

SPIRITUAL INTERVENTIONS IN FORMAL EDUCATION: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract. This study aims to synthesize empirical evidence on the implementation, supporting and inhibiting factors, and outcomes of spiritual interventions in formal education. A systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA framework. Articles were searched in three electronic databases, namely SAGE, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online. The search was limited to journal articles published between 2015 and 2025, written in English, available in full text or open access, and reporting empirical studies on spiritual interventions in formal education. The initial search identified 3,427 records. After automatic filtering, eligibility screening, and critical appraisal using criteria adapted from the Joanna Briggs Institute checklist, five articles were included in the final synthesis. The included studies originated from the United States, Indonesia, India, and Iran and covered higher education, senior high school, and elementary school contexts. The synthesis indicates that spiritual interventions are implemented through two main patterns: curricular integration and structured training programs. Supporting factors include individual readiness, personality, religious or cultural congruence, facilitator competence, institutional support, and adequate program duration. Inhibiting factors include the lack of validated assessment tools, cultural mismatch, and limited relevance for particular social groups. Across the reviewed studies, spiritual interventions showed positive outcomes in professional attitudes, emotional intelligence, well-being, religious understanding, social interaction skills, and reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and social anxiety. These findings suggest that spiritual interventions are relevant as psychopedagogical strategies in formal education when systematically, inclusively, and contextually designed.

Keywords: Spiritual intervention, formal education, student well-being, educational counseling, systematic literature review

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is a fundamental dimension of human life because it is closely related to the search for meaning, purpose, connectedness, and transcendental values. Contemporary literature shows that spirituality is not restricted to religious ritual; rather, it constitutes a broader system of subjective experience through which individuals interpret the self, others, nature, and a higher reality (Obregon et al., 2022; Pečečnik & Gostečnik, 2022). In psychological and educational discourse, spirituality is also understood as a source of hope, peace, ethical awareness, and life orientation that influences human development across contexts (Okere et al., 2024; Pinto et al., 2023).

Spiritual intelligence further positions spirituality as the human capacity to interpret life experiences, construct meaning, and apply that meaning to problem-solving. Pinto et al. (2023), drawing on King's model, describe spiritual intelligence as including critical existential thinking, personal meaning production, transcendental awareness, and the expansion of conscious states.

These capacities are highly relevant to education because formal education is expected not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate meaning, moral sensitivity, self-regulation, and social responsibility.

Spiritual interventions have developed across many fields, particularly health care, psychotherapy, counseling, social work, and education. In clinical settings, spiritual interventions are often integrated into care to support meaning-making, coping, hope, and quality of life (Mueller et al., 2001; Gonçalves et al., 2015; Park et al., 2017). Tuck, (2012) explains that spiritual intervention involves exploration, understanding, sharing, and appreciation of spiritual experience, including practices that may foster peace, hope, connectedness, and a relationship with God or a higher power.

Beyond the clinical field, spiritual approaches have also been used in social work, counseling, and psychological training. In social work, spirituality is linked to the person-in-relation perspective and emphasizes the individual's relation to community, culture, and ultimate meaning (Pathan, 2016). In counseling and psychotherapy, spiritual and religious interventions have been discussed as ways to address anxiety, depression, identity, self-worth, forgiveness, and existential concerns (Hage, 2006; Walker et al., 2008; Koszycki et al., 2010; Post & Wade, 2014). These developments indicate that spirituality can serve as an intervention component when applied ethically and sensitively, in accordance with the client's worldview.

Formal education faces complex psychosocial challenges. Previous studies have reported physical violence, bullying, harassment, discrimination, fighting, intolerance, substance use, and mental health problems within school and higher education settings (Melanda et al., 2020; Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Kim & Kang, 2017; Koçtürk et al., 2019; Deuchert et al., 2017; Elgar et al., 2015; Mustaffa, 2017; Macarthur et al., 2016; Hampson et al., 2018; Barrable et al., 2018; Aro et al., 2019). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics also indicate that, in the 2019–2020 school year, a high proportion of public schools reported incidents of crime, violence, or disruption. These conditions show that formal education requires comprehensive interventions that address cognition, emotion, behavior, values, and meaning.

