Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS), Vol.9 No.2 June, 2026; pg. 261 – 267; ISSN: 2695-2319 (Print); ISSN: 2695-2327 (Online)

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION AS A TOOL FOR CHARACTER FORMATION AND VALUE ORIENTATION IN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Dr. Harrison Imafu Okao, Ph.D
Department of Public Administration
University of Benin, Nigeria
kessingtonaigbovia@gmail.com
&
Dr. Joshua Orabiyi, Ph.D
Department of European Languages and Integration Studies
University of Lagos, Nigeria
orabiyijoshua@gmail.com
&
Prof. Aigbovia Kessington, Ph.D
Department of European Languages and Integration Studies
University of Lagos, Nigeria
kaigbovia@unilag.edu.ng

Abstract

This study explores spiritual education as a critical tool for character formation and value orientation in children and youth. Anchored in the understanding of the human being as a spiritual entity possessing a soul and expressed through the body, the research examines how early spiritual instruction shapes moral consciousness and behavior. Using qualitative methodology based on conceptual analysis and extensive literature review, the study evaluates the role of spirituality in developing virtues such as empathy, responsibility, resilience, and ethical awareness. The findings indicate that spiritual education strengthens internal moral regulation, identity formation, and social responsibility. The paper concludes that integrating spiritual education into pedagogical systems is essential for holistic development and long-term societal stability.

Keywords: Spirituality, Character, Values, Development, Education.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the moral landscape of childhood and youth development is increasingly shaped by rapid globalization, technological advancement, digital communication, and profound socio-cultural transformation. While these developments have significantly expanded access to knowledge, enhanced educational opportunities, and facilitated intercultural interaction, they have also contributed to moral ambiguity, weakened traditional systems of value transmission, and exposed young people to conflicting ideologies and lifestyles. Children and adolescents today encounter a vast amount of information through social media, entertainment platforms, and digital networks, often without the emotional maturity or ethical framework necessary to critically evaluate the messages they receive. Consequently, educators, parents, policymakers, and religious institutions are increasingly concerned about the growing decline in empathy, honesty, respect for authority, social responsibility, and civic engagement among young people.

Scholars such as Thomas Lickona (1991) argue that modern education has frequently prioritized academic achievement, technological competence, and career preparation while paying

comparatively less attention to moral education and character development. Educational systems have become increasingly examination-oriented, emphasizing measurable cognitive outcomes while neglecting the cultivation of virtues that enable learners to become responsible and compassionate members of society. As a result, many young people demonstrate high levels of intellectual competence but lack the ethical principles required for responsible decision-making and positive social interaction.

This imbalance has generated renewed scholarly interest in holistic education, an educational philosophy that seeks to develop every dimension of the human person—intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual. Holistic education recognizes that true education extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and technical skills; it also involves the formation of character, the development of wisdom, and the discovery of meaning and purpose in life. Within this framework, spiritual education occupies a central position because it addresses the deepest dimensions of human identity and existence.

Spiritual education offers a corrective framework by addressing the deeper dimensions of human existence. It is grounded in the understanding that God is a Spirit, and that human beings are likewise spiritual beings who possess souls and inhabit physical bodies. This tripartite understanding of the human person has long been recognized within Christian theology and is increasingly reflected in holistic educational theories that seek to integrate the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual capacities of learners (Miller, 2007). Spiritual education therefore transcends the mere transmission of religious knowledge; it seeks to nurture the inner life of the learner by cultivating wisdom, self-awareness, compassion, integrity, and a sense of responsibility toward both God and humanity.

Children are highly impressionable, often described metaphorically as "clean sheets" upon which experiences, relationships, habits, and teachings leave lasting impressions. Developmental psychology consistently demonstrates that the early years of life represent a critical period during which attitudes, beliefs, emotional responses, and behavioral patterns are established. Values learned during childhood frequently become deeply internalized and continue to influence decision-making throughout adulthood. Consequently, early exposure to spiritual principles such as love, kindness, honesty, humility, forgiveness, accountability, justice, compassion, and reverence for God plays a decisive role in shaping lifelong attitudes and patterns of behaviour.

Albert Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory further explains that children learn not only through direct instruction but also through observation, imitation, and interaction with significant role models. Parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other respected adults therefore become powerful agents in transmitting spiritual values. When children consistently observe adults demonstrating integrity, patience, generosity, self-control, and compassion, they are more likely to adopt similar patterns of behaviour. Conversely, environments characterized by violence, dishonesty, selfishness, and moral inconsistency often produce corresponding behavioural outcomes among young people.

The family remains the primary institution responsible for introducing children to spiritual and moral values. Before formal schooling begins, children acquire their earliest understanding of right and wrong through family interactions, daily routines, religious practices, and parental

guidance. Educational institutions subsequently reinforce—or, in some instances, weaken these foundational values through curriculum, classroom culture, peer relationships, and institutional expectations. Religious communities further complement these efforts by providing opportunities for worship, service, moral reflection, mentorship, and communal participation. The combined influence of these three institutions; the family, the school, and the faith community creates an integrated environment within which children's character can develop comprehensively.

