

Students' perspectives on the implementation of the religious culture and moral knowledge course vision

Safiye Akşit & İshak Tekin

Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Institute of Social Sciences, Eskişehir/Türkiye, safiyeomur@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2546-8227>, <https://ror.org/01dzjez04>.

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Eskişehir Osmangazi University, Faculty of Theology, Eskişehir/Türkiye, ishaktekin05@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3850-5691>, <https://ror.org/01dzjez04>.

Abstract: This study investigates high school students' insights into the realization of the 2018 Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) course vision in Türkiye. The research aims to evaluate whether the RCMK course has achieved its intended goals from the perspective of students, focusing on cognitive, emotional, national, spiritual, and moral development as well as respect for diversity. A qualitative single-case study design was employed, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty 12th-grade students from seven high schools in Eskişehir, including Social Sciences, Science, and Anatolian High Schools. Findings indicate that students perceive the RCMK course as contributing significantly to understanding the role of religion in giving meaning to life, strengthening national and spiritual values, and fostering moral attitudes, particularly within family and close social environments. Moreover, the course is seen as promoting tolerance and respect for differences. Overall, student views demonstrate consistency with the aims of the RCMK course vision. These results provide valuable insights for policymakers and educators, highlighting the importance of aligning curriculum content and teaching methods with both the broader goals of values education and the evolving needs of students.

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Introduction

Religious education in Türkiye aims to encourage individuals to understand the religious perspectives of the society they live in, to recognize the cultural elements shaped by religion, and to live harmoniously and peacefully within society. With this education, the reasons behind various beliefs and practices can be learned, and conflicts and unrest within society can be prevented (Önder, 2008; Yazıbaşı, 2020). This educational process takes a particular significance during the period of adolescence, marked by a search for meaning and security. Religious education in this period, offers young people a worldview, a safe haven, stability, and guidance for their behavior (Kaleci & Solmaz, 2019). The adolescence which includes high school period, is also called the 'age of religious awakening and development' (Gündüz, 2020). Adolescent, who experiences rapid and frequent changes in their physical and emotional states (Gürkaynak, 1987), may turn to the essence of faith during this period, but the inability to cope with sexual and aggressive impulses can also lead to a turn away from religion. Adolescence manifests itself as a period in which religious hesitations and doubts are experienced intensely (Gündüz, 2017). In this period, adolescents seek acceptance and also look for a role model whom they can identify with (Kulaksızoğlu, 1992). With the increasing importance placed on friends, and broadening in their social environment, adolescents' exposure to different ideas and beliefs may also lead

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to hesitations about their beliefs. As adolescents develop mentally (Gündüz, 2017), they also begin to understand the importance of moral principles more fully. (Köylü, 2010). At the same time, in the globalizing world, society's changing values affect young people the most (Akyüz, 2014). The RCMK course is a guiding element for a young person searching for meaning (Karaca, 2016). The spiritual and emotional turmoil experienced by the adolescent subsides in the 20s, as religious beliefs and values become more stable during high school (Hökelekli, 2002). The reason for choosing 12th grades of secondary education in this study is, that the beliefs and values of the young person which becomes evident in adolescence, shapes the rest of his/her life. For the same reason, RCMK course in high school was considered important in shaping young people's attitudes toward values and belief systems and the realization status of the curriculum vision was investigated.

The curriculum emphasizes the importance of developmental stages, and adolescence is considered a critical period for identity formation. RCMK course, taught in primary and secondary schools, is also structured around these sensitivities (MEB, 2018). The curriculum particularly emphasizes the existential dimension of religion (Ulu, 2018) and its strong influence on both tangible and intangible cultural elements such as tradition, custom, literature, art and architecture. The RCMK course also serves as a vehicle for cultural transmission (Bilgin, 1988) and encourages national unity, social harmony, and the adoption of shared values. The main objectives of the course are to instill moral values in adolescence, to prepare individuals for both religious responsibilities and to live together with others, and to encourage understanding and tolerance towards differences (Önder, 2013). For an environment of individual and social trust and well-being, it is important that religion be conveyed to students accurately and effectively by qualified educators through the Religious Knowledge and Moral Knowledge course (Acar, 2018).

In order to improve the quality of education in RCMK curriculum various approaches have been taken as a guide from past to present. The curriculum was considered as catechism-centered until 2000. It was revised with the amendments made in the same year, bringing a Quran-centered perspective to Islam (Yürük, 2010) and a scientific perspective to world religions for the curriculum (Kaymakcan, 2006; Zengin 2010).

The 2018 curriculum, which forms the basis of this study, was developed with the principles of multiple intelligences and student- and skill-based learning, that supports the constructivist approach. This curriculum also presents Islam on the bases of the Quran and Sunnah. It evaluates different interpretations of Islam from a scientific and supra-sectarian perspective. A cross-religious, scientific, and factual approach is adopted in teaching other religions (MEB, 2018). The program vision emphasizes the importance of helping students making sense of life, embracing national, spiritual, and moral core values, and developing the capacity to live with diversity. With a structured and comprehensive approach, the RCMK curriculum enables high school students to explore the importance of religion in life, internalize both universal and national values, and develop ethical sensitivities. Through its content, the curriculum supports the vision of developing individuals who are respectful of diversity and able to live with differences. The curriculum also supports developing value-oriented individuals, who are aware of their social responsibilities and fulfill them.

The 2018 RCMK curriculum for grades 9-12 in secondary education systematically interweaves learning outcomes that foster reasoning through religion, embracing national, moral, and spiritual values, as well as the capacity to coexist with diversity. The curriculum is designed from a supra-sectarian and multi-faith perspective, and aims to cultivate morally responsible, culturally aware, and socially well-adjusted individuals who embrace diversity as a source of social enrichment. Each core theme is reinforced in specific grades and units, ensuring that students encounter these core values throughout their high school education. The core themes and related units in the grades 9-12 curriculum are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Classes and Units by Themes in the 2018 Curriculum*

Core Theme	Grade	Unit
Religion in Making sense of Life	9	Religion and Islam (Unit 2)
	10	The God (Allah)-Human Relationship (Unit 1)
	11	The World and the Hereafter (Unit 1)
National Values	9	Religion and Islam (Unit 2)
	11	Issues Related to Faith (Unit 4)
	12	Islam in Anatolia (Unit 2)
Spiritual Values	9	Youth and Values (Unit 4)
	11	The World and the Hereafter (Unit 1)
	12	Islam in Anatolia (Unit 2)
Moral Values	9	Knowledge and Faith (Unit 1)
	9	Islam and Worship (Unit 3)
	9	Youth and Values (Unit 4)
	10	The Prophet Muhammad and Youth (Unit 2)
	10	Religion and Life (Unit 3)
	10	Moral Attitudes and Behaviors (Unit 4)
	11	The Prophet Muhammad According to the Qur'an (Unit 2)
	12	Contemporary Religious Issues (Unit 4)
Coexistence with Diversity	11	Judaism and Christianity (Unit 5)
	12	Doctrinal, Political, and Jurisprudential Interpretations in Islamic Thought (Unit 3)
	12	Indian and Chinese Religions (Unit 5)

This study attempts to understand the status of achievement of the RCMK course's vision goals based on student opinions. The RCMK vision aims to cultivate individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, embrace national, spiritual, and moral values, and possess the ability to coexist with diversity. Based on the findings, it is aimed to understand the status of the RCMK course vision's achievement. This study allows us to assess the vision's alignment with educational objectives, and understand its impact on students' conceptual worlds. In fact, in line with the Turkish National Education, the conceptual foundations and relations of religious and moral knowledge are planned to be established (MEB, 2018). This study will also help determine how RCMK concepts find meaning in students' minds, and how they are related to each other. During the 18th National Education Council, the concepts of national, universal, and shared values were highlighted, and the need for values education was particularly emphasized. The council recommended that the values held by children and young people to be periodically reviewed. In addition, the importance of the RCMK for values education was mentioned, and efforts to improve the effectiveness of the course were emphasized (MEB, Board of Education and Discipline, 2010). This study, evaluates the RCMK course in terms of young people's value judgments and the ability to live with diversity. The findings will allow for the long-term outcomes of the curriculum to be assessed. The study clarifies how curriculum objectives are reflected in students' personal and educational experiences. It will also provide educators with insights into increasing students' motivation to learn the course. Evaluating the curriculum's vision through student experiences provides critical insight into both pedagogical objectives and the goal of living together and harmoniously with diversity in the society. In these respects, the study offers policymakers and educators concrete insights into the applicability and effectiveness of the RCMK curriculum.