Spiritual intervention is considered relevant for formal education because it is oriented toward awareness, meaning, relationship, and value formation. Theoretical work on spirituality emphasizes meaning, transcendence, love, moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, optimism, positive emotion, and social support (Jalili et al., 2020; Schwalm et al., 2022; Ruth & A. Bear, 2010). In educational contexts, these elements can be connected to character education, student well-being, guidance and counseling, and the development of socially responsible behavior.

Despite growing research on spirituality and spiritual interventions, studies that specifically map these interventions in formal education remain limited. Existing literature has examined spiritual care education in health professions (Rykkje et al., 2022; Rykkje et al., 2022; Hashim et al., 2025), spirituality in medical education (Hashim et al., 2025), spiritual competence training for students (Razak et al., 2024), and spiritually adapted logotherapy for university students (Fereydouni & Forstmeier, 2022). However, these studies are scattered across different educational levels, designs, and cultural settings. Therefore, a systematic synthesis is needed to clarify how spiritual interventions are implemented, what factors support or inhibit them, and what outcomes have been reported.

Based on this background, the present study aims to synthesize empirical evidence on spiritual interventions in formal education. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) How are spiritual interventions implemented in formal education? (2) What supporting and

inhibiting factors influence spiritual interventions in formal education? and (3) What outcomes are produced by spiritual interventions in formal education? The novelty of this review lies in its focus on formal education as a specific setting and its synthesis of implementation patterns, contextual factors, and intervention outcomes.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review to identify, select, appraise, and synthesize empirical articles on spiritual interventions in formal education. The review process was guided by the PRISMA framework, which includes the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). A systematic review design was selected because it allows evidence from diverse empirical studies to be collected and synthesized transparently according to predetermined procedures.

The research questions were formulated by adapting the PICO framework, focusing on population, intervention, and outcome. The population consisted of students or university students in formal education settings. The intervention was defined as any structured spiritual intervention, spiritual education, spiritual counseling, spiritual training, spiritual approach, spiritual technique, or spiritually integrated program. The outcomes included psychological, educational, social, emotional, or behavioral changes reported after the intervention.

Article searches were conducted in three electronic databases: SAGE, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online. The search was limited to journal articles and English-language publications from 2015 to 2025, and to studies available in full text or as open-access documents. The search terms were developed from concepts related to spiritual intervention, counseling, and education. The same core search string was applied across the three databases, with minor adjustments for each database's interface.

Table 1. Search strategy

Database	Search string
SAGE	("spiritual interventions" OR "spiritual therapy" OR "spiritual counseling" OR "spiritual approach" OR "spiritual technique" OR "spiritual practice") AND ("guidance and counseling" OR "counseling" OR "school counseling" OR "educational counseling" OR "psychological counseling") AND ("education" OR "educational setting" OR "school" OR "students" OR "higher education")
SpringerLink	("spiritual interventions" OR "spiritual therapy" OR "spiritual counseling" OR "spiritual approach" OR "spiritual technique" OR "spiritual practice") AND ("guidance and counseling" OR "counseling" OR "school counseling" OR "educational counseling" OR "psychological counseling") AND ("education" OR "educational setting" OR "school" OR "students" OR "higher education")
Taylor & Francis Online	("spiritual interventions" OR "spiritual therapy" OR "spiritual counseling" OR "spiritual approach" OR "spiritual technique" OR "spiritual practice") AND ("guidance and counseling" OR "counseling" OR "school counseling" OR "educational counseling" OR "psychological counseling") AND ("education" OR "educational setting" OR "school" OR "students" OR "higher education")

Eligibility criteria were established to ensure that the selected articles aligned with the review's focus. The inclusion criteria covered formal education settings, spiritual interventions, reported intervention outcomes, journal publication status, full-text availability, empirical study design, publication year from 2015 to 2025, and English language. Studies were excluded when they were not conducted in formal education settings, did not report a spiritual intervention, did not present intervention outcomes, or were books, proceedings, reviews, non-full-text documents, or non-English publications.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

