

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SPIRITUAL EDUCATION FOR ADOLESCENTS IN AZERBAIJAN: AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Azerbaijan pays special attention to the education sector. This is a major concern for the government because education plays a significant role in the economic stability and security of the country, especially for Azerbaijan's youth. One important aspect of education is spiritual education. Spiritual education for adolescents (teenagers) is believed to be part of character building for Azerbaijan's future generations. Of course, its implementation has opportunities and challenges. This study examines academics' perspectives on the opportunities and challenges in implementing spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents. The research method used is qualitative, presenting the results of in-depth interviews with Azerbaijani academics about the challenges and opportunities of implementing spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents in Azerbaijan, as well as direct observations in various formal and non-formal environments. The results of this study show the importance of implementing spiritual education for Azerbaijani youth, with more than 90% of academics agreeing. Therefore, these results are expected to serve as a reference for education stakeholders to develop opportunities and challenges that can contribute to the progress, economic development, and national security stability involving Azerbaijani adolescents.

Keywords: Spiritual Education, Adolescents, Academic Perspective

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Azerbaijan is a country that has seen significant development in various sectors, as evidenced by the increase in per capita income from year to year. Although Azerbaijan is a newly independent country and is classified as the youngest Islamic country as a breakaway state of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan remains consistent in developing its human resources. One of the sectors that is the focus of the Azerbaijani government's development is education. Education is a very important sector in creating human resources that will continue the country's sustainability. The development of the education sector not only focuses on facilities and infrastructure but also on developing teacher competence by implementing teacher certification so that the expected increase in competence can be followed up and the welfare of teachers in Azerbaijan who have been certified will be improved by receiving additional income in accordance with applicable regulations.

Education is expected to contribute significantly to shaping the next generation, creating individuals with positive attitudes and reducing negative behaviours that can disrupt the stability of security, comfort, and the country's economy. Without stability in various aspects, especially security, the country's economic development will be disrupted and difficult to improve. The Azerbaijani government considers spiritual education to be an important aspect in the character and moral development of young people, especially in a country with a rich cultural and religious heritage such as Azerbaijan. In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in integrating spiritual education into the formal education curriculum. This is driven by the need to shape a young generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also has strong moral and ethical values.

A few years ago, according to data from the Azerbaijan State Statistics Committee, the young generation, namely adolescents, reached 2.3 million people or nearly 23% of the total population, with more than 52% living in urban areas (Committee, 2022). This number is a reference for the development of spiritual education so that it can contribute to character development that maintains security and economic development in Azerbaijan. Through spiritual education, young people can

understand how to develop themselves properly and gain a better understanding of their identity, as well as their future contribution to Azerbaijan, which will continue to develop the country both morally and materially.

Previous studies have shown the positive contribution of spiritual education in educating young people to create positive behaviours for the development of the country. This is demonstrated by the importance of positive behaviours, moral values, and character of young people needed by employers to work in various sectors, thereby contributing to the country's economy. However, this study does not explain in detail how to create adolescents with such positive behaviours. This study only focuses on the marketing communication of educational institutions in marketing their graduates so that they can be accepted to work in industries that are in line with their fields of study (Waris, 2022) (Guliyeva, 2020). Certainly, Azerbaijan, as a country that wants to develop its potential, must target the implementation of spiritual education as part of its efforts to educate and train Azerbaijani youth who have character, moral values, and positive attitudes to continue developing the country for the better. To that end, research is needed on the implementation of spiritual education in Azerbaijan, detailing the opportunities and challenges for its application among Azerbaijani youth in both formal and informal educational settings, so that it can become a sustainable development for teachers, educators, lecturers, educational institutions, and the Azerbaijani government, as well as other educational stakeholders from an academic perspective.

The Spiritual Education

Spiritual education is defined as an educational approach aimed at developing the character of individuals as students, accompanied by the promotion of moral values, positive behaviour within the community, and obedience to the Creator (Faozi, 2023). Spiritual education is carried out at various levels of education and is very beneficial for the development of the surrounding community, especially in terms of national and state life (Dilova Nargiza Gaibullayevna, 2024). In addition, this education instils the principles of justice and law, helping the younger generation to live fair and respectful lives in society. This education also encourages mastery of the principles of work and responsibility. A key aspect is the importance of experience in the learning process of the next generation, where national spiritual education supports an educational process that is connected to practical experience (Huseynaga, 2024). Therefore, spiritual education is expected to shape positive character among Azerbaijani adolescents, which will encourage the country's economic growth and maintain national security and order.