The study's subproblems focus on the main lines of the curriculum's vision. These subproblems are:

- How is the vision of the RCMK course reflected in high school students' understanding and interpretation of life?
- How is the RCMK vision reflected in students' adoption of national, spiritual, and moral values?
- How is the RCMK vision reflected in students' attitudes toward living together with diversity?

1. Research Method

1.1. Model

A qualitative single case research method was used in the study. As Kuş and Merriam argue, the philosophical basis of qualitative research is based on the interpretive approach, which seeks to understand meaning rather than to arrive at definitive knowledge. This approach aims to grasp diverse interpretations and perceptions (Kuş, 2012; Merriam, 2013). According to Yin and Merriam, the case study method is frequently used in educational sciences, and serves as a guide for implementing changes in the field (Merriam, 1991; Yin, 2003). As a method for seeking meaning, this approach is useful for understanding phenomena in everyday life and is also considered appropriate for investigating temporary and complex phenomena (Yin, 2003). The factors explained above were effective in choosing the qualitative case research method for this study, which aims to understand the realization status of the vision goals of the RCMK 9-12th grade curriculum from the students' perspective. In accordance with the qualitative case study method, the participants' opinions were limited to 12th-grade students using purposive criterion sampling. The reason why high school seniors were chosen for the study was that they had experience with RCMK courses from previous years. According to Merriam, such studies that include all participants under a single topic are considered single case studies (Merriam, 2013). As noted by Seggie and Bayyurt, interview is a frequently used method in case studies (Seggie & Bayyurt, 2017). This method was chosen for the current study because interviews effectively reflect participants' experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Additionally, a semi-structured interview technique was used to flexibly access and understand the participants' inner worlds (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Interview data was recorded using a voice recorder and later transcribed. Merriam notes that audio recordings preserve interview details and that transcribing audio or video recordings is considered essential for data analysis (Merriam, 2013). At the same time, the necessary criteria for validity, reliability, and generalizability of the study were considered. The literature review was conducted to develop the study's theoretical framework. According to Merriam and Yin, the documents used within the theoretical framework are considered data sources in terms of validity, reliability, and generalizability (Merriam, 1991; Yin, 2003). In addition, receiving feedback from subject matter experts from research design to data analysis and writing of results is seen as a way to increase validity (Merriam, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Accordingly, the study was conducted under the supervision and approval of consultants and experts.

1.2. Implementation

Preparing interview questions for the study is a meticulous process. To ensure the study's validity criteria, the researchers first conducted a literature review on the topic, then developed draft interview questions and obtained expert opinions on the questions. According to Yıldırım and Şimşek, the opinions of expert academics should also be sought to gain insight into the accuracy of the questions prepared for the pilot interview (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). A pilot interview process was then initiated to confirm the appropriateness of the interview questions. After the questions were clarified through the pilot study, data collection was conducted with an emphasis on validity criteria. Interviews were conducted with participants from seven different high schools in Eskişehir: Anatolian, Science, and Social Sciences High Schools, ensuring student diversity. The sample consisted of 17 female and 13 male participants. Of the 30 interviews, 24 were conducted face-to-face in convenient settings such as empty classrooms, meeting rooms, or activity rooms at

the students' own schools. The remaining six interviews were conducted online via a web application (Zoom) in quiet environments and at convenient times for the participants.

1.3. Analysis

In qualitative research where the theoretical or conceptual structure of the study is clearly outlined, descriptive analysis can be used to analyze the findings. In this type of analysis, data is organized and interpreted according to predetermined themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In the analysis of the current study, descriptive analysis was preferred because subproblems were clearly defined within a theoretical framework, and explained under subheadings. This creates themes and provides guidance for the research questions and answers. For analysis, the findings obtained from student opinions were categorized and coded under relevant themes and presented in tables.

2. Findings

The findings, which aim to examine and understand the realization status of the RCMK course vision according to student views, are presented below, based on predetermined categories and themes used in the data analysis. The findings are limited to responses from 12th-grade high school students to questions prepared considering the content of the RCMK vision and the course outcomes.

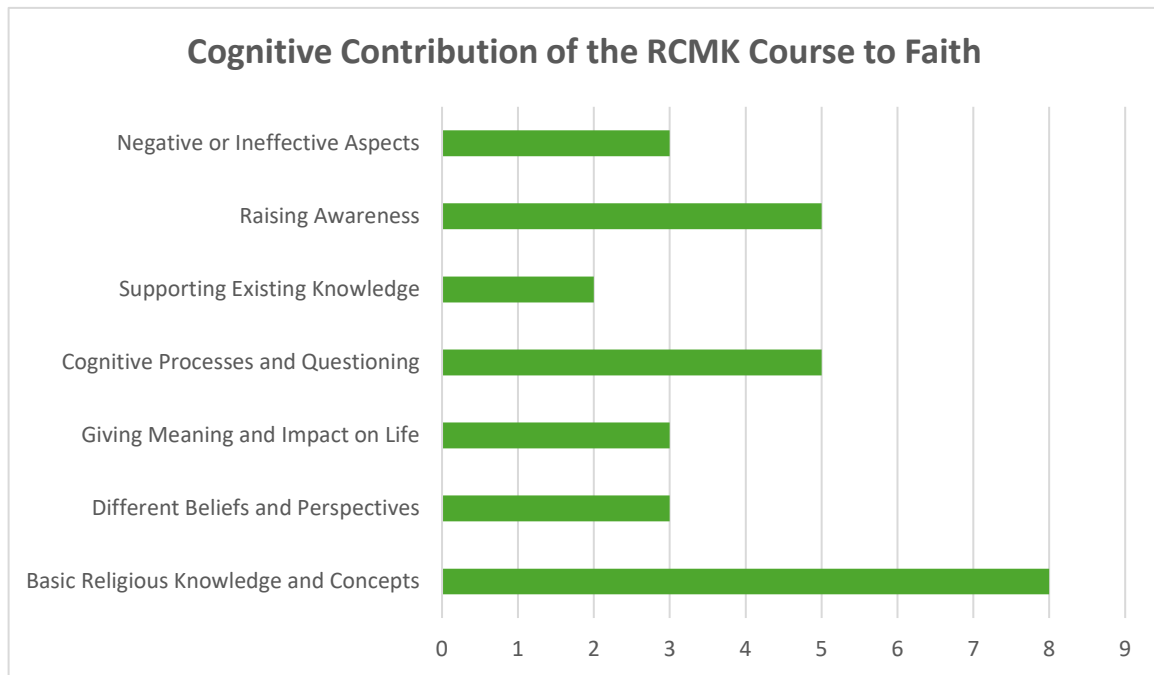
2.1. Meaning in Life

One of the research questions arising from the RCMK curriculum's vision concerns whether and how students recognize the role of religion in providing meaning to life. Student responses emphasized both the cognitive dimension of faith, related to its epistemic aspects, and the emotional dimension, related to its emotional resonance. Accordingly, to understand the role of the RCMK course in providing meaning to life from the students' perspective, their responses regarding how this vision is reflected in their faith are shared below, organized under the categories of cognitive and emotional contributions, and supported by participant statements. In this context, the theme of meaning in life, according to student responses, is particularly limited to the framework of faith.