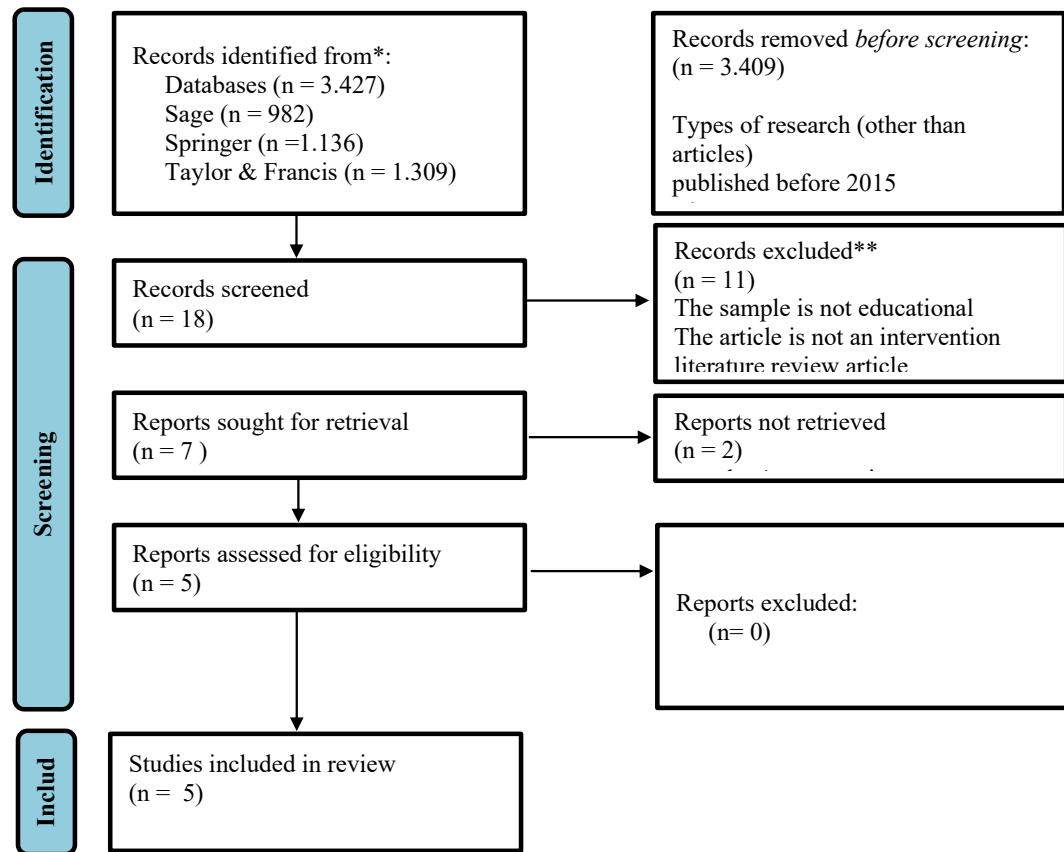
No.	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	Population: studies focusing on formal education settings	Population: studies conducted outside formal education settings
2	Intervention: studies discussing the implementation of spiritual interventions in formal education	Intervention: studies not discussing spiritual interventions in formal education
3	Outcome: studies reporting outcomes of spiritual interventions in formal education	Outcome: studies not reporting outcomes of spiritual interventions
4	Publication status: journal article	Publication type other than journal article
5	Document type: open access/full text	Documents without full-text access
6	Study design: qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method empirical studies	Books, proceedings, review articles, or non-empirical documents
7	Publication year: 2015–2025	Publication year before 2015
8	Language: English	Languages other than English

The article selection process was conducted in two stages. First, the initial search yielded 3,427 records from SAGE (n = 982), SpringerLink (n = 1,136), and Taylor & Francis Online (n = 1,309). Automatic database filters removed 3,409 records based on document type, publication year, language, and access criteria, leaving 18 articles for further screening. Second, the 18 full-text articles were read carefully and assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Thirteen articles were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria, resulting in five articles for the final synthesis.

The quality of the included studies was assessed using items adapted from the Joanna Briggs Institute critical appraisal checklist. The appraisal emphasized clarity of objectives, appropriateness of design, participant relevance, reporting of intervention procedures, outcome measurement, and the consistency between findings and conclusions. Although the JBI checklist is widely used in health research, it was considered relevant because the present review focuses on intervention studies.

Data were extracted into a synthesis matrix containing author, year, country, method, objective, educational level, sample, intervention implementation, supporting and inhibiting factors, and intervention outcomes. The extracted data were synthesized thematically. Thematic synthesis was selected because the included articles used heterogeneous designs and outcomes, making statistical meta-analysis inappropriate.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of study selection
Identification of studies via databases and registers



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The selection process resulted in five articles that met the final inclusion criteria. The articles were distributed across three databases: SAGE (n = 1), SpringerLink (n = 2), and Taylor & Francis Online (n = 2). The geographical distribution of the studies included the United States (n = 1), Indonesia (n = 2), India (n = 1), and Iran (n = 1). The educational levels included higher education (n = 3), senior high school (n = 1), and elementary school (n = 1).

