



Exploring Religious Education and Character Development in Pesantren: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Religious education plays a central role in shaping the moral and ethical development of individuals, particularly within Islamic institutions like pesantren. However, research on the subjective experiences of students in these settings remains limited, especially regarding the internalization of religious teachings. Previous studies often overlook the complex, personal processes through which students internalize and apply religious values in their lives. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how religious education shapes students' characters and worldview through a phenomenological approach. We adopted a phenomenological methodology to examine the lived experiences of students and teachers within pesantren, aiming to uncover the meanings they attribute to their religious education. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 22 participants, including teachers and students, and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that religious education significantly influences students' moral development, guiding them to internalize values such as responsibility, discipline, and integrity, despite societal challenges such as the fast-paced technological advancements, materialism, and individualism in a modern context. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the transformative power of religious education and highlight the need for further research on the integration of religious values in students' daily lives. The study underscores the importance of examining subjective experiences in educational settings and offers valuable insights for the future development of religious education programs.



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INTRODUCTION

Religious education plays a critical role in shaping moral and ethical development, particularly within Islamic institutions such as pesantren (Abdullah dkk., 2019). These educational environments are rooted in strong cultural and social traditions, offering a unique blend of religious teachings and character-building practices. Within the broader context of Islamic education, pesantren are integral institutions where students engage deeply with both religious doctrine and personal development. These schools are more than just educational settings; they act as socializing spaces where religious and ethical values are passed down from one generation to the next. The influence of religious educators in these settings is profound, as they serve not only as instructors of religious texts but also as role models guiding students toward becoming responsible, moral individuals.

The phenomenon of character development through religious education is of growing importance, particularly as the values instilled in students often resonate throughout their lives. The pesantren environment, with its emphasis on discipline, community, and spiritual growth, provides a unique context for understanding how religious teachings shape individual and collective identities. These settings offer a fertile ground for exploring the subjective experiences of students as they

internalize religious teachings and apply them in daily life (Akhyar & Suryani, 2019). The focus on the development of character and moral integrity through religious education highlights the enduring relevance of this phenomenon within broader social and cultural frameworks.

Understanding the lived experiences of both teachers and students in these contexts is vital to grasp how deeply these educational environments influence individuals' worldview and behavior. As phenomenology centers on capturing the essence of lived experiences, it provides a powerful lens to explore how religious education is not merely about intellectual engagement but also about the internalization of values that shape individuals' identities. There is a pressing need for in-depth exploration of how students perceive their religious education, particularly how they apply its principles in their personal and social lives (Alberts, 2019). This need is particularly relevant in societies where the role of religion in shaping moral conduct is both revered and challenged, making this investigation essential for understanding the broader implications of religious education in modern contexts.

This study contributes to filling this gap by focusing on the subjective experiences of students and teachers, offering a more nuanced understanding of how religious education influences their personal development and worldview. Research on the subjective experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has gained significant attention in recent years, especially in educational contexts. The study of how religious education influences personal and character development, particularly within Islamic settings like pesantren, has emerged as an important area of inquiry. By focusing on the lived experiences of both educators and students, this research aims to illuminate the deep, often transformative impact that religious teachings have on individuals' identities and behaviors. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding the essence of human experiences, has become a crucial method for exploring these personal, intimate perspectives. However, despite its growing relevance, the methodological challenges in studying such profound experiences remain considerable.

One of the key challenges in exploring these experiences is the limitation of quantitative approaches, which often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective nature of religious education. Traditional surveys and statistical analyses focus on generalizable data, yet they overlook the intricate meanings and personal reflections that shape individuals' understanding and application of religious teachings. In contrast, phenomenological methods, particularly in-depth interviews, offer the opportunity to explore the complex and layered experiences of individuals, allowing for a richer understanding of how religious education influences personal development and worldview.

Despite the advantages of qualitative approaches, the depth of understanding that phenomenology offers also presents its own set of challenges. The vastness of personal experience and the unique perspectives of each participant make it difficult to synthesize a comprehensive narrative that encapsulates the diversity of individual experiences (Corrêa dkk., 2022). Previous research on religious education has often relied on more simplistic or generalized findings, which do not fully address the complexity of how students and teachers experience and internalize religious teachings. This gap in understanding further emphasizes the need for a phenomenological approach, as it enables the exploration of these rich, subjective experiences in a way that can provide valuable insights into the essence of religious education's role in shaping character and identity.

