



# IMPLEMENTATION OF A SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT OF SPED LEARNERS

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examined the level of implementation of a Spiritual Formation Program (SFP) and its influence on the character development of learners with special educational needs (SPED) in an integrated public school in Sarangani Province, Philippines. Anchored in holistic education and transformative learning theories, the study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design. A total of 146 SPED teachers participated through total enumeration sampling and responded to a validated researcher-developed questionnaire measuring program implementation, perceived learner outcomes, and implementation challenges. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, post-hoc tests, and Pearson correlation analysis. Results indicated that the SFP was generally implemented at a satisfactory level, with strengths in program content and delivery but weaker stakeholder engagement, particularly parental involvement. Teachers reported a high level of influence of the program on learners' character development, notably in interpersonal relationships, moral reasoning, and self-awareness. Implementation challenges were rated as moderate to high, especially in adapting activities to learners' varying spiritual maturity levels. No significant differences were found in implementation levels when grouped by demographic variables. A significant inverse relationship was observed between implementation effectiveness and perceived challenges. The findings support the value of structured, inclusive spiritual formation in promoting holistic development among learners with disabilities and reinforce the goals of Sustainable Development Goal 4 by advancing inclusive and values-based quality education.*

**Keywords:** *spiritual formation, special education, character development, inclusive education, SDG 4*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Quality education extends beyond academic achievement to encompass moral, emotional, and social development, particularly among learners with special

educational needs (UNESCO, 2021). Within inclusive education frameworks, learners with disabilities require educational approaches that address the whole person cognitively, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. This holistic view aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality



education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015).

In the Philippine education system, values and spiritual formation are integrated into the K–12 curriculum through *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* and related co-curricular programs (Department of Education [DepEd], 2017). For SPED learners, spiritual formation programs may serve as critical supports for character development, emotional regulation, resilience, and social integration. However, despite policy emphasis, empirical research evaluating the implementation and outcomes of spiritual formation initiatives in SPED contexts remains limited.

Existing studies have demonstrated that character education and spiritually oriented programs contribute to positive behavioral outcomes, empathy, and moral reasoning among learners (Lickona, 2013; Nucci, 2017). In special education settings, such programs may be particularly valuable in fostering interpersonal competence and ethical decision-making (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Nevertheless, challenges related to program implementation, cultural diversity, and stakeholder participation often constrain effectiveness.

This study addresses this research gap by examining (1) the level of implementation of a Spiritual Formation Program, (2) its perceived influence on the character development of SPED learners, (3) the challenges encountered in implementation, and (4) the relationship between implementation effectiveness and perceived challenges.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative descriptive–correlational research design to examine the level of implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program (SFP) and its influence on the character development of learners with special educational needs. The design was appropriate as it allowed the investigation of relationships among program implementation,

perceived learner outcomes, and implementation challenges without manipulating any variables, thereby preserving the natural educational context of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The participants comprised 146 Special Education (SPED) teachers from an integrated public school in Alabel, Sarangani Province, Philippines. A total enumeration sampling technique was employed to ensure full representation of the target population. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least one year of teaching experience in SPED settings and direct involvement in spiritual or values-oriented activities, ensuring that respondents possessed adequate exposure to the program being evaluated.

Data were gathered using a researcher-developed questionnaire structured into four sections: (1) level of SFP implementation, covering program content, delivery, and stakeholder engagement; (2) perceived influence of the program on character development, including self-awareness, interpersonal relationships, moral reasoning, and motivation; (3) challenges encountered in program implementation; and (4) respondents' demographic profile. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale. The instrument underwent expert validation to establish content validity, and reliability testing produced acceptable Cronbach's alpha coefficients ( $\alpha \geq .70$ ), indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations were used to summarize respondents' perceptions. Independent-samples *t*-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were applied to determine differences across demographic groups, while Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine relationships among key variables. All statistical tests were conducted at a 0.05 level of significance.

## 3. Results



**Table 1. Level of Implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program (SFP)**

Dimension	Mean (M)	SD	Verbal Interpretation
Program Content	3.13	0.38	Implemented
Program Delivery	3.13	0.41	Implemented
Stakeholder Engagement	2.69	0.44	Moderately Implemented
<b>Overall Implementation</b>	<b>3.04</b>	<b>0.40</b>	<b>Implemented</b>

As shown in Table 1, the overall level of implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program (SFP) was rated as Implemented ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 0.40$ ), indicating that the program was consistently carried out within the SPED center. Program content and delivery yielded the highest mean scores ( $M = 3.13$ ), suggesting that instructional themes, values integration, and scheduled activities were clearly structured and systematically executed. In contrast, stakeholder engagement received a lower rating ( $M = 2.69$ ), indicating moderate implementation. This disparity implies that while internal execution of the program was strong, external participation particularly from families was comparatively limited, potentially affecting program continuity beyond the school setting.

