

Cultural Governance of Religious Education in Public Schools: How Pedagogical Innovation Shapes Students' Spiritual and Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how religious education in public schools operates not merely as a pedagogical practice but as a form of cultural governance that shapes students' spiritual and emotional intelligence. Rather than treating religious instruction as a curricular subject alone, the research investigates how institutional routines, school culture, and informal religious practices collectively function as governance mechanisms that influence students' character formation. The study aims to reposition religious education within broader debates on institutional governance, culture, and administrative practice in public education systems.

Method: Using a qualitative case study approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with teachers and school administrators, classroom and extracurricular observations, and document analysis of school programs and policies. Data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify patterns linking pedagogical innovation, institutional culture, and governance practices. This approach allows for an interpretive understanding of how formal rules and informal norms interact in shaping students' spiritual and emotional development.

Findings: The findings reveal that religious education in public schools functions as a hybrid governance system, combining formal administrative arrangements with culturally embedded practices. Pedagogical innovations, such as contextual religious activities and value-based routines, are shown to foster students' emotional regulation, empathy, and spiritual awareness. These outcomes are not produced by curriculum content alone but by the consistent alignment between institutional culture, teacher agency, and informal governance mechanisms within the school environment.


Significance: This study contributes to the literature by introducing cultural governance as an analytical lens for understanding religious education in public institutions. It extends governance scholarship beyond legal and administrative compliance toward everyday cultural practices that shape educational outcomes. The findings offer theoretical and practical insights for policymakers and educators seeking to integrate character education within public schooling while respecting institutional diversity and cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

Public schools across diverse sociocultural contexts increasingly face pressure to balance administrative neutrality with the moral and cultural expectations of their communities. In many education systems, religious education is formally regulated yet informally practiced through routines, symbols, and institutional habits that extend beyond the written curriculum. Scholars such as Fontdevila & Vanderhoven, (2025) and

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Kitching & Gholami, (2023) emphasize that religious instruction in secular schooling cannot be reduced to doctrinal transmission, as it is deeply entangled with broader cultural and governance structures. Within public institutions, religious education often functions as a silent regulatory mechanism shaping student behavior, emotional discipline, and moral orientation. This condition raises important questions about how governance operates not only through formal policies but also through everyday cultural practices embedded in school life. Research on public education governance has largely focused on compliance, leadership, and accountability, as illustrated in studies by Bantwini & Moorosi, (2023), leaving cultural governance relatively underexplored. As a result, the role of religious education as an institutional practice shaping students' inner dispositions remains insufficiently theorized. This gap makes the investigation of religious education as cultural governance both timely and conceptually significant.

In the context of plural societies, public schools become arenas where administrative logic intersects with religious and cultural values. Studies on institutional education systems, including the work of van Dijk, (2023), demonstrate that educational outcomes are often shaped by informal norms rather than formal structures alone. Religious activities conducted within schools, such as collective rituals or value-based routines, operate as governance instruments that regulate emotional expression and spiritual awareness. Aseery, (2024) highlight how religious traditions embedded in school practices influence students' affective engagement beyond classroom instruction. However, such practices are rarely analyzed as part of governance mechanisms in public administration discourse. The absence of this perspective limits understanding of how character formation occurs within state-regulated institutions. As Coates et al., (2023) argue, indigenous and religious values can coexist with modern administrative systems when mediated through institutional culture. Therefore, examining religious education through a governance lens offers a novel contribution to debates on public school administration. This study responds to that urgency by reframing religious education as a form of cultural governance within public schools.

The rationale for this study is grounded in the need to move beyond pedagogical explanations of religious education toward an institutional and cultural governance perspective. Existing research frequently treats spiritual and emotional intelligence as individual psychological outcomes rather than products of structured institutional environments. Arar et al., (2022); Torres, (2022) show that leadership and governance arrangements shape educational practices, yet their analysis remains largely detached from religious or cultural dimensions. By contrast, this study assumes that religious education practices are not value-neutral but are administratively sustained through routines, authority relations, and symbolic norms. Such an assumption challenges conventional boundaries between education management and cultural regulation. The study also responds to growing concerns about the effectiveness of character education in public schools without compromising administrative neutrality. Rather than framing religious education as a policy problem, this research treats it as a governance resource embedded within institutional culture. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of how emotional and spiritual competencies are cultivated. Consequently,

the study provides a theoretical bridge between public administration, cultural studies, and education governance.