2.1.1. Cognitive Contribution to Faith

In line with RCMK's vision of raising individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, two questions were posed to participants. Findings indicated that the course contributed cognitively by providing information about faith and addressing students' questions and inquiries on the subject. Participants' opinions regarding the cognitive dimension of faith in the RCMK course are categorized in Chart 1, along with the participant numbers.

Graph 1. *Cognitive Contribution of the RCMK Course to Faith*



Some examples of participant opinions given in graph 1 are as follows:

Negative or Ineffective Aspects; P.19: “Actually, this happens as my own consciousness settles, that is, as I get older... as I grow older, and that consciousness settles, life becomes more conscious accordingly... So, frankly, I don't think religion class has any impact on this...”

Raising Awareness; P.3: “It makes me question more, meaning the more I think about it positively, the more it helps me interpret and gather information.”

Supporting Existing Knowledge; P.6: “For example, we are all students in a class. Not everyone comes from the same environment, not everyone grows up in the same religious families. So, someone who is not religious learns that information in school, and I, as a knowledgeable person, learn it. It provides this for all of us.”

Cognitive Processes and Questioning; P.10: “...I actually think about it a little because after what they say, you think about it for a while, and then after thinking, you question whether it was like this, whether it was like that.”

Giving Meaning and Impact on Life; P.15: “I think about it because every time I take a religion class, I learn something new, and it changes my perspective on life, the universe, my religion... in many ways, and it makes me think more. The more I think about it, the more I try to find out what it is...”

Different Beliefs and Perspectives; P.5: “After learning about this concept in the Religious Culture class, I think I'm more comfortable expressing myself and explaining myself to myself... The knowledge I've acquired has also given me guidelines on how to live my life.”

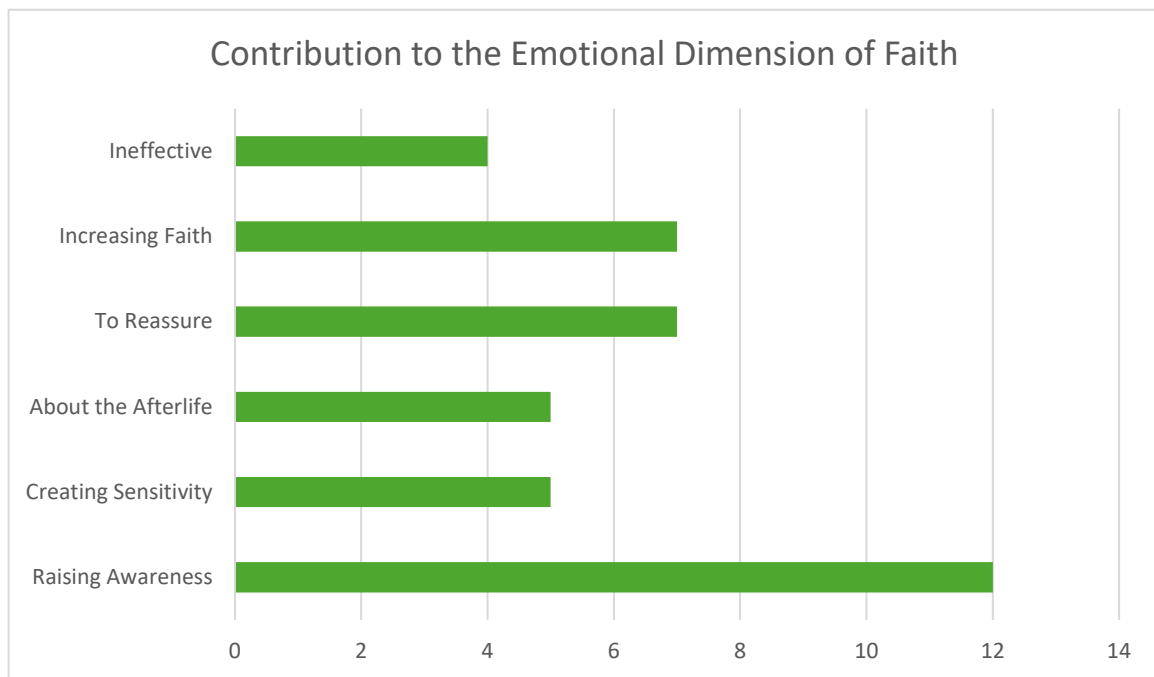
Basic Religious Knowledge and Concepts; P.25: “...ultimately, this class helps us answer these existential questions in our minds, such as where we came from and who we are. In that respect, I can say that it has positively contributed to my understanding.”

Beyond this informative role, the course also fosters critical cognitive processes such as inquiry and existential exploration, supporting students as they consider issues of faith, conviction, and the meaning of life and death. Specifically, this cognitive engagement is closely linked to the course's success in helping some students address complex questions about other religious beliefs or practices. While the RCMK course is primarily valuable for this informative and cognitive dimension, it also boasts additional benefits, such as increased religious awareness and the ability to connect religious knowledge to daily life. However, a subset of students expressed concerns about the course's limited impact, perceived superficiality, and inadequate depth, suggesting room for curriculum improvement. Overall, the alignment between the RCMK curriculum's vision and implementation is most evident in the cognitive domain; it has been particularly effective in providing high school students with the conceptual foundations necessary to make sense of life through a religious lens.

2.1.2. The Emotional Dimension of Faith

The second dimension predicted by the findings concerns the contribution of the RCMK course vision to the emotional aspect of faith, as revealed by students' responses to questions exploring the role of the course in giving meaning to life. The findings indicate that the course raises awareness of the importance of faith, fosters a sense of refuge and surrender in religion that instills trust, and contributes to the overall strengthening of students' faith. Relevant student findings are detailed in the second graph, categorized by the numerical expression of participant opinions.

Graph 2. *Contribution to Emotional Dimension of Faith*



Some Statements Regarding the Emotional Dimension of Faith are listed below:

Ineffective; P:8: "...I don't think the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge course is effective in giving meaning to my life because there are so many ideas, but we only progress through Islam; it's only effective in understanding Islam... I'm a twelfth-grade student, and I don't really care about the purpose of life or anything like that right now."

Increasing Faith; P.29: “...we saw other religions besides Islam, we saw what they were, what people believed or did not believe, how they behaved, how they worshipped in other religions... The worships they performed in other religions seemed meaningless to me, when I saw their meaninglessness, the things in our religion started to become more meaningful in my eyes, the prayers we said, the worships we performed... contributed to me in terms of making sense of them.”

To Reassure; P.9: “...sometimes there are situations where one truly falls into emptiness, and in those situations where I fell into this emptiness, it really helped... The combination of the book's content and the teachers really helped... After falling into emptiness, I was truly resurrected thanks to religion... For example, I can say the verses in the Holy Quran, because there's so much talk about the verses, and when I read them, I think they don't really pertain to today's world, but when I read their commentaries or my teachers explain them, things become clearer...”