Adolescents in Azerbaijan

Adolescents can be grouped into Generation Z, meaning the Azerbaijani generation born between 1997 and 2012 (Rebecca C. Slepian, 2024). This generation is also called the internet generation because it is highly connected to the internet. Generation Z has the following characteristics (Majid Wajdi, 2024):

- 1) Technologically proficient and digitally skilled
- 2) Independent and self-directed learners
- 3) Collaborative and team-oriented
- 4) Visually oriented and focused on attention
- 5) Prioritise real-world application and problem solving.

These five characteristics can be adapted to 21st-century learning, which focuses on collaborative, communicative, critical thinking, and creative thinking, or what is known as the 4Cs in formal and informal learning and teaching, to implement spiritual education among Azerbaijani adolescents.

RESEARCH METHOD

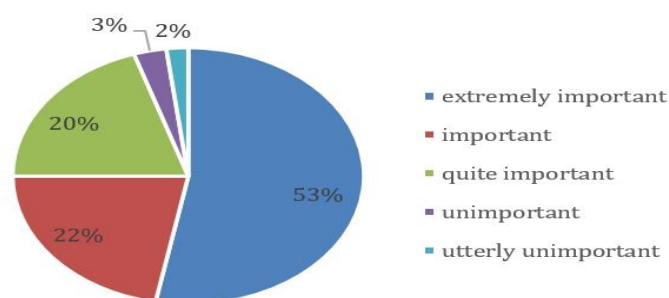
The research method used in this study was qualitative, which included in-depth interviews with academics at a university in Baku, Azerbaijan, regarding the challenges and opportunities in implementing spiritual education for adolescents in Azerbaijan, as well as direct observation in various formal and informal environments that contain spiritual educational values in Azerbaijan (Crosswell, 2009). This study focuses on the implementation of spiritual education in the city of Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, where more than 52% of Azerbaijani adolescents live. The results of this study are integrated with government policies and roles in the implementation of spiritual education for adolescents in Azerbaijan, and are expected to raise awareness of the importance of spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents for the sustainability of Azerbaijan's future generations.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

The Importance of Spiritual Education

This study found that almost all academics at one of Azerbaijan's universities strongly emphasised the importance of spiritual education for young people amid progress and the digital age, which greatly influences the character of adolescents who will later continue the country's sustainability.

Chart.1 The Importance of Spiritual Education



The pie chart above provides a clear picture of the importance of implementing spiritual education for adolescents in Azerbaijan. More than 90% of academics indicated that they emphasise the importance of spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents. The remaining 5% of academics at Azerbaijani universities stated that it is not important to implement spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents.

The implementation of spiritual education among adolescents in Azerbaijan has been met with mixed responses from Azerbaijani academics, who view it from various perspectives in terms of the benefits it will bring to the future of the Azerbaijani nation and state. In this study, academics at the University of Azerbaijan were found to have several perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in implementing spiritual education among Azerbaijani adolescents.

The challenges in implementing spiritual education are:

- 1) the less than optimal role of teachers in schools,
- 2) the lack of role models and supervision,
- 3) the negative influence of digital platforms,
- 4) the lack of consistency and coordination in the implementation of spiritual education,
- 5) the influence of the social environment, and
- 6) the secular education system in Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, opportunities for spiritual education among Azerbaijani adolescents include the following:

- 1) Utilisation of technology,
- 2) Collaboration between various parties,
- 3) Opportunities for positive content campaigns,
- 4) Development of digital literacy, and
- 5) Development of empathy and appreciation for diversity.

The Challenges and Opportunities of Implementing Spiritual Education for Azerbaijani Adolescents

