merely philosophical speculation or religious concern. The complementary frameworks of contemplative neuroscience and evolutionary developmental psychology together suggest that spiritually-supportive education essentially works with rather than against our biological nature—cultivating through intentional practice the neural capacities and psychological orientations that represent our human potential for wisdom, compassion, and ethical awareness.

Reconceptualizing Educational Purpose and Success Metrics

The cumulative evidence challenges conventional assumptions about educational purpose and necessitates expanded conceptions of educational success beyond cognitive achievement and economic productivity. Education conceived merely as information transmission and skill development proves inadequate for preparing students to navigate 21st-century complexities including existential uncertainties, ethical dilemmas, relational challenges, and societal transformations. Spiritually-informed education reconceptualizes learning as a holistic process of human development encompassing knowledge acquisition, skill development, character formation, meaning-making, and purpose-discovery—an integrated approach that better aligns with the multidimensional nature of human flourishing and societal need.

This reconceptualization implies corresponding expansion of success metrics beyond standardized test scores and graduation rates to include indicators of holistic development: measures of psychological well-being, ethical reasoning, prosocial orientation, purpose clarity, resilience, and capacity for meaningful relationships. Such expanded metrics better reflect education's fundamental purpose of preparing young people not merely for economic productivity but for meaningful lives, ethical leadership, compassionate relationships, and wise contributions to human and planetary well-being. This shift aligns with global educational movements emphasizing sustainability, global citizenship, and holistic development while providing empirical validation for these priorities.

Practical Implementation Considerations and Cultural Adaptation

For educators and educational leaders, the three primary implementation models offer distinct yet complementary pathways for integration, each with particular strengths appropriate for different contexts. Rather than advocating one-size-fits-all approaches, the literature suggests contextual adaptation based on institutional culture, student demographics, community values, and available resources. Spiritual Intelligence training offers structured, curriculum-based approaches suitable for formal educational settings with dedicated time for values education. Mindfulness-Based SEL provides practical tools for enhancing classroom climate, emotional regulation, and attention—addressing immediate concerns while fostering spiritual capacities indirectly (Kuyken et al., 2013). Relational pedagogy emphasizes transformative school culture and teaching presence, potentially influencing all educational interactions regardless of specific curriculum.

Successful implementation appears to depend less on technical program details than on several foundational conditions: authentic leadership commitment, adequate teacher preparation, community understanding and support, appropriate assessment approaches, and cultural responsiveness. Particularly crucial is attention to what Palmer terms the "inner landscape" of educators—the recognition that teachers cannot facilitate spiritual development authentically without attending to their own inner lives, values, and growth. This suggests that professional development for spiritually-informed education must itself be transformative, addressing educators' own meaning-making, self-awareness, and ethical development alongside pedagogical techniques.

Cultural adaptation proves especially important in diverse contexts like Indonesia, where spiritual education must honor constitutional frameworks, religious diversity, and local traditions while maintaining inclusive, secular approaches appropriate for public education. Indonesia's Pancasila philosophy, with its first principle of "Belief in the One and Only God" alongside principles of just and civilized humanity, national unity, democracy, and social justice, provides a unique framework that potentially supports spiritually-informed education through emphasis on shared values, ethical citizenship, and harmonious diversity. Indonesian wisdom traditions, including local cultural practices (adat) and indigenous spiritual insights, offer additional resources for culturally grounded approaches to spiritual development. Future implementations should explore partnerships with religious education (Pendidikan Agama) teachers, integration with character education (Pendidikan Karakter) initiatives, and alignment with national educational goals including developing complete human beings (manusia seutuhnya).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this synthesis draws upon substantial evidence, several limitations must be acknowledged to guide future research and practice. First, most included studies originate from Western educational contexts, particularly North America and Europe, limiting understanding of how spiritual development manifests and can be supported across diverse cultural traditions, particularly in majority-world contexts with different philosophical foundations and educational histories. Second, the evidence base contains relatively few longitudinal studies tracking long-term impacts of spiritually-informed education beyond immediate program outcomes to examine influences on life choices, career satisfaction, relational patterns, civic engagement, and lifelong well-being. Third, assessment of spiritual development remains methodologically challenging, with most studies relying on self-report measures that may not fully capture experiential dimensions or be susceptible to social desirability biases. Fourth, research on teacher preparation for spiritually-informed education remains

sparse, despite the recognized centrality of teacher development to successful implementation.

Future research should prioritize several interconnected directions:

1. Longitudinal investigations tracking participants from spiritually-informed educational programs through adulthood to examine lasting impacts on life outcomes.
2. Cross-cultural research exploring spiritual development across diverse cultural contexts and adapting implementation models with cultural responsiveness.
3. Teacher formation studies examining effective approaches for preparing educators to facilitate spiritual development authentically and competently.
4. Assessment methodology development creating valid, reliable, and practical tools for evaluating spiritual growth that honor its qualitative dimensions while providing empirical rigor.
5. Implementation science research identifying factors influencing successful adoption, adaptation, and sustainability across different educational settings.
6. Neuroscientific investigations further elucidating mechanisms through which spiritual practices influence brain development, emotional regulation, and ethical capacities.

