Alevi Individuals and the Compulsory "Religious Culture and Ethics Course": A Phenomenological Study Based on the Narratives of Alevi University Students in Nevşehir

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Abstract

Alevi students' longstanding discontentment regarding compulsory religious education has become an important human rights issue in Türkiye. Although many theologists, political scientists, and legal scholars have conducted research on this subject, studies addressing the issue through curriculum and teaching practices are limited. This study seeks to examine the experiences of 12 Alevi university students in the province of Nevşehir who attended Türkiye's compulsory Religious Culture and Ethics course within the context of religious identity and gender from a multidimensional perspective. Participants included six female and six male students. Data were analyzed along the axis of gender. The findings highlight institutionalized discrimination through curricula and teaching practices in different dimensions. According to the findings, teachers' attitudes and behaviors on the axis of religious identity included discrimination and hatred, with participants being subjected to both verbal and physical violence. Alevism topics in the content of the course book were either not dealt with or were considered superficially or on the axis of imposition/discrimination. When the experiences of Alevi participants were investigated in terms of gender, it was determined that both female and male students reported being restrained, although the extent differed by gender. While female students were pressured to adopt

an obedient attitude amid fear and tension, male students were controlled by heavy accusations and disciplinary punishments, even as they resisted them. Participants' experiences with RCE teachers demonstrate that teachers' perception of the Alevi religious identity intersected with the social perception of gender. Alevi participants experienced cross-cutting discrimination based on religious identity and gender.

Keywords: *Alevism, right to education, religion and belief education, gender, discrimination*

Alevis, an indigenous religious community of Anatolia, have not been recognized as a religious minority group in Türkiye, although they are accepted within Islam **(Gedik et al., 2020; Jenkins et al., 2018; Öktem, 1995)**. The absence of an official status has deprived them of certain religious and legal rights. It is possible that there is no reliable information regarding the Alevi population in the current data on religion and religious sects in Türkiye. According to official data from the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DoRA), 77.5% of the Muslim population is Hanafi, 11.1% Shafii, 0.1% Hanbali, 0.03% Maliki, and 1% Jafari (DoRA, 2014). However, recent data from a private research company indicate that 88% of Türkiye's population comprises Sunni Muslims, whereas Alevi Muslims account for 5% (Konda, 2022). Alevis are the "most populous religious community in Türkiye after Sunni Muslims" (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2017).

Recently, Alevi individuals in Türkiye reported facing significant challenges during compulsory Religious Culture and Ethics (RCE) courses (Duymaz, 2023; Engin, 2022; Erman & Erdemir, 2005). Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution made RCE courses compulsory in primary and secondary educational institutions. There is evidence of unequal experiences in terms of content and method of instruction, with critics claiming preferential inclusion of Sunni

Muslim students and exclusion of the Alevi sect (Akşit et al., 2012; Şirin, 2016). In addition to criticism surrounding the imposition of Sunni Islam teachings on all participants (Kaya, 2018; Taştekin & İnan, 2013), critics cite the lack of Alevi content in teaching materials and open religious preferences teachers display as an "othering" approach toward Alevi participants in prioritizing the Sunni-Hanefi[1] tradition (Erman & Erdemir, 2005). In response, Alevi groups have appealed to domestic and foreign legal bodies for compulsory religious education, which affected Türkiye's European Union (EU) membership process in various ways.

Although Alevi individuals have faced challenges in RCE classrooms, public support for compulsory RCE courses is high because the majority of the Türkiye population belongs to the Hanafi and Shafii sects. According to recent a study, 82.1% of individuals have demanded compulsory RCE courses in public schools (Mahçupyan, 2014). They argue that specific religious tenets are not encouraged in this course, and information is provided regarding all religions and sects (Kaymakcan & Aşlamaci, 2023). However, Türkiye is "the only country that has twice lost a lawsuit filed in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)" over violations of the rights of parents to raise their children consistent with their own religious or philosophical views and for not meeting requirements for objectivity and pluralism in the compulsory RCE course (Kaymakcan & Hendek, 2022).

It is imperative to focus on Alevi individuals' experiences regarding the compulsory RCE course to establish a viable balance between teaching them in schools and ensuring social justice. A review of studies on this subject demonstrates that it has taken into account the opinions of Alevi leaders regarding the expectations of Alevi people from religious education (Gevrek, 2005), although a limited sample of coursebooks were analyzed (Şentürk, 2023;

Yıldız, 2002), and the capacity of subjects related to Alevism on meeting the expectations has been emphasized (Durna, 2018; Kaya, 2014; Kurt, 2016; Ünal, 2010). Research on discrimination has not focused on teaching processes in terms of content (Erdemir et al., 2022; Yonucu, 2023), studies conducted on the basis of educational sciences are limited.

The intersectionality of religious identity with other related identities should be considered when analyzing the experiences of Alevi individuals in compulsory religious education. Social differentiated identities such as religion, race, class, and gender intersect in daily life, as individuals do not experience them in isolation. According to the intersectional approach, identities interact in ways that transform each other’s meaning and influence one another (Ferree, 2008; Morris, 2007; Yuval- Davis, 2006). Rather than analyzing experiences based solely on separate identities such as religion and gender, it is essential to examine the relationship between them (Coşkuner, 2024). Consequently, this study considers not only the relationship between religious and gender identities but also how both identities intersect in the context of the education and training process.

The concept that all are equal under the law is possible only through the strategic intervention of the state and its institutions (Doytcheva, 2013). For example, the state is duty-bound to prevent discrimination (Gözaydın, 2016). In accordance with human rights conventions to which Türkiye is a signatory, Alevi students should not be ignored in the public sphere; they should be recognized, and a place created for cultural diversity in the classroom. Religion plays a vital role in ensuring social cohesion and sustaining collective life and education, which is synonymous with healthy socialization; these aspects of society are interwoven (Durkheim, 2016). Using it to strengthen social ties and peace, religious education should use an approach suitable for social diversity

(Taştekin & İnan, 2013), and this is a necessity in modern democratic societies. Increasing religious diversity arising from international migration and the growing emergence of religion in the political sphere may trigger persistent misunderstandings of the "other," triggering conflicts between sects. Religious education may help prevent such conflicts. In this respect, international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe argue that religious education in schools is necessary to prevent conflicts based on faith and to promote mutual respect among religious groups. These organizations suggest emphasizing religious education for intercultural dialogue and democratic citizenship (ERG, 2011). A sensitive, balanced, inclusive, non-doctrinal, and human rights-based course on religion is vital for a well-rounded curriculum.

This study emphasizes human rights and gender equality, questions the experiences of compulsory religious education from the perspective of Alevi individuals, discusses the status of compulsory religious education in Türkiye, and focuses on its multidimensional and intertwined structure within a theoretical framework. Criticisms by Alevi individuals regarding the compulsory RCE course were discussed in the first stage. Subsequently, an attempt was made to answer the question, “What are the experiences of recent Alevi students in the compulsory RCE course?” As these experiences have a bi-dimensional structure on the axis of religious identity and gender, the conceptual framework, methodology, and findings of the study are discussed in both dimensions. A phenomenological design, an aspect of qualitative research, was used as the basic framework. The study sample includes 12 Alevi university students who volunteered to share their experiences regarding RCE courses. Conclusions and recommendations are offered based on the findings and within the scope of relevant literature.

The following questions were included in the study:

1. What type of content does the experience of Alevi participants in the process of taking the compulsory RCE course include on the axis of religious identity?
2. What type of content does the experience of Alevi participants in the process of taking the compulsory RCE course include on the axis of gender?
3. What are the needs and expectations of Alevi participants related to religious education within the context of compulsory RCE course experiences?

A Brief History of Alevism and RCE Course

Relationship Between Shīʿa Tradition and Alevism

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the representative of Islam, a power struggle emerged over who would succeed him as the leader of the Muslim community. This conflict led to the divergence of the Sunni and Shīʿa groups. According to Shīʿa Muslims, religious guidance and leadership rightfully belong to the Prophet Muhammad’s family (Ahl al-Bayt) and his descendants (Hazleton 2010). Sunni Muslims, however, believed that Abu Bakr, a close companion of the Prophet, should assume leadership. The Sunnis quickly gained dominance, marginalizing Shīʿa theological and legal approaches. It was not until 1501, when the Safavids seized power in Iran and declared Shi'ism the official state religion, that Shi'a Muslims gained significant political influence.

