



## **Exploring the Role of Religious Education in Urban Multicultural Communities: A Phenomenological Study of Educators and Community Leaders in Jakarta**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Religious education plays a crucial role in shaping the values and identities of individuals within diverse communities, particularly in urban settings. However, there is limited research on the lived experiences of individuals involved in religious education in multicultural environments, and the ways in which it influences their social and personal development. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of educators and community leaders in urban areas. The findings reveal that religious education fosters a strong moral foundation, a sense of responsibility, and promotes social unity and personal growth. It helps individuals navigate the challenges of urban life, despite issues related to diversity. These insights emphasize the importance of religious education in fostering social cohesion and community empowerment in multicultural urban contexts.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Religious education plays a pivotal role in shaping the moral and social frameworks of communities, particularly in multicultural urban settings. The phenomenon of religious education in these contexts is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and religious dynamics. Urban areas, characterized by their diversity, bring together individuals from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (Yacoob, 1991). This diversity often challenges the uniformity of religious teachings and practices, creating unique opportunities and challenges for religious educators. The diverse nature of urban communities necessitates a flexible and inclusive approach to religious education, one that respects the plurality of beliefs while imparting core religious values.

The relevance of religious education in urban contexts extends beyond its role in imparting religious knowledge. It is closely linked to social cohesion, community identity, and individual empowerment. For many individuals, religious education is not just about learning religious texts and rituals; it also serves as a framework for understanding their place within a multicultural society. This process of learning involves not only the acquisition of religious knowledge but also the development of critical social and moral perspectives. In multicultural cities, religious education can act as a unifying force, promoting tolerance, empathy, and respect for diversity. Thus, the way religious education is implemented and experienced in urban settings is of considerable social and cultural importance.

Given the complexity of these experiences, there is a significant need for an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to their experiences with religious education in such diverse environments. Phenomenology offers an ideal approach for investigating this phenomenon, as it focuses on capturing the lived experiences and personal perceptions of individuals (Mudzengi dkk., 2021). This approach emphasizes the importance

of understanding the meanings that participants attach to their interactions with religious education, providing a nuanced view of its impact on their lives. By exploring these experiences, we can gain valuable insights into how religious education influences not only personal growth but also social cohesion in urban communities.

Research into the experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become a critical area of inquiry in social sciences, particularly in the realm of religious education within multicultural urban contexts. A growing body of literature has focused on understanding how religious education shapes the lives and identities of individuals, as well as its influence on community dynamics. These studies often delve into how religious teachings intersect with societal values, and how education can serve as a tool for empowerment in diverse cultural settings (Smyth & Vanclay, 2017). The experiential, personal nature of religious education—shaped by individual, familial, and community-level interactions—has underscored the importance of capturing these nuanced lived experiences.

However, methodological challenges arise when attempting to capture the full depth of these personal experiences. Traditional quantitative methods, with their reliance on statistical measures and predefined variables, are inherently limited in their ability to address the subjective dimensions of religious education. These approaches often overlook the complexity of individual perceptions and the meanings participants attribute to their religious education experiences. For instance, while surveys and numerical data can provide insights into general trends, they fail to explore the deeper emotional and social impacts of religious learning, such as how individuals internalize teachings or how these teachings influence their relationships within a multicultural society.

These limitations have rendered many previous methods inadequate for fully understanding the essence of religious education in multicultural contexts. While existing studies have made valuable contributions, they often miss the richness of personal narratives and the meanings participants derive from their experiences. Phenomenology, with its focus on lived experiences and meaning-making, offers a more suitable framework for capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how religious education impacts individuals within diverse social environments (Adjei dkk., 2023). While existing studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the social dimensions of religious education, they tend to overlook the internal, experiential aspects that shape how individuals perceive and internalize these teachings. By focusing on the subjective experiences of participants, this approach addresses the gap left by more traditional methods, allowing for a richer exploration of the phenomenon.

In the context of religious education in multicultural urban environments, existing research often relies on practical, predefined approaches such as quantitative surveys or observational studies to understand the broader patterns of educational impact. While these methods provide valuable insights into general trends, they fall short in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of individuals involved in religious education. These approaches typically focus on measurable outcomes or generalizations, overlooking the richness of the personal meanings and emotional responses that shape how religious education is perceived and experienced within diverse cultural contexts. Consequently, the understanding of religious education in these environments remains incomplete, as it fails to account for the complex, lived experiences that define individuals' interactions with educational content and community dynamics.