Creating Sensitivity; P.1: “I think it increases one's sense of compassion even more, because at the end of the day, considering that everyone ends up in the same place, I wouldn't say punishing anyone, but punishment is certainly necessary, but you realize that we live in a world where forgiving some people is more important.”

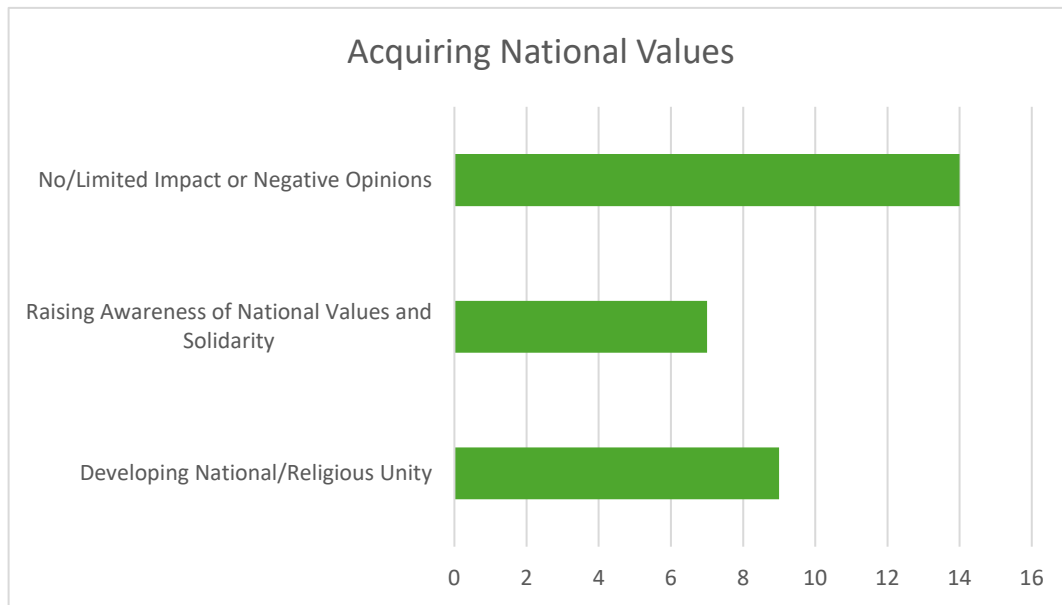
Raising Awareness; P.22: “...at least I see my existential self. I mean, some people may not be aware of this, and this may affect their mental health in the future, but by being conscious, at least I'm not dragged along by these things. I think I can be more spiritually healthy because my life has a purpose, I don't drift from place to place, and I don't feel like I've lived in vain.”

About the After Life; P.3: “...the situation of the afterlife in terms of our behavior here and there should change, that we should live in that direction, for example... I have many concerns about the afterlife.”

An analysis of the RCMK course's contribution to the emotional dimension of faith revealed a multifaceted and significant impact on students' emotional and attitudinal development. The most significant outcome is the development of awareness not only of the transitory nature of life and the purpose of existence, but also of the existence of a Creator, the impact of religion on daily life, and the importance of gratitude. The course played a vital role in fostering students' self-reflection and existential inquiry, helping them approach life's uncertainties with greater awareness. Beyond simple mindfulness, the RCMK course effectively fostered religious sensitivity and conscientiousness, encouraging students to be more thoughtful and discerning in both moral reasoning and practical behavior. Developing attitudes about the afterlife, including beliefs about heaven, hell, and accountability, further motivated students to engage meaningfully with their faith and provided comfort during periods of anxiety or doubt. The course also demonstrated its potential to strengthen students' faith by clarifying ambiguities, strengthening beliefs, or instilling new perspectives through the integration of information and emotional support. While most participants agreed with the course's positive impact in fostering personal growth, responsibility, and a deeper sense of meaning, a minority found the course ineffective due to factors such as age or lack of engagement. Overall, the findings indicated that the RCMK course largely fulfilled its vision of helping students emotionally internalize faith.

2.2. Acquiring National Values

Another subheading derived from the RCMK course's vision concerns the participants' adoption of national values. The extent to which high school students embraced national values was investigated in terms of whether their experiences with the RCMK course influenced their views on elements of national unity; student perspectives were limited to this scope. In this section, students' responses regarding the adoption of national values were categorized as promoting national unity, raising awareness about national unity, strengthening national unity, or the course having no impact on promoting national unity (ineffective) and were supported by the following participant statements. Data obtained from students on this topic are presented in Chart 3.

Graph 3. Acquiring National Values

Some participant opinions regarding the acquisition of national values are presented below:

No/Limited Impact or Negative Opinions; P.23: "...in religion classes, we were taught that the unifying factor was religion, Islam. For example, when I look at my friends around me, I have non-religious friends, friends from different religions, and friends from different sects, and I haven't seen any of them love their country less just because of their religious beliefs. They all say they are Turkish, that's why they are loyal to this country. They're not loyal to this country because they are Muslim."

Raising Awareness of National Values and Solidarity; P.14: "...it could be during religious holidays, national holidays, or religious holidays, where we usually have unity and solidarity. It was helpful in understanding these things."

Developing National/Religious Unity; P.15: "...it changed. In Religious Culture classes, the Prophet Muhammad was mentioned, and his actions were discussed, and his actions regarding national unity were discussed. He talked about his companions, his behavior towards them, how they formed unity among themselves, how they stood strong together against any event. I think this creates an awareness in many people. I think it was effective in awakening a sense of national unity, a sense of national struggle, in many people."

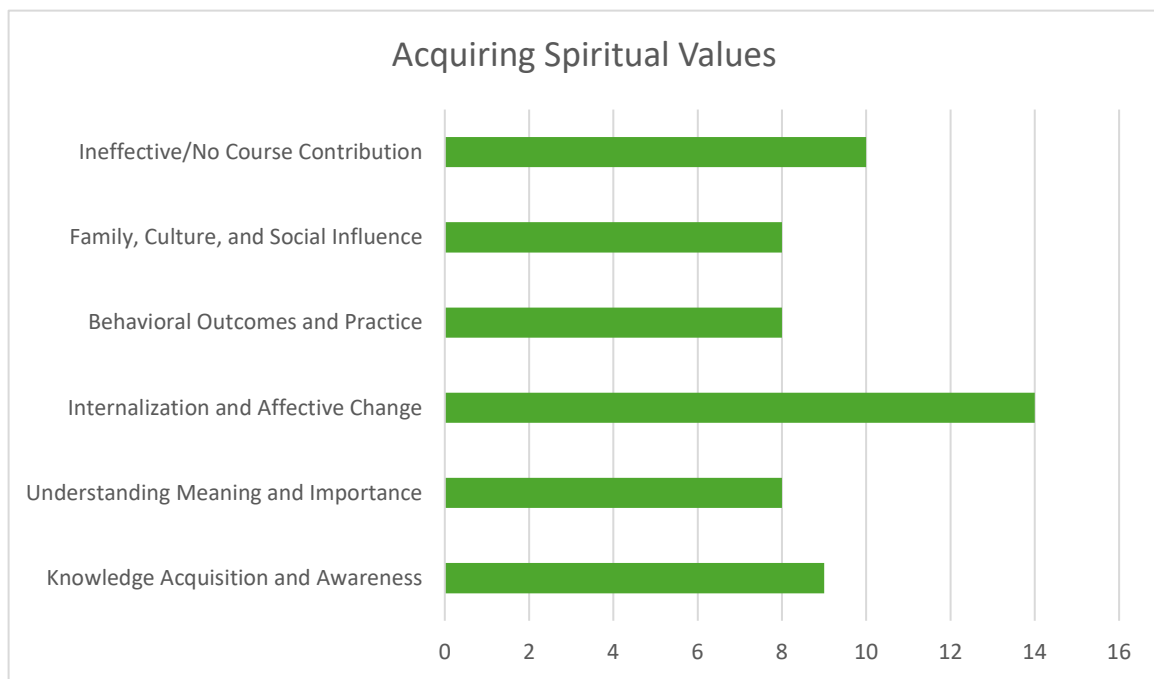
Qualitative analysis of the RCMK course's impact on national and religious unity reveals a nuanced picture with three central themes. Specifically, a significant group of students reported no or limited impact, feeling the course lacked direct relevance or content related to national unity and identity. These students frequently cited a lack of explicit discussions of unity or simply failed to connect religious education to national consciousness. However, a significant subset of participants emphasized the course's positive role in fostering national and religious unity through examples drawn from the Prophet and his companions, congregational worship, and shared religious practices, which were seen as important in fostering a sense of belonging and collective identity. Additionally, the theme of raising awareness of national values and solidarity emerged, with several students stating that the RCMK course increased recognition of national and religious celebrations, fostered respect for diversity, and emphasized the societal importance of unity. According to Chart 3, 16 participants indicated that the course's vision contributed to their embracing of national values, supporting the idea that RCMK can effectively strengthen and promote unity awareness within national