Although Alevis and the Shi'a tradition share some similarities—such as their reverence for Ali and the twelve Imams, as well as their belief in religious *taqiyya*—Alevis hold many beliefs and practices that differ significantly from those of Shi'a Islam. These include unique religious hierarchies, ceremonies, and beliefs in the transmigration of souls (Massicard, 2013).

Alevism is not a product of theological debates and disagreements like other Islamic sects (Ocak, 2013; Kehl-Bodrogi, 2017). Alevism, as it is known, today expresses a syncretism of religion[2] and culture centered around the cult of Hazrat Ali and associated with the cult of the Twelve Imams, the cult of the mourning of Karbala and other related cults (Melikoff, 1993; Ocak, 1996), while the Shi'a tradition tends to reject all non-Islamic traditions.

From the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey

Alevis do not engage in traditional Sunni practices such as praying, fasting, going on pilgrimages, or offering *zakat*. Instead, their religious worship takes place in *cem* ceremonies, which include both men and women and incorporate practices such as playing the *saz* and whirling dervishes. These differences contradict the Sunni understanding of Islam, often leading to misunderstandings and negative prejudices among Sunni communities (Erman & Erdemir, 2005).

In Ottoman documents, Alevis were described using exclusionary terms such as *Rafizî*—"separatist," *mülhid*—"godless," and "heretic"/ "non-believer" (Melikoff, 2011, p.15). Alevi communities, which lived in the Anatolian steppes in nomadic settlements for centuries (Melikoff, 2011, p.13), preserved their traditions by distancing themselves from central authority (Cinemre & Akşit, 1995). The distinct nature of Alevi rituals and beliefs, differing significantly from those of the Sunni majority, contributed to their secrecy, which in turn led to accusations from the Sunnis of moral deviance (Massicard, 2013).

Another significant factor in the Alevis' withdrawal from Turkish society is the existence of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (DoRA), described as "one of the most determined representatives of the Sunnisation policy of the ancient state tradition" in Turkey (Tuğal, 2005, p.496). The DoRA promotes a specific Sunni interpretation of Islam, functioning as a state-controlled

institution that provides not only religious services but also reinforces Sunni dominance in society (Çakır & Bozan, 2005; Erman & Erdemir, 2005; Gözaydın, 2020). "The DoRA's task was to promote a "*correct"* and Sunni Islam, emphasizing morality, human rights, and citizens' obligations toward the state, through mosques and compulsory religion classes, while countering objectionable Islamic influences" (Hollanda Kamu Politikaları Bilimsel Kurulu [Scientific Council for Public Policy in the Netherlands], 2007, p.80). At the same time, the Turkish laic approach, which seeks to control religion's public dimension within the state administration, has resulted in exclusive state support for Sunni Islam rather than equitably distributing resources among all religious groups, particularly the Alevis (Göçek, 2005).

The structuring of the social system in line with Sunni principles supports the criticism that Alevis are subject to religious discrimination in practice, although not in legal terms. According to Ateş, "DoRA also fulfills the task of religious homogenization of the national community" (Ateş, 2011, p.344). The institution is clearly positioned in a Sunni Islamist perspective and has adopted a policy that is completely contrary to the principle of the state being at an equal distance from all populations in society (Gözaydın, 2020). Given that Sunni Islam in Türkiye is experienced not as a religious practice but as a social identity (Zubaida, 2000), it has led to the attribution of a negative identity to the Alevis as a religious and political ethnic group. This negative identity leads Alevis to conceal their identity, join other faith communities, or abandon their religion altogether (Erdemir, 2005; Massicard, 2013).

Social-Class Dimension of Alevism

The official historiography of Turkey, driven by the ideology of nation-building in the years following the establishment of the republic, largely ignored the country's multicultural social structure (Göçek, 2005). According to Massicard

(2013), the new regime disregarded religious and sectarian plurality, distancing itself from elements that could threaten the ideal of creating a unified national community. As a result, Alevis are scarcely mentioned in official records (Massicard, 2013). Their religious interpretations, excluded from the state's definition and support of faith, have left them without any political or religious privileges (Göçek, 2005; Massicard, 2013).

Alevis organized their social and religious lives through traditional internal mechanisms, often living far from central authority (Erman & Erdemir, 2005). Beginning in the 1950s, mass migration from rural to urban areas led many Alevis to relocate to cities and settlement centers in the western regions of Turkey. Alongside this internal migration, external migration to Europe also occurred as Alevis sought to improve their material conditions. Similar to the Kurds, Alevis were drawn to Marxist ideology due to their dual experiences of economic marginalization and social exclusion (Bozarslan, 1997; Erman & Erdemir, 2005). Alevi and Kurdish youth embraced egalitarian leftist ideologies, hoping to overcome discrimination. For Alevi youth, especially those raised in urban areas, this included questioning their religious identity and reinterpreting Alevism as “the struggle of oppressed nations for independence.” Consequently, Alevism began to emerge as a cultural and political stance rather than solely a belief system (Erman & Erdemir, 2005).

The Alevi community, experiencing rapid socio-economic changes through migration and blending with leftist ideology, began organizing under associations and foundations following the tragic events in Kahramanmaraş in 1978 and Çorum in 1980. They continued to face racist attacks, notably in Sivas in 1993 and Istanbul in 1995 (Cinemre & Akşit, 1995).

RCE Course in Türkiye

The pressure of secularization was extreme during the initial years of the republic (Lewis, 2008), and education, especially religious education, was one of the areas most affected. With the Law on Unification of Education in 1924, all educational activities were brought under the authority of the “Ministry of Education,” and madrasahs, the traditional religious schools, were abolished.[3] In 1928, secularization policies terminated compulsory religious education courses in school curricula. This decision took effect in urban schools in 1930 and rural schools in 1933 (Berkes, 2008). After 1949, however, religious education resumed in schools following the transition to a multiparty system. The same year, students in Grades 4–5 in primary schools were allowed two hours of elective religious teaching per week, provided the courses were outside normal school hours (MoNE, 1949). Parents of children who wanted to take this course had to make a formal request. In 1950, the "religious course" was made compulsory (Cabinet Decree, 1950), and parents no longer had to make a special request to opt into the program; instead, those who were opposed to the classes had to state that they did not want their child to take part.

By 1956, a one-hour elective “religious knowledge course” was included in the program for Grades 1–2 in secondary schools (MoNE, 1956). Beginning in 1974, a one-hour compulsory “ethics course” was introduced in Grades 4–5 in primary schools and all grades in secondary and high schools (MoNE, 1974). Accordingly, in 1974, an elective “religious course” and compulsory “ethics course” were implemented for all grades from Grade 4 of primary school to the last year of high school. This practice continued until the military coup of 1982 when the elective “religious knowledge” course was combined with the compulsory “ethics course” (MoNE, 1982) and was included among compulsory courses in primary and secondary education under “Religious Culture and Ethics.” As can be seen from the brief history here, religious

education in Turkey has been gradually made compulsory since the period of determined secularism following the establishment of the republic.

The religious needs and practices of non-Muslim citizens in Türkiye were defined by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. According to the treaty, non-Muslims were legally recognized as a “minority” (albeit not all non-Muslims—only Greeks, Armenians, and Jews) and were granted certain rights in religious education (Soysal, 2000; Yıldız, 2007). These minority communities were exempt from compulsory religious education and were also granted freedom to provide religious education in their own schools. Over time, special arrangements were made regarding exemptions for minorities (MEB, 2022). Essentially, Alevis, whose religious interpretations do not conform to Sunnism in Türkiye, were required to participate in compulsory religious education in schools because they were not recognized as a religious minority (Göçek, 2005).

Compulsory Religious Education from the Perspective of Human Rights

Türkiye is a signatory to various international conventions that protect human rights and freedom and legally guarantee equal rights and dignity for its citizens. These conventions involve certain obligations for Türkiye[4], such as the “right to education,” which has a special place among other fundamental rights and freedoms. “The right to education is an integral part of both a human being in itself and the realization of other human rights” (Tarhanlı, 2009, p.33). The right to education is included in many texts, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Convention on Children’s Rights, and has more than one component (Kaya, 2018). This study delves into "religious or belief education" and "gender equality."