The included studies used different methodological designs, including a quantitative cohort design, an experimental quantitative design, a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, a cross-country longitudinal experiment, and a randomized controlled trial. This methodological variation indicates that spiritual interventions in formal education have been examined through diverse empirical approaches. However, the limited number of eligible articles also indicates that research specifically addressing spiritual interventions in formal education remains underdeveloped.

Table 3. Characteristic of included studies

No.	Study	Country and level	Design and sample	Intervention form	Main outcomes
1	Hashim et al. (2025)	United States; higher education	Quantitative cohort: 19 medical students	Elective curricular program on religion and medicine delivered across two semesters through hybrid learning, didactic sessions, case-based discussion, applied questions, oral feedback, and guided counseling practice.	Improved attitudes, knowledge, and student comfort with learning about spirituality and health; the second-semester program showed stronger, more measurable gains.
2	Razak et al. (2024)	Indonesia, senior high school	Experimental quantitative design; 40 students	Spiritual competence training conducted within a 30-day implementation arrangement, with two intensive training days totaling 16 hours. Topics included spiritual awareness, self-awareness, connection, meaning, values, ethics, altruism, and resilience.	Significantly increased emotional intelligence and student well-being.
3	Jenuri et al. (2025)	Indonesia: higher education	Sequential exploratory mixed methods; 10 qualitative participants and 150 quantitative participants	Integration of Al-Ghazali's human concept into Islamic religious education learning through concept	Improved understanding and learning performance; integration of spiritual concepts strengthened

No.	Study	Country and level	Design and sample	Intervention form	Main outcomes
				introduction, reflection and introspection, interactive discussion, implementation, presentation, and evaluation, and portfolio preparation.	the relevance and application of Islamic religious education.
4	Pandya (2017)	India and cross-country context; elementary school	Longitudinal experimental study; 3,227 children in experimental and control groups	Five-day spiritual education program, two hours per day, developed by experts from different religious backgrounds. The program included thematic sessions on self-understanding, connectedness, relationship building, and implementation.	Reduced social anxiety and phobia, improved social interaction skills, relational awareness, and peer interaction among introverted children.
5	Fereydouni and Forstmeier (2022)	Iran: higher education	Randomized controlled trial; 60 university students	Spiritually sensitive Islamic logotherapy consisting of 12 weekly group sessions plus pre-test and post-test sessions. Topics included positive memories, meaning in critical life events, values, death, positive thinking, freedom of will, and prayer as a	Significantly reduced depression, anxiety, and stress compared with the control group.

No.	Study	Country and level	Design and sample	Intervention form coping strategy.	Main outcomes
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Implementation of Spiritual Interventions

The first finding shows that spiritual interventions in formal education are implemented through two main patterns. The first pattern is curricular integration, in which spirituality is incorporated into formal course structures. Hashim et al. (2025), for example, integrated spirituality and health into medical education through an elective course on religion and medicine. This program was implemented across two semesters, combining didactic learning, case-based discussion, feedback, and guided practice in spiritual counseling (Hashim et al., 2025).

A similar curricular integration pattern appeared in Jenuri et al. (2025) who developed a learning model that integrates Al-Ghazali's concept of the human person into Islamic religious education in higher education. This model included the introduction of concepts, reflection, introspection, interactive discussion, implementation, presentation, evaluation, and portfolio preparation. In this case, spirituality was not presented as an external supplement but as a conceptual foundation within the learning model.

The second pattern is the implementation of special programs or structured training designed to achieve specific psychological and social outcomes. Razak et al. (2024) developed spiritual competence training for high school students, while implementing a spiritual education program for introverted children. Fereydouni and Forstmeier (2022) developed spiritually sensitive Islamic logotherapy for university students experiencing severe depressive symptoms. These programs were generally implemented through scheduled sessions, thematic materials, experiential exercises, and evaluation.

These implementation patterns indicate that spiritual interventions can be adapted according to educational level, program objectives, religious context, and participant characteristics. In higher education, spiritual interventions are often integrated into academic courses or therapeutic programs. In schools, spiritual interventions are more commonly delivered as training programs that emphasize emotional, social, and moral development.

Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

Supporting factors for spiritual interventions can be grouped into personal and social factors. Personal factors include individual readiness, personality, reaction to learning, openness to spiritual values, religious condition, gender, and the severity of psychological problems. (Hashim et al., 2025) identified individual reactions, learning, and behavior as important components in successful spiritual care education. Razak et al. (2024) noted that students' positive personality characteristics and religious environment supported the implementation of spiritual competence training.

Social factors include facilitator competence, culture, living environment, institutional support, program duration, and the alignment between intervention content and participants' belief systems. Jenuri et al. (2025) showed that lecturers' ability to integrate Islamic religious education with Al-Ghazali's concept of the human being supported the success of the intervention. Fereydouni and Forstmeier (2022) also demonstrated that incorporating Islamic values and practices made logotherapy more congruent with participants' cultural and religious backgrounds. Pandya (2017) found that social environment, cultural background, gender, school grade, and residence contributed to differences in intervention outcomes.

Inhibiting factors primarily emerged when interventions lacked validated assessment tools, did not fit participants' cultural contexts, or were perceived as irrelevant by certain social groups.

Hashim et al. (2025) reported the absence of a validated assessment for spiritual care education as a limitation. Pandya (2017) found that social class, cultural differences, and cross-country differences could influence the effectiveness of the spiritual education program. These findings suggest that spiritual interventions cannot be applied uniformly across contexts without cultural adaptation and rigorous measurement.

The classification of supporting and inhibiting factors into personal and social domains is consistent with previous studies showing that both internal and contextual factors influence spirituality and quality of life (Deb & Strodl, 2019; Aslan & Unsal, 2021). It is also consistent with cross-cultural findings indicating that spiritually integrated interventions require sensitivity to local beliefs, cultural values, and social meaning systems (Sim, Wonjin et al., 2022).

Outcomes of Spiritual Interventions

The third finding confirms that spiritual interventions produce positive outcomes in formal education. In medical education, spiritual care education improved students' attitudes, knowledge, and comfort in discussing spirituality and health (Hashim et al., 2025). In senior high school, spiritual competence training significantly increased emotional intelligence and well-being (Razak et al., 2024). In Islamic religious education, the integration of Al-Ghazali's human concepts improved understanding, learning performance, and the practical relevance of the curriculum (Jenuri et al., 2025).

At the elementary school level, Pandya (2017) found that a spiritual education program reduced social anxiety and improved social interaction skills among introverted children. The program strengthened relational awareness and peer interaction, indicating that spiritual education may support social development in childhood. In higher education mental health intervention, Fereydouni and Forstmeier (2022) showed that spiritually sensitive Islamic logotherapy significantly reduced depression, anxiety, and stress among university students.

The outcomes reported in the included studies suggest that spiritual interventions are not limited to religious knowledge or ritual practice. Rather, they contribute to emotional regulation, well-being, social skills, meaning-making, professional attitudes, and psychological resilience. These outcomes align with previous research showing that spirituality is associated with quality of life, subjective happiness, life satisfaction, coping, resilience, and psychological adjustment (Deb & Strodl, 2019; Schwalm et al., 2022; Schwalm et al., 2022; McKnight & Livingston, 2019; McKnight & Livingston, 2019; Smith et al., 2017).

This review demonstrates that spiritual interventions are viable in formal education when they are designed systematically and adapted to the educational and cultural context. The five included studies address the research questions by showing how spiritual interventions are implemented, which factors support or hinder their implementation, and what outcomes result from their use. The findings also indicate that spiritual interventions can be used across educational levels, from elementary school to higher education.

The first major contribution of this review is the identification of two implementation models: curricular integration and structured training. Curricular integration allows spirituality to be embedded in formal academic learning, as shown in medical education and Islamic religious education (Smith et al., 2017; Jenuri et al., 2025). Structured training, by contrast, provides targeted activities to improve specific outcomes such as emotional intelligence, well-being, social interaction, or mental health (Razak et al., 2024; Pandya, 2017; Fereydouni & Forstmeier, 2022). These models suggest that spiritual intervention can be positioned either as part of a formal curriculum or as a complementary psychopedagogical program.