contexts. However, it is significant that 14 participants reported that the course had no impact on their national values, highlighting that while RCMK may be effective for some, its impact is neither universal nor guaranteed. Overall, the findings suggest that the potential of the RCMK course to build national unity could be strengthened by a clearer and more integrated emphasis on shared identity and solidarity.

2.3. Acquiring of Spiritual Values

Another research question derived from the vision of the RCMK course was to understand the role the course plays in the adoption of spiritual values. In this study, the role of the RCMK course in students' internalization of spiritual values was categorized as informing, demonstrating importance, making values more meaningful, reflecting on behavior, and having no impact, based on their responses. Accordingly, the extent to which high school students embraced spiritual values as a result of their RCMK experiences was investigated through a question about whether their perspectives on religious events such as nights and days (e.g., holy nights, Eid nights, Ashura Day) had changed. Student opinions are categorized and expressed as participant numbers in Graph 4.

Graph 4. Acquiring Spiritual Values



Some participant opinions about the course's ability to foster spiritual values are presented below:

Ineffective/No Course Contribution; P.18: "I think these activities are related to religion, but I think they're more related to culture. They bring people together, which is ultimately a good thing. However, for a non-believer, many things can come from outside and seem absurd. But as I said, these are cultures. That's the way it is. Maybe we should continue. If it doesn't harm anyone, I think there's no harm in it. Non-believers can also do things like distribute ashure, for example, which seems perfectly normal to me."

P.17: "...the things taught in religion classes are just book knowledge, in my opinion. I don't experience things that have a significant spiritual impact on me. I feel like these conversations are just repeating things I already know, so there wasn't any influence on me at all..."

Family, Culture, and Social Influences; P.27: "...yes, because first of all, when we don't receive any religious education and learn these things from a family growing up, I think they're just in name. For example, when we talk about Ashura Day, neighbors bring Ashura to each other, but if we don't know the reason behind it, I think it loses its religious significance. However, receiving education and actually learning the true meaning of these days, why we do these things, and the significance of these days, such as what will happen as a result, completely changes our perspective on these days. It actually helps us see the true value behind it. So, I can say that it has changed my perspective on these days quite a bit... knowing also strengthens my sense of belonging..."

Behavioral Outcomes and Practice; P.28: "...I was surprised when I learned where the kandil nights or Ashura Day actually came from because it was taught at school, I mean, on Ashura Day... When I learned where they came from, I naturally approached them from a different perspective... For example, let's say on a kandil night... before, I just sat there because I didn't know the meaning of it, but now, for example, I sit with my mother and read the Quran, pray, do the necessary things... You know, there are programs on television specifically for Mawlid nights, we watch them, I mean we listen to them..."

Internalization and Affective Change; P.14: "For example, on the Night of Ascension, the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) ascension to the heavens has passed a certain date for me and it did not occur for an unknown purpose, it is a special day, so I give more importance to that day and similar days that have passed a certain date because it has something in my religion, it has a meaning for what I believe in, it is like a religious responsibility, or we celebrate the day of the birth of our Prophet because it is something very important to us, someone important to our religion, I give more importance to that day, I do whatever I have to do on that day, such as reading the Quran, praying, visiting my elders, more regularly."

Understanding Meaning and Importance; P.13: "...it affected me, I mean, I used to do these holidays that we celebrated without knowing, or the activities we did during holidays, without knowing, but after knowing, you start to look at them from a different perspective, and it created an awareness that this is the reason why we celebrate them... I realized that those activities should be done after knowing the real purpose of those holidays..."

Knowledge Acquisition and Awareness; P.11: "Frankly, yes, since I didn't go to a Quran course, I learned about the important days, the important days for our religion, in the Religious Culture class... For example, I learned that fasting is observed on the holy nights... I also learned in the classes that bad behavior and bad words should not be spoken... Our Religious Culture Teacher distributes chocolates and candies to the school on holy nights, for example, I understood the importance of this, for example, holy nights are a day of mutual support, and it set an example... I had learned about sacrifice in class, I didn't know how much of the sacrifice you should give, I didn't know any of this... and I also looked to see if we were really practicing this in the family."

Thematic analysis of participant responses indicated that the RCMK course had a multifaceted impact on the adoption of spiritual values, with the most significant impact observed in internalization and emotional change among students. Not only did students report gaining new knowledge about spiritual concepts—particularly the reasons and practices behind religious holidays and rituals—many also developed positive emotional connections to spiritual values and a deeper appreciation for these traditions. This increased awareness often led to behavioral changes, such as more active participation in religious practices and increased attention to special occasions, representing a shift from knowledge to action. Closely related to these effects, most participants indicated that the RCMK course made spiritual values more engaging and meaningful to their lives. However, this impact was not uniformly felt. A significant number of participants emphasized the dominant role of family, cultural, and social context in shaping their spiritual perspectives and behaviors. For these students, spiritual values had already been informally internalized, and the course offered little additional impact; it served more as a repetition of what they already knew or practiced.

According to the data in Chart 4, while many students benefited from the knowledge and awareness-raising functions of the RCMK course, 12 participants reported no significant impact, citing familial transmission or the perception of these values as cultural traditions rather than inherent beliefs.