Previous scholarship on religious education in public institutions has largely focused on curriculum content and ideological debates. Byrne, (2014) critically examines religion in secular education, emphasizing tensions between neutrality and moral instruction, yet does not address governance implications. Hafifuddin & Buto, (2018) document religious traditions in educational settings, illustrating their cultural persistence but leaving institutional analysis implicit. Research on public education governance, such as Ludlow, (2017), highlights historical administrative projects while marginalizing everyday cultural practices. Beckmann, (2011) further demonstrates how educational paradigms evolve within governance frameworks but stops short of linking them to religious routines. Studies on institutional context by Gray et al., (2005) underline that informal norms shape educational equity, providing a conceptual entry point for cultural governance analysis. Varghese 2016 discusses structural expansion in education systems but largely omits moral and spiritual dimensions. Collectively, these studies suggest that culture matters in education, yet they rarely conceptualize it as governance. This omission creates space for a re-theorization of religious education as an institutional regulatory practice.

More recent work begins to acknowledge the integration of indigenous and religious values within public administration. Prasojo et al., (2025) illustrate how Islamic values can be embedded within Western-style administrative systems, offering a relevant governance framework. Tian & Rautiainen, (2024) explore distributed leadership models that implicitly rely on shared values, although religious dimensions remain unarticulated. demonstrate how institutional cooperation shapes professional education outcomes, supporting the argument that governance operates through relational practices. Kallaway, (2009) emphasizes educational transitions shaped by institutional missions, reinforcing the importance of cultural frameworks. Minow et al., (2008) argue that education governance must address diversity without erasing difference. Justice, (2007) shows how public schools negotiate religious presence within administrative boundaries. Despite these insights, no study explicitly positions religious education as cultural governance shaping emotional and spiritual intelligence. This gap confirms the originality and relevance of the present research.

The existing literature reveals a conceptual gap between studies on religious education and research on public school governance. While numerous studies acknowledge the cultural influence of religious practices, they rarely analyze these practices as governance mechanisms embedded within administrative systems. Conversely, governance and administration studies often prioritize formal regulation, leadership, and accountability, neglecting informal cultural processes. The absence of an integrated framework limits understanding of how emotional and spiritual intelligence emerge within public institutions. Prior research also tends to isolate religious education from broader institutional dynamics, treating it as a curricular issue rather than a governance practice. This separation obscures the role of teachers and school routines as agents of cultural regulation. Furthermore, empirical studies seldom link institutional culture to affective student outcomes. As a result, the governance function of religious

education remains theoretically underdeveloped. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing interdisciplinary scholarship.

The purpose of this study is to examine religious education in public schools as a form of cultural governance that shapes students' spiritual and emotional intelligence. The study seeks to identify how institutional routines, pedagogical innovations, and informal norms interact within public school administration. It aims to analyze the governance mechanisms through which religious practices influence student character formation. The research also explores the role of teacher agency in sustaining cultural governance within formal administrative structures. By adopting a qualitative case study approach, the study intends to capture the lived governance processes operating in school environments. It further seeks to contribute to governance theory by extending analysis beyond legal and procedural dimensions. The findings are expected to offer insights for policymakers on integrating character education within public institutions. Ultimately, the study aims to reposition religious education within debates on culture, law, and administration.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore religious education as a form of cultural governance within public schools. The case study approach is particularly suitable for examining how governance operates through informal norms and institutional routines, as emphasized in governance-oriented education research by (Cojocaru, 2025; Twabu, 2025). By focusing on a bounded institutional setting, the study captures the interaction between formal administrative arrangements and culturally embedded religious practices. The design allows for an in-depth understanding of how pedagogical innovation functions beyond curriculum compliance. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate because cultural governance involves meanings, values, and interpretations that cannot be reduced to numerical indicators, as discussed by (Ellis & Hart, 2023) in debates on religion and secular education. The research is interpretive in nature, seeking to understand how actors within the institution construct and sustain governance practices. This design aligns with socio-administrative perspectives that view governance as a lived process rather than a purely regulatory structure. Consequently, the case study framework enables the analysis of governance dynamics that are often overlooked in large-scale quantitative studies.