The second contribution concerns contextual fit. Spiritual intervention is most effective when it is congruent with participants' belief systems, cultural background, and educational needs. This finding is consistent with research on spiritually integrated psychotherapy, which emphasizes that spiritual practices should be adapted to local cultures and belief systems rather than applied as universal techniques (Sim, Wonjin et al., 2022). It also aligns with the broader literature showing that spirituality is expressed differently across contexts, communities, and developmental stages (Zimmer et al., 2016; Park et al., 2017).

The third contribution concerns the role of spiritual interventions in addressing psychosocial problems in education. Bullying, violence, discrimination, substance use, and mental health problems indicate that formal education requires interventions that are not only cognitive but also emotional, moral, relational, and existential (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Hampson et al., 2018; Barrable et al., 2018; Barrable et al., 2018; Macarthur et al., 2016). Spiritual interventions offer a promising approach because they emphasize meaning, self-awareness, relationship, compassion, responsibility, and hope.

This synthesis also highlights the need for more standardized evaluation instruments for spirituality in educational interventions. The lack of validated assessment tools is a significant barrier because positive outcomes are often reported without sufficiently robust measurement. Monod et al. (2011) showed that instruments for measuring spirituality in clinical research are diverse and conceptually varied. Koydemir et al. (2021) also emphasized the importance of validating psychological interventions to ensure reliable interpretation of outcomes. Therefore, future studies on spiritual interventions in education should use validated instruments and stronger research designs.

The positive outcomes reported across the five studies suggest that spirituality can function as a psychological resource. Programs emphasizing reflection, values, meaning, prayer or spiritual practice, and social relationships may help learners manage emotions, strengthen identity, build relationships, and cope with pressure. This is consistent with counseling and psychological literature showing that spirituality can support meaning-making, coping, and behavioral change (Koszycki et al., 2010; Post & Wade, 2014; Richards et al., 1997).

Practical implications can be drawn for schools, universities, counselors, and educational psychologists. First, educational institutions should assess learner needs before selecting an intervention model. Second, facilitators should have pedagogical competence, basic counseling skills, and sensitivity to spiritual diversity. Third, intervention materials should combine self-reflection, social relationships, life meaning, moral values, and experiential activities. Fourth, evaluation should use clear, validated indicators to assess intervention outcomes empirically.

Theoretically, this review positions spirituality as a psychopedagogical construct that can bridge character education, student well-being, and counseling services. Spirituality should be understood not only as a normative or ritual aspect but also as a mechanism for meaning construction, motivation, identity development, and resilience. This perspective is supported by cognitive-developmental and positive psychology studies that connect spirituality with human growth, ultimate concern, and adult development (Emmons, 2000; Cartwright, 2001; Day, 2010).

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the search was conducted only in three databases, so relevant articles from other databases may not have been included. Second, the English-language and open-access/full-text criteria may have excluded relevant local or subscription-based studies. Third, only five articles met the final criteria, making quantitative meta-analysis impossible. Fourth, heterogeneity in research design, educational level, intervention model, and outcome measurement limits the generalizability of the findings. These limitations

indicate that future research should broaden database coverage, include multilingual literature, and conduct experimental or mixed-method studies with stronger methodological rigor.

Discussion

This review demonstrates that spiritual interventions are viable in formal education when they are designed systematically and adapted to the educational and cultural context. The five included studies answer the research questions by showing how spiritual interventions are implemented, what factors support or hinder their implementation, and what outcomes emerge from their use. The findings also indicate that spiritual interventions can be used across educational levels, from elementary school to higher education.

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CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review shows that spiritual interventions can be implemented in formal education through curricular integration and structured training programs. The five synthesized studies demonstrate that spiritual interventions have been applied in higher education, senior high school, and elementary school contexts for diverse purposes, including the development of professional attitudes, emotional intelligence, well-being, religious understanding, social skills, and mental health. The success of spiritual interventions is influenced by personal factors such as readiness, personality, openness, religious background, and psychological condition, as well as social factors such as facilitator competence, cultural congruence, institutional support, and program duration. Spiritual interventions were found to produce positive outcomes, including improved knowledge, attitudes, emotional intelligence, well-being, social interaction, and reductions in depression, anxiety, stress, and social anxiety. These findings imply that spiritual interventions are relevant for guidance and counseling, educational psychology, character education, and student well-being programs. Future research should develop culturally responsive intervention models, employ validated assessment instruments, and use stronger experimental or longitudinal designs to establish more robust evidence.

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