Given these limitations, there is a pressing need for alternative approaches that can delve deeper into the personal, subjective experiences of individuals. A phenomenological approach offers a promising solution by allowing for a more holistic and in-depth exploration of the meanings participants attach to their experiences (Singh dkk., 2001). By focusing on the lived experiences of individuals, phenomenology facilitates a richer understanding of how religious education influences personal identity, community cohesion, and social integration in urban settings. This method goes beyond surface-level analysis, exploring the nuances of meaning-making processes and revealing the essence of religious education from the perspective of those directly involved. Therefore, adopting phenomenology as the methodological approach addresses the gap left by traditional research methods and offers a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Previous studies on religious education in urban multicultural environments have largely focused on the broader social implications of educational programs, often using quantitative methods to analyze trends and outcomes. Research has explored the role of religious education in fostering community cohesion and individual empowerment, yet much of this literature fails to address the subjective, lived experiences of those involved. Studies such as those by Midzi dkk. (2024) have highlighted the importance of understanding the social dimensions of religious education, but they often miss the depth of personal meaning that participants derive from these experiences. Theories of social learning and community integration have been pivotal in shaping these studies, but they tend to overlook the internal, experiential dimensions of learning. This gap in the literature calls for a more nuanced exploration of how individuals within these settings make sense of and internalize their religious education.

To address this gap, a phenomenological approach is proposed. This method allows for a deeper exploration of participants' lived experiences, focusing on the meanings they attribute to their involvement in religious education within a multicultural urban context. Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding the essence of personal experiences, offering insights into how individuals navigate the complexities of urban life through the lens of religious teachings. This approach is particularly valuable in addressing the limitations of prior research by capturing the richness of subjective experiences and the intricate ways in which participants interpret their educational and social environments. By focusing on personal narratives, phenomenology enriches our understanding of the broader social phenomena observed in previous studies.

The structure of this article follows a systematic exploration of the phenomenon under study. The introduction outlines the context and significance of the research, followed by a discussion of the phenomenological approach used to explore the research questions. The methodology section details the process of data collection and analysis, while the results section presents the themes and findings derived from the interviews (Kalakbandi & Mittal, 2018). Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections interpret the results, connect them to existing literature, and reflect on the broader implications of the study for religious education in multicultural urban contexts. Through this structure, the article provides a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the experiences of individuals involved in religious education in urban environments.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

A phenomenological approach was selected for this study due to its focus on understanding and exploring the subjective experiences of individuals in specific social contexts. Phenomenology, particularly the hermeneutic variant, is well-suited for examining how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences, providing a rich understanding of the meanings they attribute to these experiences (Hanna, 2005). This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the personal and social implications of religious education in multicultural urban environments, ensuring that the complexity of participants' experiences is fully captured. The emphasis on lived experience and meaning-making aligns with the study's aim to explore the role of religious education in empowering communities within urban settings. However, it is important to acknowledge that the geographical context of this study may limit its broader applicability to other regions or communities with different social, cultural, and economic dynamics. Additionally, the participants' perspectives may be influenced by their specific urban context, which may not fully represent rural or less diverse settings.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a targeted approach that captures individuals with direct experience relevant to the research topic. The inclusion criteria required participants to be educators or community leaders involved in religious education in urban areas, particularly in communities with diverse cultural backgrounds. These participants were selected based on their extensive involvement in religious education programs and their perspectives on the impact of such programs on community empowerment. In total, 15 participants were included, with

an average age of 40 years. The group was composed of 8 male and 7 female participants, all of whom had at least five years of experience in religious education. No specific exclusion criteria were applied beyond the requirement for participants to have relevant experience.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted face-to-face. A semi-structured interview guide was employed to facilitate open-ended discussions while ensuring that key themes relevant to the research questions were explored (Armsworth dkk., 2013). Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a private setting to create a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences freely. The interviews took place in various community centers and educational institutions within the urban area. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used technique in phenomenological research. This method involved identifying key themes and patterns across the data, which were then grouped into meaningful categories that reflected the participants' experiences and perceptions. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for the organization and interpretation of data in a way that highlights the most significant aspects of the participants' lived experiences. Data were transcribed verbatim, and key passages were coded according to emerging themes. NVivo software was used to facilitate data management and organization, although the primary focus was on the thematic extraction and interpretation of the data. The analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with a thorough reading of the transcripts, followed by coding and theme identification, leading to a deeper understanding of the essential meanings embedded in the data.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection, and participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. All data were anonymized, and any identifying information was removed to ensure privacy (Jadeja dkk., 2018). Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence. The study adhered to international ethical standards for research involving human participants, ensuring that all procedures complied with established guidelines for protecting participant rights and welfare.