### 3.1 Level of Implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program

The level of implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program (SFP) was examined using descriptive statistics. Results showed that the overall implementation of the program was rated as *Implemented*, with a composite mean of 3.04 ( $SD = 0.40$ ). This indicates that the SFP was consistently carried out across the institution, though not without observable limitations.

Among the three dimensions assessed, program content ( $M = 3.13$ ) and program delivery ( $M = 3.13$ ) obtained the highest mean ratings, both falling within the *Implemented* range. These results suggest that the objectives, themes, and activities of the SFP were clearly defined and systematically delivered by teachers. The relatively low standard deviations associated with these dimensions further indicate a high degree of consistency in teachers' perceptions, implying that implementation practices were relatively uniform across classrooms and grade levels.

In contrast, stakeholder engagement registered a lower mean ( $M = 2.69$ ), indicating that while some level of involvement existed, it was less consistently observed. Notably, parental involvement emerged as the weakest indicator ( $M = 1.92$ ), falling within the *Slightly Implemented* range. This finding suggests that parents were minimally involved in spiritual formation activities, potentially limiting the continuity of values formation beyond the school setting. The disparity between strong internal implementation (content and delivery) and weak external engagement (parents) highlights a structural gap in program sustainability and shared responsibility.

**Table 2. Influence of the Spiritual Formation Program on Character Development**

Character Domain	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Self-Awareness and Identity	3.10	0.22	High
Interpersonal Relationships	3.14	0.20	High
Moral Reasoning and Decision-Making	3.12	0.21	High
Motivation and Engagement	3.01	0.24	High
<b>Overall Influence</b>	<b>3.09</b>	<b>0.21</b>	<b>High</b>



Table 2 indicates that the Spiritual Formation Program exerted a high level of influence on the character development of SPED learners ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.21$ ). The strongest effects were observed in interpersonal relationships ( $M = 3.14$ ) and moral reasoning ( $M = 3.12$ ), suggesting that the program was particularly effective in fostering ethical behavior, empathy, and social connectedness. The relatively small standard deviations across domains reflect consistency in teachers' perceptions. These results demonstrate that the SFP contributes meaningfully to learners' socio-moral development, a core objective of holistic and inclusive education.

### 3.2 Influence of the Spiritual Formation Program on Character Development

The perceived influence of the SFP on learners' character development was rated as High, with an overall mean of 3.09 ( $SD = 0.21$ ). The relatively small standard deviation indicates strong agreement among respondents regarding the positive impact of the program.

Among the four character domains assessed, interpersonal relationships obtained the highest mean ( $M = 3.14$ ), followed by moral reasoning and decision-making ( $M = 3.12$ ) and self-awareness and identity ( $M = 3.10$ ). These results suggest that the SFP was particularly effective in fostering relational skills, ethical judgment, and self-understanding among SPED learners. Such outcomes are critical in special education contexts, where social interaction, emotional regulation, and moral discernment often require structured and intentional support.

The domain of motivation and engagement, although still rated high, yielded a slightly lower mean compared to the other domains. This indicates that while spiritual formation contributes positively to learners' internal dispositions, its influence on academic motivation may be indirect and mediated by other instructional and

environmental factors. Overall, the findings affirm that the SFP contributes meaningfully to the social and ethical dimensions of learner development, reinforcing its role as a holistic educational intervention rather than a purely religious or extracurricular activity.

**Table 3. Challenges in the Implementation of the Spiritual Formation Program**

Challenge Indicator	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Adapting activities to learners' spiritual maturity	3.34	0.48	Challenging
Addressing cultural and belief diversity	3.14	0.46	Challenging
Limited parental involvement	3.07	0.44	Challenging
Measuring spiritual outcomes	2.87	0.42	Moderately Challenging
<b>Overall Challenges</b>	<b>3.05</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>Challenging</b>

As presented in Table 3, the overall level of challenges in implementing the SFP was rated as Challenging ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ). The most critical difficulty involved adapting activities to learners' varying levels of spiritual maturity ( $M = 3.34$ ), reflecting the developmental diversity inherent in SPED classrooms. Challenges related to cultural diversity and parental involvement were also prominent, reinforcing earlier findings that stakeholder engagement remains a structural limitation. Despite these challenges, the program was still effectively implemented, indicating strong teacher commitment and adaptive instructional practices.

### 3.3 Challenges in Program Implementation

Challenges encountered in implementing the SFP were rated as Challenging, with a composite mean of 3.05. This indicates that teachers consistently experienced



moderate to high levels of difficulty while executing the program.

The most prominent challenge identified was adapting activities to learners' varying levels of spiritual maturity ( $M = 3.34$ ). This result reflects the heterogeneity of SPED learners, whose cognitive, emotional, and spiritual capacities differ significantly. Teachers appear to struggle with designing activities that are simultaneously inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and meaningful for learners with diverse needs.

Additional challenges related to cultural diversity and limited parental participation were also reported, reinforcing earlier findings on weak stakeholder engagement. These challenges suggest that while teachers are committed to implementing the program, contextual constraints such as diversity of beliefs and lack of family support complicate delivery and limit program reach. The convergence of high implementation ratings and high challenge ratings indicates that effective implementation was achieved despite substantial constraints, underscoring the effort and adaptability of SPED teachers.