Religious or Belief Education

A complicated and controversial component of the right to education is “religious or belief education.” Before starting a multidimensional discussion on the subject, it is necessary to elucidate certain key concepts. “Education about religions” refers to teaching basic knowledge and history of various religions and traditions that are part of shared social histories and teaching religion as a social phenomenon and institutional actor. “Religious education,” meanwhile, refers to education that promotes the principles and practices of a particular religion or belief and analyzes other religions from the perspective of a specific theological viewpoint (ERG, 2011).

“Religious or belief education” is an extension of freedom of religion and conscience. Article 24 of the 1982 Constitution in Türkiye concerns the "freedom of religion and conscience"[5] wherein “religious and ethics education is performed under the supervision and control of the state. The RCE course is among the compulsory courses taught in primary and secondary educational institutions. Religious education depends only on the will of the individual and the request of the legal representative of the minors.”

As stated in the Article, religious or belief education in Türkiye is realized through the compulsory "RCE" course and concerns the rights of both parents and children. Secular states have no obligation to teach any religion; however, they are obliged to provide this service to all faith groups when offering religious education.

Religious or belief education is a subject related to both freedom of education and freedom of religion (Şirin, 2016). There are two basic principles behind religious or belief education in international law (Gözaydın, 2016), and various documents outline the responsibilities of the state in that regard. The first of

these principles is respect for parents' right to determine their children's education. Parents are decision-makers and have the right to raise their children in line with their religious or philosophical beliefs.[6] The second concerns opposition to discrimination. Article 2 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief prevents discrimination based on religion or belief by the state, individuals, or institutions.[7]

From the perspective of the Alevi families, Article 24 of the Constitution restricts parents from exercising their rights concerning religious or belief education. This limitation arises because the RCAB course, as outlined in the article, prioritizes the Sunni-Hanafi tradition while excluding the Alevi faith. Although the state is not obligated to provide religious education, it should ensure equal access to religious education services for all faith groups. Some Alevi families raised the issue of discrimination experienced in religious courses at the agenda using local courts and foreign legal remedies and also took their fight to ECtHR. Hasan Zengin, an Alevi citizen, appealed to EctHR to exempt his daughter from the compulsory RCE course. In response to the application, the Court unanimously decided on October 9, 2007, that there had been a violation of Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights related to the right to education (ECtHR, 2007). The Court noted that RCE courses did not consider religious diversity in Turkish society and that a Sunni-centered course was compulsory for all students. "It also ruled that the criteria of impartiality and pluralism required by a democratic society still was not met by the religious education curriculum in Türkiye and there were no appropriate methods to ensure respect towards the belief of parents" (ECtHR, 2007). After this decision, some changes were made to RCE courses, programs, and books, but discussions and legal struggles regarding the subject continued because these changes were insufficient (Kaya, 2018). In the Mansur Yalçın v. Türkiye

decision of September 16, 2014, the ECtHR once again decided that Türkiye had violated the European Convention on Human Rights with its RCE course (EctHR, 2014), primarily because Alevi students were obliged to attend Sunni Islam classes. Based on this decision, MoNE launched a study in 2017 to harmonize the RCE curriculum and books with ECtHR decisions. New curricula and textbooks appeared in schools during the 2018–2019 academic year;[8] however, as previous academic studies have indicated, new curricula and textbooks alone are not sufficient to bring about satisfactory changes (Furat, 2020; Hendek, 2021).

The latest development related to the current status of the RCE course was the Constitutional Court's decision on April 7, 2022, concerning “Hüseyin El and Nazlı Şirin El.” (Resmi Gazete, 2022). The applicant complained about students’ lack of exemption from the RCE course. This decision was a remarkable development as it was the first individual application to the Constitutional Court related to compulsory RCE. According to this unanimous decision, parents’ right to demand respect for their religious and philosophical beliefs in education had been violated. Despite improvements, the issue of compulsory religious education in Türkiye remains controversial.

Social Gender Equality

Key concepts such as religion, gender, and culture are study categories that encompass longstanding prejudices and stereotypes (UNESCO, 2022). These potentially controversial issues are also important aspects of inclusive and equitable education, as they significantly shape a school's learning environment and educational practices. The concept of social gender, which refers to characteristics acquired through cultural factors, is the cultural interpretation of biological sex (Butler, 2019). “The differences between the emotions, attitudes, behaviors, and roles that male and female students learn during the socialization

process and from the culture that are deemed 'appropriate' for their gender are considered gender differences" (Dökmen, 2014).

Article 10 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the most comprehensive international convention on gender equality and prevention and elimination of discrimination, guarantees women equal rights with men in education.[9] The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women states that women in minority groups face multiple forms of discrimination based on their ethnicity and gender in terms of their right to education. The report specifically includes legal, administrative, and social assistance measures needed to overcome this problem (UN, 2010). Moreover, national legislation prohibits gender-based discrimination (ERG, 2009).

Alevis' Criticism of Compulsory RCE Course

According to a study on the expectations of Alevi families related to the RCE course, although they supported religious education, they believed that the course should be elective rather than compulsory (Taştekin & İnan, 2013). In this case, the primary reasons for their reluctance to participate were both the subjects in the course and the method of instruction, which imposed Sunni beliefs and a Sunni understanding of belief and worship. According to another study that investigated worship teachings in the RCE course within the context of sects, religious obligations in textbooks are clearly based on the Hanafi sect (Gündüz, 2018). The same study also analyzed the content of the RCE curriculum in primary and secondary education in Türkiye and found that compulsory RCE courses do not contain a pan-denominational curriculum that covers other Islamic sects (Gündüz, 2018).

The RCE course could lead to the marginalization of Alevi students through both content and pedagogy. Although course content has undergone comprehensive changes, the training and selection of religious teachers is another source of concern for Alevi students and their families (Erman & Erdemir, 2005). Teachers’ Sunni-Hanefi beliefs affect their interactions with Alevi students in the classroom and may trigger discrimination. The religion represented by teachers, as well as their words and actions in the classroom, are among the most important determinants of student experience. According to Touraine (2015), teachers serve as intermediaries and help students create their own identities, more or less like parents. In this respect, those who teach religion should be aware of religious diversity in their communities and remain sensitive to differences (Gözüaydın, 2016).

RCE course materials have also drawn criticism previously. According to Gözaydın (2009), who analyzed course materials concerning human rights in RCE primary and secondary education, the courses use a theological approach rather than a broader religious studies strategy. Any theological approach inevitably causes religious discrimination via “othering” that starts with terms like "we Muslims" and represents non-adherents as "they." Presenting issues related to religion as a means to indoctrinate rather than inform people is not an understanding of education that respects human rights (Gözüaydın, 2009). According to another study that analyzed 1,086 pages of RCE textbooks used over nine years of 12-year primary education, only 16 pages have been devoted to Alevism (Çayır, 2014). The authors found that RCE textbooks mainly cover Sunni Islam, with just eight pages pertaining to Alevism within Sufi interpretations.

To adapt the RCE curriculum and books to the EctHR’s decisions, the Ministry of National Education drafted new regulations regarding the content of RCE

textbooks in 2017 (Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu, 2018). Human rights law analysis of the textbooks published under the new amendments determined that their religious-education-oriented nature had not changed, and the books still mainly contained information on Sunni Islam (Yıldırım, 2021). Moreover, the books had a perspective that appeared to be indifferent to impartiality and inclusivity.

Method

Study Design

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative (interpretive) research model that addressed religious beliefs and gender identities. According to Patton, qualitative research is used to question the experiences of individuals, search for meanings emerging from those experiences, and analyze individuals within interpersonal/social contexts (Patton, 2014).

In-depth interviews should be conducted with these individuals to portray and describe their human experiences methodologically, elaborately, and thoroughly. Accordingly, a phenomenological approach was recommended as an element of qualitative research design (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2013; Van Manen, 2014). The phenomenology design focuses on phenomena that we are aware of but do not have an in-depth and detailed understanding of (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). This approach is used to analyze lesser-known areas or explore sensitive content (Lee, 1993; Moustakas, 1994).

“Phenomenological research is the exploration of essences” (Van Manen, 1997). Specifically, this approach determines the essence of the common experiences of individuals toward a phenomenon. In this context, this study, which aims to determine the essence of Alevi individuals' experiences toward the compulsory RCCE course, uses a phenomenological design.