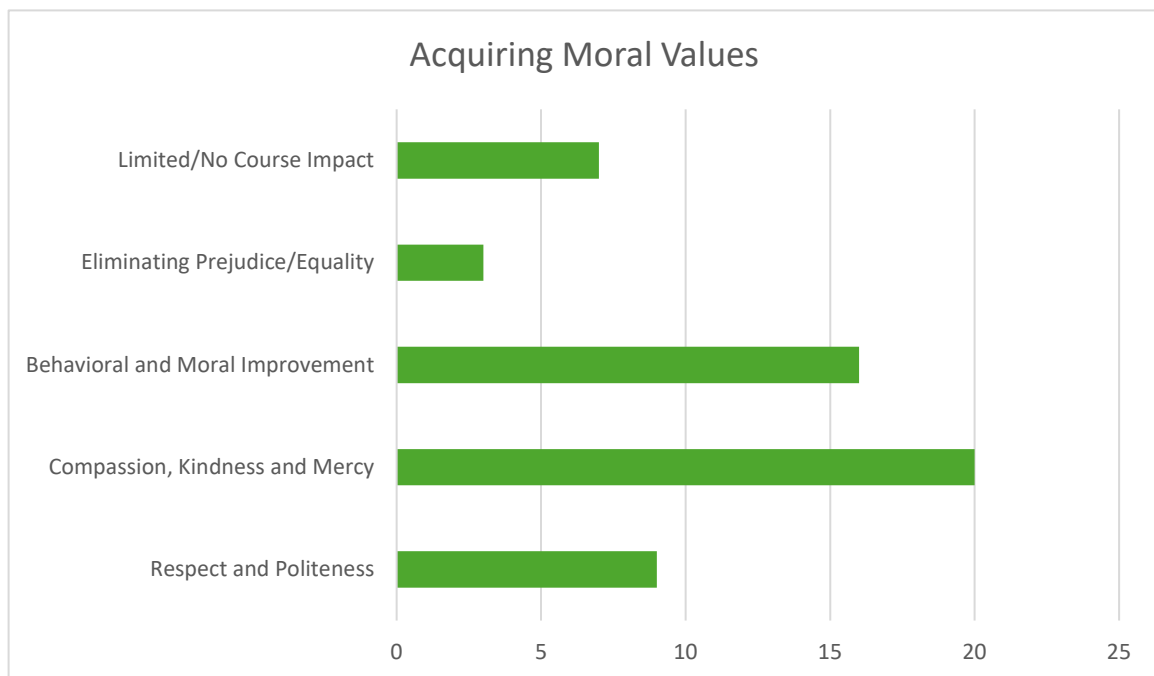
Taken together, these findings suggest that while the RCMK course can play a significant role in informing, contextualizing, and sometimes deepening students' engagement with spiritual values, its impact is often intertwined with the powerful formative influence of family and culture and is often secondary. The effective adoption of moral values among high school students emerges as a complex process shaped by both formal education and the broader social environment.

2.4. Acquiring of Moral Values

Another research question arising from the vision of the RCMK curriculum concerns the role of the course in the adoption of moral values. This section explores the extent to which high school students internalize moral values as a result of their RCMK experiences by examining whether their attitudes toward their parents, immediate circle, teachers, friends, or people they encounter in daily life have changed. The student perspectives in this section are limited to this specific investigation. Additionally, to gather more data on moral attitudes, a follow-up question was asked to determine whether the RCMK course experience also influenced their attitudes toward animals and the environment; however, the primary goal was to understand attitudes toward humans.

In this context, participant responses were categorized as follows: change in attitude toward parents and immediate environment, contributing to being a better person, contributing to a sense of tolerance, and having no impact. These categories and supporting participant statements are presented below in Chart 5.

Graph 5. *Acquiring Moral Values*



Some participant opinions regarding the course's acquisition of moral values are presented below:

Limited/No Course Impact; P.26: "Frankly, the religious culture course didn't have much of an impact. Before, I was trying to be respectful or communicate correctly when speaking and communicating with both my elders and younger ones. The Religious Culture course didn't have a significant impact."

Eliminating Prejudice/Equality; P.14: "He's changed, I've actually become more tolerant. Because his authority is the same, and mine is the same, I wasn't created higher than him, he wasn't created lower than me, everyone was created with the same values, we are equal in God's eyes, he has his own experiences, I have mine, no one sees us from within except God, no one knows what anyone else is going through, so I'm more tolerant of everyone, I'm more patient, I'm more respectful of those around me..."

Behavioral and Moral Improvement; P.10: "Well, there was a little bit about the issues, for example, something happened about backbiting, it's this, that, it's bad, etc., while dealing with people's rights, I started to get really scared of lying, etc., it's on the tip of my tongue, so I tell the truth. After that, I don't talk behind someone's back, etc. That happened after religion class, so it's a good thing..."

P.2: "...there was a certain attitude, for example, that you shouldn't stay angry during holidays... These kinds of teachings are usually given during holidays, and this teaching came to mind and made me talk to people I wouldn't want to talk to, like my relatives, for example. In other words, it had a positive impact."

P.12: "...When I hear the stories the teacher tells us about the people around us in class, it helps me a lot because it comes to mind as I learn... If I do something wrong, I really correct that action, my behavior... For example, when I could suddenly get angry and explode, I prefer to hold myself back and sit down and talk calmly..."

Compassion, Kindness, and Mercy; P.23: "...there have been minor changes, especially regarding the elderly. For example, I'm more tolerant of the elderly I see on the street... For example, I'd help an elderly person walking down the street who's in a difficult situation. It made me realize that the elderly were born and lived many years before us, and their bodies aren't in the best shape anymore. We need to help them because, well, when the time comes, I'll grow old and be in that situation, too."

P.15: "...there's a difference in how animals are treated; I've come to the conclusion that they have hearts, too, and deserve love. We should treat them as we would humans. This isn't just about animals; it's about everyone, whether they're strangers or those I know. So, that's been effective in that way."

Respect and Politeness; P.28: "Normally, I am a tough person, but since religious education instilled in me the ability to be softer, more tolerant, more compassionate, I think I am a softer and kinder person towards those around me, I mean, I get those kinds of feelings. I used to be someone who got angry more easily, but now I am calmer, I mean, I listen more carefully to the person I am talking to... I already love animals very much, and I still love them very much, I am still very kind to them, and the same goes for other people, for example, if something happens to someone on the road, I try to help them immediately, I try to make them or those around me happy, for example, this is one of them. I used to not think about my surroundings much, I mean, I didn't care much about my friends and things like that, but I don't think so anymore, I care more, I treat them better too."

Thematic analysis of participant responses indicates that the RCMK course had a broad and multifaceted impact on the adoption of social and moral values among high school students. The most prominent theme was Kindness, Kindness, and Compassion, with many students emphasizing increased empathy, a desire to help others, sensitivity to animals, constructive responses to adversity, and improved emotional regulation. This points to the course's potential to foster humanity and moral responsibility. The closely related emphasis on Respect and Courtesy reflects how the course promotes courtesy, respectful behavior, and the avoidance of harming others, thereby fostering positive daily interactions.

In acquiring moral values, 'Behavioral and Moral Development' also emerged as a significant theme, with students reporting gains in patience, honesty, tolerance, and self-awareness, suggesting that the RCMK course can foster personal moral development and encourage the adoption of positive social habits. Some participants also noted the importance of 'Eliminating Prejudice/Equality,' such as treating everyone equally and reducing prejudice against marginalized groups; this aligns with the goals of contemporary education for social justice and inclusion.