Participants

Participants in this study consist of teachers of religious education, school administrators, and selected students involved in religious and value-based school activities. Teachers and administrators were chosen because their roles position them as key actors in sustaining institutional culture, a point highlighted by Asif et al., (2024) and Mingaleva et al., (2022) in their discussion of distributed leadership. Student participants were included to capture how governance practices are experienced and internalized at the individual level. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants had direct engagement with religious education practices within the school. Administrators provided insights into policy interpretation and institutional routines, while teachers contributed

perspectives on pedagogical innovation and daily practice. Students offered reflections on emotional and spiritual development shaped by school culture. This combination of participants allowed for triangulation across governance levels within the institution. Such multi-actor participation strengthens the credibility of qualitative governance research, as suggested by Dagienė et al., (2025) in studies of value-infused public administration.

Instruments

Data were collected using semi-structured interview guides, observation protocols, and document analysis frameworks. Interview guides were designed to explore perceptions of governance, institutional culture, and pedagogical practices, drawing conceptually on cultural governance perspectives discussed by (Nauffal & Nader, 2022). Observation protocols focused on religious routines, classroom interactions, and extracurricular activities as sites of informal governance. Document analysis included school regulations, program descriptions, and activity reports to identify formal representations of religious education. These instruments allowed the study to capture both explicit administrative intentions and implicit cultural practices. Semi-structured interviews provided flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining analytical consistency. Observations enabled the researcher to examine how governance operates in practice rather than in policy statements alone. The combination of instruments reflects methodological approaches commonly used in institutional education studies, as demonstrated by Matos et al., (2023) and Tzafilkou et al., (2023) in historical governance research.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns linking religious education practices with cultural governance mechanisms. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were coded iteratively to capture themes related to institutional culture, governance routines, and student development. Thematic coding was informed by governance theory that emphasizes informal regulation, as articulated by Nakpodia et al., (2023) in analyses of educational paradigms. Codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting administrative structures, pedagogical innovation, and affective outcomes. Cross-data comparison was conducted to ensure consistency between participant perspectives and observed practices. Analytic memos were used to refine interpretations and connect empirical findings to governance concepts. This analytical process enabled the identification of how emotional and spiritual intelligence emerge as institutional outcomes rather than individual traits. The analysis strategy supports the study's aim to extend governance scholarship into the cultural domain of public education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study demonstrate that religious education in public schools operates as a structured form of cultural governance rather than a purely instructional activity. Governance is enacted through recurring institutional routines, such as collective religious practices, value-based classroom interactions, and extracurricular programs aligned with moral development. These practices function as informal regulatory

mechanisms that shape student conduct and emotional discipline. Teachers play a central role as cultural mediators who translate administrative expectations into daily pedagogical actions. School administrators provide institutional legitimacy by embedding religious activities within formal schedules and policy documents. Students experience these governance processes as normalized aspects of school life rather than imposed regulations. The findings indicate that emotional regulation, empathy, and spiritual awareness emerge through sustained participation in these routines. Overall, religious education functions as an integrated governance system linking administration, culture, and student development.

Table 1. Forms of Cultural Governance in Religious Education Practices

Governance Dimension	Institutional Practice	Administrative Role	Observed Student Outcome
Normative routines	Daily religious activities	Schedule authorization	Emotional self-regulation
Pedagogical mediation	Contextualized instruction	Curriculum alignment	Moral reasoning
Informal regulation	Extracurricular rituals	Program endorsement	Spiritual awareness
Symbolic reinforcement	School cultural symbols	Institutional legitimization	Empathy and discipline

Table 1 demonstrates that religious education practices operate across multiple dimensions of governance rather than functioning as isolated classroom activities. Each practice is institutionally anchored through formal administrative structures while, at the same time, it works through informal cultural mechanisms that shape everyday school life. The table highlights that student outcomes cannot be attributed to curriculum content alone, because they are produced through the ongoing interaction between institutional authorization and daily pedagogical enactment. In this interaction, administrative legitimacy provides continuity and direction, while routine practices provide the cultural force that enables value internalization. As a result, the table strengthens the argument that governance in religious education is realized through the alignment of formal structures and lived cultural practice.