Study Group

Phenomenological research does not aim to make an empirical generalization. Therefore, the term sample in phenomenological research should not refer to an empirical sample that is a subset of a population (Van Manen, 2014). Data sources in phenomenological research include individuals or groups that experience the phenomena, which are the focus of this research. Accordingly, it is recommended to conduct interviews with 5–25 people who have fully experienced this phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989).

This study aimed to understand the personal experiences of Alevi participants in compulsory religious education. The criteria for participation were being of Alevi origin, willing to share experiences, and having completed compulsory religious education. Snowball sampling, a non-random purposive sampling method, was used to reach the participants. This method is effective in determining subjects with certain qualities or characteristics required in a study (Berg, 2001; Yıldırım & Şahin, 2016). Snowball sampling is particularly popular among researchers who want to study sensitive issues or hard-to-reach populations (Lee, 1993).

In line with the snowballing technique, two university students of Alevi origin from the social circle of the researcher, who is also of Alevi origin, were recruited and given detailed information about the nature and purpose of the study. The students agreed to participate in individual interviews. Subsequently, they were asked to name other students with the same characteristics. With the guidance of the first two participants, other Alevi participants were contacted. In this study, data were collected from 12 participants, two of whom were interviewed individually and 10 as part of a focus group. Relevant demographic information about the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Department	Grade	Birthplace/Hometown
F1	Female	24	Pharmaceutical Representation	2	Adıyaman
F2	Female	23	Child Development	2	Kahramanmaraş/ Elbistan
F3	Female	-	Not shared	-	-
M4	Male	21	International Trade and Logistics	2	Tunceli/Adana
M5	Male	19	Graphic Design	2	İstanbul
M6	Male	21	International Trade and Logistics	2	Tunceli/Adana
M7	Male	23	Turkish Folklore	3	Kırşehir/Ankara
M8	Male	22	Turkish Language and Literature	4	Çorum/Ankara
F9	Female	23	Turkish Language and Literature	3	Adana
F10	Female	22	Modern Turkish Dialects Literature	4	Tokat/İstanbul
F11	Female	20	Tourist Guide	3	Hatay/Samandağ
M12	Male	19	Tourist Guide	1	Hatay/ Serinyol

Table 1 shows that gender is split evenly, but participants attended higher education in different undergraduate programs. The age range in this study was 19–24. Although the age interval was short, the participants did not attend secondary or high school in the same years; they attended the RCE course at different times. The participants' experiences were related to the program used for RCE before the current version (2023).

Data were collected in January 2019. In Türkiye, official “ethics committee permission,” which must be obtained before data collection, is not mandatory. However, owing to the official procedure, “ethics committee permission” was not obtained for the retrospectively collected data. Therefore, no official ethics approval was obtained.

Although official permission was not obtained, ethical procedures were observed throughout the entire process of the study. Participants were informed of the purpose and scope of the study. They had the right to withdraw from the research at any time; necessary explanations were given about the procedures to be carried out regarding the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. One of the female participants did not want to share her personal information during the focus group interview. A private group was established on the WhatsApp application, with 10 participants who participated in the focus group interview. Therefore, participant confirmation was ensured by continuing the interaction and sharing the findings obtained at the end of the data collection process. During the focus group interview, comments or explanations about difficult experiences that could put pressure on participants were avoided. When a participant spoke, the researcher and other participants listened patiently. Some of them became emotional while talking. The researcher waited quietly before asking the speakers whether they wanted to continue. The fact that the researcher was of Alevi origin helped participants express themselves comfortably and freely without worrying about being judged.

Data Collection Tool

In phenomenological research, the interview is an effective data collection method in terms of revealing the experiences and meanings of the participants regarding the phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Interviews provide an opportunity for researchers to analyze the phenomenon through interaction with individuals, flexibility, and probes.
It is important for researchers to interact intensively with interviewees in order to express and explain their experiences in detail. The negative perception regarding Alevis as a religious and political ethnic group in Türkiye impels them to conceal their identity (Erdemir, 2005; Massicard, 2013). Accordingly, it becomes difficult to reach participants who want to reveal and discuss their Alevi identity. The fact that the researcher was of Alevi origin facilitated access to the participants and the establishment of a trust-based relationship with them.

In the first stage of the research, individual interviews were conducted with two Alevi participants whom the researcher knew from his social circle, and then a focus group interview was conducted with 10 participants who were reached on their recommendation. A focus group interview is designed for small groups and aims to encourage participants to talk freely and fully about their behavior, attitudes, and opinions (Berg, 2001). Unlike one-on-one interviews, as individuals listen to each other's responses, they can express additional comments and thoughts beyond their own responses (Patton, 2014).

For both individual and focus group interviews, a semi-structured interview form was prepared by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using fully structured and unstructured interview techniques. Structured interview techniques are used in research in which individuals are asked for information on specific topics. This format helps deepen the subject with different questions during the interview, reveal diverse opinions, and form new ideas about the subject (Merriam, 2013).

In the first stage of preparing the semi-structured interview form used in this research, studies in the literature were analyzed, and a question pool was

created. Expert opinions were sought to create the best possible interview form. After receiving expert opinions, the necessary arrangements were made, and a trial interview was conducted with two participants studying at the undergraduate level. After the last deficiencies were eliminated, the interview form was finalized (See **Appendix 1**).

Data Analysis

The aim of phenomenological research is to determine what an experience means to people who have experienced it and to provide a comprehensive description of it. General meanings, or the essences or structures of the experience, are derived (Van Manen, 2014).

In this study, thematic analysis was used in an iterative and inductive cycle, as recommended in phenomenological analysis (Smith, 2007). Thematic analysis refers to the process of identifying meaning structures embodied and dramatized in human experience (Van Manen, 2014). One of the themes is "the way one captures the phenomenon one is trying to understand" (Van Manen, 1997). Phenomenological themes can be understood as structures of experience. Specifically, when we analyze a phenomenon, we try to determine the experiential structures that make up that experience and, essentially, what the themes are (Van Manen, 2014).

In this study, the reflective method suggested by Van Manen (2014) for thematic analysis was employed. Accordingly, the research data were first read holistically. The data were then read using a selective reading approach, and statements that seemed important and explanatory about the experience analyzed were identified and marked. Subsequently, line-by-line reading was carried out using the detailed reading approach, and coding was performed by questioning what each sentence evoked about the experience analyzed. The

experiences, concerns, and understanding of each participant were closely analyzed line by line (Smith et al., 2009). Patterns emerging in the content of the experiences, specifically themes, were identified. The themes are shown in organized tables and presented in detail through rich written descriptions.

Considering that the theoretical framework of the research includes human rights and gender, a gender-sensitive approach was used to address the second question and present the findings. To emphasize the difference in experience between male and female Alevi participants, their views and experiences were presented in a separate format based on gender. While presenting the themes, the best examples of the participants' experiences were selected. Participants' experiences were conveyed verbatim and conceptualized through the researcher's interpretations in line with the theoretical framework. Although some participants did not directly experience the phenomenon under scrutiny individually, they shared their experiences. Code "F" was used for female and "M" for male participants at the end of the quotations. The numbers next to the codes are given in the order in which the participants were interviewed during focus group discussions. Participant numbers were consecutively assigned during individual interviews. A coding example of the data is shown in *Figure* 1 (see Appendix 2).

Study Limitations

In phenomenological research, participants who experienced the phenomenon and were willing to share their experiences were selected rather than a certain number of participants (Patton 2014). The study group included 12 participants, a small number, which is a limitation of the study; nevertheless, the Alevi origin of the researcher allowed for easier interaction with the participants and the collection of in-depth data. In order to reveal the experiences and meanings of the phenomena in question, researchers should establish interactions with the

participants based on trust and empathy (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In this context, the Alevi origin of the researcher increased the validity and reliability of the study, given that shared culture and experiences help the researcher understand and interpret the responses.

It is possible that knowing the religious identity of individuals may be considered partiality and may lead to adverse outcomes in this study. "Criterion sampling,” which is a purposeful sampling method, was used to address this limitation. Participants of Alevi origin were willing to share their experiences.

Findings

The results are presented in a system corresponding to the study questions. The findings related to the experiences of participants’ religious identity are presented first, followed by those related to gender experiences. Finally, the findings regarding the needs and expectations of participants about religious education are presented. The themes, categories, and subcategories are presented in tables for an in-depth understanding. The themes and categories in the tables are supplemented with direct quotations. When presenting direct quotations, the participants were coded "F" and "M" and in the order of speaking, and the data collection tool for the quotation was written next to it. The researcher translated direct quotations from Turkish into English.

