

## FORMATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE THROUGH THE LENS OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the role of religious education in the development of social and emotional competence within contemporary educational environments. The study explores the relationship between religious and moral education and the formation of emotional regulation, empathy, social responsibility, and value-based decision making. By analyzing contemporary pedagogical approaches and scholarly literature, the research seeks to identify the mechanisms through which religious education can contribute to the holistic development of students and support the cultivation of socially responsible and emotionally balanced individuals.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the contribution of religious education to the development of social and emotional competence among students, with particular attention to the formation of empathy, moral reflection, emotional awareness, and responsible social behavior in educational settings.

The research is based on a qualitative analytical approach that includes a systematic review of contemporary scholarly literature in the fields of religious education, pedagogy, moral development, and social and emotional learning. The study also applies a conceptual synthesis of pedagogical models and classroom practices that integrate reflective dialogue, value education, and student-centered learning.

The results indicate that religious education can support the development of emotional resilience, ethical reasoning, and constructive social interaction when it is implemented through dialogical and reflective teaching methods. Religious narratives, moral discussions, and community-oriented learning activities provide meaningful contexts for the internalization of values such as empathy, compassion, forgiveness, responsibility, and respect for others. The study concludes that religious education, when implemented in an inclusive and non-dogmatic manner, can function as an important educational resource for the development of socially responsible attitudes and emotionally balanced behavior. It contributes both to the understanding of religious traditions and to the cultivation of reflective thinking and interpersonal awareness.

The paper recommends integrating reflective practices, discussions of moral dilemmas, cooperative learning strategies, and community engagement activities into religious education curricula. It also emphasizes the importance of teacher training programs that promote dialogical communication, intercultural sensitivity, and value-based pedagogy.

The analysis suggests that educational environments characterized by openness, mutual respect, and structured reflection significantly enhance the effectiveness of religious education in supporting students' social and emotional development and in promoting constructive participation in pluralistic societies.

**Keywords:** Religious Education, Social-Emotional Competence, Moral Development, Value-Based Pedagogy, Emotional Regulation, Prosocial Behavior

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of rapid social transformation, increasing cultural diversity, and growing challenges to children's personal development, the formation of social-emotional competence has become a matter of particular significance. Contemporary educational discourse increasingly recognises that academic knowledge alone is insufficient to ensure successful self-realisation and meaningful participation in social life. What is required instead is comprehensive support for the individual—an approach that integrates cognitive development with the cultivation of self-regulation, empathy, moral orientation, responsibility, and constructive social interaction. Within this framework, social-emotional competence emerges as a core component of both personal development and the educational process.

Social-emotional competence encompasses the individual's ability to recognise and regulate one's own emotions, to understand and respond sensitively to the emotions of others, to establish positive interpersonal relationships, and to make responsible decisions. It is closely linked to the development of a coherent value system, moral sensitivity, and conflict resolution skills. Its formation begins in early childhood and continues throughout all stages of education, shaped by family influences, school environments, broader social contexts, and cultural traditions.

Within this developmental process, religious education occupies a distinct and multifaceted position. It extends beyond the transmission of knowledge about religious doctrines and traditions to include the cultivation of values, moral norms, and spiritual awareness. Religious education fosters an inner orientation toward goodness, compassion, forgiveness, respect for others, and responsibility toward the community. Through its symbolic

systems, narratives, rituals, and ethical teachings, it contributes to the establishment of a stable moral framework that supports the development of social-emotional capacities.

The relevance of this topic arises from the need to identify sustainable pedagogical approaches that meaningfully integrate value-based and emotional development into educational process. In the context of rising aggression, social alienation, and diminishing empathy among young people, education in spiritual and moral values becomes increasingly significant. When viewed through the lens of social-emotional competence, religious education offers a holistic framework that connects inner experience with outward behaviour and social responsibility.

Scholarly interest in the relationship between religiosity, moral development, and social-emotional skills has intensified in recent decades. Empirical research suggests that engagement in religious and spiritual practices is frequently associated with higher levels of prosocial behaviour, empathy, and self-regulation. At the same time, educational practice requires a careful and balanced approach that respects the pluralistic nature of contemporary society while affirming universal human values.

This article therefore seeks to provide a theoretical and pedagogical examination of the relationship between religious education and social-emotional competence. It proceeds from the premise that the spiritual and moral dimensions of education constitute a valuable resource for fostering emotional resilience, social responsibility, and constructive communication. Through analysis of key theoretical frameworks and pedagogical practices, the study aims to outline possibilities for integrating religious education into the process of developing social-emotional competence in contemporary educational settings.