While the importance of religious education in shaping character and personal development has been widely recognized, existing research often employs practical, generalized approaches such as surveys or statistical analyses. These approaches, though useful in gathering broad data, fall short in capturing the deep, subjective meanings that individuals derive from their educational experiences. Quantitative studies typically focus on measurable outcomes, such as academic performance or behavioral changes, but they overlook the internal, personal transformations that are central to understanding the true impact of religious education. As a result, the existing body of literature lacks a rich, nuanced understanding of how religious education, specifically in the context of pesantren, influences students' identities and values in a more profound and holistic way.

A more effective approach lies in adopting a phenomenological framework, which prioritizes the exploration of lived experiences and the meanings individuals attach to them. This methodology offers an alternative to the limitations of traditional research approaches by allowing for an in-depth examination of how participants perceive and internalize religious teachings (Cremers dkk., 2019). By focusing on the essence of these experiences, phenomenology provides a more comprehensive understanding of how religious education shapes students' worldviews, behaviors, and character development. The existing gap in research is clear: there is a need for a deeper exploration of the subjective, lived experiences of those involved in religious education, which can only be adequately addressed through phenomenological inquiry.

Existing research on religious education has primarily focused on broad, quantitative analyses of educational outcomes and character development. Studies have explored the general impact of religious education on students' moral and ethical behaviors, often using surveys or structured interviews to gather data. However, few have delved into the deeply personal, subjective experiences of students within these educational settings. Research has also examined the role of teachers in shaping student values but typically lacks an in-depth understanding of how these influences are internalized by students over time. Theories on character formation and the transmission of religious values have informed much of the literature, but the lived experiences of individuals within these contexts remain underexplored.

The current study addresses this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of students and teachers in a pesantren setting. Phenomenology was chosen because it allows for a deeper exploration of how religious education is experienced and interpreted by individuals (Ebenso dkk., 2019). By focusing on participants' subjective perspectives, this study aims to uncover the meanings they attach to their religious education and how it shapes their identities and behaviors. This method provides a richer, more holistic understanding than traditional approaches, which often overlook the nuances of individual experience. Through this approach, the study aims to answer the research gap identified earlier, shedding light on the essence of religious education as a transformative process for students.

This article is structured as follows: The introduction provides an overview of the research context and highlights the knowledge gap that the study addresses. The methodology section details the phenomenological approach used, including the process of data collection through in-depth interviews. Following this, the analysis section outlines the thematic analysis conducted on the interview data, identifying key themes that emerged from participants' experiences (Fitriyah dkk., 2022). The discussion examines the implications of the findings, linking them to existing literature and theories, while the conclusion offers a summary of the study's contributions and suggestions for future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The research was conducted using a phenomenological approach, which was chosen for its ability to explore the lived experiences of participants in a deep and meaningful way. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this study as it focuses on the subjective experiences and meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Haryani dkk., 2021). This approach enables the exploration of how participants understand and interpret their experiences in relation to religious education and its impact on character development. A descriptive phenomenological approach was applied in this study, emphasizing the description of the participants' experiences without interpreting or analyzing them beyond their raw descriptions. This method was deemed the most appropriate for uncovering the essence of the lived experiences of religious teachers and students within the pesantren setting.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had relevant experiences related to the phenomenon being studied. The study included 10 religious education teachers and 12 students from a pesantren, all of whom had at least one year of experience in the institution. Teachers were required to have experience in delivering religious education and working directly with students in a formal teaching capacity. Students included in the study were selected based on their active participation in religious education programs and their willingness to reflect on their experiences (Hastasari dkk., 2022). The participants' age ranged from 18 to 45 years, and the majority were male. To ensure a broader perspective, demographic characteristics such as age, gender, educational background, and role within the pesantren were considered during participant selection. This helped to ensure a diversity of perspectives while focusing on the shared experience of religious education.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their experiences in a flexible yet focused manner. The interviews were conducted in person and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes each. The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' perceptions of religious education, its impact on character development, and the role of teachers in shaping students' moral and ethical outlooks (Hermino & Arifin, 2020). The interviews were conducted in a comfortable, quiet environment within the pesantren, ensuring that participants felt at ease and able to express themselves openly. In addition to the interviews, observational data were also collected to provide further context to the experiences described by participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying and interpreting themes and patterns within the interviews. This analysis was conducted in a systematic manner to uncover the essential meanings of the participants' experiences. The steps of analysis included familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by the coding of significant statements that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences (Hudaefi dkk., 2022). These codes were then grouped into themes that reflected the core aspects of the phenomenon under study. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and managing the data, though the analysis itself was carried out manually to ensure a deep engagement with the content. The goal of the analysis was to extract meaningful insights into how religious education shapes character development and how teachers influence students' moral and ethical perspectives.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures. Informed consent was obtained in writing from each participant, and confidentiality was ensured throughout the research process. Participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous and that the data would be used solely for research purposes. The study adhered to ethical guidelines and standards as outlined by the institutional review board, ensuring that all procedures complied with international ethical standards for research involving human participants.