Experiences of Alevi Participants in terms of Religious Identity

The experiences of Alevi participants in terms of religious identity had two main themes. The findings regarding Alevi participants' experiences in the context of religious identity are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Experiences of Alevi Participants in Terms of Religious Identity

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	f
Teachers' Negative Attitudes and Approaches towards Alevi Identity	***Discrimination***	Unfair sanctions against resistance	25
		Gender-based discrimination	14
		Exclusion and marginalization	11
		Discrimination reflected in the content	5
	Hatred and Hostility	Hatred	6
		Humiliation	4
		Alienation	3
	Use of violence		4
Superficial Course Content Left To The Teacher's Initiative	***Content about Alevism***	Not instructing the subject	11
		Instructing the subject superficially	4
		Low topic volume	4
		Topics not corresponding with Alevism	2
	Discussing the Content in terms of Imposition and Discrimination		6

Teachers' Negative Attitudes and Approaches Toward Alevi Identity

The findings in Table 2 demonstrate that the most prominent phenomenon in the experiences of Alevi participants is related to teachers' attitudes. A closer look at the findings reveals that teachers have a negative attitude and approach toward Alevi identity. Alevi participants stated that they encountered discrimination, hatred, and hostility, with teachers sometimes resorting to violence. When the participants resisted praying and memorizing surahs in the RCE course, they faced unfair sanctions such as pressure, coercion, and

intimidation by the teachers. Participants’ experiences regarding this subcategory were as follows:

> *There was a new RCE teacher. I was taking the exam; there was no problem with my exam, but on Fridays, he tried to take me for the prayers. He chose the same time for the RCE course and prayer on Friday. He said, "You will come for Friday prayers." Since I didn't go, I was graded a zero.* **(Focus Group Interview, M4)**

The findings in Table 2 show that teachers feel hatred and hostility toward the Alevi religious identity. *According to the experiences of Alevi participants,* teachers condemn Alevi religious identity and, concurrently, do not see any harm in projecting their feelings of *hatred* or hostility toward Alevi students. The participants’ experiences related to this category were as follows:

> *There was a conversation, but a humiliating conversation. She didn't like us anyway, it was obvious. The woman was opposed to Alevism; it was evident. Since then, I have hated the "you–we" discourse in my social life.* **(Individual Interview, F11)**

Unlike Sunni Muslims, Alevis are not bound by the formal obligations of normative Islam (Yonucu, 2023). They do not go to the mosque and, therefore, may not know the surahs required for prayer. Alevi participants reported that they were ostracized and unfairly punished by their teachers for not memorizing surahs or wanting to pray.

Teachers' resentment and hatred toward the Alevi religious identity are sometimes reflected in Alevi participants in the form of verbal and physical violence. Participant experiences related to this category are as follows:

> *They were teaching prayers in secondary school. One of our teachers… There were two of us (who were Alevi) in the class, and he took us one after the other; he said, "You, Godless, bookless people" or something... We couldn't answer the questions, and we couldn't do what he said anyway; he was taking those who couldn't do it out of the class...* **(Focus Group Interview, M8)**

Superficial Course Content Left To The Teacher's Initiative

The second theme in Table 2 illustrates the findings related to Alevi participants' experiences regarding the course content. When the findings were analyzed, we found that *subjects related to Alevism were not covered or were taught superficially*. Additionally, *the range of topics in textbooks was low, and the material included was generally not associated with Alevism*. According to the findings, some RCE teachers ignored topics related to Alevism in textbooks and even mentioned that these topics had no place in the RCE course. One of the participants stated that the teacher advised them to read and learn about Alevism-related topics in the official curriculum at home instead of addressing them in class.

> *In the second grade of high school, there were Alevi topics in the book, such as "What is semah, the service of 12 imams, how to make a cem' etc." Our teacher did not teach these subjects. When it comes to the subject of Alevism, he ignored it. He skipped to something else he knew. Then we told the teacher, "Why don't you teach these subjects?" He responded, "These topics are not covered in the RCE course. Nothing of the kind," adding, "There is no such thing."* (**Focus Group Interview, F10)**

According to Table 2, teachers who discussed Alevism dealt with these issues through *imposition and discrimination*. When the findings were analyzed in detail, RCE teachers were determined to use Alevi subjects as an instrument to highlight and sometimes impose the rules and practices of the Sunni Islamic faith.

> *He was not instructing the RCE course. He thought we could not understand… In our time, there was nothing about Alevism. He used to talk only about cleansing... The human perception of Muhammad. He used to tell us about such things, but he wouldn't instruct religion.* **(Individual Interview**, **F11)**

Sunni culture and the dominant discourse, while excluding the cultural identity-based differences of Alevis, realize this exclusion through the perception, discourse, and implications of pollution (Özben, 2011). In classes with Alevi students, the focus on cleanliness and ablution in lessons and the discussion of Alevism as "pollution," instead of following the flow of topics in the official curriculum, is a concrete example of the prejudiced and hostile approach of teachers toward Alevis.

Experiences of Alevi Participants in terms of Gender

The experiences of Alevi participants in the context of gender were analyzed under two themes, as illustrated in Table 3: *"Sexist approach of the teacher"* and *"in-school social environment as an extension of the power network."*

Table 3

Experiences of Alevi Participants in Terms of Gender

Themes	**Categories**			
	Male Participants	***f***	***Female Participants***	***f***
Sexist Approach of the Teacher	Silencing	***10***	Discrimination based on body control	***9***
	Confrontation with classmates	***7***	Silencing	***8***
	Coercion and pressure	***6***	Othering - being disliked	***6***
	Integration with Alevi identity	***6***	Fear and tension	***5***

	Being insulted	***4***	Being passive in class due to a lack of religious formation	***4***
In-School Social Environment As An Extension of The Power Network	Pressure for fasting and prayer	***6***	Pressure for fasting, prayer, and covering	***6***
	Marginalization	***6***	Humiliation and marginalization	***6***
	Efforts at self-expression against pressure	***7***	Efforts at self-expression against pressure	***4***
	Conflict with nationalist groups	***3***	Inadequacy due to lack of religious formation	***2***

Sexist Approach of the Teacher

In Table 3, the theme "teacher's sexist approach" draws attention to the female participants' experiences of discrimination based on body autonomy. RCE teachers insisted that Alevi females pray in class and cover their heads. Teachers created a control mechanism over female bodies by emphasizing that dyeing hair, applying nail polish, or shaping eyebrows were considered a sin.

> *Because we were all Alevis [and] the teacher knew it [since] she was in Samandağ*[10]*, and her husband was the imam there—she frequently used the "you–us" rhetoric a lot. Despite being a woman, she was [more critical] about women. When we applied nail polish, she said, "nail polish is forbidden." She said, "Here, it is forbidden to pluck our eyebrows." I don't know. We used to wear shirts, and we had a shirt/tie. Even when the shirt was slightly unbuttoned, she said we were a disgrace. She used to talk especially to women...* **(Individual Interview, F11)**

According to Table 3, the experience of *silencing* was common in both male and female participants, but *it* was carried out differently according to gender. For example, females experienced intense pressure to perform practices not included in their Alevi religious identity, such as memorizing surahs and praying.