## **RESULTS**

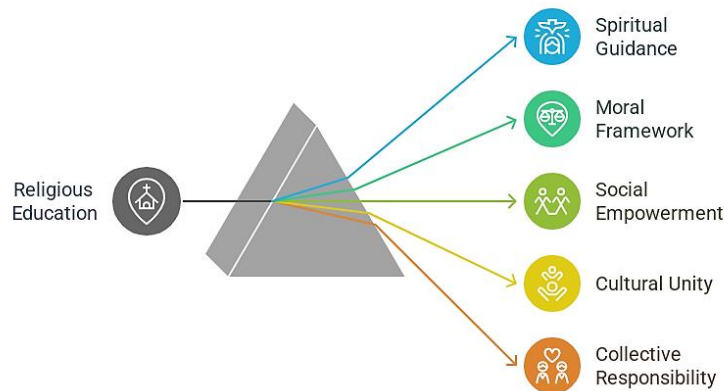
### **The Role of Religious Education in Urban Empowerment**

The participants consistently highlighted the transformative impact that religious education has had on their community empowerment, particularly in the urban setting. Several participants noted that religious education provided not only spiritual guidance but also a moral framework for navigating the complexities of urban life. As one teacher stated, "Through religious education, we are not just teaching students how to perform rituals, but how to live with integrity in a diverse and sometimes challenging environment." This indicates that, for the participants, religious education was deeply intertwined with social and moral empowerment, helping individuals navigate their urban surroundings with a stronger sense of identity and purpose.

One participant, a community leader, elaborated, "The Islamic teachings we pass on in our schools help create a sense of responsibility and unity, which is crucial in a city where many different cultures and beliefs coexist." This statement reflects how religious education serves as a unifying force in a multicultural urban environment, fostering a sense of collective responsibility and belonging among diverse community members. The data suggests that religious education in urban settings helps instill values that are essential for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect. However, it is also important to consider the broader societal structures that influence the effectiveness of

religious education in these urban settings. Factors such as socio-economic inequality, political tensions, and institutionalized discrimination may shape how religious education is perceived and implemented, potentially hindering its ability to foster unity and empowerment across all sectors of society.

### Unveiling the Impact of Religious Education



### Challenges of Religious Education in Multicultural Urban Settings

Despite the positive contributions of religious education, several participants discussed the challenges they face when implementing it in such a diverse environment. One of the key challenges highlighted was the difficulty in balancing traditional religious teachings with the pluralistic values of the urban context. A teacher shared, "It's hard to maintain the purity of religious teachings while ensuring that we respect the diversity of students' backgrounds. Some families feel that we are imposing one view, and that's a constant tension." This tension points to the complex nature of teaching religion in a multicultural environment, where the goal is to respect diversity while maintaining the integrity of religious teachings.

Furthermore, another participant, a religious scholar, added, "We try to teach acceptance, but it's difficult when the diversity is so stark and some individuals are resistant to learning about other beliefs and practices." This highlights the challenge of creating inclusive religious education that promotes tolerance without diluting the core teachings of Islam. The participants expressed a shared sentiment that while religious education has the potential to empower, it also faces resistance from some community members who struggle with pluralism.

### The Personal Impact of Religious Education on Community Leaders

Another significant theme that emerged was the personal transformation experienced by community leaders and educators as a result of their involvement in religious education. Participants noted that their role as educators and leaders in religious education deepened their own understanding of faith and its role in social empowerment. As one leader reflected, "Teaching religion has made me a better person. It has taught me patience, humility, and the importance of empathy in dealing with people from all walks of life." This comment underscores the reciprocal relationship between educators' personal growth and their ability to empower others through education. It suggests that the process of teaching religious values is not only a means of imparting knowledge but also a tool for personal development and social change.

In summary, the results of this study indicate that religious education in urban communities plays a vital role in both individual empowerment and social cohesion, especially in multicultural environments. While there are significant challenges in balancing religious teachings with respect for diversity, the experiences of participants show that religious education remains a powerful tool for fostering unity and social responsibility. The personal growth experienced by educators and community leaders further underscores the transformative power of religious education, not only for the students but for the broader community as well.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study revealed that religious education plays a significant role in both individual empowerment and social cohesion within multicultural urban environments. Participants described how religious education provided a moral and social framework for navigating the complexities of urban life. Additionally, the experience of religious education was found to be deeply intertwined with participants' personal identity and their interactions within a diverse community, reinforcing the essential nature of religious education in fostering social responsibility and unity.