Furthermore, contemporary society presents numerous challenges that increase the urgency of spiritual education. The widespread influence of social media, consumerism, materialism, violent entertainment, cyberbullying, substance abuse, family instability, and declining community cohesion has created environments in which many young people struggle to establish stable moral identities. In such circumstances, spiritual education provides an enduring moral compass that enables children and adolescents to distinguish between temporary social trends and enduring ethical principles. Rather than merely prescribing acceptable behaviour, spiritual education encourages internal transformation by shaping motives, attitudes, and personal convictions.

Beyond individual development, spiritual education also contributes significantly to social cohesion, peaceful coexistence, and national development. Communities characterized by honesty, justice, mutual respect, and compassion are built upon citizens whose values have been cultivated from childhood. Children who develop spiritually grounded character are more likely to become trustworthy leaders, responsible professionals, ethical public servants, and active contributors to community development. Thus, investing in the spiritual formation of children represents not only an educational priority but also a long-term strategy for sustainable social progress.

This study therefore explores spiritual education as a critical instrument for character formation and value orientation among children and youth. Through conceptual analysis and an extensive review of relevant literature, it examines how spiritual instruction contributes to moral development, identity formation, emotional resilience, ethical decision-making, and responsible citizenship. The study further argues that integrating spiritual education into contemporary pedagogical systems provides an effective foundation for holistic human development and prepares future generations to contribute positively to increasingly complex and diverse societies.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Spiritual Education

Spiritual education is the intentional process of introducing children to their Creator, helping them understand their origin, purpose, and moral responsibilities. It extends beyond doctrinal teaching to include the cultivation of inner awareness and ethical sensitivity. Parker J. Palmer (2003) emphasizes that true education is inherently spiritual, as it seeks to connect knowledge with meaning and purpose.

This form of education teaches children to discern the will of the divine and align their actions accordingly. It fosters a sense of accountability not only to society but to a higher moral authority, thereby strengthening ethical consistency.

Character Formation

Character formation involves the development of stable moral qualities that guide behavior. According to Lickona (1991), character consists of moral knowledge, moral feeling, and moral action. Spiritual education contributes to all three dimensions by providing clear moral frameworks, nurturing empathy, and encouraging ethical conduct.

Value Orientation

Value orientation refers to the system of beliefs that influence decisions and priorities. Milton Rokeach (1973) describes values as enduring beliefs that guide behavior across situations. Spiritual education aligns these values with transcendent principles, ensuring stability even in changing social contexts.

Theoretical Foundations

This study integrates multiple theoretical perspectives:

- Moral Development Theory by Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), which highlights stages of moral reasoning and the role of guided instruction.
- Social Learning Theory by Bandura (1977), emphasizing modeling and imitation.
- Holistic Education Theory by John P. Miller (2007), advocating the integration of mind, body, and spirit.

These frameworks collectively support the argument that spiritual education enhances both psychological and pedagogical development.

Spiritual Education and Character Formation

Spiritual education significantly influences character formation by instilling virtues that regulate behavior from within. Unlike externally imposed discipline, spiritually grounded character is sustained by internal conviction and moral awareness.

One of the most impactful aspects of spiritual education is its emphasis on exemplary figures. Across traditions, individuals are presented with models of integrity, courage, and compassion. These figures serve as constant references for behavior, enabling children to navigate complex moral situations. This aligns with Bandura's (1977) assertion that observational learning is central to behavior formation.

Moreover, spiritual education fosters conscience development. Children learn to evaluate their actions not merely based on consequences but on moral principles. This internalization of values leads to self-regulation, reducing dependence on external enforcement.

Spiritual teachings also emphasize virtues such as love, kindness, forgiveness, and humility—qualities that are increasingly challenged in a world that often promotes individualism and self-centeredness. By reinforcing these virtues, spiritual education contributes to the development of socially responsible individuals.

Spiritual Education and Value Orientation

Spiritual education plays a crucial role in shaping value orientation by providing a stable moral compass. In contrast to relativistic value systems, spirituality offers absolute standards rooted in divine principles.

One key contribution is the development of a sense of purpose. Children who understand their lives as part of a divine plan are more likely to exhibit goal-directed behavior and resilience. This aligns with findings in holistic education, which emphasize meaning as a central component of learning (Miller, 2007).

Additionally, spiritual education promotes communal values. It teaches children to prioritize relationships, empathy, and service over self-interest. In a cultural context that increasingly values independence, spirituality reintroduces the importance of interdependence and collective well-being.

Another critical aspect is resilience through faith. Spiritual education encourages trust in God, providing emotional stability during adversity. For children who may lack consistent parental support, this reliance on a higher power becomes a source of strength and continuity.

Pedagogical Implications and Practices

To effectively integrate spiritual education into child development, educators and caregivers must adopt intentional strategies:

- Curriculum Design: Embedding spiritual and moral lessons across subjects.
- Role Modeling: Teachers and parents must embody the values they teach (Bandura, 1977).
- Reflective Practices: Activities such as journaling and meditation enhance self-awareness (Palmer, 2003).
- Service Learning: Encouraging acts of kindness reinforces moral values in practice.