> *For example, we read, learn, and memorize many prayers. However, we did not receive grades because we did not pray. This is offensive, and it discourages us from participating. You are subjected to this. This time, you are conflicted: ‘Why am I doing what this person says?’ or ‘Why doesn't the other person understand me?’* ***(*****Focus Group Interview, F10*****)***

Female participants attempted to remain obedient owing to the pressure they faced; essentially, they did not reveal their opinions. Females who resisted pressure in the classroom stated that they experienced conflict, stress, and tension. Meanwhile, male participants were threatened, denied admission to the classroom, and faced serious accusations and disciplinary action when they expressed their opinions and/or criticized religious issues in the RCE course. Moreover, an uneasy agreement was made between the RCE course teacher and students, who were forced to remain silent following backlash from teachers and the administration. Participants’ experiences in this regard were as follows:

> *When the teacher called her (an Alevi female student), she initially did not want to go to the blackboard. She said, "I don't know," the teacher said, "I will teach you." She tried to say, "I don't know, teacher, I really can't do it, I don't want to," in different ways, in a gentler way. “Come, come,” the teacher insisted. They found a scarf, brought a piece of cardboard in the form of a prayer rug, and laid it on the floor. He asked, "Do you know this surah? Read this," the girl said that she did not know. He judged her, saying, “How do you not know? Is it possible not to know?”* **(Individual Interview, M12)**
>
> *My RCE teacher was simply not open to criticism. He said, “Everyone can have their own ideas,” but when we expressed our ideas, things changed because he deeply resented them. It was a major crime; therefore, we got detention. He initially said, "You can talk." But when we trusted his sincerity and spoke, he called the principal, and we were held responsible for many crimes, such as bringing politics into school, insulting national and moral values, sabotaging the course, disrespecting the teacher, etc.* (**Individual Interview, M12)**

As shown in Table 3, female participants stated that they were marginalized and clearly disliked by RCE teachers. The findings showed that RCE teachers were determined to clearly demonstrate their prejudiced attitude toward the Alevi religious identity, especially among female students. Practices such as praying and memorizing surahs that were compulsory in classes created *fear and tension* among female participants. The participants' experiences regarding the determined categories were as follows.

> *I was afraid my Alevi identity would be revealed… Because they teach something completely different, you are a completely different person.* (**Focus Group Interview, F1)**
>
> *Our religious culture teacher was a maniac; he was negative toward Alevis. He didn't like girls anyway… The length of the skirt should be something like that [i.e., long for modesty reasons]. They had such a rule.* (**Focus Group Interview, F2)**
>
> *After the RCE classes, I used to come home and say, "I have to pray." I used to do my ablutions and try to pray. I was so scared already.* (**Focus Group Interview, F9)**

Another prominent finding regarding the gender axis for male participants is shown in Table 3, namely *polarization with their classmates*. A careful analysis of the findings showed that the strict authoritarian attitude of RCE teachers toward male students was reflected by other students in the class, causing social polarization between students. RCE teachers pressured male Alevi participants to attend Friday prayers, sometimes prohibiting them from attending classes and interfering with their exam answers to intimidate them. Some participants faced punishments, such as reprimands and temporary debarment, and subsequently, did not prefer taking the RCE course. Male participants resisted *insults, coercion, and pressure*. Participants' experiences in this category were as follows:

> *He said, "Do not attend my classes"; "As we teach you about Islam, you start to run away. Actually, your homeland is…" At that time, I don't remember exactly, but a place abroad where Christians lived was mentioned (Vatican). He said, "That place is your home." He said, "Go there, you'll get along fine; go be near unbelievers."* (**Focus Group Interview**, **M4**)

> *When I was in high school, we had a religion teacher in the second year. Not me, but I had an Alevi friend whose surname was Öztürk. Our teacher cursed his mother for not memorizing [the] Fatiha [prayer].* (**Focus Group Interview, M6**)
> *I wondered if I could somehow be exempt from this course. I even asked the principal. He said, "If you do not believe in this religion and your family does not follow this religion, you can be exempt from this course." But my family was already Muslim; I was Muslim, as well. I couldn't ask my parents to go to the school and submit a petition and say, "We don't believe it; we don't want our child to take this course."* (**Individual Interview**, **M12)**

In-School Social Environment as an Extension of the Power Network

The second theme in Table 3 concerns the "*in-school social environment as an extension of the power network.*" The findings within the scope of this theme show that the negative perception of Alevi identity continues through social networks among students and that gender shapes oppressive practices at this point. The prominent findings here indicate that the pressure to fast and pray was common for both female and male students, but it differed for certain issues, such as covering. Female participants dealt with questions from their circle of friends, including implicit pressure regarding their reasons for not praying or covering their heads. Although they provided adequate explanations, female Alevi students were repeatedly confronted with the same questions. Meanwhile, male Alevi participants who faced similar questions expressed themselves using theoretical answers based on religious texts to create solidarity with other students. Participants' experiences regarding these categories were as follows:

> *We were sitting somewhere; I was telling everyone that I was an Alevi. It was all that I could do. They regarded me as a non-believer," and said, "Would you mind covering? Let your shawl be like ours; let your clothes be like ours."* (**Focus Group Interview**, **F9)**
> *I recited the verses because I had read the Quran.* **(Focus Group Interview, F10)**

Table 3 also illustrated that experiences of marginalization were common for both male and female participants; however, women experienced humiliation differently from male participants. For males, the revelation of their Alevi identity in the social environment was met with acts of alienation, such as astonishment, stolidity, and other negative reactions. Female participants who concealed their Alevi identity from their social circles continued to be subjected to insults, hostility, and hateful messages. However, female participants who shared their Alevi identity with their social circle faced additional humiliating questions such as "Are you not a Muslim?" "Is it true about 'mum söndü'?"[11] Participants' experiences regarding these categories were as follows:

> *They still feel hostile toward Alevis. They say, "We are not prejudiced," but when we say, "I am Alevi," their demeanor changes.* **(Focus Group Interview, M4)**
> *I had bad experiences in high school. My friends were talking amongst themselves. They knew me as a Sunni because that's how I disguised myself. They said, "We cannot consume food from the Alavis; we cannot visit their homes"... When I asked one of them why, I heard them say, "Because they do not know ablution, they are dirty, their food cannot be eaten... they are irreligious anyway."* **(Focus Group Interview, F9)**

Male participants, unlike their female counterparts, *had conflicts with nationalist groups* regarding *in-school social environment-related problems*, as detailed in Table 3. Unlike male participants, females said *they felt inadequate owing to the lack of foundational religious training.* Participants' opinions about these categories were as follows:

> *We experienced a reaction; we experienced opposition. Of course, this happens more to our female friends rather than to us. You know, being a normal Kurd or being a Sunni does not cause a reaction, but when it comes to being an idealist, we experience a bit of confrontation.* **(Focus Group Interview, M4)**

> *He asked, "What is your worship?" No! We do not have worship… They oppress us, but we deserve it because we lag far behind. We don't know; we have nothing to defend ourselves. For example, the men have... Normally, there is more equality in Alevism for women... nothing, women are not taught much, especially among Arab Alevi people.* **(Individual Interview, F11).**

Needs and Expectations of Participants Regarding Religious Education by Gender

When examining the needs and expectations of Alevi participants regarding religious education by gender, a clear difference in opinion was noted between male and female participants. While female participants *demanded an independent Alevism course*, male participants did *not support it*.

Table 4

Needs and Expectations of Participants from Religious Education by Gender

Themes	**Categories**			
	Male Participants	***f***	***Female Participants***	***f***
Suggestions for Religious Education	Do not support an independent Alevism course	***14***	Demand an independent Alevism course	***14***
	Suggestions for change in RCE course practices	***14***	Suggestions for change in RCE course practices	***5***
	Suggestions for official policy	***4***	Criticism of RCE course's imposition of Sunni Islam	***4***

Participant opinions about these categories are as follows:

> *I wish they would learn like how I learned. We don't need anyone to tell us. Let's not try to introduce ourselves. In fact, I want to imbibe the essence [embrace the basic philosophy of Alevism].* ***(*Focus Group Interview, F9)**
>
> *I would like it (religious education) together. If I learn Sunnism with them, they should learn Alavism with me. If they learn my way, they will regard me in that way. If they know the meaning of the word "mum söndü," it will be obvious that they will never forget it.* ***(*Focus Group Interview, M6)**

According to the findings, both female and male participants *provided suggestions for change in RCE course practices*. Female participants criticized the imposition of the RCE course on Sunni Islam, whereas male participants emphasized that the understanding and approach of RCE teachers must change. Participants' opinions were as follows.