The Challenges

The first challenge is the role of teachers in supporting the implementation of spiritual education in schools, which has not been optimal. This may be due to various factors, one of which is the lack of contextual learning facilities and infrastructure related to spiritual education, such as special rooms for Muslims to pray. In addition, religious studies are not included in the national curriculum at all levels of formal education in Azerbaijan, especially at secondary and tertiary levels where Azerbaijani adolescents receive formal spiritual education, thus limiting the role of teachers. The second challenge is the lack of role models and supervision from various parties in implementing spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents. These role models and supervision can be obtained from the adolescents' closest relatives. Azerbaijani adolescents, who are categorised as Generation Z, hope to have good role models and supervision from their families, but in reality, they do not get any of that. Many parents are busy with work and rarely engage in activities together with their children, making it difficult to provide the supervision and role models that should be provided in terms of spiritual values. Furthermore, teachers at school do not provide sufficient guidance on spiritual values as a means of control and supervision for Azerbaijani adolescents. The third challenge is the influence of digital platforms. Globally, young people (Generation Z) are very attached to digital platforms, which poses a challenge for stakeholders in providing spiritual education by utilising digital platforms that are attractive to Azerbaijani adolescents so that spiritual values can be conveyed effectively and efficiently in accordance with Azerbaijan's national education objectives. The fourth challenge is the lack of consistency and coordination between regional stakeholders and the central government in implementing spiritual education. Synergy is expected to create and accommodate spiritual education objectives evenly and have a strong driving force in shaping positive character for Azerbaijani adolescent. The fifth challenge is the social environment. The complex and rapidly developing social environment affects the consistency of the character that will be formed in the spiritual education of Azerbaijani adolescent, making this challenge a factor that must be taken into account by education stakeholders in Azerbaijan. The final challenge is Azerbaijan's secular education system, which is the biggest challenge in implementing spiritual education in Azerbaijan. This is closely related to the fact that Azerbaijan was previously a Soviet state, and during the Soviet era, the Qur'an was banned as the holy book of Islam, the religion of the majority of Azerbaijan's population. The generation that grew up during the Soviet era most likely underestimated the spiritual values of Islam, its deepest roots, and its influence on the life of the nation due to intensive anti-religious propaganda. The Azerbaijani leader's statement reveals some important historical truths from that era. The Soviet ideological and political system sought to separate Muslims from their religion, deep spiritual values, and Islamic education. Soviet ideologues feared the appeal of Islamic values, as these values could weaken the influence of Soviet ideology in society. Heydar Aliyev emphasised that we were deliberately distanced from these values. On the other hand, in combating Islam, the Bolsheviks used ideological and political propaganda methods, preventing the wider masses from receiving religious education. They distorted Islamic values, forcibly eradicated religious institutions, mosques, and holy sites, replacing them with ugly, featureless buildings, barns, and warehouses. They even blew up mosques and sacred sites. Thus, they aimed to completely erase any mention of mosques and religious attributes from the memory of future generations (AL-FALAH, 2007). The new generation is unaware of these things, making it a challenge to implement spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents. In addition, Azerbaijan is a neighbouring country and part of the same ethnic group as Turkey, which implemented

secularism during the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which had a significant influence on spiritual education in Azerbaijan.

The Opportunities

The first opportunity in implementing spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents is the use of technology. Technology is used to teach spiritual values in both formal and informal education, because today's adolescents are very tech-savvy, which is an opportunity for spiritual education stakeholders to learn how to make the best use of technology (İNCİK, 2022). The second opportunity is collaboration between various parties in the implementation of spiritual education for Azerbaijani adolescents. This collaboration is actually part of 21st-century learning, which is very relevant to the implementation of spiritual education for adolescents. Utilising collaboration between various parties (family, school, and the surrounding environment) will make it easier to achieve the spiritual education goals for Azerbaijani adolescents that are needed by the Azerbaijani nation and state (Aliyev, 2019). The third opportunity is the opportunity to promote positive values, as adolescents are more familiar with social media. This presents an opportunity for spiritual education stakeholders to create content that promotes positive values so that Azerbaijani adolescents are not only exposed to negative content but also receive positive content to balance it out, such as motivational videos and anti-bullying campaigns. This is because adolescents tend to gravitate towards negative things in their search for identity in social interactions, especially on social media, which they access frequently. The next opportunity is the development of digital literacy for Azerbaijani adolescents. This development includes several things that build awareness among Azerbaijani adolescents, ranging from choosing appropriate and inappropriate content to watch, managing privacy on social media, and understanding the dangers of cyberbullying. The final opportunity is the development of empathy and mutual respect. This opportunity is beneficial in shaping the character of Azerbaijani adolescent in responding to differences and backgrounds, whether in education, economic status, or other aspects. This sense of empathy and mutual respect will shape Azerbaijani adolescent to realise that amid their differences, there are similarities that unite them in building Azerbaijan's economic stability and national security.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of spiritual education among Azerbaijani adolescents is very important so that positive values are internalised within them. All education stakeholders can see the opportunities and challenges in this study by collaborating to utilise several digital platforms to instil spiritual values in Azerbaijani adolescents. The following are some of the things that can be done to maximise the implementation of spiritual education:

1. Training for teachers in formal schools to utilise technology in learning and teaching spiritual values.
2. Building students' awareness of the importance of spiritual values in themselves personally for the benefit of the nation, state, and society in general.
3. Encouraging teachers to continuously innovate in teaching spiritual values at school. e.g. curriculum development by integrating spiritual values into the existing curriculum.
4. The government facilitates contextual learning by providing infrastructure to support the habit of teaching spiritual education in formal schools.
5. All parties collaborate (teachers, government, families, and the Azerbaijani adolescent environment) in implementing spiritual education.
6. Maintain and preserve existing spiritual values so that they are not lost from the daily lives of Azerbaijani adolescents.

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