The results further reveal that pedagogical innovation strengthens cultural governance by increasing student engagement and internalization of values. Teachers adapt religious content to students' social contexts, enabling values to be understood as lived experiences rather than abstract doctrines. This adaptive pedagogy reinforces emotional intelligence by encouraging reflection, self-awareness, and interpersonal sensitivity. Spiritual intelligence develops through repeated exposure to symbolic and reflective practices embedded in school routines. Governance is thus sustained not through coercion but through cultural normalization. Students perceive religious practices as part of institutional identity rather than external obligations. Administrative consistency reinforces this perception by maintaining continuity across programs. Consequently, governance effectiveness depends on coherence between pedagogical innovation and institutional culture.

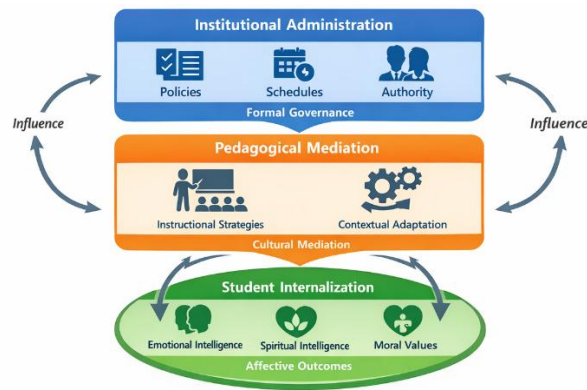


Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram of Cultural Governance in Public School Religious Education (Textual Description)

Figure 1 conceptualizes religious education as a cultural governance system operating through three interconnected layers. The first layer represents formal administration, including policies, schedules, and institutional authority. The second layer consists of pedagogical mediation enacted by teachers through instructional strategies and contextual adaptation. The third layer captures student internalization, where emotional and spiritual intelligence develop as outcomes of sustained participation. Arrows indicate reciprocal influence, showing that governance flows dynamically rather than hierarchically. This model highlights governance as a cultural process embedded in everyday institutional life.

Discussion

This study contributes to governance scholarship by demonstrating that public school religious education functions as cultural governance rather than solely pedagogical practice. While previous research has examined religion in secular education through ideological or curricular lenses, this study extends the analysis to institutional regulation through culture, as suggested in debates on religion and schooling by Byrne (2014). Governance here operates through normalization rather than enforcement, aligning with arguments by Beckmann (2011) that educational regulation often functions implicitly. The findings support the view that institutional culture can act as a regulatory mechanism shaping behavior and values. This challenges narrow conceptions of governance centered only on formal compliance. Instead, governance emerges through routine practices embedded in school life. Such an understanding broadens the scope of administrative analysis in education. It also situates religious education within governance theory rather than moral instruction alone.

The role of teachers as cultural mediators confirms insights from distributed leadership studies emphasizing agency within institutional structures, as discussed by Tian and Rautiainen (2024). Teachers translate administrative expectations into culturally meaningful practices that students can internalize. This mediation aligns with Minow et al. (2008), who argue that institutions manage diversity through everyday practices rather than abstract rules. The findings indicate that teacher agency is essential for sustaining governance coherence. Without pedagogical adaptation, religious education risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. This reinforces arguments by Gray et al. (2005) regarding the importance of informal norms in institutional effectiveness. Teachers

thus operate as governance actors rather than mere implementers. This reframing has implications for administrative theory in education.

The integration of spiritual and emotional intelligence as governance outcomes advances existing literature that treats these constructs as individual psychological traits. Prior studies, such as those by Hafifuddin and Buto (2018), document religious traditions but do not link them to institutional regulation. This study demonstrates that emotional and spiritual development is collectively produced through governance arrangements. Such findings resonate with Prasojo et al. (2025), who emphasize the compatibility of religious values and modern administration. The results suggest that governance effectiveness should be assessed through affective outcomes rather than procedural indicators alone. This challenges performance metrics commonly used in public administration. Governance success thus includes internalized dispositions. This perspective enriches governance evaluation frameworks.