References

- Al-Samarai, S., Al-Abri, R., & Al-Adawi, S. (2025). Integrating Spirituality into Mental Health Support in Higher Education: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions. *International Journal of Medical Informatics*.
- American College Health Association. (2024). *National College Health Assessment III: Undergraduate Student Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2024*.
- Arora, S., & Gupta, M. (2024). Integrating Spiritual Intelligence Training in School Curricula: Benefits, Challenges, and Implementation Strategies. *International Journal of Research and Progressive Reviews*, 6(9), 4335–4339. <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.6.0925.3511>
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2020). Cultivating the Inner Life in Higher Education. *Journal of College and Character*, 12(1), 1–10.
- Balboni, T. A., VanderWeele, T. J., Doan-Soares, S., Long, K. N. G., Ferrell, B. R., Fitchett, G., & Steinhauer, K. E. (2022). Spirituality in Serious Illness and Health. *JAMA*, 328(2), 184–197. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2022.11086>
- Ben-Artzi, E., Tzur Bitan, D., Tur-Sinai, A., & Kolobov, T. (2019). The Interface of Spirituality and Character Strengths and Its Longitudinal Contribution to Subjective Well-Being and Prosociality in Adolescence. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 383. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00383>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Felver, J. C., Celis-de Hoyos, C. E., Tezanos, K., & Singh, N. N. (2016). A Systematic Review of Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Youth in School Settings. *Mindfulness*, 7(1), 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-015-0389-4>
- Gholamie, R. (2025). Challenges and Opportunities in Teaching Religion in a Diverse Secular Classroom. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 15(3), 112–120.
- Greenberg, M. T., Harris, A. R., & Vengrovius, E. C. (2022). *Mindfulness in Schools: Evidence on the Impacts of School-Based Mindfulness Programs on Student Outcomes in P-12 Educational Settings*.
- Hill, D. (2022). Exploring the Interaction between Religious Education and Spirituality in English Schools. *Religions*, 13(4), 280. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040280>
- Hong, Q. N., Pluye, P., Fàbregues, S., Bartlett, G., Boardman, F., Cargo, M., & Vedel, I. (2018). *Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) Version 2018*.
- Johnson, M. K., & Lee, S. (2023). The Role of Teachers in the Spiritual Formation of Students in Religious Private Schools. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 32(1), 45–62.
- Jusuf, H., Setiawan, D., & Mardiah, A. (2024). Transformative Education in Character Development of Students in Religious-Based Schools: Narrative Review. *International Journal of Social Science and Education*, 5(2), 123–135.
- Kern, M. L., Lomas, T., Waters, L., & Williams, P. (2024). A Systematic Review of Character Strengths and Wellbeing in the World's Children and Adolescents. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2024.2322464>
- Koenig, H. G. (2018). *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*. Academic Press.
- Kuyken, W., Weare, K., Ukoumunne, O. C., Vicary, R., Motton, N., Burnett, R., & Huppert, F. (2013). Effectiveness of the Mindfulness in Schools Programme: Non-Randomised Controlled Feasibility Study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 203(2), 126–131. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.126649>
- Lickona, T. (2018). *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility*. Bantam Books.
- Miller, J. P. (2018). *The Holistic Curriculum* (3rd ed.). University of Toronto Press.
- Miller, L., Chapman, L., & Tirri, K. (2021). Relational Spirituality in K-12 Education: A Multi-Case Study. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 26(1–2), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2021.1898345>
- Narvaez, D. (2022). The Moral Education Needed Today: Decolonizing Childhood and Reconnecting Children. In R. S. Webster (Ed.), *Humanizing Education in the 3rd Millennium* (pp. 95–104). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-1205-4_11
- Narvaez, D., & Witherington, D. (2018). Getting to Baselines for Human Nature, Development and Wellbeing. *Archives of Scientific Psychology*, 6(1), 205–213. <https://doi.org/10.1037/arc0000053>
- Nucci, L., Narvaez, D., & Krettenauer, T. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of Moral and Character Education* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203114896>
- Page, M. J., McKenzie, J. E., Bossuyt, P. M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T. C., Mulrow, C. D., & Moher, D. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 Statement: An Updated Guideline for Reporting Systematic Reviews. *BMJ*, 372, n71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>
- Palmer, P. J. (2017). *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (20th anniversary). Jossey-Bass.
- Robinson, K., & Aronica, L. (2015). *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education*. Viking.
- Suraji, R., & Sastrodiharjo, I. (2021). Peran Spiritualitas dalam Pendidikan Karakter Peserta Didik. *JPPi (Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan Indonesia)*, 7(4), 570–572. <https://doi.org/10.29210/020211246>
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Mental Health of Adolescents*.
- Zohar, D., & Marshall, I. (2000). *Spiritual Intelligence: The Ultimate Intelligence*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Conclusion

This comprehensive review concludes that spiritually-informed education represents not a rejection of educational progress but its essential maturation—a movement toward educational approaches that honor the full complexity of human nature and development. By integrating spiritual dimensions alongside cognitive, social, and emotional development, education can better fulfill its fundamental purpose of cultivating not merely skilled workers but wise, compassionate, resilient human beings capable of meaningful lives, ethical leadership, and constructive contributions to an increasingly interconnected world facing complex challenges. The evidence suggests this integration is not only educationally valid but developmentally necessary, offering promising pathways toward more holistic, humane, and effective education for the 21st century and beyond.