In doing so, the topic contributes to the broader debate concerning the role of values and spirituality in education and underscores the necessity of a holistic, humanistically oriented approach to personal development.

## **2. CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

Social-emotional competence (SEC) has become a central construct in contemporary pedagogical and psychological theory, as it integrates emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of the individual. It is generally defined as the capacity to recognise and understand one's emotions, regulate them appropriately in context, demonstrate empathy, and establish stable, positive relationships. Current theoretical models emphasise that SEC does not represent a singular skill but rather a dynamic and interrelated system of competencies that operate across diverse social contexts.

The theoretical conceptualisation of social-emotional competence has developed largely within the framework of social-emotional learning (SEL), which organises the construct into several core domains: self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Although these domains are conceptually distinct, empirical evidence demonstrates strong interconnections among them. Longitudinal research indicates that reliable assessment of these components requires stable behavioural measures and evidence of measurement invariance over time, reinforcing the understanding of SEC as a developmental construct (Lee et al., 2023). The author emphasised that, social-emotional competence should be analysed both as a current level of functioning and as a developmental trajectory, that has significant implications for educational practice.

Recent theoretical work also emphasises the mediating role of social-emotional skills in interpersonal functioning. Structural modelling studies show that competencies such as emotional regulation and perspective-taking serve as mediators between individual traits and successful social adaptation. In particular, higher levels of emotional regulation and empathic perspective-taking are associated with reduced interpersonal conflict and greater relational satisfaction (Lin et al., 2024). These findings support the view that social-emotional competence performs an integrative function, coordinating internal emotional experiences with external social behaviour.

Another significant strand in the theoretical debate highlights the influence of contextual factors. Studies of school-based SEL interventions demonstrate statistically significant positive effects on social skills, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (Cipriano et al., 2024). These findings affirm an ecological perspective, according to which social-emotional competence develops within interconnected institutional and cultural systems. School climate, teacher–student relationships, and opportunities for collaborative learning are identified as key mediating variables in the development process.

Furthermore the theoretical models of social-emotional competence (SEC) are further enriched by the, empirical data from studies of evolving children with varying levels of risk, exploring family influences and executive functioning suggesting that parental support, levels of family conflict, and cognitive control significantly predict social-emotional outcomes (Boise et al., 2024). The authors argue that executive functions—such as inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility—facilitate emotional regulation and adaptive social behaviour, thereby linking SEC to underlying neurocognitive mechanisms of self-regulation.

In summary, the theoretical foundations of social-emotional competence may be organised into three interrelated dimensions: (1) a structural model of core components; (2) a developmental perspective conceptualising SEC as a dynamic process; and (3) an ecological approach that situates competence within family and school environments. Recent empirical findings consistently confirm that social-emotional competence is a key predictor of psychosocial adjustment and academic achievement, thereby justifying its central role in pedagogical theory and practice.

### **3. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Within the contemporary pedagogical landscape—particularly in the context of secular education—religious education is increasingly conceptualised as a process of spiritual and moral formation that integrates cognitive, axiological, and social dimensions of learning. It extends beyond the transmission of doctrinal knowledge and instead seeks to cultivate an internal value orientation, moral sensitivity, and dialogical competence in culturally pluralistic societies. In this sense, religious education assumes a distinctly humanistic character and aligns with broader frameworks of person-centered education.

Current scholarship underscores the role of religious education as a space for meaning-making and identity construction. Rather than functioning merely as an informational domain, it provides interpretative resources through which learners engage existential questions concerning purpose, responsibility, and belonging. Everington (2021) argues that, particularly within the European educational context, religious education should foster reflective engagement with religious traditions, enabling students to approach them as cultural and existential resources (Everington, 2021, p174). The author notes that the main goal of this process is the development of the capacity for critical understanding and respect.

Another important perspective is associated with the concept of religious literacy. Shaw (2022) argues that the aim of religious education is to develop students' competence in understanding religious symbols, narratives, and practices that influence social processes (Shaw, 2022, p. 98). This literacy is not merely informational; it also encompasses the ability to interpret and ethically evaluate social phenomena. In this way, religious education becomes an instrument for social orientation and civic responsibility.

Within interdisciplinary research, attention is also given to the relationship between religious education and moral development. Lucey and Laney (2020) note that religious narratives and practices can support the development of empathy, forgiveness, and prosocial behaviour when taught in a dialogical and reflective environment (Lucey & Laney, 2020, p. 312). They emphasise that moral education through religious content should promote autonomous moral reasoning rather than the mechanical reproduction of norms.