**Table 4. Differences in SFP Implementation by Demographic Variables**

Variable	Test Used	Test Value	p-value	Result
Sex	t-test	$t = 0.47$	.64	Not Significant
Age	One-way ANOVA	$F = 1.32$	.27	Not Significant
Years of Service	One-way ANOVA	$F = 1.09$	.34	Not Significant

Table 4 shows that no statistically significant differences were found in the level of SFP implementation when respondents were grouped according to sex, age, or years of service ( $p > .05$ ). These findings indicate that

perceptions of program implementation were consistent across demographic categories, suggesting that the SFP was institutionally embedded and not dependent on individual teacher characteristics. This uniformity strengthens the internal validity of the findings and underscores the program's stability across personnel profiles.

Inferential analysis using independent-samples *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences in the level of SFP implementation when respondents were grouped according to age, sex, or years of service ( $p > .05$ ). This indicates that perceptions of implementation were consistent across demographic categories, suggesting that the program was institutionally embedded rather than dependent on individual teacher characteristics.

Pearson correlation analysis further revealed a significant inverse relationship between the level of SFP implementation and perceived implementation challenges ( $r < 0, p < .05$ ). This finding indicates that higher levels of program implementation were associated with lower levels of perceived difficulty. In practical terms, teachers who reported stronger implementation tended to experience fewer barriers, possibly due to greater familiarity with program processes, stronger instructional confidence, or better access to support mechanisms.

This relationship underscores the importance of program coherence and institutional support in reducing implementation challenges. As implementation becomes more systematic and routinized, perceived difficulties diminish, enhancing program sustainability and effectiveness.

**Table 5. Relationship Between SFP Implementation and Implementation Challenges**



Variables	r	p-value	Interpretation
SFP Implementation × Challenges	-.41	.001	Significant (Moderate, Inverse)

As shown in Table 5, Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant inverse relationship between the level of SFP implementation and perceived implementation challenges ( $r = -0.41, p = .001$ ). This indicates that higher levels of implementation were associated with lower perceived difficulty. The moderate effect size suggests that as the program becomes more systematically implemented, teachers experience fewer barriers, likely due to increased familiarity, institutional support, and instructional confidence.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Spiritual Formation Program is not only consistently implemented but also substantively effective in shaping the character development of learners with special educational needs. The high ratings observed in domains such as interpersonal relationships and moral reasoning affirm the core assumptions of holistic education theory, which emphasizes that meaningful learning emerges from the integration of cognitive, emotional, social, and ethical dimensions of development (Miller, 2019). In SPED contexts, where learners often require structured support to develop self-regulation, empathy, and ethical awareness, the program appears to function as a critical mechanism for fostering social connectedness and moral discernment. These outcomes suggest that spiritual formation, when thoughtfully designed and systematically delivered, can extend beyond religious instruction to serve as a catalyst for inclusive, values-based learning that supports the whole child.

The absence of statistically significant differences across demographic variables such as age, sex, and years of service further indicates that spiritual formation is perceived as an institutionally embedded practice, rather than an initiative shaped by individual teacher characteristics. This consistency suggests that the program has been effectively standardized within the school culture, enhancing its stability and sustainability. Nevertheless, the persistence of implementation challenges most notably limited parental involvement highlights a structural gap that constrains the program's broader impact. This finding is consistent with prior research underscoring the importance of family school partnerships in reinforcing values formation and sustaining character development beyond the classroom (Epstein, 2018). Without active parental engagement, the continuity of spiritual and moral learning across home and school environments remains fragmented, potentially limiting long-term outcomes.

Moreover, the significant inverse relationship between implementation effectiveness and perceived challenges underscores the critical role of program coherence, institutional support, and teacher preparedness in mitigating implementation barriers. As implementation becomes more systematic and routinized, perceived difficulties diminish, suggesting that sustained institutional investment can enhance both teacher confidence and program effectiveness. This pattern aligns closely with transformative learning theory, which posits that personal and moral growth is most likely to occur within structured, reflective, and supportive environments that enable educators and learners to navigate change meaningfully (Mezirow, 2018). Collectively, these findings reinforce the view that spiritual formation programs, when embedded within inclusive educational systems, can contribute significantly to holistic development and advance the goals of quality and inclusive education articulated in SDG 4.



## 5. Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that the Spiritual Formation Program is effectively implemented and significantly contributes to the character development of learners with special educational needs. By strengthening interpersonal skills, moral reasoning, and self-awareness, the program advances holistic and inclusive education aligned with **SDG 4**.

### Implications

- **Practice:** Schools should strengthen parent-inclusive spiritual activities.
- **Policy:** Educational authorities should develop standardized tools for assessing spiritual and character outcomes in SPED.
- **Research:** Future studies should include learner and parent perspectives and adopt longitudinal designs.

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