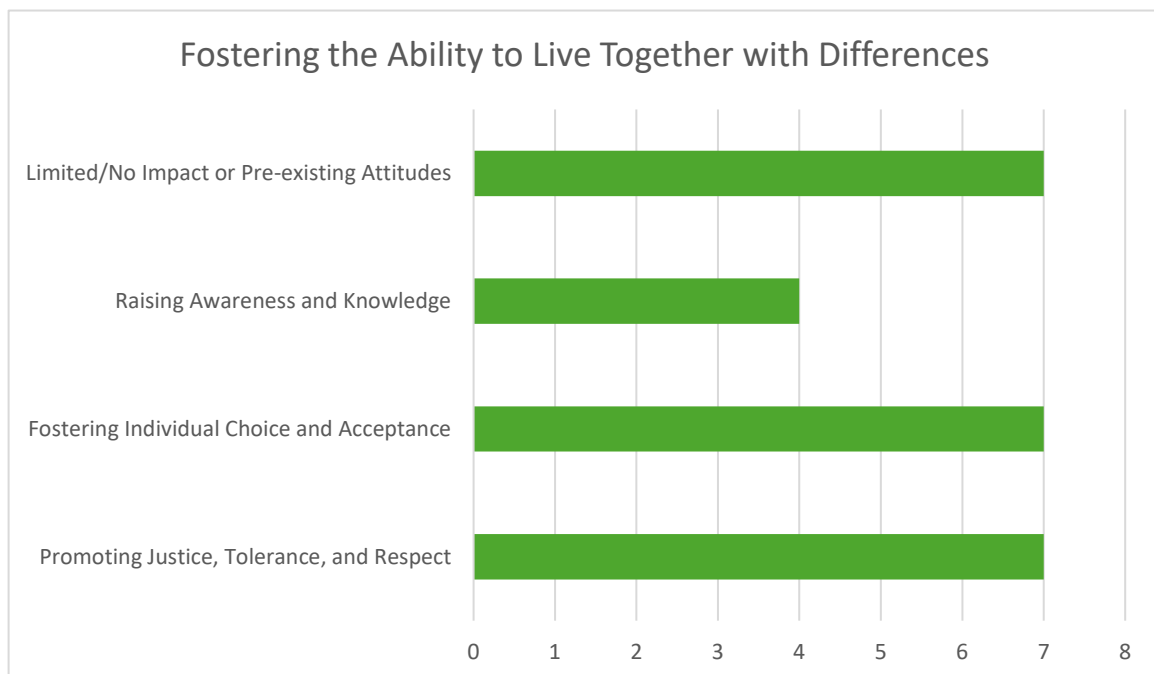
Despite these strengths of the course, the theme of "Limited/No Course Impact" is noteworthy. A significant number of students felt that their moral values were primarily formed through family influence, personal principles, or broader socialization, and that the course content was not relevant or practical enough to effect real change. According to the data in Chart 5, while most participants felt that the RCMK course helped them become better individuals (including improved relationships with parents and peers and increased tolerance), others indicated that these values were acquired outside of school or that the course was ineffective in this regard.

In summary, while the RCMK course serves as an important tool for instilling compassion, good character, and social values in many students, family environment and upbringing remain dominant factors in shaping moral development. This demonstrates that making course content more practical, engaging, and directly relevant to students' lived experiences can maximize its positive impact on moral and social values, while also highlighting its importance.

2.5. Fostering the Ability to Live with Differences

Another research question regarding the RCMK course vision is to investigate whether the course results change the attitudes of everyone toward their beliefs. Participants were specifically asked whether their attitudes toward others' beliefs had changed due to their RCMK experiences, and their responses were limited to this question. Responses regarding the distribution of the capacity to live together with the details of the RCMK vision are presented in Graph 6, supported by participant statements, under the categories of respect, tolerance, awareness, or no influence.

Graph 6. *Fostering the Ability to Live Together with Differences*



Some statements regarding fostering the ability to live with differences are presented below:

Limited/No Impact or Pre-existing Attitudes; P.23: "It hasn't changed much because I already respect other people's beliefs and behaviors, especially if they don't interfere with other people. Because everyone lives their own lives, and everyone hangs by their own legs. For example, if someone behaves badly without affecting another person, they're behaving badly themselves. But what matters in this matter is that it doesn't affect anyone else. What matters to me is their character, their behavior. Beyond that, what happens in a person's private life doesn't concern me. Because of my family, I'm already a tolerant person because, for example, in my own family, my family is Sunni, but my closest family friend is an Alevi. You know, our people don't say anything about these things; they don't maintain a stay-away-from-them approach because we always say, 'What matters is what a person does, not words.'"

P.24: "No, it hasn't changed. I'm a person who respects everyone. I don't judge or question anyone, regardless of their religion or orientation. This religious culture course hasn't changed my mind at all... I mean, there's no point in arguing about such matters; after all, it's the individual's own choice."

Raising Awareness and Knowledge; P.25: "...one difference might be this: we learn about other religions in our classes. My knowledge of other religions and understanding their cultures makes positive contributions to those I interact with. For example, I participated in a project where we explained our religions to each other. There wasn't a negative atmosphere there; on the contrary, we saw how similar we are and how much we share the same feelings. Of course, it has its effects in this respect, but I can say my attitude changes in a positive direction."

P.5: "...of course, as I learn more, I also believe that knowledge eliminates ignorance and teaches respect for one another. So, as I learned about different beliefs, I learned to respect the beliefs of others..."

Fostering Individual Choice and Acceptance; P.6: "...Because Islam is a religion of tolerance, we were taught this. As we learned the fundamentals of different faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and so on, I became aware that this is their fundamental nature. Islam says this, their religion says that, and so is their religion. We shouldn't interfere. Everyone has their own religion."

P.13: "...I also had friends with multiple faiths, and I talked to them. Along with our principle of "there is no compulsion in religion," yes, we interacted with them in a more respectful manner; they learned things from me, I learned things from them, and we interacted. I can say that my attitude towards them was a little different, that I learned to look at them more respectfully, to respect their opinions."

P.9: "Of course, it changed because, as I said from the very beginning, I was always most impressed by the life of the Prophet Muhammad. The reason I was impressed by the life of the Prophet Muhammad is because the Prophet Muhammad was always tolerant of other religions and other beliefs, you know, he was tolerant, and I have always been tolerant of other beliefs..."

Promoting Justice, Tolerance, and Respect; P.2: "...for example, I remember a teaching like this: if I remember correctly, our Prophet had a problem with justice, and it was said that he even treated Jews fairly. He also somehow teaches everyone to be tolerant, regardless of their beliefs..."

A thematic analysis of students' views on the RCMK course's contribution to the ability to live with diversity reveals a multifaceted impact. A significant number of students reported that the course played a positive role in 'Promoting Justice, Tolerance, and Respect,' often drawing on the Prophet Muhammad's example in reducing prejudice and promoting equality among people. The theme 'Promoting Individual Choice and Acceptance' suggests that the RCMK course teaches personal religious autonomy, freedom, and tolerance of others' beliefs, while also affirming coexistence without coercion within religion. Many students also highlighted the importance of 'Raising Awareness and Knowledge,' explaining that exposure to different

faiths and traditions in the course made them more knowledgeable, helped reduce ignorance, and thus promoted peaceful coexistence.

However, the analysis also highlights the reality of 'Limited/No Impact or Pre-Existing Attitudes': for a significant number of students, the course did not create new attitudes or significantly change their perspectives, because respect, tolerance, or apathy towards diversity was already ingrained, often due to family or personal beliefs. The responses in Chart 6 confirm this: while the RCMK course heavily promoted teaching respect, tolerance, and awareness, some participants argued that their attitudes towards people of different faiths or denominations remained unchanged as a result of the course.

Under this heading, the RCMK course is viewed by most participants as a meaningful tool for promoting respect, tolerance, and coexistence; however, its effectiveness is often dependent on and limited by students' prior experiences and predispositions.

3. Results and Discussion

This study explored the realization of the RCMK course's vision from the perspectives of participating students, focusing specifically on the extent to which meaning-making, national unity, spiritual and moral development, and skills for living with diversity were developed, not developed, or perceived as neutral. According to the RCMK curriculum vision, its overall goals are to cultivate individuals who recognize the role of religion in giving meaning to life, embrace national, spiritual, and moral values, and acquire the competencies to live together in a pluralistic society (MEB, 2018).