These findings contribute significantly to answering the central research question regarding how religious education impacts individuals in urban, multicultural settings. The research highlights the importance of religious education not only as a tool for spiritual development but also as a vehicle for social empowerment. By exploring the personal experiences of educators and community leaders, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of how religious education influences individuals' sense of belonging and their roles in fostering social cohesion. Unlike previous research that focused primarily on broader educational outcomes, this study provides deeper insight into the lived experiences of individuals and the personal meanings they attach to religious teachings. It emphasizes that the value of religious education extends beyond knowledge transmission, functioning as a powerful agent for personal and social transformation.

When comparing these findings with previous literature, the results align with studies that emphasize the social role of religious education in promoting community cohesion, such as those by Mahon & Mahon (2023), who have explored the integration of religious teachings in urban areas. However, this study extends their work by highlighting the subjective experiences of individuals within these settings. While Kirmayer & Eric Jarvis (2019) found that religious education could promote social unity, it was less clear how individuals personally internalize and make meaning of these teachings. This research also expands on the work of Li dkk (2024), who discussed the challenges faced in teaching religion in diverse environments, by showing how these challenges are navigated on a personal level, with educators and community leaders reflecting on their roles as moral guides within pluralistic societies. Thus, this study fills a significant gap in the literature by offering a phenomenological perspective on how individuals experience religious education in multicultural urban settings and the ways these experiences shape their identities and social interactions.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study carry significant social and educational implications. The exploration of religious education in multicultural urban environments reveals that religious education is not only a tool for spiritual development but also a key contributor to social empowerment. Participants expressed that religious education helped them navigate the complexities of living in diverse communities by providing a strong moral foundation and fostering a sense of responsibility and social cohesion. These insights are particularly relevant for educators and community leaders in urban areas, where cultural and religious diversity can pose challenges to social unity. The study highlights the need for religious education programs to be adaptable, inclusive, and sensitive to the pluralistic nature of urban societies, allowing them to serve as bridges that promote tolerance, mutual respect, and social solidarity. Additionally, these findings emphasize the broader role of religious education in nurturing community leaders who are equipped not only with religious knowledge but also with the tools to engage meaningfully in multicultural settings.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While the findings provide valuable insights, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study focused on a specific urban area and involved a relatively small sample of participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other urban settings or different cultural contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which, while rich and insightful, are subject to participant bias and may not fully capture the broader societal influences on religious education (Ayre dkk., 2018). The phenomenological approach, while ideal for exploring personal experiences, does not offer a means of testing the broader social impact of religious education on larger populations. Future research should explore diverse geographical settings and

incorporate longitudinal approaches to assess the long-term effects of religious education on community empowerment and social cohesion.

### **Prospects for Future Research**

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. Future studies could expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample of participants, including individuals from various ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds, to understand the intersectionality of religious education and social empowerment (Amadu dkk., 2021). Additionally, longitudinal research could explore how the impact of religious education evolves over time, particularly in relation to community dynamics and individual identity formation. Another promising area for exploration is the role of religious education in fostering interfaith dialogue and cooperation in urban settings, especially in multicultural societies where tensions between different religious groups can be heightened. The findings also suggest that further research on the practical application of religious education programs, particularly those designed to foster social integration and cohesion, could provide valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and community leaders.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the role of religious education in empowering individuals and fostering social cohesion in multicultural urban settings, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective experiences of participants in such contexts. The findings revealed that religious education serves not only as a tool for spiritual development but also as a means of enhancing social responsibility, personal identity, and community unity. Participants described how religious education helped them navigate the complexities of urban life, providing a moral foundation amidst cultural diversity. By focusing on lived experiences, this study contributes to the literature by offering deeper insights into how religious education shapes personal and community dynamics, an area previously underexplored. The study also highlights the limitations of traditional methods and suggests that phenomenology provides a more holistic understanding of these experiences. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring diverse populations and contexts, incorporating a variety of demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, religious affiliations, and educational backgrounds. Additionally, future studies could employ mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys to gather more comprehensive data on the impact of religious education across a broader range of participants. It would also be beneficial to incorporate longitudinal studies to assess how the influence of religious education evolves over time, particularly in relation to long-term social integration and individual identity formation in urban environments.

New areas of inquiry could include examining the role of religious education in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding, especially in urban settings where religious diversity often leads to tension. Research could also investigate the impact of religious education on specific social issues such as gender equality, social justice, and community development within multicultural communities. Moreover, incorporating action research methods where educators, community leaders, and policymakers actively collaborate with researchers could provide valuable insights into the practical applications and challenges of implementing inclusive and adaptable religious education programs in diverse urban environments.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct and publication of this research. All data collection, analysis, and interpretation were conducted independently and without any external influence that could bias the results.

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