> *The RCE teacher can also tell us the parts (related information for Alevis), just saying everything about prayer, fasting, etc. Let him teach us the semah. Let someone tell me, feed it to me (Alevism).* **(Focus Group Interview, F1)**

> *It is not enough to say that I am respectful and tolerant; it is necessary to be specific. Our teacher also told us that "of course, everyone can believe what they want," and "everyone can express their own free opinion," but to speak the truth, his behavior or how he made us feel was not like that.* **(Individual Interview, M12)**

Discussion

This study seeks to investigate the multidimensional experiences of Alevi university students taking a compulsory RCE course based on the axes of religious identity and gender and to reveal their needs and expectations regarding compulsory religious education. According to the findings, teachers' attitudes and behaviors included discrimination and hatred, and Alevi participants were subjected to both verbal and physical violence because of these attitudes. Notably, hate crime is defined as "direct and indirect violent crimes committed against a person or group due to reasons such as race, language, religion, gender, and sexual orientation." (Gürler, 2010, p. 259). Combining discrimination with violence, hate crime, and hate speech points to an ideology of exclusion, deprecation, and hostility, indicating a hierarchy among groups (Göregenli, 2013). The findings of this study show the open humiliation of the Alevite religious identity by RCE teachers, and according to the above definitions, their actions of hatred and hostility toward Alevi students

can be categorized as hate crimes (Yonucu, 2023). Emphasizing the cleansing issue instead of teaching issues related to Alevism in the course, although Alevism is included in the official curriculum, revealed a systemic hierarchical structure in the classroom that demeans the Alevi religious identity.

The experiences of Alevi participants, such as *discrimination, hatred and hostility,* and *violence* arising from teacher attitudes and behaviors, may be related to prejudice in different forms. According to Balibar (2007), prejudice is a set of practices, discourses, and representations (violence, contempt, intolerance, humiliation, and exploitation). The basis of prejudice is the necessity of "purifying the social body" and protecting the "we" identity from all types of hybridization and invasion. Balibar also noted that prejudiced acts involve not only physical violence and discrimination, but verbal actions also constitute violence, such as attitudes of contempt and aggression.

The findings related to RCE teachers’ attitudes of hatred and hostility toward the Alevi religious identity are also supported in the relevant literature (Duymaz, 2023; Yonucu, 2023). A field study involving parents and students from different provinces about religious education in schools reported that Alevi children faced discriminatory maltreatment by administrators and teachers (Genç et al., 2017). The study found that Alevi children experienced serious tension, arguments, and mutual psychological conflicts not only with their religious teachers but also with other teachers and administrators. In another study carried out about individual perception of "*otherness*" in Türkiye, 61.6% of Alevis stated that the compulsory RCE course had an oppressive and discriminatory quality (Aktay et al., 2010). According to the findings of another study that investigated the views of RCE teachers on different subjects related to the course, the teachers mostly adopted an exclusionary model in

interreligious relations. The pluralist model has yet to be accepted (Kaymakcan, 2009).

The most prominent findings about how textbook material was used in RCE classrooms showed that "*the topics were not instructed, the topics were instructed 'superficially,' 'the volume of topics was low,'* and *'the topic was not associated with Alevism.'"* Another notable finding concerned the course content in terms of "*imposition and discrimination."* RCE instruction on the subject of "cleansing/purity," as quoted by one of the participants, was consistent with the study conducted by Özben (2011) about the social and cultural marginalization of the Alevis as a "*pollution.*" Özben stated that Alevis were subjected to symbolic violence through the discourse and implication of "*pollution"* as a form of misrecognition. According to Gözaydın (2009), who analyzed RCE course materials through a human rights lens, "the most important problem observed was instructing the course with a theological approach instead of a religious studies approach." Gözaydın found that religious issues were presented for indoctrination rather than for informational purposes. The inevitable result of this theological approach was the emergence of religious discrimination that started with "we Muslims" and "them." The findings related to textbook content were also supported by Kaymakcan's (2009) findings on RCE teachers. According to this study, RCE teachers were confused about the definition and perception of Alevism, and the majority (60%) did not regard themselves as competent about Alevism.

It is crucial to regard inequality as multifaceted and interconnected (Morris, 2007). When the experiences of Alevi participants are reviewed on the axis of gender, *silencing* was a common issue for both male and female participants, but the experience differed by gender. Female participants maintained an obedient attitude in the face of pressure to memorize surahs and prayers,

whereas resistant male participants were openly threatened and refused admission to class because they criticized or opposed such practices. Attempts have also been made to silence males with serious accusations and disciplinary action. Gender-specific differences in the silencing experiences of Alevi participants are rooted in the condescending views of RCE teachers about Alevi religious identity, and teachers' perspectives on Alevi religious identity intersect with gender-based role perceptions. Teachers actively encouraged females to be obedient through fear and tension and sought to control males through an authoritarian attitude that reflected sexist gender stereotypes. "Intersecting discrimination" or "multiple discrimination refers to discrimination against an individual on more than one basis" (Gül & Karan, 2011). According to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, females in minority groups often experience more than one type of discrimination when claiming their right to education, especially based on their ethnic and religious backgrounds.[12] Alevi participants in this study, therefore, experienced intersecting discrimination by being subjected to discrimination based on religious identity as well as gender.

Intersectionality is a concept that draws attention to the dynamic and contextual relationships between experiences of discrimination based on multiple social statuses, such as race, class, religion, and gender (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Individuals do not typically experience selective inequality in their daily lives; more than one avenue of prejudice is usually present for those who endure discrimination. The intersectional approach attempts to understand these experiences by considering the relationship between them instead of distinguishing them from one another (Coşkuner, 2024; Ferree, 2008). Discrimination experienced based on one characteristic is not isolated but mirrored and magnified by multiple injustices in profound and unexpected ways (Morris, 2007). This study revealed the interconnections between religious and

gender inequality experiences. The findings also indicate that the strict authoritarian attitude of RCE teachers toward male participants was reflected in other students in the class, triggering social polarization. Male participants' conflict with their classmates was a direct outcome of their conflict with their RCE teachers. The Alevi identity caused a social backlash, resulting in different gender-specific results for male and female participants. Where male participants were confronted with acts of marginalization such as astonishment and confrontation, female participants were subjected to derogatory questions about "mum söndü."

The findings of this study on intersectional experiences align with the literature (Welply, 2018). A study conducted in a multicultural school in eastern England revealed intersectionality related to experiences of implicit discrimination toward Muslim children. According to this research, discriminatory discourses at the intersection of race, religion, language, nationality, and immigrant social status created a negative identity of "the other" for Muslim children within their peer group. Another study using the intersectional approach investigated how educators' perceptions of gender, race, and class shaped the perception of Black girls and the disciplinary regime and exposed the conflicting inequalities experienced by them. In this case, the disciplinary practices for Black girls aimed to make them more "ladylike" also served as a deterrent to their academic success (Morris, 2007).

Not all discrimination was immediately apparent. In this study, the discrimination experienced by Alevi participants related to gender was implicit within the school's hidden curriculum. Another study of the sexist elements of educational processes indicated that teachers perceived students as having gender-specific stereotypes (Yurtsever, 2011). According to that research, the majority of teachers described female students as "emotional," "respectful,"

"clean," and "docile," whereas male students were "independent," "naughty," "aggressive," "noisy," and "adventurous" (Yurtsever, 2011). Therefore, it can be deduced that the problems experienced in the RCE course by male and female participants on the axis of gender were also related to gender-specific stereotypes perpetuated by teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings revealed that Alevi participants experienced intersecting discrimination on the axes of religious identity and gender. The Alevi religious identity influenced teachers’ attitudes and behaviors, including discrimination and hatred; consequently, Alevi participants were subjected to both verbal and physical violence. Alevism topics in textbooks were either ignored or discussed superficially in terms of imposition or discrimination. Alevism as a subject was also minimal in quantitative terms, and the material included in the texts was not associated with the philosophy of Alevism. When the experiences of Alevi participants were considered on the axis of gender, the experiences of *being silenced* were common for both female and male students, but these experiences differed according to gender. Females were forced to adopt an obedient attitude because of fear and tension in class, and attempts were made to suppress males with authority using serious accusations and disciplinary actions. RCE teachers further created a control mechanism for female students by emphasizing that cosmetic practices, such as the use of hair dye and nail polish, were sinful or by checking the length of their skirts. Meanwhile, male students *resisted insults, coercion, and pressure,* leading to sanctions from teachers and administration.

When we examined the category, in-school social environment as an extension of the power network, we found that fasting and praying were common flashpoints for both male and female students, although female students faced separate pressures to cover their heads. For male students, revelations of Alevi

identity in the social environment were met with astonishment and stolidity, whereas female students were faced with humiliating questions such as "Aren't you a Muslim?" and references to "Is there any truth to the rumor that the ‘mum söndü?’” Even female students who concealed their Alevi identities from social circles were exposed to insulting and hateful messages. In the category of *needs and expectations from religious education*, male and female participants had different agendas. The female participants supported an "independent Alevism" course and criticized the imposition of Sunni Islamic practices in the RCE course, but male participants did not support an "independent Alevism" course and instead suggested the RCE course be taught with an egalitarian approach.