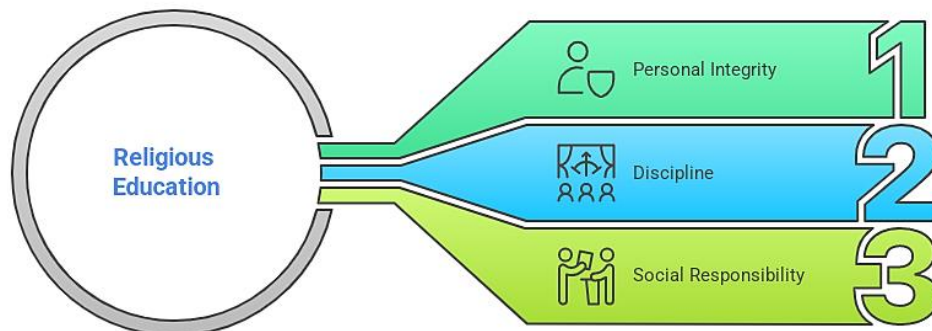
RESULTS

Role of Religious Education in Character Development

The participants consistently emphasized the significance of religious education as a fundamental aspect of character building within the Islamic boarding school (pesantren) environment. One teacher reflected, "Religious education in our pesantren is not just about memorizing verses, but about instilling values that shape the character of the students. It's about teaching them to be good individuals who can contribute to society through their faith." This observation highlights the interconnectedness between religious knowledge and character formation. Many participants shared that they view their religious education as a means to cultivate personal integrity, honesty, and social responsibility. A student stated, "What we learn here helps me to be more disciplined, not just in

prayers but in life. I've learned how to be responsible and trustworthy." This suggests that the pesantren is not only a place for acquiring knowledge but also a key site for shaping ethical and moral values.

Unveiling the Dimensions of Religious Education



The Influence of Teacher's Role in Shaping Students' Worldview

The teacher's influence emerged as a critical factor in shaping students' perspectives on religion and its application in daily life. Teachers were often described as role models whose personal commitment to religious values significantly impacted students. One participant mentioned, "Our teachers live what they teach. When they demonstrate patience, humility, and respect, we try to emulate those qualities in our own lives." Teachers were seen not just as educators, but as moral guides who fostered an environment of spiritual growth. A student remarked, "The way my teacher talks about Islam and life made me rethink my own beliefs. It's like they are living examples of how Islam should be practiced." This highlights the transformative role of teachers in conveying not just academic knowledge but also spiritual and ethical lessons, which significantly shape students' worldview.

Internalization of Religious Values in Everyday Life

Participants expressed how their religious education influenced their daily behaviors and decisions. Several students shared that the teachings they received in pesantren were not confined to religious rituals but were integrated into their everyday actions. A participant noted, "The teachings we get here are not just for the prayer mat. They guide everything—how to speak to others, how to respect elders, and how to be mindful in every action." Another student emphasized the holistic approach of religious teachings: "It's about living Islam in every moment. At pesantren, we're taught that faith is not just for the mosque, but for how we behave with everyone around us." These responses indicate that the internalization of religious values goes beyond rituals and permeates daily life, affecting interactions with peers, teachers, and the broader community. These insights align with constructivist learning theories, which argue that knowledge is most effectively internalized when it is applied in real-life contexts (Piaget, 1971).

Challenges in Integrating Religious Education with Modern Life

While the pesantren experience was overwhelmingly positive in shaping students' values, some participants identified challenges in applying these values in the modern world. A teacher mentioned, "The world outside is full of distractions. It's hard for students to carry the values they learn here when they're exposed to different pressures and temptations in society." Similarly, a student reflected, "Sometimes, it feels difficult to live according to what we've learned here because the world outside doesn't always understand our values." These challenges reflect the tension between maintaining religious values taught in pesantren and adapting to the complexities of the outside world, where different social norms and pressures exist.

The findings suggest that religious education in pesantren plays a significant role in shaping the character and worldview of students. The holistic approach to education, where religious teachings permeate both spiritual and social dimensions, contributes to the development of ethical individuals. However, the challenges identified by participants underscore the need for a continuous dialogue between the pesantren's teachings and the external societal influences students encounter. The role of

the teacher, as both an educator and a moral guide, is central to this process, fostering a deep internalization of values that students carry into their daily lives.