The findings of the study indicate that the RCMK course in Türkiye plays a multifaceted role in shaping students' perspectives on meaning, national and spiritual values, moral development, and living together in a diverse society. Thematic analysis of student responses reveals that the impact of the RCMK course is broad, detailed, and multifaceted in these areas:

Cognitive and Emotional Dimensions of the RCMK Course Related to the Meaning of Life: The most significant impact of the course is evident in the cognitive and emotional domains, where students frequently report gains in religious knowledge, correction of misconceptions, and increased capacity for existential reflection. Exposure to various religious traditions within the course fosters critical thinking and provides students with a broader context for questioning and making sense of life. It also fosters emotional well-being such as gratitude, hope, and resilience. Indeed, according to studies by (Toker, 2020) and Arslan (Arslan, 2018), the course answered 84.5% of high school students' questions about religion. In Arslan's (2018) quantitative study, 87.3% of the students agreed with the option "I am aware that the worldly life and my own life have a purpose and a goal, and I have determined my own goals in life", indicating that the course contributes to making sense of life. In Çakmak's research, which was conducted with a similar method in which he examined the mediating role of religiosity and responsibility between the RCMK education of high school students and the meaning of life, it was concluded that religiosity and responsibility have a mediating role in the search for meaning in achieving the general goals in the RCMK course, and the RCMK course is an effective factor in making sense of life (Çakmak, 2018). Our study also has findings that support these findings from the mentioned studies. This study also found that the course fosters a belief in an afterlife related to faith. However, there are also students who express the view that the course does not provide meaning to life. In a similar study, Zengin's study, which examined students' attitudes toward the Religious Knowledge and Moraal Knowledge (RCMK) course in primary and secondary schools in the Sakarya province using the "RCMK Course Attitude Scale," found that students who stated they had benefited from the course had higher attitudes toward the course, while those who had a negative opinion had lower attitudes (Zengin, 2013). In this study, P.8, P.19, and P.30, who shared the view that the course was insufficient to influence their thoughts, also agreed on a lack of effectiveness regarding at least four values. This suggests that, as Zengin also stated, negative thoughts about the course were reflected in the decline in participants' attitudes. In this regard, it was understood that the course, with its emotional surrender approach, reduced anxiety, while the presence of

religion provided peace and confidence, and the information acquired fostered self-confidence in terms of faith and trust in religion. At the same time, the informative aspect of the course clarified students' questions and supported their belief in the existence of a Creator.

RCMK Course's Inculcation of National Values: In terms of national values, the course is generally valued for providing positive role models and shared practices that strengthen national identity and unity, but its impact varies among participants. For some, these lessons translate strongly into a sense of solidarity, while for others, the formation of national values is experienced primarily through family and community rather than formal classroom settings. This demonstrates the importance of curriculum delivery that is both inclusive and context-sensitive.

The RCMK Course's Contribution to Spiritual Values: The RCMK course's contribution to spiritual development is generally seen in students' deeper understanding of religious practices and rituals, making cultural elements more personally meaningful to them. However, the course's impact on participants is sometimes seen as secondary to the influence of family traditions and broader culture, emphasizing the need for educational content that resonates with students' lived experiences. Participants' opinions regarding the RCMK course's instruction on spiritual values stated that they learned the reasons for celebrating events such as holy nights, holidays, and Ashura Day, what should be done on these days, and practices such as worship and pilgrimage. This suggests that the course was informative. Furthermore, it was understood that the course demonstrated the religious significance, history, and value of holy days and nights, made them more meaningful, contributed to their internalization, and increased participation in such celebrations.

Acquisition of Moral Values in the RCMK Course: In the area of moral education, the course supports the development of compassion, empathy, patience, tolerance, honesty, and respect for diversity. However, the majority of participants primarily attribute core moral values to family upbringing and informal social contexts, positioning the course as a complementary rather than a transformative force in the formation of moral values. Participants' views on this matter suggest that the course fosters positive changes in their attitudes toward parents and their immediate environment, including respect and not overstepping boundaries, avoiding upset and obeying, being polite, caring, and consciously doing good, compassion, and raising awareness of their needs. Similarly, in Toker's research on science high school students, which included the RCMK course outcomes, one of the findings was that the course was particularly effective in encouraging participants to behave well towards their parents (Toker, 2020). However, some students expressed the view that the course did not foster awareness of religiously sacred days and nights, that it was a culturally relevant or family-inherited teaching, that it did not align with their beliefs, and that it did not influence their thoughts because they were already aware of it.

The course also contributed to better human behaviors and feelings such as not being offended on holy days, avoiding backbiting, being patient and respectful, empathizing, compassionate, caring, helping, and approaching with positivity. Related to this topic, Ay has a study on "the mediating role of religiosity and moral maturity between Religious Knowledge and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) education and aggression." According to the results of his quantitative research on 12th-grade students in Erzurum province and its districts, it was understood that achieving the general objectives of the RCMK course can increase the religiosity and moral maturity of high school students, and this increase can reduce students' aggression levels (Ay, 2021). Similarly, this study also observed that the course stimulates emotions such as anger management, patience, empathy, and compassion. In a study conducted by Sayın with Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge (RCMK) teachers on the relationship between religious knowledge and behavior, it was stated that the course's focus on students' cognitive dimensions led to inadequate behavioral change (Sayın, 2021).

The Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge Course Promotes Coexistence with Differences: Finally, students generally found the Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge course effective in promoting respect for diversity and the principle of harmonious coexistence with differences, particularly through its emphasis on justice, freedom of belief, and religious tolerance. While most students reported greater awareness and

open-mindedness as a result of their course experiences, a significant number believed that these attitudes were formed before the course and reflected the preexisting influence of family and society. The findings suggest that the course's impact can be maximized when course content and pedagogy are designed to build on existing positive attitudes and utilize engaging, real-world discussions about diversity.

Overall, the study found that the RCMK course provides vital opportunities for students' cognitive, emotional, and ethical development, but its impact is far greater when it is grounded in students' lived realities and complements the formative roles of family and community. The findings highlight the importance of delivering curriculum in an inclusive and thoughtful way that aligns with students' diverse backgrounds and needs.

These findings align strongly with literature highlighting the informational, emotional, and behavioral roles of RCMK (Arslan, 2018; Toker, 2020; Çakmak, 2018), the importance of teaching approaches and inclusiveness (Kalfa, 2019), and the significant influence of family and informal contexts on value formation. The current study reaffirms that the effects of RCMK are not uniform: while raising awareness and imparting knowledge are its primary strengths, its potential to generate behavioral and attitudinal change may be much greater when the course curriculum is made engaging and practical, tailored to a variety of student experiences.

Based on student feedback and existing research, the following recommendations for further improving the RCMK program have been developed:

- Given constraints such as course time and curriculum overload, increasing elective and enrichment hours that allow for more in-depth exploration of Islamic practices, legal systems, and comparative belief systems will enhance the effectiveness of the training. Furthermore, it is recommended that the curriculum be expanded to address young people's questions about Islam and other religions.
- The emotional and practical impact of the training will be maximized when teachers are encouraged to make clear connections between knowledge, lived experience, emotional well-being, and daily behavior.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the RCMK course continues to be a significant and generally positive force for promoting meaning-making, national values, spiritual depth, moral awareness, and respect for diversity among high school students in Türkiye. While it has emotional and behavioral effects, particularly in transferring knowledge and raising awareness, these effects generally vary depending on practical application, effective use of class time, student participation, and prior socialization. Effectively embracing RCMK's vision depends on an adaptable, student-centered approach. To achieve the course's objectives, it is crucial to understand content gaps, acknowledge student diversity, and ensure the curriculum aligns with real-world needs. This will ensure that the RCMK course develops students who are not only knowledgeable but also ethically sound, aware of diverse beliefs and practices in society, and sensitive to the relationship between religion, nation, culture, and living in unity.

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