Contemporary pedagogical theory further considers religious education as a means of fostering social cohesion. Inglehart (2021) observes that, despite processes of secularisation, religious values continue to play a significant role in shaping moral attitudes and social engagement (Inglehart, 2021, p. 45). From an educational perspective, this suggests that religious education can contribute to the cultivation of values such as solidarity, respect, and responsibility toward the community.

On this basis, the objectives of religious education can be articulated across several key dimensions. First, the cognitive dimension – the development of religious literacy and an understanding of the cultural significance of religions. Second, the moral dimension – fostering moral reflection and internal ethical responsibility. Third, the social dimension – developing skills for dialogue and tolerance in a diverse environment. Fourth, the existential dimension – supporting the individual in the pursuit of meaning and identity.

Religious education in the contemporary educational context is characterised by its interpretative, dialogical, and value-oriented nature. It holds the potential to nurture an autonomous, morally responsible, and socially engaged individual, combining tradition with critical thinking and respect for pluralism.

### **4. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A FACTOR IN THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE**

The relationship between religious education and socio-emotional competence is grounded in a shared developmental and value-based logic. Both processes involve the cultivation of internal regulation, empathy, moral sensitivity, and the capacity for responsible social behaviour. Religious education can function as a specific pedagogical resource that supports the development of socio-emotional skills through value-laden content, symbolic narratives, and practices aimed at fostering compassion, forgiveness, and solidarity.

Contemporary empirical research indicates that religious and spiritual engagement among children and adolescents is positively associated with prosocial behaviour and emotional regulation. King and Boyatzis (2021) emphasise that religious socialisation, when conducted in a supportive environment, contributes to the formation of an internal value system and moral orientation, which in turn facilitate the development of social responsibility and empathy (King & Boyatzis, 2021, p. 1965). According to the authors, religious practices and narratives provide a context for

understanding emotions, particularly in situations of conflict, loss, or moral dilemmas. In this way, religious education supports processes of self-reflection and self-regulation—key components of socio-emotional competence.

Another important aspect is the role of religious education in fostering interpersonal skills and social cohesion. Everington (2021) notes that dialogically oriented religious education in the school setting promotes respect for diversity and develops skills for constructive communication (Everington, 2021, p. 178). She highlights the significance of discussion-based practices and interpretative approaches, which stimulate perspective-taking—the ability to understand another’s point of view. This process is closely linked to social awareness, regarded as a central element of socio-emotional competence. Religious education also contributes to the development of moral reflection, which is closely connected to responsible decision-making. Through the analysis of religious texts, ethical cases, and symbolic stories, students practice evaluating the consequences of their actions and selecting behaviour consistent with their internalised values. This process fosters internal regulation that extends beyond external control and becomes a personal resource.

From a pedagogical perspective, religious education can create an environment that nurtures empathy and compassion. Practices such as collaborative discussion of moral dilemmas, participation in charitable initiatives, or reflection on values such as mercy and justice support the development of a prosocial orientation. These practices offer opportunities to integrate cognitive understanding with emotional experience, a crucial mechanism in the formation of socio-emotional competence.

## 5. PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS AND PRACTICES

The pedagogical dimensions of religious education, considered as a factor in the development of socio-emotional competence, are grounded in the integration of value-based content and active instructional methods. Its effectiveness does not stem solely from the teaching of religious content, but from the way this content is experienced, discussed, and applied in concrete social situations. In this sense, religious education assumes the character of a student-centered and dialogical process.

A key pedagogical aspect is the creation of a safe and supportive educational environment. The teacher functions as a mediator, encouraging free expression of opinions, respect for diversity, and constructive dialogue. Through open discussions of moral dilemmas, students develop skills in argumentation, empathy, and perspective-taking. Exploring values such as mercy, forgiveness, justice, and solidarity fosters not only cognitive understanding but also emotional processing of social relationships. Among practical approaches, interactive methods are particularly significant. Role-playing and simulations allow students to assume different social roles and experience specific situations involving conflict, choice, or collaboration. This creates a space for practicing self-regulation and emotional control within a protected environment. Case-based methods further contribute to the development of moral reflection by promoting analysis of the consequences of different decisions.

Reflective practices occupy a central place in the pedagogical process. Keeping journals, writing reflections on value-related topics, or engaging in shared group reflection allows students to process their experiences and emotions. This supports the development of self-awareness, a critical component of socio-emotional competence. By recognising their internal reactions, students gradually acquire skills in self-regulation and personal responsibility.