DISCUSSION

The primary findings of this study reveal that religious education in pesantren plays a profound role in shaping both the character and worldview of students. It highlights the importance of religious educators as role models, and how students internalize religious teachings, applying them to their daily lives (Jerome & Kisby, 2022). These findings directly address the central question posed in the introduction, which sought to explore how religious education impacts students' personal development and the formation of their identities. The study emphasizes the deep connection between religious knowledge and the moral and ethical growth of students, highlighting the complex relationship between educational practices and individual transformation. However, the study also reveals the tension between the idealized values taught in pesantren and the complex realities of modern society, where competing cultural norms and societal pressures often challenge the application of these values in everyday life.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of students and teachers within the context of pesantren. By focusing on the lived experiences of participants, it provides insights into how religious education fosters a sense of discipline, responsibility, and integrity in students, shaping their character beyond the classroom. The study also sheds light on the challenges students face in applying the values they learn in pesantren to the broader societal context. While religious education contributes significantly to the personal growth of students, external pressures and societal norms can complicate the integration of these values into daily life. The findings suggest that religious education is not merely an academic pursuit, but a deeply transformative process that affects students' moral and ethical frameworks.

In comparison with existing literature, the findings of this study align with previous research that emphasizes the role of teachers as moral guides and the importance of values in religious education (Mas'ud dkk., 2019). However, unlike many studies that focus on the outcomes of religious education, this study provides a unique insight into the subjective experiences of both students and teachers, which have largely been overlooked in prior research. Previous studies have often relied on quantitative methods to measure the impact of religious education on students' behavior (Metcalf & Moulin-Stožek, 2021), but this study enriches the understanding of religious education by focusing on the meanings and experiences associated with it. Furthermore, the challenges identified by participants in maintaining religious values in the face of external societal pressures add a new dimension to the discussion, indicating that the context of modern life presents complex hurdles for religious educators and their students.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study offer significant implications for both the theory and practice of religious education. From a theoretical perspective, the study deepens our understanding of how religious education in pesantren shapes students' personal development and worldview. The experiences of students, as explored through this phenomenological approach, reveal the critical role of religious educators in not only imparting knowledge but also in modeling ethical and moral behaviors. The implications are not limited to the pesantren context; they extend to any educational environment where character development and moral formation are central to the learning process. For educators and policymakers, these findings suggest the importance of integrating moral and spiritual guidance into curricula, ensuring that education serves as a transformative process for students beyond academic achievement. From a cultural standpoint, the study emphasizes the ongoing significance of religious education in shaping individual and collective identities in societies where religion continues to play a pivotal role in everyday life.

Study Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that may influence the generalizability of its findings. The research was conducted within a specific religious and cultural context—pesantren in Indonesia—limiting its applicability to other educational settings or geographical regions. The sample size, while adequate for qualitative research, is relatively small, which may affect the breadth of perspectives captured. Additionally, the study focused on the experiences of students and teachers, but did not include the perspectives of parents or the broader community, which could provide additional insights into the role of religious education in societal development. These limitations suggest that further research is needed in different contexts or with larger and more diverse populations to confirm and expand upon the findings presented here.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research in the field of religious education. One potential direction is to explore how religious education impacts students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly in urban versus rural settings, to understand how context influences the internalization of religious values (Muhtar dkk., 2019). Future studies could also examine the role of religious education in fostering interfaith dialogue and understanding in increasingly multicultural societies. Additionally, there is a need to investigate how the challenges of maintaining religious values in a modern, often secular, world can be addressed in educational settings. These areas of inquiry would contribute to a broader understanding of the role of religious education in shaping individuals and communities in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of religious education in shaping the character and worldview of students in pesantren, addressing the question of how religious teachings influence personal development. The findings reveal that religious education, facilitated by dedicated educators, significantly contributes to the moral and ethical growth of students, fostering responsibility, discipline, and integrity. These insights offer a deeper understanding of the transformative nature of religious education, filling a gap in previous research that largely overlooked the subjective experiences of students and teachers. The study also highlighted the challenges students face in integrating religious values into their daily lives, particularly in the face of societal pressures. To address these challenges, it is recommended that religious education programs incorporate practical strategies that equip students with tools to navigate societal pressures while maintaining their values. This could include mentorship programs, discussions on real-world applications of religious principles, and collaborative efforts with parents and communities to create a supportive environment. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the influence of socioeconomic backgrounds on religious education or by investigating how interfaith dialogue is fostered within religious educational settings. These directions will provide further insights into the evolving role of religious education in diverse educational and social contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. No financial or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the research process or outcomes have been identified.

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