The study also contributes to socio-legal discussions on the role of culture in public institutions. While legal frameworks often emphasize neutrality, the findings show that cultural governance operates alongside formal regulation without undermining administrative order. Justice (2007) highlights similar tensions in public schooling, yet this study demonstrates how institutions negotiate these tensions productively. Religious education becomes a site of governance negotiation rather than conflict. This insight aligns with Kallaway (2009), who notes that institutional missions shape governance transitions. The findings suggest that cultural practices can coexist with legal rationality. Governance is therefore not diminished by culture but enacted through it. This has broader implications for public administration in plural societies.

Finally, the study addresses a notable gap in governance literature by explicitly theorizing religious education as cultural governance. Previous studies have either focused on historical administration, such as Ludlow (2017), or on institutional expansion without cultural analysis, as in Varghese 2016. By integrating governance theory with educational practice, this study offers a framework applicable beyond the specific case. The conceptual model proposed invites comparative research across different institutional contexts. It also opens space for interdisciplinary dialogue between education, law, and cultural studies. The findings underscore the need to reconceptualize governance as lived practice. This reconceptualization aligns with emerging trends in governance research. As such, the study contributes both empirically and theoretically.

Implications

The findings imply that policymakers should recognize religious education as a governance resource rather than merely a curricular component. Administrative frameworks that support pedagogical flexibility can enhance emotional and spiritual outcomes without compromising institutional neutrality. School leaders should align formal policies with cultural practices to sustain governance coherence. Teacher training programs should incorporate governance awareness alongside pedagogical skills. Evaluating educational success should include affective and moral dimensions. Governance indicators may therefore need recalibration. These implications extend

beyond religious education to broader character education initiatives. Ultimately, cultural governance offers a constructive pathway for institutional development.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on a single institutional context, which restricts generalizability across diverse education systems. The qualitative design emphasizes depth over breadth, potentially overlooking variations across schools. Student outcomes are interpreted through observed practices rather than longitudinal measurement. The study does not quantitatively assess emotional or spiritual intelligence. Administrative perspectives beyond the school level are not included. Cultural interpretations may vary across contexts. These limitations suggest caution in extrapolating findings. Nonetheless, the depth of analysis provides strong analytical insight.

Suggestions

Future research should apply the cultural governance framework across multiple public school contexts to test its transferability. Comparative studies across cultural or legal systems would enrich theoretical robustness. Mixed-method approaches could integrate affective measurement with governance analysis. Longitudinal designs may capture changes in student development over time. Research could also examine parental or community roles in cultural governance. Expanding governance analysis beyond schools may reveal broader institutional patterns. Policymakers should support such interdisciplinary research. These directions would strengthen governance theory and practice.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that religious education in public schools operates not merely as a pedagogical domain but as a form of cultural governance embedded within administrative structures and institutional routines. By examining everyday practices, teacher mediation, and organizational alignment, the research shows how governance is enacted through culture rather than formal regulation alone. Emotional and spiritual intelligence emerge not as individual psychological attributes but as collective institutional outcomes shaped by sustained participation in culturally regulated practices. These findings challenge compliance-centered models of public school governance by highlighting the regulatory power of informal norms and symbolic routines. The study advances governance theory by extending its analytical scope to include cultural processes within public administration. It also reframes religious education as an institutional resource rather than a normative dilemma in secular schooling. Overall, the article contributes a novel and transferable framework for understanding how governance, culture, and education intersect in contemporary public institutions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Sumarti conceptualized the study, developed the theoretical framework, and led the research design and data analysis. Sumarti was also responsible for drafting the manuscript, interpreting the findings, and integrating the discussion within the governance and cultural analysis perspective. Sjahid contributed to data collection, field

observations, and document analysis, and supported the development of research instruments. Sjahid also assisted in data coding, validation of analytical themes, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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