Furthermore, teaching methods must align with developmental stages, as emphasized by Kohlberg (1981), ensuring that moral instruction is age-appropriate and cognitively accessible.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite its importance, spiritual education faces several challenges:

- Secular Educational Policies: Many systems avoid spiritual content due to concerns about neutrality.
- Cultural and Religious Diversity: in beliefs requires inclusive approaches.
- Misinterpretation of Spirituality: Reducing spirituality to rigid dogma undermines its transformative potential (Wright, 2000).

Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that emphasizes universal values while respecting diversity.

Extended Discussion

The integration of spiritual education into child development highlights the necessity of addressing the whole person. As Palmer (2003) argues, education devoid of spiritual meaning risks producing individuals who are intellectually competent but morally disconnected.

The concept that "a child is a clean sheet" underscores the formative power of early experiences. Spiritual education ensures that this "sheet" is inscribed with values that promote both personal fulfillment and societal harmony.

Moreover, spirituality provides continuity of guidance. Even in the absence of parents or guardians, a spiritually grounded child retains a framework for decision-making rooted in

divine principles. This enduring guidance distinguishes spiritual education from other forms of moral instruction.

Conclusion

Spiritual education remains a vital tool for character formation and value orientation in children and youth. By introducing individuals to their Creator and fostering an understanding of divine purpose, it cultivates moral integrity, emotional resilience, ethical awareness, and a deep sense of personal responsibility. Unlike approaches that focus solely on intellectual achievement or behavioural regulation through external discipline, spiritual education seeks to transform the inner life of the individual by nurturing virtues that become enduring guides for thought, decision-making, and conduct. It provides children and young people with a stable moral foundation upon which they can build meaningful lives and make positive contributions to their families, communities, and society.

The findings of this study demonstrate that spiritual education contributes significantly to the holistic development of children by integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of learning. It equips learners with the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, develop empathy toward others, exercise self-control, and act with honesty and compassion even in situations where external supervision is absent. Such internalized values strengthen character and encourage responsible citizenship, making spiritual education an indispensable component of quality education. As young people encounter increasingly complex ethical challenges in contemporary society, the ability to make morally sound decisions becomes as important as academic knowledge and professional competence.

In today's rapidly changing world, characterized by globalization, technological advancement, social media influence, consumerism, and moral uncertainty, children are constantly exposed to diverse and often conflicting value systems. Without a strong moral and spiritual foundation, many young people may struggle to develop stable identities and ethical convictions. Spiritual education therefore serves as a reliable moral compass, enabling learners to evaluate information critically, resist destructive influences, and remain committed to principles that promote personal integrity and the common good. Rather than isolating children from the realities of modern society, it prepares them to engage responsibly with those realities while maintaining sound moral judgment and respect for the dignity of others.

The responsibility for spiritual education should not rest solely with religious institutions. Parents, schools, faith communities, and society at large must work collaboratively to create environments that consistently reinforce positive values and moral behaviour. Families remain the first and most influential setting for character formation, while schools have the unique opportunity to integrate ethical reflection, service, responsibility, and respect for others into everyday teaching and learning. Educators themselves must serve as role models whose lives demonstrate the virtues they seek to cultivate in their students, recognizing that children often learn more from observation than from instruction alone.

Furthermore, educational policymakers and curriculum developers should recognize that academic excellence and moral excellence are complementary rather than competing objectives. A balanced educational system should seek not only to produce graduates who are intellectually capable but also individuals who possess integrity, compassion, self-discipline,

and a commitment to justice and peaceful coexistence. Incorporating appropriate forms of spiritual and moral education within educational curricula can therefore contribute significantly to reducing social problems such as violence, corruption, intolerance, dishonesty, and antisocial behaviour, while promoting responsible leadership and sustainable national development.

Ultimately, spiritual education is an investment in both the individual and society. Children whose lives are shaped by enduring spiritual values are more likely to become trustworthy professionals, ethical leaders, responsible citizens, and compassionate members of their communities. Such individuals possess not only the knowledge required to succeed in their chosen fields but also the wisdom and moral courage to use that knowledge for the benefit of humanity. Consequently, integrating spiritual education into pedagogical systems should be regarded as an essential dimension of holistic education rather than an optional addition. By nurturing the spiritual, moral, and ethical capacities of children and youth alongside their intellectual development, educational institutions can help prepare future generations capable of building societies founded on justice, peace, compassion, and respect for the inherent dignity of every human person.

References

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. Prentice Hall.
Frankl, V. E. (1963). Man's Search for Meaning. Beacon Press.
Kohlberg, L. (1981). *The Philosophy of Moral Development*. Harper & Row.
Lickona, T. (1991). *Educating for Character*. Bantam Books.
Miller, J. P. (2007). *The Holistic Curriculum*. University of Toronto Press.
Noddings, N. (2013). Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (2nd ed.). University of California Press.
Palmer, P. J. (2003). *To Know as We Are Known*. HarperCollins.
Rokeach, M. (1973). *The Nature of Human Values*. Free Press.
Smith, H. (1991). *The World's Religions*. Harper One.
Wright, A. (2000). *Spirituality and Education*. Routledge.