Another essential pedagogical element is linking religious content to real-world social practices. Participation in volunteer initiatives, charitable campaigns, or projects supporting vulnerable groups translates values into concrete action. This facilitates the transition from theoretical knowledge to socially engaged behaviour, fostering prosocial attitudes and a sense of belonging to the community.

The intercultural approach is also a crucial aspect. In diverse educational settings, religious education should promote respect for different traditions and worldviews. Through comparative analysis of religious symbols, festivals, and ethical principles, students develop tolerance and dialogue skills. This contributes to social awareness and helps reduce stereotypes and prejudices. The teacher’s role in this process is both informational and formative. Personal example, communication style, and interactions with students have a strong influence on the formation of value-based attitudes. Educators should model empathy, respect, and fairness, thereby demonstrating desired social behaviour. As Shivacheva-Pineda (2020, p. 963) notes: *“Avoiding the consequences of one’s actions does not contribute to the formation of meaningful social values, moral qualities, and responsibility. Projected over time, children raised under such conditions may encounter difficulties in socialisation, affecting not only the individual but also the family (including the parents themselves) and society. From this perspective, such overprotection contradicts a profound understanding of love and care for children.”*

Pedagogical aspects and practices in religious education are characterised by dialogical engagement, reflection, and experiential orientation. Shivacheva-Pineda (2023, p. 35) observes that *“Contemporary social and educational*

*realities, with their inherent assumptions, contradictions, challenges, and problems, are the focus of attention for educational authorities and the pedagogical community, including the scientific community. In many respects, solutions are sought and proposed to address current conditions with the aim of improving educational effectiveness and fulfilling its social function.*” Through interactive methods, social initiatives, and a supportive environment, conditions are created for the development of empathy, self-regulation, and responsible behaviour. In this way, religious education becomes an effective instrument for cultivating socio-emotional competence in contemporary educational practice.

The pedagogical effectiveness of religious education as a factor in social-emotional development depends not solely on curricular content but on the methodological and relational context in which it is implemented. Its formative potential lies in the integration of value-based instruction with participatory and reflective educational practices. Consequently, religious education ent, and constructive dialogue. Through structured discussions of moral dilemmas, students develop argumentation skills, empathy, and perspective-taking. Exploration of values such as compassion, forgiveness, justice, and solidarity deepens both cognitive comprehension and emotional internalisation of ethical principles.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the relationship between religious education and the formation of social-emotional competence within contemporary educational settings. The analysis demonstrates that religious education, when implemented through dialogical, reflective, and person-centred pedagogical approaches, may serve as a significant resource for cultivating emotional regulation, empathy, moral reasoning, and socially responsible behaviour. It transcends the mere transmission of religious knowledge and emerges as a comprehensive formative process oriented toward the spiritual and ethical development of the individual.

The discussion highlights that social-emotional competence is not developed exclusively through targeted skills-training programs but also through value-enriched educational environments in which students critically reflect upon the meaning of their actions and relationships. Religious narratives, ethical deliberation, and reflective practices provide a structured space for internal engagement with emotions, moral dilemmas, and questions of responsibility. In this way, religious education supports the development of self-regulation grounded not in external control but in internalised values.

A key conclusion is that the effectiveness of religious education as a factor in socio-emotional development depends on the way it is pedagogically implemented. When classrooms foster an atmosphere of respect, openness, and safety, students are able to freely express their beliefs and learn to accept diversity. Through discussions, group work, and collaborative problem-solving, students develop skills in perspective-taking, constructive communication, and responsible decision-making. These competencies form the foundation for social adaptation and civic engagement.

The practical dimension of religious education is also significant. Participation in initiatives aimed at helping others or engaging in community activities allows students to translate values into concrete action. This transition from theory to practice strengthens intrinsic motivation for prosocial behaviour and reinforces the connection between moral principles and everyday conduct. In this way, religious education supports the development of sustainable social sensitivity.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that the positive potential of religious education is most fully realised in contexts of pluralism and respect for human rights. Its role is not to impose a particular worldview, but to create a space for dialogue, reflection, and value-based understanding. When implemented in this manner, religious education contributes to the formation of autonomous, morally responsible, and socially engaged individuals.

In summary, religious education holds considerable potential as a factor in fostering socio-emotional competence. By integrating moral reflection, emotional awareness, and social engagement, it contributes to the development of empathy, self-regulation, and responsibility. Within the framework of contemporary education, which emphasises holistic personal development, religious education can serve as a valuable component of strategies aimed at cultivating balanced, resilient, and socially active citizens.

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