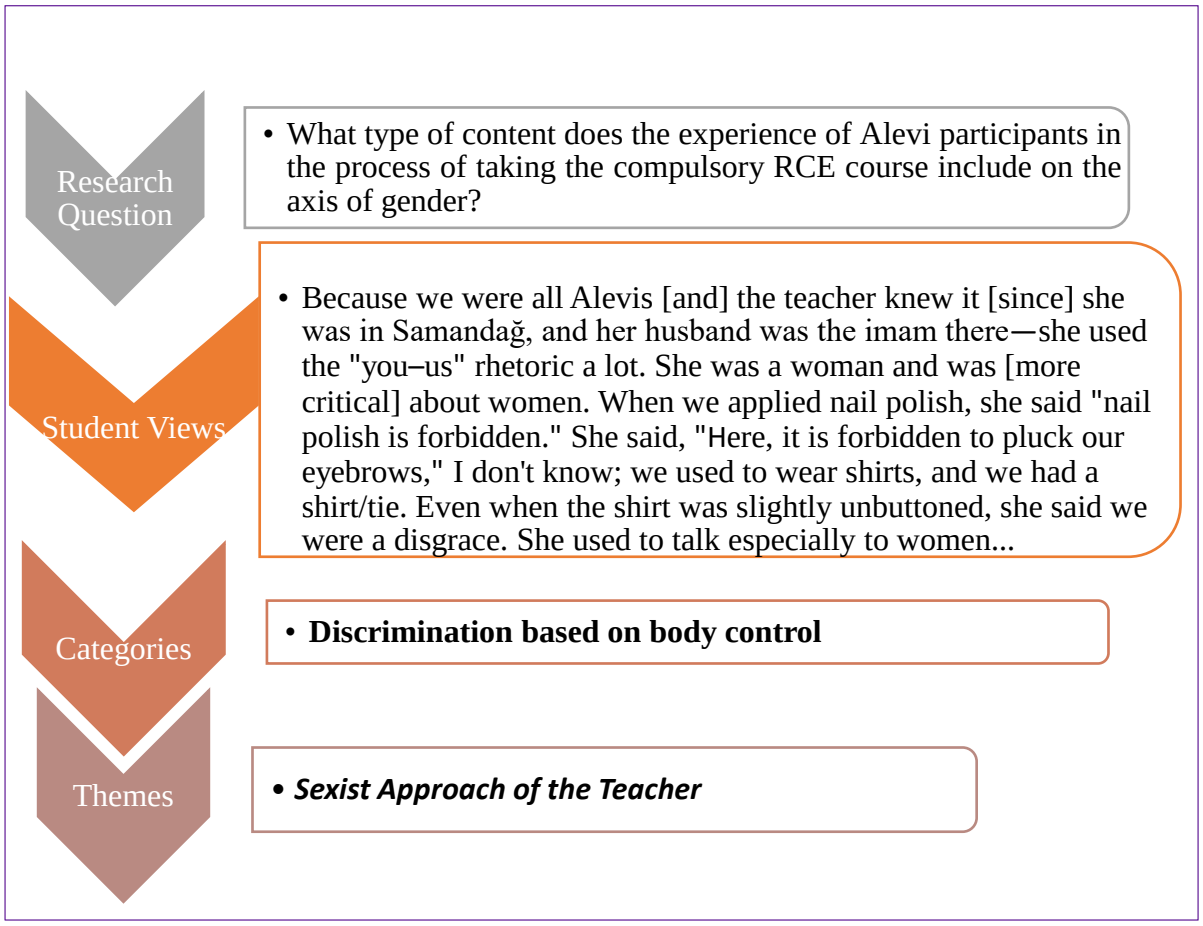
As outlined in multiple international agreements to which Türkiye is a signatory, educational content and practices resulting in human rights violations should be eliminated, and education should be designed and implemented with an egalitarian approach (Kaymakcan & Aşlamaci, 2023). The findings of this study underscore the need for a more inclusive atmosphere for different religious identities and genders in the classroom. Accordingly, RCE teachers should be given in-service training on human rights and information on Alevi culture and life. The Alevi identity should be given equal respect, and teachers should be able to address Alevism topics in RCE textbooks with impartiality. Owing to the systemic problems identified in this study, supervised visits and evaluation studies are needed to ensure that the RCE course conveys an inclusive and egalitarian understanding of different religions and gender identities. An independent "Alevism" course should be added to the curriculum as an elective course for Alevi students upon request. Finally, religious knowledge should be suggested and not imposed upon students in the current RCE classrooms.

Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Form

Have you taken the compulsory RCE course?
In depth: Would you take the RCE course if it wasn't compulsory? Why?
What is your experience with the RCE course as a student?
In depth: Have you ever faced problems in the RCE course? Please elaborate
From a gender perspective, could you elaborate on your experience regarding the compulsory RCE course?
In depth: How can gender affect experience in the RCE course?
How do you perceive the content instructed in the RCE course?
In depth: Did your teacher discuss Alevism in the RCE course? How was it?
What is your opinion about RCE course teachers? What is their attitude toward Alevi students? What could be the reason for this?
In your opinion, how does the RCE course affect Alevi and non-Alevi students?
In depth: What are your experiences with being Alevi in the school social environment?
Considering your RCE course experience, how can a good RCE course be constructed?
In depth: How should the RCE course be? What should be included? Is there anything you can offer in terms of "we won't have any trouble if it is like this" or "we want it to be like this?"

Appendix. 2


Research Question
• What type of content does the experience of Alevi participants in the process of taking the compulsory RCE course include on the axis of gender?
Student Views
• Because we were all Alevis [and] the teacher knew it [since] she was in Samandağ, and her husband was the imam there—she used the "you–us" rhetoric a lot. She was a woman and was [more critical] about women. When we applied nail polish, she said "nail polish is forbidden." She said, "Here, it is forbidden to pluck our eyebrows," I don't know; we used to wear shirts, and we had a shirt/tie. Even when the shirt was slightly unbuttoned, she said we were a disgrace. She used to talk especially to women...
Categories
• Discrimination based on body control
Themes
• Sexist Approach of the Teacher

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Notes

[1] The Hanafi sect has the largest population among the four Sunni sects. The other sects are Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki (Hallaq, 1997).
[2] In sociological terms, the concept of syncretism means 'the unification or bringing together of different philosophical, religious or cultural principles and practices' (Sözlük, 2023).
[3] Religious schools on which the Ottoman education system was based.
[4] European Convention on Human Rights; November 4, 1950, www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf, Turkey signed the Convention on November 4, 1950: www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/8662.pdf; United Nations Conventions on Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child: Adopted by Resolution 44/25 of November 20, 1989, entered into force on September 2, 1990: www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf; The Convention entered into force in Turkey on May 4, 1995: www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/22138.pdf; United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; 3 November 1976, https://unmik.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/regulations/06turkish/TIntCovEcSocCulRights.pdf , Convention entered into force in Turkey on 23 December 2003: https://insanhaklarimerkezi.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2015/08/03/EkonomikSosyalKulturelHaklarSozlesmesi.pdf; Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW): www.resmigazete.gov.tr/arsiv/18792.pdf
[5] www.anayasa.gov.tr/tr/mevzuat/anayasa/
[6] 4721 Numbered Turkish Civil Code, 22.11.2001, Article 341: www.mevzuat.gov.tr/mevzuatmetin/1.5.4721.pdf accessed October 10, 2022.
[7]Article 2 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, November 25, 1981.
[8] Board of Education and Discipline, 2 and 18 numbered and 19/01/2018 dated Resolution of Board.
[9] United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Madde 10.
[10] A district on the southern coast of Turkey, inhabited predominantly by Arab Alevis.
[11] The "mum söndü" is an accusation that suggests Alevis have incestuous relations in "cem," a religious worship ceremony, but this is not true. The slander of 'mum söndü' is still used today as an instrument to marginalize Alevis (bkz. Yonucu, 2023).
[12] United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/FactSheet16rev.1en.pdf accessed July 28, 2022.

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